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# Removing the Camouflage: A Deeper Look at Military-Connected Adolescent Perception of Identity in Secondary Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Schools can play a key role in supporting and promoting inclusion and diversity, but one marginalized group often remains invisible in public schools: military-connected adolescents. To better support marginalized groups, we must learn more about them and their needs. Despite more than four million military-connected children in the U.S. and the understanding that they are a vital source of support for fighting forces, little is known about how military-connected adolescents define themselves or perceive their experiences as a member of the military culture. Using narrative inquiry, nine military-connected adolescents shared their insights, experiences, and thoughts on their identity development as it intersects growing up among the military culture. What emerged in the attempt to reveal the invisible lives of these military-connected adolescents is a perception of themselves as confident, empathetic, mature, and adaptable, which can help enlighten teachers and educational institutions to better inform teaching and learning among members of this invisible minority.

## KEYWORDS

Adolescents; public school; culture; diversity

Children tend to thrive educationally, emotionally, and socially when they perceive support from a caring adult (Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner 2013; Ginsburg and Jablow 2006). Since schools are the closest communities and social networks outside the home, the classroom is an ideal place to increase tolerance and diversity awareness. Multicultural education is a staple in both preservice teacher training and professional development, yet one culture is often overlooked: the culture of the military.

Four million U.S. children fall under the military-connected umbrella (Lester and Flake 2013). While there are Department of Defense (DoD) schools, the majority are overseas; so, 80% of military-connected children in the U.S. attend public schools (Military Child Education Coalition 2011). Despite this massive number, most schools do little to recognize or support the needs of military-connected children, making them one of the most invisible minorities in public education (Clever and Segal 2013; Esqueda, Astor, and De Pedro 2012; Wertsch 1991). Since they look the same as civilian youth, it can be hard to identify military-connected children

based solely upon appearances, thus keeping them in the shadows (Atuel, Esqueda, and Jacobson 2011; Pollock and Van Reken 2009).

While the U.S. military consists of a multitude of diverse cultures, religions, races, and ethnicities, it is a distinctive culture itself (Hall 2011). Military families and military-connected children are referred to as the backbone of the armed forces (Dagher et al. 2010). The stronger the family at home, the more a soldier can focus on the task at hand in a conflict zone. So, ensuring ways to support military-connected children, in turn, helps to support our national defense (Olsen 2012; Torres 2006).

This study sought to make visible the unacknowledged lives of military-connected adolescents – children who have endured a continual wave of parental deployments and conflict abroad throughout their formative years – to gain enlightenment on how they perceive and define themselves in relation to their membership within the military culture.

## Review of literature

Military-connected children live in our neighborhoods, go to our schools, and are members of the

quintessential American family and there is much we can learn from them (Park 2011). With 3.2 million personnel stationed in all 50 states and 150 countries worldwide, the U.S. armed forces is one of the largest employers in the world (McCarthy 2015). Despite the increase in service members over the years, there is surprisingly little research on military-connected adolescents, especially in terms of understanding who they are and how they perceive their place in the world.

Early studies on military-connected children collected only retrospective observational data (McCubbin, Dahl, and Hunter 1976). Additionally, studies conducted as recently as Operation Desert Storm in the early 1990s may not necessarily apply to the current population of military-connected children. Recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan differ vastly from previous military engagements (Chartrand and Siegel 2007).

Military families come in different types including nuclear, single parent, blended, multi-generational, and a growing number are dual military, where both parents are soldiers (Clever and Segal 2013, Knox and Price 1999). There is an unspoken understanding that when a soldier joins the military, their family also enlists (Park 2011). It becomes abundantly clear to spouses and children that the mission of the military comes first, leaving the family perpetually in second place.

Military-connected children move to a new duty station an average of every three years, 2.4 times often more than civilians (Clever and Segal 2013; Wertsch 1991). Learning to blend in amid the “new kid” label becomes a double-edged sword because while it can allow them to fit in and make friends quickly, there is an unspoken urge to not let people get too close to protect themselves from the potential pain that comes with moving (Bradshaw et al. 2010; McDonald 2010). Because of the distinctiveness of the military culture, most of them tend to seek out fellow military-connected adolescents for friendship (Hall 2011; Moore and Barker 2012).

