Service Children's Progression
ALLIANCE

The potential of an organisational improvement framework to facilitate sharing of practice

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March 2022

Introduction

This report describes a project to explore the potential of the Service Children's Progression Alliance *Thriving Lives Toolkit* to promote and facilitate collaboration and practice-sharing between schools. The project intended to build a qualitative picture of how investment in frameworks such as this might foster collaboration and practice-sharing between stakeholders. While the research itself was severely constrained by the Covid-19 pandemic, the findings indicate a number of key learning points for the deployment of resources such as the *Thriving Lives Toolkit.* These include: designing interventions that support schools' key priorities, especially where these are common to schools; locating interventions in broader strategies for engaging schools; promoting resources within existing networks; and ensuring dedicated attention and resources towards implementing such resources.

Service children are those who have a parent or primary carer who is currently serving in the regular or reserve armed forces, or who has served at some stage during the child's lifetime (Service Children's Progression Alliance, 2022).

It is recognised that schools can be at different stages in their understanding of, and support for, Service children. Around half of state schools in England have at least one Service child on roll, of which half have only one or two (Hall, 2019). Seven local authorities in England have identified Service children in at least 90% of primary and secondary schools (Hall, 2019); these local authorities also have significant local armed forces presence. Therefore, some schools will have developed sophisticated understanding and robust approaches as a result of many years of engagement with large numbers of Service children (Walker *et al.,* 2020) and the wider Service community. Other schools may have smaller numbers of Service children on roll, may have Service children on roll less frequently, and thus may not possess the same confidence, resources, understanding or strategies to respond.

Furthermore, the degree to which Service children's experiences relate to their educational progression can vary. Schools are faced with a range of challenges, including the closing of attainment gaps, ensuring consistently high-quality teaching and learning, and securing the wellbeing and safeguarding of children in their care. For Service children, some experiences will be distinct to Service life and will thus require specific strategies; other experiences may be shared with children of all backgrounds. Service children are also a diverse group in themselves; there is no singular 'Service child life'. Therefore, it is counter-productive to regard support for Service children as a matter of 'special' interventions for 'exceptional' children.

Schools can experience a range of challenges in supporting the educational progression of Service children. Teachers and educational leaders can lack awareness of the realities of Service life, such as the emotional

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impact of service upon children (Garner *et al.,* 2014) and families (De Pedro *et al.,* 2014). Schools can experience inconsistent availability of information about the Service children on roll (Boberiene and Hornback, 2014). Lack of access to relevant training and development support can also be an impediment (Robson *et al.,* 2013). Pupil mobility presents particular challenges for schools, including: receiving information about incoming pupils' educational and welfare situations; managing lags and fluctuations in per-pupil funding, particularly where pupils join schools after the annual census point (Walker *et al.,* 2020); and managing high levels of pupil 'churn' in schools with large numbers of Service children on roll (Walker *et al.,* 2020). Ensuring appropriate support for Service children with specific learning needs can also be a challenge (Walker *et al.,* 2020). Effective inter-agency working has been identified as key to providing cohesive support (Lake and Rosan, 2017). It is important to note that many of these challenges are not unique to Service children. However, when such situations are combined with factors that are distinct to Service life, this points to the need for a more holistic engagement with Service children's progression in the wider context of the school.

The *Thriving Lives Toolkit* is an example of a resource that promotes a holistic approach. It does this through encouraging schools to reflect on their own capacities and needs, and how they might develop and embed impactful practice. Crucially, it is also positioned as "a tool for communication and collaboration within the school and in conversations with others" (Service Children's Progression Alliance, n.d., p.4). As noted, schools are at different stages in their knowledge and understanding of Service children's educational progression, yet also share a range of common challenges. The Toolkit is therefore intended to support schools in locating support for Service children within the context of school-wide priorities; collaboration may therefore be crucial in supporting this process. The focus of this research is to explore the collaborative potential of the Toolkit and to draw inferences around how other such initiatives might promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

Acknowledgements

Research objectives

The project sought to understand how the Thriving Lives Toolkit might enhance collaboration between schools in support of Service children's educational progression. The project intended to build a qualitative picture of how investment in frameworks such as this might foster collaboration and practice-sharing between stakeholders. It is not intended to seek evidence of a causal link between the use of such a framework and objective improvements in practice. Nor does it address the possibility of creating sustained practice improvements; this would require a longer-term evaluation of the impact of such frameworks. Rather, it seeks to document the potential for such activities to create possibilities for improvements in practice by providing a

tool for strengthening collaborative netwokrs. Thus it speaks to the contribution that investment in such initiatives might make in opening opportunities and overcoming barriers to collaboration.

