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RESEARCH REPORT

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OfS Uni Connect Programme

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SERVICE CHILDREN'S THOUGHTS ON APPLYING FOR UNIVERSITY:

A qualitative study exploring why young people from military families in North Yorkshire are under-represented in higher education institutions.

Executive Summary

Aims of the Study

This report aims to detail the reasons for the under-representation of service children (a child with one or two parents within the British Armed Forces) within higher education institutions in the United Kingdom; a problem that has generated traction within contemporary research in education studies, but which struggles to enter mainstream educational discourse and the broader policy arena. The consequences of which leave the educational experiences of service children living in the United Kingdom poorly understood, their lack of engagement with higher education rising, and their voices concealed from those in broader society. It is therefore hoped that the findings disseminated in this report can help to put the topic of service children's education firmly on the agenda of policymakers, teaching unions and the leadership of the British Military. At its core, this investigation focused on service children living and studying in North Yorkshire. All the students who took part in this study were aged 16 years old and currently completing their education within the secondary school system. The two central areas of investigation for this research focused on the following issues: 1) mobility and educational experiences, and 2) the health and wellbeing of service children in education. The details of these research areas are unpacked below:

Mobility and the Education Setting

This part of the investigation sought to understand better how service children's education is negatively affected through a primarily transitory childhood, which makes them open to stigmatisation through a lack of geographical stability. The consequences of which can cause service children to be perceived as 'othered' or stigmatised as strangers within the education system. Of interest here is the need to understand the effects of such forced mobility on children's progression and perceptions within the education system. Namely, in investigating how the impact of living such mobile and transient lives, brought on by following armed forces family members from place to place, has led to a situation where many participants find they are overlooked by school institutions in regards to information and encouragement in pursuing higher education.

Additionally, and closely related to the idea of mobility and transience, this report looks at the cultural values forged within military service families. This angle of the research sought to investigate the impacts of living within the cultural sphere of a military family and how this could impact on an individual's choice to pursue higher education. Here, the military emphasis on vocational and technical skills was explored to show how this mentality was positioned as an antagonist to the more academic virtues perceived to be offered by higher education institutions. Subsequently, it was important for the researcher to examine how the academic image of universities contrasted with the technical/vocational mindset espoused by family members serving in the military. In essence, creating a situation where military values could potentially drive service children away from applying to university and instead follow their parents in undertaking a military career.

Health and Wellbeing of Service Children

The issue of health and wellbeing is also a central part of the research focus. Through this avenue of investigation, the study sought to understand further the intricacies involved with entering the schooling system as a service child, and the shortfalls this could infer onto a pupils perceptions of self-worth and belonging within educational institutions. Of particular interest here, is the role of pastoral care for service children, specifically how such pupils are nurtured, guided and made to feel positive about their perceptions of self-worth. The contours of this investigation sought to understand better how the effects of continually moving school impacted on service children's perceptions of themselves, and the support they were provided in making decisions about their futures, careers and the possibility of studying in further education. Here, the research aims to assess whether pupils from military families are falling through the cracks in regards to pastoral support; something that, in turn, could have a significant impact on their levels of health and wellbeing. The consequences of which could potentially negatively taint their experiences of schooling and the prospect of remaining in the education system post-eighteen years of age.

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Introduction

Higher education within the United Kingdom has been a well-researched area for academics (Myers, 1999; Temple, 2008; Winzenberg, Oldenburg and Jones, 2010; Lareau, 2015). The University of Winchester Report, written by McCullouch and Hall (2016, pp. 10) found that in contrast to this swathe of research into under-represented groups, 'far less is known about the progression and participation of service children.' Their findings showed that 'statistics suggest that children from military service families are under-represented in the higher education population. It is in the realm of up to 4 out of 10 children who, if in the general population would go to university, do not go if they are from a military family'. The North of Yorkshire is home to the biggest Garrison in Europe, and to over three-thousand service children across the county (North Yorkshire County Council, 2019). This strong military presence, coupled with the lack of research mentioned above, contributed to the North Yorkshire being the focus of this study.

Pierre Bourdieu, a renowned sociologist, acknowledges that under-representation within higher education can be derived from a socio-cultural and socio-political aspect. Essentially, certain groups from society can be more privileged within their societal group. These factors can be explored using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social, cultural and economic capital. Over the years, research has suggested that social class and class culture has become a form of cultural capital within educational settings (Lareau, 1987). From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's theory states that a child's parents' socio-economic characteristics (occupations and education), as well as their participation in formal culture, is coupled with children's and adolescents' educational accomplishment and involvement in formal culture (De Graaf, 1986). As a result, parents' educational attainment can and will influence a child's willingness to learn and progress with their own education.

Literature Review: What is already available?

