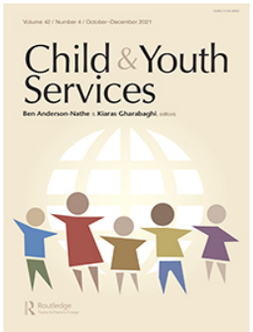

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"Not Just Participants": Military-Connected Children's Perspectives of a Recreational Camp

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ABSTRACT

Strengths-based approaches to research with military-connected children (MCC) are sparse and their voices are rarely given the equivalent weight and influence compared to the voices of adults. Recreational camps can promote positive outcomes, and this paper draws on qualitative participatory methods exploring MCCs perceptions of a one-week recreational camp. It revealed three key interrelated themes about MCCs experience: (1) relationships; (2) age; and (3) organization and scheduling. The findings support the potential of recreational camps to improve outcomes for MCC and the importance of including children's voices in the process.

KEYWORDS

Military-connected children; children's voices; participatory methods; graffiti boards; recreation programming

Introduction

The Department for Education [DfE] (2010) estimated there were almost 37,000 children with a parent in the military in England. The Ministry of Defence reported 90,450 dependents of military personnel under age 18 in the United Kingdom (UK) and overseas (Nicholson, 2014), while other estimates suggested between 38,000 and 175,000 children (Royal Navy & Royal Marines Children's Fund [RNMCF], 2009). There does not appear to be a single definitive (public) record of the number of MCC in the UK, but the figures presented here show there are tens – or hundreds – of thousands of children with a parent in the armed forces.

This is significant because MCC can experience significant future adverse outcomes because of the deployment of a parent (Chartrand et al., 2008; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Cozza et al., 2005; Jain et al., 2017; Jaycox et al., 2016; Pye & Simpson, 2017; Trautmann et al., 2015), such as poor social, emotional, and cognitive development (RCPCH, 2015); anxiety and

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depression, externalizing behavior problems and substance misuse (Mental Health Foundation, 2013); poor educational attainment (Clifton, 2007); homelessness, unemployment (TRBL, 2014); or involvement in the criminal justice system (MacManus et al., 2021). It is important to state that the outcomes for MCC are not always negative (Hayllar, 2018), as US-based studies that focus on MCC find that *recreational* and *non-recreational* camps can promote positive youth outcomes (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Griffiths & Townsend, 2018). There is, however, a lack of strengths-based approaches to research on MCC to highlight this point (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).

Research on effective support for MCC typically lack methodological rigor (Trautmann et al., 2015), access to participants (Chandra & London, 2013), and several methodological shortcomings such as a lack of attention to MCC (MacDermid Wadsworth et al., 2017). MCCs voices, experiences, and perceptions are rarely given the equivalent weight and influence compared to that of adults. Most research about the experience of MCC is *on* rather than *with* them. This is typically adult interpretations of the children's experience on *what* they do and neglects who they are – the children's own constructions of self, others, and the world around them.

The aim of this study is to address the question: what are the experiences and perceptions of British MCC of support in the form of a recreational camp? This paper explores the literature on MCC in relation to two key themes: (1) the impact of parental deployment and mobility on MCC; and (2) effective support for MCC, followed by an overview of the current study's methodological approach and findings. The paper concludes with reflections on research with MCC, implications for recreation programming, and future direction. A broad range of relevant sources have been identified to examine the key components of the MCC literature. British-focused studies have been prioritized for this paper, supplemented with international research where necessary, such as where there are gaps. Whilst the themes of international studies presented may be relevant to the current research, it is important to consider the socio-political context of each study.

The impact of parent deployment and mobility on MCC

The research literature highlights *parental deployment* and *mobility* as key influences on negative MCC outcomes. *Deployment* is typically defined as a service person spending time away from home relating to their professional duties (DfE/MoD, 2020). British-focused research has suggested around half of deployed parents report that their deployment negatively impacted their children and their relationship with them (Rowe et al., 2013, 2014;

Thandi et al., 2017). Large samples are used, but a key limitation is that they focus on the deployed parents' views, not the children themselves, and provide little information on what the negative impacts were for MCC. Pye and Simpson (2017) did collect data from the children of pre-deployed, deployed, and post-deployed parents alongside a control group of nonmilitary family (NMF) children. They suggested that the negative impact on MCC of parental deployment may be temporary and was at its highest during the deployment stage. Pre-deployment MCC scored similar to the NMF group, suggesting positive functioning of military families outside of deployment from the child's perspective. Jain et al. (2017) also found that lack of contact with a deployed father was the most reported negative aspect by children.

Unlike other studies that focused on adult perspectives, Jaycox et al. (2016) presented findings from the Deployment Life Study, a US-based longitudinal study. Based on the findings, which included children's perspectives (aged 11–17 years), MCC who socialized with other MCC during deployment of a parent reported better functioning on several measures (such as lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and higher levels of life satisfaction and family cohesion). The authors did not find similar associations with the other indices of social support, raising an intriguing question regarding the benefit of MCC socializing with like-minded peers.

