**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:** 07/03/2025 15:30 – 16:10 (28 mins)

**Interview Location:** Online via Teams

**Interviewer:** (“I”)

**Interviewee:** Participant 5 (“P5”)

**Key:**

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

**Interview Transcript** I: And then before we get into it, I'm just going to ask you a couple of demographic questions. So just to check which what pronouns you'd like me to refer to you with while we're chatting?

P5: Oh, she her.

I: And your job role currently is?

P5: So I'm a Higher Level Teaching Assistant.

I: Do the do the children you support have an identified special educational need or disability?

P5: Yes.

I: Are the parents of the children you support currently serving in the military or are they veterans? Do you know?

P5: I I believe they're serving currently.

I: Certainly serving, yeah. And do you happen to know which branch of the military that's within? In terms of Army, Navy, Royal Air Force?

P5: I think we've got some Army and we've got some Navy I don't believe we’ve got any Royal Air Force.

I: Thank you. And the children that we're thinking about today, are they in different year groups across the school or are they in a particular age range?

P5: So no they're in different year groups across the school.

I: Thank you. Lovely. So just a quick note to say that we don't obviously have consent to talk about specific children and young people, so if you try not to use any names or anything like that. So, thinking and more generally about the service children with special education needs that you support. Could you tell me a little bit about your understanding of their experiences of separation because their parents in the military so, for example, have those children had experiences where one of their parents or both of their parents has gone away for training or for deployment?

P5: Yes. So, there's one child in particular that I support and I believe it's his, his father goes away for quite significant periods of time. I believe he deployed on submarines so he can go away for months at a time and there's zero contact. And I know he finds that extremely hard. His mum always warns him when it's, you know, when it's coming up and she lets the school know as well so that we can support him with that. But it does, it definitely impacts on, I say behaviour, but not that he has poor behaviour, but just he becomes a bit more quiet into himself when dad's not around.

I: Yeah. So you kind of touched on this there, but do parents let the school know in advance of the parent going away, is that right?

P5: Yeah, usually. We've never, I don't think we've ever had a problem with being informed of that. I think the parents are aware that actually it helps us help the child if we know when possible.

I: Mm hmm yeah. And do they give you details about how long the duration is expected to be or do you just know parents away right now?

P5: I think if the parent if the parent that's home knows they always let us know. Of times that we've had situations where they they thought it would be this length of time and it turns out it was much longer because of a situation. But yeah, usually they do tell us how long, how long they are expected to be away for.

I: Yeah. And do the children you support have an understanding of that themselves, about the parent being away and how long that's going to last and that they're going to come home, do you think?

P5: I think the older children do, I think when they're sort of, yeah R year 1, the year 3 boy that I referred to before he I've known him since he's been at school and Dad has been deployed throughout that time, you know, on and off. And I think when he was younger, he didn't really have the same concept of time. So if you said oh Daddy's not here for four weeks or six weeks or three months, that could be a day that could you know there's no concept of how long that that feels. I think as he's got older, his understandings got better but I think it is hard for them to visualize the length of time, if that makes sense.

I: Yeah. To understand what that actually means in terms of their day-to-day and how long that's going to last for them.

P5: Yeah, I think that you know sort of year 4, 5, 6, you know, 8/9/10 years old, I think they understand better, but it is, it is quite difficult when they're the little ones.

I: Yeah, definitely. And you started to mention there that you see a change in one of those children particularly. But I'm just wondering about the types of differences you see in the children you support, kind of in the lead up to their parent going away, while their parents away and even when that parents coming back and they're kind of reintegrating into the family unit.

P5: Yeah. So I I think if I was to generalise across all the children, when they when they know it's coming, they start to show sort of they’re, they're more sad at school and you and they don't want to play as much or they might be quieter than they usually are. Once the parents have actually gone, I've noticed they're very cuddly, especially the younger ones, they're very cuddly and quite emotional at school, you know, they'll ask for mum or dad, you know, whoever's still at home and they'll say I want my mummy. Yeah, and they just aren't quite as lively as they usually are, and the nearer you get to the parent coming home, you start seeing more of that. You know you, especially when it's a boy with the dads being deployed, I don't know, it's that father and son relationship, I think they look forward to Daddy being home, you know. And yeah, it's it's sad to see. It's heartbreaking, really, because they don't really understand what's happening.

I: Yeah. The kind of things that you're seeing is kind of the increased emotionality and kind of seeking that, that attention or that love or that support in school because they're kind of missing some of that home from that other parent at the moment at those times.

