

Navigating Dual Identities: Reflecting on the Impact of Military Life and LGBTQ+ Identity on the Academic Performance, Aspirations, and Well-being During Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examined how school-related risk and protective factors influenced the academic performance and emotional well-being of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults. While prior research has focused on LGBTQ+ students and military-connected youth separately, few studies have explored their intersection. Using an explanatory sequential design, 71 participants aged 18–25 completed a survey on school climate, victimization, identity expression, and academic performance. Follow-up interviews with six participants added depth to the findings.

Results showed that school climate strongly affected students' safety, self-expression, and engagement. Frequent relocations disrupted friendships and required students to assess each school's inclusivity. Some participants disengaged due to marginalization, while others found stability in academic success. Supportive educators, inclusive policies, and affirming peer networks were key protective factors. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs guided the analysis. While basic needs, such as housing and food, were usually met through military resources, psychological needs like safety and belonging were inconsistently addressed, limiting students' ability to thrive. The study highlights the importance of consistent, inclusive practices in schools serving military-connected youth. By centering LGBTQ+ voices, it offers insights for creating supportive environments where all students can succeed.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

A prosperous family had been defined as not particularly trouble-free but as cohesive, affectionate, financially sound, and could constructively adapt to a crisis (Runyan et al., 1998; Walsh, 2015). When superficially comparing this definition to families connected to the military, military-connected families were perceived to fit this mold as they must develop strategies to face unique experiences compared to those not affiliated with the military (Williamson et al., 2018). Military families, like all families, have to address childcare, education, career choices, and parenting issues. However, Military-connected families were seen to have benefits as at least one parent was continually employed and could provide a stable income (Drummet et al., 2003; Williamson et al., 2018). De Pedro (2015) claimed that these employment benefits were not as fruitful as they seemed because many households struggled with financial stress while navigating concerns relating to prolonged separation of a household member, war and deployment trauma, and other deployment-related stressors. Financial stressors took a toll on military-connected children's well-being and mental health (Williamson et al., 2018).

Military family dynamics are often impacted by the demands of service life, which can lead to shifts in household roles and responsibilities. The stability of some military families may be affected as roles shift to accommodate deployments, permanent change of stations (PCS), and school transitions (De Pedro, 2015). For example, some military families undergo household adjustments that likely involve a redistribution of responsibilities and an increased need for social and emotional support that was previously provided by the now-removed adult (Cozza et

al., 2014; Mmari et al., 2009). The redistribution of responsibilities could range from typical household chores to the upbringing of siblings (Mmari et al., 2009). Such adjustments can create strain within the family unit and disrupt the emotional balance of the home.

Increased mobility and prolonged separation from caregivers also contribute to heightened stress and mental health challenges for military-connected students. The uncertainty surrounding relocations and parental deployments often leads to elevated levels of anxiety. Many military-connected youth reported increased stress during a PCS or when a parent is deployed, and these stressors have been associated with higher rates of suicidal ideation and depression compared to their non-military-affiliated peers (De Pedro, 2015). Additionally, Drummet et al. (2003) found that some military families forewent mental health services or restricted their dependents' access to such services due to concerns that seeking help could negatively impact the service member's career.

The U.S. military's stance on LGBTQ+ service members has evolved significantly over time. Prior to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in 2011, openly identifying as LGBTQ+ could result in discharge from military service (Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025). Even after the repeal, policies regarding transgender service members fluctuated, with restrictions imposed, later lifted, and then reinstated in subsequent years (Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025). These policy shifts have influenced service members and their families, including military-connected LGBTQ+ youth (Gyura & McCauley, 2016; Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025).

As military policies continued to change, military-connected LGBTQ+ youth faced their own unique challenges. For youth, the stressors associated with being military-connected only increased when they identified as LGBTQ+ (Gyura & McCauley, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth encountered discrimination in various forms, including restrictive government legislation and

exclusionary education policies (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Many faced school policies and practices that failed to support their needs or ensure their safety within educational settings (Therriault, 2017). These structural barriers often resulted in both physical and psychological harm, while also restricting their academic exposure (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). The acute and chronic stress caused by discrimination from both peers and school personnel contributed to declining mental and physical health among LGBTQ+ youth (Ghabrial & Andersen, 2021).

This pattern of exclusion and victimization is reflected in the national data on LGBTQ+ students' school experiences. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2021 National School Climate Survey provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of the school experiences of LGBTQ+ students in the United States (Kosciw et al., 2020). The 2021 survey was administered to a national sample of 22,315 LGBTQ+ middle and high school students between the ages of 13 and 18 across all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Conducted biennially, the survey collects data from middle and high school students (ages 13-18) across all 50 states and Washington, D.C., focusing on school climate, safety, and academic outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2020).

According to the 2021 GLSEN survey findings, 81.8% of participants reported feeling unsafe due to their perceived or actual personal characteristics, and 68% felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression characteristics. The survey findings also indicated that those who experienced high levels of victimization due to their gender expression or sexual orientation had lower grade point averages (GPAs), more missed days of school, and were more likely to report higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem. In addition, students from the survey in earlier grades were more likely than their older peers to indicate being unsure if they would graduate from high school. Of those, 21.4%

indicated they planned to obtain a General Education Diploma (GED), whereas 72.3% were unsure if they would obtain a GED. When asked for reasons why they may not finish high school, 92.3% reported mental health-related issues, depression, anxiety, and stress. Whereas, 65.5% reported academic reasons (poor grades, high number of absences, or lack of credits to graduate). In addition, 51.5% of the LGBTQ+ students cited reasons related to a hostile school climate, including harassment, unsupportive peers/educators, and gendered school policies/practices.

The impact of discrimination on educational outcomes extended beyond high school. When asked about post-secondary aspirations, LGBTQ+ students in the GLSEN survey were twice as likely to report they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education than those who experienced lower levels of victimization due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2020). These findings highlight the compounded stress faced by LGBTQ+ youth, and for military-connected students, these challenges are further magnified. In addition to discrimination, military-connected LGBTQ+ youth navigate the unique pressure of military life, including social stigma, homophobia, frequent relocations, and parent deployments (Gyura & McCauley, 2016). Russell et al. (2016) claimed that students who were bullied exclusively due to gender identity, race, or sexual orientation did not perform academically well. Their academic success declined when they were military-connected youth navigating parental deployments, the military culture, and constant relocations (Gyura & McCauley, 2016).

The combined effects of these stressors align with minority stress theory, which suggests that individuals belonging to marginalized communities experience disproportionate psychological distress compared to the general (Alessi, 2014; Balsam et al., 2011). Military-connected LGBTQ+ youth face multiple layers of stress, not only from discrimination within

schools and communities but also from the structural demands of military life (De Pedro, 2015; Gyura & McCauley, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020). Traditionally, stressors have been examined through overt prejudice, oppression, and discrimination, also known as macroaggressions. However, researchers had increasingly focused on the impact of microaggressions, which are subtle but harmful actions or comments that convey negative stereotypes, whether verbal or nonverbal, social or environmental or intentional or unintentional (Balsam et al., 2011). While macroaggressions are often explicit and deliberate, those engaging in microaggressions may be unaware of the harm they inflict (Balsam et al., 2011). Both forms of discrimination contribute to negative mental and physical health outcomes for those targeted (Balsam et al., 2011).

Among LGBTQ+ individuals, research has shown that they are 2.5 times more likely than heterosexual individuals to develop a mood, anxiety, or substance abuse disorder at some point in their lifetime and twice as likely to have a current disorder (Alessi, 2014). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, these risks may be compounded by the intersecting stressors of both their identity and the demands of military life (De Pedro, 2015; Gyura & McCauley, 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020).

For military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, the intersection of multiple stressors, such as discrimination, frequent relocations, and lack of inclusive support systems, can heighten stress, requiring constant adaptation to new social environments (Alessi, 2014). When these readjustments fail or prove impossible, the resulting psychological distress could manifest as depression or anxiety (Alessi, 2014). However, research by Hayes et al. (2011) suggests that individuals with multiple minority cultural identities may develop resilience characteristics that help them navigate social stressors. Similarly, Meyer (2003) argued that strong connections to one's communities could protect against the adverse effects of discrimination.

The intersectional invisibility theory offers another perspective on how individuals experience discrimination. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) proposed that individuals with intersecting cultural identities might not always be perceived as “prototypical” members of a single marginalized group, which could sometimes allow them to evade direct discriminatory practices. This concept presents advantages and disadvantages, while some individuals may avoid being targeted, others may feel unseen or disconnected from the broader community (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). These complexities help explain why some individuals report more positive social and psychological outcomes despite belonging to multiple marginalized groups (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Although military policies regarding LGBTQ+ service members have fluctuated over time, stigma surrounding their acceptance within military culture persists (Gyura & McCauley, 2016; Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youths, these challenges are further exacerbated as they navigate both the pressure of military life and the discrimination associated with their identity (De Pedro, 2015; Gyura & McCauley, 2016). Livingston et al. (2019) argued that the intersectionality within the military-connected community contributes to significant health disparities, including greater difficulty recovering from trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. These disparities are linked to a lack of protective policies, which leaves military-connected LGBTQ+ youth particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of stress, discrimination, and mental health struggles (Livingston et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

The current problem is that when compared with nonmilitary-connected students, military-connected students had significantly higher rates of experiencing physical and nonphysical victimization, resulting in negative academic achievement and aspirations (De Pedro

& Esqueda, 2020). Furthermore, the rate of victimization increased when the youth was military-connected and identified as LGBTQ+ (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020). Currently, researchers in the field of education have not explored how risk and protective factors influence school victimization among military-connected LGBTQ+ youth (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that contributed to or hindered the satisfaction of the basic needs among military-connected LGBTQ+ students. The study also examined the impact of these factors on the students' educational outcomes and experiences of victimization. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory as a framework, the study provided insights into the complex interplay of factors that influenced the well-being of LGBTQ+ students in military-connected families and how meeting their holistic needs could promote their academic achievement.

Research Questions

The following questions align with the problem and purpose of the study:

1. What are the perceived school-related risk and protective factors identified by military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults?
2. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the risk factors influencing school victimization?
3. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the protective factors that supported their well-being?
4. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the possible relationships between risk and protective factors and their academic performance and educational ambitions?

5. How do the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how does this influence their academic performance and educational aspirations?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggested that individuals had a set of hierarchical needs that started with basic physiological needs and progressed to higher-level needs such as safety, love/belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1954a). An individual's needs must be met in order for them to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1954a). The five-tier model of human needs began with an individual's physiological needs. The physiological needs consisted of food, water, and rest and were the most essential of all the needs (Maslow, 1954a). Once the physiological needs were met, the following levels involved feeling safe and secure. For an individual to survive and achieve their full potential, it was widely accepted that every individual required the fundamental, basic needs provided within the first two levels of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1954b). The need for an individual to have a healthy relationship was the next level, followed by an individual's need to feel accomplished (Maslow, 1954a). The topmost level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pertained to an individual's aspiration to reach their maximum potential (Maslow, 1954b).

To reflect the complexity of human needs, Maslow expanded his original five-tier model to include cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970). Additionally, Maslow included transcendence in his motivational model to describe the desire of self-actualized individuals to help others and positively impact the world (Maslow, 1970). The inclusion of these needs resulted from Maslow's recognition that individuals required a sense of value in their

environment to develop a desire for knowledge (Maslow, 1970). As described by Maslow (1970), fulfilling these needs allowed individuals to express themselves holistically through aesthetic needs, eventually leading to personal self-actualization and a desire to serve others. Maslow termed this as transcendence (Maslow, 1970).

Maslow's theory provided a framework for understanding the levels of needs of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth and the impact on their academic achievement. Military-connected LGBTQ+ youth might face unique challenges related to their physical safety and emotional well-being, such as the stress of dealing with discrimination or the trauma associated with military service (Lee & Ostergard, 2017; Williamson et al., 2018). These challenges could make it difficult for them to reach higher-level needs, such as belongingness and self-actualization, which were critical for academic success (Maslow, 1954a). The Hierarchy of Needs theory suggested that individuals must have their lower-level needs satisfied before focusing on fulfilling higher-level needs (Maslow, 1954a). If the basic physiological and safety needs of LGBTQ+ students were unmet, they could not focus on fulfilling their educational and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1954a). In addition, Maslow's theory emphasized that social relationships and a sense of belonging were essential for all individuals, regardless of their background or identity (Maslow, 1954a). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, supportive relationships with peers and teachers could be essential in promoting a sense of safety and belonging in the school environment (Theriault, 2017). Conversely, experiences of victimization or discrimination could erode these relationships and undermine their ability to achieve academic success (Theriault, 2017).

To complement the insights provided by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study further incorporated the intersectionality framework as a secondary theoretical lens to dissect and

understand the nuanced experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality theorized the individual's social identities, including race, gender, sexuality, and others, intersect to form overlapping systems of advantage and oppression (Crenshaw, 2013). This framework enriches our analysis by highlighting how the experiences and needs of individuals cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay of their multiple identities (Collins & Chepp, 2013).

While Maslow's theory delineates a universal progression through hierarchical needs, from physiological to self-actualization, intersectionality underscores that the journey through these needs is not uniform across all individuals (Collins, 2015; Kuran et al., 2020; Maslow, 1954a). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, their intersecting identities introduce unique barriers to achieving Maslow's defined levels of needs. The transient nature of military life, coupled with policies that may not explicitly protect LGBTQ+ identities in all settings, can exacerbate feelings of instability and isolation. For instance, frequent relocations may disrupt access to affirming peer groups and supportive school environments, making it more challenging to progress toward higher-order needs like belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Lee & Ostergard, 2017).

The dual-theoretical approach highlights that the path to fulfilling the needs of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth is fraught with specific challenges that stem from their unique social positioning (Crenshaw, 2013). The intersection of their LGBTQ+ identity with military culture introduces complexities in achieving even the most basic needs as these youth navigate environments that may not always affirm or recognize their identities. Such challenges can exacerbate feelings of isolation and hinder the development of supportive relationships that

Maslow identified as crucial for advancing through the hierarchy of needs (Jabboury et al., 2016; Maslow, 1954a).

Additionally, intersectionality brings to the forefront the role of societal structures and power dynamics in shaping the experiences of these youths (Crenshaw, 2013). It compels us to question and critique the societal conditions that make it difficult for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth to achieve a sense of safety, belonging, and self-actualization. By applying the intersectionality framework, a deeper understanding is gained of the multifaceted nature of oppression and privilege and how these dynamics impact the well-being and academic achievement of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Definition of Terms

In this research study, key terms are used repeatedly and require clarification. The conceptual definitions are as follows:

Deployment: Deployment refers to the relocation of a military service member outside of the continental United States and its territories (Farmer et al., 2014).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality refers to how aspects of a person's identity combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege (Hankivsky, 2022).

LGBTQ+: LGBTQ+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, and more. The terms describe an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Military-connected youth/student: Military-connected youth/student refers to an individual under the age of 18 whose parent or guardian is actively serving, recently retired, or separated from the United States Armed Forces (Bonura & Lovald, 2015).

Permanent Change of Station: Permanent Change of Station or PCS refers to orders or assignment of a new appointee from one duty station to another (Farmer et al., 2014).

Protective Factors: Protective factors refer to factors that promote positive outcomes and mitigate the effects of risk factors that are present in an individual's environment (Trevor Project, 2023).

Risk Factors: Risk factors refer to stigma, discrimination, victimization, and rejection that cause an individual to be vulnerable to experiencing a range of adverse outcomes (Trevor Project, 2023).

Sexual identity/orientation: Sexual identity refers to one's preference of being with the same or opposite sex (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Victimization: Victimization refers to instances of bullying, physical harm, theft of belongings, and intimidation aimed at students within and around the school premises (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Significance and Outcomes of the Study

The significance of the outcomes was to provide research-based data to inform the policy and practices of education services regarding the protective and risk factors that impact military-connected LGBTQ+ students. This research study was critical in understanding the stigma and discrimination that these youth experienced, which put them at an increased risk for negative educational experiences and lowered their drive to attend post-secondary education. This research study also identified the structures that were needed to ensure a healthy, supportive school environment that allowed military-connected LGBTQ+ students an opportunity to thrive and lessen the disparities they face.

The results of this study added to the body of knowledge, as there was limited research that had examined the school experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. There remained a need for further research to investigate the factors that inhibited and those that promoted positive outcomes for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, enabling them to thrive in secondary education and pursue post-secondary education.

Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a world of rich diversity and changing societal norms, many factors contribute to the complexity of human existence. One particular group that faces both unique challenges and significant achievements is military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. These individuals often find themselves at the intersection of two societal groups, navigating the complexities of both their military affiliation and their LGBTQ+ identity (Ttofi et al., 2012). Not only do their lives reflect the unique dynamics of growing up in military families, with frequent relocations and psychological impacts of deployments, but they also grapple with issues stemming from their LGBTQ+ identities in a world that is still evolving toward full acceptance and understanding (Ttofi et al., 2012).

To illustrate the intersection between military-connected identity and LGBTQ+ identity, consider Dylan's story, a 15-year-old transgender male residing in Pensacola, Florida. Dylan is both a student connected to the military community and an individual navigating his gender identity. He encounters dual challenges: adapting to new schools and communities while striving for self-acceptance. These challenges impact educational outcomes, as a student's ability to seek understanding and affirmation from their community can influence academic aspirations, achievements, and the overall school experience (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Dylan's experience is not isolated; it reflects broader patterns seen among military-connected LGBTQ+ youth whose academic and social experiences remain largely undermined. Recognizing the strength and resilience fostered by these experiences is essential for educators,

policymakers, and society at large. Creating an environment that embraces the diverse stories and identities of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth is critical. While research exists on the experiences of military-connected youth and those who identify as LGBTQ+, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these identities intersect and how this intersection influences academic achievement.

In response to this critical gap, this literature review examines the existing body of work focused on military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Specifically, it examines the concept of a prosperous family, the distinct intricacies of military-connected families, and the adversities and triumphs encountered by LGBTQ+ youth. The objective is to create a comprehensive narrative that not only sheds light on the current understanding of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth but also emphasizes the importance of further research to fully grasp the depth and complexity of these individuals' lived experiences.

Historical Context of LGBTQ+ and Military-Connected Students

The experiences of both LGBTQ+ and military-connected students in public education have undergone substantial evolution over the past several decades, shaped by cultural shifts, advocacy, and incremental policy changes. Historically, both groups were largely invisible in the realm of education research and policy. For many years, their unique needs were either overlooked or deliberately excluded from mainstream educational conversations. Only in recent decades has public education begun to formally acknowledge and address the lived experiences of students navigating these intersecting identities.

For LGBTQ+ students, the foundation for visibility and advocacy was laid in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in the wake of the Stonewall uprising in 1969 (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Ramrekha, 2024). While Stonewall is widely credited as a catalyst for the

broader LGBTQ+ rights movement, its immediate impact on schools was limited (Carter, 2014; Ramrekha, 2024). Educational institutions remained largely silent on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, and LGBTQ+ students were often left without protections, support systems, or representation in the curriculum (Bittker, 2021; Ramrekha, 2024).

It was not until the 1990s and early 2000s that public schools began taking more deliberate steps toward inclusion (Russell et al., 2010; Sadowski, 2017). The formation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) provided students with peer-based support and visibility on campus, often serving as a safe space for students to express their identities (Miceli, 2013). At the policy level, many states began introducing anti-bullying laws that specifically addressed harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Casey et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2017; Movement Advancement Project, n.d.). School districts also began developing nondiscrimination policies and implementing educator training to better equip school personnel in supporting LGBTQ+ students (Casey et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2017; Kearns et al., 2014). These efforts, although not universal, marked a shift in how schools began to formally recognize and respond to LGBTQ+ youth (Casey et al., 2019).

Curricular reform became another area of focus. During the 2000s and 2010s, several states adopted inclusive educational policies to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals within school curricula (Movement Advancement Project, n.d.; Snapp et al., 2015b). These policies often encouraged or required the inclusion of LGBTQ+ history, contributions, or perspectives within social studies instruction (Cruz & Bailey, 2017; Francis, 2023; Lau, 2023). At the same time, schools received guidance on practices such as using affirmed names and pronouns, as well as offering gender-neutral facilities, to better support students' identities and well-being (Adams, 2023; Crawley & Donovan, 2020; Lau, 2023). However, the degree to which

these reforms were implemented varied greatly across the country. While some states introduced legal protections and explicit guidelines for inclusive practices, others offered little or no such support, resulting in wide disparities in the educational experiences of LGBTQ+ students depending on their geographic location (Casey et al., 2019; Movement Advancement Project, n.d.; Russell et al., 2021).

At the same time, backlash to these developments emerged in various forms. In recent years, legislation such as Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” law, commonly known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, has sought to restrict classroom discussion of LGBTQ+ identities, particularly in early grade levels (Giles, 2023; Goldberg, 2023). Passed in 2022, the law has raised significant concerns about erasure, censorship, and the negative effect on educators’ ability to support LGBTQ+ students, as well as on students’ opportunity to express their identities (Fowler & Mountz, 2024; Giles, 2023; Goldberg, 2023). In parallel, transgender youth have become the focus of contentious national debates, particularly in relation to school sports, bathroom access, and gender-affirming care (Mejia, 2024; Norwood & Hileman, 2024; Redfield et al., 2024). This has occurred alongside increasing political efforts to roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across several states, with some school districts disbanding or restricting LGBTQ+ student groups such as GSAs, further limiting spaces where students can access peer support and affirming environments (Green, 2024; Knauer, 2025; McGowan et al., 2025).

In contrast, military-connected students have historically been overlooked in mainstream educational policy and research, despite their unique experiences within the school system. Prior to the 2000s, little formal recognition existed for this population, and public schools rarely considered the implications of military life, such as frequent relocations, parental deployment,

and reintegration stress, on academic performance and social-emotional well-being (Esqueda et al., 2012). Although the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) was established to serve military families in domestic and overseas settings, the majority of military-connected students attend civilian public schools that may lack the training or infrastructure to adequately support their needs (De Pedro et al., 2011; Department of Defense Education Activity, n.d.; Esqueda et al., 2012).

Greater national attention to this group emerged in the post-9/11 era, when the prolonged nature of military operations underscored the emotional and academic impact of repeated deployments (Chandra et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 2011). In response, initiatives such as the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children were introduced to promote continuity by streamlining school enrollment, placement, attendance, and graduation requirements across states (Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission, n.d.). While the Compact represents a step toward equitable access, its implementation varied widely, and it did not fully address broader psychosocial challenges or the need for culturally responsive support within schools (Chandra et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2011; Esqueda et al., 2012).

The intersection of LGBTQ+ and military-connected identities has received even less attention, both in research and education policy. For much of the 20th century, LGBTQ+ individuals were explicitly banned from military service, with the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy reinforcing a culture of silence that extended into schools serving military families (Family Equality, 2010; Gyura & McCauley, 2016). The repeal of that policy in 2011 marked a critical turning point, yet the lingering effects of exclusion continue to shape how LGBTQ+ youth are perceived, and often silenced, within military-connected communities (Family Equality, 2010; Gyura & McCauley, 2016).

In recent years, increased attention to educational equity and student well-being has helped surface some of the challenges faced by students with intersecting LGBTQ+ and military-connected identities. However, these intersections remained underrepresented in both research and policy. While progress has been made in recognizing the individual needs of each group, limited guidance existed for addressing the compounded effects of identity and mobility within educational contexts. A historical understanding of these developments provides critical context for interpreting contemporary educational practices and highlights the ongoing need for policies that offer consistent, inclusive, and research-informed support structures for all students.

Military-Connected Families

The United States (U.S) Armed Forces comprise approximately 2.2 million personnel stationed across all 50 states and in over 150 countries worldwide (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). These forces have six branches: the U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army, U.S. Space Force, and U.S. Coast Guard (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). Involvement with the military was multifaceted, ranging from full-time active-duty service, where individuals may be assigned anywhere in the world, to reservists, who balance their military obligations with civilian life. The National Guard also plays a dual role, serving their respective states and the federal government (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022).

Within this network of service members, family life is deeply intertwined with military culture. Approximately half of the military personnel are married, and approximately 40% of these families are raising children (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). These numbers provide insight into the large population of young individuals closely connected to military life. Often referred to as military-connected families, these individuals navigate experiences distinct from those of civilians (Bonura & Lovald, 2015).

One of the most defining aspects of military life is frequent relocations were an aspect of their lives that required adaptability (Farmer et al., 2014). Moving frequently as part of a military-connected family brought about challenges for children, such as adjusting to new schools, making new friends, and adapting to different communities (Farmer et al., 2014). According to a study conducted by Farmer et al. (2014), 33% of military-connected families relocated yearly. These relocations often forced families to make decisions that could potentially separate the active-duty service member from their family (Owen & Combs, 2017).

In some cases, the service member might have been assigned to a Temporary Duty or TDY, in which they had to work at a location other than their permanent duty station (Military OneSource, 2023). A TDY could range from a few days to several months, depending on the nature of the assignment (Military OneSource, 2023). It was also not uncommon for a service member to undergo TDY assignments multiple times throughout a year (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Additionally, service members could also be deployed for long-term assignments that might have involved combat or strategic missions in regions aimed at supporting national defense objectives (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022). The frequency of TDYs and deployments varied depending on the service member's health, job, location of duty station, and other factors. In the case of TDY and deployments, as noted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (2022), it was common for the operational requirements and the nature of the assignment to dictate the possibility of family accompaniment. It was also common for spouses and children to be unable to accompany the active-duty service members on these missions (Farmer et al., 2014).

Such separations often led to additional challenges in family dynamics and stability (Farmer et al., 2014). In addition to logistical disruptions, these absences often triggered a wave of emotional strain across the family unit, particularly as members adjusted to new roles and routines in the service member's absence.

TDYs and Deployments placed stress on families both externally and internally (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Astor et al. (2012) described the journey experienced during deployments in three primary phases. The first phase began with pre-deployment when the service member was informed of their deployment (Astor et al., 2012). During this time, families often experienced feelings of anger, anxiety, and some might have distanced themselves as they prepared for the absence of the service member (Astor et al., 2012). The second phase encompassed the deployment itself when the service member was away from home (Astor et al., 2012). Families may have continued to go through heightened emotions during this period with some children feeling particularly unsettled (Astor et al., 2012). The final phase was the post-deployment phase which marked the service member's return (Astor et al., 2012). According to Astor et al. (2012) many people considered reunification to be a joyful reunion; however, it often brought challenges. The returning service member might have appeared different and family members might have adjusted to a routine without them. Astor et al. (2012) clarified that even if the service member was not currently deployed, the family might still have been navigating related emotions due to the deployment.

Leroux et al. (2016) explained that marriages were also affected by deployment and TDYs. They noted that the rate of divorces increased with more extended deployments (Leroux et al., 2016). Compared to civilians' divorce rates, military-connected marriages by contrast often exhibited higher rates due to the compounded stresses of separation, frequent relocations, and the

emotional toll of combat experiences (Leroux et al., 2016). Supporting this viewpoint, Van Winkle and Lipari (2015) emphasized the emotional toll on spouses during these deployments. One significant stressor was fear for the safety of the service member, especially when deployed to combat zones. Van Winkle and Lipari (2015) mentioned that chronic stress could manifest into physical symptoms like headaches and fluctuations in weight. With extended deployments, spouses exhibited increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Van Winkle & Lipari, 2015). Van Winkle and Lipari (2015) also observed that spouses of deployed military members frequently received diagnoses of depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and adjustment disorders. The ripple effects of these stresses were felt deeply by the children in the households (Van Winkle & Lipari, 2015). The children often struggled with a feeling of insecurity and emotional turmoil resulting from their parents' experiences, which could affect their mental well-being, academic performance, and overall sense of stability (Barker & Berry, 2009).

While much attention is given to the emotional toll of deployments, military families also face frequent and disruptive Permanent Change of Station (PCS) moves that can further strain their stability. A PCS refers to the official relocation of an active-duty service member and their family to a different duty location (Military OneSource, 2023). Such deployments relocated military-connected families within the United States or to overseas destinations (Agazio et al., 2014). PCS moves were a routine part of military life and may have occurred for various reasons, such as changes in job assignments, promotions, or specific training requirements (Military OneSource, 2023). On average, military-connected families moved every two to three years (Clever & Segal, 2013). A PCS was typically stressful for all family members as it involved changes in employment, housing, education, family routines, and community, among other things that were a part of their daily lives (Agazio et al., 2014). These lifestyle disruptions often

carried over into the financial realm, mainly when one parent had to sacrifice consistent employment due to constant relocation (Agazio et al., 2014).

