THE IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY ON CANADIAN MILITARY FAMILIES AND THEIR CHILDREN’S ACCESS SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

by

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Abstract

To achieve academic success, children with learning-related disabilities often receive special education supports at school. Currently, Canada does not have a federal department or integrated national system of education. Instead, each province and territory has a separate department or ministry that is responsible for the organization and delivery of education, including special education, at the elementary level. At the macro (national) level, inclusive education is the policy across Canada. However, each province and territory has its own legislation, definitions, and policies mandating special education services. These variations result in little consistency at the micro (individual school) level. Differences between eligibility requirements, supports offered, and delivery methods may present challenges for highly mobile families who must navigate new special education systems on behalf of their children with medical or learning challenges. One of the defining features of the Canadian military lifestyle is geographic mobility. As a result, many families are tasked with navigating new school systems for their children, a task that may be more difficult when children require special education services. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of geographic mobility on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. The secondary objective was to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would have helped facilitate access. A qualitative approach, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), was employed due to of its focus on individuals’ experiences and their understandings of a particular phenomenon. IPA allowed participants to reflect on the significance of their experiences, while the researcher engaged with these reflections to make sense of the meanings associated with their experiences. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with civilian caregivers who have a child with special education needs. An interview guide and probes were used to elicit rich, detailed, first-person accounts of their experiences navigating new special education systems. The main themes that emerged from the participants’ combined experiences addressed the emotional components of experiencing a transition, factors that may facilitate access to special education services, and career implications associated with accessing and
maintaining special education services. Findings from the study illustrate that Canadian families experience many, and often times severe, barriers to accessing special education services after a posting. Furthermore, the impacts reported throughout the study echo the existing American literature on geographic mobility and access to special education services. Building on the literature, this study also highlights the need for further research exploring factors that create unique barriers to access in a Canadian context, resulting from the current special education climate, military policies, and military family support services.
Co-Authorship

Kristin Ostler is the MSc Candidate. The study proposals and each chapter in this thesis were developed with guidance from her academic supervisor Dr. Heidi Cramm. Dr. Nancy Hutchinson, a professor in the Queen’s Faculty of Education, acted as a co-supervisor for an independent study that informed a policy analysis that informed the thesis project. Kristin Ostler conducted all of the literature review, data collection and analyses, and writing for this thesis. The thesis committee (John Freeman and Deborah Norris) provided important feedback to help shape the direction of the thesis. Dr. Heidi Cramm contributed to data analysis through regular de-briefing sessions. Dr. Heidi Cramm also contributed by providing feedback on all of the chapters in this thesis. Overall, Kristin Ostler was responsible for 100% of the material in this thesis.
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Finally, a warm thank-you to my family. Without your support all of my accomplishments, including this study, would not be possible.
Reflexivity Statement

Growing up in a military family, I am familiar with unique lifestyle demands that accompany a military career, such as geographic mobility. Although I did not personally move cities or schools more than the average civilian family, my understanding of military culture was deepened through exposure and discussions with friends who moved frequently. Growing up immersed in a military culture led me to develop a desire to understand how geographic mobility may affect family functioning and youth development.

During my undergraduate degree, I completed many courses within the field of Disability and Wellness. I also became actively involved in university and community initiatives that advocated for inclusive communities and awareness of intellectual disabilities. These experiences sparked a desire to further explore and understand societal barriers to participation that individuals with disabilities encounter. This passion led me to pursue a Master’s degree in Rehabilitation Sciences in the field of Disability and Wellness at Queen’s University.

A researcher's prior knowledge and experiences will inevitably affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions (Malterud, 2001). Thus, it is important for the researcher to be aware of the potential for bias and take steps ensure reflexivity and transparency throughout the entire research process. This was achieved throughout the study by having ongoing debriefings with the research supervisor and committee members. Continuous dialogue led to the development of complementary as well as divergent understandings of the interview findings, thereby helping to ensure that my biases were not explicitly framing the findings.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................. v
Reflexivity Statement ........................................................................................................ vi
List of Abbreviations .......................................................................................................... x
Chapter 1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 1
  Unique military lifestyle demands .................................................................................... 2
    Military Families ........................................................................................................... 3
  Children growing up in military families ........................................................................ 4
  Schools that support military-connected students .......................................................... 5
Statement of the Problem and Rationale ............................................................................. 7
The Research Questions ...................................................................................................... 9
Link to Rehabilitation Sciences .......................................................................................... 9
Organization of the thesis .................................................................................................... 10
Chapter 2 Literature Review .............................................................................................. 11
  Geographic Mobility Defined .......................................................................................... 11
  Defining Military-Connected Students .......................................................................... 13
  Special Education Across Canada ................................................................................ 15
Navigating New Special Education Systems ....................................................................... 17
  Eligibility Requirements ............................................................................................... 18
    Processes of Developing and Implementing Individual Education Plans .................... 19
  Services Provided .......................................................................................................... 20
Transition Theory ................................................................................................................ 22
Promoting School Participation for Military-Connected Students ..................................... 23
  1) Positive learning and teaching environment ............................................................... 24
  2) Programming and Procedures .................................................................................. 25
  3) Communication Strategies ...................................................................................... 25
Defining Parental Advocacy ............................................................................................... 26
Current Supports Available to Military Families ............................................................... 28
Chapter 3 Methods ............................................................................................................ 32
  Research Design ............................................................................................................ 32
  Research Paradigm ........................................................................................................ 32
  Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) .............................................................. 34
    Phenomenology .......................................................................................................... 36
Chapter 4

Superordinate Theme 1: The Emotional Components of Transition

Fear of Transition

Frustration with navigating the new system

Exhaustion resulting from navigating a new special education system

Uncertainty regarding postings

Feelings of isolation

Family stress

Super-ordinate Theme 2: Factors that may facilitate access to special education services

Active Strategies Employed to Access Services

Taking on the role of an advocate

Communication Strategies

Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC) Supports

Strategies that Would Help Ease Transition

1) Increased availability of services offered by MFRCs

2) Increased outreach for military families living off base

3) The development of an information package

Super-Ordinate Theme 3: Potential career implications that may arise when parents prioritize securing special education services for their children

Career implications for the partner of the serving member

Career implications for the serving member
List of Abbreviations

Canadian Armed Forces....................................................................................................................CAF
Individualized Education Plan ........................................................................................................IEP
Military Family Resource Centre ....................................................................................................MFRC
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis .......................................................................................IPA
Appreciative Inquiry .....................................................................................................................AI
Chapter 1

Introduction

Schools play a large role in the success and well-being of children. They are not only a place where children learn academic skills, such as reading, writing and math, they are also a place where they learn to get along with other people and develop social skills (Cramm, Tam-Seto, Ostler, in press). However, the extent to which school participation occurs can be influenced by environmental factors (Robson, Albanese, Harrison & Sanders, 2013), such as growing up in a military family. Military-connected student refers to children who are dependents of a member of the Canadian Armed Forces. There is currently no identification system that records the number of military-connected students attending schools located off base; however, as 85% of military families live off base (Daigle, 2013), the percentage of military-connect students attending their local schools off base is likely reflective. Military lifestyle demands, including geographic mobility, may have a particularly profound effect on the school participation for military-connected students (Aronson, Caldwell, & Perkins, 2011; Arnold, Garner, Neale-McFall, & Nunnery, 2011; DePedro, Gilreath & Esqueda, 2014; Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum; 2010; Bradshaw, Figiel & Deutsch, 2014; Chandra, Martin, Hawkins & Richardson, 2010; Cozza, Haskins, & Lerner, 2013; DePedro & Astor, 2011; Garner, Arnold & Nunnery, 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Lester et al., 2010; Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, & Blum 2009; Richardson, Chandra, Martin, Setodji, Hallmark & Campbell, 2011). In particular, students may demonstrate behavioral and emotional adjustment issues (Chandra et al., 2010) and truancy and disciplinary issues (Lester et al., 2010) that may lead to overall lower levels of school participation. Research further suggests that children who have special education needs may be made more vulnerable by
geographic mobility as they must navigate a complex web of legislation, policies and supports to participate fully in all areas of schooling (Arnold et al., 2011; Aronson et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Garner et al. 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2011). This study explores the impact of geographic mobility on military families and their children’s access to special education services as well as supports that may help facilitate access of services.

This chapter provides insight into the unique lifestyle demands that serving CAF members and their families face, and how these demands may make them more vulnerable to additional family stressors, such as navigating special education systems. A statement of the problem and rationale will then be provided, followed by the research questions, links to rehabilitation sciences, and organization of this thesis.

**Unique military lifestyle demands**

The mandate of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) includes: 1) Protecting Canada and defending sovereignty; 2) Defending North America in cooperation with the United States, Canada's closest ally; and 3) Contributing to international peace and security through operations around the world, most often in partnership with allies from other countries (National Defense and the Canadian Armed Forces, 2016). To meet operational and institutional needs, individuals who pursue a career in the CAF must strive to meet unique work, family, and lifestyle demands, each of which contribute to a high stress career. Many enlisted men and women risk their lives every day. Deployments and peacekeeping missions to conflict zones often result in high risk and often times dangerous work environments. Furthermore, officers commonly have jobs where they must worry for more than just their own well-being, as they are responsible for the lives of those under their command. Beyond these obvious risks, CAF members experience many additional
work related stressors. These include frequent relocations, separations from their families for prolonged periods of time, and physical demands related to their training requirements (Daigle, 2013). An American study reported that the combination of risk and additional stressors rank military careers as one of the most stressful careers (CareerCast, 2016).

As illustrated, individuals who peruse a career in the CAF often experience many stressors above those experienced by most working Canadians. The unique lifestyle demands that come with a Military career also go beyond the individual enlisted, affecting the entire family unit. The remainder of this section will explore how these unique lifestyle demands affect the entire family unit and children growing up in military families (with a focus on educational outcomes). The unique demands placed on schools that support military-connected schools will also be explored.

**Military Families**

The Ombudsman’s 2013 report, *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*, stated that there three main characteristics—mobility, separation, and risk—shape the CAF lifestyle for both serving members and their families. Geographic mobility is a constant for military families as they are forced to relocate on a recurring basis, typically moving three times as frequently as their civilian counterparts (Daigle, 2013). The frequent and unpredictable nature of postings has a disruptive influence on family life and contributes to many of the challenges and stresses that Canadian military families face (Daigle, 2013). The second characteristic, separation, results as many CAF members are away from their families, often for protracted periods, throughout much of their careers for training and mission purposes. When children are involved, separations often result in sole parent
responsibility and stress related to fluctuating family dynamics. The third characteristic, risk, includes the possibility of permanent injury, illness, or even death. Risk is a central tenet of the profession of arms, and adds a unique element of stress that most professions do not experience. In isolation, none of these three characteristics is unique to CAF members and their families. However, when combined, the distinctiveness of the military career becomes more obvious (Daigle, 2013). Few occupations or professions expose the overwhelming majority of its people to recurring geographic relocation, relentless separation and elevated levels of risk as a matter of course throughout much of their careers (Daigle, 2013). Overall, The Ombudsman’s (2013) report illustrates that military families are at risk of experiencing a higher level of stress than the typical Canadian family. Therefore, when military families are faced with additional stressors, such as raising a child with special education needs and accessing services, they may be at risk of experiencing a higher level of vulnerability.

**Children growing up in military families**

A body of American literature has shown that stressors related to growing up in a military family, including geographic mobility, may impact the academic performance and school participation of military-connected children (Aronson, et al., 2011; Aronson & Perkins, 2013; Arnold, et al., 2011; Astor, et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Chandra et al., 2010; Cozza et al., 2013; DePedro & Astor, 2011; Garner, et al., 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Mmari et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2010). Within the United States, it is not uncommon for military-connected students to move schools an average of six to nine times from kindergarten to graduation (Aronson et al., 2011) With every move, students must navigate new curricula and school-specific programing, as well as develop new relationships with school staff and peers.
These unique stressors can create emotional and psychological stress for children and their families (Cramm et al., in press). Furthermore, it has been suggested that, with each move, a student may be set back an average of four to six months academically (Hudson-Plush, 2006). Entering a new school and achieving academic success may be even more challenging for military-connected students with special education needs (Arnold et al., 2011; Aronson et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Garner et al. 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2011). Special education legislation and policies vary considerably across Canada, forcing families and students to navigate a complex web of supports every time they experience a posting. American literature has shown that difficulties transferring records and Individual Education Plans, creating rapport with new special education teachers, and securing funding in the new location are exceptionally challenging for military families who have children with special education needs. Thus, actualizing a child’s potential in terms of school participation and academic success may be more difficult for this population.

**Schools that support military-connected students**

While lifestyle demands experienced by children growing up in military families may place them at a higher risk of academic vulnerabilities, research has illustrated that the negative academic outcomes may be mitigated by in school supports specifically designed to meet the needs of this population (Garner et al., 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Mmari et al, 2009; Richardson et al., 2005). Furthermore, research has shown that educators are better able to support military-connected students when they have an understanding of military culture and the unique challenges that these students face (Mmari et al. 2009; Richardson et al., 2005). However, there is currently no systematic identification system used in Canadian public schools to identify
military-connected students. Thus, many educators may not be aware that students may be
experiencing participation challenges associated with growing up in a military family. American
literature has illustrated that even when teachers are aware that children come from military
families, they may not be equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to provide
appropriate supports (Garner et al., 2014; Mmari et al., 2009). Furthermore, there are currently no
mandatory teachers training courses offered any College of Teachers across Canada that address
military culture or focus on sensitivity training to better support this population (Ontario College
of Teachers, 2014). An American study conducted by Garner et al. (2014) found that 62% of the
educators interviewed did not believe they were equipped to meet the emotional needs of
military-connected schools. Furthermore, 50% of the educators said they did not understand
military culture and only 10% said that they had received training that focused on how to support
this unique population.

To summarize, individuals who pursue a career with the CAF experience many unique
work and lifestyle demands that compound and create a high risk, high stress career. The unique
lifestyle demands that come with a military career go beyond the individual enlisted, affecting the
entire family unit. Children growing up in military families may also experience greater
vulnerabilities because of their exposure to a military lifestyle. In particular, research has shown
that geographic mobility may affect military-connected students’ ability to fully participate at
school and reach their academic potentials. Furthermore, schools that support military-connected
students may also not be equipped with the adequate knowledge and resources to appropriately
support this population.
Statement of the Problem and Rationale

CAF members and their families experience lifestyle demands above those experienced by typical Canadian families (Daigle, 2013). Meeting work, family, and lifestyle demands create unique challenges for military families, and may contribute to additional vulnerabilities when families encounter additional demands, such as caring for a child with special education needs. The main objective of this study was to explore how geographic mobility impacts Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. American literature illustrates how geographic mobility may have a particularly profound effect on military-connected students who require special education services (Arnold et al., 2011; Aronson et al., 2013; Garner et al. 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2011). A seminal study by Jagger and Lederer (2014) described four main challenges to accessing special education services that American military families face during a transition. These included:

- battling new school systems;
- navigating different education approaches across different schools;
- limited proactive planning and warm handoff to new school due to uncertainty regarding postings; and
- gaining schools not being adequately prepared for the new students.