First of all, literature relating to service children and higher education was explored. This allowed the researcher to paint a clearer picture of the current issues that are prominent within a service child's life and their educational experience. That being said, there was a large quantity of literature that was looked at in order to gain a better understanding of service children and their education (Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2001; Chandra, 2010; Ofsted, 2011; Directorate of Children and Young People, 2018; Armed Forces Covenant, 2018; The Royal British Legion, 2018; Growing Up in North Yorkshire, 2018). After an extensive amount of research, it was found there was a lack of literature based on this particular topic directly relating to service children and higher education. Therefore, the research decided to look at current issues surrounding education and higher education in general, and other topics that appeared mostly throughout the research.

The research identified other key findings from literature that is currently available. McCullouch and Hall (2016) identified several key findings on service children, such as; progression through to university, mobility, deployment and pastoral care.

Key Findings from the Winchester Research Paper

- A parent being deployed was, by far, the greatest disadvantage for a child. Children often found it challenging when their mother or father was deployed, due to deployments lasting anywhere between 5 to 12 months.
- Moving schools and starting a new chapter of their life was a particularly difficult challenge for service children. This is because children would have to create new friends and try to be accepted into certain social groups.
- Military rank could impact on a child's intent on going to university. Essentially, the higher your rank the more privileges you are entitled to.
- Mobility and deployment are two overarching issues for service children. Similar to moving schools and beginning a new chapter, being extremely mobile means meeting new people and creating new friendships.
- Moving between schools has an adverse impact academically and pastorally. Moving schools can begin to unsettle certain individuals. Therefore, their education can begin to impact their chances of further progression. This has a negative impact on their health and wellbeing too, as there is a number of issues being experienced by the service child.

The key findings identified from the Winchester paper meant that current knowledge could be further built on in order to compare and contrast with the research findings. That being said, the following three points were the most frequently mentioned throughout the literature that was found.

From June 2018 to May 2019, the information campaign took place (see Appendix 1). A themed cancer awareness factsheet was circulated to all staff at York St John University via Campus Connections. The factsheets were circulated on the first Monday of the month, except for bank holidays where they were circulated on the next working day of the month. In total, twelve factsheets focusing on male and female cancer signs and symptoms, impact of diet and nutrition, relationship with age and genetics, smoking and e-cigarettes, breast cancer screening, alcohol consumption, cervical cancer awareness, impact of weight and physical activity, bowel screening, and sun awareness were circulated. On the 27th March 2019, an email was sent to all staff containing a link to an online version of the follow-up CAM. An all staff email was then sent with a final reminder to complete the CAM on 24th April 2019. The CAM closed on 25th April 2019 and all factsheets remained available online for staff to view.

Service Children, Education and Progression into Higher Education

Research has suggested that education is an extremely important focus for a service child (Ofsted, 2011). However, research provided by the University of Winchester has since acknowledged an apparent under-representation when it comes to the progression into higher education for service children; service children are more likely to get an apprenticeship or join the armed forces themselves (McCullouch and Hall, 2016). Statistics suggest that children from military service families are under-represented in the higher education population. 'Four out of ten children who, if in the general population would go to university, do not go if they are from a military family' (McCullouch and Hall, 2016, p.03). This suggests that proportionately there are fewer service children progressing into higher education than the general population.

Mobility and Education

Service children are known for changing schools and moving countries (Ofsted, 2011). Only recently has the possible issue of changing schools and moving countries, the 'mobility' of a service child, become more apparent (Ofsted, 2011). Issues involving the mobile status of a service family can impact greatly on a service child's ambitions to want to progress to higher education. Service children tend to move to a new country and change schools more than those who are not part of a military family; thus, resulting in possible issues within their education. Changing schools regularly can have a massive impact on a child's educational experience (Lynas, 2000; Gibbons and Telhaj, 2007; Ofsted, 2011). This should not be confused with social mobility, which is often discussed in general research on education, as this is to do with a family's income and social status within modern-day society.

Health and Wellbeing in Education Settings

The health and wellbeing of a child are extremely important. Especially within a school environment where children can spend in excess of six hours a day, five days per week. Yet according to research (Channon et al, 2013; Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2014; Littlecott, Moore and Murphy, 2018), children rarely get the support that they sometimes so desperately need. Service children are children that sometimes require extra support and guidance. Especially at difficult times when their mother or father are deployed on tour. As research from Ofsted (2011) stresses, those parents with children who have Special Education Needs and have disabilities, are again at an even more disadvantage and have daily struggles with their children (DfE, 2013; Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2014).

Key factors to be considered based on the literature that is available

- Living a geographically mobile lifestyle can influence a child's educational experience.
- Service children require extra support and guidance to ensure their health and wellbeing is to a high standard.

The Research Process

Methodology

This study was conducted through a qualitative methodological approach. This is because this study focused on gaining the views and opinions of service children based on not only higher education but also Military life in general (Schmid, 1981). Literature was looked at to see what research was already available with regards to issues in higher education. There was very little research on service children and higher education, so the researcher expanded their search in order to gain a better overview of current issues in higher education.