Literature review and theoretical framing

The central premise of this research is that collaboration between schools can help to promote improvements in practice, and that a framework such as the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* can be a useful conduit in encouraging such collaboration. When school professionals come together to explore dimensions of their practice, this can be conceptualised as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). A key consequence of this engagement is the promotion of reflective practice. In order to promote collaborative development of practice, two things are needed: a mechanism to promote collaboration; and a framework to act as a focal point for engagement and reflection. It is therefore posited that the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* can play a role both in providing a means for school professionals to come together in a community of practice and in guiding and framing a community of practice in the pursuit of meaningful development of practice.

The *Thriving Lives Toolkit* can be said to aim at promoting collaboration between schools and professionals. Lofthouse and Thomas (2017) distinguish between *cooperation*, which they define in management- or task-oriented terms, and *collaboration*, which speaks to an orientation towards broader goals and challenges. Whereas cooperation can involve agreements to share responsibilities and workloads, and thus has more immediate or transactional aims, collaboration "is rooted in partnerships in which participants demonstrate respect for each other, and can support professional learning and the development of mutuality" (p.54). These, they note, are not aspects attributable to highly performative cultures. Thus, promoting collaboration goes beyond mere efficiency and outputs, and speaks more to higher level goals and values. Indeed, a strong shared educational culture is more likely to promote genuine collaboration (Sawyer and Rimm-Kaufman, 2007).

The *Thriving Lives Toolkit's* value in promoting collaboration therefore cannot be conceptualised solely in terms of efficiency, attainment, or other measurables. Instead, its value lies also in its ability to promote commonality of understanding, sharing of knowledge and experience, and the building of a strong culture around the education of Service children. This has been associated with a departure from more authoritarian approaches based on structures and rules in favour of influence through dialogue (Kutyuruba, 2013).

None of this is to say that collaboration is opposed to academic outcomes, however. A strong, collaborative community with consensus on broader goals can be helpful in supporting staff motivation, which in turn mitigates risks to student outcomes (Banerjee *et al.,* 2017). Evans (2012) notes that true collegiality *requires* a focus on performance, with the ability to talk openly about professional practice. Thus it requires "a foundation of *shared commitment to appropriate candor in the service of collective growth*" (Evans, 2012, p.102; original emphasis). Thus, attention to learner outcomes, and the willingness to discuss (and to disagree about) professional practice, are vital to promoting genuine collaboration. In this spirit, the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* emphasises the maximising of achievement as one of its central principles.

Reezigt and Creemers (2005) identify a range of factors that support the success of school improvement frameworks. First, a sense of autonomy and ownership of the project by its participants (including wider

stakeholders) can promote the sense that improvements are right for the school. Second, a culture conducive to improvement is more likely to sustain such improvement efforts. Third, adequate resources (financial and time) enable improvements to succeed more easily. Fourth, collaboration to secure improvements must be prioritised as a key professional activity; it "simply cannot depend on the goodwill and spare time of the school staff" (p.418). The *Thriving Lives Toolkit* has the potential to be the focal point and guiding structure for collaborative efforts that can be genuinely owned by their participants, through which a case for adequate resourcing and prioritisation might be made.

However, a range of potential barriers have been identified to achieving impactful collaboration:

- Lack of resources, notably time and money (Tett *et al.*, 2001; Hargreaves, 2014). Schools have been constrained by a range of contextual factors, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic, and pressures over school resourcing continue to be a feature of the educational landscape in England;
- Capacity of school leadership to support and promote collaboration (Muijs, 2015). This may be a particular challenge where schools lack the institutional experience of engaging with children from armed forces families;
- Overloading of school staff through too many improvement initiatives (Muijs, 2015). Schools are subject to a range of pressures ;
- So-called *collaborative norms*, such as the requirement to meet on a regular basis. These can be seen as burdensome (Banerjee *et al.,* 2017);
- Contextual differences between different settings, for example differences arising through the role of the curriculum between phases of schooling (Schneider and Kipp, 2015);
- The risk of emphasising either collectivism (leading to uniformity and groupthink) or individualism (leading to isolation) (Kutsyuruba, 2013).

