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Service Children with SEND in Education

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctorate in Educational Psychology

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Abstract

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Existing research has recognised the impact a parent's service can have on children within military families. In particular, frequent moves and parental absence have been highlighted as significant stressors for military families, not only because of the immediate impact on the family, but also because of the secondary impact on children's education. For those service children who also have a special educational need or disability (SEND), military transitions can be particularly disruptive as they struggle to navigate the changes that come with separation and relocation.

In this thesis, I sought to explore the experiences of military families with SEND through two different research enquiries. In chapter 2, I describe a systematic review and thematic synthesis of 13 papers which explored miliary families with children with SEND's experiences of education. In chapter 3, I detail an empirical study which explored the experiences of service children with SEND in education, with a specific focus around separation and deployment. A tri-perspective approach was employed, involving service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and school staff that support them. Participants described how separation was unpredictable, as was its subsequent impact on service children and their families. Communicating what separation means to a service child with SEND was challenging, with some categories of need making this increasingly difficult. The importance of schools supporting service children and their wider families was recognised and the types of support families currently experience and would find helpful are discussed.

Keywords: Service children, SEND, Education, Advocacy

Table of Contents

Table of Tables

Table of Figures

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

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3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

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Definitions and Abbreviations

CASP..... Critical Appraisal Skills Programme

CPD ..... Continuing Professional Development

EHCP ..... Education, Health and Care Plan

ELSA ..... Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

EP..... Educational Psychologist

MFRC ..... Military Family Resource Centre

PRISMA ..... Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses

RAF..... Royal Air Force

SCiP ..... Service Children's Progression Alliance

SCISS ..... Service Children in State Schools

SEMH ..... Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SEN ..... Special Educational Needs

SENCo ..... Special Educational Needs Coordinator

SEND ..... Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SPP ..... Service Pupil Premium

TEP..... Trainee Educational Psychologist

UK ..... United Kingdom

USA ..... United States of America

Service Children with SEND in Education

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Aims and Rationale

Militaries around the world are staffed by military personnel. 'Military personnel' refers to all individuals currently serving in the Armed Forces, whether regular or reservist. As a by-product of their service, the families of military personnel are drawn into a 'military lifestyle' and are impacted by their service. Service children are therefore described as the children or young people of parents who served in the armed forces during the first 25 years of the child's life (Rose & Rose, 2021; University of Winchester, 2025). Currently, there are no accurate or up-to-date records noting how many service children there are in the UK (Children's Commissioner, 2022; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b; Walker et al., 2020), nor are there any statistics on the number of military families with children with SEND (FANDF, 2020).

Having a parent serving in the military means service children have different experiences to their civilian peers, and their parent's service can have wide-ranging impacts on their lives (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Service children may experience many and frequent moves in line with their parent's postings, as well as regular and lengthy separations (Children's Commissioner, 2018), yet these stressors are not consistently recognised and addressed in schools and wider communities (Walker et al., 2020). However, service children who also have an identified SEND may be further impacted by the parental absence characteristic of military life.

Parental absence, as a result of deployment, training, or weekending, is just one aspect of military life that can impact on children with SEND. The parental responsibility falling on one parent to meet the child's needs (Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021), children not understanding the separation, children showing increased difficulties with emotion regulation and associated behaviour, and increased stress on the whole family (Davis & Finke, 2015) can all affect children with SEND acutely. Military mobility also impacts children with SEND due to educational provision, support, and assessment differing between authorities (FANDF, 2020; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b). As such, it is evident that service children with SEND may require different and additional support from their schools to support them through various military transitions.

In England, the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) was introduced to help schools provide additional support to service children (Baverstock, 2023). However, as Godier-McBard, et al. (2021b) recognises, there are no established methods for evaluating how the SPP is being spent and whether service pupils' needs are being met. This resonates with Rose and Rose's (2021) finding which highlighted how schools are unsure of how to best make use of the SPP to appropriately support their service children on roll.

Despite a growing interest and subsequent increase in UK research exploring various aspects of service children's lives, the majority of research and publications in this field still come from the USA (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b). Without further UK research there will continue to be gaps in our understanding of service children and their experiences (Hall et al., 2022), particularly for those service children with SEND as there has been little focus on their experiences in the literature (Sands et al., 2023; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021). As reinforced in the Armed Forces Covenant, we have a responsibility to respect, treat fairly, and support military personnel and their families (Ministry of Defence, 2016). Without creating a greater shared understanding of service families' experiences, schools and communities will continue to find it difficult to know how best to support them.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the importance of children having the opportunity to express their views on matters affecting them (UNICEF UK, 1989). Seeking the voices of service children with SEND themselves is therefore important in understanding their experiences and considering how best to support them. Equally, hearing from those who care for and work closely with them is helpful in building a picture of service children's experiences from multiple perspectives. Godier-McBard, et al. (2021b) noted that the voices of service children were largely missing from UK research reinforcing the importance of seeking their perspectives directly. Recommendations have also been made to explore teachers' awareness of SEND service pupils and to use research to inform awareness training for education professionals to educate around the issues and challenges faced by service children (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b)

The present research therefore aimed to add to the growing body of literature understanding the lived experiences of service children throughout education. Within the systematic

literature review I chose to explore the question: “What insights has research provided about the education experiences of military families with children with SEND?”. Using a thematic synthesis approach, data from qualitative questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and reflective timelines, as well as researcher interpretations from the UK, USA and Canada, were used to investigate the experiences and realities of service families with children with SEND.

My empirical paper progressed to think more specifically about service children in a UK context. The focus was narrowed to consider one aspect of military life, namely the experiences and impact of separation and deployment on service children with SEND. By doing so, I aimed to answer two research questions: (1) ‘How do service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that support them, conceptualize their experiences of separation and deployment?’, and (2) ‘What can schools and Educational Psychologists (EPs) do to better support service children with SEND during times of separation and deployment?’ My overarching goal was to expand on Taylor-Beirne and Fear's (2021) view that the stressors associated with being in a military family interlock with the stressors of being (or having) a child with SEND. I wanted to recognize service children with SEND as a population who need additional consideration and support, both in the research literature and in their educational settings.

1.2 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology is a researcher’s ‘beliefs about the nature of reality’, whilst epistemology is their ‘theory of knowledge that informs the research’ (Al-Ababneh, 2020, p. 16). Together with the methodology, they create the research’s theoretical framework. Throughout my research journey I was mindful of my theoretical stance and assumptions as to ensure they were consistent with my subsequent research decisions.

Within this research, I was guided by ontological assumptions of relativism, which posit that psychological phenomena are socially negotiated. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) suggest relativist ontology holds that subjective experiences create reality, and as such, reality cannot be separated from the subjective experience. Research with this ontology therefore aims to understand the subjective experience of individual’s realities and their truths (Levers, 2013). Aligned with this

ontology was my epistemological position of social constructivism. Social constructivism posits that understanding and meaning are created through social interactions, with language being the medium through which people construct reality (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Social constructivism further assumes that both reality and knowledge are socially and culturally constructed and that learning is a social process (Amineh & Asl, 2015). In particular, constructivist epistemology in research explores the ways in which participants construct meaning from their experiences, and how the researcher, through data analysis, constructs knowledge to answer the research questions (Hyde, 2020). As such, the researcher plays an integral part in the generation of meaning.

Qualitative methodology was most appropriate, in line with my ontological and epistemological position, to explore the lived experiences of service children with SEND. Through interviews and subsequent data analysis in my empirical research, meaning and knowledge was constructed through the voices of my participants and myself as the researcher. For the systematic literature review, my knowledge and interpretation were built through my interaction during data analysis with both participant and researcher voice in the included studies. In line with my epistemological position, the influence of my interpretations as the main researcher was valued in the data analysis and interpretation.

1.3 Reflexivity and Axiology

Reflexivity is an on-going process through which researchers consciously consider and evaluate how their own context and subjectivity impacts the research process (Finlay, 2002; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Axiology refers to the role of values in research (Pretorius, 2024), in particular the values a researcher brings and how these influence the design, conduct, and analysis of a research study. Throughout the research process I actively and transparently reflected on my own beliefs, views and experiences and detail some of this process below as to achieve integrity and transparency in my research (Pretorius, 2024).

When I began exploring a possible focus for my thesis through initial reading, there were many different subjects that I could have chosen. However, I quickly recognised that the field to which I wanted to contribute was that of service children in education. I myself grew up with a

parent serving in the armed forces, predominantly during my primary education, but also through the start of my secondary education. I do not recall, as a child, consciously considering the impact the military family lifestyle had beyond missing my parent when they went away. It was just part and parcel of my family set-up. I also attended a school in which my siblings and I were the only service children. However, as an adult, I have often wondered how and in what ways these experiences impacted me individually, my relationships with others, and my time in education. In particular, I have wondered what support my school could have offered to service children like me. Beyond this, I recognised the absence of exploration of experiences and voice for those service children who also have an identified special educational need or disability in the literature. In my role as a trainee educational psychologist, I am constantly thinking about inclusion and appropriate support for all young people, but particularly for those with SEND. I also work in an Educational Psychology service where there are many service children, and I have been actively involved with multiple service families with children with SEND. The experiences of service children with SEND was therefore an area of research I felt passionate about exploring.

Beginning this research, I was aware that I held my own beliefs and ideas about the challenges at the intersection of being a child with SEND within a military family. Drawing from my own experiences, I knew separation was challenging, both at the point of a parent leaving, but also at their return. I knew that the change in routine and roles was tricky to navigate, both for children and for parents. I anticipated that these difficulties would be exaggerated for those families with children with identified SEND, but I wondered what particular difficulties they encountered and whether they felt appropriately supported by their education settings. I believe that school should be a safe, supportive space for all children, no matter their background, context, or needs. In order for schools to be such spaces for service children, they need to have an awareness of military life, its impacts, and how to appropriately support their service children. Without this basic awareness and knowledge, it is possible for children's needs to be missed or unsupported due to a lack of contextual understanding. Therefore, I wondered how well service children were supported in schools, and if they were, what the best ways to support them were. It was important to me to highlight positive examples of schools supporting their service families and children to manage the transitions imposed

on them from their parents' military service. Drawing out strategies and practices that were helpful for service families was therefore imperative to my research and is highlighted through the research questions and implications of my empirical study.

Throughout this research process, it was very important to me that I embodied the ethical principles of respect and empathy. I wanted participants to feel able to share openly about their experiences and ideas for supporting service children. I hoped participants would feel they were truly listened to and that their views were valued and important. I wanted participants to feel as though I was working to understand them and their experiences fully. With this in mind, and knowing that my own values and assumptions would influence the research process from design to dissemination, I chose to be transparent with participants about my identity, role as a trainee educational psychologist, and motivations for this research. I presented this information in the participant information sheet and offered space for all participants to ask questions before being involved in this research. Throughout the interviews I encouraged participants to share their experiences honestly, frequently summarising what they had shared in hopes of allowing them to clarify and expand on what they had discussed. I also did not explicitly share any of my own opinions throughout the interview process as to avoid directing participant voice or leading participants to share what they thought I wanted to hear. By doing so, I was hoping to prevent any of my own preconceptions or opinions feeding into participant interviews. However, in line with my epistemological position, I recognise the value of my subjectivity in the production of knowledge. Therefore, during the data analysis stage, I continued to reflect on and consider the impact of my own values and beliefs. By being transparent about the analytic process and providing evidence (i.e., illustrative quotes), I aimed to share how my interpretations for theme development had been founded. Throughout the analysis stage, I also met frequently with my thesis team to share thinking and processes.

1.4 Dissemination Plan

Both research papers included in this thesis were written in a style appropriate for publication in peer-reviewed journals. The systematic literature review will be submitted to the Journal of Armed Forces & Society, which is a peer-reviewed journal focused on topics relevant to

the military, including military families. This journal was selected for its international scope and relevance to military family issues, which aligns with the synthesis of papers included in the review. The empirical paper will be submitted to the Journal of Educational Futures; this is a peer-reviewed journal that aims to publish research articles relevant to education. It is an open access journal, meaning anyone seeking information relevant to the research can access it, allowing for ideas and concepts to be shared with those working within education settings, including teachers. This journal is therefore appropriate because the study and its implications are relevant to all staff supporting service children with SEND in UK schools. The research will also be shared at research conferences, including the University of Southampton Annual Postgraduate Research Conference, as well as through other local opportunities, such as presenting findings to a local Educational Psychology Service and participating schools (at their request).

Chapter 2 – Service Children with SEND in Education: A Review of the Literature

2.1 Abstract

Existing literature indicates that having a special educational need or disability (SEND) compounds the challenges experienced by children within military families. A systematic review, using a three-step thematic synthesis approach, was conducted to explore the education experiences of military families with children with SEND. The generated themes suggest that the stressors of being a military family combine with those of being a SEND family to create a specific set of experiences and challenges. Military SEND families face systems that make it challenging to access appropriate SEND support and are therefore frequently left having to fight for their children's needs to be met. Implications are discussed, including the importance of military SEND families building communities of support, schools and services being proactive and open with their communication, and increasing understanding of military culture in schools and awareness of SEND in the military community.

