Service children in education: a review of the literature from five countries

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Abstract: A review of the peer-reviewed literature relating to the education of children from armed forces families (service children) is presented. In England, service children have been identified by the Office for Students as an under-represented group in higher education. However, their educational journeys through compulsory education and towards higher education are relatively under-researched. Exploring literature from countries with similar educational, linguistic and armed forces cultures enables opportunities for researchers in the United Kingdom to be highlighted. The review identified a general lack of peer-reviewed research into educational outcomes for service children, a lack of consensus on the impact of service life on children, and a tendency to focus on the barriers and challenges arising through service life.

Key words: Children from armed forces families; progression; education; deployment; separation; mobility

Introduction

In recent years the progression of children of current and former armed forces personnel (service children) to higher education has become a focus of policy in the United Kingdom. In England, service children have been identified as being under-represented in higher education (Office for Students, 2018). Subsequently, a growing number of higher education providers in England have committed to actions to improve the access and success of service children through their Access and Participation Plans. In Scotland, the mobility of service children has been associated with disruption to learning and the risk of lower attainment (Commissioner for Fair Access, n.d.). In Wales, the Welsh Government has worked with partners in the sector to focus attention on supporting service children through education and into higher education (Welsh Government, 2020).

Understanding the educational trajectories of service children is key to providing appropriate support. For example, service children typically attain as well as their non-service, non-disadvantaged peers (Ministry of Defence, 2019). However, frequently changing schools is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of achieving good outcomes in English and mathematics at age 16 (Ministry of Defence, 2019). Service children who have family caring responsibilities can experience a range of impacts on their engagement with education (Children's Society, 2017). Furthermore, while the educational outcomes of service children in England can be tracked up to the end of secondary school, comparatively little is known about their experiences and outcomes after the age of 16. Service children's education, therefore, remains under-researched in the UK context.

This review has therefore been undertaken in order to fulfil a number of goals. First, such a review highlights gaps and opportunities with the intent of encouraging further work in the field. Second, given the geopolitical uncertainties of the early twenty-first century, a renewed focus on service children is needed in order to prompt greater reflection and response to their educational experiences. Third, given the developments in policy already noted, such a review will help to contextualise the ongoing debates on support for service children.

This review assesses the state of evidence in the context of the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These four countries exhibit similarities to the UK in terms of language, the organisation of schooling, the structure of their respective armed forces and participation in geopolitical events. The review method is then described, followed by a description of four themes emerging from the review: deployment; family separation; family mobility; and the organisation of schooling. The article ends by identifying a number of opportunities for researchers to grow the base of knowledge pertaining to the educational experiences of service children.

Who are service children?

Service children are children and young people whose parents are, or have been, regulars or reservists in the armed forces of

their countries during their children's lifetimes. In the UK a number of operational definitions of service children exist. For the purposes of allocating the Service Pupil Premium (additional funding available to support the needs – mainly pastoral – of service children in state-funded schools in England), a service child is one where: one parent currently serves in the regular forces or has a full commitment in the full-time reserves; or has been at any time in the previous five academic years; or one of their parents died in service and they are in receipt of a pension under the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme or the War Pension Scheme (Ministry of Defence, 2020). The same definition is used by the Welsh Local Government Association's SSCE Cymru programme (Welsh Local Government Association, n.d.). The Service Children's Progression Alliance goes further, considering a service child to be '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' (University of Winchester, 2020). This is in recognition of the potential, as yet unquantified, for service life to leave a persistent impression on children and families.

A lack of peer-reviewed research into service children's education

In the UK context, research has typically emerged as so-called 'gray literature' (Heyvaert *et al.,* 2017), for example in response to the needs of government and third-sector organisations. In some cases these have focused on the impact on children and families, on particular aspects of service life, such as the phenomenon of family separation for non-operational reasons (Gribble and Fear, 2019). Other studies have been more wide-ranging (Walker *et al.,* 2020; Children's Commissioner for England, 2018); in such cases, the impact of service life on children's education has been identified as a factor intersecting with a range of dimensions of service life. As a result, there has been a general lack of peer-reviewed publishing focusing directly on the educational impacts of service life. This review therefore seeks to identify a number of opportunities for researchers to develop this field of research. While much of the context for this review arises from the UK, the broader findings are undoubtedly of relevance to researchers internationally.

An international frame of reference

For the purposes of this review, research was sought that was grounded in the contexts of the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. These countries represent a useful frame of reference for this review for a number of reasons. First, they are all predominantly anglophone countries that exhibit some degree of shared culture and history. Second, they all maintain volunteer, professional armed forces; the concept of being a service child would likely take on different significance in a country that operated conscription. Third, these countries – along with the UK – have cooperated closely in major geopolitical developments since World War II. Thus, children of service personnel in these countries likely have shared experiences; for example, serving parents would have been deployed to operations in similar theatres at similar times. It is therefore likely that the experiences of service children in each country would have some degree of similarity to each other despite prevailing cultural factors that are unique to each country. This, in turn, may enable some fruitful lines of inquiry to be identified for the UK context.

