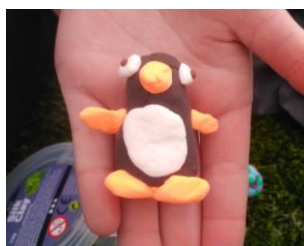
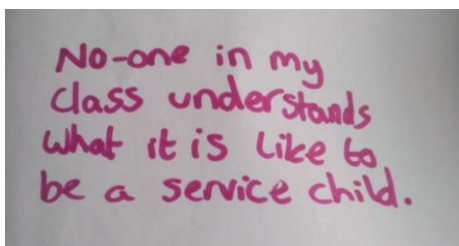


PhD Thesis Executive Summary

Not “just another school day”: An arts-based dialogic inquiry into the learning lives of children from armed forces families in a UK primary school. (2020)

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Introduction

“Please learn from our research. Service children are not heard and you don’t know how we feel. If our work was made public it would mean we were heard.” (Jessie, age 11)

This doctoral research, completed in 2020, is one of the most in-depth research projects ever undertaken with primary-school age service children from armed forces families in the UK.

The executive summary starts with a short section on the background to the project and methodology and then presents selected findings and recommendations, under five key themes:

- Complexities, diversity and change;
- Resilience and neediness;
- Making sense of the world and connectedness;
- Belonging, relationships and collaboration;
- Dialogue, listening and objects.

Some of these findings and recommendations relate specifically to service children, while others relate to primary-school age children more broadly. Many of the recommendations apply to schools, but will also be applicable to other institutions such as out-of-school clubs. Some are more directly within the remit of the MoD and support recommendations in other publications such as *Living in our Shoes* (Selous et al., 2020).

Each finding and recommendation is supported by evidence and analysis, although there is insufficient space in an executive summary for the detail of these.

Background to the project

With frequent parental deployment and the likelihood of school and home moves, as well as the ordinary joys and struggles of childhood, the everyday lives of children with a parent serving in the UK armed forces are often challenging in ways that go beyond those of their peers.

There are over 75,000 service children between Reception and Year 11 attending UK government-funded schools. Yet the evidence base investigating UK service children’s priorities and concerns is patchy: studies have rarely involved children themselves, while children from RAF families, children with a mother in the armed forces, and primary-school age children are severely under-represented. Where children have been consulted, this has largely taken the form of one-off consultations which pay little attention to the complexities of researching with children.

As an educational researcher with a background as a service child herself and with many years of experience as a teacher in a primary school with a substantial proportion of service children, Claire Lee was in a unique position to develop a research project which sought to fill these gaps, and funding from the Economic and Social Research Council made this project possible.

The research project

- **Aim:** To gain nuanced and detailed insight into the learning lives of children from armed forces families in a UK primary school.
- **Initial research questions:** How did the children wish to be understood and cared for? How did they make sense of their experiences? How can we develop appropriate ways of researching with children in a primary school?
- **Participants:** 5 girls and 3 boys aged 8-11 with diverse experiences of RAF (and one of army) family life, including different family configurations: mother, father, step-father or both parents serving and/or veterans.
- **Context:** The qualitative research took place one afternoon a week over a 14-month period in the children's primary school.
- **Methods:** Open-ended, participatory, arts-based methods were used to promote dialogue about what mattered to the participants, exploring the overarching question "What's it like to be a service child at this school?"
- **Data:** Ranged from audio and video recordings and discussion transcripts to images, timelines, sculptures, stop-motion animation, collage, songs, photography and other artworks and materials created by the children.
- **Analysis:** Dialogic and visual analysis.
- **Ethics:** The study was underpinned by attention to research methodologies appropriate for working with children, as well as a values-led approach to ethics. The PhD was undertaken at the School of Education at the University of Bristol, and received University of Bristol ethics approval.

Unique aspects of this project

- Researching for 14 months meant I was alongside the children before, during and after momentous transitions in their lives, such as moving house, settling in a new school and parental deployments, as well as more commonplace childhood events. This allowed for in-depth attention to the children's diverse and changing circumstances, priorities and concerns over time, rather than capturing a snapshot of their lives at one moment.
- The project involved children from under-researched groups: 8-11 year-old children with parents serving in the RAF and diverse experiences of armed forces family life.
- A wide variety of arts-based methods allowed the children to control what they were prepared to share as well as to communicate in ways they were fluent and comfortable with. This enabled all to engage without worrying about being judged on their ability.
- The research group developed into a space of trust and support to which the children brought things that puzzled, intrigued or concerned them. They supported one other to make sense of a very broad range of issues and topics.
- My background as a teacher and service child myself provided understanding of context.

