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# **“A Constant State of Flex and Change”: A Teacher Candidate’s Perceptions of and Experiences with Military-Connected Learners**

*Vicki S. Sherbert*

## **Introduction**

Teacher candidates exist within an ever-swirling cycle of change. Navigating through this cycle, they are called upon to consider perceptions they have formed based on their own lived experiences as students and as pre-service teachers. They enter their programs with beliefs and perceptions that are the early foundation for their emerging professional identities (Graue, 2005). As they progress through their program’s courses and field experiences, they acquire content and pedagogical knowledge. When they consider this knowledge with regard to future practice, they begin to make agentic shifts in identity from that of teacher candidate to that of professional educator (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). The realities of what they are about to experience in their student teaching internships are at the forefront of their thinking as they consider what it will mean to be in charge of a classroom. They typically have concerns about behavior and classroom management, delivering instruction, working with parents and families, and meeting the academic and emotional needs of their students (Lee, Tice, Collins, Brown, Smith, & Fox, 2012).

All teacher candidates enter the classroom with initial perceptions and assumptions regarding their students’ diverse lived experiences and the role those experiences may play in the classroom (Wenger & Dinsmore, 2005). For teacher candidates at Kansas State University (KSU), many of whom have no military background, these initial perceptions and assumptions may simply be vague ideas or concepts regarding the diverse lived experiences of military-connected learners. Until given the opportunity to work with these students, candidates may or may not have given much thought to the unique needs and challenges associated with the culture of military life. Their concerns may extend beyond those typical of teacher candidates in other internship placements to include worries about understanding and meeting the unique needs of military-connected learners.

During the fall semester of her senior year at KSU, Lindsay (pseudonym), a teacher candidate with no military background, began her internship in a first grade classroom on a military post 23 miles from campus. In this qualitative case study, she shared her perceptions of and experiences working with military-connected learners before, during, and after her student teaching internship. While experiencing typical challenges often associated with student teaching, midway through this semester Lindsay encountered an additional challenge unique to an internship serving military-connected learners: a major deployment of military personnel from the post. Concern about the effect of this deployment on her students and how to best support them during this time compounded the challenges Lindsay experienced.

What follows is an in-depth look at one teacher candidate’s perceptions of military-connected learners, her student teaching internship experience, and the agentic shifts in identity she began to make over the course of the semester. Often the best description came from the Lindsay’s own

words as she reflected upon her preparation, her current practice, and her future as an educator. Prior to her student teaching internship, she shared,

I have a lot of fears going into student teaching. I'm most interested in knowing about the emotional factors that affect military kids. If a few of the children's parents or family members get deployed or a national disaster or a terrorism strike happens....I don't know how to emotionally support my students if those things happen.

Through Lindsay's insightful reflections, this article documents her journey from student teacher intern to reflective practitioner. Furthermore, implications will be considered for teacher educators as they prepare candidates to serve the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms.

## **The Study**

Case study methodology was selected for this study in order to examine the experiences of a teacher candidate as she progressed through her internship. During three interview sessions, Lindsay (pseudonym), a white, female in her early twenties, shared her perceptions of military-connected learners and described her experiences working with them over the course of her internship. She would be completing her internship in a first grade classroom. Lindsay did not identify herself as "military-connected" or as having any military background. She described her understanding of the military as "pretty minimal." She was interviewed at the beginning of her internship experience prior to meeting her students, mid-way through, and at the culmination of the internship. Over the course of the semester, she described her own lived experiences, her perceptions of students in general and military-connected students in particular, and her perceptions of the diverse lived experiences of military-connected learners. The phenomenon of her perceptions of military-connected learners and her experiences serving them were examined and described through a sociocultural lens. In this article, background information on military-connected learners and a brief description of sociocultural aspects of identity and agency will be followed by an in-depth description of the perceptions and experiences shared by Lindsay throughout her internship. Aspects of identity and agency will then be considered as, in her own words, she describes her anxieties, successes, and growth as her identity shifts from a teacher candidate to a professional educator. Insights for teacher educators preparing candidates to work with military-connected learners will be considered.