Although similar experiences accessing services may exist in Canada, differences in education systems as well as military policies and supports vary and may result in different access barriers. For example, there is currently no Canadian accessible education act comparable to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the US; furthermore, differences in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) development processes, available services, teacher education, and funding mechanisms vary between the two countries. Thus, although similar
experiences of navigating new special education may be reported, specific ways to access services vary. Different military policies and family supports also exist between the two countries. For example, the structure of postings, what supports are available to families who have a child with special education needs, and who provides the supports (i.e., Military Family Resource Centres [MFRCs] in Canada and Military One Source in the United States) vary and may contribute to different means of accessing special education supports. It is important to note that the MFRC does not have a responsibility for directly facilitating access to education services, although they may elect to offer supports in this area should they reflect the needs of their respective bases.

Although 8% of currently active Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members have a child who requires special education services (Daigle, 2013), there have been no Canadian studies exploring the barriers and facilitators that this population faces when navigating services. Furthermore, although there are different ways in which the rates are determined that may limit comparison, it is also important to note that the disability rate is reported to be higher for children growing up in military families (8%) (Daigle, 2013) than to the Canada population as a whole as a whole (4.6%) (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2006).

This study will build upon the American literature that explores the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education services within a Canadian context. Furthermore, beginning to acquire a better understanding of the challenges this population faces, as well as supports that may benefit them, contributes to the growing body of Canadian research addressing the well-being of CAF members and their families.
The Research Questions

The main objective of the study was to explore the impact of geographic mobility on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. The secondary objective was to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would have helped facilitate access.

Link to Rehabilitation Sciences

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines rehabilitation as a process aimed at enabling individuals with disabilities to reach and maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychological and social functional levels (World Health Organization, 2011). Rehabilitation is a goal-oriented process that enables individuals with disabilities to identify and reach their potentials. This is achieved through providing appropriate tools, such as client-focused partnerships with family, providers and the community, as well as environmental and activity modifications that promote participation. Thus, rehabilitation focuses on abilities and aims to facilitate independence, self-determination, and social integration (Alberta Health Services, 2012). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)’s approach to disability and wellness understands functioning and disability as dynamic interactions between health conditions and contextual factors (WHO, 2001). The current study is in line with the ICF as it explores ways by which contextual factors, resulting from geographic mobility, interact and impact the ability of military families to access special education services on their children’s behalf. The WHO also believes that rehabilitation is cross-sectorial and is often carried out by health care providers, specialists in education, and other fields (WHO, 2011). This study is interdisciplinary in nature as it explores how interactions among the student, teachers, school
administration, family and military are all important in empowering and providing the appropriate supports to children with special education needs. Furthermore, reducing barriers to accessing special education services is seen as transformative change that holds potential to enable this population to engage more at school, achieve higher academic success, and ultimately live more satisfying lives as members of their communities – all key components of rehabilitation sciences.

**Organisation of the Thesis**

Following this chapter, Chapter 2 presents a literature review that provides a more in-depth explanation of geographic mobility and special education services across Canada. The review also explores the US-based literature surrounding the impact of geographic mobility on the school participation of military-connected students. Fabian’s (2002) Model of School Transitions is then presented to illustrate different types of discontinuities that families face when transitioning into a new school system. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological approaches and methods used throughout the study. Strategies to enhance the credibility of the study are also presented. Chapter 4 presents the unique experiences of each of the nine participants related to accessing special education services for their children after receiving a posting. This chapter is broken into sections that reflect the themes developed during the data analysis component of the study: the emotional components of experiencing a transition, factors that may facilitate access to special education services, and career implications associated with accessing and maintaining special education services. Chapter 5 discusses the findings and situates them within relevant literature; recommendations for further study are also provided.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Geographic Mobility Defined

One of the defining features of the Canadian military lifestyle is geographic mobility. Canadian military families are required to geographically relocate on a recurring basis, typically moving three times as frequently as their civilian counterparts (Daigle, 2013). Military members are relocated for three principal reasons: promotion or career opportunity, training or development requirement, or to fill a priority vacancy (Garner, Arnold & Nunnery, 2014). These relocations, referred to as postings, are decided by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) based on organizational and operational needs; as a consequence, families have very little influence over where they move, when they move, and for how long they stay. The frequent and unpredictable nature of geographic relocations have a disruptive influence on family life and contribute to many of the challenges that Canadian military families face (Daigle, 2013).

The majority of postings occur within Canada; however, there are also opportunities for international postings. When a member is posted internationally, they typically have more choice related to accepting the posting. With the exception of deployment and tours to certain remote sites, military families generally accompany the serving member on each of the moves (National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, 2015); thus, geographic relocations affect thousands of military families every year. Posting notices are typically given out in early February and moving season is typically June and July. Although uncommon, postings may occur during ‘off season’ times. Prior to moving families must attend to an extensive ‘to do’ list. Securing a new home that suits their families’ needs, navigating the new health care system and ensuring proper transfer of
files, and researching information on municipal taxes, driving permits, the cost of living and job markets all must be completed in a relatively short timeline. Thus, although managing their children’s education may be a top priority, families are faced with many competing priorities that all converge on the relocation date.

If a family is presented with a posting that they feel “is likely to cause disproportionate domestic hardship” (Daigle, 2013, p. 31), the serving member has a few options available to help accommodate their family’s personal circumstances. The military member may request one of the following: Compassionate Status, a Compassionate Posting, a Contingency Posting, or an Imposed Restriction Posting (National Defense & Canadian Armed Forces, 2015).

*Compassionate Status* is assigned to a CAF member whose personal circumstances limit his or her deployability or ability to perform duties. If this status is granted, the member’s career decisions, including postings, are frozen until the status is removed. Often times, a member is subject to career restrictions, such as not being eligible for promotion, when Compassionate Status is assigned. If, and only if, a member has been granted Compassionate Status, a *Compassionate Posting* may be requested. This type of posting is approved to accommodate personal circumstances of a member and his or her family by providing a posting to a specific geographic location or cancelling a posting. *Contingency Cost Postings* are another option that a serving member may choose to explore. Compassionate Status and Compassionate Postings may be considered if a CAF member’s deployability or ability to perform duties is limited by personal circumstances, typically related to personal health issues. In contrast, a Contingency Cost Posting for personal reasons to a specific geographic location may be considered to permit a CAF member to deal with personal circumstances if the CAF member’s deployability and ability to perform duties at the location will not be affected. All three options follow a similar rigorous
request and approval process (National Defense & Canadian Armed Forces, 2015). A fourth option for which it is easier to be approved is an Imposed Restriction (IR) Posting. An IR occurs when the serving member moves without his or her family accompanying him or her to the new location. This is usually a short-term solution and is generally used when postings occur outside of the usual posting season in order to minimize family disruption (National Defense & Canadian Armed Forces, 2015). There are no career limitations to this option; however, it does force the family to be separated for a prolonged period of time, which may create unique family challenges.

Although there are options to accommodate personal circumstances, many families do not fit the criteria for approval or may simply not explore these options. Thus, most military members and their families deal with the challenges that accompany postings on a regular basis, regardless of their personal circumstances. According to the Ombudsman’s 2013 report, relocating impacts many of the elements essential to stable family life, including: access and continuity of health care; the availability of quality, affordable, appropriate child care and schooling; viable employment opportunities for non-serving partners; and building equity and paying down a mortgage.

**Defining Military-Connected Students**

Schools play a large role in the success and well-being of Canadian children (Cramm et al., in press). School is not only a place where children learn academic skills, such as reading, writing and math, it is also a place where they learn to get along with other people and develop social skills. School participation can be broken down into three foundational components: behavioral (attentiveness, positive conduct and school attendance), emotional (attitudes towards...
school and a sense of school belonging), and cognitive (the approaches to learning and the use of metacognitive strategies) (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Together, the components of school participation contribute to the emotional, psychological and academic success of children. The extent to which school participation occurs, however, can be influenced by environmental factors (Robson et al., 2013), such as growing up in a military family.

It is not uncommon for military-connected children to experience extended periods separated from a serving parent, to have a parent deployed to dangerous conflict situations that carry risk of injury and death, and to experience multiple postings (Cramm et al., in press). These unique stressors can create emotional and psychological stress for children and their families (Cramm et al., in press). In particular, a body of primarily American literature has shown that these stressors may impact the academic performance and school participation of military-connected children (Aronson, et al., 2011; Arnold, et al., 2011; Astor, et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Chandra et al., 2010; DePedro et al., 2011; Cozza et al., 2013; Garner, et al., 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Mmari et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2010).

Within the United States, it is not uncommon for military-connected students to move schools an average of six to nine times from kindergarten to graduation (Aronson et al., 2011). Moving to a new school and having to reestablish relationships with teachers and peer support groups while simultaneously navigating a new curriculum and academic demands can be a very challenging process. It has been suggested that, with each move, a student may be set back an average of four to six months academically (Hudson-Plush, 2006). The effects of geographic mobility on military children’s educational success are well established within the literature. In particular, students may demonstrate behavioral and emotional adjustment issues (Chandra et al., 2010), truancy and disciplinary issues (Lester et al., 2010), and overall lower levels of school
participation (Daigle, 2013). However, it is important to note that the majority of the research has come out of the United States.

Currently, Canada does not have a federal department of education or integrated national system of education. Instead, each province and territory has a separate ministry that is responsible for the organization and delivery of education at the elementary and secondary level. Governance is further decentralized as decision-making power is entrusted to school boards and districts within each province and territory. These inconsistencies create the challenge of navigating new and complex school systems each time a family moves. American literature describes considerable issues for students related to curricular gaps as well as redundancies (Garne et al., 2014; Mmari et al., 2009). Furthermore, having to adjust emotionally and behaviorally to new, inconsistent curricula and social systems can be very stressful for students (Bradshaw, et al., 2014).

**Special Education Across Canada**

The academic, behavioural and social difficulties that may present themselves for military-connected students may be compounded if the student has a learning disability, physical disability, mental health issue, or developmental condition that requires special education services (Cramm et al., in press). A brief introduction to the special education climate in Canada will be presented followed by an exploration of the challenges and barriers that may arise when military families move and are tasked with having to navigate a new system.

In Canada, *exceptional students* include those who are either gifted or have disabilities. Students with disabilities often require something different or something more from their teachers than the teaching usually provided to learn (Hutchinson, 2013). The additional requirements
necessary to achieving academic success are often met by providing special education services. Special education refers to “programming and/or services designed to accommodate students within the public school system whose educational needs require interventions different from, or in addition to, those which are needed by most students” (Lantz, 2001, p.1). Across Canada, all students with exceptionalities have the right to a program developed in response to their strengths and needs (Hutchinson, 2013).

As previously stated, Canada does not have a federal department of education or integrated national system of education. Instead, each province and territory has a separate ministry that is responsible for the organization and delivery of education at the elementary and secondary level. Governance is further decentralized as decision-making power is entrusted to school boards and districts within each province and territory. These inconsistencies create the challenge of navigating new and complex special education school systems when families move. In the context of this study, the phrase “special education system” refers to the special education services and supports that are offered at the individual school level. Although overarching special education policies are set by provincial and territorial Departments or Ministries of Education, the interpretation of the policies, what supports are provided, and how the supports are provided vary considerably between school boards within provinces and territories and even between individual schools within the boards. Therefore, “special education system” refers to the rules and resources related to eligibility for potential services, funding allocation schemes, and role responsibilities that can be found at a given school within a particular jurisdiction.

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are used as an administrative tool to help teachers, school teams and parents plan and implement special education programs. Although the names vary across provinces and territories (such as Individual Program Plan [IPP] in Manitoba and
Alberta, and a Special Education Plan [SEP] in New Brunswick), the intent and components that make up the plans are similar. All IEPs address the following components: what is known about the student (current level of performance), the programming that is being and/or will be provided (outcomes, instructional strategies, activities, and materials), and the effectiveness of the programming (assessment and evaluation). Once an IEP is created, the teachers, school teams, and parents can use the document to ensure that the student is receiving the appropriate supports to reach their full academic potential. Thus, Individual Education Plans can be seen as an on-ramp to support (Gallagher-Mackay & Kidder, 2015).

Although IEPs tend to be comprised of similar components across each province and territory, it would be incorrect to assume that identification of exceptional learners as well as the processes of development and implementation of IEPs are similar across Canada. Indeed, it is quite the opposite. The overarching legislation, formal identification processes, individuals who comprise the IEP team (including the amount of parental involvement), timelines, and review and appeal processes are extremely varied across each province and territory. These inconsistencies will be explored in further detail in the context of navigating a new school.

**Navigating New Special Education Systems**

The challenges that military families face when navigating a new special education system may be compounded when family has a child who requires special education services (Arnold et al., 2011; Aronson et al., 2013; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Garner et al. 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Richardson et al., 2011). Inconsistencies between 1) eligibility requirements 2) processes of developing and implementing special education plans, and 3) what services are
Eligibility Requirements

Understanding the eligibility requirements for accessing special education services is essential when entering a new special education system. Currently, each province and territory has its own processes to assess, identify and place students with special education needs. This results in a wide variety of ways that students can gain access to special education services, ranging from informal agreements between teachers and parents to formal processes that legally bind a board to accommodate a student’s special education needs. One of the most significant issues regarding eligibility requirements relates to the legal designation of “exceptional student”. If a student is formally identified as an “exceptional student,” he or she must have access to an education that will enable the development of the knowledge and skills needed in order to participate at school and in the community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Each province and territory has specific Acts that outline what supports school boards are required to provide exceptional students to meet this standard; receiving a legal designation directly influences the supports to which students are legally entitled. For example, in most Ministries of Education across Canada, students with the diagnosis of ADHD are not identified as “exceptional students” (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, n.d). Because these students are not given the legal designation of “exceptional student”, the Ministry is not legally bound to provide specific accommodations. However, this is not the case in Manitoba where students with the diagnosis of ADHD do receive the legal designation of “exceptional student” (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, n.d). This means that services that schools in Manitoba are legally bound to provide
students with ADHD may not be legally required to be provided in other provinces and territories. If a diagnosis is not recognized within the exceptionality categorization structure, gaps or loss of services may arise.

**Processes of Developing and Implementing Individual Education Plans**

To achieve academic success, individuals with disabilities related to learning require early identification and timely, specialized assessments and interventions in school settings (Sandall, McLean & Smith, 2000; Turnball et al., 2013). Furthermore, when additional supports are provided early, it reduces the number of students who will require intensive support in later years (Turnball et al., 2013). An Individual Education Plan initiates the development of special education programming and supports and helps ensure proper implementation and continuity. Thus, for students to reach their academic potential, an IEP should be created in a timely manner and updated on a regular basis.

As previously discussed, IEPs contain many of the same components in every province and territory; however, there are differences in IEP team composition (including the amount of parental involvement required), as well as differences in timelines, review procedures, and appeal policies. In regards to in-school teams, each school must put together a team that is responsible for the special education of each student with an IEP, although every team’s overarching goal is to establish a collaborative approach to meeting the needs of the individual learner, large discrepancies do exist. For instance, the names for the teams vary, (i.e., “Service Delivery Team” in Newfoundland & Labrador, and “Learning Team” in Alberta), as well as the individual in charge of coordinating the IEP meetings, which ranges from classroom teacher, education assistant, or principal, depending on the board’s specific policies. Furthermore, although parental
involvement in the IEP process is highly encouraged across Canada, the amount of parent involvement that is legally required in order for supports to be provided does vary. For example, in Ontario, the principal is required to inform the parent(s) that an IEP is being created; an IEP must be developed with input from the parent(s)/guardian(s) and from the student if he or she is sixteen years of age or older. However, if parents do not respond to the principal’s efforts to communicate, consent through non-participation is implied. Thus, active participation and agreement is not needed. This contrasts Alberta’s policies that state that schools are required to obtain informed written consent from parents to indicate agreement with the Individual Program Plan (IPP).

