Exploring the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Adopted from Care: Using the Voices of Children and Parents to Inform Practice

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Declaration

I, Rebecca Best, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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I would like to express my gratitude to the young people, parents and teachers who took part in this research. It was an absolute privilege to listen to your experiences; thank you for sharing them so openly with me.

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Impact Statement

This study investigated the educational experiences and support needs of adopted children, and examined how the voices of adoptees and adopters can be used to inform practice and policy. It is one of few qualitative studies to elicit the perspectives of adopted children and adoptive parents in relation to school, addressing a significant gap in the research. The study found that adoptees overwhelmingly needed more support than they were getting. The lack of support for adoptees and adopters was matched by a limited awareness of their needs in schools and wider society. Within the constraints of a small study, I have uncovered a significant unmet need.

The research demonstrates the utility of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) within education and adoption research. Application of this model enabled exploration of a range of factors which affect the educational experiences and development of adopted children, and supported the identification of a wide range of implications. Three broad implications were found for schools, Educational Psychologists (EPs), wider systems and policy, highlighting the need to: i) raise awareness of adoption and the needs of adopted children within schools and wider society; ii) prioritise relational practice in schools; iii) support the socioemotional needs of adopted children and their families. The findings suggest that the support needs of adopted children can extend beyond school and demonstrate the need for ongoing, high-quality, holistic post-adoption support.

The thesis demonstrates the important role that EPs have within the field of adoption. The unique positioning of EPs with schools, Local Authorities and wider systems enables them to facilitate change across the ecosystem, to ensure that the needs of adopted children and their families are recognised, understood and supported. Specific implications for EP practice include:

- Raising awareness of and prioritising support for adopted children in schools.
• Using consultation with parents and school staff to: further understanding of adopted children’s support needs; develop effective home/school relationships; facilitate appropriate information sharing.

• Providing training for school staff on: understanding the impact of early trauma and adoption; developing relational practice; supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing.

• Working with schools to prioritise support for the mental health and wellbeing of children and staff.

• Challenging punitive behavioural approaches and supporting schools to develop empathic and flexible approaches to behaviour.

• Providing supervision for school staff and Designated Teachers working with adopted children, and support for adoptive parents (e.g. parent support groups and training).

• Extending Educational Psychology Services’ core offers and specialist posts for children-in-care to include adopted children.

• Working with social workers to develop life story approaches.

• Advocating for the provision of additional support for adopted children and adoptive families within government.

• Lobbying for educational reform and against potentially harmful education and adoption policies.

The significant difficulties experienced in school by the adoptees represented within the study demonstrate the need for a wider-scale investigation of the support needs and outcomes of adopted children in Britain. The findings suggest that adopted children should be considered as a vulnerable group within education research and policy.
Abstract

National monitoring data suggests that adopted children achieve poorer educational outcomes than the general population. Research has found that adopted children can experience significant emotional, social and learning difficulties in school. These needs are often attributed to the adverse early experiences endured by many adopted children prior to their adoptions. Few studies have elicited the perspectives of adopted children and adoptive parents in relation to school. The current study used a qualitative design to explore the lived, educational experiences of adopted children. Phase 1 investigated the difficulties experienced by adopted children in school and supportive factors which contribute to positive educational experiences, through semi-structured interviews with 11 secondary-aged adoptees and a focus group with six adopters. Thematic analysis identified five themes within the narratives of the study-adoptees and study-adopters: Inner Turmoil; Social Disconnection; Unsupportive School Contexts; Relational Repair; and Misperceptions and Prejudice. In phase 2, the findings from phase 1 were presented to 20 Designated Teachers within a workshop to explore how the voices of the study-adoptees and study-adopters can be used to inform their role. Three themes were found, which illustrate broad implications for Designated Teachers’ practice with adopted children and adoptive parents in schools: Raising Awareness, Developing Relationships and Supporting Emotional Needs. The findings from the study are contextualised within Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) Bioecological Theory of Human Development. Implications are identified for schools, Educational Psychology Services, policy makers and researchers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale

British adoption policy has aimed to reduce the number of children-in-care\(^1\) by increasing the number of adoptions since 2000, prioritising adoption as a successful route to permanency for children who have been abused and neglected in their birth families (Performance Innovation Unit [PIU], 2000; Department for Education [DfE], 2016). The majority of adopted children in Britain are adopted from Local Authority (LA) care and have experienced similar levels of adversity as those children who are not adopted and remain in care. Approximately 70% of adopted children experience abuse or neglect prior to their adoptions (DfE, 2018a), and many will have been exposed to alcohol, drugs and/or maternal stress in-utero (Thomas, 2013). These experiences are associated with neurological changes (Teicher & Samson, 2016), disrupted attachments (van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009), and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties (Adoption UK [AUK], 2014, 2017; DeJong, Hodges & Malik, 2016; Biehal, Ellison, Sinclair & Baker, 2010; Selwyn, Wijedasa & Meakings, 2014).

National monitoring data suggests that adopted children achieve poorer educational outcomes than the general population. However, the existing dataset is incomplete, as not all parents declare their child’s adoptive status to schools (DfE, 2018b). LAs routinely collect data about children-in-care, but this ceases once they are adopted; little is known about the educational needs and outcomes of adopted children. Research studies have found a higher than average prevalence of Special Educational Needs (SEN) amongst adopted samples (AUK, 2017; Cooper & Johnson, 2007; DeJong et al., 2016; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007; Selwyn et al., 2014). A survey conducted by Adoption UK (AUK, 2017) found that 1.61% of respondents’ adopted children had been permanently excluded from school, compared to 0.08% of children nationally (DfE, 2017a). These poorer outcomes are often attributed to the adverse early experiences suffered by a significant proportion of adopted children.

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\(^1\) This thesis will refer to children looked after by Local Authorities (LAs) as children-in-care. Under the Children Act (1989), a child is looked after by a LA if he/she is provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours by the LA. This could be due to: a voluntary agreement with their parents, a care order or a placement order.
Despite the significant emotional, social and educational difficulties experienced by some adopted children, schools are not always aware of their needs. There is a common perception that children will do well once they are adopted into a loving home (AUK, 2014) which can mean that adopted children remain “invisible” within the education system (Barratt, 2011, p.141). However, in recent years, several national initiatives have been introduced to better support adopted children in school (see Figure 1). The government’s growing commitment to improving outcomes for adopted children suggests that the enduring needs of this group are becoming increasingly recognised (Gore-Langton, 2017).

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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| 2014 | • Extension of Pupil Premium Plus funding to adopted children to help schools support their emotional, social and educational needs (DfE, 2014a).  
• Adopted children entitled to free early education and priority school admissions (Children and Families Act 2014). |
| 2016 | • Government expresses a commitment to “explore including ‘understanding the impact of trauma and loss on children’s ability to learn’ in initial teacher training” (DfE, 2016, p.35). |
| 2017 | • LAs have a duty to provide information and advice to promote the educational achievement of children previously-in-care.  
• Maintained schools and academies required to have a designated staff member responsible for promoting the educational achievement of children previously-in-care (Children and Social Work Bill 2017). |
| 2018 | • Guidance published by the DfE details the extension of the statutory duty of Virtual School Headteachers and Designated Teachers to children previously-in-care (DfE, 2018c, 2018d).  
• Adopted children recognised as a vulnerable group within the DfE (2018e) statistical release. |

*Figure 1.* Key initiatives introduced to support adopted children in school since 2014.

Adopted children have also received less attention within academic research than children-in-care (Berridge & Saunders, 2009). In particular, few studies elicit the perspectives of adopted children and their parents in relation to their education. This study sought to address this gap. It aimed to:

- Investigate the educational experiences of adopted children, exploring any difficulties that they face and supportive factors which contribute to a positive schooling experience;
Examine how the voices of adopted children and adopters can be used to inform practice in schools, Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) and wider contexts.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The current study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD). It does not seek to test this theory but uses it as a conceptual framework to consider the educational experiences of adopted children within the wider socio-political and historical context. This section will outline the bioecological perspective and the rationale for its application within the research.

The earliest version of the BTHD, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, recognised that children do not develop in isolation and considered the “intertwined system of contexts” in which human development takes place (Palacios, 2009, p.72). Bronfenbrenner proposed four layers of contextual systems, which interact reciprocally with each other and the developing individual, shown in Figure 2.
Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model emphasised the importance of context. Later conceptualisations of the BTHD increasingly acknowledged the active role of the individual, the nature of developmental processes and the dimension of time (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner paid particular attention to the interactions and activities that facilitate development, which he named ‘proximal processes’ (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Karnik, 2009). Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued that the form, power, content and direction of proximal processes vary according to: the personal characteristics of the individual(s) involved in the interaction; the context(s) in which they take place; and the social continuity and change across history and an individual’s life course (known as the ‘chronosystem’, shown in Figure 2). The mature version of the BTHD refers to the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model to capture these components.

The BTHD provides a holistic theoretical framework to make sense of complex social issues, such as adoption (Simmonds, 2009). There has been limited application of the bioecological model to adoptive families (Verbovaya, 2016).
However, the emphasis that Bronfenbrenner places upon the “interconnectedness of experience across contexts” seems pertinent to adopted children, whose early experiences within their birth families continue to affect their lives post-adoption (Schweiger & O’Brien, 2005, p.517). The BTHD enables exploration of proximal processes across the range of systems that affect adopted children and their families, and how these contribute to differences in children’s development. It directly informs professional practice by providing insight into the processes which promote favourable outcomes (Palacios, 2009; Swick & Williams, 2005).

The BTHD is embedded within the context of educational psychology, representing the profession’s movement away from a within-child model to more systemic approaches (Kelly, 2017). The framework facilitates practitioners to form hypotheses across each level of the ecosystem to gain a holistic understanding of children’s development and needs. This enables “problem analyses and intervention solutions to be identified at the levels of child, class, school, family and community” (Woolfson, 2017, p.153). This thesis will argue that EPs can influence positive change across the ecosystem of the adopted child.

### 1.3 Adoption: The Role of the EP

Despite the valuable contribution of educational psychology within the field of adoption, Educational Psychologists (EPs) have expressed uncertainty about their role in this area (Osborne, Norgate & Traill, 2009). The Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP, 2006) provides a protocol for working with care-experienced children but primarily focuses on children-in-care. It states that there is “more and more of an overlap between” adopted children and children-in-care, describing a “growing demand” for post-adoption support (p.7). It makes a recommendation to support families post-adoption, but there is limited exploration of what this involves. There is a need to develop this guidance to clarify the role of EPs with adopted children and adoptive families.

Little published research explores the role of the EP during and/or post-adoption in Britain. Two studies have evaluated the effectiveness of EPs’ consultations in LA post-adoption support services. Both had positive findings,
with parents reporting that they felt supported by the EP and more confident to try out new strategies post-consultation (Osborne & Alfano, 2011; Syne, Green & Dyer, 2012). These studies focus on just one element of educational psychology practice (consultation). The potential role of the EP within the field of adoption is much broader than this, spanning a range of functions (assessment, consultation, intervention, training, research, policy development) at individual, family, school and LA levels (Midgen, 2011; Gore-Langton, 2017).

Osborne et al. (2009) examined findings from questionnaires returned by 88 EPs about their role within multidisciplinary fostering and adoption work. Respondents spent twice as much time working with children-in-care, compared to adopted children. Whereas work with children-in-care was embedded into existing systems, EPs’ involvement with adopted children tended to be incidental within casework. Work with adopted children fell across three categories: consultation on educational needs; training and support for professionals and parents; and contributing to adoption panels. Each of these sits within the adopted child’s exosystem. Further research is needed to explore how EPs can affect change across the ecosystems of adopted children to improve their educational experiences and outcomes.

Doctoral research has explored the potential role of the EP with children and families post-adoption, drawing upon the experiences of adopted children (Crowley, 2014, 2018), adopters (Gibbs, 2014) and teachers (Stewart, 2017) to inform their recommendations. Consistent implications for educational psychology practice across these studies include:

- Raising awareness of the possible needs of adopted children in schools;
- Developing support plans for adopted children with parents and school staff;
- Delivering therapeutic interventions for adopted children and adopters;
- Engaging in multi-agency working to support adopted children and their families;
- Working with parents, schools and LAs to ensure that Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) is spent effectively;
- Providing training on attachment, trauma and loss for school staff.
This thesis will develop this important work, applying the bioecological framework to consider the wide-ranging and worthwhile contribution of the EP in the field of adoption. It will explore how the experiences and perspectives of adopted children, adoptive parents and Designated Teachers (DTs) can be used to inform the role of the EP across the adopted child’s ecosystem.

1.4 The Current Study

Adoption research has largely failed to investigate the school microsystem. The current study explored the lived, educational experiences of adopted children. It studied the perspectives of adoptees and adopters, upholding the value position that children and parents have a right to be heard. However, I did not want to merely pay ‘lip service’ to acquiring their views. The study also examined how DTs working within schools can use the experiences of adoptive families to inform their role and plan effective support. This is in line with education and adoption policy, which places service users at the heart of decision-making processes (DfE/Department of Health [DoH], 2015; DfE, 2016). The following research questions (RQs) were explored:

RQ1. What difficulties do adopted children experience in school?

RQ2. What supportive factors contribute to the positive educational experiences of adopted children?

RQ3. How can the educational experiences of adopted children be used to inform practice?

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This chapter has explained the rationale for the study and the relevance of the topic to educational psychology practice. It has outlined the theoretical framework underpinning the research and the research questions which were explored. The following chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to the study. Chapter 3 describes the study’s methodology. Chapters 4 and 5 detail the findings. Chapter 6 discusses the findings and considers how they can be used to inform practice and policy, across the adopted child’s ecosystem.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review employs the BTHD as an organising framework, exploring factors which influence the educational experiences of adopted children across the multi-layered ecosystem. It begins with the broader historical and socio-political contexts, moving onto the microsystems of the birth family, adoptive family and school. It is beyond the scope of the review to consider the multitude of proximal processes across the many interacting contexts that might affect an adopted child's development, therefore those most relevant to the current study have been selected. Appendix A details how the literature search was conducted.

2.1 The Changing Nature of Adoption (Chronosystem)

Adoption terminates the legal tie between a child and their birth parents, transferring the legal relationship and parental responsibility to their adoptive parent(s) (DfE, 2016). Historically, adoption in Britain served to ‘match’ relinquished, illegitimate babies with infertile or childless married couples. Children tended to be placed just after birth and did not always know they were adopted. The nature of adoption changed during the 1970’s (Thomas, 2013), as pregnancy outside of wedlock, single parenthood, contraception and abortions became more culturally accepted (Simmonds, 2009). Modern adoption in Britain aims to provide a permanent, stable and caring environment for children whose birth parents cannot meet their basic needs. Today, adopted children are likely to have had adverse early experiences, been in several foster placements and be older at the time of adoption. In 2017/18, 72% of adopted children entered care following experiences of abuse or neglect. The average age at the time of adoption was 3 years and 7 months. Seventy percent of children were between 1 and 4 years old when the adoption order was granted and just 8% were adopted before the age of 1 (DfE, 2018a).

Data concerning the total number of adopted children living in Britain is not available. There are 42500 adopted children known to attend schools in England (AUK, 2018), but it is estimated that there are many more whose parents have not declared their adoptive status to schools (DfE, 2018b). Midgen (2011) estimates that there is a similar number of adopted children as children-in-care; there were 75420 children-in-care in England in 2017/18 (DfE, 2018f).
During the year ending March 2018, 3820 children were adopted from care in England. The total number of adoptions has been decreasing since 2015 (DfE, 2018a), but between 1999 and 2017 there was a 322% increase in the number of children under the age of 5 placed for adoption or special guardianship orders in England (Bilson & Munro, 2019). This is in part due to government’s promotion of adoption during this time (see 2.3). Although increases in adoption rates are regarded as an indicator of success for adoption services (DfE, 2016), LAs with higher rates of adoption tend to have greater social care involvement with families at all levels. Therefore, a rise in adoptions arguably represents a welfare system that is increasingly failing families in terms of child protection and early prevention (Bilson & Munro, 2019).

2.2 Cultural Attitudes Towards Adoption (Macrosystem)

2.2.1 Misperceptions about adoption.

Adopted children and adoptive families, like other children and families, are subject to societal assumptions. In the case of adoption, assumptions are very often negative or betray lack of understanding. Nearly all (93%) respondents in Weistra and Luke’s (2017) study of adopters (n=43) agreed that ‘people in society do not understand adoptive families’. In a survey of the general public, 39% (n=2127) believed that adopted children are voluntarily given up by their birth families, rather than removed by social services (British Association of Adoption and Fostering, 2010). This reflects an outdated understanding of adoption, representative of its function at an earlier point in time (see 2.1). The prevailing opinion that adopted children are ‘lucky’ (Baden, 2016; Syne et al., 2012) and will ‘recover’ from early adversities (DfE, 2016) focuses on what has been gained through adoption, rather than what has been lost. As a result, society (i.e. the general public, societal institutions, government policy) fails to recognise, validate and support adopted children to reconcile the trauma and losses that many have endured (Brodinsky, 2011).

Perceptions about adoption within the macrosystem influence understanding and available support for adopted children within the school microsystem. In

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2 A special guardianship order places a child, for whom adoption is not deemed to be appropriate, with a carer who is not their parents on a permanent basis. The special guardian is granted parental responsibility (Adoption and Children Act 2002).
schools “it can be easily forgotten that adopted children have the same early experiences” as children-in-care (Golding, 2010, p.41), meaning that the possible needs of adopted children are often overlooked (Barratt, 2011). Stewart (2017) found that whilst some teachers in her sample recognised the long-term impact of early adverse experiences, others expected adoption to mitigate against these effects. There is, therefore, a need to raise awareness about the possible, enduring support needs of adopted children in schools.