## **Military-Connected Learners**

Of the approximately 2,000,000 military-connected students who have parents who are active duty, members of National Guard or Reserves, or Veterans of the United States Military, 1,381,584 are 4 – 18 years old. Over 80 percent of these children – 1,105,267 – attend P-12 public schools (AACTE, 2011). Educators entering the field may not be aware of aspects of military life or the challenges – social, emotional, educational – military-connected learners may face (Skomorovsky, Norris, Bullock, & Evans, 2016). As educators strive to set a tone for an inviting, caring, and supportive classroom for all students, they also need to be informed how the unique and diverse lived experiences of military-connected learners may affect learning (Garner, Arnold, & Nunnery, 2014; Astor, Jacobson, & Benbenishty, 2012). The experience of the deployment of a family member can lead to a variety of stressors in addition to the inherent challenges of military life. These additional social and emotional challenges may impact the

academic functioning of learners who have a family member in some phase of deployment (DePedro, Esqueda, Cederbaum, & Aster, 2014; Guzman, 2014; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Huebner & Mancini, 2005).

Kansas State University is situated only minutes from a military post. Prior to graduation, teacher candidates have the opportunity to work with military-connected students during field experiences or the student teaching internship semester. The Military-Connected Learner Educational Initiative of the College of Education at KSU was initiated in 2012 and provides a college-wide framework for preparing in-service and pre-service personnel to serve military-connected learners in education settings (Mercer, Thurston, & Hughey, 2014). The college and faculty make a concerted effort to prepare teacher candidates to include strategies for supporting the diverse needs of all students, including the unique needs of military-connected learners.

### **Sociocultural Aspects of Identity and Agency**

A goal of sociocultural research is to understand and explain the relationships between human mental functioning and the cultural, historical, and institutional situations in which this functioning occurs (Wertsch, 1995; Sherbert, 2011). Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) assert that sociocultural theory allows researchers to “explore the intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and political aspects of people’s sensemaking, interaction, and learning” (p. 2). With this in mind, education researchers may conduct studies that seek to understand the social and cultural practices of people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Sherbert, 2011). In seeking this understanding, an examination of aspects of identity and agency can yield insight into understanding the experiences of teacher candidates with no military background as they complete their internships in classrooms with nearly 100 percent military-connected learners.

Identity can be described as a stable, internal state of being that is socially and linguistically fluid, and that takes into account the different positions individuals enact or perform in particular settings within social, economic, and historical relationships (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Individuals form identities when they participate in these settings, and then they may reconfigure their identities as they react to circumstances or as they define their identities based on what they believe others expect from them (Alsup, 2006; Gee, 2000; Sherbert, 2011). In describing her perceptions of her own lived experiences, Lindsay offered insight into her identity as both a teacher candidate and an emerging professional educator.

Agency can be described as the strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, and relationships. Agency is a way of positioning, or repositioning, oneself in order to allow for new ways of being and new identity development (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; & Sherbert, 2011). As Lindsay described her perceptions and experiences during each interview, it became apparent that the experience of the internship had allowed her, or forced her, to consider her perceptions and assumptions regarding military-connected learners. As she described her perceptions and experiences during each interview, it appeared she was making agentic shifts in her identity from teacher candidate to professional educator.

## Lindsay's Story

**Before the First Day of School: Interview #1.** From the first interview, Lindsay was candid regarding her anxieties about student teaching and her lack of knowledge or understanding of the lived experiences of the military-connected learners she would be serving. She described her own lived experiences, her perceptions of learners in general and military-connected learners in particular, and her perceptions of the diverse lived experiences of military-connected learners.

***Lindsay's Perceptions of Her Own Lived Experiences.*** At the time of the initial interview, Lindsay was about to begin her student teaching internship semester. She described her lack of experience and the concerns she had about working with military-connected students. She shared her own need for consistency, structure, and stability.

I just don't have a lot of experience with military-connected people. I would think a military family's life is a constant state of flex and change....I've always thought, 'Oh, gosh, I don't know if I could have ever been in a military family!' I thrive, personally, on consistency and structure and being in the same place for the same time.