As the interloper in most situations, military-connected adolescents live with an outsider identity, feeling they only fit in within the margins (Wertsch 1991). Stressors like high mobility,

academic and school issues, separation and anxiety due to parental deployment, and personal and cultural identity development issues are common among military-connected children of all ages (Bolton 2006).

Military-connected adolescents can also be identified as third culture kids. Coined by Ruth Hill Useem and John Useem in the 1950s, third culture kids are those who spend a significant amount of time during their formative years growing up outside of their parent’s home culture and often begin to identify with the foreign culture. This can lead to melding the home and foreign cultures into a “third” one where they claim membership (Pollock and Van Reken 2009).

Parental separation is difficult for all children, but the danger of a parent deployed to a war zone adds an extra layer of stress for military-connected children (Lester and Flake 2013). The number of service members deployed from 2001 to 2007 jumped from 8% to 38% while the average length of deployments increased from six to 15 months (Engel, Gallagher, and Lyle 2010). Of the four million military-connected children in the U.S., nearly 900,000 have had at least one parent deployed since 2001, including 212,000 whose parents deployed twice to a conflict region and 103,000 who deployed three or more times (Chandra et al. 2010; Park 2011).

Military-connected children also face academic problems as a result of the transient life of a military family. Military-connected children might have gaps in their academic skills and development because of continued mobility and parental deployment (Harrison and Vannest 2008). Likewise, divergent schedules or different graduation requirements force military-connected adolescents to take or repeat classes for credit (Clever and Segal 2013).

The stressors of high mobility, deployment, and academics issues can also impact the development of a sense of self and personal identity within this population. A common issue among military-connected adolescents is prolonged or delayed adolescent maturity (McDonald 2010; Moore and Barker 2012; Pollock and Van Reken 2009; Wertsch 1991). Since adolescent identity development hinges on peer interaction, when military-connected adolescents move, they are

forced to restart the process of forging new friendships and developing a sense of belonging, which puts them further behind their peers. Additionally, military-connected adolescents can be left feeling culturally homeless from having to adapt themselves to fit in at each new duty station (Hoersting and Jenkins 2011).

Despite stressors, military-connected adolescents possess strengths as part of their cultural membership. Socially, military-connected adolescents develop a better sense of security, greater respect for authority, and are more likely to befriend someone different from themselves (Park 2011). Youth within the military culture tend to live healthier lives because of access to quality healthcare, at least one steady stream of income, and access to better resources and equal opportunities (Clever and Segal 2013; Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner 2013). Even though high mobility can hinder them, learning how to meet new people and the development of extrovert behaviors can help military-connected adolescents develop buoyancy in both social and work environments (Blum 2005).

When it comes to research concerning military families, the career soldier and the family as a unit have been well studied, but a specific focus on how adolescents feel growing up within this culture remains relatively unknown. The literature that does exist concerning military-connected children tends to be either out of date, overly concerned with deficits instead of strengths, comes a result of smaller findings within the context of a larger study uses a limited definition of military-connected children or is not methodologically rigorous (Clever and Segal 2013; Cozza and Lerner 2013; Knox and Price 1999; McDonald 2010; Park 2011; Pollock and Van Reken 2009; Wertsch 1991). Much of the research concerning military-connected adolescents focuses on observational and quantitative data or adults reflecting on their experiences instead of inquiring directly from military-connected adolescents themselves. The lack of research identifying the individual perceptions related to this invisible minority makes it difficult to develop high-quality programs and policies to support military-connected adolescents. As such, this study sought to understand how military-

connected adolescents perceive and define themselves in order to better inform teaching and learning among this invisible minority.

## Methods

Identity is understood at a personal level. Our stories shed light on how we see ourselves through what we reveal to others. Since the intent of the study is to gather an in-depth understanding of military-connected adolescent's perceptions of themselves and their experiences amid the military culture, narrative inquiry was selected as the methodology. Narrative inquiry helps give a voice to participants as they unpack their identity through the sharing of experiences and life stories within various social, historical, and cultural contexts (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Participants were selected using a criterion-based approach to ensure they met the requirements of being 14- to 18-years-old, have at least one parent or guardian that is a member of the military, have moved to new duty stations multiple times during their childhood, and endured parental deployment as part of the military culture. Below is a table with the basic demographic information about the nine participants in the study (Table 1).