Mobility refers to moving home or to different countries, and is a common experience for military families, which can leave MCC feeling unsettled (Children's Commissioner, 2018). Frequent relocation of the home and school can have negative impact on academic attainment and social and emotional development (Eodanable & Lauchlan, 2012). This can be the most significant negative impact for MCC (Children's Commissioner, 2018), with friendships difficult to develop and sustain, resulting in a distancing between the child and teachers and fellow pupils; Clifton (2007) describes this as children not taking *ownership* of their schools. In this context, schools may not be providing adequate provision for MCC (Noret et al., 2014). Ofsted (2011) reported that frequent relocation of military families was common and contributed to children's poor integration and development of relationships with others, with some children relocated up to 14 times before age 11.

Other research has found that family mobility and parental deployment can provide positive experiences, such as making new friends and living in new contexts, which can enhance MCC's social abilities (Hayllar, 2018). In a survey of US military families, Mancini et al. (2015)) found that deployment experience and family mobility (among other military context variables) were largely unrelated to youth outcomes. The authors highlight that such effects may be over-estimated by professionals and the general public,

and that these factors are not consistently influencing other dimensions of MCC's lives. This is important to note, as several programmes of support for MCC have developed from these correlated variables (i.e., the impact of parental deployment and family mobility on youth outcomes).

Effective support for MCC

It is easy to simplify the issues and imagine a quick solution, supposing the root causes can be easily fixed through broader structural reform, such as parenting programmes, improving schools, or mental and physical health provision. Attending to these matters is worthwhile and necessary but are complex and difficult tasks. Huebner et al. (2007, p. 121) suggest that undesirable outcomes experienced by MCC during parental deployment "are amenable to prevention and intervention efforts". Preventive intervention is needed, yet research focused on preventive interventions with MCC are limited. Studies examining prevention programmes with military families typically lack the methodological rigor to understand who needs what and when (Trautmann et al., 2015), access to participants (Chandra & London, 2013), and several methodological shortcomings, such as "convenience samples, cross-sectional designs, retrospective reports, overreliance on parental or self-reports, overemphasis on negative outcomes, lack of attention to children of female service members and veterans, and lack of attention to mediating and moderating variables" (MacDermid Wadsworth et al., 2017, p. 26).

Those that do exist – all US-focused – tend to be structured and concentrate on health intervention need (Cozza, 2015), wartime deployment stress (Lester et al., 2012, 2013) and multimedia interventions (Cohen et al., 2014) addressing the challenges associated with multiple deployments (O'Grady et al., 2016), transitioning out of the military into civilian life (Sherman et al., 2018) and parenting intervention (Gewirtz et al., 2019). Chawla and Wadsworth (2012) provide an evaluation of the impact of a one-week intervention (Operation Purple Camp) in the USA with children and adolescents ($N = 48$) in military families on their self-perception of social acceptance, athletic competence, and global self-worth, finding that the programme had a positive impact on all measures.

Drawing on broader *recreational* and *non-recreational* camp literature, Griffiths and Townsend (2018) identified several US-based recreational programmes for MCC. The limited research available offered promising findings that camps provided an environment which promoted positive youth development (PYD) such as enhanced resilience, self-esteem, and provided a sense of belonging through opportunities to develop relationships with other MCC.

Garst et al. (2011) provide a review of literature on camp characteristics and the impact on PYD. Whilst not focused on MCC, so conclusions should be treated with caution, the findings offer insight to the organization and structure of how camps could be delivered. Key to PYD are the supports and opportunities in camps. Supports refer to people, programmes, and intrapersonal skills, creating an environment for children to seek and test knowledge; supportive relationships with adult staff are highlighted as a key facilitator, as many children lack access to these relationships outside of the camp experience. Opportunities allow for children to apply new and existing knowledge and skills, facilitating skill building, competence, and a sense of mattering (Garst et al., 2011). The setting, particularly a natural setting (outdoors), can be key to facilitating personal restoration – a reduction in stress, arousal, and anxiety. Time (dosage) is another important factor. For example, residential camps typically offer increased benefits in PYD over day camps. The camp structure – rules and norms – and programme and activity characteristics – the role of structured and unstructured activity – are further highlighted as key components to PYD (Garst et al., 2011).

Garst et al. (2016) further summarize key literature contributing to PYD outcomes during camp experiences. The key themes from the literature highlight: (1) the distinction of the camp experience, from other youth development settings, allowing children to spend significant time outdoors, short intensive experiences of one to eight weeks, and low staff to child ratios (Henderson, Thurber, et al., 2007); (2) dosage or camp session length did not predict positive youth outcomes (Henderson, Thurber, et al., 2007; Thurber et al., 2007); (3) staff training did not predict program outcomes (Henderson, Bialeschki, et al., 2007); (4) mixed reporting on the qualities of camp staff – supportive or controlling behavior – can predict PYD (Garst et al., 2009) while other studies suggested this had no impact (Roark et al., 2010); and (5) the most consistent finding was that programme-related features were most important to PYD. For example, reporting on an evaluation of a girls-camp, Schmalz et al. (2011) found that the free-choice environment (i.e., activities freely chosen by the children) was integral to positive youth outcomes.

