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Make new friends, leave my friends: A dialogical investigation into transition experiences and agency in children from UK Armed Forces families

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Abstract

This article provides new perspectives on the transitions of children from military families. It examines the experiences and agency of a group of UK primary-school Service children who were undergoing far-reaching transitions while participating in an arts-based research project. Transitions are conceived here not as events, such as school moves, but as processes of changing, the dialogical interplay between ever-changing socio-cultural and physical environments and the psychological work individuals undertake in response to change. This reconceptualisation of transitions shifts attention away from children's resilience, or lack thereof, and towards unique, nuanced understandings of their subjective experiences and priorities. Presenting multimodal pieces created by three children as they explored the question, 'What's it like to be a Service child in this school?', I describe their diverse and agentic responses to their changing circumstances, as they sought to mitigate anticipated and past losses and perceived disadvantage and to use their transitions as positive opportunities for self-development. Although

N.B. The research described in this article was conducted at the School of Education, University of Bristol.

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punctuated by observable moments of change, this transition work happened over an indefinite timescale, highlighting a need for long-term support informed by understandings of children's agency and priorities. Such support and insight may be achieved through developing spaces for multimodal dialogue with Service children.

KEYWORDS
agency, children, dialogue, education, military children, transitions

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the transition experiences, agency and self-development of a group of primary-school children from UK Armed Forces families who participated in an arts-based research study. The 14-month study investigated how Service children wanted to be understood and cared for educationally and pastorally in school and beyond, and how they made sense of their worlds.

In this article, I present an analysis of artwork and dialogue from three of my participants, who were undergoing far-reaching transitions at the time of the research. Despite differences in timescales and their experiences and attitudes, what united the children, I realised, was that their moves were layered with multiple other changes and that they were all working on their transitions in profound and purposeful ways. Interestingly, these included appropriating the research group itself as a resource to support themselves and one another through change and to work on their sense of self. This article discusses not only how the children overtly articulated their experiences of transitions but also the less overt ways in which they exercised their agency to mediate their transitions.

The term 'Service children' is used here as shorthand for children with a parent or carer serving in the Armed Forces. It does not imply that children are somehow themselves in service. Definitions of a Service child vary, depending on organisations' purposes. The English Department for Education (DfE), for example, employs specific eligibility criteria to monitor Service children's educational outcomes and allocate Service Pupil Premium funding (see MOD, 2023). While my study was open to any self-identifying Service children, regardless of DfE criteria—those with serving siblings, for instance—all participants had at least one currently serving parent or step-parent.

In this article, transitions are understood as ongoing processes of change, in response to ever-changing circumstances, rather than as discrete events. While childhood is, therefore, by definition, a time of multiple transitions (Beach, 1999; Crafter & Maunder, 2012), Service children arguably undergo more frequent life-changing, unpredictable changes than many of their peers, including the twin challenges of mobility and separation from parents or carers (Godier-McBard et al., 2021). Parallels have been drawn with migrant children and children living in temporary housing or in traveller communities (e.g. Dobson et al., 2000). Yet Service family life has distinctive characteristics and challenges (Godier-McBard et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2020), and the lives

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of the estimated 121 600 UK Service children (MOD, 2022) remain under-researched (Lee, 2020; Walker et al., 2020). While a growing body of literature, mainly from the United States, investigates children's adaptation to military family life (Alfano et al., 2016), few studies have investigated how UK Service family members experience or handle transitions (Heaver et al., 2018).

This article will argue that research and practice related to Service children are almost invariably driven by adults' perspectives, influenced by the powerful motivation to either underplay or accentuate the more painful aspects of Service childhoods. The result can be a somewhat reductive emphasis on Service children as either damaged by or resilient to adversity. The contribution of this study is that reconceptualising children as agents undergoing transitions as processes of change avoids common stereotypes (Yarwood et al., 2021) of Service children as victims, heroes or problems, shifting attention instead to their easily overlooked but often sophisticated responses to their changing circumstances. This perspective offers valuable insights into children's agency in making sense of their lives, envisioning and working towards their future selves, seeking to mitigate loss and perceived disadvantage and articulating their needs for support and understanding. It provides insight into the tensions between children's aspirations and everyday reality, as well as what supports and hinders their agency in times of change.

This article is in two parts. First, I explain the conceptualisation of transitions used here and describe transitions that characterise Service childhoods, and then outline the methodology used in the research project. After that, I present an analysis of children's artwork and extracts of dialogue, with a focus on their transition experiences and their agency.