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant over several months. These interviews were appropriate both for obtaining thick textural descriptions of participant's experiences and for capturing participants' perceptions of themselves and their experiences. Data analysis was completed using systematic steps of the narrative inquiry process. All recorded interviews and field notes were transcribed and then restoried into a coherent, linear manner – using the adolescent's own words – to tell each participant's life story (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Those stories were iteratively read and reread to ascertain emergent patterns and resonant themes across participants as they pertained to the perception of experiences and identity development (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Esterberg 2002). To cultivate trustworthiness – something qualitative researchers are often challenged about – copies of the transcripts and

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Grade	Branch of service	Military-connected parent/ guardian
Bailey	18	Caucasian	Female	12 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Sister, active duty
Brandon	16	Black	Male (trans)	11 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Mother, active duty; Father, retired
Daisy	17	Caucasian	Female	12 <sup>th</sup>	Marines	Father, active duty
Elias	16	Hispanic & Asian	Male	10 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Father, active duty
Frank	16	Caucasian	Male	10 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Father, active duty
Leslie	18	Caucasian & Black	Female	12 <sup>th</sup>	Army and Civilian Contractor	Father, retired
Lindsey	17	Black	Female	12 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Father, active duty
Sage	18	Black	Male	12 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Father, active duty
Zion	18	Black	Male	12 <sup>th</sup>	Army	Mother, retired; Father, retired; Stepmom, prior service; Stepdad, retired

restored narratives were given to participants to check for thoroughness, correctness, and authenticity.

## Findings

According to Shank (2002), thematic analysis operates under the notion that where there are patterns there is the possibility of something that is creating them. Or, as Morse (1994) puts it, emergent themes come from perceptive questioning, observation, and a relentless search for answers to make the invisible obvious for the masses. To achieve this, research texts in this study were read and reread before being coded as they connect to the perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and actions of participants. Those codes were sorted, arranged, and rearranged into categories and later into themes to address the research question of how military-connected adolescents perceive and define themselves concerning their membership within the military culture. *Confidence, empathy, maturity, and adaptability* were the major qualities participants viewed themselves possessing as a result of their upbringing within the military culture.

## Confidence

Confidence arises when people feel secure in themselves. While the participants in the study revealed the same feelings of vulnerability many adolescents, they also articulated confidence in themselves through attributes like determination, pride, self-assured fearlessness and optimism as a result of growing up within the military culture.

Although most adolescents have a desire to put forth the best version of themselves, the military-connected adolescents in this study

expressed not just a yearning to look better but to be better. For Elias, although he has high expectations for himself, he spoke about the feeling of pushing himself further “because I have the higher expectations of how I’m not there yet, I need to reach it. ... I want to be a leader.” This desire to push himself to be better has guided many of his decisions, including the plans to attend a premier military academy in the future. Daisy, Frank, and Leslie also expressed determination as a factor of their identity as a result of fighting for the rights of others and a desire to do your best and finish what you start because it was modeled by their military parents.

Several of the participants shared that pride in themselves and their membership within the military community was an important part of how they perceived themselves. For Zion, whose mother, father, and stepparents all served in the military, it is about the way he walks with his “head up, chest out” as he saw his soldier parents do for years. Elias echoes those same sentiments but claims this expression of pride can come across in a negative way when among civilian peers, but this distinction is obvious in picking out fellow military-connected adolescents. For Lindsey, her pride manifests in her feminism while Brandon sees his ability to set an example for his younger brother on how to show pride and respect simultaneously.

One thing that participants perceived as a difference between themselves and civilian adolescents was a sense of self-assured fearlessness where they trust in themselves and their abilities in the face of almost anything. While participants shared characteristics of both extrovert and introvert personalities, they had an unwavering lack of fear over their future and how they will handle it.