She described herself as an emotional, tenderhearted person who usually connects first on an emotional level. She said,

I think that is my strength as a person, being able to connect with people, and I'm excited that I get an opportunity to do that in a military setting.

She expressed a desire to make connections with the students who would be in her classroom in a few short days and hoped to find ways to learn more about each of them.

I feel like I have the knowledge of what I need to do; of course putting it into practice is the difficult part.

Lindsay shared that she had grown up in a family she felt was very stable and close-knit. She did not elaborate directly on the structure of her family, but indicated she had not moved frequently. She also said she had not experienced the inconsistencies and lack of stability she would later describe in her perceptions of the military lifestyle. While she did not specifically describe her own lived experiences in the second and third interviews, she continued to mention aspects of the lived experiences of military-connected learners that differed from her own experiences described in this first conversation.

***Perceptions of Military-Connected Learners and Their Lived Experiences.*** Early in this conversation, Lindsay reflected upon how she perceived the lived experiences of military-connected learners. She initially hesitated to use the term "instability" in describing a military family's life and, searching for the right words, she said she thought military families must exist in a "constant state of flex and change." As she considered the strengths and needs of her future students, Lindsay stated she felt they would cross paths with many different people and have only a short amount of time to build friendships and relationships. She predicted that "some kids would adapt to that really well and some kids wouldn't." She anticipated her learners would need to be adaptable and flexible because of the constant "coming and going" in their lives. She worried,

...getting to know each student on their [academic and emotional] level, to know where they're at....will be a challenge.

Lindsay noted there are many characteristics of military-connected learners that are common with all, or most other, learners in elementary school. She described cooperative strategies and lesson ideas she had gleaned from an early back-to-school professional development session for new teachers and interns. She felt while community- and rapport-building activities were important for every teacher to incorporate into his or her classroom, these activities were especially important in her first grade classroom, where all of the students would come from military families.

When asked about her understanding of the lived experiences of military-connected learners, Lindsay immediately exclaimed,

When I think about military kids, they just move! They move a lot. They're coming and going. They don't really have a home base. Their parents might have a hometown, but they might not really have one.

She then tried to envision herself experiencing the same circumstances she perceived her students experience.

Oh, gosh, I don't know if I could have ever been in a military family. 'Cause I kind of thrive on consistency and structure and being in the same place for a time...I guess I always assumed that military families have to just pick up and go at any time. There's a change of friends. Obviously you're going to cross paths with a lot of different people. You might have only a short amount of time to build friendships and relationships...I would have a hard time with that.

Lindsay acknowledged that military families are "subjected to all the same struggles that non-military [families] are" such as divorces, deaths in the family, and medical issues. She felt those struggles would be compounded by the added stress of deployment. She perceived there would be a great deal of instability in the homes. Lindsay was concerned that this instability, along with the frequent moving, would affect them academically and emotionally. She asked, "How will I get to know each student on that level, to know where they are?" When sharing her perceptions, she was careful to identify what she perceived about the lived experiences of her students as just that – her perceptions. Throughout the interview process, she shared how she developed new understandings about her students and herself.

**Mid-Semester: Interview #2.** In this interview session, Lindsay did not refer to nor reflect upon her own lived experiences. Instead, she focused directly on what was going on in the lives of her students. In October the military post, where she was completing her internship, experienced a major deployment of personnel. During this interview, she continued to share her perceptions of military connected learners and their lived experiences. Additionally, she considered how the recent circumstance of deployment affected her students' lives outside of school and their focus and functioning inside the classroom.

Lindsay again referred to the frequent moving or changes in location experienced by her students. She said her cooperating teacher had shared with her how parent involvement can be very sporadic. She considered this to be the result of a number of factors.

Military-connected students move every few years. Mom and dad may divorce and maybe the mom moves somewhere else and then the dad moves somewhere else and then you move for deployment. So it's incredible how resilient these kids are! But it also

makes me aware that those kinds of things are affecting factors – the emotional and academic development for a lot of kids, especially in the military.

