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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Voices from Military Families: Young People's Reflections on Educational Experiences and Othering in British Schools

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the educational experiences of military children through the lens of Othering and exclusion, foregrounding young people's reflections alongside perspectives from educators and third-sector professionals. While inclusive education has gained policy traction, the distinct needs of military children remain underexplored in academic discourse. Their high mobility, exposure to deployment-related stress, and cultural distinctiveness often position them as outsiders within school communities. Drawing on in-depth interviews that centre on the lived experiences and voices of military young people, supplemented by insights from educators and support professionals, this study explores how everyday exclusion and systemic Othering manifest in classroom interactions, peer relationships, and institutional practices. Young people's reflections reveal frequent experiences of social and academic marginalisation, contributing to feelings of invisibility and disconnection from school environments. By privileging the narratives and understanding of military children, this research challenges prevailing assumptions about inclusion in schools. The analysis demonstrates how exclusion operates subtly within seemingly inclusive spaces, often overlooking the complex realities these young people navigate daily. The paper argues for targeted educational strategies that move beyond generic inclusion frameworks, advocating for approaches informed by the insights of military children to ensure their meaningful participation and a genuine sense of belonging in educational contexts.

Keywords Military children · Othering · Schools · Belonging · Education

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Introduction

This article builds upon the foundational work of researchers investigating the experiences of military children within schools in Britain and across the world (see, for example, Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010); Ruff & Keim 2014; Jagger & Lederer 2014; Directorate of Children and Young People 2018). A military child is technically defined as someone whose parent or carer serves in the regular armed forces, either full-time or as a reservist, or has served in these roles at any point during the first 25 years of the child's life (Skomorovsky & Bullock 2017; Cramm et al. 2019). Since introducing the Service Pupils' Premium (SPP) in England in April 2011, the Department for Education (DfE) has disclosed the identities of schools that heavily rely on the SPP. This policy decision aimed to enhance the educational experiences of children from military families; however, research has shown that this group continues to face considerable challenges within school settings, most notably in how their mobile lifestyles impact their sense of belonging (McCullouch et al., 2018). In this context, it is important to realise that Armed Forces personnel typically relocate between assignments every 2–3 years for career development and to meet Ministry of Defence (MOD) requirements (Ritchie et al. 2019). Nevertheless, these relocations can be more frequent and with less notice if seen as necessary by the military. The MOD offers an accompanying service for married personnel, enabling spouses and children to accompany the service member (Directorate of Children and Young People 2018). Research indicates that mobility patterns differ across various branches of the military. Army families generally move more frequently, changing homes and schools regularly, while Naval Service families tend to relocate less often and are usually geographically distributed around base ports. Naval Service personnel are more likely to commute to their jobs weekly when not deployed, and RAF mobility patterns vary depending on their roles (Children's Commissioner, 2018).

It has been communicated that military children face considerable challenges when navigating school environments (Foran et al. 2017). McCullouch and Hall (2016) explains how such experiences present both benefits and challenges, with varying proportions for each child. Some positives include increased resilience from adapting to new environments, the ability to socialise and make new friends quickly, and the development of cultural capital through travel and exposure to different languages and cultures (Noret et al. 2014; Swain & Ritchie 2024). However, existing research also highlights substantial challenges whereby military children experience a sense of loss with each move, leading to, in certain instances, extroverted or, more often, introverted behaviour, isolating them from other pupils. Additionally, the inherent dangers of their parent's military roles, especially when on active duty, can further heighten feelings of anxiety and insecurity, in addition to being exposed in certain circumstances to the traumas experienced by their parents (Department of Health 2015). Consequently, many military children report feeling isolated and excluded within educational settings, frequently leading to experiences of bullying and social isolation (Ruff & Keim 2014). This point is further connected to the growing literature on youth and

loneliness (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020), youth and social exclusion in coastal communities (Swain & Sloanes 2025; Wenham 2020), and the experiences of youth during the COVID-19 pandemic (Woodrow & Moore 2021). Authors advocating for inclusive education emphasise the importance of embracing diversity in the classroom. However, current research highlights a critical gap: while the unique challenges faced by children from military families are acknowledged, the specific ways in which their everyday experiences of exclusion impact their sense of belonging remain unexplored.