2.2 Introduction

The term 'military family' is used to refer to families in which at least one member serves in the military (Lucier-Greer & Fincham, 2017); typically, 'the family' includes the serving member, their spouse, and any children they have. Being part of a military family entails accepting and living within a culture where duty and commitment to serve one's county comes as first priority (Walker et al., 2020), and so, the serving family member's duty influences the wider family's everyday life. For example, military families' lives become highly mobile due to the serving members' military postings. Some families are expected to move frequently; this can involve moving house, moving schools, and sometimes even moving country (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Often such moves mean leaving the family's community of support, including their friends and wider family, and having to repeatedly integrate into new settings and communities (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Frequent moves also result in challenges associated with continuity of support and education, which impacts children's access to education, their school experience, and learning progress (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a).

For some military families, like those with members serving in the Royal Navy, mobility is less prominent in their lives; however, they are more likely to experience long periods of parental separation (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a). Deployment and parental separation (e.g., weekending, training) are an inherent part of military life, which is arguably one of the most challenging parts of being within a military family (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a). The military parent's absence is hugely influential, with families having limited time together, one parent taking on more responsibility for caring for the family, and children having increased responsibility or roles within the home (e.g., chores, helping care for younger siblings; Naval Families Federation, 2019a). Service children can further experience negative emotionality from separation and deployment due to missing their serving parent and/or being concerned for their parent's safety (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a).

For some military families, having a child with an identified SEND adds an additional complexity to their military lifestyle. For the purpose of this paper, a 'SEND family' refers to a family with a child who has a special education need or disability (SEND) and a child is identified as having SEND "if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for them" (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015, p. 113). As Holland et al. (2018) highlight, all children bring novel experiences and challenges for their families to navigate; however, for those in SEND families, there can be extra challenges. SEND families undergo complex processes for identifying needs and gaining diagnoses, meet challenges accessing appropriate support, and experience feelings of isolation as a result of family and friends lacking understanding of their struggles and/or not accepting the child's needs (Holland et al., 2018). Research indicates that parents of SEND children often advocate for the child's needs to be met, which can include educating themselves on their child's SEND and learning about SEND law (Dunleavy & Sorte, 2022).

For military families with children with SEND, appropriate education is a predominant concern (Aronson et al., 2016). Frequent military moves mean SEND service families repeatedly experience challenges associated with continuity of education and services (Aronson et al., 2016; Davis & Finke, 2015). Educational diagnoses or plans may not transfer or be accepted by receiving

local authorities, which results in children undergoing repeated assessments (FANDF, 2020; Walker et al., 2020). Equally, the services and support available differs largely between areas, meaning what a family received in one local authority is very different to what they receive in the next (FANDF, 2020). It is not uncommon for service children with SEND to miss months of education (Walker et al., 2020) or be unable to access support for a considerable length of time (Children's Commissioner, 2018) following a move. For many families, choosing to live separately to the serving parent is preferable to continuously having to relocate and re-establish services and support (FANDF, 2020). Inevitably, these challenges associated with military life increase family stress and make is more challenging for service families to access appropriate education and support for their service child with SEND.

The frequent and prolonged separations experienced by military families can be more disruptive for SEND military families. SEND service children can struggle to manage the separation emotionally, often displaying behaviours that are challenging for adults to support (Davis & Finke, 2015). During separations, one parent is left managing all home and family life (Davis & Finke, 2015), including taking responsibility for navigating education systems and ensuring appropriate support is in place for their service child with SEND. For many non-serving parents, they are managing alone due to living far from established support networks (i.e., friends and family), which contributes to a sense of isolation (FANDF, 2020). Evidently, the challenges associated with military life and having a SEND child exacerbate one another (Davis & Finke, 2015; FANDF, 2020; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021), or in other words, intersect to create a unique set of experiences.

Intersectionality is a term that was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how various personal characteristics interact and intersect with one another to create individual experiences (The University of Edinburgh, 2024). Crenshaw originally described intersectionality through discussion of the double discrimination black women experience as a result of the interaction between two parts of their social identity (i.e., race and gender; Crenshaw, 1989). However, over time the concept of intersectionality has been applied and used across various disciplines (Bauer et al., 2021), including to consider the interactions between protected characteristics (as defined in the Equality Act 2010)

and other characteristics that shape social identity, including socio-economic status and occupation (Scottish Government, 2022).

Intersectionality posits that the experience of individuals cannot be understood sufficiently by considering various social positions in isolation (Bauer et al., 2021). In other words, we need to consider how different social identities interact within a context (e.g., systems), in order to identify any structural inequalities (Scottish Government, 2022). To support SEND children effectively we need to have a good understanding of how their intersecting identities affect their experiences (Stergiopoulos & Rosenburg, 2020), their access to services, and their subsequent outcomes (Tirraoro et al., 2022). For those in military families, there are additional and different stressors and challenges associated with military life, which are not consistently acknowledged in society and schools (Walker et al., 2020). Therefore, it may be possible that the intersection between disability and military life creates a different experience for military SEND families. The present review, therefore, looked to explore how intersectionality affects the education experiences of military SEND families.

A systematic literature review was conducted to explore the research question: What insights has research provided about the education experiences of military families with children with SEND? To answer this question a process of thematic synthesis was employed, which generated implications for educators and other professionals supporting military SEND families.

2.3 Methodology

2.3.1 Selection and Search Strategy

A systematic search of the literature was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) approach (Page et al., 2021) as shown in Figure 1. Four electronic databases were selected based on their relevance to psychology and education (PsychInfo, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Scopus, and Web of Science), in addition to a search of grey literature via ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Following the retrieval of the final list of papers, a citation search was carried out, which generated further papers for inclusion. The final search terms generated can be found in appendix A.

All database searches were conducted between April and August 2024. Search terms and Boolean operators were adjusted where appropriate to each database used. The inclusion criteria restricted papers to those published in or after 2010. Overall, the search yielded 322 papers, of which 117 duplicates were removed. A further 169 papers were removed following title and abstract screening using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). During full-text screening, 25 papers were excluded. An additional 12 papers were identified from other sources and citation searching, three of which could not be retrieved and a further seven removed at full text screening. This resulted in 13 articles for synthesis (see Figure 1 for PRISMA diagram demonstrating the flow of information throughout the systematic review). Characteristics of the included studies can be found in Table 2.

Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram

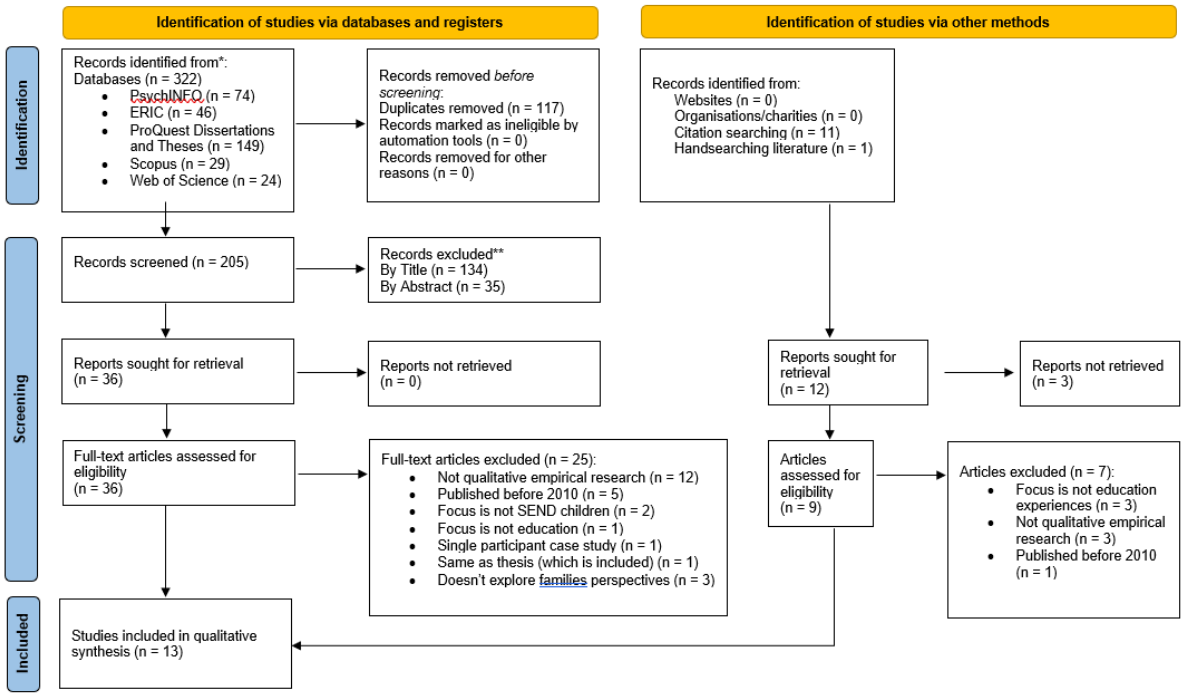


Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria
Refers to service children with SEND
Discussion of education and school experiences
Qualitative empirical or mixed methods research, including grey literature (theses and documents)
Parents as participants
Published in or after 2010
Published in English (or has been translated into English)
Full text available
Exclusion criteria
Single participant case studies
Quantitative empirical research or systematic literature reviews
Qualitative grey literature that is not empirical research (e.g., books, guides, reports)

Table 2

Study Characteristics of Papers Included for Review

Study number	Author(s) and date	Country	Type of paper	Military branch	Sampling approach	Methodology	Qualitative data collection methods	Analysis approach *(as specified by study authors)*
1	Jagger & Lederer (2014)	USA	Journal Article	Not specified	Convenience sample	Qualitative	Focus groups and individual interviews	Salient session-level themes and other noteworthy findings were coded using constant comparison
2	Ostler (2016)	Canada	Thesis (journal article also available)	Army, Air Force	Posters shared in community and on social media, and snowball sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
3	Tidwell (2016)	USA	Thesis	Army, Air Force, Navy	Purposive and snowball sampling	Qualitative	Questionnaire, interview, and written reflective timeline	Hermeneutic phenomenology
4	Israel (2018)	USA	Thesis	Not Specified	Purposive sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Hermeneutic phenomenology
5	Akwaowo (2019)	USA	Thesis	Army, Air Force	Purposive sampling and Criterion-*i*	Qualitative	Questionnaire, semi-structured interview and reflective timeline/ essay.	Line by line coding. Ideas mentioned three times categorized as a theme. Content analysis drew on principles of grounded theory.
6	Classen, Horn & Palmer (2019)	USA	Journal article	Army	Purposive sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Constant comparative analysis
7	Segler (2020)	USA	Thesis	Not specified	Purposive sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Phenomenological approach

8	Barnhill, Picchini Schafer, Consedine, DeVoss Mahany & Shuman (2021)	USA	Document/ article (empirical paper)	Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, Space Force, Coast Guard	Purposive and snowball sampling	Mixed methods	Survey	Discourse analysis
9	Aleman-Tovar, Schraml-Block, DiPietro-Wells & Burke (2022)	USA	Journal article	Not specified	Recruitment poster shared and snowball sampling	Qualitative	Demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews	Constant comparative analysis and emergent coding
10	Townes Mayers (2022)	USA	Thesis	Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines	Purposive sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interview, and a reflective questionnaire	Thematic analysis
11	Sultan (2023)	USA	Thesis	Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines	School Liaison Officer emailed potential families directly	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Narrative enquiry using a thematic analysis process
12	Carr (2023)	England	Thesis	Army, Air Force, Royal Navy	Purposive and snowball sampling	Mixed methods	Interviews	Thematic analysis
13	Meritt (2023)	USA	Thesis	Army	Purposive sampling	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews, and timeline elicitation	Phenomenological approach

2.3.2 Quality Assurance

All 13 articles were quality assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) for qualitative studies (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2024). For both mixed methods papers included for review, the CASP checklist for qualitative research was used with the researcher solely focusing on the qualitative aspects of the study. Table 3 shows a summary of the appraisal findings.

Quality appraisal was not employed to exclude studies from the synthesis, but rather to explore their individual methodological quality. The researcher used the quality of papers to determine the order of coding, giving them a place to start.

Table 3

CASP Checklist Summary Table and Order of Coding

CASP Criteria	Aleman-Tovar, Schraml-Block, DiPietro-Wells & Burke (2022)	Townes Mayers (2022)	Ostler (2016)	Carr (2023)	Meritt (2023)	Tidwell (2016)	Akwaowo (2019)	Israel (2018)	Classen, Horn & Palmer (2019)	Segler (2020)	Sultan (2023)	Jagger & Lederer (2014)	Barnhill et al., (2021)
Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	U
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	U	Y	U	U	U	U	U
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Y	Y	U	Y	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y	U	N	N

Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	U	Y	N	N
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Y	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	U	U	N	N
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U
How valuable is the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U
Order of coding	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*13*

Note. Y indicates that the criteria was met. N indicates the criteria was not met. U indicates the criteria was partially met or it was unclear.