CONCEPTUALISING TRANSITIONS: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND DIALOGICAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While commonly perceived as discrete events, in this article, transitions are understood as complex processes of change (Jindal-Snape, 2023), and events such as school moves merely the visible aspect of these often-invisible processes. Within a dialogical framework, transitions are conceived as the dialogical interplay between changing circumstances and the often-unacknowledged work of individuals seeking to navigate upheaval, adapt to new socio-cultural environments and benefit from the changes (Abreu et al., 2012; Crafter & Maunder, 2012; Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun et al., 2013). This work involves understanding the new context, reinterpreting the past, assessing possibilities and available resources and devising routes towards desired futures (Zittoun et al., 2013). Simultaneously cognitive, emotional, imaginative and practical, these processes lead to 'new knowledge, identities, ways of knowing, and new positionings of oneself in the world' (Beach, 1999, p. 113). This view is underpinned by socio-cultural and dialogical theoretical traditions that see the authoring of the self as taking part within a continuous 'dialogue' between individuals and their socio-cultural and physical world (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Holland et al., 1998), a dynamic process of mutual response that gradually transforms both individual and environment.

As children navigate ever-expanding social worlds, they must manage the tensions presented by change and new perspectives. From toddlerhood onwards, they embark on a lifelong struggle between the desire to choose their own paths and the constraints of their environment (Holland et al., 1998; Ybema et al., 2009), and, from older childhood onwards, between maintaining a stable sense of self and taking up the opportunity for personal reinvention (Abreu et al., 2012; Beach, 1999; Crafter & Maunder, 2012; Hviid & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun et al., 2013). It is within these struggles, inherent in transitions, that children and adults alike exercise

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agency—understood here not as an attribute or possession, but as the capacity to make choices and take actions as people seek to define themselves and shape their experiences and futures, within a complex, dynamic interplay of culture, institutions, resources and support systems (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

As life is always lived within ever-changing socio-cultural settings, each with certain expectations and ideologies, the self is always in transition, although the work demanded of individuals may intensify at times of profound, multiple changes, such as Service families' relocations. While some Service children seem to thrive through change, others suffer (Centre for Social Justice, 2016). The unsettling of friendships, identities and sense of belonging may destabilise individuals' mental health and ability to imagine positive futures (Beech et al., 2017; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Topping, 2011). Lucey and Reay (2000), however, propose that anxiety plays an essential positive role within transitions for most children. They suggest that a state of anxious anticipation arises as children shift from adult protection to increased independence and autonomy, and therefore supports the development of effective coping strategies.

Researchers working within a socio-cultural tradition attend to the mediational means (J.V. Wertsch, 1991, 2007)—physical and cultural resources and signs, including language—with which people make sense of the world, take action and author the self (Holland et al., 1998). Abreu et al. (2012), for example, describe ways in which migrant children used teachers and language-learning as social and cognitive resources that supported their transitions. Hviid and Zittoun (2008) describe children making sense of transitions by rehearsing their future selves through play. Later in this article, I describe how my participants created and used texts, artwork, dialogue and even the research group itself as resources to mediate their transitions.

This theoretical framework offers a shift in focus, away from international research which overwhelmingly seeks to measure children's resilience or ability to adapt to the stressors of military family life (Alfano et al., 2016; e.g. Johnson & Ling, 2013), as manifested through proxies of academic attainment or the presence or lack of psychosocial disorders. This research agenda is driven in part by military objectives (Lee, 2020; see, e.g. NATO, 2019). Assessing the impacts of change on Service children's health, well-being and educational outcomes is undeniably important; however, few studies have investigated children's subjective experiences of transition. Seeing transitions as processes in which children are agentic, rather as events 'done to' children, allows attention to shift to their easily overlooked, complex and subtle responses to constant change and uncertainty. It provides insight into the ways in which children make sense of their worlds, imagine their futures and want to be understood and cared for.

TRANSITIONS IN SERVICE CHILDHOODS

In the UK military context, the term 'transition' traditionally refers to leaving the Armed Forces for civilian life (Heaver et al., 2018; MOD, 2021). While leaving the military triggers complex transitions, some argue that Service family life is itself 'a story of multiple transitions' (Walker et al., 2020, p. 20), presenting families with diverse and distinctive opportunities and challenges.

Relocations are common for Service families (Dobson et al., 2000; Ofsted, 2011). Twenty-two per cent of Service families moved for work-related reasons in 2022–23 and 41% moved at least twice in the last 5 years (MOD, 2023b). A serving parent's posting triggers multiple changes for the entire family, in their education, healthcare, leisure and social networks: new homes, communities, schools, work, play spaces, childcare arrangements and after-school activities, as well as healthcare and other support services. Such changes may take place at short notice and in quick

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succession, rendering planning, preparation and adjustment difficult, and families often have little control over their postings. Detrimental effects on Service children of missing or repeating aspects of learning have been well documented (e.g. Army Families Federation, 2019). Many Service families struggle with school transfers, which may even leave children, especially those requiring specialist support, without school places at times (Claridge, 2020; Walker et al., 2020). Encountering different educational policies and systems also complicates matters.

To reduce disruption, some Service families choose boarding-school education for their children. Others live off-base, with the serving member commuting weekly when posted away. Requiring continual adjustment between lone-parenting and dual-parenting, 'weekending' also presents challenges to children (Godier-McBard et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2020).