This study interrogates the persistent marginalisation and experiences of Otherness reported by young people with experiences of being military children within school communities in Northern England and stakeholders involved in their education. Understanding these experiences is essential—not merely for shaping policy but for cultivating genuinely inclusive educational environments. We examine how military children are systematically Othered, identifying the structural and cultural barriers that have hindered their inclusion and recognition. As such, we aim to inform practice that actively challenges rather than passively observes these exclusions, ensuring that military children are valued, supported, and able to thrive. Slee (2013) asserts that defining inclusive education involves grappling with the processes through which exclusion operates. Schools function as complex sites where "exclusion proceeds through deep structural and broad cultural mechanisms to invigilate a shifting spectrum of diversity" (Slee & Allan 2001, p.178). We draw on Baak's (2016; 2019) provocation to dismantle such mechanisms: "Who is in and who is out? How come? And what are we going to do about it?" These questions expose the urgent need to confront unequal power dynamics that shape educational experiences. The following sections articulate a theoretical lens for understanding Othering, review policy debates surrounding military children, and detail our interview-based research with military children and key stakeholders.

The Other and Othering

Othering offers a critical lens through which to examine the construction and maintenance of identity, particularly in educational contexts. It has been instrumental in highlighting the marginalisation of LGBTQ + students (Ferfolja & Ullman 2021) and young people from migrant backgrounds. Within this framework, Othering illuminates the cultural and political dynamics that shape inclusion and exclusion, marking boundaries of belonging. This makes it especially relevant for research into military-connected children, whose transient lives often disrupt conventional narratives of stability and identity (Swain & Ritchie 2024). Educational institutions—such as schools, colleges, and universities—serve as pivotal sites where identities are contested and affirmed (Sterzuk 2015). Socio-ecological theories further underscore how identities are shaped through interactions within communities and institutional structures (Jones et al. 2020). Power relations are central here: those in authority—educators, leaders, and policymakers—actively construct and mediate public perceptions of social groups (Fylkesnes 2018). These

representations do not merely reflect social realities; they shape them, embedding dominant narratives within the collective psyche (Thomas-Olalde & Velho 2011; Crozier et al. 2016). Thus, understanding Othering is not just an academic exercise—it is essential to unpack how social hierarchies are reproduced and how identity is negotiated within everyday education practices.

Psychology has traditionally positioned identity as something inherent, suggesting that individuals are born with fixed traits that define who they are. However, scholars working within the cognate fields of sociology and philosophy challenge this notion by arguing that identity is not solely a matter of individual characteristics or personalities but is intricately linked to social identities and categories (Piekut 2020). Social identities can encompass cultural, ethnic, gender, and class-based characteristics, reflecting how individuals internalise established societal categories. These categories significantly shape our perceptions of ourselves, how we wish to be perceived by others, and the social groups to which we belong (Yan & Slattery 2021). George Herbert Mead (1934) provides a compelling framework for understanding how identities are constructed through social interaction. He posits that identities are not static but are continuously shaped through interactions with others and subsequent self-reflection. People constantly negotiate their sense of self-image and adjust their behaviour based on these interactions, highlighting the dynamism of identity formation. By understanding this process, we can see how identities are produced through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation, emphasising the fluidity of identity within different social environments. The distinction between others and the other can be better understood by recognising the importance of power differentials and unequal relationships.