2.3.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Since thematic synthesis facilitates interpretative and inductive analysis (Boland et al., 2017), it was used to extract the data from the included papers and synthesize the information to form implications and conclusions, following Thomas & Harden's (2008) process. An inductive approach was most suitable because the research question was sufficiently broad and there were no existing concepts or themes established in other research papers or syntheses to draw upon. An interpretative approach was required to link ideas from the included studies and synthesize these together into concepts relevant to the research question. This approach reflects the constructivist epistemological position held by the researcher, whereby the researcher analyzed and synthesized the data, and therefore new knowledge and concepts were established through the researcher's active interaction with the data.

The results section of each paper, including all participant quotes and author interpretations, were included in analysis. This data was stored and coded using NVivo 15. Following Thomas and Harden's (2008) work, a three-stage thematic synthesis approach was conducted. Stage one involved line-by-line coding, with at least one code applied to every sentence. This process was iterative, with codes being re-visited and re-named to capture concepts between studies, resulting in 140 initial codes. Stage two involved generating descriptive themes by exploring the similarities and differences between codes and grouping these together. 18 descriptive themes were developed. Figure 2 demonstrates two examples of the codes grouped to make descriptive themes and table 4 details

which studies informed each of the descriptive themes. During stage three, the author went 'beyond' the findings of the original papers by using the descriptive themes to answer the research question, as Thomas and Harden (2008) describe. The descriptive themes underwent a process of interpretation, particularly of how they might interact, to develop a more abstract set of analytic themes. Throughout the analysis, the researcher sense checked the preliminary themes with Michael Hall, an advisor on the project, who has experience working with military families, to consider the themes in line with the UK context.

Figure 2

Thematic Synthesis Stage 1 to Stage 2: Example of Descriptive Themes Developed from Initial Codes

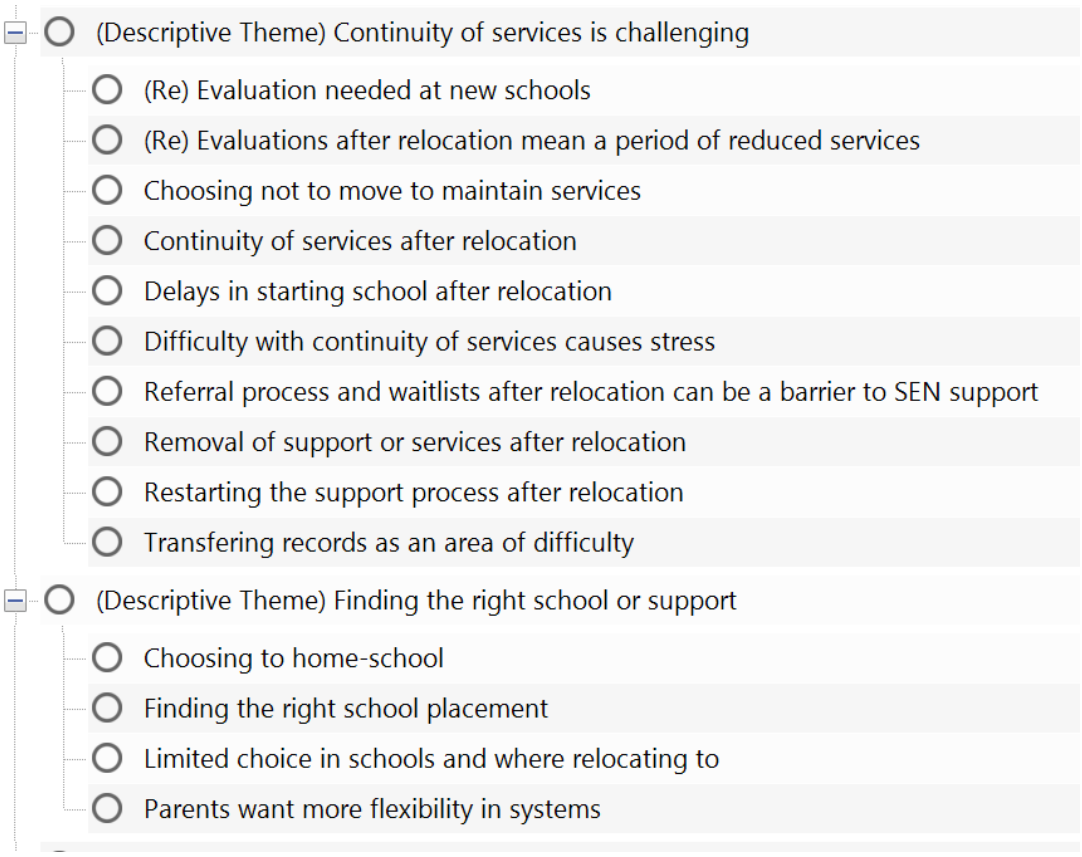


Table 4

Overview of the Descriptive and Analytic Themes Identified in Each Study.

Themes	Jagger & Lederer (2014)	Ostler (2016)	Tidwell (2016)	Israel (2018)	Akwaowo (2019)	Classen, Horn & Palmer (2019)	Segler (2020)	Barnhill et al., (2021)	Aleman-Tovar, Schraml-Block, DiPietro-Wells & Burke (2022)	Townes Mayers (2022)	Sultan (2023)	Carr (2023)	Meritt (2023)
Being a military SEND family can be isolating and difficult													
Solo parenting.	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Challenges accessing support from others.	N	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Family stress, strain, and sacrifice.	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Impact of military life on SEND child.	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Drawing on all avenues of support.													
Relying on others for support.	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
Feeling supported by schools.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Feeling supported by the military and military services.	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y
Open and proactive communication is needed for effective SEND support.													
Open and proactive communication is important.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Families want to be understood, but there are challenges that come with that.													
Understanding and awareness of SEND military families and their needs.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Military and military service support.	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Systems make it difficult for families to access SEND support.													
Continuity of services is challenging.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Access to resources and services vary.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Finding the right school/support	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N
Lack of appropriate school support.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Its not just the military parent who has to fight.													
The need for parental advocacy.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Advocating alone on the home front.	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	N
Other.													
Having choice.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Impact of Covid-19	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	N

Note. Y indicates that the descriptive theme was evident in the study. N indicates that the theme was not evident in the study.

2.4 Findings

2.4.1 Synthesis Overview

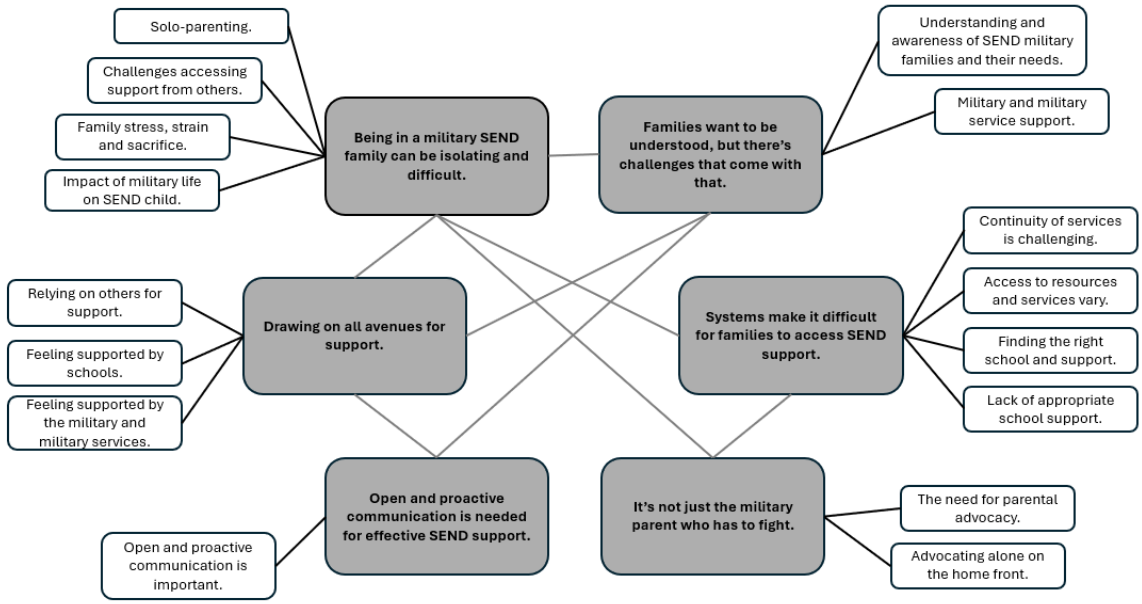
A total of 13 papers were included in this synthesis; nine theses, 3 journal articles, and 1 document. Each paper was published between 2014 and 2023. 11 studies were based in the USA, one in Canada, and one in England. Of the 13 papers, nine included army families, seven included air force families, and four included naval families. Four papers did not specify which branches of the military were included. Most papers did not detail the role of the serving personnel, but a handful did note whether the military parent was active-duty, reservist, or a veteran (e.g., Ostler, 2016; Tidwell, 2016). The number of participants in each study varied from as few as four participants to 1,156 participants (in Barnhill et al., 2021), with an estimated total of 1,279 parents included across the 13 papers. The majority of participants (where authors disclosed this) were the spouses of military personnel and typically mothers of the service children with SEND. The type of SEND need included across the papers varied hugely, with only two authors restricting the type of SEND (Akwaowo, 2019; Tidwell, 2016). The studies therefore included needs such as specific learning difficulties, developmental delay, cerebral palsy, speech and language needs, autism, and ADHD, amongst many others.

Six analytical themes were developed from 16 of the 18 descriptive themes, which can be seen in Figure 3. Two of the descriptive themes, ‘having choice’ and ‘the impact of covid-19’, did not fit within the analytical themes as they did not contribute to answering the research questions. Four

of the analytical themes were developed in response to the research question: 'What insights has research provided about the education experiences of military families with children with SEND?' and included: 'open and proactive communication is needed for effective SEND support', 'families want to be understood, but there's challenges that come with that', 'systems make it difficult for families to access SEND support', 'and it's not just the military parent who has to fight'. Additionally, insight into the contexts in which military families with children with SEND live were recognized through the inductive analysis. These insights were synthesized into two further themes: 'being in a military SEND family can be isolating and difficult', and 'drawing on all avenues of support'.

Figure 3

Graphic Representation of How Descriptive Themes Contributed to Analytical Themes



Note. Analytical themes are represented in bold on a shaded background to distinguish them from descriptive themes.

2.4.2 Theme 1: Being in a Military SEND Family Can Be Isolating and Difficult

Insight into what it means to be a military SEND family, particularly ideas around familial stress, strain, and sacrifice, was apparent in 12 of the 13 papers. Nine papers described the impact of military life on the SEND child specifically, with particular focus on the impact of military related transitions, including deployment and relocation. Military related transitions had significant emotional effects on children with SEND, including increases in stress (5, 13), anxiety (3, 5, 13),

depression (5), anger (3, 5, 7, 13), and frustration (7, 13). One parent shared “transitions are traumatic for a little person that doesn’t know how to process the emotions and things” (Meritt, 2023, p. 68). Unsurprisingly, children’s behaviour and developmental progress were also negatively affected by deployment and relocation. Some children displayed increased levels of aggression or ‘explosions’ at home and at school (3, 5, 7, 13), and regression in behaviour and skills, including academically (12, 13), emotionally (12, 13), physically (e.g., bedwetting,) (3, 7, 13), and with communication (3). Equally, while some families feel military life builds resilience in SEND children (3, 7, 9, 13), Carr (2023) noted that this can be more challenging for SEND military children, with one parent explaining “Especially with special educational needs, some children can’t just bounce back, and don’t have that ability to, or the flexibility around being adaptable to the life (Service life)” (Carr, 2023, p 157).

Parents similarly reported an isolating and difficult experience. Having a child with SEND whilst in the military can lead to increased strain on the family, particularly on the marital relationship (2, 3, 5, 11) and on the family finances (2, 3, 5, 8, 10). This may be in part because it is difficult for the non-serving parent to gain and maintain employment (2, 3, 5, 12) due to the demands of caring for their child with SEND. One parent shared, “I’ve had to give up my career and take time off of work to go to her appointments and school meetings” (Ostler, 2016, p. 70). This responsibility was conveyed as a largely solo job for the parent on the home-front (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13), with duties including managing the home, advocating for the child, choosing appropriate schools, and navigating SEND services. One parent voiced “I’m mostly a single parent anyway because of the military life, the hours” (Tidwell, 2016, p 141). For many parents, navigating SEND systems can be difficult and daunting (2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11), highlighting it as a challenging and somewhat isolating experience for the at-home parent. Parents spoke of the emotional toll, including increased worry (5, 7, 8, 12), anxiety (2, 3, 5, 12, 13), stress (2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13), and feeling alone (2, 3, 5, 7, 8), amongst other negative feelings (2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13).

Although families accepted separation from loved ones including their wider family as a fact of military life (2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13), the feelings of isolation borne from this distance were challenging (3, 7, 10, 12). One parent explained:

> With deployments and separations, it is harder because I don't have my husband here as a support system… so at the end of the day, when it's 8:30 pm and you're dealing with two tantrums that have gone on for an hour, you don't really have anyone else to lean on at that moment (Akwaowo, 2019, p. 123).

