**Interview Details**

**Project Title:** An exploration of service children with SEND’s experience of separation and deployment throughout education, from the perspective of service children, their families and school staff.

**Interview Date and Time:** 14/02/2025 14:00 – 14:45 (36 mins)

**Interview Location:** Online via Teams

**Interviewer:** (“I”)

**Interviewee:** Participant 2 (“P2”)

**Key:**

[*inaudible*] = inaudible word due to interference on the recording

**Interview Transcript**

I: Fab so just to note, please don't mention any specific children's names because we obviously don't have parental consent to discuss anybody specifically. So just thinking more generally about the children that you might have in the school. But before we get started, I've just got some demographic questions, if that's ok. So just to check what pronouns you'd like me to refer to you with?

P2: She.

I: Thank you. And your job role?  
P2: Assistant head teacher of inclusion and that incorporates the SENCo role as well.

I: And the children you support? The service children that we're thinking about today, they have identified special educational needs or disabilities?

P2: Yes.  
I: And their parents are currently serving or have served in the military?

P2: Yes.

I: Do you know which branches of the military that covers?

P2: I wouldn't know offhand. We've got various regiments that we have. It's not just one.

I: That’s fine. Is it army?   
P2: But it's armed forces, yeah.  
I: And in what year groups are the children? If you know that off hand, if you don't, is it just across the school?

P2: All year groups. Yeah, across the whole school. Reception to year 2.  
I: Ok, thank you. So, thinking about the service children with SEND that you do support in school. Could you tell me a little bit about their experiences of separation because of their parent being in the military? Anything that you might know of from working with them.

P2: Yeah. So obviously the children with the most complex needs find any change hard. So, when a parent goes away and is deployed, it's very difficult to explain to those children what's happening, and that the parents will come back, that it's not finished forever. It's very hard for them to understand time frames as well of how long they're going to be away, particularly when we've had parents that have gone away for a few weeks and then the next posting and deployment is months. That's tricky. Some deployments allow contact. Video and telephone contact and other deployments don't, so depends on where they obviously are put which country they're in, and we can see changes in the children's behaviour. And not just one when the parents are deployed, sometimes the changes are when the parent returns because they've got themselves used to a way of living. You know the parent that's back at back at home, home with the children and they've got used to these routines and then the parent that's been serving comes back. And sometimes all that can get a bit thrown up in the air as well. And they start picking up again and dropping off. And suddenly the child doesn't do breakfast Club as much because they don't use as much wrap around care and and that can also be quite challenging for some of our children.  
I: Could you tell me a little bit more there about if we focus first on when the parent is away, the kind of changes that you do see, what kind of things do you guys notice because you talked about the behaviour change there and then we'll come to the return in a moment.

P2: Yeah, I think when the parents. Yeah. When the parents away, it's mostly that they really miss that contact with that parent. And we have to be very careful with our wording, so like obviously some of our special needs children, they can be quite affectionate and want to hug and kiss and things like that. And we would say or hug it, you know, hugs and kisses for mummy or hugs and kisses for Daddy. When we know parents may be back and forth. It's things like hugs and kisses for home, but we're also very aware that some of those children aren't getting those hugs and kisses from that grown up that would have given it and are needing that sort of more affection and close contact. We find that.

I: So you see them seeking that more in school when their parents are away?

P2: Yeah, we can do. I mean, it depends on the child, but we certainly don't know what I can think of one little girl at the moment that we've got whose parent has been away. She's she's preverbal, and she's definitely been more clingy, wanting that close contact and that affection. And you know, bringing her face close up to ours and putting her cheek against ours and things like that. So that's definitely a part of it. We run Camo club for when parents are deployed that children can go to and part of Camo club is making things to put in a box to give to the parent on their return. And some children really, really like that, and other children find that really hard, that the amount of time they've got to wait before this box can go home can be quite tricky, particularly trying to explain that to their children with additional needs. So, we noticed that with and just generally, sometimes things for the children don't go as smoothly, so things like maybe their book bag isn't as in as in school as regular as it once was, because the single parents at home is then trying to cope with everything else. So their rules and routines can sometimes be a bit dishevelled, and they find that tricky as well. If if the parents been deployed over when when it's a school holiday so they haven't even had the routine of school, particularly the children with SEN, and then they've had a different routine at home with a different adult, because maybe you know, they've had to go to childcare and things like that, that can unsettle them as well. So, there's lots of varying factors. I also think like the children were SEND they sort of make leaps of progress and then slow leaps of progress and slow whilst the parents away. Sometimes the progress they make isn't always noticed until the parent comes home and sometimes that progress isn't as great either because it almost sometimes slows down the progress because of the emotional things that [*inaudible*].