During this interview, Lindsay described her appreciation of the diversity among the learners in her classroom and the different languages spoken. She noted her students came from many different backgrounds. Some spoke German or Spanish as their first language. Lindsay previously completed an ESL practicum in a different school, and she shared how that helped prepare her for a wide range of abilities and levels of students. She also described the various learning needs of her students with ADD and Asperger's. She said she was learning to support these students by applying what she had learned in her previous ESL practicum and what she was currently learning from her cooperating teacher. As she considered the students in her classroom, she said,

They're so diverse. I mean....they bring a lot of different life experiences....I think those life experiences give them a bigger world view....It kind of helps them to see that there's more than just their classroom and their school and their community. So, even as they go through the deployments, which are absolutely so difficult, I think it really gives these particular kids a broader worldview and perspective. Resiliency is a huge strength. And they're definitely very empathetic kids.

Lindsay expressed concern about the exposure of her students to video games and violent movies. She wondered if this was “just kind of a kid thing” or a “military kid kind of thing.” After conversations with others working with military-connected learners, she concluded that while this could be typical for children in general, there was perhaps a higher instance of military-connected children who play violent video games with their parents or watch violent movies. The children know that mom or dad uses a gun when they work, and she said, “...it's not outrageous to talk about that kind of thing.” She shared she had never considered that military students might have more of a numbness to aspects of violence.

It's what mommy and daddy do...not necessarily the killing part, but carrying weapons and learning how to protect and serve...It's just kind of part of their daily lives.

In considering the circumstances her students were experiencing with the deployment, she shared that some of the students had not totally grasped the concept. Her cooperating teacher asked the class how many parents were deploying soon. While some of them shared that their parents were going to Afghanistan, one student shared that his dad was leaving for El Dorado [Kansas] that weekend. Not knowing whether the child didn't understand the concept of deployment or if his parents had simply not told him the exact location, Lindsay said,

It's hard for them, being that young, to really understand that mom or dad's going to a war zone in another country as a soldier. For them, it's just that they're going to go somewhere.

Lindsay felt the concept was more difficult for the first grade students who had not yet lived overseas or experienced an overseas deployment. Some of the students, she said, started missing school so their families could take family pictures or go on little excursions before the deployment. She said she had not yet noticed the emotional impact but expected that would become more apparent once parents started to leave.

At the time of this interview, she anticipated there would be six or seven students who had a parent deploying to Afghanistan in the next few weeks. Lindsay expressed concern that home environments already lacking in stability and consistency would be even more chaotic. If one parent is deploying, the other parent must shoulder many more responsibilities and take care of additional tasks associated with a change in family dynamics. She expected an increase in the emotional neediness of the students. For her, she said, the most difficult thing would be making sure her students are getting what they need at home to be successful in school. She admitted,

I'm a little nervous about the deployment, what's going to happen at home with these kids. Are they going to come to school prepared and ready to learn, are they going to need a little more love and attention? I don't know what they're going to need, and that's a little frightening. Because I want to be prepared to give them what they need as students; but at the same time, I don't quite know what that is yet.

**After the Last Day: Interview #3.** The final interview took place in the week following Lindsay's last day in her internship classroom. Her culminating project, the student intern portfolio, had been completed and turned in, and the commencement ceremony had occurred the previous weekend. She was eager to reflect upon her internship experience. She did not refer to the deployment specifically, as a separate factor. At this point she seemed to apply the experience of deployment to the broader circumstances of military life.

In this last interview, with her very first words, Lindsay offered deep insight into how she now perceived military-connected learners. She recognized she now perceived her students, and their lived experiences, very differently from her initial perceptions at the beginning of the semester.

I feel like military-connected learners are almost like a paradox. They live a military lifestyle, which you'd think would involve a lot of structure and discipline. But on the opposite end, a lot of them live in very unstructured households and are moving a lot and don't have the stability of knowing where they're going to be in a year.... Sometimes I would think about the students in my classroom and it would be hard for me to think about their experiences. I was trying to put them into this kind of box of what I thought about military-connected learners. But, in reality, it's like every student's experiences were so different... So, one thing I think I learned is that.... you can't put these military-connected kiddos in a box of 'this is what military-connected learners are like.' I think that's one thing that surprised me. I thought I could kind of categorize them as all having similar backgrounds. There are linking threads, for sure, between all of those students, but there is a very diverse range of kiddos. Ethnicities and languages – that kind of surprised me. I almost thought that I would have a population of middle class, white kids in my classroom whose dad was in the military. But it's just not so. That's just not how our world is evolving.