Families' sense of isolation was further exacerbated by the challenges they experienced integrating into new communities after relocation (2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11). One parent shared how after relocation "we are in a new place, new people, no daddy, and no help" (Akwaowo, 2019, p. 103). For many, how easy they found it to build community and receive appropriate support depended on whether it was a military community or not (3, 5, 11, 13).

2.4.3 Theme 2: Drawing on All Avenues for Support

The impact of military SEND families having firm support networks was apparent in all 13 papers. Parents reported drawing on various avenues of support, including family (3, 7, 10, 11, 12), friends (9, 12), professionals (e.g., portage worker or psychologist; 7, 12), advocates (1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11), community services (2, 3), and other families in the SEND and military communities, both in-person and online (3, 5, 6, 9). For some families, relocating back to established support networks was important. One parent shared, "we came back here [community] because of the support network that was already in existence" (Aleman-Tovar et al., 2022, p. 849). Being offered support from their child's school was also integral to parents feeling supported, but this varied largely across schools. For many parents they felt appropriately supported when their children had access to the appropriate setting and provision (1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 12), and their child's individualized education plan was maintained (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12). Parents commented on what made a good, supportive teacher, and attributes included showing empathy and understanding (3, 6, 7, 12), being consistent and flexible to meet needs (3, 6, 7), and making children feel comfortable in school (3, 7, 12, 13). As

Tidwell (2016) recognizes “at the centre of these positive experiences are people who truly care” (p 181).

The support of the military and military associated services was also highlighted across seven papers. Having the support and understanding from military commanders was seen as important (3, 5), with it being recognized that “those who have supportive leadership have a more positive experience” (Tidwell, 2016, p 188). Some military services (e.g., Exceptional Family Member Program) were recognized as offering support to families (1, 3, 5, 9, 10, 13), including help to access needed services (e.g., therapy), whilst others, such as school liaison officers and MFRC (Military Family Resource Centre) SENCos (Special Educational Needs Coordinators) were recognized as offering support, particularly with transitions (1, 2, 7, 10) and working with parents to understand SEND processes (2). As with the experiences of school support, the experience of military support varied. Some parents described available support on base, including social and support groups (2, 5), and provision of resources (5); however, this appeared to be harder to access for those living off base, with outreach services being desired (2, 3, 5). One parent explained:

> We purposefully choose to live in more of a rural area, and there are no services here, and no one ever reaches out for any services, we're always the ones that have to say you know, we need help and its always a laborious process, so I think having an outreach would be beneficial (Ostler, 2016, p. 67).

2.4.4 Theme 3: Open and Proactive Communication Is Needed for Effective SEND Support

All 13 papers made reference to open and proactive communication between parents, schools, and other services being important to effectively support SEND military children. Parents reinforced the importance of transparency and clear communication between home and school to ensure all understood the child’s needs and were best able to support them. There were various methods of maintaining this communication, including communication books (12), emails, phone calls, or progress reports (4). However, not all schools communicated clearly, if at all, about the child’s presentation in school and/or reasoning for specific targets on individualized education plans (5, 6). Some parents felt heard by school staff regarding their child’s strengths and needs, and/or the

provision/resources they felt would be supportive (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 13). One parent explained, "I have had a great experience with the school that he is in right now, and they are always willing to be very thorough, and add anything that I suggest" (Akwaowo, 2019, p. 94). However, other parents felt ignored or dismissed (5, 12, 13), "I felt like he was quite dismissive of me, like I was a nagging mum, and that this was just hormones, and I didn't have anything to worry about" (Carr, 2023, p. 185). Parents shared how collaboration and open communication facilitated effective SEND support and helped their children achieve (4, 5, 6). Positive examples of open communication indicated that parents felt able to ask questions, all relevant professionals were present for meetings, and paperwork was shared in a timely manner. Additionally, by schools and services working proactively with parents to help them understand the resources and services available to them, parents of SEND military children were better prepared to access available support, yet this was not consistently happening (1, 5, 6, 8, 12). For example, one parent explained, "The majority of the families I know or have met, don't know the resources that are available to them" (Akwaowo, 2019, p. 122).

2.4.5 Theme 4: Families Want to Be Understood, But There's Challenges That Come with That

The reviewed research indicated that military families with children with SEND desire greater understanding and empathy. Parents expressed the reality of schools not understanding military families, including having an awareness of the unique issues military families face, as well as how the lifestyle impacts children and young people. Families felt school staff lacked understanding about the necessity of solo parenting (2, 12), the need for more support during periods of deployment (2, 7, 12, 13), the impact of transitioning into a new school following relocation (7, 13), and knowing relocation is not a choice (12). One parent highlighted this, explaining, "His dad had just deployed. He was five years old. That's trauma. And his teacher, the school, they didn't get it" *(*Meritt, 2023, p55). Additionally, many parents highlighted their feelings and perceptions around being viewed as a 'temporary' family (1, 5, 7, 12, 13). One parent shared how "it got to the point where every time [they] would speak to me, it would be 'oh, do you know where you're going next?' [they] was only interested in when I was going" (Carr, 2023, p. 138). Parents spoke of a lack of support, schools hesitating to provide services, staff making less effort with their children, and being seen as a lesser

priority because their family would be moving on soon enough. This may pose a juxtaposition, in that families want school staff to understand and support them; however, staff knowing they are military families could be an influential factor in the support they then receive. Despite this, the suggestion that school staff lack experience, knowledge and training to meet the needs of military children with SEND was highlighted (2, 5, 9, 12, 13), with parents advising that teachers and support staff need "more education and sensitivity training that addresses the unique lifestyles demands that military-connected students experience" (Ostler, 2016, p. 62).

Understanding from the military was also noted by parents; they spoke of military commanders lacking knowledge around SEND and the military services available to support families (5), as well as an apparent view that the military was priority, and the non-serving parent must manage everything else (3, 8). Fear and worry about the implications on the military parent's career was a key worry, with parents sharing concern that the military knowing the family had a child with additional needs would impact their career (2, 3, 6, 9 10). For example, one parent shared:

> I know my husband would be hesitant to do that, just because of the implications for his career. Negative outcomes would be less opportunities for promotions, just bad reputation, poor tasking, crappy jobs, there are just a bunch of possible negative implications, less opportunities for career advancements and courses, all kinds of stuff (Ostler, 2016, p. 71).

Some military families with children with SEND therefore did not voluntarily or proactively disclose this information to their chain of command.

2.4.6 Theme 5: Systems Make It Difficult for Families to Access SEND Support

Within the reviewed research, parents identified the barriers posed to effective SEND support within education. In all 13 papers, it was reiterated that access to resources and services varied. Parents described location impacting the support available to their children, with localities offering different services. Equally, the demand and wait times for services, funding, staffing, and access to training, varied across regions, as did individual school provision. Exacerbating this further was the highly mobile nature of military life, with families frequently having to relocate and face further challenges with the continuity of provision for their child with SEND. Relocation appeared to

bring many challenges linked to service continuity, including: services/support being reduced or not offered in the new school setting (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13); lengthy referral processes and waitlists for necessary support (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12); evaluations at the new school (4, 5, 10, 13), which result in periods of reduced support (6, 10, 12); and difficulties with transferring records/paperwork (1, 2, 3, 10, 11, 13), which could leave schools unaware of needs and existing support plans. Carr (2023) explained:

> For most Service Children mobility frequents their lives and impinges on their routine, their stability, the support their receive. For Service Children with a Special Educational Need, this double disadvantage is often all too familiar when delays in support further disrupt access to learning (p 160).

Parents spoke of their negative experiences of school support, highlighting examples of schools not recognizing or identifying needs (3, 4, 7, 8, 12, 13), not appropriately meeting their child's needs (1, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13), not accepting or following existing support plans (3, 4, 5, 10 11, 12, 13), and not connecting parents to available resources in the local area (3, 5, 8). As a result, some parents found it challenging to find the right school placement for their child, with some choosing to homeschool instead (3, 5, 12). One parent shared, "I think the system fails families, especially military families because we live a transient lifestyle where we come and go all the time" (Akwaowo, 2019, p 122). Having access to appropriate services and support is key for military children with SEND to experience success, whether that be emotionally, academically, or behaviourally (2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13), and therefore, existing systems need to improve to support military families with children with SEND.

2.4.7 Theme 6: It's Not Just the Military Parent Who Has to Fight

Apparent across all 13 papers was the view that parental advocacy was essential to ensuring military children with SEND received appropriate education and support. As one parent shared, "He'll continue to fall behind if I don't keep fighting" (Barnhill et al., 2021, p. 18). Parents spoke of needing to be consistent, proactive, and informed because, "the parent is always going to be the child's main advocate. Their first line of defense" (Sultan, 2023, p. 55). Across studies, parents spoke of how they

are experts in their own children's needs and what would support them to access education (3, 7, 8, 11, 12), and many expressed the importance of knowing their own and their child's rights with regard to education and support (1, 3, 8, 11, 12, 13). Parents also spoke about having to learn and expand their knowledge in order to advocate successfully, and this included learning about local schools and provision (2, 3, 5, 10), available services (3, 7), and the SEND system and how to navigate it (2, 3, 6, 12). Which parent took on this role was also discussed, noting that most often the non-serving parent took the responsibility for their child's education and associated advocacy. While this was directly acknowledged in some papers (2, 7, 9, 12), it was also implied in many others. As Ostler (2016) explained "all of the participants interviewed were the primary caregiver responsible for navigating special education services, and received help from their husbands 'when their job permitted'" (p 55). Regardless, most parents referred to having to 'fight' and go into 'battle' in order to ensure their child had access to suitable and supportive education, with some referring to this as their 'duty'. For example, "Carol stated that when it came to all school affairs, it was her duty, not her husband's; his duty was to remain focused on the military" (Segler, 2020, p 49).

2.5 Discussion

The aim of this systematic review was to explore the question: What insights has research provided about the education experiences of military families with children with SEND? Being a military SEND family is characterised by stress, separation, and isolation, as families in this systematic review and the wider literature, find their communities of support lacking (Davis & Finke, 2015; Naval Families Federation, 2019b; Rose & Rose, 2021). Military SEND families, therefore, forge links with one another, with friends and family, and with services to build the communities they need. One of the main challenges associated with accessing appropriate education and SEND support, as noted by this review and previous literature, centres around difficulties establishing continuity of provision and services (Aronson et al., 2016; Davis & Finke, 2015; FANDF, 2020; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Walker et al., 2020). Families feel they need proactive communicaition and sharing of information between themselves, schools, and services (Aronson et al., 2016; Rose & Rose, 2021), alongside schools understanding their military status and child's needs, to ensure effective SEND support.

However, for some families the fear around schools knowing their military status, or military commanders knowing the child's SEND status, prevents them from sharing openly. For example, parents worry about the impact sharing could have on the service person's career (FANDF, 2020).

2.5.1 Implications for Professionals

The experiences associated with being in a military family and a SEND family combine to create a set of experiences which differ from those who belong to just one of these communities. The interaction between these two categories of social identity can create challenges for military SEND families (Aronson et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2016). Finding and maintaining appropriate SEND support and education can be challenging for any SEND family (Wood et al., 2024); however, combine this with aspects of military life, such as frequent relocations, and this challenge is exaggerated. Receiving schools and local authorities may not offer the same services as previously received, wait times can be exceptionally long, and existing applications for support may not transfer to new services. A focus on improving transitions for military SEND families is therefore needed. The Armed Forces Covenant posits that anyone who has served in the Armed Forces, and their families, should not face any disadvantage compared to others in the provision of public services, including education (Ministry of Defence, 2016); this pledge therefore reiterates the need to ensure military SEND families are not further disadvantaged due to their military status. Consideration should be given to how transitions should be supported, including efficient transfer of records and support plans, transferring waitlist places if moving to a new area rather than going to the bottom of the list, and schools working in partnership to effectively plan and support transitions. If transitions were more efficient and supportive, parents of military SEND children would not need to fight as much to be heard.

It is also important to consider how schools can improve the support they offer to military SEND families to improve their experiences and create a sense of belonging; working proactively with families is key to this. Schools need to maintain close contact with parents so that they have space and time to share information, plan together, and ensure the child is receiving the most appropriate support. Seeing parents as knowledgeable about their child's needs and including them in discussions

and decisions around support would empower parents and reduce the need for them to independently advocate and fight for their child's needs to be met in school. Essential to this proactive partnership is the need for schools and educators to help families feel safe and respected within the school community; this may help families feel a sense of belonging and received empathy, supporting them to feel safe to talk about their experiences and share information about the family's current military status (e.g., whether parent is deployed). Existing literature suggests SEND families need active partnerships, empathy, and access to advice and information (Holland et al., 2018).

The importance of increasing school staff's understanding and awareness of both military life and specific special educational needs is also a key finding of this systematic review; this corroborates literature about military children (Gilmore, 2022) and those with SEND (Dunleavy & Sorte, 2022), which has highlighted the need for schools to have more training on diversity, inclusion, and military culture. MacFarlane (2018) described cultural responsiveness as having knowledge and awareness of the challenges that military children face. For school staff to provide culturally responsive practice for military families they need training and opportunities to further their understanding of and experience working with them. In addition, the need for more understanding of SEND was suggested as needed for military commanders and services; by increasing their awareness of what it means to be a SEND family, alongside building their knowledge of available services and support, they can be more readily available to support their families experiencing these needs.