Othering is a powerful mechanism for constructing certain groups—such as military-connected children—as fundamentally different, often inferior or peripheral to a perceived norm (Virkama 2010). Powell and Menendian (2016) conceptualise Othering as a framework that exposes the structural conditions underpinning inequality and marginalisation. Far from being neutral, this process reinforces social hierarchies through dehumanising and exaggerating perceived differences. In educational settings, Othering is both pervasive and impactful, shaping how students experience school and how they come to understand their own identities. Schools are key sites where power relations and social categories are enacted and internalised (Mansouri et al. 2009; Baak 2019). Extensive research highlights how Othering intersects with racism and gender discrimination in schools. Studies by Edgeworth (2015), Edgeworth and Santoro (2015), and Walton et al. (2016) reveal how systemic racism undermines migrant students' sense of belonging within both school and broader society. These dynamics are perpetuated by overt incidents, institutional passivity, and exclusionary practices (Wright 2010). Uptin et al. (2013) found that racialised students face layered forms of marginalisation, while Couch et al. (2021) document how young people resist such Othering through activism and critical dialogue in youth settings.

The experiences of transgender and gender-creative young people offer a powerful lens into how gender normativity fuels Othering within educational contexts. Blair and Deckman (2019) illustrate how deviation from traditional gender expectations often results in marginalisation, as these students are positioned as

'non-normative' within rigid school cultures. Teachers' limited understanding of gender diversity can further entrench this marginalisation, impeding empathetic engagement and undermining efforts to build equitable classroom relationships (Ferfolja & Ullman 2021). Francis and Monakali (2021) reveal how bullying—rooted in heteronormative assumptions—intensifies feelings of exclusion, reinforcing Othering at both peer and institutional levels. These dynamics are not isolated but indicative of broader structural issues that demand critical examination. Understanding the processes and impacts of Othering is essential for developing educational practices that move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward genuine equity (Wright 2010). From this perspective, schools must be seen not only as sites of learning but as arenas where social identities are shaped and contested. For military-connected children and others similarly marginalised, recognising and addressing Othering is vital to fostering environments where diversity is affirmed and belonging actively cultivated (Sterzuk 2015).

Military Children, Schools, and Education

The educational experiences of military children present a multifaceted and challenging landscape around which the notion of Othering in education can be better understood, as seen in existing research documenting their educational experiences. On the one hand, the Department for Education (DfE 2013) highlights several benefits of being a military child, including enhanced resilience, increased sociability from repeatedly forming new friendships, and broadening experiences through geographic mobility, which sets them apart from their non-mobile peers. These advantages suggest that children from military families develop unique strengths and adaptability. However, this mobility also introduces significant challenges. Both the DfE (2013) and the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (2011), as well as research undertaken by Cramm et al. (2022) in Canada, acknowledge that frequent relocations can severely disrupt a military child's education. Academically and pastorally, moving between schools often has negative consequences due to an inconsistent continuity of educational provision. This disruption is exacerbated by delays, inadequate communication, and poorly managed transitional arrangements, which are especially detrimental to service children with additional learning needs or those preparing for exams amidst curriculum changes (Cramm et al. 2019). Moreover, the emotional impact of frequent school changes should not be overlooked. Concerns about well-being arise from the constant need to adapt to new environments, which can strain friendships, heighten the risk of bullying, and contribute to overall emotional stress. These factors collectively paint a complex picture of the educational journey of military children, where significant educational and emotional challenges often counterbalance the benefits of mobility; see Noret et al. (2014) for insights into contexts in the UK and Rogers et al. (2023) for an Australian context.

UK policy discussions do not categorise military children as educationally disadvantaged or underachieving [House of Commons Defence Committee (HoCDC) (2013)]. The HoCDC acknowledges concerns about mobile military children,

