“Sorry doesn’t do anything”: The Opinions of Military Children on Support Offered by a School

Laura Harman-Box, BA English Literature, MA Creative Writing, PGCE Primary Education

School of Education and Sociology

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Portsmouth

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NAME: Laura Harman-Box

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Abstract

This dissertation explored the opinion of military children in a case study in one school which serves a predominantly-military population. Research about the academic and emotional outcomes of military children has often explored the opinions of their teachers and carers but less regularly their own opinion as children. Giving these children the opportunity to express their views was considered to be central to informing future policy and practice, providing as it does a validation for decisions made by school leaders who do not share their experiences. A review of literature established the gaps in researchers' understanding of the experiences of military children. A case study approach was then used to ensure in-depth thematic analysis could be conducted on the focus group of eleven year 6 pupils; the children led the conversation over a series of discussions. A questionnaire was then conducted with staff in the school in order to triangulate the results gathered from the children's discussions. The study identified that military children in the school had particular concerns around their emotional and academic development which were coded as follows: isolation versus friendship; obligations to adults; control versus freedom; and school life. The perspectives of the participants provided valuable insight into the reality of military children and exposed the dichotomies by which they live.

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1. Introduction

In 2012, the Armed Forces Covenant was introduced by the British government to support active service personnel and their families, including their children (hereafter referred to as military children). It asserts that 'special consideration is appropriate in some cases for those who have given most' (p. 1, Ministry of Defence, 2012), referring to military children as well as their parents. This poses a number of questions for schools with military children in their population: how can we ensure that military children transition smoothly; how should we spend our Service Pupil Premium (SPP) funding (Army Family Federation, no date; Ministry of Defence, 2021); and, crucially, what do military children feel that they need from their educators?

Children have the right to have their voice heard (United Nations, 1990) but military children are at risk of missing out due to their often transitory nature, which may mean they have less input on school development; on average, military personnel will move every two to three years (Army Families Federation, no date). It is therefore important to provide ample opportunity for military children to express their own, unique needs as both developing people and as learners.

The size of School A's military population is "significantly above the national average" (Ofsted, 2018) – a double-edged sword for the school's leadership. On the one hand, a large proportion of the students understand the difficulties and benefits of military life, allowing peer-to-peer support for military transitions and the ongoing barriers that military children may face (such as gaps in education (Children's Commissioner, 2018)). On the other, teachers may feel they cannot fully support these children - to close gaps in academic learning which may arise due to multiple family moves or in their emotional development as they handle complex situations.

The school believes that it offers a wide range of support for these pupils. These have not, though, been explicitly discussed with the children they affect, which is why it is important to ask: Do you think that School A supports you? Such a broad question allows the children to steer the conversation towards areas of their life which they wish to discuss; this should limit the effect of my bias as a researcher. It is hoped that the school will be able to gather information about the areas of life that the children feel are most troublesome for them and to use this to generate pupil-approved, school-wide policies.

To identify whether School A adequately supports its military children, the research aimed to identify and clarify topics the children deemed important, particularly during deployment. This included the periods before and after deployment when families must adjust and re-adjust the way they live (Vestal Logan, 1987). Following a year of increased separation for military families, this is a particularly pertinent topic of research; some overseas personnel were unable to return home when the first lockdown was implemented, despite being scheduled to, and many service people were mobilised unexpectedly.

To triangulate the results and ensure that they are a true reflection of school life, discussions with school staff focused on topics children identified, asking if there is support in place which the children had not recognised. These discussions took place with a mixture of senior leaders, class teachers and support staff. This reflected different opinions of the efficacy of support (Arnold et al, 2013; Guzman, 2014; Risberg et al, 2014) and ensured there had been input from a range of voices before a new school-wide policy may be implemented.

The year 6 bubble in which the research took place is reflective of the school population as a whole and, given the relationship between the researcher and the children involved, allowed for free conversation due to the level of trust which exists. It is an unavoidable limitation that

the research cannot be verified with repeated discussions across the year groups or within the school's cluster, a series of schools which all serve a similar population, or with parents.

It is important to acknowledge that the inherently unbalanced relationship between researcher and participant could have resulted in children tempering their responses (Morrow and Richards, 1996). Equally, as children knew that their parents had given permission for their involvement, they may have been reticent to share information which seemed too private. The concern that children's responses about their own experiences cannot be trusted or that they may deliberately lie for a number of reasons is part of a long-held discussion; however, Ennew (1994, cited in Punch, 2002) asserts that a strong relationship between researcher and participant, whether child or adult, will result in a more honest response. Furthermore, within a constructivist paradigm, a child's belief in their responses regardless of an adult's perception of the same situation, has validity. Again, the school hopes to use this research as a foundation for child-led policies which represent its population's voices; this can only be achieved by trusting the responses given.

It is hoped that these results will allow school leaders to explore both what support is offered and how the availability of the support is communicated to the children. The School Improvement Plan (SIP) identifies that it wants to ensure that SPP spending "impacts upon service children settling into school quickly and making good to accelerated progress where needed". It has been identified that children perform better academically when they feel psychologically safe (Wanless, 2016). Simultaneously, military children are more likely to experience stress, anxiety and a raft of other emotional needs (Chandra et al, 2010; Chartrand et al, 2008; Kelley, 2003; Lieberman and Von Horn, 2013; Skormorovsky et al, 2016) than their peers with civilian parents. If the school hopes to support these pupils adequately, they should explore the issues raised by the military children themselves. These can then be used to create a school-wide Service Pupil policy which explores academic, social and emotional

support, and other areas of life which the children identify as necessary. It aimed to answer the question: what do military children feel that they need from their educators?

2. Literature Review

Before embarking on work with children, it was important to examine the extant research to identify common themes and potential gaps in understanding. Although this research aims to put the military children at the centre of our understanding, it is nonetheless vital to comprehend the research landscape as it currently stands.

Mental and emotional health

Research which explores the mental and emotional health of military children is unequivocal, finding that there is an almost consistently negative impact on these children's health (Chandra et al, 2009; Chartrand et al, 2008; Kelley, 2003; Kudler and Porter, 2013; Lieberman and Van Horn, 2013; McGuire and Steele, 2016; Rowe et al, 2014).

Chartrand et al (2008) further assert that separation is a risk factor for children in a number of areas of their development, despite there being no statistically significant difference in psychopathology from the children of civilian parents. The study controlled for depressive and stress symptoms on the part of the parents; however, there are a higher number of incidents of child neglect or maltreatment in military families (Gibbs et al, 2007). Controlling for parental stress levels may not allow us to see the full picture of how separation or deployment can impact the whole family. Further, due to the unprecedented global situation resulting from the pandemic, there has been no research conducted on how military children

are affected by such sudden separations. This research does not focus specifically on this but is conducted within this context.

It is relevant to note that the majority of the research surrounding military children has been conducted with military children based in America and that these results cannot be removed from their context. In other words, it is possible that the negativity of these findings is affected by the socio-cultural landscape of the United States. In support of this is the research of Skormorovsky et al (2016) who found that parents reported that their children coped well with the stressors of military life as part of a study conducted in Canada, though still identified deployments as being a time of additional stress for families. A limitation of this study is its reliance on parental report, trusting the judgement of carers to identify the wellbeing levels of children. Its focus was on single-parent military families, in contrast to either single parent civilian families or dual parent military families. Parents' comments were often concentrated on concepts such as their relationship to their child or were couched in rather uncertain terms ('I think', 'He seems to be', 'I'm not sure') without confirmation from the child being discussed.

The fact that the results of studies on the impact of military service on mental health are different in different countries suggests that there may be further contextual issues in the United States influencing the findings. Ryan-Wenger (2001) identifies that the 1990s saw the highest ever levels of military engagement for the United States, which continued into the 2000s with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. There is a relative lack of research more recently, making it difficult to confidently assert that this pattern of increased risk to mental health has continued. Simultaneously, global events can unfurl more rapidly than research can be ethically and confidently conducted – for example, although recent events in Afghanistan have yet to lead to deployments for the families of children at School A, it is likely that there is increased concern and potential for harmful effects on mental health.

Kudler and Porter (2013) state that research must look beyond the individual children in military families in order to build communities of care to support the specific needs of this group. However, there is an assumption of risk made within this study. This may be due, in part, to the higher levels of military deployments in America, where the study was undertaken. The study begins to draw conclusions about military children as a whole, without acknowledgement of the wide range of experiences which these children have: whether mobile or non-mobile, whether stationed overseas, whether deployments of a carer are scheduled or erratic, or the impact of gender or ethnicity. They do explore the importance of military identity for war veterans, an intriguing proposition when applied to the identity of military children; the Children's Commissioner (2018) identified that children were confident using technical language and had an in-depth understanding of various elements of military life, such as the army title rankings. Giving a voice to the children's perception of themselves as part of the military would allow deeper understanding on the part of adult, civilian researchers for whom these experiences are unknowable.

One study undertaken in the UK which focuses on mental health (Rowe et al, 2014) surprisingly found that just over half (51%) of respondents believed that their military service had a negative impact on their children; this is at odds with other research, generally undertaken with military partners, which finds fewer problems overall. Research was gathered through a questionnaire and identified that its results may be limited by the single viewpoint that it can offer.

Academic attainment

The majority of research conducted within the United Kingdom focuses on the academic attainments of military children, rather than on their mental health, though some studies do address this issue. However, this is short-sighted and does not approach the concept of

military children holistically. If the same damage to wellbeing applies to the children of military families in the UK as is found to exist in the United States, the Armed Forces Covenant, which states that those who serve and are related to those who serve should 'face no disadvantage' (Appendix 2, Ministry of Defence, 2012), is not being adequately upheld. Rowe et al (2014), in a study based in the UK, found that a number of factors affected a parent's impression of their child's mental health and if military service had a negative impact on their families, and identified that more children may be at risk of suffering mental ill-health than initially thought. It is difficult, though, to isolate the cause of mental ill-health as issues with wellbeing amongst young people generally are on the increase (Ford et al, 2021; Schraer, 2019; Warne and Sellers, 2019).

Sogomonyan and Cooper (2010) identify that military children face trauma. Trauma can be defined as the harm to an individual's physical, emotional, social or spiritual wellbeing as a result of a series of circumstances or an event (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2012). This may include the separation of families and acknowledges that family separations for any reason can be traumatic for children; I use it to include military deployments and could be argued to include unexpected extensions of work, such as during the national lockdowns when carers who were not expected to be deployed were nonetheless mobilised in-country. This trauma can lead to widely-confirmed negative behaviours (American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services for Youth Families and Service Members, 2007; Heubner et al, 2007; Lester et al, 2010; Lincoln et al, 2008).

These negative behaviours may include non-attendance at school, difficulty controlling mood or difficulty expressing the emotions that the children are going through. Noret et al's comprehensive study (2014) explored pupils of both primary and secondary ages. Whilst both are relevant to the overall outcomes of military children, I will focus on the results of the

primary-aged pupils as this represents the children who will be part of my research. They found that, although more military pupils achieve as well as or better than their peers, the children's attitude towards learning was more negative in a number of categories: more military than non-military pupils disagreed with they enjoyed school, whilst a lower number of military than non-military pupils agreed their they tried their best, they learned a lot or that they got enough help with learning. Clearly, the perspective of these children (year 6 pupils, as are the pupils involved in my research) is relevant and needs to be addressed.