**Services Provided**

As previously discussed, inclusive education is the overarching policy across Canada; however, the programming and services that are offered do vary across provinces and territories, as well as between jurisdictions, school boards and even individual schools (Hutchinson, 2013). Discrepancies between services and delivery methods arise due to differences in legislation, funding, and availability of services, as well as school and teacher competencies. Understanding the differences between adaptations, accommodations and modifications is necessary to understand how discrepancies between systems can affect the educational outcomes of students who move school systems. *Adaptations* are teaching and assessment strategies specially designed to accommodate a student’s needs so he or she can achieve the learning outcomes of the subject or course and to demonstrate mastery of concepts. Essentially, adaptations are “best practice” (Ministry of Education British Columbia, 2009) in teaching. In regards to special education services, adaptations are typically broken down into two types: accommodations (changes to *how*
a student is taught) and modifications (changes to what a student is taught) (Hutchinson, 2013). Accommodations may include, but are not limited to, extended time to complete assignments or tests, access to a computer for written assignments, multiple exposure of material, and/or alternatives to assignments. Accommodations do not consist of a curriculum change and students will generally still be working towards the same academic outcomes as the general class. Modifications, on the other hand, consist of individualized learning goals and outcomes, which are different than learning outcomes outlined in the general curriculum for a given grade level (Ministry of Education British Columbia, 2009). Choosing between accommodations and modifications may have a particularly profound impact for children in high school. If modifications to a curriculum are made, the child may no longer be on track to receiving a high school diploma; thus, it is important that parents and teachers understand the implications of the adaptations when constructing an IEP. This may have compounded impacts for students who transition schools. For example, an adaptation in British Colombia may be interpreted as a modification in Ontario, thereby placing the child at a disadvantage academically. In such instances, the child may need to redo courses or entire grades.

Another significant issue outlined in the literature speaks to the inaccurate use of special education services. For example, services often come either prematurely or well past when they would be most beneficial for the child (Cramm et al., in press). Research has shown that difficulties coping with the military lifestyle, especially during parental deployment, may be misinterpreted as a special education issue that leads to a special education classroom placement (Astor et al, 2013). As consequence, children receive inaccurate supports. Difficulties may also be attributed to challenges associated with a military life that results in frequent moves, rather than an underlying learning disability or academic gaps (Arnold et al., 2011). The latter is
especially troubling, as the importance of timely, appropriate interventions have been shown to be vital to promoting the academic success and well-being of students with special education needs. It is important that Canadian research explores the challenges to system navigation that this unique population faces. Understanding the barriers and facilitators may help educators and MFRCs better support these families so that children and their families receive the appropriate programming and services to help ease the transition and promote school participation.

**Transition Theory**

Transition theory informs the understanding of the process and psychological components of navigating a new school system. Transitions are a complex field of theory and research, dealing with processes of change in the life context (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). In most theories, transitions are characterized by phases of concentrated learning and accelerated development in a social context. Educational transitions are commonly broken down into two types: horizontal and vertical transitions (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Horizontal transitions involve children’s transitions during their everyday lives between formal and social networks in school, day cares, and home. Vertical transitions, on the other hand, deal with moves and changes for the child between educational settings, including new special education systems. There has been substantial research regarding horizontal transitions, such as entry to school from pre-school (Villeneuve et al. 2013) and the transition into and out of middle school or high school (Duchesne, Larose, Guay, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2005; Varlejs, Steck, & Kwon, 2014). However, there is no recent literature that specifically addresses the vertical transition of moving from one special education system to another during the course of a child’s education. This research would
be beneficial to illustrate the additional barriers that military-connected students face when transitioning systems due to an off-season posting.

Fabian’s (2002) Model of School Transitions frames the discontinuities that children and their families face when making vertical transitions. The framework consists of 3 components: 1) physical discontinuity: changes in physical surroundings, 2) social discontinuity: changes in social networks and adults with whom children and parents interact and 3) philosophical discontinuity where the approach to learning and teaching can be quite different from that experienced previously. This framework of discontinuities can be applied to the aforementioned challenges that families face when navigating a vertical transition from one special education system to another. Physical discontinuities may arise in how accessible a school is for an individual with a disability; thus, forcing families and the student must adjust to a new physical environment. For example, if the child is in a wheelchair, learning where the ramps are and how to maneuver on them, may be challenging. Social discontinuity is present in the form of new teachers, peer groups and support workers. Parents and students need to form new relationships and communication strategies in order to create a supportive relationship that helps the child achieve his or her academic potential. The third discontinuity, philosophical discontinuity, may be the most difficult for a family to navigate when transitioning. This type of discontinuity speaks to the variations in legislation and policy that families must navigate when transitioning into a new school system.

Promoting School Participation for Military-Connected Students

Research has shown that the school participation of military-connect students is directly influenced by the interaction of the school, community, and associated social contexts such as
policy (Kudler & Porter, 2013). Most of the existing literature that focuses on increasing school participation of military-connected students has focused on 3 specific areas: 1) positive school environments, 2) programming and procedures and 3) communication strategies (Cramm et al., in press).

1) Positive learning and teaching environment

A positive learning and teaching environment is essential for student academic achievement and well-being. Research shows a link between students’ success and the school environment in which learning takes place (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Furthermore, students are more motivated to participate and realize their full potential when they have a positive school environment, where they feel safe, included and supported (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). Schools can create a more positive environment by taking an informed stance and explicitly including the experiences and identities military-connected children may have (Garner et al., 2014). Effective parental engagement is also a key component to promoting a positive school environment (Safe Schools Action Team, 2006). School staff has reported that military parents experience additional barriers to getting involved in their children’s school and school experience (De Pedro et al., 2014; Arnold et al., 2011). Reported barriers included the active military parent being unable to be present at school-teacher interviews, as well as the non-military parent being too busy maintaining the household as a sole parent to participate as much at their child’s school as they would like. Thus, it is important for schools to take proactive measures to foster parental involvement.
2) Programming and Procedures

Programming and procedures specifically designed to meet the unique needs of military-connected students may help facilitate school participation, increasing academic performance as well as emotional and behavioural outcomes (Richardson et al., 2011). In order to create and implement effective programming, schools must be able to identify military-connected students, as well as have an understanding of the issues that they face, such as parental deployment and transitions into new school systems (Richardson et al., 2011). However, most schools are not currently able to systematically identify military-connected students, with no formal procedure or resource structure for doing so (Williams, 2013). Even when students are identified as being military-connected students, the supports and resources necessary to adequately meet their needs may not be readily available. Research has suggested that increasing flexible participation requirements for extra-curricular activities (Astor et al., 2013), creating opportunities for peer support and providing students with culture sensitive counseling are supports that may help mediate the stressors that military-connected students experience after a posting (Eposito-Smythers, Wolff, Lemmon, Bodzy, Swenson, & Spirito, 2011).

3) Communication Strategies

There is plenty of evidence illustrating the relationship between positive parent-teacher and parent-school communication and the academic achievement of students (Novak, Murry, Scheuermann, Curran, 2009; Myers & Pianta, 2008; Baker, 2006). Transitions between special education systems must be seen as an interactive process between the institution, child and family (Hutchinson, 2013). Successful transitions between systems are, therefore, not an output from the child alone, but instead a function of communication and interaction of all participants involved.
(Hutchinson, 2013). When effective communication occurs, increased motivation for learning, improved behavioural outcomes, increases in attendance, and more positive attitudes about school in general have all been reported (Murray et al., 2009). Research has shown that military families may encounter unique challenges in establishing and maintaining effective parent-teacher and parent-school communication (Bradshaw et al., 2010; De Pedro et al., 2014, Mmari et al., 2010). Jagger & Lederer (2014) found that American military families believed the process of transitioning schools would be smoother if there were increased communication between the old and new schools, as well as between the new school and the family; however, discrepancies in parent and staff perceptions regarding who is responsible for facilitating the communication and the transfer of records commonly create a confusing dynamic (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014). Students and families have also reported that teachers and school staff commonly do not possess the necessary understanding of military lifestyle demands (Cozza, et al., 2013) required to build a collaborative and mutually beneficial relationship. Understanding the vulnerability experienced by military-connected students and their families could be enhanced if teaching staff received education and support in effective communication with military families (Farrell, Bowen, & Swick, 2014).

Defining Parental Advocacy

Effective school participation often includes parent advocacy that at times requires specific and specialized knowledge, skills and attitudes (Trainor, 2010). The desired outcome of parental advocacy is that the educational rights of the child are being met. To meet this objective, advocacy typically consists of interventions when needed services are not accessible, not available, not appropriate, or when the voice of a child is not being heard (Murray, 2005).
Effective parental advocacy has the potential to enhance school environments, work with schools to implement and/or improve programming and procedures, and establish and maintain positive parent-school and parent-teacher relationships (Trainor, 2010). The approach that parents take when advocating for their child may influence the effectiveness and outcome of their efforts (Trainor, 2010). However, it has been shown that regardless of the approach taken, teachers and administrators are more likely to accept and encourage involvement of parents whose requests and participation are in agreement with school policy and teacher beliefs (Lawson, 2003). This may be problematic when teachers do not understand the unique challenges that military-connected students face.

Although the role of parent as a collaborative partner and advocate exists in the general education setting, partnerships between home and school on issues relative to special education may include additional responsibilities from both educators and parents. Advocacy has historically been a key responsibility of parents of children with disabilities who have sought to provide their children with appropriate and inclusive education opportunities (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Within a school setting, teachers, administrators, and social service providers must respond to both the needs of the board and ministry that governs them (e.g., to provide cost-effective services) and the needs of individual children. The conflicts of interest that commonly arise trying to balance the needs of all stakeholders tend to place the responsibility of advocating for services onto the parents (Trainor, 2010). Parent advocacy efforts are most often directed towards securing inclusive education and classroom accommodations (Leiter & Krauss, 2004; Lyser & Kirk, 2004) but may also address legislative, policy and other areas of special education. Factors including the establishment of positive relationships with teachers and school staff (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004) and access to information and consistent
membership on IEP teams (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001) have been shown to increase parents’ confidence and willingness to advocate in the school setting.

Military parents may experience additional challenges when taking on an advocacy role. Frequent relocations force families to plan entry into and coordinate services within new special education systems. Throughout this process, parents commonly become the primary party responsible for the organization and transfer of school and medical records. The academic gaps, curricular duplications and omissions, and varying graduation requirements, as well as different IEP requirements, make the process extremely stressful for military families (Jagger & Lederer, 2014). Assertiveness in overcoming challenges, such as a school’s willingness to accept documentation, including IEPs, from other schools is imperative for academic success. The differences across school boards force military families to “choreograph a complex dance of leaving and gaining schools and providers without their child losing any therapeutic gains” (Jagger & Lederer, 2014, p. 18).

**Current Supports Available to Military Families**

Military Family Resource Centres (MFRCs) are located on Canadian Forces Bases across Canada. They are non-profit organizations that strive to enhance the quality of life and enrich the military experience for Canadian Forces families by providing specialized programs and services to promote health, education and social well-being. MFRCs are managed by a volunteer Board of Directors who are elected by the community to assess local needs, determine priorities, and provide local leadership for the delivery of the Military Family Service Program (Military Family Services, 2015). The programs and supports offered across MRFCs vary. Most MFRCs make it a priority to offer parenting supports, child and youth development programs, and deployment
support. Programs are also offered that specifically address the academic challenges that military-connected students experience, and the challenges that parents may have navigating school systems. These include parent support groups, playgroups, child tutoring, and respite care.

Furthermore, a few MFRCs in Canada have recently introduced a new position of Special Needs Coordinator. In 2014, the MFRC in Trenton, Ontario, introduced the first Special Needs Coordinator position as a pilot project. Funding for the project was renewed in 2015 and has transitioned into a full time position. The MFRC in Kingston followed Trenton’s lead and hired a part time Special Education Coordinator in late 2015. Special Needs Coordinators are described by MFRCs as individuals who have an intimate knowledge of the provincial disability service system, and are responsible for mitigating challenges faced by CAF families who have a child with special needs. Their specific responsibilities include helping families access appropriate supports and services, advocating for families to receive community services in a timely manner, providing information, support and training to MFRC staff to ensure programming is accessible (Trenton Military Family Resource Centre, 2015). Although the Coordinator offers many supports for military families who have a child with special needs, it is important to note that the position is still being developed and in trial phases.

Although MFRCs offer programs to assist families, there is still room for considerable improvement, especially surrounding programing that supports military-connected children (Daigle, 2013). There is also need to increase awareness in schools and develop tools to assist teachers and school staff address the unique needs of military-connected students. A synthesis of US-based literature conducted by Jerles (2011) described positive strategies that have been employed by school boards to increase parent-school collaboration. Some strategies include using applications, such as Skype, to conduct video conferences and parent interviews with parents who
are deployed, making videos of the child participating in extracurricular activities to distribute to families (Mmari et al., 2009) as well as implementing school-wide activities, such as yellow ribbon and patriotic celebration days (Risberg, Curtis, Shivers, 2014) to increase awareness of military culture. In the United States, programs, including Operation Educate the Educators have been developed to provide educator preparation programs that foster awareness and understanding of the experiences of military-connected students (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2012). Another US-based program, Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, addresses variations across states that military-connected students encounter, such as record transfer, course sequence, and graduation requirements (Military Interstate Children’s Compact Commission, 2013). The goal of the Compact is to provide a consistent policy for all states and schools that join, thus, replacing the widely varying policies that affect military-connected students when they transition. To date, all 50 states have signed the Interstate Compact on Education Opportunity for Military Children. These challenges may also affect Canadian military-connected students; however, no known research has been conducted examining the gaps and academic challenges that are being experienced.

This thesis seeks to address the gaps in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of Canadian military families who have had a child transition into a new special education system. Although a body of US-based literature exists, Canadian military families may have unique experiences not captured within the current literature. For example, different Military policies, supports and services exist between the two countries. Thus, the resources that families use, and how they go about accessing services may be quite different, with different challenges in between countries. Furthermore, the education system in Canada is not the same as within the
United States and fewer Canadian military-connected students attend military schools. Although similarities in experiences may exist between the two populations, generalizing American data to Canadian military families may be inappropriate given the differences in the systems and may result in inadequate supports for this population. Opportunities on how the military can better support this population will also be addressed in the discussion section of the study.
Chapter 3

Methods

Research Design

The strength of qualitative research derives primarily from its inductive approach to inquiry. It is inductive, with the purpose of describing multiple realities, developing deep understanding, and capturing everyday life and human experiences (Taylor and Trujillo, 2001). Thus, qualitative research is especially suited for studies that seek to understand the meanings that participants give to their lives and experiences. This strength of qualitative research matched the study’s main objective of understanding and exploring the lived experiences of military families who have navigated new special education systems. This chapter will provide an overview of the research paradigm and philosophical assumptions that guided the research project, as well as an in-depth explanation as to why interpretive phenomenology was selected as an appropriate qualitative research design.

Research Paradigm

Paradigms, or worldviews, are “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p.17). Within academia, paradigms can be seen as a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that the researcher brings to a study (Creswell, 2013). At the most general level, four major interpretive paradigms can be applied to qualitative research: positivist and post positivist, constructivist-interpretive, critical and feminist-poststructural (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Each paradigm combines beliefs about ontology (what kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?), epistemology (what is the relationship
between the inquire and the known?), and *methodology* (how do we know the world or gain knowledge from it?). Analyzing the underlying beliefs of each paradigm led to the adoption of a constructivist paradigm to guide the research study.