A PCS could also cause financial strains on the family due to the loss of spousal employment (Clever & Segal, 2013). Reynolds and Shendruk (2018) explained that military-connected spouses often experienced career disruptions due to relocations. These frequent moves could make it challenging for military spouses to maintain steady employment, progress in their chosen professions, or even find jobs that aligned with their qualifications and expertise in new locations (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018). As a result, the family might have faced periods of reduced income, which, coupled with the additional costs associated with relocating, could have placed significant financial burdens on military households (Clever & Segal, 2013; Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018).

The Effects of Military Life on Children and Youth

There are approximately four million children whose parents actively served in the United States Military (Military OneSource, 2023). These military-connected students found themselves experiencing the world differently from that of their civilian peers (Aronson & Perkins, 2013; De Pedro et al., 2011). The transitory nature of military life imposed a unique set of advantages and challenges (De Pedro et al., 2011). Military-connected youth often develop remarkable adaptability, resilience, and a broad worldview, shaped by their diverse experiences and exposures (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). However, this same transience could lead to a sense of instability and continual adjustment, as they navigated frequent school changes, rebuilt social networks, and adapted to new environments (Engel et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2011; Agazio et al., 2014). This duality of experience, the enrichment from diverse experiences alongside the struggle for stability, formed the core of their journey within military families (Engel et al., 2010;

De Pedro et al., 2011; Agazio et al., 2014). To better understand how this constant movement manifests in daily life, it is important to examine the frequency and consequences of these relocations.

Aronson and Perkins (2013) reported that a military-connected child, on average, typically relocated every one to four years. Agazio et al. (2014) reported this was three times more often than their civilian peers. Military-connected students were likely to have changed schools six to nine times by the time they graduated from high school (Military Child Education Coalition, 2020). Stites (2016) explained the many relocations provided experiences that fostered a high degree of social adaptability in the military-connected children, allowing them to become adept at forming new relationships and adjusting to varied social settings. Stites (2016) observed that their exposure to different cultures and communities could lead to a more inclusive and global perspective, enhancing their empathy and understanding of different worldviews. These experiences often instilled a sense of resilience and resourcefulness, qualities that served them well into adulthood (De Pedro et al., 2011; Stites, 2016).

Despite these strengths, the frequent transitions were not without challenges. Each Permanent Change of Station (PCS) or relocation represented more than just a physical move; it involved a complete upheaval of familiar environments, routines, and social circles (Bradshaw et al., 2010). For military-connected children, these transitions often meant adapting to new schools and educational systems, which could vary significantly in terms of curriculum, academic rigor, and social dynamics (Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Engel et al., 2010). Such variability could lead to academic disruptions, with students having to catch up or adjust to different educational standards and expectations (Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Engel et al., 2010).

These academic inconsistencies have been further documented by researchers who examined how mobility affects student learning and performance. Astor et al. (2012) reported that students who changed schools frequently were more likely to have greater academic gaps than their non-mobile peers. Lyle (2006) conducted a study examining military-connected children and found the gap on a standardized test was not just between military-connected and non-military-connected students. Lyle's (2006) research also revealed a disparity within the military-connected group itself, based on the rank of their parents. When compared to their non-mobile peers, military-connected students whose parents were enlisted and moved three to four times scored lower on standardized academic tests than their peers with parents who were officers (Lyle, 2006). Additionally, Lyle (2006) reported that military-connected students, both from enlisted and officer families, demonstrated distinct performance levels when compared to their non-military-connected peers. Specifically, military-connected students, regardless of their parent's rank, generally scored lower on standardized tests than their non-military-connected peers (Lyle, 2006). These findings underscored the significant role that a parent's military rank and the resulting lifestyle, particularly in terms of relocation frequency, played in shaping the educational experiences and achievements of their children (Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Lyle, 2006). Lyle (2006) also observed that the age at which students relocated further impacted their academic performance. Lyle (2006) identified a distinct pattern in the academic performance of military-connected children based on their age and parental rank. Specifically, younger children of enlisted military members who experienced five or more moves scored lower on standardized tests than their older counterparts who also moved frequently (Lyle, 2006). In contrast, the age-related disparity in academic performance was not evident among children of officer military members (Lyle, 2006)

Academic challenges were not the only challenges faced by military-connected children; they also grappled with the personal and profound effects associated with military life that impacted their emotional and psychological well-being (O'Neal et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2018). This aspect of their lives shaped their overall development and coping mechanisms (Williamson et al., 2018). Frequent relocations and parental deployments could lead to feelings of uncertainty and loss, potentially resulting in anxiety and stress (Williamson et al., 2018). These emotional burdens were often invisible yet deeply influential, affecting their social interactions, self-esteem, and long-term mental health (Agazio et al., 2014; Williamson et al., 2018). These circumstances impacted specific emotional responses such as separation anxiety, which was a deep sense of loss when leaving behind friends, familiar environments, and parental deployments (Agazio et al., 2014; Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Engel et al., 2010). These experiences could negatively impact the youth's mental health and social interactions (Bonar, 2016).

In response to these challenges, many military-connected students developed resilience through coping strategies like forging strong peer relationships and engaging in stabilizing activities; the support provided by schools and communities was vital (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Vemberg, 1990; Williams, 2013). These supportive networks were crucial in helping the youths navigate their unique challenges, fostering a sense of normalcy and aiding in their emotional and psychological adjustment (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; O'Neal et al., 2018; Williams, 2013). However, this need for consistent support was often disrupted by the frequent PCS inherent in military life (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Each PCS could mean a loss of established support networks and resources, making it challenging for military-connected youth to find the same level of understanding and assistance in their new environments (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). This

reality added another layer of complexity to their quest for stability and emotional well-being (De Pedro et al., 2011; O'Neal et al., 2018).

While the frequent PCSs, inherent in military culture, posed significant challenges by disrupting established support networks, these difficulties were further intensified by the emotional and academic impacts of parental deployments, adding layers of complexity to the stability and emotional well-being of military-connected students (Agazio et al., 2014; Williams, 2013). Parental deployments not only deeply affected military-connected students' emotional and academic lives but caused disruptions in family dynamics that reverberated through every aspect of their daily experiences (Engel et al., 2010; O'Neal et al., 2018).

These deployments, varying from a few months to over a year, imposed significant emotional burdens on children, often leading to anxiety, stress, and even depressive symptoms (Williams, 2013). The duration of these deployments critically influenced their impact (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Longer periods of absences could intensify feelings of uncertainty and concern, particularly regarding the deployed parent's safety, leading to lasting effects on the child's mental health and academic performance (Engel et al., 2010; Williams, 2013).

The cyclical nature of these deployments further complicated matters, requiring military-connected youth to continually adapt to the presence and absence of a parent, which could be especially challenging if the parent returned with stress or trauma from their experiences (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). In this environment, the role of support systems, such as school counseling and community services, became paramount in providing stability and coping

mechanisms for these students (Williams, 2013). However, the transient nature of military life could challenge the consistency and effectiveness of these support systems (Engel et al., 2010).

LGBTQ+ Identity

According to The National Association of Social Workers (2014), when working with individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQ community, it is important to familiarize oneself with the commonly used terminology. The acronym “LGBTQ+” stood for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2006). The plus sign (+) represented a range of orientations and gender identities that might not have been explicitly mentioned in the initial letters (PFLAG, n.d.). These terms encompassed groups of people who had orientations and gender identities that differed from what was considered heterosexual (PFLAG, n.d.). A lesbian is a woman primarily attracted to women (PFLAG, n.d.). Gay refers to a man who is attracted to another man but is also used as an umbrella term for homosexual individuals (PFLAG, n.d.). Bisexual individuals are attracted to both their gender and other genders (PFLAG, n.d.). Transgender individuals have a gender identity that does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth (PFLAG, n.d.). Lastly, queer is a term used for those who do not conform to conventional gender or sexual norms or are questioning or exploring their own identity (PFLAG, n.d.).

The meanings behind the letters in the LGBTQ+ acronym had changed over time (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2006). The term “homosexual” was first used for scientific contexts in the 19th century but gradually paved the way for more specific and diverse terms that captured the complex nature of sexual orientations and gender identities (Thelwall et al., 2023). The evolution of LGBTQ+ terms reflected a societal shift towards recognizing and respecting the diversity of human sexual orientations and gender identities (Thelwall et al., 2023). Each term

represented a part of the LGBTQ+ community while encompassing a wide range of experiences and identities that went beyond traditional notions of gender and sexuality (Thelwall et al., 2023).

Identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community had historically come with significant challenges and difficulties including discrimination, social exclusion, and stigma (Gower et al., 2021; Rostosky et al., 2022). Many within this community had experienced homophobia (prejudice against homosexual individuals), transphobia (prejudice against transgender individuals) and biphobia (aversion towards bisexual individuals) (Wurthmann & Ortega, 2023). These prejudices manifested in forms such as hate speech, violence, and denial of equal rights (Flores et al., 2020; Hartman, 2023). For example, in the U.S. there were over 525 anti-LGBTQ+ bills proposed across 41 states in 2023 (Hartman 2023). These bills sought to restrict access to healthcare for transgender people, limiting their participation in school activities, censoring discussions on LGBTQ+ topics, impeding accurate identification documentation and weakening existing civil rights laws (Hartman, 2023). This legislative trend highlighted coordinated efforts to undermine the rights and dignities of LGBTQ+ individuals (Flores et al., 2020; Hartman, 2023).

There had been a rise in the number of incidents involving hatred and extremism towards the LGBTQ+ community in the United States, between June 2022 and April 2023 (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). According to a report by the Anti-Defamation League (2023), a total of 356 incidents were documented during this period. Among them, 305 were categorized as harassment, 40 as vandalism, and 11 as assault (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). These incidents targeted entities such as drag events and performers, schools and educators, healthcare facilities, and government buildings (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). The increase in LGBTQ+ hate and

extremism could be attributed to factors such as the spread of false and harmful stereotypes and discriminatory laws that aimed to marginalize the LGBTQ+ community (Anti-Defamation League, 2023; Flores et al., 2020). One commonly referred to conspiracy theory known as “grooming,” which alleges LGBTQ+ individuals manipulated children into LGBTQ+ identities or behaviors, contributed to at least 191 of these occurrences (Anti-Defamation League, 2023). Additionally, these anti-LGBTQ+ incidents often overlapped with other forms of prejudice, like antisemitism and racism (Anti-Defamation League, 2023; Flores et al., 2020; Hartman, 2023).

The Human Rights Campaign (2023) had expressed concerns about the current situation faced by LGBTQ+ Americans describing it as a state of emergency. The increasing number of threats and acts of violence had forced families to search for safer environments or locations (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). According to American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.), one contributing factor to the rise in threats and violence was the influence of religious groups. Historically, religion had played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Flores et al., 2020). Many traditional religious teachings had explicitly addressed matters of sexuality and gender, which often impacted the beliefs and actions of their followers (Endsjø, 2020). For instance, some conservative religious groups adhered to strict interpretations of religious texts that considered homosexuality and gender diversity as morally incorrect or sinful (Coleman, 2019; Flores et al., 2020). These interpretations could foster negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals resulting in social stigma, discrimination, or even direct acts of violence against them (Coleman, 2019; Hartman, 2023).

Conversely, many religious organizations and faith groups had actively supported and promoted LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion (McCann et al., 2020). These groups interpreted their religious teachings as emphasizing love, compassion, and acceptance (McCann et al., 2020).

These religious groups had advocated for inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in both religious communities and society at large (McCann et al., 2020). These group's efforts aimed to combat negative stereotypes, discrimination and provide support and safe environments for LGBTQ+ individuals within religious settings and in the broader community (McCann et al., 2020).

The situation faced by LGBTQ+ individuals was complex and influenced by a range of social, religious, and political factors (Coleman, 2019). The response of societies towards LGBTQ+ rights could vary, sometimes being supportive while others opposing (Coleman, 2019; Flores et al., 2020). This complex interplay between religion, politics, and social norms highlighted the challenges in achieving acceptance and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals (Coleman, 2019; Flores et al., 2020). The intersection of these factors created a landscape where LGBTQ+ individuals experienced varying degrees of acceptance and rights based on their location, the prevailing religious and cultural norms, and the political climate (Hartman, 2023).

LGBTQ+ Youth

Teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) dealt with vast forms of discrimination from government legislation to education structures (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Many LGBTQ youths faced issues with policies, procedures, and practices that did not support their unique needs or failed to keep them safe within the educational realm (Therriault, 2017). This form of discrimination allowed LGBTQ students to endure physical and psychological harm and limited their educational exposure (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). In addition, negative societal attitudes significantly impacted the lives of LGBTQ+ youth (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Stigma and stereotypes, often perpetuated by media representation and public discourse, contributed to a culture where discrimination is normalized, further marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals (Lee & Ostergard, 2017; Leung et al.,

2022). This environment of intolerance not only negatively affected their self-perception but also influenced how peers, educators, and broader society interacted with them (Dias et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022). The portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals in media often lacked depth and diversity, which led to a limited understanding and acceptance of these individuals in everyday life (Dias et al., 2023). Such societal attitudes could create barriers to acceptance and inclusion, reinforcing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth in various aspects of their lives, from social interactions to access to support services (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). While societal norms and public institutions shape the broader environment, the influence of more immediate settings, especially the family, cannot be overlooked.

Family environment also played a critical role in LGBTQ+ youth's lives. Acceptance or rejection by family members could profoundly affect the mental and emotional well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, influencing their confidence and self-esteem (Ryan et al., 2010). When family members provided acceptance and support, it could significantly bolster the youth's ability to cope with external challenges, fostering a sense of security and belonging (Ryan et al., 2010). Conversely, familial rejection could lead to increased risk of mental health issues, social isolation, and even homelessness (Leung et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2010). The family's attitude often sets the foundation for how LGBTQ+ youth navigate their identity and relationships in the wider world (Ryan et al., 2010). This acceptance or rejection could have long-term impacts, including affecting their ability or inability to form healthy, trusting relationships and potentially leading to safe or risky behaviors (Ryan et al., 2010).

The level of support received from peers and community members played a role, according to research conducted by Leung et al. (2022) and Sadowski et al. (2009). Having a peer group and an inclusive community environment could significantly enhance the well-being

of LGBTQ+ youth, giving them a reassuring feeling of belonging and acceptance (Seil et al., 2014). In contrast, when peers failed to provide support or engaged in bullying, it could intensify feelings of isolation and potentially lead to negative mental health outcomes (Williams et al., 2005). Such negative peer dynamics also hindered the development of self-identity and might negatively impact academic performance (Cohen & Geier, 2010).

LGBTQ+ youth also encountered inconsistencies in legal protections, with the absence or uneven enforcement of anti-discrimination policies often leaving them vulnerable to mistreatment. In parts of the United States, there were strong anti-discrimination laws and policies in place to support LGBTQ+ youth, while other areas had gaps in the law that left these individuals vulnerable to unfair treatment particularly within educational and social environments (Casey et al., 2019). For example, states like California had anti-discrimination laws that ensure LGBTQ+ students were protected in schools (ACLU of Southern California, n.d). These laws prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity (ACLU of Southern California, n.d; Choi et. al., 2017). California also passed Senate Bill Number 48, also known as the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act, which required the inclusion of LGBTQ+ histories and contributions in educational curricula (California State Legislature, 2011). In contrast, states like Texas had more limited legal protections with no specific state laws addressing bullying on these grounds (Casey et al., 2019). Such disparities in protections could create different experiences for LGBTQ+ youth, where their rights and safety might be more secure in some states compared to others (Casey et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2017). This directly impacted their lives within educational and social settings (Russell et al., 2021).

A study conducted by the Human Rights Campaign (2023) reported that 59.4% of LGBTQ+ youth had been teased, bullied, or treated badly at school in the prior year. The study

also reported that more than half of LGBTQ+ youth were victimized specifically due to their sexual identity, gender identity, and/or gender expression at school (Human Rights Campaign, 2023; Russell et al., 2011). The bullying that was reported ranged from verbal harassment and social exclusion to physical violence (Human Rights Campaign, 2023; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Russell et al., 2011). Russell et al. (2011) explained that the discrimination often extended beyond peer interactions, with incidents of biased treatment from school staff and exclusion from school activities based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) explained that the educational setting itself could also be viewed as a source of discrimination. LGBTQ+ students may have encountered curricula that lacked inclusive representation, reinforcing feelings of invisibility and marginalization (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). Additionally, school policies and practices often failed to address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth, such as the lack of gender-neutral bathrooms or the lack of supportive clubs or organizations that fostered a sense of community and belonging (Marx & Kettrey, 2016; Russell et al., 2021). Additionally, LGBTQ+ students might have faced barriers in accessing appropriate health and counseling services that were sensitive to their specific needs, further isolating them in the school setting (Williams et al., 2005). LGBTQ+ students may also have faced discriminatory dress code policies, which further contributed to a hostile school environment (Casey et al., 2019; Cohen & Geier, 2010).

The experiences of discrimination had an impact on LGBTQ+ students, resulting in lower engagement in school, decreased academic achievement, higher rates of absenteeism, and a general sense of insecurity at school (Leung et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2021). Socially, LGBTQ+ students may have struggled to form connections with peers due to fear of rejection or harassment which could lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Russell et al., 2011). Marx

and Kettrey (2016) explained, when schools failed to establish clear anti-bullying policies or LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula, students may have felt unsupported and unsafe, which could hinder their ability to concentrate and succeed academically. Moreover, the absence of support groups or LGBTQ+ affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ students, within schools could amplify these difficulties and leave students without the necessary network of support (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014).

According to a study conducted by GLSEN, it was found that when LGBTQ+ students felt their learning environment was hostile, it notably negatively impacted their academic aspirations and high school completion rates (Kosciw et al., 2020). Fifty-six percent of the LGBTQ+ students showed a greater diminished interest in higher education compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Kosciw et al., 2020). The negative school experiences, marked by discrimination and lack of support, made the students skeptical about wanting to pursue higher education and were doubtful of their future success in academic pursuits (Kosciw et al., 2020). This diminished aspiration was not just a reflection of their school experiences but also a forewarning of the challenges they might face in accessing higher education and fulfilling their academic potential (Leung et al., 2022).

Military-connected and LGBTQ+ intersections

When military-connected and LGBTQ+ intersect, the youth faced a unique set of challenges, as delineated by the intersectionality theory of Collins and Chepp (2013). This theory posits that experiences of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other social categories cannot be understood in isolation (Collins & Chepp, 2013). Instead, these categories interact to form a complex network of power relationships, influencing the distinct material conditions and social experiences of those at these intersections (Collins & Chepp, 2013; Crenshaw, 2013). For

military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, the demands and challenges of military family life intersect with their sexual and gender identities, creating a multi-faceted landscape of obstacles (Casey et al., 2019; De Pedro et al., 2011).

The concept of intersectionality illuminates the lived experiences of these youth, particularly in navigating frequent relocations and parental deployments common to military families (Gleason & Beck, 2017). Such disruptions to their social support networks and educational continuity highlight the compounded nature of their struggle (Gleason & Beck, 2017). With each PCS, the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth faced the daunting task of re-establishing themselves in new environments (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). This process was particularly challenging due to the need to find LGBTQ+-friendly support systems and communities, which could vary widely in availability and acceptance depending on the location (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). Additionally, the stigma associated with being LGBTQ+ in some military contexts could create an added layer of difficulty (McNamara et al., 2021). The stigma might manifest as overt discrimination, negative stereotypes, and/or not aligned with the military's traditional values (McNamara et al., 2021). For the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, such stigma could lead to social exclusion, bullying, and a lack of support from both their peers within the military communities and from adults who might hold non-inclusive views about gender and sexuality (McNamara et al., 2021; Seil et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2010). These circumstances resulted in many LGBTQ+ youth navigating their identities discreetly, heightening feelings of isolation and preventing them from openly embracing and expressing their true selves (Williams et al., 2005).

Beyond external experiences of isolation, the intersectionality framework also sheds light on the internal conflicts and feelings of alienation among military-connected LGBTQ+ youth,

who often find themselves at the crossroads of the military and the LGBTQ+ communities (Jabboury et al., 2016). As the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth often experienced a complex navigation of their dual identities while balancing the expectations and cultures of both the military and LGBTQ+ communities, this life context could lead to internal conflicts and a sense of not fully belonging to either group (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020; Jabboury et al., 2016). The struggle for identity, acceptance, and understanding was exacerbated by the need to continually reintroduce and redefine themselves with each relocation, leading to challenges in self-expression and self-acceptance (Engel et al., 2010).

Within the school setting, the intersectional challenges continue. Military-connected LGBTQ+ youth faced a unique set of challenges (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020). The instability of frequently changing schools was compounded by the potential for encountering discrimination or lack of understanding from peers and educators about their LGBTQ+ identity (De Pedro et al., 2011; Willaims et al., 2005). In new school settings, these students had to adapt to different academic environments and social circles and navigate the varied levels of awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ issues (Russell et al., 2021). This circumstance could lead to situations where the youth encountered ignorance, prejudice, or outright hostility, making it difficult for them to feel safe and included and impacting their ability to engage and succeed academically (Russell et al., 2021). This instability underscores the need for an intersectional understanding of their experiences.

The compounded challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, as analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, could significantly impact their academic success and aspirations for higher education (Ferree, 2018; Leung et al, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020). Intersectionality highlighted how the interplay between their military affiliation and LGBTQ+

identity exacerbated the obstacles they encountered (Collins & Chepp, 2013; Leung et al, 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020). Frequent school changes, combined with potential discrimination, could disrupt their academic continuity and engagement, leading to lower grades and a diminished interest in learning (Engel et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2022). Additionally, the stress and anxiety from hiding their identity or dealing with bullying could further hinder their academic performance (Engel et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2022). These intersecting factors not only undermine their immediate educational achievements but may also adversely affect their self-esteem and belief in their ability to succeed in an academic setting, ultimately influencing their aspirations and decisions about pursuing education beyond high school (Engel et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2022).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and its Application

Abraham Maslow developed a theory known as the Hierarchy of Needs, which classified needs into five distinct levels (Maslow, 1954a). The first level focused on basic physiological needs like food, water, and shelter- the necessities for survival (Maslow, 1954b). Once these fundamental needs were met, the focus shifted to the second level: safety needs (Maslow, 1954b). Safety needs encompassed the desire for security, stability, and a secure environment (Maslow, 1954a). According to Maslow's (1954b) theory, individuals must have had their physiological and safety needs adequately met before they can effectively address higher-level needs such as love, esteem, and self-actualization.

At the base of Maslow's hierarchy are physiological needs, safety, and security (Maslow, 1954a). Physiological needs were the most fundamental human survival requirements, including access to food, water, shelter, and adequate clothing (Maslow, 1954b). These needs were universal and essential, forming the foundation upon which all other aspects of well-being were

built (Maslow, 1954b). Safety and security were equally crucial elements at the base of Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1954b). This level encompasses the need for physical safety, emotional security, and a stable environment where individuals can thrive (Maslow, 1954b). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, their fundamental physiological and safety needs were met through military provisions, such as housing and food (Military OneSource, 2023). The military provided housing on the military installation or a housing allowance (Military OneSource, 2023). These housing benefits contributed to a stable and secure living arrangement, alleviating financial pressures (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Furthermore, the comprehensive healthcare coverage provided by the military encompassed medical, dental, and mental health care to ensure support for illnesses, injuries, and overall well-being (Military OneSource, 2023).

The military also offered financial stability through a steady income, job security, and additional benefits like education assistance and retirement plans (Military OneSource, 2023). These financial provisions enabled military-connected LGBTQ+ youth to meet their basic needs and attain economic security, allowing them to concentrate on higher-level needs in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1954a; Military OneSource, 2023). However, while the military offered critical provisions that help meet the basic physiological and safety needs of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, it is essential to recognize that the very nature of military life can also pose challenges to the stability of these provisions (De Pedro et al., 2011). The frequent relocations that come with military service can disrupt the sense of home and stability that housing provides (Gleason & Beck, 2017). Moving from one location to another, often across different states or even countries, can be emotionally and logistically taxing for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, potentially impacting their sense of security and belonging (Bonar, 2016; Leung et al., 2022). Additionally, the transient nature of military life could create financial instability for

some, especially if they struggled to secure stable employment for their partners or spouses (Agazio et al., 2014). These challenges highlight the complexity of meeting the fundamental needs of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth and underscore the importance of ongoing support and resources to mitigate the potential disruptions to their basic needs while serving their country (O'Neal et al., 2018). Safety needs, including personal security and stability, are often compromised for LGBTQ+ youth due to the dual challenges of navigating military environments and societal stigmas around their identity (Russell et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2010). This instability can lead to increased stress and anxiety, impacting their mental health and hindering their academic focus, aspirations, performance, and access to educational resources (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; McNamara et al., 2021).

The middle levels of Maslow's Hierarchy involved love, belonging, and esteem needs (Maslow, 1954b). Maslow (1943) described the love phase as needing emotional relationships, including friendship, intimacy, and family connections. This level emphasized the importance of belongingness and community involvement (Maslow, 1954a). The love level suggested that individuals require acceptance and love from others to feel fulfilled (Maslow, 1954a). Military-connected youth can bond within military communities with peers who share similar experiences of frequent relocations, deployments, and the transient nature of military life (O'Neal et al., 2018). These connections provided a sense of familiarity and support as the youth shared the challenges and uncertainties of being part of a military family (Williams, 2013). Forming friendships with other children in military housing or on base can provide comfort and belonging (Williams, 2013). However, the transient nature of being affiliated with the military presented challenges for military-connected LGBTQ+ children (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Frequent relocations disrupted military-connected LGBTQ+ youth's ability to form lasting relationships,

impacting their sense of belonging (Bradshaw et al., 2010). With each relocation, the youths had to adapt to new schools, neighborhoods, and social circles, which made it difficult to establish stable relationships (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Additionally, the potential for bullying or discrimination based on their LGBTQ+ identity further complicated their pursuit of love and belonging (Russell et al., 2011). These unmet needs lead to isolation and loneliness, significantly affecting their social interactions and academic engagement (Cozza & Lerner, 2013; Russell et al., 2011).

At the level of esteem, individuals sought to fulfill their need for self-worth and the respect of others (Maslow, 1954a). As defined by Maslow (1954b), self-esteem refers to a positive perception of one's value, self-respect, and confidence in one's abilities (Maslow, 1954b). Respect from others involved seeking acknowledgment, admiration, and approval from peers, family, and society (Maslow, 1954b). It is the desire to be valued and recognized by others (Maslow, 1954b). Like anyone in a community, military-connected youth who identify as LGBTQ+ aim to excel in various areas, such as academics, sports, or extracurricular activities (Clever & Segal, 2013). Achieving success in these areas brought a sense of accomplishment and boosted their self-esteem (Maslow, 1954a). Additionally, military-connected youths sought acknowledgment and admiration from their peers and educators, which contributed to developing a positive self-image (Burlison & Thoron, 2014). However, military-connected LGBTQ+ youth might struggle with challenges related to identity, including concerns about coming out to their peers or family members (Ryan et al., 2010). The fear of rejection or discrimination heavily impacted their self-worth, leading them to self-doubt or isolation (Williams et al., 2005).

Meeting these esteem-related requirements ultimately leads to self-actualization – realizing one's potential and actively seeking personal growth and meaningful experiences

(Maslow, 1954b). Self-actualization represented the pinnacle of human potential and was the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1954b). Self-actualization encompassed realizing and fulfilling one's unique potential, talents, and capabilities (Maslow, 1954a). At this level, individuals strived for personal growth, creativity, problem-solving, and a deep sense of purpose and meaning in life (Maslow, 1954a). Self-actualization involved continuous self-improvement and the pursuit of aspirations and goals that align with one's authentic self (1954a). Military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, like all youths, had unique talents, interests, and dreams that they aspired to explore and develop (Clever & Segal, 2013; Sadowski et al., 2009). Self-actualization involves discovering one's passions, talents, and values and aligning their life choices with these discoveries (Maslow, 1954b). For military-connected LGBTQ+ youths, this may mean overcoming various challenges (Burlison & Thoron, 2014). These youths needed to navigate the demands of military life, including the frequent relocations and potential social pressure, while pursuing their personal aspirations and self-discovery (Burlison & Thoron, 2014; Clever & Segal, 2013). Managing the competing priorities of military obligations and personal goals were mentally and emotionally taxing (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Military-connected youth had to learn to balance their family's commitments with their individual pursuits, a challenge that required careful navigation (De Pedro et al., 2011). The limited control military-connected LGBTQ+ Youths had over their circumstances, including where they live and when they move, can also constrain their ability to make choices aligned with their aspirations (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). Ultimately, achieving self-actualization within the context of Maslow's hierarchy for these youths required personal growth and a supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses the complexities of their dual identities (Burlison & Thoron, 2014).