Some of these concerns continue outside attitudes to academic subjects, with a slightly higher proportion of military pupils reporting that they 'never' liked school as opposed to their non-military counterparts; this result was mirrored in more military pupils than non-military reporting that they did not like break times "very much". With such a large number of concerns raised by children, why have these not been addressed?

Supporting military children

Clifton (2007) identified that the needs of military children were not clearly understood and, as a result, schools were unable to meet their needs. This is supported by research which suggests that educational professionals do not feel well-equipped to either understand or support military pupils. Gibbs (2020) explores the issue of how to support military pupils through the specific topic of patriotism in the United States. Although the context of the research is quite particular to that country, the study raises teachers' concerns which could apply more widely. Firstly, they suggest that the teachers they spoke to were concerned that their pupils may be "overburdened and possibly traumatised" (p. 4) by a critical evaluation of war or patriotism; one teacher asks if the examination of such topics is necessary for these pupils. Certainly, when leaders develop a school's curriculum, being culturally responsive (Gay, 2002; Gay, 2015; Kozleski, 2010) can encourage the inclusion and therefore raise

outcomes for marginalised groups: in schools where the military pupils and their experiences are not embedded, a curriculum is unlikely to reflect their needs (McCullouch and Hall, 2016; Noret et al, 2014).

Gibbs (2020) found that the teachers considered that the military children were vulnerable and therefore being culturally responsive is critical. However, to assume that to do so is easy for teachers is an oversimplification. This study also focuses on the perspective of teachers that the pupils were vulnerable. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the perspective of these professionals, it does not examine whether military children view themselves in the same way.

In the University of Derby's framework for the support of military children (Burke et al, 2019), they found that 44% of the schools which they surveyed did not provide specific training for staff in the support of military children. If training were provided, it was often undertaken by a teacher with a personal military connection. Although this can give an insight into the dual perspective of someone who is both an educational professional and a military partner/relation, it does not suggest that this person is an expert in how to provide education-based support (whether that be academic, social or emotional) to military children. Schools involved in the University of Derby's framework (2019) stated that they wanted continuous professional development which was up-to-date and would therefore allow them to be the support military children needed.

Self-image and children's perspectives

This may paint a rather bleak image for the children from an adult perspective. However, it appears that the children themselves are relatively positive. Indeed, an older definition of trauma itself considers it part of a natural adaptation and assimilation of information (Turnbull, 1998). In Bradshaw et al's research (2010), the children referred to themselves as

‘a lot stronger’ (p.96), ‘more responsible’ (p. 96) and as being ‘better at communicating’ (p. 95). This highlights the importance of discussing such issues with the children themselves and attempting to understand their perspective.

Eisner, an eminent researcher in the field of arts-based research highlights the importance of consensual validation (2006): is the impression or perspective identified in the research possible to validate externally? In the case of military children’s self-assessment of their skill sets, it appears so. Both parents and teachers in Bradshaw et al’s (2010) research commented that military children demonstrated more empathy and a greater appreciation of diversity. Children also demonstrate good understanding about the complexity of their emotions. The Children’s Commissioner (2018) reflects this duality of experience. Some children explain that deployments pose a challenge whilst simultaneously being ‘very, very proud’ of their carers (p. 3); some discuss their anxiety when moving, others claim that they ‘always kind of enjoy it’ (p. 6).

A tale of two halves

There are disagreements in the literature about whether the children of military families achieve well academically or not. Engel, Gallagher and Lyle (2010) found that there are ‘adverse effects’ experienced by children in most academic subjects and that these may persist for several years, a position supported by other research (Gibbons and Telhaj, 2007; Macdonald and Boon, 2018; Strand and Demie, 2006; Strand and Demie, 2007). Engel, Gallagher and Lyle (2008) identify that the adverse effects of deployment tend to dissipate over time, that the impact of these familial separations tend to be modest. However, it is plausible that longer deployments (or deployments of more than 13 months within a 3 year period) will begin to have a larger impact, as this is the length of time identified (Rowe et al, 2014) as negatively impacting mental health and behaviour.

The Department for Education's research on educational performance (2010) found that the most disruptive factor on a child's attainment is their level of mobility. They state that it can take "four to six months for mobile pupils to recover academically from a [school] transfer" (DfE, 2010, p.38). Whilst they state that other aspects of the child's life will also be disrupted by a family move and therefore the impact of moving schools cannot be viewed in isolation, it is clear that highly-mobile children are more at risk. Of course, the academic attainment of military children is only one element of the way in which they are impacted by moves; it may be that, in the children's opinion, it is of less importance than other factors – such as social changes.

However, Gibbons and Telhaj (2007) found that the negative impact of transitions can be mitigated if managed well. In 2011, Ofsted found that "most" military children in mainstream education "attain as well as or better than their non-Service peers at the end of every Key Stage" (p. 12). However, this positive result is tempered by the fact that, when military children are mobile, they do not maintain this trajectory. It is a weakness in the literature that this level of research has not been undertaken by the Department for Education more recently, allowing analysis of the trends.

Macdonald and Boon (2018) agree with the wider research that military children who have experienced the trauma of separation or deployment are at risk of academic underachievement. However, they view the situation through the lens of school support: how do school communities after support to these pupils? They identify support networks, both formal and informal, for military carers and those serving. They also expressed the importance of ensuring that teachers have a good understanding of and flexibility when dealing with military students. However, the study did not gain the perspective of the students and whether they felt that these areas of support were adequate for their needs, socially, emotionally and academically.

There are many gaps in our understanding of the needs of military children due to the largely-adult perspective of the children's experiences. Whilst some research cites ethical considerations, research with children can give a deeper understanding for researchers and can inform policy or further strategy on the part of schools. Failing to ask the children's opinions does a disservice to the children who, the Children's Commissioner (2018) found, are able to often speak articulately about themselves, their experiences and even their parents' careers in detail, using correct, mature terminology. Given the lack of replication of this type of study, there is space for more research to speak directly to the children to get their opinions of their own lives.

Children's own voices

In educational research, the role of the child in research has been controversial. Stern et al (2015) identifies that one issue surrounding children in research is whether they should be considered as one mass or as individuals, both of which pose problems from both researchers and for educational professionals. Crivello, Camfield and Woodhead (2008) undertook a participatory research approach in their study to explore how young people self-reported their wellbeing in a number of countries; their study is based on the belief that children living in poverty are diverse. In the same way, military children are not a homogenous group and research which allows individuals to express their perspective on their situation is an important part of forming a deeper understanding. The Children's Commissioner's 2018 report Kin and Country identifies that military children may self-identify as service children, that they are proud of being part of the military; this makes it important for researchers to value their contribution to discussions which affect them.

So, what can be uncovered when research centres the military child? The Service Children's Progression Alliance's 2020 report Listening to Learn: The Voices of Service Children (Hall,

2020) collates a number of case studies of people working with military children. In all of the examples given, children's and young people's voices are put at the centre of the work. They found a diverse number of issues which may exclusively affect military children as well as many which could apply more widely to young people (McCullouch and Hall, 2016): high mobility and the procedural changes which they faced when moving, self-esteem and confidence issues, anxiety for a carer's health and wellbeing, identity, transitioning to civilian life and a lack of understanding on the part of others. Such open dialogues have directly contributed to changes which these institutions have made.

Of course, centring the child is not as simple as it may first appear. James (2007) discusses the conflict at the heart of research with children: the balancing act between viewing children as "articulate social actors who have much to say about the world" (p. 261) and acknowledging that responses may not be authentic or may be taken to represent 'children' as a whole. Further to that, James questions whether the inclusion of children's voice is merely popular, perhaps lip service to the idea of listening when children may continue to be "silenced, suppressed, or ignored in their everyday lives" (p. 261).

James and James (2004) question whether viewing children as 'a child' is more harmful than beneficial, suggesting that they were disempowered by being treated as one homogenous group. Giving the group involved in this research the chance to steer their own conversation, then, would seem to provide an answer to this. If children are choosing what to present and how to present it, the voices may be considered be authentic. However, James (2007) questions whether the dialogue which arises from such research can really be used to inform policy: does it represent the truth?

James (2007) does highlight that children may share authentic voices but that these are chosen for analysis by the researcher, thereby adding a layer of separation from the truth.

Could this not be argued to be the case in all research which requires thematic analysis or a similarly, arguably, subjective method of coding?

What strongly stands out in the literature is the lack of children's voices on issues which affect them directly. This study hopes to begin to rectify that, offering the children themselves the opportunity to express their own opinions. Whilst it intends to ask the ways in which the children can be supported at school, it allows military children to steer the conversation to the issues which they feel are most pressing to their own lives.

3. Research Methodology and Methods

Methodology

Military children represent a small yet heterogeneous group, whose experiences of life are influenced by a wide range of factors – from how often their parents and carers are deployed to the quality of education they receive as they are posted, not to mention the variety of personal, economic and cultural influences which are placed upon every child. How researchers can access and understand these children's perspectives is complex – but particularly important when considering new policies which will impact these very children. What are their experiences and how can we know them?

Ontology refers to the relationships between the concepts and categories in this area of study. These relationships do not exist in a vacuum and, therefore, are necessarily impacted by the children's subjective experience. For this reason, this study, concerned as it is with the social and emotional construct of how children view themselves and the support that they are offered, is informed by a subjective ontology.

Although there may be social facts which are unarguable (for example, that non-mobile military children outperform civilian peers in Key Stage 2), the reality experienced by the individual child is derived by the human cognitive process. Furthermore, this subjectivity applies equally to my understanding of the world – knowledge and experience of the world is shaped by our experiences. I feel it is important to acknowledge that, as a researcher, I am neither a child nor closely affiliated with the military, giving the child participants an experience that I need to try to understand.

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge, asking "How do we know what we believe that we know?" In other words, if the experiences of the children are subjective, how can I as the researcher claim some element of understanding about them? Qualitative research, focused on data which reflects an individual's perceptions of reality, can exist within a constructivist paradigm, one in which there is no one truth (Honebein, 1996). Given that military children have experiences of life which many of the staff at School A cannot share, it is important to take the relativist perspective that reality is a mental construction and view it through the constructivist lens that suggests an interplay between a person and reality. This acknowledges the children's experiences as being valid purely for their existence as a representation of the child's view. If one approaches with a subjective mind-set, it follows that children's opinions on their experiences cannot be *wrong* but a representation of their experiences. Given this, it seems important to include children's voices in a study about a topic which directly affects them; indeed, it is vital in a study based on their own experiences.

Method

Hallett and Prout (2003) state that children have been seen as "objects of concern rather than persons with voice" (p.1). Furthermore, the Children's Act (1989, updated 2004) enshrines that "children and young people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them";

this research is intended to inform future policies at the case study school and, whilst this will not impact the year 6 children who will have left by the time of implementation, it will support their military children peers. Some research is concerned with children's ability to understand complex situations and relies on adult perspectives (Huang, O'Connor, Ke and Lee, 2016). However, from a subjectivist perspective, it is the experiences of the children which are of interest, even if they do not fully reflect the objective factual knowledge held by adults within the case study school. Crucially, "unless children's perceptions… are known, services cannot respond to their needs" Hatton and Chesson (1988, p.1602) state, in a comment about the care system which is just as central to education. Greene and Hogan (2005) argue that children's experience of their childhood is unique and therefore including their voices is vital. Whilst Kinchloe (2004) asserts that children 'both construct their worlds and are constructed by their worlds' (p. xii), these young participants hold information which adults need in order to best provide for them.