In general, constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work and that they develop subjective meanings about their experiences and the context in which they occur (Creswell, 2013). Under this paradigm, researchers rely as much as possible on the participants’ interpretations of their experiences in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of study. Therefore, unlike postpositive approaches that start with a theory or hypothesis, constructivists intend to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world and develop a theory or pattern from the meanings (Creswell, 2013). Constructivist approaches also acknowledge that there is no one reality, and that the meanings individuals associate with their experiences are multiple, varied, and subjective. As such, researchers typically use broad open-ended questions to obtain a rich understanding of the individuals’ *lived experiences*. It is also important that the researcher addresses the specific context in which the individual lives and works, such as their interpersonal relationships, and the historical and cultural norms of the environment.

Researchers under the constructivist paradigm also need to recognize that their background shapes their interpretation of the data collected (Creswell, 2013). Because the understanding of the phenomenon is a co-creative process between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013), the beliefs, values and personal experiences of the researcher need to be acknowledged in order to reduce bias. Please refer to the reflexivity statement at the beginning of the thesis for an assessment of personal biases that may have influenced this research study.
To summarize, the constructivist paradigm assumes a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjective epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. These underlying beliefs are aligned with the research objectives and were therefore chosen to act as a guide for the study. In regards to a relativist ontology, the research project interviewed multiple participants and avoided generalizing the data to ensure that individual experiences and realities were heard. Because the data were analyzed and coded by the researcher, the meanings that were then derived from the interviews were a blend of the meanings articulated by both participant and researcher, illustrating a subjective epistemology. This can also be viewed as a double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) because, through analysis, the researcher made sense of the participant trying to make sense of what happened to him or her. The methodological procedures were also naturalistic in nature, as the interviews discussed lived experiences, and focused on narrative descriptions of experiences.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

The decision to situate the research project within a constructivist paradigm led to the examination of several interpretive research designs, including: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography. Narrative research designs often involve the researcher studying the lives of individuals and typically one individual, or a small group to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). The information is often then retold by the researcher into a narrative chronology (Creswell, 2013). Although this research method holds potential to provide information regarding the impact of geographic mobility, the small number of participants and limited interpretive features made it an inappropriate design for the current study.
Another design considered, grounded theory, typically consists of a researcher deriving a general, abstract theory of the process or interaction of study (Charmaz, 2006), and was not congruent with the purpose of this study. Ethnography consists of a researcher studying the patterns behaviors, language and actions of a cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time, typically involving both observations and interviews (Creswell, 2013); this approach was also poorly aligned with the purpose of this study. Phenomenology was explored as the category of interpretive qualitative approach most in keeping with the thesis objectives.

It was important that the research design could appropriately address the main goal of the study: to explore the impact of geographic mobility on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. After a thorough examination of the core assumptions and beliefs of each design, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a type of phenomenological analysis, was chosen as the most appropriate way to structure the study. IPA is a qualitative research approach that focuses on individual’s experiences and/or his or her understandings of particular phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Researchers who embark in IPA are typically interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on particular significance for people. In this study, the significant life event of interest was the navigation of a new special education system. Within this design, participants are to reflect on the significance of their experiences and the researcher aims to engage with these reflections and make sense of the meanings associated with the experiences. Thus, subjective epistemology is a key component of Interpretive Phenomenology. The theoretical foundations of IPA—phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography—will now be discussed to illustrate their appropriateness for this particular research study.
Phenomenology:

Rooted in the disciplines of philosophy and psychology, phenomenological research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell, 2013). There are two different, but related ‘streams’ of phenomenology stemming from the works of Husserl (descriptive) and Heidegger (inductive). Husserlian (descriptive) phenomenology holds the assumption that experience as perceived by human consciousness has value and should be an object of scientific study (Lopez & Willis, 2004). It assumes that there are features to any lived experience that are common to all persons who have that experience and that, therefore, reality is considered objective and independent of history and context. The assumption that meaning can be generated from lived experiences without consideration of context opposes this study’s underlying belief of relative ontology, that multiple, varied realities exist for each of the participants. Furthermore, researchers embarking in descriptive phenomenology are instructed to shed all prior personal knowledge and personal biases prior to commencing the study (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This assumption opposes the study’s subjective epidemiology, the belief the researcher and participant co-create meanings and that the beliefs and past of both parties influence the interpretation of the data collected. Thus, descriptive phenomenology’s strict adherence to the scientific approach and objective realities makes it inappropriate to use in IPA studies, which are heavily reliant on inductive analysis.

Instead of relying on the principles of descriptive phenomenology, IPA incorporates the principles of inductive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology was modified and built on by Husserl’s student, Heidegger, who proposed an alternative, interpretive, approach to phenomenology (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The aim of interpretive phenomenology is to understand and interpret participants’ experiences. Unlike descriptive phenomenology,
interpretive phenomenology believes that humans are embedded in their world to such an extent that subjective experiences are inextricably linked with social, cultural and political contexts. Therefore, research must acknowledge that the participants’ realities are multiple, varied and objective (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The principles of inductive phenomenology are aligned with the objectives of the current research project. The study acknowledges that the military families, The CAF, the children with special education needs, and the school systems interact and all influence the participants’ experience.

**Hermeneutics:**

The second principle of IPA is hermeneutics (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009), defined as the ‘science of interpretation’ (Allen & Jensen 1990). Hermeneutics can be traced back to biblical interpretations, but has since evolved into a method commonly informing qualitative research projects (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Modern hermeneutics is concerned with illuminating details of experience with the goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). The principles of hermeneutics are most evident in the analysis components of IPA research projects. Meanings that the researcher provides through coding techniques are actually a blend of the meanings articulated by both the researcher and the participant (Lopez & Willis, 2006); thus, the science of interpretation takes a co-constitutionality approach to making meaning out of the participant’s experiences. This, however, does not mean that researchers know more than the participants, but instead that they may be able to see the larger picture, which can help illuminate the participants true experience (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). The meanings that were developed in the current study were interpretive in nature, as the codes and themes that were developed are a blend of meanings articulated by both participant and
researcher. Furthermore, a key tenet of IPA is that the process of analysis is iterative—analysis is done in a back and forth fashion instead of in a linear path. This reflects the ‘hermeneutic circle’ which purports that to understand the whole you have to look at the parts; and to understand the parts, you have to look at the whole (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). This was done throughout the research project, as analysis was completed after each interview, and then recoded when all of the interviews were completed to ensure that components of the bigger picture were not overlooked. Thus, the current study is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretive endeavor for both participant and researcher. “Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009 p.3).

Idiography:

The third principle of IPA is idiography. Idiography in research is concerned with the particular, paying close attention to individual experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Incorporating idiography through IPA research ensures that there is a commitment to the particular, in the sense of detail, and the depth of analysis. This is typically established by the use of small, purposefully selected participant group so that the researcher can generate meanings of experience at the individual level. This also relates to the hermeneutic circle—that one must understand the parts of the individual experience, to better understand the whole phenomenon, and vice versa. The current study established ideography by using a small (n=9) sample that was selected to represent families who had gone through the similar experience of navigating a new special education system. It is also important to note that ideography does not eschew
generalizations; instead, it locates them in the particular and develops them more cautiously. The objective of the research study was to explore the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education services. Methods used provided insight into some of the common barriers to access experienced by the population; however, the purpose of the study was not to illustrate a generalizable, common experience of Canadian, reflecting the principle of idiography.

As illustrated, the key concepts of IPA are appropriate for research projects that aim to explore a phenomenon from the participants’ perspective. Assessment of the key concepts of IPA led to the decision to adopt it as the research design. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, references back to the concepts of IPA will be made to illustrate how the participant selection, data collection and analysis techniques were all supported by and fulfilled under an IPA design.

**Recruitment**

Ethical clearance to conduct research involving human subjects was received from Queen’s University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board (HSREB). Once ethical clearance had been obtained (6016525) the researcher began recruiting participants. Posters at community locations, social media, and snowball sampling were the primary methods of recruitment. In terms of social media, a recruitment poster (see Appendix A) was also uploaded to the Military & Veteran Health Research Group Facebook page hosted by the thesis supervisor, as well as tweeted out through her established twitter network. Six of the nine participants were recruited via the Facebook page and the other three said that they found out about the study via friends who had participated. Risks of snowball sampling include a less representative sample. This risk was mitigated by using multiple recruitment techniques that reached families across Canada, resulting in a more diverse sample. Prior to beginning the study,
potential participants were provided with an introductory letter, an invitation to participate, and were screened for eligibility. A total of 13 participants were provided introductory letters and invitations. Of the 13, three individuals opted not to participate in the study after reading the introductory letter and one participant agreed to participate but did not answer the interview call or respond to the email to reschedule.

Participants

The inclusion criteria were set to ensure that participants had a child with special education needs. No exclusion criterion was set regarding diagnosis or disability of the child. The exclusion criteria included families where both parents were active military members, as well as families where the child was enrolled in either a military or private school.

Data Collection

Nine participants were interviewed during the data collection process. All of the interviews were conducted by the primary researcher and ranged between 45-60 minutes in length. Four of the interviews were conducted in person and five were conducted via telephone. Prior to the interview, each participant was emailed the information and consent form to review and sign. The forms were re-explained at the start of the interview session and any participant questions were addressed. No compensation was provided for participation. A copy of the information and consent form can be found in Appendix B of this thesis.

The interview guide was structured using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI): Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). AI was incorporated in order to seeks out the best of “what is currently going well in regards to special education
transitions” (discovery) to help ignite the collective imagination of “what might be done better to help ease transitions” (dream). The aim was to then generate new knowledge of a collectively desired future for improved services and supports (design and destiny). In interview guides, it is not necessary that the principles of AI be in followed in order of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny, instead each principle can be used to frame questions at any stage of the interview. For example, a Discovery was, “Describe a situation where services were ideally positioned to support your child.” A Dream example is, “Are there any existing supports that you felt that you did not use but would have benefited from”. In terms, of Design/Destiny, questions such as “If you could have been given a hand out to help you navigate a new special education system, what would it look like, what would it include?” It is important to note that questions can also overlap and address multiple components of AI. This is most evident in Dream, Design, and Destiny questions. Once completed, the interview guide was tested in a pilot interview with a civilian caregiver who has a child receiving special education services and a husband who is a currently serving CAF member, Minor changes to the questions in terms of wording and sequence of questions were made after the pilot study. No major changes were made. The participant met the eligibility requirements and had helped her child into a new special education system twice in the last five years. Recruitment for the pilot study was done through mutual connections via the Kingston MFRC. The responses were assessed and revisions made. The final semi-structured interview guide is included in Appendix C of this thesis.

Data Analysis

Field notes were taken immediately after each interview, and during phone interviews, to ensure that non-verbal and environmental cues were included in analysis. Notes focused on the
tone, non-verbal cues, and emotional status of the participant. The notes were kept in a locked filling cabinet throughout the study and shredded post analysis.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and checked multiple times for accuracy. The transcripts were anonymized using a number coding system for each interview and participant (i.e., participants 001-009). The original recordings were placed in a locked cabinet and were uploaded onto a password-protected computer and stored on QShare, when in use. Prior to data analysis, member checking was achieved through sending a copy of summarized demographic data back to the participant after the interview.

Coding

NVivo software was used throughout the entirety of the coding process. Procedures outlined in Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) Guidebook to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis provided a step-by-step analysis procedure that was followed throughout the coding process. Analysis took place in 3 phases: 1) initial noting, 2) the development of emerging themes, and 3) the search for connections across emergent themes.

The first step, initial noting, was done to examine semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level. This process was done to ensure familiarity with the transcript, and to help begin to identify specific ways the participant talked about, understood, and thought about the phenomenon (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). There were no rules governing what type of notes to include; however, most notes fell into one of the following categories: descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual comments. Descriptive comments focused on describing the content that the participants spoke about. These notes tended to highlight key components that helped structure the participants’ experience, and included emotional responses, key words, and important stories.
For example, descriptive comments included the following notes: “story of negative transition experience”, “fear and frustration”, and “link to IEP development”. Linguistic notes concentrated on the specific use of language used by the participants. Specific aspects of language, such as repetition, tone, laughter, pauses, pronoun use, and metaphors were highlighted. Metaphors, such as “gasping for air” described the experience in a rich way that opened up potential for discussion of a range of more conceptual meanings, such as struggle, shock, and feelings of isolation. The third type of note, conceptual comments, focused on engaging at a more conceptual level. Most of these comments took an interrogative form and shifted focus towards the participant’s overarching understanding of the experience. For example, the phrase “he felt almost as though the military had betrayed him by not giving him more funding” was annotated with “could this result in resentment towards the military? Perhaps lead to collateral career damage?” In sum, initial noting was done to draw attention to certain areas of interest and significance, flagging them for further analysis during the second stage of coding.

The second step, the development of emergent themes, was completed in an attempt to reduce the volume of detail (in the transcript and initial notes) while maintaining connections and patterns (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Analyzing comments to identify emergent themes involved a focus, at the local level, on discrete chunks of the transcript (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). At this point the themes began to reflect not only the participant’s original words and thoughts but also the researcher’s interpretation of them. For example, one of the emerging themes was Fear of Transition. This theme captured and tried to describe the statements about fear and anxiety that the participants spoke about when thinking about the potential for a transition. At the end of Step two, there were 47 different themes. A separate document, that
included all the relevant transcript excerpts and quotes, was created for each theme. These documents were printed and organized in preparation for step three of analysis.

Step three was to develop patterns and connects across the themes that emerged in step two, developing ‘super-ordinate’ or umbrella themes. Not all themes developed in step two were incorporated into this stage of analysis. Which themes were kept and how they were organized depended on the relevance to the overall research question. For example, interesting discussion regarding maternity leave emerged in one interview; however, it was not included in stage three of analysis, as it did not relate to the lived experience of navigating a new special education system. Three specific ways of looking for patterns and connections between emergent themes; abstraction and subsumption (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) were used throughout step three.

Abstraction involved putting ‘like’ with ‘like’ and developing a new name for the clustered themes. For example, themes developed in step two: “the fear of losing supports”, “anxiety due to anticipating a move”, and “fear of child’s future”, were grouped together and a new super-ordinate theme: “Emotional components of transition” was created to encompass these related themes. Subsumption is a process where an emergent theme itself acquires super-ordinate status as it helps bring together a series of related themes. For example, the theme “factors that may facilitate access to special education services” was coded multiple times throughout the transcripts. Because of its high reoccurrence rate, it was transformed into a super-ordinate theme that then acted as an umbrella for series of related themes, including: “advocacy”, “development and maintenance of communication and collaboration with teachers”, and “navigating the new system”. Saturation was reached when no new super-ordinate themes emerged from an interview. This was met after the fifth interview. Four additional interviews were conducted after saturation was met to establish a larger and more representative sample of participants. No new
super-ordinate themes emerged throughout the additional four interviews. After each stage of coding, a debriefing session (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001) was conducted with the research supervisor. This was done to ensure that the themes being developed appropriately captured the participants experience.

**Analytical Rigor**

The overarching concept when considering rigor in a research project is trustworthiness. Due to the conceptual divergences between qualitative and quantitative approaches the typical quantitative measures of reliability and validity were not appropriate in this study. Instead, the concepts of 1) credibility, 2) dependability, and 3) transferability were used to ensure trustworthiness throughout the study.