While mobility is a well-recognised feature of Service children's lives (Children's Commissioner, 2018; Department for Education, 2010; Dobson et al., 2000; Eodanable & Lauchlan, 2012), the literature on mobility rarely looks beyond its effects on educational outcomes. Advice for schools and Service families on school transitions (e.g. Service Children in State Schools, n.d.; Forces Children's Education, 2018), often focuses on individual school moves, yet rarely acknowledges either the multiple changes that accompany a school move, or that a Service child may be experiencing the transition long before and after the visible move.

Adapting to a parent's or carer's extended deployment can also be considered a transition for Service children (Walker et al., 2020). The parent's absence affects almost every aspect of a child's life (Children's Commissioner, 2018; see also Fear et al., 2018; Godier-McBard et al., 2021; Pexton et al., 2018). Armed Forces personnel are expected to sacrifice freedoms that others take for granted; they are also exposed to danger (MOD, 2011). Children are often aware of these risks, so a deployment may also be a frightening time. The return from deployment triggers further transitions, as the family adjusts relationships, routines and expectations once again (Pincus et al., 2001). In some Service families, a parent's combat injury or trauma leads to children taking on responsibilities and identities as carers (The Children's Society, 2017; Walker et al., 2020).

Children living with single parents, in separated families or with foster parents may experience further layers of complexity in their transitions, with potential conflicts at times of posting, especially if the relocation affects the frequency of contact between the child and family members. During deployments or weekending, some families, including those with dual-serving parents, may need support from additional caregivers.

Service children also undergo easily overlooked, everyday transitions as they constantly navigate between military and civilian cultures and expectations (Clifton, 2007). One factor that differentiates Service children from other groups of children experiencing constant change is a powerful public discourse of service, sacrifice and resilience which extends military duty to the whole family (Beier & Tabak, 2020; Cree, 2019;Lee, 2020; Yarwood et al., 2021): 'one person joins but the whole family serves' (Rowe et al., 2014, p. 490). Children are portrayed in the media and by charities in one of two ways: either as resilient 'little troopers', 'expected to "put on a happy face" and be strong at school, work and in the home in order to support the armed forces' (Yarwood et al., 2021, p. 253), or as victims of the military lifestyle.

These expectations may lead children to hide certain behaviour or emotions (Yarwood et al., 2021), thereby reinforcing the common assumption that Service children are resilient (e.g. Davis, 2010; Ofsted, 2011; M. Wertsch, 2006) and need no special consideration (Lee, 2020; Yarwood et al., 2021). A positioning of Service children as either victims or success stories—objects rather than actors—may also partly explain a lack of research with children themselves. Yet when UK Service children, including my participants, do take part in research, they commonly argue that teachers and peers do not understand their experiences (Walker et al., 2020).

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I suggest that it is necessary to bypass these powerful, institutionally motivated discourses and conduct research with Service children themselves. Conceptualising transitions as processes supports detailed understandings of how children mediate transitions, through close attention to the socially situated, agentic work they carry out as their transitions unfold. As the following section describes, ethnographically informed methods are valuable in generating such rich knowledge, through detailed attention to people's actions and interactions, the mediational means people use and the institutions and spaces they inhabit (Bloome & Green, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

The pieces presented in the second half of this article were created during an arts-based doctoral research project (Lee, 2020) conducted in 2017–2018 with a group of Service children aged 8–11 years. Over 14 months, we considered the question: 'What's it like to be a Service child in this school?' The research took place in a rural state primary school in southern England. Around 23% of pupils were from Service families. All eight children in years 4 and 5 who self-identified as Service children participated in the research. The three boys and five girls had diverse experiences of Service family life, with one or both parents serving in the Royal Air Force or the Army, in various ranks. All were white, with British or dual-heritage backgrounds.

We met weekly in a cabin in the school grounds, and co-developed a space to which the children brought matters that interested them. The activities were often led by the children, who would start each session by organising the room as they wished. As they did so, they would negotiate topics for discussion. They might declare they 'had news' (parents' deployments, house moves or classroom conflicts), offer opinions on international politics (often involving Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un) or introduce seemingly light-hearted matters (Peppa Pig or party outfits). Often one topic gained momentum as the group's theme for the afternoon, but sometimes the children would explore topics individually or in subgroups. They would choose from a range of materials, exploring and articulating their ideas through such activities as painting, drawing, sculpture, song, dance, drama, stop-motion animation, photo-collage and writing. Sometimes I invited the children to explore issues in greater depth through specially designed activities such as card-sorting tasks.

