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Public Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Serving Military-Connected Students with Active-Duty Parents

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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by

Tiffany Taylor

MED, Georgia Southern University, 2003

BGS, Georgia Southern University, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Most military-connected students (MCS) with active-duty parents attend public schools in the United States. Due to the highly mobile military lifestyles of MCS, some are at risk for academic, emotional, and social challenges. School counselors are often charged with supporting and advocating for MCS; therefore, it is vital to understand elementary school counselors' experiences with these students. The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents in U.S. public-schools. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach served as a theoretical framework for this study. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 12 elementary school counselors who worked in U.S. public schools with MCS with active-duty parents for at least one year. Data were analyzed using hand-coding and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis yielded four main themes: (a) creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS, (b) supporting MCS through challenges and barriers, (c) participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS, and (d) fostering resiliency and identifying strengths of MCS. Results revealed that elementary school counselors are aware of the diverse needs of MCS, the challenges and barriers that some MCS face, and their strengths, and they are willing to develop homegrown practices or utilize support services to meet their needs. Military-focused continuing education or professional development related military families is not provided in most school districts for staff who serve MCS. The results may contribute to social change by providing higher education institutions and public-school systems with information to help facilitate more inclusive school counseling programs for MCS.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to those who have invested time and energy in my journey. I had so many challenging moments throughout this process, and so many times where I felt like giving up. I am so thankful for the support and love that I received, it truly inspired me to keep going. First, I want to thank God for giving me the strength and clarity to complete this journey. My favorite Bible verse is Philippians 4:13 it states, "I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me." It was this verse that I held onto in some of my darkest moments, and it provided me with a renewed sense of strength.

To my husband Brian, thank you so much for your unwavering support, love, and encouragement. You gave me the confidence to keep going, even in my darkest moments when I gave up on myself. You never gave up on me, and you continued to remind me of how much you believed in me. Thank you for showing up for me throughout this process, I would not have finished this without you. I love you more than words can articulate. To my son, Brian Jr. thank you for being my motivation and always telling me how much you love me. I thought about you constantly in this journey, and I hope that this journey has taught you to keep pursuing your dreams no matter how many obstacles get in your way. I love you and thank you so much for your support. To my mother Rosa and my father Franklin, thank you for instilling in me the value of hard work and teaching me that I can accomplish anything I put my mind to. It was your examples of hard-work and determination that I leaned on throughout this process. I love you both and I am grateful for all the sacrifices that you made for me. To my sisters Lisa and Stacey thank you for your love and encouragement. To my mother-in-law Thelma, late father-in-law Robert, and my sister-in –law Jessica thank you for your continued love and support. To my

grandmother Bernie Mae and my Aunt Annie Mae thank you for always praying for me and having faith that I could achieve anything that I asked God for. To my friend Ashley, we started this journey together. You have been such a great friend and listener throughout this process, and you are a true example of resiliency. I am so proud how you have kept pursuing your goals despite being faced with insurmountable challenges. Thank you for your friendship. Thank you to all my family and friends who supported me and lifted me up when I needed it. I am forever indebted. Finally, to each elementary school counselor who participated in this study, I appreciate your willingness to talk so openly to me and your passion to support military-connected students and their families.

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I am grateful for the support and mentorship I received from my dissertation committee members. Dr. Leann Morgan, words cannot express the immense gratitude that I have for you agreeing to be my Chair. Your expertise and guidance helped me throughout this process. Your encouragement and belief in me made it possible for me to complete this journey. I truly could not have done this without you and your guidance. To Dr. Katarzyna Peoples, I am so thankful that I had your expertise and support as my second committee member. You helped me understand qualitative research and ensured that my research was up to standard. I want to thank Tapestry and my dissertation cohorts for their encouragement and support throughout this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

There are about 4 million military-connected students (MCS) in public school districts in the United States (Capp et al., 2017). About 1 million of these students have active-duty military parents (Rea, 2019). According to Kranke (2019), less than 10% of school staff in public schools reported previous training working with MCS and their families. Further, about 50% of public-school staff reported little or no training and education on military families (Kranke, 2019). MCS face multiple transitions and parental deployments that have an impact on their academic, emotional, and social needs (Misca, 2018). Most public schools do little to recognize or support the needs of MCS, which makes them the most invisible minorities in public-school education (Hanna, 2020). Multiple deployments, constant transitions, exposure to service members' traumas can cause disruptions in family units, which can result in increased rates of child maltreatment in military families (De Pedro, 2015). In addition, these students are at higher risk of substance abuse, neglect, and suicide compared to their civilian peers (Rossiter et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the experiences and needs of MCS should be a priority for all schools because the challenges that these students face can have a significant impact on their social, emotional, and academic experiences (Rea, 2019).

In this chapter, I present some background information on military children and families, literature supporting the need for this study, include the study's purpose, the relevance of the problem to the counseling profession, and the implications for social

change. Additionally, this chapter contains an operational definition of MCS, the main

research question, and the theoretical framework supporting the study. I conclude this

chapter by listing the assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations of the study, and a

summary.

Background of the Study

According to the Department of Defense (DoD; 2011), more than 2 million

service members have deployed since the start of military operations in Iraq, Operation

Iraqi Freedom and Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom. Throughout history,

military children and families have been viewed as resilient and adaptable to change.

However, in recent years, lengthy and multiple deployments of service members have

created several challenges for U.S. military families (Park, 2011). Current military

families have experienced the most frequent and longest deployments since World War II

(Chandra et al., 2011). The deployments have caused more than 2 million military

children to be separated from their military parents (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Research has

indicated that military families often cope well with short deployments; however, long

deployments can negatively impact the physical health, behaviors, and academic

performance of military-connected children, and increase symptoms related to anxiety

and depression (Park, 2011).

Today's service members are not delaying marriage and children until their

service is completed; rather marriage and parenthood are common in all the ranks of

service (Clever & Segal, 2013). Military family members often outnumber military

personnel by 1.4 to 1, with 726,500 spouses and about 1.2 million dependent children in

active-duty families, and 409,801 spouses and 743,736 dependent children in Guard and Reserve families (Clever & Segal, 2013). Some of the demands of military service can be taxing on a family when they involve issues related to deployment, coping with traumatic injuries, and psychological stress (Collins & Kennedy, 2008). The long-term effects of deployments for today's military family are unknown especially as it relates to academic success (Astor et al., 2013).

Geographic mobility is often a constant for active-duty families and these moves can be coupled with both stress and excitement for these families. On average, active-duty service members move every two to three years, this means that military families move 2.4 times more than civilian families (Clever & Segal, 2013). Also, they are more likely than civilian families to move long distances, across state lines, or to foreign countries (Clever & Segal, 2013). The constant relocations and transitions have the potential to have a significant impact on the academic progress of MCS, they often must adjust to new school environments with each relocation.

According to Baker (2007), there may be pressure for military children and families to conform to a certain standard of behavior. Problems in the military are often addressed by the chain of command, which may make service members hesitant to report mental health issues within their families (Esqueda et, al., 2012). Traditionally, military culture has viewed mental health disorders as a sign of weakness and seeking help often has a negative impact on a service member's career path (Esqueda et, al., 2012). In a study conducted by Becker et al. (2014), military-connected adolescents, parents, and clinicians reported several factors that limit help seeking behaviors such as

confidentiality concerns, transportation barriers, the ethics of self-reliance, and stigma. Unfortunately, stigma surrounding seeking mental health services still exists, which may cause parents of MCS who are struggling academically and emotionally to be less likely to access support.

MCS are most likely to attend civilian public schools rather than schools operated by the DoD (Astor et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important that civilian school personnel are properly trained on how to best support these students and their families. Schools play a critical role in supporting children and families during times of deployments. Schools are often viewed as sanctuaries for students providing them with social and emotional support (Chandra et al., 2010), and school counselors can play crucial roles in assisting with these supports. It is vital that school counselors develop knowledge and competency related to how the effects of deployment and relocations influence the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning of MCS.

COVID-19 and Military Families

The COVID-19 pandemic has created stress for many families across the world, this was often compounded in military communities who are already faced with unique challenges. COVID-19 has created additional struggles for military families which include access to childcare, financial stressors, and food insecurities (National Military Family Association, 2021).The Military Family Lifestyle Survey (MFLS) revealed that COVID-19 may have exacerbated the challenges that military families face, and according to the MFLS, time away from home was often intensified during the pandemic due to unexpected quarantines and extensions of duty (work) assignments(Blue Star

Families, 2021). In addition, COVID-19 directly affected the mental health of most Americans, including military families who reported that the pandemic made their overall happiness worse or much worse, and many reported obstacles obtaining mental healthcare (Blue Star Families, 2021). Military spouses revealed that the pandemic caused their financial situation to be worse or much worse according to 31% of the respondents, and 60% experienced stress because of their financial situations (Blue Star Families, 2021).

The pandemic created additional challenges for those MCS who were eligible for exceptional educational services (Karre et al., 2022). The MFLS revealed that 39% of the families who had a child who received exceptional educational services stated that they lost some of their services and 39% reported that they lost all services (Blue Star Families, 2021). In addition, the respondents in the MFLS who had relocated in 2020 revealed the following: 51% reported having trouble transferring their Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), 48% had trouble transferring their 504 Plan, and 50% struggled with getting referrals for specialists to address their child's needs (Blue Star Families, 2021; Karre et al., 2022).

Also, the pandemic seemed to reignite the conversation around racial inequities; 8% of veterans of color reported racial discrimination as a reason for leaving the military, 26% of service members of color reported experiencing racial discrimination in their units, 21% experienced discrimination when it came to promotions, and 10% of female veterans reported that they left the service because of gender discrimination (Blue Star Families, 2021). According to Maestripieri (2021), Covid-19 was an intersectional

phenomenon and the impacts of individual and community exposure resulted in many interrelating structures of inequality. The role of intersectionality in analyzing the social and economic consequences of this pandemic has been underestimated (Maestripieri, 2021). The pandemic magnified the challenges that the military populations face, including the increased needs of MCS and their families. This study will explore those specific needs.

Problem Statement

According to the U.S. DoD (2018), there are about 1 million MCS who are in grades K-12, and 80% attend public schools (Cole, 2016). Unlike their civilian peers, MCS experience deployments, relocations, and often face social, academic, and emotional challenges in their school environments due to their military connections (Cole, 2016; Quintana, 2021; Ruff & Keim, 2014). The problem associated with this inquiry is that public schools often lack the knowledge and awareness of the issues that have an impact on military families, and in turn are unable to be supportive and responsive to the social and emotional needs of this population (De Pedro et al., 2014). A recent survey administered to K-12 public school personnel by the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC; 2020) revealed the following: 97% of school professionals believed that MCS experienced more stress and challenges than their civilian peers, 40% reported not feeling confident advocating for this population, 45% reported not feeling confident in preparing MCS for college or careers, and 38% reported not feeling confident in managing behavioral and mental health challenges related to transitions, mobility, and deployments.

Mobility and transitions are constant parts of military life, MCS with active-duty parents typically move every 2 to 3 years (Astor, 2011; Berg, 2008; Kitmitto et al., 2011; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Sherman & Glenn, 2011). In addition, the average military child will attend 6 to 9 different school systems from kindergarten to 12th grade, which is three times more than their civilian peers (Astor, 2011; Berg, 2008; Kitmitto et al., 2011; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Sherman & Glenn, 2011). It is important that school counselors are knowledgeable of the transitions of MCS because they have a direct impact on their academic success (Quintana, 2021).

MCS are often compared to *third culture kids*, individuals who have spent most of their developmental years outside of their parents' culture due to the parents' mobility or careers (Limberg & Lambie, 2011). Cole (2018) asserted that MCS are often negatively influenced by several stressors that include culture shock, distorted sense of belonging, and changes in parents' work schedules. It is vital for school counselors to be culturally competent practitioners in their work with students (Cole, 2014). In addition, school counselors must be able to develop self -awareness, knowledge and skills when working with diverse populations (Remley & Herlihy, 2014). Understanding the experiences of military youth and their families enables school counselors to recognize how culture has an impact on education and provides opportunities to identify specific ways to support this population within schools (Cole, 2016; Quintana 2021).

Ignoring MCS' needs often puts them at greater risks for physical, psychological, and behavioral issues (Rossiter et al., 2018). Addressing elementary school counselors' lived experiences of working with MCS may provide insight into effective training and

knowledge needed to support these students and their families. By exposing some of the barriers and challenges surrounding working with MCS, schools may develop comprehensive counseling programs designed to meet the needs of all students and may implement professional development opportunities that provide information on military culture and its transitions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to illuminate the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors who serve MCS with active-duty military parents. By interviewing elementary counselors who have worked with MCS, I described the phenomenon of the elementary counselor's experience of working in public school settings with MCS. As a result of this study, counselor educators can better explain how elementary school counselors might experience MCS' unique challenges, potentially highlighting the topics of support, professional development, and implementation of resources. The following overarching question was the focus of this research study: What are the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors serving MCS with active-duty military parents?

Research Questions

The main research question that guided this study were the following:

What are the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors serving MCS with active-duty military parents?

The subquestions were as follows:

What barriers, if any, do elementary school counselors experience when supporting MCS with active-duty parents?

What are the training experiences of elementary school counselors who support MCS with active-duty parents?

Theoretical Foundation

This study's theoretical foundation is based on hermeneutic phenomenology. According to Heidegger (1927/1962), phenomenology requires one to understand experience from the lens of the experienced. This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who have worked with MCS with active-duty parents. Heidegger stated that there is a preunderstanding or a structure for being in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This preunderstanding is the meaning of a culture that is present and is not something a person can put aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger believed that hermeneutics was the theory and practice of interpretation and described *Dasein* as "the state of being there" (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger stated that "being-with" or *Mitsein* is rooted in *Dasein,* which means that the entities of the world, what Heidegger called facticity are already shared with others, which means that the world and the individual are co-determined, and since world is a shared world, the individual is inhabited by other people, even in the contents of his mind (Lieberman & Havens, 2002). According to Heidegger (2009), phenomenological understanding happens in a circular process which is known as the hermeneutic circle, this preconceived knowledge (foresight), or fore-

conception are revised. The hermeneutic circle is the process of understanding and is the basis of Heidegger's philosophy (Peoples, 2020).

Nature of the Study

To address the research questions in this qualitative study, the specific research design included a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. The goal of this study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors serving MCS with active-duty parents. Qualitative research was determined to be the best approach for this study because it aims to uncover the rich experiences of the participants (Kafle, 2013). A quantitative methodology would not have been appropriate in this study because it uses controlled conditions and managed variables, which fail to understand the essence of the feelings and emotions of participants (Thamhain, 2014). Using a qualitative design allows researchers to explore individuals in their natural environment, and gain meaning through interviews, journaling, and analyzing narratives of the participants who experience a specific phenomenon (Denzin et al., 2017).

According to Dowling (2007), hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the true meaning of the participants' lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology helps the researcher use data from individuals' perspectives to understand a phenomenon (Regan, 2012). The researcher plays an active role in hermeneutic phenomenology and the researcher's understanding is inserted into the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study my role was to illuminate the voices of elementary school counselors and uncover the essence of their experiences with MCS. The hermeneutic circle was used to help the researcher obtain a deeper and new understanding of the phenomenon (Boell

& Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010), and help the researcher interpret the data and the results of the study.

According to Broomé (2011), hermeneutic approaches assist the researcher in understanding the meaning of lived experiences and connect the experiences of the individuals through the collection of data. These data allow researchers to examine perceptions of participants and develop themes related to the phenomenon. This phenomenological study illuminated the participants' voices and experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied. Cohen et al. (2000) asserted that researchers using the hermeneutic approach empower participants to disclose their experiences and perspectives. The information gained from this study may assist in identifying the specific needs of MCS and the elementary school counselors who serve this population. In addition, data from this study may provide school counseling graduate programs and public-school districts with valuable information on how to support future and current school counselors working with military populations. The theoretical framework is directly related to the research question and subquestions because they are focused on the lived experiences of elementary school counselors.

Clark (2008) posited that understanding the totality of all that can be realized or thought of by a person at a given time can lead to understanding their lived experiences. To effectively capture the lived experiences of the participants, I aimed to understand the totality of elementary school counselors' experiences serving MCS with active-duty parents. It is my hope that this research will lead to specialized training with

staff who serve military populations and increase the support for MCS within public-school environments.

Definitions

The following definitions were used within this study:

Active duty: Duty on a continuous basis, this is like full-time employment for civilians (Astor et al., 2013).

Dasein: The state of being there (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Deployment: A military service member being temporarily assigned away from their home base for an extended period for a specific task or mission (Astor et al., 2013).

DoDEA: The Department of Defense Education Activity operates schools for service members' children stationed at bases in the United States and abroad (Astor et al., 2013).

Foresight/fore-conception: The preconceived knowledge of a phenomenon (Peoples, 2020, p.34).

Hermeneutic circle: Circular process for understanding a text as a whole and is based on understanding of each individual part, as well as understanding how each individual part refers to the whole text (Heidegger, 2009).

Intersectionality: "An analytic tool for studying and challenging complex social inequalities at the nexus of multiple systems of oppression and privilege, including race, gender, sexuality, social class, nation, age, religion, and ability" (Grzanka et, al. p.1)

Military-connected students (MCS): Students in P-6 schools, adolescents in middle and high schools and young adults in trade schools, or institutions of higher

education that are official dependents of a military service member through a biological,

adoptive, or foster care relationship (MCEC, 2016).

Mitsein: Being-with (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

National Guard: Service members who serve on a part-time basis, usually within

the United States (Astor et al., 2013).

Predeployment: When a service member receives orders to deploy (Astor et al.,

2013).

Preunderstanding: Structure for being in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Postdeployment: The return or reintegration of a service member with his or her

family (Astor et al., 2013).

Reserves: The military forces comprised of service members who are not on full-

time active-duty but may be called to active-duty when needed (Astor et al., 2013).

Resiliency: "A sustained competence or positive adjustment in the face of

adversity" (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 100).

Service member: A person who is a member of the military (Astor et al., 2013).

Third culture kids: Individuals who have spent a great deal of their developmental

years outside of their parents' culture due to their parents' mobility and careers (Limberg

& Lambie, 2011)

Assumptions

There are a few assumptions that I made in this study. First, I assumed that

elementary school counselors would respond openly and honestly about their experiences

with MCS and their families. The next assumption was that school counselors and

counselors-in-training would benefit from the knowledge gained in this study. I assumed that public schools and school counselor education programs would desire to learn more about how to support MCS and their families. Finally, I assumed that the hermeneutic phenomenological approach would assist in gaining the essence of the participants' experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to increase the knowledge about the experiences of elementary public-school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents. I chose this topic and population because little research specifically addressed how school personnel are trained to support these students. Only certified elementary school counselors who work in public schools were interviewed, the results were limited to this specific group. A qualitative methodology was used, leading to a small number of participants, and the findings were bound to a small number of participants solely as opposed to a larger group of elementary school counselors. According to Smith et al. (2009), the limited scope and delimitations, the transferability of the study was restricted to the implications that individual readers may take from the limited experiences explored in the study. This study adds to the existing knowledge about what supports are needed for MCS and their families.

Limitations

Some of the limitations, challenges, and barriers that this study may present are related to its design. According to Niaz (2017), qualitative studies are not generalizable because they typically involve interviews with small populations. In addition, personal

biases and participant biases may be limitations. Researcher bias can occur when the researcher inadvertently influences the results of the study by asking bias questions based on the beliefs of the researcher (Morse, 2015). I have experience working as a military family life counselor (MFLC) and a school counselor so I had to be aware of my personal biases and how they may influence the interview questions and the results of my study. Finally, participant bias may have occurred by participants trying to manipulate the data and acting in a way that allowed the researcher to reach conclusions that were expected or withholding information or lying to create unwanted outcomes (Marshall, 1996).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because many school districts feel ill equipped to manage the challenges of military families due to their frequent work-related relocations (Rea, 2019). Military-connected children with active-duty parents will move an average of every 2 to 3 years (Astor, 2011; Berg, 2008; Kitmitto et al., 2011; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Sherman & Glenn, 2011). In addition, the average military child will attend 6 to 9 different school systems from kindergarten to twelfth grade (Astor, 2011; Berg, 2008; Kitmitto et al., 2011; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Sherman & Glenn, 2011). There are about 4 million students in the United States who are military connected (Hanna, 2020). This study hoped to serve as a tool of deeper understanding in better meeting the needs of MCS and the school counselors who support them. The results from this study will affect social change by informing school counselors on some of the best practices needed to work with MCS and their families within public schools. In addition, school counselors, school administrators, and counselor educators will receive the results of this study via

publication. It may provide insights on the training needs of school counselors, and these insights could assist school administrators in implementing training focused on MCS and their families and creating school environments that are accommodating to this population. School counseling graduate programs may be able to use information gained from this study as a basis for revising the curriculum used to prepare school counselors. The findings from this study may inform the planning and development of school-wide programs that focus on MCS and their families, which may increase coping skills and acclimation to frequent transitions within this population. Research indicates that schools that maintain inclusive environments for all students help to facilitate a sense of belonging in students, which in turn improves students' educational achievements and engagement within the school communities (Cole, 2016).

Summary and Transition

The purpose of this study was to explore the unique lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors who serve MCS with active-duty military parents. I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the research. Hermeneutic approaches assist the researcher in understanding the meaning of lived experiences and connect the experiences of the individuals through the collection of data (Broomé, 2011). I limited the study to the following criteria: (a) elementary school counselors who work/have worked in U.S.-based, K-12 public schools (b) elementary school counselors who work/ have worked with students with active-duty military parents in public school systems for a minimum of 1 year, and (c) elementary school counselors who work/have worked near military installations in military-connected schools for a minimum of 1 year.