**Credibility**

Credibility deals with the question “How congruent are the findings with reality?” (Merriam, 2002). According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness. The following provisions, as outlined by Shenton (2004), were made throughout the study to help ensure that the analysis accurately represented the phenomena of study: 1) tactics to help ensure honesty in informants, 2) iterative questioning, 3) member checks, 4) frequent debriefing sessions, and 5) peer scrutiny of the research project. *Ensuring honesty in informants* was addressed by providing each participant with a detailed information and consent form, clearly stating their right to refuse to participate in the project. Furthermore, it was made clear to the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any point, without the need to provide an explanation to the researcher. This was done so
that only individuals who were genuinely willing to take part and prepared to offer data freely participated. Participants were also encouraged to be open and honest at the outset of each interview. Similar to ensuring honesty, iterative questioning, was a preventative strategy used to ensure credibility throughout the study. This type of questioning consists of the researcher returning to matters previously raised by the participant and extracting related data through rephrased questions (Shenton, 2004). This was done to detect possible falsehoods where contradictions and discrepancies occurred.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) consider the third provision, member checking, the single most important provision that can be made to increase a study’s credibility. Member checking was achieved through sending a copy of the interview transcription and summarized demographic data to the participants after the interview. Participants were provided with the option to verify the accuracy of their transcript to ensure that recorded information matched what they meant. None of the participants reported any inaccuracies within their transcripts during the member checking process. Frequent debriefing sessions between the researcher and the project supervisor were also held throughout the study to discuss the choice of methods, coding, and analysis processes. These collaborative meetings were important to provide a sounding board for ideas and interpretations, as well as to help the researcher become aware of potential biases. In addition to debriefing with the project supervisor, semi-annual meetings were held with the research committee. The committee was made up of three professors who were knowledgeable in areas related to the research project. These meetings, along with multiple presentations to the researcher’s thesis seminar class, provided peer scrutiny of the research project. Similar to debriefing sessions, questions and observations during these opportunities helped refine the methods and interpretation of results throughout the study.
Transferability

The intent of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize findings to individuals, sites or places outside of those under study. As such, the value of Interpretive Phenomenology lies in the particular description and themes developed in the particular context. Unlike generalizability, transferability does not involve broad claims, but invites readers of research to make connections between elements of a study and their own experience. Therefore, transferability is ensured through the provision of a thick description of the sample population and setting, as well as an adequate description of concepts. The researcher took careful consideration to include the necessary information within the methods section to allow for transferability.

Dependability

The third concept, dependability, relates to the consistency between the data and the findings (Letts et al., 2007); namely, that if the same methods with the same participants were used, similar results would be obtained. Dependability was addressed in the study by reporting the process in detail. This included providing a clear explanation of the research methods, participants and settings, as well as providing additional documents such as the information and consent form, and interview guide. An audit trail was also established to describe when any why specific decisions were made throughout the project.
Chapter 4

Findings

Demographics

Interviews were conducted with nine adult civilian caregivers who have a child with special education needs. Recruitment was primarily conducted in Kingston Ontario; however, some participants were recruited from other provinces and interviewed via telephone. A general description of demographic data will be provided for confidentiality purposes. All of the participants reported that their child received an Individual Education Plan (IEPs) that consisted of adaptations and/or modifications. The amount of support required by the students ranged from 24-hour home care and tutoring from specially qualified individuals (n=1), enrollment in full time special education classes (n=3), regular classroom enrollment with some special education classes (n=3) and full integration in a regular classroom with minimal accommodations (n=2). The number of transitions that required navigating a new special education system varied from zero to three. Five participants transitioned once, two participants transitioned twice, and one participant experienced three transitions, for a total of twelve transition experiences discussed. One participant whose family had left the military to avoid transitioning was also included. To respect the confidentiality of the participants, the exact transition locations for each participant will not be provided; however, it can be noted that six transitions occurred between locations within Ontario, one occurred from Ontario to British Columbia, one from British Columbia to Ontario, two from Alberta to Ontario, and one from Ontario to New Brunswick. The bases included in discussion included, Kingston, Petawawa, Trenton, Ottawa, and Meaford, Ontario; Edmonton and Shiloh, Alberta; Gagetown, New Brunswick; and Comox, British Columbia.
All of the participants interviewed were female, and had a husband who is or was until recently serving as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Seven of the participants’ husbands were Army and the remaining two were Air Force. Of the seven participants affiliated with the Army, six of the seven reported that their husbands held the title of officer, the other being a non-commissioned member. No families were affiliated with the Navy. Furthermore, six participants reported that their husbands are still active CAF members; of the three others, one is now a reservist, and the two are retired.

**Results**

The main objective of the study was to explore the impact that geographic mobility has on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. The secondary objective was to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would have helped facilitate access. The findings have been organized into three sections corresponding with the three super-ordinate themes that emerged from the study: 1) the emotional components of experiencing a transition, 2) factors that may facilitate access to special education services and, 3) potential career implications that may arise when parents prioritize securing special education services for their children.

The first section explores the emotions that military families experienced when facing transitioning into a new special education system and is broken down into 6 sub-themes: 1) fear of transitioning into a new special education system, 2) frustration towards navigating new special education systems, 3) exhaustion resulting from navigating new special education systems, 4) uncertainty regarding postings, 5) feelings of isolation, and 6) family stress. The second section reports on the coping mechanisms and supports that families utilized to help
access special education services. This section is further broken down into two sub-themes: 1) active strategies employed to access services and 2) strategies that would help ease the process of accessing and maintaining services. The third section explores the potential career implications that may arise when parents prioritize securing special education services for their children. This section is broken down into two sub-themes: 1) career implications for the serving member and 2) career implications for the partner of the serving member. Each section will be described and supported by direct quotes that illustrate the experiences and view of the participants.

Super-ordinate Theme 1: The Emotional Components of Transition

During each interview, participants were invited to share their personal experiences of accessing special education supports for their children. Throughout the interviews, participants described a complex web of emotions that they experienced prior to, during, and after transitioning into a new special education system. Some of the emotional responses were explicitly acknowledged and described by the participants, while some, such as frustration, were mainly evident through the participants’ tone and intensity throughout the interviews. Six main emotional categories emerged throughout the study: 1) fear of transition, 2) frustration with navigating the new system, 3) exhaustion resulting from navigating a new special education system, 4) uncertainty regarding postings, 5) feelings of isolation, and 6) family stress. Each sub-theme will be explored in further detail.

Fear of Transition

All participants in the study described a predominant and, in some cases, anxiety evoking fear of having to relocate and secure supports for their child in a new special education system.
One participant explained that her family was “completely nervous and afraid of a posting” (001) and another stated that, “for families like us, the thought of it [a posting] would probably send me into an anxiety attack, really” (003). Participants described two main, highly related factors that contributed to an intense fear of having to transition: the fear of losing existing special education supports and the fear of losing funding.

The fear of losing special education supports and services after a move was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Establishing appropriate special education services that met the unique needs of their children was described as a daunting and time intensive process that required “persistent efforts from the parent” (002). Attempts to carry over supports to a new location were described by many of the participants. Some examples included purposefully staying within the same school board, contacting the new school in advance to avoid waitlists, and paying out-of-pocket for private services, such as speech language pathology and occupational therapy in the new location. The participants expressed that “it’s really hard to carry over those supports” (003) and that in most cases they were unable to successfully transfer all of their child’s special education supports from one location to the next. The majority of the participants’ fear of losing support was associated with the risk that their children’s academic and social progress would slow or, worse, regress. One participant described her biggest fear regarding a posting and the risk of losing services, stating:

(Our son) taking a step back. Because he is doing so well with all the programs that he is involved in right now. And if he takes another step back how many steps back can we take before he is 19. So it’s that, that’s my biggest fear right now, getting posted. (006)
Participants also spoke about a prominent fear of losing special education funding and the impact this would have on securing supports. Funding was described by participants as “a vehicle from which they are able to receive supports” (002), and thus essential to the academic success and well-being of their children. One participant addressed the importance of funding in regards to ensuring supports, stating that “If we move, the thing is the funding. The money is the most important. It sounds awful, you know, but it’s being able to supply the best care for our children.” (003)

The fear of losing funding for special education services was so strong that, in some cases, participants chose not to move provinces with their husbands, thereby causing family separation. One participant explained that “they would lose it all…and it could take years to get the funding back” (003) if they moved, and therefore opted not move with her husband. The participants believed that a key factor in their children’s success was having the appropriate services and supports in place; therefore, the fear of losing funding, and as result supports and services, seemed to compound and instill an overarching fear for the child’s academic success and well-being in the new school environment.

**Frustration with navigating the new system**

The fear of transition was largely attributed to the anticipation of a difficult and frustrating process of securing special education services in the new location. Participants who had experienced a transition described the process of navigating a new special education system as complex, time consuming, and stressful. Participants described many problems in the transition process. Frustrations caused by long wait times, complex processes for transferring academic and assessment records, as well as difficulties in researching and establishing supports and services,
were reported. Together, the frustrations of navigating a new special education system were described as “exhausting and overwhelming” (002).

All of the participants in the study stated that they are the main caregivers responsible for navigating their child’s special education. Furthermore, prior to a posting, all of the participants were the primary caregiver responsible for researching and connecting with the new school. A recurring theme of frustration emerged when the participants described the process of researching what school would be able to best support their child’s unique needs. The process was described as “not straightforward and intuitive at all” (004). The inability to effectively research new services and plan for the transfer of files, including IEPs, forced many of the participants to “go blind into the school system” (002) which, participants reported, often resulted in long waitlists and in some instances loss of services for their children.

Participants also addressed how different eligibility requirements and curriculum expectations across provinces and territories made it difficult to access services and understand new systems. One participant addressed the discrepancies in eligibility, stating:

He had ADHD in Ontario but it wasn’t classified as a disability by the doctor or the schools, it wasn’t until we got to Alberta and they were like.. “oh ok” , now he is considered special needs. In Ontario they were just like “it’s common”. So we couldn’t get any funding. But in Alberta we were able to because it is considered special needs. (006)

It was reported that, even if their child qualified for special education services, the services varied greatly between locations. This was largely attributed to “different interpretation of the curriculum and expectations” (008), and was believed, by the participants, to be an
influencing factor on the academic success of their children. One participant described a positive shift in services, stating that:

The old school board was very much for modifying their expectations so not pushing the kids to actually achieve the curriculum outcomes where the new school board says we will adapt wherever we can, we know that they can actually meet the curriculum outcomes. (008)

Although this is a positive example, many families reported that supports and outcomes often decreased when they transitioned from a large base into a smaller or more rural location. Participants also described frustrations related to transferring special education records from one school to another. Confusion regarding who is responsible for transferring the records, where the records should be sent, and what paperwork is required by the new school board were the major issues addressed by the participants. All of the participants reported that the inability to perform adequate research on new special education systems, as well as the challenges related to transferring files, made it difficult for children to receive the appropriate supports and services immediately after a transition occurred. Furthermore, many of the participants were put on various waitlists after a move until services became available. Waitlists were reported by the participants to be one of the largest barriers to accessing special education services for their children. One participant described her experience regarding waitlists:

We’ve been here for two and a half years now, we’re paying for private speech therapy for him because we’re not moving up on the list all because now with the school board they aren’t in a rush to help us get those resources he had back (005).
This was a common trend, as many of the participants spoke about using private services while their child was placed on waitlists. The main motivation was because parents believed that their child would be disadvantaged academically if they remained on waitlists for prolonged periods of time. Most of the participants stated that they had to pay for these private services out-of-pocket, causing financial and family stress.

**Exhaustion resulting from navigating a new special education system**

As previously stated, all of the participants interviewed were the primary caregiver responsible for navigating special education services, and received help from their husbands “when their job permitted” (006). This imbalance of responsibility caused many of the participants to experience extreme fatigue and “burn out” (004). One participant addressed her primary role as navigator and the associated fatigue: “I have to do all the work. Like I’m exhausted.... It’s very tiring. Very exhausting, doing everything on your own” (001). Many of the participants spoke about needing to take time off work due to stress and illness that they experienced resulting from fatigue. One participant described her extreme fatigue resulting from the time consuming process of accessing special education services for her daughter after a transition:

I’m sick, I’m currently off work sick because of all of the stress, and I have other issues going on right now medically, like I can’t even keep physically, keep care of myself. I was extremely athletic, I ran marathons, it’s all stopped. (003)
Uncertainty regarding postings

Participants reported that uncertainties surrounding a posting contributed to the stress and frustration that they and their families faced during a transition. Military families are typically only given a few months notice prior to a posting. Many of the participants in the study described how short notice and last minute posting changes made the process of accessing special education services in the new location challenging. Limited time between finding out about a posting and having to move was reported to greatly limit the amount of proactive planning that families could do prior to a move. One participant described how her ability to begin planning for her child’s transition into a new school system was delayed because of posting timelines:

We found out in November that we would be posted and it’s somewhat narrowed down to (location one). But until we get the message it’s not confirmed, so we’re kind of just waiting for that before we start to plan. (005)

Multiple participants also discussed the frustration that they experienced after they researched a new school system only to find out last minute that they were actually posted to a different location, resulting in “wasted planning” (007) and having to “redo the frustrating planning process” (005).

Feelings of isolation

Participants also described how unique challenges related to integrating into the new community, including their child’s school, influenced their ability to access special education services for their children. Being part of a military family and experiencing repetitive moves...
caused participants to experience feelings of isolation after a transition occurred due to “difficulties in penetrating the new community” (003). The participants in the study reported a long adjustment period to their community and described how it affected their ability to take advantage of community supports as well their willingness to fully engage with the new school system. One participant stated: “You tend not to fully engage 100% with your community, with the people that you know, that are in your city and neighborhood” (002).

Participants within the study reported that their children received services, including speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy, outside of what was provided at school. Families within the study sought support from community organizations that provide support services, including tutoring, support groups, counseling services and other disability-specific services. The use of community services was reported, by many participants, as a positive and supportive experience. However, feelings of isolation often prevented families from taking the initial step to engage with organizations and access the supports offered. This hesitance to engage may disadvantage children who would benefit academically and psychologically from receiving these supports.

**Family stress**

Many of the participants reported that the complex process of accessing and maintaining special education services during times of transition placed a large amount of stress on the family unit. Entering a new special education system was described as a “daunting processes that was made even more difficult by being a military family” (002). The “added layer” (003) of being a special needs family in the military made it difficult for many of the participants to keep their family and relationship together. Many of the participants discussed their use of couples therapy,
and how their relationship was strained because of the imbalance in caregiving responsibilities, which included the responsibility of navigating special education services. Furthermore, participants reported decisions surrounding whether to take postings or remain where current supports were established were very stressful for the entire family unit. One participant addressed the family stress that may arise if her husband chooses IR for their next posting, so that her son could remain in his current special education class, stating:

Honestly, he would go and we would stay. There is always the option of him living in barracks, like living in IR. I’m sure it wouldn’t be good for our family but we would do as much as we could to try and stay in touch and stuff. (006)

Super-ordinate Theme 2: Factors that may facilitate access to special education services

The secondary objective of the study was to gain insight into the supports that helped families access special education services for their children, as well as the supports that families perceive would have helped ease the process. Throughout the interviews, the participants discussed a wide variety of coping mechanisms that they employed to help manage navigating a new special education system. They also described a variety of services and supports that they believe would have helped ease process of accessing and maintaining services. To reflect these two sub-themes, this section exploring factors that may facilitate access to special education will be discussed according to 1) active strategies employed to access services and 2) strategies that would help ease the process of accessing and maintaining services.
Active Strategies Employed to Access Services

All of the participants described specific strategies that they employed to access special education services and mediate the emotional responses that they experienced. Three main strategies were discussed throughout the study. They included: 1) taking on the role of an advocate, 2) communication strategies, and 3) using MFRC supports.

