How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences?

A thesis submitted to the University of Oxford in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

Lucy Robinson

Department of Education

Green Templeton College

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Supervisors:

Dr Liam Guilfoyle

Prof Katharine Burn

Abstract

Service children are identified by virtue of the occupation of their parents. Their lives are shaped by the unique demands placed on armed forces personnel. Service children are more likely to move (home and school) than their non-service peers and parental separation is common amongst service families. Alongside these experiences of mobility and separation, being part of an armed forces family results in the creation of a distinct identity, which further sets service children apart from their peers. As a result, they have unique educational experiences, associated needs and a distinctive identity which are often not fully understood, or supported, in the English state school context.

Since 2011, service children in English state schools have received targeted funding, known as the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). In the academic year 2023-2024, £335 per child was provided to schools for 78,897 individuals, amounting to just over £26.43 million in total (Department for Education [DfE], 2024). Despite the significant amount of funding given to schools over the last 13 years, there has been considerable criticism of the SPP. Indeed, as a recent report – commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) – highlights, the SPP is "poorly understood and poorly used" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69).

Bringing together voice research and creative methods, this research was undertaken *with* service children, to explore their thoughts and feelings around their service child identity and school experiences. In total, 19 service children, aged between 9 and 16 years old, participated in a range of innovative 'data generation' methods – self-portraits and relational maps, timelines and free responses – alongside discussion, within their respective English state school contexts.

Findings from this doctoral research both enrich and widen current understanding of service children's school experiences and further knowledge into how service children see themselves. Crucially, this thesis develops the concept of the 'service child identity' and explores the relationship between this identity and the broader concept of school belonging. From this, implications are derived, which serve to help inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice within English state schools.

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Thank you to my wonderful family and dearest friends for your love, support and kindness throughout my DPhil journey.

And thank you to Hughie, whose four paws joined my journey a little later, but has been no less significant. You've been a very good boy and there certainly is a 'dogtorate' in it for you.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the 19 service children who shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences of being service children with me in poignant and creative ways. Throughout the writing of this thesis, you have all remained at the forefront of my mind and I hope this work does justice to your stories.

Gallery wall made up of the 19 service children's self-portraits.

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List of abbreviations

Additional Support for Learning Framework	ASL Framework
Army Families Federation	AFF
British Educational Research Association	BERA
British Families Education Service	BFES
Common Transfer Form	CTF
Continuity of Education Allowance	CEA
Defence Select Committee	DSC
Department for Education	DfE
Education, Health and Care Plan	EHCP
Education Support Fund	ESF
English as an Additional Language	EAL
Families Continuous Attitude Survey	FamCAS
Ministry of Defence	MoD
Pupil Information Profile	PIP
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	PTSD
Royal Air Force	RAF
Royal Navy/Royal Marines	RN/RM
Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund	RNRMCF
Service Children's Assessment of Need	SCAN
Service Children in State Schools	SCISS
Service Children's Progression Alliance	SCiP Alliance
Service Pupil Premium	SPP
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	SEND
Supporting Service Children in Education in Wales	SSCE Cymru
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	UNCRC
Third Culture Kids	TCKs

Prologue

Being a military child

Although it can be hard

It is loads of fun

We move from yard to yard

Welcomed as we come

Exploring everywhere

Going for a run

Making the most of where you are

Meeting new friends

At new schools

Great until it ends

Following the rules

Then it starts again

A poem by Louise, upper Key Stage 2 (aged between 9 and 11 years old)

1 Introduction

1.1 Outline of the thesis

1.1.1 Introduction and literature review

My thesis begins with me. In my introduction, I reflect on and position myself in the research by posing the questions: *Why service children? Why me?* In answering these, I share my positionality and experiences, both as a service child and a qualified teacher and how they led me to conduct this research.

The second chapter of my thesis is the literature review. In this, I explore and critique literature related to the three fundamental themes of this research – military life, identity and educational experiences. The chapter begins with a summary of how the literature review was carried out before moving to a discussion of military life and the service child. This includes a closer examination of the definition of the term 'service child' and the historical context of service children.

In the second section, I move on to identity and consider the influence of US literature and culture on discourses of British service children. The discussion then turns to examining the limited literature on the service child identity in more detail. I end the section by drawing together these various strands and discuss how this research project has been influenced by them.

In the third section of the literature review, I look at the educational experiences of service children. I begin by considering the educational context for service children across the UK, with a greater focus on England given the location in which this research was conducted. The chapter then discusses the literature on service children, covering how the two fundamental aspects of military life – mobility and separation – shape service children's education. I end the section by examining the growing phenomenon of increasingly dispersed military families and the insights revealed by the research to date into the impact of this trend.

My literature review ends by discussing how the identified features of the extant literature relate to the research project. This includes the broader research underpinnings, my ontological perspectives, the aims of the research and the two questions that the research answers.

1.1.2 Research design and methodology

My third chapter is concerned with my research design and methodology. This chapter sets out my blended methodological paradigm (voice research and creative methodologies) and from this my data generation methods and approach to data analysis. It is divided into two sections, the first discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the research design, focusing on the themes of voice and participation, creative methods and knowledge production. I end this section with a discussion of how the research project is positioned in relation to these themes.

The chapter then moves to a detailed exploration of the research design; how the research was carried out and the rationale behind key decisions taken during the process. This section also includes a discussion of the data generation methods and the stages through which I undertook the analysis following Braun and Clarke's thematic approach (2022).

1.1.3 Ethical considerations and reflections

The fourth chapter is an extended discussion of ethical considerations, and my reflections on them, which underpinned the whole research project. Within this chapter, I examine several different, but ultimately related, ethical issues which were pertinent to my research design. Within each sub-section, I discuss relevant literature, reflecting on its application within my own research context.

I begin with a discussion on positionality, research(er) transparency and my creation of the 'research ethics tree'; a tool to support my participants in their engagement with research ethics. I then move to looking at consent, assent and the role of gatekeepers in the research process, before examining how group dynamics can influence self-censorship and challenge confidentiality. Following this, I discuss how the role of time, space and place can shape the research encounter, particularly in a school setting. The chapter ends with considerations surrounding anonymity and research benefit. Whilst this chapter is situated after the research design chapter, ethics suffuses every element of the research. It is not an add-on, but something integral to my research project.

1.1.4 Findings chapter I

My fifth chapter answers my first research question; *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?* Through the analysis of the multiple data forms generated by the service children, I argue that my findings present a three-part answer. Firstly, that service children are an integral part of the military community; a distinct sub-culture which comes with a pre-built community with associated values, language and customs. Secondly, that service children 'serve in their own way' through their experiences of mobility and separation. These experiences are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice. Thirdly, that service children's 'service' shapes their sense of self, creating unique iterations of their service child identity. The chapter ends with a presentation of the concept of the service child identity, based on my findings and in dialogue with James Paul Gee's work on identity (2000; 2017).

1.1.5 Findings chapter II

My sixth chapter answers my second research question; *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* Taking the same approach as in the first findings chapter, I argue that service children acknowledge and accept that moving schools is an integral part of service life. However, despite the normality of moving, the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive; particularly around continuity of learning and making friends. For these children, these negative emotions were felt most acutely during the period of transition into their new setting.

In the second part of this chapter, I reflect on and explore the service children's educational experiences through the lens of school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). As the theoretical concept has not been previously applied to service children, I use a contextual definition – whether service children's identity is recognised and understood, and their service-related needs are met within the school context – to understand the service children's educational experiences. In doing so, I argue that many of their experiences – governed by schools' "social environment[s]" and played out in school culture and practice – have been positive (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). However, from the children's perspective, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support for their service-related needs and for

their wider school community to develop a greater awareness and understanding of their service child identity.

1.1.6 Discussion chapter

In this chapter, I present an extended dialogue between the key findings of the previous two chapters and existing literature. In doing so, I highlight how this study nuances existing knowledge and provides further knowledge regarding service children's identity and their experiences of education.

I begin this chapter with a contextualised discussion of how my concept of the 'service child identity' relates to existing literature and what new insights can be gained by using it. I then move on to examine how the service children's educational experiences relate to literature on the same theme. Notably, much of the existing literature is drawn from the perspectives of adults – school staff, parents and those working in the sector more broadly – and thus the discussion enriches existing knowledge by centring the experiences of service children and reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of schooling. Moreover, by looking at these experiences through a school belonging lens, new insights and understanding are gained. These include the central role that the social environment of a school plays in supporting service children's sense of belonging, particularly during transition into a new setting.

This thread is continued through the final section of the chapter, which focuses on identifying implications for practice. These are intended to inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice within English state schools. The implications are generated from a blend of insights, drawing from the children's collective voice alongside the wider literature.

1.1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I begin with a summary of the research, highlighting the unique contributions to knowledge and ethical research practice that the project brings. The chapter then moves on to my reflections on the research in relation to how I have sought to enable ethical research impact, the limitations of this research project and future research avenues.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the wider context of the research and how it relates to changing government policy. This includes consideration of the shifting UK military

landscape shaped by the MoD's strategic priorities and by the DfE's vision and plans under the new Labour government. My thesis ends with a reflection on how these developments could impact the lives, identities and school experiences of service children of the future.

1.2 Why service children? Why me?

Service children are identified by virtue of the occupation of their parent, or parents, which demarcates their identity and experience within the parameters of military life. As members of the Armed Forces community, they are seen through a militarised lens, and terms such as 'little trooper' or 'military brat' are commonly used in both affectionate and pejorative ways (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). The Armed Forces community is often conceptualised as a unique sub-culture within society. Members share commonalities of experience, linguistic terminology and occupation of private spaces located 'behind the wire'.

This is a culture which is often impenetrable to outsiders, termed 'civvies'. However, different members of the Armed Forces community permeate this cultural boundary and service children, through their sustained interaction with state educational settings, perhaps do so the most. More and more often, service children are attending state schools where they are in the minority. Indeed, half of state schools in England with service children only have one or two on roll (Hall, 2019).

Whilst the creation of the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) marked the Government's recognition of service children's unique experiences formed by their service background, an appreciation of the nature of these experiences is not necessarily shared within schools. As the recent report – commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) – highlights, the SPP is "poorly understood and poorly used" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69). This is perhaps due to a disconnect between service culture and school culture or a lack of awareness of what service life entails. Put simply by one service child when speaking to me about their non-service peers and adults in school, 'they just don't get it'.

However, I get it. I understand through my own lived experience. I am attuned to the cultural norms and subtleties that pervade service life. As a service child, I remember how it felt to move so frequently that the concept of belonging was a troubling one. I never felt that I belonged in a certain house or geographical area. To me, belonging was not to a physical space but rather to

a close familial group. As a service child, I acutely remember the profound effect of parental deployment; the sense of powerlessness and fear for a loved one's safety and how isolating that felt in a secondary school where I was the only service child.

Yet, as a qualified teacher, I also understand the professional challenges of the school environment with the finite resources, mounting pressures and huge expectations placed on the individual to understand and respond to each unique child they teach. In those schools where service children are the minority, how viable is it for teaching professionals to understand what is often an alien culture? With countless other pressures, do they have the capacity to attend to service children's distinctive needs through effective usage of comparatively small amounts of financial aid?

This backdrop placed me in a privileged but challenging position as someone researching service children within school settings. Whilst I am a qualified teacher, I am not currently practising. Within the school settings, I had hoped to be welcomed as an outsider, yet I was not under the same accountability framework as those on the schools' payrolls, I was under different pressures of expectation. Because of my detachment from the profession, it is plausible that I was viewed as too idealistic and out of touch with the realities of the school environment.

Similarly, whilst I identify as a service child, I am no longer a child. I was therefore close to my research participants – through a shared culture and understanding – yet I was also far. There was a detachment between us, both in terms of their current experiences and my past experiences and my position within their school. I was not their teacher nor an adult within their school. I was an outsider who, like many elements in their lives, came and went. I was a fleeting presence.

Whilst the service children and I had a shared commonality, and in their experiences, I saw partial reflections and heard echoes, this research is about them and looks forward. It sought to understand how military life – and the experiences, culture and community which are central to the phenomenon – shapes service children's identity and school experiences. In doing so, the research aimed to provide new insights and nuance existing knowledge into these two areas. Which, in turn, would help improve the culture and practice within English state schools with service children on roll.

2 Literature review

2.1 Outline of the chapter

This literature review is divided into four sections. The first three – military life, identity and educational experiences – are the bulk of the chapter, with the final section addressing the underpinnings of the research project.

The first section begins with a discussion of military life and the service child. This includes a closer examination of the definition of the term 'service child' and the historical context of service children. The second section moves on to more modern conceptualisations of service children and considers the influence of US literature and culture on discourses of British service children. The discussion then turns to examining the limited literature on the service child identity in more detail. The section ends by drawing together the various strands of the literature on service child identity and explains how this research project has been influenced by them.

The third section of the literature review looks at the educational experiences of service children. It begins by considering the educational context for service children across the UK, with a greater focus on England, given the location in which the research was conducted. The chapter then discusses the literature on service children, covering how the two fundamental aspects of service life – mobility and separation – shape service children's education. This covers provision, social development, academic outcomes, post-16 pathways and emotional wellbeing. There is also a discussion of the experiences of two specific sub-groups of service children – military young carers and those who have experienced the bereavement of a serving parent. The section ends by examining the growing phenomenon of increasingly dispersed military families and the insights revealed by the research to date into the impact of this trend.

The chapter ends by discussing how the identified features of the extant literature relate to the research project. It also discusses the broader research underpinnings, including the ontological perspectives, the aims of the research and the two questions that the research answers.

2.1.1 Conducting the literature review

Having undertaken a Master of Education (MEd) which focused on determining and analysing the perspectives of key groups (parents, educational practitioners and service children)

regarding service children's educational experiences and the use of the Service Pupil Premium (SPP), I was familiar with the field and the prevalence, and importance of, grey literature within it (Robinson, 2019). Although my MEd was undertaken fairly recently, I was cognisant of developments in the field including the 2020 report, commissioned by the MoD, *Living in our Shoes: Understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families* (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020) and the 2021 report, *The impact of service life on the military child: the overlooked casualties of conflict – update and review report,* commissioned by the Naval Children's Charity (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021).

I therefore began my review by consulting the SCiP Alliance's website which has a repository for sector research. I followed up on sources listed in the documents' respective bibliographies, repeating this process for any further literature I found. This was supplemented by the more traditional approach to conducting a literature review whereby I used several search strings (such as service child*, military AND child*) in key databases. Early in the process of conducting the literature review, I also had a meeting with the Education Librarian who helped me generate additional search strings and recommended that I use ProQuest's 'Education Collection', an online resource which provides access to ERIC and the Education Database, to systematically search for appropriate literature (ProQuest, 2024).

2.2 Military life and the service child

Military life, or service life, is a blanket term used to cover the varied yet distinctive experiences that result from employment in the military. As an organisation, the military has been conceptualised as a "greedy institution"; unique in making a "constellation of requirements" and a "*pattern* of demands on service members and their families" (Segal, 1986, p.15). Although individual experiences are broad and varied, characteristics of service life have been readily identified. Segal, in their US work, suggests the following four: risk of injury or death of the service member; geographic mobility; periodic separation; and residence in foreign countries (1986). Whilst acknowledging that such characteristics vary in both frequency and intensity across and within the Services, Segal argues that service families will experience them all at some point during the career of the serving personnel (1986). More recent, UK based research, echoes this in characterising military life as a "unique phenomenon", defined by "parental

deployments, periods of non-deployment separation, heightened mobility, and the risk of parental injury or bereavement during service" (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.11).

However, both characterisations of service life either downplay (Segal) or omit (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey) the foundational role that being part of the Armed Forces community plays in shaping the experiences of non-serving members. Whilst Segal makes a passing reference to military wives being "incorporated into the military system" and thus having access to "supportive social networks", the Armed Forces community offers far more than support systems (1986, p.23). It represents a societal sub-culture, rich in customs, language and values where members' experiences and identities are continually shaped by the military.

For the children of serving personnel, the "all-encompassing character of a military lifestyle" means that their childhoods and experiences of growing up can be very different from their peers (Children's Commissioner, 2018, p.1). Yet, as a group, service children are not homogenous. In addition to a service child's unique individual characteristics, differences in the setup of the family unit and role of serving personnel within the military (for example, their service branch) significantly shape the service child's experience. As a result, service children are part of every kind of family; nuclear, extended, blended and single parent households. They may live in service accommodation amongst other service children or in private housing situated away from the garrison, base or port. Whilst many will see their serving parent every evening, more and more are experiencing periods of weekday separation (a phenomenon known as 'weekending') (Gribble & Fear, 2022). Some service children are young carers, others may be bereaved. There are also service children whose parents may be reservists or veterans. Indeed, the sheer diversity of experience encompassed by the term contributes to the variance in definitions.

2.3 Defining the service child

When it comes to defining the 'service child', definitions have often been context specific and have varied over the requirements of 'service' and the definition of a 'child' (Department for Education [DfE], 2023b; MoD, 2023b; SCiP Alliance, 2021). The broadest and most inclusive working definition is from the SCiP Alliance: "A person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular Armed Forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that

person's life" (2021). Notably, this definition implicitly recognises the capability of an individual to self-identify and have a 'label for life' in addition to recognising the diversity of family structures and the experience of reservists who often have a primary, non-military occupation. Additionally, the definition includes children of service veterans; an often-overlooked group, despite their numbers (Royal Air Force [RAF] Benevolent Fund, 2015). By including 'or carer', the definition also includes older siblings or other, close non-parental relatives that work in the Services to whom the child has a close relationship. This nuance allows for alternative family structures to be recognised.

Other iterations – for example in Canadian literature – use people-first language such as 'children in military families' (Bullock & Skomorovsky, 2016). However, in UK literature, identity-first language ('service child', 'military child' or 'military-connected child or young person') is most used. Although it is important to be cognisant of how identity-first language can obscure the complexity of identity, 'service child' remains the best current working label to align with key documents, general knowledge and parlance.

2.4 Historical context of the service child

The existence of service children can be traced back to the origins of organised warfare when service children, alongside their mothers, were 'camp followers', who followed serving soldiers during combat (also known as 'following the drum') (Clifton, 2007; Gibson, 2012). In an educational context, schools were set up specifically for service children as early as the sixteenth century (Black, 1984; Clifton, 2007; Gibson, 2012; Huxford, 2022). However, it was not until the late eighteenth century that such education was formalised through the establishment of boarding schools in Britain (Gibson, 2012; Huxford, 2022).

In 1965, the MoD produced a film designed to educate civilian teachers joining the British Families Education Service (BFES) that would soon be teaching service children (Huxford, 2012). The film, *School Is Everywhere*, painted service children in a positive light – adaptable, mature, and self-possessed future citizens of the world (Huxford, 2012). However, this sat in contrast to the picture painted by contemporary reports. In the 1967 Plowden Report – *Children and Their Primary Schools* – service children were listed under "special groups", alongside "canal boat families" and "gypsy children" (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967,

p.60). Although only a brief sentence, a damning judgement is expressed about them: “there is evidence of serious backwardness among them and of high turnover of pupils” (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p.60).

MoD reports, commissioned to review welfare provision in the Royal Navy (Seebohm, 1974) and the Army (Spencer, 1976), took a more nuanced view. Spencer’s report identified that whilst key individuals raised many concerns about “the effect of the army way of life in the education and development of army children” (p.112), the experiences of army children, and the schools they attend, were varied. Spencer concluded that “turbulence appears in particular to handicap young children, pupils of below average ability and attainment in the cumulative skills such as arithmetic” and those “approaching examinations” (1976, p.117). Seebohm’s report echoed elements of this; finding that naval children of “average, or above average, intelligence” were not at a disadvantage “in attainment nor in behaviour” (1974, p.55). Yet, “children of below average ability were at a disadvantage” and that “severely handicapped children, physically or mentally, were much worse off” (Seebohm, 1974, p.55). Notably, Spencer suggested that “parents who themselves are satisfied with and can cope with the turbulence of army life can in turn help their children to offset any disadvantage” (1976, p.117). This suggests that parental wellbeing may act as a protective factor in service children’s own emotional wellbeing (discussed further in 2.10.1).

The impact of service mobility – known also as ‘turbulence’ – on education was further developed by Black’s doctoral research and later in Clifton’s to cover the range of experiences (father’s absence, loss of friends, change of school and home) encompassed by this term (Black, 1984; Clifton, 2007). Whilst this term has now fallen out of mainstream usage, it remains a useful shorthand in summarising the experiences of discontinuity due to service life.

2.5 Conceptualising the service child

2.5.1 Influence of US studies and culture on the British service child

The proliferation of research on and about US service children during military operations has significantly shaped how British service children have been seen. Indeed, a large proportion of the grey literature of the last 20 years is heavily reliant on US studies and has shaped discourses about service children in the UK.

A recent review of the literature on service children in five countries, carried out by Hall, McCullouch and Lawrence, identified that there is a "preponderance of research grounded in health and psychological disciplines" (2022, p.76). During the height and aftermath of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, an "enormous literature on American military families" emerged (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022; Segal, Lane & Fisher, 2015, p.2). This was seen as a response to increasing concern over the wellbeing of military personnel, veterans and their families (Cozza & Lerner, 2013). This research was conducted primarily within the discipline of psychology rather than sociology and thus in clinical settings rather than in schools or in the home. Thematically, the focus was on the relationship between service life and children's mental health, with multiple studies arguing that the former increases the likelihood of a range of behavioural difficulties and mental health problems (Chandra et al., 2010; Gorman et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010). A review by Alfano and colleagues identified that the body of research focused "exclusively on problem behaviours (as opposed to strengths) during periods of deployment", concluding that research "has overwhelmingly focused on the presence of maladjustment and psychopathology in children" (Alfano et al., 2016, pp.18, 26). These trends have also continued, with more recent studies also using purposive sampling of service children already identified as having experienced, or at risk of experiencing, mental health difficulties (White et al., 2011). Lee has suggested that in so doing, it has strengthened a misconception in the discourses about British service children; suggesting that service children should be pathologized and that dysfunctional behaviours and mental health problems are commonplace (Lee, 2020).

Given the role the UK played in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is perhaps unsurprising that this body of research is used as a key source of knowledge about service children in the UK (Centre for Social Justice, 2016; DfE, 2010; Royal Navy and Royal Marines Children's Fund [RNRMCF], 2009). However, the US and UK military have "considerable cultural and structural differences" which affect both service children's experiences and – perhaps more crucially – what type of research is funded (Farrell-Wright, 2011; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, pp.9-10). This means that transferring research findings across the two contexts, without critical engagement, is problematic as it can lead to misconceptions about British service children. Furthermore, it is important to consider how the wider military context shaped

the production of these studies. A decade on from the UK ending its combat operation in Afghanistan (albeit that a small number of troops remained in non-combatant roles until the drawdown in 2021), the defence context is significantly different. There have been significant changes to defence policy and operations which have impacted, and continue to impact, service children's life experiences. This means that findings from older studies may no longer be applicable to the service children of today.

However, these changes have not been fully acknowledged in the wider literature which has led to service children being seen through a deficit lens, rather than a strengths-based perspective (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022). Whilst it is important to understand any barriers and disadvantages that service children may experience, starting from this point risks overshadowing the diversity of experiences and downplaying or ignoring the strengths that service children have and the positives that being a service child can bring (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022; Lee, 2020). Moreover, a deficit lens can be reductive. It can foster an assumption that all service children are disadvantaged, which in turn can lead to stigmatisation (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022).

Conceptualisations of British service children have also been influenced by US cultural discourses on American service children. Firstly, there is the prevalence and impact of the 'military brat' subculture (sometimes also known as 'pad brats' where 'pad' refers to married quarters where service families have been traditionally housed) (Gibson, 2012, p.21). Although in existence prior to Wertsch's 1991 publication, *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood inside the Fortress*, the book solidified the cultural identity of the military brat. Wertsch's work, composed from interviews with over 80 adult service children, identified several features of the lifestyle and culture represented by the term. Like Segal's work, these included: highly mobile upbringing; immersion in pervasive military culture; war-related family stresses; and exposure to foreign languages and culture (Wertsch, 1991). Wertsch's work contributed to a growing sub-genre of literature and research by adult service children, reflecting on their own experiences of 'Brathood' (Queair, 2018). US military children have also been included within works about Third Culture Kids (TCKs) or global nomads; children who spend a significant part of their formative years immersed in a culture different from their parents' or home nation (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

2.5.2 Seeing service children through a militarised lens

Like in their depiction as 'camp followers' or 'military brats', service children are often seen through a militarised lens and are rarely centred. This has meant that it is more common for service children to be present as part of the 'military family', as opposed to being separate entities. When grouped this way their differing needs, as distinct from those of the adult partners of serving personnel, can be lost. Furthermore, it can mean that service children, when encompassed by the term, are seen as a potential hurdle to military effectiveness. The most recent MoD commissioned report attests to this. In the report, *Living in our Shoes: Understanding the needs of the UK Armed Forces families*, children's 'needs' are seen in relation to "operational capability" as "attracting and retaining the right number of capable, motivated individuals to deliver Defence outputs is critical" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.2). Whilst no research is free from bias, the report suggests that the impetus for research backed by the MoD and the Government is less about the children themselves and more about how they help or hinder defence capability and effectiveness. There is a clear tension between welfare and warfare.

2.5.3 Service child identity and the Armed Forces community

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the very limited research on service children's identities, discussion focusing on their identity stems from belonging to the Armed Forces community. In the Children's Commissioner report, the authors conclude that "belonging to a military family was central to their identity and sense of self" as the "all-encompassing manner of their parent's job meant that... [service children] had developed a sense of identity based significantly on their experience in an armed forces family" (2018, p.8).

By always grouping service children within the military family, attention is focused on their link to the Services rather than their existence as children. This is highlighted by the prevalent depictions of service children as serving personnel in miniature, using terms such as 'little trooper' (Lee, 2020). Service children are also regularly associated with militarised concepts or characteristics. For example, being 'disciplined', 'adaptable' and 'brave' (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; McCullouch, Hall & Ellis, 2018; Noret et al., 2014; RAF Benevolent Fund, 2021). In Hanna's US narrative study of nine military-connected adolescents, their

"insights, experiences and thoughts on their identity development as it intersects growing up among the military culture" highlighted that they see themselves as "confident, empathetic, mature, and adaptable" (2020, p.184). The participants felt that they possessed these traits "as a result of their upbringing within the military culture" (Hanna, 2020, p.187). Notably, these traits align with the US Army's values in the acronym LDRSHIP: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, hono[u]r, integrity, personal courage (U.S. Army, n.d.). The identification of such characteristics suggests an adultification and militarisation of these children (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Lee, 2020).

Indeed, service children are often positioned as "either heroic or vulnerable in relation to military activities and geopolitical events" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.254). This is highlighted in the recent growth of military charities for service children in which they are "positioned by these organisations as either 'war babies' in need of support and sympathy... or 'heroic citizens' mirroring the qualities of serving parents" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.254). This casts service children as passive entities and does not consider the role of the children's own agency in their identity formation.

Using a critical military geography approach, Yarwood, Tyrrell and Kelly challenged this dualism by engaging with the concept of 'military citizenship'; extending it to service children and seeing how their agency "allows them to negotiate, accept or resist ideas of militarism" (2021, p.254). Methodologically, their study involved engaging with service children (alongside a range of adults including parents, members of the Armed Forces and education practitioners) to "gain understandings of their everyday lives across different spaces" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.256). These included within the home, the school setting and youth institutions.

Notably, their study found that "for the most part, children commented that they felt different because they were in a service family" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.256). This difference "was felt most keenly" (p.257) in a school setting where the service children felt there was a lack of understanding from non-service peers and adults, resulting in tensions as the children sought to use "strategies to fit into spaces where they sometimes feel discordant" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.258). This notion of identity based on difference is also shown in other UK research where service children have self-reported feeling and viewing themselves as

different from their non-service peers (Bowes, 2018; Clifton, 2007; Robinson, 2019). Crucially, it is the service children's different experiences, stemming from service life, that they feel set them apart, highlighting the close connection between experiences and identity.

Yarwood, Tyrrell and Kelly's study also considered youth institutions (the cadet forces and Military Kids' Club Heroes) and their role as a form of 'civic militarisation' (2021). One participant explained that their involvement in the cadet forces "offered opportunities to mirror his parent's military experiences", including the socio-emotional support gained from being part of a formalised group with shared experiences and understanding (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.259). Similarly, in the case of Military Kids' Club Heroes (an initiative created by Plymouth City Council to support and 'give voice' to local service children), children chose to participate in these forms of civic militarisation as they were spaces "where they could feel more understood and comfortable" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.258).

2.5.4 Agency and voice of the service child

A key strand running through Yarwood, Tyrrell and Kelly's research is the role of service children's agency in negotiating their military citizenship. Rather than being passive individuals in the victim-hero narrative, they argue that service children are "citizens in their own right, seeking to live their daily lives as well as they can in the context of shifting geopolitical actions, traditional military institutions and nuanced cultural norms of militarism and service" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.260).

At the centre of this is "positioning children's subjectivity more centrally, rather than engaging them only as objects – or victims – of militarisation" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.260). This approach highlights the importance of voice in research and thinking beyond homogenising narratives (Lee, 2020). Indeed, as Bowes' doctoral research found, the "possibilities for identity in relation to being part of a forces family are not as fixed and predictable as existing research seems to imply" (2018, p.172). Rather than a fixed identity, Bowes applied the concept of 'becoming', arguing that "children's identities were not stable and continued to change throughout the research process" (2018, p.176). Like Lee, Bowes challenged the static homogenising narrative of the service child; instead offering a "more dynamic and multifaceted understanding" of service children's identities (Bowes, 2018, p.176; Lee, 2020).

In the literature on service children more broadly, service children are rarely centred in significant, sustained and meaningful ways. This has meant there is a paucity of such research. A recently published review of extant literature on service children identified that 21 of the 47 UK papers on service children included "children in their sample or consultation" (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.124). However, a closer look at the research methods of these papers reveals more tokenistic inclusion, signalling that perhaps the involvement of service children in research is seen as a tick-box exercise (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). This perception is further supported by the fact that some studies use only closed interview questions that leave little scope for elaboration or complexity (Bowes, 2018; Lee, 2020).

Within the last 20 years, three doctoral theses have focused on service children's education in England (Clifton, 2007; Lee, 2020) and Scotland (Bowes, 2018). All three projects centred service children in their research design and involved extended periods of time with the participating service children. Notably, the researchers' decisions to take more inductive and exploratory approaches to service children's educational lives encouraged thoughtful theorising beyond the constricting and homogenising narratives that often surround the service child. As Lee explained, their research "looks beyond posited disorders, norms and functioning. It aims to contribute a more nuanced, critical understanding of the complexities of UK service children's learning lives" and in doing so "sought to understand the children as meaning-makers, investigating how they made sense of and presented their worlds and themselves" (2020, p.ii).

This research project therefore aligns itself with these three existing doctoral theses in terms of axiological values, conceptualisation of the service child and the active role they play within the research itself. It thus represents a further enrichment of this alternative to the mainstream, homogenising narrative on service children. Regarding identity, this research builds on their respective works by developing the concept of the service child identity, derived from the children's thoughts, feelings and experiences of being service children and in dialogue with existing theoretical works drawn from the broader field of identity studies.

2.6 Education and the service child

2.6.1 Overview of the educational context of service children

British service children are educated in a diverse range of settings across the UK and globally. These include schools abroad overseen by the Defence Children's Services (branch of the MoD), local state schools in their host countries, public schools based in the UK (day or boarding) and home schooling. In each setting and country, the admission process, curricula, public examinations and funding models for service children's education vary considerably. This includes within the UK where state schools in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland all operate differently. Given the focused context of this research, the remainder of this chapter begins by briefly covering service children's educational contexts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland before looking in greater detail at English state schools and the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). Other funding models, including the Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA) and the Educational Support Fund (ESF)/Armed Forces Families Fund will also be considered. The chapter then discusses the literature on service children in education, covering the key themes of provision, social development and academic outcomes.

Much of the literature on these themes comes from wider, grey literature on service children's lives or military families, in the form of reports written or commissioned by government bodies and military charities. Whilst limited in terms of their research methodology and theory, these reports highlight the significant role that such institutions play in creating and perpetuating narratives about service children and show how policy and practice work within the education, defence and third sectors.

Taken together, a common thread that runs through this literature is that service children experience discontinuity in education due to service mobility and service-related separation. This interruption to their schooling is combined with the challenges schools have in providing appropriate provision and support for these often-mobile children, both academically and socially. Although most reports are based on the reporting of adults (parents and school staff), a handful of recent publications have sought to include the voice of service children.

2.6.2 Service children in the UK

Given the devolved status of the UK, the countries within it have differing educational systems that service children experience. These differences can cause difficulties for service children and their families. Broadly speaking, difficulties stem from differences between the countries regarding the admissions process, differences in curricula (particularly linked to qualifications) and differences in the funding available for service children. However, understanding the nuances of these difficulties from a research perspective is hindered by the lack of research and available data. There is limited knowledge on the numbers and details of service children across the devolved nations and only a very small number of reports which look in greater depth at the differences (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). Present mechanisms to collect data on service children across England (the SPP) and in Wales (through the work of SSCE Cymru) look only at basic numerical and descriptive data. Other data related to service (such as service branch, rank or veteran status) and to education (such as level of churn, level of additional needs or other statuses including young carer or English as an Additional Language [EAL]) is not yet collected but would have considerable value (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022).

2.6.2.1 Scotland

In Scotland, recent data has identified at least 12,497 (this is considered an underestimate) service children in local authority educational provision, spread – albeit unevenly – across all 32 council areas (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022, p.4). From the data gathered, the majority are children of veterans (46.7%) followed by regular forces (33.4%), reserve forces (9.5%), not declared (7%) and multiple categories (3.4%) (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022, p.5). This data is particularly significant as it is the first of its kind, providing an important insight into the nature of the population of service children in Scotland and a baseline for further research.

The challenges that have been identified in Scotland relate to the differences in curricula and qualification framework alongside the assignment of school years in Scotland when compared to other parts of the UK. A 2017 survey, conducted by the Army Families Federation (AFF), found that 53% of parents were ‘somewhat concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ by curriculum differences and 46% of parents were ‘somewhat concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ over school

year placement (AFF, 2017, p.2). Parental concerns also extended to seeing the Scottish system as 'unfair' when compared to the English system, particularly regarding funding for service children and access to higher education (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

In Scotland, funding is not ring-fenced for individual groups of children but rather the Scottish government operates a 'getting it right for every child approach', supported by the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Framework (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022). This framework requires "education authorities to identify, meet and keep under review a child's individual needs for support for learning, irrespective of the reason for these needs" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69). However, when service families move from England to Scotland, they perceive the lack of SPP funding as unfair or as disadvantaging to their children (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). These perceptions of unfairness also extend to accessing higher education, due to the exception Scottish students have regarding payment of university fees (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

2.6.2.2 Wales

In Wales, Supporting Service Children in Education (SSCE) Cymru, a programme currently mostly funded by the Welsh government, works to "support organisations to gather their views and experiences, build networks across Wales and raise awareness and understanding of the experiences of children of armed forces personnel" (SSCE Cymru, n.d.). As part of their work, SSCE Cymru have also developed resources and commissioned research to better understand service children's educational needs within the Welsh context.

A recent study has identified 2,677 service children across 589 schools in Wales, with the largest concentrations in Powys, Vale of Glamorgan, and Pembrokeshire, where established military communities are present (SSCE Cymru, 2022). Notably, SSCE Cymru identified these three local authorities, alongside the Isle of Anglesey, as having "significant differences in the responses" in their 2019 school survey. This included schools within these local authorities as feeling more aware of the challenges service children face yet feeling less equipped to support them (Taylor, 2019). This report, like *Rallying to the Flag* for the Scottish context, has provided

a baseline for Wales from which further knowledge and understanding can develop (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022).

Alongside the differences in admissions, public examinations and funding models, a challenge unique to service children in Wales is the use of the Welsh language in schools. This has been identified as a significant issue for schools and families; particularly for service children who are also learning English alongside their home language (typically Nepalese) (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Although a Day School Allowance is offered to support service families in North Wales, it has been suggested that for other parts of Wales, some flexibility, plausibly in the form of an exemption from learning Welsh, should be available to service children who will only be educated in Wales for a short period (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

2.6.2.3 Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, there is no equivalent to SSCE Cymru. Moreover, to date, there has been no research conducted specifically on the Northern Irish context so very little is known. In the *Living in our Shoes* report, educational support is noted to be "well-established" with "bespoke arrangements for service children" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, pp.58, 63). However, this report and others identified challenges in the design and content of the curriculum (when compared to England) (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Regarding funding, there is a 'Support for Children of Service Personnel Funding Factor' and "schools can spend this as they see fit" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69). However, beyond one reference in the report, there is little public information available about the funding or how it is used. This lack of information is likelu due to the relatively small numbers of service children in Northern Ireland, coupled with the security issues surrounding British military personnel in the country. Indeed, a 2015 report identified that "security concerns remain a key barrier to engagement with many service families living in Northern Ireland" and therefore any military association may continue to be kept private (Baverstock, 2023; Forces in Mind Trust, 2015, p.28; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021).

2.7 Service children in English state schools and the Service Pupil Premium

2.7.1 Creation and purpose

In 2011, the DfE introduced the SPP "in recognition of the specific challenges children from service families face and as part of the commitment to delivering the Armed Forces Covenant" (MoD, 2023b). The Covenant is a formalised agreement between the Armed Forces community, the nation and the Government, which "encapsulates the moral obligation to those who serve, have served, their families and the bereaved" (MoD, 2016a). It states that the Armed Forces community "should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services" (MoD, 2016a). The creation of the SPP, as a political act of recognition, marked a shift in the Government's formalised perception and monetary treatment of service children.

2.7.2 Eligibility

Although definitions vary across organisations, the DfE defines a service child as a child who attends an English state school, academy or free school (inclusive of maintained special schools, Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision), is currently in the school years of Reception to Year 11 and who fulfils one of the following criteria:

- "one of their parents is serving in the regular Armed Forces (including pupils with a parent who is on full commitment as part of the full-time reserve service)
- they have been registered as a 'service child' on a school census in the past 6 years (altered in 2023)
- one of their parents died whilst serving in the Armed Forces and the pupil receives a pension under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme or the War Pensions Scheme
- one of their parents is in the armed forces of another nation and is stationed in England (added in 2023)" (MoD, 2023b).