Findings and recommendations

1. Complexities, diversity and change

*You go away to fight the war
Each day I miss you more and more
I try to clear the thoughts out of my head
Each night I wish you could kiss me to bed.
(Poem by Ella, age 10)*

During the 14-month research project, **all eight children** experienced separation from their serving parent(s), ranging from four-month deployments to frequent, short absences. **Half of the children moved house and changed schools** during or immediately after the project, and **three of these moved more than once. One moved house four times in two years.**

The uncertainties of service children's ever-changing lives have considerable **emotional and practical impacts.**

The challenges service children face are not isolated, but **complex, ever-changing, multiple and multi-layered, often cumulative, and reach across many aspects and spaces of their lives.**

Children's responses to these challenges are also **affected by, and affect, the responses of others** such as siblings and parents.

Not only are all children's experiences different, but **any one child's responses may vary depending on the unique set of circumstances surrounding that child at any moment.** As Ella describes in her poem (above), a child's feelings are complex even during one deployment.

While many adults and other children will be sensitive towards the child's needs at the *initial* parting, and take steps to reduce additional pressures on the child, they may be unaware of **the ongoing impact of a lengthy separation** or the **cumulative impact** on children of **frequent shorter separations or "weekending"**.

The children in my research group said, "You can't really tell [other people] how military children feel... 'cause they won't understand".

Service children's everyday priorities may **differ hugely at times from those of their teachers** and carers, but may go **unacknowledged and unaddressed.**

Recommendations

- *Resist one-size-fits-all policies and practices.*
- *Never underestimate the impacts on service children of separation from parents, of moving home, and of the uncertainties that may surround these major transitions.*
- *Ensure all staff recognise that service children's circumstances, challenges and priorities are multi-layered and constantly changing, as are the ways in which they respond to these, so practices must be flexible and agile. Organise training for staff members and governors.*
- *Recognise families' expertise and ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to support dialogue with families and children.*
- *Ensure that one member of staff has time dedicated to supporting service children—and that this time is protected (i.e. not allowed to be diverted to other tasks).*

2. Resilience and neediness

“No-one in my class understands what it’s like to be a service child.” (Ella, age 10)

“My dad got a call saying he’s going away for six weeks. Obviously I’m angry because of that.” (Dylan, age 10)

“I feel kind of multi-emotional” (Imogen, age 9)

Generalisations about service children have received little critical attention within the research literature or public discourse.

Service children are **far more than passive victims** of the military lifestyle. A focus on needs, disorders and interventions not only **overlooks their individuality and agency** but also **diverts attention from structural matters**—policies and practices that disregard or act against children’s interests.

Equally, while many service children manage to “soldier on” with varying degrees of success, **over-emphasising resilience can lead to expectations** of stoic, cheerful behaviour which **place pressure on children to perform accordingly**. Children may **feel there is something wrong with them** if they struggle to meet those expectations or don’t always feel cheerful.

Resilience means different things in different settings: often simply the ability to conform to expectations in a particular setting (Masten, 2001, 2014)—in other words, to fit in and not inconvenience people. **Children may be deemed needy or attention-seeking when they are actively taking steps to manage their complex feelings and their own wellbeing.**

School attainment tests **do not measure resilience or wellbeing** and **should not be used to draw conclusions about these.**

Emphasis needs to **shift from fixing the child to improving their environment and experiences.**

Recommendations

- *Reject stereotypes and generalisations, both positive and negative, and question assumptions.*
- *Recognise that a child who appears resilient may be living up to expectations and hiding pain, whereas a child who appears needy may be actively seeking the help s/he needs. Children need to know that sometimes “it’s OK not to be OK”.*
- *Look beyond ideas of what is normal and abnormal, and shift emphasis from fixing the child to improving their environment.*
- *Avoid drawing conclusions from test result data about children’s resilience or wellbeing.*
- *Consider the needs of children in their own right, not simply in terms of barriers to military effectiveness.*
- *Overhaul systems and structures that work against children’s best interests (e.g. continued difficulties with school admissions and information transfer; a lack of continuity of educational special needs provision; mid-year postings; unnecessary uncertainty around postings and parents’ return from deployment).*