I chose to use a purposive sampling methodology to identify participants with specific characteristics. In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature search strategy, the theoretical framework, and review the literature related to the subtopics.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

MCS are often afforded opportunities to travel around the world and gain knowledge of diverse cultures that most students only get to read about (Astor et al., 2013). Many MCS thrive from their military connections. Lucier-Greer et al. (2016) posited that female adolescents who had an officer parent reported higher levels of social connections and interpersonal skills than male adolescents who had an enlisted parent. Further, military-connected adolescents who reported having several adaptive coping skills often had lower levels of depressive symptoms than MCS with fewer adaptive coping skills (Okafor et al., 2016). In addition, participating in military activities was often correlated with higher levels of social connections and support (Lucier-Greer et al., 2016). Conversely, many MCS face unique challenges that their civilian peers do not, such as gaps in school attendance, parental deployments, and difficulties adjusting to their ever-changing environments (Astor et al., 2013). To improve school outcomes, research on education reform typically focuses on minority students and students with special learning needs. It is rare that educators or school personnel are prepared to recognize the unique challenges that MCS face (Astor et al., 2013). There is a misconception that service members' children attend DoD Education Activity (DoDEA) schools; however, the reality is that only about 7% of MCS in the United States attend schools operated by DODEA (Astor et al., 2013). There are about 1.2 million school-aged children of active-duty military service members and 716,000 from National Guard and Reservist families enrolled in civilian public schools (Clever & Segal, 2013). Many

MCS report feeling misunderstood in their school environments, and often school personnel report that they lack the knowledge and resources needed to ensure that MCS and their families are supported (Astor et al., 2012).

The primary role of school counselors is to address the social/emotional, career, and academic needs of all students (American School Counselor Association Ethical Standards for School Counselors, 2016). Therefore, school counselors are positioned to play key roles in serving and advocating for MCS. Due to the significant presence of MCS in public schools across the United States, school counselors need to be adequately trained to effectively provide support for this population (Capp et al., 2017).

In this chapter, I explore relevant research related to MCS in the review of the professional counseling literature. The topics of importance include a definition of MCS, the unique challenges that these students and their families face, public school policies and practices that affect the experiences of MCS and their families, and professional development needs of public-school staff who work with these students with specific focus on elementary school counselors. This literature review will highlight the limited knowledge of the experiences of school counselors and introduce the reader to the challenges and barriers that MCS and their families face within public schools. The review will also reveal a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding the phenomenon of school counselors supporting military students who have active-duty parents.

Literature Search Strategy

I used various sources of information to compile this literature review, including the Walden University Library to search for peer-reviewed articles; databases searched included SAGE, ProQuest, Military, ERIC, Thoreau, and PsycINFO. Also, I used subject specific databases for specific search terms, including *school counselors, primary school counselors, military-connected students, elementary school counselors, active-duty, public schools, civilian schools, special education, military school counselor,* and *school counselor roles*. In addition, I used general web searches with Google and Google Scholar to search for full-text articles regarding MCS in public schools. Those general web searches led me to the following organizations: the U.S. Department of Education, MCEC, Military One Source, American Association of School Administrators, and the American School Counselor Association. Graduate-level books and dissertation databases were used to find important data on qualitative research.

Theoretical Foundation

This study was conducted using a hermeneutic phenomenological theoretical framework. Heidegger, a student of Husserl (who is known as the father of phenomenology), believed that humans are inseparable "from the world in which they exist" (Heidegger, 1927). According to Gadamer (2004), hermeneutics focuses on working on the text so that its truth can emerge. Hermeneutic phenomenology aims to uncover the true meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Van Manen, 2007). Heidegger (2003) believed that the basic structure of human understanding and existence is interpretive in nature.

The tenets of Heidegger that were used in this study are *Dasein,* being-in-the world, spatial, temporal, and care. Heidegger (2003) believed that asking questions about being or *Dasein* (there-being) sheds light on the experience of being human. Heidegger (2003) proposed that *Dasein's* preunderstandings are a part of being and cannot be bracketed but should be embraced as a part of the understanding of self and being-in-the world. People do not contribute alone to their *Dasein* or being-in-the world and are unable to separate themselves from the interactions within the world (Heidegger, 2003. In addition, Heidegger viewed being as spatial and temporal, which refers to space and time (Heidegger, 2003). Another tenet of the hermeneutic phenomenology is care, which is described as the position towards self and others and a fundamental part of *Dasein*, because it makes sense of being-in-the world (Miles et al., 2013).

According to Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), the hermeneutic circle reflects the ongoing, attentive, and circular process between the part and the whole. Gadamer (1989) stated that a hermeneutic study's goal is to understand and explain the lived experiences through establishing meaning in context and through interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology provided the framework for accurately exploring the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents.

Literature Review

When a service member joins the military, the whole family serves (Alfano et al., 2016). Therefore, families play a crucial role in ensuring the success of military operations (Alfano et al., 2016; Gewirtz et al., 2011; Park, 2011). MCS are students in P-

6 schools, adolescents in middle and high schools and young adults in trade schools, or institutions of higher education that are official dependents of a military service member through a biological, adoptive, or foster care relationship (MCEC, 2016). According to Conway and Schaffer (2017), there are over 2 million military-connected children who have a caregiver who is Active Duty, Reserve, or Guard in the United States. About 92% attend a public-school setting, and 10-12% of MCS are served in exceptional educational programs (MCEC, 2016).

While in some schools there are limited numbers of MCS, in other schools these students represent a significant percentage of the student population, designating them as military-connected schools (Capp et al., 2017). In addition, school districts may be considered military-connected, and this definition of military connection assumes that school districts are aware that Military Impact Aid is available with funding provided through the DoDEA (Kitmitto et al., 2011). In December 2015, the passage of the "Every Student Succeeds Act" changed the amount of financial aid that schools receive for serving MCS and required public schools to put processes in place to identify these students within their schools (Capp et al., 2017). All school districts serve at least some MCS; therefore, it is vital for public school staff to know who these students are and the unique challenges they face (MCEC, 2013). Although MCS are in most every school district in the U.S., De Pedro et al. (2013) argued that there are few peer-reviewed studies that focus on their school experiences.

Military Culture

The military has its own culture that consists of languages, code of manners, belief systems, behaviors, dress, and rituals (Reger et al., 2008). Through indoctrination, the military culture often replaces the civilian culture, it can have lasting effects that some veterans will continue to identify with it even years after leaving the military (Meyer et al., 2016). Military associations can often take precedence over other identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, political party, or socioeconomic status (Meyer et al., 2016). While in the military, service members develop a sense of comradery, group cohesion, and honorable tenets that bond them with other service members (Krueger, 2000). However, for some the military can present conflicts, for example, some women service members report that the military culture can present negative consequences that are related to sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination (Bell et al., 2014). Whether positive or negative, military culture can often change a service member's worldview, often making it difficult to transition back to civilian life (Brewin et al., 2011).

The spirit of the military culture is also known as the Warrior Ethos and is demonstrated in shared values and beliefs (Konheim-Kalstein et al. 2023). Each branch of service holds its own ethos; however, the shared components of these values consist of honor, courage, duty, commitment, loyalty, and service (Burek, 2018). Military culture is like an iceberg, and above the waterline are the parts of culture that are visible, such as ranks, uniforms, medals, salutes, language, and ceremonies; this is called surface culture (Center for Deployment Psychology, 2014).

At the waterline are service creeds and oaths of service, and below the waterline are the hidden parts of military culture such as the shared values of discipline, teamwork, self-sacrifice, loyalty and fighting spirit are considered deep culture (Center for Deployment Psychology, 2014). Deep culture represents intense emotional experiences that may require extensive counseling services and support (Cole, 2014; McAuliffe, 2013).

Military culture is often mission-oriented, members are expected to make sacrifices, and it is defined by service members' abilities to function (Meyer et al. 2016). This often leads to a negative relationship with mental health for some service members because seeking help is viewed as compromising the mission and can contrast with the military culture's focus on perseverance and self-reliance (Konheim-Kalkstein et al., 2022; Gibbons et al. 2014; Greenberg et al., 2007). In addition, many service members fear that seeking help will damage advancements in their careers (Greenberg et al., 2007). The stressors of military culture have been found to contribute to alcohol abuse, family violence, and sexual violence (Cameron et al., 2011).

Military families are often viewed as an important subculture, these families often must make sacrifices due to their family members being in the military (Meyer et al., 2016). Constant moves, deployments, new schools, friends, and routines are often common factors associated with military families (Meyer et al., 2016). In addition, leaving the military can be particularly difficult for military families because they not

only lose their identities, but in many cases, they lose the support of the military

community (Meyer et al., 2016).

Challenges of MCS

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq played a detrimental role in the mental health

and well-being for many children of U.S. military service members (Capp et al. 2017; De

Pedro et al., 2011; Esqueda et al., 2012). Some of the life events that military families

faced during and after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were parental separations,

household stress during reintegration, exposure to veteran war trauma, multiple school

transitions, and constantly readjusting family dynamics (Capp et al. 2017). These factors

contributed to depression and anxiety among military children (Cederbaum et al., 2014;

Chandra et al., 2010; Chartrand & Seigel, 2007; Gilreath et al., 2015; Hoshmand &

Hoshmand, 2007; Huebner et al., 2009). In addition, MCS were more likely to experience

school behavioral issues and use drugs and alcohol compared to their civilian

counterparts (Capp et al. 2017; Gilreath et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2015). Research has

indicated that MCS have poorer mental health outcomes than their civilian peers because

of the psychological factors that arise in times of war (De Pedro et al., 2014). Gorman et

al. (2010) conducted a longitudinal study on military children, deployments, and mental

health, and this study revealed the following: between the years of 2005 and 2006

behavioral health disorders increased by 18% in military children who had deployed

parents, and the amount of mental health visits of military children increased by 11%.

The findings related to military-connected and civilian students illuminate the challenges

related to military service and the importance of addressing the needs of MCS (Capp et al. 2017).

Mobility

MCS' high mobility can create academic and social challenges for these students. According to Jagger and Lederer (2014), military life can be unpredictable, but one of its constants is geographic mobility or permanent change of station (PCS). On average, students from military families move about nine times during their school years, which makes it difficult to maintain consistency in education or friend groups (MCEC, 2016). MCS face on average three times more moves than their civilian peers (Ruff & Keim, 2014). Active-duty service members' orders last for about 2 to 3 years, and these orders may allow service members dependents to travel with them to their PCS (Huebner, 2018). Relocating is a major factor that affects MCS. Research has shown some difficulties associated with relocations and transitions for school-aged MCS, which include issues related to peer relationships and vulnerabilities; to elevated levels of stress due to constant transitions (Gibbs et al., 2007; Kelley et al., 2003; Lowe et al., 2012).

A study in 1993 by Dr. David Wood and his colleagues revealed that children who changed schools at least 6 times between 1st and 12th grades were 35% more likely to fail a grade than students who moved a couple of times within the school year, or those who did not change schools at all (as cited in Astor et al., 2012). Another study, conducted by David Kerbow on elementary students in 2004 revealed that highly mobile students were 4 months behind than their less-transient peers on standardized tests in fourth grade, and by sixth grade students were a full year behind their peers (as cited in

Astor et al., 2012). In addition, a study conducted in 2009 by Burkam et al. used data

from over 30,000 kindergarten students to examine the impact of mobility on elementary

students. The study revealed that students with lower socioeconomic status faced more

academic setbacks when they changed schools during kindergarten; however, those who

repeated kindergarten showed learning gains (Burkam et al., 2009). Research also found

that children receiving exceptional educational services typically did worse when they

changed schools (Astor et al., 2013). Although most academic research exploring

challenges faced by highly mobile students has primarily focused on civilian students

who have significant issues related to poverty, homelessness, foster care, and other risk

factors; there is also a need to discuss issues related to the mobility in MCS (Ateul et al.

2011). In 2010, a study conducted by Bradshaw et al. from Johns Hopkins University

revealed that adolescents from military families reported significant stress related to

school transitions. This study revealed that students often worried about making new

friends and remaining connected to their old friends, as well as feeling lost in some of

their classes because they had not covered certain materials in their previous schools

(Bradshaw et al., 2010). In addition, O'Brien (2007) examined the relationship between

mobility and achievement in military children in the New York school district near the

Fort Drum Army base (Astor et al., 2013). This study revealed that positive social

support available in the schools or community can have significant positive impacts on

military students' academic performances (Astor et al., 2013). Research on the

geographic mobility of military-connected children and the influence that it has on their

social-emotional wellbeing is well-documented in literature (Anweiler, 2008; Aronson et

al., 2011; Barrette, 2001; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Burrell et al, 2006; Defense Advisory

Committee on Women in the Services, 2008; Ender, 2006; Military Interstate Children's

Compact Commission, 2012; Palmer, 2008; Segal, 1986). Military family relocations are

not always negative; however, the loss of relationships and familiar surroundings often

affects MCS' academic and social lives (Coalition, 2019).

Academic Issues

MCS can experience academic issues due to frequent relocations and exposure to

different and sometimes inconsistent curriculum and teaching techniques, putting many

MCS at risk for experiencing academic challenges (Engel et al., 2010). Buffman et al.

(2009) noted that academic success was contingent on the support systems and the

interventions that school staff had in place to support students' academic achievements. It

is essential to examine the academic support that all public schools have in place and

assess if they are meeting the diverse needs of MCS and their families.

Exceptional Educational Services

There are about 220,000 active-duty and reserve service members who have a

family member with exceptionalities (Huebner, 2018). In all schools in the United States,

exceptional education services are regulated by federal laws and are guaranteed for those

students who are eligible (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Students

with exceptionalities are guaranteed access to a Free Appropriate Public Education and

an IEP (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2000). However, it often

takes time for the services specified in a student's IEP to be set in place, which may or

may not happen before a military family's next PCS (Jagger& Lederer, 2014). The

challenges in obtaining a new IEP, transferring an old one, and navigating exceptional

educational services only compounds the stress that military families already face

(Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services, 2008). In a study conducted by

Jagger and Lederer (2014), military parents reported the following issues with

exceptional educational services: fragile relationships with school staff, inconsistent

implementation of exceptional education services among states and districts, school

districts that are not proactive or accessible to the needs of military families, and issues

over who pays for services. Other issues reported by military parents were as follows:

feeling like they had to battle school systems to get their children's needs met,

inconsistent approaches to educational goals, uncertainty about living arrangements

which impeded proactive planning related to exceptional education services, and new

schools being ill-prepared for military families (Jagger& Lederer, 2014). In general,

military parents reported that public schools often did not follow IEP guidelines, lacked

training and knowledge to help their children, and often delayed services until the family

PCSed (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022; Jagger & Lederer, 2014).

There have been several programs designed to support families who seek

exceptional educational services, the DoD uses the Exceptional Family Member Program

(EFMP) to provide support for military families with children with special needs (MCEC,

2020). Each branch of the military has an EFMP, and the goal of this program is to

support military families utilizing exceptional educational services, provide each family

with a service plan, and assist families with navigating through relocations (MCEC,

2020). Families must apply to be enrolled in the program. The Military Kids Now Survey

administered by MCEC (2020) was issued to 5,100 military families, veterans, and educators. The results from this survey revealed that 70% of families reported challenges implementing IEPs or Incident Action Plans, 50% reported that there were not any accommodations or supports in place during transitions, and 66% reported that they would have liked access to legal advice during relocations. Some of the issues that the Military Kid Now Survey revealed were the following: there was a lack of consistency in exceptional educational services provided between schools, some schools lacked programs or services that were needed, many students had to retest in order to be eligible for services, and many parents struggled to learn new school policies in order to advocate for their children (MCEC, 2020).

Partners in PROMISE's administered a Military Special Education Survey in 2020 to over two hundred military families from a variety of different service branches (MCEC, 2020). The responses confirmed that military parents who access exceptional educational services are not having positive experiences, 97% of the families reported negative experiences navigating exceptional educational services for their children (MCEC, 2020). MCS may be both under- and over-served in exceptional education services due to new school staff being unfamiliar with the students' needs (Arnold et al., 2014). While members of the military form their own identities due to their military connections, many military families who access exceptionality services often form similar identities based around their exceptionalities (Alhusayni, 2022). Minority students are often overrepresented in exceptional educational services due to systematic barriers that they face (Alhusayni, 2022). Strong relationships with school staff, making IEPs

more transportable, developing action plans across military branches and installations to collaborate with local school districts, and effective communication of MCS' needs can decrease barriers and reduce delays in obtaining exceptional educational services (MCEC, 2020). In addition, families being knowledgeable of the gaining school's rules, regulations, and resources can assist with making exceptional educational services transitions smoother.

Gifted, Talented, and High-Achieving

According to the MCEC (2019), highly mobile elementary students who have been identified as gifted and talented (GT) and secondary students who have been identified as high achieving may face challenges related to finding and receiving gifted and enrichment programs. In addition, GT and/or high achieving MCS may experience difficulties transferring between schools, which could limit the student's academic and socioemotional potential (MCEC, 2012). Application deadlines for applying to specialized schools are often difficult to meet since service members are not always given advance notice when relocating, and many of these schools require the presence of students during the application process, which often disqualifies eligible MCS (MCEC, 2012). In some schools, students were required to retake entrance exams to re-qualify for specialized programs or classes (MCEC, 2012). A Texas study found that the rate of participation in gifted and talent programs was much lower for MCS than non-military students (Muller et al., 2016). Finally, high achieving MCS often faced barriers enrolling in programs that meet their needs (MCEC, 2012). All students should have equal access to gifted programs that meet their educational needs. Failure to identify and meet the

needs of gifted children who are culturally diverse or economically challenged is considered a civil rights violation (Silverman & Gilman, 2020). Schools have the unique opportunity and responsibility to make sure that all students thrive in their academic environments.

Issues Related to School Record and Curriculum

With each move to another school, MCS encounter the challenges of slow transfer of records and differences in school curriculum, factors can make school transitions even more stressful (Sherman & Glenn, 2011). According to Kitmitto et al. (2011), it can take up to 3 weeks for records to be transferred from one school to another. Without these records, military students are often placed in the wrong classes or are asked to repeat classes that were already taken at their previous schools (Astor, 2011). Berg (2008) noted that the lack of communication between the previous and receiving schools regarding school history, curricula, achievements, and current stresses led to academic issues for MCS. In a study conducted by Mmari et al. (2010), military parents expressed their concerns about the quality of their children's education, and most of the parents in the study reported that that they felt school personnel did not know how to support military children, especially when it came to issues related to deployment, most felt like school personnel needed more training related to working with military children (Mmari et al., 2010). A MCEC (2012) study identified that the differences in curriculum continued to vary from school to school; and parents discussed concerns regarding the differences in scope and sequence of coursework, specifically in mathematics. Due to constant relocations and transitions MCS often faced academic setbacks due to inconsistent

curricula, content pacing, and varying achievement standards across schools, districts,

and states (Lexington Institute, 2017). These issues left many students struggling to meet

their learning outcomes in their new schools because they had not learned the

foundational skills (Arnold, et al., 2014). In contrast, other students felt bored or

disengaged due to repeating courses where they already mastered the curriculum (MCEC,

2012). Researchers have suggested advocating for quick transfer of school records and

creating uniformity in school curriculum can assist MCS with adjusting to their new

school environments (Kitmitto et al., 2011; Mmari et al., 2010; Sherman & Glenn, 2011).

Social-Emotional Issues

MCS reported higher risk for socio-emotional issues than civilian peers

(MacDermid-Wadsworth et al., 2016). According to De Pedro et al. (2011), there were

several studies conducted before and during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that focused

on MCS' mental health; the following risk factors were identified: frequent relocations,

long parental deployments, isolation, and fear of potential loss of a parent. For example, a

study conducted by Ryan-Weger (2001) revealed that children of active-duty service

members reported significant fear and anxiety that their parent(s) would die in war versus

civilian children. In addition, a study by Wickman et al. (2010) revealed that military

adolescents were more likely to have thoughts about harming or hurting themselves than

the national average. Gorman et al. (2010) further discovered that during 2005–2006

there was an increase in mental and behavioral health visits and behavioral and stress

disorders in military children when their military parent deployed. Higher rates of mental

health problems among military children were often found to be a result of frequent and

prolonged parental deployments (De Pedro et al., 2011). Compared to male MCS, female adolescents reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety than their male counterparts (Mancini et al., 2015; Walker O'Neal et al. 2017). In addition, female military-connected adolescents were at higher risk for depressive and anxiety symptoms (Mancini et al., 2015; Walker O'Neal et al., 2017). Further older military-connected adolescents were at greater risk for more depressive and anxiety symptoms and lower grades compared to younger military-connected adolescents (Lucier-Greer, 2016; Mancini et al., 2015; Walker O'Neal et al., 2017). In addition, poverty and parental depressive symptoms can have an impact on MCS' socio-emotional health (MacDermid-Wadsworth et al., 2016). These studies suggest that several factors including students' developmental levels, gender, socioeconomic status, parental mental health, and frequency and durations of parental deployments influence MCS' socio-emotional health.

Deployments

Along with transitions, school-aged MCS also must manage the stress of a parent or in some cases both parents being deployed, which can lead to difficulties adjusting and managing their emotions (Mmari et al., 2010). In addition, the stress of parental deployments and frequent school transitions impacts students' social skills and, in many cases, causes them to isolate, inadvertently putting them at risk for school victimization (De Pedro et al., 2014; Gilreath et al., 2014). Studies have shown that since the beginning of the Iraq war, mental health hospitalizations for military children with severe issues (including suicidal behaviors) have increased by 50% (Astor et al., 2012; Gorman et al., 2010). A study conducted by Richardson et al. (2011) revealed that the effects of

deployment vary by children's age and gender, with older students having more problems in school than their younger siblings with girls rather than boys having more issues when their parent(s) returns from a deployment. According to Huebner (2019), since 2001 more than 2 million children have experienced a parental deployment ranging from several weeks to a couple of years (Huebner, 2019).

Deployments can lead to families experiencing a range of different emotions which include anticipation, withdrawal, disorganization, stabilization, anticipation, adjustment, and reintegration (DoD, 2010). According to Pincus et al. (2001) the deployment cycle consists of the following distinct stages: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment (see Figure 1). It is important for school counselors and public-school staff to have a clear understanding of these stages to best support MCS and their families as they cycle through emotions related to each stage of deployment.