I: When you talk about progress then are you talking about in terms of like academic progress or?

P2: And emotional resilience as well. Things like transitions and things like that that SEN children find tricky that we feel like we've got to grips with and the child is now transitioning from X to Y and Y to Z. Suddenly they can take some steps backwards and you always have to have in the back of your mind oh mum isn't there at the minute or dad's not there at the minute or you know. We have children as well whose parents are both deployed. And then they have to go and stay with a family friend or a grandparent? We've got two children at the moment that that's happened to, so that's an even greater loss, isn't it? And sort of upheaval.

I: A bigger change as well from what you're describing. They've got to do that with two parents.

P2: And trying to explain it to children that have needs is much is is really tricky, isn't it?

I: As a school are you always aware when the children's parents are deployed or away, whether that's training or whatever that looks like or?

P2: No, not always. So sometimes you know, I think of one that little preverbal girl when her when her parent wasn't around, I remember speaking to the other parent and saying, you know, gosh, she's really struggling to pick up some of these things that we were doing, like phonics wise. She's sort of making limited progress. And then they're like, oh, yeah, because, you know, dad's away and he won't be back. you think, oh, if I'd known. So no, we're not always we're not always told, however. For them to access Camo club, they do need to give the details of when the deployment is, who's being deployed, what regiment they are, and things like that. So in that case, if they do vote to go to camo club, we do get that information, but it's not all the parents fill in those forms for those children to come. And then we're going and saying, are they away? Would they like to do camo?  
Having to chase it that way, but they're not always forthcoming. I think because it's just part and parcel of what they've always done. And I know we've just had a child that was last last year was deployed to LOCATION and then was back with us. So less than a year she's been deployed and come back. And in a year that year, obviously the other children have all moved on. Friendships have moved on, staff has changed.

I: Lots has changed for her.

P2: Yeah. And that's really tricky. And then with the additional needs on top. Obviously makes them even more vulnerable, doesn't it?

I: Yeah. So for the camo club, that's for when parents are actively deployed, that's a space for the children, like a support space for them.

P2: Yeah. Yeah, and it's run by our two ELSAs and we have a gentleman from the SERVICE NAME who also comes to camo so they run it together? Yeah, and it's it's every Friday afternoon. It's running now and it's for children whose parents are deployed, and it's a chance to talk about that. They have a camo bear, so build-a-bear camo bears and they get to take camo bear home for the week and just draw pictures to Camo Bear and share that NAME always finishes it with a story.  
And they have a snack in there and a drink, and it's that it is all kinds of military themed. But they do arts and crafts and and things like that. And you know, if the ELSAs pick up on anything, then that's something we can action then.

I: And I assume that's for all of your service children, not just your service children with SEND?

P2: Yeah, all of them. All of them. And you know, for some service children with SEN, it may not be appropriate because the transition from that what they normally do on a Friday to there because it's not a forever thing. So we have to make the right choices for each of the children. But yes, they're all welcome to join.

I: Yeah. Yeah, OK. Fab. Thank you. That's helpful. I'm wondering a little bit about because you've talked somewhat about what you do as a school to help support children during those times, but I'm wondering if there's anything that the children do themselves to help them manage when their parents are away, or if there's anything you've noticed?

P2: So sometimes the army give them a like a mini me type thing. So, it's a cuddly squashy thing of like the parent that's in the military. Obviously, we let them bring that back and forth to school if that's something they want, that's something special to them. We have tapestry which, like the online Learning journal, sometimes we've got parents that are posted that will still comment on that and then if that happens we can share that with the child and that keeps them up to date with what's going on at school as well. And then I I know in the past we've had like visits from soldiers and things like that to talk to the children and for the children to ask questions. So, if they have got anything they wanted to raise, they have that chance. And we've done that before as well.