Dialogical approach, analysis and ethics

Dialogical research involves an ethical commitment to undertake a collective, open-ended meaning-making process with participants, rather than measuring or categorising them or reducing complex, ever-changing lives to static definitions (Frank, 2005; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2014). Dialogue is not just talk; it includes written, visual and embodied modes of meaning-making (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011). Thus, the artwork and texts created in our project were conceived neither as representations of finalised ideas, nor unproblematised 'visual voice' (Bragg, 2011, p. 98), but as part of an ongoing multimodal dialogue. The making process supported the children to develop and explore ideas (Kuby & Vaughn, 2015) over time, try out stances and play with contradictions, rather than be expected to deliver concise truths about their lives.

Visual analysis (Rose, 2016; Rowsell & Pahl, 2011) and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) of the artworks and discussion transcripts also followed dialogical principles. I paid attention to the situated, relational and semiotic aspects of meaning-making, in addition to

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content and themes. I also attended to powerful discourses that the children unknowingly reproduced. While acknowledging the risk of analysis 'defining and thereby reducing and limiting' (Martin, 2007, p. 54), I avoided the uncritical assumption that children's art and explanations speak for themselves (Bragg, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). My careful analysis of our 14-month-long dialogue sought to respect the children's own meanings and to draw conclusions consistent with the entire body of evidence. I recognise, though, that I am presenting here a necessarily small selection of pieces that illustrate meanings made between us in a particular context. Although a former Service child and teacher of Service children myself, I make no claim to speak 'for' Service children.

A relational, reflexive approach to ethics underpinned this research (Meloni et al., 2015), in addition to formal institutional approval. Recognising the complexities of power dynamics and children's participation (Heath et al., 2007), including the risk of indirect coercion, I regularly discussed ethics and the purposes and progress of the project with the children, renegotiating their consent weekly. All invited children opted to participate most weeks for the entire project or until they moved away. While the children emphasised their desire to contribute to knowledge about Service children's experiences, some also said they enjoyed the activities and relaxed atmosphere outside the classroom. With a carefully developed ethos of mutual care and respect, the research group became a space for reflection, fun and solidarity; thus, the children used it for various purposes.

Transitions as focus of analysis

While an initial research question addressed how the children wanted to be understood and cared for, transitions became an important analytical focus. All the children were experiencing multiple changes. All 'went up' to the next class. Three children moved house at least once during the project, and two immediately afterwards. Some were settling following earlier moves; most were contemplating future moves. All were constantly adapting to parents' deployments of various types and durations, involving shifts between dual- and lone-parenting; some toggled between two households; some experienced bereavement.

Unsurprisingly, the children often talked about their experiences of transitions, overtly addressing our overarching question 'What's it like to be a Service child in this school?' However, it became increasingly evident that, less overtly, the children were doing something even more important and informative. They were actively using our weekly meetings as a resource to support themselves and one another through the changes they were tackling; in other words, appropriating the research group and activities agentically, to mediate their transitions. Thus, the transition processes were unfolding not only outside, but also within the research space.

Reflecting this dual activity, I now present an analysis of three children's discussions and artwork to illustrate both their transition experiences, as they described them, and their agency. These multimodal pieces highlight their ability to initiate activities and use resources, in different ways, to manage the emotional effects of multiple simultaneous changes, imagine new possibilities, counteract perceived educational disadvantage and even work towards their desired future selves.

I have used pieces from Ella, Dylan and Amelia to illustrate this work, partly because, while their efforts were remarkable, their transitions were relatively unremarkable. These three children were socially and educationally confident; their behaviour was considered normal, and their transitions were uncomplicated by factors such as special educational needs, disability or caring responsibilities. I could have highlighted other participants whose transitions had added

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dimensions of complexity: bereavement, conflict between birth and step-parents, or changing family dynamics as two families blended. Yet, Ella, Dylan and Amelia exemplify how even children who might be deemed resilient and in need of no additional consideration are deeply engaged with the challenging work of mediating complex transitions.

DYLAN[i]: STAYING IN TOUCH

Ten-year-old Dylan created the pieces below (Figures 1 and 2) after moving house, living off-base for the first time since babyhood. Although still attending his old school, Dylan would shortly move schools too, and leave our research group. With his father returning from overseas deployment only the day before the house move, Dylan was dealing with several significant changes simultaneously.

Dylan created the painting (Figure 1) days after his house move, which he discussed with the group:

> ***Dylan:*** *It's a three-storey house and I have my own bedroom*
> ***Ella:*** *Oh, that was what I was gonna ask.*
> ***Researcher:*** *So is this the first time you've had a room of your own?*
> ***Dylan:*** *Yes.*
> ***Researcher:*** *And how is that?*
> ***Dylan:*** *Yeah, oh it's exciting but it's um*
> ***Archie:*** *Oh is it because you're scared of the night?*
> ***Dylan:*** *No it's because I had this dr- this weird... I had a feeling in like my room last night, and it was like I'm trapped, I got kidnapped but the house I got put in was my house, that I live in now, I'm like eeeerp!*

FIGURE 1 Dylan's painting.

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FIGURE 2 Dylan's model.