Summary

The intersection of being military-connected and LGBTQ+ presented a complex situation that significantly influenced these youth's academic aspirations and achievements, all within the framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Burlison & Thoron, 2014). This intersection emphasized the multifaceted nature of their experiences, where they must address their fundamental human needs and navigate the intricate challenges stemming from military life and their LGBTQ+ identity (Burlison & Thoron, 2014). This duality underscores the complex balancing act they undertake, striving to fulfill their physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs while reconciling the demands and potential social pressures inherent in being military-connected and identifying as LGBTQ+ (Clever & Segal, 2013; Sadowski et al., 2009). Based on the literature review, it is evident that additional research is needed to gain a better understanding of the existing school-related challenges, factors, and conditions encountered by military-connected LGBTQ+ students. These variables have an impact on their academic performances and educational aspirations. Another purpose of this research will be to identify and recommend policies and practices that can create a more supportive and conducive learning environment for all students.

Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to explore and describe the risk and protective factors and their possible relationship to academic performance and educational ambitions among military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years – a group that presents unique experiences due to the intersectionality of their identities. This chapter describes the research methodology employed to answer the research questions below:

1. What are the perceived school-related risk and protective factors identified by military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults?
2. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the risk factors influencing school victimization?
3. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the protective factors that supported their well-being in school?
4. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the possible relationships between risk and protective factors and their academic performance and educational ambitions?

5. How do the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how does this influence their academic performance and educational aspirations?

Given the complexity of the experiences and challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, a mixed methods design was chosen for its ability to yield a richer and more nuanced understanding of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Greene, 2007). The first phase of the research involved conducting an online survey, which aimed to quantitatively assess the prevalence and nature of both risk and protective factors experienced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. The research then leveraged in-depth, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and narrative inquiry to glean insights from a carefully selected sample of participants. Extreme case sampling was used to select a smaller group for qualitative interviews to understand their perceived experiences. The theoretical lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs was used to interpret findings of how the educational environment and the fulfillment of human needs impacted students' educational attainment, self-actualization, and holistic development.

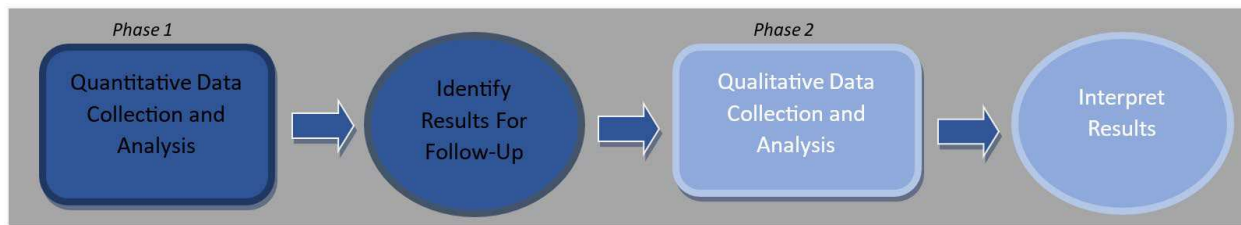
Research Design

The research design for this study was primarily rooted in an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, chosen specifically to probe deeply into the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults regarding their grade school educational contexts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Fetters et al., 2013; Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori, 2010). The approach embodied the essence of a quantitative-to-qualitative mixed-method study, seamlessly integrating quantitative insights from online surveys with deeper qualitative understanding through interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This integration not only enriched the analysis

but also facilitated data triangulation, enhancing the validity of the findings by comparing different data sources and perspectives (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The explanatory sequential design entailed an initial quantitative phase using an online survey to collect data, which subsequently guided the qualitative data interview phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such a design facilitated a thorough exploration of the risk and protective factors that shaped these students' experiences, perceptions, and educational ambitions (De Pedro & Esqueda, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the explanatory sequential model (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Figure 1

Explanatory Sequential Model



Initiating the data collection process, a survey was disseminated to a broad sample of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults aged 18 to 25. The survey was designed to capture their unique lived experiences with risk and protective factors, educational ambitions, and perceptions of their grade school educational environments. Each participant independently received the survey communication and completed the survey. The collected data was analyzed to uncover prevailing themes and patterns, which provided detailed insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Building on the insights obtained from the survey, the study transitioned into its second phase of the explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A selected subset of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults was invited to participate in semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions to dive deeper into their experiences and

interpretations. These interviews were designed to provide a more nuanced exploration of the participants' perceptions, experiences, and recommendations for a more inclusive and supportive educational setting. The resulting data were examined through thematic analysis, where themes were recognized and coded in accordance with established guidelines (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Population and Sample

The study targeted individuals aged 18-25 who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+). Participants must have had a parent serving in the United States Military during their secondary education. Data collection began with an online survey aimed at engaging 75 participants from this demographic through outreach to the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) group and related social media groups (Braun et al., 2021). To enhance these efforts, a network was established with the vice president of the PFLAG Virginia chapter, providing valuable connections to the families within the organization. Additionally, recruitment efforts included posts and flyers on LGBTQ+ organization websites and direct engagements with military family support groups, especially in areas with significant military family populations (Dosek, 2021; Leighton et al., 2021). Potential participants underwent pre-screening to ensure they met the study's criteria (Wermuth, 2022). Those eligible received comprehensive details about the study, including its objective, procedures, and potential benefits (Wermuth, 2022).

For the qualitative inquiry phase, six participants were recruited based on the initial survey (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2024; Patton, 2022). The chosen sample size balances feasibility considerations and the desire for in-depth data (Patton, 2022). To ensure a representative and communicative sample for the interviews, purposeful and snowball sampling were employed for recruitment (Dosek, 2021; Khoury, 2024; Patton, 2022). According to Ary et al. (2018),

purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who were not only willing and available but also possessed a high level of communicative skill. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed post-interview to expand the original participant pool through referrals, allowing the study to capitalize on the networks and connections of initial participants (Palinkas et al., 2016; Valerio et al., 2016).

Data Collection

This study sought to measure and explore the risk and protective factors and to understand their potential impact on academic performance and educational ambitions among military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults. In pursuit of this purpose, the study delineated the following objectives:

1. To identify the key risk and protective factors affecting this demographic;
2. To explore the relationship between these factors and academic outcomes;
3. To understand the educational aspirations among these youth; and
4. To provide recommendations for a more inclusive and supportive educational setting.

The study began with an online survey, engaging participants who identified as LGBTQ+ and had a parent(s) or guardian(s) who served in the United States Military while they were enrolled in their secondary education. The survey aimed to gather data from military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals regarding their experiences, challenges, risk and protective factors, academic performance, and educational ambitions. Upon completing the survey, the collected data served a dual purpose. Not only did it provide insights into the experiences and challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals, but it also informed the development of the interview instrument for the subsequent qualitative phase, ensuring that the questions posed were both relevant and meaningful to the participants (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The survey's rating

data played a pivotal role as the quantitative information was systematically analyzed to identify patterns, trends, and key areas of concern or interest. Assessment of the rating data allowed for the identification of specific risk and protective factors that held the most significance for the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

To further gather data, semi-structured interviews were used with a smaller sample of participants. These semi-structured interviews attempted to describe the risk and protective factors and their relationship to academic performance and educational ambitions during the participants' time as military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, as part of these interviews, participants were asked to provide recommendations for changes to educational policy and practices. Ethical protocols, such as informed consent and maintaining participant anonymity, were adhered to throughout the study. Data was collected and analyzed to learn about each group of participants and the contextual variables that might have affected each case. This approach was tailored to yield an understanding of the multifaceted dynamics influencing the lives and aspirations of those who, during their youth, were military-connected and identified as LGBTQ+.

The researcher employed data triangulation to ensure that the study's findings were robust and thorough (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). This method combined insights gathered from the survey and semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Clark, 2011). By adopting this mixed-methods approach, data from diverse sources were compared and contrasted, significantly enhancing the reliability and validity of the conclusions (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Specifically, data triangulation enabled a detailed analysis of how the lived experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals during their youth related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and their impact on academic performance and aspirations. Examining these

experiences from various perspectives yielded a more complete understanding of the students' needs, challenges, and sources of support, ensuring a comprehensive approach to addressing their unique circumstances.

Survey

Utilizing criterion sampling, posts (Appendix A) were published on social media platforms and online communities frequented by young adults, including those targeted at military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals and relevant alumni groups, to recruit participants aged 18-25 for the online survey. The survey questionnaire consisted of items focusing on risk and protective factors, academic performance, educational ambitions, and demographics. The items encompassed multiple-choice, multiple-select, Likert scale, and open-ended questions. The quantitative data, derived from the multiple-choice, multiple-select, and Likert scale questions, were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify prevailing trends and significant patterns related to the experiences of the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. The responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis. This data served to offer a broad understanding of the collective experience and challenges faced by the target demographic. The qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions provided deeper, more nuanced insights into personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions. Responses to these questions helped identify common themes, personal narratives, and unique perspectives that might not have been captured through quantitative means alone.

Interviews

Following the survey analysis, the gathered quantitative and qualitative data was utilized to design the subsequent qualitative interview phase (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The insights from both data sets informed the creation of targeted, relevant, and comprehensive interview

questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The goal was to delve deeper into specific areas of interest identified in the survey, allowing for a richer exploration of the experiences, aspirations, and challenges of the military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. This two-phase approach ensured that the interviews were built on a solid foundation of prior knowledge, making them more contextual and meaningful (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

A confidentiality agreement was put in place, safeguarding the information during the interviews and ensuring the privacy and protection of the study's subjects. This measure was crucial for maintaining the ethical standards of the study and upholding the trust placed by participants in the research process (Myers & Newman, 2007). Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained prior to data collection, ensuring that all research procedures adhered to ethical guidelines for working with human subjects. A copy of the IRB approval is included in Appendix E.

Ethical Considerations

In line with ethical research practices, this study prioritized all participants' mental and emotional well-being. Recognizing the sensitive nature of the topics explored through the survey and interviews, the researcher was committed to providing participants with appropriate support resources. To this end, a document outlining various virtual support services was provided to all participants upon the completion of the survey and interview session (see Appendix B). This document included information on organizations and services dedicated to offering support, guidance, and a safe space for LGBTQ+ individuals. This aimed to address any emotional discomfort or challenges that might have arisen from participating in the study. The provision of these resources underscored the researcher's responsibility to ensure that participants had access to necessary support during and following their involvement in the study.

Within this ethical framework, it was imperative to address the potential for researcher bias, especially given the researcher's dual identity as an affiliate of the military and LGBTQ+ communities. Recognizing the influence personal experiences can have on qualitative research, the researcher engaged in reflexivity sessions, allowing for the crucial assessment of how personal perspectives might influence the research. A reflexivity journal was maintained to document these reflections, serving as a critical tool for identifying and mitigating any biases that might have arisen during the research process (Ravitch & Carlo, 2021). The reflexivity journal served to record observations and thoughts from each interaction with participants and provided a space for the researcher to critically engage with their own assumptions and values, as well as how these might have influenced the interpretation of the data (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Through this practice, the researcher aimed to ensure that the study remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences rather than being unduly influenced by the researcher's personal background or perspectives (Ravitch & Carlo, 2021).

Researcher Reflexivity

This study was developed with the understanding that my personal and professional identities would inevitably shape my role as a researcher. As someone who is both military-connected and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I hold a shared identity with the participants I sought to engage. My own educational experiences were shaped by the dynamics of military life, including frequent relocations, shifting peer groups, and the implicit pressure to conform, and my identity development took place during a time when conversations about LGBTQ+ identity were often silenced in both military and educational contexts.

Given this shared background and personal investment, I anticipated both the benefits and challenges associated with my positionality. On the one hand, my shared background may

help build trust with participants, inform the development of more sensitive data collection tools, and support a deeper understanding of the cultural and institutional factors at play. On the other hand, I remain mindful of the need to separate my own experiences from those of the young adults in this study. While we may share similar identity markers, our generational contexts, school environments, and sociopolitical realities differ in meaningful ways.

To address these complexities and maintain research integrity, I planned for intentional reflexivity throughout the research process. This included maintaining a reflexive journal, regularly interrogating my assumptions, and incorporating feedback from colleagues to ensure my interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives rather than personal projections. I also designed the study to prioritize participant voice and agency through opportunities for follow-up communication and space within the survey and interviews for open-ended responses, ensuring that the lived realities of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth remained central to the findings.

Instrument Description

Online Survey

The online questionnaire (Appendix C) aimed to discern the perceptions of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults regarding the existence and degree of school-related risk and protective factors they experienced during their secondary education. It also explored the perceived relationship between these factors and their academic performance and educational ambitions, along with the demographic backdrop of the participants. Subsequent sections of the survey assessed academic performance by asking participants to rate their overall academic performance on a scale ranging from excellent to poor. Additional questions explored factors that participants perceived as positively and negatively impacting their academic performance, such

as supportive family and friends, mentors, and challenges, including a lack of support, limited resources, stress, discrimination, or bullying.

The survey then delved into participants' educational ambitions, allowing them to select their desired educational pathways from options such as a high school diploma, career and technical or trade school credential, college or university degree, and/or graduate and professional degrees. The level of motivation to pursue these ambitions was also assessed. Additionally, the survey aimed to identify risk and protective factors that were perceived to influence the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals during their secondary education. Participants were invited to provide their insights into the risk factors that affected their academic performance and educational ambitions and the protective factors that positively influenced these aspects of their lives.

The survey was administered through the widely recognized and secure platform Qualtrics and began with demographic information such as age, gender, identity, and military affiliation to gain a better understanding of the participants' backgrounds. The validity of the survey was bolstered by adaption of questions from two established studies, namely, *The Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey* (Kosciw et al., 2020) and *The Trevor Project's National Survey on LGBTQ+ Youth's Mental Health* (Trevor Project, 2023). GLSEN's National School Climate Survey focused on the school environment, safety, bullying, and supportive resources, while the Trevor Project's National Survey concentrated on mental health aspects of LGBTQ+ youth, addressing emotional and psychological well-being, stress, depression, and the effectiveness of mental health resources (Kosciw et al., 2020; Trevor Project, 2023). A pilot test was used to ensure validity, clarity, and effectiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). See the pilot testing of instruments section.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Drawing on the insights of Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009), interviews offered a robust mechanism for capturing qualitative insights. This study aimed to understand the interplay between risk and protective factors and their potential impact on academic outcomes and aspirations among military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Interviews were conducted with young adults to achieve a comprehensive and nuanced understanding. Focusing solely on individuals who had recently transitioned from secondary education allowed the study to capture in-depth perspectives, providing an opportunity to delve into the nuances of their experiences during their formative educational years. This approach facilitated a richer exploration of the challenges and supports that shaped their academic and personal development, emphasizing the unique intersectionality of their identities and military backgrounds. By examining the perspectives of these young adults, the study sought to uncover the dynamics of support, understanding, and communication they experienced within their family units. This approach was crucial for navigating the complexities associated with their intersecting military and LGBTQ+ identities during their secondary education years.

Interview questions were developed based on the findings from the online survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This process involved analyzing the survey data to identify prevalent themes and areas of concern or interest among participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For instance, if the survey results indicated a high prevalence of stress related to academic performance among the participants, the interview questions might have included: “Please describe how your academic experiences have been influenced by stress. Did you feel this stress is connected to your identity or military background?” This hypothetical question was designed to explore the specific issue of stress in greater depth, which allowed participants to provide

nuanced insights based on their personal experiences and perceptions. The goal was to create a set of interview questions that were directly informed by the survey results, ensuring that the interviews were grounded in the actual experiences and priorities of the study's participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Young adults aged 18-25 who identified as LGBTQ+ and were connected to the military during their secondary education were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol (Appendix D). This format, as described by Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009), allowed for a balance between structured guidance and flexibility. Moreover, to ensure depth, the interview included clarifying probes and elaborations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Each interview began with a greeting, followed by an outline of the study's purpose, research questions, and the main interview queries. Provisions for follow-up questions, observations, and reflective notes were also incorporated (Clandinin et al., 2000). Interviews were conducted via video conference and were recorded (with due consent) to facilitate subsequent transcription and analysis (Clandinin et al., 2000). Once the transcription was complete, the video recordings were deleted to ensure confidentiality.

Pilot Testing of Instruments

To strengthen the validity of the research instruments, a pilot test was conducted by the researcher with participants who closely matched the demographic and psychosocial profile of the target group. The pilot test involved military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults from a local Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) organization. To ensure a comprehensive and effective pilot test, recruitment was planned and executed, leveraging existing networks and relationships between the PFLAG organization and the researcher. Outreach included direct communication through PFLAG meetings and social media postings,

aimed to create a diverse representation within the pilot group that mirrored the target study's demographic, including age range, military family status, and LGBTQ+ identification. This approach aimed to provide a clearer evaluation of the instrument's effectiveness and ensured that the sample accurately represented the broader study population (Ary et al., 2018).

This pilot test served multiple purposes:

1. Evaluating the survey and interview protocols for their effectiveness in gathering accurate and meaningful data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018);
2. Identifying potential biases or sensitivities that could arise given the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of the target population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018);
3. Testing the practical aspects of data collection, such as the time required to complete the survey or interview and the user-friendliness of the electronic platform used for the survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2018); and
4. Assessing the clarity of expression of the questions to ensure they were uniformly understood by all participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The survey portion of the pilot test assessed the readability, understandability, and clarity of wording in the questionnaire (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Participants were asked to provide feedback on the survey's structure, question format, and response options (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Additionally, they were invited to comment on any questions they found confusing, irrelevant, or sensitive. This feedback was collected through both a survey and an oral post-survey and was invaluable in refining and improving the survey instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). After collecting and analyzing the survey data, a subsequent pilot test was conducted specially for the interview questions to ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Simultaneously, the pilot test evaluated the interview protocol's quality of questioning,

comprehensibility, and effectiveness in capturing the experiences and perspectives of the target population (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Just like with the survey, participants were specifically asked about the flow of the interview, the appropriateness of the language used, and whether they felt any discomfort or hesitation in responding to the questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). Feedback from the pilot test was analyzed and integrated into the final versions of the survey and interview protocols. Any changes made to the instruments will be clearly documented to maintain transparency in the research process (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

It is important to note that the pilot test results were not included in the final analysis. Instead, these results served as an iterative step in refining the research tools (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). This approach not only enhanced the validity of the research instruments but also addressed ethical considerations by ensuring participant comfort and improving data quality (Creswell & Creswell, 2020).

Data Analysis

This study's primary data analysis approach integrated quantitative and qualitative methodologies, adhering to an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This design started with an emphasis on quantitative data to establish foundational insights, followed by qualitative data collection to delve deeper into the initial findings and explore the nuances of participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Upon receipt of completed surveys, the data were extracted from Qualtrics and subjected to quantitative analysis. Specific metrics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were derived to provide a clear picture of the distribution and central tendencies of the responses. The analysis of rating data not only revealed prevailing trends and patterns but also laid the groundwork for the development of interview questions. Additionally, content analysis was

conducted on the open-ended responses to uncover themes, patterns, and insights that were not evident through quantitative measures alone. This analysis involved coding responses, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences.

Individual interviews served as a vital tool for collecting rich narratives (Clandinin et al., 2000). These informal conversations enabled researchers to capture a wide range of participants' information, thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Clandinin et al., 2000). Interviews were conducted in a private and safe space, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and employed a semi-structured format to explore their experiences and challenges (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This format facilitated an in-depth exploration of their sexual and gender identities within the context of their family, school, and military-connected lives.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Before delving into the qualitative aspect, the survey rating data underwent descriptive quantitative analysis. This process aimed to provide initial results that offered foundational insights, serving as a basis for the development of pertinent interview questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, these quantitative findings later served as a comparative reference when examining the qualitative data, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the overall analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative Data Analysis

After the quantitative phase, the focus shifted to the qualitative analysis, concentrating on the experiences and perspectives of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Data from the interviews underwent thematic content analysis, which aimed at identifying and reporting patterns and themes within qualitative datasets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transcribing

To ensure accurate documentation of the interviews, professional transcription services were employed. This approach was crucial for making the data more manageable for analysis and allowed for a closer examination of content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcription process played a key role in the identification and analysis of emerging themes, as it transformed the spoken words of the interviews into written text, which facilitated a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the participants' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Coding

An integral step in the qualitative data analysis process was the implementation of thematic coding. This involved the close examination of interview content, with recurring ideas, emotions, or concepts being assigned specific codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thematic coding facilitated the distillation of the essence of participants' responses, paving the way for a nuanced comprehension of their narratives (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Given the potential volume of data, pattern coding, a type of thematic coding, was deployed to discern related themes, revealing prominent patterns and their interrelations (Saldana, 2014). This approach allowed for the organization of data into meaningful themes that reflected the lived experiences of the military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults, enabling a detailed and structured analysis of their perspectives and insights.

A color-coding strategy was incorporated alongside traditional coding techniques to enhance the thematic analysis process within the qualitative data analysis (Saldana, 2014). This method involved assigning distinct colors to different themes identified during the initial coding phase, allowing for visual differentiation of the data. Using color coding, the researcher synthesized insights more efficiently, drawing deeper connections between the themes and

exploring the intricate ways participants' experiences interrelated (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This strategy enriched the analysis by providing a clear, visual representation of the thematic structure of the data, ultimately leading to more informed conclusions about the lived experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Constructing Narratives

As themes emerged from the shared experiences of participants, they were organized sequentially to construct comprehensive narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These narratives, formulated from participants' experiences and the derived themes, were then reviewed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants were given the opportunity to go over their individual sections to ensure that their experiences were accurately and faithfully represented.

Summary

This chapter outlined the mixed-methods research methodology designed to explore the risk and protective factors influencing academic performance and educational ambitions among military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults aged 18-25 who were military-connected during their middle and high school years. The study focused on understanding the unique intersectionality of their identities and experiences in educational settings. To achieve this, an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, beginning with a quantitative online survey followed by qualitative interviews. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of both broad trends through the survey and in-depth personal experiences via interviews.

The online survey targeted a diverse group of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults and incorporated both scaled and open-ended questions to gather a wide array of data. The subsequent qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with a selected subset of participants, providing a deeper exploration into the nuances of their experiences, perceptions,

and educational needs. This phase offered insights into more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Chapter IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years, with a focus on the challenges they faced and the protective factors that supported their academic performance and well-being. Given the dual impact of military life and LGBTQ+ identities, this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how these intersecting factors influenced the educational and personal development of this unique population. By examining both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher aimed to provide insights that can inform strategies to create more supportive environments for future generations of military-connected LGBTQ+ youths.

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the data analysis conducted during the investigation. The data collection and analysis procedures were designed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived school-related risks and protective factors identified by military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults?
2. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the risk factors influencing school victimization?
3. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the protective factors that supported their well-being in school?

4. How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the possible relationships between risk and protective factors and their academic performance and educational ambitions?
5. How do the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how does this influence their academic performance and educational aspirations?

This chapter begins with a brief review of the procedures outlined in Chapter 3 to provide context for the data collection methods. This is followed by a comprehensive data summary that integrates the results from the quantitative survey analysis with the insights gathered from the qualitative interviews. The subsequent sections present a detailed discussion of these findings, organized thematically, to build a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth during their secondary education. By connecting these findings to the research questions, this chapter aims to offer a cohesive analysis of how school environments, military life, and identity intersections shape the well-being and academic success of these youths.

Procedures and Participants

Data collection for this study was conducted over an 11-week period, beginning in July 2024 and concluding in October 2024. The process started with the quantitative data-gathering phase, which involved administering a confidential online survey designed to capture a broad range of experiences from military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals. The survey, titled *Navigating Dual Identities: School and Life Experiences of LGBTQ+ Military-Connected Young Adults*, consisted of 36 items organized into seven sections: demographic information, academic performance and aspirations, experiences as an LGBTQ+ student, school environment for

LGBTQ+ students, experiences as a military-connected student, experiences of being LGBTQ+ and military-connected, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The Maslow's section explored participants' perceptions of how well their basic needs were met, including physiological needs (food, water, shelter), safety (Physical and emotional security), love and belonging (acceptance within school and family), esteem (respect and recognition), and self-actualization (personal growth opportunities). This structured approach facilitated a comprehensive assessment of the participants' academic performance, social experiences, and the impact of both protective and risk factors associated with their identities.

During this period, 71 participants aged 18 to 25 consented to participate and completed the survey. Each of these individuals was military-connected during their secondary education and self-identified as LGBTQ+. The survey data provided valuable insights into their educational outcomes, examining how their military connection and LGBTQ+ identity intersected to influence their academic performance and social experience.

Participants were recruited through strategic partnerships with universities located near military bases, institutions known for their substantial populations of military-connected individuals and active LGBTQ+ groups. These collaborations with universities not only expanded outreach efforts but also increased access to a diverse pool of potential participants. Additionally, the online survey was shared through social media platforms and groups specifically focused on military-connected communities and LGBTQ+ individuals. This multifaceted recruitment strategy ensured a broad range of perspectives, enriching the diversity of experiences represented in the study.

The participant sample included individuals with a wide spectrum of gender identities, such as male, female, non-binary/non-conforming, and transgender, among others. This diversity

within the sample highlights the complexity of experiences present within the military-connected LGBTQ+ community. A detailed numerical breakdown of the participants' gender identities is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Distribution of Gender Identities Among Participants

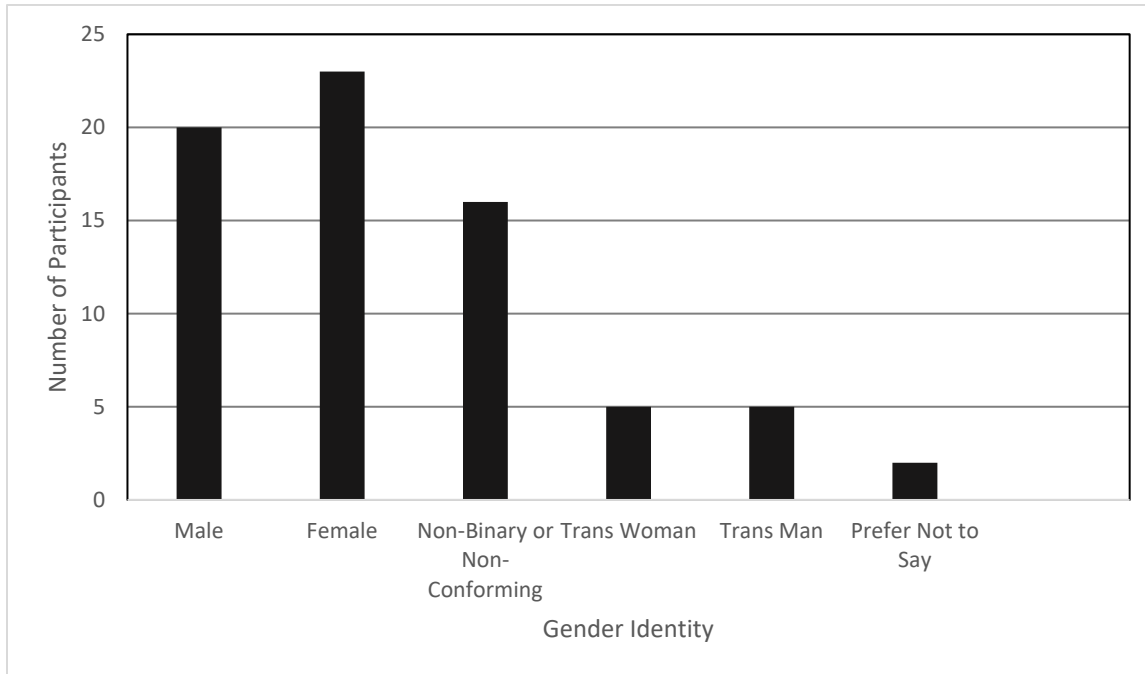


Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of gender identities among the participants in the study. Out of the total 71 participants, twenty-three identified as female, representing the largest group. Twenty participants identified as male, followed by sixteen who identified as non-binary or gender non-conforming. In terms of transgender identities, five participants identified as trans women, and another five identified as trans men. Additionally, two participants preferred not to disclose their gender identity.