Taking on the role of an advocate

Taking on the role of an advocate for their child was one of the main strategies employed by the participants to access special education services after a transition. All of the participants stated that they were the primary parent acting as an advocate, and that most of their efforts were directed towards securing appropriate supports for their child. One parent addressed the necessity of being an advocate, stating:

As parents, you do all of the advocating... it is mostly me, yaa, it’s the parents. If the parents aren’t there, if you don’t advocate for your kid, no one else is going to, they’re not… So we advocated. (003)

Advocacy efforts by the participants were reported at each stage of the transition process. Prior to moving and transitioning to new schools, participants took on the main role of researching the new special education system. This often involved being the main person connecting with the school and ensuring that the proper supports would be provided. The parental role of advocate did not dissolve once the child had entered a new special education system.
Many of the participants spoke about having to constantly advocate to ensure that their child was receiving the appropriate supports.

Many participants discussed positive outcomes, such as receiving supports, securing funding, and switching teachers as the result of their advocacy measures. Overall, it was seen as an essential tool in securing and maintaining special education services for their children. However, when discussing advocacy measures, most of the participants expressed a large amount of frustration, related to constantly fighting for supports, and exhaustion, from doing most of the advocating on their own. One participant summarized her frustrations, stating: “we keep fighting over and over and over... and half of these people [school personal] try and discredit what we say or do” (003). Thus, although advocacy can be a useful tool for accessing services, many of the participants felt unsupported during the process and experienced a sense of burnout.

*Communication Strategies*

When supportive and open communication occurred between school staff and parents, participants felt that their child was “better positioned to receive appropriate supports” (003). All of the participants in this study stated that they were the main parent responsible for facilitating communication with the school and were in charge of establishing and maintaining collaborative relationships. Most of the communication that occurred between the participants and school was reported as informal, taking the form of daily conversations during pickups and drop offs and communication binders.

Many of the participants acknowledged that there were unique lifestyle factors that teachers must understand in order to provide appropriate supports to military-connected children with special educational needs. Some of the main factors that participants believed were important to communicate included: the potential that their family would be posted, parental
deployment, and lone parent responsibilities. One participant described having to inform her daughter’s teacher when her husband was away:

When he was away [in Afghanistan] she was different. So ya, it was basically getting across to the school that this is the situation at home, if she is low, is acting up, if there is any type of change in behavior, this is the reason. (001)

Many of the participants described similar experiences of their children acting differently when their spouse is deployed or on training and believe that teachers need to understand this in order to tailor their learning objective and supports during these times. Participants also described situations where their husbands were away and they were not able to help their child finish their homework because of job and other family commitments. Participants expressed a sense of ‘guilt’ that their child was falling behind academically and expressed that they were hesitant to talk to the teachers about the reason for their incomplete homework.

Although all of the participants expressed the importance of communication and shared stories of effective strategies to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with teachers and school staff, they also spoke about a prominent barrier to successful communication—educators’ general lack of understanding of military lifestyles. One participant addressed the perceived lack of awareness and the impact it had on the support her child received:

The teachers had no clue, it wasn’t even on their radar to think about something like that [effects of military lifestyle on children]. Had it been brought to their radar, perhaps it would have been a better experience for the kids. (008)
In order to reduce the communication barrier with teachers and in school teams, participants expressed that they believe teachers should receive more education and sensitivity training that addresses the unique lifestyles demands that military-connected students experience.

**Military Family Resource Centres (MFRC) Supports**

As previously discussed, supports offered through community organizations were used by many of the participants to help secure special education services for their children. Participants also reported accessing supports and services offered by their local Military Family Resource Centers (MFRCs). Many of the participants reported that the most beneficial service offered by their local MFRCs were the family support groups for parents who have a child with special education needs. One participant described her positive MFRC support group experience and how it helps navigate and access services for her child:

> I’ve used them for, you know, looking at the IEP, making sure that it’s worded correctly, that I’m not setting him up for problems in the future. They have resources galore so I usually go to them when I have a question or a problem. (004)

Another service highly valued by the participants was being able to receive support from MFRC Special Need Coordinators. Only two MFRCs in Canada currently have a specific Special Needs Coordinator position, as it was only recently launched. Special Needs Coordinators are responsible for mitigating challenges faced by CAF families who have members with special needs. The position was designed to help military families who have children with special education needs access services by increasing inclusive programming at MFRCs and helping families achieve greater community engagement. Some of the specific services provided by the
Coordinators to the participants included summer transition planning sessions, support groups, funding application support, and information sessions specific to special education programs – including how to monitor IEPs and effectively communicate with educators.

Three of the nine participants have received support from their local MFRC Special Needs Coordinators. All three of the participants described extremely positive experiences with their Special Needs Coordinator, stating that they wanted to continue the relationship in the future, and that they would be the “first stop” (005) when they receive their next posting notice.

One participant described how the Special Needs Coordinator helped her during the transition process:

I would be so lost without this lady, it wouldn’t even be funny. She has been amazing, I found down here it was very hard to find out what services were available and even then I still had a lot of doors shut in my face per say, so when she stepped into the role [of Special Needs Coordinator] I went to her. Things started to happen very fast which was very nice.(007)

The participants that did not connect with a Special Needs Coordinator said that it was because they were unaware that the position existed, or it had not yet been established at their local MFRC. One participant was shocked and excited that the position was created, exclaiming “Lovely! Wonderful! Wonderful, that’s awesome!”(004), when the position and the supports were explained. Overall, the participants who utilized support from Special Needs Coordinators reported very supportive experiences and believed that “every base should have this service” (007).
Strategies that Would Help Ease Transition

A portion of the interview was comprised of questions that addressed supports that participants believe would help them access special education services for their children after a transition into a new system. These questions tapped into the dream, design and destiny components of Appreciative Inquiry, focusing on “what might be done better to help ease the transition experience” (dream) and the desired future for improved services and supports (design and destiny) (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Three main strategies were discussed by the participants: 1) increased availability of services offered by MFRCs, 2) increased outreach to military families living off base, and 3) the development of an information package that outlines available resources and special education policies. Each of these supports will be discussed in further detail.

1) Increased availability of services offered by MFRCs

Throughout the interviews, participants addressed how increasing the availability of services offered by MFRCs would help ease the process of accessing special education supports for their children. Increased respite care, couples counseling, and support groups were discussed the most frequently.

Respite care often consists of the provision of short-term and/or temporary relief to those who are caring for family members or loved ones. Respite gives families a break from their regular responsibilities, a chance to re-energize and pursue their own interests (Developmental Services Ontario, 2014). Four of the nine participants reported using respite services at least one time during their transition experiences, using the time to have meetings with schools and community groups regarding the establishment of supports for their children. Most of the
participants used independent respite services such as Community Living and Respite.org, while only two used respite services offered by their local MFRCs. Participants expressed that having increased MFRC respite services would help them during a transition as it would give them more time to organize the move and navigate the new special education system.

Participants also expressed that having to continuously work towards securing special education supports for their children affected the entire family unit—parents, siblings, and in some cases, extended family and friends. Attending regular couples therapy, provided by therapists who understand and are sensitive to the unique lifestyle demands of military lifestyle, was described as the participants as a good way to cope with the frustration and exhaustion that resulted from navigating new special education systems. One participant stated that it “helped them understand what it meant to have a child with special needs… what the future in the military and as a family would look like” (003) and ways that they could work together to ensure their child was receiving appropriate special education supports. A few of the participants expressed that they did not use couples counseling because it was either not offered by their local MFRC or they were unaware that they were eligible to receive the service. One participant stated that she started using couples counseling services five months after their move, but would have started using it sooner had they known that the service were available.

MFRC support groups for parents who have children with special education needs were reported as extremely beneficial, allowing parents to meet other families who have had similar experiences accessing services. As previously discussed, many of the participants in the study had extremely positive support group experiences and found them a great way to exchange information and receive emotional support. Special needs groups offered by MFRCs were reported to be especially beneficial for military families because they addressed the extra layer of
being special needs parents connected to the military. Participants reported that meeting other military families who have a child with special needs allowed them to speak about similar concerns, such as deployment and posting-related stressors.

Many of the participants expressed a desire for more MFRCs to create more special needs supports groups so that they are offered consistently at every MFRC. Furthermore, participants stated that offering the groups during the week in the evenings, or on weekend days, would help their family access the services.

2) Increased outreach for military families living offbase

Eight of the nine participants lived off base at the time of the interview. This is consistent with the Ombudsman’s (2013) report, which stated that 85% of military families live away from CF bases and wings. Participants reported many positive aspects to living off base, including living closer to community schools, increased engagement with the civilian community, and better housing options. However, living off base was also reported to create challenges in accessing military family supports, specifically those offered by local MFRCs. Many of the participants reported that “there are next to no services off base” (009) which resulted in using limited to no MFRC supports because it was inconvenient for them to access the base, where the supports were offered. The participants that relied on MFRC supports reported them to be, for the most part, an extremely valuable resource. Furthermore, participants that were not using the resources because of the distance to the MFRC reported that an outreach program to inform families of available community services, or just to check in with the family, would be a beneficial support. One participant addressed this issue, stating:
We prefer not to live on base, we purposefully choose to live in more of a rural area, and there are no services here, and no one ever reaches out for any services, we're always the ones that have to say you know, we need help and its always a laborious process, so I think having an outreach would be beneficial. (008)

Multiple participants suggested that outreach could take the form of email newsletters, social media networking pages, phone calls, or house visits.

3) *The development of an information package that outlines available resources and special education policies*

A recurring desire to know more about the new school system and available supports, prior to relocating, was apparent throughout the interviews. In reference to their transitions, all of the participants who experienced a transition (n=8) stated that they did not receive any special education information included in their posting packages. It is important to note that five of the nine participants stated that the military was aware of their unique family circumstances, but augmentative information was still not provided.

Participants expressed that receiving information about the new system, including relevant legislation, policies, and available supports on the document would help them navigate the new school system. One participant described how this would have had a ‘large positive impact’ (004) on connecting with the new school, had it been available during her family’s transition. Specifically, participants stated that having the information in advance would help reduce the time necessary to research the new system as well as reduce the time that their child had to be on waitlists.
Participants also stated that receiving a list of resources and supports available in the new location, both those offered by the local MFRC and community organizations, would be extremely beneficial. As previously discussed, many of the participants stated that they felt isolated in their new communities and found it difficult to connect with and access community services. Participants believed that, if information regarding supports were provided, they would be more likely to reach out and use the services.

Overall, all of the participants believed that receiving information explaining the new special education system and services, provided by MFRCs, would help ease the transition process. One participant addressed the void, stating:

The Military Resource Centre should, once they know that you have a special needs child, I think that they should have something set up, like a little checklist, ok, this is what you need to do, you’re going to NB, this is what you need to do. Ok, so we’re going to hook you up with the resource Centre there, they know you’re coming, they’re going to help you, let this be an easy transition for you, explain to you what the, you can talk to them via email or whatever about what the school system is like there compared to here – the shortcomings the benefit, things like that. (001)

**Super-Ordinate Theme 3: Potential career implications that may arise when parents prioritize securing special education services for their children**

Balancing work and family responsibilities is a dilemma faced by many parents. This juggling act is often made more challenging for parents of a child with special needs, as they have the added responsibility of accessing and maintaining special education supports for their children. A third theme emerged from the interview, addressing how family decisions and priorities regarding special education supports may have career implications for military personal
and their spouses. Participants discussed how decisions, such as deciding to stay in a location so their child could maintain their special education supports, could cause career implications for the serving member and their spouses.

**Career implications for the partner of the serving member**

All of the participants in the study were the spouses of active military service members. The participants stated that decisions regarding whether they work, how much time to take off, and how many hours they work was largely influenced by how difficult it was to access and maintain special education services for their children as well as the flexibility of their husbands’ job. Most of the participants in the study quit their jobs after their child with special needs was born and returned to work part time when appropriate supports were in place for their child. Although this pattern is often found in families with children who have special needs, participants in this study felt that they were further delayed returning to work because of their “husbands irregular schedule” (001). Furthermore, upon return to work most of the participants chose to work part time instead of full time, so they could ensure their children were receiving appropriate supports and be able to prepare for a transition if they were posted.

Career development and advancement opportunities for many of the participants were also curtailed by their caregiving roles and responsibilities. Many of the participants spoke about having to leave work, or turn down promotions because they had to work around their husbands’ schedules and balance being the primary caregiver of their child with special needs. One participant described how taking time off to go to her child’s IEP meetings influenced her career:
It has happened (deployments) and I’ve had to give up my career and take time off of work to go to her appointments and school meetings. And I know it’s a big red check from my boss. (002)

Many of the participants in the study believed that, if their husbands’ careers were more flexible, and allowed for more equal caregiving roles, they would be able to take on more responsibilities at work and make career advancements. Furthermore, many of the participants felt resentment towards the military and blamed their husbands’ career for curtailing their employment opportunities. Attempts to accept that “it is just part of the lifestyle” (004) was discussed as a coping mechanism to justify the sacrifices they have made as the primary caretakers.

Career implications for the serving member

The interviews also addressed how having a child with special needs influenced the military careers of their husbands. Limited posting options, deliberations on whether to accept postings, and taking early retirements, were the main issues addressed. Many of the participants discussed how their families contemplated turning down postings because of fear of losing supports for their child with special needs. Attempts to avoid postings were also described by many of the participants. For example, one participant discussed how her husband enrolled in continued education so that their family could stay in the same location for a longer period of time. This was done so that they would not have to navigate new supports and school system in a new location. Another participant discussed how her husband left the military and joined the reserves so that their family would not have to experience another posting that would pose a risk of their so losing the positive supports that their child was receiving at the time.
Participants expressed that it may have been helpful if their husbands had discussed posting options that accommodated their children’s special education needs; however, they explained that this often did not happen because they ‘didn’t want the military to get involved’ with their family dynamics ‘because they’re worried it might affect their career.” (002). One participant elaborated on her husband’s reluctance towards speaking with his career manager about his family circumstances:

> It would be awkward, and I know my husband would be hesitant to do that, just because of the implications for his career. Negative outcomes would be less opportunities for promotions, just bad reputation, poor tasking, crappy jobs, there are just a bunch of possible negative implications, less opportunities for career advancements and courses, all kinds of stuff. (008)

Two of the participants in the study also discussed how their husbands decided to take an early retirement from the military because they did not want to accept another posting and disrupt current special education resourcing. For these families, the stress of navigating a new school and the barriers to accessing special education services for their children outweighed the benefits of staying in the military. Both families felt very alone making the decision to leave the military early and felt ‘let down’ (003) by the military. Participants suggested that programs designed to help serving members manage the work/life balance, as well as retention programs that allow parents to take time off work to help with childcare responsibilities without being penalized, may have influenced their decision to take an early retirement.
Chapter 5
Discussion

Overview

Geographic mobility is one of the main lifestyle demands experienced by CAF members and their families. The main objective of the study was to explore the impact of geographic mobility on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. Participants in the study provided rich descriptions of their experiences navigating special education systems after receiving a posting. Throughout these descriptions, geographic mobility was described as having many, and often times severe, impacts on the ability to establish and maintain special education services for their children. The first component of this discussion will focus on the primary objective of this study—the impact that geographic mobility has on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. This section will be followed by a discussion related to the secondary research objective—to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would help facilitate access. Throughout both sections, links to the existing literature on geographic mobility and access to special education services, which happens to be primarily American, will be drawn. These links illustrate that Canadian military families share similar essential experiences of navigating special education systems as American families. Differences do arrive, however, in terms of supports and services that are available in a Canadian context. Following the discussion surrounding the primary and secondary research objectives, recommendations and areas for further research will be presented. To conclude, a presentation of limitations and concluding statement will be provided.
Impact of Geographic Mobility on Canadian Military Families & access to Special Education Services for their Children

The main objective of the study was to explore the impact that geographic mobility has on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. Throughout the study, participants provided rich, emotional descriptions of barriers to accessing and maintaining services that they attributed to geographic mobility. Throughout the interviews it became apparent that geographic mobility has many, and often times severe, negative impacts on families’ abilities to access and maintain special education supports. Furthermore, many of the barriers to accessing were shown to impact the emotional well-being of the participants and their families. The perceived impact of geographic mobility on their child’s education, as well as the emotional and career impacts, will be presented to illustrate the range and nature of impacts that geographic mobility can impose on families navigating special education systems.