I: OK fab. You kind of touched on this already I think, but it's thinking like specifically whether the children's special educational needs impacts their experiences of separation and deployment. So you you mentioned earlier about how it can be a bit trickier for them because of the changing routine or harder for them to understand that parents coming back and things. But I'm just wondering if you could tell me a bit more about that?

P2: Yeah, and harder for us to explain. Yeah, I think it is just hard to for us to explain. It's hard to know how much they understand when they can't express. And you know, when they're dysregulated and having those uncomfortable experiences, they're likely they're trying to express that they miss them or they don't understand what's happening. And I think it's just more than anything, it's just being mindful of that. And I think that's quite challenging for parents as well because obviously being part of the armed forces, they get deployed to lots of different places.  
The children move around a lot. And some of our children have had lots of changes before they've even got to us. Or like I said, that little one that changed and then came back and that that's that can be hard to pick if the child isn't verbal enough to be able to say this is my fifth school or whatever. So I think that's what it's really important to know their history, I think, and their journey so far. And just what the parents have accessed so far with regards to SEN because. Obviously, each local authority and each local offer are very, very different, and so in one county a child may have had X, Y and Z offered to them whilst parents haven't been there, and then they get to us and you know, LA NAME don't offer the same services and the same things, and I think parents get find that quite stressful. And when they're trying to navigate that and also deployments and being single parents and things like that, it directly does impact on the children. Because therapies and services they once accessed, they don't. Plus the fact that they're on their own, trying to navigate quite a hard system as I know you're aware the SEND system is not.

I: Yeah. Almost like they've learnt it in one place and they move and they have to relearn it all over again.

P2: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And different schools offer different things. Different local authorities offer different things, and obviously when you a SEN child, you need access to lots of things to be able to be successful and flourish. And I think sometimes if they get moved to and then the parent deploys straight away, they don't even have each other the parents to navigate this this rocky system. And I think that has a direct impact on our on our SEN service children because it's just such a lot of upheaval each time, isn't it?

I: Yeah. And then it's left on the one parent that's at home to kind of do all of that on their own.

P2: Yeah, and and things like. This isn't so much to do with deployment, but it's definitely do with SEN and and armed forces. If they were literally near the top for an assessment to the paediatrician or they've been seen by speech and language and had all this therapy, and then they moved to us. That all has to start again.

I: Yeah. So, do they have to go back to the back of the waiting list when they move into a new area?

P2: So for speech and language they can go in as a re referral and sometimes their paper gets transferred, but they're nowhere near the top. And for paediatrician they it should, the wait should carry on but each local authority has a different wait time for things. So I was talking to NAME local authority their wait time for Paediatrics is over two years. Ours is 11 months. So do you see so sometimes? They can move for worse.

I: Even though you might go to equivalent point on the list, you still are losing out that time.

P2: Yeah. And then you've got these parents, then you know, moved the, then the other parents being deployed, the child's got additional needs, services they want to access they can't or they start all over again. And that's going to always directly impact the child, isn't it? Always, always. So it does leave them really, really vulnerable and just the social side of things as well. If you think a lot of the children in our school with SEN have autism and they've got that social communication difficulty getting used to rules and routines, and then those rules and routines change because the parents gone. And that really has an impact.

I: I was going to ask you a bit more about that, about how it impacts on service children with SEND socially when their parents are deployed and their experience in those transitions. Could you tell me a little bit more about what kind of things you might see or how it impacts them?

