

Intersectional yet individual experiences: the importance of acknowledging, conceptualising and contextualising separated childhoods

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Millions of children around the world grow up, for all or some of their childhood, outside of the care of their family (Desmond et al., 2020). Yet the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) places a central importance on the rights of children to live with their families and communities, and for families to be supported to provide adequate care and to be reunited when separation happens (United National General Assembly [UNGA], 1989). Safe and nurturing family care is seen to be in the best interests of the child (UNGA, 2010) and there is a growing evidence base of good practice and wellbeing outcomes as separated childhoods gain increasing attention. There is, therefore, an opportunity to promote further dialogue and ensure that research reflects diverse global experiences.

This themed edition aims to create the space to gather and share new findings from around the world, especially evidence that centres on the voices of children and family members with lived experience of separation, and on the practical experiences of social service workforce who are key to providing adequate support to strengthen the capacity of families to remain together and to reunite safely. This is especially important at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is leading to significant numbers of children losing their caregivers and forcing many more to migrate or change their sources of livelihoods (Hillis et al., 2021).

In setting out the call for this edition, we defined the separation of children from family as their unnecessary separation from parents or extended families. Separation from family and community care can be the result of multiple forms of abuse, discrimination and disadvantage, such as sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced labour, domestic violence, neglect or having a disability etc.

(Cluver et al., 2013; Thomas De Benitez, 2011; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2017). As such, separation may be forced upon the child or may have resulted from an active decision-making process on their part.

The December 2019 resolution on the promotion and protection of the rights of children (UNGA, 2020), urges states to invest in preventing unnecessary separation through an inclusive and multidisciplinary approach. It is important that the principle of necessity is always central in decision-making at the policy and individual level. This implies that prevention efforts need to address the various push factors leading to separation and that gatekeeping mechanisms are 'capable of ensuring that children are admitted to the alternative care system only if all possible means of keeping them with their parents or wider (extended) family have been examined' (Cantwell et al., 2012).

The various reasons for becoming separated and processes leading up to such separation mean that the responses to children's individual situations are varied and complex. A separated child cannot just be 'returned home'. In many ways the child that 'returns' is not the same child that left (e.g. Beazley, 2004; Karabanow, 2008; LeVine and Sallee, 1999). Yet language used to describe the process of 'return' often includes phrases such as 'rehabilitation', 'reintegration', 'return'. The prefix 're-' denotes a return to a previous state (Robinson and Crow, 2009). For example, rehabilitation as it relates to young offenders, describes the restoration (another re- word) of the offender to the state of law-abiding citizen, permitted to re-join the community after a period of exclusion (Robinson and Crow, 2009); and reintegration describes a process of (re-)entering families and/or communities (e.g. Biemba et al., 2009; Corcoran and Wakia, 2013; Wedge, 2013). Essentially, they suggest a process of transition from a state of being out-of-place to a socially accepted position of living at home.

However, the notion of home on its own is a contested one (that we will explore later in this editorial) and 'return' suggests that they are returning to a previous time and/or place that will not be the same – or may not exist at all (e.g. Beazley, 2004; Perez Murcia, 2019). In addition, the reason they left may still exist and it may remain unsafe for a child to go back. In such instances, a child could be facing integration into a new 'home' through a transfer into alternative care – foster care, residential care, living with extended family members or living independently with support – rather than back to the 'home' that they left. For this editorial we choose to use (re-)integration to describe the process of children making a transition from a situation of separation to a new life with family, or in alternative family-based care where they feel a sense of wellbeing and belonging. With this we are recognising that not every child is going 'back' to something they knew/experienced before. Reunification is used to refer to the moment of bringing children and their parents back together. Such reunification could be the beginning of reintegration into family life or as a moment of contact and relationship building which ultimately leads to a decision or choice to live elsewhere (e.g. Bhattacharjee and Veitch, 2020).

The processes of separation, reunification and (re-)integration are therefore complex and multifaceted, and individual children may experience more than one form of separation in addition to experiences characterised by street-connectedness, disability, gender, forced displacement, involvement with armed forces, for example. Therefore, an editorial should contextualise separated childhoods, exploring guidelines around the different understandings of separation and the fields of research and practice that encompass our understanding of the field.