Of course, if one believes in a subjective ontology, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of any study undertaken. Whilst the results may demonstrate the subjective experience of pupils, and may be used as a foundation for policy-making or understanding more widely in the area of research with military children, they in actuality directly reflect the opinions of those specific children, in that social group, at that time in their lives. This makes the results no less valid and still reflects the honest experiences presented by the child participants.

According to Kuhn (1970), a research paradigm is how an experiment will be carried out, including what is to be observed and how. For ease of understanding, the methods undertaken are given here in summary: once ethical approval and consent from both children and their carers has been given, children will take part in an exploratory first session, similar in structure to a Philosophy for Children discussion; secondly, a series of focus groups will be

undertaken with the same group, with topics of discussion chosen in the first session. At the end of these sessions, children will have the chance to produce a creative piece to further demonstrate their opinions and views. Following this work with the children, I will undertake a survey with staff. This is to triangulate the data gathered from the children and its contents will be informed by their answers.

The study will primarily use a focus group to gather data, as defined by Stewart (2018): a group discussion led under the guidance of a moderator. I acknowledge Green and Hart's (1998) observation that when a small group already knows each other and are exploring a topic that they have in common, it could be referred to as a discussion group. Green and Hart (1998) further suggest that such groups are more effective at allowing researchers to access information when conducting research with children. However, I use the term 'focus group' to encompass these similar yet distinct definitions.

Kennedy et al (2001) find that focus groups which are relatively homogenous can provide insight into common emotional responses. They also state that focus groups can provide insight into children's experience which are lost in more "traditional" methods of data collection. This could mean that children at School A are able to share their knowledge and perspective in a way which allows a deeper understanding of the lives of military children. However, it is possible that some children may not feel able to fully express themselves if the group contains more socially-dominant peers. As this research is a case study with a limited number of participants who have pre-existing relationships, I need to be aware of the power dynamics which will impact responses in a number of ways: how often children reply, what they are willing to share, whether they repeat themselves if not heard initially. Michell (1999) identifies that these social constructs may prevent some participants from being able to fully share their experiences. For this reason, the study will give children the opportunity to respond more privately, using a number of creative techniques; it is hoped that, by offering

children this option, I may be able to uncover potentially-lost experiences. Morgan et al's research (2002) intended to gain children's own perspectives and therefore combined focus groups with other strategies in order to counteract both reliance on adult experience and the risk of interference from social hierarchies.

In addition, the subject matter is potentially upsetting for the children, placing them in a situation of 'public vulnerability' (Sim and Waterfield, 2019, p. 3011). In order to combat these potential issues, the children will be given an additional opportunity to express their views in a way in which they comfortable: a piece of art, drama or writing. Successful data collection and a positive experience for participants are important in focus groups (Gibson, 2007, p. 473; Morgan et al, 2002), to allow relaxed discussion. Focus group methodology can generate concerns surrounding confidentiality in that the nature of the conversations cannot be predicted (Sim and Waterfield, 2019). It is important then the focus groups' structures are adequately managed. Parts of the session in which responses are more private and do not need to be publicly shared are therefore important. Morgan et al (2002) found that 'breaking up the group so that pure discussion is interspersed with other activities' (p. 10) allowed for all participants to engage.

As previously discussed, this research is being undertaken in a constructivist framework in order to access the subjective experiences of pupils. Each of the children involved in the research has a multiplicity of experiences. No single child can provide us with an objective truth of being a military child. It could be argued that providing the children a variety of ways in which to respond to the discussion (conversation, art and drama) mirrors this diversity of experience and will present a richer and deeper understanding for researchers.

This research is a case study, set out to understand the specific views and opinions of a small group of children whose experiences of life will be simultaneously individual to themselves

and yet representative of the wider cohort of military children in some areas. Due to the arguable inability to generalise the results of a case study, it is important to use multiple methods to gain understanding (Emig, 1971, Lauer and Asher, 1988); this will be demonstrated through the art, drama or writing opportunities which the children will have. A case study is able to explore detailed information which comes in a variety of forms. It can unearth complex issues through its very inability to generalise widely or simply. This is not to suggest that wider understanding cannot be drawn from a case study, though conclusions must be come to carefully. When researchers explore the concept of validity, they are concerned with both internal interpretation and with external generalisability (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005). However, Danby and Farrell (2004) refer to the data collected during interviews as being co-constructed or collaborative, by its very nature as existing as part of a dialogue. The results of a study of children's responses should be viewed in a similar way; though an answer to the same question may be different if asked again, neither response is less valid as they both reflect the participant's lived experience (Graue and Walsh, 1998).

A key benefit of case studies is the flexibility that they offer – I will be able to allow the children to guide the conversation to ensure that my own preconceptions about their needs do not influence my understanding (Gross and Hayne, 1998). Through using multiple methods, the children will be given a variety of ways to express themselves; the data which is collected, though it applies specifically to these individuals, will still be able to inform school-wide policy and present voices which are relatively unheard by adults.

There has been criticism of participatory research, which itself challenges the idea that children are simply 'becoming adults' (Lee, 2002). This criticism suggests that children's involvement in research which affects them can be performative or inaccurate, with children's responses reflecting what they believe they want the researcher to see (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008); this is potentially a particular problem in this research in which I

unavoidably take the dual role in the children's lives as teacher and researcher. Dockett and Perry (2007) state that children are both active and effective as participants in research, rejecting positivism as the sole, valid position for studies. The key to avoid performativity is to create 'legitimate and valued spaces within which students can speak' (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 4).

Write, Draw, Show and Tell (WDST) is a creative research method which allows access for child participants of a range of ages and developmental stages (Angell et al, 2014; Hill, 2006; Horstman et al, 2008; Wetton, 1999). Gauntlett (2007) argues that use of creative methods enables child participation, emphasising the child's voice and view of their worlds (Morgan et al, 2002). Importantly for this research is Punch's assertion that 'the language dilemma is mutual' (2002); whilst children's language is limited, my language as a researcher without the dual experience of being a child or involved in the military may deny me a full understanding of participants' comments (Ireland and Holloway, 1996): in other words, the use of a creative medium will benefit my understanding just as much as it will allow children's self-expression. The Children's Commissioner's 2018 report Kin and Country states that children are confident using the language of the military and research with military children must come from a humble position of acknowledgement that children are experts in their own lives.

WDST exists in many forms. In this study, it is to be used in conjunction with child-led discussions in order to facilitate a deeper understanding on my part as researcher and to allow children space to explore ideas for freely (Backett and Alexander, 1991; Horstman et al, 2008; Pridmore and Landsdown, 1997). Children will be given the opportunity to create images, create a piece of drama, to write factually or creatively or to use puppets for role play in order to present the information they feel is relevant. Although this may reflect the discussion that we have just had, it does not need to be related – rather, the children will be

able to choose what they feel is important enough to present. As discussed, due to the social hierarchies which exist which the school, particularly when the participants have pre-existing relationships, some children may feel less able to express themselves. Equally, some children may agree with the majority if they do not feel that they have the social currency required to disagree. In this way, WDST can provide consensual validation (Eisner, 2006) – it can find that multiple children independently of one another feel or notice something.

The Tell elements of WDST is important as it can prevent researchers from bringing either assumptions about a topic or from viewing them with a literal, surface-level lens. Concerns about a child's artistic ability can also be diminished by ensuring that children are given the opportunity to describe the point of the creative work. There are some concerns that children may exaggerate their answers (Box and Landman, 1994). Discussions with children can limit the effects of this, alongside viewing children's responses or creative products in conjunction with those of their peers. However, it is also possible to interpret an exaggeration as a child's unconscious opinion that this element of their life is important, that they may wish to draw a researcher's attention to it. Although analysis needs to consider this, it is only part of the wider puzzle. Malchiodi (2010) suggests that, when artwork does not appear to reflect a real experience, it may reflect a figurative one, perhaps an anxiety the child has of what may happen. Even if drawing is used as a 'projective tool' (Lev-Wiesel et al, 2020, p. 7), it is no less valid; if this research is to be used to inform policy changes at the school in question, children's fears of what they will experience are just as important as what they already have done (Drake and Zuravin, 1998).

A potential risk to the research is my position as both researcher and teacher. Scott (2000) notes that children may assume the roles which they undertake in a classroom environment, searching for the 'right' answer in order to gain the approval of both the figure of authority and of peers. Green and Hart (1999) also found that this was a particularly prevalent problem

when research was undertaken in school settings. However, due to both time and safety restrictions, this is not avoidable. Where possible, the research will take place outside of a classroom setting, such as on the school field, in order for students to feel that they are removed from the barriers of education. In addition, Maybin's research (2012) suggests that children appropriate and reproduce the authoritative voices of education. As well as potentially limiting the responses to those which children believe are correct or suitable, my own awareness of this pattern is vital to ensure that I don't discount or give lesser weight to responses which are not in line with my own voice.

However, in an attempt to redress the power imbalance of the researcher-child relationship (and, indeed, the teacher-student relationship which co-exists here), participatory research can use child-led, child-focused and non-verbal techniques. Punch (2002) warns that drawing should not be assumed to be a simple method, taking into account children's preferences and skills. For this reason, the study will give children the opportunity to choose from a range of creative options (drama, writing, artwork or use of puppets).

After conducting the research with the children, the study will then move to a survey with the school's staff, chosen through convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018) to avoid disruption if there are changes to national guidance regarding social distancing. This survey will be used to triangulate the children's responses, to provide a form of structural corroboration (Eisner, 2006) that the children's responses tally with the staffing body's experiences of the support offered by the school. The detail of this survey will be developed only when the focus groups have been held with the children, allowing for the amplification of children's voices more widely: the staff are being asked about the topics which the children viewed as being important, rather than the other way around, as it so often the case (Alderson and Montgomery, 1996; Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Ruddick and Fielding, 2006).

Triangulation of the children's responses is an important step in the data collection process as it increases the 'credibility and validity' of the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018; Noble and Heale, 2019). It is a step which acknowledges the complexity of the material being researched and therefore which demands confirmation. None of the participants in the research will have undertaken this type of study before (though several will have been part of the school's pupil conferencing activities) and assessing their answers against the staff's experiences can ensure their responses are valid (Carter at al, 2014).

When undertaking surveys online, access options need to be considered. As all staff have received training on Google products as a result of the school's increased reliance on them during home learning, there should be no concerns regarding access. Hunter (2012) supports this viewpoint, saying that many of the previous concerns with surveys conducted online, such as 'technophobia' can be disregarded. Given that Hunter's research was conducted eight years ago, it seems prudent to assume that many more people will be comfortable with the process of answering questions online.

Hunter (2012) instead states that there are a number of benefits to online surveys, including ease of delivery for the researcher. I would add to this that teachers and other school staff are notoriously busy and that surveys which can be undertaken at a time which suits them provides a better opportunity for respondents to give fuller answers than in-person data collection, such as interviews, which require the marrying up of rotas.