Figure 1

Deployment Cycle

Pre-Deployment

Post-Deployment

Deployment

Deployment
Cycle

Redeployment

Sustainment
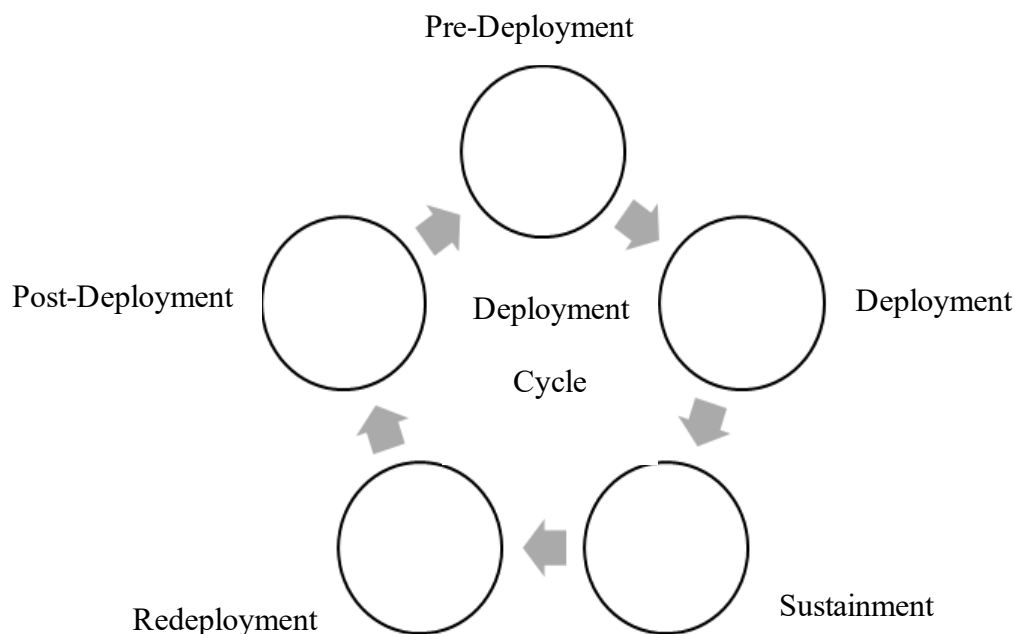
Note. From "The emotional cycle of deployment: A military family perspective," by S. H. Pincus, R. House, and J. Christenson, 2001. *US Army Medical Department Journal*, *4*(5), p. 6. https://www.west-point.org/parent/wppc-st_louis/Deployment/TheEmotionalCycleofDeployment.pdf

The predeployment phase begins with the service member receiving orders for their duty (work) assignment and ends when the service member leaves home. During this stage, the family may experience a range of different emotions and behaviors which include anticipation, loss, denial, anger, emotional detachments, family stress, and marital disagreements (Pincus, et al., 2005). A study conducted by Louie and Cromer (2014) revealed the predeployment phase is the most stressful phase of deployment for young children, and appropriate strategies for preparing children for the deployment are needed. Preschool students are cognitively able to understand deployments and have the capacity to grieve the absence of the deployed parent(s), failing to prepare these students for

parental deployments can leave students feeling sad, confused, and often blaming themselves (Louie & Cromer, 2014).

In the deployment phase, the service member is separated from his or her family for several weeks (Bolton, 2011). According to Pincus et al. (2001) the deployment phase lasts from when the service member departs from home through about the first month of deployment. In this phase, most families reported feeling divided wherein service members often focus on their missions, while family members adjusted to the new family dynamics (MCEC, 2012). Children in this phase often reported the following feelings: abandonment, anger, anxiety, confusion, depression, and/or fear (MCEC, 2012). There may also be limited or inconsistent communication in this phase due to the service members' duties and assignments or lack of infrastructure to support regular contact.

According to Pincus et al. (2001) the sustainment stage typically lasts from the first month of deployment through the duration of deployment, and it is during this time the family has developed new routines and feels more confident. The redeployment phase is described as the period before the service member is set to return home. In this phase the family may feel a variety of emotions which include anticipation, excitement, and/or apprehension (Pincus, et al., 2001). In the postdeployment phase or reintegration phase, the service member returns home and is reunited with their family. Although, postdeployments are often joyous for service members and their families, they can also present challenges due to the changes in the roles and responsibilities within the family, and the invisible or visible injuries that the service member incurred while deployed. A common misconception is that the difficulties of separation instantly disappear when a

service member returns home (Drummet, et al., 2003). Service members often return altered either emotionally and/or physically (Basham, 2007). The reintegration phase can lead to elevated levels of anxiety, fear, and excitement for some children, often making school and personal relationships difficult to navigate (MCEC, 2009).

Feelings related to deployment are often externalized in the form of declining grades and behavior problems at home and school (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). In addition, some adolescents may experience stress related to role ambiguity during a parent's deployment, especially if they took on additional responsibilities in the home to support the nondeployed parent (Chawla et al., 2011; Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Some adolescents report parentification for example, having to take care of younger siblings, managing the emotions of the nondeployed parent and siblings (Baptist et al., 2015; Huebner et al., 2007; Richardson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2017). Parentification is often shown to affect MCS' schoolwork and behaviors (Chandra et. al, 2010). In addition, the added stress can lead to the non-deployed parent being unable to cope and being more reactive in their responses to their children's behaviors (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Research has suggested that military-connected children face increased rates of maltreatment or neglect during a parental deployment (Chawla & Solinas-Saunders, 2011; Gibbs et al., 2007; Rentz et al., 2007), making the support system within public schools an essential insulating factor for children in need (Coalition, 2017).

Civilian Public Schools and MCS

Evidence suggests that frequent relocations and parental deployments contribute to stress and can cause difficulties for MCS and their families (Bradshaw et al, 2010;

Creech et al, 2014). There is a significant presence of MCS in civilian public schools in the United States; therefore, developing strategies that support these students is essential to their success. In a study conducted by De Pedro et al. (2014), researchers identified several military-connected schools that created effective support and transitions programs for their students. The programs often recognized the diversity of MCS and their families and provided support to manage the increased stress and other difficulties related to their unique transitions (De Pedro et al., 2014). Often, these programs provided resources for the students and families including tutoring services, after school programs, and military-specific support groups (De Pedro et al., 2014). In addition, Rumberger's (2003) study of highly mobile students found that by specifically implementing strategies designed to address the needs of mobile students could mitigate the effects of mobility. Despite these findings, there is still a lack of research-based programs or best practices in schools specifically designed for MCS and their families. Research suggests that civilian public schools have not been effective in meeting the needs of MCS and addressing issues related to deployments and frequent school transitions (De Pedro et al., 2014).

School Climates

According to Thapa et al. (2013) over the past three decades researchers and educators have recognized the importance of school climate in K-12 school environments. The National School Climate Council (2007) defined a positive school climate as the following:

> A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic

society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits of, and satisfaction from, learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school as well as the care of the physical environment. (p. 4)

According to Thapa et al. (2013), early educational reformers such as Perry (1908), Dewey (1916), and Durkheim (1961) recognized that the culture of a school influences the life and learning of its students. Maintaining positive school climates for a substantial number of MCS can be difficult for civilian public-school systems (Esqueda et al. 2012). Few studies have examined the role of school environments on MCS. Most of the studies on MCS focus on military-connected children and their families in clinical mental health counseling settings, rather than the MCS in school settings (Gorman et al., 2010; Huebner et al., 2009; MacDermid et al., 2008).

School climate is viewed as multidimensional and encompasses the following: caring relationships with adults, a sense of safety, a sense of belonging to the school community, meaningful participation in school activities, and respect for the students' family and culture (Cohen et al., 2009; De Pedro et al., 2014; Zullig et al., 2010). De Pedro et al. (2014) posited that school staff who are interested in making schools more accommodating for MCS should first focus on transforming the school's climate. School climate is related to the social, emotional, and academic well-being of students. Some

outcomes that are shown in positive school climates are: fewer absenteeism, increased

critical thinking skills, increased school motivation, higher levels of self-esteem and self-

confidence, and more help-seeking behaviors in students (De Pedro et al., 2014; Wilson,

2004).

MCS face unique challenges. Regardless of the branch, rank, or station

assignment, military families possess unique characteristics (Russo and Fallon, 2015).

Often the military lifestyle is viewed as problematic by public-school systems. Public

schools must be aware of the biases associated with viewing military families from a

deficit model (Russo and Fallon, 2015).

Resiliency and MCS

Resiliency is defined as a "sustained competence or positive adjustment in the

face of adversity" (Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 100). Resilience is not a personal

attribute, but it comes from interactions between people in their environments

(Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Lerner, 2006). For MCS, resilience is a product of their

relationships between the people and resources surrounding them (Easterbrooks et al.

2013). Resilience allows MCS to function and recover successfully when under

tremendous amounts of stress (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2012).

Easterbrooks et al. (2013) postulated that most of the research on military -

connected students has taken a deficit approach, and often focuses only on the negative

impacts of military lifestyles. Easterbrooks et al. (2013) argued that to best serve MCS,

identifying sources of strength that helps them cope with adversity is necessary. Children

who are resilient often possess several distinctive characteristics. Goldstein et al. (2012)

found the following characteristics of children and adolescence that promote resiliency, which include "intelligence and cognitive flexibility, regulation and expression of emotions, internal locus of control, personal agency and self-regulation, a good sense of humor, easy-going temperament, optimism, and good health" (as cited in Easterbrooks et al., 2013, p. 104).

Cultural factors often impact resiliency; military culture is deeply rooted in community and service (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Ginsberg & Jablow, 2015; Theron et al. 2011). MCS often have a keen sense of purpose and community which fosters resiliency (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Ginsberg & Jablow, 2015). In addition, MCS often share a sense of pride and service as part of their cultural identities (Cole & Cowan, 2021; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Many MCS must develop resiliency when faced with challenging aspects of military lifestyles such as frequent relocations and deployments (Cole, 2017, 2019; Cole & Cowan, 2021; Ginsberg & Jablow, 2015). While transitions can be difficult for some MCS they can also be an opportunity for personal growth and adventure (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Easterbrooks et al., 2013). In addition, traveling to various parts of the world can help MCS connect with diverse cultures and be open to adapting to new environments (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Ruff & Keim, 2014).

School Counselors and Fostering Resiliency

Secure relationships can mitigate the psychological impact of serious stressors such as deployment and multiple transitions (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Trask-Tateet al. 2012). School counselors play a significant role in fostering resilience for students who

are under-resourced, live far from their extended families, and have parents who are deployed (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Rhodes & Roffman, 2008). School counselors can support MCS from a strength-based approach by helping students develop additional strengths that they may be unaware exist (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Echterling et al., 2010).

In addition, school counselors can provide individual and group counseling services to MCS to promote resiliency (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Cole & Cowan; 2021). These counseling services can foster a sense of hope and be safe places for MCS to talk about resiliency and how they overcome and cope with challenges (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Rose & Steen, 2015). Also, school counselors can use the strength-based approach to celebrate MCS within their school environments. School counselors are often responsible for creating counseling programs that are inclusive for all cultures including military culture (Cole & Cowan, 2021; Morgan & Ross, 2015). Some ways that school counselors can include MCS is by celebrating military holidays like Veterans Day and the Month of the Military Child, which helps promote awareness of MCS and a school culture of understanding (Ruff & Keim, 2014). In addition, school counselors can foster supportive relationships with military families and other community members to strengthen these resiliencies (Bryan, 2005; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Cole & Cowan, 2021; Rose & Steen, 2015).

School Reform Related to MCS

Congress has provided financial assistance since 1950 for school districts through the Impact Aid Program (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024). The

Impact Aid law, now known as the Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 ensures that school districts who have students who live on military bases, reservations, low-rent housing, or other federal properties receive financial assistance that can be used for school expenses which can include the following: teachers' salaries, after-school programs, computers, and tutoring programs (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2024).

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires schools to include a Military Specific Identifier (MSI) question in their enrollment process to assist staff with identifying the MCS in their schools, this question is voluntary, and parents can opt not to answer it (Quintana & Cole, 2021; MCEC, 2012). The MSI may assist in enhancing academic, career, and social/emotional interventions designed for MCS (Quintana & Cole, 2021). In 2008, congress recognized that more support services needed to be put in place for military families at civilian public schools and created a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. DoD to increase services and support for this population (Council of State Governments, 2010b; Esqueda et al., 2012). In 2011, President Obama issued a directive to all federal agencies, placing the educational needs of military students as a top priority (Esqueda et al., 2012; White House, 2011).

There has been additional legislation that is focused on MCS, one of them that is discussed throughout the literature is the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children (Astor et al., 2013; Esqueda et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2014; Williams, 2013). This is a federal program that addresses some of the challenges that

MCS have while transitioning and ensures that these students are not penalized or delayed in meeting their educational goals because of their military lifestyles (MIC3, 2019). It requires public schools to coordinate with other school districts to share the following: graduation policies, excused absences during parental leave, transfer of records and courses, exceptional educational services, extracurricular activities, and other administrative policies (Astor et al., 2013; Esqueda et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2014; Williams, 2013). The Compact is the largest school reform effort aimed at MCS and it addresses the issues related to eligibility, enrollment, placement, and graduation, all fifty states and the District of Columbia have endorsed the Compact (Military OneSource, 2022).

Solutions for Civilian Public Schools

Civilian public schools can be safe places for children that can help students cope with the stressors in their lives (De Pedro et al., 2011). Civilian public schools need to look at solutions that highlight best practices for military students and their families. The following are a list of solutions taken from the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL; Coalition, 2017):

1. Ensure that all academic records accompany the students during their moves are interpreted and incorporated accurately and efficiently by the receiving school.

2. Look at the educational strategies that were effective and ineffective for students.

3. Implement the Military Student Identifier, which will improve the ability to identify and track academic successes and challenges of military students.

4. Create an in-depth student portfolio that provides information on the richness of the child's experiences, including much more than test scores, transcripts, IEPs, and discipline records would put the new school in a better position to know and begin serving the whole child.

5. Develop communication protocols between schools or school districts to and from which students often transition could speed the integration and positive assimilation of a student into the new school.

6. Develop parent-centered, tech-enabled tools and rubrics that will allow parents to maintain information that can guide decision-making and access to resources.

7. Identify and institutionalize state-level education personnel charged with creating an ongoing, but flexible state infrastructure could develop locality-specific institutionalized processes to support MCS and transitions.

8. Continue to implement and keep public awareness of the provisions of the Interstate Compact, which could accelerate the standardization of key practices around school transitions and could lead to support for developing nationwide tools on credit/course transfer consistency.

9. Institutionalize welcoming practices and specific counselors with expertise in serving highly mobile students, which could lead to greater acceptance and more stability for these programs.

10. Strengthen military-school partnerships as a core component of improving the school transition experience for students and parents. This action will allow schools to be even more responsive to individual student needs.

11. Keep the presence of skilled, supportive professionals in schools, districts, and communities as a key to the goal of meeting student transition needs, which could go a long way in dealing with the challenges of mobility and transitions.

12. Continue professional development that is consistent and targeted to counselors and staff with student contact, which can have a substantial impact on the experience of military children transitioning into the schools.

13. Make the name and contact information of the POC for military children clear on websites for districts and schools with significant numbers of MCS(Coalition, 2017, pp. 28-29).

Most public schools do not have a keen awareness of MCS and the challenges that their families have endured (Elfman, 2017). Public schools must make their behavioral policies transparent to combat at-risk behaviors for all students.

School Counselors and MCS

School counselors play a critical role in ensuring that MCS feel connected and supported in their school environments (American School Counselor Association, 2023). A part of a school counselor's responsibility is to support MCS with their academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2023; Quintana & Cole, 2021). In addition, they provide instruction, appraisal and advisement, and counseling services to assist with supporting the needs of MCS (ASCA, 2019, 2023). School counselors are

positioned in public schools to serve and advocate for MCS and consequently transform school transitions into positive experiences (Ruff & Keim, 2014). The school environment plays a significant role in helping MCS adjust during times of transitions and deployments (Quintana, 2021). In addition, the school counselor facilitates, develops, and implements preventive programs and interventions that support social belonging for all students (Rush & Akos, 2007).

As culturally competent professionals, school counselors must be informed about military life and become knowledgeable about resources and culturally sensitive interventions suited for military students (Waliski et al., 2012). The military is often viewed as a culture within a culture that includes specific factors such as branch, status, job, rank, years of service, and language (Cole, 2014). It is important that educators and school counselors are equipped with tools to support this population (ASCA, 2015). According to Ruff and Keim (2014), staff training can facilitate cultural sensitivity and supportive student and teacher relationships that in turn contributes to positive school experiences.

ASCA (2023) provides the following guidelines to enhance school counseling programs that support MCS:

1. Recognize and identify distinct challenges faced by MCS and help mitigate their impact on students' academic, career and social/emotional development (Cole, 2016; Ruff & Keim, 2014).

2. Understand the intersections of students' identities, including military culture (e.g., language, customs, etc.), and the need for culturally responsive and

sustaining practices when working with MCS and their families (ASCA, 2022; Cole, 2014).

3. Promote an inclusive school climate that includes school-family-community partnerships, connectedness, and a sense of belonging for MCS (James, 2017; Quintana & Cole, 2021).

4. Identify and provide resources for MCS and families, especially during unique periods such as relocations, deployments, and military separation (Cole, 2016).

5. Provide goal-focused, evidenced-based, short-term group and individual counseling services to address MCS' social/emotional needs (ASCA, 2020).

6. Support the postsecondary readiness needs of MCS through various college and career-focused activities (e.g., postsecondary action plans, SAT/ACT preparation, career inventories, financial aid planning, identification of gaps in college/career access, college/career advisement, etc.; College Board, 2010; Quintana & Cole, 2021).

7. Use data-informed approaches to identify academic needs and support remediation efforts for MCS experiencing learning loss/gaps due to transitional experiences (ASCA, 2019).

8. Collaborate with military families when referring students to appropriate support services and community organizations (ASCA, 2019).

9. Advocate for school policies that increase awareness, knowledge, support, and success when working with MCS (e.g., Military Student Identifier, Military Interstate Compact, etc.; James, 2017; Quintana & Cole, 2021).

10. Consult and collaborate with installation and community partners (e.g., school liaison officer, Exceptional Family Member Program, Family Advocacy Program, etc.) to promote MCS' educational success (Quintana, 2021).

11. Engage in and promote professional development opportunities to support MCS and advocate for their diverse, unique needs in schools (Quintana & Cole, 2021). (ASCA, 2023, pp. 1-2)

School counselors are obligated to promote the equitable treatment of all students (ASCA, 2022). Historically, underrepresented populations like MCS have faced systematic barriers when it comes to accessing resources and support; however, all students have a right to have access to school counselors who function as social-justice advocates for social change (ASCA, 2022). School counselors' roles in public schools place them in the prime position to foster positive experiences and advocate for MCS and their families (Ruff & Keim, 2014).

Summary and Conclusions

Given the unique challenges that MCS face related to mobility, academic stressors, socio-emotional issues, and deployments; more research is needed on evidence-based interventions that can be used in all civilian public schools to combat these issues. School counselors are positioned in civilian public schools to serve and advocate for

MCS and consequently transform school transitions into positive experiences (Ruff &

Keim, 2014). Through the study, I examined the experiences of elementary school

counselors working with MCS with active-duty parents. It was my hope that this study

would gain insight on interventions and supports that have helped MCS and their families

thrive in civilian public schools. In addition, I hoped to provide information that would

enhance the counseling profession's ability to understand and support MCS and their

families within their communities and schools. In Chapter 3, I expand on the research

method for the study, including the procedures I used for recruiting the sample, data

collection methods, and analysis.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of elementary public-school counselors who serve MCS with active-duty parents. I wanted to specifically explore the training needs and professional development opportunities for public-elementary school counselors regarding MCS and their families. According to Kranke (2019), less than 10% of school staff in public schools reported previous training to work with MCS and their families. Further, about 50% of public-school staff reported little or no training and education on military families (Kranke, 2019). MCS are most likely to attend civilian public schools rather than schools operated by the DoD (Astor et al., 2013). Therefore, it is important that civilian school personnel are properly trained in how to best support these students and their families, as schools play a critical role in supporting children and families during times of deployment.

In Chapter 3, I present the research methods design and rationale and my role as the researcher. I discuss the selection of participants and instrumentation along with research procedures. In addition, I explain the data collection and analysis, and how I address threats to validity and reliability, and any ethical concerns.

Research Design and Rationale

For this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. According to Van Manen (2007), hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the true meaning of the participants' lived experiences. In this study, I answered the following overarching

question: What are the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors serving MCS with active-duty parents? To help me understand this overarching question, I also wanted to gather participant answers to the following questions:

   1. What barriers, if any, do elementary school counselors experience when supporting MCS with active-duty parents?

   2. What are the training experiences of elementary school counselors who support MCS with active-duty parents?

   To best address the research questions, I used the hermeneutic approach. The research gained from hermeneutic phenomenological studies helps the researcher use data from individuals' perspectives to understand a phenomenon (Regan, 2012). The researcher plays an active role in a hermeneutic phenomenological design and the researcher's understanding is inserted into the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this study, my role was to illuminate the voices of elementary school counselors and uncover the essence of their experiences with MCS.

