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Thriving lives for military service children – improving progression to HE (0179)

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This paper reflects on the outcomes of a project funded by the Ministry of Defence in the United Kingdom to investigate the progression to higher education of children of military service personnel (Authors, 2016) (hereafter "service children"). It presents the consequences for educators in engaging with the complex and distinctive realities and identities of service children, challenging stereotypes about both service children and disadvantage. Their identifying characteristics of pride, control and determination mask the impact of the loss of agency imposed by the service child's life. However, the emotional and intellectual effort of coping takes its toll and some structural constraints service children cannot overcome, address or militate against; lack of agency impacts and university becomes less attainable or desirable.

The research is a systematic and critical engagement with the multifarious factors that characterise the lives of service children. Consequently, the research approach drew on data from a wide range of sources including: existing research; quantitative data; literature; and empirical data (through interviews and questionnaires) collected from school-age and undergraduate service children. Analysis used a thematic approach: data-driven analysis for findings then cross-referencing to concept-driven analysis for the discussion (Gibbs, 2007). Consequently the data was not used to test a theory or hypothesis ("deductively") but to allow it to stand on its own merits ("inductively") (Seidman, 2006:100). As a result it was possible to discern, whether stated specifically, overtly, implicitly or subconsciously, what is important or significant to the respondents, including illuminating critical incidents.

Service children seldom fall into the typical categories for deprivation, and they are not generally regarded as educationally disadvantaged or underachieving (HoCDC, 2013). They can demonstrate identities that exhibit great qualities of personality, resilience in the face of adversity, maturity in the face of change. Academically, they are held to perform at least as well as their non-military peers (DfE, 2014) although this does not take account of variables due to service or rank: examination of PISA data (OECD, 2015) shows notable discrepancies between children of officers and those from other ranks, hence achievement showing a reasonable reflection of general society. It would therefore be reasonable to expect progression to HE to show similar parallels. However, service children appear to be under-represented in the United Kingdom higher education population. This apparent gap in progression is therefore not readily explained by conventional discourses of deprivation and low attainment.

A number of themes highlight what impacts on the education of service children, including the weakening or denial of agency. Family mobility and parent(s) on combat deployment brings a higher risk of emotional, behavioural and attainment problems (NCSL, 2011). Indeed, our research found that service children themselves regarded deployment as a far greater challenge than mobility. Service children have a higher rate of caring responsibilities (DoH, 2015) than non-service peers. However, this is not always acknowledged by schools or even disclosed by service children.

Differences in practices between schools may also be significant. Some schools are experienced and effective in responding to the needs of service children. However, in other

schools service children may choose not to self-identify as such in order to maintain greater control. Few service children expect their schools to help with educational support or decisions, relating strongly to the family habitus and hence ingraining their cultural capital. As Bandura *et al*. (2001) note, agency governs ambitions, purpose and supports resilience to daunting obstacles, thus creating momentum. As children from military families mature, their awareness increases in a way that is related strongly to family habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), thus ingraining their cultural capital. We therefore argue that a lack of progression to HE by service children is symptomatic of a loss of agency.

As a result of our research, the Office for Students has identified service children as a priority group for increasing access to higher education in their guidance to higher education providers in England. It has also led to the establishment of networks in Yorkshire and Scotland to bring together stakeholders and practitioners to identify and address practical barriers to facilitating the progression of service children to thriving, agentive lives.

Such has been the momentum generated by our research that the XXXX (anon) has been established. This has brought together stakeholders including the MoD, DfE, DoH, UCAS, OFFA and the OfS. It has led to the direct engagement with the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as other interest groups and universities. Some example of resultant practical changes is in UCAS access agreement guidance, an OfS position paper and citations underpinning the Armed forces Covenant annual reviews for the last two years.

The research group within XXXX now comprises members from multidisciplinary backgrounds from within and outside the University of Winchester and the outcomes of the findings of the research group directly informs both the activities of the practice group with development and dissemination of resources and the action of policy makers at local, devolved and national level in order to: Understand the experiences and outcomes of service children fully and the reasons for them; identify the most effective approaches to improve outcomes; and translate this knowledge into sustainable activity everywhere where it is needed.

Three priority dimensions are active in mediating outcomes for service children: the service children themselves in the context of their family (individual); the teachers and other practitioners who support them (professionals); and the policy contexts within which they develop and progress (system). The three priority dimensions are argued to inter-relate. Therefore, while individual research activities might address these dimensions as discrete entities, the overall narrative seeks to recognise the interaction between these dimensions of young people's lives. Our work therefore holds the potential to challenge traditional perceptions of barriers to progression through education. It also has the potential to identify practical opportunities for the higher education sector and other stakeholders to ensure that service children "are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education" (Office for Students, 2018, p.14) through the realisation of their agentive potential.

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