Method

Initially, a selective sampling strategy (Heyvaert *et al.,* 2017) was undertaken. A search of the Ebsco Academic Search Complete database was conducted using the keywords 'children', 'military or armed forces or army or navy or air force or national guard or marines' and 'education'. Search results were restricted to peer-reviewed papers published in the period 2001–2020. Titles and abstracts were assessed to gauge the relevance of subject matter and geography. Given the comparatively small number of papers emerging from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the search was widened to include non-peer-reviewed literature from those countries.

A total of 76 papers were initially identified as candidates for inclusion based on their titles and abstracts. These were then read in more depth. Through this process, ten of the initial 76 papers were discounted for reasons of irrelevance or unavailability. This left 66 papers, which were categorised according to geographical focus, methodological approaches and academic discipline. The same selective search strategy was

subsequently applied to identify peer-reviewed papers from the UK. This identified a total of four additional papers.

Papers were assigned a weighting according to two factors: generalisability and primacy. The intention was to give greater credence in the review to those papers that were more likely to be representative of a wider range of situations and whose findings were more likely to be transferable to other contexts. Generalisability was estimated according to breadth of data analysed in the paper; those with larger samples (or in the case of reviews, drawing on a wider range of evidence) were assigned a score of 2, while those reporting on narrow ranges, or specific cases, were scored 1. Primacy was estimated according to the kinds of studies being reported. Papers reporting on primary or empirical research were given a score of 2, while literature reviews of existing research and evidence were given a score of 1. While typically one might wish to assign greater weight to secondary syntheses of evidence (Stewart and Kamins, 1993), of the 20 papers identified as literature reviews, only one was presented as a systematic review where the methodology was able to be interrogated. The remainder can be characterised as thematic overviews that draw on the knowledge and experience of the authors. While this does not suggest that such papers are not rigorous, there are, *prima facie,* no grounds for determining these papers to be more reliable. Additionally, given the relatively small field of research in question, there was a tendency for the review papers to draw on similar selections of studies. As such, it is reasonable in this case to give higher weighting to primary research as a means of limiting the risk of multiple publication bias (Heyvaert *et al.,* 2017).

The team of three researchers undertook an initial reading of the included papers. Each team member took initial responsibility for one country (Australia and New Zealand were addressed together), with the team coming together to compare the initial readings. This process identified four recurrent overarching themes: deployment; family separation; mobility; and school organisation. These were used as primary codes. The papers were then read in more detail, again with each team member taking an initial lead for each country. Relevant extracts were selected in order to draw out the main findings. Recurrent themes were then

drawn together by the lead author in order to characterise the themes arising in the literature underneath each primary code.

Table 1 summarises the geographical focus of the papers included. The vast majority of papers initially identified, and subsequently included, focused on the US. By contrast, it was not possible to include any studies from New Zealand.

Table 1: Papers included by geographical focus		
Geographical focus	**Number of papers included**	**%**
Australia	5	7
Canada	7	10
New Zealand	0	0
United States of America	54	77
United Kingdom	4	6

Table 2 summarises the disciplinary grounding of the papers included. It is notable that, out of the papers included, education was only the third most represented discipline. More than half of papers were grounded in health (including physical and mental health and child development) and psychology. This perhaps represents a tendency to focus on the biopsychosocial impacts on children and families of armed forces life, as well as interest in the efficacy of interventions aimed, for example, at supporting family functioning. Of the 15 papers grounded in education (see Table 3), few directly addressed the academic attainment of service children; the majority were focused on the 'softer' dimensions of schooling, such as the wellbeing of children in schools and the organisation of schooling to support children's needs. Thus, the majority of papers can be said to address the broader interaction of factors that make up the experiences of service children as opposed to directly addressing schooling.

Table 2: Major disciplinary focus of included papers		
Academic discipline	**Number of papers included**	**%**
Education	15	21
Geography	1	1
Health	18	26
Policy studies	1	1
Psychology	23	33
Social work	7	10
Sociology	5	7

Table 3: Papers included grounded in education			
Citation	**Country**	**Focus**	**Methodology**
Ashurst, K., Smith, L., Little, C., Frey, L., Werner-Wilson, T., Stephenson, L., & Werner-Wilson, R. (2014) 'Perceived Outcomes of Military-Extension Adventure Camps for Military Personnel and Their Teenage Children', *American Journal of Family Therapy,* 42, 2: 175–189.	USA	Evaluation of a project to aid family reconnection	Questionnaire research, n=28
Astor, R., Pedro, K., Gilreath, T., Esqueda, M., & Benbenishty, R. (2013) 'The Promotional Role of School and Community Contexts for Military Students', *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review,* 16, 3: 233–244.	USA	Examines how supportive public school environments can serve as a promotional context for the development of children and adolescents from military families	Thematic review of literature
Cabrera, A. F., Peralta, A. M., & Kurban, E. R. (2018) 'The Invisible 1%: A Comparison of Attaining Stepping Stones Toward College Between Military and Civilian Children', *Journal of Higher Education,* 89, 2: 208–235.	USA	Attainment and progression towards higher education, military versus civilian children	Statistical analysis of large-scale data set, n=46,000 military, 3.2m civilian
Classen, A. I., Horn, E., & Palmer, S. (2019) 'Needs of Military Families: Family and Educator Perspective', *Journal of Early Intervention,* 41, 3: 233–255.	USA	To understand family-professional partnerships from families' perspective as they seek educational services for their child	Multicase qualitative research, interviews and focus groups – 2 sites, 13 professionals, 8 families