Situating separated childhoods

The study of childhood is an established yet evolving field that has progressed through the new sociology of childhood movement to focus on children's 'everyday lifeworlds' and explorations of

the various aspects of their lives as social actors in their own right, with their own voices (Yelland et al., 2021). Our focus on childhoods in this themed edition recognises how the notion of childhood is a contested one, constantly being examined and reconfigured as researchers and practitioners recognise the multifaceted complexity of inhabiting and being influenced by forces at family, local community, national, regional and international levels (Burman, 2015; Wells, 2009; Yelland et al., 2021). However, as Yelland et al. (2021) highlight, dominant discourses surrounding children and their place in society – as ‘innocent, inexperienced, incapable, or incompetent’ and in need of adult protection – impact heavily on public understanding and resultant policy and practice.

Such normalised understandings of childhood: simplify children’s experiences; fail to acknowledge the diversity of understanding across cultural, historical and geographical contexts; and tie into notions of space and predetermined places for children (Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021). Children’s separation from their families, in particular, challenges normative and binary understandings of the ideal child and their ideal relationship with family and society (e.g. Beazley and Miller, 2015). For example, lone children problematise the notion of separate spaces or worlds of belonging for adults and for children and related notions of protectionism (e.g. Knight, 2019).

Given the complex situations that separated children find themselves in, and the potential experiences of trauma that many of them face (e.g. being forcibly separated from a parent at an international border, subject to abuse on the street, the perpetrator of violence when recruited into armed forces or trafficked), it is important to recognise that separated children cannot simply be reunified with their families. Separated childhoods, while ‘easy’ to describe in terms of children’s unnecessary separation from parents or extended families, are context specific. Each child’s and family’s situation is both complex and unique, and experience separation in their own way.

Contributions to the themed edition

One of our aims in bringing a collection of articles together around the topic of separated childhoods was, as Bell et al. (2021: 3) suggest, to ‘challenge the values that privilege the expertise gained through academic training above that derived from personal insight and experience in community settings’. There is often a divide between research, practice, and lived experience. We hoped to develop a themed edition that drew from all of these areas and continued the process of weaving together the varied, yet equally important perspectives to prioritise practitioner knowledge and lived experience. As a starting point, the editors all have practice-based experience of working with young people, and of practice-based or academic research. We represent two universities and three civil society organisations.

As researchers, we chose to value articles which prioritise the voices of children and family members who have lived experience of separation, and the practitioners who work to support them, that are rooted in an understanding of the local context. We therefore aimed to bring together a collection of articles that in some way represent countries from all continents. This has been achieved to some extent as the themed edition consists of six papers that represent research and/or practice in the US, Norway, Ghana, Guatemala and Uganda – and participants from these countries, as well as the Philippines and an unnamed West African country. Finally, we wanted to explore as many different ways of understanding what it means to be a separated child. Given the constraints on authors of working within a pandemic and the limit of only six articles, there are many more ways in which children are separated from families than we could present in one themed edition. The final articles featured here focus on street-connectedness, alternative care provision in residential centres and economic migration.

Edmonds et al. (2022) draw on the findings from the Building with Bamboo project at S.A.L.V.E International Uganda – that investigated how a resilience-based approach might usefully impact education and wellbeing outcomes for street-connected children. They examine the resilience pathways of individual street-connected children to unpack the connections between resilience processes and these outcomes, outlining how programme activities were developed and nurtured through cycles of learning and innovation. They found that resilience-based approaches have greater potential to produce transformative outcomes for children – emotionally reconnecting them with supportive peer, family and community networks and helping children to move beyond surviving situations to actively changing their trajectories.

In a paper that bridges practice and theory, Ursin et al. (2022) explore the experiences of Amara, born in West Africa but living in Norway. When she and her family come into contact with Child Welfare Services Amara is temporarily taken into foster care. Amara's role as a 'mini mum' to her younger sister when her stepmother is travelling for work raises concerns with educators and case workers, even though it is a normal role within Amara's culture. Using the frame of 'ubuntu' – I am because we are – and relational rights, Ursin and Langfeldt highlight the importance of recognising relational interconnectedness within and beyond families. It is argued that a relational and cross-culturally sensitive approach to child protection practice could lead to fewer unnecessary separations from family care.

Two papers focussed on Ghana explore the situation of residential care and reintegration efforts for children exiting care. Both emphasise the importance of social workers who can support children through clear case management processes, as well as highlighting the varied and complex experiences and relationships of children in residential care leading to varied outcomes.

Petrowski et al. (2022) remind us that data on numbers of children who are separated from their families, and on their wellbeing, is critical to inform policy and practice. Findings are reported on residential care in Ghana from a two-stage survey to track the number of residential care providers and the number of children in their care, as well as the wellbeing of the children.