Asking staff to voluntarily undertake a survey will not present the same challenges of formality which would occur with children as all of the adults will be comfortable with both the format and access options. However, as a Senior Leader within the school, it is important that I assure staff of both their anonymity and confidentiality within any publication. I will use a Google Form to collect this data but will not ask for names or email addresses in order

to ensure staff feel able to 'speak' freely. As part of the survey, staff will be asked to indicate which job title best reflects their position (Senior Leader, Class Teacher or Teaching Assistant) – this is to allow me to identify if there are differences in the staff's understanding of military children's needs.

The survey will begin with a question asking how well they believe the school supports military students (on a scale of 1-5), which is repeated at the end of the survey to see if their opinion changes. The main body of the survey will consist of: asking staff to give ways in which they feel the school *does* support military students adequately; asking them to give ways in which the school *does not* support military students adequately; quotations or images from the focus groups (anonymised) to which the staffing body can respond; and a free-form answer to allow staff to add any further details. It is hoped that, by giving a range of styles of questions, staff will be encouraged to think more widely on their understanding.

Sample

The research population will, due to social distancing limitations in place at the school, be drawn solely from a class bubble of year 6 pupils. Using purposeful sampling to meet the dual criteria of children with at least one carer actively (or within the last year) serving in the British Army and who are in this bubble will result in a small sample size to be invited to participate. This could have presented a population which appears not to be representative of the wider group, for example with regards to the gender or ethnicity of the military children population across the school as a whole. However, the group does include both male and female participants, children of a range of ethnicities and religions, and children whose carers reflect a variety of ranks within the military. Regardless, the results of the study will still represent the concerns and opinions of the children participating. It will still be able to be

used to inform the policy changes to be made for military children's support across the school, when taken into account alongside the staff's responses to a survey.

Ethical Considerations

Sim and Waterfield (2019) raise ethical challenges which exist in focus groups, namely that consent and confidentiality concerns can lead to a risk of harm. Whilst consent and assent will be gained from both parents/carers and the child participants, Sim and Waterfield argue that conversations which can cause harm (including emotional) are outside the control of the individual. Furthermore, conversations had within the focus group are cannot be guaranteed to be confidential; disclosures can also have an additional emotional toll on the other participants. It is important to bear all of these concerns in mind when conducting the interview and to report any concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Lead. However, Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) state that conversations about sensitive issues (in this case, family separations as a result of deployment or social difficulties following a school move) can provide a deeper understanding of experiences for the researcher, though they warn that this can need careful management.

It is important to ensure that children are kept safe throughout the process of research. In my research, I will gather informed consent from both children and their carers. This is because the children may not be able to fully and with full understanding consent to the research of which they would be a part. The consent forms which the children will read and sign will be written using child-appropriate language to ensure that they have a clearer understanding of the work. They will be able to withdraw their consent, along with the parents withdrawing consent on the behalf of the child, at any time, up to the beginning of data analysis.

All results will be fully anonymised. The topic being discussed is potentially emotionally-charged and it is important that the children's honest responses are not identifiable, by either

the public or people in their own lives. I will do this by ensuring that information gathered is assigned a randomly-generated name and all identifying information is removed. There is potential that children may become upset during the research as we are discussing challenging topics, such as family separation through deployment. This is an experience shared by all participating children and is, therefore, valid as a point of research. However, I will treat children's responses with respect and, within safeguarding limits, protect their responses to me as personal to themselves. If a child should become distressed, I will allow them the chance to withdraw from one or all research sessions. I acknowledge that my position as a figure of trust within the school means that I may experience disclosures. If this were to be the case, I would follow the school's child protection policy by informing a Designated Safeguarding Lead as soon as possible. This is problematised by the combination of individual responses and group responses which a child may give. In a group scenario, I will ensure that all other children are also kept safe from the disclosure through both use of our DSL and our Emotional Literacy Support Assistant.

Analysis

The purpose of the study was to listen to the children's voices in discussions which focused on their experiences of life as a child in a military family. As such, the data in turn describes what life is like for these children and allows me to begin to identify patterns or themes in the content of their conversations. This data can therefore lead me to a deeper understanding of this group of children and can contribute to a wider discussion surrounding the experiences of military children, although it may not accurately describe the experiences of others.

In analysing the data provided in conversations with the children, I approached it thematically. I used an inductive approach, accepting my position as both an authority figure to these children and as someone without their experiences. As such, I did not want to take a

deductive approach, coming to the data with themes that I particularly wanted to discover. There are some key themes which I discovered within the data which were expected in that they support other similar studies conducted with military children (Bradshaw et al, 2010; Chandra et al, 2009; Chartrand et al, 2008; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Skormorovsky et al, 2016; Sogomonyan and Cooper, 2010). It is important to acknowledge that I did not come from a position of complete ignorance on the topic and therefore my own understanding could have influenced by interpretations.

It was for this reason that I also conducted a staff survey. This was intended to triangulate the results gathered from the children. This data is explored thematically as well, although some data is quantitative. This data supports the conclusions that I have drawn from the children's responses. I used a combination of both semantic and latent approaches to my analysis, ensuring that I took the children at their word, analysing the explicit content of their conversation, but also applied a latent analysis to explore the subtext, particularly with regards to their art and drama pieces.

In beginning my thematic analysis, I explored the text a number of times, both through listening to the audio recording and then through a word-for-word transcription in which I left any pauses or repetitions. This was to allow me to identify both what the children were saying and how these words (and silences) were being said. Through this process, I coded the children's conversations. Through a process of iterative comparison, I then developed themes from these codes, identifying the simple conclusions that could be drawn. I identified four main codes from the children's conversations: isolation versus friendship; obligations to adults; control versus freedom; and school life.

4. Data Analysis

Preliminary Session

Each of the sessions with the children focused on one key element that they had identified they would want to discuss during a preliminary session. The over-arching elements that the children identified were moving (including making new friends, starting a new school, and other people's understanding of army life), parental deployment (including the emotions associated with parents leaving and returning, and other people's understanding of army life), and school life (mostly concentrated on the frustration of re-learning topics). In actuality, the discussions did not strictly follow these topics as they were guided by the children, with interjections on my behalf only to clarify their statements or to ask questions to further my understanding. In general, even the children who did not contribute as much verbally to the discussions were in agreement with what was said.

Isolation Versus Friendship

The most prominent codes that I identified in my analysis were associated with the ideas of isolation and friendship. Many of the children expressed frustration with their civilian peers – indeed, the children draw this distinction between themselves and others, referring to the difference between "*army* kids" and "*children* children". At these children's school, military children make up approximately 70% of the population, a number which changes weekly due to the number of deployments which can happen at any one time. Despite being part of the majority, the children othered themselves repeatedly, focusing on what made them different from their peers.

Abby: "It makes me feel isolated, left out, like they don't know why I'm not normal"

The concept of the Other refers to a wide range of ideas which share one common theme: difference between the Self and Others. There is much psychological and philosophical debate surrounding the concept of childhood itself being inevitably Othered from the

experiences of adults. It often refers to the exotification of those who are different from one, in this case the idea that the children's non-military peers are fascinated by the ways in which military children's lives are dissimilar to civilians'. Foucault suggested that Othering is an imagined difference between oneself and others which would support the findings that these military children were distancing themselves from peers, rather than the other way around (Foucault, 1986; Said, 1978). I cannot find research which explicitly explores this Othering of military children, an interesting exclusion for children with such a clear identity, albeit heterogeneous in nature.

At times, this frustration with peers was focused on the inability of non-military peers to understand their situation.

Carla: "…when you use [army language], they look at you like you've gone completely bonkers. It's like… you're talking a different language or something."

Ella: "They're like oh my God. I'm so sorry for not knowing. But that just makes you feel worse and awkward."

Gita: "She was like 'Don't go,' and it just really annoyed me like I had told her I had parents in the army."

Ben: "They don't know they're hurting you but…"

Much of the children's frustration seems to stem from how difficult their peers find it to know what to say in these difficult situations. The idea that saying sorry was upsetting for them (Abby: "Sorry doesn't do anything about the situation.") prominently featured in their responses. A few of the children identified that this conflict does impact their relationships with others, with Ella commenting that "you want to say, 'Can you stop please?'" when non-military peers try to empathise with their situation.

However, there was a clear gender divide in this case with all of the male participants identifying that they found such situations frustrating but disagreeing with the idea that it affected friendships. This is perhaps unsurprising given current research into the mental wellbeing of military children which concludes that girls are more likely to experience emotional distress or negative impacts on their mental health as the result of a parental deployment (James and Countryman, 2012).

Nonetheless, the children did express that they found making friends with other military children more satisfying.

Daniel: “There’s no… there’s no sense of embarrassment with them.”

In fact, the very turbulence which seems to make, to use their terms, relationships between army children and *children* children so difficult has little impact on the friendships formed with other military children. This could be due to the understanding that the children have with one another that a relationship can proceed long-distance.

Gita: “You have it in your head that you won’t be there long, you won’t be friends for long but, it’s kind of okay.”

Hansa: “I have friends from Nepal and I talk to them, and my parents talk to their parents and we’re all still friends.”

Part of the children’s ability to form these relationships is due, in their opinion, to their well-developed skills. 8/11 children agreed when one child said that they had the skills that they needed to make new friends. One child emphatically stated that they did not just have the skills but found it “really really really easy”, certainly confident in their abilities. Another child, perhaps more reflectively, stated that it wasn’t just the skills which they possessed which made making friends relatively simple. In addition, it was that they “have a good image that we’re easy to make friends with” (Abby). Nearly all of the children shared this

self-confidence, with even those who were less confident (Gita: “I like making friends but I do find it a little harder. I just like it, I just need someone to come to me first”) expressing that they formed strong relationships in every school they’ve attended.

In these conversations about friendships, the children moved consistently back and forth between expressing feelings of isolation and of having strong relationships. This dichotomy of experience is summed up in this artwork which Hansa produced at the end of one session: as well as the range of words she used to describe herself, she has explicitly labelled her “mind” as “different” and used colour to demonstrate the split of emotions she feels.

Image 1: Hansa's dichotomy of self-image

Some children, after discussing their relationships with their peers, chose to create a piece of drama in which one military child was being bullied for being upset about their parents being deployed. In the piece, two other children notified the children of what was happening and this character resolved the situation swiftly. In discussion with the children, they explained that adults do handle friendship problems well and could use the language of staff with ease. However, they also expressed that the original upset caused by deployment was not something they would share (Fred: “I wouldn’t tell someone because it’s none of their business”; Abby: “You want to talk about it but you don’t have the words”).

Image 2: Conflict during deployment

Control Versus Freedom

In this way, the conversation in the following session developed into the school's understanding of deployment and the way that this affects the children. Although emotions regarding parents leaving and returning did feature heavily in the conversation, I coded much of the conversation under either control or freedom, noting that the children's main concerns – after the separation from a family member – was how little control they had over the situation.

The children seemed to find it more difficult to articulate the emotional upheaval of these changes in family dynamics. Instead, they relied on almost narrative devices in order to punctuate their explanations with emotion.