Lindsay went on to describe the resiliency she saw her students exhibit over the course of the semester. Some students seemed more flexible and adaptable than others. She compared the resiliency of her military-connected learners to that of students who may have lived in the same house their whole lives and had the same friends during their growing-up years. She observed that her students seemed to make close friends easily and that they were supportive of one another in everyday situations, as well as the stressful circumstances of deployment.



## **Agentic Shifts in Identity**

Over the course of the semester, Lindsay was willing and eager to speak of her experience. With little prompting, she would reflect on her perceptions and suppositions and what she was learning about teaching and about military-connected learners. The insights she shared during the first interview indicated that, even before her internship began, she was already reflecting upon her teacher preparation coursework and the needs of the students with whom she would work. As the semester progressed, she considered the experiences of her military-connected learners prior to and during deployment. She also reflected upon her response to what she perceived as her students' greater level of need for emotional support and for structure in the classroom. She described her own increased level of confidence, as well as her understanding that she would continue to learn and grow as a teacher. She spoke of practices that she wished to continue and develop further in her own classroom.

Lindsay's reflections and her own descriptions of her perceptions and experiences offer insight into her original identity as a teacher candidate and the shifts she made in her thinking and in her practice working with military-connected learners. While encountering many circumstances beyond her control such as the deployment of some of her students' parents, the varied and diverse home circumstances of her students, and the increased level of need she perceived her students to have, she was forced to consider her identity as a teacher and how she needed to respond. She articulated shifts in her perceptions of military-connected learners, from initial assumptions about their lived experiences and individual characteristics to what she had come to understand about the phenomenon of military life. She most clearly described these shifts by stating she felt military-connected learners were "almost like a paradox" and that she had been trying to "put them in this kind of box of what I thought about military-connected learners." She admitted trying to categorize them as having similar backgrounds and then realizing there was a "very diverse range of kiddos."

**Interview #1: Before the First Day of School.** From the start, Lindsay's words demonstrated that she was beginning to make agentic shifts in identity from one of a teacher candidate to that of a professional educator. She reflected upon her program and course work in the College of Education. In speaking of a field experience which occurred the previous semester, she referred to the requirement of completing a contextual factors section in the field experience portfolio, which required information about military-connected learners and possible adaptations or modifications that might be necessary to afford them equitable learning opportunities in the classroom. Of this experience, she said,

There was a larger focus on military-connected learners, because of requirements in our portfolio. That was so helpful for me. At first it was like, 'Where am I going to get all this information?' I just wanted to get to the fun stuff! Now, looking back, it was so helpful to consider who had an IEP, who was military-connected, and so on. I think my tendency would have been to skip past that and go straight to the instruction.

In this statement, she describes her impatience as a teacher candidate at having to gather and analyze data rather than focusing on more creative or "fun" aspects of teaching. Although at this point she had not met her students or assumed any responsibilities in the classroom, she was beginning to see the importance of gathering and considering information about the lived

experiences and needs of her future students. She was considering the knowledge she would need to have and responding with a more professional reflection upon her previous coursework.

She also described ideas she had been considering and wondering about prior to the beginning of her internship. At the time of the first interview, Lindsay had yet to meet her students but had attended back-to-school meetings and professional development activities. She described her reaction to the content of these meetings:

One of the things they talked about in the workshop on the first six weeks of school was building community using cooperative strategies and games to help kids think about what are their hopes and their dreams...making them feel they have a place of belonging...like they were special and loved...there was a focus on that. I was, like, Yes! Those were the things I'd kind of been thinking about but hadn't been able to make the connections like they did in the workshop. Because, I'm so preservice! I have ideas in my head and can't quite connect the dots between how you want it to flow out.