From the survey respondents, six individuals who volunteered were selected for the qualitative data-gathering phase to provide deeper insights into their experiences. This subset of participants provided deeper, more nuanced insights into their personal experiences as military-

connected LGBTQ+ youth. The selection aimed to reflect a variety of experiences that would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues explored in this study. To protect their anonymity while ensuring clarity and coherence in presenting their narratives, pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant. These pseudonyms were chosen to align with the participants' self-identified gender identities and are used consistently throughout the study. The demographic characteristics of these interview participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Overview of Interview Participants

| Participant | Age | Gender Identity | Sexual Orientation |
|-------------|-----|-----------------|--------------------|
| Alex | 21 | Non-binary | Queer |
| Sophie | 22 | Female | Lesbian |
| Ethan | 23 | Male | Gay |
| Liam | 20 | Trans Man | Gay |
| Mia | 19 | Female | Bisexual |
| Noah | 18 | Male | Gay |

Findings and Analysis

This section presents the key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study, providing a comprehensive overview of the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years. The quantitative data-gathering phase involved analyzing survey data through descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data-gathering phase captured detailed personal narratives through semi-structured interviews.

The purpose of this section is to integrate results from both phases, highlighting trends, patterns, and insights that deepen the understanding of the risk and protective factors influencing participants' academic performance, social experiences, and overall well-being. The quantitative

findings offer a broad overview of the participants' experiences, while the qualitative interviews offer in-depth context and personal stories that bring these trends to life.

Through this combined analysis, the section identifies emergent themes related to the prevalence of school victimization, the role of protective factors, and academic resilience of these individuals. The qualitative narratives illustrate individual struggles and triumphs, adding rich detail to the statistical trends observed in the quantitative data. This integrated approach ensures that both the survey data and personal accounts collectively address the research questions, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the support systems required for military-connected LGBTQ+ youths.

The qualitative phase involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with six participants. These interviews explored personal experiences, coping strategies, and suggestions for enhancing support available to military-connected LGBTQ+ youths. The following sections will first present statistical findings from the survey, followed by the qualitative narratives that expand on and deepen these trends.

Survey Findings

The quantitative data-gathering phase of the study offered crucial insights into the school experiences, academic performance, and social dynamics of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze and summarize the data, highlighting overall trends and providing a clear overview of participant's experiences. This method was chosen to identify general patterns related to victimization, protective factors, and academic outcomes, aiming to understand the broader experiences within this unique population.

Academic Performance and Aspirations

The survey assessed the self-reported academic performance, educational goals, and perceived influences on academic success and challenges of the military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years. Participants were asked to rate their overall academic performance, and the results revealed a range of responses. As shown in Table 2, 50% reported performing “Above Average (B average),” while 24% rated their performance as “Excellent (A average).” A smaller group, 20%, described their performance as “Average (C average),” and only 6% reported their academic performance as “Poor (D/F average).”

Table 2

Self-Reported Academic Performance (N = 70)

| Academic Performance level | n (%) |
|----------------------------|----------|
| Excellent (A average) | 17 (24%) |
| Above Average (B average) | 35 (50%) |
| Average (C average) | 14 (20%) |
| Poor (D/F average) | 4 (6%) |

To better understand the perceived influence of LGBTQ+ identity and military-connected status on academic performance, the study employed descriptive statistical analysis. Participants rated the impact of their identity on academic performance on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Significantly). The results (see Table 3) indicated a mean score of 3.22, suggesting a moderate influence on their academic experiences. The most frequently selected response (mode) was 4 (“Very”), indicating that more participants selected this category than any other response.

Table 3*Perceived Impact on Academic Performance. (N = 68)*

| | Missing | Mode | Median | Mean | SD |
|--|---------|------|--------|------|------|
| Perceived Impact of LGBTQ+ & Military-Connected Identity | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3.22 | 1.11 |

Table 4 presents the distribution of participants' ratings across the five-point scale. The largest group (36%) reported that their LGBTQ+ or military-connected identity "Very" influenced their academic performance, followed by 29% selecting "Moderately. Additionally, 19% selected "Slightly," While 6% reported no influence at all. Another 10% of participants indicated that their identity "Significantly" influenced their academic performance, reflecting a more pronounced impact. These findings highlight a diverse range of experiences, with some participants reporting strong academic effects while others experienced minimal impact.

Table 4*Distribution of the Perceived Influence of Identity on Academic Performance (N = 69)*

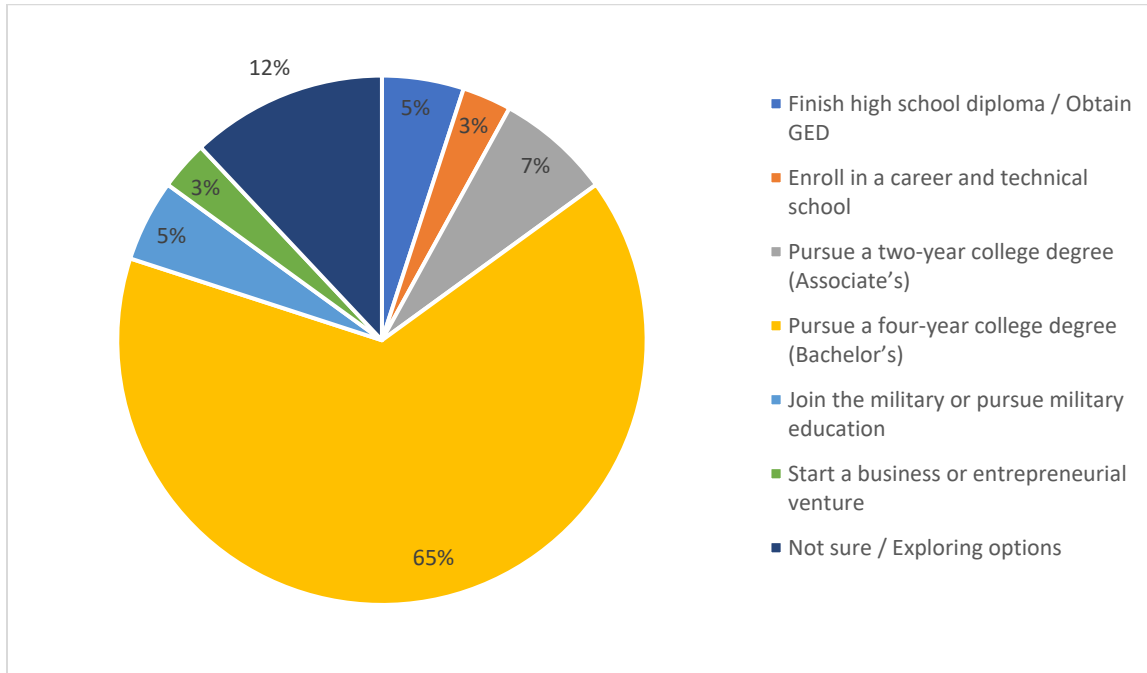
| Scale Rating | n (%) |
|-------------------|----------|
| 1 (Not at all) | 4 (6%) |
| 2 (Slightly) | 13 (19%) |
| 3 (Moderately) | 20 (29%) |
| 4 (Very) | 25 (36%) |
| 5 (Significantly) | 7 (10%) |

Educational aspirations were also a key focus of the survey, with a strong majority of participants (65%) expressing a desire to pursue a four-year college degree, and 7% aimed for a two-year college degree. A smaller group (3%) reported an interest in career and technical education, while 5% planned to either finish a high school diploma, obtain a GED, or pursue military education. Additionally, 12% of participants were still exploring their educational

options, reflecting some uncertainty in post-secondary plans due to challenges related to their LGBTQ+ identity or military-connected status (see Figure 3 for details).

Figure 3

Educational Goals and Aspirations (N = 69)



Survey respondents were asked if they had encountered any barriers or challenges in pursuing their educational goals due to their LGBTQ+ identity and/or military-connected background. Participants were given two options: “Yes (with a follow-up request for a description of barriers) or “No.” As indicated in Table 5, 85% of participants reported experiencing barriers, while 15% indicated they had not faced significant challenges.

Table 5

Percentage of Participants Facing Barriers to Educational Goals (N = 69)

| Response | n (%) |
|----------|----------|
| Yes | 59 (85%) |
| No | 10 (15%) |

For respondents who indicated they had encountered barriers in pursuing their educational goals, the survey prompted them to describe these challenges in detail. Of the 69 respondents, 59 reported facing barriers, with 34 providing descriptions of their experiences. The remaining 10 respondents noted that they had not encountered significant obstacles. As shown in Table 6, the most frequently reported barriers included frequent relocations (56%), difficulties in building relationships with teachers or peers (31%), challenges related to their gender identity or LGBTQ+ status (25%), and experiences of bullying or harassment (19%). Other significant barriers reported were mental health challenges (16%), lack of support from teachers or family (12%), and unsupportive school environments (12%).

Table 6

Specific Barriers to Educational Goals (N = 34)

| Barrier | n (%) |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Frequent Relocations | 19 (56%) |
| Difficulty Building Relationships | 11 (31%) |
| Identity Challenges (Gender/LGBTQ+) | 9 (25%) |
| Bullying and Harassment | 6 (19%) |
| Mental health challenges | 5 (16%) |
| Lack of Support from Teachers/Family | 4 (12%) |
| Unsupportive School Environments | 4 (12%) |

When participants described the barriers they faced, many cited how bullying, discrimination based on their LGBTQ+ identity, and the emotional strain caused by frequent relocations disrupted their academic progress and well-being. Many participants described how the constant need to adjust to new schools disrupted relationships with teachers and mentors, impacting their academic progress. One survey participant noted, “The constant moving between schools made it hard to maintain relationships with teachers or mentors who could help me with my academic goals. On top of that, some schools weren’t welcoming to LGBTQ+ students.”

The frequent relocations inherent to military life posed additional stressors, with participants struggling to rebuild social connections and adjust to different school cultures. As one respondent expressed, “Being military-connected meant I moved around a lot, so every time I got used to one school, we’d move, and I’d have to start over. The emotional stress from constantly coming out to new people took a toll on my mental health and affected my grades at times.” These sentiments were echoed by others who also highlighted the challenges posed by conservative school environments that did not always respect or understand their identities,

The qualitative analysis of survey responses employed thematic coding to identify recurring themes related to barriers, such as bullying, discrimination, frequent relocations, and lack of support from school staff. This process facilitated a deeper understanding of the intersection between the qualitative experiences and quantitative trends highlighted in Table 6. This mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the complexities these students navigated as they balanced their LGBTQ+ identity with the demands of a military-connected life.

Despite these challenges, many participants identified positive factors that contributed to their academic resilience. Based on the survey responses, participants selected various supportive factors that aided their academic success. The most commonly selected influences included personal motivation (73%) and support from family and friends (72%). Additionally, 30% of participants highlighted effective study habits and encouragement from teachers or mentors as key contributors to their academic resilience. Other positive influences, such as positive school environments (28%), support services like tutoring or counseling (28%), and involvement in extracurricular activities (15%), also played a role in helping these students persevere academically.

However, only 13% of participants reported feeling safe and accepted at school, a finding that underscores the broader challenges these participants faced in their academic journeys. This low percentage aligned with the data on barriers and challenges, indicating that while some participants benefited from protective factors, many still struggled to find a safe and supportive environment. Table 7 summarizes the positive factors that contributed to participants' academic success.

Table 7

Positive Factors Contributing to Academic Success (N = 71)

| Positive Factor | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| Personal motivation and goals | 44 (73%) |
| Support from family and friends | 43 (72%) |
| Effective study habits | 18 (30%) |
| Encouragement from teachers or mentors | 18 (30%) |
| Positive school environment | 17 (28%) |
| Support services (tutoring, counseling) | 17 (28%) |
| Access to educational resources (books, internet, etc.) | 9 (15%) |
| Participation in extracurricular activities | 9 (15%) |
| Feeling safe and accepted at school | 8 (13%) |
| Other | 2 (3%) |

Survey respondents were also asked to identify specific challenges they faced in school that affected their academic performance or well-being. As shown in Table 8, the most frequently reported challenge was struggles with mental health, selected by 23% of respondents. This was closely followed by feelings of being unsafe or unwelcome (22%) and experiences of bullying or harassment (17%). Other notable challenges included navigating school policies that did not support LGBTQ+ identities (11%) and lack of support from teachers or staff (7%).

While issues such as difficulty balancing school with other responsibilities (7%) and experiencing discrimination or exclusion (7%) were less frequently cited, they still contributed to the overall strain many participants experienced in their school environments. Additionally, pressure to perform academically (6%) was another stressor that compounded these challenges.

These findings emphasize the intersection of mental health, safety concerns, and discrimination in shaping the academic experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Table 8

Challenges Faced in School (N = 71)

| Challenge | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| Struggles with mental health | 52 (23%) |
| Feeling unsafe or unwelcome | 51 (22%) |
| Bullying or harassment | 38 (17%) |
| Navigating school policies that do not support LGBTQ+ identities | 26 (11%) |
| Lack of support from teachers or staff | 16 (7%) |
| Difficulty balancing school with other responsibilities | 17 (7%) |
| Experiencing discrimination or exclusion | 15 (7%) |
| Pressure to perform academically | 14 (6%) |
| Difficulty accessing resources (books, internet, etc.) | 2 (1%) |
| Other (please specify) | 0 (0%) |

Following the quantitative findings on challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults, respondents were asked an open-ended question: “Looking back, what could have been done differently at your school to better support your educational and personal development?” The 34 responses were analyzed using thematic coding to identify common themes. Table 9 provides a summary of these recurring themes and the percentage of participants who mentioned each.

Table 9

Key Themes on Improving School Support (N = 34)

| Theme | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| Stronger anti-bullying policies | 16 (47%) |
| More visible LGBTQ+ support | 13 (38%) |
| More mental health resources | 11 (32%) |
| Training for teachers on LGBTQ+ issues | 10 (29%) |
| Creation of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students | 9 (26%) |
| Gender-neutral bathrooms and facilities | 7 (21%) |
| Support tailored for military-connected students | 6 (18%) |
| Improved counseling services | 5 (15%) |
| Other | 2 (6%) |

The most frequently mentioned theme was the need for stronger anti-bullying policies (47%), with many respondents expressing that schools failed to adequately address bullying, particularly when it involved LGBTQ+ students. One survey respondent shared, “Schools should have had stronger policies in place, with staff who were trained to recognize and stop harassment.”

The second most common theme was the call for more visible LGBTQ+ support (38%), including LGBTQ+ clubs, supportive staff, and inclusive school messaging. One participant explained, “I often felt like I had to hide my identity or navigate everything on my own, and that made school more challenging than it needed to be.”

Another key theme that emerged was the need for more health resources (32%), particularly those that were LGBTQ+ inclusive. Many participants suggested that access to mental health professionals who understood LGBTQ+ and military-connected experiences would have significantly improved their well-being and academic focus. One respondent shared, “A stronger support system for mental health, especially geared toward LGBTQ+ students, would have helped me stay more focused on my academics.”

Training for teachers on LGBTQ+ issues (29%) was also a prominent theme, with several participants emphasizing that educators lacked the preparation needed to support LGBTQ+ students effectively. One respondent stated, “Schools could have done more to educate students and staff about LGBTQ+ issues, especially around transgender and gender identity.”

Additionally, 26% of participants called for the creation of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, while 21% highlighted the need for gender-neutral bathrooms and facilities. Some respondents also mentioned the importance of support tailored for military-connected students (18%) and improved counseling services (15%). Furthermore, 6% of participants, categorized

under “Other,” expressed the need for more visible LGBTQ+ role models and an inclusive curriculum, emphasizing the importance of representation in educational materials.

LGBTQ+ Identity, Openness, and Participation in School

Military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults navigated their identity within school environments with varying levels of openness and participation in school activities. Their experiences revealed the complexities of being open about their LGBTQ+ identity in school settings, as well as how their identity influenced their involvement in extracurricular activities and access to support resources. By examining these aspects through both quantitative data and qualitative responses, the findings provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges and support systems encountered by these students during their educational journeys.

The survey asked participants to rate their level of openness about their LGBTQ+ identity on a scale from 1 (Not open) to 5 (Very open). This assessment aimed to understand the degree to which they felt comfortable sharing their identity with peers, teachers, and the broader school community. The results, as shown in Table 10, displayed a wide range of experiences, with 37% of participants indicating they were “Moderately open” about their LGBTQ+ identity. Notably, 33% reported being “Slightly open,” meaning they shared their identity only with a few close individuals, while 13% reported not being open at all.

Table 10

Participants Openness About LGBTQ+ Identity at School (N = 67)

| Openness level | n (%) |
|---------------------|----------|
| 1 – Not open | 9 (13%) |
| 2 – Slightly open | 22 (33%) |
| 3 – Moderately open | 25 (37%) |
| 4 – Quite open | 6 (9%) |
| 5 – Very open | 5 (8%) |

The descriptive statistics further illustrate these varied experiences. On average, participants reported a mean openness score of 2.69, reflecting that they were slightly to moderately open about their LGBTQ+ identity at school. Both the median and mode scores were 3 (Moderately open), indicating that a significant portion of participants found themselves navigating between selective disclosure and more open expression of their identity. However, the standard deviation of 1.06 suggests that there was considerable variation, with some participants being very open while others chose not to disclose their identity at all, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics for Openness About LGBTQ+ Identity (N = 67)

| | Missing | Mode | Median | Mean | SD |
|--|---------|------|--------|------|------|
| Openness about LGBTQ+ Identity at School | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2.69 | 1.06 |

When examining the influence of LGBTQ+ identity on student involvement, as reported in the survey, 89% of participants reported that their identity affected their participation in school activities or events, while 11% said it did not. For many, fear of harassment, misgendering, and feeling unaccepted limited their engagement in extracurricular activities and school life. One survey participant shared, “I avoided participating in a lot of school events, especially sports, because I didn’t feel like I belonged. The fear of being harassed or misgendered kept me from fully engaging in school life.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, explaining, “I didn’t participate in a lot of extracurricular activities because I didn’t want to risk being outed or judged.” These statements were further supported by another-respondent’s reflection: “I didn’t participate in many activities because I was afraid of being judged or harassed. I stayed away from things like sports and social events because I didn’t feel comfortable or welcome. It made

me feel more isolated, and I wish I could have been more involved.” These insights illustrated how concerns about safety and acceptance led many military-connected LGBTQ+ youth to limit their participation in school activities, resulting in feelings of isolation and missed opportunities for social engagement.

Participants were also asked about their use of LGBTQ+ resources or support groups in their schools. The goal was to assess the availability of these resources within military-connected school settings and their impact on the students’ well-being. While 38% of respondents reported accessing LGBTQ+ resources or support groups, a notable 62% stated they had not.

Table 12

Use of LGBTQ+ Resources or Support Groups in School (N = 67)

| Accessed LGBTQ+ Resources/Support Groups | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| Yes | 24 (38%) |
| No | 43 (62%) |

Among those who accessed resources or school-based LGBTQ+ support groups or organizations played a crucial role in providing a sense of community and validation. For example, one survey participant noted, “In one of the schools I attended, I found a GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance] group, and it was incredibly helpful. It was the first time I felt like I wasn’t alone in what I was going through. It was a place where I could talk openly about being trans and meet others who understood.” Another participant found that joining an LGBTQ+ group during their senior year was particularly beneficial, offering emotional support when they needed it most. However, the availability of such support was inconsistent. As one participant pointed out, while their final school offered a supportive group, many other schools they attended had little to no resources for LGBTQ+ students. This inconsistency highlights the challenges that military-connected LGBTQ+ youth face as they move between schools with varying levels of support.

Following the responses regarding the availability of LGBTQ+ support resources, participants were asked to reflect on their time in middle and high school and share what additional support or resources they wished had been available to LGBTQ+ students. This open-ended question generated 25 responses, which were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring themes. Table 13 summarizes the most commonly mentioned themes and the percentage of participants who highlighted each.

Table 13

Themes identified in Additional Support Desired (N = 25)

| Theme | n (%) |
|--|---------|
| Transgender-specific support | 9 (36%) |
| LGBTQ+ representation in curriculum and staff | 8 (32%) |
| Gender-neutral facilities and inclusive policies | 7 (28%) |
| LGBTQ+-specific mental health resources | 6 (24%) |
| More visible LGBTQ+ role models and support Groups | 5 (20%) |
| Inclusive sex education | 4 (16%) |
| Other | 2 (8%) |

One of the most prominent themes was the desire for more transgender-specific support (36%). Several participants expressed that even within LGBTQ+ spaces, the focus was often on sexual orientation rather than gender identity. As one participant stated, “I wish there had been more transgender-specific support. Even in LGBTQ+ spaces, it sometimes felt like the focus was more on sexual orientation than gender-identity. Having access to trans mentor or counselors who really understood what I was going through would have been invaluable.” Another echoed this sentiment, noting that “more resources specially for transgender students, such as access to gender-affirming healthcare and mental health support, would have been incredibly helpful.”

Another common theme was the call for greater visibility of LGBTQ+ representation in both the curriculum and staff (32%). Many participants felt that seeing LGBTQ+ individuals in leadership roles or having a more inclusive curriculum would have normalized their presence

and made them feel more accepted. One participant shared, “I wish there had been more visible LGBTQ+ representation in the curriculum and staff.” Others suggested that more visible role models among the staff would have provided a sense of safety and validation. “I wish there had been more openly LGBTQ+ role models among the staff or more frequent events focused on LGBTQ+ issues,” one respondent noted.

Participants also emphasized the importance of having gender-neutral facilities and more inclusive school policies (28%). Many expressed that access to gender-neutral bathrooms or policies that explicitly protected LGBTQ+ students would have made them feel safer at school. One survey participant remarked, “I wish there had been more gender-neutral facilities and more visible LGBTQ+ staff or allies,” underscoring the significance of fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment. This need for more inclusive policies highlights a broader desire for systemic changes that would protect LGBTQ+ students from discrimination and ensure they have access to resources that meet their needs.

In addition to these structural supports, participants mentioned the need for LGBTQ+-specific mental health resources (24%). Many felt that having counselors who understood LGBTQ+ issues, particularly the challenges faced by transgender or non-binary students, would have significantly improved their mental health and academic focus. Table 13 provides a detailed breakdown of the recurring themes identified in the responses.

School Environment for LGBTQ+ Students

This section explores the school climate and policies in place to protect and support LGBTQ+ students, with a focus on military-connected youth. Participants shared their experiences with bullying and discrimination, the presence of policies aimed at supporting LGBTQ+ students, and the perceived effectiveness of these measures. Using both qualitative

responses and quantitative Likert scale data, this section provides insights into the overall effectiveness of the policies and the level of support LGBTQ+ students received during their school years.

Survey participants were asked to rate their schools’ effectiveness in providing protection, support, and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students using a five-point Likert scale. For the question, “To what degree does your school protect LGBTQ+ students from harassment, discrimination, and bullying?” the mean score was 2.30, indicating minimal efforts by the schools to protect LGBTQ+ students. Slightly less than two-thirds of the respondents (62%) rated their school’s protection efforts as “slightly” effective, while 10% felt their school did “not at all” protect them, and a larger portion (19%) reported “Moderate” protection. Additionally, 8% rated their school as providing protection “Well,” and only 2% felt their school protected them “Very well” (see Table 14).

Table 14

Effectiveness of School Protection for LGBTQ+ Students (N = 63)

| Scale Rating | n (%) |
|--------------------------|----------|
| 1 – Not at all effective | 6 (10%) |
| 2 – Slightly effective | 39 (62%) |
| 3 – Moderately effective | 12 (19%) |
| 4 – Well | 5 (8%) |
| 5 – Very well | 1 (2%) |

Survey participants were asked to rate their schools’ effectiveness in supporting LGBTQ+ students. For the question, “How well did your school support LGBTQ+ students like yourself?” the average rating score was 2.27, indicating that participants generally felt their schools provided only minimal support. More than two-thirds (66%) of participants rated their school as “slightly” effective in supporting LGBTQ+ students. A smaller portion, 16% reported “Moderate” support, while 8% indicated there was “No support at all.” Additionally, 8% rated

their school as providing support “Well,” and only 2% felt their school supported them “Very well” (see Table 15).

Table 15

School Support for LGBTQ+ Students (N = 64)

| Scale Rating | n (%) |
|----------------|----------|
| 1 – Not at all | 6 (8%) |
| 2 – Slightly | 42 (66%) |
| 3 – Moderately | 10 (16%) |
| 4 – Well | 5 (8%) |
| 5 – Very well | 1 (2%) |

In addition to rating their school’s effectiveness, survey participants were asked whether their school had specific policies or initiatives aimed at protecting LGBTQ+ students. Only 30% of the survey respondents reported that their school had such policies, while 70% indicated that no such policies were evident (see Table 16). For those who acknowledged the presence of policies, examples ranged from general anti-bullying campaigns to more targeted initiatives, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) or anti-discrimination measures. These policies varied significantly in their effectiveness and visibility across different schools.

Table 16

Presence of Policies or Initiatives Protecting LGBTQ+ Students (N = 63)

| Response | n (%) |
|----------|----------|
| Yes | 19 (30%) |
| No | 44 (70%) |

Despite the existence of some policies, many survey participants expressed skepticism about their effectiveness, with many feeling that these measures were often symbolic rather than impactful. One survey participant described, “In one school, there was an anti-bullying campaign that mentioned LGBTQ+ students, but it felt performative.” Another respondent remarked, “The

policy was there on paper, but when harassment happened, there wasn't much accountability for the students responsible."

Other participants shared examples of more robust support systems. One respondent noted, "My school had anti-bullying policies that explicitly included protections for LGBTQ+ students, as well as GSA that was supported by the administration." However, even in schools with explicit policies, there was variation in how strongly these were enforced. One participant noted, "There were anti-bullying policies, but they weren't strongly enforced, especially when it came to LGBTQ+ students. Some teachers were great, but others weren't as supportive."

When asked, "How effective did you find these policies or initiatives in creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ students?" participants reported an average rating score of 1.89. More than three-quarters (78%) of the survey respondents selected the least effective ratings, with 42% stating the policies were "Not effective" at all, and 36% reporting them as "slightly effective." Only 6% of respondents considered the policies to be effective," and just 2% found them "Highly effective." Additionally, 14% of survey respondents rated the policies as "moderately effective," indicating that there was some recognition of efforts but overall limited success in providing meaningful protection (see Table 17).

Table 17

Effectiveness of School Policies in Creating a Safe Space (N = 64)

| Scale Rating | n (%) |
|--------------------------|----------|
| 1 – Not effective | 27 (42%) |
| 2 – Slightly effective | 23 (36%) |
| 3 – Moderately effective | 9 (14%) |
| 4 – Effective | 4 (6%) |
| 5 – Highly Effective | 1 (2%) |

To further assess the prevalence of hostile behaviors toward LGBTQ+ students in military-connected school settings, participants were asked if they had witnessed or experienced

bullying or discrimination related to their LGBTQ+ identity. Overwhelmingly 94% of survey participants reported witnessing or experiencing such incidents, indicating a widespread issue within these environments. Only 6% of respondents indicated they had not encountered any bullying or discrimination.

Survey participants who experienced bullying shared detailed accounts of verbal harassment, misgendering, social exclusion, and subtler forms of discrimination. For instance, one participant noted, “I experienced a lot of verbal harassment and misgendering. People would use my deadname [the name assigned at birth, which a transgender person no longer uses] or intentionally call me 'he' to make me uncomfortable.” Another participant echoed similar experiences with microaggressions: “I experienced subtle forms of bullying, like people using the wrong pronouns or making jokes about my gender. It wasn’t always overt, but those microaggressions added up and made me feel like I couldn’t fully be myself.”

Participants also emphasized the lack of effective school policies specially aimed at addressing the bullying they experienced due to their LGBTQ+ identity. One survey participant reflected, “The policies were more for show, and most students didn’t take them seriously. LGBTQ+ students were still left to deal with harassment on their own.” Another survey participant shared, “There was a lot of name-calling – it was loud enough for teachers to hear, and they never did anything about it.” The emotional toll of bullying, especially when accompanied by social exclusion, left many students feeling unsupported and isolated within their school communities.

Table 18 provides an overview of the specific types of bullying or discrimination reported by survey participants. These percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who described these incidents in their qualitative responses. Through a thematic analysis, recurring

patterns of discrimination were identified, illustrating the multifaceted nature of harassment that military-connected LGBTQ+ students faced in their educational environments.