### 2.2.2 Discrimination towards adoption.

A growing body of literature highlights discriminatory attitudes towards adoption in Western society (Baden, 2016). Sue et al. (2007) refer to ‘microaggressions’ expressed towards marginalised groups in the form “brief and commonplace daily, verbal or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative…slights” (p.271). Garber and Grotevant’s (2015) secondary analysis of data from interviews with adopted young people (n=153, mean age=15:7) identified that they had encountered 15 categories of adoption microaggressions, shown in Figure 3. These microaggressions serve to undermine the legitimacy of the familial ties within adoptive families and the positioning of adoptees within society. Their findings suggest that adoptees are a marginalised group within American society. Unfortunately, it is not clear how often these microaggressions took place so there is no data on the duration and intensity of the discrimination, nor whether the findings are transferable to Britain. However, there is some evidence to suggest that British adopted children experience adoption stigma. Over half of the school-aged adoptees (n=23) interviewed in Neil’s (2012) study had been asked ‘uncomfortable questions’ by peers and/or teased about their adoptions in school. Sixty-three percent of secondary-aged children (n=1972) in AUK’s (2018) survey had been bullied specifically about their adoptive status. Through the lens of the BTHD, it seems that the person characteristic of ‘adopted’ can discourage positive interactional processes in school and society.
French (2013) applies Crocker and Wolfe’s (2001) contingency of self-worth theory (CSWT) to consider how adoption stigma can influence adoptees’ self-esteem. Within CSWT, contingencies are defined as personal characteristics which are particularly important to self-esteem. They are influenced by social contexts and serve to mirror social values. French suggests that when adoption is portrayed as a socially devalued contingency, adoptees will seek to minimise the importance of their adoptive status to protect their self-esteem and social status. He argues that denying the significance of a life-long and defining personal characteristic is ‘psychologically taxing’ and prevents the contingency from being incorporated into an individual’s self-concept; the strategy to protect one’s self-esteem from society’s stigma may be counter-productive to the development of a coherent self-identity. School environments which stigmatising adoption could, therefore, negatively affect adopted children’s self-esteem and identity development. Whilst French’s assertions seem logical, the CSWT has not yet been empirically explored with an adopted sample, highlighting an important area for future research.

Figure 3. Microaggressions reported by adopted young people (Garber & Grotevant, 2015).
2.3 Adoption Policy and Processes (Macrosystem/Exosystem)

2.3.1 Adoption: The solution for permanence?

Adoption is promoted as the best solution for permanence in British adoption policy (DfE, 2016). An analysis of the national dataset on all children adopted from care over a 12-year period in England (n=37375) found that the cumulative national adoption disruption rate was 3.2% (Selwyn et al., 2014), a lower figure than previously thought and much lower rate than foster care placement breakdown (Selwyn, 2017). Factors associated with adoption disruption include: more maltreatment pre-adoption; older age at the time of entry to care and adoption; more time and moves whilst in care; and behavioural difficulties (Biehal et al., 2010; Rushton & Dance, 2006; Selwyn et al., 2014). Hamblin (2018) highlights the difference between the “rarity of adoption disruption” and the number of challenges associated with adoptive placements. She argues that, given the limited post-adoption support available, parents are “prepared to go to great lengths to preserve their adoptive families” (p.72). There is an increasing recognition that adopted children are likely to require sensitive, ‘therapeutic’ parenting to mitigate against the enduring impact of early trauma (Selwyn, 2017). However, parenting adopted children with complex needs can have a substantial impact on adopters’ mental health (King, Gieve, Iacopini, Hahne, Stradling, 2017).

The preference for adoption as the solution for permanence is not ubiquitous. Other European countries tend to favour family preservation and view the totality of severing biological ties as an infringement on human rights (Simmonds, 2009). In Nordic countries, long term foster care is preferred, multiple moves are avoided and birth family contact is maintained (Skivenes & Thoburn, 2016). Critics of British adoption policy have speculated that adoption is used to reduce the costs associated with care, rather than improve children’s welfare. Others argue that the rhetoric that ‘adoption is best’ can result in more appropriate permanence solutions being discounted (McNeish & Scott, 2013). Bilson and Munro (2019) assert that the pervasive promotion of adoption has contributed to the development of a social care system which is focussed upon child protection and ‘rescue’ at the expense of early intervention for struggling families.
2.3.2 Legislative changes.

Since 2000, adoption legislation has sought to address delays within the adoption process (PIU, 2000; DfE, 2012a; DfE, 2016). This has reduced the average time adopted children spend in care (DfE, 2018a). However, despite there being more approved adopters than ever, 2000 children were waiting to be adopted in 2017. This suggests that the matching process is inadequate and/or there are approved adopters who are unable to meet the needs of those waiting to be adopted (Selwyn, 2017). Selwyn et al. (2014) argue that the allocation of resources to the adoption process may be at the cost of effective post-adoption support. They conclude, “the adoption reform agenda needs to consider the whole adoption journey and ensure that support services receive the same level of interest and investment as services at the front end” (p.151).

PP+ funding was extended to adopted children in 2014, providing schools with £1900 (now £2300) per year per child to fund specific support for their emotional, social and academic needs (DfE, 2014a). Although schools are advised to consult with parents about the spending of PP+, two thirds of adopters feel that their child’s school is not transparent about how the money is used and question whether it is being spent appropriately (AUK, 2018; n=2218). The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was set up in 2015, making £19.3 million available to fund therapy for adopted children with complex needs. Initial evaluation of the ASF found “modest but meaningful improvements in [children’s] wellbeing” (King et al., 2017, p.121). However, King et al. (2019) doubt the sustainability of these early benefits, arguing that discrete, individual therapy cannot meet the needs of struggling families. Hamblin (2018) queries the scope of the ASF because it does not fund work within schools. What is needed is ongoing, holistic and multi-disciplinary post-adoption support (Golding, 2010; King et al., 2019; Tarren-Sweeney, 2010).

‘Adoption: A Vision for Change’ (DfE, 2016) outlines what the current government aims to achieve by 2020. It highlights the need to improve support for adoptive families during and post-adoption. The document calls for additional teacher training to ensure that schools “understand the impact of a range of developmental issues, including trauma and loss on children’s learning” (p.9). The government has not yet delivered on this assurance; just
34% of respondents to AUK’s (2019) survey of British educators (n=300) had received whole-school training about the needs of care-experienced children. In 2018 the statutory duties of the Virtual School (VS) and DTs (previously for children-in-care only) were extended to include adopted children (DfE, 2018c, 2018d). However, Kelly (2018) has expressed unease about the increased workload this brings to a strained service amidst budget cuts, and uncertainty about how to ensure consistency nationwide. There are concerns about the capacity of DTs to fulfil this duty, given that most are not allocated additional time or funding for their role (AUK, 2019). Nevertheless, the government’s commitment to improving services for adoptive families is indicative of an increasing recognition of the potential vulnerabilities of adopted children (Gore-Langton, 2017).

2.4 The Microsystems of the Adopted Child

Three key, interconnected microsystems affect adopted children’s development: the biological family, the adoptive family and school (Schweiger & O’Brien, 2005). The interaction between these microsystems is classed as the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), demonstrated in Figure 4. This section will explore adoptees’ experiences within these microsystems, focusing on: how experiences within the birth family can affect socioemotional development; the impact of the transition into the adoptive family on identity; and what is known about adopted children’s experiences of school.

![Figure 4. The microsystems of the adopted child (Schweiger & O’Brien, 2005).](image-url)
2.4.1 Biological family.

The interactions between an individual and their environment (proximal processes) are more likely to foster positive development within stable contexts and strong emotional relationships. Exposure to “hecticness, instability and chaos” during early childhood can result in “developmental disarray” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p.796). A child’s primary task in a dangerous environment is survival. Proximal processes serve to avoid dysfunction, rather than facilitating positive developmental outcomes. The majority of adopted children have experienced chaotic birth family contexts in-utero and/or during childhood (Thomas, 2013). Data suggests that children-in-care who are adopted are the most abused in the system; it is the extent of the maltreatment that results in the severance of ties with their birth parents (Selwyn, 2017). This section will explore the possible impact of adverse early experiences on adopted children’s development.

2.4.1.1 Experiences in-utero.

Estimates of the prevalence of in-utero exposure to drugs and/or alcohol abuse amongst British adopted children range from 40 to 75% (Gregory, Reddy & Young, 2015; Selwyn 2017). Data from a large sample of British adopted children is not currently available, but statistics from the Children in Need census offer a helpful comparison. In the year ending March 2017, 18.4% and 21.0% of children were referred to social services due to parental alcohol and drug misuse respectively (DfE, 2018g). Therefore, estimates of in-utero exposure among British adopted children may be too high. A wider-scale American study found that 28.5% of adopted children (randomly selected from a sample pool of 3000) referred to a mental health clinic met the criteria for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorders (FASD). However, this sample only includes children with mental health difficulties and is not representative of adopted children in general. FASD is associated with a range of learning difficulties, behaviour problems and mental health conditions. If there are elevated levels of FASD among adopted populations, adopted children may be more likely to have a range of needs relevant to their learning and wellbeing (Chasnoff, Wells & King, 2015). Further research is needed to explore the prevalence and effects of FASD in a larger, representative sample of British adopted children.
Within the literature, several terms are used to encapsulate the maltreatment endured by the majority adopted children within their birth families, including ‘relational trauma’, ‘complex trauma’ and ‘developmental trauma’. These terms all describe ongoing exposure to distressing events within the context of familial relationships during childhood. Given the significant overlaps between the meanings of these terms, this thesis uses them interchangeably. ‘Relational trauma’ refers to adverse events which occur within a child’s caregiving system, which significantly jeopardise or violate the connection(s) between relational partners. Relational trauma includes experiences of neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and exposure to domestic violence (Treisman, 2017a). The term ‘complex trauma’ essentially refers to ongoing exposure to multiple relational traumas during childhood, which results in difficulties with self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness (Cook et al., 2005). The term ‘developmental trauma’ is also used to describe exposure to repeated interpersonal traumas, but aims to capture the significant impact this can have on a child’s “neurological, social, emotional, sensorial, physiological, moral and cognitive development” (Treisman, 2017a, p.9). Evidence suggests that chronic interpersonal trauma results in more generalised emotional and behavioural problems than exposure to single, non-interpersonal traumatic events (Spinazzola, van der Kolk & Ford, 2018).

Neuroscientific evidence suggests that: early childhood is a ‘sensitive window’ for brain development; and exposure to relational trauma (e.g. abuse or neglect) during this time can have significant neurological and developmental implications (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2014; Treisman, 2017a). However, it is important to apply a critical lens to neurological research. The ‘seduction’ of neuroscience has dangerous implications for social policy if findings are accepted without thorough critique (Watsell & White, 2012). Research in this area is at an “embryonic stage, if not that which precedes conception” (Belsky & de Haan, 2011, p.409). Much of what is known is informed by findings from animal studies and research involving children raised in Romanian orphanages (Brown & Ward, 2013); their applicability to British children adopted from care is limited. Watsell and White (2012) question the evidence behind the claim that the first three years of a
child’s life are most critical for brain development, arguing that this ignores what is known about neuroplasticity\(^3\). Findings are complex and suggest that different parts of the brain are more/less susceptible to change at particular times. Similar experiences result in different neurological alterations and individuals who experience similar neurological changes achieve different outcomes; reliable predictions cannot be made from neuroscience alone. A more holistic approach must be used to study relationships between early trauma and development (Woolgar, 2013).

With these significant caveats in mind, it is still worth considering the evidence emerging from neuroscience. A growing body of research associates adverse early experiences with changes to the brain’s development, including structure and functioning. More severe maltreatment is linked with a greater magnitude of alteration. These findings are consistent across laboratories and populations, and are supported by longitudinal studies (NSCDC, 2014; Teicher & Samson, 2016). Neurological alterations seem to be experience-specific, suggesting that brain changes are adaptive responses to stressful environments, rather than brain ‘damage’. However, these neurological adaptations can be viewed as maladaptive in a world without stress (Woolgar, 2013). When the brain’s stress response system is continually triggered, it can become sensitised and more reactive to environmental cues indicative of danger. This enables the individual to quickly respond to the threat. As a result, the child may sense threat in the absence of danger, and when in safer environments (e.g. the adoptive family, school; Pollak, 2008). This heightened arousal is “particularly ill-suited to the structured and ordered learning environment of the classroom or chaotic playgrounds”. Children may display preoccupation, high levels of distractibility and disproportionate emotional responses to seemingly small events, such as finding school work challenging or a teacher raising their voice (Music, 2017, p.228). There is a strong overlap between the behavioural presentations of hypervigilance to threat and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; Crittenden & Barne, 2007), which can lead to the over and misdiagnosis of ADHD amongst traumatised populations (Szymanski, Sapanski & Conway, 2011).

\(^3\) Neuroplasticity refers to changes to brain structure and function across the life course, in response to genetic, biological and environmental factors (Rees, Booth & Jones, 2016).
In circumstances of chronic stress, toxic levels of cortisol can flood the brain (McCrory, De Brito & Viding, 2010). This can kill brain cells, affecting neurological structure and functioning. Changes to the prefrontal cortex (PFC) can impair language and executive functioning (EF) skills, such as working memory, planning and reasoning (Shonkoff et al., 2012). EF is essential for learning and therefore exposure to chronic stress during childhood is likely to affect school performance (Brown & Ward, 2013). Much research supports the claim that maltreatment is linked to EF deficits (Davis, Moss, Nogin & Webb, 2015). Lansdown, Burnell and Allen (2007) found that of 86 fostered and adopted children referred to a therapeutic clinic in London, every child was rated by their parent and/or teacher as having EF difficulties within a ‘clinically worrying range’. This provides some evidence for the link between the experience of early trauma and EF deficits in an adopted British sample. However, given that children were receiving specialist therapeutic intervention, they may have endured extreme levels of trauma which are not representative of the general experiences of adopted children. Further research is needed to explore EF difficulties in the wider population of British adopted children.

Education professionals should be trained to understand the potential impact of trauma and provided with appropriate information about the histories of adopted pupils, so that their behaviour can be understood within the context of their early experiences. Otherwise, repercussions of trauma may be perceived as wilful, poor behaviour (Stewart, 2017). However, given the shortcomings of the available neurological evidence, it is important not to overstate claims about the relationship between adverse early experiences, brain development and children’s learning. Geake (2008) warns that the premature bridging of neuroscience and education could perpetuate ‘neuromyths’. Promoting neuroscience research that emphasises the plasticity of the brain throughout childhood may be most helpful when working with adopted children in educational contexts. This places the responsibility on schools to create optimal learning environments for all children (Rees et al., 2016).
2.4.1.3 Disrupted attachment.

Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued, “to develop, a child needs to participate in increasingly complex activities regularly and over time with one or more individuals with whom they have a strong attachment” (p.12). He believed that when a child has a mutual emotional connection with their caregiver, they internalise that parent's expressed affection. This parallels Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory, which examines how relational experiences in infancy shape an individual’s beliefs about themselves and future relationships. Bowlby proposed that infants develop mental representations or ‘internal working models’ (IWMs) of their caregiver(s) and themselves which are reflective of their early relational experiences. He suggested that these IWMs serve as a ‘blueprint’ for future relational encounters. If an infant experiences consistently positive interactions with their caregiver(s), they are likely to develop an IWM of others as trustworthy, responsive and caring, and a model of themselves as being worthy of that care. This is indicative of a secure attachment style. If, however, a child grows up in an abusive or neglectful household, they are likely to develop an IWM of others as unresponsive, unpredictable and/or frightening, and themselves as being unworthy of care; secure attachment is unlikely to emerge. Bowlby proposed that negative IWMs impair the ability to trust others and form new relationships. Insecurely attached children have often missed opportunities to learn emotional coping skills alongside a supportive caregiver (co-regulation) and can, therefore, experience difficulties with emotional regulation (Howe, 2005). Through the lens of BTHD, the person characteristics that an adopted child’s birth parents possess (e.g. unresponsiveness, impulsivity, aggression) can disrupt the proximal processes which facilitate positive socioemotional development. Treisman (2017a) urges that positive relationships must underpin intervention for insecurely attached children, so that they can revisit and re-evaluate their negative IWMs.

Attachment theory would assume that the relational adversities endured by most adopted children would result in elevated levels of insecure attachment among this population. However, a meta-analysis of 39 studies found that adopted children were generally as securely attached as non-adopted samples, and had greater attachment security than institutionalised children. The authors suggest that adoption provides ‘corrective attachment experiences’ which
increase attachment security (van den Dries et al., 2009). This echoes van IJzendoorn and Juffer’s (2006) argument that adoption offers an ‘effective intervention’ for ‘developmental recovery’, in comparison to remaining in adverse circumstances. However, children adopted after their first birthday demonstrated greater attachment insecurity than their non-adopted counterparts (with a large effect size, $d=0.80$). In Britain, 92% of adoption orders are granted when children are older than 1 year (DfE, 2018a), suggesting that British adopted children are very likely to exhibit insecure attachment styles. van den Dries et al. (2009) also found that adopted children displayed more disorganised attachment patterns\(^4\) than non-adopted children, regardless of their age at the time of placement. This provides evidence for the potentially long-lasting effects of relational trauma, even when experienced within the first few months of life. The authors acknowledge the possible existence of publication bias of positive findings within the literature and caution that the results may overestimate differences in disorganised attachment between adopted and non-adopted groups. Further research is needed to explore the attachment styles of British adopted children.