20 participants made up of service children, mothers, older service children (16 and 21), members of the armed forces, a Secondary School Pastoral Support Supervisor, Army Welfare Service Chief Community Development Officer and a service child advocate, were required in order to collect their views based on this topic area. This was to be able to gain a different perspective on the life of a service child and the military (Powell & Single, 1996; Kiddd & Parshall, 2000; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Weber, 2004; Ryan, 2018). The researcher used an interview guide that would help the researcher ask specific questions to the participants, and following a guide prevented any possible errors from occurring and prevented the researcher from asking something that they should not be asking.

A gatekeeper provided the researcher with access to certain schools that include children who are part of Armed Service Families. When it came to the military wives and soldiers, they were recruited due to the researcher having contacts with a number of individuals who were eligible to participate in this study.

Findings

Mobility and Service Children in Schools - “you make friends… and then you have to leave them and you have to start all over again”

From previous research (Gibbons and Telhaj, 2007; Channon et al, 2013; Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2014; FiMT, 2015; Ofsted, 2016; McCullouch and Hall, 2016; Littlecott, Moore and Murphy, 2018), mobility has been acknowledged to be of concern for service children and military families. Alongside mobility, comes an absence of stability for military families (McCullouch and Hall, 2016). Although, research suggests that military families are very resilient, every family needs some form of stability (Armed Forces Covenant, 2018).

Below are five quotes provided by three contributors who participated within the focus group. The names below are aliases.

11 “I went to eleven different primary schools”

Samantha aged 16]

“so if you have to move around coursework might get mixed up in it and this causes more problems”

Peter 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

“ive been to eight different schools”

Eric aged 16

8

“you make friends… and then you have to leave them and you have to start all over again” Peter aged 16

Service children and families are known for being mobile (De Pedro et al, 2011). In comparison to non-service children, they are more prevalent to move schools and move countries (DfE, 2013). Some of the quotes above acknowledge the number of schools participants have been to, as well as issues with regards to creating new friends, and having previous issues within education. Therefore, as a result of living such a transient lifestyle, service children are at risk of developing mental health issues, such as anxiety and stress (Ofsted, 2016) which could ultimately lead to drop out, as well as simply not wanting to progress through to Higher Education.

Health and Wellbeing amongst Service Children

Issues involving mental health, stress and anxiety are caused by a number of matters, many of which are prevalent in service families, simply by being part of a service family, is one of them (McCullouch and Hall, 2016).

The health and wellbeing of children is extremely important (Littlecott, Moore and Murphy, 2018) and should be monitored throughout schools in order to help individuals who require support. Therefore, more needs to be done in order to provide the help that service children deserve (McLaughlin, 1993).

“yeah I think there is its not well advertised enough its there it just needs to be known”

Peter aged 16 (on support in school)

“it depends on your relationship with the teachers as well though”

Noah aged 16

“I have a good relationship with MR. ……. and hes ex service”

Noah aged 16

“I didn’t get any support when I was in a service school” Noah aged 16

“think people here like to keep a lot of stuff to themselves …just the way we have been raised”

Mason aged 16

Although the service children interviewed acknowledged the pastoral and welfare team at their school, they declared that they never used this facility, in part due to a characteristic acquired by most service children to ‘just get on with it’. The interviews could not determine whether the stoicism revealed in that situation was a necessity due to the absence of understanding from the faculty, or the stoic attitude was embedded in service children due to their upbringing, thus negating the ‘requirement’ for mental health provision.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is an under-representation of service children in higher education. Issues include moving to different countries and moving schools on a number of occasions. It is apparent that service children experience situations that their civilian counterparts would not experience as often as a service child. For example, it is well documented that service families are extremely mobile. This report highlights the impact this transitory lifestyle can have on both the educational journey of a service child, and their future educational choices. It has been shown to be the catalyst for an increased amount of stress and anxiety, a disruption to continual education, and can result in dropout with future progression into higher education after leaving secondary school less likely.

However, from this research it was apparent that there appears to be very little support that a service child can utilise in order to gain the help they need. The research also highlighted the fact that due to them being extremely mobile, they would never know where they would eventually settle. As opposed to the majority of civilian students, they would not know where their education would end once they finished their secondary school. This issue of mobility and a service child's health and wellbeing is a serious matter that could ultimately result in a lower likelihood for progression into higher education. Issues including continually changing schools and having to make new friends are often seen as a disadvantageous characteristic of a service child's life. The results that this study drew to attention acknowledge these issues, as does other research that has been previously mentioned. Therefore, future recommendations are provided in order to provide other researchers an insight into what should happen next.

Future Recommendations

Service children and higher education needs to be further researched in order to gain an even stronger understanding of the issues based upon the under-representation. Better pastoral support needs to be offered and provided in order to allow service children to be able to talk to someone who understands their difficulties. Further education should be provided to teachers in order to help them understand clearer the issues and difficulties experienced by service children on a daily basis. This might bring an under-represented group a little closer to the forefront of discussion, and when more research and conversations take place the natural step is progress of a kind; a progress that will be only too welcome for the health and wellbeing of this minority group.

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