P5: Yeah, bless them. Yeah. Especially when there's lots of siblings as well. Obviously the parent that's at home that's harder for them. That's a bigger, you know, that's a bigger responsibility for them to to deal with 2/3/4 children. And so I think it is hard for the children because they're not necessarily getting the same amount of attention or whatever that they would if there were two parents there. And so I do think they seek that a little bit at school. And we do have a very good support network for the children you know emotionally, but also, you know, for the SEN  
children, so educationally as well. But yeah, there is definitely a massive change in the children I would say when when the parents go away.

I: I want to think about that a little bit more in terms of like some distinct areas. So, we started by thinking about kind of emotionally. I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you notice emotionally in the children when their parents are deployed or away from home?

P5: So, well, one one of the children, so he suffers with a stammer, quite a severe stammer, and has a lot of support for that from speech and language and all sorts of agencies are involved with him. But one thing that we've all noticed, and that mum has noticed, is that when Dad is away, his stammer gets much worse. And I don't know if that is the emotional side of it, where he's, you know, maybe anxious and that's coming out with his speech as well. I think anxiety is something I've seen a lot of in the children. So obviously there's the boy with the stammer. There's another boy, he often says he feels sick, and we've had instances where he's tried to make himself sick so that he could be sent home. And I think that's an anxiety thing. It's like sort of they want to be with or near the parent that's still there and I I totally understand that I can, I can totally understand that. But yeah, they sort of start to display other other things start coming out, you know, like the feigning of the sickness, or I've got a headache and that that kind of thing as well. Yeah, bless them.

I: So, some of those somatic symptoms, but also a strategy for them, whether they're aware of it or not, to be able to get back to that parent that they feel they need need in that moment.

P5: Yeah, I think. I think there is a lot of built up anxiety in them, I I guess there's a limited amount of understanding that they have of what the other parent is doing when they're away, and especially if they know you know if they're in the armed forces or somewhere and they're going somewhere that their understanding is it's a dangerous place you. You can see that that anxiety is there building up, and I guess they're trying to express that in a way that their maturity level allows them to, so it may be, I feel sick, but actually it's probably an anxiety feeling. And that, yeah, the boy with the stammer looks, like I say I think that comes from a feeling of anxiety.

I: Yeah. Thank you. I'm thinking when their parent is away or deployed, do you think there's any change in them socially? So thinking about their relationships with peers or with adults within school as well, do you see a change in that regard?

P5: I think they tend to gravitate more towards adults and they sort of I've noticed, not necessarily dramatic withdrawal from their friends, but definitely in the sort of the early days of deployment, sort of you can see a slight withdrawal from their friends and they would rather be around a familiar adult. And I think that gets as they sort of get used to the parent being deployed, I think that eases a little bit and they sort of go back to their normal behaviour. But I think there's definitely sort of in the first few weeks there's definitely a sort of a withdrawal from friendship groups. And they appear quieter, I think as well when at school.

I: There's something in that transitional period where parents gone, they're getting used to it they're working out the new norm before they kind of resettle, yeah.

P4: Yeah, exactly. And I think it usually takes a couple of weeks and then you can you sort of think, oh, ok, they're getting, they're getting back to themselves. Obviously they, you know, we I still see sort of the emotional side of it as well, but it's nice when they start reintegrating with their friends and not wanting to stand with you at break time and have a cuddle instead of going off and playing.

I: Yeah. Yeah. So is that. Am I understanding that that you you're saying that the emotional kind of thing carries on throughout deployment, but the social side of it, you see that impact initially, but then that kind of goes back to the norm?

P5: Yeah. I yeah, I think so. I think so. They because I think it's it's almost like a distraction as well when they're at school, when there's all their friends and their friends are saying come and play come and play, I think actually it's probably quite a nice relief when they when they're over there sort of shock periods of the parent leaving. It's a good distraction for them to get back into those normal routines, but I think the underlying anxiety is still there is still present.

I: Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. That makes sense. And thinking about, I'm just wondering kind of a similar question, but in terms of do you see any impact into on their learning or their education during those times when a parent is away for deployment or training or whatever that looks like, do you see any effects there?