P2: Yeah. So some children will almost go introvert and go in on themselves and things they once enjoyed and things they once would do they don't want to do anymore. And it can be little things like if the if the parent that's deployed has always packed their lunch box. We've had that before and has done their lunchbox in a certain way and then the parent that has now at home does it and then suddenly they won't eat it because dad didn't make it and Dad didn't have, dad didn't do that. And they find that really, really hard. And that that affects them, I think just little little changes that have to be made around childcare that affects them socially and sometimes they don't always know who's going to be picking them up because they know it's not going to be, often it's the military parents on a Friday, the dads picking up on a Friday and it gets to a Friday and they kind of know that's not going to be the case. And sometimes the other parent isn't always great at communicating who it's going to be, so you can prepare them, and then when it's the person at the door they're not expecting, they won't cross the threshold to go home. We had difficulties with that before, so all those little changes because they just get used to one way and then it has to change, doesn't it? Which is why it's really important that school doesn't. That school remains the constant for those children. Even though we might have to bend and flex a little bit because of what we know is happening. Yeah. And then when the parent returns, sometimes that can be quite overwhelming for some of our children and they don't really know how to what to do with those feelings of sort of almost happiness that the parents there but confusion, because where did you go? You know, will you go again? And that sense of sort of loss is tricky as well. So yeah, there's there's socially, it can really impact.

I: And some of those things you were describing are the things that you couldn't even predict were going to be difficulties. So it's and it's going to be different for every child, isn't it?

I: It is. Is we've had one child in the past whose behaviour certainly became more challenging when Dad returned. And Mum said it's because we got into our little routines and now dads come home and he's thrown it all up in the air. And that child found that really, really, really difficult and that impacted to what he could manage at school. And that, yeah. And we all so we always used to say to them when when dad's about to return give us the heads up and then we can prepare for that. He he he found that very challenging, very challenging.

I: Yeah. Yeah. And you were talking there about how it can affect affect them emotionally when the parent returns. I'm wondering if you see the same or similar impacts when the parents about to go or while the parent is away, whether you see a change in their emotional status really?

P2: Yeah. Some of our children, I don't think are always aware that the parents about to go, which doesn't help because it doesn't give them sort of plan of what's happening and that impacts.

I: OK. Do you think that's? Is that do you think because they haven't been told or because they don't understand?

P2: I think sometimes it's because they haven't been told. I don't think the parents always appreciate the turmoil that can cause children and the emotional upset that can cause. So sometimes, you know, like I said before, we'll be thinking what's going on, what's going on, and we'll mention it and they say, oh, yeah, Dad, dad went last week he's not back until June or something. You know? You think. And thats why, they just don't say, I think so a lot of our school community, they don't like to make a fuss. You know, they just don't, we've got a lot of, as you know, a lot of sort of different cultures and the respect for the teaching profession is, is really high in those cultures and they don't want to make a fuss. They don't, sometimes, you know, say, or push hard enough and half of them I say to them fight a little bit harder for your child. You know, because there's other parents that get things, but they just don't, they just don't think about it, or perhaps realise that their child is going to find that that tricky. Yeah, it's quite a vulnerable place to be.

I: Just made me wonder then, when you were explaining that whether there's they see school and homes very separate. So they think, oh, there might be some impact, but it's at home and school still school, so that'll be the same.

P2: Yeah, I agree. And I think you know, the other thing that we have to manage and this is particular for parents of children with SEN is then the parent left at home starts to find things hard and things start to slip. Like I said, the book bag stops coming into school, there's no water bottle and stuff like that. And then you realize that that's because they're trying to manage everything by themselves, and parenting a child with additional needs is challenging as it is, let alone trying to do that by yourself, perhaps in an area that you don't know very well, you don't have many other people you can call on you don't have a wider family. And all those vulnerabilities impact the child because you know what they're used to having and the sort of consistency and security of what you know of coming to school and this happens and that happens suddenly, that parent isn't managing that.

I: Yeah. It goes beyond just a parent being away.

P2: It absolutely does.

I: There's all these other factors that are there as well.

P2: It does, and quite often the parent back here are is working a lot of our parents work nights. So and then the grandparents or somebody of child mind is looking after the children and then different people are bringing them to and from school and yeah, it's just all out of sync for them. And I do think that when they're SEN and they can't express or the parents are trying to manage more with their needs. It it it just it has, you know, it has sort of creaking ship really.

I: We thought then about the impact socially and the impact emotionally, but I'm wondering about the impact on their learning and their education as well. So they can specifically during those times when parents are away serving. Do you see a change and an impact on their their access to their learning and education?