Once a child is identified, the school is then able to claim the SPP on their behalf. For the academic year 2024-2025, the funding is £340 per pupil, per year and is designed so that "eligible schools...can offer mainly pastoral support during challenging times and to help

mitigate the negative impact on service children of family mobility or parental deployment" (MoD, 2023b).

2.7.3 Entitlement

When the SPP was first introduced in April 2011, the entitlement was £200 per child, per annum (MoD, 2020). Over the following years, the funding has steadily risen. As of this academic year (2024-2025), the funding stands at £340 per child, per annum (DfE, 2024). The entitlement relies on parents declaring their children's eligibility to their educational provider (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). The funding is linked to the school, so if an eligible child moves schools during the year, the funding does not follow them, and they miss out on their entitlement until the next school census (MoD, 2021a).

As table 2.1 shows, over the past 13 years, the number of children eligible for the SPP has steadily grown. This is likely to be due to growing awareness in schools of the SPP rather than to an increase in the number of service children. Whilst the SPP falls under the umbrella term of 'pupil premium', this is purely for administrative ease as the two forms of targeted funding are not commensurable in purpose or amount. The SPP is a fractional part of the Government's annual pupil premium funding, making up approximately 1% of pupil premium spending year on year.

Table 2.1: The funding cost of, and number of children eligible for, the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) comparative to the Pupil Premium (PP) over the course of 13 years. Data collated from (DfE, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2022b, 2023a, 2024).

Academic Year	Total no. of children on roll in state schools in England	Total no. of children eligible for PP (including SPP)	Total amount of PP funding (£)	Total no. of SPP recipients	Total amount of SPP funding (£)
2012-2013	6,830,600	1,924,920	1,179,692,000	52,370	13,093,000
2013-2014	6,899,260	2,017,750	1,839,744,000	57,940	17,381,000
2014-2015	6,966,550	2,070,020	2,413,079,000	64,390	19,317,000
2015-2016	7,093,291	2,075,406	2,410,690,874	68,896	20,668,700
2016-2017	7,186,542	2,073,665	2,406,456,479	73,469	22,040,775
2017-2018	7,333,124	2,061,813	2,392,824,013	75,312	22,593,238
2018-2019	7,435,162	2,047,305	2,416,997,614	76,318	22,892,263
2019-2020	7,501,205	2,047,974	2,417,783,381	77,154	23,146,200
2020-2021	7,579,666	2,036,141	2,453,572,923	79,343	24,595,633
2021-2022	7,611,513	2,081,884	2,503,419,553	79,977	24,792,689
2022-2023	7,659,713	2,154,483	2,679,025,389	80,109	25,634,853
2023-2024	7,683,856	2,182,812	2,850,535,653	78,897	26,430,495
2024-2025	7,709,500	2,200,262	2,917,077,290	77,862	26,472,910

2.7.4 Distribution

Previously, it was assumed that service children attended schools situated within the proximity of the major garrisons, ports and bases belonging to the Armed Forces and thus distribution was geographically concentrated. However, an analysis of the DfE's data highlights that the

geographical spread of service children across England is far broader and that, over time, military families have become increasingly dispersed (Rodrigues, Osborne, Johnson & Kiernan, 2020; SCiP Alliance, 2022). Comparative concentrations of service children across England using 2020 data from the National Pupil Database can be seen below in figure 2.1.

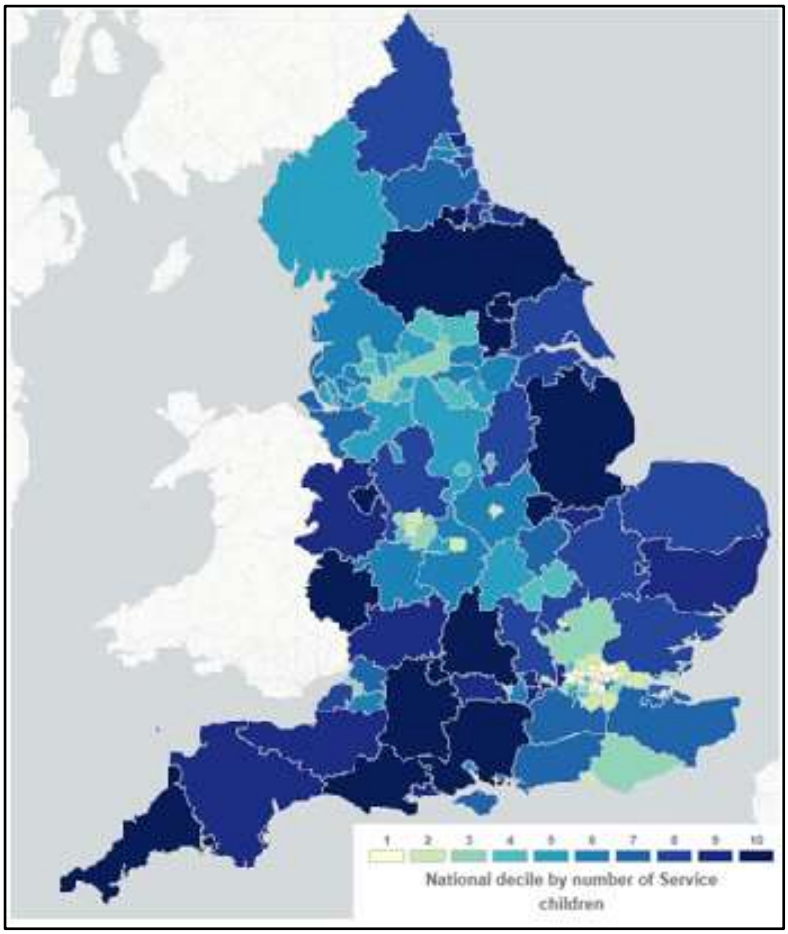


Figure 2.1: Map showing the comparative concentrations of service children across England (SCiP Alliance, 2022).

Hall's (2019) analysis of unpublished DfE data highlighted that 52% of schools across England have at least one service child, but within that 52%, half have only one or two service children. This is of particular significance as it highlights the extremes in the distribution of service children at a school level and in so doing, nuances the collective understanding concerning the complexities associated with service children's education.

Notably, the SPP is also the only measure, albeit a proxy, of the number and geographical spread of service children in England. Accurate records for service children who fall outside of this

definition (such as those being educated in other countries or being privately educated, and those younger than 4 years or older than 16 years) are sparse. There remains no single, accurate record of service children living in the UK or overseas (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022). Indeed, several recent reports have identified the scarcity of data on service children, and the subsequent impact it has had on the research conducted and how generalised the outcomes of such studies can be (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Rose & Rose, 2018; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

2.7.5 Evaluation

However, since its introduction, the SPP has attracted criticism. In the 2013 Defence Select Committee (DSC) report, *The Armed Forces Covenant in Action? Part 3: Educating the children of Service personnel,* the authors commented that "we are not convinced that this expenditure is adequately monitored…to ensure that it is used to the best possible advantage to the service children themselves" (2013, p.6). Thus, the report called for "more evaluation of spending on the Service Pupil Premium and evidence that this funding is used to support service children in the particular problems they face" (2013, p.44). However, the DSC felt insufficient action was taken in the following years and thus their most recent report highlighted continued challenges with effective SPP usage, particularly in schools with low numbers of service children (2019). Continued challenges surrounding the SPP have also been identified in the Children's Commissioner report, the SCiP Alliance's 'stakeholder consultation' and the MoD's most recently commissioned report into the needs of UK Armed Forces families (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Rose & Rose, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). The latter characterised the SPP as a "controversial topic" and argued that "the SPP is not being utilised to its full potential and service children are losing out on valuable support as a result" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69). Identified issues with the funding focus on three inter-related aspects: understanding, use and accountability.

In schools where there are low numbers of service children, the report identified the funding as "poorly understood and poorly used" (2020, p.69). This has also been highlighted by the Children's Commissioner report (Children's Commissioner, 2018). A related concern surrounding usage is that some schools combine the SPP with the pupil premium (Robinson,

2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). This means that the accountability for the SPP is diminished, and that the money is not targeting the specific needs of service children.

According to the MoD, schools are "held to account for the spending of this funding through the focus in Ofsted inspections on the progress and attainment of their wider PP eligible pupil cohort" (MoD, 2023b). However, schools do not always publish the funding decisions of the SPP on their websites and by considering service children within the "wider PP eligible pupil cohort", distinctions between the different groups are blurred (MoD, 2023b). In turn, this suggests that non-existent or minimal monitoring or accountability systems are present (Burke et al., 2019; Robinson, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). When questioned, schools felt that their accountability bodies (academy trusts and/or Ofsted) are uninterested in service children as no attention is paid to acknowledging them in policy decisions or inspections (Robinson, 2019). This also has knock-on effects for stifling awareness and support of the funding, particularly from parents who have moved into the English education system from another devolved nation within the UK or from abroad.

2.8 Other financial provision for service children

2.8.1 Continuity of Education Allowance

There is an additional form of targeted funding – albeit with certain stipulations – available for service children called the Continuity of Education Allowance (CEA), which is funded by the MoD. The CEA provides partial funding for a place at an approved boarding school (state or independent) to offer service children the opportunity of continuous education and to enable the partner of a serving member to accompany them on UK and overseas postings (AFF, n.d.). According to the 2024 *Families Continuous Attitude Survey* (FamCAS), it is estimated that "one in eight families with school age children receive Continuity of Education Allowance" (MoD, 2024c, p.16).

The CEA is available for children aged 8 years or over, with the expectation that the parent(s) of the service child contribute at least 10% of the school fees. The MoD currently contributes up to £18,288 or £23,541 (junior and senior boarding rates respectively) per year (Defence Business Services, 2022). For comparison, the Independent School Council's 2023 report

identifies average independent boarding fee rates of £27,960 and £38,361 (junior and senior boarding rates respectively). These significant differences suggest that service families claiming CEA are also contributing a large amount of money to their children's school fees. Indeed, from the data available on the CEA, obtained through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, most service children receiving CEA attend independent schools as opposed to state boarding schools (3,470 and 569 respectively) (Defence Business Services, 2023).

As table 2.2 shows, most service children are receiving CEA for the secondary phase of their education, coinciding with public examinations.

Table 2.2: The number of service children in receipt of CEA allowance, as of Spring term 2022, divided by year group. Data taken from an FOI request (Defence Business Services, 2023).

	Year group	**No. of service children (as of Spring term 2022)**
Primary phase	3	56
	4	133
	5	189
	6	294
Secondary phase	7	492
	8	519
	9	571
	10	535
	11	527
	12	367
	13	346
	Total	4,029

Although it is difficult to compare the statistics of the SPP and the CEA given that the SPP does not collect more detailed information (such as rank or service branch), there is considerably more funding being spent through the CEA on a far smaller number of service children. For the financial year 2021-22, the total cost of the CEA was £83.25 million for 4,320 service children (Defence Business Services, 2022). This is compared to the £24.8 million spent on the SPP for 79,977 service children (see table 2.1). However, it is worth noting that the SPP and the CEA are not commensurate in purpose. The CEA gives continuity of education whilst the SPP "help[s] mitigate the negative impact on service children of family mobility or parental deployment" (MoD, 2023b). Thus, whilst recipients of both the CEA and the SPP experience

parental deployment and family mobility, those receiving the CEA are not moving schools because of the latter.

In recent years, there has been criticism of the CEA due to the considerable financial implications for the MoD and the perceived bias in its use. As the MoD requires serving parents to contribute at least 10% of the school fees, it is seen as an allowance available only to higher-ranking officers. Although data is not routinely shared, recent FOI requests support this perception. Given the hierarchical nature of the Services, there are considerably more individuals of lower ranks (other ranks - OR) than those of higher ranks (officer ranks - OF). However, as table 2.3 shows, the total number of serving personnel from OF currently in receipt of the CEA is 1,520 and those of OR is 1,390. This shows the disproportionate distribution of CEA by rank.

Table 2.3: The number of service personnel in receipt of the CEA allowance for their child(ren), as of Spring term 2022, divided by rank and service branch. Data taken from an FOI request in which the MoD has rounded all figures "to the nearest 10, numbers ending in 5 have been rounded to the nearest multiple of 20 to avoid systematic bias" (Defence Business Services, 2023, p.2).

Rank of serving personnel	**Army**	**RAF**	**Navy/Royal Marines**	**Total**
OF 1	-	~	~	10
OF 2	200	70	20	290
OF 3	220	100	50	370
OF 4	330	110	50	490
OF 5	180	50	30	250
OF 6	60	10	~	80
OF 7	20	~	~	20
OF 8	~	~	~	10
OF 9	~	-	~	~
OR 2	20	10	~	40
OR 3	60	~	~	60
OR 4	230	30	10	270
OR 6	290	70	20	380
OR 7	270	50	20	340
OR 8	200	-	~	200
OR 9	70	20	~	100
Grand Total	2,150	530	220	2,900

Regarding service branch, the above figures in table 2.3 show most service personnel in receipt of the CEA allowance are Army (74%) followed by RAF (18%) and Navy/Royal Marines (8%). Whilst the RAF percentage is broadly in line with the numbers reflecting the composition of the Armed Forces, the Army's and Navy's percentages highlight a considerable difference. Statistics from 2022 place the division at Army (60%), RAF (19%) and Navy/Royal Marines (20%) (MoD, 2022a). A reason for this could be attributed to the relatively settled status of naval families and associated eligibility of the allowance.

2.8.2 Education Support Fund and the Armed Forces Families Fund

The Education Support Fund (ESF) was a form of annual funding, supplied by the MoD, to support the education of service children across the UK, subject to conditions. It was initially set up in 2011 to alleviate the financial challenges to school funding when large numbers of service children join or leave a school at non-standard times (Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, 2023a; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Publicly funded schools, academies, free schools and sixth form colleges throughout the UK who had service children on roll who experience mobility and/or separation were eligible to apply (Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, 2023a). The amount of money available was allocated annually and varied year to year; the sum in 2021 being £3 million (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022, p.66). The application process was "tightly prescribed by the MoD, and requires completion of a detailed, word-limited, application form" and had been criticised for being onerous, with a slim chance of a successful application (MacLeod, Short & Matthews-Smith, 2022, p.66).

The ESF ended in 2023, having been amalgamated into a new, broader fund – the Armed Forces Families Fund – following the launch of the MoD's Families Strategy in January 2023 (MoD, 2022b). Recent communications into the new 'Service Pupils' Support Programme' suggest some changes have been made. This includes a tightening of the purpose of the funding into three types: closing the attainment gap between service children and their non-service peers; addressing the needs of service children with additional needs; and identifying and addressing the needs of small cohorts of service children within educational settings (Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, 2023b). The first of these three categories of purpose show a clear focus

on academic attainment of service children; something that the SPP does not explicitly cater to given it is for "mainly pastoral support" (MoD, 2023b).

2.8.3 Charitable provision for service children

There are also a small number of military charities who provide funding related to service children's education. Some have this as a sole focus (such as the Armed Forces Education Trust and The Alexander Duckham Memorial Schools Trust) whilst others offer resources and funding to support education alongside other types of provision for service children (such as Little Troopers and Scotty's Little Soldiers). Benefactors of the charities can be service children themselves or their families. These charities can be single service (for example, Naval Children's Charity), regimental charities or regional (for example, Forces Children Scotland).

In addition to providing funding and support for service children, the charity sector also plays a significant role in developing knowledge and understanding of service children. Often, leading individuals will serve as subject matter experts in government or MoD commissioned reports (for example in the *Living in our Shoes* report) or charities will commission reports into service children's experiences. These reports form a large part of the existing literature on service children, both generally and regarding education and thus those concerned with the latter will be discussed in the next section.

2.9 Service mobility and education

2.9.1 Educational provision

The impact of mobility on service children's education is well documented in the literature. Parents and schools have reported key challenges in acquiring a desired school place, obtaining information from previous schools, addressing gaps in learning and in the case of service children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), accessing continuous specialist provision. Although neither the MoD nor the DfE directly record data on service children's school mobility, the MoD's FamCAS go some way in allowing researchers to assess, in quantifiable terms, the impact that service mobility has on service children's educational provision. The survey is sent annually to a stratified sample of tri-service regular personnel

(MoD, 2024c). The sample aims to provide broad enough coverage to represent the diversity of the British Armed Forces, with the response rate averaging around 21%, which represents approximately 6,000 respondents (MoD, 2024c). Regarding education, the survey highlights that "25% of families with school age children experienced difficulties with their children's schooling in the past year" (MoD, 2024c, p.17). Despite the 2014 change in prioritisation of service children in the oversubscription criteria for school places, the results from the 2024 survey reveal that "a quarter [of families who applied for a place at a state school] were not happy with their allocation" (DfE, 2021b; MoD, 2024c, p.17). This finding is echoed in several other reports (Ofsted, 2011; RAF Benevolent Fund, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Closely linked to the difficulties associated with the admissions process is poor or inconsistent information transfer between schools. Historically, there was no requirement for schools to transfer educationally relevant information, meaning that schools with service children on roll often had little, or no, knowledge of their educational history. Ofsted's 2011 report sampled 44 schools and "found no cases of a single cumulative learning and development record for each child which could be passed between providers" (p.20). This was also corroborated by O'Neill's and Clifton's school-based research where no service child had a complete record (Clifton, 2007; O'Neill, 2012). Lack of information transfer, in any form, can mean inaccurate assessments, widening gaps in learning and repetition of curricula (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Ofsted, 2011; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Despite the introduction of a 2014 Pupil Information Profile (PIP) for service children, to "ensure a comprehensive transfer of information between schools for mobile service children", the Children's Commissioner's report published 4 years later identified that schools were not using the PIP adequately (2018, p.17). In the same year, a more detailed Common Transfer Form (CTF) was introduced to "transfer extra information about service children to help in addressing their particular needs" (DfE, 2018a, p.8). In this form, three data items on moving school, parental deployment and parental separation were added for schools to complete. However, like the PIP, the CTF is not mandatory, thus making it unlikely that the uptake and outcome will be markedly improved (Baverstock, 2023; DfE, 2018a).

2.9.1.1 Difference by number of service children on roll

In their 2011 report, Ofsted proposed that schools which have large service child populations (such as Service Children's Education schools or state schools close to bases, garrisons or ports), are "highly attuned to the needs of service children" and as a result, service children feel settled and supported within the school environment (p.17). This is further supported by the recent *Living in our Shoes* report (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). As part of the report, a brief consultation was held with service children, as recipients of the CEA, attending a state boarding school (Duke of York Royal Military School), "imbued with military values" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.80). Notably, the service children consulted recognised that attending such a school meant they had "supportive teachers who understand the challenges they face as service children" including "the emotional ups and downs that accompany being away from their parents and the stressors of deployment cycle" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.79). Despite this, most service children are not recipients of the CEA allowance and therefore do not have the continuity of education that this MoD-backed funding brings (MoD, 2021a).

However, the recent Service Children in State Schools (SCISS) report challenges the idea that a school with a larger cohort of service children supports their needs better (2021). Indeed, the picture is far more complex. In the report, several schools with small numbers of service children "identified qualitatively different challenges and opportunities to those with larger service child cohorts" (SCISS, 2021, p.17). Whilst these schools identified deficiencies in staff experience and resources to meet the service children's needs (particularly those with greater levels of need), such schools identified the benefits of networking with schools with larger service child cohorts and being able to "provide effective bespoke support" better than schools with greater numbers (SCISS, 2021, p.18). Data also showed that mobility was the fifth ranked challenge for schools with less than 5% of service children on roll whilst it was the biggest challenge for schools with 25% or more service children (SCISS, 2021, p.9). This suggests that schools with lower number of service children experience less disruption from service mobility as larger regimental moves are not commonplace, so the subsequent 'churn' is less. This is significant given that, as previously discussed (see section 2.7.4), service children are geographically diverse and thus the majority are attending schools with low numbers of service children.

2.9.1.2 Difference by service branch

The SCISS report also found that schools with different service cohorts identified different challenges. For schools with a majority army cohort, 'mobility' was identified as the biggest challenge (SCISS, 2021, p.8). This compares to mobility being ranked third for schools with a majority RAF cohort and fifth for those with a majority naval cohort (SCISS, 2021). Regarding 'separation from parent(s)', the report found that schools with a RAF or naval majority cohort were more likely to view this as a 'very big' or 'big' challenge compared to a majority army cohort (SCISS, 2021, p.10).

Although no rationale is proffered, these differences may reflect the broad differences that the Services experience with mobility and separation. Typically, the RAF and the Army experience more service-related mobility than the Royal Navy and Royal Marines do (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Regarding separation, the British Armed Forces endeavour to adhere to the 'Harmony Guidelines', which indicate the maximum frequency and duration of deployments for the different branches of the Armed Forces (MoD, 2022a). The guidelines differ based on the Services' structures and organisation. Over a 36-month period, the limits are 660 days away (Royal Navy and Royal Marines) and 498 days away (Army and RAF) (MoD, 2022a). Given this, children of Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel are likely to experience significantly longer periods of parental separation and hence schools with this majority cohort view it as a significant challenge.

2.9.1.3 Engagement with armed forces families and the wider military community

Alongside the issues discussed above, school engagement with armed forces families and the wider military community was also identified as a challenge that some schools with service children on roll experience (SCISS, 2021). In the report, "levels of engagement with local armed forces communities varied considerably" with the "overall picture [as] one of inconsistency" (SCISS, 2021, p.14). Some schools also reported that families were "reluctant to engage with schools on issues related to their status as an armed forces family" (SCISS, 2021, p.15). Such families did not want to be identified this way – most often in schools with low numbers of service children – or when the member of the Armed Forces was transitioning to civilian life (SCISS, 2021). This meant that schools were often not aware of periods of deployment or

transition; often associated with change and upheaval. Challenges with parental communication were also identified when parents did not have English as their first language. Whilst this is not a widespread challenge, it is pertinent to schools located near certain regiments that have concentrated proportions of serving personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries (SCISS, 2021).

2.9.2 Making and maintaining friendships

Several reports have identified challenges for service children with regards to making and maintaining friendships within the school environment due to service mobility. The DSC's report, *Educating Service Children*, highlighted that "moving schools is stressful for all children and frequent moves can have a significant detrimental impact on young people, particularly on their willingness to form friendships with their peers" (2006, p.8). This is further supported by other governmental and third sector reports which sought the views of schools, parents and on occasion, service children themselves (National Audit Office, 2013; Noret et al., 2014; Ofsted, 2011; RAF Benevolent Fund, 2021). In Noret et al.'s study of the educational attainment of army children, 30.4% of consulted parents agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement "My child has had difficulty making friends in school" (2014, p.27).

When consulted, service children also reported social difficulties. In Ofsted's report, many service children reported having "no lasting friendships" and could not name a close friend at school (2011, pp.16-17). Service children also reported that it was particularly challenging to make friends when they moved part way through a school year as friendship groups have already been established (Ofsted, 2011). This is particularly pertinent given that service moves do not often align with the start of the academic school year.

Feelings of loneliness, isolation and difference were also reported. In Noret et al.'s study, just over 66% of Year 6 army children reported 'sometimes' or 'often' feeling lonely in school, compared to 28.6% of their non-army peers (2014, p.18). Concerns around being 'the only service child' in a new school or attending a school with a low number of service children on roll, was identified as an extra challenge (Ofsted, 2011). As one child reported, being in this situation meant that, "there was no-one you could relate to or talk to about what was happening... They [teachers] don't know how the children feel" (p.8). This is further supported by the recent

Living in our Shoes report, which found that service children attending a state boarding school identified that no longer moving schools had provided them with "the chance to develop lasting friendships with their peers" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.79). When asked about 'bad things' in their prior school experiences, the young people readily identified friendship difficulties and a lack of understanding from their non-service peers and teachers (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.81).

A lack of understanding of the military lifestyle in schools with low numbers of service children was also found in Clifton's research (2007). Conceptualised as a "clash of cultures" between the "world of the Army and the world of the school", Clifton argued that "the children in this research did not always have their distinctive army background recognised by their schools" and that their service-related home and school experiences "were something of an oddity for the receiving schools" (2007, pp.2, 193). This resulted in the children's needs not being "sufficiently identified and understood… [and] attended to" (2007, p.2).

In some instances, these feelings of difference can lead to bullying and stigmatisation. Although no research has been conducted which focuses specifically on military stigma and bullying, wider literature suggests that some service children do experience it (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). A report commissioned during the war in Afghanistan, found that service children were "prime targets for bullying", according to parents and school staff, due to anti-war sentiment or hostility (RNRMCF, 2009, p.35). More recent research, outside of this context, found that older service children (secondary school and undergraduates) identified military-related bullying as a challenge due to a lack of understanding amongst peers not from an armed forces family (McCullouch & Hall, 2016). However, the prevalence and experience of military-related bullying and stigma may be influenced by the educational setting, with schools with a greater number of service children and/or pride in the Services, making for a safer environment (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.71).

2.9.3 School belonging

These themes of support, understanding and friendship are closely associated to the broader concept of school belonging which, in the seminal work of Goodenow and Grady, is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by

others in the school social environment" (1993, pp.60-61). Work by Allen, Vella-Brodrick and Waters has developed the definition further, by creating a conceptual framework of school belonging, based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development (2016) (see figure 2.2). Drawn from a range of studies, the framework highlights both the multidimensional nature of the concept and the importance of relationships within schools (2016).

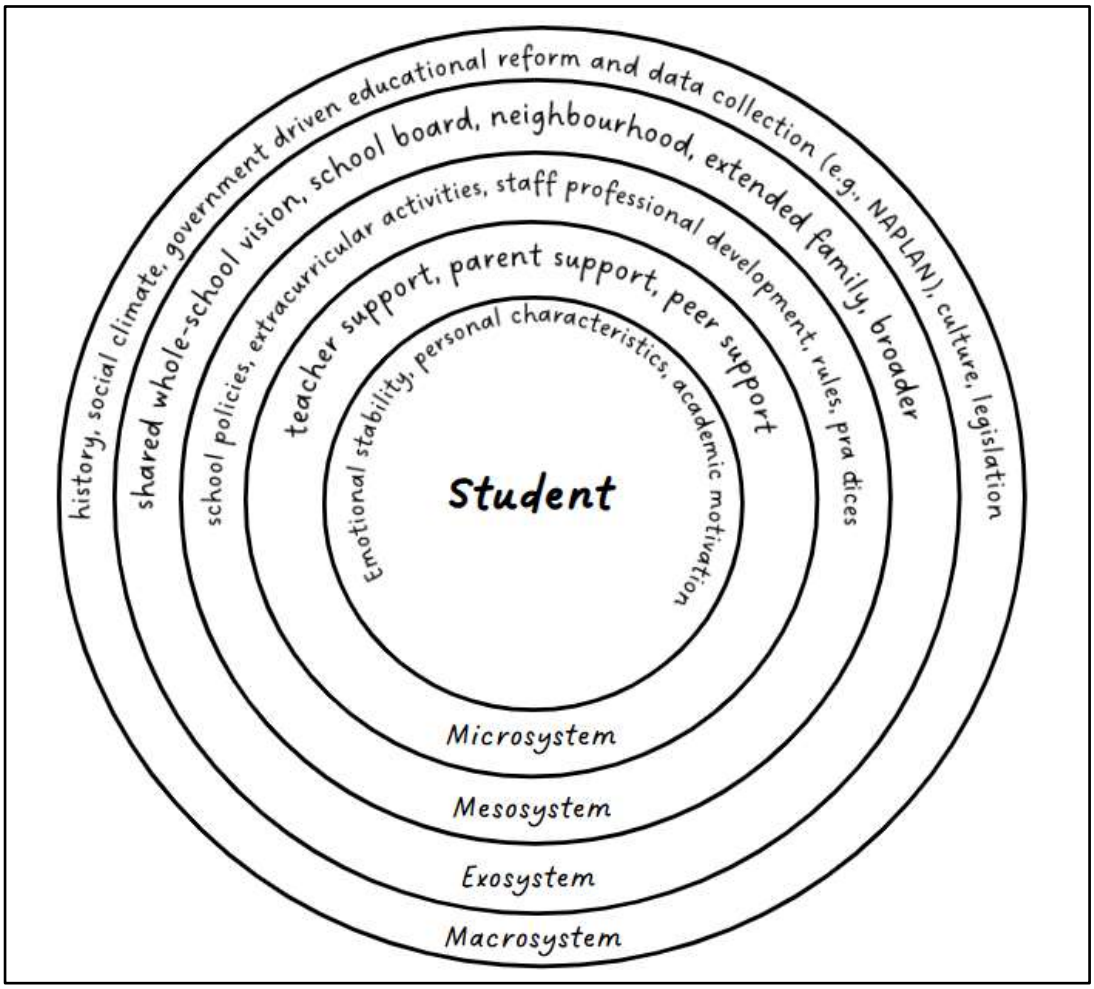


Figure 2.2: A conceptual framework of school belonging (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2016).

School belonging, with its origins in the wider theoretical literature on belonging (see Slaten et al., 2016 for overview), is now an established and diverse field. Variables relating to school belonging – such as academic motivation and outcomes alongside mental wellbeing – have been

examined alongside predictors and benefits of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Slaten et al., 2016).

Although school belonging as a construct has received a significant amount of research attention, very little research has looked at the experiences of school belonging for defined groups. A recent study, involving looked after children (those in the care system) found that these children "highlighted the importance of friendships as a mechanism for supporting their belonging" during transition to secondary school (Francis, Rowland, Humrich & Taylor, 2021, p.37). Although a distinct group from service children, their commonality of experience of school mobility suggests the importance of the concept of school belonging in the service child context.

2.9.4 SEND dimension

Service children with SEND can be considered as being at a 'double disadvantage' in education given that "challenges [associated with SEND] are exacerbated by military life" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.73). Although, in the most recent *Voice of Schools SEND Survey Report*, the majority of respondents (77%) identified no differences in SEND needs between service children and non-service children, a significant minority "identified specific needs" (Rose, 2024, p.6). One such need focuses on the emotional impacts of service life. Respondents identified that there were "more frequent co-occurring social, emotional and mental health needs among service children with SEND than with other pupils with SEND" (p.6). The reasons for this were stated as "attachment issues and other emotional needs linked to parents' absence", "the stress of the military lifestyle leading to behavioural issues" and "the emotional impact of mobility" (Rose, 2024, p.7). A second specific need is the impact of service mobility as a barrier to "fully identifying the needs of service children with SEND" and as a possible exacerbator of SEND needs (p.7). This latter need brings additional challenges linked to transferring information between educational settings to ensure continuity of specialist provision (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Llewellyn, Duggan, Graham & McDonald, 2018; Ofsted, 2011).

In the National Audit Office's study into the education of service children, 73% of respondents (300 parents consulted) who had children with SEND reported difficulties related to their children's special educational needs (2013, p.5). In the DSC's report, parents spoke of

considerable difficulties in accessing SEND support for their children in the first instance (2006). Obtaining a SEND diagnosis can be a protracted process for all children due to waiting times between assessments, judgements and appeals. If a service child moves to a different school during this process, they effectively lose their place in the waiting list and thus must begin again (Children's Commissioner, 2018; DSC, 2006; SCISS, 2021).

Maintaining continuity of specialist provision when moving schools – either from abroad or within the UK – is also fraught. Although the *SEND Code of Practice* issues guidance stating that "when considering provision for service children with SEN or disabilities, use all relevant evidence, including statements made for service children in Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as Co-ordinated Support Plans made for them in Scotland and the Service Children's Assessment of Need (SCAN)", this does not always happen in practice (DfE & Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC], 2020, p.221). Testimony from parents explained that their children's SCANs were not recognised, and subsequently no specific provision was given until a new assessment was completed and a new statement drawn up (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Ofsted, 2011). This failure to build on previous diagnoses of need has also been echoed in the most recent *Voice of Schools* report which highlighted that often the new school's "local authority did not recognise or make use of the SCAN document" (Rose, 2024, p.23). Although the Code of Practice identifies the needs of service children with SEND, it provides mainly guidance, not legal requirements, for the transfer of information and continuation of provision (DfE & DHSC, 2020).

The Naval Children's Charity 2021 report highlighted continued difficulties in obtaining and maintaining specialist provision. Furthering the recommendations of *Living in our Shoes*, the report urges Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for service children to be transferable and thus to be accepted across different local authorities and devolved administrations (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.94). Until obtaining and maintaining specialist provision for service child with SEND can be achieved, this sub-group is likely to continue to experience significant educational disadvantage.

2.9.5 Academic outcomes

Research that has sought to assess the impact of moving schools on service children's educational attainment has revealed mixed outcomes. As with other groups of mobile children, the relationship between mobility and academic achievement is complex. Whilst it appears that there is a direct causal relationship – high mobility leads to low academic achievement – studies on mobile non-service children have suggested that other factors (for example, high levels of absence, low prior attainment and eligibility for pupil premium funding) also play a role in determining children's academic outcomes (Demie, 2002; Demie, Taplin & Butler, 2002; Dobson, Henthorne & Lynas, 2000; Gibbons & Telhaj, 2011; Strand, 2002). For service children, there are additional, service-related factors, that may also impact outcomes. These include the service branch and rank of their serving parent (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Because of these factors, the outcomes of the studies discussed below should be treated with caution.

The DfE's 2010 report concluded that "service children [in English state schools] perform at least the same as, if not better than their peers across the Key Stages" (p.35). This assertion is supported by the MoD's research which compared attainment datasets for service children and non-service, non-pupil premium children in state funded schools (2016a). Their research found that there was "little difference between the attainment of service children and non-service, non-pupil premium children at Key Stage 2 (82.3% and 82.9% respectively) and Key Stage 4 (64.9% and 63.0% respectively)" (MoD, 2016b, p.1).

However, the report also found that the attainment of service children "decreases as the number of schools attended increases at both Key Stage 2 and 4" (MoD, 2016b, p.3). At Key Stage 2, 78.9% of service children who attended four or more schools reached the expected standard (Level 4+ for reading, maths and writing) compared to 85.3% of service children who attended one school (MoD, 2016b). The same trend was also true for Key Stage 4 pupils. Nearly half (46.7%) of service children who attended four or more secondary schools reached the expected standard (5+ A*- C (or equivalent) GCSEs, including English and maths, (equal to grade 4 (standard pass) in the recently reformed GCSE qualifications) compared to 68.4% who attended one school during their secondary education (MoD, 2016b).

This trend was also identified in Ofsted's 2011 report. In a sample of 217 schools (both in England and abroad), inspectors found that service children's academic performance "was broadly in line with other pupils in the school" (Ofsted, 2011, p.5). Yet, the report commented that "many [service] children's learning had slowed or receded by continual moves …[and] some did not achieve the grades they might have achieved, if they had not been geographically mobile" (Ofsted, 2011, p.6).

More recent data, taken from the 2022 *Armed Forces Covenant and Veterans Annual Report*, identified the varying impact of different amounts of mobility at secondary school on educational achievement (measured by GCSE results in English and Maths) (p.87). Whilst there are some cautionary details in the analysis (due to the impact of COVID-19), it does show that multiple secondary school moves can have a large negative impact on service children's academic achievement.

Collectively, these studies suggest that frequently moving schools negatively impacts upon the educational outcomes of service children. However, in these reports, service children are treated as a broadly homogenous group, which negates the ability to consider whether, and how, service- and non-service- related factors shape outcomes. Research at a more granular level, considering sub-groups, needs to be conducted to reach less tentative conclusions and to obtain a greater understanding of this complexity.

2.9.6 Post 16-(educational) pathways

Over the last few years, an interest in service children's post-16 pathways has developed (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022). The earliest report, conducted in 2016, concluded that "statistics suggest that children from military service families are under-represented in the higher education population" (McCullouch & Hall, 2016, p.3; MoD, 2022a). Despite this finding being caveated by the challenges over existing data making it "difficult to build a coherent picture of the educational progression of military service children", the generalisation began to be circulated (McCullouch & Hall, 2016, p.16).

Alongside the lack of data about service children's post-16 pathways, the decision to enter higher education is shaped by numerous factors, some of which are not related to disadvantage in access but differences in decision making (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker,

Selous & Misca, 2020). Recent DfE data, analysed by the MoD, found that service children in England are more likely than the children of civilian parents to go directly into employment at the age of 18 years (see Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). Moreover, service children may choose to attend university later in life or join the Services (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Decision making has also been shown to be influenced by family considerations (such as caring responsibilities and financial factors), parental attainment, and school and college support (McCullouch, Hall & Ellis, 2018).

A report looking into the needs and experiences of service children in education aged between 16 and 19 years old reinforced the view that the "principal challenge in the study of service children and young people's education [is] inconsistent identification and tracking of this cohort" (Granada & Mulcahy, 2022, p.8). Additionally, one report on university students from military families identified that some students continue to experience "high levels of unpredictability in their lives that may impact on their studies at university" (Ince, Chappell & McHugh, 2021, p.5). This suggests that any potential barriers to higher education are not removed upon entry but may persist and impact the completion of studies. Collectively, these reports highlight that the current understanding of the educational trajectories of service children post-16 is partial, yet clearly complex, and thus warrants further research to gain a clearer picture.

2.10 Service-related separation, wellbeing and education

Service children's emotional wellbeing and education can also be impacted by service-related separation. This term covers operational deployments (both to friendly and hostile environments), training exercises and separation due to postings or weekending. Service-related separation is a fundamental part of military life and thus many service children are continually adapting to the recurring presence and absence of their serving parent(s). Within this 'cycle of deployment', there are heightened emotions alongside roles and routines both within the home and in school being in a state of flux (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Combat operations in Iraq (Operation Telic) and Afghanistan (Operation Herrick) saw the largest numbers of British Armed Forces personnel being deployed in recent years. Statistics from the MoD show that 148,990 personnel were deployed on Operation Telic and 139,030 on Operation Herrick (Defence Statistics, 2015, p.2). During these periods of conflict, a large

volume of studies on military families were carried out (see section 2.5.1), albeit in the American military context. The British Armed Forces are still involved in "39 operations in 46 countries [in addition to training exercises]" with the purposes including "projecting the UK's influence, keeping the peace, tackling terrorism, delivering humanitarian aid and keeping the country safe" (British Forces Broadcasting Services [BFBS], 2021). Whilst the numbers of serving personnel deployed overseas is small – as of April 2024, 5,700 UK Regular Forces were based overseas, representing ~4% of the total strength of the UK Regular Forces – the periods of separation are still significant (MoD, 2024a). Combined with the growth of weekending, it is surprising that comparatively little UK-based research has been conducted into the effect service-related separation has on service children's wellbeing and education (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021).