The research project

The purpose of this paper is to draw on empirical data exploring Military Connected Children's (MCC) perceptions and experiences of a one-week recreational camp, titled an 'Independent Adventure Break' (hereafter *Breaks*) from a larger research project evaluating The Royal British Legion (TRBL) national Break Services (Barrett et al., 2019a,b). This study adds

empirical findings to the limited research base about MCC experiences of recreational camps and direction for future design and delivery.

This study collected MCC's perceptions of a one-week residential recreational camp. In 2017, UK-based charity TRBL provided Break Services as a foundation of recreation for the Armed Forces community and was intended to improve and sustain quality of life by providing respite to serving/ex-serving Force's personnel and their families (TRBL, 2019). These Break Services were expanded to the children of those currently serving or have served in the Armed Forces, divided by four types: (1) Army Welfare Breaks, (2) JET Cyprus, (3) Royal Air Force Community Support, and (4) Independent Adventure Breaks (Barrett et al., 2019a,b), which aimed to provide opportunities for children to meet new people, have fun, and improve their confidence and self-esteem.

TRBL commissioned an external organization, *Xplore the World* (Xplore), to deliver the Breaks which were fully compensated by TRBL; the eligibility criteria to attend the Breaks was based upon income and welfare needs. These seven-day residential Breaks for children ages 8–17 years were delivered simultaneously across four UK sites. Xplore offered a programme of outdoor activities (e.g., archery, bush craft and abseiling), excursions and social evenings (Xplore the World, 2017), which were also available to international groups throughout the summer months (June-August); the Breaks took place in the final week of Xplores summer schedule.

Materials and methods

This study draws on empirical data to explore children's perceptions and experience of Breaks using graffiti boards, observations, and documentary analysis. Each Break site was visited by the same two researchers on one occasion during a working day (9 am−5 pm) for the Break. Seventy-nine children attended the Breaks, and all were invited to take part in the research, so that a total of 72 children took part; seven children did not take part due to illness or because they arrived at the camp late or left the camp early. All children participating had a parent currently deployed or previously deployed. Group sizes varied at each location (Suffolk: 13; Berkshire: 7; Gloucestershire: 28; Nottinghamshire: 24). Participant ages were captured by age band: 8–10 years ($n = 9$), 11–14 years ($n = 53$), 15–17 years ($n = 10$).

Graffiti boards were the primary methodological tool used to engage children in the research. This allowed the children freedom of expression and enhanced their anonymity (Tracy, 2005). Children can participate in more traditional research methods, such as interviews or questionnaires (Christensen & James, 2008), but the visual graffiti board method was a

more appropriate fit with the daily schedule of children attending the Breaks and minimized the power relationship between the adult researcher and child (Eldén, 2013).

Four graffiti boards were designed representing an individual theme: (1) I like, (2) I dislike, (3) I feel, and (4) I would change. The children were organized into three or four equally distributed groups at each site, which were organized according to age – keeping similar aged children together – and they spent 10–15 minutes at each graffiti board writing words or drawing pictures to express how they felt about the Break in relation to the individual board theme.

The graffiti board method presents several challenges also. For example, the number of entries written by individual children on the graffiti boards was not tracked, and it is possible that responses are not a true reflection of all the children who participated. Children may have been influenced by peers when completing the graffiti board, impacting *what* and *how much* they contributed. The researchers could not discuss all entries with each participant, so some entries that appeared less obvious in their intent were left open to interpretation in the analysis (see below). To reduce the impact of these limitations, two researchers were present, and prompted children, if necessary, for further explanation of their responses.

In addition to the graffiti boards, and to reduce the limitations, observations combined with documentary analysis (web pages and official documents) were conducted for the researchers to become familiar with the Break structures and processes, which allowed for additional data to situate the children's perspectives within the Break context and reduce the risks of taking the children's views at face value. Gold's (1958) *participant-as-observer* role was followed during this process. Within this role the observer and participants "are aware that theirs is a field relationship" (Gold, 1958, p. 220); the observer does not conceal that they are researching participants, whilst the role as observer is prioritized over the role as participant. During and immediately after the field visits, detailed field notes were taken. Where possible, notes were made about the verbal conversation with the children and their corresponding written responses on graffiti boards.