P2: Yeah, I think if they're not emotionally regulated, then they're not ready to learn, are they? We know that. And and again, just because the parent at home is now trying to manage everything, you know, the reading might stop the regular reading that we encourage the story times, the regular bed times and all these things that lead to positive learning outcomes for children, book bag not coming back, so we can't change the reading book, and it all just becomes a bit dishevelled and a bit messy.  
And we definitely noticed that we also have, you know, the difficulties that sometimes these children aren't picked up on time or come to school on time, that impacts learning. And if you come late to school, that's not a good start to the day for that child they've missed the input. Parents are trying to manage an awful lot without having a lot of outer support, that wider family support. So yeah, I mean emotion. You know, the most important thing is children are safe and happy. And emotional, emotional, you know, development comes before anything else. But if they're not, if they're not happy, they're not going to learn, are they?

I: So has that knock on effect then? Across everything really.

P2: It absolutely does. I think I think of another little girl that was just stuck on phase two graphemes for ages, and she sort of flown through the whole of the phase two, and we got and I was thinking now I just want her to learn these last ones I can get on to phase three, this is phonics, and and it’s unpicking and unpicking and unpicking, then when I eventually said to the parent and they said, oh yeah, Mum's away, she'll be back, you know, in three months time. I was thinking no wonder then.  
You know a the person that used to do all that reading and check and things with her has gone. But also she just was just not even in a place to be able to listen and attend. It's just so unsure about what was going on.

I: It creates a lot of uncertainty for them, it sounds like.

P2: It does. It does. It does. And some of them can can voice how they're feeling and, you know and say that they miss the parent or, you know, they don't want so and so to look after them or they don't want to go to and after school club because so and so's away or whatever, but some of them can't. You got to be a bit intuitive then I suppose.

I: Leaves you guys doing a lot more of trying to unpick and figure it out yourselves then isn't it? Which must be quite difficult.

P2: Yeah. And that's why we try and build really, really strong positive relationships with our parents, and particularly for me for parents of SEN they all have my direct contact details so they can contact me at any time. And just building that relationship so that they will mention these things to you or ask for help when things are hard and that, you know, part of that support hub that we got through the armed forces grant for SEN parents was about saying you're not alone and we're here and just reach out and ask and if we don't know the answer, there's somebody here that will, because vast majority of those parents are military navigating a SEND system that isn't always fit for purpose.

I: Yeah. So it's not always about supporting a young person in school, but also supporting the wider family.

P2: Oh, absolutely. Because they're the ones that are looking after that child, aren't they? The child the child’s a vulnerable little thing that needs that other parent to be in the very, very best place they can be physically and mentally. So that when the child is received at school, we can, you know, work with that child and help them as much as we can academically as well as emotionally and socially. And actually at infant level, you know, the emotional social side is, is fundamental, isn't it? If you just look at child development and what we do in EYFS it’s the it’s the starting block for for any sort of learning. So we know that.

I: Yeah. You've mentioned lots of different things that you do as a school, like your camo club, the family Support hub, amongst other things. I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you do as a school to support your SEN service children that you haven't mentioned?

P2: Not specifically, we do signpost them a lot, so things like CEAS, which obviously an organization that support military families so we might signpost into places like that. I kind of scroll on Facebook a lot and find groups that have got like tag for and groups like that that have play groups and activities for children over the holidays. Because like things like wrap around care and clubs, the military funds for those families. So those families can access these things at a discounted price and they may not always realize that. So just trying to flag them to, you know, group sessions, activities, events where they can take their children, and their children will be welcome. And and obviously it can be partly funded by the armed forces, because they do they do pay for that sort of activities and care. We obviously involve army welfare if we're ever really concerned about a family. And that doesn't have to be SEN obviously, but quite often that's navigating hard things with with SEND children. And we keep so we do access that as well for families. Yeah. And also as part of our, As part of our sort of funding We have two parent support advisors and the reason we have two is because of the military side. So we have one who's kind of just general parent support advisor, but we have another one that specifies more for the military families.

I: So has, I assume has some of that background around what it means to be a military family?

P2: She does. She's a military wife herself.

I: Yes, exactly.