Further challenges with identity and support may be seen due to families feeling they do not share the same experiences as either of the communities they should belong to. For example, a military SEND parent may find it difficult to connect with other military families when they do not experience the same challenges around their child accessing appropriate education and support. At the same time, they may find it difficult to connect with other SEND families because of the demands of their military lifestyle, such as being a lone parent during periods of deployment and frequently having to relocate. From a first glance, it may appear as though military SEND families should be well connected to avenues of support (e.g., within education, SEND services, and the military); however,

this research has highlighted significant barriers to families accessing the help they need. This includes a lack of information about services being shared and made available, waitlists and re-assessments preventing access to support, and a lack of awareness of military SEND families' needs. It is therefore important that consideration is given to how military SEND families can be further supported to access their communities and avenues of support. Both education and military services need to be more proactive in supporting families to access available resources and offering space for families with similar needs to connect. Considering how this support can be facilitated throughout various military transitions, including relocation, would be helpful in reducing the impact a loss of community has with each transition. For example, offering online and virtual spaces for families to connect.

2.5.2 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

Through the use of a systematic and transparent approach, the findings and interpretations of 13 papers were brought together and synthesized, allowing for broader conclusions to be drawn in answer to the research question. The main author understood and acknowledged their own influence throughout the research process and reflected on this in supervision with the wider research team. The decision to include grey literature in this review is another strength. As identified in this research, there are few published studies in this area, and therefore including grey literature allowed for more sources to be drawn upon.

Given the key findings from this synthesis highlighting the intersectionality between being military and a SEND family, it is important to consider how other aspects of social identity could further interact with and impact this community. We may predict that the experiences and issues identified in this study could be further exaggerated for families marginalized in an additional way, for example due to their class or ethnicity. None of the included papers commented on or explored whether experiences were impacted by other personal and social aspects of identity. Some papers collected identity data (including ethnicity, race, and gender) but did not include this within the writeup (e.g., Israel, 2018). Others did report identity data (e.g., ethnicity) but did not comment on its impact or relation to the reported data (e.g., Classen et al., 2019). It is therefore impossible to

determine whether families' experiences were also impacted by other aspects of their social identities.

The majority of the research papers included in this review were from the USA, with only one English paper included. Despite there being similarities between the educational systems and armed forces cultures, there are still discrete and significant differences. Therefore, it may be helpful for future research to explore the education experiences of military SEND families exclusively in the UK context. In addition, none of the included papers explored whether experiences differed by any mediating characteristics. For example, research indicates that mobility patterns differ across each branch of the military. For army or RAF, a highly mobile lifestyle is more common, while those in the navy are least likely to experience moves, and instead more likely to experience long periods of parental separation (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Similarly, participants in some of the included studies commented that the rank of the service person impacted the support they received. It would be interesting to explore whether the experiences of military SEND families varied based on these characteristics.

Additionally, despite exploring the education experiences of military SEND families, none of the included papers sought the voice of the service children themselves. Future research could focus on hearing from SEND service children to understand their experiences further and include them in the conversation around what support they feel would be beneficial.

2.5.4 Conclusion

Prior research has explored some of the challenges associated with being a military SEND family; however, this review highlights how the intersection between two social identities, military and SEND, creates a specific set of experiences and challenges for families. For some, this intersection creates an invisibility, where families are left fighting to get their children's educational needs met. As a result, this review draws attention to the necessity of recognizing this sub-population and their experiences. Whilst these challenges are noted, participant voices draw attention to the changes and support that are needed to improve the educational experiences of military children and their families.

Chapter 3 – An Exploration of Service Children with SEND's Experiences of Separation and Deployment Throughout Education, From the Perspective of Service Children, Their Families, and School Staff

3.1 Abstract

Frequent separations are a stressor distinctive to military families. How children manage and respond to parental absence and their parents' return home is dependent on their age and stage of development, but deployment and separation can have a range of impacts on children, including on their education. Parental absence can be especially disruptive to a military family with a child with a special educational need or disability (SEND). This research study sought to understand the lived experiences of military families with children with SEND, with a particular focus around times of separation and deployment. The voices of service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that supported them were sought in order to create an understanding of the children's experiences and the support already available to them. Through a reflexive thematic analysis approach, these families described how separation and its subsequent impact is impossible to anticipate; however, families consistently found it challenging to communicate what separation meant to their service child with SEND and the child's additional needs could make the experience even more challenging. Both families and school staff recognized the importance of schools supporting children directly as well as the wider family, particularly the at-home parent, and therefore the types of support families may find helpful from schools and educational psychologists are discussed.

3.2 Introduction

A family is referred to as a 'service family' if one or more members of the family unit are serving, or have served, within the armed forces. A 'service child' is therefore any child or young person whose parents or carers serve in the armed forces during their lifetime (Hall et al., 2022). In England, for the purpose of allocating service pupil premium, this definition is extended to include children and young people who have a parent currently serving in the armed forces (regular or full-

commitment reservist), or who had a parent serving within the previous six years and were registered on a school census as a 'service child', or who experienced the death of a parent while serving in the armed forces (and receive a pension under the War Pensions Scheme or Armed Forces Compensation Scheme), or who have a parent serving in another nation's armed forces but are stationed in England (Ministry of Defence & Department for Education, 2024). The Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP) and Service Children in State Schools (SCISS) further specify that a service child is one whose parent served at any time during the first 25 years of the child's life (Rose & Rose, 2021; University of Winchester, 2025).

The number of service children within the UK is largely unknown because of a lack of accurate statistics (Children's Commissioner, 2022; Walker et al., 2020). In December 2024, there were 78,293 pupils recorded as eligible for service pupil premium in England (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2024); this number, however, may not be fully representative of the service child population in England, because it only captures service children in state schools, academies and free schools (reception-age to year 11), and it relies on families disclosing to schools their service status, which some families choose not to do. According to a briefing in 2019, service children were in attendance at over 50% of state schools in England, with half of these schools having only one or two service children on roll (Hall, 2019). This aligns with the data discussed in the 'Living in Our Shoes' report, which highlights that some schools near military bases have very high numbers of service children on roll, yet most service children attend schools with very few (e.g., less than 10) service children as pupils (Children's Commissioner, 2022; Walker et al., 2020).

The Armed Forces Covenant, which was first introduced in 2012 (Walker et al., 2020) declares that it is the duty and obligation of the whole nation to respect, treat fairly, and support those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces and their families (Ministry of Defence, 2016). The covenant is a promise between the people of the United Kingdom, Her Majesty's Government, and those who serve or have served in the Armed Forces of the Crown and their families. It acknowledges the sacrifices made and danger faced by those serving to fulfil their duty, and reinforces the importance of service families facing no disadvantage due to their service (Ministry of

Defence, 2016). The covenant was also designed to draw attention to the challenges faced by military families, highlighting the additional stressors associated with military life, including deployments and periods of separation, mobility, and dangerous work settings (Walker et al., 2020).

Inherent to service life is deployment and separation (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a). Deployment refers to the movement of the armed forces for operational and combat missions and it can be planned, short-notice, and/or no-contact (Naval Families Federation, 2019b). Although separation occurs as a result of deployment, it can also frequent military service families' lives due to non-operational family separations, including postings and training (Baverstock, 2023; Hall et al., 2022; Naval Families Federation, 2019b) and weekending (also referred to as dispersal, where the service parent works and lives away from the family during the week; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b; Naval Families Federation, 2019b). The amount and type of deployment and separation experienced varies between the services with, for example, those in Naval service families tending to experience longer deployments and live separately (geographically) from the serving parent (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Walker et al., 2020).

Research has highlighted parental absence and separation due to military service as one of the most challenging aspects of being part of a service family (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Classen & Meadows, 2019; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a). Various models describing the cycle of deployment and its associated impacts have been generated, including the emotional cycle of deployment (Vestal Logan (1987), the three stages of deployment (Amen et al., 1988), and the parenting cycle of deployment (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Although some of these, such as the emotional cycle of deployment, was originally created to describe the experience of military wives, it has been used to help explain the behaviour and emotional change in children and young people also (Vestal Logan, 1987). Each of these models refers to the impact of deployment prior to the parent leaving, during the parent's absence/deployment, and after their return. In the pre-deployment stage, families experience the anticipation of loss, where upon they are preparing for the serving parent to leave. During this time, some families experience withdrawal or detachment to cope with the impending separation (Amen et al., 1988; DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Vestal Logan, 1987). During the

deployment stage, children and parents may initially experience many and mixed emotions at once (DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Vestal Logan, 1987), before the family establishes their new routine, roles, and responsibilities (Amen et al., 1988; Vestal Logan, 1987). Towards the end of a deployment, the family begins to anticipate the homecoming (Vestal Logan, 1987) and counts down to the parent's return (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). Finally, in the post-deployment phase, the home-coming parent has to assimilate and reintegrate into the family unit. The family experiences a period of change where upon routines and roles in the family are re-established (Amen et al., 1988; DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Vestal Logan, 1987). At each stage of the deployment cycle, behaviours and emotions can change, with the experience being different for each individual and for each deployment (Naval Families Federation, 2019b).

Due to having a parent in the armed forces, children and young people in service families can have different experiences to those in civilian families; their serving parent being frequently away from the family home can have wide-ranging impacts, and research has noted that deployments are viewed by some military parents as the trigger for their children's difficulties (Walker et al., 2020). However, Godier-McBard, et al. (2021b) highlighted how the existing literature paints an inconsistent picture of how deployment and separation impacts children's emotionality and behaviour. Some literature highlights the positive impact separation can have on children and young people. For example, some parents report that periods of separation contribute to their children having close, supportive relationships with each other (Naval Families Federation, 2019a), and others refer to a positive impact on resilience (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Russo & Fallon, 2001).

There is, however, substantial research that recognizes the emotional impact of deployment and separation. Children and young people can experience increased anxiety and worry (Chandra et al., 2010; Children's Commissioner, 2018, 2022; McCullouch et al., 2018), miss their serving parent (Children's Commissioner, 2018; McCullouch et al., 2018), and experience difficulties with the child-parent relationship (either for the at-home parent or the serving parent; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021; Naval Families Federation, 2019a). For some children, more

extreme changes can be seen, including a regression in skills (e.g., toileting) and an increase in externalizing behaviours (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Naval Families Federation, 2019a). Parental absences during times of family celebrations, such as birthdays or Christmas, can be particularly difficult (Children's Commissioner, 2018; McCullouch et al., 2018). Research has also highlighted more practical impacts on children and young people, including having increased responsibility in the home for household chores and/or siblings (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a).

When thinking about service children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), the emotional impacts of separation and deployment can be further heightened (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017; Hall et al., 2022). This may be because it is more difficult for some children with SEND to adapt to the separation (Naval Families Federation, 2019a), they may not understand the separation or why it is happening (Davis & Finke, 2015), or their difficulties regulating their emotions may be further exacerbated by the separation (Davis & Finke, 2015). Service children with SEND may exhibit an increase in challenging behaviours (such as aggression; Akwaowo, 2019; Meritt, 2023; Segler, 2020), a regression in skills (Akwaowo, 2019; Davis & Finke, 2015; Meritt, 2023; Tidwell, 2016), or a slowing of their academic progress (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Meritt, 2023). Additionally, the absence of the serving parent leaves the at-home parent to care for and support the service child with SEND alone (Sands et al., 2023; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021). In 2021, Taylor-Beirne and Fear noted the lack of UK research exploring how SEND military families cope with prolonged separation. They further highlighted the absence of data on the prevalence of SEND in service families, which has been recognized by other researchers also (FANDF, 2020; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021). It is mandatory for those serving in the Army to formally notify their chain of command of their family member with an additional need or disability, but it is optional for those in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force to do so (FANDF, 2020; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021).

The impact of separation and deployment on service children can be seen within education, and researchers have highlighted that supporting children through periods of separation is one of the biggest challenges school staff face in working with service children (Children's Commissioner, 2018;

Rose & Rose, 2021). This may be in part because parents do not routinely and consistently inform schools of upcoming deployments (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Rose & Rose, 2021), making it impossible for schools to actively plan or provide support. This appears to occur more frequently in schools with fewer service children on roll (Rose & Rose, 2021). In addition, service life can create additional stressors for service children that may impact their academic performance in school. Baverstock (2023) recognized how school staff can be key and constant figures during times of separation and deployment. Further evidence suggests that service children need to be appropriately supported by their schools in order to experience success and thrive in education (Walker et al., 2020). Key to this are knowledgeable and understanding staff members who have an awareness of military culture and a good understanding of the impact of deployment (Macdonald & Boon, 2018; Robson et al., 2013).

In England, the Department for Education introduced the Service Pupil Premium in April 2011 to support schools to provide additional support for service children (Baverstock, 2023). Typically this funding is used to provide pastoral support to service children; however, schools may choose to use it to provide academic support or to fund staff posts (Rose & Rose, 2021). It was highlighted by Rose and Rose (2021), however, that schools are often uncertain about the best ways to use this funding, particularly when the school has a small service child cohort, and there is a want for clearer guidance and evidence-based practice. In 2018, the Children's Commissioner gathered the views of service children themselves, which highlighted various ways in which schools supported them, including after-school clubs, drop-in centres, and having a named member of staff responsible for the service children's wellbeing.