   Qualitative research was the best approach for this study because it aims to uncover the rich experiences of the participants (see Kafle, 2013). A quantitative methodology would not have been appropriate in this study because it uses controlled conditions and managed variables which fail to understand the essence of the feelings and emotions of participants (see Thamhain, 2014). Using a qualitative design allows researchers to explore individuals in their natural environment, and gain meaning through interviews, journaling, and analyzing narratives of the participants who experience a specific phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

Conroy (2003) stated that in a hermeneutic phenomenological study both the researcher and participants reflect meaning through sharing personal beliefs, values, and assumptions. As the only researcher in this study, I recognized how my background might influence the study. I have a master's degree in Community Counseling and hold a licensed professional counselor credential. For the last 6 years, I have worked as a MFLC working specifically with active-duty service members and their children. My own experience with MCS led to the selection of this topic. I have often observed interactions with public school personnel and wondered if they felt prepared to address the sometimes-complex issues that these families often present. Due to my personal history, the hermeneutic circle was used in this study to assist with becoming aware of personal biases and was used in the data analysis section to identify how my interpretations would emerge. To ensure a clear separation of my role as a MFLC, I did not interview participants who worked in the school district in which I currently work. A clear separation of roles was established to ensure confidentiality and prevent potential biases from occurring. In addition, I used member checking to mitigate threats to validity.

Another aspect of my history is that I have worked as a school counselor in a public school near a large military installation. My role as a school counselor created my preunderstanding. Through this experience, I have become familiar with the many roles that school counselors have to navigate, and the complex challenges that MCS experience due to relocations, deployments, and stressors related to military life. According to Bleiker et al. (2019), researchers can use many different strategies to mitigate threats to

validity and address potential biases, such as triangulation, member checking, audit trails, and thick descriptions. I used member checking, and I followed an interview guide, when conducting the interviews with participants (see Appendix A).

Methodology

I used purposeful sampling in this study, and I relied on snowball and criterion sampling to identify participants who may have information about the phenomenon being explored. According to O'Halloran et al. (2018), studies with phenomenological designs require purposeful sampling methods to help identify individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. To reach potential participants, I posted an invitation for participants on the Georgia School Counselor Association (GSCA) list serv, CESNET, academic twitter, and other social media outlets. I used snowball sampling from my professional network to find participants that fit the criterion for the study.

Participant Selection Logic

According to Laverty (2003), participant selection in interpretative phenomenology targets participants who meet certain criteria and have the lived experience that is being researched. The criteria for participants in this study was the following:

1. Elementary school counselors who work/have worked in U.S.-based, K-12 public schools.

2. School counselors who work/ have worked with students with active-duty military parents in public school systems for a minimum of 1 year.

3. School counselors who work/have worked near military installations in military-connected schools for a minimum of 1 year.

I determined whether the participants met the criteria by asking the following screening questions:

1. Are you a certified school counselor in your state?

2. Have you worked in your role as a school counselor for a minimum of 1 year?

3. Do you currently work/or have you worked as a school counselor in an elementary public school with MCS who have active-duty parents for a minimum of 1 year?

Population

The population for this study consisted of public-elementary school counselors who have worked with MCS with active-duty parents. They were invited to contact me via e-mail to indicate their interest and provide contact information for the study. I recruited a sample size of 12 participants using a purposive, snowballing sampling strategy, as Hennink and Kaiser (2022) suggested data saturation can be attained with a sample size of nine to 17 participants. Saturation occurs when the researcher obtains duplicate information from participants and new data is not collected in the interview process (Creswell, 2013).

I chose to include only certified school counselors because they had most likely received appropriate training required for school counselors in the United States by the ASCA (2016). According to ASCA (2016), certified school counselors in their state must have the following: an advanced degree in school counseling, stay up to date on current

research, maintain professional competence in current school counseling issues and topics, and help to maintain a school climate that embraces diversity and promotes academic, career, and social/emotional development for all students. I needed to understand the experiences of elementary school counselors who have served MCS with active-duty parents to obtain the richest data for the study. In addition, it was crucial that I interviewed the right participants to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. By making sure the participants met the inclusion criteria, I ensured that the information obtained represented the voices of elementary school counselors.

Sampling Strategy

According to Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), sampling is an important aspect of qualitative research design because it influences the trustworthiness of the study's findings. A strength of qualitative research is its ability to explain processes and patterns that are difficult to quantify (Tenney et al., 2022). Phenomena involving experiences, attitudes, and behaviors can be difficult to capture quantitatively, however a qualitative approach allows participants themselves to explain how, why, or what they were thinking, feeling, and/or experiencing (Tenney et al. ,2022). The goal of qualitative sampling is to have enough participants that will provide rich data to understand the phenomenon being studied (Hennink et al., 2019). Bernard (2013) believed that 10 to 20 research participants were needed to uncover and the lived experiences of any qualitative study. This research study targeted 12 participants.

After I received approval from Walden University Institutional Board, I started to recruit participants. Participants for this study were recruited via social media sites such

as Facebook, Academic Twitter, email lists of school counselors found on school websites, and the GSCA. Morgan et al. (2013) stated that email lists created specifically for target populations are effective in recruiting participants for qualitative studies. In addition, many researchers view Facebook and other social media sites as viable options for recruiting participants (Antoun et al., 2016; Ash et al., 2021; Gu et al., 2016; Kapp et al., 2013; King et al., 2014; Pedersen & Kurz, 2016; Ramo & Prochaska, 2012; Thomson & Ito, 2014). I identified social media groups and chatrooms associated with elementary school counselors; I posted the recruitment flyer to identify potential participants. The link to the informed consent and demographic questionnaire (via Qualtrics), was included within the recruitment flyer. Once the participants selected "I consent" in the Qualtrics platform, I emailed participants a brief description of my study including the purpose of the research, informed consent, and brief information about me. The informed consent contained an explanation of the following: the risks and benefits of the study, the purpose of the study, the projected length of the interviews along with how the interviews would be conducted (via Zoom) and contact information for the researcher. I scheduled a time to conduct semistructured interviews via the Zoom platform after the demographic questionnaires were completed. According to Persen and Kurz (2016), Facebook recruitment creates a digital version of snowball sampling which leads to study participants recruiting other participants with similar profiles.

Instrumentation

According to Peoples (2020), phenomenological research includes a variety of sources of data collection, including interviews, focus groups, field notes, recordings, and

observations with the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon being studied. I used memos, observations, and semistructured interviews; one-on-one interviews with participants was the main source of data collection. For this study, I used a researcher-created, semistructured interview protocol to answer the overarching research question. Peoples recommended semistructured interviews because interview questions can be constructed to the research questions which can assist participants in discussing information that is relevant to the study. Also, the interviews consisted of open-ended questions, allowing for flexibility during the interviewing process (see Smith et al., 2009). All interviews were audiotaped via Rev App. Each of the interviewees' verbatim transcripts were utilized as part of the data analysis process. Researcher observation notes and memos were written within 24 hours of the participants' interviews on an interview sheet that I developed to ensure accuracy. All interview recordings were stored in a secure folder on my password-protected computer. Participants were sent a copy of their verbatim transcripts via email to review and to ensure the accuracy of the data collected. Participants had 10 days to respond to the initial email from me to identify potential inaccuracies. Participants were sent two reminder emails on Day 5 and again on Day 9. After Day 10, if the participant had not responded no further emails were sent out and the initial transcripts were used. If a participant responded to the email indicating inaccuracies in the interview, I conducted a 30-minute follow up member checking interview. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to keep biases in check.

With the permission of each participant, I conducted the interviews by using the Zoom online platform. All interviews were audio-recorded using the Rev App; this

application also transcribed each interview. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant a coded identity that was a part of a file containing their signed consents, audio files, and transcripts from interviews (American Counseling Association, 2014). Member checking, follow-up interviews, and reviewing transcripts were conducted to clarify any gaps or missing data in the initial interviews.

Twelve elementary school counselors were interviewed for this study, and all agreed to participate in semistructured interviews that ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. I read the interview script to each research participant prior to reading the prepared set of interview questions. All participants were told that the interviews were recorded on a separate device and that their identities would be protected and kept confidential. Interviewees were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences.

During the interviews, I took notes to track the interviewees' nonverbal cues and any additional observations that I noticed in the interviews. All 12 participants were debriefed at the end of each interview and encouraged to share additional feedback and questions. Reflexive journaling was utilized after each interview.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I recruited participants using the GSCA list serv, CESNET, academic twitter, and other social media outlets. I gathered data, in the form of semistructured interviews, from each participant utilizing an online Zoom interview that lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. I posted recruitment invitations through the listserv (and other outlets) and followed up with potential participants via email to review procedures, answer questions, and arrange

interviews. I posted requests for participation weekly until I had obtained the goal sample size of eight to 12 participants, or until data saturation was reached.

As part of the informed consent process, participants were notified of the risks and benefits of the study and were told that they were free to exit the study at any time. Prior to scheduling interviews, I asked participants to complete and return a brief demographic form via Qualtrics. Interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform and were audio recorded using the Rev App. Audio recordings were hand-coded and analyzed. I used pseudonyms for the participants during transcription to protect identities and maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis Plan

Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the true meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Regan, 2012). In addition, hermeneutics concentrates on interpretation by looking at context and original purpose (Heidegger, 1962). The hermeneutic circle refers to exposure to the text, interpreting the text, and then re-exposure to the text, this offers a closer look and leads to new insights (Heidegger, 1962; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Audio recordings of the interviews were hand-coded, and I compared the transcripts to the audio recordings to check for accuracy.

A descriptive qualitative data analysis was used to guide the data collection of the research study. According to Peoples (2020), students should immerse themselves in the descriptive world when analyzing phenomenological data. Peoples discussed the following steps for phenomenological data analysis:

1. Read and delete irrelevant information.

2. Create preliminary meaning units.

3. Break down the meaning units into final meaning units.

4. Organize situated narratives.

5. Create general narratives.

6. General structure

7. Complete a phenomenological summary/analysis. (pp. 59-62)

Illustrated Data Analysis Steps

Above I listed the phenomenological data analysis steps used in this study. Below, I explain the steps in further detail.

Read and Delete Irrelevant Information

I used the Rev App and hand-coding to transcribe all the participant interviews. I immersed myself in the data by reading the entire transcripts and notes taken during all the interviews to gain an understanding of the whole account of the participants' experiences. In addition, I deleted any irrelevant repetitive statements or filler linguistics such as "you know" or "um" (see Peoples, 2020).

For example, the initial text for P003 was as follows:

I think one of the biggest challenges that I have seen is that (um), we have students that will often come into the school (um), maybe not at the beginning of the school year, but maybe mid school year or after the year has started.

P003 revised,

I think one of the biggest challenges that I have seen is that we have students that will often come into the school, maybe not at the beginning of the school year, but maybe mid school year or after the year has started.

Create Preliminary Meaning Units

I read all the transcripts and separated them into "meaning units." According to Peoples (2020), the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis follow-up interviews should be included in the data analysis steps. There were not any follow-up interviews conducted or needed. These initial meaning units were succinct parts that reflect the language and understanding of the participants (see Shelton & Bridges, 2019). I assigned alphanumeric codes to each transcript to protect the participants' confidentiality, for example, P001 to P0012. The following are examples of participants' quotes that were pulled into meaning units.

P001 stated,

I would say the biggest things we see are when parents are getting ready to deploy or come home. Whether that parent is more of the stable parent for them. We've had some whose spouses are at home to care for the kids. They just become so overloaded, and their mental health can decline quickly, that we've had to put in some different supports for them.

P009 added, "I've seen, some parents struggle with depression and then at times we have dealt with truancy issues, attendance, and that kind of thing." In addition, P0010 claimed, They're going through their own things emotionally and mentally as well as the stress."

From these quotes, I was able to pull the meaning unit "mental health of at-home parent during deployments." I did this for each interview, looking at each paragraph.

Break Down Meaning Units Into Final Meaning Units

In this step, I broke down the preliminary meaning units to final meaning units. The final meaning units that I pulled out from each of the interviews created themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2003), any recurring concepts are identified as themes and labeled accordingly. The themes helped broaden my understanding of each of the participants' descriptions (see Peoples, 2020). The following is an example of final meaning units. Theme 2 was supporting MCS through challenges and barriers, and the subtheme was experiences with deployment-related risk factors with MCS.

Organize Situated Narratives

The situated narratives were a reiteration of each participants' interview. I organized the specifics and experiences pertaining to each interview question thematically (see Peoples, 2020). I highlighted each of the participants' experiences thematically using direct quotes and responses to interview questions (see Peoples, 2020). The following is an example. P001 asserted,

> We also have, it's new this year. One of our teachers runs it, it's a spirit squad, so anytime we have new kids, they go down and greet them and they have little goody bags and things like that. I think it just makes them feel a little bit more at ease that first day that it's not so big and scary.

P005 added,

One of the things that we do here is any time that we have a new student in

military or, or not we do something called Welcome Wagon, where the student

and some students in their classroom take and bring them around the school and

they meet everybody.

Moreover, P0010 claimed, "The culture of the school is amazing of course that's my

perception of it, but really when families come in and they enroll their kids from the very

start it is a very welcoming and love filled building." The theme that I extracted from

these quotes was creating welcoming public schools for military-connected students.

Create General Narratives

In this step, I created general narratives from the situated narratives, this put

together the participants' narratives into a general description (see Peoples, 2020). Each

narrative was organized by interview questions. In addition, the organized narratives

highlighted meaning that existed in the participants' experiences (see Peoples, 2020). The

following is an example:

Interview Question 9 asked, "Describe any training or professional development

activities that your school offers related to military culture, military families, or military-

connected students. If there are no trainings or professional development activities

offered, do you think that they would be beneficial for your role as a school counselor

why or why not?" Over half of the participants identified that there was not any training

or professional development opportunities offered at their schools. Three out of the 12

participants mentioned that they were Purple Star Schools and that training was a part of

this designation. According to the MCEC (2023), Purple Star School programs were

designed to assist schools with responding to the academic and social-emotional needs of MCS and offer training for staff and student-led programs. All participants in the study acknowledged that training on military culture and military families was beneficial for their roles as elementary counselors.

General Structure

The general structure of the data analysis process is intended to assist the researcher in moving away from the participants' everyday perspectives (Peoples, 2020). It is here that Peoples (2020) proposed discussing the implicit themes of the participants' descriptions. I identified and discussed the themes that were in all or most of the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Participants were given alphanumeric codes: P001 to P012.

Phenomenological Summary/Analysis

Peoples (2020) asserted that the phenomenological summary should be written in a way that describes the experience so that any reader who has had that experience can identify it. In addition, discrepancies among participants should be discussed and how the discrepancies factored into the data analysis process (Peoples, 2020). The following is an example: When elementary school counselors can recognize MCS' entire *Dasein* as relates to their military culture, it often empowers MCS to share their experiences.

Throughout the data analysis process, I used the hermeneutic circle to understand the whole (entire transcripts) and analyzed the whole as I read it. I then used it to understand the parts (codes and themes) until a new understanding emerged (see Peoples,

2020). Data analysis became a spiral process as I used it to understand new data as they were introduced (see Peoples, 2022).

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four strategies to establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I maintained trustworthiness by transcribing verbatim transcripts using the Rev App. According to Gadamer (1989), qualitative researchers need to use a variety of different strategies to make their study credible, rigorous, and trustworthy. I also used semistructured interviews, member checking, reflexive journaling, and audit trails. I fully address the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability further in Chapter 4.

Semistructured Interviews

Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) posited that semistructured interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to understand the unique perspectives of participants. For this study, I used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the semistructured interviews and what participants experienced in their daily lives or *lifeworlds* (Neubauer et al., 2019). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach helped me to interpret the semistructured interviews in relation to their individual contexts and helped to illuminate the participants' understanding of being and how this shaped their individual decisions (see Heidegger, 1867). I was able to interpret the lived experiences of the participants through

open-ended prepared questions. The interview protocol I utilized can be found in Appendix A.

Debriefing

At the end of each interview, participants were debriefed for approximately 5 to 10 minutes. The purpose of the study, confidentiality, and member checking were reviewed. The risks and benefits were explained, and each participant was asked to review the resources on the informed consent page in case any adverse symptoms developed during or after the interview. Participants were allowed to ask additional questions or make comments about the interviews. Each participant was reminded that transcripts and audio-recorded files would be saved on a password-protected computer file and held by the researcher for 5 years.

Member Checking

Participants were sent a copy of their verbatim transcript via email to review and to ensure accuracy of the data collected. Member checking is a way for participants to verify the accuracy of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010). Once participants were sent their transcripts, they had 10 days to respond to the initial email from me if inaccuracies are found. Participants were sent two reminder emails, first on Day 5 and again on Day 9. After Day 10, if the participant had not responded, no further emails were sent out, and the initial transcript was used. Ten participants confirmed via email that the data in their interview transcript was accurate. Two participants requested that minor modifications were made, and I obliged. Data collection concluded on July 11,

2023, after the member checking process was complete. I used 10 original and two modified transcripts in my coding and data analysis process.

Reflexivity

Researcher bias is not viewed as problematic in qualitative research if researchers are explicit about their preconceived beliefs (Harry et al., 2005). Reflexivity allows the researcher to be transparent about their potential influence as they engage with the data (Carlson, 2010). Grant et al. (2012) stated that reflective journals can identify the researcher's biases and reflect on the data that unfold in the study. Throughout the study, I kept a journal recording my thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the research process. I made any biases that I had explicit as I interpreted the participants' interviews. In addition, the hermeneutic circle was used in the reflective process. I learned about my biases, and I compared them to the participants' responses. This provided an understanding of the participants' experiences of working with MCS with active-duty parents, using my own lens, but recognizing my biases as part of the process.

Audit Trails

Audit trails originated in qualitative research with the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to Lincoln and Guba, audit trails establish the confirmability of qualitative findings. Observation notes, interview notes, journals, and maintaining audiotapes for a set length of time were all part of the audit trail (see Carlson, 2010) in this research study. Throughout the study, I kept a journal recording my thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and assumptions about the research process. Audio-recorded files were saved on a password-protected computer file and will be held for 5 years.

Ethical Procedures

Ravitch and Carl (2016) posited that protecting the privacy of participants includes both confidentiality and anonymity. I completed an application through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University to ensure that the research complied with the university's ethical standards as well as U.S. federal regulations (see Walden University, 2021). The IRB approval number for this study was # 01-26-23-1009799. In addition, I provided each participant with the opportunity to withdraw from the research study, for any reason, without penalty. I provided the participants with the option to have their interview information withheld from the study should they decide to withdraw from the study.

To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant a coded identity that was a part of a file containing their signed consents, audio files, and transcripts from interviews (see ACA, 2014). Participants were sent a copy of their verbatim transcript via email to review and to ensure accuracy of the data collected. Participants had 10 days to respond to the initial email from me if inaccuracies are found. Participants were sent two reminder emails on Day 5 and again on Day 9. After Day 10 if the participant had not responded, no further emails were sent out, and the initial transcript was used. If a participant responded to the email, I conducted a 30-minute follow up member checking interview. I provided each participant information about confidentiality and the use of email and provided the option to mail hard copy forms to be completed before the live video interview.

Summary

A phenomenological design was used to address the following research question: What are the lived experiences of elementary school counselors serving MCS with active-duty parents? This design allowed for the discovery of rich descriptions of the phenomenon. In addition, purposive sampling and the snowball strategy technique were used to assist me in recruiting participants for the study. Recruitment took place using the GSCA list serv, CESNET, academic twitter, and other social media outlets. Participant criteria included self-identification as an elementary school counselor who has worked or currently works with MCS with active-duty parents. Interviews were conducted using the Zoom teleconferencing platform and were audio-recorded using the Rev App. Trustworthiness and ethical procedures included approval from the Walden University IRB, complying with confidentiality guidelines, member checking, audit trails, and keeping a reflexive journal. In Chapter 4, I will outline the results of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The overarching problem for this study was that public school personnel often lack the knowledge and awareness of the issues that have an impact on military families, and in turn are unable to be supportive and responsive to the social and emotional needs of this population (De Pedro et al., 2014). In Chapter 4, I present the research findings and connect the findings of the study with a hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy. In addition, I explore the experiences of 12 public-school elementary school counselors who have worked with MCS with active-duty military parents. The information obtained from the data collection and analysis process answered the main research question: What are the lived experiences of elementary public-school counselors serving MCS with active-duty military parents? In addition, the data answers the following sub questions: What barriers, if any, do elementary school counselors experience when supporting MCS with active-duty parents? What are the training experiences of elementary school counselors who support MCS with active-duty parents?

In this study, I explain the barriers and challenges surrounding working with MCS and how elementary school counselors can mitigate some of these challenges. The participants' openness to share their experiences provided insight on support for MCS, professional development for elementary school counselors, and resources needed for MCS and their families.

In this chapter, I provide information on the setting, demographics, data collection and analysis process, trustworthiness, and the results of the study. I explain my coding

process along with thematic identification. The participants' responses emerged themes and led to identifying the commonalities among the participants along with any discrepancies in data.

Research Setting

Data for this hermeneutic phenomenological study were collected by conducting online semistructured interviews using the Zoom platform with 12 elementary school counselors. As technology advances, video conferencing programs, such as the Zoom platform, provide researchers with a cost-effective and convenient alternative to in-person interviews (Gray et al. 2020). In addition, many researchers have found that there is not a difference in quality of interviews when online and face-to-face interviews were compared (Cabaroglu et al., 2010; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Each potential participant was asked to choose an interview day and time that was convenient for their schedules. Participants were emailed the date and time of their interviews and their password protected Zoom links. Participants were encouraged to be in a private location during the interviews, were told that all interviews would be audio-recorded on a separate device, and were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview at any time during the study. A brief description of my study including the purpose of the research, explanation of informed consent, and brief overview of the researcher was explained in a Qualtrics survey. The participants selected "I consent" in the Qualtrics platform, indicating their understanding of the research process and willingness to participate in the study.

According to Rabionet (2011), it is important for the researcher to establish rapport with participants so that the participants are more willing to discuss the topic

being researched. I began each of my interviews with a brief explanation of my study and cordial conversation to put the participants at ease. All the participants were willing to discuss their experiences openly and did not verbalize any issues with the questions that were asked. During the interviews, I clarified participants' statements and asked follow-up questions to gain rich information about their experiences. At the conclusion of each interview, I thanked each participant for taking the time to participate in the study and asked if there were any additional questions. Finally, I explained that each interview would be transcribed, and the transcripts would be sent to them via email to confirm accuracy.