Genuine collaboration must also go further than merely the sharing of practice. Hargreaves (2014) notes that the *sharing good practice* paradigm can fail to account for the challenges involved in translating practices from one context to another. Another challenge relates to the risk of defensiveness in the 'target' school, such that: "Good intentions from the source are insufficient for successful practice transfer" (p.701). Thus, building of trust (Muijs, 2015) between participants is essential. In the case of the *Thriving Lives Toolkit*, a key consideration is the mechanism through which collaboration on the core principles might be achieved. The *Toolkit* is framed as offering principles that can form the focus of discussions and sharing, as opposed to normative recommendations or prescriptions of practice.

What is aimed for, then, is what Wenger (1998) terms a *community of practice.* Practice cannot be considered as mere discrete activity, but "resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do" (p.74). Communities of practice therefore depend on some commonality of purpose as their focal point, which enables relationships to be sustained with that purpose in mind. When conceived of as arising through a community, the development of practice does not proceed through a task-and-finish approach; it is a dynamic process that is both unpredictable and open-ended (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, communities of practice interrelate and are interconnected, entailing "relations with the rest of the world" (p.103). The *Thriving Lives Toolkit*, designed on a foundation of evidence of the educational experiences of Service children and the perspectives of school professionals who support them, thus articulates

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a commonality of purpose that can become the focal point for a community of practice. It therefore has the potential to facilitate the emergence of communities of practice around the support of Service children by locating such a purpose within the broader activities of schools.

Nevertheless, despite their interconnectedness, communities of practice do establish boundaries. These can be represented by "idiosyncratic ways of engaging with one another… detailed and complex understandings of their enterprise… [and] a repertoire for which outsiders miss shared references" (Wenger, 1998, p113). Thus, communities of practice both establish a coherence and commonality around an idea, which brings their members together, and establish barriers to entry for outsiders. The *Thriving Lives Toolkit* has the potential to break down the barriers to entry to communities of practice around Service children's education by providing access to a baseline of understanding. This allows newcomers to the field a starting point from which mutual understanding might be formed. For schools with relatively few Service children, for example, engagement with the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* may aid entry into a community marked out by its distinctive terminology, networks and shared understandings.

Indeed, the potential of the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* to promote the crossing of boundaries is one of its potential benefits. Boundaries represent both barriers and sources of opportunity, and their crossing can promote deep learning (Wenger *et al.,* 2002). Crucially, this is a benefit available to all schools, not only to those with little prior experience of working with Service children. One of the greatest possibilities of the *Toolkit* is therefore the opportunities it may raise through collaboration for professionals to "adapt their existing frames of reference, assumptions, and theories, and to integrate them into their identities" (Mortier, 2020, pp.335-336). This allows a coming together around a common purpose in order to develop and explore possibilities and solutions to complex questions (Mortier, 2020).

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

This research was conducted within the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Schools in England experienced substantial disruption as a result of the pandemic, including moving to online learning for a substantial period of time. The pressures that this created undoubtedly impeded progress with this research.

- It is likely that schools had less time to devote to engagement with the Thriving Lives Toolkit than would otherwise have been available;
- Collaborative meetings between schools were conducted online, which may have impacted the quality and scope of collaborative engagement;
- Time pressures on school personnel will have limited the motivation to participate in the questionnaire and interview phases;
- The research project itself was extended as a result of the disruption experienced.

The findings of this project should therefore be read in the context of the pandemic.

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Method

The project consisted of four elements:

- Questionnaire research, conducted in May-June 2020, to establish a baseline of understanding of the support offered for Service children. This took the form of an online questionnaire (n=13) circulated to key contacts in primary and secondary schools participating in the already-established Hampshire District Coordinators' Network and local groups, networks established independently of the SCiP Alliance. Thus, a convenience-based and purposive sampling strategy was undertaken.

- A series of workshops was then held over the course of the 2020/21 academic year to introduce network members to the Thriving Lives Toolkit and to prompt conversations about its potential in use.

