

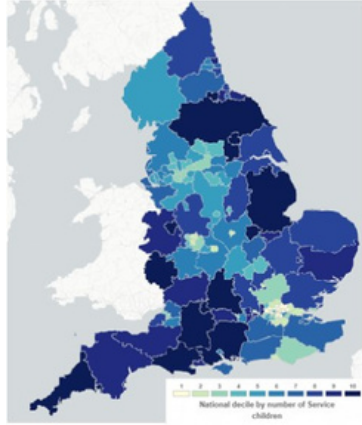
Executive summary

How does military life shape service children's identity and school experiences?



This executive summary has been produced based on Dr Lucy Robinson's doctoral research; funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Scan the QR code to find out more about her work, including access to her full thesis and other research outputs.

Background to the research



Map showing the comparative concentrations of service children across England (SCiP Alliance, 2022).

Service children are identified by virtue of the occupation of their parents. Their lives are shaped by the unique demands placed on armed forces personnel. Service children are more likely to move (home and school) than their non-service peers and parental separation is common amongst service families. Alongside these experiences of mobility and separation, being part of an armed forces family results in the creation of a distinct identity, which further sets service children apart from their peers. As a result, they have unique educational experiences, associated needs and a distinctive identity which are often not fully understood, or supported, in the English state school context.

Since 2011, service children in English state schools have received targeted funding, known as the Service Pupil Premium (SPP). In the academic year 2023-2024, £335 per child was provided to schools for 78,897 individuals, amounting to just over £26.43 million in total (Department for Education [DfE], 2024). Despite the significant amount of funding given to

schools over the last 13 years, there has been considerable criticism of the SPP. Indeed, as a recent report – commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) – highlights, the SPP is “poorly understood and poorly used” (Walker, Selous & Misca, 2020, p.69).

Research aims and questions

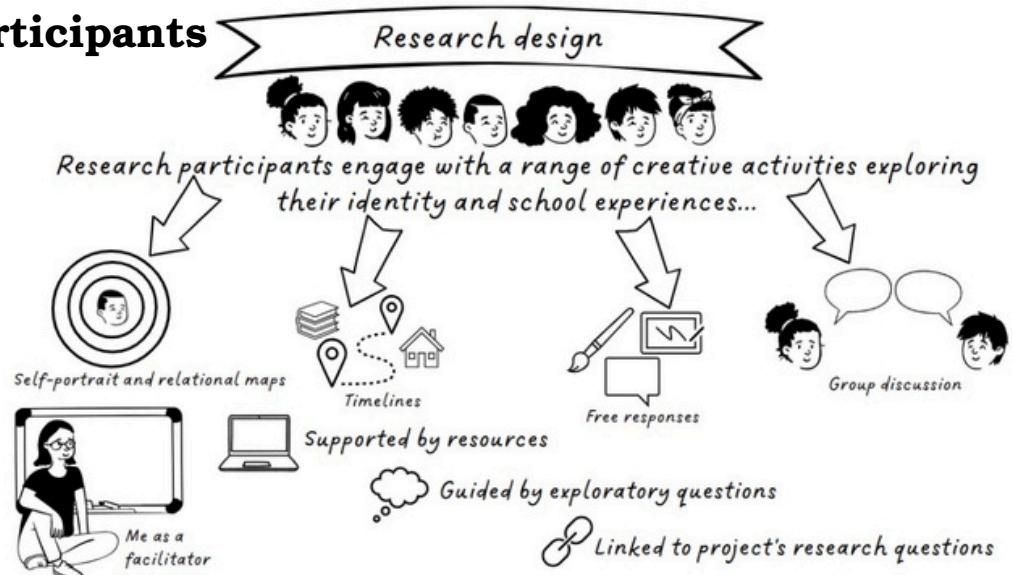
This research project was cognisant of the prevailing approach to how service children have been viewed and how different facets of their experiences have been studied previously. It responded to the call for “more educational research into service children's experiences” and as such, had two key aims (Hall, McCullough & Lawrence, 2022, p.76). Firstly, to nuance and widen current understanding of service children's school experiences and further knowledge into how service children see themselves. Secondly, from these findings, and in dialogue with the existing literature, to identify implications for practice that help to inform SPP funding choices and wider school culture and practice in English state schools.

The two research questions which guided this project were:

- *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?*
- *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?*

Research design & participants

Bringing together voice research and creative methods, this research was undertaken *with* service children, to explore their thoughts and feelings around their service child identity and school experiences. In total, 19 service children, aged between 9 and 16 years old, participated in a range of innovative ‘data generation’ methods within their respective English state school contexts.