**2.4.1.4 Critique of attachment theory.**

Attachment theory emphasises the importance of understanding a child’s development within the context of their relational experiences. This broadens thinking from ‘within the child’, providing a more holistic account of child development. Emerging findings from neuroscience seem to provide evidence for attachment theory, demonstrating how disrupted early relational experiences can affect neurological development (see 2.4.1.2). However, critics deem the theory to be deterministic and dispute the underpinning assumption that all children with disrupted attachments will achieve poorer outcomes (Meins, 2017). Hodges, Steele, Hillman, Henderson and Kaniuk (2005) found that the attachment security of late-placed adoptees (adopted between 4 and 8 years) had increased after 2 years in the adoptive family home, challenging the notion

\(^4\) Disorganised attachment is typically associated with experiences of unpredictable and/or frightening parenting. It is characterised by wariness of, and the display of seemingly erratic/contradictory attachment behaviors towards, the caregiver (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). In the classroom, disorganised attachment is associated with hypervigilance, emotional regulation and social interaction difficulties, unpredictable behaviour and developmental immaturity (Golding et al., 2013).
that children develop a fixed attachment style in early childhood. Crittenden’s (2006) dynamic maturational model offers a more optimistic perspective, considering how children’s attachment behaviours change across relationships and over time. Her theory highlights the ongoing importance of supportive relationships with key adults in the child’s life. It is important to recognise the range of factors that contribute to the diverse range of outcomes achieved by adopted children, rather than solely focussing on their early attachment experiences (Woolgar, 2013).

Cook et al. (2005) argue that an exclusive focus on attachment ignores the wide-ranging effects of complex trauma. This had led to calls for the recognition of a new diagnosis, ‘Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD)’, which moves beyond classifications of attachment and post-traumatic stress disorders (van der Kolk, 2005; Spinazzola et al., 2018). The DTD classification aims to provide “an integrative framework for assessing and treating children’s emotional, biological, cognitive, behavioral, interpersonal, and self/identity dysregulation in the wake of traumatic victimization and disrupted attachment” (Spinazzola et al., 2018, p.631). The DTD diagnosis has not yet been accepted in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), but the term ‘developmental trauma’ is becoming increasingly used by professionals to describe the experiences of adopted children (see 2.4.1.2).

Attachment theory has gained momentum within educational policy and practice in recent years, prompting a movement to make schools ‘attachment aware’. These initiatives primarily promote positive teacher-student relationships, indicating a serious lack of confidence in relational practice within schools. Smith, Cameron and Reimer (2017) argue that “attachment has become almost shorthand to signal the importance of relationships” (p.1607) and that the focus on attachment theory is at the expense of other pedagogic approaches. They present Honneth’s (1995) recognition theory as an alternative, which highlights the importance of love, reciprocal relationships and simply ‘being together’. These principles are more readily transferable to teaching practice than those offered by attachment theory. Gore-Langton and Boy (2017) recommend using whole-school relational approaches, such as Emotion Coaching (Declaire,
Gottman & Goleman, 1998) and PACE (Hughes, 2006), to support staff to develop empathic and responsive interactions with children. As asserted by Treisman (2017a, p.152), “relationships are the anchor on which children learn, flourish and make behavioural changes therefore a relational approach is integral” for traumatised, and indeed all, children in educational contexts.

However, Hutching’s (2015) survey found that the majority of teachers (n=7466) felt that high academic pressures, driven by the government’s attainment agenda, jeopardise the quality of their relationships with pupils. The established, individualistic educational culture in Britain’s macrosystem is at odds with a caring, relational approach (Held, 2006; Noddings, 2015). Whilst school accountability measures in the exosystem primarily judge academic attainment, efforts to promote relational practice in the school microsystem may be redundant. It is encouraging that the proposed Ofsted (2019) inspection framework recognises academia as just one element of pupils’ development. However, critics, including young people, doubt whether it prioritises socioemotional development, wellbeing and relational practice enough (AUK, 2019; States of Mind Student Working Group, 2019).

### 2.4.2 Transitioning into the adoptive family.

A child’s transition into adoption removes them from their birth family and community, and requires them to adapt to a new family’s lifestyle, community and expectations (Peake, 2006). This has a significant impact on identity development. Identity resolution is more complex for adoptees as they are required to make sense of their adoption, and reconcile their pre and post-adoptive identities. Adoptive identity is put upon an individual – they do not have a choice over this aspect of the self. Therefore, “the task of identity involves ‘coming to terms’ with oneself in the context of the family and culture into which one has been adopted” (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler & Esau, 2000, p.382). Adolescence is an important time for identity development (Erikson, 1968). Brodinsky (2011) suggests that adopted teenagers make sense of their adoptions in new ways as they develop a realistic understanding of their birth parents’ circumstances and societal views about adoption.

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5 The PACE approach, derived from Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, advocates that interactions characterised by Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy facilitate the development positive child-adult relationships (Hughes, 2006).
Adoptees are likely to search for answers to questions about their adoptions, including ‘where do I come from?’ and ‘why was I adopted?’ (Neil, 2000). Identity resolution extends beyond the self, because the answers lie elsewhere (Hanna, Tokarski, Matera & Fong, 2011). Neil (2012) interviewed 43 children (aged 5-13 years) to explore how they understood the reasons for their adoptions. The most common answer was that their birth parents were unable to look after them. However, one third of children indicated beliefs that their birth mother chose not to look after them; children expressing such opinions used emotive language and implied feelings of rejection. When children experience feelings rejection and self-blame relating to their early experiences and adoption, they may develop an understanding of themselves as inadequate and/or unlovable. This can evoke an overwhelming sense of shame, which can lead to emotional dysregulation (Cook et al., 2005; Grotevant, 1997).

The personal narratives of adopted children “are often disrupted and partial, littered with gaps in knowledge”, which makes it difficult for them to develop a coherent sense of self (Watson, Latter & Bellow, 2015a, p.96). Life story books are required by law to support adopted children to make sense of their personal narratives. Although valued by children, Watson et al. (2015a, 2015b) highlight several problems with life story books, including: they are written about rather than with children; stories are filtered by professionals which can result in missing parts; adoption tends to be framed positively, which may be at odds with the child’s perception; they are often used in isolation, without additional work to explore the child’s life history. As a result, children may be left with unanswered questions, confusion and a lack of ownership over their story. Watson et al. (2015a, 2015b) have called for better life story training for social care professionals, and improved support to help parents use and update them effectively. Brodzinsky (2006) stresses the importance of communicative openness about adoption within adoptive families, so that children have opportunities to discuss their life histories. However, open communication may be difficult with/for children who have experienced significant maltreatment within their birth families. Parents may need professional advice about how to discuss sensitive information in a developmentally-appropriate way.
2.4.3 School.

2.4.3.1 Educational outcomes.

Recent changes to adoption policy are rooted in the notion that adopted children may have significant needs, therefore it is surprising that there is limited data about adopted children's educational outcomes. LAs are not legally required to monitor the educational progress of adopted children (unlike children-in-care), but the introduction of PP+ has made it possible for the DfE to collect some attainment data about adopted children. In the year ending March 2017, 39% of children known to schools to be adopted achieved the expected standards in Key Stage 2 (KS2) reading, writing and mathematics, compared to 32% of children-in-care and 61% of children who have not experienced care. At Key Stage 4 (KS4), just 34.7% achieved a pass in English and Maths, compared to 17.4% of children-in-care and 58.8% of children who have not experienced care (DfE, 2018b). This suggests that adopted children are underachieving in comparison to those who have not experienced the care system, but attaining better educational outcomes than children-in-care. However, it is unclear whether these figures accurately capture the attainment of adopted children in general. Identification of adopted children within the dataset relies upon parental disclosure of their child’s adoptive status to schools. This was approximately 60% at KS2 and just 30% at KS4 (DfE, 2018b); the dataset is only “partial”. For example, it may exclude children with less significant needs, whose parents do not feel inclined to inform schools of their children’s adoption. This hampers any definitive conclusions. The dataset does “not yet meet the overall quality standards necessary to be designated National Statistics” (DfE, 2017b, p.14). Further investigation of adopted children’s educational outcomes is needed.

Information about post-16 aspirations and outcomes amongst adopted young people is sparse. Brown, Waters and Shelton (2019) found that adoptees (n=22, aged 10-15) were less inclined to continue education after compulsory school age and more likely to intend to seek full time work, compared to matched non-adopted controls (n=110). The authors hypothesise that adoptees’

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6 These figures were calculated by comparing the number of adopted children on the school census with data about the number of children who leave care to adoption (DfE, 2017b).
socioemotional difficulties contribute to less favourable experiences of school, resulting in a desire to leave education; this warrants further investigation. The only study of British adoptees’ post-16 educational outcomes found that adoptees (n=34) achieved better education and employment outcomes than young people living with foster carers or from ‘socially deprived backgrounds’ (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011). This valuable work has not been expanded. Wider-scale investigation of post-16 aspirations and outcomes is needed.

2.4.3.2 Special Educational Needs.

Few studies explore the prevalence of SEN amongst British adopted children; those that do are dated and/or tend to rely upon parental reports. Nevertheless, findings are fairly consistent, with approximately 40% of adoptive parents identifying that their child has SEN. Twenty to 35% report that their child has a statement of SEN/Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), compared to 2-3% of the general population (AUK, 2017; Cooper & Johnson, 2007; DeJong et al., 2016; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007; Selwyn et al., 2014). This suggests that adopted children have higher levels of SEN than non-adopted children, and similar levels to children-in-care (DfE, 2019). However, it is unclear whether these elevated figures are representative of the wider adopted population, or if they are skewed due to biased samples within research reliant upon parental surveys. Adoptive parents may also have a greater awareness of the issues that might affect their children and a good knowledge of the services available to them, resulting in a higher rate of referrals to professionals who identify SEN.

The profile of SEN among AUK’s (2017) sample of adopted children differed to the wider population of children with SEN. A higher proportion of adoptive parents (n=936) identified SEMH difficulties as their child’s primary need (45% of the sample, compared to 16% of children with SEN nationally). Even within a sample of children whose parents described their adoptions as ‘going well’, 23% had Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores within the ‘abnormal’ range. This is comparable to a ‘disadvantaged’ population, suggesting that adopted children may be at greater risk of SEMH difficulties within a clinical range than non-adopted, non-disadvantaged samples, even when the adoption is successful (Selwyn et al., 2014). This spike in SEMH needs is also seen among children-in-care in England (DfE, 2019). It seems that the common early
experiences of care-experienced children give rise to similar SEMH needs later in their school career (Peake, 2006; Tarren-Sweeney, 2010). SEMH difficulties reported by adopters include attachment needs, low self-esteem, insecurity, underdeveloped language and inappropriate social skills, friendship difficulties and experiences of bullying (AUK, 2014; Cooper & Johnson, 2007), as well as a range of diagnosed/diagnosable mental health conditions (DeJong et al., 2016; O’Reilly, Bowlay-Williams, Svirydzenka & Vostanis, 2016). Teachers identify similar needs (Stewart, 2017). Adopters report that adolescence is a particularly challenging time for adoptees’ socioemotional wellbeing (AUK, 2014). Two thirds of adoption disruptions occur during secondary school, suggesting that it can be difficult for families to cope with higher levels of SEMH needs at this time (Selwyn et al. 2014). Whilst adolescence can be unsettling for all young people and families, it seems that the changes, transitions and identity exploration that typically occur during the teenage years can evoke particularly difficult questions and feelings for adoptees about their early experiences and adoptions.

The high levels of SEMH needs within adopted populations may contribute to their poorer educational outcomes. The severity of adopted children’s socioemotional needs is negatively associated with their participation in education and academic outcomes (Biehal et al., 2010) and 69% of adopters (n=2218) report that their child’s progress and learning is affected by their SEMH difficulties (AUK, 2018). However, it is difficult ascertain the nature of this relationship (learning needs may also contribute to SEMH needs). Either way, it is vital that adopted children are provided with appropriate socioemotional support. National guidance places an increasing emphasis on the role of schools in supporting all pupils’ emotional wellbeing, due to the increasing prevalence of mental health needs amongst children (DfE/DoH 2017; DfE, 2018h; Patalay & Gage, 2018; Public Health England, 2014); 24% of girls and 9% of boys aged 14 years suffer from serious psychological symptoms of depression (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018). However, given the potential complexity of the needs that can arise from early trauma, schools may require external, multi-professional advice to support adopted children experiencing significant difficulties.
2.4.3.3 Exclusions.

AUK’s (2017) survey found that adopted children (n=2084) are twenty times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than the general population. In England, children with SEN make up nearly half of the excluded population. Exclusion is disproportionately higher amongst children with a primary need of SEMH, compared to other categories of SEN (DfE, 2018i). Adopted children are more likely to be represented in both of these groups, which may explain the high exclusion rates. The punitive behavioural measures typically adopted in schools, as recommended by government policy (DfE, 2018h), are failing vulnerable children. This may be because they are incompatible with the responsive, caring and nurturing approach (Noddings, 2015) that these students need. Fifty percent of adopters report that a punitive approach is damaging for their child (AUK, 2018).

Closer examination of AUK’s (2017) exclusion figures reveals that adopted children had similar rates of fixed-term exclusions as children-in-care (12% vs. 10.42%) but were over ten times more likely to be permanently excluded (1.61% vs. 0.14%; DfE, 2017c). This could suggest several things:

- Something about the experience of being adopted increases the likelihood of being permanently excluded;
- The status of children-in-care as a vulnerable group reduces permanent exclusions among this population, compared to adopted children who, until recently, have not been considered as a vulnerable group. The VS and DTs may prevent exclusions of children-in-care;
- The survey’s sample was unrepresentative and skewed towards parents whose children had been excluded. This may explain the greater disparity between the high exclusion rates and better educational outcomes found amongst adopted children, compared to children-in-care.

Further investigation of SEN and exclusion rates within the adopted population is needed, drawing upon a more representative sampling frame. It is promising that the ‘Timpson Review of School Exclusion’ (Timpson, 2019) specifically recommends that the DfE should collect and publish exclusion data relating to adopted children.
2.4.3.4 Parent's perspectives on their children’s education.

Parental surveys provide some insight into adopted children’s educational needs (AUK, 2014, 2018; Cooper & Johnson, 2007) and ways to support them in school. Parental recommendations for schools include: training staff in attachment, trauma and loss; recognising curricular areas likely to cause distress (e.g. discussion or creation of family trees); good home-school relationships; agreed and appropriate information sharing about the child’s adoptive status and history; anti-bullying policies that acknowledge the stigma of adoption (Cooper & Johnson; King, 2009). However, surveys do not allow in-depth exploration of parental views. King (2009) also used a focus group (n=6) to explore parental experiences of their child’s transitions to secondary school. Although parents were willing disclose their child’s adoptive status to the new school, they were unsure of who to tell and how to ensure that the information was shared appropriately. Some had experienced negative consequences of disclosing the adoption, including hostility from other parents and their child being teased by their peers. They highlighted the importance of high-quality pastoral support and relationships with key members of staff. The group expressed a desire, now fulfilled, for DTs to have responsibility for adopted children.

Gibbs (2014) used individual interviews and a focus group to explore parental views on the adoption process, their child’s education and post-adoption support. Whilst parents had different experiences of the education system, there were common themes. Gibbs presents her findings within Cicchetti and Lynch’s (1993) ecological transactional model, identifying protective and risk factors across the ecosystem that parents felt had influenced their children’s lives in school, including:

- Limited adoption awareness in schools, which means that appropriate support is not put in place for adopted children (enduring vulnerability factor in the microsystem);
- School exclusions (transient challenger in the microsystem);
- The important role of the social worker as an advocate for the child and family in school (transient buffer in the micro and mesosystems);
• A lack of training for school staff on the impact of early trauma (enduring vulnerability factor in the exosystem);
• Budget cuts and waiting lists for services (transient challengers in the exosystem);
• A culture of parental determinism, which frames parenting failures as the root cause of children’s and society’s problems (enduring vulnerability factor in the macrosystem).

Parents highlighted the value of good home-school communication, demonstrating the importance of building connections within the mesosystem. Although small-scale (n=12), Gibbs’ qualitative study provides a useful insight into the experiences of adopters. The current study develops this valuable work, exploring the microsystem of school in more depth and including children’s views.

### 2.4.3.5 Adoptees’ accounts of school.

Cooper and Johnson (2007) surveyed 33 adopted children about school, but included just seven items, six of which were closed questions. Whilst their findings provide some insight into adopted children’s school experiences (e.g. the importance of social relationships, ways teachers can support them), this is limited by the survey design; the authors themselves highlight the need for a more in-depth exploration. King (2009) used questionnaires to examine adopted children’s transitions to secondary school, receiving just 11 responses. Adoptees identified a range of strategies which supported their transition, including peer mentoring and having a map of the school. There were disagreements about whether disclosing their adoptive status at school was helpful. Being asked difficult questions about their families and experiences of bullying had made their transitions more challenging. Adoptees rated themselves as being different to their peers across a number of statements, including knowing who to talk to about their worries and making new friends. However, no comparison was made to non-adopted children therefore it cannot be assumed that these differences were due to their adoptive status. Other surveys have found that whilst some children feel different in school because they are adopted, others do not (Morgan, 2006; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011).
A large-scale survey of adopted children (n=1972) conducted by AUK (2018) identified that:

- 79% agreed with the statement “I feel worried and confused in school”, with 64% feeling that they consistently do not know what the teacher wants them to do;
- 73% felt that other children enjoy school more than them;
- 74% of secondary-aged children felt that teachers do not understand their needs;
- 63% of secondary-aged children reported being bullied specifically about their adoptive status.

These findings suggest that many adopted children experience a range of academic, emotional and social difficulties in school. Further investigation is needed to understand the lived experiences behind these statistics.

Qualitative studies exploring adopted children’s views in general are sparse (Neil, 2012). Thomas and Beckford (1999) interviewed 41 adopted children about their experiences of the adoption process. Participants shared positive and negative experiences of changing schools following their adoptions. Some described excitement about a new start, whilst others had felt anxious about not knowing anybody and navigating their new school, and missed old friends. It had been helpful to visit the school, and make links with peers and the Headteacher before starting. This study benefits from using child-friendly and creative methods to gain consent and gather children’s views (e.g. sending an audio recording describing the research, pictorial prompt cards). However, the findings are dated as it was conducted 20 years ago. More recently, Neil’s (2012) study of adopted children’s sense of integration into family life raised issues relevant to school. This included uncertainty about disclosing their adoptive status and managing their identity in school.