- A follow-up questionnaire, conducted online in May-June 2021 (n=5), to ascertain whether and how support for Service children had developed within schools as a result of collaborative engagement with the Thriving Lives Toolkit. Given the limitations arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, this could not be regarded as a delayed evaluation; thus, caution must be take when drawing any inferences of impact.

- An interview with a network member (November 2021) to explore some of the key themes in greater depth. It was originally intended to conduct a focus group with network coordinators. However, only one participant volunteered their time.

Findings

Baseline questionnaire

Thirteen responses were received. Eight respondents represented primary schools (three all-through primary schools, three infant schools, two junior schools); three represented secondary schools. Two respondents were representatives of family federations. Two school respondents self-identified as Service children, while one disclosed that they were a former serving person.

The baseline survey was conducted during the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. At that time, schools had rapidly transitioned to online learning for the majority, with school premises generally open only for the children of key workers. At that stage it was not clear how long the pandemic would last, and the focus for many schools was ensuring that core learning continued. Therefore, while the pandemic was not referenced specifically by respondents, it undoubtedly impacted on the readiness of school staff to respond. Indeed, the questionnaire had originally been planned to be promoted in early April, around the time of the first stay-at-home order.

The following are summaries of the key themes arising from each question.

Prior understanding of the lived experiences of Service children

Commonly expressed themes related to issues associated with family separation and mobility. Eight respondents highlighted emotional difficulties or anxieties experienced by children as a result of parental absences. Four suggested that Service children were likely to attend more than one school or experience more than one curriculum, and four pointed to challenges of mobile Service children in establishing friendships. Other themes expressed included a desire amongst Service children not to be treated differently to their non-Service peers, and a sense of pride amongst Service children about the work of the serving parent/carer. Such responses represent commonly held perceptions reflected in prior studies (McCullouch and Hall, 2016).

Impact of Service children's lives on their education

Six respondents pointed to gaps in knowledge or curriculum experiences as a result of moving schools. Repeating content was also noted as a particular challenge. Moving schools was also associated with lack of confidence and a need for additional time to build trust with new adults, thus impacting on children's ability to settle into learning. Challenges associated with family separation were also noted. Four respondents suggested that parental absence could act as a distraction. Two respondents pointed to challenges associated with home turbulence, such as difficulties experienced by the remaining parent during separation and the potential for disruption when the family is reunited; this is not always regarded as an event with potential for negative impact. Another respondent suggested that the non-serving parent may be less well placed to offer academic support during periods of separation.

However, respondents also noted positive impacts on Service children's academic experiences. Service life itself – including the opportunity to travel – was highlighted as a source of strength. Mobility was also associated with the ability to fit in and form new peer relationships, hence indicating a degree of resilience and self-reliance.

Professional development undertaken in relation to Service children

Responses here indicated a diversity of ways in which school personnel develop their own understanding of Service children, but also highlighted a general lack of participation in formalised professional development activities. Seven respondents reported participating in non-specific sessions, such as Service cluster meetings. Three respondents pointed to activities such as visiting local bases, working with armed forces liaison personnel, and engaging with networks such as Service Children in State Schools (SCISS). Three respondents also disclosed their own familial experiences of Service life, such as through being a veteran, having a partner in the services, having Service children of their own, or being a Service child themselves.

While one respondent reported attending a SCiP Alliance workshop, five respondents reported undertaking no prior professional development. This suggests a potential gap in formalised provision for school staff.

Respondents' perceptions of their own needs

Respondents identified a variety of specific needs, including:

- Better understanding of the impact of multiple school moves on children's emotional and academic wellbeing;

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- Greater understanding of the complexities associated with school moves, including the impact on family life;
- Better access to training, case studies and best practice information;
- Greater understanding of Service children as individuals, including interests, preferences, and family dynamics;
- Whole-school strategies for supporting Service children;
- Visits to school by Service personnel to demonstrate that Service children are a priority;
- Engagement with the Service community to inform schools about how different branches of the services work;
- More notice of future deployments to aid planning and support.

Many of these needs reflect a need for broader understanding of the Services themselves, as well as understanding of specific children and families. There was also a demand for greater understanding and sharing of school practice, indicating a need for mechanisms to facilitate this.

