

# **“If You Don’t Know Who They Are, You Don’t Know How to Support Them”: A Qualitative Study Exploring How Educators Perceive and Support Canadian Military-Connected Students**

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## **Article abstract**

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# “If You Don’t Know Who They Are, You Don’t Know How to Support Them”: A Qualitative Study Exploring How Educators Perceive and Support Canadian Military-Connected Students

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## Abstract

To date, American research has provided the foundation for what is known about the educational experiences of students living in military families. Given contextual differences that exist between the United States and Canada, it is unclear how representative the American findings are of the Canadian experience. Using semi-structured interviews, this phenomenological study collected data from six educators to better understand how the needs of military-connected students are addressed within Canadian secondary schools. Participants generally had a good understanding of the military lifestyle and its associated challenges for students. However, many participants were unaware of any formal mecha-

nisms used to identify military-connected students, any professional development opportunities for educators, or any collaborations that exist between schools and the military to support such students. Given the current lack of Canadian research, this study will help contribute to the building of knowledge and capacity in the Canadian context.

*Keywords:* military-connected students, secondary school educators, Canada

## Résumé

À ce jour, les recherches américaines ont posé les bases de ce que l'on sait des expériences éducatives des étudiants vivant dans des familles de militaires. Étant donné les différences contextuelles qui existent entre les États-Unis et le Canada, une ambiguïté plane concernant la mesure dans laquelle les conclusions américaines sont représentatives de l'expérience canadienne. À l'aide d'entrevues semi-structurées, cette étude phénoménologique a recueilli des données auprès de six éducateurs afin de mieux comprendre comment les besoins des élèves provenant de familles de militaires sont pris en compte dans les écoles secondaires canadiennes. Les participants avaient généralement une bonne compréhension du mode de vie militaire et des défis que rencontrent ces étudiants. Cependant, de nombreux participants n'étaient au courant d'aucun mécanisme formel utilisé pour identifier les étudiants provenant de familles de militaires, des possibilités de développement professionnel pour les éducateurs ou d'une quelconque collaboration existant entre les écoles et l'armée pour soutenir ces étudiants. Étant donné le manque actuel de recherches canadiennes sur le sujet, cette étude contribuera au développement des connaissances et des compétences dans le contexte canadien.

*Mots-clés :* étudiants, familles de militaires, éducateurs du secondaire, Canada

## Introduction

The military lifestyle can be defined by a unique triad of stressors that include frequent relocation, parental absence, and living with the understanding that serving members may sustain physical and/or psychological injuries or death due to their military service (Manser, 2018b). The ongoing stressors associated with the military lifestyle can lead to continuous disruptions for families across various domains such as schooling (Wang &

Aitken, 2016). To date, American research has provided the foundation for what is known about the educational experiences of military-connected students. Military-connected students can be defined as “students having at least one parent as active duty in the [Regular Force] or the reserves, or a parent who was honourably discharged with Veteran status” (Kranke, 2019, p. 189). Challenges that can be experienced by military-connected students may include curricular gaps and/or redundancies, disruptions to friendships, and missing out on opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Garner et al., 2014). While the literature often focuses on the challenges experienced by military-connected students, positives have also been cited, such as having the opportunity to travel and meet new people (Bullock & Skomorovsky, 2016). While the American research helps provide insight into the educational experiences of military-connected students, this literature is reflective of a particular national cultural identity, deployment pattern, sociodemographic profile, and vast infrastructure that provide direct services to military families. As a result, it is unclear how representative the American findings are of the schooling experiences that military-connected students have in other geographic locations such as Canada. With the current lack of Canadian research, little is known about the extent to which educators are aware of and are addressing the educational challenges and needs of military-connected students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the needs of military-connected students are addressed within Canadian secondary schools.

## Literature Review

### Schooling Experiences of Military-Connected Students

On average, students living in military families will relocate six to nine times during their schooling years (kindergarten to graduation) (Aronson et al., 2011). Frequently relocating means that military-connected students can experience gaps and/or redundancies in school curricula (Garner et al., 2014). Additionally, with education systems having varying standards and requirements, military-connected students can face challenges with entry into school as well as graduation and post-secondary opportunities (Manser, 2018b). Since relocations can occur in the middle of a school year, the academic performance and school grades of military-connected students may become further impacted

(Skomorovsky, 2013). Times of parental absence have also been shown to impact military-connected students academically, particularly if a parent is deployed (Card et al., 2011; Garner et al., 2014).