Data Collection

I interviewed 12 participants regarding their experience of working with MCS with active-duty parents. All interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform, and each interview was audio-recorded on a separate device for transcription purposes. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. After recording each interview, I wrote in my reflective journal and personally transcribed each recorded interview for accuracy. I omitted the participants' names, school names, and military installations from each of the transcripts to ensure participant confidentiality. To my knowledge, each participant was in a private location during the interviews. All participants selected "I consent" in the Qualtrics platform after completing the demographic questionnaires. After the interviews, I used member checking to ensure that the information was an accurate representation of the participants' experiences. Some of the techniques that I used to gain information were open-ended questions, paraphrasing, taking notes, and clarifying information that was not

clear. Follow-up interviews were not needed; however, minor modifications were needed for two of the participants' transcripts. I followed the prescribed data collection process and did not deviate from this process.

Data Analysis

I used hermeneutic phenomenology to conduct and record 12 in-depth interviews. The verbatim transcripts were transcribed using the Rev App. I analyzed each transcript by listening to the audio file and comparing it to the initial transcript to check for accuracy. I created descriptive codes and I hand-coded the data while keeping the overarching research question concerning elementary school counselors' lived experiences of working with MCS with active-duty parents as the focus of my research. I used thematic analysis to develop codes and themes for the 12 transcripts. The first codes that were identified using thematic analysis created preliminary meaning units. Braun and Clark (2006) postulated that thematic analysis provides core skills for conducting qualitative analysis and should be a foundational method used by researchers. In addition, thematic analysis is useful in examining the different perspectives of research participants and illuminating the similarities and differences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

As I described in Chapter 3, I used the following steps when I analyzed the data: (a) read the transcripts in entire form and take out irrelevant information, (b) create preliminary meaning units, (c) break down final meaning units, (d) organize situated narratives, (e) create general narratives, (f) create a general structure, and (g) complete a phenomenological summary/analysis. First, I read the transcripts and played the audio files of all the 12 transcribed interviews to make sure the data was accurate. I deleted any

irrelevant or repetitive words in the transcripts. I generated initial codes based on the responses in the participants' interviews and typed these initial codes to a Microsoft Word Document. I used the research questions, codes, and themes to help me develop the final codes for all the interviews. Next, I synthesized the codes into categories and subcategories and organized them based on my research questions. This generated codes on professional development for elementary school counselors, how elementary school counselors experienced barriers and challenges with MCS, and how they mitigate some of these challenges at their schools. Next, I re-read all the transcripts and separated them into "meaning units." Then, I read the interview notes and reflective journal entries for all the 12 transcribed interviews to look for patterns between the interviews. In the reflective journal, I discussed my preunderstandings of the phenomenon and any fore-conceptions that I had prior to the interview were identified in the journal. Next, I broke down preliminary meaning units to final meaning units. I assigned codes for a general narrative, which included meaning units such as education on military families/issues, where participants shared military-focused continuing education training experiences. The barriers code included participant responses such as "PCSing," "parental deployments," "emotional dysregulation issues," "academic gaps," and "transitions." The code mitigating barriers included responses such as "collaborating," "support groups," "school programs and clubs," "building relationships," and "communication with key supports." Then, I highlighted each of the participants' experiences thematically using direct quotes and responses to interview questions (see Peoples, 2020).

Next, I put the major phenomenological themes into an integrated general

structure (see Peoples, 2020). At this step, I moved from the participants' experiences to

the population's experiences and created a general structure. Finally, I created a

phenomenological summary/analysis that described the experience in a way that any

reader who had this experience could identify it.

I used Microsoft Word to manage and keep track of the data. The hermeneutic

circle was used to move from parts of the data to the data as a whole and gain an

understanding of the interpretation of the data (see Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010).

All participants were emailed copies of their transcripts to check for accuracy. Two

participants requested that minor modifications were made, and I obliged so the final

transcripts used in data analysis consisted of 10 original and two modified participant

interview transcripts.

Discrepant Cases

Identifying and analyzing discrepant data is a vital part of validity testing in

qualitative research (Maxwell, 2010). Discrepant cases are also known as deviant cases,

require the researcher to examine and identify all the data that might challenge the

conclusions of the study (Anderson, 2010; Smith & Noble 2014). Contradictory data are

common in interviews; therefore, researchers must identify when this happens in their

studies (Anderson 2010, Smith & Noble 2014). Based on the interviews I conducted, the

data suggested that most elementary school counselors experienced challenges and

barriers related to parental deployments and multiple relocations with some of their MCS.

Most of the participants reported that some MCS would struggle with regulating their

emotions and behaviors during times of deployment because they were often concerned about their deployed parent. However, P005 was a discrepant case in this study. Her interview suggested that there were not any specific challenges with the MCS she served, her students were not very concerned about their parents' safety due to them not deploying to war zones, and that transitions or moves of her students typically occurred at the beginning of the year or mid-year, which made transitions easier for students to adjust to. I chose to use this discrepant case to enhance the depth of my study. I discussed this case in my results section.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has been used in qualitative research to ensure rigor and legitimacy (Alonzo & Feng, 2023). Trustworthiness was the focus throughout the data analysis and data collection process. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, there are four criteria that establish trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (see Lincoln &Guba, 1985). Below is a description of how I used the aforementioned trustworthiness criteria in this study.

Credibility

Tobin and Begley (2004) postulated that credibility addresses the fit of the participants' views and establishes the confidence that the results are credible and believable. To ensure credibility, I used member checking, debriefing, and reflective journaling. During the interviews, I clarified responses and asked additional questions to make sure that the accurate information was recorded. Next, the participants were emailed their verbatim transcripts to check for accuracy. Member checking was used to

review the credibility of a study and to test the findings and interpretations of the participants (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two of the participants requested minor modifications to their transcripts and ten participants did not require any changes. I verified themes, codes, quotes, and commonalities in each of the participants' interviews to ensure credibility (see Houghton et al., 2015). Debriefing and reflective journaling were done after each of the interviews to check the preliminary findings against the data to ensure consistency and limit biases. In my journal, I recorded my impressions of each interview, wrote down notes on participants' responses, and made my biases explicit as I interpreted the participants' responses.

Transferability

Transferability is the ability to which the results of a qualitative study can be transferred to other contexts or settings with other participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I provided rich and thick descriptions of the study and the findings, used purposeful sampling to obtain the sample, and reached data saturation, consistent with this process. Also, I used purposive sampling to enlist elementary school counselors who work/have worked in U.S.-based K-12 public schools, school counselors who work/have worked with students with active-duty military parents in public-school systems for a minimum of 1 year, and school counselors who work/have worked near military installations in military-connected schools for a minimum of 1 year. Insights gleaned from the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents may be like the insights of populations who have similar experiences. The setting, participants, and their experiences should be considered when generalizing the findings

of this study. The themes and general structure may provide insights for other elementary counselors who work with MCS. According to Tuval-Mashiach (2021), transferability increases the validity of the research due to the implications of trust. The transferability of the study may be limited because of the participants' size, demographics, and location.

Dependability

Tobin and Begley (2004) asserted that to achieve dependability research must be logical, traceable, and repeatable. To ensure dependability, a review of the audit trail determined that the methods used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data were dependable. I provided a detailed audit trail in Chapter 3 and followed each step. The audit trail included a flyer to obtain participants, interview protocol, emailed consent forms, scheduled interviews via Zoom platforms, transcription of interviews in the Rev App, and secured storage of the data. According to Koch (1994), if the research can be audited, the research can demonstrate dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a way of establishing the interpretations and findings of the research are clearly derived from the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). In addition, confirmability can extend the confidence that the results from the study can be corroborated by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used reflective journaling throughout the study to identify and protect the research from biases and to assist in understanding the participants' experiences. In Chapter 3, I described the areas of potential biases. The theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices were clearly explained throughout this study. In addition, in my journal I recorded the choices I made

throughout my study and recorded why I made these choices. According to Koch (1994), it is recommended that researchers include reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the study so others can understand how decisions were made and how they were clearly derived from data. Next, I used the hermeneutic circle to determine the initial meaning units, emerging themes, and made connections to my data. My attempts to ensure conformability were ensured through this process.

Results

Using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach helped me to gain a deeper understanding of elementary school counselors' lived experiences with MCS with active-duty parents. In the data collection and analysis sections, I explained how immersing myself in the data led to the development of codes and thematic meaning units. In this section, the demographics of the participants, a general narrative, general structure, and phenomenological analysis are discussed.

Demographics

Purposeful and snowballing sampling were used to recruit participants for this study. Participants were recruited using social media sites such as Facebook, Academic Twitter, email lists of school counselors found on school websites, and the Georgia School Counselor Association. Participants for this study met the following inclusion criteria: Elementary school counselors who work/have worked in U.S.-based K-12 public schools, school counselors who work/ have worked with students with active-duty military parents in public-school systems for a minimum of 1 year, and school counselors who work/have worked near military installations in military-connected schools for a

minimum of 1 year. Participants were asked seven demographic questions. The questions included the participants' contact information, state where they received their school counselor certification, length of school counselor certification, number of years worked as an elementary school counselor with MCS, and if work setting was near a military installation. Four of the participants were certified in the state of Colorado, two were certified in the state of Georgia, two were certified in the state of Florida, and the other certifications varied. Six of the participants had been certified for 1-5 years, three were certified 6-10 years, and three were certified 11-20 years. Seven participants worked in the role of elementary school counselor with MCS for 1-5 years, three participants had worked with this population for 6-10 years, and two had worked for 11-20 years. All participants worked near military installations. Table 2 provides the demographic details for the participants in this research study. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric number to ensure confidentiality. The first participant was assigned the alphanumeric number P001, and this pattern continued for each additional participant, that is, P002 to P0012. Table 1 identifies the participants' demographic data. In addition, Figure 2 identifies the percentage of MCS at each of the participants' schools. The percentages ranged from 5% to 99%.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Participant	State certified	Length of certification	Years worked with MCS	Work near an installation
P001	Colorado	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P002	Georgia	6-10 years	6-10 years	Yes
P003	Georgia	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P004	North Carolina	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P005	Florida	11-20 years	6-10 years	Yes
P006	Nebraska	6-10 years	6-10 years	Yes
P007	Florida	11-20 years	11-20 years	Yes
P008	Virginia	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P009	Colorado	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P0010	Kansas	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes
P0011	Colorado	6-10 years	6-10 years	Yes
P0012	Colorado	1-5 years	1-5 years	Yes

Note. MCS = military-connected students.

Figure 2

Percentages of MCS in Participants' Schools
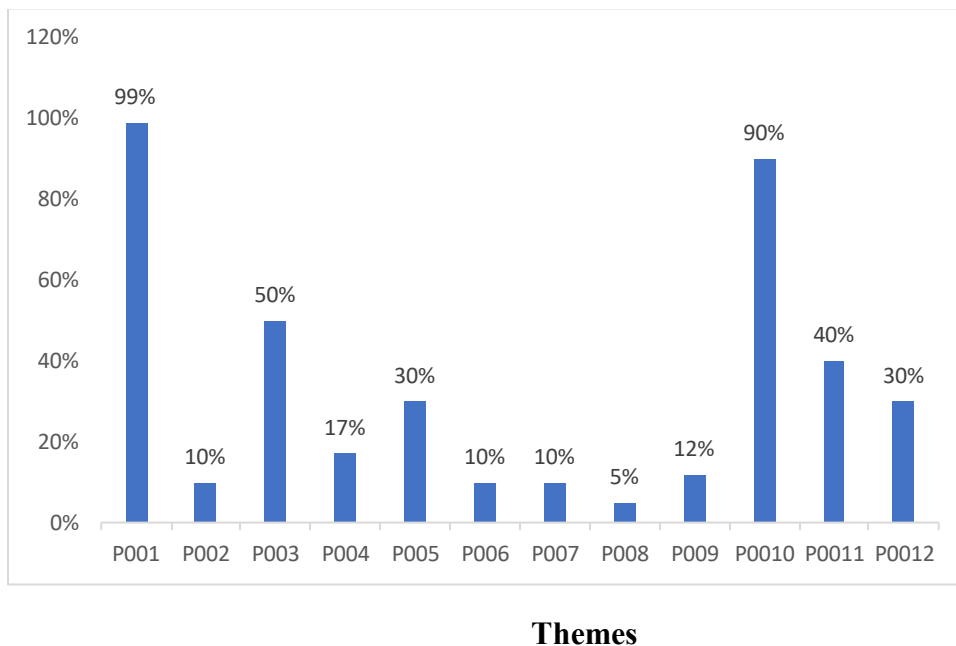
Themes

The research question (What are the lived experiences of elementary counselors serving MCS with active-duty parents?) guided the data collection and analysis process, which yielded four themes and four subthemes. The following four themes emerged from the interviews: creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS, supporting MCS through challenges and barriers, participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS, and fostering resiliency and identifying strengths of MCS. The following four subthemes emerged: experiences with deployment-related risk factors, transition-related risk factors, academic-related risk factors, and social-related risk factors with MCS. Table 2 identifies the themes and subthemes of the participants.

Table 2

Participant Inclusion Themes

Themes	P001	P002	P003	P004	P005	P006	P007	P008	P009	P010	P11	P12
Creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Supporting MCS through challenges and barriers												
Experiences with deployment-related risk factors with MCS	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Experiences with academic-related risk factors with MCS	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
Experiences with transition-related risk factors with MCS	X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	
Experiences with social-related risk factors with MCS	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X	
Participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS	X	X	X	X	X		X	X				
Fostering resiliency and identifying the strengths of MCS					X		X			X	X	X

Below are the illustrated themes of the study along with the participants'

responses that illuminated each theme.

Theme 1: Creating Public School Environments that are Welcoming and Supportive for MCS

Twelve participants expressed a desire to support MCS at their schools. Twelve

participants discussed that creating welcoming, inclusive, and supportive school

environments were necessary when supporting MCS' needs. Creating welcoming and

supportive public schools for MCS was a significant theme in this this study. This theme

was highlighted in several different aspects of school culture which included: support

services, school programs and clubs, recognition activities, homegrown strategies, school

culture/climate, and family events.

The MFLC was identified as a supportive service for most of the participants

(P001, P002, P003, P004, P005, P0010, and P0011). The MFLC works solely with MCS

and their families. The importance of this resource is described in the following

participants' responses. P001 stated,

> We have our MFLC, she's great. She is somebody who we can refer families to if
>
> they need extra support in school, but she also does some family work with them
>
> if they need it. She helps to find support on post for them.

P002 stated, "We have a MFLC at our school she works specifically with our military

families. She helps students with deployments and transitions and facilitates groups for

our students." P003 stated, "The Military Family Life Counselor is a support that we

utilize. Our Military Family Life Counselor works with those students who have a family

member that's deployed or is about to be deploy, and they do activities with them." Also, P004 stated,

> I definitely think having the MFLC in place is probably the biggest resource that we have. Just having someone who's in the know about what's going on now and having their knowledge to assist us to help students with active-duty parents is important.

In addition, P0010 added,

> We have an MFLC at our school and our MFLC she's split between two schools. She's really only at our school for two and a half days a week, but she will pull the majority of students that are struggling with deployments.

P0011 shared, "I love my MFLC, she helped our families. She helped when families were experiencing food insecurities or domestic violence. I was lucky to have MFLC to help with resources that they (military families) needed." Seven participants described the MFLC as a valuable resource for their schools because this person works specifically with MCS and their families and has access to resources that support military families.

Another support service that was identified was the school liaison officer (SLO). Some participants (P0012, P003, P006, P008) identified the SLO as a useful resource for their military families due to the SLO's connection to military installations. For example, P006 stated,

> The main one is the school liaison officer. Her job at the base is just to get engaged with the schools in the area and just be there as a support. She's really great at reaching out and getting materials. They send us journals and workbooks.

They send us like a whole bunch of stuff, picture books to read with the kids and

pencils like all sorts of things.

P007 stated, "We have an amazing school liaison officer that has lots of materials that

they leave here at the school ...there's pamphlets and flyers on our school website that

provide resources for military families." P008 stated, "I have talked with the school

liaison officer at the base...She helped to get some soldiers to come in to be reading

buddies for the students." Also, P003 stated,

The school liaison reaches out to.... check in to see how everything's going with

the military population at our school. The liaison also comes to our school and

participates in a deployment program. She and other individuals from our local

military base work with those students who have a family member that's deployed

or is about to be deployed.... She's also available to come and speak for different

occasions if needed, such as Veteran's Day.

The SLO was a supportive service for four participants due to this person's connections

to military installations and other community agencies.

Another support service resource identified by some of the participants was

school staff or coworkers. Some participants (P004, P008, P009) identified utilizing the

school staff as support to make connections on the installations and to support activities

and groups for MCS. P004 stated,

Our county representative...he is the main liaison for county services. We have

actually contacted him, and he has done on his part to try to reach out to the

officer, his commanding officer.... We have something in place where we can be

in contact with our county representative who ...has more connections to be able

to try to reach out to a particular soldier.

In addition, P008 stated,

There are military connected staff members.... I try to when I'm making decisions

either about our school week or activities... touch base with them...and include

their perspectives about things that might be helpful. Especially when a child is

like my dad's about to be deployed and I'm really worried about him or my mom

just got an assignment, we don't know what's going to happen.

In addition, P009 stated, "We have a very mental health aware population... I have

supportive administrators.... we have run groups in the past that are both grief and trauma

oriented." Three participants identified their co-workers or administrators were support

resources for their MCS.

The last support service identified by the participants was School Behavioral

Health. For example, P001 stated,

We also have, it's called School Behavioral Health and she's contracted through

the hospital to work within our school. She's a social worker and so our kids who

need just a little bit more support than myself or school psychologist can offer, we

refer her to them, and she can communicate with doctors or therapists in the

community, things like that.

In addition, P0010 stated,

Behavioral health that is housed within our school. So, we have someone that is

contracted through the hospital that has an office in our school and sees more of

those more of those like tier three leveled kids. He primarily sees students in

special education. But mental health wise, there are more pathways to getting

support than you would see in a typical school.

Two participants identified the school behavior health worker as a useful resource to

meet the needs of MCS who required more mental health support.

School clubs and programs were described by some participants as a great way

for MCS to engage. Some participants (P001, P004, P005, P007, P008, P0011) identified

how school programs and clubs support their MCS. For example, P001 stated,

One of our teachers runs a spirit squad, so anytime we have new kids, they go

down and greet them and they have little goody bags and things like that. I think it

just makes them feel a little bit more at ease that first day that it's not so big and

scary.

P004 stated, "We have a student ambassador program that is led by our students. They

welcome new military students to our schools. This has made it easier for these students

to learn the campus." P005 stated,

We have an Anchored4Life Club. The club is for military-connected students...

we work to try to just help them with the different things they are going through.

They (military-connected students) help with service projects like recognizing our

veterans and things of that nature.

P007 shared,

We have a student led ambassador program. We call it PAWS, 'peers assisting

and welcoming students.' So as soon as I find out that we have an active-duty or a

military connected student coming in, one of the members, or several of the
members from our PAWS team will either take a card to their class to welcome
them to the school. We reach out to the parents.

P008 stated,

We have a buddy welcoming program. We gather the kids together once or twice
a month in a group where they share experiences and have like a big buddy, little
buddy and read books about what it's like to be in a military family.

In addition, P0011 stated,

We also had activities that we would encourage the kids to get involved in, like a
running club and we had a drama club. We had lots of after school activities like
LEGO club and a cartoon drawing club and so those kids often got involved that
way as well, which I think helped them.

Six participants identified that school programs and clubs were enjoyable ways for
military- connected students to connect with other peers.

Some participants (P002, P003, P004, P009, P0011) discussed the importance of
recognizing military holidays, celebrating the Month of the Military Child in April, and
engaging in school-wide Purple Up Day events. Participants acknowledged that these
events helped their MCS and their families to feel valued and appreciated. For Purple Up
Day events, purple is worn to represent all service branches of the military. The following
participants' responses illuminated their experiences with events and activities used to
celebrate MCS. P002 stated, "We do all of those kinds of activities for Veteran's Day, we
normally have school-wide program to recognize our military families. We also celebrate

the Month of the Military Child to recognize our military-connected students." P003 stated,

> Some of the practices that our school uses are we recognize certain holidays that are in honor of military for instance, Veterans Day. We have Purple Up Day, which is for the military child. We use those types of holidays, the 4th of July, Memorial Day, to recognize our military students and their families... it's very helpful for them because they're able to feel welcomed by the school in general. Then they're also able to kind of build that connection with their fellow military students, and they're... able to in some cases form that lasting connection that they can take with them.

P004 stated,

> We have in November, we try to have a Veterans Day program, and we have recognition month for the military child, and the whole county participates in Purple Up Day. We have a spirit week, the week of Purple Up Day, to show our appreciation for the military. We try to do a bunch of different activities during that month and during Veterans Day.

In addition, P009 stated,

> We are a school that takes patriotism and those types of things very seriously...even something as simple as the school saying the pledge every morning. The Pledge of Allegiance... expresses kind of that respect, but we also celebrate Constitution Day. Every class in the school does projects related to Constitution Day. Then for Veterans Day, all of our military families and their

kids are allowed to come in, we serve them breakfast and our principal gives a

speech, kind of welcoming them. We also just for new kids in general, try to reach

out to them and be very proactive as far as reaching out to them...whether they're

in the military or not.

 P011 stated, "We celebrate Month of the Military Child every April and I incorporate

that into my monthly teaching...We order purple bracelets and t-shirts and encourage

teachers to celebrate the military students." Acknowledging and celebrating military-

connected students through events and activities was important for five participants

(P002, P003, P004, P009, P0011).

Homegrown strategies were developed by school staff to improve relationships

between students, families, and/or staff. Some participants (P001, P005, P0011, P008)

described the homegrown strategies used with the MCS at their schools. P001 stated,

We also have its new this year, one of our teachers runs a spirit squad, so anytime

we have new kids, they go down and greet them and they have little goody bags

and things like that. I think it just makes them feel a little bit more at ease that

first day that it's not so big and scary.