prompting initiatives to enhance school pastoral care. One such initiative is the implementation of the Service Pupil Premium (SPP) in England (DfE 2014), which provides additional funding to schools with significant populations of military children. This support aims to mitigate some of the unique challenges these students face. However, despite these measures, children from military families continue to encounter difficulties in educational settings due to the strain of family separation, a point documented in Australia by Rogers et al. (2024), who explain how separation is an inherent aspect of military life, often leading to challenging experiences for service children, especially during a parent's combat deployment. In the U.K., both the DfE (2013) and the HoCDC (2013) have noted, albeit briefly, that deployment negatively impacts military children academically and pastorally. This disruption is further associated with a higher incidence of mental health issues among service children and their parents. In this context, research from Canada (Cramm & Tam-Seto 2018) found that children with a parent on combat deployment struggle more than those with a non-deployed parent, with increased emotional and behavioural problems being common. Similarly, White et al. (2011) identified that children of parents deployed to combat operations face a greater risk of psychosocial difficulties compared to their civilian peers. The complex emotions of anticipation, fear, anxiety, and intensity surrounding a parent's homecoming all play a significant role in shaping the mental health of these children.

The Department of Health[1](DoH 2015) highlights that children from military families are more likely to have caring responsibilities than their peers in the general population. It is documented how young carers within military families may be tasked with looking after parents who suffer from injuries or posttraumatic stress disorder or care for a parent with health issues while the other parent is deployed. In cases where both parents are deployed, the child might be placed in the care of grandparents or even foster care (Longfield 2018). Despite these challenges, data from the Department for Education (DfE 2014) indicates that GCSE attainment among less mobile military children is comparable to that of the civilian population. However, academic performance tends to decline sharply with an increase in the number of relocations. Paying close attention to the affective development of these children can help educators develop strategies to support their learning and emotional well-being (NCSL 2011). Recognising the unique educational needs of military children, the Ministry of Defence's Directorate of Children and Young People (DCYP), in collaboration with the Department for Education (DfE), issued guidance to head teachers in England in July 2015. This advice emphasised the importance of sensitivity regarding term-time absences for military children due to parental deployment. This acknowledgement underscores the need for a more tailored approach to supporting the educational journeys of service children, ensuring their unique circumstances are considered.

[1] Ministry of the U.K. Government.

Research Context

This study was conducted in the North of England, adjacent to one of the U.K.'s largest military garrisons. Data collection employed a multi-method qualitative approach, including 20 semi-structured interviews (Edwards & Holland 2013), three focus groups comprising three to five participants each (Sim & Waterfield 2019), and supplementary interviews during participant observation. Thirty-five individuals participated, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders who educate military-connected children. Participants included young people from military families ($n=20$); aged 16 or recently out of compulsory education, alongside their family members ($n=5$); and professionals such as teachers ($n=5$), senior leaders ($n=2$), pastoral staff ($n=2$), and a policy advisor ($n=1$). Interview topics ranged from school experiences and transitions to emotional well-being and future aspirations. Interviews were conducted in diverse settings—homes, schools, and via Microsoft Teams—and lasted between 40 min and 2 h. Most were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; a few were transcribed from detailed field notes. Data was analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by NVivo-12 (Jackson & Bazeley 2019; Swain, et al., 2025). This iterative process generated 15 initial codes, which were distilled into three overarching themes discussed in the findings, capturing the complexities of educational support for military-connected youth.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to facilitate a dialogic and participatory data collection process that foregrounded the voices of stakeholders, particularly military-connected young people, as they reflected on their experiences of school (Brown & Danaher 2019; Chapman et al. 2024). This approach yielded nuanced, in-depth accounts of their lived experiences while maintaining a flexible yet focused structure that enabled the exploration of core themes without deviating from the research aims (Watson et al. 2018). The method facilitated a democratic exchange, empowering participants to discuss sensitive and often complex issues, such as school transitions, parental deployment, and emotional well-being (Oplatka 2018). Ethical considerations were central to the research design. In alignment with trauma-informed principles and reflecting the guidance of Rogers et al. (2024), interview protocols were sensitively adapted to minimise potential distress. The research assistant was attuned to verbal and non-verbal indicators of discomfort, with lines of questioning modified or withdrawn accordingly. This approach mitigated re-traumatisation risks and addressed concerns around coercion and participant vulnerability (Comer 2009). The study adhered strictly to institutional ethics protocols, including informed consent procedures involving young people, parents, and school leaders. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout, with all identifying details—of individuals and the participating schools—fully anonymised to safeguard privacy (Bryman 2012).