In addition to academic challenges, frequent relocation means that military-connected students are often required to leave behind old friends and create new relationships with peers with each subsequent move (Garner et al., 2014). For adolescents, developing and sustaining new social relationships can be particularly stressful (Bradshaw et al., 2010). It also has been documented that military-connected students often find it challenging to develop friendships with civilian peers, as civilian peers may not understand the stressors that can be involved with living in a military family (Mmari et al., 2010; Williams, 2013).

Participation in extracurricular activities may also be put at risk for military-connected students. As previously mentioned, relocations do not always occur at the end of the school year. As such, tryouts or sign-ups for clubs and sports, at either the school or community levels, may have already passed by the time a student transitions into a new school (Aronson et al., 2011; Bradshaw et al., 2010). Participation in extracurricular activities may also be put at risk during times of extended parental absence, as military-connected students, particularly older students, may be required to pick up additional household responsibilities such as chores and childcare duties if there are younger siblings within the household (Chandra et al., 2010). Furthermore, with the at-home parent picking up additional household responsibilities, the availability of the at-home parent to transport their child(ren) to and from extracurricular activities may become limited (Harrison & Albanese, 2012).

For military-connected students with special needs, the above challenges can be further amplified as military families try to navigate the challenges associated with the military lifestyle in addition to the coordination of special education services (Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Manser, 2018b). With each education system having its own standards, requirements, and eligibility criteria for the provision of special education services, military families in a Canadian study described the process of “navigating such systems as complex, time consuming, and stressful” (Ostler et al., 2018, p. 73). In a study conducted by Arnold and colleagues (2011), participants noted that military-connected students may be prematurely identified as having a disability when academic issues may be related to relocating and experiencing curricular gaps and/or redundancies. Alternatively, partici-

pants in the same study noted that the provision of special education services for military-connected students may become delayed because of evaluations being interrupted or left incomplete because of frequent moves (Arnold et al., 2011).

### **Schooling for Military-Connected Students in the United States**

Following the Second World War, the Department of Defense (DoD) in the United States established schools for the children of American service members who were stationed in Europe and the Pacific (Department of Defense Education Activity, 2021a, para. 1). Currently known as Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) schools, 160 schools remain active today and are in “11 countries, 7 states, and 2 territories across 10 time zones” (DoDEA, 2021b, para. 1). Approaching education with a military-focused lens, DoDEA schools offer military-oriented services and supports that help mitigate the challenges that are often experienced by military families (Brendel et al., 2014; Esqueda et al., 2012). Because of these supports, students who attend DoDEA schools often continue to function academically and socially at high levels, regardless of the challenges that the military lifestyle can create (Esqueda et al., 2012). Furthermore, such supports can be maintained because educators working in DoDEA schools have an understanding about what the military lifestyle entails and the impacts that such a lifestyle can have for students (Esqueda et al., 2012). However, “only 87,000 of the approximate 1.2 million children of active service members” attend DoDEA schools worldwide (Brendel et al., 2014, p. 650). The remaining American military-connected students attend civilian school districts (De Pedro et al., 2011). However, only a small portion of civilian school districts in the United States (214) have been identified as having a military connection—meaning that military-connected students account for 10% or more of student enrolment (Kitmitto et al., 2011). This means that most military-connected students within the United States are attending non-military-connected school districts (Kitmitto et al., 2011).

### **Schooling for Military-Connected Students in Canada**

A similar process of establishing schools for military-connected students occurred in Canada following the Second World War by the Department of National Defence in Canada (Morin, 1986). In 1946, it was recognized that there was a lack of educational facilities available for the children of service personnel (Morin, 1986). As such, a proposal was submitted and eventually passed to authorize the Minister of National Defence (MND) to

“operate schools in establishments, camps and stations where public educational facilities were not available within a reasonable distance” (Morin, 1986, p. xxii). By 1950, 18 schools had been established with a total of 2,600 students enrolled (Morin, 1986). While little is known about these schools, the educational approach “personified the military spirit” (Rehman, 2015, para. 2). A former teacher who taught in one of the DND-established schools within Canada noted that “you would integrate more into your curriculum about where their parents were. Whether it was Bosnia or Afghanistan, or Haiti or whatever was happening in the world” (Rehman, 2015, para. 8).