Despite being limited by its small and female only sample, Crowley’s (2014, 2018) British study provides an in-depth, qualitative exploration of four adopted children’s (aged 10-16) educational experiences. Five themes were identified
across participants’ narratives: identity and self, relationships, school, attachment and adoptive status. Most prominently, participants highlighted the importance of relationships and a socially supportive school environment. Three of the four children had been bullied about their adoptive status and all had considered ways to withhold their adoptive status to protect themselves from discrimination. Participants identified a range of supportive strategies in school, including 1:1 support, having more time with teachers, smaller class sizes and multi-sensory teaching methods. The two participants who exhibited behaviours indicative of a secure attachment style had positive views about their self-identity, education and peer relationships. The others expressed difficulties managing their emotions, forming relationships and engaging in learning. Crowley argues that this supports the assertion that secure attachment leads to better outcomes. This conclusion is only tentative as no formal measures of attachment security or educational outcomes were administered, and generalisations cannot be made from just four young people.

Although there has been an emphasis on listening to the voice of the child for 30 years (since the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]), this principle has not been applied to research with adopted children. There is a dearth of research which takes account of their views (Gore-Langton, 2017). Thomas (2009) argues that there are moral, psychological and practical reasons for listening to children. Morally, children have the “right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them” (Article 12 of the UNCRC). Psychologically, they should have a sense of control over what happens to them. Practically, this is likely to lead to better decisions about, and enhanced engagement with, support. This study adopts Thomas’ assertion that “children, like adults, are experts in their own lives and it would be foolish to ignore that expertise” (p.65).

2.5 Chapter Summary

A review of the literature has identified a wide range of processes which influence the development of adopted children across various, interacting contexts within the multi-layered ecosystem. It has highlighted the potential vulnerabilities of adopted children, largely attributed their adverse early experiences and transition into the adoptive home. Research suggests that
adopted children achieve poorer educational outcomes than the general population, and may encounter a range of SEMH and learning difficulties in school. However, the needs of this group can be easily forgotten due to socio-political depictions of adoption as a solution and ‘happy ever after ending’ for care-experienced children. Adopters report that the limited recognition and understanding of their children’s needs in school can mean that they are not provided with appropriate support. What emerged whilst reviewing the literature was the valuable role that the EP could have within the field of adoption, which will be discussed in Chapter 6 within the context of the study’s findings.

Very few qualitative studies have explored the educational experiences of adopted children and just one (Crowley, 2014, 2018) has directly sought the views of young people about school. The current study aimed to address the evident gap within the literature. To reiterate, the research questions were:

RQ1. What difficulties do adopted children experience in school?

RQ2. What supportive factors contribute to the positive educational experiences of adopted children?

RQ3. How can the educational experiences of adopted children be used to inform practice?

The following chapter outlines the study’s methodology.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of the study, first exploring the underpinning philosophical positioning and how my prior experiences and assumptions might have influenced the research process. It details how participants were recruited, the characteristics of the sample, methods of data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

This study is rooted in a social constructionist ontology and epistemology. Social constructionism asserts, “whatever the underlying nature of reality...there is no direct access to it. In principle, there are as many realities as there are participants” (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p.24). An objective reality cannot be known, as we can only obtain individuals’ perceptions of phenomena. There was no search for a single, objective truth and every participant’s story was considered to be valid (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Social constructionism is relevant to the research questions, which seek to understand how participants make sense of their/their child’s schooling experiences, and how these perspectives can be used to shape educational practice. In line with social constructionism, an exploratory qualitative methodology was used to elicit “rich or thick descriptions of meaning and experience” from participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.24). Within social constructionism, knowledge is understood as a social artefact which is created through our interactions with others (Burr, 2003). The interactional nature of the qualitative methods used within the study resulted in the construction of knowledge between myself and participants. I built upon the experiences and ideas that they shared through my responses and vice versa. I acknowledge the influence that my own experiences and social constructs will have had on the research process, my interactions with participants and the findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016; see 3.2).

The social constructionist worldview is compatible with the bioecological theoretical framework (Kelly, 2017) as both consider the influence of sociocultural contexts upon lived experience and the formation of knowledge. Social constructionism underpins the consultation approach commonly used within EPs’ practice, which involves working collaboratively with children, parents and professionals to construct shared understandings about ‘problem’
situations and possible futures (Wagner, 2017). It therefore straddles my positioning as a researcher-practitioner.

3.2 Reflexivity

I come to this research with a personal and professional interest in adoption. I have three adopted cousins/second-cousins with very different experiences of school. Since 2013 I have been involved with Beech Lodge School, set up by members of my family when they were unable to find a suitable mainstream school for my (adopted) second-cousin. The school offers an alternative educational experience for children who have experienced early adversity, and has a high proportion of adopted pupils. Adoptive families accessing Beech Lodge often arrive at a point of crisis, usually following several school placement breakdowns. I have listened to many stories about the difficulties encountered within the mainstream system and witnessed parents’ relief in finding a school that can meet the SEMH and learning needs of their children. As a trainee EP, I have continued to find that the potentially enduring socioemotional needs of adopted children are not always fully understood by, and/or supported in, mainstream schools. Nevertheless, there are noticeable, positive shifts within this area, due to legislative changes and the movement towards ‘attachment aware’ and ‘trauma informed’ practice in schools.

I am wary of pathologising adopted children and the associated cultural construction of “adopted child syndrome” (Palacios, 2009, p.89), which conceptualises all adopted children as being ‘damaged’. The media plays a role in exacerbating this view, and so does research. “When researchers frame their questions from a deficiency perspective, they (quite logically) find deficiencies in adoptive families” (Borders, Black & Pasley, 1998, p.240). The motivation for this research was not to demonstrate that adopted children have a multitude of problems in school, but to explore factors supportive of positive school experiences. I had hoped that by adopting a naïve position (underpinned by an assumption that schools will be providing effective support of some kind for adopted children) and wording most of the interview and focus group questions positively, this aim would be achieved. It was therefore both alarming and saddening that participants’ narratives were predominantly problem-saturated, representing negative school experiences. Upon this discovery, it was
especially important to consider the nature of the sample, review the analysis and reflect upon my findings with others, to ensure that I have made fair judgements about the data.

When exploring reflexivity, it is important to critically reflect upon one’s positioning as an insider/outsider to the group being studied (Hellawell, 2006). Whilst an insider has a priori knowledge about a community, an outsider is unfamiliar and does not (Merton, 1972). This distinction does not reflect a dichotomy or single continuum, but rather a number of continuums across various dimensions, participants and times (Hellawell, 2006). The most pertinent insider/outsider positioning to consider is my outsider status to adoptees as a non-adopted person who has grown up within my birth family. French (2013) would argue that my ‘birth privilege’ places me within a group perceived as superior within society, firmly placing me as an outsider to adopted children. Five study-adoptees explicitly expressed within the interviews that non-adopted people cannot understand what it feels like to be adopted, highlighting my outsider status. Huxley, Clarke and Helliwell (2011) suggest that an outsider status can prevent a researcher from pursuing lines of questioning which insiders might have perceived as important. However, given my prolonged personal and professional engagement with adopted children and their families, I have some insider knowledge regarding their possible needs and experiences. The study-adoptees seemed reassured when I told them that I have three adopted cousins, perhaps moving me along the insider continuum. Whilst increasing my status as an insider was helpful to build attuned relationships with participants, I was also able to utilise my outsider position to ‘step back’ and ask curious questions about their experiences (Morrow, 2005). This highlights the benefits of being an insider and outsider, enabling both empathy for and detachment from participants (Hellawell, 2006).

3.3 Method Overview

Figure 5 provides an overview of the study’s method. Informed by a bioecological approach, the educational experiences and support needs of adopted children were explored at an individual level (interviews with study-adoptees) and family level (focus group with study-adopters). These findings
were then used to consider and develop practice at an institutional level (workshop with study-DTs). More detail is provided in the following sections.

3.4 Pilot Study

Given the limited research involving adopted children, a pilot study was undertaken to: explore the feasibility of the research; refine methods of recruitment and data collection; and practise using qualitative methods, including thematic analysis. I had initially intended to focus solely on the views of children; therefore, the pilot involved interviewing six secondary-aged adoptees. Table 1 details how the pilot study influenced the final research design.

Table 1.

Changes Made to the Research Design Following the Pilot Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lessons Learnt</th>
<th>Changes Made</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment: it is possible to recruit adopted children but there was a limited response to adverts targeted towards families in South England</td>
<td>Recruitment of adopted children nationwide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method: interviews were reliant upon talking, which was tiring for some participants</td>
<td>Inclusion of visuals and activities within the interview schedule (see 3.6.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method: parents gave valuable insight into their children’s educational experiences during discussions before the child interviews and valued the opportunity to express their views</td>
<td>Inclusion of parents within the research, to give them a voice and deepen understanding of the topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis: identified themes were underdeveloped and represented domain summaries, rather than fully realised themes (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2013)</td>
<td>Care taken within the analysis to identify meaningful themes with a central organising concept (see 3.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. Overview of the method.
3.5 Recruitment and Participants

3.5.1 Adoptees and adopters.

A purposive, criterion sampling strategy was used to recruit the study-adoptees\(^7\) and study-adopters\(^7\). The selection criteria were:

- **Study-adoptees**: young people attending a mainstream secondary school in England or Wales, in years 7 to 11, who were adopted from Local Authority care in England or Wales.
- **Study-adopters**: adopters of young people attending a mainstream secondary school in England or Wales, in years 7 to 11, who were adopted from Local Authority care in England or Wales.

This resulted in the recruitment of:

- **Study-adoptees**: Eleven young people (five boys and six girls) aged 12-16 who were adopted from Local Authority care in England and Wales, attending a mainstream secondary school at the time of the research, living in England in a mixture of urban and rural areas. One adoptee attended a specialist Autism unit attached to a mainstream school for 20% of the school week. At the time of the interviews, the average age of the study-adoptees was 14 years and 3 months (ranging from 12:1-16:4). Study-adoptees had lived with their adoptive families for 11 years and 3 months on average (ranging from 6:0-15:8). The six young people interviewed within the pilot study were not included in this group.
- **Study-adopters**: Six parents (three males, three females) of adopted children with the same characteristics described above. At the time of the focus group, the average age of the study-adopters’ children was also 14 years and 3 months (ranging from 12:9-15:9). The study-adopters’ children had been living within their adoptive families for 12 years and 5 months on average (ranging from 8:11-15:5). The study-adopters were not parents of the study-adoptees. The inclusion of parents was not to triangulate information, which would undermine the constructionist view that all personal narratives are inherently valid, but to provide a

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\(^7\)It is important to note that participants may not concur with a primary identity of ‘adoptive’ or ‘adopter’. For example, they may first consider themselves as young people and parents. However, for the purpose of this thesis these participant groups will be referred to as ‘study-adoptees’ and ‘study-adopters’.
complementary perspective to enrich understanding of the topic (Yardley, 2008). It also enabled me to efficiently explore a greater number of adopted children’s educational experiences.

I decided to focus on secondary-aged adopted children because:

- Participants would be able to reflect upon their/their child’s experiences over time across primary and secondary school, making useful comparisons between different provisions;
- Previous studies have identified this age group as most at risk of difficulties both in school and the adoptive family (AUK, 2014; Selwyn et al. 2014);
- Children under 12 years old may not yet have explored what their adoption means to them (Neil, 2012) and/or may just be starting to understand the realities of adoption-related loss (Brodinsky, 2011); it would be unethical to ask the questions which prompt further exploration of their adoption/adoptive status before they are ready;
- Research currently taking place in Wales is exploring primary-aged adopted children’s experiences of school.

Adoptees and parents of adoptees specifically attending mainstream schools were sought for several reasons. Firstly, research suggests that the majority of adopted children attend mainstream schools; in AUK’s (2017) schools and exclusions survey, fewer than 100 of 1136 respondents reported that their child attends a special school. Given that very little is known about the educational experiences of adopted children, I wanted to investigate the perspectives of this larger group. Secondly, children attending mainstream and special schools are very different groups; adopted children attending special schools are likely to have a significantly higher level of need. I anticipated that a focus on adopted children attending special schools might result in readers concluding that the findings are not relevant or transferable to the larger number of adopted children attending mainstream schools, and sought to avoid this critique. Furthermore, the higher level of need amongst special school populations means that it is likely that this group would have required a different methodological approach to that taken within the study. Finally, the systems of support within special schools are very different to those within mainstream
schools; implications derived from the experiences of children attending specialist schools might not be relevant or appropriate to mainstream settings.

Appendix B provides further information about the characteristics of the adoptees represented in the study (i.e. the study-adoptees and the children of the study-adopters).

Parents act as ‘gatekeepers’ to children within research (Murray, 2005), so contact was initially made with parents to recruit adoptees. Adverts (Appendix C) for the adoptee interviews and adopter focus group were distributed to parents via the following means: i) the post-adoption service within my placement authority; ii) existing mailing lists and/or websites of adoption organisations; and iii) the social networking site Twitter. Adoptees were recruited nationwide. For logistical reasons, the adopter focus group flyer was targeted towards parents living in and around London. The majority of parents reported that they heard about the study via Twitter or adoption organisations.

I arranged a telephone call with interested parents to provide more information. They were sent the relevant information sheets and consent forms (Appendices D and E). Parents were asked to complete a ‘Young Person Information Request Form’ (Appendix F) to provide information about the sample. I provided adoptees with an emailed link to a video, in which I introduced myself and explained the study. Adoptees were offered the opportunity to meet me either in person or via video calling before the interview, but none requested to do so. This suggests that the video fulfilled its purpose adequately.

3.5.2 Designated Teachers (DTs).

Within a research progress review meeting, I was advised to include school professionals in the study to gain their views about supporting adopted children. Fortuitously, at a similar time, I was asked by the VS within my placement authority to support the design and delivery of a training day for DTs about the educational needs of adopted children, following the extension of their role to this population (DfE, 2018c, 2018d). The VS agreed that I could run a workshop during this day, which became phase 2 of the study (see Figure 5). The VS distributed an advert (Appendix C) for the training to all Headteachers and/or
DTs within the authority, alongside the information sheet and consent form (Appendices C and D). Recipients were informed that they could attend the workshop without taking part in the research to ensure that attendees did not feel pressured to give consent. Twenty of 27 delegates consented to taking part in the research: 17 DTs, one teacher (in place of the school’s DT) and two Early Years Advisors. For convenience, from hereon in participants who took part in the workshop will be collectively referred to as study-DTs.

The average length of time within role as a DT was 4 years and 6 months (ranging from new to role to 15 years) and on average study-DTs had worked with 3-4 adopted children in their role (ranging from 0 to 8). Study-DTs primarily worked in mainstream primary schools (n=15). Two study-DTs worked in early years settings, one in a mainstream secondary school, one in a primary SEMH specialist school and one in a secondary SEMH specialist school. The small number of secondary school DTs is a limitation of the study’s design (see 6.6.2), but this was unavoidable given the method of participant recruitment.

3.6 Data Collection

3.6.1 Adoptee interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore study-adoptees’ experiences of school. This flexible method allowed me to follow the participant’s lead and ask additional follow-up questions, whilst ensuring that particular topics relevant to the research questions were covered (Robson & McCartan, 2016). A focus group with several adoptees was considered as an alternative, but I decided that interviews would enable more in-depth exploration of individual experience. Additionally, sensitive topics were raised by the young people within the pilot study, so I felt that the private space of an individual interview was more appropriate. I considered conducting multiple interviews with each child to develop a relationship over time but was concerned about the potential emotional impact of another relational loss within their lives; I decided it was more ethical to have a bounded, one-off encounter. Interestingly, several participants commented that it was easier to express their views openly knowing they would not see me again (see 6.6.1).
I developed an interview schedule (Appendix G) following a ‘tree and branch’ design - different questions aimed to answer different elements of the research problem (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The schedule was refined several times following:

- Initial piloting with a trainee EP colleague;
- Feedback from a consultation group, consisting of an adopter, Headteacher and EP specialising in the needs of adopted children;
- The pilot study (see 3.4);
- Feedback from research supervisors.

This refinement resulted in the inclusion of more general and open-ended questions so that participants did not feel ‘led’ to answer in a particular way, and additional practical activities to reduce the reliance upon spoken word.

Following Thomas’ (2009) recommendations for communicating with care-experienced children, a range of activities and tools were made available to facilitate the conversation, including ecomaps, pictorial prompt cards (Thomas & Beckford, 1999) and a timeline to map important events (Wood & Selwyn, 2017). Whilst some study-adoptees engaged in these activities, most preferred to talk instead. One young person completed an ecomap, one sorted the pictorial cards and six created a timeline.

Most study-adoptees chose for the interview to take place in their homes, apart from one whose interview took place in school. Two asked for a parent to be present; the rest were conducted with no one else present. One hour was allocated for rapport building activities prior to the interviews. The sentence completion cards from Treisman’s (2017b) ‘Therapeutic Treasure Deck’ were used to structure these conversations. I chose this tool because they are specifically designed for use with children who have experienced developmental trauma. I frequently use the cards with children with a range of needs within my practice as a trainee EP and have found that they scaffold fun, accessible and interesting interactions. I offered information about myself within these conversations to develop my relationship with participants.
3.6.2 Adopter focus group.

