The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education

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We Serve Too! A reflection on drama and storytelling with military children

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My family is a military family. My partner is a combat veteran of the Iraq War and my kids are military kids. I haven’t always embraced this aspect of my identity because I didn’t think I was a real military spouse or that we were a military family. That was something my husband and my stepson experienced before me and our daughter. My husband was already a veteran and two years out of the military when we met. I did not endure deployment and have no context or nostalgia for the person my husband was before the war and the PTSD that followed this experience. I’m not particularly patriotic and do not have a lineage of military service in my family.

Then a bedtime story in 2016 changed something for me. One night, I sat down to read my daughter, then three, a brand-new picture book my mother-in-law sent us called Why Is Dad So Mad? by army veteran Seth Kastile. The story is designed to help kids understand what military PTSD is and the reasons why an afflicted parent may react or respond to their children in an angry manner at times. In the book, PTSD is described as a fire which burns inside the father lion and causes him to lash out at his cub. The cub comes to learn that their father’s anger is not his fault but that of military PTSD due to a combat experience. The cub is reassured that they are loved no matter what and that nothing the cub does causes the anger, but that the fire is from the PTSD burning inside the military parent. All of these messages are important and valuable, but still something about the book irked me that I couldn’t put my finger on.

After I put my daughter to bed, I laid awake thinking about the story and processing what bothered me about it. Then it hit me: this wasn’t a story for kids. It was a story around kids. A story to help adults explain a difficult concept to children, but not actually written from a child’s point of view. I began to wonder: What does Little Lion think when their dad is mad? What does Little Lion think or feel about any part of their experience? Then my wonderings went beyond the scope of the bedtime story into larger questions about the military child identity as a whole. Why are there so few stories about military kids? Why did existing representations of this experience seem to only show military kids in sad and lonely existences?

All of these questions did not make for a restful night of sleep. Instead, they kicked my drama educator brain into overdrive. I recalled numerous arts projects involving military people and veterans, but very few for their children who were along for the often-tumultuous ride of military life with their parents. I began brainstorming possibilities for how...
I would create theater with military kids. I kept circling back to the idea of kids at the center of their experience. Military kids telling stories the way they wanted to tell them.

In order to support this story sharing, I took into consideration some of the key issues affecting military people and their families in the United States. First, the general population is removed from military life due to the voluntary nature of service. A 2016 demographics report released by the United States Department of Defense states that the total number of active-duty service members is approximately 1.3 million and of reserve forces more than 800,000, accounting for around 0.04% of the US population (2015, 3). This growing divide between service members and civilians contributes to a lack of understanding and mystery around military life in general.

Additionally, our volunteer force is further impacted by how 9/11 has changed the landscape of war in the United States. We have been fighting in a seemingly endless war since going to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. According to Department of Defense data, “2.7 million service members have been to the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001, and over half of them have deployed more than once.” Increased deployments take a toll on the mental health of military people. The website of the office of the US Army Surgeon General reports the following: “mental health problems in 11.9 percent of those with one deployment, 18.5 percent with two deployments and 27.2 percent with three or four deployments.” Different protocols in modern warfare require responsive services in order to support military people bearing the weight of multiple deployments. This also extends into the types of services and programming available to families as they support their military person through deployment and beyond.

I began to think of military children as service members in their own right and how deserving they were of their own programming based on their family roles. Eventually my wonderings around military child identity evolved into a drama/storytelling residency program: We Serve Too! Military Kids Theatre Workshop. The residency program merges applied drama techniques with newer real-life storytelling modalities inspired by story slam performative experiences like *The Moth Radio Hour*. Below I highlight two iterations of the program.

**Pilot at Museum of the American Military Family, Tijeras, New Mexico**

In July 2019, I had the opportunity to pilot We Serve Too! as a free week-long summer camp experience at the Museum of the American Military Family in Tijeras, New Mexico, with military children ages 9 to 14. The military kids researched in the museum archives, interviewed the curator and created devised scenes for their audience using museum exhibits. The data collection informed the piece developed by the kids comparing their experience as military children with the discoveries they made as researchers in the museum. On the final day of the camp, the military kids invited their families and community to an interactive, ambulatory performance through the museum space.

What I most appreciated about this iteration of We Serve Too! was the dialogue sparked between the kids and their military parents after the performance at the reception. A couple of these families toured the museum on their own after the performance, and I heard military parents filling in details of their own experience with a military ceremony based on something their child said in the piece. The performance ignited further conversation and offered the family a different medium to explore their military life together. This is why I believe drama work has the potential to be therapeutic for military families. Conversations around complicated topics can be vulnerable and seemingly impossible to begin, but the
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drama creates a shared space to look at something outside yourself, which can be less burdensome. I believe this is something military families can benefit from due to the difficulty and distance often created by the military experience.