Research Findings

Service Children's Experiences of Othering—The School Environment

According to existing literature, research undertaken in Australia has found that military children live lives characterised by constant change, instability, and a unique set of

pressures that differentiate them from their civilian peers (Rogers et al. 2024). These frequent relocations, parental deployments, and the transient nature of their friendships are evident in the research, creating a school experience marked by a persistent sense of being Othered. For the young people who took part in the study, the school environment was communicated as challenging, where many reflected on their struggles to fit in, find stability, and confide in others about the anxieties they faced regarding their parent's deployments. One of the most significant challenges that the young people who took part in this research spoke about was the need to adapt to new school environments repeatedly, something that distinguished them from research undertaken on the effects of Othering on other social groups such as refugee children and LGBTQ children (Blair & Deckman 2019) who often went through this process if they were forced to change school, rather than this being a habitual process. This emphasis on mobility and the consistent changing of schools is evident in the interview extracts below.

> I went to eleven different primary schools [Samantha, aged 16]

> I've been to eight different schools [Eric, aged 16]

> urm I think it has and it hasn't because by moving around a lot we understand different cultures and ethnic backgrounds so I think we are a lot more accepting of that urm all the time when you start a new school it is scary and I think that's probably scary for everyone but also I think sometimes you have in the back of your mind I don't want to make really good friendships because I know I'll be moving soon [Emma, Aged 21].

In this context, it is crucial to be aware that military families are usually required to move every few years, and with each move, military children must start over in a new school with new teachers, new classmates, and entirely different social dynamics (Cramm et al. 2019). This frequent uprooting disrupts their educational continuity, making it challenging to build on prior knowledge or develop long-term academic relationships with teachers who understand their learning styles and needs.

The experience of moving schools heightened feelings of alienation and a sense of being Othered. While other students were seen to enjoy the stability of staying in one place, forming deep friendships, and participating in long-term extracurricular activities, young people from military backgrounds reflected how they were positioned as being the 'new kid'—a label that was seen to be both isolating and stigmatising, as we will discuss further in the section below on peer Othering. What is interesting here is how the school environment influenced and magnified this sense of Othering. This was something that the research found to be exacerbated by attending numerous schools across different regions or even countries, each with its own specific curriculum, culture, and expectations.

> "Schools teach you in different ways like back in Scotland the schools teach a lot different to how it is here" [Carter, aged 16]

> "So, if you have to move around, coursework might get mixed up, and this causes more problems because you have to redo it, and that makes you fall behind the new class" [Peter, aged 16]

The pressure to quickly adapt and conform to new environments was something that the research found overwhelmed many of the participants, leading to a persistent sense of not fully belonging anywhere.

To fully grasp how these young people felt Othered within educational environments, the study got them to reflect on various aspects of school life, particularly their relationships with teachers and peers, which was crucial for the research to develop a holistic understanding of the barriers they faced. The reason for this was that these relationships were seen to play a significant role in shaping the experiences and identities of military children. In this context, existing research on Othering in school contexts (Walton et al. 2016) highlights how interactions with teachers are central in influencing how students are both perceived and treated, potentially leading to feelings of exclusion if educators lack an understanding of the unique challenges service families face, such as frequent relocations and parental deployments. Similarly, peer relationships are vital in determining whether military children feel integrated or marginalised within school settings. A lack of shared experiences with non-service peers can result in social isolation, reinforcing their Otherness and increasing the risk of being bullied.