In the 1990s, 80% of Canadian military families lived on military bases, with many families sending their children to attend these on-base schools (Battams, 2016). Due to strategic assessments and budget cuts during the 1990s, these schools began to be phased out and the responsibility for education was passed over to the provincial and territorial school boards (Manser, 2018b; Rehman, 2015). It is important to note that some of these schools remain physically on some military bases across Canada, even though they are provincially and territorially mandated and run (Ombudsman Department of National Defence and Canadian Forces [ODNDFC], 2013). While DND-established schools have been phased out within Canada, two DND-established schools remain open overseas for the children of Canadian military personnel: AFNORTH International School in the Netherlands and SHAPE International School – Canadian Section in Belgium (Canadian Forces Morale & Welfare Services, n.d.).

In 2017, it was estimated that 57,639 children were growing up within Canada in Regular Force families (Manser, 2018a). Today, 85% of military families living within Canada now live off military bases and within local communities, meaning they are accessing the same systems as civilian families, including schooling for their children (ODNDCF, 2013). Given the lack of Canadian data, little is known about the level of awareness that school personnel have about the military lifestyle and its associated stressors. However, it was reported in 2009 that more than half (54.4%) of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) spouses felt that “military children are at a disadvantage because civilian public schools do not understand military life” (Dursun & Sudom, 2009, p. 46).

## Methods

### Research Paradigm

This study is situated within a constructivist research paradigm. Within this research paradigm, it is believed that “reality is individually constructed [and] there are as many realities as individuals” (Scotland, 2012, p. 11). However, as noted by Crotty (1998), “knowledge and meaningful reality are constructed in and out of interaction between humans and their world and are developed and transmitted in a social context” (p. 42). Therefore, constructivist methodologies aim to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of individuals while also considering the interactions individuals have with the world around them (Creswell, 2009).

### Research Design

A phenomenological approach guided this qualitative study. The purpose of phenomenological research seeks to understand lived experience and describe the essence of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Teherani et al., 2015). As such, researchers seek out the perspectives of individuals who have experienced a phenomenon (Teherani et al., 2015). Given the focus of this study, individuals with experience working in Canadian secondary schools were recruited to better understand how the needs of military-connected students are being addressed.

### Participants

To be eligible to participate in the study, individuals had to be a current school professional (e.g., classroom teacher, guidance counsellor, vice principal, principal, etc.) working in a Canadian secondary school. While a pan-Canadian perspective was sought, for the study, all participants ended up being from Ontario. Ultimately, six participants working in rural schools located across Ontario were recruited. All six participants worked in schools that had a military base located within the catchment area. The participants held various positions at the schools where they worked (e.g., classroom teacher, department head, student success teacher, etc.). Teaching subjects across the participants included math, physics, computer technology, history, geography, physical education, and English. The years of teaching experience amongst all six participants ranged from six to 30 years. The participants also estimated that military-connected students made up 10–30% of the total student population at their respective schools.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were developed to gain insight into the following: (1) what the participants knew about the military lifestyle, (2) how military-connected students are identified in schools, (3) the types of professional development opportunities that are available to educators who focus on military families, and (4) if the military had collaborated with schools and/or school boards to support military-connected students. Interviews were conducted in-person by the primary investigator (SH) and were audio-recorded. Each participant provided informed consent at the beginning of their interview. The date and location of each interview were chosen by each participant. Interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. Following each of the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the primary investigator (SH). Any identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms to help protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

## Data Analysis

A general inductive approach was used to analyze the data. The inductive nature of the data analysis refers to a process where themes were derived through the reading and interpretation of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), this was completed using open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts and taking notes of any terms or phrases that were related to the purpose of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial coding involved grouping open codes into categories based on similarities (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally, selective coding involved grouping categories based on similarities, which then emerged as the broader themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These broader themes are discussed below as the findings of the study.

## Findings

The following themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) participants were generally aware of the defining features of the military lifestyle and the associated challenges that military-connected students could experience; (2) military-connected students were often identified informally; (3) participants were unaware of any professional development

opportunities focused on military families, but could identify some military-focused resources; and (4) participants were unaware of any collaborations between the military and their respective schools/school boards to help support military-connected students.

### **Theme 1: Participants Were Generally Aware of the Defining Features of the Military Lifestyle and the Associated Challenges that Military-Connected Students Could Experience**

Participants described various features they thought were defining of the military lifestyle as well as the challenges that they thought the military lifestyle could cause for military-connected students.