Focus groups provide a useful method to investigate the opinions and experiences of a group that share a common characteristic, to develop an understanding of a particular topic/issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Shared experiences can be explored, whilst allowing individual stories to be heard. Participants can build upon each other’s responses, enabling viewpoints to be “challenged, extended, developed, undermined or qualified in ways that generate rich data for the researcher” (Willig, 2001, p.29). Given the limited research in this area, a focus group offered the most likelihood of a productive source of detailed dialogue about the range of adopters’ experiences in relation to their children’s education (Liamputtag, 2011). The schedule explored their children’s experiences of school, including what was going well, what challenges there were and what support had been helpful (Appendix G). The group size of six adheres to recommendations within the literature. I took the role of moderator, asking questions, listening, keeping the conversation on track and ensuring that everybody had the opportunity to speak. Participants generally participated equally in the group, although at times two adopters dominated the conversation. One adopter presented as a ‘quiet participant’ (Krueger & Casey, 2009). To address this, I used gentle questions to directly acquire their views. Towards the end of the focus group their contributions increased, suggesting that they may have felt increasingly at ease over time. My reflective journal recalls the following supportive relational processes between the study-adopters: agreeing, empathising, reassuring, complimenting, appreciating difficulties, giving advice and sharing ideas. A criticism of focus groups is the tendency for participants to agree, rather than disagree, to adhere to a group norm (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This did not seem to be an issue; participants expressed disagreement, gently challenging each other and posing alternative ideas.

3.6.3 DT workshop.

The DT workshop consisted of two main parts: i) presentation of the findings from phase 1; ii) reflection upon how these findings can be used to inform practice. Figure 6 summarises the content of the session.
An adaptation of ‘The World Café Method’ was used to structure group discussions and support the DTs to consider how the findings from phase 1 could be used to inform their practice. This technique essentially involves facilitating small group discussions about particular key questions (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015). Three rounds of conversations were set up, based on different school-based scenarios relating to the themes from phase 1. Each scenario was discussed for ten minutes in groups of 6-8. Delegates then moved to a different group to study the next scenario, enabling them to converse with a range of individuals. Participants were asked to write/draw key ideas from their discussions onto large sheets of paper. This creative method was chosen to maximise engagement and facilitate a dynamic exchange of ideas between participants. At the end of the session, DTs made a written pledge to the adopted children in their school. The group notes and individual pledges formed the basis of the analysis for phase 2 of the study. Appendix G includes the scenarios and template for the individual pledges.

I had initially planned to present the findings from phase 1 to EPs and conduct a focus group to consider the implications for educational psychology practice within phase 2. However, the logistics of coordinating a group of EPs proved challenging. It was fortuitous that the opportunity arose to conduct workshop-style data gathering with DTs at a training event. This enabled access to a wide...
range of perspectives and increased the ecological validity of this phase. I had hoped to run a similar workshop during a whole-service training day within my placement EPS, but this was not possible within the timescale of the project. A rich discussion about the findings between experienced EPs would have indicated whether the findings are what they would expect based upon their work with adopted children, or are unexpected and surprising. I would have gained additional insight into the professional implications within the current context of service delivery. Furthermore, the findings may have influenced EPs to make positive changes to their practice with adoptive families. I hope to deliver the workshop to EPs in the near future.

3.7 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from both phases was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2013) six-step process (see Table 2). Whilst completing steps 1 and 2 of the analysis (familiarisation with the data and generating initial codes) in phase 1, I observed a significant overlap between the meanings and codes captured by study-adoptees and study-adopters. It was therefore decided that these datasets would be analysed together. Data from the DT workshop was analysed separately.

Coding was inductive and data-derived to ensure that the identified themes originated from participants’ experiences. However, coding will have been influenced by my pre-existing values, assumptions and theoretical knowledge. Therefore, it is likely that there was an implicit, researcher-driven, deductive element to the coding process. Codes and theme titles thought to encapsulate psychological theoretical principles and existing preconceptions were revisited and revised to ensure that participants' voices remained at the centre of the analysis. Table 2 outlines the actions completed within the analysis and purpose of each step. These stages are not linear; I moved recursively through them. For example, whilst producing the report (step 6), changes were made to the definitions of some themes (step 5) which resulted in the revision of their subthemes and the data extracts contained within them (step 4).
Table 2.
Six-Step Process of Thematic Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of analysis</th>
<th>Actions completed</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarisation with the data</td>
<td>• Transcription of audio recordings/written notes by the researcher (see Appendix H for transcript extracts).&lt;br&gt;• Checking transcriptions against original recordings/written notes.&lt;br&gt;• Immersion in the data – active listening to, reading and rereading the dataset.&lt;br&gt;• ‘Noticings’ written on transcripts to capture initial ideas, thoughts and items of interest (see Appendix I).</td>
<td>• Capturing what was said, by who.&lt;br&gt;• Ensuring transcripts represent what was said.&lt;br&gt;• Familiarisation with the content of the dataset and developing thoughts about meanings within the data.&lt;br&gt;• Becoming aware of preconceptions and assumptions which might influence the analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>• Systematic coding of the dataset using NVivo (QSR, 2017): all data thought to be relevant to the research questions coded (complete coding); meaningful chunks of text given a title capturing the essence of its usefulness.&lt;br&gt;• Inductive and data-derived coding.&lt;br&gt;• Codes reviewed by the researcher; codes from transcript extracts discussed with research supervisors and trainee EP colleague.</td>
<td>• Identifying “anything and everything of interest or relevance” to the research questions (Braun &amp; Clarke, 2013, p.206).&lt;br&gt;• Ensuring that the codes and resulting themes are rooted within the voices of participants, rather than my preconceptions.&lt;br&gt;• Checking code names are relevant, clear and meaningful; merging overlapping codes; fine graining broader codes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>• Active examination and sorting of codes into meaningful groups by hand to develop provisional subthemes/themes (see Appendix J). Codes which did not fit within the existing themes or fit together meaningfully to create a new subtheme/theme were placed within a ‘miscellaneous’ category.&lt;br&gt;• Thematic maps created.</td>
<td>• Finding larger patterns of meaning relevant to the research questions; identifying central organising concepts which unify codes and associated data extracts.&lt;br&gt;• Exploring relationships between codes, subthemes and themes to ensure they fit together within the overall analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing and revising themes</td>
<td>• Review of the data extracts relating to each theme.</td>
<td>• Checking that there is enough meaningful data to support each theme and exploring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Data extracts moved or themes reworked when data did not fit coherently within a theme.
• Rereading of the entire dataset, highlighting data relevant to each theme.

5. Defining and naming the themes
• Each theme defined to refine the specifics.
• Names chosen to capture the essence of the theme; names reviewed with research supervisors and trainee EP colleagues.
• Illustrating the essence of the themes, capturing what is unique about each theme; specifying scope and boundaries themes (i.e. what is and is not included within them).
• Ensuring that theme titles capture the central organising concept and represent fully realised themes, rather than domain summaries.

6. Producing the report
• Pertinent and vivid examples of data selected for each theme across all participants.
• Illustrative presentation of data within findings chapters.
• Demonstrating breadth and diversity of each theme across the dataset, ensuring that all participants are represented within the writeup.
• Presenting a narrative which tells the story of the data.

Appendix K provides examples of the codes and data extracts contained within each theme/subtheme.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The research was approved ethically by the department of Psychology and Human Development at the UCL Institute of Education. I adhered to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Codes of Ethics and Conduct (2010) and Human Research Ethics (2014) throughout. Children are vulnerable participants in research (BPS, 2014) and the adoptees interviewed in this study were considered to be particularly vulnerable, given their adverse early experiences and SEMH needs (see 4.1). Careful consideration was given to the ethics of including such a vulnerable group within the study. However, I strongly advocate that it would have been unethical not to have offered adopted children
the opportunity to take part and to continue to omit their views and experiences from adoption research. A thorough assessment was made to evaluate the potential risk to participants against the possible benefits of the research. With appropriate ethical safeguards in place, the benefit of giving adopted children a voice and gaining rare insight into their educational experiences was considered to outweigh the potential risk of harm. In line with the ethical principles of ‘respect for autonomy and dignity of persons’, ‘scientific integrity’ and ‘social responsibility’ (BPS, 2014), it is the duty of researchers to respect the knowledge, insight and expertise of adopted children to develop understanding of their experiences and inform practice.

Care was taken throughout with all participants to:

- Explain the purpose of the study in an understandable way;
- Gain informed consent;
- Ensure they were informed about their right to withdraw at any time;
- Maintain their anonymity and confidentiality, whilst ensuring that my safeguarding responsibility was upheld;
- Follow up any safeguarding concerns;
- Address the potential power imbalance between participants and myself;
- Manage potential distress;
- Ensure my own safety;
- Boundary and end the relationship appropriately.

Appendix L provides further information about how each of these steps were achieved.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the study’s methodology, explaining the theoretical underpinnings and how the research was conducted. It has described the methods of recruitment, data collection and analysis, as well as ethical considerations. In phase 1, individual interviews with adoptees and a focus group with adopters were conducted to explore the educational experiences of adopted children. In phase 2, the findings from phase 1 were presented to a group of DTs using a workshop-style data collection method to explore how the
voices of adoptees and adopters can be used to inform their role. The following two chapters present the findings of the research.
Chapter 4: Findings – Adoptees and Adopters

Chapters 4 and 5 present the findings of the research. As noted in 3.7, the study-adoptee and study-adopter datasets were analysed together, due to the similarities in the meanings captured within their narratives. This chapter will first outline the characteristics of the adoptees represented in the study. Subsequently, it will present the themes identified within the study-adoptees’ and study-adopters’ narratives. Chapter 5 will discuss the themes identified within the data collected in the DT workshop.

4.1 Characteristics of the Sample Adoptees

The data from phase 1 of the study relates to two groups of adopted children: i) the study-adoptees who were directly interviewed during data collection; ii) the children of the study-adopters. Information about the adoptees represented in the study (i.e. the study-adoptees and children of the study-adopters) was collected from the parents of the study-adoptees, and the study-adopters (using the Young Person Information Request Form – Appendix F). Table 3 compares the characteristics of the adoptees represented in the study to averages from the national adoption dataset (DfE, 2018a).

Compared to the national averages, the adoptees represented in the study were, on average: younger when taken into care; experienced a longer wait between entry into care and their adoption order; and were older at the time of their adoption order. Compared to the children of the study-adopters, the study-adoptees were, on average, older when taken into care and older at the time of their adoption orders and placements. The average time between being taken into care and granting of the adoption order was greater for this group, and they had experienced more placements whilst in care. These differences are likely to be because two of the study-adopters were involved in concurrent planning programmes. Concurrent planning adoptions are associated with a younger age at the time of adoption placement, fewer moves in care and a quicker adoption process (DfE, 2012b).

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8 Concurrent planning “is suitable for looked after children under two years old, for whom a local authority thinks adoption is likely to be the best option, but who may still be able to return home. The child is placed with carers who have been approved both as foster carers and as prospective adopters. Efforts to support the birth family and make possible a reunification between infant and the birth family are not abandoned. But if they fail, the infant is then adopted by those same carers.” (DfE, 2012b, p.4).
### Characteristics of the Adoptees Represented in the Study Compared to National Averages (Years:Months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Study-Adoptees</th>
<th>Children of Study-Adopters</th>
<th>All Adoptees Represented in the Study</th>
<th>National Averages (DfE, 2018a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age when taken into care</td>
<td>1:4 (Birth – 3:5)</td>
<td>0:10 (Birth – 5:0)</td>
<td>1:1 (Birth – 3:6)</td>
<td>1:4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of moves in care</td>
<td>2.5 (0 – 7)</td>
<td>0.5 (0 – 3)</td>
<td>1.55 (0 – 7)</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at time of adoption placement</td>
<td>3:0 (0:6 – 7:5)</td>
<td>0:9 (6 weeks – 6:0)</td>
<td>2:5 (6 weeks – 4:11)</td>
<td>Unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at time of adoption order</td>
<td>4:6 (1:2 – 11:0)</td>
<td>2:6 (Birth – 8:0)</td>
<td>3:6 (Birth – 11:0)</td>
<td>3:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time between entry into care and adoption order</td>
<td>3:2 (1:0 – 11:0)</td>
<td>1:6 (0:0 – 3:0)</td>
<td>2:4** (0:0 – 11:0)</td>
<td>1:11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This figure refers to the national average age of children on starting their final period of care (i.e. the last continuous period of being in care before the adoption).  
**This figure is comparable to the national average during 2014. The reduction in the national average since 2014 is likely to be due to government initiatives focussed on reducing the time between entry to care and adoption since 2012 (DfE, 2012a).

All parents of the adoptees represented in the study (i.e. the study-adopters and parents of the study-adoptees) perceived their child to be experiencing at least some challenges in school. Overall, parents rated their children’s school placements as being less successful than their adoptions (see Figure 7). Upon reflection, it would have been worthwhile to ask the study-adoptees the same questions to gain their views.
Parents were also asked whether their child has any socioemotional and/or learning needs. This revealed a high prevalence of SEMH needs, as shown in Table 4. Learning needs were less prevalent.

Table 4.

*Percentage of Adoptees Identified as Having SEMH Needs, Learning Needs and an EHCP by their Parents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SEMH Needs</th>
<th>Learning Needs</th>
<th>EHCP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study-adoptees</td>
<td>82% (9)</td>
<td>36% (4)</td>
<td>27% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children of study-adopters</td>
<td>100% (6)</td>
<td>50% (3)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please see Appendix B for further information about the specific needs of the adoptees represented in the study.
4.2 Overview of Themes

Five overarching themes were identified within the study-adoptees’ and study-adopters’ narratives, each with two subthemes, shown in Figure 8.

![Diagram of themes and subthemes]

*Figure 8. Themes and subthemes identified within study-adoptees’ and study-adopters’ narratives.*
Although I had hoped to highlight positive experiences of effective support for adopted children in school, the dominant narrative of participants was problem-focused, with reference to difficulties and inadequate support. This is represented within the themes, most of which relate to the first research question about difficulties experienced in school, rather than the second about factors considered to contribute to positive educational experiences. The following discussion will explore each theme, beginning with the emotional world of the developing child (Inner Turmoil), moving outwards to experiences within the school environment (Social Disconnection, Unsupportive School Contexts, Relational Repair) and then to wider society (Misperceptions and Prejudice). Although presented separately, there were noticeable and complex relationships between the subthemes, as shown in Figure 9. These connections will be explored throughout the discussion.

Figure 9. Connections between subthemes identified in study-adoptees’ and study-adopters’ narratives.

Please note that the study-adoptees and study-adopters have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. When referring to study-adoptees, the young person’s age will be given with their name (e.g. Dylan, 16). Adopters will be identified as such (e.g. Sam, adopter).

4.3 Inner Turmoil

The theme ‘Inner Turmoil’ represents the turbulent and disordered emotional experiences described by participants. All study-adoptees and study-adopters
made reference to this theme. The subtheme ‘Intense Emotions’ relates to adoptees’ experiences of overwhelming feelings and difficulties managing their emotions in school. The subtheme ‘Uncertain Identity’ represents the difficulties adopted young people have making sense of their adoptive identity, and apprehension about managing this identity within the social context of school.

Figure 10 demonstrates the links identified between the subthemes ‘Intense Emotions’, ‘Uncertain Identity’ and other subthemes. The subtheme ‘Intense Emotions’ was related to most subthemes, in that experiences within other subthemes either contributed to or reduced the intensity of adoptees’ emotional experiences. The links between subthemes are highlighted throughout this chapter.

4.3.1 Intense Emotions.

Study-adoptees and study-adopters described themselves/their child frequently experiencing overwhelming emotions and portrayed themselves/their child as being emotionally reactive. Some adoptees considered themselves as being angry or close to anger most of the time; this was associated with the display of aggressive verbal or physical behaviour towards others. Accounts of anger often illustrated a sudden emotional response outside of their conscious control:

Sometimes I don’t even notice that I’m getting angry until I’m angry, so if something’s annoying me I won’t clock that until it’s gone too far to stop…and then it’s just ((clicks finger)) (Dylan, 16)
Other participants discussed internalised stress responses, with Charlie (12) explaining, “usually in school I just sit there and be quiet, that's how I show my stress”. Unlike the externalised behaviours associated with anger, these internalised responses seemed to go unnoticed by others. Frances (adopter) described how, despite experiencing significant anxiety, her daughter “gets overlooked” by teachers.

Some participants portrayed the experience of intense feelings as being temporary and passing states whilst others described ongoing emotional needs, such as enduring symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. The experience of intense emotions had disrupted learning, due to a loss of concentration in lessons and/or missed schooling:

*By the end of year 9 he was falling behind in everything and was school refusing and couldn’t get out of bed in the morning. I mean he spent two weeks in bed this time last year. (Ashley, adopter)*

Some perceived the move to secondary school to contribute to their/their child’s intense emotional experience, citing the transition as a significant source of anxiety due to: the increase in size (pupil numbers and physical space), lack of familiarity with pupils and teachers, loss of friends, change in routine and high number of transitions during the school day. However, others framed transition more positively, referring to the increased freedom, space and variety of activities, facilities and subjects in secondary school.

Participants frequently attributed their/their child’s emotional difficulties to the experience of adverse early life events:

*My mind’s pretty messed up anyway with everything I’ve seen and witnessed and been told. (Corey, 16)*

Some commented that sensory cues reminiscent of their/their child’s adverse early experiences can trigger emotional reactions:
We have a bell at the end of every lesson that’s really loud and loud noises scare me because it reminds me of my past. And really crowded areas…when you get pushed around it triggers more things off of when I was younger (Alex, 14)

Chris (adopter) described “colours and smells that kick off things” and how the unpredictability of what might trigger an emotional reaction from his daughter makes him extra-sensitive to cues within her environment:

Almost like the kids that you’ve adopted you’re on permanent tenterhooks wondering what the hell is gonna come next…you are constantly looking out for potential problems… because you never know all the facts about what happened to the kids in the first place. We’ve got a lot of decent background info, but it wasn’t all correct and it wasn’t all true.

Here, Chris directly links the need for extra sensitive parenting to the incomplete information about the nature and possible impact of his daughter’s early experiences. Whilst parents sought some comfort in the rationale that “there’s obviously lots of children that aren’t adopted that have problems” (Sam, adopter), there was a sense that “as an adoptive parent you have to be slightly one step ahead” (Frances, adopter).

