

*This article was written by Chris Gabbett, a Pax Christi member and Principal of Trinity Catholic School, Leamington Spa, to coincide with the launch of **The Unseen March**, a film produced by the Quakers for Armed Forces Day 2015.*

For schools like mine, the General Election was characterised by agonised debate over whether education funding would be ring-fenced. In an increasingly complex and constrained context, schools face delivering ever more with less.

I was therefore struck when the Education Secretary pledged further funds, resulting in a total of £11 million, to use military ethos in schools to improve education attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils. These finances are being allocated whilst frontline children's mental health services are withdrawn, investment in the development of teachers has stalled and support for vulnerable pupils outside school has been cut to the bone.

This funding reflects former Education Secretary Michael Gove's assertion that every child in Britain could benefit from a military ethos, an agenda pursued by his successor Nicky Morgan and allocated to Edward Timpson, Minister for Children and Families.

As Principal of a Pax Christi secondary school, it makes me wonder what a *military* ethos can teach my students that an outstanding teacher cannot, and that's why our school identifies with the Quaker message in [The Unseen March](#).

The Department of Education's definitions of a military ethos (altruism, bounce back, comfort zone busting, destination) bear little resemblance to the primary function of a soldier - to obey orders and to act as a group, to kill or to maim. So, my first question: are school leaders comfortable endorsing a programme that has the potential to normalise militarism?

In a Government [learning resource](#), Michael Fallon, Secretary of State for Defence, claimed, 'the military ethos is a golden thread that can be an example of what is best about our nation and helps it improve everything it touches.' One might expect this kind of mantra in less democratic countries where civic education is used to underpin civic control. A military ethos of obedience bears little resemblance to a learning ethos of independent thinking and robust questioning.

This is not to belittle those who choose a military career. My father was in the Australian RAF, and benefitted from some of its processes. But rather to critique government action to enhance military recruitment and acclaim. We risk many more young people coming to see the military as inherently benign, whatever it is asked to do in their name.

So, my second question: should the government instead be entrusting the building of ethos to professional, dedicated and values-driven teachers?

The growing role of the military in education is not a coincidence. It is part of a strategy for a more militarised society, outlined in [a 2008 report by Quentin Davies](#)

[MP](#). The strategy, now policy, intends to make the public more willing to fund and join the military. This policy is now reaching classrooms.

I want to make it plain that this is not a criticism of voluntary military service. I merely seek a deeper conversation on the unquestioned move toward military involvement in schools - an important distinction.

I no longer allow cadet forces or military recruitment personnel to speak at school assemblies. As a Pax Christi school, we not only oppose violence but also refuse to enable the slow creep of militarisation. However, we *will* support our students who are members of external cadet forces on Armed Forces Day on 27 June. This may seem counter-intuitive, but I distinguish between celebrating the contribution and commitment of individual students, and exposing impressionable young people to unsolicited military recruitment messages.

In my school, I need outstanding teachers and trained professionals who can help my most vulnerable pupils. Adolescence is a time for learning, questioning, receiving pastoral and academic guidance and growing as inquisitive, confident global citizens. Militarisation by stealth is not the best way to support our children, and neither parents nor school leaders have had a say in its validity. We must start the conversation about what constitutes a true ethos-driven approach, and move towards a more transformative, progressive and values-driven path.

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You can view the film here <http://www.quaker.org.uk/unseenmarch>