The data analysis followed the grounded theory methods described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Layder (1998). A thematic content analysis was undertaken using the computer software package NVivo to organize the data. This approach followed the principles of description, analysis, and interpretation as three major ways to "do something with descriptive data" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 10). Each graffiti board and observational notes were fully transcribed and coded individually using NVivo. Through the coding process themes were explored in the data. The coding categories (or nodes) developed through two phases of (1) open coding of each graffiti boards

data (repeated three times) through which five prominent themes, with subcategories, emerged, and (2) reexamination of previous nodes and the sub-categories were merged, considering the networks created in NVivo. This second phase highlighted gaps and connections in the coding process. For example, there emerged clear positive and negative feelings toward peers and Breaks staff, which were further broken down into feelings toward communication and family, linked to the 'emotions' node, which were sub-categorised by the reported feelings of 'tired', 'happy', 'excited' and so on. This example highlighted the connection of 'Wifi' to 'communications with family' as a key emergent theme within the broader node of 'relationships'. This process was also repeated three times, so to review the data. Three distinct themes emerged: (1) relationships, (2) age, and (3) organization and scheduling. NVivo allows for searches across the transcripts by theme; this was adopted for each thematic area in this paper, whereby meticulous searches were conducted through each theme, the cutting and pasting of key quotations, and making extensive notes on each theme. This analytical approach enabled horizontal analysis, in which responses across Break sites (by graffiti board theme) were compared, and vertical analysis, in which responses within Break sites were compared. These comparisons enabled a systematic approach to the analysis (Wolcott, 1994).

Results

A note on the purpose of the breaks

A clear purpose for any programme, service, or initiative is key to its design, implementation, and delivery (Fixsen et al., 2005; Marshall, 2013). When an organization is commissioned to deliver a service, it is critical there is a shared purpose between the organizations and the service is delivered as designed. The focus of this research was TRBL and the Breaks, *not* Xplore, but inconsistencies were found in the purpose of the two organizations. TRBL stated that:

> Adventure Breaks are a great opportunity for young people to enjoy themselves, meet new people, have new experiences, improve their self-esteem and most of all have fun, while giving parents a well-earned break.
>
> (TRBL, 2017).

Xplore's primary aims focused on providing an environment for enjoyment and fun, meeting new people, and having new experiences, with a secondary potential outcome of increased self-confidence. Xplore stated that:

> Xplore overnight camps are energetic and lively! Join other children from all around the world for a fun-filled programme of challenging outdoor activity sessions, exciting excursions and entertaining social evenings. Integration is central to how we operate as an organisation, by encouraging lots of social interaction between a diverse mix of nationalities and cultures–our camps bring new friends and fun to life!
>
> (Xplore the World, 2017).

It is important to note here that Xplore were referring to the breaks they offer and deliver as an organization; although the TRBL Breaks were 'bespoke' in the context of their own services, these were delivered according to Xplore's criteria. They further stated that their camps involved getting active (being outside), cultural excursions (day trips to local sites) and social interaction (meeting and making new friends). They highlight the benefits of "[b]eing part of a diverse international community at camp, in mixed nationality sessions builds self-confidence in communicating with others." (Xplore the World, 2017). The primary focus was on enjoyment and fun, meeting new people and having new experiences. A potential outcome was that self-confidence may be improved, but this was not the primary focus of Xplore camps. The children's responses supported observations that Xplore met the objectives of delivering activities and creating an environment of enjoyment and fun.

MCC Responses

The 72 children who participated produced 653 responses across the graffiti boards (one individual response could be a single word, a sentence, paragraph, or a picture). The distribution and frequency of these responses are presented in Table 1. The *I feel* and *I would change* boards had higher total responses but contained a high number of repeated words, whereas the *I dislike,* and *I like* boards generated a broader range of individual responses. The variation in group size and the day of the week a Break was visited would have had some impact on the number and nature of responses, but analysis showed a consistent pattern of themes across each site.

Thematic analysis of the graffiti boards, supplemented with data from observations and documents raised three key themes: (1) relationships, (2) age, and (3) organization and scheduling. These are discussed in turn,

Table 1. Response distribution and frequency by graffiti board and location.

Location	I Dislike	I Like	I Feel	I Would Change	Total
Suffolk	23 (17%)	43 (26%)	40 (22%)	36 (21%)	**142** (21.7%)
Berkshire	17 (13%)	12 (7%)	37 (21%)	25 (14%)	**91** (13.9%)
Gloucestershire	46 (34%)	53 (32%)	43 (24%)	51 (29%)	**193** (29.6%)
Nottinghamshire	49 (36%)	56 (34%)	59 (33%)	63 (36%)	**227** (34.8%)
Total	**135** (100%)	**164** (100%)	**179** (100%)	**175** (100%)	**653** (100%)

followed by reflections on the importance of children's voices in the research process and considerations for future direction.