De Pedro, K. M. T., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Estrada, J., Smith, G. R. D., & Esqueda, M. C. (2011) 'The Children of Military Service Members: Challenges, Supports, and Future Educational Research', *Review of Educational Research,* 81, 4: 566–618.	USA	Review of non-educational empirical literature examining links between special circumstances and stressors and of known factors impacting on school experiences	Systematic review
De Pedro, K. T., Esqueda, M. C., Cederbaum, J. A., & Astor, R. A. (2014) 'District, School, and Community Stakeholder Perspectives on the Experiences of Military-Connected Students', *Teachers College Record,* 116, 5: 1–32.	USA	The schooling experiences of military-connected students and their strengths and challenges in civilian public schools	Interviews, n=31
Engel, R. C., Gallagher, L. B., & Lyle, D. S. (2010) 'Military deployments and children's academic achievement: Evidence from Department of Defense Education Activity Schools', *Economics of Education Review,* 29, 1: 73–82.	USA	The effect of a soldier's deployment on the academic achievement of his or her children	Statistical analysis of large-scale data sets, n=56,000
Garner, J. K., Arnold, P. L., & Nunnery, J. (2014) 'Schoolwide Impact of Military-connected Student Enrollment: Educators' Perceptions', *Children & Schools,* 36, 1: 31–39.	USA	Perceptions of educators of various aspects of school activities that are affected by military-connected student enrollment	Focus groups and questionnaires, n=74
Gilreath, T. D., Estrada, J. N., Pineda, D., Benbenishty, R., & Astor, R. A. (2014) 'Development and Use of the California Healthy Kids Survey Military Module to Support Students in Military-connected Schools', *Children & Schools,* 36, 1: 23–29.	USA	How local data-driven monitoring efforts support the expansion of evidence-based programs and school reform aimed at social climate change	Questionnaire conducted in 7,600 schools

Griffiths, H. K., & Townsend, J. A. (2018) 'Recreation-Based Camps for Military Children: Past, Present, and Future', *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education & Leadership,* 10, 2: 97–108.	USA	Impact of non-recreation and recreation-based activities on children's resilience	Thematic review of literature
Jagger, J. C., & Lederer, S. (2014) 'Impact of Geographic Mobility on Military Children's Access to Special Education Services', *Children & Schools,* 36, 1: 15–22.	USA	Exploration of common challenges facing military students with disabilities and their families	Focus groups (27 with between 2 and 11 participants) and 10 individual interviews (n>64)
Kingston, T. S. (2002) 'What Can Department of Defense Schools Teach Us about School Reform?', *Journal of Education,* 183, 1: 58-67.	USA	Description of two public sector analyses	Narrative
Phelps, T., Lyons, R., & Dunham, M. (2010) 'Military Deployment and Elementary Student Achievement'. *Educational Research Quarterly,* 33, 4: 37–52.	USA	Comparison of academic attainment of children with deployed and non-deployed parents	Statistical analysis of attainment data, n=137
Robson K., Patrizia, A., Harrison, D., and Sandres, C. (2013) 'School Engagement among Youth in Canadian Forces Families: A Comparative Analysis', *Alberta Journal of Educational Research,* 59, 3: 363-381.	Canada	Impact of military stressors on school engagement	Questionnaires (n=1066) in one school
Stites, M. (2016) 'How Early Childhood Teachers Perceive the Educational Needs of Military Dependent Children', *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 44, 2: 107–117.	USA	Early childhood teachers' perceptions of educational needs of military children	Likert-style internet survey, n=63

Approximately 60% of the papers included were reports on primary research. Almost a third of the papers included were reviews of existing literature, as distinct from empirical research. Three of the primary research papers reported on randomised control trials; all three were grounded in psychology and had one author in common. Six papers involved analyses of large-scale administrative datasets, all of which were based in the US context. Of the papers that reported on primary research, all but one of the papers from the field of psychology scored 2 for generalisability. This compares with around 63% of papers in the health and education disciplines. This indicates a greater tendency towards larger-scale studies and the use of methods aimed at establishing causality or controlling for variance within primary research grounded in the psychological sciences.

Results

Four broad themes emerged from the analysis of the papers included: the impact of deployment of the serving person; the consequences of family separation; family mobility; and the organisation of schooling. This section explores each theme in further depth. Note that, because the majority of papers included emanate from the US, care should be taken not to infer essential differences between the contexts for service children on national lines. However, where a paper raises a point that is specific to the context of a particular country, this is noted in the discussion.

Deployment

There is a lack of consensus on the impact of deployment on students' academic attainment and progression. A number of papers, almost all from the USA, posit negative impacts of deployment (Engel *et al*., 2010, USA; Phelps *et al.,* 2010, USA; Lester and Flake, 2013, USA; Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2016, Canada; Rowan-Legg, 2017, Canada). This is 'embedded in a complex set of influences' (Sheppard *et al.,* 2010: 602, USA). The educational impact of deployment has been associated with children's concerns about their deployed parents (Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2016, Canada), reduced interest in and engagement with school (Lester and Flake, 2013, USA) and the necessarily reduced parental involvement in their children's education (Lester and Flake, 2013, USA). Deployment has been associated with a

greater likelihood of educational neglect (Cozza *et al*., 2018, USA). In a broader sense, deployment may impede children's educational opportunities through the financial and logistical difficulties around extracurricular activities (Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2016, Canada).