Support already in place

Respondents indicated that they already offer a broad range of support for Service children. Six respondents pointed to support offered and awareness-raising by SENCos within school. Six respondents declared undertaking family liaison activities, while four reported engaging in liaison as Service children transferred in and out of school. Other initiatives included: clubs for Service children; running staff forums; visits to Service bases; inviting serving parents into school; analysing Service children's progress in order to target support; and emotional wellbeing initiatives.

However, three respondents reported having no specific support in place.

Ease of identification of Service children

Most respondents reported that Service children were readily identifiable at the point of entry. One respondent commented that: "our parents are very forthcoming and are happy to identify themselves when they start at our school". One respondent commented that their school population was around 60% Service children, and thus they were able to track them specifically as a group. Another noted that identification of Service children was becoming easier through engagement with the agenda. Others pointed to the use of a school management information system common to schools in the locality through which Service children can be flagged.

Ease of access to resources to support Service children

Respondents reported varying levels of ease of access to relevant resources. Some respondents noted that they had access to some level of resource and were actively creating their own. Others pointed to collaborative opportunities such as service clusters, the district coordinators' network, and the families' federations.

However, others noted that the Service child agenda might not be a high priority or was not a key focus for the school. One respondent declared that "I only have 23 service children and never seem to be high priority enough".

Engagement with families, services and other schools

Seven respondents reported actively engaging with families, for example through phone calls home, having serving personnel on the governing board, and through inviting families to school-based events. Five respondents reported participating in networks such as local service family groups. Two referenced liaison with local military bases or families' federations, while one reported having dedicated webpages and newsletters. Only two respondents reported no wider engagement.

Follow-up questionnaire

Following online engagement with local networks to promote the Thriving Lives Toolkit, a follow-up questionnaire was circulated in May-June 2021. Five responses were received, three from primary schools (two infant schools, one all-through) and two from secondary schools.

The follow-up questionnaire aimed to explore changes in perceptions relating to Service children, the contribution of the toolkit to practice and understanding, and the role of the toolkit in promoting engagement.

By this stage of the pandemic, schools had experienced another disrupted academic year. While schools had reopened for the autumn term, a subsequent closure was announced in January 2021 that lasted around two months. The added pressures arising from a return to remote learning, plus the need to focus on making up for lost learning, undoubtedly limited the capacity and inclination of schools both to collaborate over the use of the toolkit and to respond to the follow-up questionnaire.

The following are summaries of the key themes arising from each question. Due to the low response rate, care should be exercised in drawing comparisons with the baseline survey.

Respondents' understanding of the experiences of Service children

As with the baseline survey, prominent themes related to mobility – attending multiple schools and/or engaging with multiple curriculums (three responses) and the challenges of (re)establishing friendships (three responses). Emotional difficulties arising from family separation was identified by one respondent. Themes arising in the follow-up but absent from the baseline included anxiety resulting from serving parents on deployment (two responses), and a range of individual matters (such as experiencing PTSD, experiencing uncertainty and upheaval, and suppressing their emotions). Compared with the baseline survey, no respondents identified overtly positive elements of the Service child experience. It may therefore be that greater knowledge of the experiences of Service children might result in greater awareness of negative factors previously unimagined.

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The most educationally significant aspects of the Service child experience

Educational impacts tended to be framed as barriers or difficulties arising from Service life generally, and mobile Service life in particular. Four respondents noted effects of attending multiple schools in terms of gaps in pupils' knowledge and repetition of curriculum elements. Two respondents highlighted impacts of mobility on the formation of attachment and trust with teachers, while one observed that Service children may have less academic support from the remaining parent during periods of family separation. New themes arising included the emotional impact of moving schools and of deployment, the lack of educational opportunities when moving schools, a lack of awareness amongst school staff, and more generally-framed factors relating to transition, adaptation and the formation of relationships.

CPD or training engaged with

Other than the use of the Thriving Lives Toolkit, respondents reported engaging in local or regional cluster meetings with other practitioners (three respondents), visiting local bases and/or working with military and third sector organisations (two respondents), and attending other activities (e.g. Service Children in State Schools conference or specific individual training courses). One respondent reported engaging with Service families as a form of development. One respondent reported no engagement in development activities.

Contribution of the Thriving Lives Toolkit to understanding Service children

Three respondents highlighted the value of the Toolkit in supporting school self-evaluation activities and contributing to school improvement planning. Other contributions identified were: providing a source of guidance for staff; supporting communications with families and other schools; accessing support; aiding the identification of specific provision; and encouraging in-school research (e.g. the use of focus groups).