Discussion

Relationships

Developing friendships was important for children attending the Breaks. "Meeting new people" and in particular "[m]eeting new friends" were common responses. There was also an expression of feeling "[c]omforted due to making new friends" and "I feel happy because I have made lots of friends." Meeting and making friends with, and in a space shared by, other MCC with whom they shared similar biographies was a positive aspect of the Breaks, which suggested support for the findings of Jaycox et al. (2016) that MCC socializing with other MCC during deployment of a parent reported better functioning on measures such as life satisfaction and family cohesion. The Breaks appeared to provide MCC with a space and opportunity for a sense of mattering (Garst et al., 2011). This was consistent for children of all ages – in observations alongside the graffiti boards – and the children reported positive feelings of being around fellow MCC – and most prominent in older children (15–17 years old) who had attended Breaks over several years; all 10 children in this age group had attended at least one previous break, two had attended five (annual) consecutive breaks, one had attended three consecutive breaks, and two had attended two consecutive breaks. Common across these factors was that relationships had formed over successive Breaks or during the time spent on the current Break. The consistency of attending the Breaks and the perceived "safe space" provided to develop and sustain friendships appeared to be a similar "safe and secure environment" as the Armed Forces housing described by the Children's Commissioner (2018, p. 9).

Making new friendships may be "second nature" to MCC (Children's Commissioner, 2018, p. 6) but children who had attended more than one Break stated that they had developed close friendships, over several years attending the Breaks, and expressed a desire to continue these friendships beyond the Breaks. To protect these "special friendships", they would intentionally limit contact with each other between Breaks. There was a suggestion, from older children (ages 15–17 years), that sustaining friendships outside of the Breaks was difficult, as "we live too far apart and it's difficult to travel to meet up", due to the proximity of their homes (e.g., residing in different towns and cities) and the difficulties attached to regularly meeting up in person (e.g., they were unable to travel unless accompanied by a parent/adult). Contact could be, and was in some cases, maintained through technological means (e.g., SMS messaging or social media platforms) but

the children stated that this provided a less desirable method to sustaining friendships, as "we prefer to see each other in person it's not the same through social media". This further points to the value of the Break experience on MCC, at least for the duration of the residential camp – e.g., a sense of belonging and mattering (Garst et al., 2011), but raises important questions about the support and opportunities available to MCC outside of the Breaks experience – e.g., educational provision and support (Clifton, 2007; Hayllar, 2018).

The children reported positive feelings toward the non-stigmatising treatment they received from staff at the Breaks. Despite being referred to as "the military children" by staff, which the children were aware of, what the children appeared to perceive was that they were being treated as "children" rather than "*military* children", which allowed them a degree of autonomy to build and maintain friendships with their peers who had a shared understanding of their experience away from the Breaks, again suggesting support for the positive impact of MCC socializing with each other (Jaycox et al., 2016) and the free-choice or autonomy that a camp setting can provide (Schmalz et al., 2011). This raised questions about the children's identity – individual and collective – and boundaries. Those aged 15 years and above were not happy to be treated as "children" – a desire to be seen and treated with the respect of "mature young people" was evident (see *age* below) but there was a want from the children to be treated without being labeled ("military") and a need for understanding of their circumstances and experiences ("meaningful relationships"). This extended beyond peers to the staff themselves. This resonates with the findings of the Children's Commissioner (2018) who described MCC in schools with a distinct group of MCC, rather than a school with majority MCC, and spoke most passionately about the support they received.

The children were explicit about their like and dislike of individual staff members at each site and generally felt "supported" and "[a]ccepted by the instructors and the friends I have made" and "grateful to the leaders [Break staff]". Analyses showed that Break staff had little knowledge and understanding about MCC, which may have driven the positive influence on the children's perceptions of the autonomy they were receiving, i.e., Breaks staff lack of awareness meant that they spoke to and interacted with TRBL children as they would any children; TRBL children in turn acknowledged that they were being treated like "children" rather than "military children". The difficulty with this is that some behavior may be ignored or dismissed as childish behavior or youthful indiscretion. As one Break staff member said "they [TRBL children] are generally good. There are some behavioral issues, but kids do that, test boundaries." Another indicated that "they [TRBL children] are misunderstood" and "they come from a PTSD

environment", without any specific knowledge on what "misunderstood" or a "PTSD environment" were; this appeared to be personal beliefs and general knowledge of the military, rather than specialist information. Garst et al. (2009) reported that the qualities of camp staff can predict PYD, whilst Roark et al. (2010) suggested this had no impact, and Henderson, Bialeschki, et al. (2007) found that staff training did not predict program outcomes, which raise questions about the personal qualities and training of camp staff and the programme-related features, the latter of which the recreational camp literature suggested is most important (Schmalz et al., 2011). Given the knowledgebase on the needs of MCC and potential adverse future outcomes (Chartrand et al., 2008; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Cozza et al., 2005; Jain et al., 2017; Jaycox et al., 2016; Pye & Simpson, 2017; Trautmann et al., 2015) this raised safeguarding and child protection issues, which are central to promoting the welfare of children and protecting them from harm (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2019).