As discussed in 2.9.1.2, the British Armed Forces endeavour to adhere to the 'Harmony Guidelines', which indicate the maximum frequency and duration of deployments for the different branches of the Armed Forces (MoD, 2022a). Children of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines are the "most dispersed of children in all armed forces families" and therefore "most likely to experience long periods of separation from their parent(s)" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.49). However, many families from all three of the Services have identified that deployments are both too long and too frequent (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020; MoD, 2022a).

The 2018 Children's Commissioner report found that "for the majority of the service children we spoke to, the period of parental deployment affected every part of their everyday lives" (p.10). Yet, the impact of service-related separation on service children's educational experiences is tricky to isolate, given that it is often subsumed by the broader practical and emotional challenges that the separation puts on family life (Bowes, 2018; Children's Commissioner, 2018).

A 2018 survey found that 56% of naval personnel and spouses felt that "being part of an armed forces family [had a negative effect] on their children and young people's mental health" (Naval Families Federation, 2018, p.9). The negative effects identified by respondents included:

- extended, unpredictable and disruptive periods of separation from the serving parent... leading to emotional difficulties, anxiety, and behavioural difficulties for the child

- experiencing anxiety about the safety of their serving parent
- difficulty sustaining close relationships between the serving person and their child, worsening with age
- the impact of serving personnel's ill health on their child(ren) and/or their child(ren) acting as young carers (Naval Families Federation, 2018, p.10).

Notably, the remaining percentage of respondents said it had a neutral effect (35%), whilst only 9% said it had a positive effect, citing increased resilience of their children due to "having to shoulder more responsibility and to experiencing frequent change" (Naval Families Federation, 2018, p.10). Research by Farrell-Wright also found that deployment did cause some positive behavioural changes in service children (2011). Women whose husbands were deployed at the time of the research reported that their children showed increased maturity, resilience, thoughtfulness and empathy (Farrell-Wright, 2011). Participants felt that this in turn led to improved communication and family relationships (Farrell-Wright, 2011).

Service children's wellbeing and education can also be impacted during periods of service-related separation if they are required to take on additional responsibilities. For many service children, service-related separation can significantly alter their family dynamic, leading to changes in their routine, increased caring responsibilities and the perceived requirement to fulfil the role of the deployed parent (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; RNRMCF, 2009). These changes can mean that service children are unable to participate in activities (including those at school) due to the logistical difficulties of temporarily becoming a one parent household (Baverstock, 2023; Children's Commissioner, 2018). Furthermore, such changes can be more pronounced in dual-serving or single parent families (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). In the Children's Commissioner report, such scenarios meant that some service children were moved to stay with extended family members or placed in foster care (2018). Alongside the emotional upheaval, such events could have repercussions on service children's education if a school move or a period of home schooling was required (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021).

Service children themselves also readily identify service-related separation as a significant emotional and practical challenge. The RAF Benevolent Fund's report, *Growing up in the RAF*, and Bowes' doctoral study found that "whilst the type of parental absence experienced by the children varied, many of the children described their experiences of parental absence as emotional and associated with feelings of sadness, loss and worry" (Bowes, 2018, p.112; RAF Benevolent Fund, 2021). McCullouch and Hall's research found that all groups they worked with (service children from primary schools, those at secondary school and undergraduates from military families), cited "absent parent" as the biggest challenge (2016, p.27). Themes within this category included missing them, anxiety over their safety, missing important events, changing routines and the health of the non-serving parent (McCullouch & Hall, 2016).

2.10.1 Factors influencing emotional wellbeing

When considering the international literature on the emotional and behavioural impact of deployment on service children, the results are mixed (see Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021 for a review). However, it has been suggested that several factors, including the number, type and frequency of deployments, the mental health of the non-deployed parent and the age of the child, can impact behaviour and mental health (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). In the UK context, very few studies have been conducted on these factors. However, those that have, identified them as significant.

Normille's doctoral research found that "the wellbeing of the pre-school child during a parental deployment is inextricably linked to the wellbeing of the at-home parent" (2021, p.2). In their research, focused on the impact of deployment-related wellbeing of British Army children aged between 3 and 4 years, Normille found that there was a dyad relationship between mother and child, with their moods and emotions affecting one another. Notably, their study also identified that the pre-school environment, by providing stability and routine, supported the child's wellbeing during deployment (Normille, 2020; 2021). This highlights the significance that educational settings can play in supporting service children's wellbeing and development, particularly during periods of service-related separation.

Bowes' research identified that emotional responses to service-related separation differed based on the age of the service child (2018). In their doctoral research, they found that "younger

children were more likely to report trying to connect in both material and embodied ways to their absent parent [for example, deriving comfort from the deployed parent's deodorant on a blanket]" whilst "older children were more likely to reflect on the family relations involved in the experience of parental absence [for example, a change in the family dynamics]" (Bowes, 2018, p.134). Age was also identified as a factor in other reports which found that whilst both younger (primary-aged) and older (secondary-aged) children felt sadness, worry and distress from the physical absence of their parent, older children also spoke of the additional anxiety and worry they felt about the welfare and safety of their deployed parent (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Noret et al., 2014). This supports the argument that the age of the service child influences their understanding and emotional response to service-related separation.

2.10.2 Military young carers

Service-related separation can also lead to service children becoming young carers for siblings, the remaining parent and/or other adult(s) who may be affected by illness, injury, addiction, or disability (Children's Society, 2017; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). Whilst there is limited data on this sub-group of intermittent military young carers (and indeed military young carers), a survey carried out with military families in North Yorkshire found that 9% of service children in Year 6 and 10% of service children in Years 8 and 10 were young carers (Children's Society, 2017, p.14).

Studies into non-military young carers have found that caring can "affect a young person's physical health and emotional wellbeing, education, life chances and socialisation" (Children's Society, 2017, pp.8-9). Military young carers have been highlighted as a particularly vulnerable group because "the impacts of the caring roles of these young people are further compounded by other factors linked specifically with military life" (Children's Society, 2017, p.9). Despite this, very little research has been conducted on this sub-group. Defining and identifying this group has been suggested as a significant barrier; as many service children are not recognised as young carers or do not recognise it in themselves (Children's Society, 2017; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Watson, 2022). Indeed, the military young carers who were consulted for the Children's Society report, "identified with the issues, however some were unfamiliar with the term" and that "although they were caring, they had not recognised they were a young

carer" (2017, p.10). When it came to school, the young people identified school-specific challenges, including arriving at school and finishing homework on time, revising for exams and schools understanding and responding to their concerns (Children's Society, 2017, p.10).

2.10.3 Parental bereavement

As with military young carers, service children who have experienced parental bereavement are another sub-group who have received very little research attention. Indeed, a recent scoping review identified "no papers related to impact of parental death on service children in the UK Armed Forces" (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.80).

Whilst the leading charity for bereaved military children, Scotty's Little Soldiers, does not conduct research, it is fundamental in raising awareness of this group. As recognised by the charity, bereavement can happen through active service as well as illness, accident, and suicide (Scotty's Little Soldiers, 2022). Although the rates of death in the UK regular Armed Forces have fallen (following the drawdown of operations in Afghanistan), death in service still occurs, with 73 deaths of armed forces personnel recorded in 2023 (MoD, 2024b).

In US research, it has been highlighted that there is a stigma associated with military suicide as it is seen as a "dishonourable death" (Harrington-LaMorie et al., 2018). In Harrington-LaMorie et al.'s study, suicide by a member of the Armed Forces led to their family subsequently losing their military way of life which had practical implications as well as the loss of belonging to a community (2018). Such challenges for the wider military family have also been identified in the *Living in our Shoes* report following submissions from the War Widows' Association (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Whilst the impact of parental bereavement on the service child has not been studied, it is likely that they would experience emotions and responses akin to those of non-service children, overlayed with those military-specific ones identified above.

2.10.4 Weekending and dispersed military families

As identified by Bowes, most research conducted on service-related separation looks at deployment (2018). Yet, in their research, service children "employed a broader understanding of parental absence" (Bowes, 2018, p.112). This included weekending; when the serving parent works and stays away during the week, returning home at the weekend. Families experiencing

weekending are referred to as ‘dispersed’ and over the last decade or so, are steadily increasing in number (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; RAF Families Federation, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

The rise of weekending is attributed to an increasing number of serving families purchasing their own home instead of moving with their serving family member (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). Historically, naval families have been more dispersed, yet home ownership for all three service branches has increased considerably – with the biggest rise seen in army families – in the last decade (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; MoD, 2022a). Indeed, numbers of dispersed families are likely to increase following the roll out of the New Accommodation Offer in October 2023, which gives service families more choice and flexibility over their accommodation choices (Baverstock, 2023; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). This means it is increasingly likely that service families will seek stability in housing in the form of long-term private rental or purchasing, possibly in areas away from where their serving family member is employed (Baverstock, 2023).

There have been several studies looking at the experiences of weekending by the different service branches. The 2019 RAF study found family stability, facilitated by home ownership, was the most identified benefit of dispersed living (RAF Families Federation, 2019). Participants noted that such stability supported their children’s education as well as having positive impacts on the non-serving partner’s employment prospects (RAF Families Federation, 2019).

However, increased separation also brought a raft of additional challenges. Whilst numerous, these predominately related to changes to family dynamics with added pressure and responsibilities for the non-serving parent, isolation from the military community and lack of associated support, and challenges regarding integration with local civilian communities (RAF Families Federation, 2019). Similar findings were identified in an earlier report, focused on army families (Verey & Fossey, 2013). Interviews were conducted with 11 female army spouses, ranging in age and rank of partner (although a high proportion of partners were drawn from non-junior ranks). From these, four key themes were identified: family, home, community, and welfare provision (Verey & Fossey, 2013). Notably, the research also found that dispersed army

families experienced a loss of military identity coupled with stigma and lack of understanding from the civilian community (Verey & Fossey, 2013).

In Gribble and Fear's 2022 study, both partners and adolescents (aged between 13 and 19 years) in UK naval families were consulted. In their study, "two major, inter-related themes were identified: family functioning and dynamics and the influence of these experiences on family health and wellbeing" (p.84). Like experiences of deployment, the age of the service children was also found to play a role in the emotional responses to weekending (Gribble & Fear, 2022). Similarly, in research commissioned by the Naval Families Federation, most non-serving partners viewed non-operational separation as having a negative impact on their children's mental health and wellbeing (Gribble & Fear, 2019). Indeed, the *Living in our Shoes* report highlighted incidences of separation anxiety in service children and the associated stresses of being a temporary single parent household during the week (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Although only one of the studies sought the views of service children and none looked at the impact on education specifically, these studies raise important points in identifying how service life is changing. More and more, service children are from dispersed families, living away from military communities and attending schools in small numbers. Moving forward, the rise of weekending is likely to have significant implications for service children's identity and school experiences.

2.11 Research underpinnings, aims and questions

This research project works in dialogue with existing literature. It is cognisant of the prevailing approach to how service children have been viewed and how different facets of their experiences have been studied previously. As discussed in 2.5.4, many studies lack a sustained and significant engagement with service children. In line with the growth of children's rights research more broadly and in Hall, McCullouch and Lawrence's recent review on the literature on service children across five countries, there is a need for researchers to "consider opportunities to engage with the lived experiences of service children" (2022, p.78). The lives of service children are differing, diverse and complex with some experiences particular to service life and others not. Thus, for this research, service children have deliberately been centred; their agency, voices and diversity of experiences are valued. Whilst this decision is

informed by the literature, it is also substantially influenced by the maxim 'nothing about us without us'; a guiding principle originating from disability activism (Reyes & Iglesias, 2023).

Regarding education specifically, Hall, McCullouch and Lawrence's review identified a "lack of peer-reviewed research into the educational experiences of service children that is grounded specifically in education" and subsequently called for "more educational research into service children's experiences" (2022, p.76). Crucially, it is the word 'experiences' in this call that is important. Experience equals complexity. Knowledge is subjective; built from the individuals' unique embodied experiences of the world. Therefore, the phenomenon of the service child experience is such a complex entity that, to create a thorough understanding, a range of research typologies is needed. However, in this research field, "quantitative, experimental and statistically generalisable research" takes precedence (such as large-scale survey work like FamCAS, backed by the MoD) (Denzin & Giardina, 2008; Tracy, 2010, p.838). This can mean that other forms of research, such as those that centre the individual, often come under adverse judgement and criticism. By centring the service children and using creative methods, this research therefore takes a different methodological approach. However, it works in dialogue with existing literature, to help create a more complete picture of service children's experiences.

Given the desire for the research to be impactful, the project has a strong practice-based element. It is grounded in the context of English state schools and the SPP funding. In doing so, it responds to the continued calls for more research on the SPP (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020). Moreover, it is cognisant of the type of state school settings that service children attend. Schools with many service children are atypical and as the aims of the new Armed Forces Covenant Trust funding highlights, there is a desire for focus to be placed on the needs of small cohorts of service children within educational settings (Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, 2023b). Therefore, this research project deliberately sought to involve schools which had comparatively small numbers of service children on roll (see section 3.3.3 further details).

Thus, to take all the above into account, the two research questions guiding this project are:

- *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?*
- *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?*

The aim of the research is twofold. Firstly, to nuance and widen current understanding of service children's school experiences and further knowledge into how service children see themselves. Secondly, from these findings, and in dialogue with the existing literature, to identify implications for practice that help to inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice in English state schools.

3 Research design and methodology

3.1 Outline of the chapter

This chapter is divided into two sections. I begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the research design, focusing on the themes of voice and participation, creative methods and knowledge production. I end this section with a discussion of how the research project is positioned in relation to these themes. The chapter then moves to a detailed exploration of the research design; how I carried out the research and the rationale behind the key decisions I made within the process. This includes a discussion of the data generation methods used. I end the chapter by charting the stages through which I undertook the analysis following Braun and Clarke's thematic approach (2022).

3.2 Theoretical underpinnings of the research design

3.2.1 Voice, narrative and knowledge

As identified in the literature review in the previous chapter, within the broader field of veteran and family studies, recent reports have begun to include service children in conversations around military life and the impact it has upon the family (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021). However, there has been a general absence of work (aside from a small handful of recent theses) which includes sustained engagement with service children (Bowes, 2018; Clifton, 2007; Lee, 2020). Typically, children's voices have been used in a tokenistic manner or as linguistic flourishes to evidence a point. In part, this has contributed to the homogenising or simplifying of service children's experiences.

However, when used effectively, voice research can be a powerful methodological approach to gaining insight into individuals' 'living' and 'lived' experiences. Indeed, voice research has been "championed for offering a more authentic account of [children's] perspectives and lived experiences" (Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson, 2020, p.1). Furthermore, supporters have argued that voice research affords children agency and empowerment (Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson, 2020).

Traditional interpretations conceptualised children's voices as something to be 'found'; like "buried metal waiting to be unearthed by the [researcher]" (Lane, Blank & Jones, 2019, p.68).

Voice was seen as an objective source of knowledge, as 'truth' and something to be taken at face value (Facca, Gladstone & Teachman, 2020; Lane, Blank & Jones, 2019; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012).

However, influenced by the 'narrative turn' and the theoretical work of numerous scholars including Jerome Bruner, Clifford Geertz and Paul Ricoeur, the assumption that "voice presents an unwavering truth" has since been critiqued (Cooper, 2023, p.75; Komulainen, 2007). As Clarke, Boorman and Nind argue, voice is "contextual, fluid and shifting" and "speak[s] of the dynamics of the speaker and listener, the surrounding discourses and the mode adopted" (2012, p.768). Thus, voice is "crafted"; relationally constructed in the research process (James, 2007, p.265; Komulainen, 2007; McGarry, 2016; Tamboukou, 2010). The words spoken or written, or the images created, are governed by the perspective of the creator and the choices they make at the time of sharing (Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021; Salkind, 2010). Indeed, the mediated nature of voice means that experiences can be shared which fall outside the consigned research purpose (Tamboukou, 2010). Motives for sharing, such as remembering or reminiscing, legitimising agency or constructing identity, mean that voice is partial; there are always elements which remain untold, purposely suppressed or subconsciously forgotten (Lewis, 2009; Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021; Salkind, 2010).

In addition to voice being constructed between the researcher and participants within the research space, the researcher also shapes voice in their subsequent analysis and presentation of their data. This makes voice polyvocal. Allowing readers to 'hear' or 'see' participant voices by presenting their 'exact words or images' as authentic truths fails to duly consider that they are "constructions that have been selected, interpreted, and re/presented as direct quotations to inform a particular argumentative stance" (Facca, Gladstone & Teachman, 2020, p.3; James, 2007). As Mazzei and Jackson argue, researchers are always shaping 'exact words' through "the unequal power relationships present and by our own exploitative research agendas and timelines" (2012, p.746). Ultimately, it is the researcher who decides what 'exact words' make it into the text and how they are presented. Voices can thus become "complicated, distorted and fictionalised in the process of both transcription and reinscription" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p.746).

Thus, the knowledge from voice research is constructed, rather than discovered, aligning with sentiments of postmodern epistemology (Bruner, 1987; Salkind, 2010). In the research setting, this process of knowledge construction includes those instances when participants make links between aspects of their lives and when the researcher interprets what is being said to them (Greene & Hogan, 2005). In this way, experiences shared through voice research are both re-constructed and co-constructed. Thus, 'knowledge' created from voice research does not provide a carbon copy of an experience but a multifaceted and complex re-construction of it.

3.2.2 Children's participation in research

Over the last 20 years, there has been an increasing use of voice research with children and young people (Faulkner & Coates, 2011; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021). Such approaches offer considerable scope to engage with diverse and varied groups of children; for them to 'tell stories' about their lives in various ways (Hill & Dallos, 2011). In so doing, researchers have suggested that this type of research offers a 'portal' into children's lived experiences whilst simultaneously offering an exploration of wider socio-political and cultural contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; McNamara, 2021; Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021).

The growth of voice research with children is closely linked to the re-conceptualisation of childhood (often referred to as the 'new sociology of childhood') which began in the early 1990s and was bolstered by the ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Clark, 2010; Cooper, 2023; Greene & Hogan, 2005; Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021; UNCRC, 1989). This paradigm challenges the traditional developmental notions of children as 'becomings' as opposed to 'beings' and in so doing, positions children as socially competent actors and commentators on their own lives (Ansell, 2005; Garvis, Ødegaard & Lemon, 2015; Smith & Greene, 2014). Furthermore, this viewpoint positions children as engaging in and changing the world through interaction and active participation (Garvis et al., 2015; Moran, Reilly & Brady, 2021; Percy-Smith et al., 2009). As a result, interest has grown in accessing children's perspectives (contestably known as 'giving voice') to help inform policy makers and practitioners (Clarke, Boorman & Nind, 2012; Greene & Hogan, 2005; McNamara, 2021).

However, using a metaphor such as a portal does not explicitly attend to the highly inferential nature of voice research (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Children construct and articulate their

experiences but given that this is done within the research domain, children are actively making choices over how researchers are included or excluded from these processes (Emond, 2006; Engel, 2006; Greene & Hogan, 2005; McGibbon, 2021). Children therefore moderate what they share. Thus, they give us insight but not an open gateway into their lives.

There is also concern around over-privileging the epistemological principle that child-produced knowledge of an experience is a 'better' or more 'authentic' understanding of these experiences than that generated by adults (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Grover, 2004). Critics argue that this can lead to "valorising of the all-knowing and all-seeing child who has unique insight into his/her own life and the subjective reality of his/her peers" (Lomax, 2012, p.106). However, whilst "identity produces knowledge", it only produces a certain type of knowledge – one that is not 'better' or more 'authentic' but rather different and equally valuable (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p.502).

3.2.2.1 Positioning participation

The position of children in voice research can take several forms. Typically, variations indicate the participatory input children have had in the research. This can be summarised graphically, as in Hart's Ladder of Participation (see figure 3.1) or by thinking with prepositions; research *without, about, with* and *by* children (Hart, 1992; 2008).

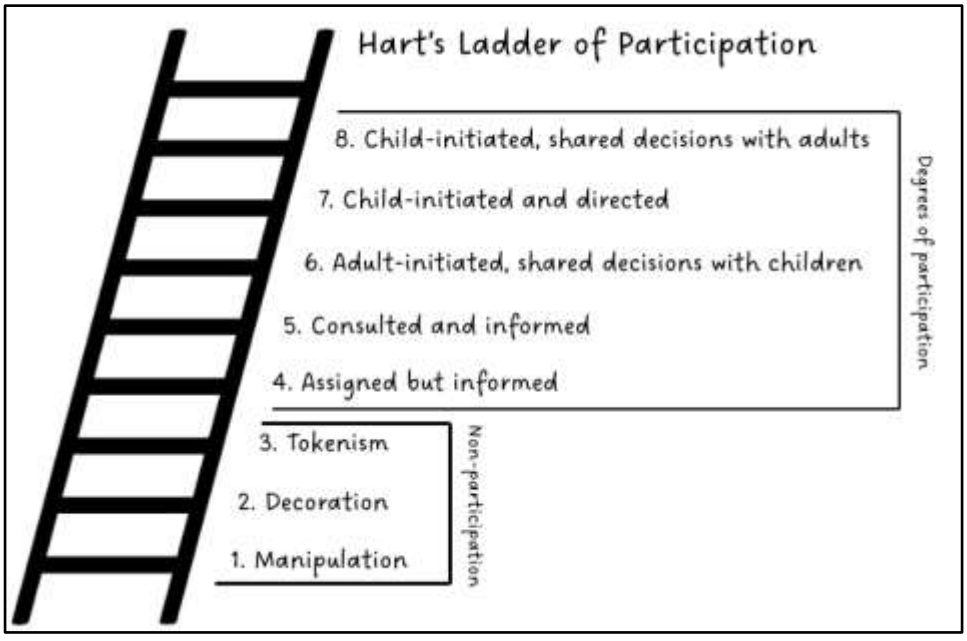


Figure 3.1: Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992).

Participatory research is a complex and technical process – "messy, fraught and ambiguous" (Gallagher, 2008, p.404; Lundy, 2018). Moreover, like other forms of research, it is restricted by constraints (for example, time and resources) and thus always imperfect (Lundy, 2018). Whilst the top rung of the ladder – child-initiated – is viewed as the gold standard, more 'limited' forms of participation should not be dismissed (Hart, 1992). As Lundy argues, they offer "a useful and sometimes necessary step on the journey to more respectful and meaningful engagement with children" (2018, p.340).

Regardless of the level of participation, the true measure of participatory research should be the meaningful impact of the research. Effective dialogue between children and adults (as opposed to passive listening) is a fundamental cornerstone of meaningful child participation (Lodge, 2005; Lundy, 2007; 2018; Mannion, 2007). Although participatory research can allow children significant expression, if their views are not heard and acted upon, there is little opportunity to enact positive change. Lundy suggests that the end of the research process is "a pivotal point in this dialogue" as it "opens up a space for further informed interaction" and is thus "core to accountability...and to human rights" (2018, p.349). Such dialogue, or feedback, should be "full, (child) friendly, fast and followed-up" and embedded within research practice (Lundy, 2018, pp.349-350).

3.2.3 Creative methods and children

Creative, or arts-based methods, is an umbrella term encompassing a large variety of differing methods, all of which employ some element of an art form (Bagnoli, 2009; Finley, 2008). Their range is far-reaching; from theatre performances and virtual reality to collages and sculpture. They can be used as standalones or in conjunction with more traditional methods like interviews or focus groups (Brooks, Lainio & Lažetić, 2020). In the latter, they can function as openers, ice breakers or memory aids, thus taking a subsidiary role (Bagnoli, 2009; Morrow, 1998; Scott, 2000). Given their varied use, they can be perceived on a spectrum – from constructionist tools used to facilitate textual knowledge to constructions of knowledge in their own right (Morrow, 1998). Creative methods are most associated with the data generation period of a research project. However, they can also be used effectively in other stages, such as dissemination (Kara, 2020; Moskal, 2009).

Drawing on Pauwels (2011), Mannay suggests that creative methods can be sub-divided into three approaches: found materials; researcher-initiated productions; participatory productions (2015). Regarding the first of these, emphasis is placed on "the importance of analysis and interpretation", whereas the others focus on creation and production (Brooks, Lainio & Lažetić, 2020, p.1). Participatory productions, where the researcher acts as a facilitator and the participants are involved in the research in more participatory ways, has become increasingly popular (Moskal, 2009; Thomson, 2008). This is likely to have happened in response to a growing concern for research to be less exploitative and more inclusive, facilitating the involvement and engagement of often marginalised populations (Brooks, Lainio & Lažetić, 2020; Heath, Brooks, Cleaver & Ireland, 2009). This has been seen as an attempt to re-balance the uneven power dynamics often inherent in research practices (Lodge, 2009; Moskal, 2009).

Creative methods often go hand in hand with child-orientated research. This conjunction is seen as stemming from the paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of children from passive objects to active, knowledgeable social agents (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Lomax, 2012; Morrow, 2008). Across an increasing range of disciplines, researchers employ creative methods to explore children and young people's experiences (Moskal, 2019).

Advocates of arts-based methods argue that they enable children to "give voice to their experiences in ways which are meaningful to them which are not reliant on verbal competencies" (Lomax, 2012, p.106). Bagnoli argues that "even a very simple drawing task...enables participants to make the project their own" thus making the research process "more democratic" (2019, p.1257). Furthermore, creative methods facilitate the exploration of aspects of experience that cannot be researched using linguistic dimensions only (Bagnoli, 2009; Gauntlett, 2007). They open a different kind of knowledge that "does not privilege words as the main format for its construction, sharing, and communication" (Bagnoli, 2019, p.1257). It is also argued that creative methods have several practical strengths when engaging with children. Art forms like drawing or dance are often familiar and enjoyable to the child (Mitchell, 2006; Moskal, 2019). Moreover, such engagements can put child participants at ease, thus building rapport between them and the researcher (Bagnoli, 2019).

However, creative methods should not be seen as a panacea to oral or text-based forms of research and knowledge. Firstly, the link between creative methods and inclusive, participatory research is not a given (Mannay, Vaughan, Boffey & Wooders, 2023). Whilst there is choice of expression in the task for the participant, research is often predicated by the adult researcher using their research agendas, time frames and priorities (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Lomax, 2012). Thus, Holland et al. (2010) argue, what often passes as creative participatory methods with children are actually closely managed encounters between adult researchers and children, reliant on "institutionalised practices...and children's 'schooled docility'" (p.362; see also Lomax, 2012).

Furthermore, even when creative methods are utilised, children's expressions may be influenced or curtailed by social and cultural norms or the "'intrusive presence' of significant others" (Lomax, 2012; Mannay, 2015, p.45). Such constraints are particularly pertinent when conducting research in a school environment. Creative methods also typically require significant time commitment and an element of creative confidence on the part of the participants (Brooks, Lainio & Lažetić, 2020).

3.2.4 Positioning the research project

Bringing together voice research and creative methods facilitated the opportunity to centre service children in my research project. It offered a methodology for exploratory research *with* service children about their identity and school experiences. Given the broad spectrum of creative methodologies, I specifically chose visual methods. This was due to the constraints of the research project combined with my previous experience of researching with children using visual methods.

There are three types of visual data: those produced by the researcher, those produced by the research participants and those already in existence (Banks, 1995; Sewell, 2011). For my research, I chose to focus on visual data created by the child participants only. This data, alongside the written and spoken data, made up my data corpus.

I chose to combine visual methods with talk to encourage a "holistic narration of self" (Bagnoli, 2009, p.566) and help uncover "the layering and subtlety of lived experience" of my research participants (Gauntlett, 2007; Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011, p.553). Using visual

methods alongside discussion provided me with the opportunity for 'new ways of seeing' and helped open up the world of an individual's thoughts, feelings and experiences more than through speech or text alone (Parry, 2015). Moreover, like their other creative method counterparts, visual methods helped me to build rapport with my participants and promoted more inclusive research (Sewell, 2011, p.175).

As with any chosen research method or wider methodological approach, there are critiques and limitations. For visual methods, the notion that they facilitate insight into experience is underpinned by the premise that thoughts, feelings and experiences are truly knowable and that, as researchers, we can access them if we only use the right methodological approach (Sewell, 2011; Sturdy, 2003). I would argue that this is untrue. Like words, written or spoken, images are not "records of reality" (Liebenberg, 2009, p.445). But they can be used to *represent* experience. As with other creative methods, the data created from visual methods are forms of solicited data; created specifically for the research (Bagnoli, 2009; Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011). Thus, their meaning and production is contextual. This is a strength of my research as it acknowledges the active role that my participants and I played in the co-construction of knowledge (Cooper, 2014; Sewell, 2011).

3.3 Research design

This section begins with an overview of the research design followed by a discussion of the data 'generation' methods – self-portraits and relational maps, timelines and free responses – and my rationale for using each. The choice to use 'data generation' rather than 'data collection' is a deliberate one. Using the word 'generation' better reflects the active role my participants took in the research and the wider philosophical idea that data is not something to be 'found' but rather constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The second part of this section then examines and reflects on the research context including the respective school contexts, how the participant group was formed and details of it, and the role of the pilot study in developing my research design. The final part of this section covers my approach to data analysis, looking in detail at the different 'steps' or processes I took following Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2022).

3.3.1 Overview of the research design

As figure 3.2 shows, the 19 service children involved in this research project explored the themes of identity and school experiences by engaging with several creative activities, supplemented by group discussion. Each activity was supported by a range of resources and accompanied by exploratory questions designed to stimulate personal thought and reflection alongside discussion (see table 3.1). These questions were linked to the project's research questions:

- *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?* (RQ1)
- *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* (RQ2)

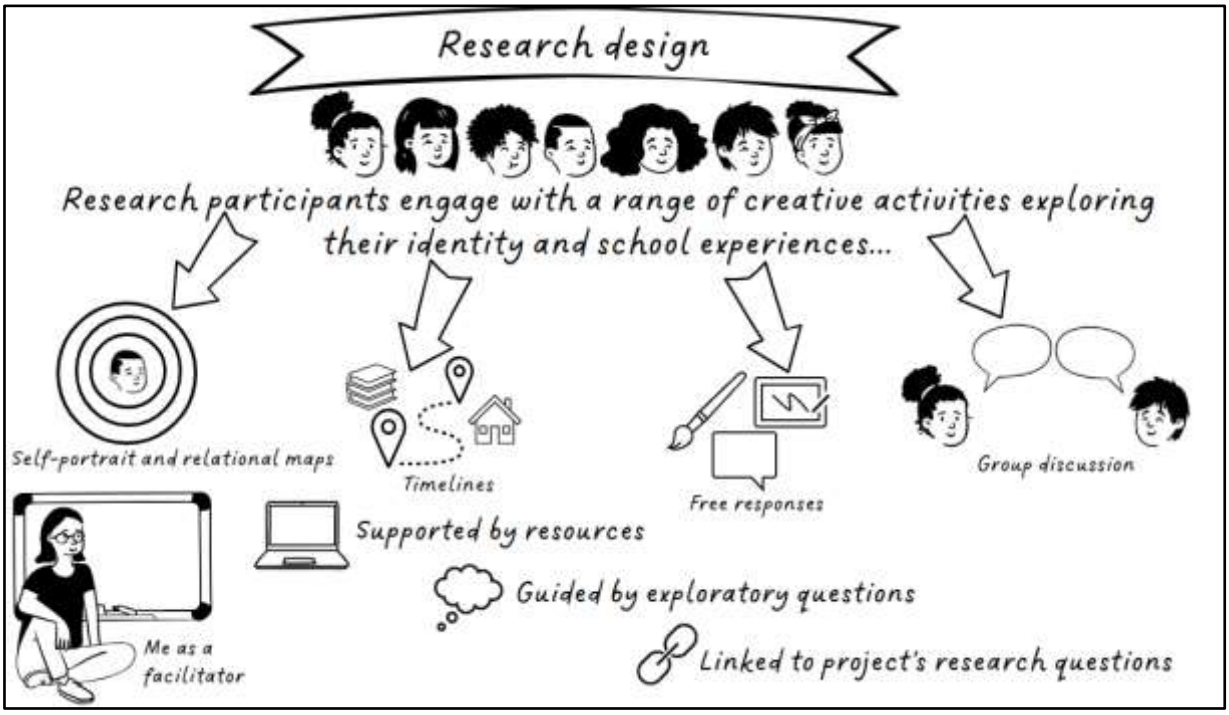


Figure 3.2: Overview of the research design.

Three types of data were generated in this research project – visual, written and oral. The activities were carried out in small group settings (between two and four service children per group, aged between 9 and 16 years), within the service children's school environments. In total, the sessions took four hours per group, typically divided into four, one-hour sessions.

Table 3.1: Relationship between the research questions, exploratory questions and data generation activities.

Research questions	Exploratory question(s) to guide activity and discussion	Activity to be completed by the children
RQ1	Can you tell me about yourself? Who and/or what is important to you and why?	**All about me self-portrait and relational map** Children draw a portrait of themselves in the centre of A3 paper and add 5 key words that describe them. Around that portrait, children add who and/or what is important in their lives. 
	What have been important or significant events in your life?	**Timeline** Children draw a timeline charting important events and changes in their lives. The timeline is drawn in three stages: 1. The places they have lived (their homes) and the moves between them. 2. The times when their serving parent(s) was/were away for significant periods (training, deployment). 3. Any other significant events. 
	What does being a service child mean to you?	**Free response** Children write, speak or draw in response to the question prompt. 
RQ2	What have been your experiences of education in your life so far?	**School timeline** Children draw a timeline of their educational journey with details including location of schools and duration. 
	What's it like being a service child in the different schools you've attended? What are your experiences of moving schools? What could schools do to help service children more?	**Then and Now** Using their school timelines as a prompt, children jot down points to discuss as a group. 
	Think about your serving parent'(s)' deployments (including training and weekending), what are your experiences? What was it like being in school during this time?	**Free response** Children write, speak or draw in response to the question prompts. 

3.3.2 Data generation methods

The rationale for the data generation methods chosen – self-portraits and relational maps, timelines and free responses – was based on several factors. This included elements of pragmatism (time and space restrictions), professional experience and consideration of the creative methodologies used by other researchers (Leitch, 2008; Sewell, 2011). Collectively, these factors led me to primarily use pen to paper activities (graphic elicitation), supplemented by group discussion. My role within the research space was as a facilitator, providing practical

support for the activities (including modelling) alongside responsive questioning and engaging in discussion (see appendix A for further details).

Although my activities were varied, they worked to allow children "to express themselves in a variety of complementary and congruent ways" (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005, p.424). I sought to have clear alignment between the activities, the exploratory questions and my overarching research questions (see table 3.1). The methods were chosen to provide a clear focus point – "a constructive prompt" – whilst also offering the children choice in the way they could reflect on and share aspects of their lives (Annamma, 2018, p.23; Eldén, 2012; Punch, 2002). The prompt also provided the children with time for personal reflection and thus removed the immediacy required in answering a series of questions verbally (Clark, 2010; Morrow, 1998; Punch, 2002). Moreover, by choosing activities which generated multiple data sources, "different aspects of the same stories" were shared (Marshall, 2019, p.1187; Saarelainen, 2015). This allowed me to obtain a more complete sense of participants' experiences (Flaherty & Garratt, 2022).

3.3.2.1 Self-portraits and relational maps

Self-portraits are a familiar and well-used creative medium in educational settings as children are "continually engaged in identity formation" within this space (Thomson & Hall, 2008, p.148). As I was interested in service children's sense of self, I began with the self-portrait activity to allow them to "think holistically about their identities and lives" (Bagnoli, 2009, pp.549-550; Bagnoli, 2019). I wanted to combine the self-portrait with the relational map to see how service children saw themselves and what was important in their lives. This aligned with my conceptualisation of identity as something discursive, formed through social connections and relations (Hall, 1997; Thomson & Hall, 2008).

Whilst relational maps have a range of names and iterations (for example, concentric circles, family maps, ego-centred maps, network maps), the method is most used to investigate relationships (Bagnoli, 2009; Josselson, 1996). Like self-portraits, they centre the participant. In the relational maps created by the children, they are at the centre. Concentric circles of varying proximity then surround them which are used to represent relative importance.

The method allows the researcher a way in to understanding their participants' social dynamics and a starting point for subsequent discussion (Eldén, 2012; Juozeliūnienė, 2021). Whilst some researchers dictate the categories of the circles (Samuelsson, Thernlund & Ringstrom, 1996), Spencer and Pahl (2006) left these open to study the social suffusion between friends and family. For my research, I took the same approach. I was particularly interested in seeing how service children saw their relationship with their serving family member(s) and their peer friendships. I also wanted to explore if, and where, the military would feature on their relational maps and therefore did not include this in the example I shared with the children. Additionally, I phrased the question, *'Who and/or what is important to you?'* with the inclusion of 'what' to allow space for parasocial relationships and relationships with non-human entities including imaginary friends, toys and pets (Morrow, 1998).

3.3.2.2 Timelines

Timelines are a malleable and adaptable research method, open to being utilised in different ways and in different research contexts (Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011). For my project, I was interested in service children's educational journeys as well as the military and the non-military experiences they had gone through in their lives so far. Because of the explicit temporal dimensions of timelines, they allow participants to "explore dimensions of continuity and change in their lives"; something particularly pertinent to service children (Mannay, 2021; Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011, p.566).

Like self-portraits and relational maps, timelines centre the participant and give them an "opportunity to share their story in a way that is meaningful, empowering, and authentic" (Marx, 2022, p.3). Timelining facilitates narrative accounting that can deepen and enrich story telling (Bagnoli, 2009; Sheridan, Chamberlain & Dupuis, 2011). It encourages the construction of rich temporal narratives and, when used alongside other techniques, can make participants' narratives richer and more coherent (Flaherty & Garratt, 2022). Indeed, they have the potential to "break through the 'usual story', producing narratives that participants were less accustomed to telling" (Flaherty & Garratt, 2022, p.18).

3.3.2.3 Free responses

Finally, I invited the children to participate in two 'free response' activities centred around questions (see table 3.1). I felt it was important to provide a contrast to the more structured activities, particularly as the corresponding questions were open-ended. Also, I was aware that my other activities had encouraged free-drawing, and I was conscious that some of my participants may have had creative hesitancy or lacked confidence, which could have inhibited their contributions (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Hill, 2006).