P5: I think there's different effects, so I think one of the effects that I've noticed is quite often, especially if there are lots of siblings, things like they might not be read with as much at home because the parent doesn't have time you know, they're doing everything themselves and you know, from me there is no judgement, you know, this is not a judgmental comment, but I have noticed things like that. Or they might not do sort of the homework and that because the parent doesn't have time, you know they work themselves or whatever. And I just I think particularly with the reading, I think that can have quite a knock-on effect on the children's attainment because obviously reading is the source of everything. And so I have noticed for some of the children, their learning when there's deployment, their learning sort of stagnates for a little while, and whether that's an emotional impact, that that's from an emotional impact as well you know that they're not quite in the right frame of mind when they're at school. But I think the support from the parent at home has a part to play as well.

I: Yeah, which is understandable, as you say, isn't it? If there's just one parent trying to manage all of those different things at home.

P5: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It's it's, you know, it's hard work. My husband worked shifts and when our children were small, it was hard for me as well. You know, it's like I said, there's absolutely no judgement, but it definitely impacts on the children's learning.

I: And do you think these children having a special educational need impacts on their experiences of separation and deployment? As in, do you think it's different to service children who don't have that additional need?

P5: I think, I think when there's a special educational need that is sort of an emotional and social issue, I think that impacts more. I think when it's more of a cognitive special educational need, I don't think it impacts as much if that makes sense, because I think that will impact regardless. I think when they struggle with their emotions anyway, and then they have that additional emotional impact of the parent leaving, I think that can be sort of overwhelm them, I think that's, yeah, it's definitely harder. Whereas the children that don't have the sort of social, emotional issues I think they can cope a bit better with it if that makes. Did I make sense? I don't know if I did.

I: Yeah, it does. It does. So what what I'm hearing is that depending on the type of need that the young person has will impact whether that it'll change kind of their response to that experience and their ability to manage that experience.

P5: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. You said it much better than I did. But yeah, that's what I meant.

I: No, no. Yeah, that's really helpful to think about actually and thinking about, yeah, that not all of those special educational needs are going to have the same impact on these children in these experiences.

P5: Yeah.

I: I want to think a little bit now about kind of supporting these children and young people. But before we think about from a school perspective, what school can offer, I'm wondering do the service children themselves do anything to help themselves manage when their parent is away?

P5: So, at school we do have a designated lead for service children. So obviously service children and others as well, but are entitled to the pupil premium. So part of that funding goes towards those children having like a group with this designated adult, but also like special day trips and things. So when it was the the VE celebrations last year, they got to go down to LOCATION, they were part of a group that got to see the celebration. As for sort of them personally dealing with it, I think they're, I don't think they're mature enough necessarily to be able to cope with that and understand that themselves. I think it takes a lot of adult support and a lot of adult intervention to guide them through that process. I think without the support in place, certainly adults that know them really well at school, I think they would find it really hard to cope, because they're not emotionally mature, obviously at, you know, at that at that young age. I think even the older children, you know, sort of the 10/11 year olds, they're still going through so much development within themselves, I think it's a, it's a very hard thing to process, if you didn't have those people around you to to talk you through it and guide you through that.

I: From a school's perspective, what kind of other things that your school puts in place to support your service children with SEND?

P5: So they do like special day trips out that just just for them, but also they have, so we have an ELSA team as well at school, so they'll have sessions together, like the service children will have sessions with the ELSA support team, and they do that as a group as well. So I think the idea behind that is for them to realize that it's not, it's not just them, there's other children and it's quite nice because the children they know, they know each other, they're not necessarily in the same class or the same year group, but they because they do these activities together, they know each other and so on the playground and things they might, you might see them chatting and things, and I think that's a nice way of helping them realize they're not alone. You know, there's other children going through the same thing as they are. So I think that support network from schools invaluable to them, to be honest. And obviously in from an educational perspective, they get lots of additional support in relation to whatever need it is they have, whether it's a literacy difficulty or an emotional difficulty. There's lots of support networks within the school for that as well.

I: Yeah. It sounds like offering that space for that peer support and kind of building those relationships with people have similar experiences is really important.

P5: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, it is lovely. It's when they go off on little trips and things. It's nice because they'll it's just that it's a different friendship group to the one that they necessarily would have day-to-day, so it's nice, I think it's nice to see them go off and socialise with different people they wouldn't necessarily play with every day.

I: Yeah, yeah. Do you think there's anything else that schools could be doing to support service children with SEND during times of separation and deployment?

P5: I mean from the perspective of where I work, I think we do quite a lot. I think what I would like to see is maybe more support for the parents while their partners or whatever are deployed. We do we obviously put the children at the centre of it all, quite rightly, but actually, you know, right next to them are the parents that could be really struggling as well. So I think in order to help the children more, I actually think supporting the parents as well would assist that, if that makes sense. Because quite often you know the parent that's left at home is, you know, could be struggling or really tired because they're working, they're doing that, you know, they're juggling all these balls at the same time. And so I think having a support network in place for them would then in turn benefit the children as well and I think that's something I think could be managed better. I think we do we do do a lot for the children, the service children. But yeah, definitely if their parents were supported more, I think that would have a positive impact on their experience of the deployment period as well.