The results highlight that many residential care providers are not following national standards and procedures in their licencing, safeguarding practises, staffing and case management processes. This leads to conclusions calling for further efforts to improve case management systems, which requires an investment in the social welfare workforce who are needed to deliver this case management in a way which can truly support children and families. In addition, the limited look at child wellbeing throws a light on how difficult it is to understand children's experiences through a quantitative data collection process which risks reducing a complex situation to a simple series of statistics.

Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022) draw on quantitative data drawn from interviews with young people in Ghana to outline the factors that impact the stability of family reintegration after experience in residential homes for children (RHC). Essentially, the authors question what makes a child prefer to remain with biological parents or extended family over a return to RHCs. Among others, this paper demonstrates that contact by a social worker after reunification and the existence of documentation related to reunification are contributing factors within the child's decision. They suggest that formalised processes pre- and post- reunification are significant to the longevity of reunification, perhaps because issues connected to the separation can be addressed. The evidence and subsequent discussion presented by Frimpong-Manso et al., therefore, provide valuable points of departure for further research into the nature of such reunification processes to understand how they contribute to the creation of trustful relationships between the child and the social care system, and between child, family and community.

In their paper reflecting on practical efforts to support the reintegration of children from residential care with families in Guatemala, Guillermo et al. (2022) highlight the importance of case

managers considering the community connections in the preparation and ongoing support provided to children and their families. Through the lens of the Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1989) and the use of practical Star Model case management tool (flagging different domains for case managers to check on in their engagement with families) the group of practitioner-authors reflect on case work with 36 children to show how efforts to support build community belonging can support children and caregivers during their reintegration processes.

Caregivers were enabled to build supportive relationships with neighbours and community leaders and to connect to local service providers, whilst case workers also acted proactively to address stigmatisation of children who have been in the child protection system. This important piece of practice-based research further flags the need for further investigation into connections between protective factors such as community connections with both reintegration outcomes for children and the prevention of family-child separation.

Finally, exploring the separation and reunification of young people negotiating transnational relationships with family, Shaw (2022) contributes to existing debates around notions of family through young people's explorations of what she calls the 'disjunctive experience of migrating'. The work centres on qualitative work with 10 young people who left the Philippines to join their mothers who had migrated to Canada. The use of arts-based methods foregrounds the young people's images, stories and lyrics, and are presented in this paper within emotional narrations of their social lives. Through the young people's accounts of the bonds they created whilst separated from their mothers, Shaw challenges assumptions that 'social fields are first and foremost family centred'. The reflections in this paper demand deeper engagement with how young people experience the complexities of separation and reunification, and to recognise that migration results in young people feeling both connected to and apart from people beyond the familial context. As Shaw concludes, 'illuminating how children craft and carve social fields beyond family paints a different image of what constitutes separated childhoods for children'.

The papers in this edition showcase a range of methodological approaches, most rooted in direct support to children and families. They reflect the importance of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to understanding unique experiences in order to inform ongoing practice. Supporting practitioners to reflect on their work and habitually adapt should be a central goal of research. This is more easily achieved when research is embedded within practice itself (e.g. Corcoran et al., 2020). Two papers in this issue explore successful examples of this kind of process. Edmonds and Ochaya (2022) drew on developmental evaluation, ethnographic principles, participatory action research, peer research approaches and service design. The team engaged cycles of learning and innovation to continually evolve S.A.L.V.E International Uganda's resilience-based approach. The paper focuses on the resilience journeys of three children involved in the project, bringing out findings which were used to immediately inform programme activities. Guillermo et al. (2022) reflect upon case files and practitioner interviews with children and families reuniting following an exit from residential care with support from the Changing the Way We Care initiative in Guatemala. The focus on practitioner perspectives allows for deeper understanding of the context and experiences of children and families to bring out practical recommendations.

Other examples of methodologies closely linked to practice come from care reform efforts in Ghana. The first (Cappa et al., 2022), draws from a large survey of residential care providers and the second (Frimpong-Manso et al., 2022) presents findings from a quantitative analysis of interview data with 408 children. These more quantitative pieces of data collection are helpful in providing high level results on the general situation of the provision of alternative care in the country. This is useful to inform policies and guidelines for practice, and to ensure that resources are directed appropriately – in this case both papers recommend increased investment in the social

welfare workforce and their use of case management. However, it is also clear that the issues raised need to be further explored through qualitative approaches in order to deepen our understanding.