Experiences of Othering from Teachers

Several researchers have identified the profound and morbid effects of Othering on students who experience it (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010), whether in the form of deliberate acts of exclusion by the teacher or a result of implicit biases. Mendoza-Denton and Perez (2016, p. 42) have argued that implicit bias is "the automatic yet measurable associations that people have about others and the behaviours that these associations unconsciously influence". Whether through implicit bias or intentional exclusion, young people reflected on numerous ways in which they felt Othered within classroom environments by their teachers. The first relates to a lack of connection with teachers due to the consistent movement between different schools. Emma [aged 21], for instance, spoke about her experiences of feeling marginalised in teacher interactions due to the stigma she felt was associated with military children's academic performance:

> Conversations with teachers never really came up because they never thought I would amount to that anyway… so they sort of put me on the backbench and talked to the students they knew who had a higher probability of doing well at high school… The teachers didn't really understand the needs of a military child, possibly because sometimes they do miss out on education… because of moving around so they might be further behind in their studies. I felt that many teachers just saw me as a problem because I wasn't a high achiever.

A similar point was also brought up by Samantha [aged 22], who spoke about her feelings of being Othered because of her poor academic attainment:

> In primary school… I think I sometimes used to have extra reading, and I was always in the bottom sets for English and Maths as I got older… at secondary all from like year seven all the way through possibly… I didn't get offered any support from teachers.

Ric [aged 16] spoke about how he internalised his lack of relationship with his teachers by focusing on hobbies away from school as a coping mechanism:

> My ability to fit in hasn't been aided at all by teachers, I don't feel that I ever really get the chance to develop a relationship with them because of the amount of times I have moved schools…I think my hobbies take charge of me instead of where I've been moving around and stuff in the military so things like football and history, I make friends through the types of things instead of having to fit into social groups during a private area or something like that.

It was subsequently found that the young people experienced being Othered in school environments due to the lack of personal rapport with their teachers, which played a significant role in their feelings of isolation. Here, frequent relocations, a common aspect of military life (Ruff & Keim 2014), were reflected upon as being central in preventing service children from establishing long-term relationships with educators.

Similarly, teachers spoke about how they found it difficult to understand military children's unique challenges due to the emotional strain of parental deployments and the stress of adjusting to new school environments.

> Working with service children because they are consistently moving makes it difficult to build relationships with them emotionally because it is rare that you will be working with them for a prolonged period. (Anna, primary teacher)

> As a school, there are lots of things that we have to be aware of when dealing with service children. The data shows that military service children have statistically significant differences from non-military service children – and for the most part, these are negative differences. For example, Military Service Children are more likely to be young carers, to worry about their parents when they are away, and are more likely to have been bullied. Military Service Children will also suffer more gaps in their education because they move schools a lot. This makes it hard for teachers to deal with and adds to the difficulties in building sustained relationships. (John, Headteacher)

The absence of strong and supportive connections with teachers caused these young people to feel overlooked or misunderstood, thereby exacerbating their sense of being 'Othered' within the school community. This lack of rapport hindered their academic progress and deepened their social isolation, as many reported struggling

to form meaningful connections with educators and pastoral support, further entrenching their feelings of isolation at school. Interestingly, this point was also highlighted by those working in the policy arena, who explained how such environments harmed the well-being of military children.

> I feel that pastoral care is essential if schools want to support service children both physically and emotionally. This is because it encourages a school cohort to feel safe and happy and have the strategies and confidence to fulfil their potential. A strong pastoral network is vital – especially if a school facilitates a high proportion of students from service backgrounds. Quite often, a child's presentation and behaviour in school will reflect any difficulties they are experiencing at home; teachers and people working in pastoral support must be taught about how to spot this within service children. Better relationships are therefore needed to reduce the barriers that service children face in the education system. (Policy Advisor, Defence Children and Young People Board)

The research revealed that military children experienced systematic Othering by educators, which profoundly impacted their educational trajectories and emotional well-being. Young participants reflected on how teacher stereotypes diminished their perceived academic potential. Their testimonies highlighted how constant relocations disrupted not only learning continuity but also their sense of belonging, with many expressing exhaustion from repeatedly having to "start over" and prove themselves academically and socially. Participants particularly emphasised the emotional toll of educators' failure to understand their unique circumstances—the anxiety of parental deployment, the stress of frequent transitions, and the challenge of maintaining identity across multiple school contexts. These cumulative experiences fostered profound isolation, with young people describing feeling "invisible" and "misunderstood." Their reflections underscore the urgent need for educator training and targeted pastoral support systems that recognise the distinct needs and resilience of military children.