P005 stated,

One of the things that we do here is any time that we have a new student in

military or not we do something called Welcome Wagon, where… some students

in their classroom take and bring them around the school and they meet

everybody in the office. That just kind of helps them get to know the people that

are here and to know the different roles of people here at the school and even just

to kind of learn the campus.

P0011 shared, " (I) help transition them in by introducing them to other students and even

having other students kind of mentor them.... a buddy to show them around." In addition,

P008 stated,

> We try to help the kids connect with each other because, it's not like the kids wear
>
> a uniform, they don't always know who is military. So, we do a lot of like team-
>
> building activities and that has gotten kids to open up a little bit more too.... We
>
> did cards and they got to make a card to send to their family member who was
>
> deployed. Then I reached out to parents to see if I could have the mailing
>
> addresses to mail them, it was a good kind of cathartic exercise to make
>
> something out of love.

Homegrown strategies were utilized by four participants to build connections with MCS

and their families.

School culture and climate were identified by some participants as important

components that foster relationships and connections. Some participants (P0010, P0012)

described how their school culture and climate helped MCS build relationships. For

example, P0010 stated,

> The thing that I value the most about the school that I work in is.... the culture.
>
> The culture of the school is amazing and of course my perception of it, but when
>
> families come in and they enroll their kids from the very start it is a very
>
> welcoming and love-filled building. Every staff member for the most part will go

above and beyond just to like to make a kid feel welcomed and loved…. It's a

place where the adults in the building are very open and cognizant of the struggles

that our kids are experiencing, and no one is shy to talk to a kid about it, and kind

of just meet them where they're at. Because there's going to be days that they walk

in, and they miss whoever in their family is deployed and they just need time and

grace and that our teachers in the building are really good at just being

understanding, and a lot of that is due to them working with military-connected

students for the majority of their careers.

In addition, P0012 stated,

Our social vision is to have a safe and friendly school where everyone is

included… There's a lot built into for all students. We have in the past created a

big bulletin board for people to be able to celebrate their serving family members.

It was an opportunity for the kids to write about their loved one and what they did

or where they went.

School culture and climate were key components for two participants to foster

relationships with MCS and their families.

Inviting parents and families to school events was important for some participants

to build relationships with military families. A couple of participants (P001, P006) shared

that inviting military families to their schools provided opportunities for them to connect

to the schools and other military families. P001 stated,

I think it's just nice for them to kind of get out of their normal routine and get to

meet some other people. We have Title One nights where we have events for our

families to come. I think that kind of helps them get to know more of the families their students are hanging out with and things like that."

P006 stated,

We've had.... this year there were three parents that were returning... from deployment, and they surprised their kid in the classrooms. We were involved with that, and we'll work with the families so that they can have a time that works for them, and we keep it a secret and they're allowed to come in and videotape.

Including parents and families in school events was important for two participants and they identified that these events were ways to support military families and build connections.

Overall, all participants discussed several factors that assisted them with creating supportive, welcoming, and inclusive public schools for MCS. Some of the factors illuminated in the participants' responses were support services, school programs and clubs, recognition activities, home grown strategies, school culture/climate, and family events.

Theme 2: Supporting MCS Through Challenges and Barriers

Most participants discussed challenges and barriers related to supporting MCS. The challenges and barriers that were discussed were labeled as the following subthemes: experiences related to deployment risk factors, transition risk factors, academic risk factors, and social-emotional risk factors. Each subtheme is discussed below along with the participants' responses.

Subtheme: Experiences with Deployment-Related Risk Factors with MCS

Eleven participants identified deployment-related risk factors that included emotional dysregulation issues, coping with long and multiple deployments, at-home parent's wellbeing, and supports and accommodations that help MCS navigate through deployments.

Most participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P006, P007, P008, P009, P0010, P0011, P0012) discussed how deployments often lead to emotional dysregulations in students which can be exhibited as behavior issues. P003 stated,

Students have a hard time concentrating on their classes because that family member has been deployed. Oftentimes you may see behavior issues. Maybe they're dealing with feelings of fear or anger, and it causes them to act out in school. Depending on the age of the child, sometimes they can't articulate exactly what they're feeling...they can't say that I'm scared, or I'm upset that my parents are gone again, so they act out in different ways. Those different ways can be refusing to do their work or talking in class or starting arguments or starting confrontations with other students.

P0012 stated,

I have noticed higher levels of dysregulation. I have one little baby in my mind who just blew up and no one knew why. He wouldn't talk about why he was crying in a ball in the cafeteria. After we got him a snack and helped him, he said that his dad and him used to play video games together and he didn't get to do

that now because dad was deployed. It's the things that he's missing those

comfortable routines.

In addition, P006 stated,

I know one student in particular who has had an uptick in behaviors. Mom and I

have kind of traced it back to his dad being deployed. So, we see that when

parents leave, not all students, but some of them tend to have some behaviors. I

have another student who I can think of who is anxious and struggles with anxiety

since her dad's been deployed.

Eleven participants identified that they noticed emotional dysregulation issues in some of

their MCS which was demonstrated by behavior issues.

Some participants (P001, P002, P004, P006, P008, P0010, P0011) discussed the

importance of having support services and accommodations within schools during times

of deployment. P001 stated,

We see huge behavior spikes from the moment they find out the deployment's

coming until a little while after a parent gets home just readjusting…We have

small groups that I run. We have our MFLC who does lunch groups three out of

the five days… So, a lot of support is in place, but a lot of it is just that social

emotional and behavioral piece because they are so young…they don't know how

to handle everything quite yet.

P002 stated,

One of the things I was tasked with was working with the kids whose parents

were deployed, obviously military-connected kids. I conducted a lot of individual

counseling with these kids facilitated process groups for these kids. At that time, there was a lot going on in the Middle East. The kids were frequently depressed or worried and concerned about the safety of their parents in war zones.

P004 stated,

Just letting that child know that they're supported, that they're loved, that this is a safe space, that if they're ever feeling… that they need to talk to somebody, we just try to make sure we're available for them. We try to make sure that the staff is aware that the parent is deployed. We also have a military family liaison counselor that works with us. Every school in the county does... so, what that person does with permission, she basically does my job, but specifically aimed at military students… She does groups with them. She does individual and counseling sessions with them… she's in contact with their parents…. she's like me, but just for military students.

P006 stated,

We do have quite a few that have a parent who is actively deployed. I actually run two different small groups. One for kindergartners only, and then I have another for second graders only. And the membership just changes as we have parents returning from deployments or some that are leaving. Like we have students who have had… a parent leave already twice this school year. Leave, come back, leave again. So right now in those groups I have four in each. But like I said, it just kind of changes throughout the year. So that's probably the biggest thing I do for students who have an actively deployed parent is the small group.

In addition, P008 stated,

> Sometimes people don't have quite as much patience. So, it's a situation where it might be helpful for a teacher to approach it with a little bit more empathy and patience... I gently remind the teacher that one of our military-connected kiddos. I think dad just deployed where we need to make sure that they got what they need. Is there any way you could give an extension, or they didn't sleep last night because of dad's deployment, is there a time of the day where they could put their head down and rest when they're done with their work. Just making sure there are accommodations because deployments can be hard on the kiddos emotionally.

P0010 shared,

> So, we have an MFLC at our school and our MFLC she's split between two schools, so she's really only at our school for two and a half days a week, but she will pull the majority students that are struggling with deployments. However, a lot of our students have an adult that have been deployed in the past two years… it's not really possible to reach them all through our MFLC…. so I have done deployment groups in the past.

P0011 stated,

> I used to do a grief group during that time. Because there was a lot of sadness. Even though it was… going to be supposedly temporary, some of them were… deployed to areas that were dangerous… I think kids worried about that… this is all beyond their control… I think they needed to learn… to have the knowledge and the skillset to learn how to cope when something is out of your control. and

still be able to remain positive and successful in school. I'm thinking of a family

where they've had several deployments and one of the two children… struggled

every time. It was just really hard on the family.

Seven participants shared about the importance of counselor-led support during times of

deployment.

Some participants (P004, P007, P0011) discussed how long deployments,

multiple deployments, and being deployed in active war zones oftentimes creates anxiety

for those family members who are left at home. P007 stated,

We have a couple kids; their dad was deployed to Korea for a year. It was a long

deployment essentially. It was a struggle because mom understood how long a

year was, but her kids did not. A pre-k kid and the other one was a lower

elementary student. So just to be there for her and help navigate through it. She

and I talked a lot, and I gave her lots of tools and tips on how to help her boys

through that period. When dad came back, for mid tour that temporary reentry, we

talked about how to navigate through that. Then when he came back for good, we

discussed how to prepare, because they had spent a whole year with their own

routines.

P004 stated,

I would say that the most difficult thing you'll get is that this is not their first time

that they left, or they might not know that their child is having difficulty because

this deployment might be the sixth deployment. The parent might not understand

that it's still taking a toll on their child.

In addition, P0011 stated,

>Some of the parents were deployed to areas that were dangerous. I think kids worried about that and felt like this is all beyond their control.... I think they needed to learn how to cope when something is out of their control and still be able to remain positive and successful in school. I'm thinking of a family where they've had several deployments, and one of the two children struggled every time.

Three participants shared that long deployments and multiple deployments often create anxiety for some of their MCS.

>Some participants (P001, P009, P0010) discussed how the deployments can create a strain for the at-home parent. P0010 stated,

>We have some students that come from single-parent houses, and so when they are deployed, they will have a guardian come move in for that duration. You have someone, and even if it is a family member, you have someone taking care of you, that is not your parent... that is a challenge just like the added stress. It trickles down to kids for sure. I think behaviors sometimes start to pop up with some kids, but not all of them.

Another challenge is that we kind of navigate with compassion and understanding and identify what is the purpose behind the behavior or what is the function behind it. P009 stated,

>I think the biggest things that we work with military parents especially when one parent is deployed. Then one parent is kind of operating in single-parent mode.

Sometimes there can be some grief and transition associated with that missing parent. We have also had it where both parents are deployed at one time and then a grandparent steps in or something of that nature to provide care for the children. That can be a big loss for students.

In addition, P001 stated,

I would say the biggest things we see are when parents are getting ready to deploy, whether that parent is more of the stable parent for them. We've had some whose spouses are at home to care for the kids. They just become so overloaded, and their mental health can decline quickly. We've had to put in some different support for them. We see behavior spikes in students when parents come back or leave for deployments.

Three participants discussed how deployments can cause stress for the at-home parent.

Contradictory Data

P005's statements contradicted the above responses. P005 stated, "I have not had a lot of at least to my knowledge.... of students with parents in places where they're very concerned about safety. Safety hasn't necessarily been a concern because most parents (here) aren't deployed to war zones."

Overall, 11 participants discussed the following factors that influenced deployments at their schools: emotional dysregulation issues, counselor-led support, coping with long and multiple deployments, and at-home parent's wellbeing. In addition, contradictory data included in this section was from participant P005, who experienced deployment differently from most of the participants.

Subtheme: Experiences with Academic-Related Risk Factors with MCS

Ten participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P006, P007, P008, P009, P0010, P0012) described how transitions and relocations can create academic gaps and attendance issues that can negatively impact MCS' academic performance. In addition, these transitions can expose MCS to different teaching styles and curriculum and in some cases emotional issues can impede their academic performance.

Some participants (P001, P006, P007, P0012) discussed academic gaps in students. P001 stated,

> So, then academically we have a whole range of kids. Depending on where they
> come from, the academics look different. I think I've heard that every move sets a
> kid back three months. Every year it's a lot of catch up. We have some great
> teachers who put in the hard work for that.

P006 stated,

> We have quite a few who their anxiety levels are definitely a lot higher when that
> parent's gone. When there's an uptick in behaviors, that definitely impacts their
> academics cause they're having to leave the room and not be in the classroom for
> a bit and that causes them to get behind.

P007 stated,

> There's lots of concerns and challenges that they face that their civilian
> counterparts don't, and that does sometimes show up in the classroom as far as
> their academic achievement. And as a school counselor, it's my role to implement
> interventions to close those achievement gaps, working with the teacher, working

with the parent, and ultimately working on behalf of and with the student to get those achievement gaps closed. And if there's something other than environment that is preventing them from closing it, then requesting evaluation (or) observation to see if there is a special education need…. And to make sure they have everything they need when they leave.

P0012 shared,

The academics didn't match the place where they came in before or they were on a lower level or a higher level… I haven't noticed a trend that was consistent. But I will say is for a family that I knew moved frequently, and they did homeschool just kind of out of necessity for stress. Their children did come in significantly…. behind…. They were significantly below grade level.

Four participants discussed how transitions can cause academic gaps for some MCS.

Some participants (P007, P0009, P0010, P0012) discussed how attendance issues and academic support can influence academic issues. P009 stated, "Some parents struggle with depression and then at times we have dealt with truancy issues, attendance that kind of thing and that definitely lead to academic concerns for students." P0012 stated,

I knew (a family) who moved frequently, and they did homeschool just kind of out of necessity for stress. Their children did come in significantly below grade level. What I noticed though is the consistency of their attendance, the support from home and school, they made more than a year's worth of growth by just being in the same place.

P007 stated,

There's lots of concerns and challenges that they face that their civilian

counterparts don't, and that does sometimes show up in the classroom as far as

their academic achievement. So, as a school counselor, it's my role to implement

interventions to close those achievement gaps, working with the teacher, working

with the parent, and ultimately working on behalf of and with the student to get

those achievement gaps closed.

In addition, P0010 stated,

I think with the academic piece, it's that because you have the students moving so

frequently, like our teachers' jobs as teachers are to.... teach. We get them up to

the standards that they need to be up to until they move on to the next grade level.

When you have students that are moving in mid-year and they're coming from a

different educational system, the standards and the expectations aren't necessarily

always going to be the same.... I would say that the academic concerns are just

making sure that they are ready to move on to the next grade, and then of course it

becomes like all these skills that they're learning in elementary school are just

foundational to everything that they'll be learning in middle school and high

school.

Four participants discussed how truancy and other attendance issues can cause some

MCS to experience academic issues.

Some participants (P003, P004, P008) discussed how teaching styles, curriculum,

and timing of moves can create adjustment issues for students and can negatively affect

their academics. P003 stated,

Depending on that child, academics can be a challenge. They are trying to adjust

to their new school. Take a subject like math, for instance, maybe when the child

has relocated to the new school, they're not at the same place in their math

learning as they were at the previous school. So sometimes there can be that gap,

and then they have to try to adjust and catch up. Or maybe they're a little bit ahead

and then they have to adjust to where they're at."

P004 revealed,

With moving around from space-to-space teaching styles are different. One

curriculum might say we do, I think core is the thing for math, but anyway, we

might be doing core over here, but somewhere else they're doing something else.

So having to adjust to different curriculums. I can see that being a problem. It has

been a problem. Their reading skills have been a problem. Again, moving from

space-to-space is missing different skills. I would say that would be an issue.

In addition, P008 stated,

We have had kids leave us who were military-connected. Mid-year moves come

with curriculum disparity questions. The big things are like my old school we

were doing this, and we only had to do word study and it was due on Wednesday,

but now it's due on Monday. The students have to get into the routine and

expectations of their new class.

Three participants discussed how teaching styles and different curriculum can negatively

influence academic performance for some MCS.

Some participants (P002, P006, P009) identified how constant relocations can take a toll on the mental health of the students and parents which can lead to academic issues. P002 stated, "I think with constant transitions with youngsters in school settings, grades can drop. I have seen students start isolating, and their attitude and disposition changes." P006 stated,

> We have quite a few (students) who, like their anxiety levels are a lot higher. If there's an uptick in... behaviors, that definitely impacts their academics because if they're having to leave the room and not be in the classroom for a bit that kind of causes them to get behind.

In addition, P009 stated, "Some parents struggle with depression.... that kind of thing and that definitely lead to academic concerns for students."

Three participants discussed how emotional issues can create academic issues for some MCS. Overall, 10 participants recognized how frequent transitions and relocations can influence MCS' academic performance.

Subtheme: Experiences with Transition-Related Risk Factors with MCS

Transitions or PCS are often a part of military life. Eight participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P007, P009, P0010, P0011) identified how transitions can cause MCS to have difficulties adjusting to new school environments, create grief and loss, and create opportunities for school counselors to expand their skills.

Some participants (P002, P003, P004, P0010) described how their MCS adjust to new school environments. P002 stated,

Some students are moving every two years. Many of these elementary school kids have moved probably four times. So, the biggest challenge is helping them to transition. I have one youngster who was born in Europe and went to school in Europe. She was complaining of headaches every day. So, when I kind of explored what she was saying was, the kids in school here in America were different than the students in Europe. There were huge cultural differences that she felt due to living in a different country for so many years.

P003 stated,

Transitioning to a new school, a new city, there's a lot of stressors that are associated with that. It depends on the child's age, their ability to manage their emotions and their feelings. I can say that I've worked with students that have been able to express their emotions and who have not. I've worked with students who find it hard to get adjusted to their new environment, only to be uprooted again due to another relocation.

P004 shared, "We're highly transient because they are PCSing from time to time, and that just means they're changing their duty stations. So that's always somewhat of an adjustment for students and parents." P0010 stated,

That constant transition and change, I think, are the main stressors. The moving and the kind of anxiousness that leads up to moving, even if it is like three years from now. They still talk about it and then you see that a lot through that emotional dysregulation piece, how they cope with it.

Three participants discussed how some of their MCS struggle with adjusting to new schools.

Some participants (P009, P007) identified how transitions can create grief and loss which makes it difficult for MCS to express their emotions and these transitions can cause career setbacks for non-military parents. For example, P009 stated,

So, there's a lot of that processing through the grief and the constant transition, losing friends, that kind of thing. Especially if they're in a school that they have built friendships and feel comfortable in. So, working on processing through that transition, I think comes up a lot.

In addition, P007 stated: "When the active-duty member PCS's and brings their family along that spouse, they lose their job. Sometimes we overlook the sacrifices that the spouses must make." Two participants identified how transitions can cause grief and loss for some MCS.

Some participants (P001, P011) reported that enhancing counseling skills to meet the needs of students and providing outlets to help students sort out their feelings are crucial in supporting MCS. For example, P001 stated,

We had one day where 20 new students came in... it's just learning to adapt to the constant new needs of students, and the different kinds of families that we have coming in and out. Those transitions were something I hadn't experienced and so it was new for me learning how to do that and support them through that.

In addition, P0011 stated,

During those years some of the biggest challenges were transitioning. When they

would PCS in or out... as a school counselor, I used to try to make lunch groups

available. There was no curriculum per se, it was just a time for other students to

connect with our new military kids. They needed some connection and direction.

Two participants identified how school counselors often must expand their counseling

skills when they have a high-level of v who transition frequently.

Contradictory Data

P005 stated,

I think overall with military families, they do seem to transition more at the

beginning of the year or mid-year, which I think is very helpful. We …sometimes

have families that are not military transitioning at more awkward times for

students to come in. I think that piece at least helps. They tend to be more

beginning of the year, like right after Christmas where it's more a natural

transition."

Overall, eight participants discussed the challenges of transitions and how some MCS can

struggle with adjusting to new schools, grief and loss, and how these transitions can

expand counseling skills for some participants. In addition, one contradictory case was

mentioned in this section. P005 identified transitions as occurring at the beginning or

mid-year and she found these times easier for her students to adjust.

Subtheme: Experiences with Social-Related Risk Factors with MCS

Eight participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P007, P009, P0010, P011) discussed

that MCS struggle with social issues during moves and relocations. Some factors that

influence these social issues are making friends, leaving old friends, and lack of connections. According to P002, "There is an underlying theme of, I'm not going to get too close because we might move any minute." P007 stated,

> For those who have left good friends, that hurts, and they learn to be close to a certain point, because you never know when you're going to have to move again. They've made those really good friends and that's the end of it. These are going to be my lifelong friends, and then they PCS here and their hearts are broken.

In addition, P003 stated,

> I think some of those social concerns are the ability to adjust. It is often assumed that because military families may relocate often, that the child is used to that constant change. That's not always the case. There's that space in which that child is working to fit in into a new environment, not just at home and in their city, but in their school, as well.

P0011 stated,

> The kids did really well academically, but... socially and emotionally they struggled with friendships and social skills and knowing what's appropriate and what's not. They had that book knowledge, but the social skills were lacking. I taught in all the classrooms some social emotional curriculum. The group guidance helped...I would provide small group support with the Second Step curriculum.

P0010 stated that

The stress of leaving friends and making new friends and that constant transition

and change can be hard on students. I would say that the stressors are that

constant change, there's still that stressor of, but we're going to have to move in a

year, or we're going to have to move in two years. So that stressor of, I'm going to

have to leave my friends and I'm going to have to make new friends. Or a new

student that moves, we have new students still rolling in this week, it's about to be

the end of the school year. We have new students that move here the first week of

May and they're put in this environment where they have to make new friends

right away.

According to P004 she stated, "They're moving from school to school. They are only

there for six or seven months and then they must pack up and move again. So, I would

say making friends, even personal boundaries can be difficult.". P009 stated,

There's a lot of that processing through grief and the constant transitions, losing

friends, that kind of thing. Especially if they're in a school that they have built

friendships and feel comfortable in. So, working on processing through that

transition, I think comes up a lot.

P001 stated,

There are often just a lot of friendship issues. I run a lot of friendship groups just

because they get used to one setting and then they come to another and they're

trying to relearn social skills within that setting. Some kids are just quiet and

they're not sure how to interact with people, and it's easier for them to kind of

shell up for the couple years they're here and then move to the next place.

Overall, eight participants identified that some social risk factors related to highly mobile military lifestyles were making and leaving friends.