Therefore, I was clear with the participants that their expressions could be in a variety of differing forms. As Hill points out "children are normally passive with respect to method choice" and therefore, by being deliberately non-directive and encouraging, I allowed the participants to express their answers in their preferred way (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Hill, 2006, p.69; Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). Although some of the children were a little hesitant to begin, after encouragement and discussion of ideas, they all wrote something (in either poetry, prose or both), created drawings with and without annotations, and engaged in conversations with me.

Because of the open choice in responses, I offered children the opportunity to verbally narrate and explain their creations. I wanted the focus to be on "what the children say about what they draw", rather than my interpretation of their drawings (Driessnack, 2005, p.420). This meant that the later analysis of these more diverse responses was, at least in part, participant generated (see section 3.3.5 for discussion on data analysis).

3.3.3 The research context

3.3.3.1 Researching in schools

Five schools were involved in the project (one primary, one junior and three secondary) with 19 service children participating. The schools were located across two neighbouring counties in England. Key details about the schools are shown in table 3.2. The information has been derived from the school websites (references withheld to protect anonymity) and private communication with the respective schools.

Table 3.2: Key data pertaining to the five schools involved in the research project.

School name	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
School type	Primary	Junior	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary
Number on roll	350	360	1064	1380	864
Number of service children (%)	99 (28%)	24 (7%)	70 (7%)	4 (<1%)	24 (3%)
Majority service type	RAF	RAF	Army	Mixed	Army

The research in the five schools was conducted over the academic year 2022-2023. During this year, many schools were still experiencing considerable challenges due to the continued effects of COVID-19. Notwithstanding a global pandemic, schools can be challenging to engage with initially (particularly if the researcher has no pre-existing connections to the setting) and many lack capacity to engage with research even if they are interested in it. Furthermore, schools are often not in the position to match novice researchers' expectations regarding scope, levels of engagement and time investment.

I would have liked the service children to have a greater degree of participation within the research (for example in co-designing the research questions and active involvement in research dissemination). However, the feasibility and successful completion of the project, within the required timeframe, remained paramount. Therefore, I focused on working with the children to create the data; placing my research between 'assigned but informed' and 'consulted and informed' according to Hart's Ladder of Participation (see figure 3.1, section 3.2.2.1).

The schools determined the length of time I was permitted to spend with the children; a total of four hours per group. Given this, I sought to maximise the limited amount of time I had available with the children by carefully time-managing the sessions and recording all dialogue using a recording device. This meant that no time was spent writing notes and observations during the

sessions. Therefore, after each session, I spent time noting down observations I deemed pertinent and which had not been captured by the recording device. This allowed my notes to be written as close to 'real time' as possible. In so doing, I had a record of my immediate reflections which could be referred to, and contrasted with, my later reflections generated when I began data analysis (Brown, 2021).

Although I suggested a format of four, one-hour sessions, I offered schools flexibility as to when the sessions could be held. This led to a variance in the way the sessions were carried out. The primary schools chose four, one-hour sessions whilst the secondary schools varied their approaches by offering a mixture of one-and-a-half-hour sessions, two-hour sessions and a block of time across one school day. Due to staff sickness and several periods of strike action, some re-scheduling of sessions was also necessary.

Due to data protection regulations, I was reliant on the contact at each of the schools to distribute information and consent forms and undertake any necessary chasing. This meant relying on a single individual to go above and beyond their expected workload to support the research, ultimately a significant ask. Having experienced challenges with timeframes and deadlines for previous research, I started engaging with schools as soon as I had received ethical approval. From my initial recruitment email to researching with the children, timeframes for schools varied from 3 to 12 months.

3.3.3.2 Identifying service children in schools

From an axiological perspective, my aspiration regarding the participant group was to involve a diverse mix of service children (with variety, for example, in terms of service branch, gender and rank of serving parent) to reflect the inherent diversity of the British Armed Forces and to disrupt the homogeneity of narratives. However, given that service children are a 'hard-to-reach' group – with no publicly available school-level data – specificity of this kind could not be planned for.

As with any study involving a defined population group, there are complex factors that influence how the participant group is formed. In a sense, the notion that a participant group is 'representative' is a fallacy, given the artificial and often hindering factors surrounding the recruitment process. For my research, I sought to maximise the likelihood of achieving diversity

in my participant group by using my knowledge of the military alongside my network of pre-existing professional relationships.

With no publicly available school-level data, I was reliant on this imperfect method to locate potential schools with service children on roll. Although most schools with significant numbers of service children on roll are near military sites, this is not a given. Therefore, whilst I approached schools near to significant military bases and garrisons within geographical proximity to me; schools that did not state whether they had service children on roll on their school websites were not approached. I therefore missed the opportunity to involve these schools. Moreover, due to feasibility and my location, schools near naval ports were not approached. This led to my study being dual-service (Army and RAF), as opposed to tri-service (Army, Royal Navy/Royal Marines and RAF).

Additionally, the schools I worked with provided none, or minimal service-related information about their service pupils. Although I could ascertain the majority service branch of the schools (see table 3.2), based on proximity to military sites, I only found out additional pertinent military details from the children themselves. Thus, there was an element of serendipity in my participant group, as discussed in further detail below.

3.3.3.3 Service children involved in the research project

The participant group was made up of a total of 19 service children. Children were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms but where they did not express a preference, an alternative name was chosen for them. Children's exact ages are not provided but rather indicated based on their key stage at school. Those children in upper Key Stage 2 were aged between 9 and 11 years old and in Years 5 or 6, those in Key Stage 3 were aged between 11 and 14 years old and in Years 7, 8 or 9 and those in Key Stage 4 were aged between 14 and 16 years old and in Years 10 or 11. Figure 3.3 shows the collated key military details of the children's parents. I felt it was important to also ask children about any veteran or reservist experiences to disrupt the normative assumption that it is only fathers who serve.

As figure 3.3 highlights, my participant group had a variety of different military connections in different combinations. From what the children knew of their primary military parent's role (i.e., serving, or served full-time), I identified that nine children's serving, or veteran parents, were

from non-commissioned ranks (including one serving foreign and Commonwealth soldier) and ten were from commissioned ranks.

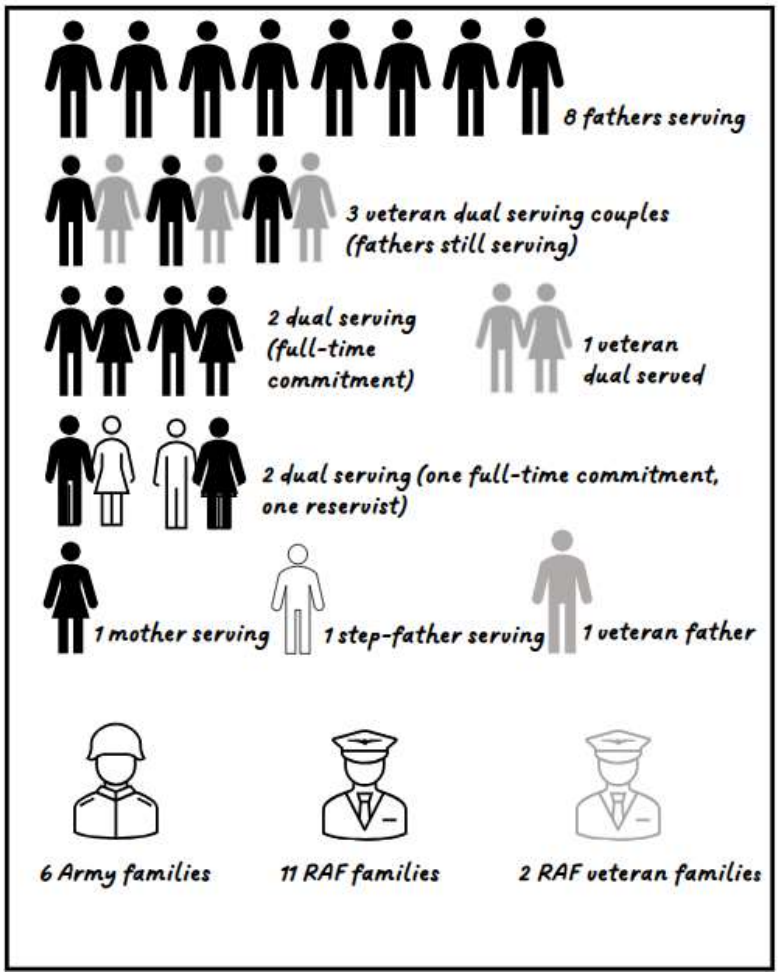


Figure 3.3: Key military details of the children's parents.

The children were also asked if other adults in their families were serving or had previously served. Six children had other family members (uncles, cousins, aunt and brother) serving. Whilst no child identified as a military young carer, six spoke about 'intermittent caring responsibilities' during deployments and other forms of service-related separation, indicating the likelihood of them being intermittent military young carers (see section 2.10.2). One child spoke at length of her step-father's recent Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis due to military service. None of the children in my research were bereaved due to military service.

As with any research, it is important to be cognisant of its temporal context. Indeed, "as researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories" (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p.634). Given the nature of service children's lives, I felt it was important to ascertain whether they were experiencing, had recently experienced, or were soon to experience, service-related mobility. As the figure 3.4 implies, most of the service children were settled, having been in a school or home for over a year. Out of the 19 children involved in my research, three children knew they would be moving in the next 3 months. However, this is likely to be an underestimate of reality, given that postings can be issued with very short notice and some parents may choose not to share upcoming details with their children.

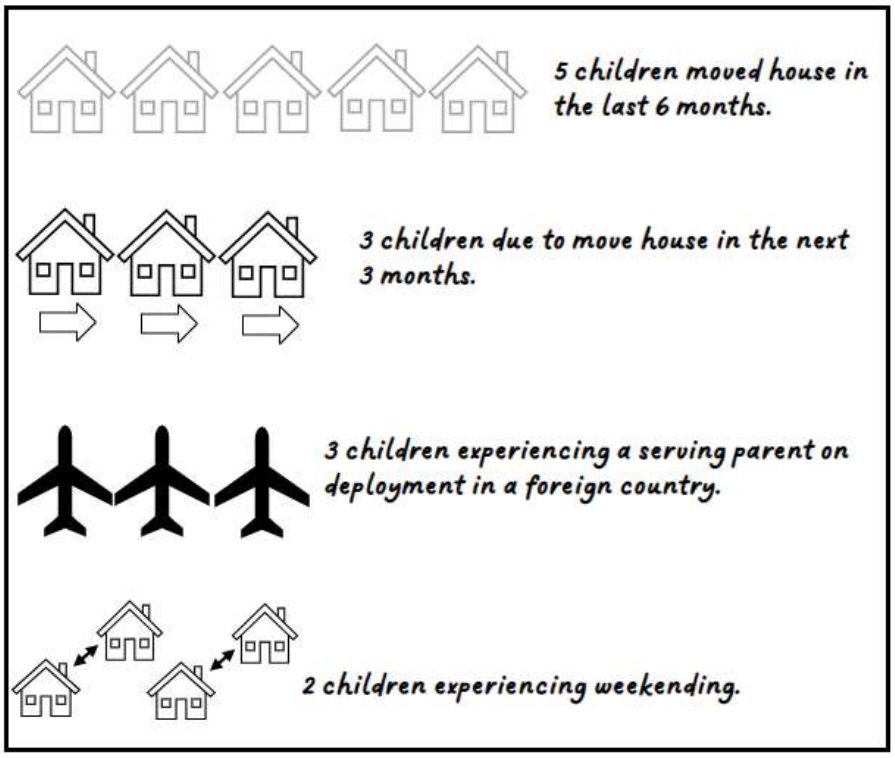


Figure 3.4: Number of service children with current, recent or future experiences of mobility and separation at the time of data generation (academic year 2022-2023).

I also wanted to be cognisant of the wider context of the British military and how recent operations were impacting the service children's current experiences of service-related separation. Whilst the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine was discussed by several of the service children during the research, none of their serving parents were directly involved in the

British military response. For the three children experiencing deployment during the research, their serving parents were deployed to the Middle East and a British overseas territory. For the two children experiencing weekending (see section 2.10.4), their parents were based at other RAF bases within England.

3.3.4 Role and impact of the pilot study

I chose to conduct a methodological pilot study as part of my research design to trial my proposed activities (included in the project's ethical approval, see appendix B). The pilot included a focus on the resources that I provided, the questions I asked, the time I allocated to each activity and my role as a researcher. The pilot study involved me engaging with two secondary-school-aged groups (Year 7 and Year 10) for approximately one hour each (see appendix C for a more detailed overview). Given the challenges associated with recruiting service children and my interest in the methods (rather than the data output), I worked with groups of non-service children.

During the sessions, I piloted the various activities. I made sure the children were aware of what my purpose was and as a result, they were explicit in their feedback. Indeed, one child regularly started their responses with 'When you do this with the other children, you should...'. Their honesty, openness and ability to critique the activities was enormously helpful to me. It resulted in alterations to the activities themselves, the associated questions, the timings and the resources provided. Notably, it crystallised the need for me to further differentiate my approach based on the children's ages. Whilst the younger children were very eager to engage fully with the activities, the older ones were more hesitant to put pen to paper and expressed their preference to share their thoughts and feelings orally.

Based on the non-service children's reflections and suggestions, additional and more diverse resources were included for the main study. These included sharing aspects of my personal story as well as stories of varying experiences of other service children, captured in a range of formats including podcasts, newspapers and museum exhibitions. I sought to provide such resources for several reasons: to help children generate their ideas; to de-centre 'my story'; to act as a buffer against the assumed narrative that all service children have the same experiences.

3.3.5 Data analysis

For my data analysis, I used the process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). This is a six-phase analytic process; developed originally in 2006 but updated to encapsulate subsequent developments in their thinking (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Ultimately, it is a *method* for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It offers the researcher "a set of tools – concepts, techniques, practices, and guidelines – to organise, interrogate and interpret a dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.4). But, in so doing, it relies on the fundamental, and active, role of the researcher to engage in reflexivity: active thinking, critical reflection and choice making.

Reflexivity can be categorised into three types:

- Personal reflexivity – how the researcher's values shape their research and the knowledge produced
- Functional reflexivity – how the methods and other aspects of design shape the research and knowledge produced
- Disciplinary reflexivity – how academic disciplines shape knowledge production (Wilkinson, 1988 in Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.14).

This emphasis on reflexivity is the primary reason I chose this approach to data analysis. Outcomes from any research are not neutral as they are predicated on the research data, which is itself constructed through the active work of a researcher. Indeed, my background and values, my research decisions and my broader disciplinary research training fundamentally shaped all aspects of this research project. Therefore, it would have been remiss not to have properly engaged with and reflected on this issue throughout the process of data analysis.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase analytic process is as follows: 1) dataset familiarisation or immersion; 2) data coding; 3) initial theme generation; 4) theme development and review; 5) theme refining, defining and naming; 6) writing up. However, as Braun and Clarke stress, their analytical process "offers guidelines rather than rules and phases rather than steps to highlight [that it is] not a unidirectional or linear model" (2022, p.32).

As Braun and Clarke highlight, these activities work primarily as tools to support the individual researcher (2022, p.46). However, as they also remark, the process of data analysis is often

shrouded. Therefore, in the interest of researcher transparency and reflexive openness, and as a guide for future researchers, in my discussion of the six phases below, I have sought to write a reflexive and transparent account of my own experience; encompassing what each phase is, why the phase is necessary and the work I did within each phase.

Phase 1: Dataset familiarisation or immersion

The first phase of Braun and Clarke's data analysis is dataset familiarisation. In this phase, the researcher immerses themselves in their dataset whilst simultaneously critically engaging with it. Braun and Clarke identify this as "analytical sensibility", taking an "inquiring and interpretive position on data" (2022, p.44; 2013). This phase is very active, with the researcher both conducting practical activities to gain deep familiarity with their data and engaging in active dialogue with the dataset.

My research data was multi-modal (see appendix D for further details regarding the type and breadth of data generated). In response to the activities, the children created a range of visual data (referred to as artistic outputs in table 3.3) alongside the oral data generated during discussions. Given this range of visual data, I sought to categorise it into drawings, annotated drawings and annotated prose.

Figure 3.5: Example of a drawing (top left hand side), annotated drawing (top right hand side) and annotated prose (bottom middle).

Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis focuses on textual data and therefore I needed to decide how I would analyse my visual data; whether I would amalgamate it into their process, or opt for a secondary, complementary process (2022).

Initially I considered using Rose's 'critical visual methodology framework' which uses three modalities – technological, compositional and social – to analyse visual images (2001). However, the framework was designed to facilitate critical engagement and interpretation of visuals such as paintings, photographs and advertisements, which had not been deliberately created as data for research. Because of the situated context of creation of my visual data, I felt it was not the best fit for my research.

Moreover, I wanted the child participants to play an active role in the interpretation and explanation of their creative endeavours. Therefore, during the research sessions, I asked the children to share and verbalise their responses to the activities (which were thus captured in my oral data). Images do not necessarily 'speak for themselves' and when interpreting and analysing visual data, the original creator's meanings can be misinterpreted, ignored or obscured. Therefore, by facilitating child-led interpretation of the visual data, I sought to reduce the emphasis of my interpretation by considering the child's account of their images (Bagnoli, 2012; Eldén, 2013; Mannay, Staples & Edwards, 2017; Sewell, 2011). Although this approach is not foolproof, as children "may only mention some of the ideas expressed in their images and omit others", I still felt it was the most appropriate decision for my research context (Hickey-Moody, Horn, Willcox & Florence, 2021, p.62). Indeed, for some visual outputs, I relied solely on the children's interpretations to provide context and understanding. For example, figure 3.6 was drawn by Izzy as a 'free response' to the activity focusing on her experiences of separation.

Figure 3.6: Drawing by Izzy as a 'free response' to the data generation activity focusing on her experiences of separation.

Whilst the immediate meaning of the bottom half of the image is clear – it is a drawing of a plane – and the inferred context – a drawing of her father on the plane he travelled on for his deployment – is derivable, the case is not the same for the top half of the image. Without Izzy's explanation and rationale of why she chose to draw a frog, cows and a milkshake carton, the drawings seem out-of-place and irrelevant. However, once the viewer understands that Izzy spent the last day before her father's deployment at a farm where they interacted with cows and drank milkshakes and, that in the gift shop, she was bought a cuddly frog as a leaving present, then a much richer understanding of the content is present. From this understanding, inferences about the importance of pre-deployment rituals and experiences and the materiality of deployment come to the forefront.

As table 3.3 shows, for my dataset, I undertook a range of data familiarisation activities which facilitated repetition but also allowed me to look at the data from different angles. Although Braun and Clarke suggested activities, I knew I wanted to also engage in activities that facilitated "new ways of doing and knowing", particularly regarding my visual data (Couceiro, 2024, p.301). Indeed, as Thomson notes "it is sometimes the case that doing something a little out of the ordinary can alert us to other possibilities, and to how our expectations shape what we see in our data" (2020).

Table 3.3: Data familiarisation activities undertaken by me alongside the rationale for doing so.

Data familiarisation activity	**Rationale**
Listened and re-listened to the audio recordings, paying particular attention to inflections of speech and making notes of the emotions I perceived.	Although I chose not to undertake discourse analysis, I felt it was important to be cognisant of the inflections of speech (i.e., tone, utterances and pauses) when reviewing my transcripts as they are often lost due to the selectivity of transcription.
Read and re-read the transcripts generated from the audio recordings.	As I transcribed mostly verbatim (using my discretion to not transcribe conversations which were off-topic) and without the use of transcription software, it was necessary to read and re-read the transcripts (and compare them to the audio recordings) to ensure I did not omit or mis-transcribe any important detail. It also helped me to feel 'closer' to the research encounter as I could re-listen to what was previously said.
Studied and re-studied the artistic outputs of the children – by activity, by child, and by content.	As in my reading and re-reading of the transcripts, I wanted to make sure I was familiar with the artistic outputs of the children and aware of their contextual production. This was the first step in the process I took to analyse my visual data.
Created descriptive summaries of all artistic outputs focusing on their production, content and associated dialogue.	
Read and re-read additional notes made immediately after the sessions.	As time passes from the research encounter, reflections on it can change and memories alter. Therefore, I felt it was important to reflect on my immediate responses and compare them to my later, more distanced responses.

Data familiarisation activity (cont.)	**Rationale (cont.)**
Uploaded all data to NVivo.	I used NVivo to function as a data management tool so that I could upload and organise all my data items for easy access.
Organised data items on NVivo into various categories (e.g. by group, by school, by type of data, by activity).	
Created a 'moving art gallery' for the artistic outputs, incorporating the descriptive summaries to act as 'exhibit signs'.	I knew I wanted to do something "a little out of the ordinary... to "alert...[me]...to other possibilities" within the data (Thomson, 2020). Therefore, I created a 'moving art gallery', made up of the originals, or copies of the artistic outputs, physically displayed in my working space. For each image, I wrote descriptive summaries to act as 'exhibit signs' and bringing these together helped make connections with the different forms of data. The gallery was 'moving' as I regularly arranged and re-arranged the outputs around points of interest which helped me to re-consider them each time.
Created in-depth mixed media profiles about each child encompassing all data types.	I used a selection of art materials and included hand-drawn images and graphics alongside prose to create A4 sized in-depth descriptions of each individual participant. I did so as I wanted to be cognisant of the individual before I began to code and look for similarities and differences across the dataset.
Created shorter, more summarised data portraits about each child made up of hand-drawn images and individual words and phrases.	This activity allowed me to distil what I felt were the fundamental elements of each participants' representations of their experience and identity, based on the data they had created (see appendix E).

As discussed in section 3.2.1, the process of transcription is an important element in voice research. The researcher makes decisions on what, and how, to transcribe thus shaping the outcome of a transcription which in turn, can fundamentally shape data findings.

As such, voices can become "complicated, distorted and fictionalised in the process of both transcription and reinscription" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012, p.746). As table 3.3 explains, I chose not to undertake discourse analysis as part of my research. However, I felt it was important to be cognisant of the inflections of speech (i.e., tone, utterances and pauses) when transcribing as they are lost due to the selectivity of transcription. This process of selectivity means that as a researcher, I 'shaped' and 'crafted' the voices throughout. Although I was diligent to ensure I did not omit or mis-transcribe any detail, it is important to recognise that the transcripts are not carbon copies of the research encounters.

Throughout my research, I also maintained a reflexive journal in which I wrote, drew and annotated. These jottings included "observations and conversations, emotions and experiences, thoughts and reflections" (Brown, 2021, pp.25-26). As this was a tool to support my research, the resulting handwritten documents were messy, reflecting my broader experience of research (Brown, 2021). For the sections on my data analysis, I made notes on the data items and dataset; including anything I found particularly interesting and my reflections on playing an active role in the analysis. For this, I used A3 paper which I found easier to capture more detail (compared with my A5 lined notebooks) and visualise the relationships between the data items.

Phase 2: Data coding

The second phase is data coding. This is a systematic, in-depth and rigorous process that is repeated by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.54). The codes produced from this process are "working tools" and as such, adapt and evolve as the process develops (2022, p.62). For my data coding, I used NVivo and took a broadly deductive orientation to the process. I had gained ideas from the literature before analysis and thus by taking a deductive orientation, I could consider these early ideas and where appropriate, nuance and substantiate them in this process. However, I was also open to unexpected ideas. Therefore, when I began coding the transcripts, I used an informal coding framework which was suitably open to refinement. Once I moved on

to coding the visual data I could therefore either code to existing codes, refine existing codes or, in some instances, create new codes.

I worked through the process in an iterative manner, and in so doing, further developed and refined my coding choices. I used a mix of semantic and latent coding (although not a dichotomy) as table 3.4 shows. Noting that Braun and Clarke argue that "the 'best' coding is the coding that best fits *your* purpose in analysing your data", I was comfortable that most of my codes were more of a semantic nature (2022, p.57).

Table 3.4: Sample of my codes, my judgement as to their nature (semantic<->latent) and my rationale for creating the codes.

Code	**Semantic <-> Latent**	**Rationale**
Knowledge of the military parent's role (duration)	All three codes are semantic.	Initially, these codes were one, 'knowledge of the military parent's role', but I soon split them into three to account for the volume of data and to contribute to a richer analytical understanding of the service children's military knowledge.
Knowledge of the military parent's role (service branch, rank and job)		
Knowledge of the military parent's role (uniform)		
Strained relationship with military parent	Seemingly semantic, this code also has implicit meaning. Whilst some data was explicit, my judgement from other data was more of an inference.	The data connected to this code is mixed. In some cases, the children have said they have a difficult relationship with their military parents. In other instances, I have inferred this. This reflects the complicated nature of child-adult military relationships that can be characterised by regular periods of separation.

Code (cont.)	Semantic <-> Latent (cont.)	Rationale (cont.)
Pride in the military	These appear more sematic, but they do have my analytical judgement of the data.	Like the code 'strained relationship with military parent', some of the data for these codes were explicit, others I had inferred meaning from broader discussions of experiences that I felt attributed ‘pride’ and ‘importance’.
Importance of the military		

I was conscious of the reductionist element inherent in coding and how in coding a written transcript, elements of the research encounter (for example, personal reflections captured in field notes or the tone and manner of the participants) are lost. Therefore, throughout my coding, I referred to any relevant field notes and re-listened to sections of the recordings to ensure I had coded appropriately.

I was also conscious of ensuring counternarratives were not overlooked, even if there was only a singular mention. I reflected this in my coding choices by creating seemingly contradictory codes such as ‘challenge to make friends’ and ‘easy to make friends’ to reflect the differing experiences of the participants. Counternarratives were particularly important to my data analysis, given my desire to disrupt the assumption of a homogenous service child experience.

Phase 3: Initial theme generation

The third phase is initial theme generation. This involves “engaging with the data codes to explore areas where there is some similarity of meaning” before “clustering together the potentially connected codes (into candidate themes) and exploring these initial meaning patterns” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.79). The exploration considers each cluster “on its own terms; in relation to the research question; and as part of the wider analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.79).

For this phase, I began by exporting a ‘codebook’ from NVivo into a Word document so that I could see all the codes I had created in one long list. From this list, I looked for “patterned meaning” by clustering relevant codes together (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.79) (see appendix F). As Braun and Clarke point out, the aim is “to generate a number of working, provisional themes”

(2022, p.89). I then looked to further consider and refine my provisional themes by relating them to my research questions. At this point, some codes featured in multiple themes whilst others did not feature at all. To ensure I did not lose any codes I may have wanted to "resuscitate" at a later point, I maintained the original codebook in a separate document (Braun & Clake, 2022, p.89).

At this point, I took a step back and reviewed my codes and provisional themes. To ensure clarity and more of an analytical stance, I altered some of my codes. However, given my research questions were exploratory, most of my codes remained descriptive. At this point, the codes focused on different facets of understanding and experiences, knowledge and relationships.

As I moved from code-level to theme-level, I used visual mapping to further develop and review my provisional themes. Working with pen and paper allowed me to physically mark potential relationships between the codes and think about how they relate to my research questions. At this point, one code – 'service children serve in their own way' – really stood out for me as analytical and rich. Thus, I "promoted" this code to a candidate theme (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.81).

Phase 4: theme development and review

Phase four "extends, and offers a vital check on, the initial theme development in phase three, through a process of re-engagement with: (1) all the coded data extracts; and (2) the entire dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.97). The purpose of the phase is "partly about providing a validity check on the quality and scope of your candidate themes" but also "about developing the richness of your themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.97).

In this phase, I reviewed my candidate themes by looking again at the codes I had clustered. I checked to see if the codes were relevant to each candidate theme and that they "capture[d] a (different) core point" and added "rich diversity and nuance...about the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.98).

For each of my themes, I also used Braun and Clarkes' five reflective questions to ensure my themes were coherent with clear boundaries and had meaningful data to evidence them (2022).

This involved going back to NVivo to review my full dataset, my coded dataset, and my code labels. This helped to re-fresh my memory of my dataset (as I had been working with my code labels) and avoided "misremembering, decontextualisation, or just plain forgetting the full scope of the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.101).

Phase 5: theme refining, defining and naming

This phase is concerned with refining the themes developed in the previous phase. To do this, I wrote 'theme definitions' which "clarifies and illustrates what each theme is about... outlining the scope, boundaries and core concept of the theme" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.108). Creating definitions also helped me to consider how I might organise my writing to ensure there was clarity in how the overall story in my analysis is built, in relation to the research questions.

The second part of phase five involved naming themes. As Braun and Clarke point out, "a good theme name will be informative, concise, and catchy" (2022, p.112). Moreover, a name must "signal its *meaning* and *analytic direction*", and not just name a topic (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.112). When I reviewed my provisional theme names, I realised that I had in fact done the latter. I also noticed that the theme names for my second research question did not align well. Therefore, I altered my theme names to "capture the essence of the theme and engage the reader" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.112). This process took multiple attempts. In table 3.5 below, I have shown the original theme names and the developed theme names for my first research question.

Table 3.5: Relationship between my first research question, the original theme names and the developed theme names.

Research question	**Original theme name**	**Developed theme name**
In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?	The military as a distinct sub-culture that service children grow up in	Growing up in the military: a distinct sub-culture
	Service children serve in their own way	Service children "serve in their own way" *('experiences...' merged into this theme).*
	Experiences are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice	
	Experiencing difference as a service child – identity and life experiences	*Who am I?* Understanding the service child identity

Phase 6: writing up

The final phase is concerned with the "deep *refining* analytic work to shape the detail and flow of the analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.118). Ultimately, the writing that comes from this phase of analysis should "engage the reader and convince them of the validity of your analytic claims and argument" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.118). As Braun and Clarke note, this phase is not an add-on to the analysis as the process of analysis continues during the writing process. Indeed, writing provides "a final opportunity for refinement" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.118).

The most challenging element of this phase was the decision-making process involved in re/presenting children's voices. I was aware of the importance of illustrating the claims I was making in my findings chapters and thus initially liberally peppered my writing with direct quotations from my participants. In so doing, I sought to do justice to the children's individual and collective experiences by including multiple examples, rather than 'cherry picking' particular words, phrases or images.

However, on reflection, I realised that over-reliance on quotations lessens their impact and detracts from my main narrative thread. In this instance, more does not equate to better. Therefore, in the process of refining my analytical writing, I reflected carefully on what, and how, I would re/present the data.

When using quotations, researchers typically present children's words as "decontextualised quotes which prevent the reader from examining and scrutinising the researcher's role in their production" (Spyrou, 2011, p.160). Often, quotations are embedded within the writing and therefore, as a reader, it is important to always be cognisant of the contextual nature of their production. In my findings chapter, I have therefore sought to contextualise the quotations and images I have selectively re/presented whilst also acknowledging the limitations of representation through my own reflexivity. In so doing, I hope that I have highlighted the "messiness, ambiguity, polyvocality, non-factuality, and multi-layered nature of meaning in 'stories' that research produces"; something which is often lost in the writing up process (Spyrou, 2011, p.162).

Before moving on to the findings from this research, the next chapter focuses on an extended discussion of the ethical considerations and my reflections upon them. Within each section, I

discuss relevant literature, reflecting on its application within my own research context. Whilst the chapter is situated after the research design chapter, ethics suffuses every element of the research. It is not an add-on, but something integral to my research project.

4 Ethical considerations and reflections

4.1 Outline of the chapter

In this chapter, I reflect on and discuss several different, but ultimately related, ethical issues which are pertinent to my research design. Within each section, I discuss relevant literature, reflecting on its application within my own research context. I begin with an extended discussion on positionality, research(er) transparency and my creation of the 'research ethics tree'; a tool to support my participants in their engagement with research ethics. I then move to looking at consent, assent and the role of gatekeepers in the research process before examining how group dynamics can influence self-censorship and challenge confidentiality. Following this, I discuss how the role of time, space and place can shape the research encounter, particularly in a school setting. The chapter ends with a discussion surrounding anonymity and research benefit.

4.2 The position of the researcher and research(er) transparency

The position of the researcher is complex in many research scenarios but arguably more so in research that is exploratory and deeply personal. As I discussed in the introduction, I strongly identified with my participant group, as I identify as a service child myself. However, whilst I am part of this group and therefore could be seen as an 'insider', there are differences between myself and the participants. Moreover, there is the relevance of time – I am no longer a child and my own experiences occurred within the uniqueness of my own temporal context. Therefore, to use a metaphor, I see my position in relation to my research context as someone who was navigating a space with an out-of-date map. I was familiar with the location but there were aspects that looked and felt considerably different.

However, despite this distance, I chose to share details of my own lived experience with my research participants to establish a more rapid rapport with them – given the limited time I had – and highlight aspects of shared knowledge (Oakley, 1981). I also hoped to create a research space where participants felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and experiences with someone who understands to some shared degree. I therefore started each first session with my participants with the short script (figure 4.1) – spoken informally, rather than read aloud – alongside a photograph of my father in service dress.

My name is Lucy and I'm also a service child. My dad was an officer in the Royal Logistic Corps in the Army for 36 years before he retired a few years ago. Here's a photo of him. I was born in England but throughout my childhood and adolescence I moved about a lot due to my dad's postings. These were mainly UK moves but I did live in America for 9 months. My dad also did tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. I went to seven schools and my sister went to nine. Once I started secondary school, we stopped moving as a family and my dad lived away during the week, returning only at weekends. My dad is now a veteran. My sister joined the Army Reserve a few years ago.

Figure 4.1: Introductory script shared with the research participants at the start of each first session.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) identifies necessary characteristics of a researcher such as "sensitivity and attentiveness" alongside being open and transparent in their conduct (2018, p.6). In my research, these attributes manifested themselves in my decision to share my link to the Services with my participants. Whilst this decision demonstrated my commitment to meeting BERA's requirement for researcher transparency, choosing to share what I see as pertinent personal details did invariably come with additional "unavoidable dilemmas" (Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014, p.110). As the researcher, I had considerable power over what elements of 'my story' I chose to share with the participants. I carefully constructed my introduction, creating a factual account of my own experiences of being a service child. By sharing this with my participants at the start of the research, I had carefully positioned how I wanted my participants to view me.

However, I was concerned with making sure I did not provide too much transparency, which may have risked making me too prominent within the research process. I also did not want to risk creating a blurring of the perception of my role and the purpose of the research space if I took the "'I am just like you' approach" (Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014, p.110; Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). I wanted to know what my participants thought and felt about being service children, so I kept my own personal reflections on the topic private. In one sense, this felt deceitful or dishonest as there was an absence of 'me'. I tried to balance this by including personal elements in the 'model' example I created for the self-portrait and relational map

activity (see section 3.3.2.1), where I included personal qualities, named family members and shared my love of art and gardening. Regardless of how much, and what detail I shared, it would have impacted the perceptions of, and engagement with, my research. This includes by the participants, their gatekeepers (I also stated that I was a service child in the research information forms) and any wider audience, present and future. Whilst it is impossible to gauge the impact quantifiably, it is important to be cognisant of the power a researcher has in how they present themselves.

4.2.1 Creation of the 'research ethics tree'

Over-disclosing or embedding myself too deeply amongst my research participants also risked commodifying my lived experience and creating "false or fake friendships" with participants (Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014, p.109). This could have transgressed into exploitative practice given that the research is primarily for my own ends (Duncombe & Jessop, 2012). Ultimately, I am a researcher who conducted a research project with finite time allocated to data generation. Therefore, the relationship between me and the participants was transactional and short-lived. I could not offer a therapeutic outlet or time outside the research space to personally follow-up on anything they disclosed (Flaherty & Garratt, 2022). To mitigate this, I therefore felt it was important that the purpose of the research remained explicit and central during the sessions, so my intentions were not misconstrued by participants.

However, how this approach played out in practice involved a period of intensive reflection after the first session with my first group of service children. As they arrived in the research space, they were excitable and chatty. The discussion of the 'child-friendly' consent form felt rushed and superficial as they were eager to get started with the activities. Afterwards, I reflected that whilst their experience of the first research session had been enjoyable, they left with little knowledge or understanding of the research process and their role within it. Ethically speaking, I felt uncomfortable.

Therefore, prior to meeting them again and before engaging with another group, I sought to design an activity that the children would find engaging but from which they could also learn about research and their role within it. Inspired by the work of Timperley, who used a selection of objects, housed in a multi-compartment suitcase (their 'Case of Ethics'), to give their

participants a tactile and engaging way into discussing the ethics related to their doctoral project, I developed my own 'research ethics tree' (2019).

As figure 4.2 shows, I designed the tree to be visual and interactive and to cover nine aspects – the tokens – that I felt were key to my research project. At the start of each session, the tree was set up and, taking turns, the children were asked to pick a token down from a branch and explain how they thought it was related to research. For trickier ones, prompts such as *'What is the purpose of a mask?'* and *'How might that purpose be linked to research?'* were offered.

The tree remained present in the sessions with every group and led to children asking questions about the research process and understanding technicalities (using pseudonyms was excitedly accepted by several of the children and many were keen to make suggestions). This meant that the information sharing was bi-directional and allowed the participants to clarify their understanding through questions and discussion (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Using the 'privacy and safeguarding' token (the padlock and key) also assisted me to structure the conversation when a safeguarding concern was raised and helped the child understand why I had to share what they had disclosed to me. It also helped the remaining members of the group understand that what had been shared should not be discussed again outside the session or with others.