Although the impact of military life on service children has been explored in the literature, there has been very little focus on the experiences of service families with children with SEND (Khera et al., 2017; Sands et al., 2023; Taylor-Beirne & Fear, 2021). Taylor-Beirne and Fear (2021) recognized the need for more research exploring how the stressors associated with having SEND interact and combine with the stressors of being a service child; they further noted that there was an absence of UK research exploring the lived experience of SEND military families. In addition Godier-McBard, et

al. (2021b) stated the need for future research to include service children themselves in the discourse around their experiences after highlighting their voices as missing from UK literature.

The aim of the current study therefore was to explore (a) the lived experiences of service children with SEND and their non-serving parent during periods of separation and deployment, and (b) the experiences and recommendations of school staff who work closely with military SEND children and their families. The research was therefore designed to address the following research questions:

1. How do service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that support them, conceptualize their experiences of separation and deployment?
2. What can schools and Educational Psychologists (EPs) do to better support service children with SEND during times of separation and deployment?

3.3 Method

3.3.1 Research Design

To explore the lived experiences of service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that support them, a qualitative research design was most appropriate. Semi-structured interviews facilitated a flexible approach, allowing for further exploration of ideas or thoughts shared by participants. This resonated with the researcher's social constructivist epistemological position in which knowledge is created through interaction between participant and researcher. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) in line with Braun & Clarke (2006) process was used to analyse the interview transcripts.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for data collection in line with the exploratory nature of this study. The interview topic guide was employed to guide the interviews and allowed for flexibility in the interviews to explore what participants discussed. The interview questions were designed to explore children's experiences of separation and deployment, as well as to establish an

understanding of the support that is available and needed to support service children with SEND. The interview topic guide can be found in Appendix B.

3.3.3 Recruitment

Participants were recruited via multiple means. The research poster was shared on X (Twitter), on the Naval Children's Charity social media, and via email to schools with large numbers of service children on roll. The research also recruited snowballing, where those who saw the research poster shared it within their own communities.

3.3.4 Participants

Six participants from England took part in this research. Of these, one was a service child with SEND, one was a non-serving parent of a service child with SEND, and four were school staff that support service children with SEND in school.

Some demographic and biographical information was collected from participants to contexualise the analysis and findings. For children and young people, this included their age, gender, and ethnicity, the military branch to which they belonged, and their identified special educational need or disability. For the non-serving parent participants, this included the age and ethnicity of their child, their own and their child's gender, the military branch to which their child belongs, and their child's identified special educational need or disability. For school staff participants, this included the school year of the children they support, the military branch to which the children they support belong to, and the identified special educational needs or disability for the children they support. See Table 5 for participant details.

Table 5

Participant Information

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Setting	SEND of Service child(ren)	Military branch
Anna	Mental Health Lead and ELSA	Female	Junior school	Autism, SEMH needs	Royal Navy
Beth	Assistant Headteacher of	Female	Infant school	*Various needs*	Army

	Inclusion (SENCo)				
Cherry	Parent	Female	Junior school	Autism, speech delay	Army
Daisy	Teacher	Female	Primary school	Speech and language	Royal Navy, Army
Emma	Higher Level Teaching Assistant	Female	Primary school	*Various needs*	Royal Navy, Army
Finn	Child	Male	Secondary school	SEMH	Royal Air Force

3.3.5 Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Southampton's faculty ethics committee, and the researcher was supervised by two members of staff at the University of Southampton throughout the research journey. The research contributed towards the researcher's doctoral thesis, and therefore their qualification as an educational psychologist.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose and nature of the research via email. The researcher's details were provided to allow participants to ask any questions, and written consent was then obtained via the consent forms. If the participant was a child or young person under the age of 16, parental consent was obtained, as well as assent from the child or young person.

All interviews took place via Microsoft Teams and were scheduled at a time convenient for the participant. Interviews were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams and a Zoom audio-recorder and ranged from 20 to 60 minutes. Audio-recordings were stored securely on a password-protected University laptop and were deleted immediately following transcription. During transcription, any identifiable data was removed and participants were assigned a pseudonym to maintain their anonymity.

3.3.6 Data Analysis

Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was used to explore the experiences of service children with SEND regarding separation and deployment. Analysis was guided by the processes for reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). The researcher initially

transcribed the data and read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with and immerse themselves in the data, before generating initial codes using NVivo 15. To develop initial themes, the researcher grouped the codes based on similarities and differences, allowing themes to be established from patterns of meaning with a shared central concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For example, 'feeling anxious or worried', 'missing the deployed parent', and 'separation is stressful and upsetting' shared the same organising construct of 'separation impacts children'. They were therefore combined to form an initial theme.

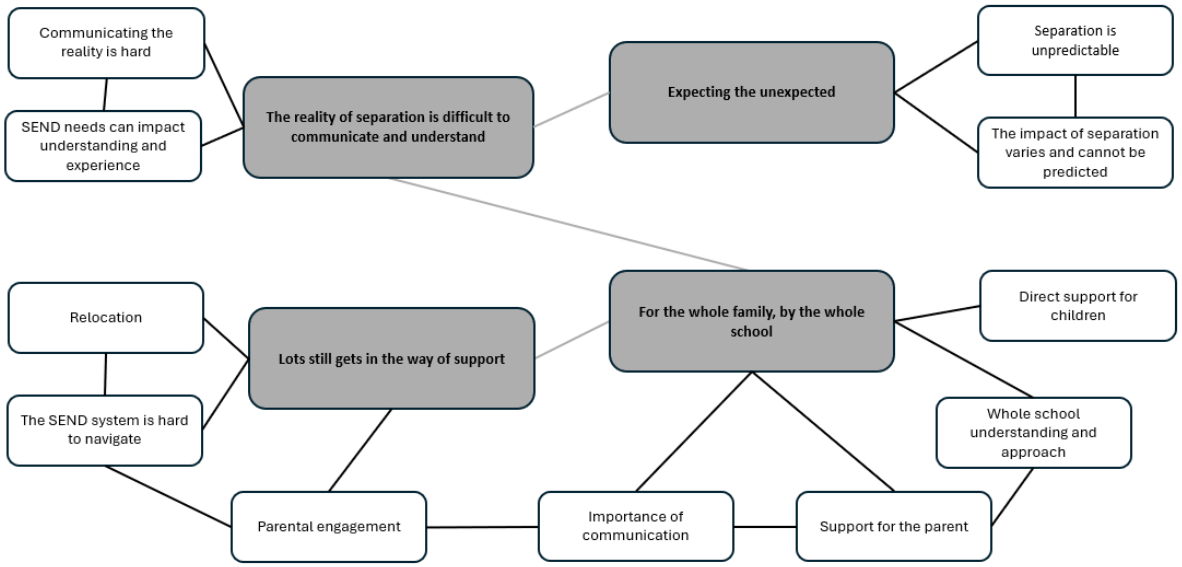
Each generated theme was reviewed and adjusted through a process of checking initial codes and transcripts to ensure participant voice was represented. Each theme was then defined and named. For example, 'separation impacts children' became the subtheme 'the impact of separation varies and cannot be predicted' to accurately reflect participant's views. Generated codes and themes were discussed with the research team to support the researcher to develop richer interpretations and understanding. Where codes were mentioned by only one participant, and ~~didn't~~ did not answer the research questions, they were not included for analysis, such as 'following her interests'.

3.4 Findings

Following data analysis, four themes were generated to capture the lived experiences shared by the participants of this study (see Figure 4). Despite descriptive quotes from specific participants being used to support each theme, it should be noted that all participants contributed to each of the themes, with the exception of Finn in Theme 3. The generated themes aimed to answer the first research question, 'How do service children with SEND, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that support them, conceptualize their experiences of separation and deployment?', as well as part of the second research question relevant to schools, 'What can schools and educational psychologists do to better support service children with SEND during times of separation and deployment?' The second half of this research question, which considers the role of educational psychologists, is explored in the discussion.

Figure 4

Graphic Representation of Themes and Subthemes Generated Through Thematic Analysis



Note. Themes are represented in bold on a shaded background to distinguish them from sub-themes.

3.4.1 Theme 1: Expecting the Unexpected

Although it was acknowledged by participants that separation is a part of military life, what this actually meant for each individual family varied and it was often unpredictable. As a result, families were left trying to expect the unexpected.

Participant's reflections in subtheme 1 noted how 'separation is unpredictable', with the type of separation, its duration, and the flexibility around contact being inconsistent between each separation. Families often knew in advance of upcoming separations and their anticipated durations; however, frequent, last-minute and unexpected changes to the separation made it challenging for families to appropriately plan for and manage the separations. Emma shared "we've had situations where they thought it would be this length of time, and it turns out it was much longer because of a situation". Similarly, Daisy recognized the uncertainty experienced by children living within military families, explaining how:

> There's no real structure to when they go away in the military and it could be that he's worried that he's going to go home with [his] parent and then it's going to be really short lived and [he] has to say goodbye again. And it's a minefield, isn't it? (Daisy)

What each individual service family subsequently experienced and found difficult was therefore varied; however, participants described separation going beyond a parent simply being away from the family home. The times of transition resulting from separation were particularly challenging for these service families with children with SEND. For example, some families found it challenging to return to the norm when the deployed parent returned to the family home. Beth described how "they've got used to these routines and then the parent that's been serving comes back. And sometimes all that can get thrown up in the air", acknowledging how it is not only difficult for the parent to leave, but also to return and reintegrate into the family unit. Equally, some families found it easy to revert back to their usual routines when the serving parent returned; as Finn described "all my family is just really happy to see him again and then we go back to normal life with dad being back". Therefore, knowing which aspects of the separation were going to be difficult was impossible to predict, with each family experiencing something different. Beth further reinforced this idea by recognizing that small things that you could never anticipate could become problematic for some service children and their families. For example, Beth described how:

> It can be the little things, like if the parent that's deployed has always packed their lunchbox. We've had that before… and then the parent that is at home does it, and then suddenly they won't eat it because dad didn't make it. (Beth)

Drawn from participant experiences, subtheme 2 recognizes how 'the impact of separation varies and cannot be predicted'. For some service children with SEND, separation did not have a huge impact, perhaps because the child was familiar with the experience of separation. Daisy described how "they are quite used to it; they've become quite robust with it". Equally, many children, although impacted at the point of the initial separation, seemed to go back to 'normal' with time. Anna described how "generally that settles as they sort of become accepting and understanding of what's going on" and Emma shared "and I think… as they sort of get used to the parent being

deployed, I think… they sort of go back to their normal behaviour". However, all participants also reinforced the impact separation can have on service children with SEND, even where their initial response suggested separation does not have a large impact. The descriptions of this impact were diverse, with reference to varying impacts on behaviour, learning, emotions, and relationships.

With regards to impact on behaviour, service children with SEND may become quieter or more withdrawn. They may display more physical behaviours that are challenging for supporting adults to manage or show regression in their behaviour. Beth described how "suddenly they can take some steps backward and you always have to have in the back of your mind, oh mum isn't there at the minute, or dads not there at the minute, you know". Equally, participants felt that children's learning and academic progress can be impacted. This was largely attributed to children's focus and concentration being affected by the separation. Finn explained "I can't concentrate as well as I would cause I'm thinking about dad and worrying about him sometimes"; school staff reinforced that learning progress can slow while the parent is away also. Emma shared her observations that for some children "when there's deployment, their learning sort of stagnates for a little while, and whether that's an emotional impact as well, you know that they're not quite in the right frame of mind when they're at school". Evidently, there was an impact of children's emotions, with some children becoming tearful and sad, while others became angry or frustrated, or increasingly stressed, anxious or worried. Finn explained how he found "it more difficult to regulate myself if I get into a situation where I feel upset or angry because I'm just more stressed at the moment or upset, so it adds on what I would normally feel"; this could feed into their experiences with peers and impact their social relationships also. Anna noted "they'll get frustrated with other people… and occasionally we see them kind of pushing everybody away a bit". Similarly, it could also impact on the child's relationships with the serving parent; their bond with the at-home parent may have been stronger, meaning that separation from that caregiver was more stressful than from the serving parent. Cherry explained "she will be quite distressed if I am not around, rather than him not being around". However, others experienced anticipation and excitement for their parents return; as such, each experience was individual and could not be anticipated.

3.4.2 Theme 2: The Reality of Separation Is Difficult to Communicate and Understand

For service families with children with SEND, communicating the reality of separation can be challenging as it is more difficult for their children to comprehend what this means.

Subtheme 1 captures how 'communicating the reality is hard', with Beth noting "when a parent goes away and is deployed, it is very difficult to explain to those children what's happening, and that the parents will come back, that it's not finished forever". This evidenced how challenging it can be to communicate in a way that the child can understand and make sense of. For many service children with SEND, they found it challenging to comprehend the duration of the separation; Anna explained "but I guess our service children find that harder to maybe rationalize, to understand, to have the concepts of time". Having varied experiences of separation in the past added to this difficulty, with Beth describing how "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 the next posting/deployment is months". However, as children became older, their understanding tended to develop, and therefore they found it easier to comprehend the separation. Cherry described how her daughter "is slightly getting a little bit of understanding" and Finn echoed this explaining, "now that I'm older, I find it easier when he goes away because I know when he is coming back, and like…I know more now because I know where he is, I know why he's there".