**Relocation.** Many of the participants noted how relocation was a defining feature of the military lifestyle. When asked what they thought of when hearing the phrase “military lifestyle,” almost all the participants discussed relocation. Many participants also discussed the impacts that relocation could have for military-connected students and their families. One of the main challenges noted by participants was needing to develop new friends and relationships every time a relocation occurred. One participant discussed the idea of military-connected students being hesitant to develop new friendships following a relocation. They noted:

I wonder too if there is ever a fear of developing a strong relationship with someone outside the military because you might not be around for a long time. I wonder if they purposefully hold back because they don’t want to get attached because they, they are going to move again.

One participant described how developing new friendships and relationships could be even more challenging “when trying to establish amongst a peer group that may have been together since kindergarten.” One participant offered their thoughts on what educators could do to support military-connected students in times of relocation:

I think that in those moments of transitions, you have to be even more sensitive to that. Be aware of things like their engagements, and their mental health. I think that with leaving their peer groups, coming into new communities, and knowing you have to leave, there is a lot of transition that these students are going through.

Two participants discussed how they thought military-connected students can adjust well socially following a relocation. One participant stated how they have seen military-connected students “interact socially really well, really quickly. Especially if they get involved in something.” Another participant felt that military-connected students do well socially but acknowledged that they might not “necessarily love it when they have to move.”

**Parental absence.** Parental absence was also discussed by the participants as a defining feature of the military lifestyle. Many of the participants discussed the feeling of the “unknown” that military-connected students can experience while a parent is away. One participant stated that military personnel are “on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year depending on what’s going on in the world” which makes it a “high alert, high stress position.” Some participants discussed how parental stress can affect children. One of the participants described how the “stress that is put on the parents in their jobs” can be taken on by the students. This was echoed by another participant who described how the role a parent holds within the Canadian Forces might cause greater stress for a student during a time of parental absence:

We have the JTF2. Those are our secret forces. They are the equivalent to the Green Beret down in the United States. Those guys are gone all the time. Those kids don’t even know where their dads are. They are not allowed to know. So, that’s a whole other level.

Because military-connected students can experience parental absence, one participant specifically noted how milestones can be missed by parents who are required to be away from their families:

The other thing I really thought about was that parents miss milestones. And they can’t help it. Their job says you’re not going to see your child graduate, or you’re not going to see that dance recital. Or you’re not going to watch their championship football game. And that you’re not going to be able to assist them daily with homework.

Drawing on their experience, one participant discussed that things are “better when the parents are home. Always happiness when their parent comes back into the home situation. And you do see a shift.”

## **Theme 2: Military-Connected Students are Generally Identified Informally**

When asked about how military-connected students were identified in their respective schools, many of the participants described informal means of identification such as visual cues, conversations, and school assignments.

Participants discussed how seeing a student or parent come to school dressed in military attire signalled a military connection. One participant reflected on a time that they saw a student come to school dressed in a Cadet uniform. While this participant acknowledged that being in the Cadet program does not mean that a student is growing up in a military family, they assumed that “there is probably a connection [to the military] somewhere down the line.” Other participants also noted how seeing a parent come to school dressed in their military attire was an indicator that a student was living in a military family.

Participants also described how conversations with students, parents, and/or other staff members helped identify whether a student lived in a military family. One participant remarked, “honestly, we don’t know until the kids say so themselves. No one tells me but the kids.” One participant noted that conversations about living in a military family can come up around Remembrance Day. They noted that, “when that time of the school year comes around, we get into discussions, and that’s how I find out.” Conversations with parents were also brought up by participants. One participant discussed that conversations with parents have happened at teacher-parent interviews noting “I’ve had parents come up and say we’re not from here,” implying that the family had just relocated into the area. One participant also stated that sometimes staff meetings at the beginning of the year are used to inform staff of incoming students who live in military families. However, this participant never discussed how those military families were identified.

Some of the participants who taught English described how military-connected students may be identified through school assignments. One participant discussed the following:

In my Grade 9 class, one of the expectations for the writing portfolio is to write a personal narrative. So, they are expected to pick a moment in their life that mattered.... Every year I have students writing about moving. So,

there's always at least one person writing about what it's like to go through the experience of saying bye to a father, or mother who is going abroad. What it's like to drive all the way from B.C. and arrive in this new city. So, it's through that. That's a big way I learn.

