

RESILIENCE

AN EDUCATIONAL GOOD?

IN THIS BRIEFING:

This briefing examines the concept of resilience in connection with the educational experiences of Service children. It challenges the assumption that resilience is simply about coping with the setbacks of life, and questions whether Service children are automatically resilient.

Are our Service children more resilient than non-Service children, and is that resilience a gift of Service life? The literature on resilience and Service life suggests that we ought to think about resilience in more complex and critical ways in order to better support our Service children.

In recent years the concept of resilience has occupied a prominent place in the discourse of education in the UK. Resilience has been positioned as central to addressing issues of psychological wellbeing (Challen et al., 2011), while schools are held to have a responsibility to help pupils manage the 'normal stress of life effectively' (Department for Education, 2018, p.6). In early 2019 the secretary of state for education, Damian Hinds, described character and resilience as 'the inner resources that we call on to get us through the frustrations and setbacks that are part and parcel of life'. In the policy discourse, then, resilience is that dimension of education that underpins successful responses to

the challenges experienced in everyday life.

Resilience is a complex concept that encompasses a range of factors. Rutter (2012) conceives of resilience as an interactive concept whose presence needs to be inferred from the variation in individual responses to stressors. On this reading the quality of resilience will look different in differing circumstances. Cocoradă et al. (2019), for example, draw a connection between resilience and socioeconomic status, noting that young people from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to demonstrate better well-being than those from less affluent backgrounds.

Berridge (2017) offers a connection between agency and resilience and notes its importance in disaggregating the individual experiences of young people. In this way, engaging with resilience in terms of individual young people's lived circumstances offers opportunities for exploring their progression through education.

Resilience underpins successful responses to the challenges of life... yet it is not always an unquestioned educational good.

Resilience, however, is not only argued to be an internal quality possessed (or not) by an individual. Ungar (2005) points to the relation between resilience and 'the structural conditions, relationships and access to social justice that children experience' (p.446). Therefore, to speak of resilience purely as a personal quality is to potentially ignore the role of the systemic environment experienced by young people in fostering their ability to respond positively in challenging situations.

Nor is it sufficient to think of resilience as merely recovering from setbacks. Resilience also involves 'bouncing beyond... learning from the process in order to become stronger and better at tackling the next challenge' (Singh, 2018, p.312). This points to the potential to think of resilience as something that promotes personal growth from an encounter with challenges.


However, this is not to suggest that exposure to difficulty is always a good thing. For example, in their investigation of young people's response to experiencing family violence, Kassis et al. (2018) note that 'higher levels of experienced family burden are significantly connected to lower levels of protective and higher levels of risk factors' (p.82). In this case, resilience is argued to be precarious in the face of family violence, and thus some young people may develop resilience at a cost. Resilience may therefore be developed through facing highly undesirable challenges.

Resilience and Service life

Resilience forms part of the discourse of Service life. The Army (2017) has expressed

the importance of personal resilience to the wider military community in order to address the pressures of modern life, while noting that military culture and ethos instils a mind-set to cope with intense pressure and stressful situations. Interestingly, among the protective factors identified by the Army that are implied to contribute to resilience are: supportive family and friendship networks; educational achievement; and culture, ethos, values and standards.

The mobility associated with Service life has been suggested may offer Service children opportunities to develop strengthened resilience (Department for Education, 2013). Service children themselves have identified the development of resilience amongst a range of positive character traits, including independence, responsibility, adaptability and organisation (McCullough and Hall, 2016). This is perhaps associated with a sense of 'just getting on with it' and dutifully dealing with what inevitably comes their way as a consequence of Service life. This, though, may point to a tension between the resilience, determination and organisation instilled through Service life and a loss of agency that such a life implies (McCullough et al., 2018).

 Everyone counts you as a person who hasn't got much problems and are just normal like everyone else when actually it's a bit hard ... Not literally not normal - we're different from the crowd.
 (McCullough and Hall, 2016)

Service Children's Progression




While there has been little direct research into the link between resilience, attainment and progression amongst Service children, highly mobile Service children may be likely to achieve more highly at Key Stages 2 and 4 than their highly mobile non-Service peers (Ministry of Defence, 2018). This may point to a number of potential factors:

- A greater likelihood of Service children to develop strategies for successfully coping with the disruption to education that mobility entails;
- The ability of mobile Service families to better negotiate the consequences of a mobile life than their non-Service counterparts, or;
- The greater ability of schools with experience of working with larger numbers of Service children to manage the process of transition for Service children and thus to minimise the impact of disruption to learning.

Despite this, McGarry et al. (2013) argue that the concept of resilience as deployed institutionally through the armed forces risks inducing the sense that the Service personnel should display stereotypically masculine behaviours. This has resulted in demobilisation and reintegration difficulties for some veterans. This may manifest itself in terms of challenging family circumstances as the veteran attempts to adjust to post-Service life. Resilience might also then be understood from the perspective of children experiencing a transition from Service family to civilian family. The resilience associated with Service life, then, might also pose difficulties in the transition to civilian life.

Indeed, some evidence suggests that the independence and fortitude fostered by Service life may also pose challenges for children during their parents' service. For example, the Growing Up in North Yorkshire 2016 survey (North Yorkshire County Council, 2017) suggests that Service children aged 15 and 16 may be more likely than their civilian peers to: report being offered drugs; be sexually active; have tried smoking, and; worry about money. This is in spite of Service children being more likely to demonstrate traits of high resilience. These points suggest the potential for the independence and coping demonstrated by Service children to be underpinned by a kind of fragile resilience.

What counts as resilience is contextually dependent and cannot be easily reduced to a universal quality. Misca (2018) has called for a holistic and child-centred approach to understanding 'the complexity of the phenomenon of being a military child and thus better inform prevention and intervention strategies' (p.3). This is part of engaging with the specifics of Service children's lives, acknowledging the diversity of experiences that characterise Service life and avoiding the reduction of Service children to a homogeneous category.

 ..bouncing beyond ...
learning from the process in order
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(Singh, 2018)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Resilience is a complex concept that manifests itself according to context. More than mere coping, it implies an ability to benefit from an engagement with change and challenge. While Service life is held to offer opportunities for children to develop positive qualities of character and resilience, it would be a mistake to consider resilience to automatically be a quality possessed by Service children.

Professionals supporting Service children should:

- Understand their Service children as individuals, not simply as a homogeneous group;
- Consider and question their own assumptions about Service children's lives;
- Not assume that Service children are automatically resilient;
- Consider how the educational environment might be developed to help Service children make the most of their strengths; and
- Consider how Service children can be helped to feel a sense of control over their own education.

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THE SCIP ALLIANCE

The Service Children's Progression Alliance leads UK and international work to improve the educational progression of the children of armed forces personnel and veterans. We undertake research, champion better policy and support effective practice to enable thriving lives for Service children.

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