Theme 3: Participating in Military-Focused Continuing Education to Support MCS

Seven participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P005, P007, P008) shared that they have participated in military-focused continuing education to support MCS. Three of the participants (P004, P007, P008) identified that they work for Purple Star Schools where they facilitate military-specific training for all school staff. The following is information that the participants shared about the military-focused training at their schools. P004 stated,

> Part of the Purple Star award requirement is to have an information session for your staff about military culture, to kind of connect the dots there. So, we have a whole presentation that we present to our staff about military culture that is part of our requirements. I will talk about the military community because of course that's all we know about here. We do try to talk about military culture, and I even have programs with my kids. I think last year we did a panel with our MFLC with a military child of a retired officer. She came out and spoke to the children about deployments, and the adults found that helpful.

In addition, P007 stated,

> I offer professional development for our staff.as part of the Purple Star program. We have another person on our team, she is a retired military spouse, and she gives professional development from the perspective of the military spouse. When the active-duty member PCS's and brings their family along that spouse loses

their job. The experience of the spouse is important because they're never really rooted down in their careers. I have another staff member; she's going to speak about growing up as a military child to give that perspective. She's a grown-up now, but to speak about what it was like to grow up in Europe on installations over there. She felt like an alien because she had never lived in the United States.... to give that experience and to talk about that when we have kids that come in from Okinawa, Germany, or England helps them navigate their journey, so they don't feel alone.

P008 stated,

I did all the training required by the Department of Defense for the Purple Star program. That's like two or three hours of modules all about military culture, about the kind of cycle of emotions surrounding deployments... It talks about the anticipation of loss, and it has a lot of interviews of military-connected kids. We provide virtual training for our staff and give them the information in a condensed form so that they can review themselves from our training.

Some participants (P002, P003, P004, P005) shared that they participated in community-based continuing education training. For example, P002 stated, "Since I am a certified counselor and an LPC, I have participated in continuing education units that have discussed military culture and families." P003 shared, "I have attended both online and in-person conferences and seminars that are related to military culture." In addition, P004 stated,

I am a member of the North Carolina School Counselors Association. I'm also on

one of the committees that plans training. So, there have been speakers during that

timeframe to assist other counselors with tools and tricks to try to help military

families.

P005 stated "Couple years ago, pre COVID, I went to a training there (on base) about

assisting military kids…more a training on some of the struggles they might have and

how to support them at school."

One participant shared that she had attended a military-specific graduate class.

For example, P001 stated, "I've taken one military focused training and that was in grad

school. It was called military connection; it was a real cool one on using DBT therapy to

help kids just with all the transitions."

Overall, seven of the participants in the study participated in military-focused

continuing education. The participants described how attending these training courses

provided insight on MCS' needs. All participants in their interviews verbalized that

having school-wide ongoing military-focused professional development opportunities for

public school staff is necessary.

Theme 4: Fostering Resiliency and Identifying Strengths of MCS

Five participants (P005, P007, P0010, P011, P0012) discussed the importance of

understanding MCS' strengths and resilience amid the challenges that they face. P005

explained,

We don't know sometimes when we will have a new student at our school. At

times some students may need more support and at times I find that we are being

more responsive rather than proactive with the students due to their military

lifestyles. I think overall military families in general are just so resilient and their

children are so resilient. They're so used to change that they adapt well for the

most part.

P0010 shared,

It's been very eye-opening for me and truly like my overall experience is that they

are very amazing and resilient humans. They face a lot of challenges, and I feel

like a lot of people are naive to all the things they face like deployments and just

constantly having a parent that is gone most of the year. The sense of community

that I see with my military families is amazing.

P0011 stated, "I think military kids have a special skill set anyway. The ones that have

moved around often are very good at connecting quickly and adapting and making and

building friendships and maintaining the friendships as well." In addition, P007 shared,

Historically, we are a very small, very rural county. As we have experienced this

tremendous expansion and tremendous growth, with that growth has come people

with new experiences, people with different understandings of the world. This

diversity that we all hear about has really changed the fabric of our school and

local community. There has been more of an understanding and collective growth

within the school and local community because of our military families.

P0012 stated,

At the family level, I would say they're also very flexible in that, if dad is being

deployed to Poland, and it's mostly been mothers who I have talked too. They

oftentimes have served themselves, and so they will tell us my spouse is going

away for X number of days, but it's just, it's very matter of fact. It is just part of

who they are, and they have this strong sense of service.

Overall, five participants were able to identify the strengths of the MCS. Most

participants verbalized admiration for MCS' sense of service, resiliency, and their

openness to diverse cultures.

General Narrative

Twelve of the participants discussed their overall experiences working with MCS

with active-duty parents. There were several examples that were illuminated throughout

the interviews. Most participants experienced high levels of transitions and mobility

within some of their MCS.

Most participants discussed the challenges and barriers of supporting MCS, and

these challenges were related to parental deployments, transitions, academic and social

issues. Most participants agreed that tailoring support services in public schools to meet

the needs of MCS was necessary. Most participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P005,

P006, P007, P008, P0010, P0011, P012) identified supportive resources within their

schools with the top two being the MFLC and the SLO. Other support services that were

mentioned were school behavioral health services, co-workers, and administrators. Most

participants (P001, P002, P004, P006, P009, P0010, P011) identified counselor-led

deployment groups, social skills groups, and individual sessions as interventions that

were used to support MCS at their schools.

Most participants (P001, P002, P003, P004, P007, P009, P0010, P011) discussed that some of their MCS experienced social connections issues (i.e., making friends and maintaining friendships). Six participants (P001, P004, P005, P007, P008, P0011) identified school programs and clubs that were utilized in their schools to assist MCS with making social connections. In addition, five participants (P002, P003, P004, P009, P0011) out of 12 participants identified that they utilized special events such as the Month of the Military Child and Purple Up Day to celebrate their MCS and make social connections with their peers. Five participants (P002, P003, P004, P009, P0011) out of 12 participants identified how special holidays were recognized such as Veterans Day to celebrate military families and to help develop relationships with school staff and other military families.

Seven (P001, P002, P003, P004, P005, P007, P008) out of the 12 participants experienced military-focused continuing education. All participants acknowledged as they experienced MCS they realized the importance of military-focused continuing education for all staff at public schools. As some participants increased their knowledge about military culture, there was an increase in their professional needs being met, an increase in their awareness of the needs of MCS and their families, and a desire to connect with military populations.

Some participants (P005, P007, P0010, P011, P0012) discussed the importance of recognizing the strengths of MCS and described how this often fosters resiliency in these students. Two participants (P005 and P009), when describing strengths, used the

following statements: "They are as strong as rocks" and "they are matter of fact." These two participants related strengths to being void of emotions.

General Structure

Most elementary school counselors play integral roles in public schools. Many elementary school counselors engage and advocate for students to assist them with being successful in their learning environments. Most elementary school counselors recognize that military families often experience unique challenges such as elevated levels of mobility and parental deployments. Most elementary counselors are aware that military lifestyles can often create barriers for MCS which can impact them academically, socially, and/or emotionally. As most elementary counselors gain experience working with MCS, they recognize that community resources, support services, and military-focused continuing education are needed to assist MCS with being successful.

As most elementary school counselors become aware of the MCS' identities and how these identities relate to military culture they revise their understanding. This leads to many elementary school counselors implementing interventions and developing counseling programs that are culturally responsive to meeting the needs of MCS. These new understandings help to empower MCS to build relationships and make meaningful connections within their learning environments. Some elementary school counselors can build on these connections and assist MCS with recognizing their strengths and abilities as they navigate through tough times.

Phenomenological Summary/Analysis

MCS often have diverse and unique needs that often differ from their civilian peers. Some MCS may struggle with parental deployments and family relocations; while others may thrive when faced with transitions. The elementary school counselor must constantly revise his/her understanding of MCS and create new understandings based on interactions with students. As elementary school counselors seek to understand MCS' *Dasein* or being there; they must put aside their preconceived knowledge. When elementary school counselors can recognize MCS' entire *Dasein* as relates to their military culture, it often empowers MCS to share their experiences. In addition, it can foster a sense of belonging and connectedness in MCS. This sense of connection may lead to MCS feeling encouraged to fully engage in their school environments.

Elementary school counselors are constantly revising their understanding as they work with students from diverse backgrounds. Their foresight or preunderstandings are also changing because each student they encounter can present with unique needs. School counselors recognize that MCS are often thrown into military lifestyles that they did not choose. This thrownness shapes and influences MCS' lives. The totality of circumstances or facticity that MCS carry are often associated with parental deployments, transitions, and trauma surrounding parents who are injured or killed in active-duty. School counselors recognize the importance of seeking new understandings or knowledge via professional development opportunities or interactions with other professionals who support MCS. As school counselors experience being with (*Mitsein*) MCS they are better

able to understand their cultures and lifestyles, which assists with providing culturally responsive interventions to meet their needs.

The Participants' Experience

Dasein and Fore-Sight/Fore-Conception

During the interview process, I ensured that the participants' stories were not influenced by my own experiences of working with MCS. I used reflexive journaling throughout the interview process to make my biases explicit and to assist with illuminating each participants' experience. I recognized that each participant had their own unique experiences with supporting MCS with active-duty parents, and I wanted to capture the essence of these experiences. In capturing the essence of the participants' experiences, I discovered that all participants acknowledged the importance of participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS' needs. Most participants discussed the challenges and barriers of supporting MCS, and these challenges were related to parental deployments, transitions, academic and social issues. Most participants identified supportive resources within their schools with the top two being the MFLC and the SLO. In addition, most participants identified counselor-led deployment groups, social skills groups, and individual sessions as interventions that they utilized to support MCS.

Hermeneutic Circle

Each of the participants acknowledged that as they experienced MCS within their public schools and gained knowledge through working with them and/or through participating in military-focused continuing education they were better able to understand

their students' needs. This new understanding allowed most participants to tailor interventions and support services at their schools that were welcoming, engaging, and inclusive to MCS and their families.

Summary

In this chapter, results were presented using themes that reflected the participants' lived with MCS with active-duty parents, proving insight into the phenomenon. The themes and accompanying words from the participants may serve as helpful guidelines for public schools on how to support MCS and their families and how to develop opportunities for military-focused continuing education for staff. Consistent with the literature, the findings of this research may help elementary school counselors navigate support for MCS and families, while helping to change the school culture to be more inclusive of MCS. Chapter 5 addresses the interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications for social change, and conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

According to ASCA (2023), there are about 4 million MCS in the United States. In addition, 80% of all MCS attend public schools within the United States (ASCA, 2023; MCEC, 2013). Many active-duty families experience transitions, parental deployments, relocations, grief, and loss due to their connections with the military (ASCA, 2023; Cole, 2016; Ward, 2018). School counselors are often the main support for students who are struggling with issues related to their military connections within public schools (Capp et al., 2017); however, there is a lack of research to understand the lived experiences of school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents. School counselors are responsible for supporting MCS' academic, career, and social/emotional development within the public schools (ASCA, 2023; Quintana & Cole, 2021). The school counselor must be aware of military culture and the specific needs of MCS and their families to facilitate comprehensive school counseling programs that are inclusive to all students (Quintana & Cole, 2021).

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who support MCS with active-duty military parents in U.S. public schools. The goal was to illuminate the experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents. The research questions for this study addressed the experiences of elementary school counselors, barriers related to supporting MCS, and professional development of elementary school counselors. The main findings in this study were that many elementary

school counselors (a) shared that they had school climates that were inclusive to MCS and their families, (b) identified that parental deployments and multiple transitions can create barriers and challenges for some MCS (i.e. social/emotional issues and academic issues), (c) participated in military-focused continuing education, (d) acknowledged that all public school staff who worked with MCS should have access to military-focused training in order to better understand military-connected needs, (e) recognized strengths of MCS and their families, and (f) had specialized support services within their schools to support MCS (i.e. MFLC, SLO, support groups, peer programs, clubs, recognition activities, and family events). The findings of this study supported previous research explored in the literature review. Specifically, elementary school counselors' discussions confirmed the current literature that states MCS face challenges related to deployments and transitions that often have direct effects on their social-emotional health and academic needs (Astor et al., 2013; Capp et al., 2017; DePedro et al., 2016; Esqueda et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2014). This study also contradicted previous research studies that stated that public school counselors were not aware of the diverse needs of MCS (Elfman, 2017; De Pedro et al., 2014). The findings from this study may inform a future study or military-specific professional development training.

In Chapter 5, I compare the study results to findings identified in the literature review in Chapter 2 to determine whether this study added new knowledge and information about the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, I discuss the interpretation of findings, limitations, recommendations, implications for social change, and conclusions.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings were interpreted using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Based on the 12 participants responses, there were four themes that emerged from the interviews: (a) creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS, (b) supporting MCS through challenges and barriers, (c) participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS, and (d) fostering resiliency and identifying strengths of MCS. The following four subthemes emerged: experiences with deployment-related risk factors, academic-related risk factors, transition-related risk factors, and social-related risk factors with MCS. These themes included stories related to the stressors, barriers, and strengths of MCS and how school counselors effectively support these students. In this chapter, I describe the ways my findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge to the counseling profession by comparing the data from my study to the peer-reviewed literature in Chapter 2. I provide my interpretations of the findings and emergent themes, and I analyze and interpret the findings in the context of the hermeneutic phenomenological framework.

Dialogue With the Literature

The scholarly literature surrounding MCS experiencing challenges and barriers within their civilian public schools has been mixed (Astor et al., 2013; Baptist et al., 2015; Capp et al., 2017; Chandra et al., 2010; DePedro et al., 2016; De Pedro et al., 2018; Esqueda et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2014; Karre et al. 2022; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; MCEC, 2012). This is likely because MCS possess several distinctive characteristics and have diverse needs. Several studies have explored the differences between civilian

students and MCS using large datasets (De Pedro et al, 2014; Gilreath et al., 2014; Renz et al., 2007). However, very few qualitative studies have focused on elementary school counselors' experiences with supporting MCS during times of parental deployments, relocations, and reintegration. In this section, I discuss what the literature shows about MCS with active-duty parents in civilian elementary public schools and how the literature relates to my participants' experiences of supporting these students.

School Climate and Culture

Several research studies have revealed that a supportive school climate can support MCS who are struggling with their military lifestyles (Astor et al., 2013; Capp et al., 2017; DePedro et al., 2016; DePedro et al., 2018; Garner et al., 2014; Neil, 2015; Ruff & Keim, 2014). In some of the qualitative literature, positive school climate and culture were linked to fewer episodes of bullying, decrease in depression, higher levels of self-worth, and positive wellbeing in military-connected who attend public schools (De Pedro et al., 2016; De Pedro et al., 2018). Positive school climate and culture were also linked to more positive relationships and feelings of connectedness (Astor et al., 2013; Berg, 2008; De Pedro et al., 2016; De Pedro et al., 2017). Furthermore, parents of MCS emphasized the importance of schools being inclusive to military culture (Culler et al., 2019). When military families perceive that their community understands their military lifestyles, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging (Blue Star Families, 2019). De Pedro et al. (2014) posited that school staff who are interested in making schools more accommodating for MCS should first focus on transforming the school's climate.

The literature related to school climate and culture is related to theme 1: creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS, this theme is discussed thoroughly in Chapter 4. All participants confirmed the literature on positive school climates and discussed that providing inclusive environments for MCS helped their students feel connected (Astor et al., 2013; Berg, 2008; De Pedro et al., 2016; De Pedro et al., 2017). The participants identified several distinct factors that positively influenced their school's climate and culture. The following factors were included in the participants responses: support services, programs and clubs, recognition activities, homegrown practices, family events, and culture and climate. All the participants in this study agreed that their role as an elementary school counselor was to foster a school climate that was understanding and accepting of military culture; this aligned with Acuri's (2015) study, who found that school counselors are obligated to understand and provide awareness about military culture. In addition, civilian public schools can provide positive support to MCS during challenging times (Karre et al, 2022). All participants commented that they wanted to provide their MCS with safe places to learn, share their feelings, and build relationships. Public schools can be safe havens for MCS and be places to build friendships and make positive adult connections (Karre et al., 2022; MCEC, 2012; Richardson et al., 2011).

Challenges of MCS

The literature states that MCS often face challenges related to the stress of their military lifestyles, which typically includes frequent relocations, parental deployments, fears about the deployed parent being killed or injured in active duty (Astor et al., 2013;

Capp et al., 2017; DePedro et al., 2016; DePedro et al., 2018; Garner et al., 2014; Neil, 2015; Ruff & Keim, 2014). The personnel working with students at public schools are vital to helping MCS cope with the challenges and stressors they face (Neil, 2015).

Deployments

Some of the studies reported in the literature review that examined parental deployments and family separations had mixed results on how these deployments affected the emotional health of the MCS (Baptist et al., 2015; Chandra et al., 2010; ; De Pedro et al., 2018; Engel et al., 2010; Fairbank et al., 2018, Lester et al., 2010; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2011; ; MCEC, 2012; Reed et al., 2011, Richardson et al., 2011). For example, studies that examined the effects of having a parent deployed versus never having a parent deployed, found that students with deployed parents had a lower quality of life, appeared to have more depressed moods, lower academic achievement, and externalizing behaviors (Engel et al., 2010; Fairbank et al., 2018, Lester et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2011, Richardson et al., 2011). Some studies showed that MCS experienced parental deployments may demonstrate behavioral issues, emotional issues, academic struggles, utilize health care services more frequently, or may struggle with a combination of these concerns (Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Huebner, 2019; Knobloch et al., 2015; Trautmann et al., 2015). Conversely, other studies found no differences in general well-being and reported positive aspects of deployment (i.e. resilience, pride, etc.; Baptist et al., 2015; Chandra et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2018; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; MCEC, 2012).

Both quantitative and qualitative studies indicated factors related to child and adolescent outcomes, are often directly related to the at-home parent's mental health. Often, poor at-home parent mental health and well-being were related to child and adolescent emotional and academic issues during periods of family separation due to military deployments (Baptist et al., 2015; Chandra et al., 2010; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Lester et al., 2010; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2009; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2017).

Long parental deployments often led to an increase in stressors for MCS (Chandra et. al., 2010). Chartrand et al. (2008) found that children aged 3 to 5 years with a deployed parent experienced greater behavioral symptoms than older children with a deployed parent. The authors suggested that this may be because attachment relationships are typically formed at this stage of development for children (Chartrand et. al, 2008). In addition, a study conducted with Army spouses with a deployed service member and children aged 5 to 12 years within the home revealed that one-third of the children were at considerable risk for psychosocial morbidity (Flake et. al, 2009).

The literature on deployments is related to theme 2: supporting MCS through challenges and barriers and subtheme experiences with deployment-related risk factors with MCS. This theme and subtheme are thoroughly explained in Chapter 4. Eleven participants confirmed the literature and discussed the following factors that influenced deployments at their schools: emotional dysregulation issues (Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Huebner, 2019; Knobloch et al., 2015; Trautmann et al., 2015), coping with long and multiple deployments (Chandra et. al., 2010), and the at-home parent's

wellbeing (Baptist et al., 2015; Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2010; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Lester et al., 2010; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2009; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2017).

However, participant P005 confirmed the literature that stated that there we no prominent differences in well-being for some MCS during deployments (Baptist et al., 2015; Chandra et al., 2010; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Lester et al., 2010; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2009; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2017). P005 noted, "I have not had a lot of at least to my knowledge.... of students with parents in places where they're very concerned about safety. Safety hasn't necessarily been a concern because most parents (here) aren't deployed to war zones."

Seven participants out of 12 participants identified that having deployment support groups helped their MCS navigate through deployments. In addition, some participants confirmed the literature that discussed that reintegration periods of deployments can be particularly stressful for some military families due to the shift in family dynamics (Capp et al., 2017) and some participants viewed reintegration periods as prime opportunities to check-in with military families.

Academic Issues

The literature states that differences in school quality, curriculum, achievement standards, teaching styles, and testing requirements can lead to academic challenges in some MCS (Arnold et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; CPRL & MCEC, 2018; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011). The academic

success of MCS is based on the support systems and the interventions that school has in place (Buffman et al., 2009).

The literature on academic issues is related to theme 2: supporting MCS through challenges and barriers and subtheme experiences with academic-related risk factors with MCS. I thoroughly discussed this theme and subtheme in Chapter 4. Ten participants confirmed the literature and discussed that frequent transitions and relocations can negatively influence some MCS' academic performance (Arnold et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; CPRL & MCEC, 2018; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011). Three participants stated that they noticed attendance issues in some of their MCS which negatively influenced their academic performance this aligned with the research that discussed that absences could increase academic gaps and disrupt routines for MCS (MCEC, 2012; Richardson et al., 2011). In addition, participants P003, P004, and P008 confirmed literature and discussed how transitions can expose MCS to different teaching styles and curriculum (Arnold et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; CPRL & MCEC, 2018; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011), and, in some cases, emotional issues from the transitions can impede student's academic performance. Some participants shared that some interventions that they used to close the academic gaps included observations, IEP meetings, assessments, and adaptive educational plans.

Transitions

Bradshaw et al.'s (2010) study on military students found significant stressors in school transitions were related to adjusting to the school's campus and to the culture of

the school, along with knowing the school's procedures and policies. The literature has found that higher rates of transitions within short periods of time are often associated with anxiety, depression, and social isolation in adolescents (Landers-Potts et al., 2017; Lucier-Greer et al., 2014; MacDermid-Wadsworth et al., 2016). The timing of moves, especially for students in high school can cause challenges associated with loss of credits or setbacks in graduating on time (Bradshaw et al., 2010; MCEC, 2012; MCEC & CPRL, 2017; Mmari et al., 2010). Relocations (PCSing) and school changes have been shown to lead to poor academic and mental health issues in some MCS (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

The literature on transitions is related to theme 2: supporting MCS through challenges and barriers and subtheme experiences with transition-related risk factors with MCS. I thoroughly discussed this theme and subtheme in Chapter 4. Eight participants confirmed the literature and identified that transitions can cause MCS to have difficulties adjusting to new school environments and create grief and loss for some students (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Eight participants shared that losing friends and having to make new friends can be difficult for some MCS. Some participants discussed that they noticed that some MCS avoid getting too close due to multiple transitions, P001 stated, "It's easier for them to kind of shell up for the couple years they're here and then move to the next place." This aligned with De Pedro et al.'s (2014) and Gilreath et al.'s (2014) studies on multiple transitions which discussed that frequent transitions caused isolation and negatively influenced social skills for some MCS. Also, some participants noted that high levels of transitions can create opportunities for school counselors to expand their skills,

because they often have high numbers of students during enrollment periods. However, P005 contradicted the above literature about transitions. P005 stated,

> I think overall with military families, they do seem to transition more at the beginning of the year or mid-year, which I think is very helpful. We …sometimes have families that are not military transitioning at more awkward times for students to come in. I think that piece at least helps. They tend to be more beginning of the year, like right after Christmas where it's more a natural transition."