Due to the difficulties with communicating what a separation was going to mean, there were mixed experiences of whether parents chose to inform their children of an upcoming separation. Some parents shared with their children about the planned separation; for example, Emma said, "his mum always warns him when… it's coming up". However, others did not tell their children at all; Beth noted "some of our children, I don't think are aways aware that the parents about to go", and others told the child of the separation, but did not provide further details or support them to understand what it really meant. Anna described how "often they are quite unclear what it's really going to look like".

Subtheme 2 reinforces how 'SEND needs can impact understanding and experience' further. For many service children with SEND, their needs can make it more challenging for them to cope with

the separation, with their needs frequently being exacerbated by the separation. Beth explained "and you know, when they're dysregulated and having those uncomfortable experiences, they're likely… trying to express that they miss them or they don't understand what's happening", which reinforces how children's behaviour may be communicating their confusion. Additionally, Emma said "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… it's definitely harder". The child's category of need therefore appears to be an influential factor, with those who had an emotional or social-communication difficulty being impacted the most. Beth explained how:

> 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. (Beth)

Equally, language difficulties can impact a child's understanding and ability to communicate their experience of the separation. This was reinforced by Cherry who explained "we do not know what is going on with her, you know, because she cannot express it so much".

3.4.3 Theme 3: Lots Still Gets in the Way of Support

Across participant responses it was clear that there are many barriers to families accessing the appropriate support for their SEND child and family. Some of these are unique to individual families, whilst others all families are likely to face.

Subtheme 1 captures the difficulties shared around 'relocation'. For some military families, relocation was an inevitable and frequent part of life, which had an impact on their child's access to appropriate support and services. Relocation could mean having to restart the process of support or experiencing longer wait times in the new location. Beth explained

> 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… 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 sometimes they can move for worse". (Beth)

As a result, it could be a rush to establish EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plan) to ensure the child didn't need to restart the process in a new local authority. Anna explained "it was a real panic to get her EHCP in place, because if she moved area they'd have to start from scratch".

Linked to this, is subtheme 2 which highlights how participants felt 'the SEND system is hard to navigate' for service families with SEND children. Parents could feel like they were repeatedly being faced with barriers that inhibited their child's access to support. Cherry stated "she told me to raise a complaint, which I did. And then after that, her EHCP process started rapidly. So she did need some help, but it did take me all of those challenges I had to face". One of the key barriers for service families was that available services differed by location, meaning what a child received in one local authority may have differed to another. Beth explained "and different schools offer different things. Different local authorities offer different things, and obviously when you're a SEN child, you need access to lots of things to be able to be successful and flourish". This inconsistency could make it challenging and stressful for parents to subsequently advocate for their children successfully. Equally, school staff highlighted the difficulties with the SEND system more generally, noting it "isn't always fit for purpose" (Beth). A few participants made suggestions as to how to improve the system, which included increased funding and having specialists in local authority SEND teams, so that you had a SEND system "that represents all children" (Beth).

Subtheme 3 captures a third barrier noted in participant reflections, which is 'parental engagement'. Across participants various factors were described as impacting parent's willingness and ability to engage in offered support. Parents lacking an awareness of appropriate support or not having the time to engage in available support was highlighted. For example, Emma noted "I mean, I think most schools offer you know… lots of support and what we always find is it's the parents accepting the support I think is always the first challenge". Equally, parents not understanding the impact of the separation on their child can lead them to dismissing opportunities for support. Beth shared "I don't think the parents always appreciate the turmoil that can cause children and the

emotional upset that can cause". For some families, it may be that fear of stigma or admitting they needed help prevented them accessing support. Anna reflected how "sometimes that's a barrier that they're like, we're fine… we don't need anything". It could also be parental mental health that affected engagement. Anna shared "for one or two of ours at the moment, I worry that there are maybe some sort of mental health issues at home so the non-serving parent is quite reluctant to engage with anything". For other families, where English was an additional language, it may have been that their English proficiency inhibited their access to support; Cherry described struggling to access support for her daughter despite having a relatively good use of English and emphasised how this would be exacerbated for those who do not understand English so well. Cherry noted that:

> Some parents will not be knowing all the paperwork and they have to wait [for] the husband to come back and do the paperwork for them, but then what? It is gonna result in the EHC going to be delayed for that case and how long [do] they have to wait? Months and months and years and years. And that is not fair for those families, is it? (Cherry)

This highlights how challenging it can be for those families who do not have proficiency in English to navigate SEND processes. Although the above factors were mentioned between the participants of this research, it is likely that there are many other barriers experienced by other service families that have not been captured here.

3.4.4 Theme 4: For the Whole Family, by the Whole School

In order to support service families with children with SEND appropriately, schools need to support not just the individual children, but the entire family. Equally, support needs to come from the whole school, not just one dedicated member of staff.

Participants' reflections in subtheme 1 indicated the need to keep children at the centre of our support and work and therefore reiterated the importance of offering 'direct support for children' during periods of separation and deployment. This support could be facilitated through various means. Firstly, offering emotional and pastoral support to individual children helped them make sense of their experiences and manage their feelings. As Emma noted:

> I think, I always I always go back to… 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 [I] 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. (Emma)

Having secure, established relationships between children and supporting school staff was indicated as essential to effective support. Offering children space and time with a trusted adult was helpful for allowing them to share and check-in. For example, Daisy explained:

> So we have a pastoral lead, who all of the communication about when parents go away and all that sort of thing goes to them and quite a lot of the time she will come down and she will take that child out, they'll do like a nice activity together, she'll have a chat with them, make sure they are ok in like her kind of job role aspect of it, and then bring them back afterwards. (Daisy)

Additionally, school is often seen as a distraction and a constant during periods of separation, which can make it more manageable for children with SEND. Beth explained “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”.

Direct support could also be facilitated by providing appropriate peer support groups. Having the opportunity to spend time with other children who have similar experiences was crucial for children knowing they were not alone. Anna expressed how “the support of peers is equally powerful as the support adults can give”, which Daisy echoed saying “they can be a support for each other, rather than just relying on the group-ups, because its all well and good us supporting them, but we’re not actually in their situation”. Therefore, support from peers within school, not just staff, was important for building support systems in schools.

Subtheme 2 goes on to emphasize the importance of ‘support for the parent’, indicating it as equally important as it is to support individual children. During periods of separation, one parent was left to manage all aspects of family life alone, which could be isolating and challenging, particularly

when there was a child with SEND in the family. Cherry described how “my husband was deployed… for month and months…I had to do it on my own. It was really hard for me” and Beth expressed how “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”. The at-home parent was described as “juggling all these balls at the same time” (Emma), which could be a struggle when the number of demands became overwhelming. For some, activities that were done regularly when the serving parent was home, such as reading with the child before bed, may reduce due to the at-home parent being tired, busy, or prioritizing other demands. Consequently, schools needed to be supporting the at-home parent to reduce the possibility of burn-out and help them manage the separation too. Support could come through signposting families to appropriate activities and resources (including charities or welfare services where appropriate), facilitating peer support, and providing direct support to parents. Daisy described:

> For those children with that higher level of SEN and parents that are going away and disrupting their routine, their normal life, maybe schools being more involved with… the other parent that's left at home and how they're doing, rather than being super, super focused on that child because at the end of the day that child's going back to that home. And if that that parent isn't coping, then that's going to come back on school and impact that. (Daisy)

This was echoed by Cherry who explained “if mums are not right, how would kids be safe?”, which reinforces the importance of supporting the at-home parent, so that in turn the child is appropriately cared for and supported through periods of separation.

Subtheme 3 highlights the need for a ‘whole school understanding and approach’ to supporting service children with SEND and their families. In order to effectively support these families, schools needed to understand the impact of separation and deployment on the wider family, not just the child. This included having an understanding and awareness of military life and culture, and the experiences families may have had. Beth explained “some of our children have had lots of changes before they’ve even got to us”, which recognizes the importance of knowing the

family and their journey. Equally, increasing the understanding of the whole school, staff and children, of what it means to be in a military family was essential to effective inclusion and support. Anna noted “I think it is about you know raising awareness of what it’s like to be a service child”. By facilitating this understanding, staff were able to better meet children where they are at and support with an awareness of their home context. For example, they may have needed to understand behaviour as communication, be more flexible in their approach to working with the child, or be willing to modify their expectations. Finn expressed this sharing:

> They probably could know how difficult I find it sometimes, I find it hard to concentrate and stuff. So instead of getting cross at me not doing it… they'd know why that I was doing it and not just thinking I was misbehaving. (Finn)

Often schools had a dedicated member of staff responsible for leading support for service children. Although it may have been important to employ such a person to ensure there was ongoing CPD for staff and appropriate support for service children, it could lead to other staff feeling absolved of the responsibility to understand and support service children. For example, Daisy expressed how they were uncertain about the support available in their school, despite having a service child with SEND in their class. Therefore, support needed to come from all staff in school, even if one person was leading, so that children were supported by adults who were aware of and understood as much as possible how separation and service life may affect them. Anna described how in their setting “there’s a lot that is really embedded into school now, which is good that just it just happens as part of what we do”.

Finally, subtheme 4 emphasises the ‘importance of communication’ in facilitating appropriate support for the service child and their family. By having positive, open, and established communication between home and school, parents were more likely to share information about upcoming separations, schools could help prepare children and appropriately support throughout periods of separation, and strategies of support could be used consistently between home and school. Daisy described the need for “that open line of communication”, which echoed Anna expressing “I try really hard engaging with parents to get them to let me know ahead of time because

we have resources that go home with the children". Particularly, it was important to share information around planned separations so that schools could be prepared and support children. The experiences described by participants were very mixed. Beth explained "we're not always told", Anna described instances of being informed on the day of the separation by the child, "sometimes the child just comes in and says my dads gone away", while Daisy described having advance warning, "parents are very good at communicating it with us and they will me know as class teacher and let the school know as well". Sharing in advance facilitated school and home working together to think about how best to support the child and family throughout the separation period and was therefore crucial to effective support.

3.5 Discussion

Separation is a prominent part of military life that service children with SEND and their families frequently navigate (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021b; Hall et al., 2022). Participant's voices in the current study reflect that although children miss their parents while they are away, the impact is much more nuanced, with effects seen across most areas of their lives. Perhaps the central impact, however, is how children's emotional state and capacity to regulate is impacted by separation. Service children with SEND can experience increased levels of stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration, during periods of separation, which mimics the effects noticed in existing research for service children without identified SEND (Chandra et al., 2010; Children's Commissioner, 2018). However, service children with SEND's experiences may be heightened because their existing difficulties (including with emotion regulation) are exacerbated by the separation (Davis & Finke, 2015). Additionally, it can be more challenging for service children with SEND to comprehend the separation, including what it means and why it is happening (Davis & Finke, 2015), resulting in children expressing the confusion and uncertainty through their behaviour and emotions. This difficulty in understanding separation likely explains why some families chose not to inform their SEND child prior to a separation.

Emotions are not the only area impacted by separation, however. This study highlighted the perceived effect of separation on many other areas, including a child's academic learning and

progress, as well as their relationships, with both peers and family. This reinforces existing literature that highlights deployment as related to lower school performance (Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Meritt, 2023) and difficulties with the child-parent relationships (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Godier-McBard, et al., 2021a; Naval Families Federation, 2019a). It is likely that the emotional impact of separation influences both of these areas, with children's stress and worry making it increasingly difficult to concentrate on learning and manage conflict or disagreement within relationships.

What was also evident from the current study, is how the point of separation is only one aspect of separation that children with SEND find tricky to manage. For many, various points of transition including the return of the parent can be equally unsettling and challenging to navigate. When the serving parent returns, the family have to adapt to reintegrate the parent back into the family unit; for some SEND children this is particularly challenging as the rules and the routines of the home change. In line with the emotional cycle of deployment, parental return can cause children to feel tense, unsettled, and pressured to go back to normal (Naval Families Federation, 2019b). However, this effect, and those mentioned above, are not experienced for all children with SEND during periods of separation, with some children showing no impact or returning to their norm shortly after the point of separation. Godier-McBard, et al. (2021b) acknowledged this inconsistency, recognizing that separation does not impact all children in the same way. Therefore, each individual's experience of separation is unique, unpredictable, and likely different at each separation. It is impossible to anticipate what impact separation may have on a child with SEND, but it is supportive to know what could happen, particularly recognizing and acknowledging that behaviour is often communication for these children.