As a female-to-male transgender adolescent, Brandon felt the cultivation of fearlessness made his gender transition easier. For example, Brandon talked at length about the bullying he endured while transitioning at his previous school, but the moment he decided to use the men's restroom for the first time was a "title of victory" for him. "That's why when ... trans are like 'I don't wanna go in,' I'm like, 'just walk in, it's not that big of a deal.'" Brandon's fearlessness allowed him to overcome hurdles and develop a self-assured facet of his identity.

Feelings of confidence also brought about a perceived optimism for many of the participants. Sage, who had moved the most out of all the participants, claims he can remain optimistic and "make the most of what they got under the circumstances" that helped him to view the military life as "rewarding." Bailey claims it gave her optimism watching how the military helped her older sister – and guardian – follow a better path because she was so unfocused in college. Bailey saw her sister "change her life around and go to the Army and look at her now. I mean she's successful and so it shows me that anything is possible. I mean my own sister can do it, so can I." The years spent living with her sister in relative stability helped Bailey, who is now in the military herself and deployed overseas, to develop confidence and envision a future where anything is possible. This knowledge allows the participants to perceive life in a realist and optimistic manner, which results in increased confidence because even though they went through tough experiences, they can survive and even thrive as a result.

### **Empathy**

In contrast to sympathy, empathy goes beyond simply feeling bad for someone in a difficult situation, it involves trying to imagine how you would feel in that position. The participants in this study express empathy as a key part of their identity through being humble, considerate, worldly, and self-sacrificing as a result of their experiences within the military culture.

With the ability to travel and see the world, one could easily look at being a military-connected adolescent through rose-colored

glasses. However, it is this very thing that the participants claim helps them to approach the world with a perceived sense of humbleness. While Frank, Daisy, Zion, and Brandon spent more time overseas, they don't brag about the places they've been or the things they have seen for fear, as Frank puts it, "showing off." Zion claims that the self-absorbed behavior common among teenagers growing up in a social media world where "a lot of people worry about how their Instagram looks and all that" isn't something he and most military-connected adolescents he knows to ascribe to. "I don't worry about that kind of stuff. It's not important to me. Just the little things I feel like make me different," Zion claims. Sage, who also notices privileged behavior from his civilian peers, states he just tried to learn from each situation he found himself in and realized that he is humbled to just be alive and feels "kind of blessed" to have lived the life he did.

Several of the participants perceived themselves as being more considerate of others as a result of growing up within the military culture. Brandon showed pride that he is considered a good listener by many of his friends while Leslie spoke about how much she loves to help others, sometimes to the point where she perceives others as taking advantage of her, but that will not stop her from being caring and considerate in the future. Daisy, whose father was the only military officer of the group, asserts that the charity work that her mother does as a part of being a military spouse not only helps her to empathize with others but lit a fire in her join service clubs in high school and a desire to continue giving to others in the future.

All nine participants perceive a major difference between military-connected adolescents and civilian peers is the awareness and openness they have for people from other cultures. For Zion and Frank, the different people they met while living on military posts in South Korea and Germany makes them aware of the diversity around them while Lindsey, who didn't live overseas but was stationed all over the United States, said the different regions of the country she lived in her increase her awareness of people from other walks of life. Being able to see how others

live – here and abroad – allows military-connected adolescents to be exposed to the diversity of the world that many of their civilian peers do not have a chance to partake in.

One thing nearly every participant spoke about was how unaware the rest of the world is about the sacrifices that military families make. While the military does provide a stable paycheck and access to housing, food, and good healthcare, as Frank shares, this comes with the reminder that if “the military calls us tomorrow, we have to go.” This idea is something that reverberates with Bailey as her sister was deployed during the final months of Bailey’s senior year, leaving her to navigate final senior moments and choices basically on her own. As one of 10 kids in the family, one of which has special needs, Daisy is no stranger to sacrifice. However, having endured the demands of military life made growing up difficult because “we just take it ... whatever he wants to do, we’re just gonna follow along ...” While she is quick to state that she wants to “support him in what he’s doing,” it is a sacrifice that she, her siblings, and her mother have had to make over and over again. For Leslie, her sacrificing nature tends to cut a little closer to the bone. She survived a sexual assault during the summer between her sophomore and junior year and even though this is something she battles with daily, Leslie expresses a desire to take her experience and use it to help others, even if that means having to relive and share something so personal.