Study-adoptees described bottling up their emotions, and voiced difficulties finding the words to express the complexity of their emotional experience. There was a sense that the emotional intensity is so great, that to start to describe it would unleash feelings that are too difficult to manage. Dylan (16) described not wanting to burden others, including his parents, by sharing his intense feelings:

What goes on in my head…it is normally is too extreme and can upset people.

Difficulties trusting others also prevented adoptees from wanting to share their feelings (see 4.4).

Whilst describing upsetting emotional experiences, study-adoptees often did so with an emotional disconnect. There seemed to be a dissociation between their
difficult experiences and the ‘felt’ emotions. This could represent a coping strategy used to block out difficult feelings:

*I tend to shut my emotions off like I’m doing in this interview...when it comes to just saying how I’m feeling I’m OK with that but expressing them is a lot harder.*

(Alex, 14)

Those who/whose child had received therapeutic support within and outside of school reflected upon the benefit of having someone to talk to within a judgement-free space. Caring adults in school had also been an important source of emotional support (see 4.6). The therapeutic and calming effect of animals was also mentioned, with adoptees commenting that animals make you feel wanted and/or needed, are easy to talk to, have the time to listen and cannot share your secrets. Interestingly, these qualities were often identified as lacking in adults and peers:

*Int: So you feel like the dog always listens?*

*Frankie (13): Yeah because she always has time and sometimes adults don’t always have time.*

Two commonly cited strategies which supported adoptees to cope with difficult feelings in schools were: access to a safe space and having a ‘time out card’ to leave lessons when feeling upset/anxious/angry:

*If you’re in a foul mood or if something’s gone really bad in your life, you go [to the chill out room] for a while with a pass and then you stay in there, you do your lessons, you have your lunch in there… I do ask, “can I go to this place please because this kid is doing my nut in and I’ll end up doing something to him that I’d regret?”* (Corey, 16)

*I’ve got this thing called a time out card, so I’m allowed to leave the lesson and walk around for five, ten minutes until I’ve calmed down and then come back.*

(Drew, 14)
It is striking how seemingly straightforward these suggestions are, compared to the complexity of their emotional experiences.

**4.3.2 Uncertain Identity.**

Study-adoptees tended to explain that their adoptions had occurred because their birth parents were unable to provide adequate care and security, with some explicitly describing experiences of neglect and/or abuse. On the surface, this reasoning places the blame for the adoption with birth parents. However, Jamie, Alex and Drew (study-adoptees) expressed a conflicting, deeper rooted belief that they were unwanted and undeserving of their birth parent’s love, placing the blame for the adoption within themselves:

*It’s when your parents don’t want you anymore and they give you away as they can’t look after you.* (Jamie, 12)

*I was very insecure and felt worthless most of my life and thought I was a mistake …you grow up with the “why wasn’t I good enough for you to keep?”* (Alex, 14)

For Drew, this had resulted in uncertainty about the authenticity of explanations about her adoption:

*With my Mum and Dad, even though it’s not true, I just feel like they left me even though I left them if that makes sense.* (Drew, 14)

This suggests that, for some adopted children, the generic explanations that they receive about their adoptions do not fit with the inherent sense of rejection and unworthiness that they might feel. Interestingly, Jamie and Drew also expressed that they were ‘chosen’ by their adoptive parents. This represents an inaccurate perception of the adoption system, which rarely allows for ‘choice’. It may be that these young people embrace this explanation to alleviate feelings of rejection.

Study-adopters reflected upon how their children’s sense of worthlessness causes them to feel undeserving of their lives within their adoptive families:
He doesn’t actually believe that he deserves a good education, to be successful in it, to carry on to university, because he knows that his siblings for example do not have that kind of life, his birth siblings. He knows that his birth family doesn’t have that kind of life and he doesn’t understand why he should. (Ali, adopter)

Here, Ali describes a child who identifies himself as a member of both his birth and adoptive families, but struggles to reconcile these two identities. This notion of having a dual identity was also described by study-adoptees, who described lifelong connections to their birth families. Alex (14) commented, “I’m always going to have their blood. It doesn’t mean I’m going to like them but I’m always going to have their blood.” Corey (16) expressed that whilst his adoption had moved him into the “middle class”, “I will always know where I came from, like council house, benefits”.

Throughout the study-adoptees’ narratives, there was a dilemma both within and between persons about whether being adopted makes them different to their peers. Although adoptees had not always equated adoption with difference, they described being made to feel different within the social arena of school, where difference is undesirable (see 4.7.2):

**Int:** Do you feel different to other children because you’re adopted?

**Drew (14):** Well no but yes. No because I’m human and everyone’s human but yes because people keep making comments about it so they’re basically forcing me to feel different.

However, Corey (16) felt that the very fact that he is adopted makes him ‘abnormal’ and different to others:

**My parents who had me as a child they were meant to be my parents until I’m old but that just never happened, so I’ve never had a normal life or a normal upbringing.**
Ashley (adopter) suggested that it is typical for teenagers to feel different to their peers, but added, "when you’re adopted you have something to hang it on, even the bits that aren’t about adoption you can think they are, ‘I’m different, I’m a freak’”.

Study-adoptees voiced uncertainty about how to manage their adoptive identity within the social context of school. Just one adoptee (Brook, 14) said that he felt totally comfortable sharing his adoptive status with others, but also expressed that he does not think people need to know. Adoptees generally conveyed that their adoptive status is sensitive, personal information which they had only shared with chosen teachers and friends. They expressed that whilst they “don’t try and hide it” (Alex, 14), they had “not run round screaming it from the rooftops” (Dylan, 16) either. There was a general agreement that trusted teachers should know, so that they can be sensitive to any needs arising from the adoption (such as awareness of sensitive topics and possible triggers) and provide appropriate support. This included responding appropriately to teasing about adoption. There were mixed views about telling peers. Experiences of being bullied about their adoptive status meant that some regretted telling peers and now wanted to conceal this important aspect of their identity:

I don’t want to be ashamed of it but I just don’t think people are mature enough to deal with it properly…I’d like to be able to go back 8 years and…not tell the people that I was adopted…One of the reasons we were hoping to move me away was so that no one would know that I was adopted. That way I could start afresh. (Billy, 13)

Decisions about disclosure were not always within adoptees’ control, for example when a trusted confidant shared the information with others. The adoptive status of children with gay parents was described as being inherently more obvious.

4.4 Social Disconnection

The theme ‘Social Disconnection’ captures descriptions of enduring difficulties forming trusting relationships with others. Participants described how adverse relational processes within their/their child’s birth families has compromised
their/their child’s ability to trust others and effectively engage in relationships in the subsequent contexts of the adoptive family and school. All study-adoptees and study-adopterers discussed this theme.

The subtheme ‘Negative Expectations Within Relationships’ explores how experiences of disrupted relationships has resulted in the conceptualisation of relationships as risky, threatening and/or unfulfilling. The subtheme ‘Friendship Difficulties’ describes subsequent difficulties forming and maintaining peer relationships. The relationships between these subthemes and other subthemes are highlighted in Figure 11.

![Figure 11. Connections identified between the subthemes within ‘Social Disconnection’ and other subthemes.](image)

**4.4.1 Negative Expectations Within Relationships.**

Participants discussed their/their child’s difficulties forming trusting relationships with others, with Jesse (16) expressing, “I do feel like most children my age that I know don’t have the biggest trust issues that I have”. There was a sense that if their birth parents could let them down, then others would too. This resulted in a ‘default’ position of mistrust in others:

*I don’t even fully trust my family ((laughs)). It’s just one of those things for me. My birth family let me down multiple times in loads of different ways so it’s like if my own family let me down then I don’t see how anyone else can’t. So no there’s never been a person that I’ve fully trusted and that hasn’t let me down. (Alex, 14)*
Adverse relational experiences and the experience of multiple relational losses prior to their adoptions were associated with fears of being hurt, let down, abandoned or rejected within subsequent relationships:

*I just feel like if I trust them, they’re just gonna leave so there’s no point in trusting someone that’s just gonna leave and that I’m never gonna see again.*

_Drew, 14_

Study-adopters also reflected upon their children’s ongoing fears about being rejected by them, even years after their adoptions:

_Jules:_ …I find mine doesn’t like any help from me.

_Frances:_ Yes, it’s a really difficult. I’m not completely sure why.

_Ashley:_ It’s exactly the same, it’s so familiar.

_Chris:_ It’s cos they fail in front of you they’ll think you won’t want them anymore.

_Several adopters:_ Yes.

Additional relational traumas had occurred post-adoption in the lives of the study-adoptees and children of the study-adopters, including: the death of an adoptive mother; the death of a birth mother; a physically abusive adoptive brother leaving the family home; and the experience of sexual abuse. Study-adoptees also described feeling abandoned, hurt and/or let down by friends and teachers that they had developed trusting relationships with in school. These experiences had confirmed fears that people are unreliable, untrustworthy and/or likely to hurt to them. This perpetuated negative expectations of others within relationships, creating a sense of self-reliance:

*I then just don’t tell teachers what’s going on because I don’t trust them cos there’s no point telling them half a story and then them just leaving and not being able to finish sorting it out.* _Drew, 14_
Participants linked difficulties trusting others to problems forming and maintaining relationships with peers and adults:

_Having had experiences that an awful lot of kids will never have, thank God, it’s made her look at people in a more guarded way in general and she is much more picky about who she makes friends with and how she makes friends and what she will tell people, particularly adults because it’s adults obviously that caused the problems in the first place._ (Chris, adopter)

The negative expectations of others were particularly prevalent in Alex’s (14) narrative. Interestingly, however, whilst reflecting on what advice she would give other adopted young people, Alex expressed regret about pushing others away:

_I always pushed those away that I could feel getting closer but at times I needed someone there…so I definitely would have let certain people in that I didn’t._

Here Alex recognises that it has not always been helpful to reject the support of others, describing a conflict between the desire to push people away whilst also wanting to keep them close. This internal battle was present for all of the study-adoptees that expressed difficulties trusting others, who also voiced desires for rewarding relationships.

### 4.4.2 Friendship Difficulties.

With the exception of Brook (14) and Ashley (adopter), study-adoptees and study-adopters described a range of friendship difficulties that they/their children experience or have experienced, some of which are summarised in Table 5. This subtheme was more prevalent amongst the study-adoptees’ narratives, compared to study-adopters, which may represent the significance of peer relationships during adolescence.
Table 5.

**Friendship Difficulties Described by Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited friendships</td>
<td>He doesn’t really have any close friends. <em>(Jules, adopter)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty making friends</td>
<td>Sometimes it’s hard to make friends with new people because around people that I don’t know I’m sometimes very quiet and so it’s hard for me to just go up to them and just say, “hey do you wanna be my friend?” <em>(Robyn, 12)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties understanding others</td>
<td>I struggle with relating to people…as a species I find humans really confusing like how the emotions work I just find them confusing like I look at them and think “what goes on inside that head?” <em>(Jesse, 16)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling disliked/left out</td>
<td>Everybody doesn’t like me, I’ve heard it all before. <em>(Corey, 16)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling different to others</td>
<td>Sometimes they don’t want to play with you, or they don’t want to be your friend when you ask them. <em>(Frankie, 13)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling uncomfortable around peers</td>
<td>I think that people could have opinions that I don’t know about and I think that’s make me quite uneasy around them and I don’t feel like I can, like [I] want to relate to them. <em>(Charlie, 12)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transient friendships</td>
<td>I’ll just end up losing friends and gaining them like a lot. I tend to jump from friend group to friend group so yeah that’s definitely hard for me. <em>(Alex, 14)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Friendship difficulties seemed to be rooted in adoptees’ negative perceptions of themselves as being unlikeable, unable to interact with their peers and different to others. As well as having negative expectations of others within relationships, study-adoptees also had negative expectations of themselves within relationships and their ability to navigate relationships effectively. This represents feelings of low self-worth within the context of relationships. For example, Dylan (16) explicitly blamed himself for the friendship difficulties that he has experienced:

*They’ve got to be able to put up with me, that’s normally where lots of people slip up. I do think I’m a very difficult person, I’m not exactly low maintenance.*

Participants wondered whether their/their child’s history of having extreme emotional reactions (see 4.3.1) had affected their peer relationships. Chris
(adopter) described his child expressing feelings of regret and shame for her behaviour and concern about how her actions might be perceived by others. Jesse (16) deemed public emotional reactions as being incompatible with the maintenance of social status:

*If I do snap in public…it’s difficult trying to keep your social ranking…you start kind of losing what you’ve already worked for.*

This suggests that the display of unpredictable behaviours within a social context can jeopardise peer relationships and could, therefore, be a contributory factor to difficulties maintaining friendships.

Alex and Jesse (adoptees) reflected upon how their difficulties trusting others had limited their ability to form friendships with others:

*I don’t trust them so I keep my distance and I think that puts people off quite a lot cos they’re trying to be welcoming and I’m kind of like, “yeah I’ll say hello, but I don’t wanna get close, I’ll keep my distance.”* (Jesse, 16)

They explained that their reluctance to share personal information and become close to others has meant that they have been unable to fulfil the expectations that others have for trust and self-disclosure within friendships:

*People get offended when I don’t tell them things because I say I don’t trust them yet or something which makes me lose friends I guess.* (Alex, 14)

They described friendships serving a function of companionship, rather than intimacy.

On the other hand, Charlie (12) described feeling the need to keep friends close so that she does not lose them, due to a fear of rejection:

*I kind of worship her…if she has something, I want it basically…if she says something, I have to change my mind…just so that she stays my friend.*
Here, Charlie describes an overwhelming desire to preserve her friendship. Similarly, Jamie (12) expressed that she prefers having friends who are “quite rude and not really that nice”, compared to being “alone”. Although Charlie and Jamie seemed to accept that these relationships may not be healthy, both prioritised the existence of any friendship over no friendships.

Participants also relayed accounts of being bullied. Study-adoptees who had experienced bullying described significant physical violence and verbal abuse from peers:

*A kid called me a psychopath, insane, a freak and then he also said “why don’t you just go end your life” so two people throughout my whole school life have told me to kill myself.* (Corey, 16)

Bullying was often targeted towards attributes which were perceived as being different, suggesting that school contexts are intolerant of difference:

*I’m different to many people and being different is something they can pick on people for.* (Charlie, 12)

Adoption was viewed as a point of difference and all of those who had experienced bullying had been specifically targeted about their adoptive status (see 4.7.2).

4.5 Unsupportive School Contexts

The theme ‘Unsupportive School Contexts’ captures participants’ experiences of school systems and environments which do not understand and/or adequately support adopted children. Within this theme, participants described insensitive school contexts devoid of understanding, empathy and compassion, which compromise the emotional wellbeing of adopted children. This theme was present in the narratives of all study-adoptee and study-adopters. The subtheme ‘Unrecognised Needs’ refers to schools’ limited awareness about, and sensitivity to, the possible needs of adopted children. The subtheme ‘Inadequate Support’ portrays perceptions that there is a dearth of appropriate socioemotional support available to adopted children in schools. The
relationships between the subthemes ‘Unrecognised Needs’, ‘Inadequate Support’ and other subthemes are highlighted in Figure 12.

Figure 12. Connections identified between the subthemes within ‘Unsupportive School Contexts’ and other subthemes.

4.5.1 Unrecognised Needs.

Participants described a limited awareness of and sensitivity to the possible socioemotional needs of adopted children within schools. This subtheme was more prevalent within study-adopters’ narratives. Adopters and adoptees mentioned the lack of teacher awareness of curriculum ‘hotspots’ which adopted children might find challenging, such as being asked to create family trees. Ashley (adopter) described the insensitivity of her son’s class teacher when he chose to disclose his adoption within a class presentation, commenting upon the teacher’s complete lack of awareness about how difficult this might have been for him:

_They had to do a presentation about something important to them and he did his about adoption and so he told everyone all about the adoption…and then he realised that everybody else was doing it about Manchester United and Call of Duty… I ended up getting a phone call from this teacher saying “oh [he] did a wonderful presentation but he was very fidgety in everybody else’s, so he got a detention.”_

Frances (adopter) had experienced a lack of understanding from school when her daughter’s birth Mother died, commenting that they “had to really push to get anybody to take on board that it was a big traumatic thing that had
happened to her”. This reflects a limited awareness of the enduring emotional connection that adopted children may feel towards their birth families. The limited understanding of adopted children’s needs in schools is likely to be underpinned by a more general misunderstanding of adoption within society (explored in 4.7). Interestingly, Ali (adopter) reflected upon the improvement in the support from school when he had suggested, “the way you treat your autistic kids, you need to treat our kid the same way”. This suggests that some schools are more familiar with the support needs associated with particular diagnostic labels than those associated with adoption.

When parents had attempted to support their child’s school to understand their children and their early, pre-adoption experiences, some had been dismissed by school staff and felt that the significance of their child’s needs had been undermined. This seemed largely due to a limited awareness of issues commonly found to be particularly difficult for children with adverse early experiences:

_I said, “it’s transitions, he’s adopted he find transitions (difficult)…and they said, “oh all children find transitions into year 7 difficult.” (Sam, adopter)_

Ashley (adopter) recalled a Deputy Headteacher telling her that she was “over-worrying” and felt treated like a “neurotic, middle class parent”.

Parents reported taking the lead in educating school staff about their children’s needs, arranging meetings, providing relevant literature and even offering to deliver training. However, some described schools’ reluctance to engage, including with external post-adoption support services. This suggests that the dismissal of adopted children’s needs may extend beyond interactions with parents and that some schools doubt the expertise of services who actively promote the need to better support adopted children.

It is unsurprising that study-adopters expressed a need for additional training for school staff. There were various suggestions for training topics:
• “the kind of behaviours that might be expected if they have an adopted child in the class” (Frances);
• “shame and how that impacts children” (Jules);
• how to “deal with” anger (Ali);
• “attachment problems” (Chris).