Dylan took time over the painting, selecting colours carefully, painting slowly and in silence. Afterwards, he explained that it represented feeling '*very emotional*': '*some colours are my feelings, so like yellow's happy, red's angry, green is jealous because sometimes* [Dad] *goes out to really nice places*'.

In analysing this activity, I observed how Dylan had begun by talking about his house move, recounting the '*weird*' dream/feeling, but then redirected the discussion towards his feelings about his father's deployments. This suggested that to Dylan the move and the deployment were entangled dimensions of his everyday life, rather than separable events. I sensed that Dylan was using the activity of painting, which he had initiated, to gently probe and then begin to articulate his complex emotions. The artwork also enabled him to bring these feelings to the group's attention and elicit solidarity, to which the other children responded with anecdotes about people and events on the military base, subtle reminders of their shared sense of belonging.

Several weeks after the house move, but before moving schools, Dylan created the model (Figure 2). He described his design ideas:

> ***Dylan:*** *I'm gonna make a face, and it's gonna have like a red cross through it? Because like when I was living on the base, I like made a lot of friends there, but when, now I live on, obviously,* [town], *none of my friends are like around me? And... I'm gonna put a massive like, X in the face.*
> ***Researcher:*** *What does the X represent?*
> ***Jessie:*** *You don't have them.*
> ***Dylan:*** *That they're not around me any more and I'm sad.*
> ***Jessie:*** *Sad.*

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To me, this model, with the stark, red cross hiding the facial features, suggests powerful feelings, a sense of violent disruption. We knew that Dylan had previously associated the colour red with anger. His words ‘*around me’*, repeated twice, suggest a sense of loss of his comforting circle of friends. Jessie demonstrates empathy by chiming in. However, amid these losses, Dylan also identified possibilities: ‘*I can get a phone, um and also… the school that I'll be going to is like one minute walk away’*. I sensed that he was, perhaps, using the much-coveted phone and ability to walk to school as symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2007) to aid his transition—exercising hope as an agentic strategy to counterbalance his negative emotions.

Dylan's third piece is a screenshot of an email entitled ‘RAF REASEARCH!’ [sic] (Figure 3), sent to me immediately after his last session in our research group before leaving the school.

This email highlights Dylan's agency in obtaining my email address and seeking to maintain contact with the group. His actions suggest that Dylan had found the research group and activities helpful resources for mediating his transition, ‘*Hi guys’* suggesting a familiarity that may have felt sustaining as he anticipated his school move. Although he did not eventually stay in touch, it seemed important to Dylan to reserve the option, at least, of doing so.

Analysed together, and in the context of our entire dialogue, these three texts suggest a child unsettled by multiple simultaneous changes, attempting to make sense of his emotional responses, and then taking positive action, exercising his agency in actively mediating the transition and recruiting us to help in that process.

ELLA: FINDING ‘THE REAL YOU IN THE REAL WORLD’

This coloured-pencil drawing and written explanation (Figures 4 and 5) were created by 11-year-old Ella. Ella's family was 9 months away from a move to the north of England, triggered by her father's posting and promotion. She would change schools, move to secondary school and

Hi guys I have finally made a group for us so I can keep in touch with all of you and also so you can tell me what you have been up to in the group

FIGURE 3 Dylan's email.

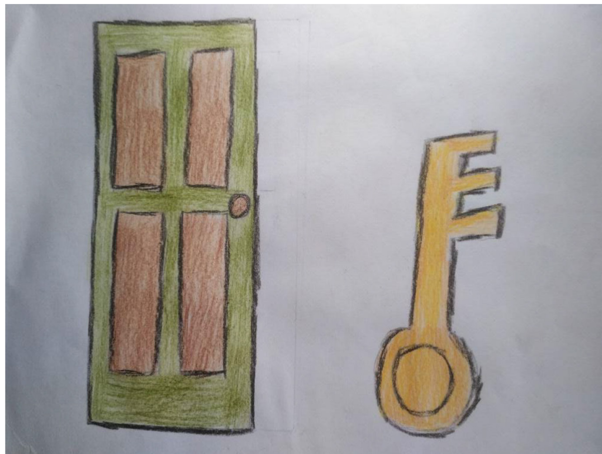

FIGURE 4 Ella's door image.

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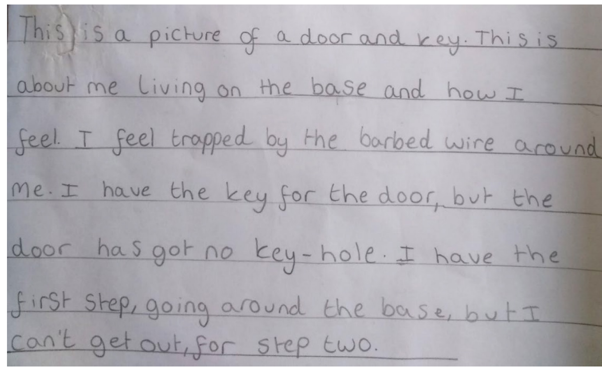
This is a picture of a door and key. This is about me living on the base and how I feel. I feel trapped by the barbed wire around me. I have the key for the door, but the door has got no key-hole. I have the first step, going around the base, but I can't get out, for step two.