Social-Emotional Issues

Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that MCS often lack feeling connected to others at their new schools, which can lead to issues adjusting. MCS are frequently forced to end relationships with friends due to constant relocations which leads to difficulties making and maintaining close friendships (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Due to students constantly ending close relationships, most students reported they avoid making close connections with peers at new schools, and many students will choose to have superficial relationships instead of close friendships (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Throughout the literature peer programs like Student 2 Student and peer ambassador programs were mentioned as useful programs to help ease transitions for new MCS (Karre et al, 2022; Kitmitto et al., 2011; MCEC & CPRL 2017).

The literature on social-emotional issues is related to the theme 2: supporting MCS through challenges and barriers and subtheme experiences with social-related risk factors with MCS. Eight participants confirmed the literature and discussed that it was

difficult for some MCS to build trust and maintain friendships (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Most participants offered small groups and large group guidance to support students with social issues. Four participants confirmed the literature and had formalized peer programs at their schools to welcome students and help them build connections with others (Karre et al, 2022; Kitmitto et al., 2011; MCEC & CPRL 2017). In addition, two participants developed their own peer programs. Some participants identified The Anchored4Life club as a great resource for MCS to enhance their social skills, build leadership skills, increase character, and improve self-esteem (Anchored4Life, n.d.).

Elementary School Counselors and MCS

According to the literature, parents and teachers report that school counselors and staff are not trained in working with MCS with deployed parents (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Garner et al., 2014; Mmari et al., 2009). Often staff at U.S. civilian public schools lack the knowledge related to military culture and the challenges that MCS and their families face (Astor et al., 2013; Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Russo & Fallon, 2015; Williams, 2013). Therefore, school counselors need specific training that is unique to the setting and population they work with (Kozlowski & Huss, 2013) and implementing military-specific professional development opportunities within public schools that assists school personnel with understanding the unique needs of this population (ASCA, 2023; Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Quintana & Cole, 2021). Professional development opportunities can facilitate cultural sensitivity and supportive student and teacher relationships that in turn contribute to positive school experiences (ASCA, 2023; Quintana & Cole, 2021; Ruff and Keim, 2014). Sherbert's (2018) case study found that new teacher candidates working

with MCS for the first time desired professional development opportunities with experienced teachers to assist with supporting the needs of MCS in the classrooms. Other researchers posited that appropriate training is needed for school staff who work with MCS to assist these students with navigating frequent moves, academic issues, social issues, and issues related to deployment (ASCA, 2023; Quintana & Cole, 2021; Williams, 2013).

The literature related to elementary school counselors is related to the theme 3: participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS. This theme is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4. Seven participants disconfirmed the literature that stated that school personnel were unaware of the needs of MCS because they lacked training (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Garner et al., 2014; Mmari et al., 2009). These seven participants identified that they had participated in military-focused continuing education. In addition, three of those participants shared that they received military-specific training offered at their schools. These three participants were located at Purple Star schools that provided military-specific training for all staff. All Purple Star Schools require school and district staff to complete professional development on working with MCS and their families (MCEC, 2021). In North Carolina, professional development training for Purple Star Schools is offered on an annual basis, in other states the school district can decide how often this training occurs (MCEC, 2021). The three participants that participated in the training stated that it was offered annually at their schools for all staff. There is a designated qualified trainer and point of contact at each Purple Star School that conducts the professional training, and in some states this POC will collaborate with other experts

such as the SLO, MFLC, and organizations like MCEC to coordinate the professional development training (MCEC, 2021).

Four other participants reported that they had attended community-based training, earning continuing education units or through taking graduate-level courses. Although professional development training was not offered at most participants' schools some of them sought out military-focused continuing education. Overall, seven participants reported receiving training on military-focused issues and five participants reported receiving no training at all. This disconfirmed the literature that states that school counselors are often not trained to address the needs of military students and their families (Astor et al., 2013; Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Russo & Fallon, 2015; Williams, 2013), because over half of the participants in this study had been trained in military-specific issues. In addition, all participants were aware of the challenges and stressors that MCS and their families faced despite their training, which disconfirmed the literature that stated that counselors are unaware of specific stressors facing this population (Astor et al., 2013; Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Russo & Fallon, 2015; Williams, 2013). All participants indicated a desire to have military-focused training offered within public schools and felt that this type of training would be beneficial for their roles as school counselors. Professional development has been shown in the literature to be a vital way of educating staff on the issues that MCS face (Astor et al., 2013; Fenning, 2021; Russo & Fallon, 2015; Williams, 2013). My study extends to the research on school counselor professional development, in that all participants desired military-focused continuing

education to enhance their knowledge; however, this type of training was not widely offered throughout all school districts.

Fostering Resiliency in MCS

Some studies found that multiple school transitions fostered strength, resiliency, adaptability, maturity, appreciation for cultural differences, and strong social skills in MCS (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2010; Sherman & Glenn, 2011; Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). MCS' cultural values and identity are often strong, and they share a strong sense of community and shared purpose (Ginsberg & Jablow, 2015). Easterbrooks et al. (2013) postulated to best serve MCS, identifying sources of strength that helps them cope with adversity is necessary.

The literature related to fostering resiliency is related to the theme 4: fostering resiliency and identifying strengths of MCS. This theme is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4. Five participants confirmed the literature and identified MCS' strengths and described them as resilient and "adaptable to change" (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2010; Sherman & Glenn, 2011; Strobino & Salvaterra, 2000). According to Echterling et al. (2010), school counselors can capitalize on the resiliency in military connected students by working with them from a strengths-based perspective and by developing additional strengths and resiliency in dealing with military lifestyles.

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Theoretical Implications

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Kakkori (2009), described phenomenology as studying the essence, and hermeneutics as studying the processes of interpretation. The word phenomenology means "that which shows itself in itself" (Heidegger 2003, p. 51). Husserl is known as the

father of phenomenology, and Gadamer is known as the founder of philosophical

hermeneutics (Kakkori, 2009). According to Kakkori (2009), Heidegger served as the

link between Husserl's phenomenology and Gadamer's hermeneutics. Heidegger was

born in Germany and began his career in a field theology (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger was

trained by Husserl in the processes of phenomenological intentionality and reduction

(Laverty, 2003). Heidegger later dissociated himself from Husserl and his work (Laverty,

2003). Heidegger created hermeneutic phenomenology which is described as the human

experience as it is lived (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger believed that phenomenology

required one task which is to ask and clarify the question of being (Kakkori, 2009). This

study used hermeneutic phenomenology as the framework.

The hermeneutic circle is a process of understanding. Gadamer later expanded on

the hermeneutic circle, and used it to understand the connectedness and interdependence

of the parts and the whole of a thought being studied (Regan, 2012). I used the

hermeneutic circle to address the research question: What are the lived experiences of

school counselors supporting MCS with active-duty parents? After the research question

was formed, the school counselors were interviewed. Next, I used the hermeneutic circle

to find the emerging themes of the participants' interviews (see Gadamer, 2004). There

were four major themes that emerged. I captured the common language of the

participants some of the common words that were used were "military-connected,

PCSing, post, installation, base, SLO, MFLC, and deployment." According to Gadamer

(2004), language is identified as the medium for understanding and sharing the human

experience. The commonness of language warrants a shared acceptance of meaning and

ability to verbalize thoughts when alone or with others (Reagan, 2012). The hermeneutic circle was used to gain meaning from the interviews and the lived experiences of elementary school counselors. Throughout the study, I used reflexive journaling to assist me with identifying my biases and experiences of being a school counselor and a MFLC.

<div align="center">**Researcher's Process**</div>

Dasein and Fore-Sight/Fore-Conception

A structure of Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* or "being there" is being in the world and exploring "average everydayness" (Heidegger, 1927/2011, p. 65). Heidegger (1927/2011) believed that both the world and being were inseparable, meaning that there is a shared humanness and interactions in the world. As an MFLC, I have primarily worked with military-connected with active-duty parents for the past 8 years. In addition, I have worked for 2 years as a middle school counselor with MCS near an army installation. Interpreting my participants' experiences was at the forefront of my thinking. Using my reflexive journal, I reflected on my experiences of working with MCS in elementary schools, the different challenges that I faced, and the strategies or activities that helped support these students. I often wrote in my reflexive journal, and I made my biases explicit. When I conducted my interviews, I returned to my reflexive journal after each interview to compare what I knew about MCS and what my participants shared and was able to view these experiences using a different way of understanding.

Hermeneutic Circle

I used the hermeneutic circle to address the research question: What are the lived experiences of school counselors supporting MCS with active-duty parents? The

hermeneutic circle was used to obtain a deeper and new understanding of the phenomenon (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2010). After all the interviews were completed, I used the hermeneutic circle to find the meaning units and emerging themes of the participants' interviews. I exposed myself repeatedly to the interview transcripts which led to new insights on the lived experiences of elementary counselors.

Revising Conceptual Assumptions

My first assumption was that most participants would provide inclusive and welcoming public-school environments for MCS. This assumption was validated as all participants discussed providing inclusive and supportive schools for their MCS which included support services, programs and clubs, recognition activities, homegrown practices, and family events. I was surprised that when some participants did not have a supportive service in place, they were willing to be creative and develop their own. Two participants developed their own peer programs to help their new MCS acclimate. Most participants focused on building positive relationships between MCS, school staff, and parents.

Another assumption was that most participants would not have military-focused continuing education or training. My most surprising finding was that over half the participants had participated in military-focused continuing education. Three participants were trained within their schools and received this training as part of a Purple Star School designation. These participants were also responsible for providing military-focused training to teachers and administrators at their schools. Four other participants sought out this training because they wanted to gain more insight into how to best serve MCS in

public schools. I assumed that most of the participants would not be trained on military-focused issues and would be unaware of military culture. I revised my understanding of this population, and my initial assumptions were challenged by hearing the participants stories. My preunderstandings of this population were revised as I gained more knowledge and insight into this population through their interviews and transcripts.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this hermeneutic phenomenological study. One of the limitations is related to its design. According to Niaz (2017), qualitative studies are not generalizable because they typically involve interviews with small populations. I used a small population of 12 elementary school counselors who work with MCS in U.S. public schools. This study did not include MCS and their parents, which may have limited the complete understanding of MCS' experiences. Also, I found that some school districts restrict their employees from participating in outside research, which may have limited some school counselors from participating in this study. This study may not be transferable to the general population because of its size.

In addition, the role of the researcher is another limitation. I have worked as a middle school counselor, and I currently work as a MFLC. Researcher bias can occur when the researcher inadvertently influences the results of the study by asking bias questions based on the beliefs of the researcher (Morse, 2015). I used reflexive journaling throughout my study to be actively thinking and keenly aware of my personal biases and how they may influence the interview questions and the results of my study.

Finally, I used purposive sampling in my study. The participants from my study were not randomly selected. The limitation of purposive samples is that the more purposive the sample is, the more limited the external validity will be (Andrade, 2021). Participant bias can occur when participants try to manipulate the data and act in a way that allows the researcher to reach conclusions that were expected or withhold information by lying to create unwanted outcomes (Marshall, 1996). It was my role to provide a welcoming environment that allowed participants to feel comfortable being honest about their experiences.

Recommendations

There are several opportunities for future research regarding the lived experiences of elementary school counselors who work with active-duty parents. This study was conducted with elementary school counselors who worked in public schools in the United States. Future studies on elementary school counselors who work at Purple Star Schools within the United States may be beneficial in identifying best practices and support services for school personnel who work with MCS and their families. Purple Star Schools designations are designed to assist public schools with responding to the educational and social-emotional challenges of MCS (MCEC, 2024). In addition, limiting this study to only Purple Star schools may highlight the training experiences of school personnel and provide insights into how to best support MCS and their families.

This study focused solely on the experiences of elementary school counselors. Future research that focuses on MCS, teachers, and parents may bring a more comprehensive understanding of the unique experiences of this population. In addition,

this study focused on elementary school counselors' experiences with active-duty families. Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 requires public schools to collect data on parents who are active-duty military (MCEC & CPRL, 2017), but does not require data on National Guard, Reserve, or veteran families. Future research studies should focus on families of the National Guard, Reserve, and veterans. The National Guard represents about 45% of the DoD military services (Zinth, 2013). Many members of the Reserve are mobile, and some of their families often face challenges related to their mobility (Zinth, 2013). In addition, the needs of veteran families often increase while transitioning from military lifestyles to civilian life (Maguire et al. 2022)

Many of the participants spoke openly about how all public schools should have access to resources that support MCS and their families. Future studies that reveal support services within different school districts and installations for military-students and their families would be beneficial in mitigating some of the barriers related to obtaining support. Many participants discussed that training on military-focused issues was needed for classroom teachers since they spend much of their time with students. Future studies could examine the professional development experiences of teachers who work with MCS. Finally, all the participants indicated that participating in military-focused continuing education is needed for all staff who work with MCS. Future research that explores why military-specific training is not widely implemented within public schools is needed.

Social Change Implications

The results of this research study have several implications for positive social change. This study is significant because it illuminates the experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents. The stories shared by the participants may enable other elementary school counselors to identify strategies that they utilize to best support MCS and their families. The counseling literature asserted that school counselors are responsible for supporting the academic, career, and social/emotional development of MCS within public schools (ASCA, 2023; Quintana & Cole, 2021). Having insight on what other elementary school counselors have experienced, both positive and negative, may provide the knowledge necessary for public-school systems to implement more comprehensive programs that provide support for all MCS and families.

Multiple parental deployments and frequent moves can have adverse effects on MCS' academic success (Aranda et al., 2011; DoD, 2010; Gorman et al., 2010); therefore, public schools need to implement more inclusive school programs that support these students' needs. MCS with physical, intellectual, or psychological challenges should have the same access to public school support; but they often face gaps in services or little support due to their mobile military lifestyles (MCEC, 2020). In addition, military families are culturally diverse and may include the intersectionality of other marginalized groups i.e., minority groups based on race, groups who face economic challenges, religious minorities, and members of LBTQI communities, and other groups affected by inequality (MCEC, 2020; Tong et al., 2018). Creating a sense of belonging or

connectedness is crucial for the academic success and overall health of all students (Cantor, 2021; Cozza, 2014; ; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019; MCEC, 2020). The results from this study may help school officials develop updated policies and procedures that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion for MCS.

This study may have an impact on positive social change at the organizational level. Most elementary school counselors in this study mentioned the importance of collaborating with other professionals who work with MCS (i.e., MFLC, SLO) to assist students at their schools who struggled with deployments, frequent transitions, academic issues, and relocations. This information may help military organizations build relationships with school systems to advocate for the needs of their military families. In addition, the results from the study may help counselor education programs create practices that focus on training new school counselors on military families. Sharing the results with higher education institutions, counseling educators, military organizations, school counseling professionals, and public-school systems may lead to more comprehensive training on military populations.

Finally, this study may have implications for positive social change at the society level. The goal is to publish the results of this study, make them available to the research participants, and the public so that the public is aware of the experiences of elementary school counselors who work with MCS with active-duty parents. To provide additional recognition of the findings, the plan is to share the results at counseling conferences, webinars, and workshops. Sharing these findings may have significant implications on

understanding how elementary school counselors can facilitate more inclusive school counseling programs for MCS.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study was to provide elementary school counselors who work in US public schools with MCS with active-duty parents the opportunity to share their overall lived experiences. It illuminated some of the successes and challenges that elementary school counselors face supporting MCS and their families in public schools. The findings of this study revealed a need for more supportive services within public schools to address the diverse needs of MCS and their families. While a significant body of literature on MCS exists, very few qualitative studies highlight elementary school counselors' experiences with MCS with active-duty parents. The results of this study fill a gap in the literature by providing the real-life stories of elementary counselors who have worked with MCS with active-duty parents. The results of this study add to the body of literature on MCS by presenting the elementary school counselors' stories in the themes that emerged in the study, which include continuing education for school counselors, challenges of MCS, strengths of MCS, and creating inclusive public-schools.

The findings from this study revealed that more professional development opportunities that focus on military culture and military families are needed within public schools. The findings indicated that military-focused continuing education needs to be provided within school systems that support MCS. Over half of the participants had participated in military-focused continuing education; however, most of the participants

sought out their own training and this training was not provided by their schools. Also, a few participants who were in Purple Star Schools expressed satisfaction with their professional development training and voiced feeling prepared to address the needs of MCS at their schools. Further research on Purple Star Schools may be useful in providing guidelines that assist with training public-school personnel on best practices for working with MCS and families.

The findings from this study revealed that supportive services, homegrown strategies, school programs and clubs, and recognition activities at schools that included recognizing the service of military families; along with professional collaborations with MFLC's and SLO's were useful in meeting some of the needs of MCS. The 12 participants who participated in this study voiced a desire to have more supportive services within all school districts that addressed the needs of MCS, and for all school counselors to have access to supportive resources that assisted the at-home parent during times of deployments.

This study added to the literature that states that a supportive school climate is vital for the academic and social-emotional success of MCS (Astor et al., 2013; Capp et al., 2017; De Pedro et al., 2016; De Pedro et al., 2018; Gilreath et al., 2014; Neil, 2015). The participants in this study confirmed the literature when they discussed the welcoming practices that they offered and how they create positive school climates that are inclusive to their MCS. By allowing each participant to share their experiences, counseling educators, school counselors-in-training, higher institutions, public-school systems, military organizations, and other elementary school counselors may be more willing to

discuss strategies, support services, programs, and policies that alleviate barriers and provide more inclusive environments for all students.

Based on the participants' responses, four themes were identified: creating public school environments that are welcoming and supportive for MCS, supporting MCS through challenges and barriers, participating in military-focused continuing education to support MCS, and fostering resiliency and identifying strengths of MCS. Based on the responses of the participants, they are aware of the needs of MCS and their families. However, participants wanted more supportive services, professional development opportunities, and resources to meet the complex needs of MCS and their families. Also, based on the participants' responses, some participants could make more efforts to acknowledge the strengths of military families and assist with building resiliency during challenging times. Finally, the findings from this study may provide counseling educators, school counseling professionals, school counselors-in-training, higher institutions, and public-school systems with information to consider when developing school counseling programs, preparing new school counselors in the field, and developing programs designed for MCS within public schools.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol

Hello, my name is Tiffany Taylor and I want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this research study. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University enrolled in the Counselor Education and Supervision Program (CES). My dissertation focuses on the lived experiences of public-school elementary counselors who serve military-connected students with active-duty parents. I want to reiterate that you can terminate your involvement in this interview at any time and also want to remind you that this interview is being recorded on a separate device. The interview is planned to run about an hour, and I would like to follow-up with you once I have had the opportunity to analyze and process our conversation for further clarification. My goal is to make this conversation comfortable, but I do have some prepared questions to guide the conversation. Do you have any questions before we get started? Are you ready to start?

Interview Questions/Guide

Overall Experience Working with Military-Connected Students

1. Describe for me your overall experience working with military-connected students with active-duty parents.

2. Describe for me, if any, challenges, or problems you have experienced working with military-connected students with active-duty parents.

3. Tell me about your experiences related to what has helped overcome these challenges in serving military-connected students with active-duty parents.

4. What percentage of students at your school identify as military-connected? How are these students identified?

Experiences with Supportive Services for Military-Connected Students

1. Tell me about your experiences utilizing supports within your schools to assist military-connected students and their families. Please identify the supports utilized.

2. Describe for me your experiences with utilizing resources in your community to assist military-connected students and their families. Please identify the resources utilized.

3. Describe some practices that your school uses to assist military-connected students with feeling connected or welcomed at your school. In your experience have these practices been helpful to these students, if so why or why not?

Training Experiences

1. Describe any training experiences that you have participated in related to military culture, military families, or military-connected students.

2. Describe any trainings or professional development activities that your school offers related to military culture, military families, or military-connected students. If there are no trainings or professional development activities offered, do you think that they would be beneficial for your role as a school counselor why or why not?

Coping Strategies

1. Describe your experience working with military-connected students with active duty parents during deployments? What issues or challenges have you noticed?

2. Describe your experience working with the parent or guardian who is left behind to care for the military-connected student during deployment. What issues or challenges if any have you noticed?

3. Tell me about your experiences with any stressors within this population? How stressors are typically managed within this population?

4. What emotional, social, or academic concerns if any do military-connected

   students with active-duty parents have at your school?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Recruitment Flyer
for
Elementary Public-School Counselors Who Serve Military-Connected Students with
Active-Duty Parents Study

Researcher: Tiffany Taylor (student at Walden University)
Title of Study: Public Elementary School Counselors Experiences Serving Military-Connected Students with Active-Duty Parents.
Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insight on Public Elementary School Counselors' experiences serving military-connected students with active-duty parents.
Study Activities: Study participants will be invited to participate in a confidential zoom interview (audio-recorded on a separate device) to share their experiences related to serving military-connected students with active-duty parents.
Criteria for Participating: To participate in the study, you must:
1. A certified school counselor in your state.
2. Have worked in the role of a school counselor for a minimum of 1 year.
3. Have worked/currently work as a school counselor in an elementary public school with military-connected students who have active-duty parents near a military installation for a minimum of 1 year.

If you meet the criteria and are interested in participating in the study, please follow the link listed below. If you have questions about the study, please contact Tiffany Taylor at XXX or via email at XXX@waldenu.edu

The link to the informed consent and demographic questionnaire is:

The approval for this study is