3.5.1 Implications for Professionals

Findings from this study illustrate the necessity for schools to support service children with SEND as individuals, responding to their individual journey and experiences; as such, the support they offer needs to be bespoke and tailored to individuals' needs and experiences. Some children may require a light-touch approach, where check-ins are offered as and when needed, whilst other children will require more direct, in-depth support to manage the separations; for example,

emotional support through pastoral teams or Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and frequent opportunities to spend time with peers with similar experiences. In order to offer this support effectively, school staff need to have a good understanding of what it means to be a service child and the potential impact of separation and deployment. In this way, supporting staff can be understanding, empathetic, and show an awareness of the child's current situation. It is also important for education professionals to recognize the impact of separation may go beyond emotional changes, with children's behaviour changing (regressing or becoming more challenging) alongside their engagement with academic learning. Supporting adults need to understand that during times of separation and deployment, children may be more unsettled and therefore not consistently in a ready state for learning. Academic expectations may need to be adjusted during these times, with priority given to ensuring children feel safe, cared for, and like they belong in their school.

In addition to supporting children directly, school staff are well placed to support the wider family, particularly the at-home parent. It is important for schools to build open and proactive relationships with parents so they feel more comfortable sharing information about their families' military status; by doing so, schools and parents can work closely together to ensure the child's needs are being met and to allow for consistency between home and school. Having an established relationship will make it easier for school staff to share resources with parents, signpost families to appropriate avenues of support (where needed), and plan for upcoming instances of separation. For the at-home parent, this relationship may also encourage them to engage with offered services and/or seek help if and when it is needed. For example, schools could offer space for service families to come together and share experience and ideas, through coffee mornings or a support hub. However, building trusted relationships is more difficult in schools with fewer service children or less experience working with service children (Rose & Rose, 2021). It is important for education professionals to consider barriers to individual families accessing appropriate support for their service child with SEND and themselves; where possible, schools should be working to help reduce these. For example, where parents do not engage with offered services because they have other children who they need to care for, support spaces should be facilitated where children can join or

be engaged in a parallel activity in the school. If the barrier is the parent speaking English as an additional language, as noted by a participant in this study, families should be supported by translating resources/information, and offering space for families who speak the same language to come together and support one another (e.g., a buddy-like system within the school). Whatever the potential barriers are, schools should be working actively to unpick these and make their services and support more accessible.

In order for schools to provide any of aforementioned support, there needs to be a whole-school approach and understanding of how to support service children with SEND. Although it can be helpful to have a service child 'lead', this can result in other staff feeling like they have less responsibility in ensuring the effective support of service children with SEND. Therefore, practice needs to be embedded across whole schools, where all staff have a good understanding of who their service children are, what it means to be a part of a service family (including typical experiences and military culture), how separation and deployment can impact children, and subsequently what support is most helpful for service children with SEND. Participants in this research spoke of good examples of this happening, noting ways of celebrating service children, facilitating whole-school continuing professional development (CPD; e.g., assemblies), and offering activities solely for service families. Often, establishing this understanding and knowledge is facilitated through involving the service family community, associated charities and organizations, and professionals from the military. Previous research has noted this can be more challenging in schools where there are low numbers of identified service children, but networking with schools with larger service children cohorts can be supportive (Rose & Rose, 2021). The Service Children's Progression Alliance has also produced a 'Thriving Lives' toolkit which suggests seven principles through which schools can reflect on their practice (Service Children's Progression Alliance, n.d.). Many of these align with the findings of this research, particularly that children's wellbeing is supported, strong home-school partnerships are created to support parental engagement, and staff are well-informed of how to support service children.

As was suggested by a participant within this research study, it would be helpful for local authorities to have a member of staff responsible for ensuring service children receive the support and resources they need. This aligns with the recent suggestion in the 'Service Pupils in Schools: Non-statutory guidance' (Ministry of Defence & Department for Education, 2025), which encourages local authorities to consider having a 'Service Pupil Champion'. Having somebody in this role who is in a position to influence local authority policy, strategy and practice, would be most helpful in supporting service children to achieve, by, for example, ensuring supporting services have a sufficient knowledge and understanding of service children in the local area.

3.5.2 Implications for Educational Psychology

Educational psychologists (EPs) are frequently sought by schools to develop a shared understanding of a child's needs or presentation, and to support the planning of actions to help. EP support can be used in this way to consider individual children through consultation, ensuring all interacting factors are being considered. By contributing psychological understanding, EPs can help build staff awareness of a child's presentation and needs in the context of their wider life, supporting schools to better understand a child's presentation. Similarly, EPs can support schools to consider evidence-based social, emotional mental health (SEMH) interventions and their implementation, to ensure they are meeting the needs of individual service children with SEND.

EPs could also work alongside school staff to provide support for families of service children with SEND. For example, through the provision of family support hubs, where sessions involve a mixture of information-giving, sharing with peers, and problem-solving particular difficulties. In this way, the EP can support both parents and staff's understanding of children's experiences, promote collaborative working, and offer support through sharing psychological understanding.

3.5.3 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

By exploring the experiences of service children with SEND, their families, and schools, this study offers a novel contribution to the field of service child research and, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, is the first within a UK context. While there is a growing body of research exploring the experiences of service children more generally, this study considered the intersection

between being part of a military family and having a special educational need or disability, recognizing the challenges these families face. By using a tri-perspective approach, the views of service children, their non-serving parents, and the school staff that support them were elicited, which facilitated consideration of the most effective and desirable support for these families.

However, due to the small sample size, only one young person and one parent (from separate families) participated, meaning most participants were supporting school staff. With this research exploring the impact of separation and deployment on service children with SEND throughout education, it was appropriate to include school staff's voices, particularly because many of them supported young children, who may not have been able to engage in a semi-structured interview themselves. In this way, these young people's experiences are captured second-hand through adults that work with them closely and know them well. However, it is important to consider why more young people and their families did not volunteer for this research. It may be that these families, as acknowledged throughout this research, are managing many other demands, and therefore they did not have the time or capacity to engage. It could also be that families did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences with an unknown researcher, particularly if they do not feel comfortable sharing their service status or deployment schedule with their child's schools, or sharing their child's SEND status with their military commanders for fear of it having an impact on their career.

In line with the recruitment challenges experienced, the researcher took a more active role in recruitment, by contacting schools directly with high numbers of service children on roll. As a result, many of the participants are connected to schools with higher numbers of service children. The experiences of those in schools with very few service children may be largely different and may not have been captured. This study also did not explore whether any personal characteristics impacted the experiences of service children with SEND during periods of separation and deployment. For example, whether the child's age or category of SEND had an impact. Some participants spontaneously referenced these factors as influential, and it would be useful for future research to consider how they affect young people's understanding and experiences.

Future research should consider alternative methods of collecting the voice of service children with SEND, that may be more appropriate to varying levels of need. For example, exploring visual methods of data collection or creative tools to elicit their views. This may make their involvement in research more accessible and helpful. Additionally, it may be helpful for future research to employ a longitudinal design to explore how children's experiences change throughout the different points of separation. As was noted in this research, various points of transition, for example, are challenging, and some children return to the norm quickly following the point of separation. Exploring these differences, in line with the emotional cycle of deployment (Vestal Logan, 1987), could provide more insight regarding the impact of separation on service children with SEND across time. Understanding these experiences in more detail would support schools to consider how to support effectively at all stages of the separation. Exploring whether the type of separation (e.g., deployment vs. training vs. weekending) would also be informative, as would exploring differences in experience across the three military branches.

3.5.4 Conclusion

This study illustrated that service families with children with SEND experience instances of separation and deployment in different ways, making it very difficult to anticipate the impact of separation. Although it was acknowledged that children typically return to their 'normal' with time as separation ensues, effects can be seen across most areas of their lives, including changes in behaviour, an increase in negative emotionality, reduced focus/concentration in school, slower academic progress, and an increase in social difficulties. Children therefore need direct support, through both individual intervention and peer support, to help them manage their experiences; beyond this, the wider family system, particularly the at-home parent needs additional support.

Key to effective support for the young person and their family is establishing open and proactive communication between home and school. Through ongoing conversations, schools can be more prepared to effectively meet the needs of the service children with SEND they support throughout the separation cycle. Equally, communication between parents and children about upcoming separations, particularly what these mean and look like, is important for children to make

sense of their experiences; this inevitably needs to be at a developmentally appropriate level for the child. Having a whole school awareness and approach to working with service children with SEND is also key to effectively supporting them. Staff need to have knowledge of who their service children are, what it means to be a service child, and how to appropriately support them. This type of approach is most effective when support and understanding is embedded across a whole school, rather than lying solely with a designated member of staff; by doing so, we can create a school system where everyone can find a place to belong.

Appendix A – Search Strategy

For PsychInfo, ERIC, Web of Science, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, the following search terms were included:

"military famil*" OR "military child*" OR "service famil*" OR "service child*" OR "armed forces famil*" OR "armed forces child*" OR "armed services famil*" OR "armed services child*" AND SEND OR "special educational need*" OR disability* OR disabled OR "educational needs" AND education OR school OR college OR nursery OR class*

For Scopus, the following search terms were included:

"military family" OR "military families" OR "military child" OR "military children" OR "service family" OR "service families" OR "service child" OR "service children" OR "armed forces family" OR "armed forces families" OR "armed forces child" OR "armed forces children" OR "armed services family" OR "armed services families" OR "armed services child" OR "armed services children" AND SEND OR "special educational need" OR "special educational needs" OR disability OR disabilities OR disabled OR "special education" OR "educational needs" AND education OR school OR college OR nursery OR class OR classroom

Appendix B – Interview Topic Guide

Table 6

Demographic Questions

Children	Non-serving Parent	School Staff Member
What if your age?	What is your child's age?	In what year groups are the children you support?
What is your school year?	What is your child's school year?	
What is your ethnicity?	What is your child's ethnicity?	
What is the sex you were assigned at birth?	What sex was your child assigned at birth?	
How would you describe your gender?	How would you describe your child's gender? How would you describe your gender?	How would you describe the gender of the children you support?
What pronouns would you like me to refer to you with?	What pronouns would you like me to refer to you and your child with?	What pronouns would you like me to refer to you with?
Do you have an identified special educational need or disability?	Does your child have an identified special educational need or disability?	Do the children you support have an identified special educational need or disability?
Is your parent currently serving in the military or a veteran?	Is the child's parent currently serving in the military or a veteran?	Are the parents of the children you support currently serving in the military or a veteran?
What branch of the military is your parent in?	What branch of the military is the child's parent in?	What branch of the military is the child's parent in?
What is/was your military parent's role and rank?	What is/was the role and rank of your child's military parent?	
		What is your job role?

Prompt Questions for Children

- Have you experienced separation because of your parent being in the military?
- How long and how often does your parent go away with the military?
- Do you know where your parent is when they are away (training or on deployment)?
- Do you know when your parent is planned to deploy and/or return?
- What do you do to help you manage when your parent is away?
- Can you tell me what it is like in the lead up to your parent going away?
- Can you tell me what it is like for you when your parent is away for training? Weekending? For deployment? Including main challenges.
- Can you tell me what it is like for you after your parent has returned home? What were the main challenges you faced during your parent's reintegration?

- How have your experiences of separation and deployment changed over time?
- How do you think these experiences impact you emotionally?
- How do you think these experiences impact you socially?
- How do you think these experiences impact your learning/education?
- During the lead up to, during, and after these separations:
    - How does your family support you?
    - How do your friends support you?
    - How does your school support you?
- What else could your school do to support you during these times?
- What is important for your school to know to be able to support you during these times?
- Is there anything else you want to me about your experiences of separation and deployment?

Prompt Questions for Non-Serving Parent

- Has your child experienced separation because of their parent being in the military?
- How long and how often does their parent go away with the military?
- Do they know where their parent is when they are away (training or on deployment)?
- Do they know when their parent is planned to deploy and/or return?
- What do they do to help themselves manage when their parent is away?
- Can you tell me what it is like/what happens in the lead up to their parent going away?
- Can you tell me what it is like for them when their parent is away for training? Weekending? For deployment? Including main challenges.
- Can you tell me what it is like for them after their parent has returned home? What were the main challenges they faced during their parent's reintegration?
- How has their experiences of separation and deployment changed over time?
- How do you think having a special educational need or disability impacts your child's experience of separation and deployment (if at all)?
- How do you think these experiences impact them emotionally?

- How do you think these experiences impact them socially?
- How do you think these experiences impact their learning/education?
- During the lead up to, during, and after these separations:
  - How does their family support them?
  - How do their friends support them?
  - How does their school support them?
- What else could their school do to support them during these times?
- What is important for their school to know to be able to support them during these times?
- Is there anything else you want to me about their experiences of separation and deployment?

Prompt Questions for School Staff

Thinking about the service children with SEND you support…

- Have the service children you support experienced separation because of their parent being in the military?
- Are you/school aware of when and for how long the parent(s) of the children you support are away with the military?
- What do the service children you support do to help themselves manage when their parent is away?
- Do you see any differences in the children you support in the lead up to their parent going away/while the parent is away?
- How do you think being having an identified special educational need or disability impacts a service child's experience of separation and deployment (if at all)?
- How do you think these experiences impact service children emotionally?
- How do you think these experiences impact service children socially?
- How do you think these experiences impact the learning/education of service children?
- How do the peers of service children support them?
- How do service children's school's support them?

- What else could schools do to support service children during these times?
- What is important for service children's school to know to be able to support them during times of separation and deployment?
- Is there anything else you want to me about service children's experiences of separation and deployment while in education?

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