The staff lack of knowledge may have limited their ability to respond to MCCs individual welfare needs. Staff did suggest that they had "received some training on military children's needs" but did not acknowledge its importance. Some staff suggested they had training on these issues, but when prompted, they indicated this as "boring training on bullying" and "how to deal with young people with issues" and was perceived by some staff as a "tick-box" exercise rather than meaningful and purposeful for their roles. Staff were sensitive to the issues of working with children (i.e., safeguarding and child protection) and some acknowledged the enhanced needs of TRBL children but lacked specific knowledge of what these issues were. The children reflected this in their responses, feeling "mad because they never bother to ask if you have certain things wrong with you like "anger issues". These are critical issues to be addressed. Xplore and the staff at each site appeared to do a very good job with activity planning and delivery, and the children were very complimentary of their overall experience and the types of activities they were taking part, with most staff also receiving high praise from the children. The identified conflict of *purpose* between Xplore and TRBL appeared to exacerbate the issues above.

Developing friendships was important to feelings of happiness, as was retaining contact with family whilst at the Breaks. Some highlighted feelings of sadness on the *I feel* graffiti board, which they connected with being away from the family home. A key tool facilitating their connection with family members whilst at the Breaks was the internet. Wi-Fi was the most prominent response across all Break sites *and* across different graffiti boards; it was *liked*, *disliked* and *something to be changed*. Children typically liked "[t]he free internet" and "free wifi" but felt "annoyed about wifi

not being in our rooms", "sad (because I don't have the wifi code)" or disliked having "no internet" or "no wifi" or "bad wifi" and would change the "internet [to] run better speeds". Several children were clear that using various telecommunication apps and tools, which required an internet connection, was how they connected to family whilst at Breaks. Negative feelings were particularly associated to "[n]o wifi in the room when want to talk to family" [sic]. Feelings of being homesick or missing home may be common among children, but likely exacerbated in MCC during deployment of parents (Jain et al., 2017; Pye & Simpson, 2017).

Age

The theme of *age* featured prominently. The age range for the TRBL children was 8–17 years, and they were all together as one large group at each Break (although split up into smaller groups for daily activities). Children highlighted a need for age-appropriate groups and consistently highlighted their discontent with "[t]he age differences between kids." This was a concern for older children (typically aged 15 years and above) and younger children (typically aged 10 years and below). Younger children were observed distancing themselves from older children and some stated that they could not sleep at night due to being near to older children's "noisy" dormitories who stayed awake later, "people running up and down the halls when we are trying to sleep" and "people chatting when others are trying to sleep". The younger children did not want rule changes to curfews, but they wanted a quieter environment to allow them to relax and sleep. In contrast, older children expressed irritation with what they perceived as "being treated like children" or more explicitly "[w]e get treated like we are 5 [years old]." They "don't mind the younger children but should be separated". The older children wanted more freedom for unsupervised visits offsite (which were not permitted), disliked "not being able to go outside when we want", "curfew times made later" and "that we should be allowed to stay up wherever, as long as we are quiet." Corsaro's concept of 'peer culture' provides useful insight to MCC's interpretations and behavior at the Breaks, suggesting that "[c]hildren creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures" (Corsaro & Eder, 1990, p. 200), which simultaneously extend peer culture and actively challenge and reproduce adult culture. The creation of hierarchical, age-based structures (alongside gender and race) was found to be an important sense of identity for children in recreational camp settings (Moore, 2001). The perception of MCC as being treated as younger or older than their own peer culture defined, supported these findings. This key finding presented a paradox that all MCC on the Breaks perceived, and

appreciated, they were being treated as "children" rather than "*military* children" (see *relationships* above) but desired the staff to be sensitive to their experiences as MCC. Older children (typically 15 years and above), however, did not like being treated as children in the context of their MCC group. This presented a challenge to the delivery of Breaks whereby staff must be seen to treat MCC as they would any other child but remain vigilant to their unique experience and potential enhanced needs. Adding further support to the need for staff working with MCC to have enhanced knowledge and understanding to better respond to MCCs individual welfare needs.

For those who had attended the Breaks for several years, there was a perception that the rules had "become stricter this year", with new staff members reflecting and enforcing these rules with little flexibility, or "tight rules (could be more chilled out)." There did not appear to be any changes to the rules from previous years, but there were new staff members that were supervising and leading activities with the children. What was being perceived as rule changes appeared to be staff changes, and the loss of longer-term relationships with staff who had been present at previous Breaks. This presented a disruption to the expected programme-level organization and structure that returning MCC had experienced on previous Breaks, and further disruption to the individual-level established peer culture and hierarchal norms, which appeared to reduce their sense of mattering (Garst et al., 2011). In addition, some older children were close to being 18 years old and stated their sadness that they would no longer be eligible to attend the Breaks. This raised important questions about transition beyond the Breaks, particularly sustaining friendships and issues of connectivity (see *organization and scheduling* below). Family mobility can be unsettling for MCC (Children's Commissioner, 2018) and the Breaks appeared to provide a point of stability for those children that had attended more than one Break, reinforcing the point that recreational camps can provide positive support to MCC.