### **Maturity**

Adulthood is just around the corner for the military-connected adolescents in this study, and while age is the lawful way to determine adulthood, maturity is a vital element as it relates to the notion of knowing how to act in any given situation. Military-connected adolescents face certain situations that their civilian peers often do not which they claim has manifested into a higher level of respect, self-reliance, and discipline that they feel is more present in military-connected adolescents than others.

Since respect is a core value in the military, it is only natural to think that this would filter

down to military-connected adolescents. Many participants feel they express pride in themselves by showing respect for their elders, including parents and teachers. Sage and Bailey both state this is a natural thing for them when addressing or interacting with adults because giving someone “attitude,” even if they didn’t want to do what was being asked of them, is disrespectful. While he views respect as a byproduct of restraint, Brandon claims people comment his behavior “makes sense” when they find out he is a military-connected adolescent since many people associate membership in this culture with being respectful. Daisy declares her peers often comment on her level of respect, while Zion describes his ability to always be respectful allows him to “act more mature than most people.” He says this behavior also helps him to feel comfortable interacting with adults in ways his peers would not. Growing up with military parents, who are expected to show respect in all situations, is what aids the participants in learning to develop respect and internalize this behavior as part of their identity.

Having to say goodbye to a parent for an extended period increases the likelihood of having to learn to do things on your own. As such, all participants in the study commented on feeling self-sufficient or intrinsically motivated throughout their childhood and subsequently see self-reliance as a facet of their identity. In some instances, being self-reliant comes from wanting to avoid being a burden on parents (Daisy), learning to push yourself academically (Elias and Frank), as a way to express self-care and self-love in light of not perceiving in from others (Leslie and Lindsey), as a trait modeled by military parents (Brandon), or as a way to express maturity as you accomplish something on your own (Bailey and Zion). For Sage, this was something he feels he learned when his dad was deployed, and he had to live with an extended family member because “even though you’re not on your own, you kind of feel like you’re on our own.” While Sage recognizes and is grateful that he and his twin brother were given a stable place to live while their father was gone, he perceived he had to learn to trust and rely on himself more.

Linked to the notion of self-sacrificing, perceptions of discipline were demonstrated in multiple ways by participants as a byproduct of growing up amid the military culture. Elias and Zion both point out many of their civilian friends don't understand that when they are asked to perform an action, say a chore, that "it needs to get done now." According to Elias, discipline and delayed gratification go hand in hand for military-connected children. Brandon shares that the desire to make his mother proud helps him to focus on achieving certain goals through hard work and discipline, while for Leslie, her sense of discipline comes from having to care for her mother's health by taking her to appointments, getting groceries, and other adult responsibilities while her dad was deployed. While Lindsey perceives that she has supportive parents, at times their high expectations for her discipline felt like it went overboard because "it was always like you make sure you do good in school, like you do chores, just don't go out in public and act all wild and stuff." The lessons involving responsibility she was taught as a child from her military father helped her develop maturity and discipline that she perceives as important now as she enters adulthood despite resenting them when she was younger.

### **Adaptable**

Most people are not big fans of change, yet military-connected adolescents learn quickly that being blindsided is just a natural rhythm of their lives. The participants in this study suggest they all have a general acceptance that nothing is promised, and changes are simply going to happen. To make sense of the randomness of their lives, they refer to themselves as adaptable as they perceive themselves as resilient, accepting of a limited locus of control, and as masters of unpredictability.

Resiliency comes from being able to bounce back to where one was before a setback occurred. This ability is something all participants view themselves as possessing based upon the experiences they have had growing up within the military culture. Both Bailey and Daisy see resiliency in their ability to keep up with their grades.

Lindsey Sage, Zion, and Elias perceive military-connected adolescents as having "thicker skin" than others, allowing them to toughen up when facing inevitable changes that come with military life. Leslie, who has been thrown into the role of adult caretaker while her father was working as a government contractor overseas during her senior year of high school, expresses how even though she dislikes having to deal with "everything," it helps her develop her own voice and the ability able to make decisions for herself without relying on others. Brandon also found he developed a sense of resiliency during his parent's deployments and extended training because he learned to rely on himself to take care of himself and his brother, something he is proud of accomplishing. However, the best example of perceived resiliency comes from Frank, who provided a metaphor for what he thought military life was kind of like growing a tree, but "it's growing a tree for three years then ripping it out and replanting it ... I would guess I could say [that] military families, I mean some of them are stronger than like ordinary families." This shows how military-connected adolescents may suffer abrupt and sometimes devastating changes, but how enduring them makes them more resilient to unexpected events of life in the future.