A body of American literature has shown that stressors associated with geographic mobility may impact the academic performance and school participation of military-connected students (Aronson, et al., 2011; Arnold, et al., 2011; Astor, et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Chandra et al., 2010; DePedro et al., 2011; Cozza et al., 2013; Garner, et al., 2014; Jagger & Lederer, 2014; Mmari et al., 2009; Richardson et al., 2010). Although this study did not explicitly measure the degree of school participation and academic success of children, many of the participants spoke about how geographic mobility may result in their children taking steps back academically. As reported by the participants, the main academic impacts of geographic mobility included having their children placed on waitlists for prolonged periods of time, losing existing supports and services after a move, and the regression of their
children’s academic progress. Participants drew attention to these impacts by providing personal experiences where such circumstances occurred. They also addressed factors that they believed were largely responsible for the negative outcomes, including limited ability to pre-plan for a transition due short notice postings, the inability to easily transfer school files between schools, schools’ inability to effectively support military-connected children with special education needs. These descriptions provided insight into how both military policies surrounding geographic mobility as well as complex special education systems often compound and make it difficult for military families to research, access, and maintain services when they are posted.

The extent to which geographic mobility impacted participants’ ability to access special education services was primarily illustrated through descriptions of their emotional experiences through the transition process. Intense fear, stress, and anxiety towards receiving postings, as well as descriptions of extreme frustration and exhaustion when recounting past experiences of navigating a transition, illustrated how difficult the process and experience of accessing services was for the participants. These emotions mirrored those reported by participants in Jagger & Lederer’s (2014) study that looked at the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education for American families. Thus, illustrating how similar, severe emotional experiences exist between the two countries.

For many of the participants, the strain of navigating a new system began before they moved. Pre-planning for a transition typically consisted of researching new school systems, transferring IEP records, connecting with new schools, and ensuring augmentative supports were in place. Participants reported that pre-planning was a frustrating experience due to fragmented policies, difficult means of transferring files, and being unaware of where to find information on the new systems. All of the participants who experienced a move also reported that the pre-
planning process was even more draining due to the fact that they were the main caregiver responsible for the planning, only receiving help from their husbands when their schedules permitted. Uncertainty surrounding postings and the limited time to prepare for a move were also reported to be limiting factors in the ability to plan and facilitate a smooth transition for their children. This was reported to create feelings of anxiety in anticipation of the move and frustration because research often had to be completed multiple times because posting locations were modified last minute. These findings further support Jagger & Lederer’s (2014) study, illustrating that limited ability to proactively plan for a warm handoff to a new school due to uncertainty regarding postings is a frustrating and difficult barrier for military families to overcome. Future research may wish to further explore how Canadian posting notices may be altered to provide families with more time, or support to enable them to better plan for a transition.

Participants in the study also expressed a fear of losing supports for their children upon relocating and entering a new special education system. This fear was one of the main factors that contributed to an overarching fear and anxiety towards receiving a posting. This fear was, in some cases, so intense that families took proactive measures to avoid postings. These measures included family decisions for the serving member to take an early retirement (n=2) or leave Regular Forces to join the Reserves (n=1). Canadian research has found that currently, children’s education is one of the main factors that influences CAF members’ decision to leave the military (Daigle, 2013). This study supports this finding; however, future research is required to determine whether having a child with special education needs made children’s education more of an influential factor in leaving the military than for a typical military family.
The emotional components of navigating a transition and securing supports did not ease upon entry into the new system. Participants discussed that the effects of improper transfer of documents lasted for prolonged periods after transition and often resulted in long wait-lists and absence of services for their children. Participants reported that it was often not clear whose responsibility it was to ensure that files were appropriately transferred, resulting in a prolonged, confusing dynamic that slowed down service delivery access. This confusion echoes Bradshaw et al.’s (2013) finding that unclear responsibility in regards to file transfer can reduce the ability to access services directly upon entry into a new school.

The current study also illustrates how geographic mobility impacts military families’ ability to develop and maintain collaborative relationships with schools. Participants expressed that both receptiveness and availability of services were highly dependent on the educators’ awareness of and sensitivity towards military lifestyle demands. For example, participants expressed that when educators were aware of military lifestyle demands, including the complexity of entering a new system, they were more responsive and helpful in terms of setting up supports and avoid wait-lists. Furthermore, participants also stated that, when educators understood that behavioural and attention issues may be more prominent during parental deployment, they were able to more effectively tailor special education services to better support their children. These findings resonate with Cozza’s (2013) findings that military students and families often feel that educators and school staff commonly do not possess the necessary understanding of military lifestyle demands required to build collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships. In particular, participants in the current study believed that transferring files from the previous school and setting up IEPs was much easier when educators understood posting processes and the time constraints that military families face during transitions. Thus,
although participants expressed the importance of educator awareness, they echoed findings that many teachers and school staff do not possess the necessary understanding of military lifestyle demands required to effectively support military-connected student with special education needs (Chandra et al., 2009; Cozza et al., 2013; Mmari et al., 2009).

Participants also discussed their husbands’ apprehension towards using military career options to accommodate their unique family circumstances, which would make it easier to access special education services for their children, due to potential career impacts. Compassionate Status, Compassionate Postings, Contingency Postings and Imposed Restriction Postings were all acknowledged by the participants as possible options to minimize the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education services. However, IR was the only option exercised, and only by one participant. According to the participants, a fear of losing career advancement opportunities as well as poor relationships with career managers dissuaded the exploration of these options. Furthermore, instead of exercising these options, one participant reported that her husband joined the reserves, and another two took early retirements to avoid postings that would affect their child’s special education. Currently, there is no literature that explores the potential career impacts that result when parents choose to prioritize their children’s academic progress. However, as children’s education is reported to be one of the main reasons that serving CAF members chose to leave the military (Daigle, 2013), it may be an important area for future research, as recruitment and retention is a priority for the CAF.

Overall, the impacts described by the participants illustrated how geographic mobility had many, and often times severe, impacts on the ability to access and maintain special education services. The perceived impacts on their children’s academic success and frustrations resulting from waiting lists, lost services and inability to develop collaborative relationships with teachers
and school staff were reported to greatly impact the emotional well-being of the participants and their families. The emotional experiences of planning for a transition, accessing services upon entry to a new system, and maintaining services mirror the experiences reported by military families in the United State. In particular, the results from the current study echo the impacts of geographic mobility on access to special education services reported by participants in Jagger & Lederer’s (2014) seminal US study. In their study, parents reported feeling emotionally drained and often dissatisfied with inadequacy of supports provided due to 1) battling new school systems to secure supports 2) navigating different education approaches across different schools, 3) limited proactive planning and warm handoff to new school due to uncertainty regarding postings and 4) schools not being adequately prepared to receive file transfer and provide supports. Thus, this study builds on the current literature illustrating that many of the essential experiences reported in previous findings are experienced in a Canadian context as well. However, although similar challenges and emotional impacts exist between the literature and current study, differences did also arise. These differences relate to the services and systems that are unique to a Canadian context. The next section of the discussion will focus on the services the supports that helped ease transition, as well as those that participants believe would help facilitate transition in the future. This is an important addition to Canadian military literature as it addresses specific supports uniquely accessible to CAF members and their families.

**Supports to Facilitate Access to Special Education Services**

The secondary objective was to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would have helped facilitate access. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed many strategies and coping mechanisms that
helped them access special education services for their children after receiving a posting. These included: researching the new education system in the new jurisdiction; connecting with the new school in advance to ensure that files were transferred appropriately; employing parental advocacy measures to ensure that adequate services were delivered; establishing collaborative relationships with teachers and school staff; and on both community and MFRC supports. Participants addressed how each of these strategies held potential to help ease transitions; however, barriers within school systems as well as military procedures often times made it difficult to actualize the potential of each strategy. Participants addressed these barriers by proposing supports and services, for both schools and the CAF, that would help mitigate the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education services. The remainder of this section will be divided into two sections, the first, addressing CAF supports, and the second, school supports.

**Military Supports**

Participants in the study echoed the Ombudsman’s 2013 report, *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium*, stating that, although The CAF offer many programs and supports to assist families, there are still areas for improvement. The main areas viewed as impacting access to services included the lack of formal procedures to identify families who have a child with special education needs, inadequate assistance in the pre-planning process, limited outreach to families living off base, and variations of service availability between bases.

Multiple participants also stated that they were unsure if the military was aware that they had a child with special education needs. Participants expressed that his lack of awareness
impacts their ability to access special education services after a move because the military was not able to effectively identify them and provide appropriate supports throughout the transition. Currently, CAF does not have an identification system (mandatory or voluntary) for families that have a dependent with special needs. In the United States, The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) is a mandatory program that was created so that the military could identify families who have a dependent with special needs and therefore provide assistance to them when navigating special medical and educational systems (U.S. Army Medical Department, 2015). EFMP consists of three components: the identification and enrollment of a family member with special education needs, assignment coordination to determine the availability of services at the projected duty station, and support to help families identify and access programs and services (U.S. Army Medical Department, 2015). A similar program, The Children’s Education Advisory Service (CEAS), exists in the UK. CEAS is education specific and was established to provide information and support to service families on all aspects of their children’s education (Ministry of Defence, 2012). Like the EFMP, registration with CEAS is mandatory for all Army families who have a child with special needs. Both programs assign families with case-workers that are responsible for helping them navigate services, including special education services, in their new posting location. Establishing a similar mandatory identification program in Canada may help families access services and open up streams of communication with career manager to explore options that help ensure their children are receiving appropriate special education supports.

Another prominent barrier to accessing special education services after a transition was the limited time for proactive planning due to uncertainty regarding postings. It may not be feasible to provide more advanced warning to families because of the operational nature of postings; however, the pre-planning process may be made easier by providing families with more
information about the new school system and supports when they are given a posting message. One possible way of disseminating special education information to military families in an efficient manner could be through the development and distribution of a policy guide, outlining legislation, policy, supports, and IEP requirements for each province and territory. An example of such a guide has been developed in the United Kingston by The Ministry of Defence. A Guide For Service Families: UK Education Systems provides an overview of the four education systems across England and the devolved administrations and addresses frequent areas of confusion arising for Service parents navigating new special education systems (Children’s Education Advisory Service, 2013). The document also lists resources that provide detailed information on the different education systems. A similar, Canadian special education guide, targeted towards military families, may help families understand the new system, therefore making the transition process more manageable. The idea of a special education guide, or information package, was discussed by many of the participants and viewed as a resource that they would be interested in using. (An analysis has completed through independent study and is currently in collaborative development with MFS.)

A comprehensive tool to help military families proactively plan for a transition into a new special education system may also be beneficial to other highly mobile populations, including families of athletes, businesspersons, and many other professions. Fabian’s (2002) Model of School Transitions illustrates that similar discontinuities are experienced during any vertical transition into a new school, regardless of the reason for moving or the time allocated to preparation. These include physical discontinuities (changes in physical environments), social discontinuities (changes in social networks) and philosophical discontinuities (different approaches to teaching and learning). Philosophical discontinuities have been reported as the
most difficult for families to navigate (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Thus, a document that provides an overview of philosophical discontinuities including different special education policies, legislations and supports a military child would encounter could be beneficial for any family transitioning into the school system.

Participants in the study reported that MFRCs provided them with many programs and services specifically designed to support military families who have children with special education needs. Programs, including support groups for families who have children with special education needs and on-line parent forums, were viewed as valuable resources to help learn about and access special education services in their new communities. Another MFRC program that the participants discussed was the Special Needs Coordinator program. In 2014, the MFRC in Trenton, Ontario, introduced the first Special Needs Coordinator position as a pilot project. Funding for the project was renewed in 2015 and has transitioned into a full time position (Trenton Military Family Resource Centre, 2015). The MFRC in Kingston followed Trenton’s lead and hired a part time Special Education Coordinator in late 2015. The new position was viewed as a highly valuable resource during transitions into a new special education system. A liaison who understands military lifestyle demands and has knowledge of special education systems was seen as a huge asset by the participants. Participants received support from a Special Needs Coordinator reported that they helped with the coordination and transfer of files, understanding the new IEPs and curricula, and the navigation of services available in the new community. They also organized events, such as support groups that discussed challenges related to special education services, that were reported to be extremely helpful by the participants in the study who had attended. It is important to note that only three of the participants have been in contact with a Special Needs Coordinator. However, participants who have not yet used the
resource were very excited about the new position, and believe that it would help ease their future transitions. As previously discussed, programs that offer programs similar to MFRCs’ Special Needs Coordinator are currently offered in the US by the Exceptional Family Member Program (U.S. Army Medical Department, 2015), and in the UK by the The Children’s Education Advisory Service (CEAS) (Ministry of Defence, 2012). Both of these programs include individual case-workers that are assigned to military families who have a child with special education needs. The caseworkers work with the families to help them plan for a transition into a new special education system when they receive a posting. These programs could be used as a model to further develop the Special Needs Coordinator program offered by MFRCs across Canada.

Although the participants shared many positive experiences using MFRC supports, barriers to access were also reported. The main barrier emphasized by the participants was the lack of outreach to families living off base. Currently 85% of CAF members live off base (Daigle, 2013). This trend of military families living off base is similar in other counties, including the US where only 10% of military families are currently living on military bases (Military Housing Privatization, 2015). This statistic was mirrored within this study as seven of the nine participants lived off base at the time of the interview. Participants in the study stated that it was at times difficult to access services at MFRCs because of the driving distance. Furthermore, participants reported that they were often unaware of services offered, as they were not on base to see posters or get information via word of mouth. Providing outreach, either in the form of emails, social media groups, personal phone calls, or home visits, was reported by the participants as outreach that they would be receptive to and appreciate. One program offered by the CAF to support to military families who cannot reach the base is the Family Information Line (FIL)
This service provides military families with available counseling seven days a week, 24 hours a day (Family Forces, 2014). Similar phone and video supports programs are offered in the US by Military One Source (Military One Source, 2015). Although Family Forces offers the FIL, none of the participants reported to have ever used the service, and many were unaware of its existence. Disseminating information about services, such as FIL, that are appropriate for families living off base, may help families access services more affectively.