Changes to school provision following engagement with the Thriving Lives Toolkit

Respondents identified a range of provision in place following engagement with the Toolkit. Four respondents indicated making specific use of tracking and progress data, for example in diagnosing gaps in understanding and monitoring educational progression. Four respondents reported engaging in family liaison, for example organising workshops with Service families. Three reported having structured transition processes for children entering school. Other approaches included: specific pastoral support and counselling; specific support for building attachments and relationships; events for Service families; liaison with Service children in school; and the involvement of specific staff (two schools identified specific roles for ELSAs). More generally-framed responses included identifying Service children as a key group, and the development of specific strategies for supporting Service children.

How schools identify Service children and disseminate information

All five respondents noted that Service children are identified on admission to school, i.e. through parental identification. Four respondents reported that this data was shared with the whole school staff. Other approaches noted included disseminating to specific staff, to school governors, to a designated lead for Pupil Premium, and to individual class teachers for use in reporting.

Impact of the Thriving Lives Toolkit on access to resources

Two respondents reported engaging with other organisations, such as other schools. One respondent highlighted the value of case studies and ideas for developing school practice. One respondent noted that their engagement with the Toolkit was still at an early stage, but that it would help to clarify requirements and good practice to support future work.

How respondents engage with Service families, military units, and/or other schools with Service children

Two respondents reported engaging with other schools, for example through their local cluster. Two noted liaison with the services, for example through their local HIVE. Two reported indirect engagement through articles and information. One reported having service personnel on the school governing board.

Easiest and most difficult principles to implement

Respondents were asked to assess which of the principles of the Thriving Lives Tookit they found easy or challenging to implement.

Principle	Respondents highlighting as easy	Respondents highlighting as difficult
1 Approach is clear	4	0
2 Wellbeing supported	3	0
3 Achievement maximised	1	1
4 Transition effective	3	0
5 Children are heard	3	1
6 Parents engaged	1	3
7 Staff are well informed	3	1
None of them	0	1

While five out of the seven principles were regarded as generally easy to implement, three respondents noted challenges in engaging parents. This is not a phenomenon unique to the Service community; schools may experience barriers to parental engagement in a wide range of contexts. However, Service families can experience particular situations that may mitigate against engaging with school staff about their circumstances (Marshall *et al.,* 2008; Sansone *et al.,* 2008; De Pedro *et al.,* 2011). It should be noted that the *Toolkit* is not primarily intended as a resource for parents, carers and families, though schools may choose to make families aware of it through communicating their work in support of Service children.

Challenges in implementing the principles of the Thriving Lives Toolkit

Unsurprisingly, disruption arising from the pandemic was identified as a challenge. Three respondents referred to the pandemic in general, while one referred specifically to disruptions to parental engagement. Despite the enforced closures of schools, no respondents reported challenges around e.g. the move to online learning. One respondent noted that work to implement the principles of the Tookit was ongoing, while another highlighted challenges with a lack of incoming information.

How respondents worked with other schools in engaging with the Thriving Lives Toolkit

Three respondents reported liaising with staff from other schools as part of their local cluster. One reported working with a co-located school, one noted that engagement had not occurred yet, while one respondent reported engagement in a non-specific way.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Two respondents noted general constraints on time available to address engagement with the toolkit. Two specifically mentioned difficulties in engaging with parents. One respondent noted that the pandemic required their school to "adopt a variety of alternative and probably short term solutions to supporting students", which was felt to have impeded progress on implementing the Toolkit. One respondent referenced Service children remaining at home, possibly as a contrast to children of other key workers who were permitted to continue attending school during periods of closure.

Other barriers to collaboration

One respondent again highlighted the pandemic as a general barrier to collaboration. Another suggested that schools with fewer Service children were not engaging with local cluster meetings.

Follow-up interview

The third phase of data collection was initially planned as a focus-group. However, only one willing participant responded to the researchers' invitations to take part. Thus, an exploratory interview was held to explore some of the themes arising from the surveys.

As a result, the discussion of the interview should be regarded as indicative, potentially pointing to considerations to inform further work with schools. It should not be interpreted as providing evidence of causal relations.