4.5.2 Inadequate support.

Participants highlighted a general lack of emotional and relational support available for them/their child (and all children) in school. They described how school itself has contributed to their/their child’s experience of anxiety and/or depression. Descriptions of school included: “not safe” (Billy, 13), “scary” (Frances, adopter), “stressful” (Frankie, 13) and “like hell” (Corey, 16). Ashley (adopter) became tearful as she recalled her son saying, “I feel ruined by school”. Alex (14) likened school to “throwing me into a battle zone without any protection”, creating a sense that children are set up to fail when adequate support is not in place. Frankie (13) described how the stress of school had led to him being home schooled at the end of primary school (he subsequently attended a mainstream secondary school):

I pulled out cos I found it really stressful and it was it was just horrible so I was home schooled… none of the staff helped me at all and the Headteacher wasn’t very nice and she always told me off about things that I didn’t do and some of the teachers weren’t very nice either…they didn’t really care about some of my needs cos they always shouted really loudly and the class was just always really loud.

Reflecting on the wider system, Dylan (16) commented that “the biggest issue for anyone in school is people in the infrastructure to help them not being there”, highlighting that inadequate emotional support is not unique to adopted children. Some participants felt that teachers are too busy to provide pastoral care to students, whilst others felt emotional support should not fall within their remit because they lack adequate training.

Emotional support that was in place was often judged as inadequate and/or inconsistent. Jesse (16) expressed a reluctance to engage in support
advertised around school on posters, when pastoral staff had not first established relationships with students. Alex (14) described school temporarily putting effective solutions in place, but later withdrawing this support as though the underlying problem had been ‘fixed’. Drew (14) expressed frustration at the inconsistent application of an agreed emotional support strategy (a time out card) by different members of staff. This suggests that school staff may not be aware that children’s emotional needs may be ongoing over time. In some instances, effective support (e.g. mentors) had been taken away due to financial constraints, illustrating how a national backdrop of budget cuts affect support systems available to adopted children within school.

Parents described an ongoing battle to gain appropriate support in school and needing to “shout really loud in order to get any kind of help” (Frances, adopter). They had encountered blocked channels of communication and described their child reaching crisis point before schools took their concerns seriously. Ali (adopter) needed “to go very high” within the school to ensure that appropriate action was taken. Similarly, Sam (adopter) described, “the big changing moment to the way [school] treated [her son]” occurring after she had contacted the school’s governors. Parents highlighted the importance of having a named ‘ally’ in school to facilitate home-school communication:

_You need a named person who’s there for the kid and communicates with the parent on a regular basis and that person is responsible for letting all the other teachers know, all the staff (Ashley, adopter)_

School contexts were portrayed as being devoid of empathy and compassion, with Frances (adopter) expressing, “it’s pot luck if you get someone who is kind to your child”. The older adoptees attributed the lack of kindness and empathy in schools to a focus on academic attainment over and above their welfare:

_You could have the most incredible student, straight 9s, but mentally they could be an absolute wreck and kill themselves the day after they leave school. As long as they’ve got grades, school won’t care...as long as they look good...it’s not their job, they’ve just taught them all they need to know. (Dylan, 16)_
It’s not great because it doesn’t focus on you as a student. I almost moved schools in year 8 because I was really unhappy but most schools we couldn’t find one which ticked all the boxes...the people are alright but it’s all about exams. It’s all about “are you achieving what we want you to achieve, do you fit the world’s ideal like intelligence?” (Jesse, 16)

Other participants commented that schools’ desire to maintain a good reputation is incompatible with a caring ethos. Corey (16) felt that his school’s preoccupation with their reputation had caused the system to put the needs of the organisation before the pupils:

I’m like this isn’t what school’s meant to be. On your logo it says ‘students first’. I’m not first, you haven’t put any students first, you’re just thinking about what’s best for you and what’s best for your image and if that’s like keeping all the kids with different really bad problems at bay then your school gets shined the golden light.

Sam (adopter) expressed that the pressure on Headteachers contributes to a school system based fear, rather than compassion:

Ashley (adopter): Why should we have to ask for kindness? Isn’t it a given?

Jules (adopter): It’s not expensive either.

Sam (adopter): I mean schools are sort of based on fear aren’t they? The teachers are all frightened that everything’s gonna get out of control, the Headteachers are frightened that they’re gonna get bad reports, the children are frightened that they’re going to get in trouble. It’s a terrible, toxic, friction pot.

The unempathic nature of schools was also demonstrated by crude behavioural policies and approaches. Participants recalled adults reprimanding behaviours rooted in difficult emotions without attempting to understand what that behaviour might be communicating:
My head of year he just went “you’re not angry, you’re just putting it on so you don’t have to do any work” and then wrote in my planner. (Drew, 14)

Parents described a resistance in schools to understand their children’s behaviour within the context of their experiences and adoption, with Ashley (adopter) recalling a time she had been told, “just because he’s adopted it doesn’t mean he can get away with bad behaviour”.

Participants’ desire for a flexible and empathic approach to behaviour was at odds with the traditional behavioural management approaches commonly encountered in schools. Systems which are reliant upon fixed rules and consequences to ‘manage’ behaviour were perceived as being largely ineffective:

People just misbehave because they feel like after one consequence they can’t be good… then they do it again and again cos you don’t know what’s doing it and you don’t know how to solve it. (Charlie, 12)

Sam (adopter) felt that a rigid and a punitive behavioural approach had been harmful for her son:

It wasn’t just naughty behaviour, he was very unhappy, he was very stressed…he used to get in trouble…then he’d get angry about being punished…then he’d be punished for that. It was like a punishment cycle…and it was so damaging for him. (Sam, adopter)

Clear, purposeful boundaries were perceived to be effective, demonstrating that boundaries can exist within an empathic context.

Brook and Robyn (adoptees) did not comment upon the lack of pastoral support in school, but had experiences of inadequate academic support. Brook (14) described teachers “who don’t explain what to do” and Robyn (12) expressed, “to help me catch up I would have liked more support”. It was felt that the fast-paced delivery of the curriculum means that “you either keep up and do really well…or you get left behind” (Jesse, 16).
Study-adopters described how the “stress of school comes into the house” (Ashley, adopter), describing the impact that inadequate support in school can have on family life. Sam (adopter) explained that her son’s difficulties in school had resulted in her husband having a “nervous breakdown” and “completely broken” his relationship with their son. She had decided to give up work to provide additional support for their children at home. Ashley (adopter) had also given up work for one year when her son was experiencing high levels of anxiety and difficulties in school. This demonstrates how unsupportive school environments and challenging school experiences can significantly affect parental wellbeing and employment.

It is important to highlight that parents did appreciate that individuals in schools “do want to do the right thing” (Ashley, adopter). They acknowledged that teachers are “pushed up against it” (Frances, adopter) within “inflexible and self-serving institutions [which] don’t have the systems in place” (Ashley, adopter) to support students. Rigid school systems and academic pressures were described as preventing teachers from having adequate training and time to fully recognise and respond to the needs of adopted children. Despite the difficulties faced by their children in schools, they expressed gratitude for teachers:

I know we have sort bashed teachers a little bit, but secretly I do bloody admire them because I know I sure as hell couldn’t do it, I would not have the temperament and I certainly wouldn’t have that patience to be able to do it.

(Chris, adopter)

4.6 Relational Repair

The theme ‘Relational Repair’ explores the valued and fulfilling relationships experienced in school, which had offered important opportunities for relational healing. These relationships had challenged negative relational expectations, teaching adoptees that people can be trusted and that they are worthy of other people’s care. All study-adoptees and study-adopters discussed this theme. Two subthemes were identified. ‘Caring Adults’ describes the supportive role of positive relationships with compassionate adults in school. ‘Peer Support’
explores the experience of rewarding friendships and relationships with peers. Figure 13 demonstrates the subthemes upon which reparative relationships were described as having a positive impact.

![Diagram showing Connections identified between the subthemes within ‘Relational Repair’ and other subthemes.](image)

**Figure 13.** Connections identified between the subthemes within ‘Relational Repair’ and other subthemes.

### 4.6.1 Caring Adults.

All study-adoptees and study-adopters made reference to having/their child having a positive relationship with at least one adult in school, including those who experienced difficulties trusting others. These adults were described as being compassionate, showing adoptees that they are worthy of care:

*She often goes up to me and says, “hi chick, how are you?” and sort of sometimes quietly has a talk with [me].* (Jamie, 12)

*He’s found some teachers really like him and he doesn’t like himself so that’s good.* (Jules, adopter)

Participants appreciated the availability of caring adults on both a regular and ad-hoc basis, which contrasted with the inaccessibility of other adults in school. Caring adults were considered to be reliable and there was a sense that they would go ‘over and above’ for students:

*She would go out of her way to give us a half hour or something to talk to her. She’ll come out of her class…just so you can tell her about what’s going on.*

(Jesse, 16)
Adoptees generally trusted caring adults and they were conveyed as important sources of emotional support. They described conversations with these adults as a safe space to discuss feelings or problems away from judgement. Dylan (16) highlighted the accepting, curious and empathic approach of a caring adult:

*When I used to talk to her it was more of a like accept what I said, and when I’d say things it was looking for the reasons of me thinking it, as opposed to “well this is how I see it, you don’t think what I think, I’m gonna make you think what I think” which I think is what lots of people do, cos when you don’t agree with them they go “no that’s wrong” and dismiss whatever else I said.*

For those who described difficulties expressing their feelings, caring adults had found ways to ‘tap into’ their emotional world. This included suggesting alternative ways to express and cope with negative emotions, such as: writing poems, songs, stories or letters; drawing; and listening to/playing music.

However, some expressed that there is a limit to the emotional support that non-adopted adults can provide, expressing that it is impossible for non-adopted people to truly understand the experience of adoption. For example, Corey (16) explained that people who have grown up knowing their birth parents cannot understand what it feels like to be separated from them, with Robyn (12) agreeing that non-adopted people cannot “understand how hard it would have been” before and during the adoption.

Caring adults had also provided companionship on a more general basis:

*They’re friends with you and so you get on better and so you understand them more and so you feel more relaxed.* (Robyn, 12)

Humour was associated with likeability and adoptees cited it as an important quality in adults:
Being a funny, cool teacher everybody likes - that’s what inspires people because then you actually wanna do that lesson because you like them and I guess you’re inspired. (Brook, 14)

The significance of the relationships with caring adults was portrayed by the familial terms used to describe them and references to relationships characterised by love:

She was more like a Mum figure to us than a teacher. (Alex, 14)

She loves him and she’s like his Mum at school…and I think that’s what’s helped for him. (Sam, adopter)

This represents the strength of the bond that can develop between children and adults in school, and demonstrates the important role caring adults can play in teaching children that they are worthy of love.

Although all study-adoptees and study-adopters referred to themselves/their child having access to a caring adult in school, most could only name one or two adults from their entire school career. Caring adults seem, therefore, somewhat of a rarity. This suggests that student-teacher relationships more commonly lack compassion, empathy and connection. There was a general desire amongst participants for a greater number of rewarding and supportive relationships with adults in school.

4.6.2 Peer Support.

Participants described themselves/their child as having at least one close and supportive friendship inside or outside of school. Friends were described as sources of companionship and study-adoptees mentioned doing activities together during breaktimes and outside of school. Friends were considered to be an important source of comfort and encouragement during periods of heightened emotion and uncertainty. Robyn (12) commented, “if I’m sad or if I need calming down or something like that they help me with that”. Billy (13) expressed, “my friendships [are] the only thing that’s kept me together” through
a period of ongoing bullying. Jesse (16) described the importance of friendships during a time when she has been trying to make sense of her adoption:

*Adopted children need every friend they can get especially when they’re going through adolescence and they’re trying to work out who they are and what happened.*

This suggests that peers can offer valuable support as adopted young people attempt to understand their life histories. Corey (16) particularly valued his friendship with another adopted young person, explaining:

*because he’s had similar experiences you can talk to him… so that helps having him cos then you can say “this has happened” and he knows cos he’s got sisters, he’s got all of these people so you can talk to him.*

Others also expressed a desire to have adopted friends “to talk about it (adoption)” (Jamie, 13) and learn more about “how they cope and stuff” (Alex, 14). This suggests that some adoptees might find it helpful to connect with other adopted young people.

The benefits of peer mentoring from older students were also mentioned:

*She really responded to [peer mentoring] because they were far closer to her in age than the adults…they could have a little conversation and slag off the same people and have a good laugh about what was going on at school and as a result of that she could have a lot more closeness…so the idea of sixth form mentors or some sort of volunteer going in is far better than a teacher.*

*(Chris, adopter)*

Jamie (13) had also enjoyed having a sixth form mentor to talk to, however she explained that there are limits because they “don’t really do something about it” and suggested that the system might work better if the mentor had supported her to raise issues with adults in school.
4.7 Misperceptions and Prejudice

The theme ‘Misperceptions and Prejudice’ refers to the limited understanding and inaccuracies about, and discrimination towards adoption within schools, communities and wider society. It captures a dichotomy between overly positive and exceedingly negative discourses about adoption, both of which are unhelpful as they fail to portray an accurate picture of the complexities of adoption. All but one study-adoptee and one study-adopter made reference to this theme.

Two overlapping but distinct subthemes were found, as illustrated in Figure 14. This overlap represents misperceptions that are underpinned by derogatory assumptions about adoption, and illustrates how the general lack of understanding about adoption can contribute to the formation of stigmatising beliefs.

![Figure 14. Overlap between the subthemes within ‘Misperceptions and Prejudice’.

The findings within this theme illustrate how inaccurate and stigmatising misperceptions about adoption within society can influence the understanding of adoption within schools and result in the marginalisation of adopted children and adoptive families. Figure 15 illustrates the connections between subthemes contained within this theme and other themes.
4.7.1 Misconceptions About Adoption.

Participants described misperceptions and inaccuracies about adoption that exist within schools, communities and society. Chris (adopter) highlighted the existence of an outdated view, reminiscent of illegal, forced adoptions that occurred during the mid-1900’s:

*“A lot of them almost think it’s a backstreet thing and it’s done through churches.”*

Ashley (adopter) described frustration at other parents treating her son “as if he’s this Oliver Twist character”, suggesting that some people assume that adoptees are akin to orphans. The perception that adoptees are parentless was also represented in a “silly song” (Frankie, 13) that four study-adoptees had encountered about adoption:

> Your mum, your dad, the ones you never had, cos you’re adopted.
> (Billy, 13; Corey, 16; Jamie, 12)

These lyrics signify a misunderstanding that adopted children have never had relationships with their birth parents and also serves to undermine adoptive parents as ‘real’ or ‘valid’ parents (explored in 4.7.2).

Jamie (12) commented that “people say ‘oh it must be good being adopted as you get more presents’ but that’s not really how it goes”. This misperception communicates the message that adopted children benefit from having two sets of parents, contributing to the narrative that children are ‘lucky’ to be adopted. It
also demonstrates limited awareness that adopted young people are likely to have little contact with their birth families. Indeed, Corey (16) specifically made reference to the fact that he has never received birthday presents from his birth Mum and expressed the pain of being the one to initiate contact with her:

*I've never received a present but I've always sent her a letter…recently she got in touch…I started balling with tears…and I was just thinking, “I was your child who had to get in contact with you”…it’s meant to be their job not mine.*

Jesse (16) described encountering a ‘happy ever after’ narrative in which people expect adopted children to “get over” their early experiences once placed in the adoptive family:

*They don’t really know that children can be quite badly traumatised or affected by their earlier experience… they’ll be like, “oh I’m sure they’re sad at first but they’ll get over it”…They see it as kind of like a phase, not a permanent thing.*

This represents an ignorance of the possible magnitude and long-lasting impact of early trauma, and an expectation that traumatised children will quickly recover from adverse experiences. This particular misperception is at odds with participants’ accounts of having enduring needs rooted in early adversities (see 4.3 and 4.4). A ‘happy ever after’ narrative is also likely to contribute to an insensitivity in schools about the possible needs of adopted children (see 4.5).

Interestingly, Sam (adopter) and Jamie (12) reflected upon their role in the construction of an overly positive or partial understanding of adoption within their own social circles. Sam expressed that “the complexity [of adoption] is too big to explain when you’re waiting outside the school”. As a result, she had provided alternative explanations for her son’s difficulties:

*If another parent asks me why [my child] has difficulty at school I will quite often say, “oh he’s dyslexic”…rather than saying, “I think it’s partly because he’s adopted”, so I’m sort of contributing to the idea that there’s nothing wrong with being adopted, which is not very helpful.*
Here Sam seems to suggest that by failing to explain that her son’s difficulties are related to his adoption, she paints an overly positive picture of adoption and misses an opportunity to educate others about the possible needs of adopted children. Similarly, whilst discussing how she answers her peers’ questions about her adoption, Jamie (12) explained, “sometimes I sort of change it a bit so it sounds a bit better than it actually was”. This represents a reluctance to disclose the full details of her adoption and desire to present a more positive life history. Whilst the partial presentation of sensitive personal information is perfectly understandable, portraying adoption as being “a bit better” than it is in reality arguably contributes to the existence a ‘sugar-coated’ adoption narrative within society.

Given the misunderstandings surrounding adoption, participants expressed a need to educate others about adoption. Study-adoptees argued that adoption should be included on the curriculum, with a particular focus on what it is and how it affects children as they grow up. Frankie (13) felt that it would be important to include the positives of adoption and “explain that it’s a good thing…you’re giving them a better future or a better life.” Parents also commented upon the role of the media in educating society about adoption. Jules (adopter) described the positive effects of television programmes on children’s knowledge about the care system and adoption, expressing that, as a result, “children’s knowledge is actually sometimes better than the teachers’ and [their] acceptance in my experience”. Chris (adopter) commented that whilst the media has the potential to “change people’s opinions” about adoption, it can contribute to negative stereotypes about adoption because “a lot of the news stuff is always about bad things.”

4.7.2 Adoption Stigma.

Participants recalled a range of negative and stigmatising misperceptions that they had come across within schools about adoption and/or adopted children. One commonly encountered belief was that adopted children are unwanted or rejected by their birth parents. Participants described the sense of blame this places on the adopted child, as though their behaviour or personality caused their birth parents to abandon them:
They thought I was some kind of devil child and no one wanted to look after me.  