**School Supports**

Participants in the study reported that school supports were more likely to be optimally positioned for their child when they were able to connect with the school and plan for their child’s entry prior to a move. Furthermore, connecting with the school in advanced was reported to result in more collaborative relationships with the teaching staff and smoother IEP transfers. Participants also described parental advocacy at school as one of the most necessary and useful strategies to ensuring that their children were receiving appropriate special education supports. However, participants expressed that advocacy measures were typically more successful when the school had an understanding of military lifestyle demands. The theme of educator awareness and understanding of military lifestyle demands was a common theme throughout the interviews. In general, participants in the study echoed Cozza’s (2013) findings that families believe schools would be better positioned to support their children with special education needs after a transition if they had a better understanding of military lifestyle demands.

Many participants expressed a belief that increasing sensitivity training for teachers that addresses military-connected students may help reduce these barriers. This resonates with the American literature, which addresses the issue of educator awareness and underscores the need
for enhanced collaboration between military family services and school boards that have a high density of military-connected students (Astor, et al., 2012, Cozza et al. 2013). Furthermore, tools to educate school staff on the unique needs of military-connected students have been developed in both the United Kingston and the US.

In the United Kingdom, The Ministry of Defence and Department of Education teamed up to publish the Support Services for Military and Defence Personnel and Their Families (Ministry of Defence & Department for Education, 2009). The handbook is a guide for teachers and other professionals, to the specific issues relating to the needs of children of service personnel. In combination with the guide, a web-based tool kit was developed to provide additional information and strategies on how to support military-connected students. A similar comprehensive and evidence-informed guide, The Teacher's Guide for Supporting Students from Military Families was created in the US to educate teachers on the many challenges and special circumstances that military-connected students face (Astor et al., 2012) These guides outline the unique needs of military families related to continuity of access to the curriculum, effective transition strategies, and are joint ventures by the military and educators. Additional elements for consideration for families with children who have special education needs are also included. These serve as exemplars for consideration on what could be developed within the Canadian context.

As illustrated, Canadian military families experience many, and often times severe, challenges to accessing services resulting from geographic mobility. The participants in the study reported extremely frustrating and complicated experiences that affected both their ability to access and maintain services. The essential experiences reported in this study reflect the current body of literature that explores the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education
systems. Specifically, the emotional experiences of frustration that arise from battling new school systems, navigating different special education systems, dealing with limited time to plan, and the inability for schools to adequately support their children’s unique needs (Jagger & Lederer, 2014). This study also builds upon the body of literature by addressing supports that are unique to the Canadian context. Canadian families must navigate special education systems that are governed by Canadian legislation and policies and taught by teachers educated under standards set by Canadian institutes of higher education. Furthermore, military families access military family supports through MFRCs, organizations that are responsive to the perceived needs of Canadian military families. As such, the supports offered do not mirror exactly the services offered by other militaries. Thus, this study highlights that, although the essential experiences of navigating special education systems may be similar between countries, it is important that Canadian research continues to address barriers that may exist as a result of supports offered in a Canadian context. At the same time, supports offered in other countries may act as exemplars for services that could be provided in a Canadian context.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This study was the first Canadian study to explore the impact of geographic mobility on access to special education services for military families. One Canadian study has explored school participation and academic success of military-connected students (Robson et al., 2013); however, it did not specifically look at the impact of geographic mobility or barriers to accessing special education services. Thus, a strength of the current study was that it allowed research to focus on a target group of individuals, *parents who have children with special education needs and who have experienced geographic mobility*, who had never before been evaluated with
regards to their experiences of access. This study acts as a positive first step in research to better understand and support this unique population. Another strength of this study was the inclusion of participants from multiple bases across Canada. This allowed for a more diverse sample that provided a broader picture of challenges to accessing special education services. The use of qualitative methodologies, in the form of open-ended interviews also allowed for participants to provide detailed, personal accounts of the impacts that geographic mobility had on their experiences of accessing special education services for their children. These detailed accounts provided rich information regarding the emotional components of navigating and securing supports, coping mechanisms, career implications and areas that may help ease access—all of which have not previously been explored in a Canadian context.

However, there are also limitations to the current study. One of the main limitations was that the study participants were spouses of CAF members affiliated with the army (n=7) and air force (n=2), with no representation of families affiliated with the Navy. Military supports, relationships with career managers, and frequency of relocations may vary between branches; thus, future studies should include all three services branches to provide a more holistic understanding of the impact that geographic mobility has on access to special education. This study is also limited by the fact that only civilian caregivers were interviewed. The perspective of active CAF members, educators, school administrators and career managers were not included and therefore limited the scope of insight provided. For example, although participants spoke about educator’s lack of understanding of military lifestyle demands, it cannot be concluded from the study that educators actually have a lack of understanding, as the educator population was outside the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, participants spoke about how their husbands did not want to talk to career managers about their personal circumstances or request
accommodations because of the fear of losing career advancement opportunities. Again, because this population was not included in the study, it is important to remember that participants are reporting their perspective on a third party.

Attention will now be drawn to limitations in the present study related to method. Information about the study was distributed via word of mouth, recruitment posters and social media outlets. Individuals interested in participating contacted the researcher to participate and acquire more information; thus, individuals who participated may represent a more proactive group of parents. Therefore, experiences of advocacy and proactive planning may be more common in the population interviewed. Furthermore, participants were provided with the information and consent form by the primary researcher, which may have made it difficult for participants to back out if they did not feel comfortable continuing in the study. Future studies in this area should consider using an arms length research assistant to distribute the information and consent forms.

**Future Research**

This study focused on the impact that geographic mobility has on military families and their children’s access to special education from the perspective of civilian caretakers. Accounts provided illustrated many of the emotional impacts of navigating new systems, barriers to accessing services, and career implications that occur as a result of geographic mobility. Future research looking at access to special education services should explore the perspectives of different parties involved. This includes the perspectives of parents who are active CAF members, educators and school administrators, and CAF Career Managers.
Including the perspective of active CAF members may provide insight into the balancing act between career and family obligations, specifically regarding how career decisions to accommodate their children’s special needs are made and acted on. Many of the participants in the study discussed how their husbands did not want to talk to career managers about their personal circumstances or request accommodations because of the fear of losing career advancement opportunities. Interviewing active CAF members could explore this area in greater depth and provide insight into whether CAF members feel supported with their unique family circumstances.

Throughout the study, many participants expressed that they did not feel as though school educators and administrators had enough of an understanding of unique military lifestyle demands, including geographic mobility, to adequately support their children. A lack of understanding and systematic identification system was also believed to act as a barrier to effective communication between the school and family. Studies with educators and administrators who work with military-connected students should be done to explore how much this population understands about the unique demands faced by military-connected students, their confidence in supporting this population, and amount of training that they have received.

Conducting studies with CAF career managers could provide insight into supports and programs that are offered to military families who have children with special needs, as well as military supports that career managers believe could be improved to better support this population. Many participants in the study discussed that their husbands were apprehensive about discussing career options to accommodate their unique family circumstances; thus, it may be beneficial to understand the situation and support opportunities from the career manager’s perspective.
Conclusion

Geographic mobility is one of the main lifestyle demands experienced by CAF members and their families. The main objective of the study was to explore the impact that geographic mobility has on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. Participants in the study provided rich descriptions of their experiences navigating special education systems after receiving a posting. Throughout these descriptions, geographic mobility was described as having many, and often times severe, impacts on the ability to establish and maintain special education services for their children. Difficulties developing relationships with schools, complex systems to navigate, and ineffective methods for transferring files were all described as barriers to accessing services that were experienced as a result of geographic mobility. This study mirrored Jagger and Lederer’s (2014) findings that military families attempting to access special education services after a move often end up battling new school systems, are forced to navigate different education approaches across different schools, are presented with limited proactive planning and warm handoff to new school due to uncertainty regarding postings, and enter schools that may not be adequately prepared for the new students. This study also illustrated that these challenges and barriers to access resulting from geographic mobility contributed to many emotional and career implications for families. For instance, the stress associated with navigating complex special education systems had many emotional impacts that affected the participants and their families. Having to navigate new systems, as well as the fear of losing supports for their children also impacted career decisions for serving members, such as joining the reserves or taking early retirements.

The secondary objective was to gain insight into supports that helped facilitate access to services, as well as supports that participants believe would have helped facilitate access.
Participants in this study addressed this objective by highlighting coping mechanisms such as; advocacy measures, communication techniques, and the utilization of both community and MFRC supports that helped them access special education services for their children. This insight illustrates that many positive supports are available, including support groups offered by the MFRC. Insight was also provided on how services could modified to provide more effective supports, such as offering MFRC services during evening, and providing more outreach to families living off of base. Furthermore, participants expressed a belief that increasing teacher training on how to affectively support military-connected students would help ease the process of establishing and maintaining special education services after a move.

In conclusion this study is a positive first step in understanding the impact that geographic mobility has on Canadian military families and their children’s access to special education services. Future studies should build upon the findings and continue to explore supports and services that are unique to a Canadian context. Research should also explore different perspectives of the transition experience and barriers to access; including those of educators, school administrators, and active CAF members.
References


Hudson-Plush, S. (2006). Improving Educational Outcomes for Children in Foster Care: Reading the McKinney-Vento Act's Waiting Foster Care Placement Provision to include Children in Interim Foster Care Placements. *Cardozo JL & Gender, 13*(1), 83.


Appendix A

Are you a member of the Canadian Armed Forces who has a child receiving special education services?

If so, you may be eligible to participate in a study about the impact of military relocations on accessing special education services.

If you are interested in taking part in the study or for more information please contact:

Kristin Ostler at k.ostler@queensu.ca or 613-929-4607

Dr. Heidi Cramm at Heidi.cramm@queensu.ca or 613-533-6094

To find out more about your rights as a study participant contact: Dr. Albert Clark, Chair of the Queen's Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board at (613) 533-6081
Appendix B

Project title: *The impacts of geographic mobility on Canadian Children’s access to special education service*

Principal Investigator: Kristin Ostler: k.ostler@queensu.ca, 613-929-4607

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study, “*The impacts of geographic mobility on Canadian Children’s access to special education services*”. Please read this Information Sheet and Consent Form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before deciding whether to participate in this research study.

Details of the Study
The main goal of this qualitative study is to gain a better understanding of the barriers that Canadian military families experience as they relocate and are forced to navigate new special education systems for a child with special education needs. It is important to understand how Canadian military families are currently navigating special education systems upon relocation in order to understand the process and develop appropriate supports to aid transitions. This study seeks to discover barriers that affect how military families’ access special education services as well as any facilitating factors that could be strengthened.

Description of Procedures
If you agree to participate you will be contacted by a researcher and can choose to attend an in person interview or an interview conducted via telephone to discuss the your experience accessing special education services for your child. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. All discussions will be recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the researchers to help them learn about your experiences. Your interview will be kept confidential at all times. Please see “Confidentiality” below for more information.

Risks/Side Effects and Benefits: There are no expected side effects or risks from your participation in this research study. There is no expectation that the research will benefit you directly, though you may benefit from gaining insight into how accessing mental health services has affected your family.

Freedom to Withdraw or Participate: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any impact.

Confidentiality
All information obtained during the course of this study is confidential and your anonymity will be protected at all times. If you choose to participate in the focus group, you can choose a pseudonym to protect your identity. You will not be identifiable in any publications or presentations resulting from this study. Your name will be assigned an independent participant code to ensure your anonymity during the study. The link between your name and the independent participant code will only be accessible by Kristin Ostler and her research supervisor, Dr. Heidi Cramm. The link and study files will be stored separately and securely.
Both files will be kept for a period of 5 years after the study has been completed. All paper records will be stored in a locked file and office. All electronic records will be stored on a university server and protected by a user password, again only accessible by Dr. Cramm and her team.

Questions about the Study
If you have any questions about this study please contact Kristin Ostler at (613) 929-4607 or k.ostler@queensu.ca or Dr. Heidi Cramm at (613) 533-6094 or heidi.cramm@queensu.ca.

Consent to Participate in Research

By signing this consent form, I am indicating that I agree to participate in a research study, which is aimed at understanding the impacts of geographic mobility on Canadian children’s access to special education services. I have read this 2-page Consent Form (or have had this document read to me). I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form for my own records.

All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time.

I will sign the document and send it to Kristin Ostler via phone: (613) 929-4607, fax: (613) 533-677 (attention Dr. Heidi Cramm) or email: k.ostler@queensu.ca.

________________________________________________________________________
Participant’s Name (Please Print)     Participant’s Signature

________________________
Date

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Albert Clark, Chair of the Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board at (613) 533-6081.
Appendix C

Interview Guide:

**Lead Question:** Tell me about your families?

**Probe Questions (if necessary):**
What section of CAF is your husband in?
How many children do you have?
How many children do you have that require special education services?
Did they attend a private or public school?
How many times have you transitioned into a new system?
What type of services does your child require?
How many adults are there in your household who interact with your child’s special education providers?
How many years have you been involved with special education services?
Does the child receive special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)?

**Lead Question:** Describe a situation where services were ideally positioned to support your child?

**Probe Questions:**
How were the supports set up?
Who was part of the special education team?
How much involvement did you have in the delivery of the special education services?

**Lead Question:** Can you tell me about your level of involvement with your child’s special education providers.

**Probe Questions:**
Do you have flexibility to attend IEP meetings? What about your spouse currently active in the military?
Can you tell me about your experience with IEP meetings?
In your opinion, do you feel that you are encouraged to be an active parent participant in IEP meetings? Explain

**Lead Question:** Where did you acquire information regarding the new special education system?

**Probe Questions:**
Have you ever attended any type of parent training about parenting a child with a disability (for civilians or military families)? Describe experience
What was your experience of trying to understand the new special education system/ laws etc. upon relocation?
Do you feel you have the opportunity to learn more about the system through your child’s school?

**Lead Question:** Can you explain your relationship with your Military Family Resource Centre Support Staff while navigating the new special education system?

**Probe Questions:**
Were you provided with a personal caseworker to help you navigate the new special education system?
Have you used any resources/services through the Military Family Resource Center (i.e. the Military Information line or parenting courses)?
Did you feel as if the services offered adequately addressed your needs?
What, if any, barriers have prohibited you from utilizing any of the supports/services currently offered?

**Lead Question:** Can you explain your relationship with you child’s classroom teacher/educational team?

**Probe Questions:**
What are some strategies that helped you collaborate with the child’s teacher/educational team?
Did you feel that you were considered a part of the team?
What, if any, barriers have prohibited you from collaborating with your child’s teacher/educational team?
How long did it take you to complete the IEP process?

**Lead Question:** Do you believe that there are unique supports that military families require that typical civilian families may not?

**Probe questions:**
If you could design a program targeting military families what would it look like?
What do teachers need to know about military families who have children receiving special education services?
What do administrators need to know about military families who have children receiving special education services?

**Lead Question:**
If you could have been given a hand out to help you navigate a new special education system, what would it look like, what would it include?

**Lead Question:** Tell me about your overall level of satisfaction of your experience navigating the new special education system.
**Probe Questions:**
Are there things you would like to highlight as very positive experiences?
Are there any existing supports that you felt that you did not use but would have benefited from?
Are there any supports that were not available but that you believe would have benefited you during system navigation?