3. Making sense of the world and connectedness

*“You don’t know what [your parents are] doing and you don’t know if anything’s gonna happen”
(Jessie, age 10)*

“I’m really worried that Trump is gonna make a World War 3.” (Archie, age 9)

“We’ve got our mortgage sorted out. I know it sounds boring but it’s good... So next time when we see a house, when we put an offer in... we’re more likely to get it” (Ella, age 11)

“We’re really lucky cause we all live with a lot of kids and adults that all know about stuff we all go through” (Jessie)... ‘We get a lot of freedom on the base’ (Dylan, age 10)

Children use every opportunity available to them to **actively pursue their own intellectual, physical, social and emotional development**. Whether or not they are supported in their endeavours, this includes making sense of **weighty and complex matters**—relationships, life-course events, politics and society—often considered adults’ concerns and far removed from the traditional UK primary-school curriculum. **Service children are particularly alert to topics such as war** which require sensitive handling.

While **children can access up-to-the-minute knowledge via traditional and social media with ease**, they need **support to make sense of current world issues**, and particularly with **navigating the online environment with criticality**.

Out-of-school physical and virtual spaces such as the military base and gaming sites offer **vital learning opportunities, and, often, more control over both what and how children learn** than their classrooms.

My findings support the argument that **children’s opportunities for outdoor play and exploration have been severely curtailed in recent decades** (e.g., Waller et al., 2017). The base, however, can offer children **a safe space for independent exploration and personal development**. It also acts as a space where **they feel they belong and are supported to deal with the unique challenges of the armed forces lifestyle**.

Qualitative research into the role of the military base in supporting children’s independent outdoor activity could offer **insights into the conditions that allow children opportunities for outdoor play** that may be more limited elsewhere.

Recommendations

- *Recognise children’s concerns and priorities, including their need to explore and make sense of the world. Rather than trying to close down children’s access to information, find ways of understanding what children’s puzzles, priorities and concerns are, and support them to access reliable and age-appropriate sources that deal with these matters. Where possible, align the curriculum with these. Sensitivity towards subjects such as war and Remembrance is vital.*
- *Work on critical media and social media literacy should be a priority, not just for older children. Children adopt new technologies quickly and may be several steps ahead of policies.*
- *Recognise the importance of independent outdoor play for children’s intellectual, physical, social and emotional development.*
- *Make research funding available for investigating the conditions that support children’s independent outdoor play.*

4. *Belonging, relationships and collaboration*

“sad and scared. What if I can’t make friends?” (Archie, age 10, talking about an impending move)

“I’ve had to move schools three times... all I have to do is make new friends, leave my friends, make new friends, leave my friends... I would have loads and loads and loads of friends, but most of them wouldn’t be with me, only some of them which are in this school now.” (Amelia, age 9)

The children’s two main priorities were (1) relationships and (2) a sense of belonging.

The children in my research group talked about relationships and people (family, peers, teachers, neighbours etc.) above all else, whatever the subject under discussion. While military children have been stereotyped as “aloof” (e.g., Sories et al., 2015) this study **absolutely refutes** that idea.

Service children need **support with making friends** in a new environment and with **keeping in touch** until they are ready to let go of old friends.

Structures and systems play an important part in facilitating or hindering children’s relationships. **Framing achievement predominantly in terms of individual goal-attainment rather than collective accomplishment can motivate children to act in competitive, performative and sometimes antagonistic ways.** Rethinking some of the **markers of success** (whether academic, sporting, or creative, e.g. speed of completing work, quality of handwriting or artwork, numeric grades achieved, goals scored) and **celebrating and supporting children’s collaboration** encourages children to combine their individual strengths, build on one another’s work and value what each child can bring.

Developing strong friendships and working relationships supports children’s sense of belonging. **Being visible in the school environment** (in photos or having their art displayed, for example) and **having a valued role to play** (such as “buddy” for a younger child or club/team member) are also important in helping them feel they belong.