The funding by development actors of child protection efforts in lower-income countries and in situations of migration often over-emphasise the importance of quantitative impact monitoring, evaluation and research, such as the indicators on number of children served by PEPFAR-funded programmes (Pepfar, 2020). For organisations working long term with children, keenly aware of the need to use approaches which are flexible to each child's unique situation, there is a need to equally value qualitative approaches (De Bruin Cardoso et al., 2020). Research which engages deeply with people with lived experience and seeks to understand their stories can bring forth invaluable new insights. Shaw (2022) uses storytelling through visual methods and participatory photography to unpack young people's experience of migration, highlighting their emphasis on different supportive relationships. Similarly, Ursin and Langfeldt (2022) effectively use a life story interview approach to capture the experiences of Amara, a 16-year-old girl. The narrative approach centres on Amara as a social actor in her own right and creates the space to hear about her experiences through her own words and how she assigned meaning to these. This is critical to understanding the cross-cultural context which impacted decisions made by social workers and by Amara herself.

Pulling the threads together: Conclusions and implications

The papers within this themed edition present a complex understanding of childhood through a focus on separation. Notions of family, home, identity and belonging are evident throughout the issue, highlighting the centrality of relationships to how separated childhoods are experienced. In this section, we step back from the individual papers to consider the themes running throughout the issue that deepen conceptualisations of childhood, whilst also acknowledging other topics to be considered.

Separation, in and of itself, implies the breaking up of constitutive parts. However, even when broken apart, a relationship remains, albeit weakened or in a different form, while other relationships emerge and take a new shape. Even without the experience of separation, relationships ebb and flow, evolve and re-emerge as new and different. When examining separated childhoods, therefore, we need to recognise the many relationships that children are a part of, how they are experienced and felt, how they change and evolve, and the interconnections that one relationship might have on another.

It is important, as we examine these different relationships, that assumptions are not made about the value of family relationships versus those beyond family. Value will be assigned differently by different individuals, families and communities. As both Shaw (2022) and Ursin and Langfeldt (2022) highlight, a nuanced understanding is critical in providing the necessary support to ensure that a child's best interests are met - especially in more challenging situations of street-connectedness, trafficking, recruitment into armed conflict, and cross-border migration (e.g. Betancourt et al., 2010; Bhattacharjee and Veitch, 2020; Karabanow, 2008; Weisman, forthcoming). For example, Shaw's (2022) idea of building social fields beyond family links to notions of familial ties developed between street-connected children and the complex relationships and subcultures developed on the street (e.g. Beazley, 2003a,b; Davies, 2008).

The 'identities of exclusion' inherent to the sense of (not) belonging have implications for the processes of leaving the street and supporting street-based families to go 'home' (Corcoran, 2016; Corcoran et al., 2020; Dryjanska, 2014; Karabanow, 2008). Similarly, Frimpong-Manso's et al. (2022) exploration of supported transitions, recognises (re-)integration as 'problematic' as children do not always want or are able to go back to what they left. This was also evident amongst young

people affected by child sexual exploitation in Nepal who preferred to build new lives in the community, rather than return to family homes and face potential exclusion and stigma in their families and communities of origin (Bhattacharjee and Veitch, 2020).

When separation is forced, such as the separation of children from their parents on the Mexico-US border in 2019 for example, there is a wider context that must be considered. Incidents of forced separation can be framed within politicised discourses such as migration or national budgets and result in criminalisation policies, which can become volatile for those experiencing them (Weisman, forthcoming). These discourses are lived and felt by children and families who are separated across international borders and increase the pressures on social work practitioners on both sides of the border who work towards reconnection. Studies that examine the lived experiences of migration and transnationalism highlight the complex nature of 'becoming' when separated from 'home' (e.g. Berman et al., 2009). In the context of forced separation, these complexities are exacerbated. The wider context in which separation occurs is therefore especially pertinent when supporting children whose separated childhood is being experienced in a whole new country.

The different categories of separation are critical to developing practises that are personalised and resist homogenisation of separated children and their experiences. We must consider how different experiences – such as border separations, trafficking, loss of care-givers or time spent in alternative care – shape each child's developing identity, their sense of self and belonging, and how they build and navigate new and existing relationships through the multiple and intersecting stages of separation and return.

It is important to recognise that any response to prevent unnecessary separation (separation that is not in the child's best interest) or to promote reunification must be carefully crafted to meet a particular set of needs – this necessitates close collaboration with children – and family – and creating space to hear and value their opinions (e.g. Butler et al., 2021; Johnson, 2017; Kaime-Atterhög and Ahlberg, 2008). Given the trauma that children may have experienced at the hands of adults, a key first step is developing relationships of trust between social workers and children that can support them through the physical and emotional transitions inherent to reintegration (e.g. Ferguson, 2017; Long and Evans, 2021).