Table 18

Forms of Bullying or Discrimination (N = 31)

| Theme | n (%) |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| Verbal Harassment | 21 (69%) |
| Misgendering | 17 (56%) |
| Social Exclusion | 16 (50%) |
| Lack of School Response | 14 (44%) |
| Death Threats/Severe Harassment | 4 (12%) |

Following the exploration of bullying and harassment experiences, participants were asked to reflect on potential improvements or changes that could make their schools more welcoming for LGBTQ+ students. The open-ended question, “What improvements or changes would you suggest to make the school a more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ students?” garnered 31 responses, which were analyzed using thematic coding.

Several key themes emerged from the participants’ suggestions. Many participants (38%) emphasized the need for clear and explicit policies protecting transgender and gender-nonconforming students, particularly in areas such as bathroom access and the correct use of names and pronouns. Another frequently mentioned theme was the importance of staff training on LGBTQ+ issues (32%), with participants advocating for mandatory training to ensure that teachers and staff understood how to support LGBTQ+ students appropriately.

Visibility and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ students in school environments were also highlighted (29%), with participants suggesting the need for more visible support systems, such as LGBTQ+ clubs or dedicated LGBTQ+ counselors. Participants further stressed that the enforcement of existing policies was often inadequate (26%), and stronger anti-bullying measures and follow-through were necessary to create a genuinely inclusive environment.

In addition to these structural suggestions, 22% of participants highlighted the need for gender-neutral bathrooms and facilities to ensure inclusivity for transgender and gender-nonconforming students. Another 20% emphasized the importance of establishing designated safe spaces within schools where LGBTQ+ students could seek support and respite from hostile environments.

Beyond structural and policy changes, some participants also underscored the need for cultural shifts within schools. Many called for more comprehensive education on LGBTQ+ issues for both staff and students (18%), as well as a focus on intersectionality to support those facing multiple forms of discrimination (15%). One respondent stated, “Schools need to create explicit policies to protect transgender students, including bathroom access and the correct use of name and pronouns. There should be mandatory training for staff so they understand how to support LGBTQ+ students, and schools should have safe spaces where we can go if we need support of just a break from the hostility.” Another participant echoed the sentiment, saying, “More visibility for LGBTQ+ students in schools and stronger anti-bullying policies would help create a more welcoming space.” Table 19 summarizes the major themes identified from these qualitative responses.

Table 19

Suggested Improvements for a More Welcoming School Environment (N = 32)

| Theme | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| Explicit policies protecting transgender students | 12 (38%) |
| Staff training on LGBTQ+ issues | 10 (32%) |
| Visibility and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ students | 9 (29%) |
| Stronger enforcement of anti-bullying policies | 8 (26%) |
| Gender-neutral bathrooms and facilities | 7 (22%) |
| Safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students | 6 (20%) |
| Comprehensive education on LGBTQ+ issues | 6 (18%) |
| Support for intersectionality (Multiple forms of discrimination) | 5 (15%) |

Participants were also asked to reflect on their time in school and suggest one major change to improve or enhance the experience for current and future LGBTQ+ students. A thematic analysis of the 24 responses revealed several key suggestions. A recurring theme was the call for students to create a culture of acceptance and inclusivity. This was emphasized by 38% of participants, with one stating, “Schools should work harder to create a culture of acceptance and inclusivity.” Another 29% of respondents highlighted the importance of visible and proactive support, noting, “Schools should create more visible and proactive support for LGBTQ+ students. This includes having LGBTQ+ clubs, visible LGBTQ+ allies among the staff, and clear policies to protect us from bullying and harassment.”

Other survey respondents, comprising 25%, focused on the need for more inclusive policies and visible support systems for LGBTQ+ students, such as dedicated counselors and safe spaces. One suggestion was, “Ensure that all school policies are inclusive of transgender and non-binary students, and create more visible support systems, such as LGBTQ+ clubs or safe spaces, where students can feel secure and accepted.” Another 21% recommended incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives into the curriculum to foster a supportive environment, with one respondent stating, “Incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives into more areas of school life, from the curriculum to school events. Making sure students see themselves reflected in the school environment would have fostered a sense of belonging.”

Additionally, 17% of respondents emphasized the role of proactive staff support and leadership, calling for increased staff training on LGBTQ+ issues and stronger enforcement of anti-bullying policies. Table 20 provides a summary of the major themes identified from these qualitative responses.

Table 20*Suggested Improvements for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Schools (N = 24)*

| Theme | n (%) |
|---|---------|
| A culture of acceptance and inclusivity | 9 (38%) |
| Visible and proactive support for LGBTQ+ | 7 (29%) |
| Inclusive policies and support systems | 6 (25%) |
| LGBTQ+ perspectives in the curriculum | 5 (21%) |
| Increased staff training and policy enforcement | 4 (17%) |

Experience as Military-Connected Students

The survey participants reflected on their experiences as military-connected students, focusing on the impact that frequent relocations had on their academic performance, social interactions, and the level of support they received from schools. Insights were gathered regarding how well schools understood and addressed the unique needs of military-connected students and the types of resources or support systems that could have better promoted their success. Additionally, the findings explore the attitudes of teachers and school staff toward military families and the strategies participants used to navigate the challenges of being both LGBTQ+ and military-connected during their middle and high school years.

To gain a deeper understanding of these experiences, the analysis began with exploring the frequency of school relocations due to participants' military family status. This data highlighted a significant factor in both academic and social experiences for these youth. When asked about how often they had to move schools, 78% of the survey participants reported that they "often" relocated, understanding the frequent transitions that define the lives of many military-connected families. Another 19% indicated that they moved "sometimes," while a small percentage (3%) reported moving "rarely." None of the participants stated they had "never" moved schools, emphasizing the inherent mobility that comes with military life (see Table 21).

Table 21*Frequency of School Relocations Due to Military Family Status (N = 62)*

| Frequency of Relocation | n (%) |
|-------------------------|----------|
| Often | 48 (78%) |
| Sometimes | 12 (19%) |
| Rarely | 2 (3%) |
| Never | 0 (0%) |

The impact of these frequent relocations on academic performance was a key area of focus. When asked how these moves affected their educational outcomes, a substantial majority of the survey respondents (81%) reported a negative impact on their academic performance. However, 19% of respondents indicated that relocations had no significant effect, suggesting that some could manage the transitions well or benefited from protective factors that mitigated the disruptions caused by frequent moves. Notably, no participants reported that relocations positively impacted their academic performance, indicating the challenges that mobility often poses to academic stability (see Table 22).

Table 22*Impact of School Relocations on Academic Performance (N = 63)*

| Impact on Academic Performance | n (%) |
|--------------------------------|----------|
| Negative Impact | 51 (81%) |
| No significant Effect | 12 (19%) |
| Positive Impact | 0 (0%) |

In addition to academic performance, the survey asked participants how military family moves affected their friendships and social interactions at school. A majority of participants (61%) reported that it was challenging to form lasting friendships due to frequent relocations, and 36% mentioned feeling isolated or left out at new schools. Only 3% of respondents found it easy to make new friends and adjust quickly, while none indicated that relocations had little to no impact on their social life. These findings underscore the significant social challenges that

military-connected LGBTQ+ students face as they move between school environments (see Table 23).

Table 23

Impact of Military Moves on Friendships and Social Interactions (N = 64)

| Social Impact of Relocations | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| Challenging to form lasting friendships | 39 (61%) |
| Often felt isolated or left out | 23 (36%) |
| Found it easy to make new friends and adjust quickly | 2 (3%) |
| Little to no impact on social life | 0 (0%) |

Survey Participants were also asked to evaluate how well their schools understood and supported their needs as military-connected students, revealing a diverse range of experiences. While only 6% of participants felt that their schools did not support or understand their needs at all, the largest group (53%) rated their school’s support as “Moderate.” An additional 34% felt that their school understood and supported their needs only to a limited extent. A smaller proportion, 5%, reported that their school supported them “well,” and just 2% rated their experience as “Very well.” These findings suggest that while some participants experienced adequate support, the majority felt their schools offered only moderate or limited assistance in addressing the specific challenges of being military-connected (see Table 24).

Table 24

Perception of School Support for Military-Connected Needs (N = 62)

| Level of School Support | n (%) |
|-------------------------|----------|
| Not at all | 4 (6%) |
| Limited | 21 (34%) |
| Moderate | 33 (53%) |
| Well | 3 (5%) |
| Very Well | 1 (2%) |

When survey participants were asked about the resources or support that would have helped them thrive as military-connected students, several key themes emerged. A large number (59%) of participants expressed a desire for peer groups or mentoring programs specifically designed for military-connected students. Additionally, 53% of survey participants highlighted the importance of having counselors who were trained to understand the unique challenges faced by military-connected students. Many respondents believed that dedicated counseling services could have made the transitions between schools smoother and helped with the academic and social difficulties associated with frequent moves. As one survey participant noted, "I think having counselors specifically for military-connected students would help. It's tough to move around so much and deal with the social and academic challenges that come with it. Having someone who understands that struggle would make a big difference."

Similarly, 43% of respondents felt that having a community of peers who shared similar experiences of frequent relocations would have provided emotional and social support. One survey participant explained, "Having a peer group for military-connected students would have helped a lot. It's hard to constantly start over, and having a group of people who understood what it was like would have made it easier." Another echoed the value of peer support, suggesting that "having a mentor program where older military-connected students help newer ones adjust could be really beneficial."

Survey participants (41%) also pointed to the need for more consistent academic support and flexibility for students who fell behind due to relocations. Some suggested that schools should provide programs to help students adapt quickly to new academic environments, while others called for more social events and outreach initiatives that would foster a sense of belonging. One participant reflected on the cancellation of a previous support program: "I was a

part of Student-to-Student which helped give support to incoming military kids switching schools. It has unfortunately been canceled and now there is no reach out program for them.”

Table 25 summarizes the resources and support identified by participants, along with their corresponding frequencies.

Table 25

Recommended Resources/Support for Military-Connected Students (N = 29)

| Recommended Resource/Support | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| Peer groups/mentoring programs | 17 (59%) |
| Counselors trained in military-connected challenges | 15 (53%) |
| Peer support and community | 12 (43%) |
| Consistent academic support/adaptation programs | 12 (41%) |
| Social events and outreach programs | 3 (12%) |
| Stable curriculum to ease transitions | 2 (6%) |

Experiences of Being LGBTQ+ and Military-Connected

Navigating the intersection of being both LGBTQ+ and military-connected presented distinct challenges for participants. Through survey responses, participants reflected on the unique difficulties they faced, including struggles with belonging, balancing privacy with authenticity, and rebuilding support networks after frequent relocations. This section explores the obstacles participants encountered, the strategies they employed to manage these challenges, and the strengths they developed as a result of their experiences. Insights gained from these reflections provide a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in managing dual identities during middle and high school years.

To explore the difficulties encountered by military-connected LGBTQ+ students, survey participants were asked to identify the particular challenges they faced as members of both communities (see Table 26). The responses revealed several key themes, highlighting the complex experiences of these students as they sought to balance their dual identities.

One of the most significant challenges reported by 31% of survey respondents was the feeling of not fully belonging to either the LGBTQ+ or military community. This dual isolation left many students feeling disconnected, as they struggled to find common ground in either group. Similarly, 31% of respondents noted that frequent relocations exacerbated this issue by requiring them to repeatedly rebuild support networks and re-establish a sense of belonging each time they moved to a new school.

An additional 19% of participants indicated that balancing the need for privacy with the desire for authenticity was a recurring challenge. These students faced constant tension between wanting to openly express their LGBTQ+ identity and protecting themselves in environments that might not be supportive. This challenge was compounded by the fact that military environments often come with rigid norms and conservative values, creating further difficulties for 5% of respondents who struggled to navigate these expectations. Furthermore, 13% of respondents cited experiences of stigma or misunderstanding from peers and adults. For many military-connected LGBTQ+ students, these negative interactions made it difficult to fully express their identities or feel accepted in their school communities.

Table 26

Challenges Faced by Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Students (N = 63)

| Challenge | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| Feeling like I don't fully belong in either community | 58 (31%) |
| Dealing with moving and finding new support networks | 57 (31%) |
| Balancing the need for privacy with the desire for authenticity | 36 (19%) |
| Facing stigma or misunderstanding from peers or adults | 25 (13%) |
| Navigating conservative norms or environments | 9 (5%) |

Despite these challenges, survey participants identified several strengths fostered by their dual identity (see Table 27). Adaptability was the most frequently cited strength, with 33% (N = 58) of respondents noting their ability to quickly adjust to new environments as a valuable skill

honed through frequent relocations. Resilience was another key strength, recognized by 31% (N = 54) of respondents, who felt that overcoming these challenges had fortified their determination and ability to preserve.

Additionally, 15% (N = 26) of survey participants reported that their experiences cultivated a strong sense of empathy and understanding toward others, allowing them to relate to the struggles faced by their peers. This perspective was further supported by 14% (N = 24) of respondents, who believed that their dual identity provided them with a unique outlook on diversity and inclusion, driving them to advocate for greater representation and acceptance within their communities.

While only a small percentage reported advanced problem-solving skills (3%) (N = 5) and communication skills (3%) (N = 6) as strengths, these skills were present in the data, indicating that some students recognized their development in these areas. A small number (2%) (N = 3) mentioned other strengths, such as being "worldly and accepting of other cultures" or having a broad understanding of cultural dynamics, as additional benefits of their background.

Table 27

Strengths from LGBTQ+ and Military-Connected Participants (N = 65)

| Strengths | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| Adaptability to new situations or environments | 58 (33%) |
| Resilience in facing challenges | 54 (31%) |
| A strong sense of empathy and understanding towards others | 26 (15%) |
| A unique perspective on diversity and inclusion | 24 (14%) |
| Enhanced communication skills by interacting with diverse groups | 6 (3%) |
| Advanced problem-solving skills due to navigating complex social situations | 5 (3%) |
| Other (Please specify) _____ | 3 (2%) |

When discussing strategies to cope with the challenges of being both LGBTQ+ and military-connected, selective disclosure emerged as a key tactic for 26% of the survey

participants, who chose to keep their LGBTQ+ identity private to maintain a sense of security (see table 28). Seeking support within the LGBTQ+ community was another common strategy, with 24% finding solace in friends or groups within this network. Similarly, 23% turned to online communities for advice and encouragement. While only 11% actively engaged with school or community groups that promoted diversity, those who did found these spaces to be critical sources of affirmation and acceptance. In contrast, a smaller subset (6%) found allies within military family circles, highlighting the difficulties of reconciling their LGBTQ+ identity with traditional military values.

Some participants also employed avoidance strategies, with 3% focusing on academics as a coping mechanism and 2% avoiding social interactions altogether. Additionally, 9 participants (5%) reported using other coping strategies, such as advocating for themselves in school, maintaining long-distance friendships, engaging in creative outlets like art and writing, and being mindful of avoiding situations that might reveal their identity.

Table 28

Strategies for Seeking Support and Coping (N = 68)

| Strategies | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| Keeping aspects of my identity private | 45 (26%) |
| Seeking support from friends or groups within the LGBTQ+ community | 43 (24%) |
| Relying on online communities or resources for advice and support | 41 (23%) |
| Actively participating in school or community groups that embrace diversity | 19 (11%) |
| Finding allies and support within military family communities | 10 (6%) |
| Other Strategies (please specify) | 9 (5%) |
| Focusing on Academics | 5 (3%) |
| Avoiding Social Interactions | 4 (2%) |

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Survey participants were asked to reflect on how well their experiences in middle and high school satisfied Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, especially addressing physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. This analysis aimed to provide a clear understanding of how well their basic and psychological needs were met during their educational journey.

Participants were asked to rate how well their basic physiological needs (such as food, water, and shelter) were met during their middle and high school years. As illustrated in Table 29, the majority of participants felt well-supported in these areas. Specifically, 47% reported that their needs were "well met," and 51% indicated that their needs were "fully met." Only 2% of participants reported that their basic needs were "moderately met," with no participants reporting that their needs were "poorly met" or "not met at all." This overwhelmingly positive response highlights that, for most, these fundamental needs were adequately addressed.

Table 29

Physiological Needs Rating (N = 62)

| Rating | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| 1 - Not met (My basic physiological needs were not met at all) | 0 (0%) |
| 2 - Poorly met (My basic physiological needs were barely met, often insufficient) | 0 (0%) |
| 3 - Moderately met (My basic physiological needs were generally met, but with shortcomings) | 1 (2%) |
| 4 - Well met (My basic physiological needs were consistently well met) | 29 (47%) |
| 5 - Fully met (My basic physiological needs were completely and excellently met) | 32 (51%) |

In addition to physiological needs, participants were asked to reflect on their sense of safety within their school environment during their middle and high school years. As shown in Table 30, a significant portion of respondents reported feeling insecure or only lightly secure. Specifically, 65% of participants indicated that they felt “slightly secure,” while 5% reported feeling “not secure” at all. In contrast, fewer participants reported feeling “secure” (10%) or “very secure” (2%). Only 19% of participants felt “moderately secure,” highlighting that safety concerns were a predominant issue for these students.

Table 30

Safety Needs Ratings (N = 62)

| Rating | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| 1 - Not secure (I did not feel secure at all in my school environment) | 3 (5%) |
| 2 - Slightly secure (I felt only slightly secure at school; there were many concerns) | 40 (65%) |
| 3 - Moderately secure (I felt moderately secure at school, but there were some areas of concern) | 12 (19%) |
| 4 - Secure (I felt secure in my school environment most of the time) | 6 (10%) |
| 5 - Very secure (I felt very secure and consistently safe in my school environment) | 1 (2%) |

For love and belonging, survey participants reflected on their experiences of feeling accepted and having a sense of belonging both at school and within their families during their middle and high school years. These reflections provided valuable insights into how military-connected LGBTQ+ youths navigated relationships in both educational and familial environments. The findings explore the extent to which these students felt supported and accepted, shedding light on one of the more personal aspects of their school experience.

To better understand these feelings of belonging, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they felt a sense of acceptance. As seen in Table 31, the majority of respondents (54%) indicated that they experienced a “moderate” level of belonging and acceptance, suggesting that while they felt some level of support, it was not consistently strong. However, a significant number of participants (28%) reported feeling only a “slight” sense of belonging, with their connections to school and family often feeling minimal and lacking in depth. Alarming, 7% of respondents stated that they did not feel a sense of belonging or acceptance at all during this time.

In contrast, only a small portion of respondents reported higher levels of belonging, specially 12% of participants felt “mostly” accepted by both their school and family, while no participants reported feeling a “complete” sense of belonging. This absence of respondents at the highest level underscores the challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ students in establishing strong, consistent connections during their middle and high school years.

These findings suggest that, for many participants, the need for love and belonging remained a challenging and unfulfilled aspect of their lives. While many respondents experienced some degree of connection, a considerable number still struggled to feel fully integrated into both their school and family environments.

Table 31*Love and Belonging Needs Ratings (N = 61)*

| Rating | n (%) |
|--|----------|
| 1 - Not at all (I did not feel a sense of belonging or acceptance at school or within my family) | 4 (7%) |
| 2 - Slightly (I felt a slight sense of belonging and acceptance, but it was minimal and often lacking) | 17 (28%) |
| 3 - Moderately (I felt a moderate sense of belonging and acceptance at school and within my family) | 33 (54%) |
| 4 - Mostly (I felt mostly accepted and like I belonged, both at school and within my family) | 7 (12%) |
| 5 - Completely (I felt completely accepted and had a strong sense of belonging) | 0 (0%) |

Survey participants were also asked to reflect on their sense of self-esteem and the extent to which they felt valued and respected by others during their middle and high school years. These insights provided a deeper understanding of how military-connected LGBTQ+ students perceived their worth in both personal and social contexts during this critical period.

As shown in Table 32, the majority of participants reported low to moderate levels of self-esteem. Specially 40% of respondents indicated that they had low self-esteem and seldom felt valued or respected by others. A nearly equal portion (42%) reported having moderate self-esteem, meaning they sometimes felt valued and respected. Only a small percentage of participants reported feeling consistently valued, with 11% indicating they had high self-esteem, and just 2% reporting very high self-esteem.

Conversely, 5% of participants reported having very low self-esteem and feeling neither valued nor respected during their middle and high school years. These results suggest that self-esteem was a significant challenge for many military-connected LGBTQ+ students, with the

majority of participants expressing feelings of being undervalued or disrespected by those around them.

These findings, when compared to the data on other needs (such as love and belonging), highlight the complex social and emotional challenges faced by these students. Despite some participants reporting moderate to high self-esteem, the majority still struggled with a lack of consistent affirmation and respect during a formative period of their lives.

Table 32

Esteem Needs Ratings (N = 62)

| Rating | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| 1 - Very low (I had very low self-esteem and did not feel valued or respected by others) | 3 (5%) |
| 2 - Low (I had low self-esteem and seldom felt valued or respected by others) | 25 (40%) |
| 3 - Moderate (I had moderate self-esteem and sometimes felt valued and respected by others) | 26 (42%) |
| 4 - High (I had high self-esteem and often felt valued and respected by others) | 7 (11%) |
| 5 - Very high (I had very high self-esteem and consistently felt valued and respected) | 1 (2%) |

Participants were asked to reflect on the opportunities they had for personal growth and to pursue their interests and talents during their middle and high school years. This question aimed to explore the extent to which military-connected LGBTQ+ students felt supported in their development beyond academic requirements, focusing on areas of personal fulfillment and self-actualization.

As shown in Table 33, the majority of participants (68%) reported having “some opportunities” to engage in personal growth and pursue their interests and talents at school. This suggests that while many students had some avenues for self-development, the extent of these opportunities may have been limited.

A smaller group of participants (13%) indicated they had “many opportunities” for personal growth, while 5% reported having “numerous and diverse opportunities” in this area. However, a notable portion of respondents indicated that their opportunities for self-actualization were minimal. Specifically, 11% stated they had “few opportunities,” and 3% reported having no opportunities at all to pursue their interests and talents during their middle and high school years.

These results highlight the variability in the opportunities available for personal growth. While a majority of participants experienced some level of support, a significant number still reported feeling limited in their ability to fully explore their interests and talents. This suggests that the availability of programs and activities that foster personal growth may have been uneven, potentially affecting students’ ability to achieve self-actualization during this critical development period.

Table 33

Self-Actualization Needs Ratings (N = 62)

| Rating | n (%) |
|---|----------|
| 1 - No opportunities (I had no opportunities to pursue personal growth or my interests and talents at school) | 2 (3%) |
| 2 - Few opportunities (I had very few opportunities to pursue personal growth or my interests and talents at school) | 7 (11%) |
| 3 -Some opportunities (I had some opportunities to pursue personal growth and my interests and talents at school) | 42 (68%) |
| 4 - Many opportunities (I had many opportunities to engage in personal growth and pursue my interests and talents) | 8 (13%) |
| 5 - Numerous opportunities (I had numerous and diverse opportunities to actively pursue personal growth and my interests and talents) | 3 (5%) |

Summary of Quantitative Findings

The quantitative phase of this study provided a comprehensive overview of the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years. By examining key areas such as academic performance, aspirations, barriers to success, and experiences related to self-esteem, safety, and belonging, the survey revealed critical patterns and trends.

Survey results indicated that while many participants reported moderate academic success, frequent relocations, discrimination, and a lack of support from school environments posed significant barriers to both their academic and personal development. Self-reported academic performance varied, with 50% of participants rating their performance as “above average,” while 24% rated it as “excellent.” However, many participants also highlighted the challenges posed by their LGBTQ+ identity and military-connected status, with 85% indicating they had faced barriers to achieving their educational goals, most notably due to frequent relocations, bullying, and a lack of supportive resources.

In addition to academic challenges, survey responses shed light on participants’ experiences related to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. While physiological needs such as food and shelter were largely met, concerns about safety, belonging, and self-esteem was prominent. For example, 65% of participants felt only “slightly secure” in their school environment, and only 13% felt accepted and supported at school. Furthermore, a significant portion of participants reported low to moderate self-esteem, with 40% indicating they seldom felt valued or respected by others.

Despite these challenges, participants identified several protective factors that contributed to their resilience, including personal motivation, support from family and friends, and

involvement in extracurricular activities. However, the quantitative data highlighted that many students still faced significant emotional and social struggles due to the unique intersection of their LGBTQ+ identity and military-connected background.

These findings provided a broad overview of the challenges and success faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth but also underscored the need for a deeper exploration of these themes. Therefore, the qualitative phase of this study builds upon the quantitative results to provide richer, more nuanced insights into these students' lived experiences.

Interview Findings

Building upon the quantitative survey findings, which provided a broad overview of the academic, social, and personal experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults, this section delves into the qualitative data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The qualitative insights offer a rich and more nuanced perspective on the challenges and protective factors that shaped participants' middle and high school years. Through their personal narratives, participants elaborated on themes that were only briefly touched upon in the quantitative phase, revealing the deeper complexities of their experiences and the coping strategies they employed.

The development of the interview questions was directly informed by the results of the survey phase. After analyzing the survey data, specific areas that required further exploration were identified, including participants' experiences with bullying, social isolation, school support systems, and the impact of frequent relocations. These questions were designed to provide participants with the opportunity to expand on their survey responses and discuss their experiences in greater detail. However, the themes themselves were developed after conducting and analyzing the interviews. The qualitative data from these interviews provided deeper insights into the lived experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults, allowing for the

identification of major themes. To ensure that the reader can connect the analysis to the questions posed, the interview instrument is included in Appendix D.

The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with six participants, purposefully selected based on their survey responses to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. These open-ended interviews encouraged participants to share their lived experiences, offering detailed accounts of their lives as military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. This approach allowed for a more in-depth exploration of not only the challenges they faced but also the coping strategies and support systems they relied upon during their school years. The six participants represented a variety of gender identities, sexual orientations, and military-connected backgrounds, as outlined in the demographic summary table (see Table 1). Their unique stories provided insights into the diverse realities of navigating both military life and school environments as LGBTQ+.

To analyze the qualitative data, a systematic process of coding and categorizing the interview transcripts were employed. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns and significant topics that emerged from the participants' narratives. This process involved a thorough review of each transcript, highlighting key phrases, concepts, and experiences, which were then organized into broader categories. These categories were aligned with the study's research questions and the lived experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults resulting in the identification of major themes. These themes encapsulate the common challenges, coping mechanisms, and protective factors that participants encountered during their middle and high school years, offering a deeper understanding of how their identities and military-connected status shaped their academic and social lives.

The themes identified in this analysis provide a comprehensive view of the multifaceted experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. By categorizing the data into these themes,

the research highlights both individual stories and shared experiences, allowing for a clearer picture of the broader issues impacting this population. Table 34 provides a preview of the themes that will be explored in detail in the following section.

Table 34

Major Themes Identified from Qualitative Interviews

| Theme | Description |
|---|--|
| Theme 1: School Victimization and Bullying | Participants described experiencing various forms of bullying, harassment, and social exclusion related to their LGBTQ+ identities in school environments. |
| Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Support | Many participants felt let down by school administrators, teachers, and counselors who lacked adequate knowledge and training to provide meaningful support. |
| Theme 3: Mental Health Struggles | The emotional toll of bullying, social exclusion, and lack of support contributed to significant mental health struggles, including anxiety and depression. |
| Theme 4: Protective Factors | Participants identified supportive teachers, LGBTQ+ peer groups, online communities, and family support as key factors in managing their school experiences. |
| Theme 5: Impact on Academic Performance | Bullying, isolation, and unsupportive environments negatively impacted participants' academic performance, though some used academics as a coping mechanism. |
| Theme 6: Educational Aspirations and Resilience | Despite adversity, many participants maintained high educational aspirations and used their experiences as motivation to succeed and help others. |
| Theme 7: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs | Participants' experiences aligned with the unmet needs in Maslow's hierarchy, with safety, belonging, and esteem being the most impacted areas. |

Theme 1: School Victimization and Bullying

The theme of school victimization and bullying emerged prominently across the interviews, with all six participants describing various forms of mistreatment related to their LGBTQ+ identities. These experiences ranged from verbal harassment and social exclusion to more direct forms of intimidation and physical threats. Such incidents often occurred in vulnerable spaces, such as locker rooms, classrooms, or during school activities, significantly affecting the participants' emotional well-being, sense of safety, and ability to engage academically and socially.