Peer Othering—Service Children's Relationship with Other Schoolchildren

The young people who participated in this study reflected on their experiences of being "Othered" by their peers in school settings, which significantly impacted their social integration, academic success, and overall well-being. This sense of Othering was understood to manifest itself in several diverse ways; however, it was primarily through being perceived as new and unfamiliar in the school community they were entering and through assumptions made about their academic abilities due to being streamed into lower sets. One of the most evident ways in which military children communicated about being Othered was through their perpetual status as "the new kid" in school. Here, various participants reflected on how moving to a new school made them feel isolated, resulting in a sense of loneliness.

> Knowing people from your old school and then going to a new one where you know nobody is tough. It is awkward because people are already in their little social groups, and you know nobody [Owen, aged 16].

> I was posted on the last day of year six. So, I had to move up north and start secondary school without knowing anyone [Peter, aged 16]

Unlike their peers, who may have attended the same school throughout most of their educational careers, the young people interviewed often found themselves moving from one academic institution to another, sometimes multiple times a year, due to their parents' deployments.

Each new school presented a daunting social environment where established friendships and social circles had already been formed before their arrival. This constant movement was communicated to the research, placing military children in a perpetual state of adjustment and integration, often making them feel like outsiders. The label of being the "new kid" or the "service child" was seen to carry a stigma, one that provoked a sense of curiosity, suspicion, and even exclusion from established peer groups, who viewed the new arrival as temporary or unworthy of the effort required to form lasting relationships.

> The moment you go to a different school, and you're labelled as a service child it is almost like separating you like you don't belong there or something. It is strange and hard at the same time [Peter, aged 16].

These experiences align with Foucault's (1982, pp. 777–778) notion that through such dividing practices, the subject is 'objecti[fied]' as Other, and as a result, they are 'divided from others'. Such experiences were identified by the research as isolating the young people who took part, making them feel like they were always on the periphery of school life and never fully accepted as part of their peers.

However, the research also found that the experiences of Othering faced by this group extended beyond social interactions and permeated into academic settings, where assumptions about perceived academic ability came to the fore. Here, the young people reflected on how they felt judged based on preconceived notions about their academic performance and that, in their opinion, this led to other students harbouring stereotypes about them regarding their academic credentials. These assumptions were found to lead to lowered expectations regarding educational attainment and perceived intellectual ability. The following interview extracts highlight this aspect of the research findings.

> I think it is hard to change schools all the time because you often find yourself in the lower classes. So, everyone thinks that you aren't that smart without ever realising that it is because you have learnt something differently in another school. [Dave, aged 18]

> Others often teased me for being in the bottom sets when I moved schools. It is like nobody wants to know you when you are in the bottom sets, and it affected my confidence even later in life. [Samantha, aged 22]

So if you have to move around, coursework might get mixed up, and this causes more problems for you because you end up falling behind and people in your class think that it is your fault, so you get teased about being behind when really it's not your fault. [Peter, aged 16]

This form of Othering based on perceived intellectual ability was seen to impact the young people's self-esteem and motivation, leading to a sense of alienation and frustration. Interestingly, many participants reported feeling disconnected from the school community and disengaged from their education, perceiving school environments as temporary rather than a place where they could settle and feel a sense of belonging. The impacts of this can be seen in the propensity for these students to leave education after the age of 18 and without pursuing higher education, something that has been documented in the work of McCullouch and Hall (2016) and Swain and Ritchie (2024), who explain how children from military families are far less likely to attend university than their non-military peers, despite holding the grades necessary to do so. Consequently, peer Othering based on perceived intellectual ability plays a significant role in the educational experiences of military children, highlighting the importance of challenging this form of behaviour to increase inclusivity within school settings.