In expressing concerns about her internship, she stated, "Classroom management is going to be my greatest weakness." She was most concerned about being able to understand the emotional and academic levels of her students. She said she would strive to be clear and consistent and to focus on positive behavior. When reflecting on the type of student she was throughout her program in the College of Education, she described herself as a planner and as someone who likes a great deal of structure. She was grateful that, for her internship, her cooperating teacher had invited her into the classroom prior to the first day of school and she was excited to learn from her during the upcoming semester. She said she felt more prepared and ready emotionally and physically because of the extra days spent getting to know her cooperating teacher and gleaning early information about the students she would be serving.

**Interview #2: Mid-way Through the Semester.** By this time in the semester, Lindsay felt her biggest success was connecting with students on a deeper level. She described her students as "awesome, awesome kids" and stated that, even with all of their struggles, she had built really good relationships with them.

While she shared joyfully about relationship building, her next words described her doubts and anxieties as she considered her journey.

And so, a few times this semester, I'm not going to lie, I asked myself, 'Can I make it in teaching? Am I going to last? Am I going to make the five-year threshold?' And I know that half of all teachers quit. Am I going to get to that point? I feel like I'm always brought back to: this is what I'm supposed to do. Just make it through student teaching right now and you'll have a lot of doors opened to you in the future.

Prior to this, whenever Lindsay's words had indicated a shift in identity from student to educator, she would smile and immediately follow up with statements indicating she knew these were typical concerns of all student teachers. But when she shared the above words, she had tears in her eyes and paused quietly when she was finished. Her candid questioning and consideration of her future seemed to indicate she was deeply reflecting on this agentic shift and the potential impact on her future as an educator.

**Interview #3 - After the Last Day.** As Lindsay continued to deeply reflect upon her experience, she considered how she felt at the beginning of her internship. She described herself as very unsure in her abilities to “execute a lesson, to manage students, to plan well, to build positive relationships with students, AND deal with the discipline that goes with classroom management.” She stated that her most difficult realization over the course of the semester was:

...there is only so much control that I have. I’m like a ‘fixer.’ I’m a ‘doer.’ I see a problem and I try to think of a solution to that problem. And there were so many times when I saw a kiddo struggling with something or I knew that something was going on at home...I wanted to fix it. I wanted to provide a solution. I think that’s a teacher thing. That was the hardest thing for me, to realize that I couldn’t have control over a lot of the happenings and the situations that my kids would bring into the classroom. I could only deal with what happened in the classroom.

As she reflected further upon this, she said coming to terms with the limits of her control, accepting the fact that she couldn’t “take them all home and cook them dinner and tuck them in” was the hardest part of her experience.

Lindsay shared that in the previous two or three weeks, she had been thinking about the most surprising realizations that came to her over the course of her experience. In a previous interview she had spoken of the impact she hoped to make on her students. In our final conversation, she emotionally shared how she had learned of the importance of modeling and the influence she and her cooperating teacher had on the children in their classroom.

We talk about modeling in education classes and making clear our expectations and what we want from our students. And also modeling character. We had one student whose dad deployed to Afghanistan. He had some moments when I would look over and he would just be sitting at his desk with tears rolling down his face. He wouldn’t make any noise. I would pull him aside and just give him a hug. I’d always ask why he was crying and he never knew. So my teacher and I would just give him a little backrub and some encouraging words. The same little boy, at the assembly on my last day, was sitting there with little tears rolling down his face. The two little girls next to him immediately turned to him and started rubbing his back in the same way that we would. As they rubbed his back, they said, ‘It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay.’ So I learned that modeling caring and concern is so important, especially for these kiddos....I knew that I was capable of that as a person, but I think that as a teacher, it really taught me something, made an impression on me in my personal and professional growth as a teacher. How sometimes the love that we give students is probably more powerful than I’ll ever realize.

### **Insights for Teacher Educators**

In considering Lindsay’s story, two important insights became evident: the power of reflection and the need for focused professional development and resources.