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Key findings

Findings from this research both enrich and widen current understanding of service children's school experiences and further knowledge into how service children see themselves. Crucially, this research develops the concept of the 'service child identity' and explores the relationship between this identity and the broader concept of school belonging.

Service child identity

In answering the first research question – *In what ways do service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children?* – a three-part answer is presented. Firstly, that service children are an integral part of the military community; a distinct sub-culture which comes with a pre-built community with associated values, language and customs. Secondly, that service children 'serve in their own way' through their experiences of mobility and separation which in turn are characterised by repetition and a lack of control or choice. Thirdly, that service children's 'service' – their experiences of mobility and separation – shapes their sense of self, creating differing iterations of their service child identity.

The development of the concept of the 'service child identity' is significant. It provides new knowledge and a new approach to conceptualising how service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children. By characterising the service child identity as contextual, relational and child-led it recognises the importance of:

- The commonalities and differences in service children's military-related experiences
- The role and position of the military in the existence of the identity
- The children's active role in identity formation and the propensity for change.

Service child identity

The service child's identity is relational, child-led and contextual. It is continually shaped by service children's experiences of military life. Children's relationship to their service child identity can change and develop as they grow.

Thus, the concept of the service child identity offers an alternative conceptualisation of the service child. In doing so, it challenges the existing static, passive and homogenising narratives and instead presents a model which more suitably attends to the complexity of how service children see themselves and understand their lives as service children.

School experiences

In answering the second research question – *What do service children think and feel about their school experiences?* – the findings highlight that service children acknowledge and accept that moving schools is an integral part of service life. However, despite the normality of moving, the children's thoughts and feelings on their school experiences were not always positive; particularly around continuity of learning and making friends. For these children, these negative emotions were felt most acutely during the period of transition into their new setting.

In centring the experiences of service children and reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and experiences of schooling in relation to those identified in the literature (primarily the concerns and experiences of adults), a better understanding of what is important to the children themselves was gained. By then applying the concept of school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) to the service child context, the collective existing understanding of service children's experiences of education was widened and enriched. This included new insights into service children's experiences of friendships; the importance they attribute to them and the ways they make and see them.

Implications for practice

Service children had a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support which focused on two related elements. The first was for more provision and school practice to focus on meeting their service-related needs. Such needs begin during the transition into a new setting as the children expressed significant concerns and worries around this experience. Therefore, effective transition – in, for example, the form of an induction and transfer programme – should be seen as a cornerstone of provision for service children. This should go together with ongoing social and emotional support from adults within the school community. Such support could include having a dedicated member of staff, with links to the military and an understanding of the demands of service life, with protected time to offer support and provision which is consistent and available. The support and provision should also be a blend of proactive and reactive, able to pre-empt and prepare for service children's concerns but also be responsive to developing needs.

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Implications for practice (cont.)

The second related element that service children wanted was developing awareness and understanding of their service child identity from their own perspective and those of their non-service peers, particularly in schools where there are low numbers of service children. Schools could therefore seek opportunities to do so in their physical environments. Such opportunities could include the purchasing of targeted resources, the creation of relevant displays and the existence of themed school assemblies. This would also support in developing the school community's awareness and understanding of service life; particularly important in schools with low numbers of service children where there is not necessarily an embedded military culture and inherent understanding.

Whilst the service children in this research identified several examples of good practice in their current and previous schools, there was a clear desire for more proactive and tailored support:

(1) More provision and school practice to focus on meeting service children's service-related needs.

(2) Developing awareness and understanding of the service child identity from service children's own perspectives and those of their non-service peers.

Enacting practice

The lives of service children have shared similarities but also reflect a great diversity of experiences. As such, service children are not a homogenous group with identical sets of learning needs. Therefore, it is paramount for schools to have mechanisms in place for listening and responding to the uniqueness of their school's cohort of service children. Such mechanisms should run on the principles of effective student voice; not to be tokenistic or piecemeal but accessible, representative, ongoing and dialogic.

However, whilst "children's perspectives should be viewed as an integral part of school discourse", they do not exist in a vacuum (Lundy, 2007, p.934). Indeed, children are only one part of a functioning school community. Therefore, engaging with them – alongside other members such as staff and parents – is essential to understand service children's identities, experiences and needs and to create effective support for them within their school settings.

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I extend my gratitude to the 19 service children who shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences of being service children with me in poignant and creative ways.