Younger children expressed a dependency and comfort with rules, boundaries, and structure, and older children expressed more distain at rules, boundaries, and structure. This is not surprising, given the developmental stage of these children (Jaycox et al., 2016), and it would be simple to dismiss some of these responses as children testing the boundaries, but analyses suggested the need to separate these groups for activities and sleeping arrangements, but attending the Breaks together could be beneficial. Where conflict arose between staff and children, it was evident that some children came together, regardless of age, in support of incidents they perceived as unfair and subsequently self-managing these situations. For example, in a case where one younger child was punished by staff

for misbehaving, the older children perceived that this individual had been "baited and then reacted" and the punishment was unfair. They raised this with staff, but perceived "leaders [staff] assuming things that might not be true" and there being no "chance to explain yourself and be given another chance" driven by "[b]ig bosses making decisions when they aren't even there." The perception from some older children was that younger "children [were] out of control and leaders not really doing anything". Subsequently, these older children appeared to act as mentors to the younger children on "how to behave" and "show respect to others", creating an informal process of supervision and guidance; it was not clear how the younger children responded to this. This incident highlighted the potential benefits and key role that older children with more, yet shared, experience can provide to younger children in both a sense of mattering (Garst et al., 2011) and the power of hierarchical peer culture (Corsaro & Eder, 1990; Moore, 2001). This also highlighted the importance that staff should have good knowledge and understanding of the background and context of MCC. The Breaks could be a valuable space providing PYD support for children to learn and develop critical methods to manage behavior from peers (Garst et al., 2011), leading to a reduction of future undesirable outcomes (Trautmann et al., 2015). The relationships that developed appeared to extend beyond friendships to an informal mentor-mentee relationship.

Organization and scheduling

At each location, all children expressed their enjoyment of the activities and new experiences the Breaks provided. "The fact that they gave us the opportunity to meet new people and experience a variety of things" was typical of responses on the *I like* graffiti board. But a prominent request of the younger children was to have more time to rest as they were feeling the effects of a demanding physical itinerary. This was also connected to the disruption to relaxation and sleep that younger children raised. The schedule was structured, and time was accounted for throughout the day with four or five 1.5 to 2-hour activities with breaks, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, through to 9 pm. Children highlighted a desire for more flexibility and autonomy around the activities to socialize with other children in a less formal space and to have downtime to relax. They disliked "not being able to choose what you do and what time you do it" and in some cases this led to feeling "unhappy because I never have time for myself" and wanting to "be able to reject some or one activities for free time" linked to requests for changes to "the time you can relax each day." The Breaks provided a structured environment

with limited flexibility, and the need for children to have autonomy or free-choice is key to positive youth outcomes in recreational camp settings (Schmalz et al., 2011).

The timing of the Break was a concern to those children who had attended previously, who wanted to "come at a time when there are more people to socialize with." The Breaks were delivered in the final week of Xplore's summer schedule when there were fewer international groups present than other weeks during the summer. Children stated that some staff members had left the break sites midway through the week (some had been relocated to other sites) and remaining staff "had far less enthusiasm compared to previous years" when the Breaks were delivered earlier in the summer schedule. This was linked to responses about staff changes from previous years but raised an important point about the timing of the Breaks. There were also responses expressing a desire to extend the Breaks beyond seven days (10–14 days were the common preferred duration) or to have additional Breaks throughout the year (have two Breaks; early summer and late summer). Whilst dosage or camp session length is not found to predict positive youth outcomes in recreational camp settings (Henderson, Bialeschki, et al., 2007; Thurber et al., 2007), a key motivation for additional or longer Breaks was to meet new people and build and sustain friendships with peers at the Breaks, which can have positive impact on youth outcomes (Garst et al., 2011). The frequency and duration (dosage) of the breaks is a further important point, closely linked to the *purpose* of the Breaks (see above). This could reduce future adverse outcomes for MCC (Bello-Utu & Desocio, 2015; Chartrand et al., 2008; Children's Commissioner, 2018; Cozza et al., 2005; Jain et al., 2017; Jaycox et al., 2016; Pye & Simpson, 2017; Trautmann et al., 2015), while promoting PYD (Garst et al., 2016).

Overall, the Breaks achieved Xplore's primary aims but there was no evidence that the Breaks achieved their aims of improving self-esteem (TRBL) or self-confidence (Xplore the World). In evaluations of other TRBL Break Services for children, the findings revealed a quantifiable increase in children's self-esteem and confidence (Barrett et al., 2019a,b), suggesting that TRBL Breaks can achieve this desired impact. The needs of MCC – such as increased stress and mental health problems – are connected to their experience of military life (i.e., frequent relocation and parent deployment (MHF, 2013). Addressing these needs is complex and the Breaks – as delivered – did not address these critical needs, despite for the most part achieving their stated aims. The children's responses suggested an overarching sense of enjoyment and fun, whilst revealing a complex relationship between their needs and perceived experience at the Breaks.

