

The Educational Challenges of Armed Forces Children

Rowena Piers, March 2021



*Scotland's Armed Forces
Children's Charity*

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Executive Summary

This report summarises findings and recommendations from a research project funded by the Royal Caledonian Education Trust (RCET) and carried out by the University of Strathclyde, exploring literature on the experiences and educational outcomes of armed forces children. This report outlines the academic and emotional impact of the unique challenges of parental deployment, mobility and mental health on armed forces children. An integrated, collaborative approach is required to support the educational wellbeing of armed forces children, with key recommendations broadly falling into three main categories:

1. Training and awareness
2. Resources and Programmes
3. Further research and data collection

Background

The aim of this project is to review relevant existing research on the experiences of Armed Forces children through an educational lens, with particular focus on potential barriers to educational attainment and progression to higher education. On the basis of this literature review, this report provides recommendations for schools and higher education institutions (HEIs), as well as directions for future research.

This project explores research from around the world, while also focusing on the implications of these findings within a Scottish context. As there is international variation in the terminology used to refer to children and young people with family members in the Armed Forces (Bowes, 2018), throughout this report, the term “armed forces children” is used as an umbrella term referring to all children and young people who have at least one parent who has served or is currently serving in the armed forces (Royal Navy, British Army and Royal Air Force).

There is limited research into the educational experiences and outcomes of armed forces children around the world. Within the UK, there is currently no existing accurate record of the number of armed forces children at any educational stage, nor is there accurate information regarding their educational attainment and progression to higher education (McCulloch & Hall, 2016; Royal Caledonian Education Trust (RCET), 2020). Accurate information about the academic achievement of armed forces children is necessary in order to ensure that their educational needs are being met (Ingram, 2014).

The Educational challenges of armed forces children

Armed forces children face unique stressors which can substantially impact armed forces children’s educational outcomes (Neil, 2015; RCET, 2020). Parental deployment and high levels of mobility are the two major challenges for armed forces children, which have been shown to negatively impact pupils academically, socially and emotionally (McCulloch & Hall, 2016; Harrison & Vannest, 2008).

Frequent mobility and transitions between schools can lead to transition-related education gaps (Arnold et al., 2011) and difficulties adapting to new environments and sustaining peer friendships (Neil, 2015), which can negatively impact armed forces children academically and pastorally (McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Pupils from armed forces families may struggle to adapt to different school systems (Arnold et al., 2011), and the challenges of reintegration can impact their educational outcomes (De Pedro et al., 2011).

Parental deployment has consistently been found to have a negative impact on armed forces children and families (De Pedro et al., 2011; McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Deployment can affect children emotionally, behaviourally and academically (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Williamson et al., 2016) and these negative consequences can persist for several years, beyond the duration of deployment itself (Engel et al., 2010). The adverse educational effects of parental deployment are significantly worsened during lengthy deployments, or if deployment occurs during exam periods (Engel et al., 2010).

These unique stressors faced by armed forces families can have detrimental emotional and psychological impact on children, and schools need to be prepared for the sensitive nature of dealing with these issues (Williamson et al., 2016). It is important to understand the mental health needs of armed forces families, incorporating a trauma-informed approach within educational settings (De Pedro et al., 2011; Williamson et al., 2016). Some armed forces families may require additional support (Ingram, 2014), such as those experiencing long-term mental health conditions or armed forces children with disabilities (Arnold et al., 2011).

Whole-systems approach

Research calls for an integrated and collaborative approach, with involvement at every level (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Khleif, 1975). This whole-systems approach cannot rely on individual initiatives alone (Sherbert et al., 2017; Arnold et al., 2011). Programmes and resources need to be approved at a national level (Neil, 2015) rather than a school-by-school basis (Sherbert et al., 2017). These formal initiatives nevertheless require teacher and school support (Arnold et al., 2011), involving both school-wide and classroom-based resources (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). This collaborative approach should involve support for teachers as well as armed forces pupils and their families (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Williamson et al., 2016). Ongoing empirical research would be required in order to evaluate the effectiveness of new and existing programmes and resources (Ingram, 2014).

Armed forces families should be actively involved in the development of any programmes and initiatives through this whole-systems approach, in order to ensure that these supports are relevant and specific to the unique needs of these armed forces pupils (Sherbert et al., 2017). Schools should work collaboratively with local authorities and armed forces families to support the transitions and educational journeys of armed forces children (McCulloch & Hall, 2016; Neil, 2015).

Key Recommendations

Research recommendations broadly fall into three main categories:

1. Training and awareness
2. Resources and Programmes

3. Further research and data collection

Training & Awareness

A recurring theme throughout recent research is the need for educators to be aware of the unique challenges of armed forces families (Neil, 2015; Williamson, 2016; McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Additional training for educational staff is recommended, to enhance understanding of the unique social, emotional and educational needs of armed forces children and families (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Sherbert et al., 2017; McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Better understanding of these issues enables educators to better accommodate and provide for armed forces children's educational wellbeing (Sherbert et al., 2017).

Training should focus on preparing teachers to support armed forces children through challenges such as parental deployment and school transitions (Neil, 2015). Initiatives such as "Operation Educate the Educators," established by the Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE; Sherbert et al., 2017), may provide a framework for training programmes with the goal of raising awareness of the needs of armed forces learners as part of teacher education curriculum.