Verbal harassment was the most commonly reported form of victimization, often taking the form of derogatory comments or slurs related to participants' sexual orientation or gender identity. Several participants noted that this harassment frequently went unchecked by teachers and staff, contributing to an environment of intolerance. For instance, Liam, a transgender man, recounted a pivotal moment in the locker room that led to profound feelings of vulnerability and fear. Liam recounted a distressing incident where a group of students harassed him, repeatedly using his 'deadname', the name assigned at birth that a transgender person no longer uses (GLAAD, n.d.). Liam shared, "They called me by my deadname and made fun of my appearance. I felt completely powerless and scared." This distressing experience prompted Liam to make significant changes to his daily routine to avoid further harassment. Reflecting on this, Liam explained, "After that, I avoided the locker rooms altogether, even if it meant skipping gym class," emphasizing how the harassment reshaped his sense of safety within the school environment.

Other participants shared similar stories of social exclusion linked to their LGBTQ+ identities. Mia, a bisexual woman, shared that coming out in high school was met with

skepticism and judgment from her peers. Their dismissive reactions caused her emotional distress and led her to withdraw from social interactions. Mia explained, "Some of my friends started treating me differently, making comments like, 'Are you sure you're not just confused?' or 'You're probably just going through a phase.' It made me feel invalidated and like I didn't belong anywhere."

Beyond verbal harassment, several participants experienced physical intimidation or threats of violence, which intensified their sense of fear and insecurity at school. For example, Noah, a gay man, described how rumors about his sexuality in middle school escalated into aggressive behavior during gym class. He recalled "In 8th grade, a group of boys started picking on me during gym class. They'd call me slurs and make fun of the way I talked or moved. It made me feel incredibly unsafe, like I couldn't be myself without being attacked." Similarly, Alex, a non-binary individual, noted how bullying sometimes led to physical confrontations, making them dread attending school. This fear prompted changes in behavior, such as avoiding school events or skipping classes to minimize encounters with their harassers.

The emotional toll of bullying was significant for all participants, leading to heightened states of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Participants frequently described feeling hyper-vigilant, always on guard and anticipating negative interactions with their peers. Ethan, a gay man, described frequent anxiety attacks related to peer judgment affected his focus in class and engagement with learning: "I was always looking over my shoulder, and it was hard to focus on anything else." This constant state of alertness not only impacted his academic performance but also caused disengagement from social aspects of school life.

Sophie, a lesbian woman, echoed these sentiments, explaining that bullying and exclusion led to depressive episodes and a noticeable decline in academic performance. She shared, "I

started feeling really lonely and isolated, which led to some depressive episodes. My grades started slipping because I just didn't have the motivation to keep up with my schoolwork." This narrative of emotional depletion was a common experience, underscoring the significant impact that victimization had on their overall school engagement.

In response to victimization, several participants reported altering their behavior to avoid confrontation, resulting in reduced participation in school activities. This avoidance ranged from skipping classes to avoiding specific locations, like locker rooms or cafeterias, where they were more likely to encounter harassment. Liam, for instance, chose to stop attending gym class altogether after being harassed in the locker room, which not only impacted their physical education credits but also led to a sense of exclusion from the broader school community. Similarly, Noah sought refuge in the library during lunch to avoid potential confrontations, a choice that deepened his sense of isolation: "I kept to myself more and tried not to draw attention. I'd eat lunch in the library instead of the cafeteria and would go out of my way to avoid them in the hallways. It was exhausting, and it made me feel really isolated."

School victimization and bullying significantly impacted the participants' academic and social experiences, intensifying their feelings of isolation, fear, and disengagement. The persistent verbal harassment, physical intimidation, and social exclusion created an environment where LGBTQ+ students found it challenging to feel safe or accepted. This sense of alienation frequently led participants to withdraw from school activities, adversely affecting both their mental health and academic performance. These findings highlight how the persistent verbal harassment, physical intimidation, and social exclusion experienced by LGBTQ+ students created environments that undermined their sense of safety, belonging, and academic engagement.

Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Support

The lack of institutional support for LGBTQ+ students in military-connected schools was a significant theme that emerged from participants' narratives. Four out of the six participants described feeling let down by school administrators, counselors, and teachers who either failed to intervene during instances of bullying or lacked the knowledge and training to provide adequate support. This gap in institutional support not only intensified the challenges they faced but also reinforced feelings of isolation and fear.

Liam recounted his disappointment when seeking help from school officials. He described how, after experiencing harassment and feeling unsafe, he reached out to a counselor for guidance but was met with dismissal. Reflecting on the experience, Liam shared, "I did try to talk to a school counselor about what was happening, but their response was pretty disappointing." He explained that the counselor's advice to "just ignore it" and their comments that "kids can be cruel" left him feeling invalidated and unsupported. Reflecting on this experience, he added, "It really eroded my trust in the school system. I felt like the adults who were supposed to protect me were either unwilling or unable to do so."

Similarly, Noah expressed his frustration with the lack of institutional support when he faced homophobic bullying. While teachers noticed his social and academic withdrawal, none took meaningful action to address the issue. Noah shared, "One teacher asked me why I was always alone," he said, "but when I shrugged it off, they didn't press further." This lack of follow-up made him feel invisible and unimportant. He believed that better training and more proactive support from educators could have significantly improved his school experience. Summarizing his perspective, he reflected, "There wasn't much awareness or training around LGBTQ+ issues, so I felt like I was on my own."

Mia also faced institutional barriers when her peers excluded and judged her after rumors about her sexual orientation spread. Despite reaching out to teachers for help, their responses were passive and insufficient. "One teacher did ask if everything was okay, but when I said I was fine, they didn't push further," she recalled, expressing frustration at the lack of deeper engagement from educators. In some cases, participants acknowledged that the lack of support stemmed not from malicious intent but ignorance and inadequate training. Liam noted, "Some of them were well-meaning but just didn't have the knowledge or training to support me properly," highlighting the need for better-prepared staff to provide meaningful support.

For military-connected LGBTQ+ students, the absence of clear support systems and specific anti-bullying policies further compounded these issues. Participants emphasized the importance of policies tailored to protect LGBTQ+ students and training for school staff to understand the unique challenges faced by these individuals. Noah pointed out, "If the school had clear anti-bullying policies that were actually enforced, it might have made me feel more protected." This sentiment was echoed by Liam, who stressed that without proper training and policies in place, schools were failing to create safe environments for LGBTQ+ students.

The lack of institutional support impacted the participants' sense of safety and well-being in school. Without reliable systems in place to address their unique needs, many LGBTQ+ youths were left feeling unsupported, isolated, and vulnerable to victimization. Participants often encountered dismissal or inaction from school staff when seeking help, which not only hindered their academic experiences but also contributed to lasting distrust in school systems and the adults meant to protect them. The absence of clear anti-bullying policies and proper training for teachers and counselors on LGBTQ+ issues exacerbated these difficulties, leaving participants to

navigate their challenges largely on their own. The findings indicate that existing support mechanisms and policies have fallen short in safeguarding LGBTQ+ students.

Theme 3: Mental Health Struggles

Mental health struggles emerged as a pervasive theme expressed by the participants, highlighting the profound emotional toll that bullying, social isolation, and a lack of support had on military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Participants described how the stress of navigating their sexual or gender identity in hostile or unsupportive school environments often led to heightened anxiety, depression, and isolation, resulting in long-term mental health challenges.

For Noah, a gay man, the constant need to remain vigilant to avoid bullies severely impacted his mental health. He spoke about the overwhelming sense of isolation from peers and the persistent fear of being targeted, which made it difficult for him to enjoy school or feel safe. "The isolation took a big toll on my mental health," he recalled, emphasizing the loneliness and anxiety that marked his school years. To cope, he immersed himself in schoolwork as a distraction from his emotional turmoil. While this strategy helped him maintain his grades, it did little to address the deeper mental health issues he was facing.

Mia, a bisexual woman, also experienced significant mental health challenges after coming out during her junior year of high school. The judgment and exclusion from her peers left her feeling increasingly disconnected from her social circles, "I started feeling really lonely and isolated, which led to some depressive episodes," she shared. This emotional strain not only affected her mental well-being but also caused her to withdraw from social activities, which in turn led to a decline in her academic performance. She admitted, "My grades started slipping because I just didn't have the motivation to keep up with my schoolwork."

Similarly, Liam, a transgender man, struggled with anxiety and depression as a direct result of the bullying and harassment he endured after coming out during high school. The constant stress of being misgendered, harassed, and feeling unsafe in school led him to disengage from both academics and extracurricular activities. Reflecting on his experience, he explained, "The constant stress and fear made school a really difficult place to be." His anxiety became so overwhelming that even basic activities, like getting out of bed or completing homework, felt insurmountable, highlighting the significant toll it took on his daily life.

The participants' narratives revealed that their mental health struggles were closely tied to their sense of belonging and safety, or lack thereof, in their school environments. Many, like Noah, spoke about the challenge of building meaningful connections with peers due to the constant fear of being targeted for their sexual orientation. Reflecting on this pervasive fear, he stated, "I was always on edge, trying to avoid situations where I could be targeted." This state of hyper-vigilance not only heightened his anxiety but also made it difficult for him to engage socially or focus on his education.

Physical symptoms often accompanied the mental health struggles, manifesting as a direct response to the stress of feeling unsafe at school. Liam described how his anxiety led to trouble sleeping, frequent headaches, and stomach issues, while Noah also noted physical symptoms, further highlighting the interconnected nature of their emotional and physical well-being.

Many participants found that their mental health challenges persisted long after they left high school, underscoring the long-term impact of these adversities. The anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation that developed during their school years continued to influence their emotional health into adulthood. For example, Mia sought therapy after high school, finding that

professional help was pivotal in addressing the deep-rooted cause of her anxiety and depression. Reflecting on the lasting impact of her high school experiences, she explained, "It took me a while to realize how much high school had affected me. Even after I graduated, I was still dealing with anxiety and depression." She went on to share, "Therapy helped me develop healthier coping strategies and start addressing the root causes of my anxiety and depression."

Similarly, Noah noted that his anxiety and fear did not dissipate after he left high school, emphasizing how therapy became essential in unpacking the trauma from those experiences. Reflecting on the lingering effects, he shared, "Even after high school, I was still carrying that anxiety with me. It's like those feelings didn't just go away once I left." For Liam, journaling became a way to process his emotions and regain a sense of control over his mental health, helping him manage the ongoing impact of his school experiences.

Ultimately, the mental health struggles faced by these military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults were deeply intertwined with the lack of support, bullying, and feelings of isolation they encountered in school environments. Participants described how these challenges led to anxiety, depression, and even physical symptoms that persisted beyond their school years. While some participants found ways to cope through therapy, personal strategies, or academic focus, the emotional scars of these experiences persisted long after their school years ended, underscoring the lasting impact of hostile environments on their mental well-being.

Theme 4: Protective Factors and Support Systems

Despite the significant challenges participants faced related to their identities, protective factors and support systems emerged as crucial elements in their ability to navigate these difficulties. These protective factors varied across participants, but common themes included supportive teachers, LGBTQ+ peer groups, online communities, and, in some cases, family

support. These sources of encouragement and validation helped participants maintain their sense of self, build resilience, and, in some cases, recover from the emotional and academic challenges they faced.

For Liam, finding a supportive environment during his senior year in high school significantly transformed his experience. After enduring extensive bullying and social isolation earlier in high school, he transferred to a school with an active LGBTQ+ student group. Reflecting on this change, he shared, "The group was a lifesaver. It was the first time I felt like I had a place where I could be myself without fear of judgment." The presence of the LGBTQ+ group leader, a supportive teacher, played a significant role in fostering inclusivity, which encouraged Liam to re-engage with his education. He described the impact of this support, saying, "Having that support made a huge difference. I started participating more in class, and I even joined a couple of clubs. I wasn't as afraid to interact with other students because I knew I had a group of people who had my back." This newfound sense of belonging helped him regain confidence, improve his academic performance, and engage more fully with his peers.

Similarly, Mia emphasized how pivotal her school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) was during her senior year in high school. After experiencing judgment and exclusion from her peers upon coming out as bisexual, she withdrew from social activities and struggled with isolation. Reflecting on her involvement in the GSA, she shared, "Being part of the GSA gave me a sense of community that I hadn't felt before." The group provided a space where she could reconnect with other LGBTQ+ students who understood her experiences. Additionally, the mentorship of a supportive teacher played a transformative role in her journey. She described the teacher's influence, saying, "She encouraged me to embrace who I was and not let others' opinions define me." With that support, Mia found it easier to refocus on her academics and shared, "Having that

support made it easier for me to focus on my academics again. My grades started to improve because I wasn't as consumed by anxiety and self-doubt."

For Noah, the presence of a supportive teacher, even indirectly, made a substantial impact on his experience. Although his teacher was unaware of his sexual orientation, his kindness and patience provided a sense of stability during tough times. Noah reflected on this support, saying, "He [the teacher] didn't know I was gay, but he was supportive in other ways, like being patient when I was having a rough day or encouraging me to pursue my interests in writing." This encouragement helped him feel more connected to the school and reinforced his belief that not all adults in the educational setting were indifferent or hostile. Additionally, joining an online LGBTQ+ community during his senior year became a critical source of emotional support. He explained how this connection made a difference, stating, "Being part of the online community gave me a sense of belonging that I hadn't felt in a long time," emphasizing how these connections offered him hope and motivation to move forward.

Alex, who had experienced extensive bullying and harassment throughout their middle and high school years, found significant support through online communities. These virtual spaces provided validation and sense of belonging that was absent in their school environment. Reflecting on this support, Alex shared, "I found a lot of support through online communities, where I could connect with other LGBTQ+ people and feel less alone." This connection helped them maintain a sense of identity and determination, even when school felt overwhelmingly hostile. Similarly, Ethan valued online forums and communities as a crucial part of his support network, particularly when in-person resources were lacking. He explained the importance of these spaces, stating, "The online spaces were really important because they gave me a sense of belonging when I couldn't find it in school."

Family support, although not always fully aligned with participants' needs as LGBTQ+ individuals, also emerged as an important protective factor. For Liam, his family's unconditional love provided a foundation of support, even when they didn't fully understand his transgender identity. Reflecting on this, he explained, "Knowing that my family loved me unconditionally, even if they didn't fully understand, was a huge help." This support gave him the security to pursue his academic and personal goals despite challenges at school. Similarly, Mia emphasized the stability her family's acceptance provided, even though they did not completely grasp what it meant to be bisexual. She shared, "Even though they didn't fully understand what I was going through, their support gave me the strength to keep pushing forward."

Protective factors, including supportive teachers, LGBTQ+ peer groups, online communities, and family support, were pivotal in shaping participants' resilience and ability to cope with adversity. These sources of encouragement help military-connected LGBTQ+ youth manage stress, maintain academic performance, and cultivate a sense of self-worth, even in the face of challenges like bullying and social isolation. The presence of just one reliable support system significantly contributed to their personal and academic growth by providing a sense of belonging and stability. This highlights the crucial importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQ+ youths within military-connected Schools.

Theme 5: Impact on Academic Performance

The academic performance of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth was significantly shaped by the challenges they faced due to their sexual or gender identity. Participants described how bullying, isolation, and the lack of supportive environments directly affected their engagement in school, often leading to declines in academic achievement. While some managed to maintain their grades through sheer determination or as a means of coping, others struggled to

keep up as the emotional toll of their experiences overshadowed their ability to focus on academics.

For Liam, the bullying and harassment he experienced after coming out as transgender in high school severely impacted his academic performance. Constant misgendering and taunting created a hostile school environment, prompting him to avoid spaces like the locker room, which led to skipping gym class altogether. Reflecting on this, he admitted that "Skipping gym class and avoiding certain parts of the school definitely took a toll on my grades," highlighting how the stress of navigating an unsafe environment made it difficult to concentrate on other subjects as well. Despite his best efforts to catch up on his schoolwork at home, the strain of balancing academic responsibilities with the emotional challenges proved overwhelming, leading to a decline in his academic performance.

Similarly, Mia described how the anxiety and depression she experienced after coming out as bisexual caused a noticeable drop in her academic performance. The judgment and exclusion from her peers led her to withdraw from social activities and lose motivation in her studies. Reflecting on this, she explained, "My grades started slipping because I just didn't have the motivation to keep up with my schoolwork." The emotional impact of being treated differently by friends also affected her focus in class, leading her to participate less in discussions and activities. She noted, "I used to love participating in class discussions and extracurricular activities, but after coming out, I became more withdrawn," emphasizing how stress and anxiety eroded her academic success.

Noah, a gay man, coped with his challenging school environment by retreating into his academics as a form of escape. Reflecting on this strategy, he explained, "Schoolwork became my escape, something I could control and excel in, even if everything else felt chaotic." While

this approach helped him maintain strong grades, it came at the cost of his social development and overall school experience. By isolating himself from peers and avoiding social situations, Noah missed out on the extracurricular activities and social bonds that typically enhance a student's school engagement. He reflected on this disconnection, stating, "It was like I was only half-present at school, physically there, but emotionally and socially disconnected." Although his academic performance remained relatively stable, his emotional disconnection from the school environment hindered his ability to fully thrive.

Other participants also described how the emotional burden of navigating their identities in unsupportive environments detracted from their academic focus. Sophie explained how her anxiety about being outed to peers and teachers made it difficult for her to engage in class, stating, "I was always on edge, trying to avoid drawing attention to myself." The mental energy required to remain hypervigilant about her surroundings left little room for academic concentration, causing her grades to decline. Reflecting on this experience, she shared, "It felt like I was always trying to stay invisible, which was exhausting," highlighting the toll that her dual focus on safety and schoolwork had on her academic performance.

Despite these challenges, some participants used their academic performance as a means of asserting control and creating a sense of stability amidst the chaos. Ethan described how his commitment to maintaining good grades allowed him to affirm his capabilities despite the turbulence in his life. Reflecting on this, he shared, "Focusing on my academics was one way I could prove to myself that I was still capable, even when everything else felt like it was falling apart." His determination to succeed in school became a source of pride and purpose that helped buffer against the negative experiences he faced in other aspects of his life. He further explained, "It was like, if I could just keep my grades up, I could eventually get out of that environment and

into a place where I could be myself," emphasizing the hope his academic efforts gave him for a better future.

However, not all participants were able to use academics as a form of refuge. Alex described how the combination of social isolation and relentless bullying during their middle school years caused a significant decline in their grades. Reflecting on this period, they shared, "I felt like no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep up with the schoolwork because I was so emotionally drained." The emotional exhaustion from constant teasing and exclusion by their peers left Alex struggling to find the energy or motivation to excel academically. Alex further explained, "I stopped trying as hard because it felt like no one cared whether I succeeded or not," highlighting the deep sense of disconnection they felt from both her peers and her teachers.

The participants' academic performance was closely tied to their emotional well-being and the degree of support they received in their school environments. Many faced significant challenges as military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, with the emotional strain of bullying, isolation, and unsupportive atmospheres taking a toll on their academic success. For some, schoolwork offered a temporary refuge or a way to regain control, providing a sense of stability amidst emotional turmoil. However, for others, the overwhelming effects of anxiety, depression, and exclusion led to declines in academic performance. These experiences underscore the complex relationship between emotional health and academic success, highlighting the critical role that support systems play in shaping educational outcomes for LGBTQ+ youths.

Theme 6: Educational Aspirations and Resilience

Despite the significant challenges they faced, many participants exhibited remarkable resilience, maintaining high educational aspirations even in the face of adversity. For these military-connected LGBTQ+ youths, education was more than a pursuit of academic

achievement; it was a pathway to personal growth and self-determination. Their stories highlight how the belief in education's transformative power sustained them, guiding their ambitions and shaping their future goals even in hostile environments.

Noah found that focusing on academics became a lifeline during his most difficult school experience. Faced with bullying and social isolation, he turned to schoolwork as a means of escaping the difficulties of daily life. Reflecting on this, he shared, "Schoolwork was something I could control and excel in, even if everything else felt chaotic." His consistently high grades were not just a reflection of his abilities but also of his determination to succeed. He explained, "If I could just keep my grades up, I could eventually get out of that environment and into a place where I could be myself," highlighting the connection between his academic resilience and his hopes for a better future.

Mia shared a similar view, using her educational aspirations to overcome the challenges she experienced after coming out as bisexual. Initially, she considered dropping out of high school due to the stress and isolation. Reflecting on this difficult time, she shared, "At one point, I considered dropping out of high school altogether because I didn't see the point in continuing when I felt so alienated." However, she explained how her perspective shifted, saying, "But after some soul-searching, I realized that I didn't want to give up on my future because of how others were treating me." This change in mindset drove her to push through her senior year with renewed determination, focusing on the goal of attending an LGBTQ+-friendly college where she could thrive both academically and personally.

Liam's educational trajectory was significantly altered by the support he received after transferring to a school with an active LGBTQ+ group. He shared how the emotional and social support from this group reignited his interest in academics, saying, "I went from barely scraping

by to actually enjoying learning again." Inspired by the encouragement he received, he decided to pursue a career in psychology with the goal of working with LGBTQ+ youth. Reflecting on the impact of this support, he explained, "The support I received helped me see that I wasn't just surviving anymore; I was starting to thrive," showing how protective factors in his life not only improved his academic performance but also shaped his career aspirations.

Similarly, Ethan, who struggled with social isolation and anxiety due to his sexual orientation, found that focusing on his educational goals provided a sense of purpose and direction. He shared how support from online communities gave him the confidence to aim higher academically, saying, "Connecting with others online gave me the courage to pursue my goals, even when things were hard." This resilience allowed him to view education as a means to escape his high school limitations and build a future where he could be true to himself.

For Alex, despite facing a hostile school environment, educational aspirations offered them a focus beyond the immediate challenges. They shared how the idea of a supportive college environment motivated them, explaining, "I kept reminding myself that if I could just make it through high school, things would be better in college." This future-oriented mindset was crucial in helping them maintain hope and resilience, even in difficult circumstances.

Many participants also expressed a desire to use their education to give back to the LGBTQ+ community. Mia, inspired by her involvement in the GSA, shared her aspirations of pursuing a degree in psychology to become a counselor for LGBTQ+ youth, stating, "I wanted to be the kind of support system that I wished I had had earlier in my life." Noah envisioned a career in social work or counseling to support LGBTQ+ youth who faced challenges similar to his own. His determination to help others stemmed from his own struggles, reinforcing his educational and career ambitions.

Across all six participants, education emerged as a powerful tool for change and self-determination. It served as both an escape from hostile environments and a means to build a future where they could embrace their identities fully. Despite the adversities they faced due to their LGBTQ+ identities, their educational aspirations remained strong, often fueling their determination to succeed. Some found that their resilience led to improvements in academic performance when they discovered support systems that affirmed their identities, while others used education as a coping mechanism to find stability amid bullying and isolation. Education was seen as transformative, empowering participants to not only achieve personal success but also to give back to the LGBTQ+ community in their future careers. Their resilience and educational ambitions were crucial in helping them navigate and rise above their challenges, highlighting the profound impact that supportive environments and academic aspirations can have on personal growth and self-actualization.

Theme 7: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

The participants' experiences as military-connected LGBTQ+ youth aligned closely with the levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Their challenges impacted their ability to fulfill basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs, shaping both their academic performance and personal development. Maslow's framework provides a useful lens to examine how unmet needs in the areas of safety, belonging, and esteem influenced their overall well-being, while also illustrating how some participants aspired to achieve found self-actualization despite significant obstacles (Maslow, 1954a).

At the base of Maslow's hierarchy, the participants generally reported that their physiological needs, such as food, shelter, and other basic necessities, were met within their family environments. Growing up in military-connected families, participants highlighted the

stability of their access to these necessities due to benefits like military housing, healthcare, and regular provisions. Liam, for instance, noted that while his school environment posed significant challenges to his sense of safety, his home life provided a secure and stable foundation where basic needs were consistently met. Similarly, Mia shared that her family ensured she always had access to meals, shelter, and essential resources, which she described as a “cornerstone of stability” in an otherwise challenging adolescence.

The participants’ accounts consistently emphasized that their physiological needs were not directly impacted by their sexual or gender identities. Noah mentioned that his family support, even though they did not initially understand his identity, ensured that his physical well-being was never compromised. This stability provided him with a crucial foundation to channel his energy into academics and aspirations, even while grappling with emotional struggles at school.

While their basic physiological needs were securely met, the participants’ challenges became pronounced at the next level of Maslow’s hierarchy: safety needs. For many, this was where their experiences of discrimination, bullying, and social exclusion began to take a significant toll. Liam, a transgender man, described how harassment and bullying overshadowed every other aspect of his life. Reflecting on these experiences, he shared, "The harassment and bullying made it hard to feel safe, and that lack of safety overshadowed everything else." This constant fear affected his academic engagement and mental health, contributing to anxiety and depression that interfered with his ability to attend school regularly. While his safety needs were met at home, they remained unmet within his school environment, ultimately hindering his personal growth and education.

Similarly, Noah described how the bullying and social isolation he experienced in school, emphasizing how these challenges created a persistent sense of insecurity. He explained, "I wasn't always sure if I could trust the people around me, which made it hard to relax and focus on my education." The unmet need for safety prevented him from progressing to higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy, such as belonging and esteem. This lack of security at school caused him to feel isolated and contributed to a decline in his confidence.

The third level of Maslow's hierarchy, love and belonging, posed another significant challenge for the participants. Many felt disconnected from their peers, lacking meaningful social connections due to their LGBTQ+ identities. Mia, reflecting on her experiences after coming out as bisexual, described how the judgment and skepticism she faced from her peers led to a period of deep isolation. She shared, "I felt like I didn't belong anywhere," highlighting the profound impact this absence of belonging had on her self-esteem and academic engagement.

Similarly, Alex explained how they felt entirely disconnected from the school community until they found a supportive LGBTQ+ group. They reflected, "The lack of acceptance from my peers and the constant harassment made me feel very isolated and alone." For many participants, finding supportive communities, whether in LGBTQ+ groups at school or online forums, became essential in fulfilling their need for belonging, enabling them to refocus on their education and personal growth.

The fourth level, esteem needs, was closely tied to participants' experiences with bullying and victimization. Ethan, who moved frequently as part of a military family, reflected on the difficulty of building self-esteem when he constantly had to navigate new, potentially unaccepting environments. He shared, "It felt like I was constantly starting from scratch in environments where I wasn't sure if I'd be accepted," emphasizing how the stress of being

judged and isolated made it hard for him to participate fully in class, ultimately eroding his self-esteem. However, when participants found supportive environments, their self-esteem began to rebuild. Noah described how connecting with an online LGBTQ+ community helped him regain confidence. He stated, "Finding the online community was a turning point. It was the first time I felt like I had a group of people who understood and accepted me for who I am." This newfound support allowed him to pursue academic and personal goals with renewed confidence.

At the top of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, the need to fulfill one's potential and pursue personal growth. Despite the barriers they faced in earlier levels, all six participants expressed strong educational aspirations and a desire to make a positive impact on the world, particularly by supporting other LGBTQ+ youth. Liam, for example, reflected on how his experience as a transgender student navigating a hostile school environment shaped his career aspirations, stating, "I realized that I wanted to go to college and study psychology so that I could help other LGBTQ+ youth who were going through what I did." His resilience and determination to give back reflects his journey toward self-actualization. Similarly, Mia shared how her involvement in the school's GSA, inspired her to pursue a career as a counselor for LGBTQ+ youth. Reflecting on her aspirations, she noted, "I wanted to be the kind of support system that I wished I had had earlier in my life."

For these participants, the journey toward self-actualization was marked by resilience and a strong sense of purpose. Their educational goals extended beyond personal success, reflecting a commitment to using their experiences to support others. Noah shared how his own struggles motivated his career aspirations, stating, "I see my future career as a way to give back and help others who are struggling like I did." This sense of purpose helped them navigate the challenges

of their school years and shape their future with a focus on personal growth and community impact.

The participants' experiences closely aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as their struggles to meet safety, belonging, and esteem needs heavily influenced their academic and personal development. While physiological needs were generally met within family environments, emotional and physical safety at school was a critical unmet need, creating significant barriers to their overall well-being. The lack of safety and support in their school environments led to pervasive feelings of fear and isolation, hindering their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

As participants gradually found support systems, whether through LGBTQ+ groups or online communities, their self-esteem began to recover, allowing them to refocus on personal growth and academic success. These support systems played a crucial role in helping them meet their needs for belonging and esteem, setting the foundation for their pursuit of self-actualization. Ultimately, their journey toward self-actualization was marked by resilience and a strong sense of purpose, with many aspiring to use their experiences to help others and make a positive impact on their communities. The challenges they overcame and the resilience they demonstrated underscore the vital importance of supportive environments in facilitating both personal fulfillment and academic success.