The nature of parental deployment may be a variable in the academic impact. More frequent deployments (Engel *et al.,* 2010, USA; Phelps *et al.,* 2010, USA) and longer deployments (Lester and Flake, 2013, USA) have been associated with more negative impacts on attainment. Additionally, deployment may not impact all children equally; Phelps *et al.* (2010, USA) found that female students whose parents were deployed tended to attain lower than males whose parents were deployed. The impact of deployment may also be seen unevenly across the curriculum; Engel *et al.* (2010, USA) noted more significant effects on attainment in mathematics and science and less pronounced effects in languages, arts, social studies and reading.

By contrast, Cabrera *et al.* (2018) found no significant difference in American service children's attainment of milestones towards university attendance compared with their civilian peers. They posit that the military culture may offer a protective effect through promoting academic socialisation. Additionally, they argue that the military emphasis on education is not restricted to those from more affluent backgrounds, and thus military culture may offer an equalising effect 'unlike the U.S. civilian population, military organizational structures provide access to resources that are not tied to familial SES [socio-economic status]' (Cabrera *et al.,* 2018: 229).

Also, Robson *et al.* (2013), in a study of a school serving a military community in Canada, found that parental deployment was associated with higher self-reported indicators of school attachment, school attitude and talking to teachers, and lower likelihood of skipping school. They suggest that a high level of teacher understanding of deployment, significant numbers of service children, and community presence of the military acted as protective factors. This, they suggest, 'can be viewed as a positive adaptation to adverse conditions' (Robson *et al.,* 2013: 375).

A number of studies addressed the importance of knowledge and understanding by school staff and other professionals of military culture (Robson *et al.,* 2013, Canada) and of the impact of deployment on families (Tupper *et al.,* 2018, Canada; Sensiba and Franklin, 2015, USA). Greater levels of understanding help to build a more supportive school culture (Macdonald and Boon, 2018, Australia); this is important given the amount of contact teachers have with children (St. John and Fenning, 2020, USA). In this vein, Pinna *et al.* (2017, USA) suggest giving attention to the backgrounds of those professionals providing military family interventions. Similarly, support and interventions ought to be developed with military culture in mind (Sherman *et al.,* 2018, USA; Pinna *et al.,* 2017, USA; Mogil *et al.,* 2015, USA).

Deployment has been associated with negative impacts upon family functioning, such as 'less healthy communication, reduced affective involvement, and less effective problem solving skills' (Lester *et al.,* 2016: 947, USA) among primary caregiving parents. Such challenges can arise through an intersection of circumstances and persist even following reunion (Flittner O'Grady *et al*., 2018, USA). For families with children with disabilities, the specific experiences of military life may be more difficult to adapt to (Fallon and Russo, 2003, USA). The serving parent's rank may also be a factor in the extent to which families experience disruption to functioning (Fallon and Russo, 2003, USA). This dynamic was also noted in the UK literature; reservists were less likely to perceive a negative impact of service upon children than regulars, and lower-ranked personnel less so than higher ranks (Thandi *et al.,* 2017).

While the risk of child abuse among service families may be lower than for the general population (Cozza *et al.,* 2019, USA; Rabenhorst *et al.,* 2015, USA), deployment may still lead to a greater risk of abuse (Kelley *et al.,* 2006, USA; Berle and Steel, 2015, Australia). Again, rank may be a factor in the likelihood of abuse occurring due to an intersection with socio-economic status (Rabenhorst *et al*., 2015, USA; Kelley *et al.,* 2006, USA). However, existing metrics of substantiated cases of abuse may serve to underestimate such incidences (Cozza *et al.,* 2019, USA); thus, official data sources may not give a representative picture of the likelihood of abuse among families, whether in the services or the general population.

Deployment may also impose negative effects on children's wellbeing (Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2016, Canada; De Pedro *et al.,* 2011, USA). Deployment has been associated with negative effects on children's behaviour (Russo and Fallon, 2001, USA). These can be exacerbated by experiencing multiple deployments (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014, USA), by longer deployments (Harrison and Vannest, 2008, USA), by the (di)stress experienced by the primary caregiver (Russo and Fallon, 2001, USA; Lester *et al.,* 2016, USA) and impairments to family functioning (Saltzman *et al.,* 2011, USA). Transitions associated with deployment may be more problematic for school-aged children who are developing their social networks (Gewirtz *et al.,* 2011, USA). For adolescents, the impact of deployment may be exacerbated by their growing awareness of their parents' work and the risks they may be experiencing (Lester and Flake, 2013, USA). Studies suggest that the stresses experienced by children may be only temporary (Harrison and Vannest, 2008, USA), though *combat* deployment may have cumulative impacts on children that persist beyond the deployment (Lemmon and Stafford, 2014, USA). Research in the UK reinforces a connection between negative outcomes for families and the exposure of service personnel particularly to 'traumatic or life-changing experiences, and to deployment stress' (Thandi *et al.,* 2017: 567), as opposed to a generalised impact of service.