Carla: "two weeks later – boom"

Ella: "One day, suddenly, my parents told me"

There is not enough evidence to draw a solid conclusion from the children's words as to why they framed this conversation differently: one child may have begun using this tone and others naturally fell in-line with a similar structure; the children may have been working on narrative devices that day or week and therefore had this style more readily available; or the children may have been uncomfortable with the subject matter and been distancing

themselves from it. Regardless, as their teacher who is used to the way in which these children communicated, I was struck by the difference in this conversation.

Much of the discussion surrounding deployment and family moves focused on how quickly these can happen for the children as well as how little involvement they have in the decision.

Ben: “I didn’t know anything about it”

Ella: “One day, suddenly, my parents told me that we might be posted to Northern Ireland”

Carla: “I was like, ‘What is Cyprus?’”

However, perhaps surprisingly for someone without first-hand experience of these situations, the children were more keen to discuss when parents come home from deployment than when they get the news of a departure. The comments illustrated that many children found it difficult to adjust to the transition back into the ‘normal’ family dynamic. Some of these seemed like noticing seemingly small physical changes (Ella: “you wouldn’t see them have a beard but then they come back and you’re like, ‘Who is this man?’; Abby: “Before, they might have been really unfit and they come back and they’re like, ‘Look at my muscles!’); however, these bely a much deeper discomfort with the emotional distance between themselves and their returning parent. As one child stated, “it really weirded me out” (Indra) that their parent had returned.

Three of the children chose to create a piece of drama depicting the return of a parent after this conversation. In the scenario, a father had chosen not to tell his children that he was coming back but to surprise them as they played. When the father revealed himself, one child was immediately ecstatic to see him and jumped on him crying, “Daddy! Daddy!”

However, the second child only hugged the father once they had hesitated and said, “Um.” In discussion with the children, they stated that this was intentional, that it was often

uncomfortable when a parent returned as they did not know how to behave around them. This was further emphasised by the distance between all three characters once the return had been completed. The children spoke about how they sometimes want to hug their parents but do not do so.

Image 3: Awkward reunions

In addition, the children explored the idea that “when [he] comes back, it’s different” (Daniel). This idea was met with nods and affirmative sounds but none of the children could or chose to elaborate further. When pushed to explain this further, they all agreed that it couldn’t be explained but was, in fact, simply true.

Image 4: Celebratory reunions

Many of the children also spoke and chose to draw about the excitement of a return from deployment. They discussed how they would receive presents, how they would spend time together as a family and how it was “like Christmas” (Abby). In the picture here, Ella explained that the colours were both how the house looked when it was filled with decorations and how she felt when parents returned home.

Once again, then, the children seem to have a dichotomy of experience: they have no control over what is happening to them but they enjoy the benefits of family celebrations fairly regularly.

Obligation to Adults

There did seem to be a difference in experience within the group depending on the type of role in the army that their parents or carers took. One child, in the middle of a session, announced out of context that she just remembered her father was on a plane at that moment. She went on to explain that "I forget all the time because he's just always away" (Gita). However, another child explained that his father rarely went away and that they rarely moved. Perhaps it was due to this relative isolation within this group of his peers that he spoke only when directly questioned.

For most of the children, there was a sense of maturity beyond their years when discussing these issues. However, this is understandable given that they are exploring and day-to-day coping with experiences beyond the reality of many other *children* children.

Carla: "School doesn't understand if you didn't get enough sleep [if parents fail to call when they have arranged to]. They're like, 'Focus!' [She clicks her fingers.] You're like, 'My dad might have died. Show some respect."

The children spoke freely about the possibility that their parents might die in active service, though these are not conversations that I have either had or overheard the children having before commencing the study. Carla remarked that she wouldn't normally talk about such things but that she felt comfortable in the group where everyone could understand the feelings she was expressing. The idea of being stoic was rewarded by the group of their peers with affirmative noises and nods each time it was shared.

Hansa: "I've never actually done that" [referring to crying during a separation]

However, the children did share the emotions that they experienced which were also agreed with. It may be that the children felt at first that they needed to present a particular, emotionally-strong persona as they demonstrated more empathy as the session continued.

Indra: "Yeah, I worry"

Abby: “It was really scary when he told me the stories”

Ella: “I’m lucky to still have them”

It is clear that the children are handling complex emotions about very difficult situations and, although none of the children present had experienced a bereavement or a family member experiencing a life-changing injury, they were aware of these possibilities. However, none of the children seemed to feel comfortable with the idea of discussing these emotions with their parents. The following is an exchange between three of the participants:

Fred: “If [teachers] tell your parents [when a child is upset], it will make you more stressed because, like my mum would be worried it I was sad.”

Daniel: “Yeah, you have to hide it when you’re worried.”

Ella: “You regret not spending time with him.”

There is a huge level of emotional maturity required by these children to experience these emotions in isolation from the rest of their family. It is perhaps clear why they stated that they wanted to discuss situations like this with their friends who were also military children, rather than with civilian children or with adults who were not connected to the army.

School Life

The children did not speak much to the role of the school in supporting them as military children. They identified that it was frustrating to re-study a topic which they had already learned – Gita stated that she had studied the Titanic four separate times. Although they were clear that this was irritating to them (“It’s annoying”; “Please don’t teach me this again!”), they were more vocal about the emotional support that school should offer.

Through a complicated exchange in which children added and adapted each other’s ideas, they came to the conclusion that teachers should allow students out of class whenever

needed, trusting them that they wouldn't take advantage of this ability, and to allow them to choose to take another military child with them if they needed. Here, the children again demonstrate exceptionally mature emotional understanding, able to explore what they need.

The children chose, in the main, to share their experience of school life at their current provider mostly through their artwork. It is interesting to question whether the comments made by the students would have included so much positivity had the conversation been managed by someone other than their teacher. Below are some examples of the children's comments on how the school manages to support them. Repeated across multiple examples are events and clubs which are run to celebrate army life, such as Camo Club, a lunchtime support group for children to drop in and out of when their parents are deployed. However, a consistently-reported problem was a lack of understanding which the children feel adults display towards them when they are struggling.

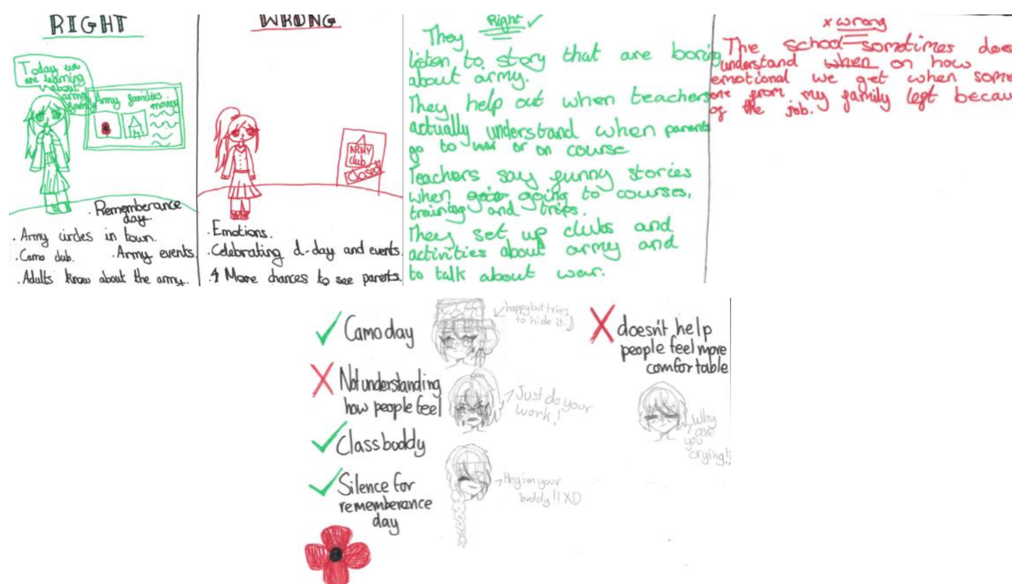

Image 5: Right and wrong provision

Staff Survey

Once the sessions with the children had been completed, a survey was sent out to all members of staff. There were 19 responses: 8 identified as a teaching assistant, 7 as a class teacher and 4 as a member of the Senior Leadership Team. 18 of the staff assessed the school support for military children as ‘well’ or ‘extremely well’ before beginning the survey, made up of 7 stating ‘extremely well’ and 11 as ‘well’. This decreased to 5 people choosing ‘extremely well’ and 9 as ‘well’, with the larger number of 5 stating that they felt neutrally. This may demonstrate that the staff has reflected on the support the school offers following the survey and now understand a wider range of needs which military children have.

I chose a number of quotes based on the discussions I had had with the children. This, in itself, presents a potential bias as I had assigned value to the quotes in order to choose them as a representation of the children’s range of views.

The children stated that they found it harder to make friends as an older army child because they “get that feeling of embarrassment of awkwardness”. 16 people stated that they ‘sometimes considered and somewhat understood’ or ‘always considered and deeply understood’ this point of view.

Nearly all members of staff stated that they ‘sometimes considered and somewhat understood’ or ‘always considered and deeply understood’ that “people don’t understand that you move house a lot.” This is an element of army life which directly impacts members of staff, with children leaving regularly or entering the school. The turbulent population means teaching staff need to be aware of previous learning, or of how to consolidate learning and support staff need to complete the transition work required by the school. It is understandable that these responses would present such a positive image.

Similarly, nearly all members of staff ‘sometimes considered and somewhat understood’ or ‘always considered and deeply understood’ that ‘we don’t have control over what happens to us”.

16 members of staff stated ‘sometimes considered and somewhat understood’ or ‘always considered and deeply understood’ that ‘schools don’t really care if you’ve already learned about something before or not.”

A larger number of staff (4) than in the previous questions responded negatively or neutrally to the quote “It’s hard when they come back and people think you just have to be happy all the time.”

An even larger number of staff (5) than in the previous questions responded negatively or neutrally to the statement “when dad or whoever comes back, you need time off school.”

17/18 respondents to the question of whether staff members had considered the quotation “You have to hide how you feel a bit when dad is away because mum is already sad. School doesn’t get that” stated that they ‘sometimes considered and somewhat understood’ or ‘always considered and deeply understood’.

In all of these cases, more members of staff stated that they understood and often or always considered the children’s emotions in this topic than didn’t. In fact, across all the questions which used the children’s own words to explore the concept, only seven responses were negative. 11 of the responses were neutral and an overwhelming 113 responses were positive.

There is a tension in analysing data of this nature as a researcher who also works as a member of the Senior Leadership Team at the school at the centre of the study. It is not possible to escape my position as a member of staff who has led training on this topic and, as such, is in a position to question if these responses do honestly reflect the staff’s knowledge and

understanding. Anecdotally, my experiences of staff members does not reflect this depth of understanding.

As part of the survey, staff were also given the opportunity to share their thoughts in longer-form answers, asking them what they felt the school both did and did not do well for military students. In response to the question, “What do you think are the most important issues facing military children from an academic point of view?” 17 staff members identified that army moves had a large impact on children’s attainment. Many of these staff members referred to the turbulence resulting in gaps in the children’s education, though only one staff member identified the same issues which the children were focused on: repeating topics. It is understandable that staff, held to account for their pupils’ attainment, would be aware of gaps in education. However, as most military children outperform their non-military peers at Key Stage 2, and this school is a Junior which only teaches this age range, it is perhaps a concern which staff members do not need to overly fret about.