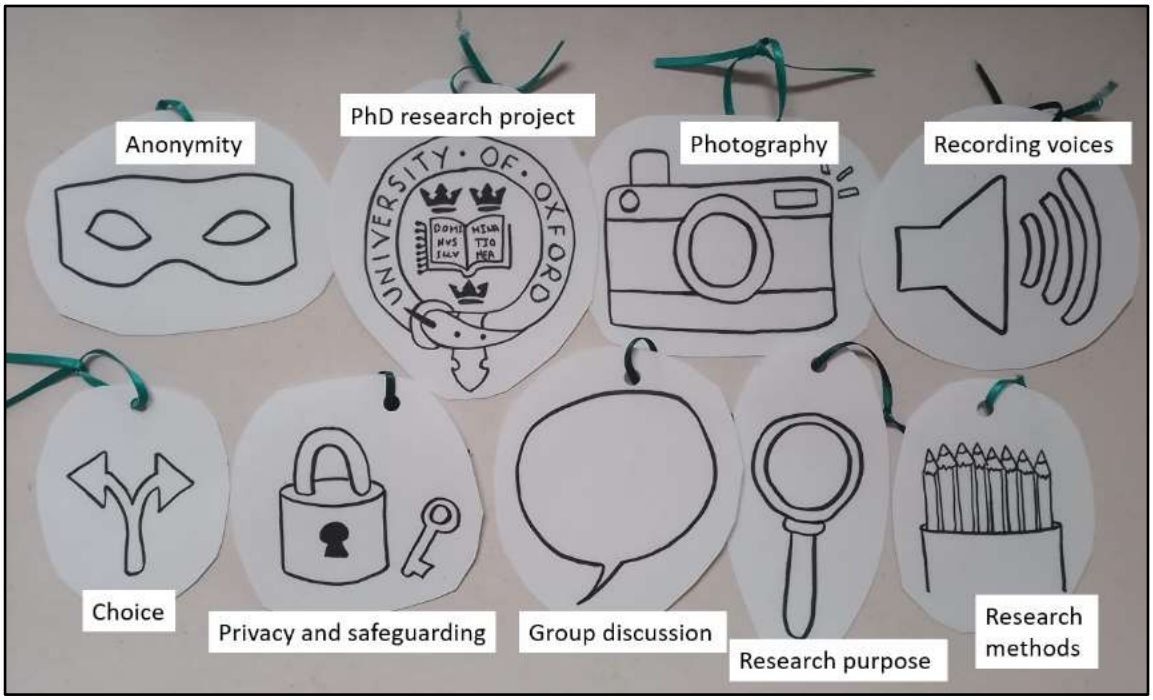


Figure 4.2: The ‘research ethics tree’ (top) and a close up showing the ‘tokens’ (bottom).

4.3 Consent, assent and gatekeepers

There is considerable ethical complexity when it comes to 'consent'; both what we mean by it and its temporal and individualised characteristics. Children in schools are a "captive audience" and within their educational institutions they are expected to follow rules and expectations or face consequences (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992, p.129; Kirby, 2020; Morrow, 1998). Therefore, children may feel pressured to comply with adult researchers, viewing them as another adult in the position of power (Kirby, 2020). The pressure of this expectation to comply may also be influenced by "their age and maturity... [and] any associated anxiety, their previous experience, the degree to which they may expect and/or wish to hand over control to their parents and their family's cultural traditions" (Balen et al., 2006, p.44). Therefore, 'consent' may be given, albeit through pressure or even coercion.

These ethical challenges around consent have led to some researchers opting instead for the term 'assent', "the affirmative agreement of the child to participate in the research" (Balen et al., 2006, p.24). Assent involves the child in decision-making yet recognises that children are not capable of fully comprehending the implications of taking part in research (Balen et al., 2006). Indeed, such implications – for example, foreseeing any potential long-term risk associated with research participation – can be challenging for both children and adults.

The debate around children's ability to give consent reflects the differing assumptions about children's competence and associated rights (Balen et al., 2006; Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014). Daniels and Jenkins outline three varying approaches to children's rights (2000). Firstly, the welfare model in which children's interests are decided by adults. Secondly, the participatory model where children have an active role in decisions about them. Thirdly, the independence model where "children have rights to make their own decisions for themselves" (Balen et al., 2006; Daniels & Jenkins, 2000, p.53). These models highlight differences in how children are conceptualised; from vulnerable "becomings" to "knowing subjects", with varying degrees of power (Balen et al., 2006, p.43; Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014).

However, each model has its limitations. Approaching research with children using the welfare model may only serve to "patronise" or "infantilise children" highlighting "their powerlessness and lack of knowledge/experience" (Brooks, Riele & Maguire, 2014, p.102). Yet, the

independence model removes necessary safeguarding checks in place to lessen the risk of harm, risk or exploitation (Balen et al., 2006; Morrow, 1998). Whilst the participatory model arguably has most merit and aligns closely with BERA's guidelines, adult gatekeeping can "impinge on the rights of children to be heard" (Lloyd Smith & Tarr, 2000, p.60). This occurs in scenarios such as when a child has consented but their parent or carer refuses, rendering the child unable to participate in the research (Balen et al., 2006; BERA, 2018).

Rather than use the being/becoming dichotomy discourse, Uprichard argues for theorising children as 'being and becomings' (2008). They argue that such a term "addresses the temporality of childhood" whilst also presenting a "conceptually realistic construction suitable to both childhood researchers and practitioners" (Uprichard, 2008, p.303). Using the 'being and becomings' perspective for my own research context worked well. It acknowledged the service children's agency as active social actors in their present and future lives whilst also being cognisant of the practical research impacts that differing conceptual frameworks of childhood have.

Consent is also temporal. Whilst I endeavoured to ensure consent was "informed and ongoing" and offered participants time and space at the start and end of each session to reflect on what they had shared (including the right to withdrawal), I could not do this beyond the designated timeframe (BERA, 2018, p.9; Morrow, 2008). Given that I did not interact with the participants beyond the sessions, I could not seek to ascertain whether their consent had changed after a lengthier period and whether they wanted to 'take back' what they had shared. Therefore, there is a limit to how 'ongoing' consent can really be (David, Edwards & Alldred, 2001). In such a scenario, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider that 'ongoing' and 'active' consent can only occur during 'live' data generation.

Finally, consent is individualised. When received, consent is given by the individual and, in the case of children, their respective gatekeepers. However, as Mannay identifies, it does not cover the consent of those who are discussed in the subsequent research (2011). Employing a poetic form, Mannay reflects on how, during data production, "every story involves a cast who are not privy and thus not giving consent" (2011, p.963). Thus, "researchers are offered subjective perspectives of these other lives without their 'owners'' informed consent" (Mannay, 2011,

p.962). For my own research, I have gained understandings of these children's individualised lives and experiences but also a partial insight into the lives and experiences of those around them. Learning intimate details about individuals – "non-consenting others" (p.963) – who are "unaware that I am now privy to these recollections" is ethically challenging (Mannay, 2011, p.964). As researchers, I am not convinced there is an answer to how we reconcile this tension. However, it remains important to be aware that these co-constructed accounts of others outside the research space are held by the researcher and go on to shape their findings.

4.4 Group dynamics, self-censorship and confidentiality

From the early stages of planning my research design, I knew that I wanted to conduct my research with service children in small groups. Given that I did not have any relationship with the children prior to the research (for example, as a researcher-practitioner), I felt that a group setting would make the research space more informal and relaxing and challenge the power inherent within a single adult-child interaction (Punch, 2002). Moreover, the group setting offers children more scope for engagement as they can develop their thoughts and ideas through peer interaction (Punch, 2022). Focus groups also place participants as the experts; an important positioning given my research values related to voice. Therefore, in the space I sought to create, children were not "being questioned by an adult" but rather "sharing experiences with a group of peers" (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p.238). This was further reinforced as I took the role of "facilitating and encouraging the discussion rather than formally leading it" (Greene & Hogan, 2005, p.238).

Given that I was conducting the research in their school environment, I was conscious to stress to the children that this was not schoolwork and I was not there in a teaching capacity (Morrow, 1998). I explained that I was most interested in their thoughts, feelings and experiences rather than how they wrote. It was not a test nor a competition; each child's contribution was valued equally, and they could choose what they did. I explained this to the participants to ensure they understood their choice in participation and right to withdraw. This was particularly important given the research space and the similarities between normal classroom practice (and the surrounding expectations of this) and the research design which could have led to "subtle deception" and participants' misunderstanding of their right to withdraw (Sewell, 2011, p.179).

However, group work can also bring other dynamics into play. Although interpersonal interaction is viewed as a significant advantage of group work, the nature of the social interactions within the research space are not always positive for the research project or the participants (Greene & Hogan, 2005). The group setting can cause children to self-censor or to agree with a dominant personality, thereby limiting their individual contribution (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Lewis, 1992). Secondly, within a group setting, what the participant shares is not kept between them and the researcher. Rather, it is shared with all group members present (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Whilst this can stimulate a supportive peer environment, it does mean that any disclosure is at risk of being shared outside of the research space and therefore could be used as leverage in bullying or shared unwittingly with a wider peer group, causing the individual distress (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Although the culture and ethos of the research space that I co-created with the children (along with the research information and consent forms) was fundamental in mitigating these risks, the thoughts and feelings might remain and the experiences remembered, after the sessions had ended. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of misappropriation.

All but two groups (in one of the primary settings) were created by necessity as there were four or fewer children taking part. In the primary and junior settings, the children all knew each other well and were often with a friend. However, in two of the secondary school settings, the groups created were made up of young people who had never met one another. I observed there was a different dynamic in these groups compared to groups made up of known peers. One was more informal and chattier – with children regularly interjecting and talking over one another – whilst the other was more structured and formalised, with children taking turns to speak. From this observation, I can hesitantly surmise that some self-censorship might have occurred, particularly in the groups where the children did not know their peers.

4.5 The research space in schools

Across the five school settings, the research space varied considerably, primarily due to practical restrictions as to what rooms were available. However, the spaces we used were not neutral; they were "social worlds often reflecting wider societal tendencies within their walls" (Fay, 2018, p.408). Indeed, they "influence[d] and compromise[d]" the application of research

methods and how the participants encountered them (Fay, 2018, p.409). Ultimately, "place [made] a difference to the research encounter" (Anderson & Jones, 2009, p.292).

In the primary schools, the children and I worked together in spare classrooms, often used for creative activities (music, art and an indoor space for forest school). These children were thus familiar with the spaces, which were seen as fun; with children excitingly rushing to the room when they knew that was the location. This excitement was then heightened when they saw the layout of the room – tables joined together to create a single, large working space – and the multitude of creative materials that were laid out on the table.

In stark contrast were the spaces within the secondary schools. Across the different schools, we used the headteacher's conference room, a room for external meetings and suspensions and an exam and study space for sixth formers. These settings were "imbued with significant adult/child power relations" by the nature of their purpose (Jones, 2008, p.328; Spyrou, 2011). For the children, these spaces were unfamiliar, as they were not part of their 'normal' school environment and thus sparked a range of reactions (Jones, 2008). For the research conducted in the sixth form study space, the children came in nervously, thinking they were in the wrong place, or having to sit an exam. They commented that they felt out of place and uncomfortable as, to reach the room, they had to walk through crowds of sixth form students. Although these feelings dissipated after I explained what we would be doing, the physical geography of the research space did influence their initial perceptions.

There was also the temporal element of the research space. Over the sessions, children inevitably missed several lessons which evoked a range of responses depending on the children's personal preference towards the subject missed. In one school, sessions were held over part of the lunch break and extended form time and thus the teacher had provided the children with lunch that they ate whilst undertaking the data generation activities. To an extent, this informalised the research space (Goodenough, Williamson, Kent & Ashcroft, 2003).

The time of the year also shaped the research encounter and was often what the children first referred to and discussed at the start of the sessions. For two groups, the children I worked with had recently completed sets of external exams which led to discussion about the impact of their results on future schooling and careers. For one group I worked with, it was approaching

Remembrance Day, a significant annual event for military families. Children in that group spoke about how their school was commemorating the event and what they would be doing within their own family and wider military community. In turn, this led to further discussion about the role of the military and connections to past, current and future conflicts.

4.6 Anonymity and benefit

During the research, details pertaining to children's backgrounds and links to the Armed Forces (e.g., identifiable school names or deployment locations) were inevitable as children shared narratives about their lives. However, such detail increases the identifiability of a service child and thus carried an additional associated risk. As a researcher, I had a duty of care to the participants to ensure all 'raw data' was kept secure and any sensitive data was altered or removed to maintain confidentiality and lessen any risk of identifiability (BERA, 2018). As such, children's exact ages are not provided, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

However, this practice of anonymity is not without ethical tensions (BERA, 2018). As a researcher, I strived to support the children's rights, yet I gave them no choice in their anonymity. In anonymising demographic detail or creating composite research participants, we, as researchers are making decisions that are ultimately "altering a participant's voice and authentic response" (BERA, 2018, p.23; Liabo & Roberts, 2018). Whilst drawings differ from photographs and video, in that they are not direct visual records, they can still contain identifiable information (for example, distinctive handwriting or images) (Hall, 2015; Sewell, 2011). Therefore, like when altering spoken or written words, cropping or erasing parts of drawings changes the data itself and does fundamentally alter the participant's voice (Sewell, 2011). This is an uncomfortable truth. Moreover, it reinforces the criticism of research as an extractive process – a commodification of experience without due credit.

With aspects of their identity removed, what benefit does research have for the participants? Indeed, the 'benefit' of most research projects comes at a post-publication stage, when researchers "communicate their findings, and the practical significance of their research, in a clear, straightforward fashion" for "the benefit of educational professionals, policymakers and the wider public" (BERA, 2018, p.32). Therefore, the benefit to the research participants is often overlooked. Incentives, financial or otherwise, can be seen as interfering with consent as they

influence “the free decision to participate” (BERA, 2018, p.19). However, should participants not be rewarded for their time and emotional labour? In the case of children in their school setting, perhaps it is even more pertinent for children to receive financial benefit as they are a “captive audience” (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992, p.129; Kirby, 2020).

Despite this, I chose not to have financial incentives for participation. Perhaps naïvely, I wanted children to engage with the research simply because they wanted to. Children may have seen the creative activities as a bit of fun or as an opportunity to connect with others who understand and share military-related experiences. As Edwards and Alldred suggest, several factors impact children’s willingness to take part in research (1999). Alongside interest in seeing research as ‘fun’ or having interest in the subject matter, research can be therapeutic (1999). Creating a space to be heard can also be a valuable, and often overlooked, benefit to some participants. Moreover, research can be empowering for participants as it gives children the opportunity to air their views; though only empowering if those views are listened to and subsequently acted on (Edwards & Alldred, 1999). Although I cannot know what every child felt about the experience – and indeed whether that evolved over time – feedback that I received from several of the school staff confirmed that their experiences had been positive and affirming.

Although I did not provide any financial incentives, I did give my participants stickers, short thank you messages and seed packets as a sign of gratitude for their involvement in the research. However, I only informed my participants about this at the end of my last session with them, rather than prior to participating in the research. I did this to remove the possibility of the tokens of gratitude acting as an incentive and influencing their choice to participate (Bushin, 2007).

In this chapter, I have discussed several different, but ultimately related, ethical issues which were pertinent to my research design. In doing so, I highlight how research ethics is not simply a set of procedures or tick-boxes which can be neatly completed at a discrete point in the research project. Rather, it is a complex, continuous and evolving entity where there are often complexities, intricacies and ambiguities that can remain unsolved. This is not necessarily a limitation or criticism, but rather a comment on how ethical research should reflect the inherent complexity of real life. In my conclusion, I return to ethics and discuss how I have, and continue

to, strive for ethical research impact, considering the ethical demands and complexities associated with research dissemination.

5 Findings chapter I

5.1 Outline of the chapter

In this chapter, I answer my first research question; *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?* Through the analysis of the multiple data forms generated by the service children, I argue that my findings present a three-part answer. Firstly, that service children are an integral part of the military community; a distinct sub-culture which comes with a pre-built community with associated values, language and customs (section 5.2). Secondly, that service children 'serve in their own way' through their experiences of mobility and separation. These experiences are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice (section 5.3). Thirdly, that service children's 'service' shapes their sense of self, creating unique iterations of their service child identity (section 5.4). This chapter ends with a presentation of the concept of the service child identity, based on my findings and in dialogue with James Paul Gee's work on identity (2000; 2017).

5.2 Growing up in the military: a distinct sub-culture

5.2.1 Relationships to the military

All the service children in the study were 'born into the military' or had become part of a blended military family in their very early years. As such, life before the military was unknown to them; they truly were growing up in the military. Whilst all were identified as 'service children' by their schools – using the SPP eligibility criteria – the children's personal positioning to, and within, the military varied. Arguably, this was due to the children's varying relationships with their military parent(s) and their interest in, and subsequent awareness and knowledge of, the military.

Looking again at figure 5.1, there is a clear diversity of relationships to the military, going beyond the nuclear family model of the father serving. Whilst the MoD does not collect detailed statistics on family relationships, two routine data collection surveys provide some insights. Firstly, the 2024 FamCAS (see section 2.9.1) identified that 79% of service families have children, with 55% of those having at least one child of school age (MoD, 2024c, p.15). Secondly, the UK Armed Forces biannual diversity statistics – which provide some insights into

demographic details of serving personnel – show that, in 2021, 11% of the UK Regular Forces were female (MoD, 2021b). Estimated veteran numbers, according to the 2021 census, calculated 1.85 million veterans living in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

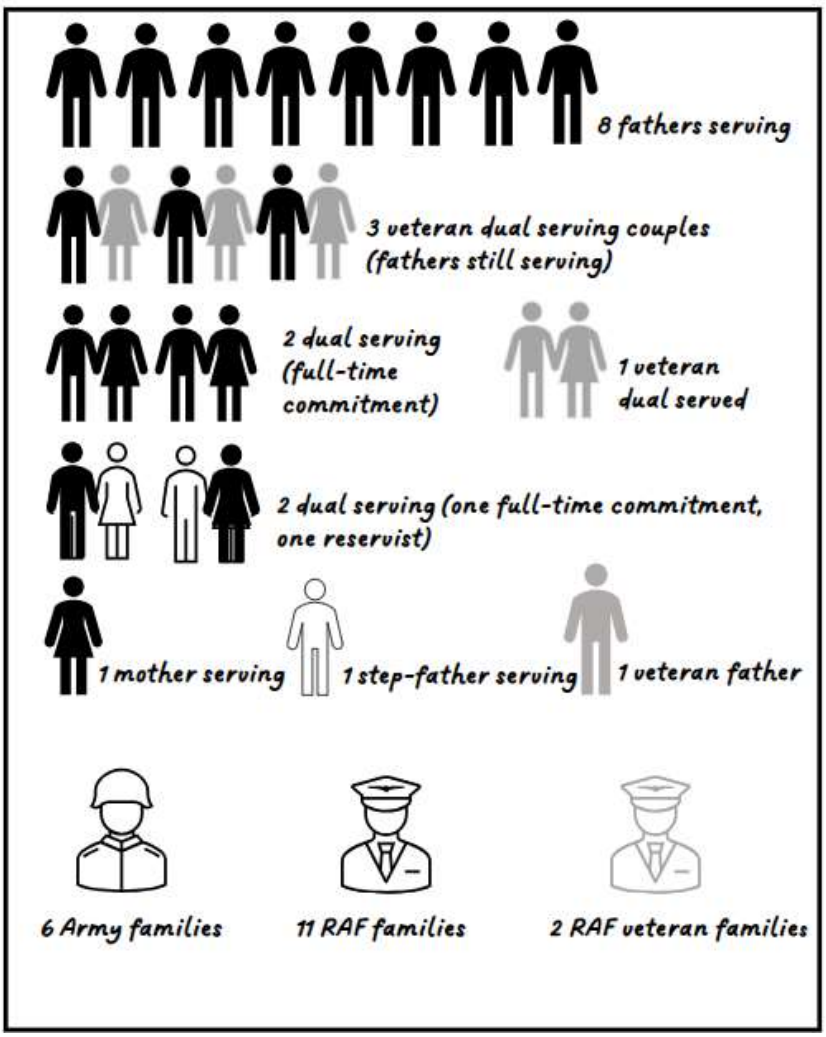


Figure 5.1: Key military details of the children's parents.

Within the participant group, there were also children whose wider family had military connections, not captured by the SPP eligibility criteria or the infographic above. These included grandfathers, uncles, aunts, cousins and brothers. When responding to the free response activity, *'What does being a service child mean to you?*', Sheena chose to draw a family tree showing four generations of her family, labelling when a member of her family had

been in the Army or the Navy. As a result, seven adults were identified across the two Services. Sheena commented on her work, *"Most of my family are in the Army and have been since my great grandad"*. Her comment implies the wider context of generational military service. Again, whilst data is not routinely recorded, it is not atypical for military families to have multiple serving and veteran members. This suggests a rationale for thinking beyond the SPP eligibility criteria when understanding service children's military connections.

5.2.2 Importance of the military

For the first data generation activity, the service children created their own self-portrait and relational map (see section 3.3.2.1). For this activity, I asked them to add what was important to them in the two concentric circles around their portrait. I was particularly interested to see whether any children added the military without prior suggestion. Therefore, I had deliberately omitted the military in my own 'model' example. Interestingly, the majority of the children included the military (in the form of 'military', 'army' or 'RAF') in their responses. This was alongside family members and friends, pets, types of food, hobbies and interests, and local spaces.

When I asked about why they had included the military within what was important to them, Henry felt it was self-evident, explaining that *"Like my dad used to work there. My step-dad works there, and my mum works there".* For James, the military was on the outer circle. He contextualised this by explaining that *"It depends how you put it. Say in general, it would probably be on the outside one but when your dad's in and serving, it's then very important to you. I put it there [outer circle] because it doesn't really affect me that much but it's still important too."* Anna, a child of a veteran, felt that the importance of the military was "*not that much anymore. Like maybe 5 years ago I'd put it here [inner circle]"*. Like James, this suggests that the military fluctuates in importance for service children.

For Victoria, the only service child in the study who did not grow up living with her military parent, or seeing them regularly, commented that, "*I don't know if I ever would have put it on really. I think in some ways it's always been like a background thing in my life and I've never really like thought about the impact that it's had. I've spent most of my time with my mum and not so much with my dad"*. Victoria explained that she had a challenging relationship with her

father, which she attributed to a lack of time spent together and poor communication. As such, this may have contributed to her decision not to include the military in her self-portrait and relational map.

These children identified that the importance of the military is governed by the effect it has on their lives. Therefore, for veteran service children like Anna, their parents' service now has little impact because it no longer dictates them moving or their parents being away for extended periods. This suggests that for some veteran service children, the military undergoes a waning of importance after the transition to becoming a military veteran family.

5.2.3 Awareness and knowledge of the military

The children's awareness and knowledge of the military stems from their parents' position within it. This can be broken down into details about their duration in the military, rank and job roles, and uniform.

5.2.3.1 Duration

Those with parents who were currently serving as a full-time commitment had been doing so for significant time periods. Many children were aware of the duration of their parents' military careers, identifying that many of their fathers "*went into the Army at a pretty early age"* and as such, have *"served all my life".*

For the three children who were part of veteran dual serving couples, it was their father who remained in service. They explained that whilst their mothers had served – for comparatively shorter periods to their fathers – they had left the military due to becoming mothers.

Several of the children were also aware that their serving parent was retiring from the military, having served what is a full career of 22 years for a senior ranked soldier in the British Army. These children provided details of timeframes and similar roles their fathers were looking at taking up within a civilian context. This suggests that the children have been informed of, or possibly been involved in, future planning as a family unit. Similarly, it also suggests that the serving parents recognise the impact that their service has on their children.

5.2.3.2 Rank and job roles

The children also readily shared details about rank and job roles, past and present. Indeed, many were aware of their parents' current rank and how that fitted within the rank structure of the two Services. This is not surprising as rank forms the backbone of the military's structure and is a fundamental aspect of military life.

However, the children explained that whilst they were open in discussing rank – and indeed were aware of the ramifications of rank – their parents' respective positions did not matter to them in school. A notable exception to this was for Izzy, who had attended a military school abroad. Her experience was that male service children boasted about rank incessantly.

> *When you've been in a military school for 2 years and all they've got to talk about is 'My parents are better than you'. Like, the annoying boys brag about their parents. Never the girls. They are always like 'My dad flies a Spitfire' and then someone else is like 'My dad flies a jumbo jet'. Then somebody else is like 'That's nothing compared to what my dad does. My dad is like the boss in the military'. And at that point, I'm just like 'Be quiet!'.*

This suggests there is a potential difference in the importance of rank between non-military and military schools; perhaps as a mechanism for service children to self-differentiate in a majority military setting.

5.2.3.3 Uniform

Across the children's responses to the various activities, they consistently depicted their military parents in various iterations of military dress or aspects of military dress. The images below (figure 5.2) show two different children's representations of their parents in army combat dress (left hand side image) and in barrack dress (right hand side image) respectively. Although the Army has multiple orders of dress with variance between regiments; service, combat and barrack dress are the three most identifiable and regarding the latter two, most worn in a day-to-day setting.

Figure 5.2: Two different children's drawings, showing their parents in combat dress (left hand side) and barrack dress (right hand side).

When responding to the question, '*What does being a service child mean to you?*', Noah explained that he was "*going to draw my dad in uniform holding a gun"*. His response included two images of his father. The first was a smaller one depicting his father with a gun (top of figure 5.3). The second one was a larger and more detailed image. In it, his father is depicted wearing a dress cap, his medals and combat dress. This collection of items would not typically be worn together, suggesting that Noah created a composite and personal image of his father. As such, he brought together elements of the past (previous deployments) and the present (uniform, medals) in his response.

Figure 5.3: Noah's depiction of his father in response to the question, *'What does being a service child mean to you?',* with annotations from Noah's verbal explanation and labels by me.

For Myles, getting the details correct on his mother's uniform was very important. Like Noah, he chose to draw his serving mother in response to the activity, '*What does being a service child mean to you?'*. However, to depict her accurately, he sought assistance from his peers. This resulted in a conversation around (female) RAF service dress, reflecting the complexity of military dress and highlighting the children's detailed knowledge of this aspect of military life. Indeed, through the group interaction (figure 5.4), it is clear that the children built upon the pre-existing knowledge of others, creating an engaging learning dialogue which resulted in a more accurate depiction than Myles could have drawn alone.

Myles: *I need help. What does the RAF hat look like again?*

Sophia: *There are different types.*

Myles: *I mean the one that's got the thing in the middle of it. Like the golden crown thing here.*

William: *The RAF hats have like an eagle on it.*

Sophia: *They are blue, dark blue.*

William: *They have the queen's crown with an eagle on it. The hats vary by ranks. And the Army ones are different from the RAF ones.*

William *You know the legs for RAF women, they have to wear tights.*

Sophia: *Yeah, but they are like see-through. They are like netted tights.*

William *They have to be black.*

Sophia: *It's not like a sock fabric, it's thin.*

Figure 5.4: Transcript from the group's conversation and Myles's response to the question *'What does being a service child mean to you?'*

5.2.4 *"The service community is like a big family"*: the military as a community

For the service children, the military is a community. It is both a physical and metaphorical place of safety, understanding and belonging. Between individuals within the community, there is a "strong bond", created from shared experiences, culture, knowledge and values (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.5).

In Ishya's response to the activity, '*What does being a service child mean to you?',* she drew and annotated a composite image. In the left centre of the image, she drew a tree with the word 'family'. When asked about this inclusion, Ishya explained that *"The service community is like a big family".* She went on to say that *"The community is really nice. They are really nice to us and they protect us",* reflecting her experiences of the military as a community that protects.

This notion of protection and, by extension, safety, was brought up and discussed by other service children too. Many lived, or had experience of living, on a military patch, often 'behind the wire'. This meant that their immediate locality was secure and off-limits to the public, as to gain access one needed to obtain permission and pass through the guardhouse and security checks. With this came an inherent safety. As the children noted, they had significant freedom in movement, going to other service children's houses or the park on the patch, without direct adult supervision.

When Thomas found out he would no longer be living 'behind the wire', he explained he had felt nervous and apprehensive; *"I've always lived in an RAF base but when I joined here, I felt like 'Ah what is going to happen!?'. Because I've never lived without a wire".* This further demonstrates this notion of safety within the military community. Moreover, Thomas' use of the word 'always' points to the notion that military bases "provide a sense of permanence", and indeed, similarity, when experiencing a continual cycle of change (Lee, 2020, p.169).

The service children also discussed other militarised spaces, also often located 'behind the wire'. These were the 'mess' – a space where military personnel (and on occasions, their families) socialise, eat and live – and the HIVE – a place for military families to receive information, support and guidance. During a conversation with four of the service children, they reflected fondly on their memories of time spent in the mess as a place of enjoyment and as a space to

socialise with other service children. Military features of the built environment were also recounted – "*a big Spitfire in front of it and army cars"* – reinforcing the militarised nature of the space.

Collectively, these spaces are physical manifestations of community – where service children experience understanding and belonging, surrounded by, or in the presence of, their wider military family. Such spaces offer recreation, enjoyment and emotional support. As Gracie explained, "*When you've found your own community of people, you feel a lot more better".*

5.2.5 *"A good thing":* pride in the military

For the children, their military links and community were a source of pride. However, many recognised that these came at a price and could also be a source of conflict.

The children's pride in the military had two focal points. Firstly, several of the children expressed pride in the military as a historic institution. William spoke of the role the RAF played in the Battle of Britain and how that translated into the twenty-first century and his father's role as a pilot. Gracie echoed this, explaining that her step-father is *"actually doing something for the soldiers that died".* This sense of continuation was also spoken about by the children who had multiple generations of their family serve.

Secondly, there was a clear sense of pride in their parents' current role in the military. Several of the children conceptualised the military as something to look up to. Conversations invoked honour, pride and respect; the military as *"a good thing"*. Indeed, Louise conceptualised what the military does as *"making a difference and helping people"*.

5.2.5.1 Manifestations of pride

In addition to the children's conversations and artistic outputs, manifestations of pride also took the form of recounting experiences where they had fundraised for military charities, given school speeches, appeared on local radio, contributed to newsletter articles and led their schools' involvement in Remembrance Day. Regarding the latter, the children reflected on wearing a poppy and the importance of respect. Several also spoke about having laid a wreath on behalf of their schools at their local war memorial, as part of their schools' Act of Remembrance.

For Gracie, her pride in the military was closely intertwined with her identity as a service child, her involvement in the cadets and her future military aspirations.

> *Basically, I've grown up with the Army and my dad's like people who he trains are family to me. His whole reg [regiment] is my family. I'm basically just one of them. They call me by my second name sometimes. They see me as born to be a soldier... I've always wanted to join the Army. Just always.*

5.2.5.2 Complicating military pride

However, for other service children, their feelings of pride were complicated. Victoria was conflicted. During one of our conversations, I referred to a personal experience, having previously informed Victoria that I had lived in America as a child (figure 5.5). This led to her recounting her own experiences whilst visiting America with her father. In it, she echoes his sentiments that pride is derived from active service, rather than service in general.

Me:	*Do you feel 'proud'?*
Victoria	*I don't know. I think that is a difficult one.*
Me:	*It makes me think of the American military culture and people over there are like 'Support our troops'. I don't know if you've experienced that with your American military friends?*
Victoria:	*Yes, it's like everywhere you go and when my dad shows his ID they are like 'Oh thank you for your service' and he's like 'Well, I've never been in active service' and they're like 'Oh cool, thank you'. It's weird.*

Figure 5.5: Extract from a conversation between myself and Victoria about military pride.

Other children explained they were proud of their serving parents but recognised that their occupation was a source of conflict because of the sacrifices required. For these children, they readily identified extended periods of family separation, the requirement to move regularly and risk to life during deployments. Indeed, these identified sacrifices map closely with Segal's conceptualisation of the military as a "greedy institution", demanding a "constellation of requirements" and a "pattern of demands" (1986, p.15). However, what came through strongly

with these children was the *expectation* bound up with these sacrifices. This can be thought of as 'military first, family second', where the operational needs of the military come first, despite the needs of partners and children. As Izzy explained, service children "*just have to cope with it".*

5.3 Service children *"serve in their own way"*

Because of these expectations, service children *"serve in their own way".* Although they do not experience military service in the same way as their serving parents, their experiences of mobility and separation can be conceptualised as forms of service. For these children, their experiences are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice and their lives are shaped by the cyclical nature of these military experiences. However, their feelings associated with the experiences of military life are complex and context driven. They range from excitement, acceptance or ambivalence to frustration and dislike, and opposing emotions are often felt simultaneously.

5.3.1 Experiencing mobility

As a group, the service children experienced differing patterns of movement due to service requirements. For some, they moved frequently between different parts of England, often returning to similar locations. For others, their patterns of movement were global in scale, including Cyprus, Germany, the Falkland Islands, Saudi Arabia and the Netherlands. These patterns of movement reflect the military context of movement; driven by occupational requirements and shaped by the rank, job role and skill set of serving personnel.

The number of house moves ranged from zero (in the case of Victoria, who never lived with her serving parent) up to seven, with the average across the group being five. Five of the group (Gracie, Georgie, Anna, Maria and Louise) had experienced seven moves each. With four of that group being 13 or 14 years old, these children had therefore moved on average, once every 2 years, with Louise who was younger, moving even more frequently. Both Gracie and Georgie were also moving within the next 3 months following the research, which would take their total to eight moves each.

5.3.1.1 Moving, losing and making friends

The service children unanimously felt that moving meant losing friends. All the children included 'friends' or named close friends in their relational maps and losing friendships was a recurrent theme across several of the children's free responses to *'What does being a service child mean to you?'.* Indeed, Maria chose to respond to this activity with annotated prose, where she explained that *"It's also more difficult to make friends with moving all the time especially now I'm older. I've never had a 'best friend' that I've known for years and had a connection with people"*.

Several of the children explained that staying connected with old friends was a challenge, particularly in their younger years. In the case of friendships with other service children, this challenge was exacerbated as they too were moving regularly, often to different countries. As such, the children reflected on the finality of their loss, citing that they *"can't speak to them anymore"* and they *"don't see them again".*

Surprisingly, the increased connectivity offered with technology did not impact the children's losses. Georgie noted this in her response to *'What does being a service child mean to you?'* and went on to explain that,

> *It is really hard to keep in contact. Snaps [photo messages sent on the social media platform Snapchat] keep you going back and forth but WhatsApp you have to have something to talk about. When you're not at the same school, for the first part of it you'll keep in contact and you'll be fine but then you'll drift and you don't really notice.*

Unusually for the group, Sheena had been able to retain sporadic contact with old friends due to her mum signing her up for PGL trips (outdoor adventure education courses) with *"other army kids"* after she last moved. Sheena explained that *"Although I haven't been in ages, when I do go on one, we catch up. We still lose contact, but I do see them there"*. This suggests the benefit of such residentials to retain, and perhaps also make, new ties of friendship with other service children also experiencing mobility.

5.3.1.2 Having new experiences

Although Ishya expressed that *"when you move away from your friends, you're sad",* she readily spoke about the new experiences that she gained from moving. As well as making new friends, she identified living in and visiting new places, concluding that moving is, for her, *"a privilege"*. Having new experiences was also spoken about by other service children who had lived in other parts of the UK and abroad. From Wales to the Falkland Islands, these children embraced the change in environment and the chance to experience a different culture. Indeed, Anna felt like she was *"on holiday"* during her first couple of weeks in the Middle East.

5.3.1.3 Looking ahead - what does the future hold?

Three children knew they would be moving in the next 3 months, both abroad (to Cyprus) and within England. However, given the ubiquity of service-related mobility, others felt it was only a matter of time before they moved again. Several of the children explained that although they are used to it, *"it's still really hard",* and as such, they still feel a range of emotions including excitement, sadness, stress and anger. Indeed, for William, he hoped for his dad to get a posting to Cyprus as he was enthused by the weather and the history. Whilst for Izzy, she was resentful of a future move, explaining that she would "*be really angry"* if she moved again.

Sheena and Georgie both spoke about their respective family's hopes of purchasing their *"forever home"* and living together. Notably, the timeline for purchasing these homes and settling down was tied up with their parents retiring from the military, highlighting the reality that a serving military family cannot often be simultaneously settled and together.

5.3.1.4 "He goes away, so we don't have to move": experiencing being settled

Whilst service-related mobility is a fundamental aspect of military life, there is a growing trend in unaccompanied postings (where the serving parent moves, leaving their family behind) and 'weekending' (where the serving parent lives and works away during the week, returning to live in the family home over the weekend) (see section 2.10.4 for further detail). Weekending and unaccompanied postings allow for service families to 'settle' and avoid the continued regularity of moving homes. However, this can come with longer and/or more frequent periods of

separation from the serving parent. This means that the second fundamental military experience – separation – is often closely intertwined with mobility.

As a group, the service children had experienced, or were experiencing, a significant range of types of separation, stemming from the occupational requirements of the military and family decisions. Because of this variety, the children's experiences of separation are complex, individualised and context driven. As such, the following section shall look at five of the children's – Sheena, Victoria, Charlotte and Sophia, and Gracie – differing experiences to highlight this.

Sheena: settled and separated

Sheena had been 'settled' for the longest of all the service children, having lived in, or very near, her current army accommodation for 9 years. She knew this was unusual and identified herself as *"lucky".* However, she explained that during those 9 years, her dad had undertaken multiple periods of weekending and long postings to parts of Europe and Africa, resulting in him being away from his family for significant periods of time.

Victoria: separated by seas

Victoria had also experienced prolonged periods of separation, due to her serving father moving to North America for work whilst she stayed living with her mother in England. This meant that many months, or years, passed before Victoria saw her father, leaving her with feelings of frustration.

> *When I was a lot younger, my dad was away with training in different places. Then there was a period of time when he was sometimes close, but not close enough that I was able to see him all the time. Then he went to [North America] and then 5 years later I was like 'When are you coming back?' and he said, 'When you're 11'. But then I got to 11 and he was like 'On second thoughts, I've probably got to come back in a year or two' and I was like 'Argh, ok cool'.*

Charlotte and Sophia: new to weekending

For Charlotte and Sophia, their serving parents had started weekending within the last couple of months. For Charlotte, she felt she adapted to this change easily as she already only saw her

father at weekends due to her parents' divorce. However, she did note that *"Sometimes he misses something really big that happens and that's really sad"*. For Sophia, she was finding the adjustment more challenging. Although she understood her parents' decision to provide stability to her and her young sister, she reflected that she would "*always see my dad every evening. But now he's like 'See you' and then it's a week. It's hard"*.