Military-connected adolescents are required to show discipline in all they do, which can lead them to feel as though they don't have control over their lives. "You can never plan for anything because the next day, there could be something new that you have to add," Elias states. Sage, who perceives his father as giving him the freedom to make certain decisions in his life, was quick to remind people he has no say on whether he wants to be in a military family because military-connected children don't "choose to be a military kid." Even though he perceives this life as a privilege, the fact that he didn't have much control over the course his life took weighs heavy on him and how he sees himself. Of the nine participants, only two – Bailey and Zion – expressed this lack of control in a positive light. For Bailey, she sees herself as having more control living with her sister than with her mother, even though the military can move them with a moment's notice, while Zion claims that even at

18-years-old, he might not be mature enough to make all his decisions on his own and is happy to have the help from his parents and the military structure to guide him.

One extremely negative byproduct of perceiving limited control is the development of feelings of abandonment or trust issues, which is evident in a few of the participants. Lindsey spoke about not wanting people to get close to her because she feels she has no control over whether they could hurt her. However, it is Leslie who expresses these feelings the loudest, claiming that the transient life of a military-connected adolescent made her “very self-conscious about the people I surround myself with because I know that ... everybody is temporary, so I don’t really have much trust in people.” She also stated whenever a friendship ends for her, it is “devastating” to her enough that she feels the need to keep people from getting too close. It is important to point out that Leslie is also dealing with feelings of strain in the relationship she has with her father while she was being interviewed. She sees him pulling away from her and her mother when she learned he is having an affair while working as a government contractor overseas. This knowledge could have led to an amplification of her feelings of abandonment.

Whether they call themselves tough or flexible, being adaptable to the frequent change that comes with being a military-connected adolescent is something all participants perceive as part of their identity. This level of adaptability allows them to deal with unpredictability at a level far superior to their civilian peers. Some of it comes from the discipline instilled in them as part of the military life where, as Sage says, they must “adapt to life and being a military kid” because they “know [the military parent] has a job to do.” Others attribute it to the exposure with other lifestyles and experiences that allows them to see how other people handle adversity head-on or, like Frank, find ways to shrug or brush it off and continue with life. For Bailey, dealing with the unpredictability of this life is like building up a callous, it is tough at first, but eventually, it gets easier. Elias echoes the same feelings of ease with change because it becomes something you accept so much that acceptance is inevitable. For

Brandon and Zion, going with the flow and not getting riled up when changes occur is how they master the consistent changes within this culture. However, this level of adaptability doesn’t mean you change who you are at your core. Adapting to survive consistent change may be important for military-connected adolescents but changing to the point where you alter who you are is too much, according to Brandon and Zion. Achieving a balance between adaptation and assimilation is what helps them to master the unpredictability of growing up as a military-connected adolescent.

## Discussion

The findings in this study that military-connected adolescents perceive themselves as confident, empathetic, mature, and adaptable support and reinforce several key pieces of previous research within this culture.

O’Leary and Ickovics’ (1995) findings concerning the ability for adolescents to grow by developing personal autonomy coincides with current findings as autonomy is related to individual confidence. Additionally, Blum (2005) claimed the ability to develop extroverted behaviors can be beneficial, which is something nearly all participants expressed as either a part of their identity or perceive as an added benefit for military-connected adolescents. The addition of pride and optimism as a perceived facet of identity adds to the previous research within this group (Seligman 2011) and addresses the gap of seeing military-connected adolescents less as simply victims of their circumstances and more as agents of change in their own lives.