The participant was a head teacher of an infant school in a coastal community. The interviewee estimated that around a third of the school's pupils were Service children, the majority being from Royal Navy families. Other branches of the services (Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Marines) were also represented.

The school's role in supporting Service children

Understanding and responding to the specifics of Service life was felt to be a key role for the school. For Royal Navy families, deployment has been recognised as the key challenge. Conversations about the impact of deployment begin from the point at which a child joins, the focus being on the whole cycle of deployment in order to inform support:

> "when is the next deployment due and for how long, when will they be coming back so we can have lots of things put in place"

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However, it was noted that Naval deployments could be a source of uncertainty, characterised by last-minute changes throughout the cycle:

> "The other thing you get to know is that nothing is set in stone in the navy – all of that can change and maybe at the last minute and they don't go or they go suddenly and don't know when they are going. And the same with when they are coming back"

The process of "weekending", whereby the serving person is not officially on deployment but away from home Monday to Friday, could in some ways be more disruptive than the separation that occurs through deployment. Whereas longer deployments permit families to settle into some kind of routine, weekending involves "separation and saying goodbye each week which often families find harder than deployment". Furthermore, weekends can result in challenges to the family dynamic once the serving parent returns:

> "Also with weekending, the weekend when they are there is often not easy, with making the most of Dad time sharing with mother and children"

A key step in supporting children at such points is to work with the family to establish rules that continue to operate irrespective of the presence of the serving parent. This was felt to be a key role for the school's family liaison officer:

> "when you are in the services you live your life by rules. When you are working with them and you come home it's not like other families and we don't want the rules changed at the weekends. You have to fit into our lives"

Service Pupil Premium – additional funding claimable by state schools in England to support the wellbeing of Service children – was regarded as primarily used to support children emotionally in order to be ready to learn. A similar logic was applied to the regular Pupil Premium. Primary schools may be better placed than secondary schools to support children and families, and this may be reflected in apparently higher attainment. For example:

> "If a parent is really struggling with a deployment, they aren't in a position to do things like hear their child read or do homework less often [sic]. As we have them on our radar we can help, take over the extra reading etc, take away the burden."

Schools may be uniquely placed to support families in situations where accessing other channels of support may be unattractive. Families may be unwilling to engage with service welfare support because of concerns over career stigma, or negative impacts on the serving parent's career prospects:

> "If we spot a struggling parent we ask if they've been to navy welfare and they say no because if we do they could bring the partner home and that will affect his chances in future. But they will come to us as we are on a site apart from the navy or anything to do with them. They can offload and talk to us openly about their struggles."

The impact of the Thriving Lives Toolkit on collaboration

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The use of the Toolkit was believed to have influenced the interviewee's relationships with other schools, for example through advocacy for the Toolkit in order to support other schools. While collaboration through a local cluster of schools was felt to be a helpful mechanism, a challenge identified related to the turnover of individuals participating in such clusters. This may be interpreted as requiring a re-building of relationships and starting conversations about the Toolkit afresh:

> "We just get to the point towards the end of the academic year when we are ready to get going in September and then there are new people."

Liaison with other head teachers in the local area was seen as a mechanism for sharing understanding and supporting each other. An example was described of the local cluster selecting one of the principles from the Toolkit and jointly working on it. This cascaded into actions by individual schools related to their own priorities. The local authority was also reported to be actively engaged as part of the cluster from the outset, which was felt to have helped with initial engagement and cascading to individual schools. Therefore, the means through which collaboration is pursued has a bearing on its ultimate impact on action at the school level.

However, it was suggested that schools with greater numbers of Service children may be more predisposed to engage with the Toolkit. A continued challenge was the engagement of those with smaller numbers of Service children on roll.

Barriers to promoting collaboration

The Covid-19 pandemic was identified as a barrier, particularly in the early phases. Conversely, one potential benefit was identified as arising from the pandemic. As the local cluster had moved to online meetings as a result of the pandemic, participation in meetings was observed to have increased. This may be reflective of those highly-engaged schools continuing to work on their implementation of the Toolkit. However, by removing the need to commit time spent off site, the move to virtual meetings may also open opportunities for those schools that are less engaged to participate. Thus, a digital resource combined with virtual meetings may offer a lower-risk route for those schools that have not traditionally engaged with the Service child agenda.