Only one participant discussed a formal mechanism that was in place to identify military-connected students in the school where they worked. This participant stated that because the school they work at offers counselling and has a military student support group, students are identified as being military-connected when they register with the school.

Although the participants identified that military-connected students are often identified through informal means such as visual cues, conversations, and school assignments, many of the participants suggested that implementing formal mechanisms to identify military-connected students could be beneficial. Many of the participants discussed that formally identifying military-connected students wouldn't be used to "treat them differently," but instead to better support them inside the classroom. One participant felt that if they knew who the military-connected students were, they could "keep [their] eyes open and make sure that they are adjusting okay." Another participant echoed this point by stating "if you don't know who they are, you don't know how to support them."

### **Theme 3: Participants Were Unaware of Any Professional Development Opportunities Focusing on Military Families**

None of the participants were aware of any existing professional development opportunities that specifically focused on military families. However, one participant described how a professional development session they had participated in could be used to support military-connected students. Centring on mindfulness, this participant noted how the professional development session focused on working with students who experience anxiety or depression. Recognizing that military-connected students are not the only students who can experience anxiety and depression, this participant did feel that such training could benefit military-connected students. Although unaware of any professional development opportunities for educators, some participants were able to identify military-focused resources that they had heard about in their professional context. Two participants specifically spoke about a magazine that they had seen that focused on military families. As noted by one participant, "I did notice interesting things like there was a magazine on the

table in the office for parents to pick up or kids that said something like ‘military families.’” Furthermore, a few participants discussed hearing about Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC). One participant noted hearing about the MFRC on the radio and the daycare services that they offered.

Many of the participants discussed a need for professional development opportunities that focused on military families, especially when working in schools that could have large percentages of military-connected students amongst the larger student population. One participant noted that:

Maybe it should be a part of what we do in Ontario, or even Canada. Because you know, those teachers will encounter, no matter where you are in Canada, you are going to encounter someone that is in the military.

Similarly, one participant felt that “if you want to be a good teacher, you’ve got to know [who] is in front of you.” Another participant echoed the need for professional development and stated:

We need to know what is going on out there. We raise their kids five days a week, eight hours a day. We need to know what’s going on in their lives if we want to educate them properly. Not to the point where we think we are their parents, but if there are bigger issues than on the normal—and I keep using the word normal. There is no normal. If we want to support them properly, we need [to know what is going on].

Including student voice and experience into professional development content was also discussed by participants. As noted by one participant, “hearing from [the students]. Right now. What they are struggling with. What is relevant. They have the answers. These kids really need to drive that and what they really need.”

#### **Theme 4: Participants Were Unaware of Any Collaborations between the Military and Their Respective Schools/School Boards to Help Support Military-Connected Students**

Many of the participants were unaware if the military had reached out to their respective schools to collaborate on supporting military-connected students. However, one participant described how members of the military community have reached out and offered to help in their classroom:

When I ran the outdoor class, I just have to make a phone call to the base to borrow canoes and it was a Sergeant Major for the Cadets that gave me their canoes to use. PFDs, their paddles, tents, sleeping bags, for two of the years. And also, within that, I had—there was a retired search and rescue technician guy [who] took us out and did some survival stuff with us.

This participant also discussed a time when a member of the military community reached out and offered to help with the football program that their school was offering. Another participant also shared their experience with the military reaching out to schools to collaborate on supporting military-connected students. This participant noted that, “Not the military directly. Their support services have. That’s their mandate. The MFRC has counsellors that are attached to schools.... The relationship with the MFRC is well-established.”

Although many of the participants were unaware of how schools and the military may be collaborating on supporting military-connected students, many of the participants agreed that there should be some form of collaboration moving forward between the two groups. One participant noted how open communication between schools and the military would be important to push any collaboration forward:

I just think we should be more involved, particularly our proximity to the base. But the base also needs to be more open about what they would like to see us do. So, it’s to communicate back and forth, and to break down that barrier between two institutions. I think it would be exciting to find a way to bridge the gap. I think if you bring both institutions together, that’s the secret. That’s the key for allowing programming to go forward. To have that linkage. Then that means, okay we’re safe. We can talk about these things. Both bodies agree, and both organizations want this to happen. So yeah, all about breaking down walls.