Gracie: moving around England

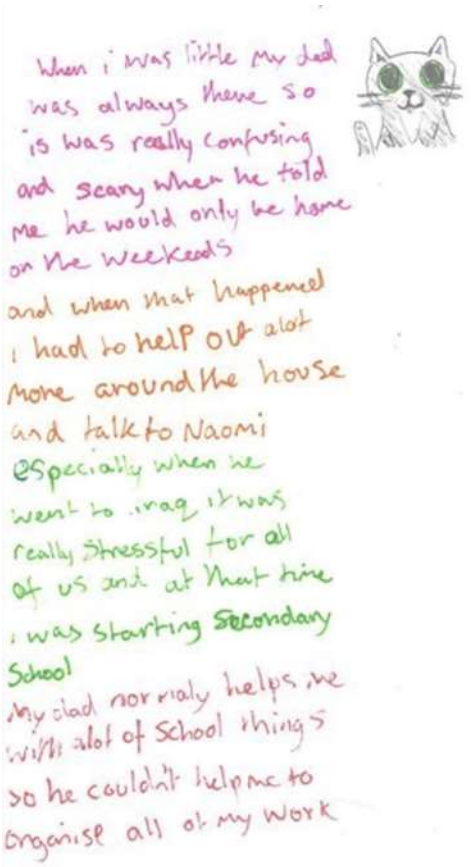
Gracie has frequently moved within England (indeed she moved again a week after she was involved in the research), although she has never moved abroad. As she explained,

> *Every time my dad has had to move country, my mum has stayed here. She basically tells him he has to go by himself. She's got really good friends in England and like a new country would be very different for her and she'd get stressed. It would be hard for me and for my sister.*

As these intertwined experiences of mobility and separation highlight, the reality is complex and nuanced for service children. There is both the repetition of separation, but also the nuances inherent in the experiences.

5.3.2 Experiencing separation

Although the theme of separation was threaded throughout the time I spent with the children, I had also specifically planned a free response activity, rather than a prescriptive task, to engage the children in thinking about what they perceive to be the impacts of service-related separation. As such, the children's responses varied with drawings, annotated prose and mind maps (individual and group), all supplemented by discussion. As Maria's 'free response' (figure 5.6) shows, she collated her experiences of 'weekending' (as discussed above) with her experiences of her father's deployment to Iraq into her response.



When I was little my dad was always there so it was really confusing and scary when he told me he would only be home on the weekends

And when that happened I had to help out a lot more around the house and talk to Naomi [younger sister]

Especially when he went to Iraq it was really stressful for all of us and at that time I was starting secondary school

My dad normally helps me with a lot of school things so he couldn't help me to organise all of my work

Figure 5.6: Maria's 'free response' to the theme of separation. Her prose includes a drawing of her pet cat, given to her by her parents when her father started weekending.

Although several of the children spoke about these experiences of weekending and unaccompanied postings, the experiences of deployments were more readily shared and discussed. Therefore, this following section will consider the children's experiences of separation, through their experiences of operational deployments. In this context, an operational deployment is an extended period (often between 3 and 9 months) when serving personnel are away from home, performing operational duties as required by the Armed Forces. This can be in hostile or friendly countries and can involve extended periods of training. Within the literature, deployment has been conceptualised as a 'cycle', made up of several stages (White et al., 2011). For the children involved in this research, they focused on three stages – 'before deployment', 'during deployment', and 'after deployment' – as highlighted by Sarah's drawing

below (figure 5.7). Therefore, the following section will look in greater depth at these three stages in turn.

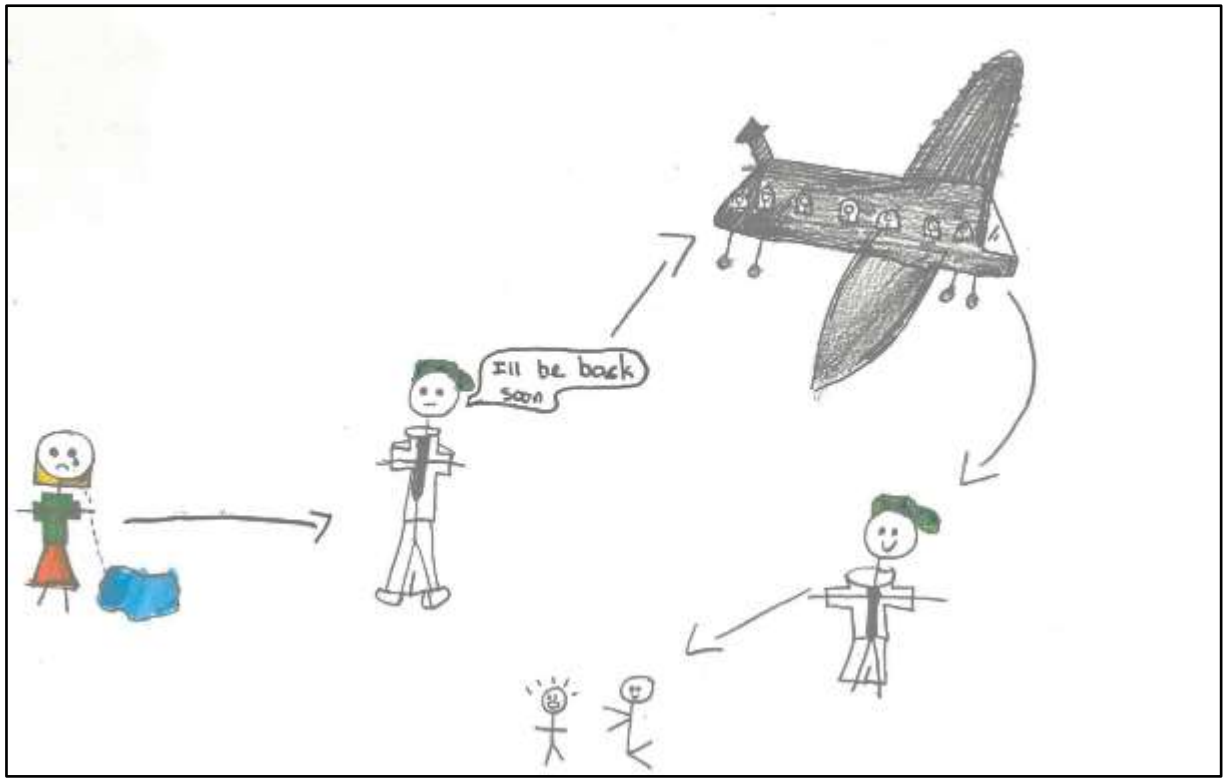


Figure 5.7: Section of Sarah's drawing from her 'free response' to the theme of separation. The drawing shows three stages of deployment.

5.3.2.1 Experiences before deployment

As a group, the children spoke comparatively little about the period before a deployment, instead choosing to focus on the periods of during and after. A notable exception to this was William. In his free response to *'What does being a service child mean to you?',* he chose to depict his father at the point of leaving for a deployment (figure 5.8). As such, William was deliberately choosing to focus on a memory, something that held significance for him. When asked about the drawing, William explained that whenever his father leaves, they would "*do this thing [a silly face] and say goodbye"* and so that is what he wanted to draw. This suggests the importance William attached to this experience, perhaps conceptualising it as some sort of pre-deployment ritual.

Figure 5.8: Drawing by William depicting his serving father, at the point of separation, with the words ‘Goodbye Daddy’.

5.3.2.2 Experiences during deployment

The second stage of the deployment cycle – during deployment – was spoken about at great length by all the children. For the children, this period ranged from 3 months up to 9 months and as such, represents a significant period, or periods, of absence from their serving parent. The impacts of which are both practical and emotional, as exemplified by Georgie’s free response (figure 5.9). The following section shall therefore look at the practical and emotional impacts in turn before looking at how the children managed their separation, through material objects and differing forms of communication.

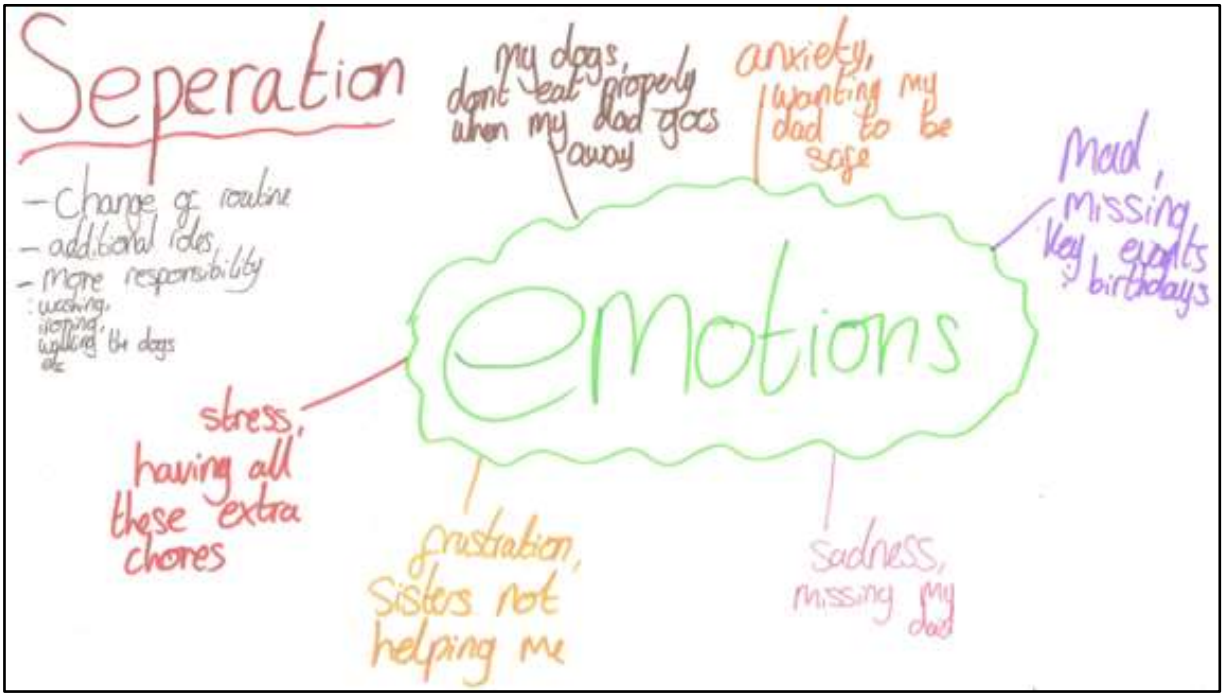


Figure 5.9: Spider diagram by Georgie showing the practical and emotional impacts of separation.

Practical impacts of separation: changes in routine and hobbies

Separation brings changes to family routine (Baverstock, 2023; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; RNRMCF, 2009). However, how this looked in practice differed across the group. Some service children spent longer periods at school, going to before- and after-school clubs whilst others spent extra time with family members and friends. Ishya's mother was not employed during her father's separations, so they ended up spending more time together; building and strengthening their relationship with days out, to help Ishya *"feel happier".* Izzy's parents, when they both served and had periods of separation, employed a full-time nanny to look after her and her younger sister. Whilst Anna's parents leaned on the military community and as such, Anna and her siblings would go to other service children's houses for short periods, something which Anna fondly reflected on.

The literature identifies that during periods of separation, children miss out on activities and hobbies, often due to the logistical constraints of becoming a one parent family (Baverstock, 2023; Children's Commissioner, 2018). Whilst this was true for some of the children, others started new hobbies. For Ishya, she joined Girlguiding and started Taekwondo lessons during her father's 6-month deployment abroad. Similarly, for Noah, he had to *"give up football*

because my dad normally teaches me" but instead started tag-rugby and *"turned into a massive gamer".* Although the children did not specify where these activities took place, it can be surmised that, aside from gaming, these activities took place outside the home – either in school or dedicated spaces. This suggests that for some service children, separation may bring about new opportunities and interests.

"I always feel like I have so much to do": increase in responsibilities

For many of the service children, particularly those in secondary school, separation meant a notable increase in responsibilities. The children commonly referred to an increase in chores around the house – feeding the family pet, helping with preparing meals and cleaning. However, several also discussed the emotional responsibility they felt they must take on during separations. For Gracie, this was supporting her younger sister and her mother. She felt that her mother "*kind of relies on me. I feel like you have to take on a role, like helping".* Other children also spoke of looking after siblings with additional needs and balancing the increased responsibilities with their own interests and lives. As Georgie explained, "*I always feel like I have so much to do... It's frustrating because it all gets put on me".*

These caring responsibilities for siblings and/or their remaining parents are significant; both emotionally and practically. As such, it can be argued that, during deployments, these service children go through periods of being military young carers (Children's Society, 2017). Although none of the children identified with this label (see section 2.10.2 for challenges in identification), the significant caring implications that these children spoke about is noteworthy.

'Minutes take hours, hours take days': emotional impacts of separation

The emotional impacts of separation are often tied with the practical ones. Alongside sharing experiences of increased emotional responsibility, the service children also spoke and reflected on feelings of loss, disappointment, sadness, anxiety, frustration, anger and upset. Several of the children noted the impact their age had on their experiences, explaining that when they were younger, they *"didn't really notice it"* or *"understand it"*, thinking it was *"kind of normal"*.

One of the groups – Maria, Daisy, Sheena and Georgie – also spoke about how their family pets had an emotional response to the deployment, mirroring their own feelings. Sheena explained

her dogs 'looked down' and were less excitable. Building on this, she explained that she "*feel[s] sorry for my dog because I feel like he thinks my dad has left him".* Similarly, Georgie shared that her dogs, *"don't eat properly when my dad is away"*.

The feeling of loss came through strongly for some of the children. Although Thomas was living with his step-mum, he explained that due to his father's current deployment he has *"zero [parents] since my dad's gone".* Similarly, this idea of loss was raised by William, explaining that he *"can't cope with just one parent"*. This suggests these children see their father's physical absence as something complete, where they no longer function as their parent during the separation.

All the children raised their feelings of disappointment and sadness when their serving parents missed key events – predominantly their birthdays – due to deployments. Several of the children referred to specific birthdays where they remember "*opening presents and stuff but he's not there".* Daisy also explained that she "*feels bad for my dad because he's away too. Like last year, he was away for his own birthday. He was like alone and away from his family and we are all at home. We're missing him but he's away and alone"*.

Although the children were forthcoming about sharing their experiences with me, several explained that they prefer to distance themselves from their experiences of deployment, potentially as a coping mechanism. As such, they try to *"forget about"* and *"never really think about"* the deployment whilst it is happening. Charlotte explained that *"When my dad goes away, I cry usually. When my friends remind me of him, I get sad. I think 'Can you please just be quiet?! My dad's gone and I don't want to talk about it'"*. Thomas expressed similar sentiments; "*You don't want to be mean, but you want them to be quiet. You may shout because you are angry. I've never cried of pain, but I cry of emotions and sadness"*.

In addition to distancing themselves from the experience, several children also reflected that their experiences of time differ during a deployment. Louise conceptualised her experiences using a metaphor of a rollercoaster. As figure 5.10 shows (her free response to the theme of separation), Louise wrote that her experience of deployments is *'up and down emotionally, a loop the loop when it ends'*, also noting that *'rollercoasters go at different speeds'.*

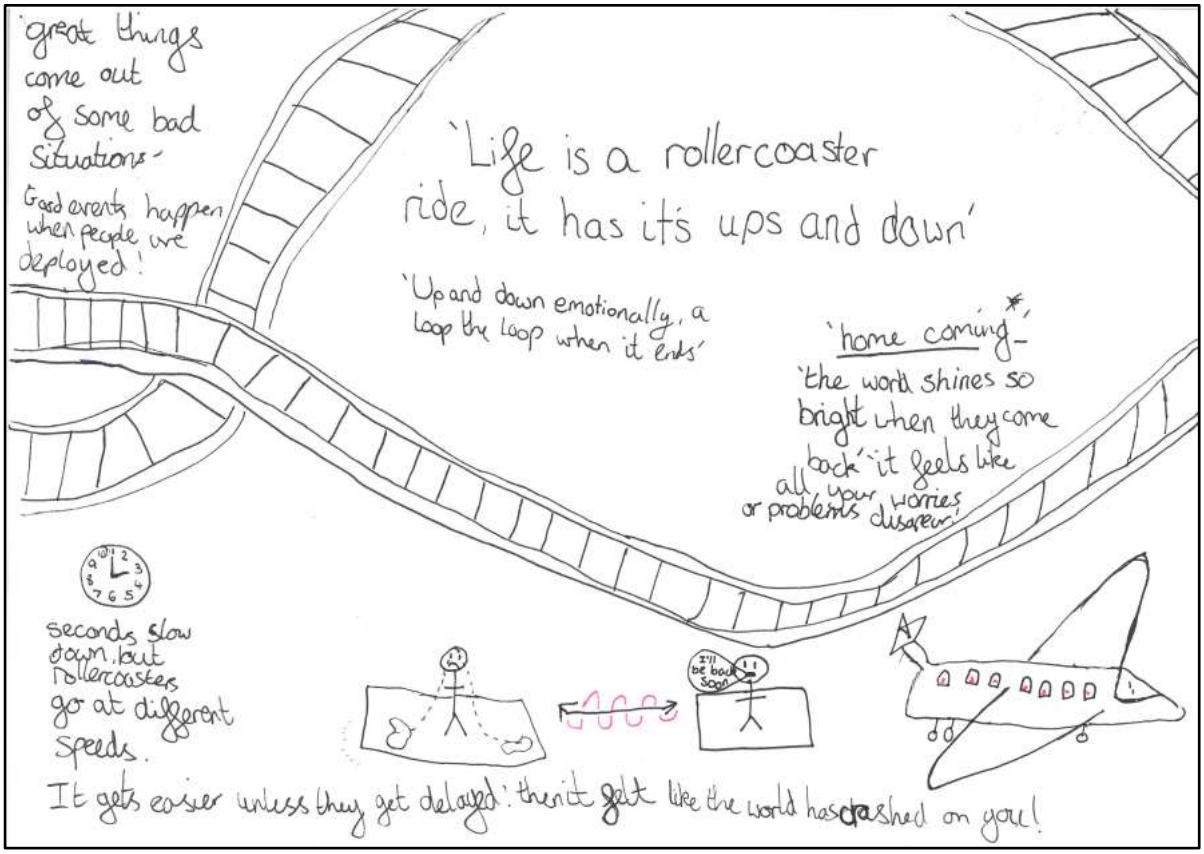


Figure 5.10: Annotated drawing by Louise, created as a 'free response' to the theme of separation.

Similarly, Sarah picked up on this idea of the inconsistency of time, noting in her free response that *'minutes take hours, hours take days, days take years and years take centuries'*. When asked about her drawing, Sarah explained that during a deployment, time is *"a bit different. It's really slow".*

Managing separation: materiality and communications

The service children managed the physical separation from their serving parents in differing ways. For several, they spoke of the emotional attachment and support they had from physical objects, often made or purchased especially for the deployment. Others spoke about the differing forms of communication they used to keep in touch with their serving parents.

Louise, whose father was on a 9-month deployment in the Middle East during the research, talked about her *"huggable hero"* which, as she explained, is *"a teddy but it's got a picture of my daddy on".* Through her attendance and engagement with a group for service children with

parents on deployments (run through her local HIVE), she also received a teddy bear. As she explained, the bear was *"only for deployed children to have over Christmas".* This was part of 'Christmas smiles'; an initiative run by Little Troopers, a military charity, to support service children who have a parent deployed over the holidays (RAF Families Federation, 2023). Indeed, Louise was so animated about her objects that, after the research session, she took me to her locker to show me both the bear and a keyring that her father had given her on a previous deployment. By her choosing to do this, it reinforces the value Louise felt in having material objects to support her emotional wellbeing during the lengthy separation from her father.

Ishya explained that before her father's last deployment, he *"made a teddy that when you pressed the button, you'd hear his voice"*. Similarly, during Izzy's father's 6-month deployment to the Middle East, he "*recorded a story on a CD, the Gruffalo. So, every night I'd press the button and lie in my really small bed. It made it a bit easier"*. Both these experiences highlight the emotional support these children gained from having a mechanism where they could hear their fathers' voices and in the case of Ishya, having something tactile to hold.

Although the children valued the one-way communication given by the CD and teddy, the children also used other methods of communication during deployments. Most commonly, the children called, messaged or emailed their serving parents. However, Ishya and Thomas had also written postcards and letters to their serving parents, facilitated by their previous and current schools.

Whilst the children clearly valued communication during separation, many were frustrated by the sporadic and limited nature of it. Many of the parents' deployments had significant time differences meaning that the children were often in bed, or at school, when it was a suitable time to call. This severely limited their ability to speak to their serving parents. Other service children spoke of using asynchronous messaging, meaning that they can *"still get a bit of contact"* but as they pointed out, it limited effective conversation. Notably, these challenges were also raised in a recent report looking at communication amongst naval families during separation (Wood et al., 2022).

Victoria found the communication with her father during his deployments *"really, really bad"*. As such, she felt it contributed to her poor relationship with him. She explained that she *"doesn't*

know where he is most of the time" which drives her frustration, but also her concern over his safety, citing one instance when he was serving abroad during heightening political tensions. Like the challenges raised above, worry over parental safety, particularly if communication is sporadic or suddenly cut off, was also raised in the report, with the authors noting children's worsening anxiety when communication was poor (Wood et al., 2022).

5.3.2.3 After deployment

Children recounted their experiences of 'after deployment' or 'homecoming' with enthusiasm. Many had made posters, displayed at celebration parties with family and friends. There was a clear emphasis on social activities, re-establishing their relationships and doing *"special things"* as a family or 1-on-1. The children spoke of feelings of excitement, joy and happiness during this period.

Materiality was again important for many of the children, with several receiving gifts of food, toys and musical instruments. Other children received geographically specific items, tokens of deployment. Noah explained that his *"dad brings back at least £10 in every currency of wherever he goes"* whilst Sheena's father contributes to her rock collection, as *"a reminder about where he's been and that he came back"*. For others, it is less materialistic. As Thomas counted down the *"127 days"* of his father's deployment, he simply looked forward to "*just a warm hug*".

5.4 *Who am I?* Understanding the service child identity

Service children's 'service' – their experiences of mobility and separation – shapes their sense of self, creating unique iterations of their service child identity. However, how the service children related to this aspect of their identity greatly varied within the group.

Service children's relationship with their service child identity can be viewed on a spectrum, from acceptance to conflict. On one end, there were children who were outward, embracing and proud of their identity, highlighting the importance the military has had, and continues to have, in shaping their positive sense of self. On the other end, some of the children were ambivalent, undecided or conflicted by the term. Whilst not rejecting their service child identity, they were vocal in the negative impacts their 'service' had brought. For these children, it could be argued

that their relationship to their service child identity fluctuated and as such, they were grappling with what it meant to be a service child in their own personalised contexts.

5.4.1 *"It made me how I am"*: the military and the service child identity

In the children's self-portraits and relational maps, most of the children included the military in what was important to them. However, Sarah and Izzy both wrote 'military' alongside their perceived qualities such as kind, friendly, helpful, chatty and 'good friend maker'. Indeed, Izzy went on to explain that the military is *"like it's just part of us".* Sarah agreed, explaining that being a service child is *"a huge part"* of her identity.

Developing from this, other children felt that being a service child was a *"big part of growing up"* and as such has been a fundamental factor in shaping their identities. Indeed, for Georgie, the military "*made me how I am"* and as such, the military was, for her, a *"part of me. I'm an army child"*. On Louise's free responses, she included a cut-out from a service children's newsletter saying, *'I am proud of myself'* and next to her poem wrote *'I am proud to have a military dad'.* For these children, their service child identity held great importance and they derived a strong sense of pride from it.

5.4.2 *"There's so much to it"*: grappling with the service child identity

Other children were conflicted. Although these children had previously raised positive aspects of their lives and experiences as service children, they also held particularly negative emotions about being a service child. They attributed this to the regularity of having to move and, as such, not being able to stay with their friends. Noah explained that *"Being a service child sucks. It is bad. You move all over the place and you won't be able to stay with your friends"*. Similarly, Daisy clarified that she did not *"want to be an army child"* as *"you have to move a lot and I don't want to. I don't want friends to move. I get sad by that and pissed off"*. Whilst this suggests a rejection of her service child identity, Daisy did previously identify several positives of being a service child. This suggests she has a complex and fluctuating relationship to this aspect of her identity.

For others, they were ambivalent or unsure about their service child identity. Maria explained that she *"hadn't heard of the label"* and *"hadn't really thought about"* her identity as a service

child. However, after listening to others in the group, and reflecting on her own experiences, she explained she wanted to *"put it on"* her self-portrait. This suggests that Maria was aware of her identity as a service child, shaped by her experiences, but had not realised that there was a 'label' for it. As such, it could be argued that the service child aspect of her identity was latent or dormant, as she had previously not reflected on or challenged it, unlike Daisy.

Victoria found identifying with the terms 'service child' or 'child of a veteran' particularly fraught. She explained that,

> *I think because of my experiences, I feel a bit like 'I'm too much of this to be that but I'm also too much of that to be this'. So, it's a bit of a difficult thing. I'm like 'Well I can't use that, because it's not me but then I can't use that because that's not me either'. I think that kind of gets a bit confusing and annoying because why can't I just pick something?*

Because of Victoria's more atypical military experiences – never moving and not living with her military parent – she was grappling with whether she 'fitted' into what she had assigned as parameters of what it means to be a service child. Indeed, throughout our conversation about her identity, she explained she thought the parameters were based on experiences and as she had not "*had those experiences"* she *"can't be it".* However, she nuanced this by explaining that she equally did not feel that she was not a service child – "*you can't say you're normal in a way because you're not because of stuff that's happened"* – ultimately concluding that *"there's so much to it".*

5.4.3 Characterising the service child identity

Within the literature, it has been argued that service children possess certain characteristics, or qualities of self, stemming from their military backgrounds (see section 2.5.3). As discussed in section 2.5, there are several discourses on service children where differing qualities are seen as an integral part of being a service child. One discourse views service children through a deficit lens, as 'vulnerable' and 'disadvantaged', whilst the opposing discourse conceptualises service children using a strengths-based model, often championing militarised characteristics like 'brave' or 'resilient' (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Hanna, 2020; Lee, 2020).

As part of the resources available to the service children throughout the sessions, a printed copy of the resource bank (figure 5.11) of experiences and qualities, derived from the literature (in bold), was available for the children to engage with and discuss.

Resilience	**Losing friends**	**Learning the same thing twice**	**Responsibility**
Easier to make friends	**More experiences**	**Having gaps in learning**	**Adaptability**
Harder to make friends	**Growing up in different countries, seeing the world**	**Pride**	**Travelling**
Worry	*Friends all over England*	*Brave*	*Different*

Figure 5.11: Resource bank of experiences and qualities of service children, derived from the literature (in bold) and added by the children (in italics).

All the groups engaged with the resource bank, often using it to spark conversations or using aspects of it to create their own free responses. I had deliberately left the bottom four boxes empty to indicate that there could be more experiences or qualities to add. Indeed, the four words or phrases written in italics were added by children in the first group I worked with. The children's engagement with the terms was insightful. Throughout discussions, they rejected, challenged and related to the different words and phrases, citing their own experiences and feelings. This suggests two findings. Firstly, that there is an overly simplistic view of the characteristics of service children. Rather than a binary model, opposing characteristics can be identified with simultaneously. Secondly, that within the discourses, children's agency in their construction of their service child identity has been downplayed and/or not addressed sufficiently.

5.4.3.1 "Oh yeah, I change a lot": being adaptable and responsible

Being 'adaptable' and 'responsible' are seen as fundamental characteristics, or qualities, of service children. The service children cited different contexts where they have been adaptable and/or responsible, including when moving schools, making new friends, solo travel and periods of separation from serving parents alongside the additional caring responsibilities that often

come with this. Within these differing contexts, the children explained that they could *"adapt easily"* to changes because of the repetition of change they experience.

Gracie also reflected that her emotions change too; *"Oh yeah, I change a lot. Like sometimes my feelings. Sometimes I'm alright and then the next, my thoughts about my dad leaving the Army and I get a bit down".* Similarly, when talking about being adaptable, Victoria felt her selfhood shifts and changes based on context; *"I think I find it quite easy to just almost, not entirely become someone else, but change parts of myself to fit the situation".* Because of the demands of military life, service children have, in a sense, been forced to be adaptable and responsible; the requirements place upon them have necessitated these qualities.

5.4.3.2 "Probably in some ways, yes. I'm not really sure": being resilient and brave

In addition to being adaptable and responsible, discourses on service children portray them as 'resilient' or 'brave' in the face of their adversarial experiences. This is exemplified by the conceptualisation of service children as 'little troopers'; the name of a prominent service children's charity and within wider cultural discourses (see section 2.5.3 and Lee, 2020 for critique).

For the children who engaged with these characteristics on the resource bank, they held a mixture of views. Louise felt that "*A lot of military children are quite brave because our parents go away a lot and we have to start new schools too many times"*. Like with the qualities of adaptability and being responsible, Louise's comment – and her use of the word 'have' – reinforces the idea that service children have little choice over these characteristics.

However, other children simply rejected the word and any association to it, whilst other were ambivalent, suggesting they were "*probably in some ways, yes. I'm not really sure".* Notably, Gracie felt that being a service child actually made her less resilient:

> *I think less resilient. When your parents are away at war or something and you haven't heard from them for ages, you're kind of losing confidence. Because there's not many people that support you. It makes me less resilient.*

As Lee argues, presenting children as "home-front heroes" where children are "valued for their ability to cope with adversity" is "problematic" (Lee, 2020, p.13). Indeed, how do children like

Gracie – who do not fit this prevailing narrative – navigate their feelings and understand their service child identity?

5.4.3.3 "Something I definitely feel is different": being different, being normal

The characteristic that generated most discussion was 'different', added by the first group. Different, alongside the characteristic of 'normal', sparked considerable debate and discussion amongst the groups. Many of the children used the related terms interchangeably and often voiced opposing views to their peers. From the discussions, it was clear that these qualities resonated with many of the children. Indeed, when looking at the resource bank, Victoria remarked, "*I think probably the one that stands out most for me and something I definitely feel is different"*.

Figure 5.12 is a section of a conversation that one group had around the term 'different'.

Me:	*Do you think that being a service child makes you different?*
Thomas:	*Ohhhh what a hard question.*
Sophia:	*I don't know. Maybe because you have friends that come here [current school], only stayed for 3 months and then left again. I might have maybe had more experiences.*
William:	*Yes, it does make you different. Being a normal civilian is a word for a normal civilian being a service child is for service children.*
Myles:	*I think I'm different because I'm a service child. And I've moved so many times.*
Sophia:	*We don't really have a choice whether we move or not. So if they [non-service child] wanted to move schools, then they could move schools. But we don't have a choice. When we move somewhere else, we can't go back to the same school.*

Figure 5.12: Extract of a group conversation discussing being different.

The way the children conceptualised and spoke about difference was through three inter-related ways: (1) identification with the 'service child' label, (2) uniqueness of the military related experiences and (3) comparison with others. This suggests that the service child identity is relational and experience driven.

As the conversation developed, Sophia also brought up about feeling 'normal' explaining that *"Some things feel different but you also kind of feel normal"*. Izzy, in a different group, felt differently; *"We are not what we seem. Like we might look like normal children but if you look deeper, you realise that we're not normal"*. Louise disagreed, explaining that *"I think we are normal. Like we aren't that different"*.

For the children, these ideas around difference and normalcy are closely bound to their military experiences and how these were perceived as different, or unique, when compared to their non-service peers. As Daisy explained, *"We just haven't had a normal childhood. Like most people just stay in one place and have one solid friend their whole life"*. When speaking about her peers and friendships, Victoria explained that she "*always felt quite different from people around me"* as her "*friends couldn't really understand about having a parent so far away and not being able to see them all the time".* These children identified both *being* different – through their experiences – and *feeling* different – when their experiences did not match those of their friends, or their friends did not understand.

In addition to a lack of understanding from friends, Sheena also felt, *"to some extent"*, the same about her family members; *"like my mum, she doesn't really understand it. It's not how she grew up"*. This idea that you "*have to be an army child to understand how it feels"* reinforces the suggestion that service children might always feel different because their fundamental life experiences cannot be fully understood by others who are not service children.

5.4.4 Theorising the service child identity

The findings of this chapter highlight that there is a clear rationale for developing the concept of the service child identity. Whilst there is little literature within the field of service children to draw on, there are works in the broader field of identity which can be a useful theoretical framing. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter presents the concept of the service child identity, based on the findings and in dialogue with James Paul Gee's work on identity (2000; 2017).

5.4.4.1 Relational

Firstly, there is the concept of a relational identity. According to Gee, this is a 'classificatory label' and as such, is defined "in terms of relations, contrasts or oppositions between different types of people" (2017, p.87). The children within the service child identity label are different to those who are not service children. Moreover, relational identities are "often imposed on or assigned to people" (Gee, 2017, p.87). Indeed, the service children who encompass this label have no choice – it is assigned to them due to the existence of a military parent or parents.

Gee argues that relational identities can "exist in three separate ways: (1) a classificatory label that other people apply to you, but which you reject or don't much care about; (2) a label that you own and identify with; (3) a label you are conflicted about" (2017, p.87). This is a fundamental point for the service child identity. As section 5.3 highlights, all the service children involved in this study fitted into one of the three ways – acceptance (5.4.1), ambivalence (5.4.2) or conflict (5.4.2).

Because of the lack of choice service children have in *being* service children, it suggests that the service child identity can also be conceptualised as a 'Nature-identity' (or N-identity); a state in which the individual has no control over – they have not done anything to accomplish it (Gee, 2000). However, in the case of any N-identity, they "gain their force as identities through the work of institutions", which in this case, is the military (Gee, 2000, p.102). Indeed, the service child identity exists because of the relationship between the child and the military. Without the military, the identity would not exist.

Whilst Gee's work provides a useful theoretical framing, it does not attend to the other fundamental findings from the data – the importance of context and the children's agency. Therefore, I propose that the concept of the service child identity is relational, but also contextual and child-led.

5.4.4.2 Contextual

The service child identity is contextual. Service children's 'service' – their experiences of mobility and separation – shapes their sense of self, creating unique iterations of their service child identity. Whilst the service children shared military-related experiences, they occurred

within each child's unique context. The differences in these contexts made the experiences both shared and individualised and contributed to differing approaches to how the service children made sense of their lives. To conceptualise the service child identity as contextual accommodates the diversity that service children experience whilst grouped under one label.

5.3.4.3 Child-led

Closely linked to the relational and contextual aspects of the service child identity is it being child-led. Throughout the research, the children engaged with and challenged pre-existing discourses about them. They were forthcoming in their opinions, willing to disagree with peers and share their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. To an extent, they had ownership and agency over what, and how, they shared aspects of their experiences and identities as service children.

By conceptualising the service child identity as child-led, it acknowledges the agency that the service children have in shaping this aspect of their identity and importantly, how this can develop and oscillate over time, something particularly relevant to children of veterans. It offers a more nuanced framing of the service child identity, beyond the imposed narrow discourses of deficit or strength models.

5.4.5 Applying the service child identity

The following chapter takes the concept of the service child identity and looks at it in an educational context. The children's reflections on how they think and feel about school experiences are examined and then analysed through the lens of school belonging. In so doing, I consider whether service children feel they 'belong' within an educational setting through whether their service child identity is recognised and understood and if their service-related needs are met.

6 Findings chapter II

6.1 Outline of the chapter

In this chapter, I answer my second research question; *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* Through the analysis of the multiple data forms generated by the service children, I argue that service children acknowledge and accept that moving schools is an integral part of service life (section 6.2). However, despite the normality of moving, the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive. Many shared their experiences of several challenges due to moving, particularly around continuity of learning and making friends (sections 6.3 and 6.4). For these children, these negative emotions were felt most acutely during the period of transition into their new setting (section 6.5).

In the second part of this chapter, I reflect on and explore the service children's educational experiences through the lens of school belonging; "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). As the theoretical concept has not been previously applied to service children, I use a contextual definition – whether service children's identity is recognised and understood, and whether their service-related needs are met within the school context – to understand their educational experiences.

In doing so, I argue that many of their experiences – governed by schools' "social environment[s]" and played out in school culture and practice – have been positive (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61) (section 6.6). However, from the children's perspective, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support for their service-related needs and for their wider school community to develop a greater awareness and understanding of their service child identity (section 6.7).

6.2 *"It's what it's like to be in the military"*: moving schools as an accepted part of service life

All the service children had attended multiple schools in their educational journeys thus far. Whilst the majority had been within the UK – England specifically – several of the children had experiences of being schooled abroad, including in the Falkland Islands, Saudi Arabia, Brunei,

Germany and the Netherlands. For the service children, moving schools was an accepted and normalised part of service life. As Myles explained, moving schools regularly is *"what it's like to be in the military".*

Perhaps due to the perceived normality of moving schools, the children talked readily about their experiences. Whilst they all engaged with completing their timelines of their educational journeys, very few drew or wrote in response to the other data generation activities focused on their school experiences, preferring instead to engage in group discussion. In these discussions, they made comparisons across their differing schools and with each other, recounting both similarities and differences in their experiences and the thoughts and feelings related to these.

Indeed, the normality of moving was so engrained that Maria, having recently joined her sixth school – with a comparatively low number of service children – explained that *"It's been quite weird. Like I'd never really thought before that some people have lived in only one place but now, I've met a lot more people who have only been to this secondary and their one primary school".* However, despite this 'normality of moving', the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive. Many shared their experiences of several challenges, particularly around continuity of learning and making friends.

6.3 *"It interrupts your learning"*: school mobility and (dis)continuity of learning

Whilst it is typical for a child to move schools at least once in their educational journey (from primary to secondary), service children regularly join schools at atypical times, often in the middle of a school year. Wider literature on mobility suggests that there is a direct causal relationship – high mobility leads to low academic achievement – with other factors (for example, high level of absence, low prior attainment and eligibility for pupil premium funding) also playing a role in determining children's academic outcomes (Demie, 2002; Demie et al., 2002; Dobson et al., 2000; Gibbons & Telhaj, 2011; Strand, 2002). However, in the context of service children, it is less clear cut (see section 2.11.4).

As a result of moving schools, the service children reflected on how mobility *"interrupts your learning"* and identified both gaps in learning and repetition of topics and skills-based learning. This included core subjects. For example, Charlotte had "*only done long division twice in one*

school but long multiplication I've done it in practically every school". Charlotte also had to grapple with differences in pedagogical approaches, explaining that schools *"teach it differently so you don't know how to do it, so you have to keep on trying".*

Several service children self-identified that, due to the gaps, they were now *"bad at"* different subjects. For Gracie, she felt her learning had been severely impacted by both her multiple school moves and her additional learning needs:

> *I just can't take things in well. I find learning hard anyway and the moving around makes it really tricky. I am getting tested for dyslexia soon. There are loads of gaps in my learning so sometimes when I go to school, I don't know what they are talking about. It affects me so much and my mum will blame it on me. I know she wants the best for me but it's not my fault we are moving all the time.*

Given Gracie's experiences, it could be argued that she has a 'double disadvantage' given that "challenges [associated with SEND] are exacerbated by military life" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.73). As her reflections highlight, *"moving around"* made learning *"really tricky"* resulting in *"loads of gaps in learning".* Notably, Gracie, already diagnosed with autism, explained that she is *"getting tested for dyslexia soon".* At the time of the research, Gracie was in Key Stage 3, which echoes previous literature findings in which service children experience delays in obtaining diagnoses and associated support (DSC, 2006).