Summary

This study examined the school-related experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults, focusing on the risk and protective factors that influenced their well-being and academic success. By integrating the data from a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, the study provided a comprehensive analysis of the prevalence and impact of school

victimization and the role of support systems in mitigating these challenges. Findings revealed multiple school-related risk factors that contributed to the marginalization of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, including bullying, social isolation, and frequent school relocations. At the same time, several protective factors, including affirming educators, peer support networks, and LGBTQ+-inclusive student organizations, helped mitigate these challenges and foster resilience.

To contextualize these findings, this section is organized according to the study's research questions. Each research question is first introduced, followed by a summary of the relevant data and key conclusions.

Research Question 1: What are the perceived school-related risk and protective factors identified by military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults?

Research Question 1 sought to examine the specific school-related risk and protective factors that influenced the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data highlighted the dual impact of victimization and support systems on students' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and social inclusion.

A primary risk factor was the high prevalence of victimization, with 90% of participants reporting harassment related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants described verbal harassment, physical intimidation, and exclusion from peer groups, particularly in unsupervised areas such as locker rooms, hallways, and bathrooms. These experiences contributed to an ongoing sense of fear and unease, as participants remained vigilant to avoid mistreatment. The impact of frequent relocations further compounded these challenges, making it difficult for students to establish stability and form lasting peer relationships.

Beyond direct victimization, participants expressed uncertainty about the inclusivity of each new school. The participants described the experience as a constant cycle of uncertainty,

where each move presented new risks in terms of peer relationships, school climate, and institutional support. The military-connected aspect of their identity created structural challenges related to mobility, but it was their LGBTQ+ identity that primarily shaped their day-to-day interactions and levels of support within school environments.

Research Question 2: How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the risk factors influencing school victimization?

Research Question 2 explored the specific risk factors that contributed to school victimization among military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults. Findings from both the quantitative survey and the qualitative interviews indicated that bullying, harassment, and social exclusion were primary contributors to the participants' experiences of victimization.

Participants recounted specific incidents of verbal abuse, physical intimidation, and derogatory comments about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many described how their visibility as LGBTQ+ individuals made them more vulnerable to mistreatment, particularly when their gender expression, mannerisms, or perceived sexual orientation did not conform to heteronormative expectations. To avoid becoming targets, some participants regulated their behavior or concealed aspects of their identity, increasing stress and self-consciousness in school settings.

The role of school climate and policy was another major theme. Participants described inconsistent enforcement of anti-bullying policies, with some reporting that they did not trust school officials to intervene effectively. The absence of institutional support reinforced feelings of vulnerability and isolation, making it difficult for students to seek help.

Participants also noted that frequent relocations made them more vulnerable to victimization. The process of repeatedly integrating into new school environments, often without

established peer support systems, added additional stress. Many expressed frustrations about the variability in LGBTQ+ inclusivity across different schools, particularly in regions where social and political attitudes toward LGBTQ+ rights were more conservative.

Research Question 3: How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the protective factors that supported their well-being in school?

Research Question 3 examined the protective factors that supported the well-being of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years. Findings indicate that supportive peer networks, affirming educators, and LGBTQ+-inclusive student organizations played a critical role in fostering resilience and mitigating the effects of victimization.

Participants described how affirming teachers provided validation and advocacy, even in school environments that were not always inclusive. Small gestures, such as displaying LGBTQ+-affirming materials or intervening in cases of bullying, made students feel seen and supported. Additionally, LGBTQ+ student organizations, such as GSAs, provided structured spaces for students to connect with peers, share experiences, and advocate for inclusivity.

Online communities also emerged as a crucial protective factor, particularly for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth who faced frequent relocations. Several participants described how digital spaces provided a continuous source of support, allowing them to maintain connections despite disruptions caused by moving. These platforms offered emotional validation, peer mentorship, and educational resources, although some participants acknowledged the risks associated with online spaces, such as exposure to misinformation or cyberbullying.

Research Question 4: How do military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults describe the possible relationships between risk and protective factors and their academic performance and educational ambitions?

Research Question 4 explored the relationship between school-related risk and protective factors and their impact on academic performance and educational aspirations. Findings revealed that while some students struggled academically due to bullying, isolation, and frequent relocations, others used academic achievement as a coping mechanism. Several participants described how the presence of affirming educators, peer support groups, and LGBTQ+-inclusive school policies enhanced academic engagement. Conversely, students who lacked these protective factors experienced diminished motivation and disengagement. Unlike their non-military LGBTQ+ peers, who had more consistent access to support networks, military-connected LGBTQ+ youth faced additional academic instability due to frequent relocations.

Research Question 5: How do the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how does this influence their academic performance and educational aspirations?

Research Question 5 examined how participants' experiences aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and influenced their academic performance and long-term aspirations. At the physiological level, participants largely reported that their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and access to healthcare, were met due to military family benefits. At the safety level, however, many described feeling physically and emotionally unsafe due to bullying, harassment, and inconsistent enforcement of anti-discrimination policies. At the belonging level, frequent relocations disrupted social stability, making it difficult to establish lasting friendships. Those who had access to LGBTQ+-affirming teachers, LGBTQ+ student organizations, and online

communities reported a stronger sense of belonging than those who did not. At the esteem level, participants' experiences varied widely. Some struggled with self-worth due to negative school climates, while others gained confidence when they encountered affirming teachers and inclusive school policies.

Finally, participants demonstrated a perceived sense of self-actualization in their aspirations for future advocacy and personal fulfillment. Many expressed a desire to pursue careers in social work, education, or psychology, hoping to create more inclusive environments for future LGBTQ+ youth.

These findings highlight the role that stability, institutional support, and inclusive school policies played in shaping the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Participants who attended schools with consistent, affirming policies and visible LGBTQ+ support reported greater resilience and academic engagement, whereas those who lacked such support experienced heightened vulnerability to victimization and social isolation.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the educational and emotional experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their middle and high school years, focusing on the challenges they encountered and the protective factors that supported their academic performance and well-being. By integrating data from the quantitative survey and qualitative interview narratives, the study explored how school-related risk factors, such as bullying, harassment, social isolation, and frequent relocations, shaped participants' experiences. Additionally, it investigated the role of protective supports, including affirming educators, peer networks, and LGBTQ+ student-led organizations, in fostering resilience and academic persistence.

This chapter builds upon the findings presented in Chapter 4, offering a comprehensive interpretation of the results and their implications. The chapter begins with a discussion of the findings, connecting them to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Following the discussion, the chapter explores the broader implications of the study, providing actionable recommendations for stakeholders, identifying the study's limitations, and concludes with a summary of the study's contributions and future directions for research.

Discussion and Conclusions

This section presents a thematic discussion of the study's findings, providing a synthesis of patterns that emerged from the data. The discussion is organized around the following key themes: (1) School Climate as a Determining Factor in LGBTQ+ Students' Experiences; (2) Impact of Mobility and Instability on Identity and Well-being; (3) Academic Resilience and Challenges Among Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Students; and (4) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Framework for Understanding Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Youth. By examining these themes, this discussion situates the study's findings within existing literature and theoretical frameworks, offering a deeper understanding of how risk and protective factors intersect in the lives of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

School Climate as a Determining Factor in LGBTQ+ Students' Experiences

The school climate played a crucial role in shaping the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ students, influencing their sense of safety, identity expression, and overall well-being. The extent to which schools explicitly protected LGBTQ+ students through policies, staff training, and inclusive programming determined whether participants felt affirmed or marginalized in their educational environment. Consistent with prior research, schools with clear LGBTQ+-affirming policies, explicit anti-bullying protections, and educators trained in LGBTQ+ inclusivity fostered safer environments, whereas the absence of these structures left students vulnerable to discrimination and social isolation (Kosciw et al., 2020; Snapp et al., 2015b).

A recurring theme in participants' narratives was the inconsistent enforcement of LGBTQ+ protections across schools, with some attending institutions where anti-bullying measures were effectively implemented and others experiencing environments where

discrimination was ignored or implicitly tolerated. Several participants described how school staff and administrators varied widely in their willingness to intervene in cases of harassment, reinforcing the notion that policies alone were insufficient without active enforcement. Some students encountered schools where educators played a supportive role, advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusivity and swiftly addressing incidents of bullying, while others described teachers and administrators as passive bystanders, or, in some cases, contributors to a hostile climate by dismissing student concerns or refusing to acknowledge LGBTQ+ identities. These disparities in school climate align with research by Greytak et al. (2016), which found that students in schools without explicit protections were significantly more likely to experience unchecked victimization and disengagement from academics.

Geographic differences also exacerbated the uncertainty military-connected LGBTQ+ students felt when transitioning between schools. Many participants described moving between progressive regions where LGBTQ+ protections were well-established and conservative areas where LGBTQ+ issues were largely ignored or stigmatized. In these less supportive environments, students were often uncertain about whether it was safe to be out, whether they would find affirming peer groups, or whether discrimination would go unchallenged by school staff. These experiences reflect broader research on regional disparities in LGBTQ+ protections, where students in more conservative regions report higher rates of victimization and weaker institutional support compared to those in progressive areas (Taylor et al., 2020). The unpredictability of school climates intensified stress, particularly for students who had previously attended schools with strong LGBTQ+ protections but were forced to relocate to environments that were markedly less inclusive.

Participants' experiences in different school environments notably shaped their willingness to engage in social and academic activities. Schools that incorporated LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula, visible representation, and actively enforced anti-bullying policies provided students with a sense of belonging, whereas schools that lacked these measures left students feeling isolated and invisible. In affirming school climates, students reported greater confidence in advocating for themselves, engaging in extracurricular activities, and forming meaningful peer relationships. However, in less inclusive schools, many students described withdrawing from social interactions, avoiding school events, and even modifying their gender expression or behavior to avoid negative attention. This finding is consistent with research by Poteat et al. (2017), which suggests that LGBTQ+ students who perceive their school as an affirming space are more likely to develop resilience and maintain academic motivation despite external stressors.

For military-connected LGBTQ+ students, this unpredictability was compounded by their lack of control over school placement. Unlike their non-military peers, who could seek out affirming school districts or maintain long-term support networks, participants were frequently assigned to schools based on military reassignments, with little agency in choosing inclusive environments. This lack of control contributed to feelings of powerlessness, as students were often placed in schools without knowing whether they would be welcomed or marginalized. For those who had previously attended supportive schools but were forced to relocate to less affirming ones, the regression in school climate was particularly distressing, reinforcing feelings of instability and forcing students to reassess their safety and identity expression in each new setting.

The findings highlight the urgent need for policy consistency across schools serving military-connected students, particularly in ensuring that LGBTQ+ protections are enforced regardless of geographic location. While individual educators played a pivotal role in shaping school climate, system-wide policies that explicitly support LGBTQ+ students and require cultural competency training for educators are critical in addressing disparities. These findings reinforce existing research demonstrating that the presence of strong institutional protections, inclusive curricula, and affirming educators are key determinants of LGBTQ+ students' well-being, academic persistence, and overall school engagement (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that school climate significantly contributes to the degree of acceptance or victimization experienced by military-connected LGBTQ+ students. Supportive school environments, characterized by clear protections, educator training, and inclusive programming, were associated with greater student resilience, academic motivation, and social engagement. Conversely, schools lacking these affirming structures often perpetuated feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and disengagement, highlighting the critical role of school climate in shaping educational and emotional outcomes for the population.

Impact of Mobility and Instability on Identity and Well-being

The frequent relocations inherent to military life created additional challenges for LGBTQ+ students, significantly shaping their ability to establish and maintain peer relationships, assess school environments for inclusivity, and maintain emotional and academic stability. Each transition introduced new uncertainties about social acceptance, school policies, and institutional support, forcing students to continuously adapt to new environments while managing the risk of discrimination and social isolation.

Participants described repeated struggles with forming and maintaining peer relationships due to the transient nature of their schooling experiences. Unlike non-military LGBTQ+ youth, who could establish long-term friendships and support networks, military-connected LGBTQ+ students were repeatedly required to start over in forming social connections. This disrupted continuity in support systems, particularly for those who had previously found affirming peer groups or LGBTQ+ student organizations but were forced to leave them behind with each relocation. Kosciw et al. (2020) indicated that peer support played a crucial role in buffering LGBTQ+ students from victimization and mental health risks. However, for military-connected LGBTQ+ students, this protective factor was consistently unstable, increasing their vulnerability to isolation and distress.

Beyond peer relationships, participants described how each relocation required them to reassess the safety and inclusivity of their new school environment. This process often involved observing educator attitudes, LGBTQ+ visibility in school policies, and whether existing LGBTQ+ student groups were active and well-supported. In less inclusive schools, students described feeling compelled to conceal their identity until they could determine whether coming out would lead to social rejection or victimization. This cycle of identity concealment and self-monitoring aligns with minority stress theory (Meyer, 2015), which posited that marginalized individuals often modified their behaviors to navigate potentially hostile environments, leading to heightened stress and anxiety. The repeated need to evaluate and adjust their gender expression, mannerisms, or openness about their LGBTQ+ identity resulted in emotional exhaustion, as participants described constantly negotiating their identity depending on the perceived safety of their new school.

The emotional toll of repeatedly adapting to new social climates was profound, with participants expressing heightened stress and anxiety, particularly in the early weeks of transitioning to a new school. Many described delaying or avoiding coming out in their new environments, prioritizing self-protection over self-expression to minimize the risk of victimization. This dynamic reflects findings from Snapp et al. (2015a), which indicated that LGBTQ+ students in unsupportive school environments were more likely to suppress their identities as a means of self-preservation. For some, this meant adopting a low-profile presence in their school communities, avoiding unnecessary interactions, and disengaging from social opportunities, which further exacerbated feelings of isolation.

Ultimately, the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and military-connected status created a recurring cycle of uncertainty, adaptation, and emotional strain, forcing students to continuously assess, modify, and negotiate their identity in response to unpredictable school climates. These findings illustrate how the instability of military-connected students' school environments created ongoing challenges in maintaining peer relationships, sustaining a sense of belonging, and navigating identity disclosure. The presence or absence of protective factors, such as affirming educators, LGBTQ+ student groups, and online communities, significantly influenced students' ability to manage these challenges. Inconsistent access to these supports left some students feeling isolated, while those with access to affirming spaces reported greater emotional well-being and academic engagement. The findings highlight the critical role of school climate, institutional policies, and peer networks in shaping the overall experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, demonstrating how structural factors either mitigated or exacerbated their vulnerabilities.

Thus, it can be concluded that frequent school relocation significantly disrupted the social and emotional stability of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, heightening their vulnerability to social isolation, identity concealment, and academic disengagement. Students who encountered affirming school climates, inclusive peer networks, and supportive educators were better equipped to navigate these transitions and maintain resilience. Conversely, the absence of such protective factors often intensified the stress associated with relocation, underscoring the critical role that consistent institutional support plays in mitigating the adverse effects of mobility on this population.

Academic Resilience and Challenges Among Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Students

The academic experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ students were shaped by a complex interplay of risk and protective factors, with bullying, social isolation, and frequent relocations influencing their engagement, motivation, and overall performance. Prior research indicates that LGBTQ+ students frequently experienced academic declines due to victimization and psychological stress (Kosciw et al., 2020). However, this study adds nuance to existing findings, showing that while some participants experienced academic disengagement, many others reported high academic achievement, using schoolwork as a coping mechanism.

For some participants, bullying, exclusion, and emotional distress led to disengagement from academics. School avoidance, difficulty concentrating, and lack of motivation were common among those who experienced persistent victimization in unsupportive school environments. Consistent with prior research, LGBTQ+ students who faced unchecked harassment or lacked affirming educators described academic decline, absenteeism, and reduced engagement in learning activities (Kosciw et al., 2020). Some participants viewed school as a

hostile space, leading them to withdraw from classroom participation and extracurricular activities.

However, unlike broader research that suggested discrimination led to lower academic performance among LGBTQ+ youth (Russell & Fish, 2016), this study found that many military-connected LGBTQ+ students maintained high grades despite external stressors. Several participants described schoolwork as an anchor, providing structure and stability amid the unpredictability of relocation and marginalization. This finding aligns with research suggesting that LGBTQ+ students who engage in goal-setting behaviors and develop strong academic identities were more likely to persist despite external challenges (Russell & Fish, 2016).

The structure of military life may have contributed to higher academic engagement among these students. The emphasis on discipline, adaptability, and academic success within military culture, coupled with family expectations and access to military-affiliated educational resources, may have reinforced resilience mechanisms that enabled these students to excel despite adversity. Unlike non-military LGBTQ+ students, who may lack structured external supports, military-connected LGBTQ+ youth often navigated educational environments with clear academic expectations from their families, which may have buffered against some of the negative effects of bullying and social exclusion.

A critical determinant of academic persistence among participants was the presence of affirming environments and support systems. Students who had access to supportive educators, inclusive school policies, and LGBTQ+ student organizations described feeling more motivated to succeed academically, as these protective factors provided emotional stability and a sense of belonging. Several students credited affirming teachers as pivotal figures in their academic success, particularly those who actively advocated for LGBTQ+ inclusivity, intervened in cases

of bullying, and created safe classroom spaces. These findings align with research showing that teacher support was strongly correlated with increased academic motivation and success among LGBTQ+ students (Poteat et al., 2017).

Beyond teacher support, peer networks and LGBTQ+ student organizations also played a role in promoting academic engagement. Participants who were able to connect with like-minded peers, whether through GSAs, friendships, or online communities, reported greater motivation to persist in their education. Among these networks, online communities emerged as a particularly significant support mechanism, providing continuity and social connection despite frequent relocations. Participants described how digital platforms, such as LGBTQ+-focused forums, social media groups, and virtual support networks, offered safe spaces where they could share experiences, seek advice, and build relationships with peers facing similar challenges. These virtual connections not only reduced feelings of isolation but also helped students maintain focus on their academic aspirations, even when transitioning to new school environments. This finding aligns with research indicating that LGBTQ+ students who perceive their schools as inclusive were more likely to engage academically and pursue long-term educational goals (Snapp et al., 2015c).

Ultimately, the relationship between risk factors and educational outcomes varied among participants. While some students experienced declining engagement and motivation due to persistent victimization, others leveraged academic success as a means of control and self-determination. The presence or absence of affirming educators, peer networks, and inclusive school policies played a decisive role in shaping these trajectories. These findings emphasize the importance of institutional support in mitigating the negative effects of victimization and

ensuring that military-connected LGBTQ+ students have access to the resources and encouragement necessary to persist in their education, regardless of school placement.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that academic achievement and aspirations among military-connected LGBTQ+ students were not necessarily a casualty of unsupportive and unaccepting school environments. The results of the study showed that academic achievement was notably influenced by the presence of protective factors, including affirming educators, supportive peer networks, and inclusive school environments. While some participants experienced academic disengagement due to persistent victimization and social isolation, many others maintained high academic performance, often using schoolwork as a coping strategy to navigate the instability associated with frequent relocations. The structure of military life, characterized by discipline, adaptability, and family-driven academic expectations, further contributed to students' resilience, enabling them to persist despite external stressors. Ultimately, the findings underscore the critical role of consistent institutional support, peer connections, and safe school climates in promoting the educational success and well-being of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a Framework for Understanding Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Youth

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a valuable framework for understanding how military-connected LGBTQ+ youth navigated their educational experiences, revealing the complex interplay between material stability and psychosocial vulnerability. While participants' physiological needs, such as access to housing, healthcare, and food, were consistently met due to military benefits, higher-level needs related to safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization were frequently compromised by inconsistent school climates and the disruptions associated with

frequent relocations. This imbalance between basic survival and emotional well-being highlights the unique vulnerabilities faced by this population, emphasizing how unmet needs in one aspect of life undermined their overall well-being and academic engagement.

At the base of Maslow's hierarchy, participants generally reported stable access to housing, healthcare, and other essentials, reflecting the structural support typically available to military families. Military benefits, including government-provided housing, comprehensive healthcare, and financial stability, ensured that physiological needs were consistently met. Unlike LGBTQ+ youth in non-military families, who may experience economic insecurity or unstable living conditions (Russell & Fish, 2016), military-connected LGBTQ+ students did not face significant challenges related to basic survival. While this level of material stability provided a foundation for educational engagement, it did not insulate students from the psychological and social stressors associated with marginalization, school victimization, and social exclusion. The presence of material resources could not compensate for the toll of navigating inconsistent school climates, the loss of peer networks, and the constant need to reassess safety and acceptance in new environments.

Safety needs, the second tier of Maslow's hierarchy, emerged as a consequential vulnerability for participants. Although military families often provided secure home environments, participants frequently described feeling physically and emotionally unsafe in school settings. This insecurity was especially pronounced in schools without clearly enforced anti-bullying protections or LGBTQ+-affirming policies. Most participants recounted experiences of harassment, social exclusion, and microaggressions that went unchecked by school staff, reinforcing feelings of institutional abandonment. Inconsistent responses from

educators and administrators further heightened participants' sense of vulnerability, leaving them uncertain about whether they could rely on schools to protect them from harm.

The transient nature of military life heightened these safety concerns. With each relocation, students had to reassess the social climate of their new school, often triggering a cycle of hypervigilance and identity concealment. Participants described how, upon arriving at a new school, they would quietly gauge teacher attitudes, peer interactions, and visible signs of LGBTQ+ inclusion, such as pride flags, inclusive curricula, or student organizations, before deciding whether it felt safe to disclose their identity. This constant self-monitoring took a mental toll, aligning with Meyer's (2015) minority stress theory, which explained how marginalized individuals often adopted protective behaviors, like identity suppression when they sensed potential threats. The strain of this vigilance made it harder for students to focus on learning. Several participants shared how the fear of bullying or exclusion distracted them from academic tasks, reduced their classroom engagement, and ultimately undermined their educational progress.

The need for belonging, another component of Maslow's hierarchy, was similarly compromised by the transient nature of military life. The instability associated with frequent relocations disrupted students' ability to form long-lasting peer relationships, often leaving them isolated and disconnected. Unlike their non-military peers, who could maintain consistent social networks, military-connected LGBTQ+ students frequently had to start over, building relationships from scratch while navigating the complexities of identity disclosure. Participants described how each relocation forced them to suppress their identity until they could determine whether their new school environment was affirming or hostile. This pattern of identity

concealment, driven by fear of rejection or victimization, further reinforced social isolation and limited opportunities for meaningful peer connections.

For some students, the absence of belonging led to academic disengagement, as the emotional strain of social exclusion undermined their motivation to participate in classroom activities or pursue long-term educational goals. However, others found alternative coping mechanisms that allowed them to maintain a sense of stability and purpose despite the instability of their social environments. Academic achievement, for instance, emerged as a protective factor for many participants, providing a structured and controllable outlet amid the unpredictability of relocation. Several students described immersing themselves in schoolwork as a way to regain control and maintain a sense of normalcy, setting academic goals to counterbalance the instability of their social lives. This finding contrasts with broader research suggesting that LGBTQ+ youth often experience declining academic performance due to victimization and social exclusion (Kosciw et al., 2020). Among military-connected LGBTQ+ students, the emphasis on adaptability and resilience often associated with military culture may have contributed to their ability to maintain academic engagement despite the challenges they faced.

The presence of affirming environments further influenced students' ability to meet their belonging and esteem needs. Participants who had access to supportive educators, inclusive school policies, and LGBTQ+ student organizations reported greater resilience and higher levels of academic persistence. Teachers who actively affirmed LGBTQ+ identities by using inclusive language, advocating for students, and addressing instances of bullying played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of safety and self-worth. Peer networks, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), also provided critical support, offering students a space to connect with others who shared similar experiences. However, the availability of these resources varied widely across

schools, reflecting the inconsistent institutional support faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ students.

The inconsistency in meeting safety, belonging, and esteem needs markedly shaped students' progress toward the final tier of Maslow's hierarchy: self-actualization. While few participants reported fully achieving self-actualization, many expressed aspirations that reflected a strong sense of purpose and future-oriented thinking. Students who had access to stable, affirming environments described developing personal goals centered on advocacy, social justice, and community-building. Several participants expressed a desire to pursue careers in education, counseling, or social work, specifically to support LGBTQ+ youth facing similar challenges. However, for students in less supportive environments, the pursuit of self-actualization remained an aspirational goal rather than an achievable reality, with structural barriers, such as inconsistent school climates and the lack of long-term peer support, limiting their ability to fully engage in personal growth and self-expression.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that while military-connected LGBTQ+ youth often had their basic physiological needs met, their experiences across the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy were marked by instability and vulnerability. The lack of consistent safety, belonging, and esteem undermined their overall well-being and academic engagement, while access to affirming relationships and supportive school environments served as critical protective factors. The cyclical nature of relocation meant that even when students found stability in one school, they often had to restart the process in a new environment, further complicating their ability to achieve self-actualization. Rather than progressing through Maslow's hierarchy in a linear fashion, participants often cycled between stages, with each relocation resetting their progress

and requiring renewed efforts to establish safety, belonging, and self-worth in unfamiliar school environments.

These findings underscore the profound impact of systemic instability on the psychosocial well-being of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. While military structures provided for participants' basic survival, the absence of consistent social supports, inclusive policies, and affirming school environments hindered their progress toward higher-level needs, such as esteem and self-actualization. For many participants, aspirations for future success and advocacy were rooted in their desire to overcome these challenges and create safer, more inclusive environments for others. This cyclical pattern of unmet needs and resilience highlights how inconsistent support and disrupted peer networks shaped the educational experiences and personal growth trajectories of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Based on this analysis, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs proved to be a valuable framework for understanding the educational experiences and well-being of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. While participants consistently had their physiological needs met through military-provided housing, healthcare, and financial stability, their higher-level needs for safety, belonging esteem, and self-actualization were frequently compromised by school instability and inconsistent support systems. The transient nature of military life disrupted social connections and exposed students to varying school climates, often forcing them into cycles of hypervigilance and identity concealment. These findings highlight how unmet needs in one domain, particularly safety and belonging, created cascading effects that undermined both academic and engagement and personal well-being. For many participants, aspirations for future success and advocacy were rooted in their desire to overcome these challenges and create more inclusive environments for others. This cyclical pattern of resilience and vulnerability

underscores the importance of consistent institutional support, affirming peer networks, and inclusive school climates in fostering the holistic development and long-term success of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Implications

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, particularly regarding how school environments, institutional practices, and social supports shape their academic and emotional well-being. The study underscores the complex relationship between risk factors, such as bullying, social isolation, and frequent relocations, and protective factors, including affirming educators, peer networks, and inclusive school policies. These findings have implications for future research, educational practices, and policy development.

Implications for Future Research

The findings highlight several avenues for future inquiry that could further illuminate the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. One area involves examining whether the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth differ based on the branch of the military their family is affiliated with. Each branch, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, have distinct cultures, policies, and support structures that may influence how youth navigate school environments, access resources, and cope with relocation-related stressors. Understanding these branch-specific dynamics could inform targeted interventions and tailored support across military communities.

Additionally, while this study explored the intersection of military connectedness and LGBTQ+ identity, future research could further investigate the experiences of transgender and non-binary youth within military families. These students may encounter distinct challenges

compared to their lesbian, gay, or bisexual peers, including heightened vulnerability to victimization, identity concealment, and inconsistent access to affirming resources. Expanding the sample size to include a broader range of participants would also improve generalizability, providing more comprehensive insights into how experiences may differ based on gender identity, geographic location, or school setting.

Longitudinal studies could further examine how relocation and school transitions affect the long-term academic and emotional trajectories of LGBTQ+ students, shedding light on whether resilience strategies evolve or diminish over time. Such studies could explore how protective factors, such as affirming educators, peer networks, and virtual communities, shape students' educational outcomes and well-being across different developmental stages.

The findings also suggest the need to explore the role of virtual platforms in peer support. Many participants relied on digital communities to maintain the continuity of social connections during relocations. Future studies could investigate how virtual platforms can supplement in-person support systems and foster resilience among transient LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, research into the dynamics of school LGBTQ+ policymaking, examining what factors influence policy adoption, implementation, and enforcement, could provide valuable insights into how schools can create more affirming environments.