The extent to which children experience challenges to their wellbeing may be contextual, for example associated with historical (e.g. war context) and demographic (e.g. reservist versus active duty) factors (De Pedro *et al.,* 2011, USA). Children of deployed parents may be more likely to exhibit negative impacts on certain child development indicators, which may be more significant for younger children (Nguyen *et al.,* 2014, USA). Protective factors may include the ability to develop peer relations with other service children (Griffiths and Townsend, 2018, USA). In the UK, Hogg *et al.* (2014) noted the importance of peer support among non-serving parents in supporting children during times of deployment.

In contrast to the literature from the US, Kaczmarek and Sibbel's (2008) study in Australia did not find that deployment exerted a negative impact on child wellbeing. It may be that service children tend to develop resilience and coping

mechanisms that overcome any potential disadvantage (Russo and Fallon, 2015, USA). However, the significance of contextual factors, for example the nature of Australian involvement in geopolitical events, cannot be discounted as an explanatory factor.

Separation

This section focuses on the impact of familial separation understood as the absence of the serving parent from the family setting. Separation of families is an inevitable consequence of the deployment of the serving parent. However, separation can also occur in non-deployment scenarios, such as the serving parent being required to undertake training. Therefore, there is inevitably some overlap between the literature regarding deployment and separation. However, this section focuses on factors that are generalisable to the absence of a parent as opposed to the specific circumstances of deployment on active service.

There is some disagreement in the literature regarding the impact of separation on the wellbeing of children. A comparative study of children from Australian military families and those from fly-in/fly-out mining families, whereby employees spend extended periods (from consecutive days to weeks) away from the family at remote places of work, found little significant impact of separation on service children's psychosocial wellbeing (Kaczmarek and Sibbel, 2008). Furthermore, the authors found no difference in impact on depression, anxiety and perceptions of family functioning between military, mining and other families (Kaczmarek and Sibbel, 2008). Literature from the USA suggests that service families may develop particular resilience in the face of separation (Russo and Fallon, 2015); secure parental attachment may be a protective factor in this regard (Lester and Flake, 2013).

However, as noted earlier, separation may carry more negative effects when associated with combat deployment (Savitsky *et al.,* 2009, USA). The impact on adolescents may be more significant (Harrison and Albanese, 2012, Australia) than for younger children, perhaps due to older children having greater situational awareness and being more likely to take on additional familial responsibility during the period of separation (Lester and Flake,

2013, USA). The impact of separation on children's wellbeing may also depend on the particular local environment in which the family is based. For example, the children of reservists living in communities with little military affiliation may experience a greater sense of loneliness than those living in military communities (Harrison and Vannest, 2008, USA).

In terms of family functioning, separation can impact negatively upon the remaining parent's ability to communicate their emotions (Kaczmarek and Sibbel, 2008, Australia). Families with children with disabilities may experience additional stresses relating to separation, which may heighten the risk of crisis (Russo and Fallon, 2001, USA). Rentz *et al.* (2008, USA) note that the stresses associated with serving personnel's experiences of training, temporary assignment, relocation and deployment can be disruptive to family life and may precipitate child maltreatment; however, they also suggest that incidences of maltreatment are generally lower among service families than non-service families.

Separation, as noted in the US research, may carry a risk of behaviour difficulties (Russo and Fallon, 2001). Younger children may be more susceptible to the negative effects of parental absence, particularly with respect to interpersonal behaviours (Nguyen *et al.,* 2014) and their ability to manage daily routines (Lester and Flake, 2013). This has been reflected in the UK context; Lake and Rosan (2017) identify the risk of emotional regression among younger children due to anxiety associated with parental separation. Such negative behaviours can be exacerbated when children perceive that the non-serving parent is not coping well (Russo and Fallon, 2001, USA). Indeed, children can come to believe that they are to blame for the parental absence (Lake and Rosan, 2017, UK). However, such behavioural difficulties associated with separation can be temporary, resolving themselves following reunification (Berle and Steel, 2015, Australia).

Reunification itself may present specific challenges. When the serving parent returns and 'asserts a claim to prior responsibilities', the non-serving parent may be 'left feeling that her (or his) efforts during deployment are now invalidated' (Doyle and Peterson, 2005: 369, USA). This can pose a challenge to

familial cohesion post-separation. Indeed, the presence of young children may be associated with a higher risk of child maltreatment upon reunification (Strane *et al.,* 2017, USA). Cohesion may be enhanced if families can successfully adopt new communication strategies (Ashurst *et al.,* 2014, USA) in order to support the serving parent's reintegration into family life.

Greater awareness of when children are experiencing separation would support school personnel in providing support (Harrison and Albanese, 2012, Australia), particularly in terms of their ability to address the impact of daily stressors (Ross and DeVoe, 2014, USA). In the UK, Lake and Rosan (2017) identify the need for inter-agency working in order to provide a cohesive package of support to families.

Mobility

The likelihood that service families experience mobility depends on the nature of serving personnel's work and the branch of the services to which they belong. However, mobility has been identified as a significant element of service life (Walker *et al.,* 2020, USA). While it is not a universal experience, it is held to be a frequent one (Cabrera *et al*., 2018, USA) and the international literature addresses its impact on family life.