I: And if you've got any thoughts about what that would look like or what kind of support you think they would benefit from?

P5: I mean, I think most schools offer you know, not just for for this topic, but lots of support and what we always find is it's the parents accepting the support I think is always the first challenge. But I think even something simple like coffee mornings or like stay and play after school or even just where it's a social event, I think think would be beneficial, but it's whether or not people would obviously take part that I guess that's on them, isn't it? But I think from what I've seen from the children's experiences of them linking together and having that shared experience, I think that the adults could also benefit from that same experience. And it would be another support you know, another support chain for them as well, so I think that would be that would be a good idea.

I: So mirroring kind of the support that you're already offering to the children in school, but for the parents.

P5: Yeah. And. And even like family picnics or do you know, like, even if it was at school, I don't I don't know what it would look like, but I think I think even just having a space for people to talk I think is beneficial, because it is for the children, so I can't imagine why it wouldn't be for the adults. So I think yeah, that would be lovely to see.

I: And what I'm taking from you there is that it'd be helpful for them to talk to people who have similar experiences to them.

P5: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I think I think across all walks you know across any situation in life, if there's someone else going through the same thing as you, I think that can only be beneficial if you're, you know, for you to share that experience, definitely.

I: Thank you. I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about if a school is to have a service child with special educational needs, what's the most important things for them to know about supporting that young person?

P5: So I think with anything with children, I think, I always I always go back to the, you know, the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They need to feel safe. They need to feel secure. They need to feel loved and all those things think before any academic issue, you know, attainment, anything, those needs need to be met and I think in order to do that, you really need to know the child and you need to have that relationship with them. I think that's the core of of any anything with the child you have to have that relationship and once you have that then you can go on to support all the other issues. But I think that investment needs to take place first and that can be hard, I think some children there can be, I've seen sort of, anger and frustration, and from children and unwillingness to talk. And I think once you persevere and you sort of show them I'm, I'm here, I'm here for you and you build that bond then you see sort of the barrier coming down a little bit. And then you become a trusted adult and that's when you can actually work with that child to support them further. But I think you have to have that foundation first because otherwise it it doesn't work.

I: Yeah. So the importance of that relationship and knowing that child as an individual is really important, yeah.

P5: Yeah, yeah. And I I do a lot of work in either in small groups or one to one, and so I've had that privilege of being able to get to know some children really, really well to the point where I no longer need to work with them, but they'll still come down to my little office and come and say, how can I just have a chat with you? I’m like of course you can come and sit down and I think that's lovely when children feel that they can do that and open up to you. But I think it's like someone compared it to depositing money in a bank, like you've got to invest in them before you can then take money back out and say, oh, you know, let's let's do some reading together or that you've got to build relationship first before you expect anything of the child, because they just won't want to do it. And I think especially when they're feeling anxious or, I guess there's an element of neglect, like when a parent leaves, I think sometimes they’re like why do they have to leave me? And I think that's, I think to show them that you're there and that you're, you know, you're there to stay and you're there to help them, I think it speaks volumes to them.

I: Yeah. So kind of in the midst of that when they're they've got all these questions about what? Why is my parent going away? What does that mean for me? What does that look like? They've got somebody in school who is really trusted and safe and predictable, and they've had that experience to build a relationship with them.

P5: Yeah, like that constant that you know, ok, this I know when I go there, that person will be there and I can talk to them, you know. And it's it's, yeah, it's about that consistency, definitely.

I: Thank you. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about when we're thinking about service children with additional needs, their experiences of separation and deployment, that you think it would be helpful for me to know?

P5: I don't think so. I think I've kind of covered most of most most things. I mean, it would be amazing if there was more money invested into schools, from government to support not just service children with SEND, but all children with SEND, because I don't think there is enough and I think schools do their best to with what they with the resources that they have. But I like with anything I think oh, there's always improvements that can be made, but it is ultimately down to down to finances. But I think if you've got a good team of people that are loving and want, want to support the children, you know, that's their passion, I think that's an amazing start because if you've got that then you know that's the foundation of all of it. And yeah, definitely.

I: The foundation, isn't it? You need that. Thank you. That's really, really helpful.