Future research could also investigate how regionality impacts the existence of protective school environments for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. Understanding how state, district, and community-level policies intersect with military culture could inform more consistent and inclusive practices across school systems. Finally, exploring the higher education attainment of military-connected LGBTQ+ high school graduates compared to their peers would provide insight into how school experiences shape post-secondary opportunities and long-term success.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several actionable recommendations can guide educators, school leaders, policymakers, and military institutions in fostering inclusive environments for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. These recommendations address the need for systemic support, tailored interventions, and collaborative practices that promote safety, belonging, and academic success.

Recommendations for Practice

Professional Development for Educators

Given the study's findings that inconsistent educator support contributed to students' vulnerability, schools should implement comprehensive professional development programs focused on LGBTQ+ inclusivity, with an emphasis on the unique challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. These programs should equip educators with the skills to identify and address victimization, create affirming classroom environments, and provide culturally responsive support for mobile students. Training should extend beyond general LGBTQ+ inclusivity to include strategies for supporting students during school transitions, addressing the emotional toll of frequent relocations, and recognizing subtle forms of harassment, such as misgendering and social exclusion. Schools should ensure that these trainings are ongoing and integrated into existing professional development frameworks rather than one-time initiatives.

Tailored Transition Protocols

The transient nature of military life often disrupts students' access to stable support systems. To address this challenge, schools should develop structured transition protocols specifically designed for newly transferred LGBTQ+ students. These protocols should include intake meetings within the first two weeks of enrollment to identify both academic and social-

emotional support needs. Schools should prioritize early connections with school counselors, LGBTQ+-friendly peer groups, and access to school-based and community resources. Regular check-ins with counselors and peer mentors should be scheduled throughout the first semester to facilitate smoother adjustment during school transitions. To ensure consistency, transition protocols should be standardized across all schools serving military families, with clear implementation guidelines for administrators and staff.

LGBTQ+ Peer Support Networks

Findings revealed that peer connections were critical to students' resilience, particularly during relocations. Schools should prioritize the establishment of LGBTQ+ peer support networks, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), to create safe spaces for students. These networks should be student-led but supported by trained staff members who can facilitate meetings, ensure inclusivity, and promote student leadership. In schools without on-campus organizations, partnerships with external LGBTQ+ organizations can facilitate access to virtual peer communities, ensuring continuity of support throughout transitions. Schools should also promote these networks during student orientation and transition meetings to increase awareness and engagement among newly transferred students.

Anti-Bullying Policies and Intervention Training

The study highlighted the inconsistent enforcement of anti-bullying policies, contributing to students' vulnerability. Schools should adopt clear, enforceable anti-bullying protocols that address both overt and subtle forms of harassment, including identity-based microaggressions. To ensure consistent enforcement, schools should implement regular policy reviews and establish confidential reporting channels for students. Restorative practices, such as facilitated dialogues and peer mediation, can promote accountability while fostering understanding among

students. Comprehensive bystander intervention training for both educators and students can further strengthen schoolwide support for marginalized youth. These initiatives should be monitored annually, with student feedback informing improvements to policy implementation.

School-Based and Virtual Mental Health Support

Given the prevalence of mental health challenges reported by participants, schools should prioritize the availability of culturally competent mental health services tailored to the unique experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. This includes ensuring that school counselors receive training on LGBTQ+ issues and military life stressors, such as frequent relocations and disruptions to social networks. Mental health services should be integrated into the school's support framework, with counselors conducting regular check-ins and collaborating with families to provide comprehensive care. To address the needs of students during school transitions, schools should also promote access to virtual mental health platforms and telehealth counseling services, ensuring continuity of care regardless of geographic location.

Recommendations for Policy

Standardized LGBTQ+ Protections Across Schools

To address the variability in school climates experienced by military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, educational policies should establish standardized protections across all schools serving military families. These policies should explicitly protect students based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Consistent implementation across schools, regardless of geographic location, is essential for ensuring continuity of support for mobile students. School districts and military-affiliated educational organizations should establish clear guidelines for implementing these protections and provide accountability measures, such as annual climate surveys and student feedback loops, to ensure effectiveness.

Collaboration Between Schools and Military Institutions

The study revealed a lack of coordination between schools and military institutions in supporting LGBTQ+ youth during transitions. Specifically, there is a gap in structured, collaborative systems that address the unique challenges faced by military-connected LGBTQ+ students, particularly during school relocations, when continuity of support is most vulnerable. Schools, military family services, and counseling centers should collaborate to address this gap by providing tailored resources for students and families. This partnership should include culturally competent training for educators, streamlined communication protocols between military installations and schools, and shared resource hubs to ensure continuity of care during relocations. Joint initiatives, such as school-based transition programs and family support networks, can further strengthen this collaboration. Additionally, military-connected schools should also develop transition toolkits to assist families during relocations, including digital resources, checklists, and support contacts.

Access to Virtual Support Platforms

Given participants' reliance on digital platforms for peer support, policies should promote equitable access to virtual support platforms for LGBTQ+ youth. These platforms can supplement in-person networks and provide continuity of care during school transitions. Schools and military organizations should collaborate to establish centralized, secure online hubs where students can access peer mentoring, counseling services, and educational resources, regardless of their geographic location. To ensure accessibility, schools should provide information about available platforms during student intake and transition meetings. Military family support centers can further promote these platforms as part of their relocation resources.

Accountability and Enforcement Mechanisms

While policies promoting inclusivity and anti-bullying exist in many schools, the study found significant gaps in enforcement. To address this, policymakers should implement accountability mechanisms, such as regular audits of school climate, anonymous reporting systems for harassment, and periodic reviews of anti-bullying training effectiveness. These measures will ensure that policies are not only adopted but actively enforced to protect military-connected LGBTQ+ students. Schools should conduct annual climate assessments and report findings to district-level leadership, ensuring that disparities are promptly addressed.

Inclusive Support for Transgender and Non-Binary Students

Recognizing the heightened vulnerabilities faced by transgender and non-binary students, policies should specifically address their unique needs during school transitions. This includes ensuring access to gender-affirming facilities, such as restrooms and locker rooms, and providing clear guidelines for name and pronoun use in school records. Educators and staff should receive training on supporting transgender students, including how to address identity-based bullying and promote inclusive classroom practices. Schools should also collaborate with military family support services to provide resources for families navigating gender-affirming care during relocations.

Limitations

While this study provides insights into the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. These limitations primarily relate to the study's sample size, participant demographics, methodology, and scope, all of which may influence the generalizability and applicability of the results.

One notable limitation is the relatively small sample size, which, while sufficient for identifying themes and patterns, limits the ability to generalize findings to all military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. The experiences described by participants, though rich and informative, reflect individual perspectives that may not capture the full range of experiences within this diverse population. A larger sample, particularly one that includes participants from different regions, school settings, and military-affiliated communities, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various contextual factors shape the educational and social experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ students.

The study's participant demographics also present limitations. While efforts were made to capture diverse identities, the sample was not fully representative of the broader LGBTQ+ community. For instance, transgender and non-binary youth were underrepresented, limiting the ability to explore how gender identity intersects with military-connectedness. Given that transgender and non-binary students often face unique challenges in school settings, future research should prioritize the inclusion of these voices to better understand the complexities of their experiences.

Methodologically, the study relied on self-reported data collected through interviews, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. Participants may have emphasized certain experiences while underreporting others, consciously or unconsciously shaping their narratives based on what they perceived as socially acceptable or relevant to the study's focus. While the interview approach allowed for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, the inclusion of additional data sources, such as school climate surveys, academic records, or observational data, could have provided a more holistic view of participants' experiences.

The scope of the study was also limited to examining the intersection of military-connectedness and LGBTQ+ identity within the context of school environments. While this focus yielded important insights, it did not explore other contexts that may significantly impact participants' well-being, such as family dynamics, community support systems, or healthcare access. Given the influential role of these factors in shaping the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, future research should adopt a more comprehensive approach that considers how multiple domains intersect to influence educational and emotional outcomes.

Finally, the cross-sectional design of this study captures participants' experiences at a single point in time, limiting the ability to examine how experiences and outcomes evolve over time. Given the transient nature of military life, a longitudinal approach could provide valuable insights into how relocation, school climate, and support systems interact to shape long-term educational trajectories, mental health outcomes, and personal development for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a critical foundation for understanding the unique challenges and protective factors shaping the educational experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ youth. While the findings are not universally generalizable, they offer valuable insights that can inform future research, educational practices, and policy development aimed at creating more inclusive and supportive school environments for this population.

Summary of Important Outcomes

This chapter explored the implications of the study's findings, offering insights into how military-connected LGBTQ+ youth navigate the intersection of their identities within school environments shaped by frequent relocations and inconsistent institutional support. The findings highlighted the complex interplay between risk factors, such as bullying, social isolation, and

instability, and protective factors, including affirming educators, peer support networks, and inclusive school policies. While military benefits ensured that students' basic physiological needs were consistently met, higher-level needs, particularly safety, belonging, and esteem, were often compromised by varying school climates.

Central to the study's findings was the pivotal role of school climate in shaping students' experiences. Participants who attended schools with strong anti-bullying policies, culturally competent educators, and visible LGBTQ+ support structures reported more positive academic and emotional outcomes. In contrast, students in schools lacking these protections experienced heightened stress, identity concealment, and disengagement. The transient nature of military life further exacerbated these challenges, requiring students to continually assess the inclusivity and safety of each new school environment.

Despite these obstacles, many participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, often leveraging academic achievement as a coping mechanism. For some, schoolwork provided a sense of control amid the instability of relocation and social exclusion. This finding contrasts with broader research suggesting that LGBTQ+ youth often experience academic declines due to discrimination, indicating that the military community's emphasis on adaptability, structure, and goal-setting may cultivate unique resilience mechanisms among this population.

The study also revealed that while few participants had reached the stage of self-actualization within Maslow's framework, many expressed aspirations for future advocacy and leadership. Students who experienced supportive environments were more likely to develop long-term educational and career goals centered on social justice and community-building, underscoring the transformative potential of inclusive school practices.

Ultimately, these findings emphasize the critical need for consistency in institutional support across schools serving military families. The absence of uniform policies, educator training, and peer support networks created a fragmented landscape that left students vulnerable to marginalization. Addressing these gaps requires sustained collaboration among educators, school leaders, policymakers, and military institutions to create environments where military-connected LGBTQ+ youth can not only survive but thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. As military families continue to navigate frequent relocations, ensuring that LGBTQ+ students have access to affirming school climates across all educational settings remains an urgent priority for fostering resilience, well-being, and long-term success.

Researcher Post-Study Reflexivity

In reflecting on this study, I believe it is essential to consider my own position in relation to the research. Having grown up as a military-connected student and identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I approached this work with both a personal connection and a deep sense of responsibility. My educational experiences were shaped by a different sociopolitical landscape, one in which policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" were not only in effect but also deeply ingrained in the culture of the military and its surrounding institutions. During my adolescence, open discussions about identity were rare, and expressions of queerness were often suppressed or entirely concealed. This silence extended into schools, where fitting in often meant remaining quiet about one's identity.

In contrast, many of the participants in this study came of age in a more publicly visible era for LGBTQ+ rights, one marked by the legalization of same-sex marriage and increasing national conversations about inclusion and equity. Some participants described coming out in middle or high school, and several encountered affirming educators and student groups along the

way. However, despite these shifts, the data also revealed that policies and protections do not always translate into lived safety, particularly for military-connected students navigating frequent relocations and inconsistent school climates. Their stories made clear that visibility does not guarantee acceptance, and that institutional progress has not erased the need for support, advocacy, and consistency.

As someone who once navigated these systems under a vastly different set of expectations, I was deeply moved by the resilience, clarity, and vulnerability shared by the participants. I saw parallels between their stories and my own, particularly in the ways identity can be reshaped, or sometimes hidden, depending on the environment. Yet I also recognized that their experiences were not mine to project onto. I remained mindful throughout the research process to let participants' voices speak for themselves, rather than interpreting their narratives through the lens of my own history.

This study reaffirmed that while progress has been made, structural inconsistencies persist, particularly for those navigating multiple layers of identity. My position as both an insider and an outsider (someone familiar with the systems but separated by time and context) allowed me to approach the work with empathy, while also taking on a responsibility to examine my assumptions. Ultimately, the participants' voices deepened my understanding of how systems of support and systems of exclusion continue to shape the academic and emotional journeys of LGBTQ+ youth in military-connected schools.

While their stories are rooted in personal experience, they are also deeply connected to the broader social and political climate in which those experiences take shape. This reflection would be incomplete without acknowledging the current political climate and its implications for LGBTQ+ students. Despite the progress made in recent years, we are now witnessing a

resurgence of policies and rhetoric that seek to undermine the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ individuals. From executive orders targeting trans individuals to state-level legislation like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill, the social and educational landscapes are again shifting, this time in ways that threaten visibility, inclusion, and safety. As we look ahead, the findings of this study take on greater urgency. They serve as a reminder that support systems cannot be assumed; they must be built, maintained, and defended. Schools have the power to either amplify or buffer against broader sociopolitical harm. It is my hope that this research not only brings attention to the lived realities of military-connected LGBTQ+ students but also encourages school systems, policymakers, and communities to act with intention and care in shaping educational environments that honor the full humanity of *all* students, regardless of identity, background, or circumstance.

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APPENDIX A:
Social Media Post

Attention!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR STUDY ON MILITARY-CONNECTED LGBTQ+ EXPERIENCES

Help us understand the unique experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals during their middle and high school years.

Who can take part in this study?

We're seeking young adults aged 18-25 who:

1. Had a parent actively serving in the U.S. Military while in grades 6-12
2. Identify as LGBTQ+

How to Participate:

Interested participants aged 18 and older can scan the [QR Code](#) to learn more and take the survey.



Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Antoine Sharpe at asharpe@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

APPENDIX B:

Support Resources for LGBTQ+ Participants

Support Resources for LGBTQ+ Individuals

Understanding the sensitive nature of the subjects discussed, it is essential to provide supportive resources for anyone who might experience emotional distress or discomfort. Below is a list of virtual resources designed to offer support, guidance, and a safe space for expression.

The Trevor Project (24/7) - Offers confidential suicide prevention and crisis intervention services to LGBTQ+ youth.

- Website: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>
- Lifeline: 1-866-488-7386
- Text: START to 678678

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) - Works to ensure LGBTQ+ students can learn in a school environment free from bullying and harassment.

- Website: <https://www.glsen.org/>

It Gets Better Project – Uplifts, empowers, and connects LGBTQ+ youth around the globe.

- Website: <https://itgetsbetter.org/>

PFLAG (Parents, families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) - Offers support groups and resources for LGBTQ+ people, their parents and families, and allies.

- Website: <https://pflag.org/>

Trans Lifeline - A grassroots hotline offering direct emotional and financial support to trans people in crisis.

- Website: <https://translifeline.org/>
- Hotline: 1-877-565-8860

National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTCN) - Committed to transforming mental health for queer and trans people of color.

- Website: <https://www.nqttcn.com/>

Military OneSource (24/7) - Offers a range of support services for military families, including confidential non-medical counseling.

- Website: <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/>
- Hotline: 1-800-342-9647

These resources are provided as a means of support and empowerment. Feel free to reach out to any of these services should you need assistance or someone to talk to.

APPENDIX C:

Survey to Measure Academic and Social Experiences of Military-Connected LGBTQ+ Young

Adults

Survey:

Thank you for participating! Your experiences are valuable. This survey will take about 15 minutes and aim to better understand your perspective. Your responses are completely confidential.

Instructions: Please read each question carefully and select the response that best represents your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. If a question does not apply to you or if you prefer not to answer, feel free to skip it. Your honest and thoughtful responses will greatly contribute to the success of this study.

Before you begin:

Lets clarify some terms:

- Protective Factors: Things in your life that help you stay strong and positive.
- Risk Factors: Challenges that make it harder for you to be happy or successful.

Demographic Information:

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with?
 - a) Male
 - b) Female
 - c) Transgender Male
 - d) Transgender Female
 - e) Non-binary/Non-conforming
 - f) Prefer to self-describe:

- g) Prefer not to say. _____
3. Have you had at least one parent or guardian who served in the military during your secondary education (e.g., active-duty personnel, reservist, dependent, veteran, etc.):
- a) Yes ____
- b) No ____

Academic Performance and Aspirations:

1. How would you rate your overall academic performance during your secondary education?
- a) Excellent (A Average) ____
- b) Above Average (B Average) ____
- c) Average (C Average) ____
- d) Below average (D Average) ____
- e) Poor (F Average) ____
2. To what extent do you believe your LGBTQ+ identity and/or military-connected status influenced your academic performance during your secondary education? [Scale: 1(Not at all) to 5 (Significantly)]
3. What were your educational goals or aspirations during your secondary education?
- a) Finish high school diploma / Obtain GED
- b) Enroll in a career and technical or trade school
- c) Pursue a two-year college degree (Associate's)
- d) Pursue a four-year college degree (Bachelor's)
- e) Join the military or pursue military education
- f) Start a business or entrepreneurial venture
- g) Not sure/ Exploring options

- h) Other (please specific): _____
4. Have you faced any barriers or challenges in pursuing your educational goals due to being LGBTQ+ and/or military-connected? [yes/No; If yes, please describe]
5. What positive factors contributed to your academic success during your secondary education? (Please select all that apply)
- a) Support from family and friends
 - b) Access to educational resources (books, internet, etc.)
 - c) Positive school environment
 - d) Participation in extracurricular activities
 - e) Effective study habits
 - f) Encouragement from teachers or mentors
 - g) Personal motivation and goals
 - h) Support services (tutoring, counseling)
 - i) Feeling safe and accepted at school.
 - j) Other (please specify): _____
6. What challenges did you face in school that affected your academic performance or well-being? (Select all that apply)
- a) Bullying or harassment
 - b) Lack of support from teachers or staff
 - c) Difficulty accessing resources (books, internet, etc.)
 - d) Feeling unsafe or unwelcome
 - e) Struggles with mental health
 - f) Difficulty balancing school with other responsibilities (work, family care)

- g) Pressure to perform academically
 - h) Navigating school policies that don't support LGBTQ+ identities
 - i) Experiencing discrimination or exclusion
 - j) Other (please specific)
7. How did your experiences in school as a military-connected LGBTQ+ individual influence your current life choices and perspectives?
 8. Looking back, what could have been done differently at your school to better support your educational and personal development?

Experiences as an LGBTQ+ student:

1. How open were you about your LGBTQ+ identity at school? [Scale 1(not open) to 5 (very open)]
2. Did you access any LGBTQ+ resources or support groups at school? Were they helpful? [Yes/No; If yes, please describe]
3. Describe how being LGBTQ+ has influenced your relationship with peers and teachers during your secondary education.
4. What actions did your school take to create an inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ students?
5. Reflecting on your time in secondary education, what additional support or resources do you wish had been available for LGBTQ+ students?

School Environment for LGBTQ+ Students:

1. How well did your school support LGBTQ+ students like yourself? [Scale: 1 (not at all) to 5 (Very well)]

2. To what degree did your school protect LGBTQ+ students from harassment, discrimination, and/or bullying?

- a) All the Time
- b) Some of the Time
- c) Not Very Often
- d) Not at All

2. Did you witness or experience bullying or discrimination at school related to LGBTQ+ identities? [Yes/No; If yes, please describe]

2. Did your school have policies or initiatives specifically aimed at protecting LGBTQ+ students? Please give examples

3. How effective did you find these policies or initiatives in creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ students? [Scale 1 (Not effective) to 5 (Very effective)]

4. What improvements or changes would you suggest to make the schools more welcoming place for LGBTQ+ students, based on your experiences?

6. How did your LGBTQ+ identity impact your participation in school activities or events? [Scale; 1 (Significantly reduced my participation), 2 (Somewhat reduced my participation), 3 (Had no impact on my participation), 4 (Somewhat increased my participation), 5 (Significantly increased my participation)]

7. Were there any teachers or staff members who you felt were allies or particularly supportive of LGBTQ+ students? Please describe how they supported you or other students.

8. How did the overall school culture and peer attitudes impact your sense of safety and belonging at school?
9. Did your school offer any LGBTQ+ specific education or awareness programs? If so, how effective were these in improving the school climate for LGBTQ+ students?
[Yes/No; If yes, please describe effectiveness]
10. Reflecting on your time at school, what one major change would you suggest to improve the experience for current and future LGBTQ+ students?

Experiences as a Military-Connected Student:

1. Being part of a military family, how often did you move schools?
 - a) Never
 - b) Rarely
 - c) Sometimes
 - d) Often
3. Considering your experience as part of a military family, how did moves impact your friendships and social interactions at school? (Choose one)
 - a) I found it easy to make new friends and adjust quickly.
 - b) It was challenging to form lasting friendships due to frequent moves.
 - c) I often felt isolated or left out at new schools.
 - d) It had little to no impact on my social life.
 - e) Other (please specify): _____
4. Did you feel your school understood and supported your needs as a military-connected student? [Scale 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very Well)]

5. Share an experience where being military-connected had a positive or negative impact on your school life.
6. What resources or support would have helped you, as a military-connected student, thrive at school?
7. How did frequent relocations affect your academic performance?
 - a) Positively, by exposing me to different educational environments
 - b) Negatively, due to continuous adjustments and lack of continuity
 - c) No significant impact
 - d) Other (please specify): _____
8. Were there specific programs or support systems at any of your schools that were particularly effective in assisting military-connected students like yourself? Please describe.
9. How did the attitude of teachers and school staff towards military families influence your school experience?
 - a) Very positively
 - b) Somewhat positively
 - c) Neutral
 - d) Somewhat negatively
 - e) Very negatively
 - f) Not applicable/Don't know
10. Did you participate in any school-based or community support groups for military families? Were they helpful?
 - a) Yes, very helpful
 - b) Yes, somewhat helpful

- c) Yes, but not helpful
- d) No

11. Looking back, what would have made your transitions between schools easier or more supportive?

Experiences of Being LGBTQ+ and Military-Connected:

1. How has being both LGBTQ+ and military-connected influenced your educational experiences?
2. Have you found communities or support networks that understand and support both your LGBTQ+ identity and military-connected background? If so, describe these communities.
3. What strategies have you used to navigate the challenges of being both LGBTQ+ and military-connected? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Seeking support from friends or groups within the LGBTQ+ community
 - b. Finding allies and support within military family communities
 - c. Relying on online communities or resources for advice and support
 - d. Keeping aspects of my identity private
 - e. Actively participating in school or community groups that embrace diversity
 - f. Other Strategies (please specify): _____
4. What unique strengths do you feel being LGBTQ+ and military-connected has provided you? (Select all that apply)
 - a. Adaptability to new situations or environments
 - b. Resilience in facing challenges
 - c. A strong sense of empathy and understanding towards others
 - d. A unique perspective on diversity and inclusion

- e. Advanced problem-solving skills due to navigating complex social situations
 - f. Enhanced communication skills from interacting with diverse groups
 - g. Other (Please specify): _____
5. What are the particular challenges you have encountered as someone who is both LGBTQ+ and military-connected? (Select all that apply)
- a. Feeling like I don't fully belong in either the LGBTQ+ or military community
 - b. Navigating discourse of my LGBTQ+ identity in military environments
 - c. Dealing with moving and finding new support networks
 - d. Balancing the need for privacy with the desire for authenticity
 - e. Facing stigma or misunderstanding from peers or adults
 - f. Other (Please specify): _____
6. What specific resources or supports would better serve students who are both LGBTQ+ and military-connected in navigating their educational journey?
7. How frequently have you accessed specific resources aimed at supporting LGBTQ+ and military-connected students during your education?
- a) Never
 - b) Rarely
 - c) Sometimes
 - d) Often
 - e) Always

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

1. *Physiological Needs:* On a scale of 1 to 5, rate how well your basic physiological needs (Such as food, water, and shelter) are met during your secondary education. [Scale: 1 (Not met) to 5 (Fully met)]
2. *Safety needs:* How secure did you feel at your school during your secondary education? [Scale: 1 (Not secure) to 5 (Very secure)]
3. *Love and Belonging Needs:* Did you feel a sense of belonging and acceptance at school and within your family during your secondary education? [Scale: 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Completely)]
4. *Esteem Needs:* Rate your level of self-esteem and how much you felt valued and respected by others during your secondary education. [Scale: 1 (Very low) to 5 (Very high)]
5. *Self-Actualization:* Did you have opportunities for personal growth and to pursue your interests and talents at school during your secondary education? [Scale: 1 (No opportunities) to 5 (Many opportunities)]

Thank you for completing this survey! Your valuable insights will contribute to our understanding of the educational experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ young adults during their secondary education. Your participation is greatly appreciated. If you have any additional comments or concerns, please feel free to share them below:

APPENDIX D:
Interview Questions

Sample Interviews Questions:

Research Question 1: How did participants describe the risk factors influencing school victimization during their secondary education as military-connected LGBT+ individuals?

1. Please describe any instances or experiences where you felt at risk due to your sexual or gender identity during your secondary education.
2. How did these risk factors affect your educational experiences?
3. In what ways do you perceive these risk factors impacted your experiences in school?

Research Question 2: How did participants describe the protective factors influencing school victimization during their secondary education as military-connected LGBT+ individuals?

1. Please share any examples of supportive environments or individuals who helped you navigate your sexual or gender identity during your secondary education.
2. How did these protective factors influence your academic performance and educational ambitions?
3. From your perspective, what protective factors do you believe influenced your academic performance and educational ambitions as an LGBTQ+ military-connected individual?

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between the perceived degree of risk factors and the academic performance and educational ambitions of self-identified LGBTQ+ military-connected secondary students?

1. How did you perceive the extent to which risk factors affected your academic performance and educational goals during your secondary education?
2. Do you believe there was a correlation between these risk factors and your academic achievements and aspirations?

Research Question 4: Is there a relationship between the perceived degree of protective factors and the academic performance and educational ambitions of self-identified LGBTQ+ military-connected secondary students?

1. Do you see a connection between these protective factors and your academic achievements and aspirations during your secondary education?

Research Question 5: What do participants in this study recommend needs to be done to make learning environments more protective of LGBTQ+ students?

1. Based on your experience, what recommendations do you have for creating safer and more inclusive learning environments for military-connected LGBTQ+ youth?
2. Are there any specific strategies or initiatives you believe would be effective in fostering a more protective educational environment?

Research Question 6: How do the experiences of military-connected LGBTQ+ individuals align with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how does this influence their academic performance and educational aspirations?

Physiological needs:

1. Reflect on how your basic needs (like food, shelter, and safety) were met during your secondary education. Did you face any challenges in this area due to your sexual or gender identity?
2. How did these basic needs, or the lack thereof, impact your ability to focus and succeed academically during that time?

Safety Needs:

1. Looking back, how supported did you feel at school and at home in terms of safety and security, both physically and emotionally?

2. Can you describe any past experiences where your need for safety was not met and how this influenced your academic focus or performance?

Love and Belonging Needs:

1. How do your experiences at school and within your family align with your need for love, acceptance, and belonging during your secondary education? Were there areas where this need was unfulfilled?
2. How did the level of acceptance and support from your peers and family affect your educational ambitions and self-esteem back then?

Esteem Needs:

1. Discuss how being a part of a military-connected family and identifying as LGBTQ+ affected your self-esteem and self-confidence, specifically in academic settings during your secondary education.
2. How did your achievements or challenges at school impact your sense of accomplishment and self-worth during that period?

Self-Actualization:

1. Do you feel that your sexual or gender identity and being part of a military family influenced your pursuit of personal goals and self-fulfillment during your secondary education? How so?
2. How did your experiences align with your aspirations for personal growth, and what role did education play in this journey?

General Questions Related to Maslow's Hierarchy:

1. Reflecting on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which level do you feel is most impacted by your experiences as a military-connected LGBTQ+ youth?

2. Were there specific needs within this hierarchy that you struggled to meet during that time? How do these unmet needs influence your aspirations and performance in school?

APPENDIX E:

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Form



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04511-2024

Responsible Researcher(s): Antoine Sharpe

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Reynaldo Martinez

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. Regina Suriel

Project Title: *Navigating Dual Identities: The Impact of Military Life and LGBTQ+ Identity on the Academic Aspirations and Well-being of Youth.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Protocol was originally submitted as an expedited IRB. Following modifications made by the researcher, the protocol was approved as Exempt – category 2.*
- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interview group sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. **Therefore, upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted from all recording and storage devices used.***
- *In keeping with established consent guidelines, audio recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the interview consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing participant's willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement. The transcript must document the researcher reading and obtaining consent.*
- *Pseudonym lists must be kept in a separate, secure file from corresponding name, email lists, etc.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email list, transcript, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olphie

07.25.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.