Conclusion

Implications for research with children

This study provided a platform for children's voices to be heard, conducting research *with*, rather than simply *on*, children. They highlighted that this research process provided them with "the opportunity to reflect on my experience, I feel for the first time that my voice is being heard" and "allowed us to feel more involved in the overall process of the Adventure Breaks and not just participants." The reflective approach of the graffiti boards and conversations with researchers was evidently valuable for the children to feel part of the broader Break process and provided a space to focus on their experience and allowing the children freedom of expression.

There was a complex overlap of issues relating to (1) the development and sustainability of *meaningful* relationships, (2) space for children to develop these relationships outside of structured activities, (3) space for children to rest, and (4) staff knowledge and understanding of the needs of MCC. This is not to suggest that what the children say should be designed, implemented, and delivered without critical attention, but that an environment, which allows for children to enhance their positive experience and not only *feel* listened to, but to *be* listened to, should be promoted. Listening is not just a simple auditory process, as it requires a deep knowledge and understanding of the immediate social environment and the people with whom that is shared. Children's voices are rarely given the equivalent weight and influence compared to the voices of adults in research on military families. The value of listening to MCC's voices is apparent in the limited research base (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Hayllar, 2018), and there remains wide scope for future research with MCC to explore their experiences and the impact of military life on their development.

Implications for recreation programming

Defining a clear purpose for the Breaks is critical to ensure recreation programmes can achieve stated aims (Fixsen et al., 2005; Marshall, 2013). Linked to this purpose is a set of achievable objectives detailing the aims of the Breaks that should be developed. These should outline how Breaks are designed, implemented, and delivered, taking into consideration the needs of MCC. If Breaks are outsourced and delivered by a third-party organization, it is critical that there is a shared purpose, and the organization can deliver the objectives as designed.

The Breaks provided a space for the development of meaningful relationships between MCC, which is shown to improve youth outcomes

(Jaycox et al., 2016) and provide a sense of belonging (Garst et al., 2011). The Breaks environment could enhance facilitation of these relationships through care and attention to developing programme-related features and organization and scheduling of activities. Although some recreational camp research suggest dosage or camp session length do not predict positive youth development (Henderson, Thurber, et al., 2007; Thurber et al., 2007), given the needs of MCC (e.g. Jaycox et al., 2016; Pye & Simpson, 2017) consideration should be given to the frequency and duration (dosage) of the Breaks to allow for more time for relationships to develop and sustained enhancing the sense of mattering and belonging for MCC (Garst et al., 2011), to the scheduling of activities, enabling enough time for rest and space for meaningful relationships to be developed and sustained outside of structured activities. Providing MCC with greater autonomy and free-choice could enhance PYD (Schmalz et al., 2011). The mixed findings in the recreational camp literature on staff qualities (Garst et al., 2009; Roark et al., 2010) and the enhanced needs of MCC (Jaycox et al., 2016) staff involved in the design, implementation and delivery of Breaks should have good knowledge and understanding of the background and context of the children attending Breaks more systematically to help inform safeguarding and service development, as suggested in research with children who have enhanced needs, such as justice-involved children (Marshall, 2013). This could be facilitated through focused training, which incorporates up-to-date and context-specific safeguarding and child protection training. This is further supported by the findings in this study that MCC wanted to be treated without the label of "military" but did desire that staff involved in the governance and delivery of Breaks had an understanding of MCCs circumstances and experiences; a finding which supported research with MCC in schools (Children's Commissioner, 2018).

From a practical and research-linked perspective, monitoring and evaluation frameworks should underpin the Breaks implementation and delivery and built into the programme as a key criterion to inform service development. The tools developed for this research could be built-in to future Break delivery and reviewed periodically to ensure the continuous improvement of monitoring and evaluation tools *and* the Breaks implementation and delivery, providing a strategic and sustainable approach to Break development. An important point here is that evaluation is valuable for a system to understand itself (Cronbach et al., 1980) and as part of that evaluation all participants in that system or programme should be involved. This approach should include children's voices; as active participants, their views are important. This does not mean that their opinions should be uncritically accepted – but for truly child-centered approaches, as key stakeholders, they should be included and able to influence decision-making.

Future research

This research is not without its limitations and there are several areas for empirical growth and analysis. Understanding the changing social demographics of the military community and the needs of children in this community is critical to informing the design of Breaks. A valuable next step would be to gather detailed evidence on the impact of the Breaks before, during and after children's participation. The methods used should be extended to a larger population of MCC to gain deeper knowledge of the Breaks' impact. A longitudinal study of children who attend Breaks will provide more robust insight and analyses to the lasting effects of the Breaks and enable an informed approach to the design of Breaks, particularly regarding social, emotional, and cognitive development, behavioral problems, and attachment relationships. This would also provide useful knowledge of the Breaks as a preventive process in children's lives and the long-term impact they have. To understand and develop services for children, including their voices is key.

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