The perceived levels of empathy among the participants in this study support Pollock and Van Reken (2009) belief that third-culture kids tend to have fewer feelings of prejudice as they have more experience with diversity in meaningful ways. It also supports Tyler’s (2002) findings that mobility and the chance to grow up visiting different regions of the globe makes for more open-minded youth. Easterbrooks, Ginsburg, and Lerner (2013) pointed out that the service and sacrificing identity prevalent among military soldiers is liable to be passed down to the children raised in this culture, which is supported by the

empathic, considerate, and self-sacrificing nature participants in this study shared as part of their perceived identity.

While there was plenty of research which found military-connected youth victims of prolonged or delayed adolescent maturity (McDonald 2010; Moore and Barker 2012; Pollock and Van Reken 2009; Wertsch 1991), the participants in this study overwhelmingly viewed themselves as more mature than their peers, especially civilian ones, which contradicts previous findings. While their perceptions might change when they reflect on their childhood as adults, their current perception is that their military culture affiliation had the opposite impact as it helped them to develop maturity through respect for others, self-reliance, and discipline.

Adaptation as a survival mechanism was something both Wertsch (1991) and Pollock and Van Reken (2009) identified among youth in this culture. Since this was also a perceived trait among the adolescents in this study, it helps to support the claim of adaptation as a defining trait among past and present military-connected children.

Since it was Leslie, whose mother was born and raised in Germany, who expressed the highest levels of trust issues, this aligns with Park's (2011) findings that families with foreign-born spouses are more likely to see higher levels of anxiety and depression. Additionally, Lindsey's desire to keep people at arm's length relates to previous research concerning that same tendency among military-connected youth in other studies (Bradshaw et al. 2010; McDonald 2010, Wertsch 1991).

While Litwack and Foster (1981) viewed the need for military families and military-connected adolescents to present a façade of always being prepared in a more negative light, the participants in this study were able to see their ability to tackle unpredictability and survive as a source of resiliency, which is a more positive way to look at their endurance and aligns more with that of Wertsch's (1991) participants who viewed adaptability in the face of change in this same manner.

### Limitations

Data for the study were taken from a series of interviews with nine military-connected

adolescents. While their stories allow us to look deeper into the lives of military-connected adolescents, a few limitations are inherent.

First, the participants were interviewed over a few months, but their developmental journey is set to continue for many more years to come. As they continue to grow, their perspective of their experiences as military-connected adolescents will likely continue to evolve, so their perceptions might adjust as they get older.

Second, being a teacher at the school where the participants attended did help in gaining access, but it is important to note that this could be viewed as a limitation. The participant's ability to open up and share with the researcher that they already know have been different from what they might have shared with someone they didn't know previously. Although an effort was spent in developing an interview protocol to avoid this, students may have been motivated to respond in ways that they believed would please the researcher or hide things they didn't want someone they know in a different context to know about themselves.

Despite these limitations, I hope that this research might make the heretofore invisible lives of military-connected adolescents more visible.

### Conclusion

In this narrative study, nine military-connected adolescents allowed the veil that hides their culture from the world to be pulled back. They shared who they think they are, achievements and successes, losses and sorrows, hopes and dreams. Military-connected adolescents see themselves as confident, caring, and capable of handling nearly anything life has in store for them. The perceptions and responses to military culture shared by participants indicate a childhood colored by high expectations, relationships both strained and strengthened, and the development of myriad coping strategies.

Although there were only nine participants, their voices provide a richness to the research concerning military-connected adolescents. In a nation that has been at continuous war around the globe, where our country's fighting force needs to be in prime position to defend this

nation, ignoring the children left behind seems indefensible.

Military-connected adolescents face hurdles in their lives on a scale often unmatched among their civilian counterparts. Their resiliency in the face of these experiences and their ability to thrive continues to be an inspiration to the youth, parents, and educators who encounter them. Perhaps we will reach a day where military-connected adolescents are no longer invisible in schools. Perhaps our gratitude for the role they and their parents play in supporting our national defense won't be invisible either.

### Notes on contributor

A veteran, military spouse, and self-proclaimed military brat, Dr. Jennie L. Hanna earned her Ph.D. in secondary education from the University of Oklahoma. She has been an English educator at MacArthur High School in Lawton, Oklahoma, for the past 12 years and also works as an adjunct professor at Cameron University in both the Business and Communications, English, & Foreign Language departments.

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