For some service children, the prospect of relocation can be an exciting one (Skomorovsky and Bullock, 2016, Canada), and where children experience multiple transitions they can develop coping mechanisms that grant a certain resilience to the stresses associated with mobility (Russo and Fallon, 2015, USA). However, service children can come to an early realisation that 'the needs of the military service often come before their own needs' (Lemmon and Stafford, 2014: 349, USA).

For families with children with special educational needs mobility can present particular challenges. These can be due to differences in provision between localities leading to discontinuity of support, as noted in Canada (Daigle, 2013). Families can also experience a sense of helplessness and a lack of control over the demands of military life, which may be exacerbated by caring for young children with disabilities (Russo and Fallon, 2001, USA). For such families, the disruption of mobility can begin before the actual move as they attempt to 'choreograph a complex dance of

leaving and gaining schools and providers without their child losing any therapeutic gains' (Jagger and Lederer, 2014, p.18, USA). Uncertainty over where families will be living complicates such arrangements (Jagger and Lederer, 2014, USA). While families may anticipate and become accustomed to such events, 'even the most resourceful families may find this life-style taxing at times' (Russo and Fallon, 2001, p.4, USA).

More generally, while families can accept 'mission first' as a central principle of service life (Lemmon and Stafford, 2014, USA), families can experience other disruptions to their functioning due to mobility. These can include limitations in the ability of the non-serving parent to pursue their own careers (Daigle, 2013, Canada) and the experiencing of language barriers when moving between localities, which Daigle (2013) noted in the Canadian context. Supporting parents in developing a sense of self-efficacy in supporting their children through such transitions (Sherman *et al.,* 2018, USA) may be important in managing such stressors.

Mobility can disrupt service children's education through discontinuity in their learning leading to gaps in their knowledge (Garner *et al.,* 2014, USA; Savitsky *et al.,* 2009, USA). This can manifest itself through variations in curriculum content between school systems, leading to children 'struggling for a semester or full academic year to catch up' (Daigle, 2013: 66, Canada). In the North American context this can result in some service children being held back an academic year (Daigle, 2013, Canada; Savitsky *et al.,* 2009, USA), which is not a practice that occurs in the UK. The impact of such factors can become more acute for older children and can limit their post-secondary school opportunities (Daigle, 2013, Canada). Language differences between school systems may also be significant since families can struggle to secure provision in their main language, as Daigle (2013) noted in the Canadian context. Additionally, where families relocate to more remote military communities, this can limit students' access to post-secondary provision, part-time employment and extracurricular opportunities due to poor transport links (Daigle, 2013). In their study of service families in England, Rodrigues *et al.* (2020) noted that such families were less likely than the general population to live in metropolitan areas. This has 'potential implications for the resources available

in a sparsely populated, more rural area' (Rodrigues *et al.,* 2020: 14), such as the availability of school or college places.

Moving schools frequently can lead to lower engagement with school. Moving schools requires children to adjust rapidly to new environments with different routines and expectations, make new friends and form relationships with new teachers (Savitsky *et al.,* 2009, USA). This may require children to 'strike a balance between making friends and adjusting to new academic standards, teachers, and extracurricular demands' (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014: 14, USA). Robson *et al.* (2013, Canada) noted that children who moved schools more frequently perceived lower school attachment, lower dispositions towards school and were more likely to skip school. Echoing the findings from the US, Hogg *et al.* (2014) observe that some parents in UK service families report that children can stop trying to make friends knowing that their friendships cannot be maintained through the next move.

Additionally, there can be a gap between the realities of mobility and professionals' understanding of its impact. Stakeholders can perceive a posting as 'a punctual event wrapped around the physical displacement of the furnishings' (Daigle, 2013: 33, Canada), whereas the impact on families of mobility can extend to months either side of the actual move. As per the questions of deployment and separation, greater understanding of the real impacts of mobility upon children and families may enable professionals to better support children through such situations. Similarly, Hogg *et al.* (2014, USA) highlight the importance of communication between schools when children move, particularly given that the child's previous school is in a position to advise the new school of 'strengths and areas of concern' (Hogg *et al.,* 2014: 175).

School organisation

The theme of school organisation is rather different from that of mobility, separation and deployment. Whereas the previous three themes speak to the consequences of service life, school organisation addresses the institutional responses to such consequences. As a result, this section deepens some of the themes raised in relation to schooling and begins to present opportunities for practical change at the school level.

The knowledge, awareness and understanding of professionals has already been identified as a significant factor in the educational impact of mobility, separation and deployment. As noted, awareness by teachers, and other education professionals, of service life and its impacts can help to promote school engagement (Robson *et al*., 2013, Canada). However, teachers can report feeling under-equipped to support service children (Garner *et al.,* 2014, USA). This can include a lack of awareness of the emotional impact of service life on children (Saltzman *et al.,* 2011, USA), lack of appreciation of the impact of service life on families (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014, USA), and a general lack of understanding of the military (Garner *et al.,* 2014, USA; Rowan-Legg, 2017, Canada). This can be exacerbated by inconsistent availability of information as to the service children in their care, and especially regarding children of military reservists (Boberiene and Hornback, 2014, USA).