**Reflection.** Deep, focused reflection allows teacher candidates and professional educators to examine their own perceptions and to consider how they navigate the varied experiences they encounter in the classroom. Reflection that extends beyond questions on assignments to deeper consideration of beliefs and practices can assist teacher candidates in creating and supporting

new professional identities (Alsup, 2006). While reflection is critical as teacher candidates develop and shift identities, it can be difficult for them to systematically begin the process. Creating opportunities for focused, holistic reflection helps candidates examine their ideas and actions within new circumstances (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). When given the opportunity to reflect deeply upon her own lived experiences and her perceptions of military-connected learners and their lived experiences, Lindsay offered insight into her shifts in thinking, how she perceived her students and their circumstances, and how she perceived her role as an educator. She mentioned how helpful she found the reflection process and how much she appreciated telling her story. Taking a focused look at her own perceptions throughout the semester helped her be more cognizant of her professional growth as she shifted identities to navigate the new and varied experiences that arose during the deployment.

Teacher educators can support the development of candidates' reflective practices by offering strategies such as writing journal entries, recording video diaries, or participating in reflection groups during the semester. These strategies are most effective when introduced during program coursework prior to the internship semester, allowing candidates the opportunity to engage in reflection before the full-time experience of student teaching. When candidates engage in focused reflection, they consider the diverse cultural contexts of the lives of all their students (Birmingham, 2003). As indicated by Lindsay's comments, actively reflecting on the needs of military-connected learners provided opportunities to understand her learners' diverse lived experiences and to better consider her own perceptions and practices.

**Focused Information in Coursework and Professional Development.** Interaction with practicing educators and participation in professional development opportunities can offer teacher candidates support as they face the challenges of the classroom (Risberg, Curtis, & Shivers, 2014). Lindsay indicated how helpful the professional development sessions were for her at the beginning of the school year. She also emphasized how grateful she was for the support and information provided by her cooperating teacher. Her comments illustrate that she often relied upon her cooperating teacher's experience when navigating the circumstances unique to working with military-connected learners. In talking about her learning during this time, she reflected on her program, coursework, and projects. She mentioned receiving some information about working with military-connected learners in her diversity class and in other courses as well. She wished she had received more information specifically addressing the unique needs and diverse experiences of military-connected learners throughout her program. However, she also admitted, as often is the case, until she had the context of applying her learning to the experience of teaching, she had not made connections. Once she was faced with her internship, she then began to reflect upon her learning and consider how that work had indeed offered preparation for her current circumstances. She noted that access to resources for working with military connected learners is crucial to developing lessons and learning experiences that address their unique needs.

To provide quality support, resources, and professional development, the Military-Connected Learner Initiative of the College of Education at KSU made available a variety of resources for undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and practicing teachers who support military-connected learners. *Train the Trainer to Educate the Educator*, a workshop addressing topics of concern for educators working with military-connected learners, offered tools designed to

provide learners with the academic and cognitive preparation, and technical and employability skills needed for success. Workshop presentations were recorded and are available on the college's Military Initiative webpage. <https://www.coe.k-state.edu/military/> In 2016, funds were allocated by the College of Education to purchase a collection of children's, middle grade, and young adult books, as well as resource materials to be made available to all students and faculty for use in lesson preparation and delivery and to help inform their understanding of the needs and lived experiences of military-connected learners. A growing list of titles can also be found on the Military Initiative webpage. <https://www.coe.k-state.edu/military/docs/Military-Connected-Learning-books.pdf>

## Conclusion

At the beginning of her student teaching internship semester, teacher candidate Lindsay said she perceived military-connected learners existed within a “constant state of flex and change.” Over the course of the semester, she examined her own perceptions and experiences and reflected on her practice as she navigated the challenges of working with military-connected learners and the circumstances of deployment. As she made shifts in her own identity in response to her experiences within these challenges and circumstances, she gained understanding of the teacher she was becoming and the teacher she hoped to be. Considering her story can offer insights into the power of reflection and the importance of focused information in coursework and professional development as teacher candidates become professional educators.

During her third interview, Lindsay shared these final words:

I would never have thought in a million years that I would have worked with military kids. It definitely is a privilege to be a teacher. To work with students. But I think that working with military-connected learners – it is an honor to serve the children of men and women who serve us....These men and women lay down their lives for our basic freedoms, so to be able to love on their kids when they're not physically able to, because they're away, it's a huge privilege.

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