Three members of staff identified that emotional disruption can lead to children finding it difficult to concentrate. However, the students in the focus group talked at length about both showing and hiding the emotional upheaval they were experiencing.

Only one staff member discussed that parental support may decrease when one parent or carer is absent from the household. This point of view supports the children’s assertion that they need to take on responsibility or that they do not want to put pressure on their remaining parents for risk of overwhelming them. However, that this was only one staff member suggests that staff may not consider the impact of these absences in a more holistic way.

In response to the question, “What do you think are the most important issues facing military children from a non-military point of view?” 9 members of staff discussed issues which children may have making friends. None of these members of staff suggested that these

children were able to form friendships more easily than other pupils, despite the children themselves believing this to be the case.

7 members of staff referred to the emotions which children experience in some way, though many did not specify what these emotions could be or to what they would be related. One member of staff identified that children may experience “feelings of grief, sadness, separation anxiety”. This may not have, in the main, been the language that the children used, but does reflect the emotions that they expressed, for example: “Yeah, I worry.”

Three members of staff referred to how the parents who remained at home may struggle. All of these members of staff were members of the Senior Leadership Team, perhaps reflecting that these year leaders and above have more input in the support offered to families than the class teachers or teaching assistants. The children’s worries about their parents struggling to cope with their emotions were not reflected in the understanding of the majority of staff who took part in the survey.

One member of staff identified that serving military in the lower ranks are likely to have low family income. Although they did not elaborate on the ways in which they believe this would affect a student, it is an important area of further study. I did not take the focus group children’s ranks into consideration during our discussion.

Only two of the members of staff suggested that there were positives attributes associated with military children: one stated that they “think they are stronger than most children” and the other that they “find most military children are resilient to change which gives most of them confident to form new friendships.” Both of these suggest that these children have a strength which the children themselves have stated that they are proud of. Although only two people identified these positives, this may be due to the survey’s wording as the most important “issues”, which may have a negative connotation and encourage respondents to

give less positive responses. This supports Bradshaw et al's research findings that these children had such positive attributes (2010).

The staff identified a number of ways in which the school supports military children well in their opinions. These have been grouped into broader categories, such as learning quality including the use of timely intervention in order to address misconceptions in learning.

Learning quality was mentioned by 10 members of staff, many of whom explicitly referred the PSHE curriculum, which features a unit on military life and which provides all children with steps to develop emotional literacy.

A similar number of staff members referred to the events offered by the school (8), the My Passport transition programme (9) and the level of communication with parents (7). The events run by the school span both the PSHE curriculum and encourage communication with parents, resulting in some overlap in results. It is interesting to note that the transition programme was so highly rated by members of staff as the pupils in the focus group (all of whom have received the programme) did not refer to it. Some pupils in the group have moved in and out of the school a number of times due to regular army moves and so will have completed the programme multiple times. Without further conversation, it is not possible to say whether the failure of the children to mention this is due to them receiving the programme some time ago, or speak to its efficacy.

The largest number of responses referred to the category of emotional support. This includes Bubble Time as run by ELSA staff, specific ELSA programmes which run for a set number of weeks, and Camo Club – a weekly meeting which invites any pupil finding the emotional separation due to a deployment of their family difficult. 15 members of staff identified that these help pupils both with their friendships and with their general emotional resilience. The focus group did refer to Camo Club but raised some concerns that they would not use it due

to not knowing everyone within the group. It may be that this is the case and also may speak to the relative isolation that the children have experienced due to class bubbles, which limited the number of children they interacted with and perhaps encouraged them to become more reliant on only those within their bubble.

With regards to what the school does not do to support military children, it is interesting to note that 9 members of staff identified an issue which does not *directly* impact the children: the lack of knowledge that staff have about when army moves are scheduled. It is, of course, the case that emotionally-vulnerable pupils would be supported with a longer or more comprehensive transition if class teachers were aware of moves. However, the language choices (such as, "frustrating", "lack of communication") suggests a conflict between class teachers and either Senior Leaders or administrative staff, rather than centring the military children's needs.

Multiple members of staff referred to the difficulties that have faced the school as a result of lockdown, which meant that parental events have been cancelled and that cross-bubbling as part of support structures such as Camo Club has not been possible. This is reflective of a wider concern that this group of children has a particular need which has been overlooked during the restrictions of the pandemic. This is a potentially significant problem as many of these children have experienced increased separations and anxieties due to the increased pressure on key workers, at a time when supportive services have been removed. It is evident that staff are keen to return to the normal support structures. Linked to this is the idea that transitions are often not viewed as long enough, with staff commenting that children are "expected to settle into the [school's] way of doing things".

When asked if they would like to add anything else, most members of staff did not add an additional comment. However, one member of staff expressed some frustration with the school's procedures:

> "With [the school] being a school with [a] predominantly military population, it seems to me that the needs of military children are not as important as they should perhaps be. Other groups of children seem to trump their needs (EAL, one-parent families etc). The needs of military children seem to be limited to ELSA for the few that need it and Camo Club for the few that may need that…[The school] is supposed to be a school 'community' [quotation marks used by respondent] that encompasses families as well as the children that attend."

It is clear that this member of staff, a teaching assistant, does not believe that adequate structures are in place for either the children or the family. However, it is interesting to consider whether this is rather an issue of communication. Three other teaching assistants (making a total of four out of the 8 that responded) added additional comments regarding the support that the school should offer, with one class teacher suggesting a national shift towards attainment focus was detrimental to all pupils and one Senior Leader expressing that their role in supporting families during deployment put additional strain on her as a professional. Could there be an issue that some of the support offered is focused on class teachers and Senior Leaders, leaving teaching assistants both unsatisfied and under-utilised? Or could it be that teaching assistants have a different relationship with pupils, allowing them to see problems which others are missing?

5. Conclusions

The study into how military children feel about their experiences of their school identified that these children cope with a vast array of concerns and worries. Many of these were not directly related to the school's practice but still provide insight into the provision which the school offers. The study identified that military children feel separated from their non-military peers due to a lack of understanding on their peers' part; this may be related to not comprehending the emotional upheaval that military children go through or even a simple lack of understanding that life may look very different for these children. This is not to suggest that these children did not still form friendships with non-military peers.

The study also identified that military children feel some obligation to their parents and carers, particularly with regards to the emotions which they feel able to express. Children stated that they needed to hold back from sharing their true emotions with their parents sometimes or that they did not know how to respond when parents returned from deployments.

Children also spoke about the lack of control that they experienced in day-to-day life as an army children, as well as when it comes to more significant changes in their life, such as family moves. Many of the children explained that neither friends nor adults around them at school really understood what this was like for them.

With regards to school, the most common comment from the children referred to how little school's understood what life was like for them, whether this was a lack of acknowledgement that they may have studied a topic before, a lack of understanding about their emotional needs and how to accommodate these, or a perhaps inevitable inability to comprehend the experiences of these children by the adults around them.

A common thread throughout much of the commentary by the children was their opinion that the adults around them at school did not understand what life was like for them. The results

from the staff survey can only go so far in identifying if staff truly do have an in-depth understanding of the desires and needs of military children. However, the majority of staff answered questions asserting that they did understand elements of the children's answers which I included in the survey. Assuming that these results genuinely reflect the staff's understanding, there is a clear disconnect between what staff know and whether the students believe that. Without being able to examine in more detail the veracity of staff claims, this should form the foundation of change within the school.

The results of the study are limited by the small number of children who were part of the focus group. This was, in turn, a result of the school's adherence to social distancing and class bubbles. However, the pupils who participated in the study do reflect the population of the school in that they were a mix of genders and races; some children had experienced many deployments or family moves and others rather fewer. All of the participants had a male parent or carer who they spoke about mostly, though they acknowledged that other children would have a mother or female carer in this role instead. Given all this, the results can be used as representing the needs of the older children within the school at least.

As previously mentioned, it is important to note that any responses given by both staff and students could also have been impacted by my role as a Senior Leader in the school. This could account for the positive responses given by the staff. The children's responses appear to be honest, including criticism of the school. However, I cannot guarantee that my presence and my role as an authority figure in the children's normal school life has not impacted the results gained.

In future research, several of these limitations could be addressed. The study could be replicated in other schools, exploiting a similar strong professional relationship between students and teachers or by an external figure with whom the children do not have an

attachment. It would also provide interesting insight to talk to both younger and older children in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the children's experiences may develop over the course of their time in schooling.

Going forwards, there are specific policy changes that the school could undertake. Staff appear confident that they have a deep understanding and appreciation of the needs and wishes of the military children in the school. However, the children do not believe this to be the case and therefore it is important to find ways to communicate this to them. The school may need to be more explicit in its event choices and communicate these to the pupils as well as to parents. It runs a number of events which are planned to encourage engagement with the army community.

Fijian and Nepali Day events are organised and run by the school in conjunction with parent volunteers in normal years, these being two communities with a large number of military families. There is also a Camo Day, run with support from local army regiments in which all children have the opportunity to explore military equipment, such as infra-red goggles. On top of these, the school previously identified a lack of engagement from male family figures. As mentioned previously, many of the family relations who are in the army are male. To amend this, the school put into its calendar two additional events: a Dads Vs Kids rugby tournament and a Family Camp Out. Both of these events filled up each time they were able to run and post-event surveys showed that children were happy to have their families more involved in school life. Indeed, the children in the study identified some of these events in their art work.

However, these events have not been run since the beginning of the pandemic. As the school is a Junior school, a year and a half is a significant proportion of the children's time at the school. This will surely have had a marked impact on the children's sense that the school

appreciates and celebrates its military connections. It is vital that the school put these events back in as this will assist in helping the children to believe that the school values them and their experiences.

Year 4 have a PSHE unit based on the work of the military. The children, when asked, stated that they enjoyed this topic and seeing their non-military friends learning about military life. It is therefore worth the school considering a similar topic in upper Key Stage 2. This would require oversight from the PSHE co-ordinator to ensure that learning outcomes were in-line with national expectations whilst balancing this with the needs of the school's population.

In addition, the school should consider using a focus group to explore the efficacy of its current transition programme, which it calls My Passport and My Future, based on a pre-existing template and adapted for the school's community. Using a focus group would give the children an authentic voice in the creation of policy which affects them. Those children who have experienced the programme can discuss its benefits and ways it can be improved.

In addition, the children stated that they wanted to be given the opportunity to step out of the classroom, alone or with a friend if and when they found themselves overwhelmed by their situation. Most teachers would allow children the chance to calm down if pupils were visibly distressed but much harder is putting into policy a set of procedures to allow pupils the opportunity to have these conversations before they reach this level of need. It is possible to make it policy that all children are given the opportunity to stay inside during break or lunchtime as soon as staff are aware of a deployment or family move.

However, this could prove ineffective as staff are rarely notified when deployments and moves are happening not due to a breakdown in communication between staff but due to the often last-minute nature of these events being communicated to the family. Regiment moves

can also be cancelled or rescheduled, providing a significant obstacle for Senior Leaders who need to know that their staff are frustrated by them not knowing this information.

