Review of military ethos alternative provision projects

Research brief

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Introduction, aims and objectives

The Department for Education's (DfE) ambition for the alternative provision (AP) sector is to ensure that all young people, whatever their circumstances, achieve a good education on a par with that provided in mainstream classes or settings. The Military Ethos AP programme aims to tackle actual and potential disengagement from school through instilling Service values such as self-discipline, confidence and leadership to strengthen a young person's achievements at school, both personal and academic.

The DfE awarded a total of £8.2 million to six organisations (across two rounds of funding: 2012/13 and 2013/14) to help expand Military Ethos AP across England, delivering varied programmes of work within primary schools, secondary schools, sixth form and further education colleges, and other AP providers (predominantly Pupil Referral Units).

The DfE commissioned TNS BMRB to conduct a small-scale evidence-based review of Military Ethos AP within the academic year 2013/14, and to make recommendations for future project and programme-level monitoring and evaluation. The aim was to provide an understanding of the effectiveness of Military Ethos AP in relation to behaviour, attendance and attainment, as well as any wider reported outcomes. This was achieved by reviewing monitoring and evaluation information submitted by the six Military Ethos AP providers to DfE during the 2013/14 academic year, and undertaking case studies in 12 schools. Consequently, this review was not designed as, nor intended to be, a rigorous evaluation of the Military Ethos AP projects or the programme as a whole.

Key findings

Programme reach

- Over the 2013/14 academic year over 52,000 pupils participated in the Military Ethos AP programme from across 460 educational establishments. This included 16,377 pupils deemed to be disengaged and 1,333 pupils in AP or excluded from school. The majority of pupils (approximately 40,000) were reached by a single provider across 198 schools. The type of provision ranged from support to whole year groups to intensive interventions with small numbers of pupils that presented very challenging behaviours.

Potential impacts of the Military Ethos AP

Behaviour

- Monitoring information returns from Military Ethos AP providers highlighted examples of positive outcomes for pupil behaviour. Fifty-three per cent of pupils surveyed by one delivery provider identified improvements in their own behaviour. Another reported that all of those involved in the project had not re-offended 18

months after the intervention. Less than 1 per cent of the pupils participating in one Military Ethos AP project were excluded from school, where 12 per cent were deemed to be at high risk of exclusion. Military Ethos AP providers also gave examples of an increased ability to work in teams and improvements in self-control.

- Positive outcomes for pupil behaviour were also described in the interviews with pupils, teachers and parents/carers. After attending Military Ethos AP pupils were perceived to be able to better manage their own behaviour, with teachers noticing fewer instances of disruptive behaviour. Pupils reflected on the way in which participation had increased their confidence, made them less self-critical, more self-aware, and able to recognise and respond when they were in danger of losing their temper. In particular, the influence of Military Ethos AP projects was thought to be more pronounced for pupils in secondary schools who were still engaged in school life but had ingrained behavioural problems.

Attendance

- Military Ethos AP providers have submitted examples of improvements in school attendance rates and a reduction in pupils arriving late. The approaches used by delivery providers to measure changes in attendance varied. Delivery providers gave examples of improvements in school attendance rates between 4 and 8 per cent. Other providers submitted findings from commissioned surveys with teachers and pupils. One reported that 94 per cent of teachers thought that there had been an improvement in pupil attendance. Another reported that 41 per cent of pupils self-identified that their attendance improved after attending the Military Ethos AP project.

- Interviews with teachers and pupils described how the projects equipped pupils with stronger coping skills, which was thought to help them to participate more effectively in lessons. Increased levels of confidence, resilience and motivation were perceived to lead to more frequent and punctual attendance.

Attainment

- Delivery providers submitted information on the number of qualifications gained through the Military Ethos AP provider. Pupils worked towards vocational qualifications with four providers, with 1,163 achieving BTEC Level 1 and/or level 2 qualifications. However, no evidence was presented in relation to KS2 or KS4 outcomes and the direct impact on pupil attainment was not assessed. Some providers reported perceived improvements in pupil attitudes to learning and self-reported improvement in reading, writing and numeracy skills.

- Although 93 per cent of teachers surveyed by one provider perceived that there had been some improvement for the attainment of secondary school pupils, the

majority of teachers interviewed for this review tended not to view Military Ethos AP as a way of improving attainment. Rather, it was considered a means to support resilience, self-confidence and inter-personal skills, which were thought to influence attainment.