P2: Yeah, but it's with other schools. Like SCHOOL NAME that also have a high military cohorts. So yeah, we do that as well. Just to look on my board, check if there is nothing else I've forgotten. Now that's the CEAS, that's kind of more specific, I would say, to obviously they can still access everything else that those things are things. So yeah, this is our, so this is the [*inaudible*], one for the armed forces (*shows flyer to camera*). And then CEAS, which is the the Children's Education Advisory service from the Ministry of Defence. So that's kind of a handy. You probably know about them, but handy thing. So yeah, we just make sure we still a lot of signposts. And then EP NAME and I do a lot of that as well in our sessions, but there are certain things that military families can access over and above.

I: Yeah, what I'm hearing is that it's helpful for the school to know a lot about their military families and what's available and to be in tune with all of that to be able to effectively support them.

P2: Yeah, we track our military children separately in our data, not we track them because they're like a vulnerable group. So we track the military children and then the military children with SEN again separately on our systems. It will say if they're a service child and obviously they get service premium for that and then forget that on top of any SEN funding then they're entitled to more again.

I: I feel like you're doing so many different things to support, but I'm going to ask this question anyway. But is there anything else that you think your school or schools could be doing to better to support service children with SEND?

P2: I mean, it would be lovely, wouldn't it, if there was a somewhere in LA NAME SEN, like somebody that was a little bit more representative for our military families. You know how you've we've got obviously our SEND caseworkers and so on and so forth, but I do wonder if they because they move around so much, particularly think of these EHCP children and the vulnerabilities around having to move and then get a new placement of school I do think it would be nice if there was somebody that was a specialist in that, that we could talk through the school to understand.

I: So kind of higher up in the system.

P2: Yes. And just and to support things with that, so you know if when a parent is deployed or when somebody's something's happened, they've got someone to access and talk to that specifically knows what's available. Or what, you know what, how they could help the child. I think that would that would that would probably be lovely. Then you would have a LA NAME SEND system that represents all all children.

I: So having that knowledge higher up in the kind of the system, really so that.

P2: Yeah. Or, you know, as part of our local offer, when you go on the local offer website, you know, just moved into the area military move, single parent type thing, click here and here's some of the things on offer.

I: Yeah. So, it's kind of like a central place to share that information and for it to be more easily accessible for them.

P2: Yeah, to support, to support. Because I think if our parents knew where to go and what to do, they would access things like that. But you know, I doubt there's many people that would would know. And that is that is a barrier for us because obviously we get children moving in and out, left, right and centre as well. So sometimes it's about sharing information, isn't it? And having good transitions that can make lives a bit easier.

I: You very nicely led me into my next question actually, which is what is what are the most important things for a school to know if they're having, or if they've got a service children with SEND and they're experiencing those periods of separation or deployment?

P2: I would say know the child's journey so far. Know what, the child, who the child, the child's significant adults are because they're the people that you want to work with, because they want the best for the child and can also give you the voice of the child as well because we don't always have that. So definitely that sort of transition and partnership together. Sometimes it's about supporting staff to be a little bit maybe kinder and less demanding at times and a bit more empathetic. So, it's about supporting your staff through that as well, because obviously some of it can present in that low level disruption and behaviour, which can be exhausting in the classroom, I know that there's always a reason, isn't it? We know behaviours communication, so I definitely would say around that, making sure that that's understood and then you know, until all that's in place, then the learning will happen. Sometimes it's about teachers being a bit kind to themselves and being do you know what they didn't do that today, but they they separated from whoever brought them really, really well, they were a bit independent when they did this, that and the other, and they've gone home happy and so tomorrow can be an even more positive day. But it's just been mindful, isn't it? And knowing the children.

I: And meeting them where they're at on that particular day sounds like.

P2: Yeah, absolutely. And then you know, if staff are worried, it's about flagging it. It's about making sure you've you've recorded it and you've flagged it to the right people so that others people can can support. And if we need conversations with parents that can happen and a plan can be put in place because you can't have every day being hard. Can you?

I: Yeah. So kind of having that that wider view to monitor it and be able to recognize when do we need to actually kind of think about what else we need here.

P2: Yeah, with all stakeholders. Yeah.

I: OK. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about you think would be helpful to share when we're thinking about these children? Or have we covered everything?

P2: I think we've covered it all, haven't we? Talked about lots of things.