Supporting children and families to reunify after separation, and promoting (re)integration into family and community life is rarely straightforward. In many cases it is impossible to support children to return to family care, and we also need to consider who the decision makers in such a process are. Who gets to decide that the family is the 'best' place for reunification of a child? Conceptualisations of separation are, therefore, more complex than a consideration in terms of familial relations (Shaw, 2022).

Every child making a change in their location, relationships and way of life needs support that is tailor-made, places their best interests at the centre and values their voice and choices. This support needs to be available for as long as it is needed (IGCR, 2016) – often a major challenge in resource-poor settings (Wedge, 2013). The social service workforce and process of case management are critical in helping children and families navigate the long journey of (re-)integration (Busschers et al., 2016; Global Social Service Workforce Alliance [GSSWA], 2018). Support for children and families needs to begin with assessments, collaborative planning, and preparation ahead of reunification or relocation – continuing supportive monitoring and revision of plans during (re-)integration (IGCR, 2016; Walakira et al., 2014).

The wider community – both children and adults – is also of central importance in providing support to families, building a sense of belonging for children who may have been absent for some time and combatting any stigma due to a child's experiences whilst they were separated (e.g. Beazely, 2003a,b; Betancourt et al., 2010; Corcoran et al., 2020; Guillermo et al., 2022). These

wider relationships, which include interactions with teachers and peers at schools and training centres, have been shown to have huge potential to support or disrupt (re-)integration (e.g. Corcoran, 2016). Similarly, for young adults leaving care and becoming independent within a community peer and mentor support is essential (CTWWC & KESCA, 2018). And it is important to consider both the relationships a child may be leaving behind as well as the new ones they are building or re-establishing (e.g. Karabanow, 2008; Shaw, 2022).

The final point to consider in this editorial concerns future directions for developing research literature that recognise practitioner knowledge as critical to understanding lived experience. Our small contribution to the literature on separated childhoods provided a foundation for reconceptualising an ethics of academic publishing to broaden the range of voices and knowledges and explore horizontal ways of working. Just as practitioner voices were prioritised in the articles, they were also involved in the peer review process – volunteering alongside academics to offer their unique perspectives.

We encouraged publications from non-native English speakers and contexts – as exemplified in the papers from Guillermo et al. (2022) and Ursin and Langfeldt (2022), allowing insights from different contexts to come together within this themed edition. However, as Ursin and Langfeldt themselves point out, mixing language in a research process can lead to misinterpretations: as editors we tried to be sensitive to the time it takes to produce papers when working across languages and the different formats that written language may take as a result. However, there are challenges associated with supporting such knowledge production within the time frames of academic publishing and traditional notions of knowledge production – especially during a pandemic, and we are cognisant these norms can be challenged further.

This collaboration between academics and practitioners offers new directions for research publishing. Recognising local practises and lived experiences as significant evidence within research is key to enabling local solutions held by the experience and expertise of the practitioners who are closest to the context of children, families and communities. Deepening the connections between academic and practitioner research brings forth new possibilities for creating knowledge, understanding, and shaping practice. More significantly, these connections illuminate the voice of those with lived experience and bring important new reflective insights into the world of research.

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Su Lyn Corcoran is a Research Associate at Manchester Metropolitan University and programme officer at the Enabling Education Network. Her academic research draws on her experience of teaching science and theory of knowledge in the UK and the international sector, and working with international non-governmental organisations focused on street-connected children, disability, and/or education, to take a cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary approach to research. Su is interested in 'blue sky inclusion' (inclusive education in the broadest sense), refugees, street-connectedness, equity in education, post conflict, humanitarian youth employment and social justice, as well as creative and artistic modes of research. Her research is mainly focused on East and Central Africa.

Helen Underhill is a Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK, specialising in critical education and community-led learning, and teacher education. Her academic research builds on experience leading teaching in schools to explore education and informal learning in a range of settings, including within informal settlements and social movements. By approaching education and learning from the perspectives of diaspora, migrant and refugee populations, her research engages deeply with the lived experience of learning of often marginalised people. Her research is informed by critical pedagogy and is particularly concerned with reimagining education in ways that can enable communities to tackle multiple forms of inequality and exclusion.

Joanna Wakia is a child protection monitoring, evaluation and research specialist, with a particular interest in family reintegration and prevention of family-child separation. She has 17 years' experience working across eastern Africa and globally building monitoring systems and capacity, designing and leading research and evaluations and promoting the use of evidence in child care and protection practice. Joanna is currently leading monitoring and evaluation efforts within the Changing the Way We Care initiative.