Personal character

- All delivery providers recorded examples where Military Ethos AP had positive wider outcomes for those participating. One delivery provider survey of pupils in six schools reported that 53 per cent had more self-respect and 63 per cent had more respect for others. The same provider reported that the majority of teachers recognised improvements in social skills (86 per cent) and pupil confidence and self-esteem (82 per cent).

- Teachers, parents/carers and pupils interviewed also described how Military Ethos AP had a positive impact on the confidence and inter-personal skills of those involved. Teachers described how pupils who had been disengaged were now actively participating in school life and that Military Ethos AP had a positive influence across the school.

Motivations for engaging Military Ethos AP

- The schools interviewed generally used a range of behavioural interventions of which Military Ethos AP was often one aspect. Military Ethos AP providers were recruited by schools to deliver work driven by the military values of resilience, responsibility and respect. Military Ethos AP providers were considered to be a valuable resource for schools in instilling these values due to the expertise and experience of the staff involved and the activities used to engage pupils. This support was seen by schools as valuable for all children and young people, but in particular for those at risk of disengagement due to a lack of confidence or because of behavioural problems.

Factors perceived to influence project success

- The factors which schools considered contributed to the success of the Military Ethos AP projects were: engaging and fun content; the use of staff that specialise in engaging hard-to-reach pupils; the opportunity for pupils to try new things; and the flexibility and responsiveness of providers. However, Military Ethos AP was not necessarily a quick-fix; neither was it successful for all pupils.

Methodological issues with the delivery provider monitoring and evaluation data

- Monitoring information and evaluation tools/reports provided by funded organisations were reviewed to assess the reliability and validity of the project

impacts being reported. A range of methodological, sampling and reporting issues were identified which, together, undermine the potential for impacts to be rigorously attributed to the Military Ethos AP programme. As context, it is important to acknowledge that providers were not required to evaluate their projects and few had any prior research experience or in-house expertise to draw upon in designing or conducting evaluations.

- Key issues impacting the reliability and validity of reporting impacts included: a lack of information provided on the sample of schools/pupils for whom data was presented or the methodological approaches used by providers to identify the project impact; differences in definitions existed across schools and projects; direct connection between project activity and outcomes/impacts was rarely made; very limited use of baseline data, "control" or comparator pupil groups; sample sizes were very small, potentially giving rise to the potential margin for error in reported impacts.

Future monitoring and evaluation recommendations

Principal recommendations

- The research team's principal recommendations are to ensure individual-level monitoring data are collected by project delivery staff with support from schools. This would include demographic characteristics such as gender, year group, ethnic group, pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), free school meal (FSM) status, special educational need (SEN) status, and whether the pupil is classed as a 'looked after child'. Measures which should be collected include: attendance rates, attrition rates on the project, behaviour, using simple and standard scales, and attainment on qualifications gained through the provider.

- Pre and post project data should be collected for: detentions, exclusions, behavioural incidents and attendance. A measure of 'attitude to school' should also be collected in order to understand changes in engagement / dis-engagement with school.

- Where delivery providers are undertaking evaluation activity, clarity on the sampling strategy used for any data collection, including those who do not complete the course, is required.

Secondary recommendations

- The use of standardised testing methods, especially for attainment, is a pre-requisite for any reliable impact assessment undertaken by delivery providers.

- Evaluations commissioned by providers would benefit from the use of a counterfactual to determine impact. This can be achieved in a number of ways: the use of comparison groups (of which there are many different approaches); monitoring of school attainment measures with a wider cohort of pupils in schools; matched comparison with the National Pupil Database; surveys of perceived change; and qualitative studies of perceived change.

Research design

The research comprised two overlapping strands of activity:

Strand One - Collation, synthesis and evaluation of Military Ethos AP 2013/14 monitoring and evaluation data to provide a consolidated picture of the reported impact of Military Ethos AP. Some organisations independently commissioned external evaluations of their projects, others collated monitoring and evaluation evidence themselves (e.g. through feedback forms and case studies). There was no specific requirement to undertake evaluation but all providers were required to complete a termly monitoring template. Interviews with each provider were undertaken to assess the accuracy of the information contained in the monitoring templates.

Strand Two – Qualitative research conducted during 12 case study visits (two establishments per provider) with members of the senior leadership team and link teachers (20), pupils (73) and parents/carers (19) to validate and substantiate the impacts reported in project monitoring and evaluation data, as well as to identify any wider benefits associated with the programme.

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