A solution to part of the problem is for the school to ensure that every class teacher and teaching assistant is given a list of military pupils at the beginning of the academic year. This will help them to identify changes in behaviours and emotions. Ultimately, it is up to individual staff members to build strong relationships with their pupils in order to ensure that their pupils trust them with this emotional weight, alongside more school-wide policies which encourage children to understand they are valued.

Making these small changes to the school's policy could impact the way that the pupils believe they are viewed by staff. They could help pupils to feel a little less isolated in their experiences as events school-wide would allow children to find common ground. Listening to their opinions on what would ease their transitions may make the community feel that they have more control over their lives.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

Ethical Review Form for Post Graduate Taught Programmes in Education

(Questions 1-13 to be filled at time of proposal submission)

Student Name: Laura Harman-Box

Student No. UP959120

Email address: UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Dissertation title: The Opinions of the Children of Military Families about School Support

Approval code (ED123456):

1. What are the aims of your research?

   To identify and examine the areas of need as identified by the students of military families through semi-structured focus groups and art-centred conversations

   To analyse the children's responses to broad topic questions to identify the efficacy of School A's support

   To triangulate the children's responses against staff perception of support

2. What is your method of data collection?

   Semi-structured focus groups with year 6 children, followed by the opportunity for children to create a piece of art, drama or writing. This will be analysed alongside the children to ensure no biases are brought to the study. I will also be undertaking a survey with staff, based on the students' topics of discussion.

3. Who will be the research participants? How many would you like to participate?

   At most 10 children from year 6 at a Junior school in Hampshire. I will send the survey out to all members of staff who come into contact with children, approximately 40 people. I would like to receive responses from at least 30, representing a spread of Senior Leaders, class teachers and Teaching Assistants.

4. How will participants be recruited and selected?

   Student participants will be selected through purposeful sampling, against the dual criteria of children of military families in which one carer is in active service or has been in active service in the previous year, and being in year 6, due to social distancing restrictions. Children (with carer consent) will be invited to

participate from this small group. No further selection method is needed due to the small pool of potential respondents.

Staff participants will be selected through convenience sampling and then chosen using a random selection technique, ensuring that there is representation of the Senior Lead Team, class teachers and support staff.

5. What will be the procedure for **informed consent** for **adults** involved in your study?

   Adult consent will be sought through a second stage of ethical approval, when staff involvement begins.

   This is not currently sought as the topics under discussion are child-led; when the children have stated their intentions to discuss particular topics, I will produce the staff survey which will include consent and research information.

6. If you are planning to conduct research within an organisation (e.g. school, FE, HE, or early years setting), please explain how you will get permission from the organisation.

   Consent will be gained from the Head Teacher as the representative of the school, alongside informed consent from the participating staff.

7. Are you planning to include children/ young people under the age of 18 in your study? YES

8. If yes, what ages?

   Year 6, aged 10-11 years

9. If yes, what will be the procedure for gaining **consent/ assent from children and their carers i**n your study?

   Both carers and students will, in age and development-appropriate language be informed of the method, purpose and content of the study. This will include clear information about the study in general and will ask for consent for the data to be used in publications. The letters will inform both children and carers of the purpose, content and methods of the study, in age and developmentally-appropriate language. Both carers and children need to consent in order to be part of the study. This will include clear information about the study in general and will ask for consent for the data to be used in publications.

   At the beginning of data gathering sessions, students will be reminded of their ability to withdraw consent at any time up to data analysis.

10. What steps are proposed to safeguard the *anonymity* of the participants?

Participants' anonymity will be safeguarded as all children will be assigned a random name in reporting. Children's artwork and general responses will be anonymised, alongside any remarks which may be identifying. The school's identity will be not disclosed. Any identifying information will either be excluded or may be amalgamated into another response to ensure anonymity.

11. How will the data be stored after data collection?

    Data, including images of children's artwork, will be stored on a password-protected memory stick which requires a password to access. It will be stored for up to 10 years after the research is completed and none of the data will be identifiable to any participants.

12. Are there any *risks* (emotional, physical or reputational) *to participants* that may result from taking part in this research?

    YES

    If YES, please specify and state what measures are proposed to deal with these risks.

    There are emotional risks to the children participating due to the sensitive nature of the topic. These will be mitigated by ensuring that the children are aware of their ability and right to withdraw from the study at any time. I will follow the school's safeguarding procedures if I am concerned about their emotional response or if they have made a disclosure. The school has Emotional Literacy Support Assistants who will be made aware of concerns and who can discuss these in a more private environment. These ELSAs will also follow school safeguarding procedures.

    Carers will be aware of the topic of the semi-structured focus groups and I will be in communication with them where appropriate. If this results in a follow-up conversation at home, this could affect their responses in future sessions. However, it is important to prioritise the child's safeguarding above all else.

    If a disclosure is made during a group discussion, it is important to also protect the other participants. Depending on the situation, I will either monitor the conversation closely or I will end the conversation appropriately. This may need ongoing monitoring to ensure other participants do not discuss this more widely or that they are not impacted by it. I will follow the school's safeguarding procedure and ensure that disclosures or concerns are reported to the appropriate Designated Safeguarding Lead.

13. Are there any *risks* (emotional, physical or reputational) *to the researcher or to the University* that may result from conducting this research?

    NO

I confirm that the information provided is a complete and accurate record of my plans at present and that I shall resubmit an amended version of this form should my research alter significantly such that there is any significant variation of ethical risk.

Student (sign or type your name): Laura Harman-Box

Date: 1st May 2021

Pre-Data collection addendum

Prior to collecting your data, you will need to review the information you supplied at the time of your proposal and update it according to any changes you've made in your research design. Additionally, you need to attach all forms for data collection including:

- Consent forms for participants
- Information sheets for participants
- All data collection tools

Please list all attached forms below:

  - Please list all information sheets and consent sheets included.

Information Sheets	Consent forms
Parents/carers	Parents/carers
Child participants	Child participants

  - Please list all of the data collection tools included and which participants it will be used with.

Tool	Participants
Focus group discussions	Child participants
Online survey	School A staff

Appendix 2

Consent form for child participants

ASSENT FORM

Title of Project: The Opinion of the Children of Military Families on the Support Offered in School

Name and Contact Details of Researcher(s): Laura Harman-Box, UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of Supervisor (if relevant): Anita Franklin, anita.franklin@port.ac.uk

University Data Protection Officer: Samantha Hill, 023 9284 3642 or data-protection@port.ac.uk

Ethics Committee Reference Number:

Initial boxes

1. I have read and understood the information sheet and I have had the chance to ask questions. I am happy with the answers to these questions.

   I know that I don't have to take part if I don't want to. I know that I can choose to stop taking part at any time up to Friday 7th July. I don't have to give any reason, even if I've done some of the study.
2. I give permission for my answers to be voice recorded.
3. I give permission for me and my writing, drama or art to be recorded only to be used in the study.
4. I give permission for the words I use or the writing/art I produce to be included in the study. I know that I won't be identifiable from the picture.
5. I understand that I will be given a codename and any identifying information removed so that I am kept safe.
6. I understand that any information collected during this study will be kept safe and used only for the study, unless an adult need to share it in order to keep me safe. When the study is finished and written up, the data will be deleted.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Your name: ____________________________________ Date you're signing: _______________

Appendix 3

Consent forms for carers

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: The Opinion of the Children of Military Families on the Support Offered in School

Name and Contact Details of Researcher(s): Laura Harman-Box, UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of Supervisor (if relevant): Anita Franklin, anita.franklin@port.ac.uk

University Data Protection Officer: Samantha Hill, 023 9284 3642 or data-protection@port.ac.uk

Please initial box

Ethics Committee Reference Number:

8. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. My child has also had this opportunity. ☐
9. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time up to data analysis Friday 7th July without giving any reason. ☐
10. I consent to my child's answers being voice recorded and securely stored in accordance with data protection law. ☐
11. I consent to my child's writing, art or drama to be videoed or photographed and securely stored in accordance with data protection law. ☐
12. I understand that my child's identity will be anonymised, a codename given and that any other identifying features will be changed or removed. ☐
13. I understand that data collected during this study will be processed in accordance with data protection law as explained in the Participant Information Sheet. ☐
14. I give my consent for my child to take part in the above study. ☐

Name of Participant: ___________________________ **Date:** __________ **Signature:** _____________

Name of Person Giving Consent: ___________________________ **Date:** __________
Signature: _____________

Appendix 4

Information sheet for child participants

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: The Opinion of the Children of Military Families on the Support Offered in School

Name and Contact Details of Researcher(s): Laura Harman-Box, UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of Supervisor: Anita Franklin, anita.franklin@port.ac.uk

1. **Invitation**

   I would like to invite you to take part in my research study. Joining the study is entirely up to you, before you decide I would like you to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. I will go through this information sheet with you, to help you decide whether you would like to take part and answer any questions you may have. I would suggest this should take about 10 minutes. Please feel free to talk to others about the study if you wish. Do ask if anything is unclear.

2. ***Study Summary***

   This study is concerned with how your school supports military children which is important because you deserve to have the best education possible. Due to the school's COVID restrictions, I will be working with children in year 6 who have family currently or recently serving in the army. Participation in the research would require you to attend up to five sessions with me where we discuss issues which you think are important. It will take around 45 minutes each time.

3. **What is the purpose of the study?**

   During our first session, we will have a general conversation about what it is like to be a military child and, as a group, you and the other participants will choose the topics that you want to talk about in more detail. You will be part of what is called a focus group, a small group who will talk about their own experiences. The purpose for me is to identify if the school is doing everything that it can to help you – whether that be with your learning or with something else. The results of the study will be discussed with other adults in the school to work out what we can do better.

4. **Why have I been invited?**

   You have been invited because you are a year 6 child whose parents have identified you as a military child. In your bubble, there 10 children who fit this group and you will all be invited to be involved. Your opinions are important because they tell me about your experiences but there are lots of other children in the school who are also military children. That means that I will use the points you make as part of the focus group even if other children might have seen or experienced different things; it's okay if you tell the group something that no one else agrees with because your experiences are important.

5. **Do I have to take part?**

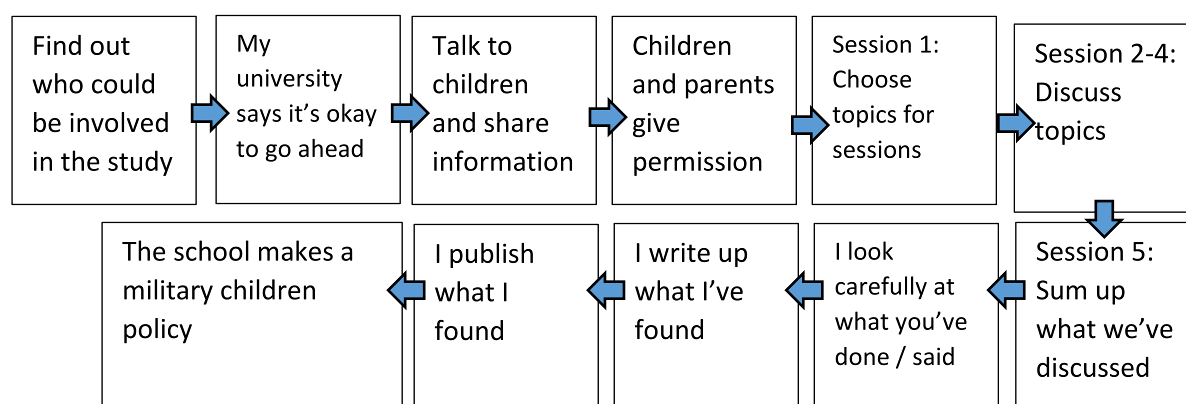
   No, taking part in this research is completely voluntary, which means you don't need to do it. It is up to you to decide if you want to volunteer for the study. We will describe the study in this information sheet. If you agree to take part, we will then ask you to sign the attached assent form. This form means that you agree you would like to be involved. Your parents or carers need to sign one too.