Factors that could aid professional understanding include the availability of professional development opportunities, whether a compulsory part of staff training (Robson *et al.,* 2013, Canada) or provided on a more voluntary or informal basis (Classen *et al.,* 2019, USA). Having school staff who act in specialist support roles can: promote whole-school awareness of service children's experiences; support teachers in implementing supportive processes in the classroom; and promote the development of a positive school culture that is conducive to supporting service children and their families (Macdonald and Boon, 2018, Australia). This point was reflected in the UK literature; in particular, Hogg *et al.* (2014) highlight the potential for play workers to support the development of friendships.

Alongside knowledge and understanding, professionals' attitudes and dispositions towards service children can be significant. Given that teachers are the professionals who spend the most time with children in the classroom, their influence is critical to meeting, in particular, behavioural and socio-emotional needs (St John and Fenning, 2020, USA). However, the impact of teachers' perspectives of service children and families has historically been under-researched (De Pedro *et al.,* 2011, USA). Teachers can possess a variety of perceptions about elements of service life. Relocation, for example, can be viewed as carrying positive socioemotional benefits (for example, through the

enhanced ability to make friends and to adapt) as well as negative consequences for academic performance. Parental separation, by contrast, can be perceived as negative both socioemotionally and academically (Stites, 2016, USA). The expression of negative perceptions by teachers can also be counter-productive. During wartime, for example, negative comments made by authority figures about military operations can place a child with a deployed parent in a difficult position. Such comments risk denigrating the actions of deployed parents who may be risking their lives as well as closing down possibilities for supportive relationships (Hathaway *et al.,* 2018, USA). Garner *et al.* (2014, USA) emphasise the significance of deliberately creating a positive and supportive school climate with regards to service children. Such a climate can promote 'coping skills that augment family supports' (Davis *et al.,* 2012: 87, USA). Indeed, the particular challenges arising through deployment and relocation reinforce the importance of empathetic and sensitive treatment by educators (Classen *et al.,* 2019, USA).

A positive school climate can contribute to service children's sense of safety and wellbeing. In some cases, service children can record lower scores on measures of adolescent safety, such as in alcohol use or hitting and being hit (Gilreath *et al.,* 2014, USA). However, it is not necessarily the case that teachers will perceive negative behavioural effects among service children compared to their non-service peers (Stites, 2016, USA). Both staff and peers can lack awareness of the socioemotional aspects of service life (Daigle, 2013, Canada; Rowan-Legg, 2017, Canada); this can place service children at greater risk of victimisation (Astor *et al.,* 2013, USA). In response, schools can seek to become places of stability for service children through the provision of school-wide and classroom-based support (Harrison and Vannest, 2008, USA), by maintaining a clear focus on learning (Kingston, 2002, USA) and in adopting a clear and consistent approach to discipline (Astor *et al.,* 2013, USA). Furthermore, the importance of schools as places of support for families was also highlighted in the UK literature (Hogg *et al.,* 2014).

In addition to creating positive and supportive school climates, the literature emphasises the importance of responsiveness and supportiveness in the provision of schooling and other educational supports. Russo and Fallon (2015, USA) highlight the need for

varied modes of teaching and assessment that 'recognize the diversity and functionality of behaviors and uniqueness of the military child's learning history' (Russo and Fallon, 2015: 414), and suggest that service children's needs may be best served by teams of teachers who can bring effective strategies to bear. Long-term holistic planning has been highlighted as important in meeting service children's needs (Kingston, 2002, USA). However, for children with special educational needs in particular, discontinuities in provision can arise as a result of service life. When children move schools, the receiving school may not engage with the child's needs in the same way, nor may they necessarily provide continuity of support (Jagger and Lederer, 2014, USA). The wider educational ecosystem – including universities and the wider community – surrounding the school can also play a significant role in promoting positive social and emotional outcomes for children (Astor *et al.,* 2013, USA). For example, schools could play a more responsive role in supporting families by drawing connections between a range of local support services and resources (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014, USA).

Constructive and supportive relations between schools and families can act as protective factors. The ability of families to build constructive working relationships with schools can have a bearing on the type and quality of support that children receive, as Rogers-Baber (2017) notes in Australia. Just as specialist provision can enhance the quality of the educational experience in school, such provision can also reassure parents as well as promoting mutual understanding of the child's needs (Macdonald and Boon, 2018, Australia). Where teachers are prepared to listen to and collaborate with service families, this can lead to support that is targeted more closely towards children's needs as well as contributing to building trust (Classen *et al.,* 2019, USA). In the UK, the importance of regular school communication with families, particularly while children are settling in, was emphasised by Hogg *et al.* (2014).

Given the significance of the organisation of schooling in supporting service children, the operating environment for schools is also a factor. Schools can find themselves subject to multiple reform initiatives that can occupy a great deal of attention, which risks relegating the needs of service children to lower priority levels (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014, USA). Furthermore,

regimes of accountability that emphasise, for example, standardised testing can elevate the pursuit of academic outcomes above the social and emotional wellbeing of children (Garcia *et al.,* 2015). This can become an obstacle to providing sustained support. The very fact of student mobility can also result in additional pressure on teachers' workloads since they have to evaluate their new students' emotional needs while still attending to the needs of their existing students (Garner *et al.,* 2014). Such challenges may be ameliorated somewhat by engaging in collaborative planning within and between schools, with families and with other professionals engaged in supporting children (Lewis-Fleming, 2014; Russo and Fallon, 2015; Classen *et al.,* 2019).