The Toolkit and relationships with the services

Parents were identified as a crucial link with the services. Informing and involving them in the implementation of the Toolkit's principles can result in them informing the service community in turn. Staff connections with the services was also felt to be helpful in building trust amongst parents.

Working on the principles of the Toolkit was also felt to help with understanding differential experiences between the services and their consequences for educators. An example given was a greater need for transition-related work with children of Army families, owing to increase prevalence of family moves compared with the Royal Navy.

Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the potential of resources such as the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* in promoting collaboration between schools. Collaboration refers to engagement with broader shared objectives and challenges (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2017) within the context of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). As noted, the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted on both the use of the Toolkit as a means of collaboration and the ability of school personnel to participate in this research. Nevertheless, the findings presented here offer a number of points that may inform future work.

1. Time pressures on schools, leading to a drive to focus on core activity, can restrict the potential for schools to collaborate. The Covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the most significant example in recent memory, but it is conceivable that other major changes – for example to teaching, learning and assessment – may also impact schools' ability to collaborate on matters that are not immediately recognised as core business. Therefore, resources offered to schools should be designed to dovetail with schools' highest priorities insofar as possible. This would avoid the risk of viewing Service children's education as a 'special' or 'exceptional' matter, and would encourage it to be viewed in the context of broader questions of teaching and learning, wellbeing etc.

2. An electronic resource, supported via online or virtual engagement, can provide a route to engagement that requires less initial commitment. It may thus be more attractive for schools experiencing multiple calls on their time or who see the Service children's education agenda as being relatively low priority. However, such resources need to be viewed within a broader strategy for engaging schools that are less engaged.

3. The Toolkit demonstrates potential for promoting collaboration between schools on common, shared challenges. There is therefore the opportunity to frame such a resource within broader strategies that speak to sector-wide matters such as closing attainment gaps or engaging with parents and carers.

4. Additionally, resources such as the Toolkit may be helpful in prioritising shared issues, thus acting as a conduit to focus on the most urgent or challenging factors. In this regard it can be helpful in justifying the targeting of time, attention and resources

5. The research has signalled the Toolkit's potential use as a frame for collaborative engagement. However, given the circumstances in which the research was conducted, it is not clear how effective it may be in engaging schools that are less engaged with the question of Service children's education. As a result, little evidence was seen of the Toolkit's potential for enabling entry into existing communities of practice around Service children's education.

6. Insofar as possible, resources such as the *Thriving Lives Toolkit* should be promoted within existing networks and forums that already bring schools together. This does not in itself address the challenge of engaging the less engaged. However, it may help to build wider recognition of the resource, for example through early adopters promoting it to colleagues in a range of settings. This may result in, for example, greater credibility of the resource being established through group experience, which

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could be used to engage those outside of the community of practice.

7. Engaging with the principles of the Toolkit may in itself prompt schools to reach out to other schools, support networks and the service community. Thus, such resources may have a role in promoting the need for schools to collaborate. Again, this would require the resource to be considered as part of a broader strategy to promote engagement. This might mean the allocation of dedicated time and funding, dedicated CPD, promoting awareness of and engagement with the agenda, or establishing a dedicated role within the school. Furthermore, school professionals may be unsure as to how to access further support and training, or may not be aware of existing networks. Thus, greater signposting to such sources of support would be needed alongside the resource.

Limitations and opportunities for future research

1. Pressures arising from the Covid-19 pandemic – time pressures, adjustment to remote working, impossibility of face-to-face working etc - limited schools' opportunities for engagement with the Toolkit, collaboration with other schools, and participation in the research. Addi research post-pandemic may yield further insights.

2. Participants in the research tended to be drawn from schools with relatively large numbers of Service children, or were otherwise more engaged with the Service children's education agenda. The perspectives of those who were less engaged were, by definition, more difficult to access.

3. The research focused on one geographical area in which the Service community was predominantly Army and Royal Navy. A broader study would better allow for specific local dynamics to be identified.

4. Future research might usefully attempt to engage a wider cross-section of the educational community, including: independent schools; special schools; pupil referral units; and further education providers.

5. Future research might seek to explore possibilities for promoting collaboration between schools and the wider stakeholder community (charities and third sector organisations, social work, health and psychological services etc).

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