I was pleased with the outcome of the We Serve Too! residency pilot, but I felt like the piece we created centered on the military child narrative put forward by the museum exhibits and less so on the real experiences of the actual military children I worked with. The devised piece leaned heavily into the challenges of being a military child, but the children I worked with also expressed great joy and pride in being part of a military family. These positive aspects were overshadowed in the storytelling. The deficit-based aspects of being part of a military family were front and center. I had more work to do in order to facilitate an environment for military kids to share their honest stories and not the ones even they thought everyone wanted to hear.

I made the decision to slow things down and offer fewer activities within each residency session. By not filling every moment, the military kids would have more room to claim the space for themselves, which would hopefully translate into more honest storytelling. This was difficult for me as an educator—I’ve always overloaded my curriculum. Better to have more than not enough. Another change I made to the residency was to shift the curriculum away from military-themed content and add more ensemble-building activities, improvisation and ambiguous storytelling prompts in an attempt to build a space for multifaceted storytelling.

We Serve Too! At Valor on Eighth, Tempe, Arizona

These changes helped propel We Serve Too! into a more military-child-centered direction when I did the residency again with ten youth ages 8 to 13 at Valor on Eighth, a military-family housing community in Tempe, Arizona. The first two weeks of the session I made the choice to only do ensemble- and community-building activities. Spending time strengthening the ensemble is always time well spent in any drama practice, but I think it was especially valuable to these youth as military children. Many of these youth did not know other military children, and this space provided them with a solidarity they were not experiencing in other aspects of their lives. These moments also occurred outside of drama activities during transitions and breaks. A particularly beautiful moment of connection occurred before a session when one child was dropped off by a military parent who was in uniform on her way to work at a nearby base. Another student said, “Oh my mom has a uniform just like that in her closet!” This expanded into a conversation about how the kids felt when they saw their parents wearing their uniforms. Some kids stated they were embarrassed when they got picked up at school by their active-duty parent in uniform, while others had only seen pictures of their veteran parent dressed this way.

I believe the additional time ensemble-building and leaving room for the kids to connect outside of the structured activities of the residency made for more honest storytelling due to their comfort with each other. An example of this was during a story circle activity. I gave the prompt What do people say about military kids? My intention was to use this content to devise scenes that juxtaposed stereotypes of military kids with what it’s really like to be a military kid. At first the kids took the prompt lightly, shouting out things like We’re weird! We’re crazy! Everyone laughs. Then one student says, “It’s not like we’re aliens or something.” Everyone laughs again. Then she repeats herself quietly, “It’s not like we’re aliens or something.” The laughter dies down and the rest of the kids look at her. She says, “We’re not aliens, we’re humans.” I write what she says on the paper. Another student joins in and tells
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a story about her mom asking her why she wasn’t happy. She says, “Maybe it’s depressing to move so many times—like why bother with making friends.” I write what she says on the paper. The military kids shift the brainstorm from what others say about them to their own experience, without my prompting. Now the ideas are all connected to what they felt people should know about military kids. We’re brave. We’re strong. Our families are strong. The stories from this brainstorm session evolved into new expression through Image Theatre exercises and the devised scenes that followed.

The Valor on Eighth portion of the residency was cut short due to the COVID-19 pandemic and like so much in the world at that moment was cancelled. I made an attempt to continue the program virtually, but the uncertainty in the early months of the pandemic made it overwhelming for the military kids and their families to continue in earnest. I was really heartbroken. I had put so much of myself into this process, and it seemed like it was ending before it started. I decided to put the project away for a while.

Shaking the dust, I continue to refine and grow my vision for We Serve Too! I’m in the process of developing a version of the program for military spouses and caregivers, a population that also serves in numerous ways and could benefit from drama programming. I am also interested in infusing more opportunities for intergenerational exchange into the program. I want to keep exploring how drama can forge pathways of communication with military families, but I am also excited about the ways in which storytelling can promote moments of joy and celebration in these families. When I began We Serve Too! I thought a lot about telling stories, but now I think more about sharing stories. This adventure began with a bedtime story but goes on to envisioning how the story helps military families find their story together.

References


United States Department of Defense. 2015. “2015 Demographics: Profile of the Military Commu-