Conclusions and opportunities for future research

This review has highlighted a number of key opportunities for future research. These are:

1. Understanding service children's experiences in their national contexts.
2. Growing the peer-reviewed research base, particularly in educational research.
3. Promoting understanding of service children among educators.
4. Analysing service children's experiences from a strengths-based perspective.
5. Engaging with service children's own narratives.

While the particular conclusions are framed in a UK context, they indicate opportunities for education researchers globally.

Understanding service children's experiences in national contexts: a major conclusion arising from the literature is that the vast majority of peer-reviewed, published research around the circumstances of service children has taken place in the US, of which a significant proportion appears to emerge from a few centres of research. While there are some key similarities between the USA and the UK in social and military cultures, school organisation, and geopolitical exposure, there are undoubtedly elements of childhood experiences that will be distinct to the US and not easily transferable to other contexts. Therefore, generalising between the US and the UK is not entirely

straightforward. Furthermore, the relative lack of research grounded in Canada, Australia and New Zealand makes it difficult to identify factors that are distinct to those countries. One such example is that of 'fly-in fly-out' mining families in Australia (Kaczmarek and Sibbel, 2008), whereby working parents spend extended periods of time separated from their families working at remote locations; this reflects something distinct about the social, economic and geographical circumstances of Australia. Further attention is therefore needed to the commonalities and distinctions in economic, social, political and service cultures between countries.

Promoting peer-reviewed education research: this paper has also highlighted a general lack of peer-reviewed research into the impact of service life on children's academic outcomes. A possible explanation for this may be the difficulties of large-scale research of this kind in federal or highly devolved countries, largely due to challenges of comparability and access to data between regimes. This presents a particular opportunity for researchers in countries with well-developed educational data resources. It must also be acknowledged that this review was not an attempt to provide an exhaustive account of research in the field. It is therefore possible that further work has been undertaken that has been disseminated via 'grey' literature, doctoral theses and so forth. Thus, further systematic reviews of the wider field of literature are needed.

A related issue is the preponderance of research grounded in health and psychological disciplines. These two disciplines combined accounted for just over half of the research in the sample, with educational papers accounting for a further quarter. This may reflect differences in publishing conventions between academic disciplines or differences in levels of resource investment in different categories of research. There is, therefore, a lack of peer-reviewed research into the educational experiences of service children that is grounded specifically in education. This illustrates both a global need for more educational research into service children's experiences, as well as the potential scope for concerted interdisciplinary efforts to engage with the circumstances of service children.

Promoting educators' understanding of service children: an oft-recurring theme in the literature was that education and other professionals in contact with service children can hold misconceptions or misunderstandings about service children's experiences. Given the vast diversity of experiences of service children (McCullouch *et al.,* 2019), promoting greater awareness and understanding by professionals of service life in general and the lives of the service children in their care would seem to be a priority. Therefore, a key opportunity for the research community would be to engage with education professionals and others involved in the support of service children to strengthen and develop evidence-based practice.

Adopting a strengths-based perspective: there was also a tendency in the literature to focus on the barriers and challenges experienced by service children as a result of their parents' service. This trend was not restricted to the medical and psychological research; there was a general tendency to begin research through an interrogation of the perceived deficits emanating from service life. While this is valuable insofar as it offers insight into forms of disadvantage that are not necessarily captured in conventional understandings (McCullouch and Hall, 2016), it also carries the risk of labelling service children as a disadvantaged, hence stigmatised, group. Such an approach risks denying both the individuality of service children's experiences and the strengths that service children can possess. There are possibilities for informing practice that might emerge from, say, a critical realist perspective that begins with the lived experiences of service children, in a similar vein to Clifton *et al.*'s (2018) engagement with the self-narratives of those with quadriplegia. This would avoid the trap of projecting the researchers' categories onto those being researched (Veck and Hall, 2020). Thus, researchers might consider ways in which future research might adopt an appreciative stance.

Engaging with service children's narratives: similarly, the literature assessed here indicated a lack of consensus over the impact of service life on children's wellbeing. For example, some papers pointed to the potentially negative effects of parental absence and deployment; some identified service children being at higher risk of experiencing bullying and other forms of

marginalisation. Other papers, however, identified protective effects of service life stemming from military culture, though sometimes this was not elaborated in depth. Further research into the life narratives of service children would therefore be valuable in exploring these trends, provided that such research did not begin from an 'excluding barriers' perspective which may simply reproduce narratives of marginalisation and exclusion. Researchers should therefore consider opportunities to engage with the lived experiences of service children.

Ultimately, though, the educational experiences of service children are subject to a broad range of influences, some of which are particular to life in service families. This paper has highlighted the complexity and irreducibility of such factors, and is a call to researchers to engage with the tensions and intersections that characterise the educational experiences of service children.

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