Recommendations

- *Recognise the high priority that children place on relationships.*
- *Find ways of supporting service children to make friends in a new environment and to deal with changing friendships, supporting them to keep in touch with old friends until they are ready to let go.*
- *Create opportunities for children’s identity work, such as “show-and-tell” type activities, which offer children the opportunity to present themselves as they wish to be understood in their new environment.*
- *Remove barriers to settling in a new environment (e.g. aligning moves with school summer holidays so children establish new friendship groups at the start of the school year; ensuring adequate information is transferred swiftly to allow teachers enough time to prepare for a new child’s arrival).*
- *Take stock of the extent to which individual and collective successes are valued within the institution’s culture, and consider ways of celebrating and supporting collective achievements, in order to foster children’s relationships and allow children to recognise and maximise their collective strengths.*
- *Ensure that children are visible within the school environment and have valued roles to play.*

5. Dialogue, listening and objects

“At [other] schools, you might have a child coming in in the morning crying because their dad’s gone away for six weeks but they don’t do anything; well they might take them out of the classroom to talk about their feelings, but they don’t care. To them it’s just another school day. All schools should do this sort of research so they know what it’s like for their children.” (Edward, age 11)

Recent commitments to “hear service children’s voices” are welcome but there is **far less emphasis on how to do that ethically and effectively.**

Child-led dialogue allows people working with service children to gain an **in-depth and up-to-date understanding** of what matters within their own setting and context. **Getting the conditions right to really listen to children is vital and an act of caring in itself** (see Edward’s comment).

Trusting, respectful and supportive relationships between adults and children and between the children themselves are fundamental to children’s participation in dialogue.

Relying on spoken language alone and putting questions to children places the adult in control of the discussion and **may put the child “on the spot”, especially when trying to discuss matters that are difficult to articulate or which they have not considered before.** Children are highly adept at saying what they think adults want to hear, or finding the “right” answers, especially in an educational setting or formal consultation.

Children’s meaning-making can be supported by “objects to think with” (Turkle, 2007, p. 5). Through creating artworks or bringing in objects and talking about all these, **children are able to reflect on and express complex and unfolding ideas in highly sophisticated ways.** Taking time over creating and choosing their objects also allows children to **rehearse and take control** of what they are willing to share. Putting shape to their feelings through art, as well as sharing their artwork with others, also enables children to **gain some perspective on their experiences and emotions.**

Recommendations

- *Reach out to children and rethink approaches to children’s voice.*
- *Recognise that the dynamics of any communication situation (e.g. power imbalance, mood, space, relationships) powerfully affect what may be said.*
- *Focus on the process of dialogue with children, not just on the outcomes.*
- *Recognise the limitations of language-only approaches to dialogue.*
- *Consider using objects to think with to support children’s meaning-making and enable them to exercise a greater control over dialogue.*

Conclusion

My thesis makes no claim to be the “last word” on service children; nor does it provide a simple blueprint for best practice; service children’s lives are far too complex, diverse and changeable for that. It does, however, yield rich insight into what mattered to the children, how they made sense of their lives and their identities, and the ways in which their lives were powerfully shaped by institutions, spaces and routines.

What is clear is that a context-specific, up-to-date understanding of what matters to service children (and indeed any children) is vital to curricula, policies and practices. However, what is also clear is that people, relationships, belonging and connectedness are overarching priorities for the children.

This study also provides an example of how, given the appropriate conditions, time and resources, children of all abilities can make meaning collectively in highly sophisticated ways, develop supportive and trusting relationships and nurture their own wellbeing. Care must therefore be taken in developing ethically and methodologically appropriate approaches to child-led dialogue.

There are more findings and theoretical insights that are beyond the scope of this brief summary and I am more than happy to discuss them; please email me. I am also happy to elaborate on the evidence underpinning these findings.

I owe an enormous debt of thanks to the eight children who generously and playfully shared many aspects of their lives with me, and to their parents and school for entrusting me with the children and providing the space and time to conduct the project. Finally, this project was made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, for which I am extremely grateful.

“Do more of this kind of research in more places to have knowledge about us and share this knowledge worldwide.” (Amelia, age 9).

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