Some service children can also experience extended periods of time when they are not in formal education. This can also cause gaps in learning. As Sheena explained,

> *I've had to miss a lot of school to move, like to pack everything up and then to go. You have your last day and say goodbye but you're still there for a couple of weeks later. Then you get to the place you're moving to and have to go and see what the school's like first and meet other people.*

As a group, the service children had also experienced *"learning the same thing multiple times".* Although several of the children explained that this led to a sense of apathy and feelings of school being "*tiring and boring",* others relished the experience. For them, the repetition of learning had made them more confident and *"better"* at a subject. Ishya stated that she *"loves*

learning the same things twice" whilst James explained that *"Because of the primary schools I went to, I learnt a lot of stuff twice. Most of it was maths and stuff. I think it's one of the reasons I'm better at maths now".*

6.4 *"You have to keep making friends"*: school mobility and friendships

> *When I talk about moving, people say 'Oh it's fine, you'll make friends, and it won't be that bad' but you have to be an army child to understand how it feels. Moving this much – like I've moved six times – you get used to it but it's still really hard.* Georgie

For the service children, their cyclical experiences of making and losing friends were discussed and reflected on at great length, highlighting the importance of social connection and the impact that service-related mobility has on them. However, the ease with which the children felt they could make new friends was mixed. James, Ishya, Noah, Thomas, Anna, Louise and Chatlotte felt that overall, making friends was relatively easy, as exemplified by James' reflections, *"I've been to lots of schools. Moving between them is pretty easy. Obviously, you miss the friends back in your old school, but you get used to it and make new friends really fast".*

However, the rest of the children felt that for them, making friends was hard. Notably, despite the repetition in their experiences of making friends, many felt it did not make it easier. As William explained, "*I don't think it's easier to make friends. It's harder. It's really hard for me because every time I go, I am so nervous. Even though I've had years of it, I'm still nervous because I don't know anyone".* The challenges of making and maintaining friendships are well documented in the literature, both from the perspective of service children and their parents and carers (see section 2.9.2).

Several of the children attributed their challenges in making friends to different factors; personality, age and having additional needs. Victoria felt she "*struggle[s] to make friends as I don't put myself out there too much".* Similarly, Sheena found her early experiences of trying to make friends in a quick succession of early school moves *"a bit overwhelming"* due to her being *"quiet"* and "*shy",* leaving her *"being that kid in the corner, alone, because I didn't like meeting new people".*

Many of the children felt that "*the older you get, the harder it will be"* as peer friendship groups would become increasingly well established. This reflects Maria's past experiences of moving to secondary school, where she had not "*been able to make friends that easily"* and in the perception of future experiences, as the exchange between William and Sophia (both in Key Stage 2) in figure 6.1 shows.

William:	*Starting in secondary school is probably loads harder.*
Sophia:	*Yes, I think so too. Starting in secondary school would be harder. Like if it's in the first year, it's fine because everyone is new because no-one would have been in Year 6 with everyone else in secondary school.*
William:	*But if you joined in Year 8 it would be so hard because everyone's been together. Everyone's already made friends. You're the new kid and everyone would be like 'Oh look, it's the new kid. He or she doesn't have any friends. Ha ha ha'.*

Figure 6.1: Extract of a conversation between William and Sophia discussing joining a secondary school.

Henry and Gracie, who both have SEND, felt that their additional needs were a barrier to forming friendships. Henry, when asked how he finds making friends, responded, *"[It is] hard. I don't have any. All schools. It's hard for me to make friends. It's generally hard for me. I think it's my autism, it makes it hard".* Gracie also felt she had difficulty in making friends. Now attending her sixth school, she had developed a strong apathy towards making friends. When asked the same question as Henry, Gracie explained:

> *It's hard to make friends. Everyone has different personalities and most people find me annoying sometimes because of how I am. I'm so stressed out from all the moves that I'd rather be alone. There's like no point when you're moving away again.... I don't really care about friends to be fair. I don't really need them to succeed in life. I get along with people in the Army at the barracks better than I do with kids my age because of how they are. I have similar values and my peer group are not great.*

Despite the shared experiences of the difficulties in making friends, it was only Gracie who had developed this apathy. As Georgie explained, despite the challenges she always persevered, explaining that "*you **have** to keep making friends".*

6.5 *"I think when we first join a school, that's when we need help":* experiences of school transition

For the children, the period of transition into their new setting, both the first day and the first few weeks, was a pressure point where thoughts and feelings about friendships and 'settling in' socially came to the forefront. Indeed, for most of the children, their focus on transitioning into a new school was very much on social connections.

Some of the children were easy going about moving schools, notably those who also found making friends relatively easy (see section 6.3). As Charlotte explained, *"When you go to a new school, you're a bit worried that no one will like you there... but as soon as you're there, it's ok. Then you're really happy".* Similarly, Ishya's experiences of feeling *"lonely outside"* were short-lived after another child *"came up to me and asked me what I wanted to play",* leading to the establishment of a firm friendship. Notably, both children reflected very positively on their current school and the number of friends they had. Despite having only joined within the last month, Ishya added, 'made lots of new friends!' under her new school's name on her timeline whilst Charlotte created the annotated drawing (figure 6.2) as part of her 'free response' to the exploratory questions on school experiences.

Figure 6.2: Section of Charlotte's 'free response' to the exploratory questions on school experiences.

Those who found making new friends more of a daunting experience felt that the initial transition into a new setting was challenging. For Sarah, moving schools was *"scary...tiring and worrying. Because I had no friends. I didn't know the place that well. It was tough to make friends. I didn't make any straight away".* The worry around making social connections was also raised by Noah, Charlotte, Sophia and William. William, who had experienced bullying in a previous school, explained that since then, he remains worried about joining new schools as *"you don't know how your next school will be. It could be good or bad. You might get bullied or...".* Sophia nuanced this point, explaining that it is also *"about when you move"*, drawing a distinction from her own experiences from joining at the start of a school year compared to joining part way through. For Sophia, the latter meant she "*had a whole half term with nobody... I didn't have any friends. Everyone already has friends".*

In addition to forging social connections, several of the children found the change in the school environment and culture challenging. Izzy, when moving from a private school abroad to her current English state school, found the change of routine a bit overwhelming as her new school had "*so much planned in"* within a school day. Similarly, when Sophia last moved schools, she struggled to understand the differing behavioural systems because "*they [the school] didn't explain anything".* As a result, she ended up being disciplined for breaking a rule she was not aware of, something she found particularly frustrating.

6.6 Looking through the lens of school belonging

These experiences around transitioning into a new school and 'settling in', bound up with the themes of support, understanding and friendship, closely align to the broader concept of school belonging; "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). The importance of school belonging is well documented within literature (see section 2.9.3) and tends to play out in school practice when new pupils join in Reception and Year 7, the traditional points of transition.

As service children regularly move schools outside of these points, it is plausible that their experiences of school belonging may vary. However, the concept of school belonging has never been applied to the service child context. By bringing in this theoretical dimension to the

findings, it provides another layer of understanding to whether, and how, from the children's perspective, school belonging is experienced by this group. As the concept has not been previously applied to service children, I use a contextual definition – whether service children's identity is recognised and understood, and whether their service-related needs are met within the school context – to understand the service children's educational experiences.

Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will look at the examples of school practice where school belonging has been supported and where it has not. Overall, the findings highlight that the service children's experiences of school belonging – governed by schools' "social environment[s]" and played out in school culture and practice – have been positive (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). However, from the children's perspective, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support for their service-related needs and for their wider school community to develop a greater awareness and understanding of their service child identity.

6.6.1 *"Going to that school was like going to a different house with your family in":* experiences of schools with high numbers of service children

> *We can share experiences we have had like moving and everything and having someone who understands what it's like to move.* Daisy

Apart from Victoria, all the children had attended at least one school which was either a 'military school' – that is, an MoD school abroad – or an English state school that had a majority of service children on roll. As Louise explained, "*It was like the military didn't exist at our school because it wasn't anything special, it was just you know, the military".* As such, the culture, ethos and practice around service children was embedded into the fabric of these schools (Ofsted, 2011; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

The children were very positive about their experiences at these schools due to the inherent relatability to their peers, as fellow service children. The children were unanimous, explaining that in these schools, *"everyone was kind, and everyone knew your circumstances".* There was a clear feeling of shared understanding and experiences, and this commonality meant that it was *"easier to make friends".* As Louise explained,

> *I liked my military school [English state school with a majority of service children] because everyone could empathise with you. And when there was a dad deployed, many other people had their dads deployed as well so they knew how it felt. All their parents had been deployed before.*

This understanding also extended to staff, meaning that the whole school community shared in this understanding of service life and could be a support when needed. Gracie, reflecting on her attendance at a previous English state school with many service children, explained that *"It was full of service children I could talk to and people. Like wives. Like teachers and TAs and stuff".* Indeed, Gracie compared attending that school to "*going to a different house with your family in. It felt like that because for service children, the service community is like a big family".*

6.6.2 *"I mean, my friends, I try to talk to them about it but there's a little bit of a disconnect":* experiences of schools with low numbers of service children

However, most English state schools which have service children do not have large numbers on roll. Indeed, across the 52% of the English state schools which have service children on roll, half have only one or two service children (Hall, 2019). As table 6.1 shows, all the children in this study were in schools where they were a minority group. In these types of schools, the children's sense of belonging – stemming from feeling that their service child identity was understood – varied.

Table 6.1: Key information pertaining to the five schools involved in the research project.

School name	School A	School B	School C	School D	School E
School type	Primary	Junior	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary
Number on roll	350	360	1064	1380	864
Number of service children (%)	99 (28%)	24 (7%)	70 (7%)	4 (<1%)	24 (3%)
Majority service type	RAF	RAF	Army	Mixed	Army

As discussed previously, the importance of friendships and social connection was paramount for these children. However, many of the service children felt they could not share their experiences and associated emotions with their *"civvy"* friends because they do not *"properly understand"* service life. As James summarised, *"I don't really talk about it with my friends because they are all civilians".*

For Victoria, having never attended a school with significant numbers of service children, there was a sense of *"disconnect"* when trying to access support from her peers and staff (figure 6.3).

Victoria:	*... Like one time, I remember my dad dropping me off at school and then leaving and I got into my class and just started crying and everyone in my class was like 'What's wrong with you?' and I was like 'I'm just sad', and no one could really understand that. I just remember like my favourite teacher brought me out, sat me down in the library and said, 'How do you feel?' and I was like 'Terrible'. I think I was in Year 4.*
Me:	*You mentioned you had a favourite teacher at that school. Do you have a favourite one here?*
Victoria:	*I don't really talk to the teachers here. I think it's because it's such a big school. It's difficult to talk to them. I do have some teachers that I like but I don't talk to them. I like them. I like being in their lessons. If I'm having a bad day and I have their lesson coming up I'm like 'OK, I guess it's not that bad'.*
Me:	*You've mentioned that sometimes you feel you can't talk to your peers?*
Victoria:	*Yeah, I think that's another thing that kind of frustrates me... But then I think with my friends, I talk to them about it for a bit, but I think what frustrates me in some ways about them is they think my dad's job is really cool and I'm like 'No it's not. It's terrible!'. I can understand it but I'm like 'No! You have to feel bad for me, you have to see it as a bad thing!' and they're like 'Why? It's such a cool thing!' and I'm like 'Arghh! OK, I don't want to go through this with you'. I think that kind of frustrates me.... Because I think in some ways, because my friends don't really understand it, it's kind of something I ignore and forget about.*

Figure 6.3: Extract of a conversation between myself and Victoria discussing her experiences of support in schools.

Gracie also shared similar feelings about support in her current school (school E). In her experience, it was due to the low numbers of service children that there were *"not many people that support you. No one at school would understand what is going on at home".* Indeed, later in the discussion, Gracie explained that simply, *"There's less service children so there's less support".*

However, this association between a low number of service children and minimal support is not an experience shared by all the children. A more positive picture is painted by Louise's experience of her current primary school (school B) and Sheena, Georgie, Maria and Daisy's experiences of their current secondary school (school C), which are reported in the next two sub-sections.

6.6.2.1 "Sometimes we do have hard times so it's nice to have some special treatment": Louise's experience

Louise started at school B part way through Key Stage 2, her third school so far. At the time of the research, her father was part way through a 4-month deployment in the Middle East. The school had 24 service children on roll, making up 7% of the total pupil population. The school employed a Learning Support Assistant who was also the Service Family Support Worker. Mrs Smith had a service background and was well-known and liked by the service children, as evident in their praise of her during the research.

Due to Louise's father's deployment, she was receiving additional pastoral support from Mrs Smith in the form of 1-2-1 support which Louise described as *"really good"*. Louise, along with the other Key Stage 2 service children, was also taking part in a Little Troopers' Wellbeing course, which covers "separation, deployment, house moves and living abroad, as well as the personal themes of belonging, identity and mindfulness" (Little Troopers, 2024). Louise explained that because of the course, she was finding managing her father's deployment "*a lot easier because we've been doing about deployment and separation and I'm in it".*

Louise also spoke about other practices within her school, including a service children's club, open to all ages across the school. She was also chosen to represent her school during Remembrance Day this year by laying a wreath at the local war memorial. As Louise's father was deployed whilst she began a new school year, her mother requested that her closest friend,

Sarah, could be in her class to help her feel more settled. Louise referred to the examples above as *"special treatment",* explaining that *"sometimes we do have hard times so it's nice to have some special treatment".* Louise's experiences highlight how her school, despite the low number of service children, was able to "provide effective bespoke support" (SCISS, 2021, p.18).

6.6.2.2 "She sent out this email letting us know she's there for us": reflections from Sheena, Georgie, Maria and Daisy

At the time of the research, Sheena, Georgie, Maria and Daisy all attended school C, a secondary school with 70 service children on roll, making up 7% of the total pupil population. Like school B, school C also had a dedicated staff member for service children – Mrs Jones – who like Mrs Smith, had a service background. However, unlike Mrs Smith, she held this position as an additional, voluntary role alongside her subject teaching. As she acknowledged, this meant she does not have much time to dedicate to the role. Despite this, Mrs Jones was known to the service children involved in the research and like Mrs Smith, was well-liked. At the start of each term, Mrs Jones sends out *"email[s] letting us know she's there for us".* Sheena explained that "*she's really sweet. If I did need to speak to her, I know I can talk to her. She's not one of those teachers that are horrible. She understands".* Although the support is not explicit as in school A, the children felt sufficiently supported. Mrs Jones knew each child individually and had built up an easy relationship with them, evidenced by their conversations before the research began. As Georgie summarised, *"It's nice that I've got support as an army child".*

6.6.3 Other examples of school practice to support belonging

The children also shared other experiences of school belonging – and their opinions on them – in both their current and previous educational settings. Alongside one-off special days and trips with military themes (for example, having a 'camo day' and visiting an RAF museum), children shared experiences of more embedded and regular forms of provision. Typically, these were supporting transition into a new school, reflecting the associated challenges with this process. These included a buddy system, small group 'catch-up' learning and school tours before joining.

Many of the children spoke about having a buddy assigned to them when they started a new school. The buddies were other service children, typically those who were outgoing and popular,

providing them with help to settle in and make friends. The buddy system was seen as beneficial by the children.

In addition to the buddy system, James also reflected positively on his experiences of small group 'catch-up' learning. As he explained, *"When I was younger, sometimes I'd go out separately learning stuff. That was helpful. That was useful but I think I'm OK now".* Although the service children had mostly moved between schools in England, James was the only one to refer to experiencing this kind of support. Although the SCISS report found that 39% of schools identified, "addressing gaps in service children's learning" as a moderate, big or very big challenge, it suggests that perhaps service children did not generally receive such 'catch-up' provision or did not identify it as bespoke support due to being service children (2021, p.7).

Henry reported that he *"got to go around"* his current school before joining. He explained he *"needed to have a look around... because of my autism"* and found the experience *"really good"*. Notably, Henry visited during COVID-19 so *"no one was there".* In referring to their own tours, the service children reflected on their utility but explained that they were *"pretty awkward"* experiences because *"everyone stared"* at them. William recounted how he *"came into the classroom and everyone stared at me. The teacher said, 'This is William' and they stared and whispered".* He explained this was a negative experience for him as he does not like *"being singled out".* These differing reactions suggest the importance of child-centred support, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.

6.6.3.1 "They made this big service group so we could talk about our families": reflections on service children's clubs

Many of the service children had attended, or were currently attending, service children clubs. These clubs were typically held at lunch time and ranged from providing structured activities and focused themes to offering more informal spaces where children could "*talk about it [being a service child] in groups and have biscuits and juice".* For Gracie, she felt that attending the club at one of her primary schools also helped her wellbeing during periods of service-related separation. As she reflected,

> *Yeah, they made this big service group so we could talk about our families. And they put a big map on the board, and we could point out where our parents were. Like 'Oh my*

mum's here', 'My dad's here'. It made you know that sometimes they aren't that far away. Like my dad doesn't get moved so far away like Antarctica but he gets moved around Germany and Poland, so we point out where they are. It makes us realise it's not actually far, far, far away. It makes us feel better as we know where they are.

Notably, these clubs all took place within primary school settings. Although Sheena, Georgie, Maria and Daisy praised the work of Mrs Jones in their secondary school, they unanimously felt that there *"could be like more pastoral support for the bigger things"* and more awareness and understanding of service life across the wider staff body. As Sheena explained "*I feel like if the school knew, like why you were upset or not concentrating, or acting up in lessons, they would get it and not get angry. Like they'd listen and hear you out. Maybe talk to you about how you're feeling and stuff".*

When asked the exploratory question, *What could schools do to help service children more?* (see table 3.1, section 3.3.1), as a group, the children spoke about how a club, like those they had experienced during their primary education, would be beneficial to them. However, as figure 6.4 shows, the group discussed at length as to when such a club should occur. This highlights how for some service children, they would prefer less explicit forms of pastoral support during their teenage years.

Me:	*Do you think you need any extra help with your mental health?*
Georgie:	*A little bit. Moving is really stressful and so difficult. Even if I just think about moving, it upsets me. It's not easy moving schools and houses in the middle of the school year. Yeah, it would be helpful. We don't have a choice.*
Daisy:	*Maybe during our lesson time, we could have a club. Like after school, it's a bit embarrassing to say, 'I'm going to this club' and someone asks, 'Why do you go to that?'.*
Sheena:	*Break and lunch are like our only time to relax and socialise and if you are at a club, you miss that time. And your friends ask where you are, and you've got to explain that, and it could be uncomfortable for you.*
Georgie:	*It wouldn't have to be for very long. Like in a subject that isn't English or...*
Maria:	*It's better for it to be private than having to explain to everybody where you are going.*
Sheena:	*Yeah, I think there could be like more pastoral support for the bigger things.*

Figure 6.4: Extract from a group conversation discussing pastoral support in school.

6.7 *"I want staff to pay attention more":* desire for further support

The desire for more pastoral support was not just felt at secondary school. Sarah, currently in Key Stage 2, also felt that she wanted *"staff to pay attention more"*. Sophia felt similarly,

> *It would be good to have a teacher for service children. Like if parents are away, they can go tell them and talk to them. They should know who the service children are. I'm not sure they know I'm a service child. Or they could take service children out and speak about being service child – like this.*

At Sophia's current school (school A, 28% service children), there was a Family Liaison Officer whose role, funded in part by the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) included service families. However, Sophia was not aware of this, unlike the service children in schools B and C. This suggests Sophia lacked awareness of what support was available to her and a missed opportunity, by her school, to better respond to her needs.

Notably, Victoria was also the only child who was aware of the SPP. As she explained, *"When I got to Year 7, they [her current school (school D)] were like 'Hey, there's this thing, what do*

you want to do with it?'". As the copy of her bullet point list (figure 6.5) shows, although it is currently being used for *"textbooks/revision resources"*, Victoria identified several possible future uses which she would benefit from, including social connection to other service children.

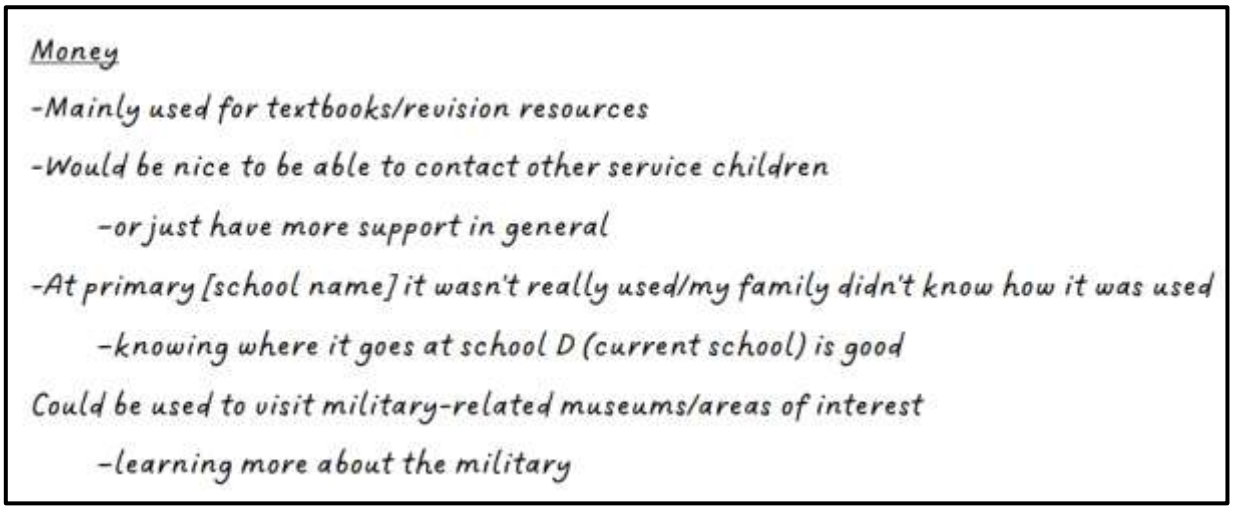

Money
-Mainly used for textbooks/revision resources
-Would be nice to be able to contact other service children
-or just have more support in general
-At primary [school name] it wasn't really used/my family didn't know how it was used
-knowing where it goes at school D (current school) is good
Could be used to visit military-related museums/areas of interest
-learning more about the military

Figure 6.5: A copy of Victoria's handwritten bullet point list written in response to a discussion about the SPP.

At the time of the research, Victoria was one of four service children in school of 1,380 children. She felt that social connection to other service children would be beneficial to her.

> *So, for me, it would be nice to be able to contact other children who have similar experiences. It would also be quite nice to just have more support as a general thing. Like emotional support. Like especially when I was younger, there wasn't anything... I don't know, I think just knowing there was someone here.*

Victoria's suggestion of *"learning more about the military"* such as through visits to military museums was also raised by Louise, Izzy and Sarah. They collectively agreed they would like to go on such *"military school trips"*. As Izzy explained,

> *Me personally, I just want to go on a school trip. It would help us because it could be educational. We could learn about what it's like being a service child over the years. Like in 1965, what is it like? Like 1847? As a military child we want to learn more about our history.*

Developing an understanding of service children was also thought to be helpful by Louise, but for her non-service peers. She explained, "*At this school I'd like to inform other children about military children. Like about what our parents do. Maybe in an assembly".*

Collectively, these children's suggestions highlight the desire for more provision and school practice to focus on meeting their service-related needs and developing awareness and understanding of their service child identity from their own perspective and those of their non-service peers. Moreover, they suggest that some service children want to visibly express, and celebrate, their service child identity in educational contexts where they are the minority.

In the following chapter, the findings in relation to the service child identity (findings chapter I) and service children's educational experiences (findings chapter II) are discussed in relation to the existing literature. From this, suggested implications for wider school culture and practice within English state schools, including SPP funding choices, are shared.

7 Discussion

7.1 Outline of the chapter

In this chapter, I present an extended dialogue between the key findings of the previous two chapters and existing literature. In so doing, I highlight how this study nuances existing knowledge and provides further knowledge regarding service children's identity and their experiences of education.

The chapter begins with an extended, contextualised discussion of how my concept of the 'service child identity' relates to existing literature and what new insights can be gained by using it. The chapter then moves on to examining how the service children's educational experiences relate to literature on the same theme. Notably, much of the existing literature is drawn from the perspectives of adults – school staff, parents and those working in the sector more broadly – and thus the discussion enriches existing knowledge by centring the experiences of service children and reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of schooling. Moreover, by then looking at these experiences through a school belonging lens, new insights and understandings are gained. These include the central role that the social environment of a school plays in supporting service children's sense of belonging, particularly during transition into a new setting.

This thread is continued through the final section of the chapter, which focuses on identifying implications for practice. These are intended to inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice within English state schools. The implications are generated from a blend of insights, drawing from the children's collective voice alongside the wider literature.

7.2 Military life and the service child identity

The extant literature portrays service children through different lenses, or by using different models, recognising certain qualities and lifestyle features. From their 18th-century portrayals as 'camp followers', to their conceptualisations in films and governmental reports, service children have been historically positioned in a passive and predominately negative light (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967; Clifton, 2007; Gibson, 2012; Huxford, 2012; Seebohm, 1974; Spencer, 1976).

With the proliferation of research on and about US service children during the combat operations in Iraq (Operation Telic) and Afghanistan (Operation Herrick), this positioning continued, with a growth in the use of a deficit model when discussing service children. As such, the body of research from that period "has overwhelmingly focused on the presence of maladjustment and psychopathology in [service] children" (Alfano et al., 2016, p.18).

More recent studies have looked at the 'unique qualities' that service children possess such as being 'disciplined', 'adaptable' and 'brave' (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Hanna, 2020; McCullouch, Hall & Ellis, 2018; Noret et al., 2014; RAF Benevolent Fund, 2021). The identification of these qualities, alongside the prevalent depictions of service children as serving personnel in miniature – for example in using terms such as 'little trooper' – has meant that service children have been strongly associated with militarised concepts and characteristics. The result has been further reinforcement of the militarisation of service children (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Lee, 2020).

With all these portrayals, service children are seen *in relation* to the Services. This also came through strongly in my findings, where I argued for the utility of applying Gee's relational identity theory to the service child context (2017). A relational identity, according to Gee, is a 'classificatory label' and as such, is defined "in terms of relations, contrasts, or oppositions between different types of people" (2017, p.87). Moreover, relational identities are "often imposed on or assigned to people" (Gee, 2017, p.87). Indeed, the service children who are encompassed by this label have no choice – it is assigned to them due to the existence of a military parent or parents. As such, they are different to, or even in opposition to, those who are not service children. The service child identity exists because of the relationship between the child and the military. Without the military, the identity would not exist.

However, conceptualising the service child identity as relational offers only a partial understanding of its complexity. As in the conceptualisations outlined above, service children are often cast as passive entities, "objects or victims – of militarisation" (Yarwood, Tyrrell & Kelly, 2021, p.260). Framing service children this way overlooks the pivotal role of the children's own agency in their identity formation.

The findings from my research clearly highlight how the children did exhibit their agency and subjectivity. Throughout the research, the children engaged with and challenged pre-existing discourses about them. They were forthcoming in their opinions, willing to disagree with peers and share their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. To an extent, they had ownership and agency over what, and how, they shared aspects of their experiences and identities as service children.

Therefore, conceptualising the service child identity as child-led acknowledges the agency that the service children have in shaping this aspect of their identity and importantly, how this can develop and oscillate over time. As my findings demonstrate, several of the children spoke about how their service child identity altered and fluctuated at different points, such as in the transition to becoming part of a military veteran family. This aligns with the findings from Bowes' doctoral research where they found that the "children's identities were not stable and continued to change throughout the research process", leading Bowes to claim that the "possibilities for identity in relation to being part of a forces family are not as fixed and predictable as existing research seems to imply" (2018, pp.172, 176).

Recognition of the formation of the identity as – at least in part – child-led, also offers a more nuanced framing of the service child identity, challenging the static, passive and homogenising narrative of the service child. Instead, it provides a "more dynamic and multifaceted understanding" of service children's identities, acknowledging the children's active role in identity formation and their propensity for change (Bowes, 2018, p.176).

The findings from my research also identified the importance of context in relation to the service child identity. The service children's 'service' – their experiences of mobility and separation – shapes their sense of self, creating differing iterations of their service child identity. Moreover, these children's military-related experiences occurred within each child's unique context. The differences in these contexts made the experiences both shared and individualised and, as such, contributed to differing approaches to how the service children made sense of their lives.

In the literature, service life has most recently, in a UK context, been characterised as a "unique phenomenon", defined by "parental deployments, periods of non-deployment separation, heightened mobility, and the risk of parental injury or bereavement during service" (Godier-

McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021, p.11). The children's experiences speak closely to this characterisation. In my research, they shared their experiences of mobility – the continued cycle of making and losing friends, transitioning into new educational settings and having new experiences. They also shared their experiences of service-related separation; both through parental deployments and periods of non-deployment separation. Indeed, the latter highlighted how several of the children were now experiencing being 'settled' in one house, yet simultaneously experiencing longer, or more regular, periods of separation from their serving parents.

However, the findings from my research also enrich this characterisation of service life. Many of the children's experiences were underpinned by their relationship to, and engagement with, the wider military community. For them, the military community was both a physical and metaphorical space of safety, understanding and belonging. Several of the children used the metaphor of the military community as a family – one who protects and one in which there is a "strong bond", created from shared experiences, culture, knowledge and values (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.5). The children also spoke of their experiences in militarised spaces. Collectively, these spaces are the physical manifestations of community – where service children experience understanding and belonging, surrounded by, or in the presence of, their wider military family. Such spaces offered the children recreation and enjoyment but also a space in which to process the emotional impact of separation.

7.3 Service children in the educational context

In chapter six, I presented the findings of my second research question: *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* In doing so, I argued that service children acknowledge and accept that moving schools is an integral part of service life. However, despite the normality of moving, the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive; particularly around continuity of learning and making friends. For these children, these negative emotions were felt most acutely during their transitions into their new settings.

In relation to the literature, my findings enrich the collective existing understanding of service children's experiences of education whilst also providing new insights. Notably, much of the

existing literature is constructed from the perspectives of adults – school staff, parents and those working in the sector more broadly – and drawn from wider, grey literature on service children's lives or military families, in the form of reports written or commissioned by government bodies and military charities. Therefore, by centring the experiences of service children and reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of schooling in relation to those identified in the literature (primarily the concerns and experiences of adults), a better understanding of what is important to the children themselves is gained.

7.3.1 Mobility, continuity of learning and making friends

As my findings highlight, the children experience a range of challenges due to service-related mobility. However, the children's focus was on the impact on their continuity of learning and friendships.

The service children reflected on how school moves interrupt learning. They identified gaps in learning, repetition of topics and skills-based learning and different pedagogical approaches as the main challenges. Due to the gaps, several children acknowledged that they struggled academically. Those who had repeated topics had contrasting opinions. Some felt apathetic about schooling, identifying it as *"tiring and boring"* whilst others found that the repetition had made them more confident and *"better"* at the subject.

In the literature, the difficulty in maintaining continuity of provision is well documented, but often through the lens of service children with SEND (Children's Commissioner, 2018; DSC, 2006; SCISS, 2021). These children have been perceived as being at a 'double disadvantage' in education given that "challenges [associated with SEND] are exacerbated by military life" (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.73). My findings suggest that maintaining continuity of provision, specialist or otherwise, is a concern for all service children.

Friendships were of central importance to the service children involved in my study. Thus, when moving to a new school, making friends was the primary concern. The DSC's report highlighted that "frequent moves can have a significant detrimental impact on young people, particularly on their willingness to form friendships with their peers" (2006, p.8). Although some of the children in my study reported that they did find making friends relatively easy, the majority shared experiences of their difficulties, particularly when starting part way through a school

year when social groups were already established (as identified in Ofsted's 2011 report). Notably, however, only one child had developed an apathy towards making friends because of her frequency of school moves. Others reflected that despite the challenges, they always persevered.

When it came to types of friendships, the children in my research readily divided their friends into those who were *"civvy"* (non-service) and those who were service children. Children spoke about their differences to non-service children, conceptualising a *"disconnect"* between them. The service children felt that their non-service peers could not understand service life or share their service-related experiences and associated emotions. Notably, the children identified as both *being* different – through their experiences – and *feeling* different – when their experiences did not match those of their friends, or their friends did not understand.

However, there was an inherent relatability with other service children. These children *"just got it"* and as such, there was a clear feeling of shared identity, understanding and experiences. These friendships were quick to form, often sought out when beginning at a new school and long-remembered, even after several years apart.

These findings about service children's friendships are significant. They provide new understandings of how service children make and see friendships. These findings also have implications for schools. If service children derive comfort and understanding from interacting with other service children, then schools should facilitate mechanisms to ensure new service children are able to build friendships with existing service children. Given that most service children attend English state schools with low numbers of service children on roll, this may therefore require schools to provide support for friendships to develop between different year groups. Alternatively, such schools could work together with other local schools to facilitate these connections. This could be through more formal mechanisms such as existing multi-academy trusts or through involvement in 'Festival of Friends' projects which seek to establish strong connections between schools in a given geographical area (SCiP Alliance, 2018).

7.3.2 Separation and schooling

Peer understanding of service life also encompassed a shared understanding and appreciation of the often painful experiences of service-related separation. The 2018 Children's

Commissioner report found that "for the majority of the service children we spoke to, the period of parental deployment affected every part of their everyday lives" (p.10). This was certainly true of my findings.

The children spoke at length of the emotional and practical impacts of service-related separation. Emotionally, as with Bowes' doctoral findings, "many of the children described their experiences of parental absence as emotional and associated with feelings of sadness, loss and worry" (2018, p.112). In addition to these emotions that Bowes found, the children in my study also identified feelings of disappointment, frustration and anger. Several of the children noted the impact that their age had on their experiences, explaining that when they were younger, they *"didn't really notice it"* or *"understand it",* thinking it was *"kind of normal".* This aligns with the literature on how the age of the service child influences their understanding and emotional response to service-related separation (Bowes, 2018; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Noret et al., 2014).

The Naval Families Federation 2018 report found that 56% of naval personnel and spouses felt that "being part of an Armed Forces family [had a negative effect] on their children and young people's mental health" (p.9). The negative effects identified by respondents included the impact separation has on "sustaining close relationships between the serving person and their child, worsening with age" (Naval Families Federation, 2018, p.10). Whilst all the children in my study had experiences of various forms of separation, often for extended periods, only one child felt she had a challenging relationship with her military parent. In this case, she attributed this to a lack of time spent together (they did not live together) and poor communication. Notably, two children characterised their serving fathers' physical absences during deployments as something complete, identifying that they went to having *"zero"* parents or *"one parent"* during the separation.

The Naval Families Federation report also found that 9% of the adult respondents felt that separation had a positive effect on their children, citing increased resilience of their children due to "having to shoulder more responsibility and to experiencing frequent change" (p.10). This is supported by research by Farrell-Wright who found that, from the mothers' perspectives,

their children showed increased maturity, resilience, thoughtfulness and empathy during their fathers' absences (2011).

However, this did not ring true for the children in this study. When discussing the idea of resilience, some of the service children felt they *had* to be resilient, adaptable and responsible, reinforcing the idea that service children have little choice over these characteristics. Others rejected the word, explaining that their experiences of separation have made them less resilient. This is a particularly salient finding and encourages discourse to move away from characterising service children as 'resilient' or other similar qualities. As Lee argues, presenting children as "home-front heroes" where children are "valued for their ability to cope with adversity" is "problematic" (Lee, 2020, p.13). Although often done in a celebratory way, it excludes service children who do not fit into this prevailing narrative.

In addition to the emotional impacts of separation are the practical ones. As the literature highlights, separation brings changes to family routine (Baverstock, 2023; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; McCullouch & Hall, 2016; RNRMCF, 2009). For the service children in my study, how this looked in practice differed across the group. Some – typically those in the primary phase of their education – spent longer periods at school, going to before and after-school clubs or spending extra time with other family members and friends. Others, particularly those in secondary school, spent more time in the home taking on additional responsibilities. These ranged from caring – both physically and emotionally – for siblings and/or their remaining parents to a notable increase in chores. Whilst no child identified as a military young carer, the additional responsibilities that several of the children took on were significant; both emotionally and practically. Several of the children explained how they felt relied on and how they had to *"step up",* highlighting the pressure of their emotional responsibility. As such, it can be argued that, during these periods of separation, they became (intermittent) military young carers. As the literature explains, this is a sub-group of service children who face challenges regarding identification, acknowledgement and support (Children's Society, 2017; Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; Watson, 2022). This study therefore suggests a need for further research into this sub-group to better understand and support their caring experiences and how these impact their schooling.

7.3.2.1 Weekending and other forms of persistent separation

The literature identifies a growing trend in 'weekending'; where the serving parent lives and works away during the week, returning to live in the family home over the weekend. Families experiencing weekending are referred to as 'dispersed' and over the last decade or so, are steadily increasing in number, with predictions that this trend will continue (Godier-McBard, Wood & Fossey, 2021; RAF Families Federation, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

There have been a few recent studies looking at the military family's experiences of weekending, most commonly from the perspective of the non-serving partner. Whilst family stability and supporting their children's education were identified as major benefits, this form of separation also brought a range of additional challenges (RAF Families Federation, 2019). These included changes to family dynamics leading to added pressure and responsibilities for the non-serving parent, isolation from the military community and lack of associated support, loss of military identity and challenges regarding integration with local civilian communities (Gribble & Fear, 2022, RAF Families Federation, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Several children in my study were experiencing weekending – and indeed other forms of separation – due to the occupational requirements of the military and family decisions. However, the children's experiences, and their responses to them, varied. There was the repetition of separation, but also the nuances inherent in the experiences. Some of the children were adjusting to their serving parents' weekly commute whilst others were experiencing longer periods of separation, where their serving parents were abroad. Moreover, their experiences of separation were often intertwined with their experiences of mobility, making the reality complex, individualised and context driven for these service children.