This research fundamentally transforms our understanding of military children's educational experiences by positioning their voices as central to challenging deficit narratives and institutional assumptions about inclusion. Young people's reflections—spanning both current students and those reflecting on past experiences—reveal how schools systematically Other military-connected children through overlapping social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms. Their testimonies illuminate how repeated transitions create not merely logistical challenges but profound identity destabilisation, with participants describing feeling "perpetually displaced" and "never quite belonging anywhere." These first-hand accounts expose the inadequacy of viewing military children through resilience frameworks alone, instead highlighting how mobility, parental deployment, and persistent "newcomer" status generate chronic disconnection and institutional invisibility. Young people's narratives reveal how teacher misconceptions—ranging from assumptions about academic deficits to misunderstanding deployment-related stress—compound peer exclusion and cultural marginalisation. Their experiences demonstrate how structural barriers intersect with cultural biases, creating a compounding disadvantage that positions military children within broader discourses of educational inequality alongside refugee and LGBTQ + students. While acknowledging policies like the Service Pupil Premium (SPP), young people's reflections reveal how such measures inadequately address deeper, systemic processes of Othering. Their insights underscore the pressing need for practical anti-Othering tools, similar to the storybook approach employed by Rogers et al. (2024) in Australia. Future research should pursue comparative intersectional approaches that examine how military status intersects with race, class, and gender, alongside the development of comprehensive teacher training, institutional change initiatives, and mental health support systems, all of which are essential for fostering genuinely inclusive educational environments.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, we argued for leveraging recent understandings of inclusive education to advocate for the inclusion of military children. Central to this effort is identifying, analysing, and dismantling exclusion (Slee 2013) through examining the experiences of Othering. Young people's reflections on their marginalisation within school settings contribute significantly to broader discussions in youth studies about identity formation, belonging, and institutional power dynamics. Their narratives reveal how educational institutions function as key sites where social hierarchies are both reproduced and potentially disrupted, aligning with youth studies' emphasis on understanding how young people negotiate complex identity positions within institutional contexts. As Slee and Allan (2001, p. 175) remind us, inclusion remains "a continuing struggle of the politics of identity and difference." The experiences of Othering documented here illuminate how schools operate as microcosms where broader societal exclusions are enacted; yet, they also demonstrate young people's agency in articulating resistance to these processes. These findings align with youth studies scholarship that examines how institutional settings shape young people's sense of self and social positioning, particularly for those holding intersectional identities that challenge normative assumptions. The narratives presented underscore the recognition in youth studies that young people are not passive recipients of institutional practices but rather active meaning-makers who critically evaluate their experiences. As Powell and Menendian (2016, p. 77) note, "the only viable solution to the problem of Othering is one involving inclusion and belongingness." This aligns with youth studies' emphasis on participatory approaches that centre on young people's voices in understanding and transforming the institutions that shape their lives. This study contributes to international research on military children (Rogers et al. 2024), while demonstrating how their experiences illuminate broader questions about youth agency, institutional belonging, and the role of educational settings in either perpetuating or challenging social inequalities—core concerns within contemporary youth studies scholarship.

Author Contributions The article is the result of a close collaboration between the two authors, who have contributed equally to the article's conceptualisation and the analysis and writing phases. Dr. Spencer Swain has submitted the article and is therefore listed as the first author.

Data Availability Unfortunately, it is not possible to make the dataset on which the article's conclusions are based available to readers. According to the agreements with the informants and the signed consent forms, the data is stored on a closed drive on the university server. It is not possible to change these agreements retrospectively.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Ethical approval for this research was granted by the ethics committee at York St John University, which has reviewed and endorsed the ethical framework of this study to ensure compliance with our institutional standards. Informed consent was provided by all participants who contributed to the research project.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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