FIGURE 5 Text accompanying Ella's 'door' image.

live off-base for the first time. Initially, Ella's father would start 'weekending', working away until the family could follow. An extended overseas deployment also lay ahead. Approaching adolescence, Ella was still living within her childhood contexts of primary school and military base.

The image of a closed door and giant key, Ella explained, represented her feelings about living on a base. Her written text spotlights an easily overlooked detail: *'the door has got no key-hole'*. Ella explained that living on the base had equipped her with certain competences for her future independence, but that she felt '*trapped*'. She explained the '*first step*': *'I'm allowed to go to like everywhere on the base on my own now'*. Yet, while others celebrated this independent mobility, Ella complained about the very mechanisms that rendered the base a safe space to roam:

> ***Dylan:*** *The good thing is we get to play out a lot. We get quite a lot of freedom.*
> ***Ella:*** *I don't agree. One day I was coming back from a party and... walking through the gate and the police stopped me and said, "Hey, you look over thirteen. Where's your ID?" And I said, "I don't have one. I'm eleven." And then the police called me into his little hutch and asked me for all these details. I felt quite awkward... it felt like he was spying on me.*

Ella also criticised the uniformity of base housing: '*everywhere you go, like, it's just the same houses, ...every house on the base is done out the same way..., everything the same, and it just gets a bit annoying... all my life I've lived on a base.*'

Anticipating the move, Ella described a life of increased independence and expanded horizons. She imagined that living in an urban civilian community would provide new opportunities for exploration:

> ***Researcher:*** *So when you say, Step 2, what do you imagine? What would happen?*
> ***Ella:*** *To, get out, to get out there and, like, do other things, explore more than just staying on the base... If you get a bus, within ten minutes you're like in the city? Loads of houses and shops and things'.*

However, Ella also described a process of *self*-exploration and development. She argued that *'out of the base it's like the real world—like you can find the real you in the real world, like what you want to start doing, like your future'*. Ella seemed to feel that her personal development was on hold until the move, hence the missing keyhole.

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I suggest that Ella's struggles between the perceived constraint, regulation and uniformity 'behind the wire' and the opportunities for exploration and transformation outside make visible the 'dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions' (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301) considered key to self-authoring (Holland et al., 1998). Resisting authority and adult protectiveness is, perhaps, an unremarkable part of adolescents' transitions to adulthood, necessary to develop the self-protection strategies they need to step physically and metaphorically beyond the often sheltered landscapes of childhood (Lucey & Reay, 2000). What I found remarkable about Ella was her intuitive understanding of the formative role of change in her self-development. She knew the familiar no longer sufficed, that she needed the new, to shape her desired future self, that she would not develop the self-protection skills she needed while protected by razor wire and armed guards. Perhaps, also, her current threshold state invited—or obliged—her to re-evaluate her situation and imagine that new self, and thus accelerated her self-awareness and her transition to adulthood.

Positioning her existing situation negatively may also have helped Ella to mediate the loss of friendships. One afternoon, for example, while discussing moving schools, Ella described a clay model she was making: *'there's gonna be like two people in the playground, and then they're gonna be like holding hands and have sad faces cause they're leaving each other.'* She then changed tack completely and made: *'a massive smiley face... I just wanna get off the base... I'm so excited I have 3D eyes'*. I suggest her emphasis on the positives was an agentic choice; perhaps, she needed to believe that the move would offer a more attractive future than her present and past.

Figure 6 illustrates other strategies Ella employed to exercise agency in her transition processes.

This picture, Ella explained, represented her spare-time activities: reading, learning spellings, SATs[ii] revision and watching YouTube videos. We knew of Ella's love of literacy—*'I could read 24/7'*, she had said—and her vision of herself as a future student, again linked to her move: *'there's a really good like college and university up there, so like I'll be close to my parents, so I can probably come home like every weekend'*.

An analysis that attends to context suggests that Ella created this image with the move in mind. In 3 days, she explained, she would visit a potential new school: *'My dad wants me to go to [school name]; it's like an outstanding school, I think it's number 3 in the country'*. However, they faced twin challenges common to Service families: to secure school places without a confirmed address and to find a nearby house without confirmed school places (Walker et al., 2020): *'I don't know what school I'm going to when I move. Because we have to*

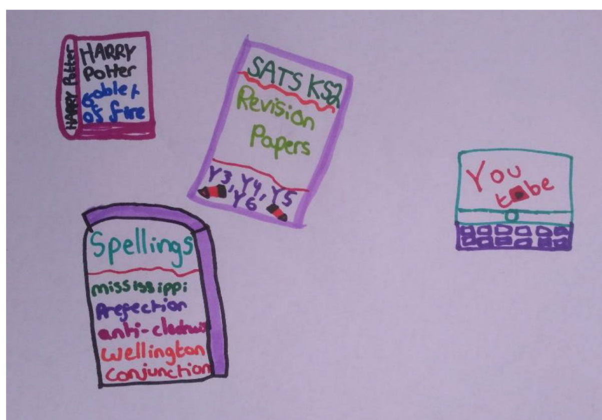

FIGURE 6 Ella's out-of-school activities.