6. **What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be part of a group of around 10 people (it might be smaller if some people don't want to be involved). You will have the chance to talk about anything that you think I should know about being both at your school and being a military child. However, you can talk about things outside of school too. We will meet about 5 times to talk; each time, we will have a conversation as a whole group. Then, you'll have the chance to tell me more about your experiences through lots of different methods: you could choose to write more, to draw an image, or act it out, or to use puppets for drama. These sessions will be around 45 minutes and will be during the school day.

I will be voice recording our conversations so that I can type up the words we all say. This will help me to make sure I don't forget anything and can really understand what you are telling me because I will type them up word for word. I will also video or take photos of the ideas that you give me in your writing, drama or art. This is also to make sure I can really understand what you wanted me to know.

Below, I've made an image to help you understand this process a little bit more.



7. Will my data be kept confidential?

It is important that we keep you anonymous. When I voice or video record, or take photos, I will know who said or did what. However, when I type it up, I will give each of you a codename so that people reading my study can't identify you. Sometimes, using lots of small bits of information together, you can still be identified. As a result of this, I will also change any details you give me which might mean people can identify you – for example, if you used your parent or carer's army unit when you're speaking.

I will need to keep your data in order to write my study. However, all the time that I've kept it, I will store it on a password-protected memory stick. This means that no one else will be able to access it. I will delete all of the files when I have written my study.

If someone in the study says something which makes me feel that they are unsafe, I may need to talk to a safe adult at school. This is a way that I can make sure you're all protected. Otherwise, I won't be sharing what you have told me with anyone at your school.

8. What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

As a volunteer, you can stop being involved at any time (even if you've done some of it) up to the point when I start analysing (looking at) your answers. This will be Friday 9th July. You don't need to give me a reason in order to stop being involved. If you stop, I will ask if you and your parents/carers if I can use what you've said and done so far. If I can, I will keep that information safe. If not, I will remove any data straight away.

9. What if there is a problem?

If you or your parents/carers have a question, concern or complaint about any aspect of this study, you or they can start by talking to me if that's appropriate. If you or they would rather talk to my supervisor Anita Franklin, her information is at the very top of this document.

If you or your partner/carers would like to talk to someone else after Dr Franklin, please contact:

The University Complaints Officer

023 9284 3642 complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering volunteering for this research. If you do agree to take part, your consent will be sought; please see the accompanying consent form. You will then be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form, to keep.

Laura Harman-Box

UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Appendix 5

Information sheet for carers

PARTICIPANT CARER INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Project: The Opinion of the Children of Military Families on the Support Offered in School

Name and Contact Details of Researcher(s): Laura Harman-Box, UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Name and Contact Details of Supervisor: Anita Franklin, anita.franklin@port.ac.uk

1. **Invitation**

   I would like to invite your child to take part in my research study. Before you and your child decide if you are happy for them to participate, please read the information below; it will explain why the research is being done and what it will involve for your child. Your child has another information sheet. Please read this with them to make sure both you and them understand. I will also read your child's information sheet with them. This should take you about 10 minutes. Please feel free to talk to others about the study if you wish. Do ask if anything is unclear.

2. ***Study Summary***

   This study is concerned with how your school supports military children which is important because your child deserve to have the best education possible. Due to the school's COVID restrictions, I will be working with children in year 6 who have family currently or recently serving in the army. Participation in the research would require your child to attend up to five sessions with me where we discuss issues which they think are important. It will take around 45 minutes each time.

3. **What is the purpose of the study?**

   During our first session, we will have a general conversation about what it is like to be a military child and, as a group, your child and the other participants will choose the topics that they want to talk about in more detail. Your child will be part of what is called a focus group, a small group who will talk about their own experiences. The purpose for me is to identify if the school is doing everything that it can to help your child – whether that be with their learning or with something else. The results of the study will be discussed with other adults in the school to work out what we can do better.

4. **Why has my child been invited?**

   Your child has been invited because they are a year 6 child whose parents have identified them as a military child. In their bubble, there 10 children who fit this group and they will all be invited to be involved. Their opinions are important because they tell me about your child's experiences but there are lots of other children in the school who are also military children. That means that I will use the points they make as part of the focus group even if other children might have seen or experienced different things; it's okay if your child tells the group something that no one else agrees with because their experiences are important.

5. **Do they have to take part?**

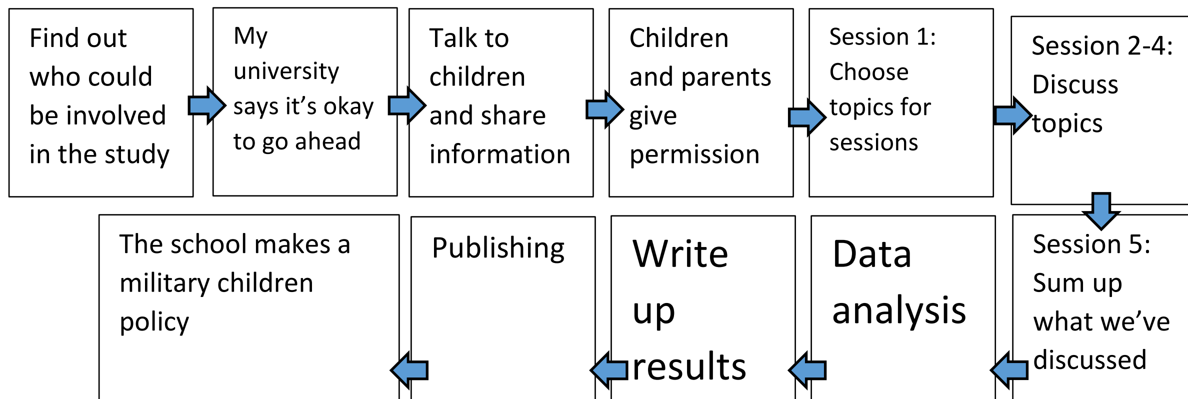
   No, taking part in this research is completely voluntary, which means your child doesn't need to do it. It is up to you and your child to decide if they volunteer for the study. We will describe the study in this information sheet. If you and your child are happy to take part, we will then ask you to sign the attached consent form. This form means that you agree you are happy for your child to be involved. Your children will sign a form too.

6. **What will happen to my child if they take part?**

Your child will be part of a group of around 10 people (it might be smaller if some people don't want to be involved). They will have the chance to talk about anything that they think I should know about being both at their school and being a military child. However, they can talk about things outside of school too. We will meet about 5 times to talk; each time, we will have a conversation as a whole group. Then, your child will have the chance to tell me more about their experiences through lots of different methods: they could choose to write more, to draw an image, or act it out, or to use puppets for drama. These sessions will be around 45 minutes and will be during the school day.

I will be voice recording our conversations so that I can transcribe all the comments. I will also video or take photos of the ideas that your child gives me in their writing, drama or art. This is to make sure I can really understand what they wanted me to know.

Below, I've made an image to help you understand this process a little bit more.



7. Will my child's data be kept confidential?

It is important that we keep your child anonymous. When I voice or video record, or take photos, I will know who said or did what. However, during transcription, each child will be assigned a randomised name. Any of identifying information will also be removed - for example, if you used your parent or carer's army unit when you're speaking. This data will be stored on a password-protected memory stick. These files will be deleted when the study is written.

If someone in the study makes a disclosure, I will follow the school's safeguarding policy. Otherwise, information shared in the session will be anonymised and not shared.

8. What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study or my child doesn't want to?

As a volunteer, your child can stop being involved at any time (even if they've done some of it) up to the point when I start analysing their answers. This will be Friday 9th July. They don't need to give me a reason in order to stop being involved. If they stop, I will ask if both them and you if I can use what you've said and done so far. If I can, I will keep that information safe. If not, I will remove any data straight away. If you wish to remove your child, the above process remains the same.

9. What if there is a problem?

If you or your child have a question, concern or complaint about any aspect of this study, you or they can start by talking to me if that's appropriate. If you or they would rather talk to my supervisor Anita Franklin, her information is at the very top of this document.

If you or your child would like to talk to someone else after Dr Franklin, please contact:

The University Complaints Officer

023 9284 3642 complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering allowing your child to volunteer for this research. If you and your child are happy to take part, your consent will be sought; please see the accompanying consent form. You will then be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form, to keep.

Laura Harman-Box

UP959120@myport.ac.uk

Appendix 6

Staff survey

Staff Survey

The Opinions of the Children of Military Families about School

Support Laura Harman-Box, Master's in Leadership in

Education MSc, UP959120

The purpose of my study is to identify the areas of life (both in and out of school) whichmilitary children feel are significant to them and then to discuss whether the school adequately supports them in these areas. I am asking staff to give their feedback and responses to some of the points raised by the children, to identify if there is agreement between how staff view military children's support and how children view it.

If you are happy to take part, the survey should take you around 15 minutes to

complete.Your answers will be kept anonymous.

As a volunteer, you have the right to participate or withdraw any time before submitting this questionnaire. By completing the questionnaire and clicking ‘Submit’, you are giving your consent to having your data used for my study. If you decide you would not like to take part, simply exit the questionnaire without submitting and the data will not be saved.Once the data is submitted, it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

*Required

1. Please indicate your job role to the closest-matching description.

- o Teaching Assistant
- o Class Teacher
- o Senior Leadership Team

2. Please answer this question before reading further. How well do you feel the school supports military children? 1 = not at all well / 5 = extremely well.

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

3. What do you think are the most important issues facing military children from an academic point of view?

____
____
____

4. What do you think are the most important issues facing military children from a non-academic point of view?

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5. Give ways in which you believe the school does support military children.

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6. Give ways in which you believe the school does not support military children.

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7. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? It's harder to make friends as an older army child because "you get that feeling of embarrassment or awkwardness."

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

8. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? "People don't understand that you move house a lot."

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

9. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? “We don’t have control over what happens to us.”

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

11. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? “Schools don’t really care if you’ve already learned about something before or not.”

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

12. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? “When dad or whoever comes back, you need time off school.”

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

13. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? “It’s hard when they come back and people think you just have to be happy all the time.”

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

14. To what extent do you think you understand and have considered the following opinion given by a child participant? “You have to hide how you feel a bit when dad is away because your mum is already sad. School doesn’t get that.”

○ Never considered or not understood at all

○ Not considered often or not fully understood

○ Neutral

○ Sometimes considered and somewhat understood

○ Always considered and deeply understood

15. Given the opinions you have read from children participants, please now answer the following question: How well do you feel the school supports military children? 1 = not at all well / 5 = extremely well

○ 1

○ 2

○ 3

○ 4

○ 5

16. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

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