As my research findings and the literature identifies, service children are increasingly part of dispersed families, living away from military communities and attending schools in small numbers. These studies raise important insights into how service life is changing. Moving forward, the rise of weekending and other forms of persistent regular periods of separation are likely to have significant implications for service children's identity and school experiences. As with military young carers, these children's needs may be overlooked, as there might only be limited awareness within the school context.

7.4 The central role of schools in supporting service children's sense of belonging

In the second part of the second findings chapter, I presented the service children's educational experiences through the lens of school belonging; "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). As the theoretical concept has not been previously applied to service children, I used a contextual definition – whether service children's identity is recognised and understood, and whether their service-related needs are met within the school context – to better represent the service children's educational experiences. In doing so, I argued that many of their experiences – governed by schools' "social environment[s]" and played out in school culture and practice – have been positive (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, pp.60-61). However, from the children's perspective, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support.

Using Allen et al.'s conceptual framework for school belonging provides a useful tool to understand what it looks in an educational setting. In figure 7.1, the elements in blue are those which were readily identified by the children in my study. In the Microsystem, the children spoke about 'peer support' – from their fellow service children – and 'teacher support' as being fundamental to feeling settled, accepted and supported ('emotional stability'). Indeed, the importance of these two types of support is threaded throughout the children's experiences of school belonging. Through these relationships, service children felt that their identity was understood and valued, and support could be found when needed.

In the Mesosystem, the children identified several 'extracurricular activities' as important. In particular, service children's clubs were identified as important spaces in which to share experiences and build relationships. In schools with many service children, the children reflected on how the school community had an embodied understanding of service life. Indeed, as one child explained, attending such a school was like "*going to a different house with your family in".* This aligns with the 'shared whole-school vision' within the Exosystem and of 'practices' and 'school policies' within the Mesosystem.

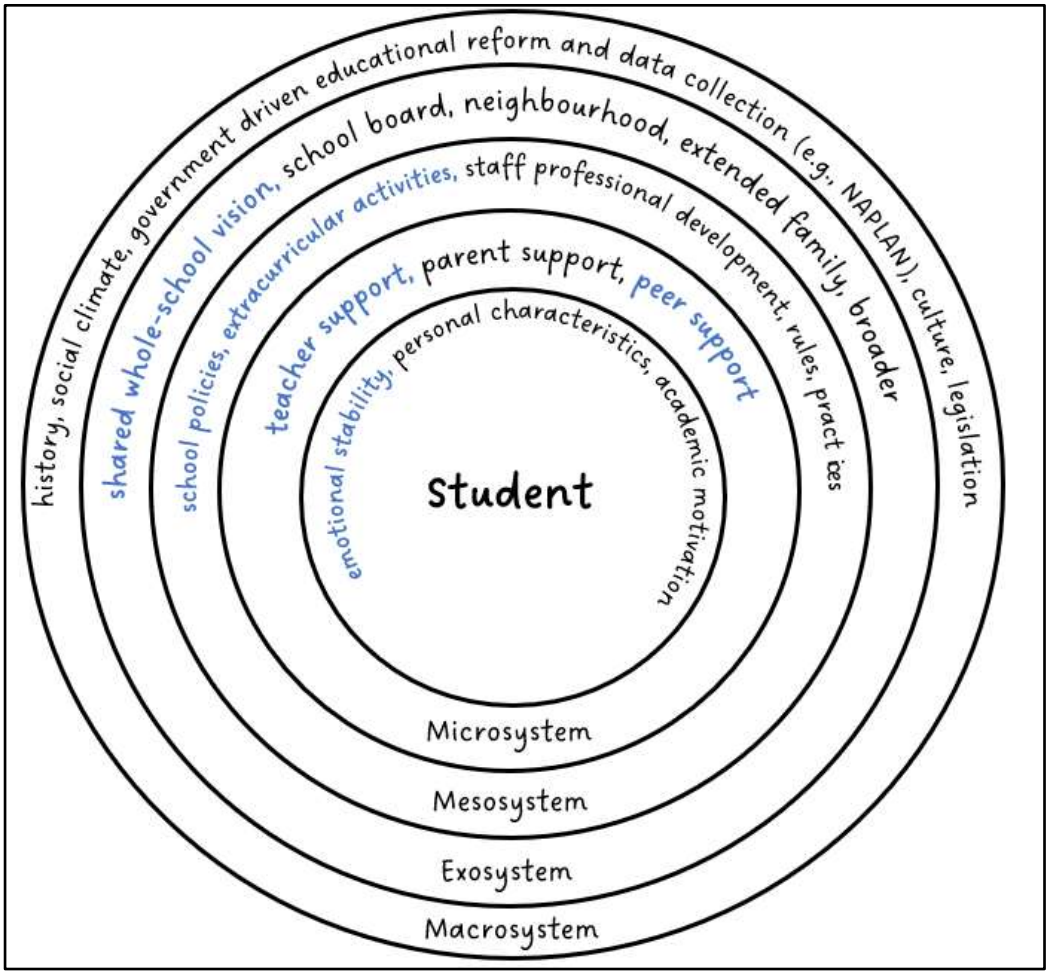


Figure 7.1: Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters' conceptual framework of school belonging (2016). Elements in blue are those which were readily identified by the children.

7.4.1 School belonging and the Service Pupil Premium

Although many positive examples of school belonging were identified by the children, from their perspectives, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support. The children's suggestions – as discussed in section 6.7 – highlight two related elements. The first was the desire for more provision and school practice to focus on meeting their service-related needs. The second was developing awareness and understanding of their service child identity from their own perspective and those of their non-service peers.

Such suggestions could, and arguably should, help to inform wider school culture and practice and within English state schools, choices about the use of the SPP (see section 2.7 for discussion

of the SPP). Although the financial amount is limited (currently at £340 per child, per academic year), the SPP could provide the finances to support the development of school culture and the implementation or continuation of provision (MoD, 2023c). The MoD defines the purpose of the funding to be so that "eligible schools...can offer mainly pastoral support during challenging times and to help mitigate the negative impact on service children of family mobility or parental deployment" (MoD, 2023c). Thus, by schools providing 'pastoral support', the service child is being supported to develop 'emotional stability', one of the three central elements of school belonging.

Given the criticism of the SPP as being "poorly understood and poorly used", coupled with calls for guidance on how to use it effectively, the MoD produced a document of examples of 'best practice' (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69). This document is a "selection of effective, creative and innovative ways in which both primary and secondary schools have used the available funding to support service children" (MoD, 2023c). Made up of seven case studies, the document includes pertinent school profile details (for example, age of service children and number of service and non-service children on roll), alongside how – and often why – the SPP funding is being used within the setting. Considering the document alongside the findings from this research has identified several key areas where examples of existing support could be optimised.

7.4.1.1 Transition

As my study highlights, starting a new school is a key transition point for service children and many expressed significant concerns and worries around this. Effective transition supports 'emotional stability' and as such, should be seen as a cornerstone for provision for service children. In the MoD guidance, examples of such provision include "settling in packs" for newly arrived service children and an "induction and transfer programme" run by a "designated member of staff" to collect pertinent information about the child (MoD, 2023c). These types of provision would support service children's educational and holistic development whilst also helping them integrate into the existing school community.

7.4.1.2 Social and emotional support

The findings from my study emphasise the importance of ongoing social and emotional support for service children, both from peers and from adults within the school community. Examples from the case studies of such support include other service children acting as mentors or buddies for new service children and various iterations of service children's clubs, led by a dedicated staff member with links to the military and an understanding of the demands of service life (MoD, 2023c). As my findings suggest, where possible, the staff should have protected time for this role, so support is consistent and available. To take into account the complexity and diversity of service children's experiences, such clubs or other forms of provision should be a blend of proactive and reactive, able to pre-empt and prepare for children's concerns but also be responsive to developing needs.

The findings of my research identified the importance of materiality during separation and how, for many of the children, physical objects provided emotional support (see section 5.3.2.2). Therefore, as well as the provision for schools' social environments, the SPP funding could also be used to purchase such resources. In the MoD guidance, several schools purchased books on separation, school mascots and a large world map oilcloth. The latter was "used in lots of ways and generates many valuable conversations" which also worked to inform the school about how they "are able to help support the children and families" (MoD, 2023c). As well as offering emotional support, physical resources, alongside relevant displays and school assemblies, may also help service children to feel that their identity is recognised and supported within their school environment. This would also support in developing the school community's awareness and understanding of service life. This is particularly important in schools with low numbers of service children, where there is not necessarily an embedded military culture.

7.4.2 Enacting practice

As the findings from my research highlight, the lives of service children have shared similarities but also reflect a great diversity of experiences. As such, service children are not a homogenous group with identical sets of learning needs. Therefore, it is paramount for schools to have mechanisms in place for listening and responding to the uniqueness of their school's cohort of service children. Such mechanisms should run on the principles of effective student voice; not

to be tokenistic or piecemeal but accessible, representative, ongoing and dialogic. Examples of best practice (see McBeath et al., 2003) and guidance could be sought from works of others. This includes the work of Lundy who advocates for a model which conceptualises Article 12 of the UNCRC into four key elements – Space, Voice, Audience and Influence – "for informing understanding, developing policy and auditing existing practice" within educational settings (2007, p.941).

However, as Lundy points out, whilst "children's perspectives should be viewed as an integral part of school discourse", they do not exist in a vacuum (2007, p.934). Indeed, children are only one part of a functioning school community. Therefore, engaging with them – alongside other members such as staff and parents – is essential to understand their identities, experiences and needs and to create effective support for them within their school settings.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Outline of the chapter

In this chapter, I begin with a summary of the research, highlighting the unique contributions to knowledge and ethical research practice that the project brings. The chapter then moves on to my reflections on the research in relation to how I have sought to enable ethical research impact, the limitations of this research project and future research avenues.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the wider context of the research and how it relates to changing government policy. This includes consideration of the shifting UK military landscape shaped by the MoD's strategic priorities and by the DfE's vision and plans under the new Labour government. My thesis ends with a reflection on how these developments could impact the lives, identities and school experiences of service children of the future.

8.2 Summary of contributions

The focus of this research was to understand how military life shapes service children's identity and school experiences. To do this, the research asked two questions:

- *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?*
- *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?*

The research project worked in dialogue with the existing literature. It was cognisant of the prevailing approach to how service children have been viewed and how different facets of their experiences have been studied previously. It responded to the call for "more educational research into service children's experiences" and as such, has both nuanced and widened current understanding of service children's school experiences and their sense of self (Hall, McCullouch & Lawrence, 2022, p.76).

8.2.1 Contribution to knowledge: the service child identity

In answering my first research question – *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?* – I argued that my findings present a three-part answer. Firstly, that service children are an integral part of the military community; a distinct

sub-culture which comes with a pre-built community with associated values, language and customs. Secondly, that service children 'serve in their own way' through their experiences of mobility and separation which in turn are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice. Thirdly, that service children's 'service' – their experiences of mobility and separation – shapes their sense of self, creating differing iterations of their service child identity.

The development of the concept of the 'service child identity' is significant. It provides new knowledge and a new approach to conceptualising how service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children. By characterising the service child identity as contextual, relational and child-led it recognises the importance of:

- The commonalities and differences in service children's military-related experiences
- The role and position of the military in the existence of the identity
- The children's active role in identity formation and the propensity for change.

Thus, the concept of the service child identity offers an alternative conceptualisation of the service child. In doing so, it challenges the existing static, passive and homogenising narratives and instead presents a model which more suitably attends to the complexity of how service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children.

8.2.2 Contribution to knowledge: educational experiences and school belonging

In answering my second research question – *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* – I argued that service children acknowledge and accept that moving schools is an integral part of service life. However, despite the normality of moving, the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive; particularly around continuity of learning and making friends. For these children, these negative emotions were felt most acutely during the period of transition into their new setting.

In centring the experiences of service children and reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of schooling in relation to those identified in the literature (primarily the concerns and experiences of adults), a better understanding of what is important to the children themselves was gained. By then applying the concept of school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) to the service child context, the collective existing understanding of service children's

experiences of education was widened and enriched. This included new insights into service children's experiences of friendships; the importance they attribute to them and the ways they make and see them.

8.2.2.1 Implications for school practice

From the findings related to both research questions and in dialogue with the existing literature, implications for school practice were also identified. These sought to help to inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice within English state schools.

Service children had a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support which focussed on two related elements. The first was for more provision and school practice to focus on meeting their service-related needs. Such needs begin during the transition into a new setting as the children expressed significant concerns and worries around this experience. Therefore, effective transition – in, for example, the form of an induction and transfer programme – should be seen as a cornerstone of provision for service children. This should go together with ongoing social and emotional support from adults within the school community. Such support could include having a dedicated member of staff, with links to the military and an understanding of the demands of service life, with protected time to offer support and provision which is consistent and available. The support and provision should also be a blend of proactive and reactive, able to pre-empt and prepare for service children's concerns but also be responsive to developing needs.

The second related element that service children wanted was developing awareness and understanding of their service child identity from their own perspective and those of their non-service peers, particularly in schools where there are low numbers of service children. Schools could therefore seek opportunities to do so in their physical environments. Such opportunities could include the purchasing of targeted resources, the creation of relevant displays and existence of themed school assemblies. This would also support in developing the school community's awareness and understanding of service life and is particularly important in schools with low numbers of service children where there is not necessarily an embedded military culture and inherent understanding.

Although the SPP is a limited fund (currently £340 per child, per academic year), it could provide the finances to implement the suggestions above (MoD, 2023c). Indeed, given the criticism of the SPP as being "poorly understood and poorly used", it is essential that schools with service children on roll engage in practice and provision which meets their service children's service-related needs, including in understanding and supporting their identities (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69).

8.2.3 Contribution to knowledge: methodology, creativity and the research ethics tree

This research also makes a significant contribution to knowledge in relation to methodology and ethics. In my project, the service children were deliberately centred; their agency, voices and diversity of experiences were valued. By deliberately taking this approach to the research design, the research complements existing literature and in doing so highlights the value of using differing approaches for collective knowledge development.

Moreover, centring the service children and applying creativity to a key research challenge whilst 'in the field' led to methodological innovation. After realising my participants left their first session with little knowledge or understanding of the research process and their role within it, I designed an interactive tool – my research ethics tree – to support my participants in their engagement with, and understanding of, ethical research. Using the research ethics tree with my participants meant that information sharing was bi-directional, allowing them to clarify their understanding through questions and discussion (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). This meant that my participants had a far more sophisticated understanding of their role within the research project compared to what they would have gained from having just the traditional 'child-friendly' information and consent forms. Whilst designed for my research context, the tree can be applied to other research contexts and as such, is both a significant and innovative output of my doctoral research (see appendix G).

8.3 Reflections on the research

8.3.1 Enabling ethical research impact

As section 8.2 highlights, this research has academic impact by advancing existing understanding of service children's identities and school experiences and in developing

methodological innovation, with applicability to other disciplines and research contexts. The research also has societal impact, focusing on benefiting English state schools with service children on roll through greater knowledge and understanding and improved practice. To realise these impacts, I engaged with differing forms of knowledge exchange (UK Research and Innovation [UKRI], 2022). Therefore, throughout my DPhil journey, I sought out opportunities to share – and engage in dialogue about – my ideas, skills and research developments. As such, I have presented, run workshops and published on research findings, ethics, methodologies, creativity and experiences of being a doctoral researcher (see appendix G). These have been to broad audiences; including fellow students, other academics and practitioners.

However, according to the UKRI, "good knowledge exchange is as much about approach, mindset, personal qualities and researcher mission" (2022). As such, I recognise that there is much more left to be done, particularly around the findings from this research.

Unfortunately, there is often a disjuncture between the listening done by the researcher and the hearing and acting of the wider audiences (Lundy, 2007, 2018; Mannay et al., 2019). This can lead to research fatigue, disappointment and frustration on the part of the participants when research is regularly conducted with or about them, but there is little resulting tangible change. Anecdotally, this is true for other groups within the Armed Forces community such as non-serving partners of military personnel.

Whilst the thesis itself offers the greatest depth and largest coverage of a topic, it is a long, complex and often jargon-filled document that adheres to necessary university standards and regulations. Therefore, publishing a thesis 'as is' greatly limits the audience and subsequent impact of the research. To an extent, this also holds true for other traditional academic outputs such as book chapters and journal articles (Barnes et al., 2003; Mannay et al., 2019; Timmins, 2015). Such outputs can also be limited by paywalls, providing further barriers to impact.

The format and storage of a thesis also promotes a certain representation of knowledge (Mackinlay, 2022). Being so closely linked to a university, it encourages the notion that knowledge learnt from research is something hallowed, untouchable and only to be consumed by those in the academic realms. This is further reinforced by theses being stored within the

University. It suggests that the curation of knowledge is disparate and separate – a solely academic pursuit (Robinson-Pant & Singal, 2019).

However, I believe that knowledge should belong not to the few, but to the many and particularly those who constructed it. Therefore, I continue to seek opportunities to broaden the outputs of my research to challenge these ideas. I want to go beyond the dusty shelf and develop creative, ethical and impactful research outputs targeted at key individuals, groups and organisations and presented in appropriate and meaningful ways. At this stage, I seek to do so through the following mechanisms.

8.3.1.1 Further dissemination of the research ethics tree

As discussed in section 8.2.3, my research ethics tree has applicability to other research contexts and as such I have plans in place to share it again in the conference setting (at The Open University's Children's Research Centre's 20th Anniversary Conference) before publishing it in the newly formed *International Journal of Creative Research Methods.* I have also been approached to work collaboratively with a senior academic to develop an interactive step-by-step video guide to further support the dissemination of my tool.

8.3.1.2 Communicating findings to participants and schools

During the next year, I will be returning to the five schools who facilitated my research to share my findings and implications for practice. I have offered the schools a variety of formats and therefore in preparation for my visits, I will be writing a short summary document and preparing an oral presentation to share with staff. For my research to obtain a greater reach, I will also be publishing a 'Deanery Digest' which is a "short, plain language summary of research", designed for education practitioners (Department of Education, 2024). Depending on interest, this may further develop into a Continuing Professional Development (CPD)-type event.

Finally, I will also be creating a child-orientated research summary of my doctoral research so that service children are not excluded from the dialogue. Whilst the format of this is still in development, it will likely be in a digital format and take the form of a zine. I will share my research summary with the participants, and ideally their peers, as part of my upcoming school

visits. I shall also seek to have the summary distributed at the next annual SCiP Alliance conference and uploaded to their website.

8.3.2 Limitations of the research and future research avenues

Whilst this thesis brings unique contributions to knowledge and practice, like all research, it is not perfect. As discussed in section 3.3.3.2, finding participants for this project was challenging and involved an element of serendipity. Service children are a 'hard-to-reach' group – with no publicly available school-level data – so I was reliant on an imperfect method to locate potential schools with service children on roll. This meant that some potentially suitable schools were missed by me. Furthermore, the schools I worked with provided none or minimal service-related information about their service pupils. I therefore only found out additional pertinent military details from the children themselves such as those who were part of dual-serving families, those whose mothers served and those who were part of veteran families.

This participant diversity was important. The children's experiences highlighted the significant diversity of their military-related experiences and how these have shaped and developed their identity as service children. It also reinforced the need to not conceptualise service children as a homogenous group. Whilst service children have similarities in their experiences, their lives can look considerably different. Although I was cognisant of this, I feel my research has only really scratched the surface. There is a clear need for research into the experiences of different sub-groups of service children; including those mentioned above, those from foreign and Commonwealth countries, those of serving single parents or reservists, those who are young carers and those who are bereaved due to military service. A focus on these complexities and where appropriate, intersectionalities, would contribute considerably to the field.

This study is dual-service (Army and RAF), as opposed to tri-service (Army, Royal Navy/Royal Marines and RAF), due to research feasibility. As such, I did not engage with any naval children as part of the research. This is significant as naval children have notably different experiences of service-related separation. Indeed, they tend to experience far longer durations of continuous separation and often have very little communication with their serving parents during these times (Wood et al., 2022). The inclusion of their thoughts, feelings and experiences would have

therefore further enriched the collective understanding of military separation, from the service child's perspective.

This research presented a 'snapshot' in time. I researched with the children on a one-off basis or over several sessions which were in short succession (see section 3.3.3 for more detail). As discussed in sections 3.3.3.3 and 4.5, the temporal context of the research was important. Whilst the children spoke at length about their pasts and presents, and of their futures, this was shared through a lens of their current reality. I therefore believe there would be significant value in conducting research which is longitudinal, even taking a life course approach. Notably, several long-term cohort studies are being conducted by the Kings Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) on veterans and serving personnel. However, the viability of such an approach is dependent on robust data and the ability to 'follow' participants over time. As discussed in section 2.6.2, data on service children is severely limited. Present mechanisms which collect data on service children are insufficient. Indeed, there is not even an agreed number of how many service children there are. Without a significant improvement in data collection methods, such an approach is not feasible.

The second thread to this research was examining service children's school experiences. Whilst the children in the study had attended a variety of school types, this research was deliberately situated in the English state school context, as a response to the growing criticism of the SPP and given it is where most service children are being educated. However, as the literature review and the children's experiences of other educational settings highlight, there is considerable value in conducting research in differing educational contexts such as MoD schools abroad or private, fee-paying schools within the UK. The latter would be most pertinent given the recent announcement of the introduction of VAT on fees in these settings which may reduce the number of service families taking up the offer of CEA, despite the continuity of education it provides (HM Revenue & Customs, 2024).

8.4 Wider context of the research

The UK military landscape is continually shifting as the MoD and wider government respond to domestic and foreign changes, advancements and threats. In July 2023, the MoD published the *Defence Command Paper Refresh* (DCP23) as a response to a "more contested and volatile

world" (p.1). The paper outlines how the British Armed Forces will adapt to the changing global picture in the coming years and as such, deliver "a credible warfighting force" (MoD, 2023a, p.10). These include significant additional financial investments in munitions and readiness of personnel, developments in science and technology and an improved "surge capacity through our Strategic Reserve" to collectively "address increasingly complex and diverse threats" (MoD, 2023a, pp.87, 2).

Although these are at a strategic and governmental level, the changes that will be implemented will impact the lives of service children. Given the credible threat to peace and the investment into readiness, it is highly plausible that over the next few years, service children will experience an increase in periods of service-related separation and a heightened sense of concern for their parents' safety. With service children increasingly living away from military communities this could potentially lead to increased isolation alongside limited support for themselves and their families (Gribble & Fear, 2022; RAF Families Federation, 2019; Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020).

Moreover, given the huge rise of mental health concerns in children and young people – evidenced in part by increasing levels of school absence – schools will be under even more pressure to meet these needs through bespoke support (Gregory, 2024). For service children, this may mean that their service-related needs and identities are sidelined. Alternatively, an increased focus on equipping schools to support the mental health needs of all their pupils may lead to better recognition and support of the needs of sub-groups of children, like service children, within the general school population.

The new Labour government has promised in their manifesto to "break down barriers to opportunity by reforming our childcare and education systems" (Evennet, 2024, p.1). Although there is no explicit mention of pupil premium funding, Labour's commitments to education have a strong emphasis on equality. It is therefore plausible that there will be a review of the funding, including the SPP. Whilst not without criticism, the SPP funding is significant in that it recognises service children as a distinctive group within education. Indeed, it is the recognition of that distinction which is fundamental to furthering knowledge and understanding of how military life has, and continues to, shape service children's identity and school experiences.

Epilogue

Being a military child

Being a military child is stressful at times,

But sometimes you've got to man up, and,

When they go away, until another day,

Then they get to stay, until they go away,

AGAIN.

A poem by Sarah, upper Key Stage 2 (aged between 9 and 11 years old)

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Appendices

A: Outline of main study

B: Ethical approval letter

C: Outline of pilot study

D: Data generated – type and breadth

E: Data analysis – phase 1

F: Data analysis – phase 3

G: Research dissemination

Appendix A: Outline of main study

Document submitted as part of the ethical approval process.

Main study (academic year 2022-2023)

Overview

- Small groups of 3-4 service children, grouped by age
- Children attending 5 English state schools
- 15-20 children, aged between 9 and 16 years old
- 4 sessions of approximately 1 hour each, carried out in their school environment (dependent on school preference)

Outline of the sessions

Introduction (5 minutes) *(supplemented with the research ethics tree)*

- Remind the children of the information on the participant consent form – what the research is about, what the research will entail and what I will do with the information they share.
- Explain that the activities will require them to complete several different activities that ask questions about themselves and their school experiences.
- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers and anything they share with me will remain confidential (unless for safeguarding).
- Explain that I will make audio recordings to help me remember what is said.
- Confirm their consent by asking them to sign their name on the consent form provided.
- Briefly introduce a bit about myself (my service background and why I'm doing the research).
- Explain that in the first session we'll be focusing on themselves, and the second session will be focusing on their school experiences.

Main sessions

Children complete the following activities under each session within the planned timeframe.

Session 1: Service child identity and perception of self (110 minutes)

RQ1: In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as 'service children'?

- All about me self-portrait (20 minutes)

Exploratory question: Can you tell me about yourself?

Children construct a self-portrait (drawn or written) within a 10-minute timeframe. Children asked to informally share their work with myself and others in the group (10 minutes).

- Relational map (20 minutes)

Exploratory question: Who and/or what is important to you and why?

Children construct a relational map showing who and/or what is important to their lives. This is likely to be an unfamiliar task so I will provide an example to help children with the concept (10 minutes). Children share their maps and answer the 'why' part of the question. Children add and annotate their maps if desired (10 minutes).

- Timeline (35 minutes)

Exploratory question: What have been important or significant events in your life?

Children draw a timeline charting important events and changes in their lives (25 minutes). Children share their timelines and discuss what they included and why. (10 minutes)

- Free response (20 minutes)

Exploratory question: What does being a service child mean to you?

Children write or draw in response to the question prompt (10 minutes). Children share their responses as a group (10 minutes).

(15-minute buffer to allow opportunity to extend timings if children wish to discuss any parts further)

Session 2: School experiences (110 minutes)

RQ2: What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?

- School timeline (40 minutes)

Exploratory question: What have been your experiences of education in your life so far?

Children draw a timeline of their educational journey (20 minutes). Discussion and opportunity for annotation (20 minutes).

- Then and Now (40 minutes)

Exploratory questions: What's it like being a service child in your current school? Is this different from other schools that you've attended? What are your experiences of moving schools?

Using their school timelines as a prompt, children jot down points to discuss as a group (5 minutes). I then facilitate a group discussion (35 minutes).

- Free response (20 minutes)

Exploratory questions: Think back to the last time your serving parent(s) was/were deployed..., what was it like being in school during this time?

Children write or draw in response to the question prompt (10 minutes). Children have the option to share their thoughts and experiences. (10 minutes)

(10-minute buffer to allow opportunity to extend timings if children wish to discuss any parts further.)

<u>Concluding the session (5 minutes)</u>

- Thank children for their time and engagement with the activities
- Remind about confidentiality
- Ask if they have any questions
- Give out thank you notes and tokens of appreciation

Appendix B: Ethics approval letter

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Research Governance, Ethics & Assurance Team, Research Services, University of Oxford,
Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB, UK
Tel: +44(0)1865 289881 Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk

Lucy Robinson
Department of Education
University of Oxford

17 May 2022

Dear Lucy,

Research ethics approval

Research title: How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences?

Research ethics reference: R80968/RE001

The above application has been considered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (SSH IDREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the IDREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's guidance and legal requirements.

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's website.

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the SSH IDREC webpage.

Adverse events: The SSH IDRECs must be notified within seven days of any unexpected adverse consequences to the research participants, researchers or other people involved in this research project.

Audit: The SSH IDREC audits a sample of projects each year to enable the Committee to monitor the ethical aspects of research in progress.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

DocuSigned by:
Alison Monk
162CBC83B879410...

Alison Monk
Research Ethics Administrator

for

Jennifer Blaikie
Research Ethics Manager (SSH IDREC)

cc: Professor Katharine Burn

Appendix C: Outline of pilot study

Document submitted as part of the ethical approval process.

Methodological pilot study (June 2022)

Outline of the sessions

Introduction (5 minutes)

- Explain to children that they will be involved in testing out some activities that I'd like to do with other groups of children for my PhD research.
- Explain that the activities will require them to complete several different activities that ask questions about themselves and their school experiences.
- Explain that there are no right or wrong answers and anything they share with me will remain confidential (unless for safeguarding).
- Explain that I am interested in what they think of the activities and the associated discussions (engagement, ease, duration).
- Remind children that they are an important part of the research process and thank them for their time.

Main session (40 minutes)

Children complete the following activities within the planned timeframe:

- All about me self-portrait

Exploratory question: Can you tell me about yourself?

Children construct a self-portrait (drawn or written) within a 5-minute timeframe. Children asked to informally share their work with myself and others in the group.

- Relational map

Exploratory question: Who and/or what is important to you and why?

Children construct a relational map showing who and/or what is important to their lives. This is likely to be an unfamiliar task so researcher will provide an example to help children with

the concept. Children share their maps and answer the 'why' part of the question. Children add and annotate their maps if desired.

- Timeline

Exploratory question: What have been important or significant events in your life?

Children draw a timeline charting important events and changes in their lives. Children share their timelines and discuss what they included and why.

- Free response

Exploratory question (adapted): Think about an identity marker or role that is important to you. What does having that identity or role mean to you?

Children write or draw in response to the question prompt. This question has been adapted for the pilot study and therefore serves as a proxy by asking children about what an important identity marker (like being a service child) means to them.

- Then and Now

Exploratory questions (adapted): What's it like being a pupil in your current school? Is this different from other schools that you've attended? What are your experiences of moving schools?

Children are given 5 minutes to jot down some of their thoughts on the adapted exploratory questions ready to discuss as a group. I will then facilitate the group discussion for the remainder of the activity. These questions will serve as a proxy by asking the children about their current school experiences vs previous schools. It is anticipated that the secondary school children will have attended at least two schools from which they can draw from.

N.B. The 'free response' (in relation to experiences of deployment) activity and the 'school timeline' activity will not be included as the methods are being trialled already. I feel that the children will have gained familiarity with the activity and will be able to provide relevant feedback already without needing to repeat the activities with adapted questions.

Review session (15 minutes)

Ask children for their feedback on the above activities, based on the following questions:

- What did you think of the activity?
- How easy/difficult was it to complete the activity?
- Did you have enough time to complete the activity?
- How did you feel about discussing your work in a group setting?
- Did you prefer presenting your work one after another?
- Did you feel you had enough time/too much time to talk?
- Would you have liked me to speak more/less?
- Is there anything that could have made the activity or the research process better?

The children will be provided with a grid to help organise their thoughts and jot down their ideas. The session ends with me thanking the children for their time and engagement in the activities.

Appendix D: Data generated – type and breadth

Data generation activity	No. of artistic outputs	Explanation
All about me self-portrait and relational map	19	All children completed the activity individually.
Timeline – important events and changes	19	All children completed the activity individually.
Free response – *What does being a service child mean to you?*	21	All children completed the activity individually with two children creating two free responses each.
School timeline	(0)	All children chose to incorporate their school timeline into their timeline of important events and changes rather than creating two separate timelines.
Then and Now	6	Five children completed the activity individually by creating annotated drawings and annotated prose. One group of four children worked together and created an annotated spider diagram. The remaining children (10) chose only to respond to the activity verbally.
Free response – service-related separation	9	Eight children completed the activity individually by creating annotated drawings and annotated prose. One group of four children worked together and created a series of drawings and annotated prose. The remaining children (7) chose only to respond to the activity verbally.

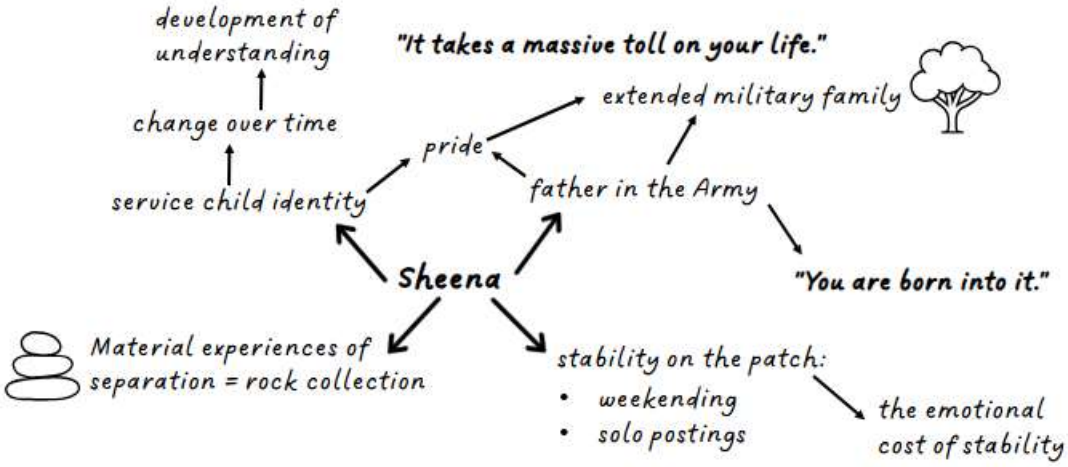
Total length of audio recordings: 20 hours and 25 minutes

Total number of words on transcripts uploaded to NVivo: 30,471

Appendix E: Data analysis – phase 1

Phase 1: Data(set) familiarisation

Below is an example of a section of a summarised data portrait of Sheena. Originally hand drawn, it has been translated to this format to serve as an example of one data familarisation activity I undertook. This example is only a partial depiction as identifiable drawings (such as her family tree), names of friends and places and other sensitive details have been omitted.



Appendix F: Data analysis – phase 3

Phase 3: Initial theme generation

Below shows an example of where I looked for "patterned meaning" in my codebook by clustering relevant codes together (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.79). This generated a "number of working, provisional themes" as indicated by those phrases in bold. These, alongside several others, were then grouped under a provisionally named candidate theme 'uneasy relationship between static schools and mobile children'.

Joining a school at an atypical time	**Impacts of being a mobile child**	**The role of schools in supporting mobile children**
• Experiences of joining a new school • Joining at the start of the year vs midway • Thoughts and feelings about moving schools • Thoughts and feelings on joining a new school	• Gaps in learning due to mobility • Repetition in learning due to mobility • Interruption in learning due to mobility • Loss of learning due to mobility • Losing friendships due to mobility • Repetition of making friends due to mobility • Apathy towards education • Apathy towards making friends • Challenges of making friends	• Desire for support in school (SPP) • Perceived good practice in schools

Appendix G: Research dissemination

(chronological, from the start of my DPhil research journey)

- Multiple internal departmental presentations focused on emerging ideas and research plans (2020-2022)
- Presented at Kaleidoscope (student-run conference), University of Cambridge (2021, 2022)
    - *Ethics & identity: problematising the ethical complexities of research involving service children* (2021)
    - *Co-constructing narratives about service children's identity: a methodological exploration* (2022)
- Published a blog post on the Defence Research Network's website (2021)
    - *What's in a name? Exploring the diversity and intersectionality of service children in English state schools*
- Regular engagement on Twitter/X including the 'Month of the Military Child (#MotMC) Twitter Takeover' where I shared an overview of my ongoing doctoral research in the form of daily tweets (2022)
- Invited to co-present at CARN (student network focused on creative arts) (April 2023)
    - *Weaving creativity throughout the research process*
- Presented at the ESRC GUDTP's annual conference, University of Oxford (May 2023)
    - *Using Twitter as a tool to support researcher development*
- Presented at the International Creative Research Methods Conference (September 2023)
    - *Creativity under constraints: one PhD student's experiences of embedding creativity in their research*
- Presented at the Rees Centre Symposium, University of Oxford (October 2023)
    - *The research space in schools: reflections on the role of place and temporal context in the research encounter*
- Delivered a workshop at the SCiP Alliance conference (October 2023)
    - *Translating child-centred creative research methods into the school context*

- Delivered a webinar at the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) e-festival (November 2023)
    - *The research ethics tree: engaging children with research ethics using an interactive tool*
- Invited to deliver a guest lecture to a cohort of MA Childhood Studies students, University of Leeds (November 2023)
    - *Ethics with children and young people in practice: the research ethics tree*
- Invited to deliver a guest lecture to youth researchers engaged in the 'Pathways to Health' project with the University of Southampton (November 2023)
    - *A look into a doctoral research project*
- Published a research methods tutorial for the NCRM (January 2024)
    - *Creative data generation methods: The self-portrait and relational map*
- Presented at the Qualitative Research Symposium, University of Bath (January 2024)
    - *The research ethics tree: engaging children and young people with research ethics using an interactive tool* [solo]
    - *Credibility, trust and power: is sharing positionality with participants always ethical?* [co-presentation]
- Presented at the Department of Education's Qualitative Research Hub (January 2024)
    - *The research space in schools: reflections on the role of time, space and place in the research encounter*
- Published a British Educational Research Association (BERA) blog (March 2024)
    - *Presenting at an e-festival: Experiences of an early career researcher*
- Presented at the Armed Forces Community Research International Webinar, Westminster Centre for Research in Veterans, University of Chester (March 2024)
    - *How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences? An overview of ongoing doctoral research*
- Invited to present on creativity and creative methods, Anglia Ruskin University (April 2024)
    - *Creativity in the doctoral research journey: how, what and why*

- Published a journal article in the *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health* (June 2024)
    - Military life, mobility and me: a collection of compositive images by British service children, *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health, 10*(2), 159-162, DOI: 10.3138/jmvfh-2023-0043
- Presented a poster at the ESRC GUDTP's annual conference, University of Oxford (June 2024)
    - *6 Things you should know about service children*
- Published two event reviews in the QMiP Bulletin (June 2024)
    - International Creative Research Methods Conference, 11-12 September, 2023, *QMiP Bulletin,* 37, 55-56, DOI: 10.53841/bpsqmip.2024.1.37.55 [solo]
    - The Eighth Annual Qualitative Research Symposium, 30–31 January 2024: Reflections from two doctoral students, *QMiP Bulletin*, 37, 57-58, DOI: 10.53841/bpsqmip.2024.1.37.57 [co-authored]
- Presented at the Children and Childhoods conference, University of Suffolk (July 2024)
    - *Service children: identity, belonging and 'otherness'* [presentation]
    - *Researching children's lives: using the self-portrait and relational map as a create data generation method* [workshop]
- Presented at BERA's annual conference, University of Manchester (September 2024)
    - *Service children in schools - so what? Implications for practice*
- Delivered a workshop at the International Creative Research Methods Conference (September 2024)
    - *Getting creative with data familiarisation*