Thinking about collaboration, some participants discussed the idea of creating a “liaison” position. Participants who discussed this idea felt that the liaison could act as an intermediary between the schools and the military. One participant noted:

The military has to have an education liaison at every base. Somebody in a role like yours, or whatnot, that touches base with the schools. They can

have an officer in the Canadian military who is an educator that kind of fits under that family liaison that goes out and teaches the local schools on [the military lifestyle]. Educates the [schools] on the tools they need.

## Discussion

Overall, the participants were generally aware of the defining features of the military lifestyle and the associated challenges that military-connected students could experience. This finding differs from what has been discussed in the American literature. Various American studies have found that school professionals working in civilian-operated schools are generally unaware of, or do not understand, the complexities involved with the military lifestyle (Esqueda et al., 2012; Harrison & Vannest, 2008). In response, various efforts have been made during the past 10 years to ensure that civilian-operated schools in the United States are provided with the necessary tools and knowledge to support military-connected students. A key example is the *Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children* (ICEOMC). Currently adopted by all 50 States and the District of Columbia, the ICEOMC provides civilian-operated school districts with consistent and comprehensive policy that addresses the key educational issues encountered by transitioning military families such as “enrollment, placement, attendance, eligibility and graduation” (DoDEA, 2020; Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, n.d.).

The social implications of frequent relocations on students were the main focus of discussion by participants. They noted how students are required to develop new friends and relationships with each move. Participants suggested how military-connected students may be hesitant to develop and sustain friendships and relationships if they know they will not be in a location for an extended period. This finding is consistent with several American studies that found that military-connected students often experience challenges when initiating and sustaining relationships with their peers, particularly civilian peers, as civilian peers may not understand the different stressors related to the military lifestyle, such as frequently relocating or having a parent who is required to be absent to meet operational requirements (Mmari et al., 2010; Williams, 2013). Within Canada, Military Family Services (MFS), a branch of the Department of National Defence (DND), has published recommendations to reduce the number of relocations for military families who have children, particularly adolescents, due to the known disrup-

tions that relocation can have for this age group (Manser, 2018b). While these guidelines have been set out, some of the participants did note that military-connected students often adjust well socially following a relocation. A Canadian study conducted by Bullock and Skomovorosky (2016) found that, although military-connected children often do not look forward to frequently relocating, it allows military-connected children the opportunity to travel and meet new people.

The impacts of parental absences were also discussed by the participants, particularly noting that military-connected students often worry about a parent who is away. This finding is consistent with a Canadian study conducted by Skomovorosky and Bullock (2017) that explored the impacts of deployment on children living in Canadian military families. Participants in this study indicated that deployments can be stressful because “something could happen to [a] parent without them knowing about it” (p. 660). This same study found that deployment-related stress can cause problems for some children in school such as a decrease in concentration and lower school performance. This was echoed by an American meta-analytic review that explored the impacts of “military deployment, particularly combat related, on the psychological and academic adjustment” of children living in military families (Card et al., 2011, pp. 508–509).

Participants in this study also discussed how military-connected students are often informally identified through conversations, school assignments, and seeing a parent come to the school dressed in a military uniform. Within Canada, it is unclear whether formal mechanisms are being used to identify military-connected students. Similarly, it has been noted by Esqueda et al. (2012) that “civilian” schools in the United States also lack established procedures to identify military-connected students. An American study by Fletcher and Albright (2016) found that military-connected students and/or their families often have to disclose their connection to the military themselves. The lack of formal identification has been described as a barrier for military-connected students in the United States who attend civilian schools, as these students often become “invisible” given that the data systems “lack the capacity to systematically identify military students, their academic performance, and/or their needs” (Russo & Fallon, 2014, p. 68). However, American studies found that military-connected students and their families may be hesitant to disclose their military connection out of worry about the stereotypes that educators and schools may hold about military families (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Russo & Fallon, 2014). DoDEA schools have developed a data system that helps prevent any delays when

dealing with student enrolment and learning (Atuel et al., 2011). As noted by Atuel and colleagues (2011), having access to educational and health information about military-connected students in civilian schools would allow for the facilitation of “school enrollment, grade placement, and the awarding of course credits – all of which are issues that military-connected students encounter” (p. 4) due to their high mobility. Furthermore, having access to such data allows for schools with a high percentage of military-connected students to be identified, further facilitating decision making about the allocation of services and supports (Atuel et al., 2011). Given both the benefits and drawbacks of formal data systems that have been documented in the literature, it would be beneficial moving forward to investigate the implications of having a formal data system to identify and track military-connected students in Canada, either at the federal or provincial and territorial level, and to examine what this would mean from a support perspective, particularly for military-connected students who have special needs.