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get a house first... Technically my mum and dad just want to get a house so that we can be put down for school'.

Ella talked frequently of the uncertainties surrounding her school move, which suggests it was provoking considerable stress. Caught between conflicting school admission and military policies, Ella sought to mitigate the perceived disadvantage. To give herself *'a better chance of getting into a better school'*, she explained, she was striving to *'get really good scores'* in her SATs. Seven months before the tests, Ella talked of investing her free time in revision and extra homework, rather than playing outside, and replacing her toys with a bookcase. For Ella, it seems, leaving her childhood behind was both desirable and necessary to secure the place at the 'outstanding' school she perceived as instrumental in her educational journey. Her coming move was a step towards her aspirations—even more reason, then, to relish the change.

This evidence suggests that Ella was exercising agency, not only to manage the emotional aspects of the multiple changes she was experiencing and to mitigate disadvantage, but also to ensure the transition served as a route towards her desired future self.

AMELIA: 'MAKE NEW FRIENDS, LEAVE MY FRIENDS'

The final piece presented here (Figure 7) was created by 10-year-old Amelia. Amelia had lived on a military base in Cyprus before returning to England 2 years previously. She explained that the images she had chosen represented Cyprus, the military base, her school and her interests. The word 'love', nested hearts and harmonious colours suggest a deep affection for her past in Cyprus.

Unlike Ella's orientation towards potential future gains, Amelia seemed more concerned with what she had lost. Lucey and Reay (2000) suggest that the capacity to endure loss and to grieve is essential for the development of a meaningful sense of self. A sense of loss and grief are evident within Amelia's words:

FIGURE 7 Amelia's multimodal heart.

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> *I've had to move schools three times. Yeah, three times and, all I have to do is make new friends, leave my friends, make new friends, leave my friends. So then 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.*

Throughout the research project, Amelia regularly brought in keepsakes from Cyprus, such as photos of people and a toy flamingo—a symbol of Cyprus, portrayed also in her heart collage—and used these to initiate conversations about the climate, language, water parks, people and landscapes of the country. Other children in the group also knew something of Cyprus, either first-hand or from their parents' deployments, a factor which may have supported Amelia to share her memories and knowledge.

Amelia had arrived into a class in which most children had been together since pre-school. She complained that they saw her as the 'new' girl. She seemed to feel that her rich history and knowledge of Cyprus counted for little in the school. Rowsell and Pahl (2011) describe how texts 'sediment' identities, signal community and carry memories. I suggest that the heart collage, keepsakes and dialogue served these purposes for Amelia, allowing her to define herself as a child with a sense of belonging to a place she loved and an identity shaped at least partly by Cyprus. When another child learned that he was soon to relocate to Cyprus, Amelia also supported him to mediate his transition; she showed him pictures, answered his questions and emphasised the positive experiences that awaited him.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research provide unique and important insight into the experiences and agency of Service children as they sought to mediate the transitions that characterise military family life. These insights are enabled by a conceptualisation of transitions as complex processes of change over an indefinite timescale and across multiple socio-cultural settings (Jindal-Snape, 2023). The ability to conduct a granular analysis of children's activity as their processes of transitions unfolded revealed their sophisticated efforts to ensure their transitions worked to their advantage, using available resources and demonstrating agency in ways that have been largely overlooked in previous research with Service children.

Attending to the complexities of children's experiences and their agency is a shift away from the more usual investigations into whether military children function within accepted norms. What is normal, we might ask, in circumstances Service children find themselves in? Who decides? If a child seems sad or 'clingy', disengages with schoolwork or provokes conflict, might these not be reasonable and even agentic responses to change?

Each child in my study, faced a unique and complex set of intersecting challenges over different timescales, and responded in different ways. Dylan was undergoing a prolonged transition, with staggered house and school moves. Although Amelia had arrived from Cyprus well before our research project, her transition seemed far from over, while Ella's transition work far preceded her actual moves. Dylan and Amelia focused mainly on losing friendships and familiar surroundings, while Ella seemed to prioritise self-authoring, educational success and expanded horizons. Dylan seemed more concerned with his immediate neighbourhood, while Ella pictured broader horizons, and Amelia's focus was on an entire country. Thus, this research provides an understanding of the dimensions of the transitions that mattered to the individual children,

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rather than adults' assumptions about what successful transitions look like for Service children as a cohort. My analysis suggests that, despite their diversity, the children shared three common priorities: to deal with loss; to 'author' their imagined future selves; and to mitigate disadvantage.