Further resources should be directed towards school-based counselling services, as these services should play a key role in caring for the social, emotional and mental health needs of school children (Williamson et al., 2016; Khleif, 1975). Specific training should also be available for school counsellors, nurses and social workers, in order to better meet the unique needs of armed forces children (Berkowitz et al., 2014; Williamson et al., 2016).

Resources & Programmes

In addition to staff training, schools are recommended to implement programmes that may help address the challenges faced by armed forces children and families (Engel et al., 2010; Harrison & Vannest, 2008). As issues such as parental deployment and multiple school transitions have been found to negatively impact children's educational outcomes (McCulloch & Hall, 2016; RCET, 2020), schools can take actions to mitigate these effects (Engel et al., 2010). These initiatives should involve school-based programmes as well as educational resources for armed forces families that can be delivered at home (Ingram et al., 2014; Berkowitz et al., 2014). Involving armed forces parents in these programmes and improving school-to-parent communication can be a key step in ensuring these programmes are effective (White et al., 2009; Berkowitz et al., 2014).

Research suggests that creating a welcoming and supportive school environment can help ease the difficulties associated with multiple school transitions (Harrison & Vannest, 2008; Williamson et al., 2016). Schools can support armed forces families by quickly establishing routines and ensuring new pupils feel welcome and appreciated in a nurturing educational environment (Williamson et al., 2016). Initiatives such as buddy systems, not only for new pupils but also for armed forces families, can help schools become more welcoming places (Neil, 2015). In addition to welcoming new pupils, schools can support armed forces children through school-wide and classroom-based programmes (Harrison & Vannest, 2008). Initiatives are also recommended to involve the expansion of mental health services to include individual and group-based counselling, social skills training and coping skills training (Ingram, 2014; Harrison & Vannest, 2008). As individual schools may be under-resourced to meet the unique

needs of armed forces children, it is necessary for these initiatives and resources to be introduced at a national level where possible (Arnold et al., 2011; Sherbert et al., 2017).

Beyond school, universities can develop similar initiatives to better support the academic and pastoral needs of armed forces students (McCulloch & Hall, 2016; Arnold et al., 2011). In recognising the unique needs of armed forces students, HEIs should provide opportunities and tailored support accordingly (McCulloch & Hall, 2016). As there is no record of the educational attainment of armed forces children, it is unclear whether this should be included in university access agreements (Ingram, 2014; McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Nevertheless, by providing resources, developing evidence-based initiatives and creating a positive learning environment, educational institutions can help armed forces children succeed (Neil, 2015).

Further Research & Data Collection

This report summarises all available research into the educational outcomes of armed forces children, highlighting great need for further research. Most importantly, there is the need for accurate records of the number of armed forces children at each stage of education (Ingram, 2014; McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Without this information, it is unclear whether the educational needs of armed forces children are currently being met (Ingram, 2014; RCET, 2020). While a couple of small-scale studies have explored differences in educational attainment between armed forces children and children with no connection to the armed forces (Cabrera et al., 2018; Ingram, 2014), accurate monitoring of the educational progress of armed forces children is required on a national level (McCulloch & Hall, 2016). Furthermore, governments are recommended to increase funding for the educational support of armed forces children, in order to develop and evaluate the initiatives outlined above (Ingram, 2014; Neil, 2015; McCulloch & Hall, 2016).

Summary of Key Points/Recommendations

- Accurate information about the academic achievement of armed forces children is necessary in order to ensure that their educational needs are being met;
- Parental deployment and high levels of mobility are the two major challenges for armed forces children, which have been shown to negatively impact pupils academically, socially and emotionally;
- It is important to understand the mental health needs of armed forces families, incorporating a trauma-informed approach within educational settings;
- Armed forces families should be actively involved in the development of any programmes and initiatives through a whole-systems approach, ideally at a national level;
- Training should focus on preparing teachers to support armed forces children through challenges such as parental deployment and school transitions;
- Specific training should also be available for school counsellors, nurses and social workers, in order to better meet the unique needs of armed forces children;
- How best to support armed forces children is a greatly under-researched area, so further contemporary, empirical research is required in order to identify how best to positively support the educational outcomes and destinations of this group. The need for research within a Scottish context is particularly stark.

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Appendix: Armed Forces Systematic Review

Methodology

Study Identification and Selection

Three electronic databases were searched for relevant publications in December 2020, including Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA), Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and British Education Index (BEI). Words pertaining to the armed forces, children or families, and education were used in a main search string (see below for full search string). Full-text articles were assessed for eligibility if they focused on the education (primary, secondary or tertiary) of children or young people with family member(s) in the armed forces.

Results

Study Inclusion

A total of 3254 publications were identified across all three databases, with an additional three records identified through other sources. After removing duplicate records, 3065 records were screened at title and abstract level, during which 3046 records were excluded. Of the 19 articles assessed for eligibility at full-text level, a total of 15 full-text articles met the inclusion criteria. Figure 1 is a flow diagram detailing the review process and results at each stage.

Study Characteristics

The 15 publications included in this review consisted of six empirical studies, four technical reports, three theses and two literature reviews. Ten publications focused on the USA, four focused on the UK and one focused on Canada.

Full search strings:

“armed forces” OR “military” OR “forces” OR “service child*” OR “navy” OR “army”
OR “Royal Air Force” OR “veteran” OR “reservists”

AND

“famil*” OR “child*” OR “young people”

AND

“education*” OR “attainment” OR “university” OR “postsecondary” OR “post-
secondary” OR “tertiary”

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of results and article selection.