Participants in this study were unaware of any professional development opportunities that exist for educators to focus on military families. Within Canada, it is unclear what professional development opportunities exist for both pre-service and in-service educators. However, efforts have been made within Canada to develop awareness-enhancing resources, such as the *School Counsellors Working with Military and Veteran Families* guide, which was developed through a collaboration between the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) and the Canadian Military and Veteran Families Leadership Circle (2017). While the development of this resource is a step forward, it is unclear whether educators are aware of and/or using this resource to inform their professional practice. Furthermore, this resource seems to focus on in-service educators rather than pre-service educators. Within the United States, organizations such as the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) offer a variety of professional development and continuing education opportunities for educators working with military-connected students. Within the United Kingdom, toolkits and resources are now available for educators due to the tremendous efforts of the Service Children’s Progression (SCiP) Alliance. Moving forward, more research is warranted to understand the professional development and training opportunities that currently exist for either pre-service or in-service educators in Canada and what the needs of these educators are. With numerous Canadian Armed Forces Bases and Wings located across Canada, there is a strong likelihood that educators will interact with military-connected students inside classrooms and schools.

Thus, it is critical to ensure that educators can support military-connected students by understanding the unique stressors associated with the military lifestyle and how this lifestyle can create a unique set of challenges for these students.

Participants were also unaware of any collaborations that existed amongst the military and schools to help support military-connected students. Given the lack of awareness about any collaborations, some of the participants discussed the idea of having a “liaison” who could act as an intermediary among schools, families, and the military. Within the United States, School Liaison Programs have been developed and tailored by each of the military branches (Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force) (Aronson et al., 2011). School Liaison Officers “provide information, referrals, programming, and outreach to families, schools, and other stakeholders working with military families to make school transitions less stressful and problematic for all involved” (Aronson et al., 2011, pp. 1005–1006). Within Canada, this liaison position does not formally exist as it does in the United States. However, efforts are being made by Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs), organizations funded through the Canadian Forces Morale and Welfare Services (CFMWS), to offer services and supports to military-connected students and schools. For example, the Halifax MFRC offers a school outreach program that includes both briefings and resources to educators and military-connected students (Halifax & Region Military Family Resource Centre, n.d.). Furthermore, the *Seamless Canada* initiative was launched in 2018 by the DND in support of the priorities discussed in Canada’s defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, which include ensuring that military families have access to services and supports that can help mitigate the challenges that can be associated with the military lifestyle (DND, 2017). The *Seamless Canada* initiative aims to improve services offered to CAF members and their families during times of relocation, with one area of focus being the education of military-connected children and youth (DND, 2018).

### Limitations

Given the small sample size of the study, we recognize that the findings are more illustrative than generalizable. Nonetheless, the findings provide important initial insights into the level of awareness that educators in Canada have about military-connected students and the military lifestyle. Although efforts were made to recruit participants from across Canada, in the end all participants were from Ontario. Future research needs to include educators who work in other provinces and territories where military families live. Fur-

thermore, given that the participants in this study worked in secondary schools, future research should include other educational professionals who work with military-connected students (e.g., elementary school teachers, etc.).

## Conclusion

To our knowledge, this qualitative study is among the first in Canada to explore the level of awareness that educators have about military-connected students and the military lifestyle. This study identified that participants were aware of most of the distinguishable features of the military lifestyle as well as the associated challenges that such features (e.g., frequent relocation and parental absence) can create for military-connected students. Many participants were unaware of any formal mechanisms that are in place to identify military-connected students in education systems. From the participants' experiences, military-connected students are often identified informally through visual cues, conversations, and school assignments. Only one participant identified a formal mechanism that was in place to identify military-connected students. While participants were unaware of any professional development that is offered to educators that focuses on military families, many of the participants felt it would be beneficial to have such opportunities. Furthermore, the participants felt that it would be beneficial moving forward for schools and the military to collaborate when supporting military-connected students. In the future, conducting research that includes both the family and educator perspectives will be valuable in building both the knowledge and capacity across the academic, military, and education domains to improve support, not only to military-connected students and their families, but also to the educators who serve this population.

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