To mediate their losses, I suggest it was helpful for Dylan and Ella to imagine possibilities that lay ahead. The positives they anticipated—a phone, a new bedroom, the ability to walk to school or to get out and explore—might be considered symbolic resources (Abreu et al., 2012) which they employed to help manage the ruptures they were facing. Ella took the process a step further by casting her past life as restrictive and stale, and her future as full of possibility. The children also seemed to value the research group as a resource which offered the opportunity to share their experiences of loss with others who could understand. Amelia did so by bringing her past into the present through more symbolic resources—keepsakes that enabled her to share memories and her knowledge of her previous surroundings.

Those symbolic resources, I suggest, also enabled Amelia to restore stability to her sense of self that had been unsettled by her positioning as a blank-slate 'new' girl by her classmates. The objects allowed her to position herself as someone with rich experiences, knowledge and expertise of Cypriot culture. These agentic processes of self-authoring (Holland et al., 1998) and restoring stability (Abreu et al., 2012) were also visible in Ella's powerful arguments about *finding 'the real you in the real world, like what you want to start doing, like your future'*. While less visibly concerned with identity, Dylan's model of his 'crossed-out' face suggested a highly uncertain sense of self, while his eagerness to have a phone and walk to school suggest he was authoring a more stable teenage self.

These findings also shed light on the challenges placed upon Service children by institutions that too rarely consider their interests. Dylan's move was sparked, partly at least, by dissatisfaction with poor Service family accommodation, while inflated house prices near oversubscribed schools necessitated the move to a less sought-after area. Ella's desire to score highly in her SATs could be interpreted as her seeking to mitigate the effects of conflicting policies and to claw back some agency in a set of effectively disempowering circumstances. While Ella's diligence may appear laudable, and may well be rewarded with excellent exam results, I suggest the pressure she puts upon herself is also a cause for concern.

Throughout the project, the children appropriated the research group itself and the activities within it for their own purposes. They seemed to find artwork generative in itself in exploring and gaining perspective on their experiences and their sense of self. Yet the dedicated space for that activity was equally important. The research group, with its open-ended agenda and relationships of trust and solidarity developed over time, became a social resource (Abreu et al., 2012) in which others' responses to their work and ideas allowed the children to make sense of their transitions and, ultimately, themselves. This finding suggests that carefully designed multimodal dialogic spaces might support Service children to mediate their transitions.

A dialogical approach seeks not to reduce complexity, but embraces the coexistence of multiple and even contradictory perspectives (Holland et al., 1998). Thus, we see the military base as a space that both allows freedom to explore and prevents exploration; a school move is both a threat and an opportunity; the children hold anxiety and anticipation in careful equilibrium; they are both heavily controlled by external authorities and agentic. These findings do not provide easy answers to those seeking what I have heard described as a 'magic bullet' that will work for all Service children. Rather, they highlight the limitations of over-simplistic thinking, generalisations, large-scale interventions or even the assumption that any individual child will always respond to change in the same way.

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Conclusion

This article has presented important and unique insights into the transitions of children from UK Armed Forces families. It draws attention to the children as complex individuals navigating multiple and multidimensional transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2023) in sophisticated ways and demonstrating agency in ways that have been largely overlooked in previous research. Conceptualising transitions as processes of changing rather than events shifts the focus away from children's resilience to adversity and onto their agency as participants in their transitions, offering nuanced understandings of the cognitive, emotional, identity and practical work the children undertook to support their emotional responses to change and deal with loss, to move towards their imagined future selves, to mitigate disadvantage and to ease their transitions. I have described the children's use of the research group as a dialogic space in which to accomplish some of this complex work and to renegotiate their sense of self. The activity of creating multimodal texts in itself, I suggest, supported the children to mediate their transitions. The article also provides evidence of pressures placed upon Service children by unhelpful policies which, in part at least, stem from institutional indifference to them as people who matter in their own right.

In a dialogical framing, 'all that is unethical begins and ends when one human being claims to determine all that another is and can be' (Frank, 2005, p. 966). I make no claim to represent all Service children's experiences of transition, or even these children's experiences beyond the space in which this knowledge was generated. However, I suggest that attention to children's concrete, situated activity and their agency as their transitions unfold can generate rich, diverse and nuanced accounts of children's experiences, aspirations and challenges. Service children are by no means a homogeneous group. As policies, practices and circumstances change, more qualitative research is needed into the challenges faced by Service children and families. We need rich understandings of how they undertake the complex and demanding work of mediating their transitions, and how they wish to be supported in the process.

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The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical permission was granted for this project by the University of Bristol Faculty of Social Sciences and Law Research Committee (reference number 44701), in line with British Educational Research Association guidelines.

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ENDNOTES

[i] Children's names are pseudonyms.

[ii] Statutory National Curriculum tests taken in English schools at age 10–11 years.

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