(Robyn, 12)

Jamie (12) had encountered the assumption that adopted children come from ‘bad’ families and therefore she must be inherently ‘bad’ too:

People thought I would be a bully or a liar…because I had a different start in life and that means my parents were really bad… apparently children take after their parents [and] what their parents teach them to do so they thought I was taught to be like it.

Participants also described negative attitudes towards adoption more generally. Sam (adopter) described adoption being used as a “cuss” (negative slight) amongst non-adopted children; the notion that ‘being adopted’ is an insult represents a derogatory view of adoption amongst some children. Ashley (adopter) described a teacher saying, “oh it’s wonderful the way the children accept [your child] even though he’s adopted”.

The experience of others’ conceptualisations of adoption as being a ‘bad’ thing had resulted in some study-adoptees questioning their own, more positive perceptions of adoption:

I find it a positive thing normally but then once they start making negative comments it then puts me in a negative mood so then I see it badly. (Drew, 14)

This demonstrates the difficulties some adoptees have making sense of their adoptive status within the social context of school, where the existence of discriminatory attitudes can negatively influence their understanding of adoption and themselves as an adopted young person.

Some study-adoptees had experienced significant and enduring episodes of bullying targeting their adoptive status. There was a sense that bullies saw adoption as “weakness” (Corey, 16) and/or understood that it “hurt more” (Billy, 13) to target this than other personal attributes. Adoptees described incidents in which bullies had made spiteful references to their birth families and adoption:
There were quite mean comments going around on Instagram saying stuff about my Mums, also me being different …comments like, “I hope she chokes on her Dad’s used condoms” and that was the worst one for me because I don’t have a Dad…they knew I don’t have a Dad…and something like “I’ll boot her to space the adopted gay twat” so it was quite hard. (Charlie, 12)

They’re saying, “oh you were adopted because you were difficult” or…”ah you’re really hard work so no wonder they didn’t want you.” (Drew, 14)

Study-adoptees attending separate schools located in four Local Authorities had encountered the same ‘adoption song’ (see 4.7.1). This suggests that, somehow, it has spread across disparate areas of the country and indicates an existence of adoption stigma nationwide.

Bullying had led to adoptees developing negative constructions about their adoption and themselves (also see 4.3.2):

She made me feel like me and my siblings got adopted separately because it was my fault. She’d make everything feel like it was my fault…she did make me insecure and think that my family was going to do the same now…And that really tore me apart. (Alex, 14)

There was a sense that people target adoption because they do not have an accurate understanding of what it is (see 4.7.1). It was felt that educating children about adoption would reduce the stigma associated with it, so that people would no longer “find it so weird” (Robyn, 12):

I think students, anyone, needs to understand more about adoption so that it’s not such an alien like thing…if you see something you don’t understand you might be nervous about it, scared about it…I think if people knew more about it they wouldn’t treat people who are adopted as like not people. (Billy, 13)

Study-adoptees described the significant psychological impact that the bullying had on them, including experiences of anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Billy (13) was in the process of changing schools to escape
bullying. Some expressed regret about sharing their adoptive status in school, due to the subsequent bullying that they had experienced. This suggests that adoption stigma can directly influence how adopted children choose to present themselves in school (also see 4.3.2).

Despite the significant impact of bullying, it was felt that schools do not take bullying about adoption seriously enough:

*I mean we’ve gone into school and said to teachers you know if somebody says something about adoption, you have to- here’s the clue, take out the word adopted, put in black, Jewish, disabled, how does it sound? Good? No? well it doesn’t sound good with adopted either.* (Ashley, adopter)

Study-adoptees commented on the inadequate responses of schools in relation to bullying, voicing that “teachers just don’t do anything about it” (Drew, 14). Again, this highlights the importance of training teachers about what adoption is and how it affects young people, so that they are better able to understand the significant impact that bullying could have. This is likely to promote a more effective response to bullying when it occurs.

Reference was also made to a societal construction and ideology of ‘ordinary families’, consisting of two heterosexual parents with biologically related children, which undermines adoption as a valid family structure:

*I had this one teacher that I got really mad at…because they said, “your parents and your family are the ones that gave birth to you”. No, it takes more than blood to be family.* (Alex, 14)

Frankie (13) described his peers depicting his adoptive sister “like a step sister because she’s not actually your real sister”. This represents a perception that “real” familial bonds can only occur within biological families and suggests that relationships within adopted families are perceived as somehow being ‘unreal’.

Charlie (12) described a need to defend the legitimacy of the love within her family expressing:
They’re always confused about whether they love me or not and I always have to say, “yeah they do love me… I’m not their genetic child but they do love me like I was their own.”

Similarly, Sam and Ashley (adopters) suggested that some adoptive parents feel a need to prove their love for their child and might conceal/deny their child’s difficulties as a result. However, both agreed that it is important to acknowledge the needs of adopted children and that doing so does not undermine the love within parent-child relationships:

Sam: …a lot of liberal, middle class Mums jump very quickly to saying it’s exactly the same, you know the bond between adopted child and my birth child is exactly the same and you know they’re very keen to sort of not show any difference, not accept the difference, or not understand the difference because they try to be kind.

Ashley: I think they feel they don’t want to sound like you’re saying that you love them any less…we all know we couldn’t possibly love our children any more if they’d come out of our bodies…but they do have extra needs and it’s not belittling the love if people will admit that.

4.8 Chapter Summary

Thematic analysis of the data from the study-adoptivee interviews and study-adopter focus group found five overarching themes: Inner Turmoil, Social Disconnection, Unsupportive School Contexts, Relational Repair, and Misperceptions and Prejudice. The study-adoptees and children of the study-adopters had experienced a range of challenges in school, particularly in relation to their SEMH. These socioemotional difficulties were often attributed to the experience of adverse life events, and were felt to be exacerbated by the unsupportive nature of school systems and environments. The experience of discriminatory attitudes about adoption suggests that societal stigma about adoption filters into schools. Positive relationships with peers and caring adults were perceived as a vital component of effective support in schools. The following chapter will explore how DTs used these findings to inform their role.
working with adopted children.
Chapter 5: Findings - Designated Teachers

This chapter will examine the findings from the DT workshop, exploring the third research question: How can the educational experiences of adopted children be used to inform practice? As outlined in Chapter 3, study-DTs were presented with the findings from phase 1 of the study and asked to consider how they might use the voices of adopted children and adoptive parents to develop their role.

5.1 Overview of Themes

Thematic analysis of the data collected within the workshop (from the group notes and individual pledges) identified three themes. Each theme represents a different function of the DT role in relation to supporting adopted children in school (see Figure 16). These will be explored in the following discussion.

Figure 16. Themes identified within DTs’ written contributions in the workshop.

5.2 Raising Awareness

The theme ‘Raising Awareness’ captures the DT’s role in developing understanding in schools about adoption and the needs of adopted children. All study-DTs made reference to this theme. Firstly, study-DTs expressed the need to identify the adopted children in their schools. Participants expressed the importance of gathering and sharing information about the support needs of particular adopted children to “ensure strategies are known, shared and used
by all staff” (DT5, Primary School). They suggested developing “one-page profiles” for adopted children which highlight the child’s “motivations, interests, triggers, calming strategies” (group task). One DT commented that, as a result of the workshop, he planned “to review our students’ pupil profiles to ensure they include trauma development strategies” (DT1, specialist SEMH Secondary School). Study-DTs suggested that pupil support plans should be closely monitored and regularly reviewed.

The DTs also emphasised the importance of organising whole school training to “ensure all staff understand emotional behavioural needs etc. of adopted/looked after/SGO children” (DT2, Primary School). They suggested provided training on: attachment; the impact of early trauma, shame and rejection; and supporting anxiety. These are similar to the suggestions made by parents (see 4.5.1). One DT also stressed the importance of continuing to develop her own knowledge (“Keep reading! And researching” [DT16, Junior School]). Finally, participants identified a need to include adoption on the curriculum, teaching children about “different family types” (group task) and celebrating family diversity:

[I promise to] encourage adoption to come onto our curriculum within the context of other differences like young carers, LAC, cultural and ethical difference. (DT5, Primary School)

However, there was some concern about how to talk about adoption honestly and sensitively with children; one group requested guidance about this.

5.3 Developing Relationships

All but two DTs identified their role in supporting adopted children and adopters to develop effective relationships with their peers and/or school staff. Whilst some pledged to ensure adopted children are allocated one key adult, others promised to develop a “network of safe adults” (DT5, Primary School) or “key team” (group task). Participants also explored ways to support adopted children’s social skills and peer relationships, through “circle of Friends/buddy system” (group task), lunch time clubs, peer mentoring and Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) support “around building friendships” (group task).
DTs said that they would develop their own relationships with the adopted children and adoptive parents in their setting. They promised to show adopted children that they are valued and cared for:

[I promise] to go and speak to them at least once per week, even if it is brief (so they know I keep them in mind) (DT14, Primary School)

Recognise key opportunities to let him know you are thinking of him (group task)

[I promise] for you to feel heard, nurtured and valued, so that you feel safe and happy. (DT17, Primary School)

This included listening to their voices of children to plan person-centred support:

[I promise to] meet with the child…and see if they would like any extra support. (DT4, Secondary School)

[I promise to] ask for your views about how you feel about school. (DT14, Primary School)

DTs promised to ensure that they work in partnership with parents “to understand their issues and anxieties” (DT11, Primary School) and “help them feel safe” (DT2, Primary School). It was suggested that this could be done through a home-school book, improved communication systems and/or regular meetings with parents.

DTs also identified their role in developing professional relationships with other services, for example, “[I will] contact post-adoption support service for support” (DT2, Primary School).

5.4 Supporting Emotional Needs

The theme ‘Supporting Emotional Needs’ outlines the DT’s role in understanding adopted children’s emotional experiences and identifying
strategies to help them to cope with difficult feelings. This theme was mentioned by 16 DTs (n=20). DTs reflected upon how they could support children to find ways to express and regulate their emotions. For example, using non-verbal means to support them to communicate how they are feeling (e.g. 5-point scale, temperature gauge, Blob Tree). Specific suggestions for regulation strategies included: access to a safe space, having a free pass to leave the classroom and access to ELSA sessions. Participants described how they might adapt their interaction style when supporting children in a heightened state of emotion, referring the importance of the language they use:

I will always consider the language I use and work hard to ‘wonder’. (DT16, Junior School)

Shared language - non-blame, non-questioning, emotion coaching/labelling (group task)

DTs identified specific strategies they might use to build the self-esteem of adopted young people, such as providing regular praise and giving them a role of responsibility in class.

Participants recognised the importance of adopting an empathic approach to understanding behaviour, considering the underpinning emotional experience. They highlighted the need to “step into the child’s shoes, understanding their lived experiences” (group task) and to consider behaviour within the context of their early experiences. It seemed that discussions around crude behavioural approaches in schools had prompted the DTs to rethink their schools’ behavioural policies, with participants suggesting that they would ensure that policies were informed by what is known about the impact of early relational trauma on children’s emotions and behaviour:

[I promise to] adapt/re-write behaviour/SEN policy to ensure it is underpinned by attachment and trauma awareness (DT2, Primary School)

One suggested including a “LAC/adopt(ion) specific section” (DT3, specialist SEMH Primary School) within their behaviour policy.
5.5 Chapter Summary

Three themes were identified within the data from the DT workshop. These represent the study-DTs’ views about the key tasks of the DT role with adopted children, based on the experiences of the study-adoptees and study-adopters: Raising Awareness, Developing Relationships, and Supporting Emotional Needs.

Chapter 6 will discuss the findings from phases 1 and 2 of the study in relation to the BHTD, existing literature and policy, and examine implications for practice.
Chapter 6: Discussion

This study adopted a bioecological approach to investigate the educational experiences and support needs of adopted children at the individual level of the young person, the family level through adoptive parents and the institutional level through DTs. Although the primary focus of the research was the school microsystem, it has identified factors across the meso, exo, macro and chrono systems which impact upon the lives of adopted children inside and outside of school. The study found that adoptees overwhelmingly needed more support than they were getting. The lack of support for adoptees and adopters was matched by a limited awareness of their needs in schools and wider society. Within the constraints of a small study, I have uncovered a significant unmet need. This chapter will discuss these needs and explore how they might be met by school professionals, EPs and wider policy. Whilst the BTHD helpfully directs our understanding of the multiple influences upon the educational experiences of adopted children (see Figure 17), the inter-dependability of the contextual layers makes it difficult to isolate the study’s key findings at each level of the ecosystem. Therefore, the discussion of the findings will be more cross-cutting. There will be three broad areas of discussion at the child, societal and institutional levels. I will then examine the strengths and limitations of the study and consider future directions for research.

6.1 Summary of Findings

6.1.1 Phase 1: RQ1 and RQ2

Five themes were identified within the narratives of the study-adoptees and study-adopters: Inner Turmoil, Social Disconnection, Unsupportive School Contexts, Relational Repair and Misperceptions and Prejudice. Figure 17 maps the findings contained within each theme across the contextual layers of the BTHD. It illustrates factors that participants considered to contribute towards difficulties in school (RQ1) and those that were reported to be supportive of positive educational experiences (RQ2).
### Key:
- Difficulties experienced in school
- Factors considered to be supportive of positive educational experiences

### Chronosystem (Time)
- Shift in the function and nature of adoption over time
- Recession impacting upon school budgets
- Tradition of punitive behavioural approaches within schools
- Development of an academic attainment agenda in schools

### Macrosystem
- Schools primarily judged on academic attainment
- Pressure on schools to maintain their reputation
- Reliance upon diagnostic labels to understand the needs of children
- School budget cuts
- Punitive approach to behaviour in schools
- Limited understanding about adoption and the needs of adopted children
- Overly positive portrayals of adoption
- Societal ideology of ‘ordinary’ families related by blood - adoptive family relationships not

### Exosystem
- Lack of teacher training about the impact of relational trauma and adoption
- Inclusion of triggering topics on the curriculum
- Rigid school systems
- Adoption not on the curriculum

### Mesosystem
- Impact of early experiences on life in school and the adoptive family
- Dismissal of parental concerns by schools
- Negative assumptions about adoptive parents in schools
- Reluctance of schools to engage with post-adoption support
- Blocked channels of communication between home and school
- ‘Stress of school comes into the house’

### Microsystems
- Adoptive status shared without consent
- Friendship difficulties
- Teasing/bullying about adoption
- Limited understanding about adoption and the needs of adopted children
- Lack of adequate emotional and pastoral support
- Limited empathy and compassion
- Focus on academic attainment

### Developing child (Person)
- Intense emotions
- Uncertainty about identity and decisions about disclosing adoptive status
- Low self-worth
- Feeling different to others
- Negative expectations of themselves and others within relationships
- Conflict between wanting relationships and pushing others away

### Teaching training about the impact of relational trauma and adoption

### Parental decision to give up work

### Parent taking a lead role in school

### Parent ‘going very high’ (school leadership team, governors) to facilitate

### Counselling

### Safe spaces

### ‘Time out’ card

### Clear, purposeful boundaries
Study-adoptees and study-adopters described how damaging relational processes within their/their children’s birth family microsystem had given rise to overwhelming emotions and emotional regulation difficulties. They reported that
the experience of relational trauma and loss had jeopardised their/their child’s ability to trust others and effectively engage in relational processes in subsequent contexts. This represents the interaction between processes within the birth family, adoptive family and school microsystems, at the level of the mesosystem. It also demonstrates how the disruption of positive proximal processes within the birth family microsystem can affect socioemotional development at the individual level. These socioemotional needs were portrayed as being enduring over time. Participants described how adverse early experiences and adoption had affected their/their child’s understanding of who they are. Adoptees had explored their individual life histories (chronosystems) to make sense of their identity.

Positive relational processes in school contexts were perceived as having the ability to mitigate against some of the damage caused by the negative relational processes experienced pre-adoPTION, supporting the adopted person learn to trust again and improve their self-worth. Adoptees had strong relationships with adults who exhibited caring personal qualities; these adults often supported adoptees to express and manage their emotions. This suggests that the proximal processes associated with positive relationships in school can facilitate socioemotional development. Despite study-adoptees’ and study-adopters’ desire for high quality socioemotional support in school, schools were portrayed as unempathic contexts which do not prioritise positive relational processes or support emotional needs adequately. This was attributed to a lack of training about the impact of trauma at the level of the exosystem, the impact of a focus on academic attainment and a pressure on schools to maintain their reputation within the macrosystem. As a result, the school context itself was perceived to further compromise the socioemotional wellbeing of adopted children.

Inaccurate and stigmatising views about adoption, originating from the macrolevel societal context, were perceived as influencing how adoption and adopted children are understood within the microsystem of school. Societal misunderstandings were described as reflecting an outdated understanding of adoption. Study-adoptees and study-adopters had encountered discriminatory attitudes towards adoption within schools and the wider social context, which
affected how they chose to present themselves to others (i.e. disclosure/non-disclosure of their adoptive status).

6.1.2 Phase 2: RQ3

Study-DTs identified three key implications for their practice, derived from the experiences of the study-adoptees and study-adopters (RQ3): Raising Awareness, Developing Relationships and Supporting Emotional Needs. The implications contained within each theme fall across the adopted child’s school microsystem, the mesosystem and exosystem, shown in Figure 18. As explored in the following sections, these broad implications also apply to the role of the EP and at a wider policy level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exosystem</th>
<th>Mesosystem</th>
<th>Microsystem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify adopted children in school</td>
<td>Work with parents to develop understanding of adopted children’s needs</td>
<td>Establish network of key adults for adopted children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share information about support needs of adopted children with staff</td>
<td>Establish/develop relationships with adoptive parents</td>
<td>Develop relationships with adopted children, demonstrating care and empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review support for adopted children to ensure strategies are trauma-informed</td>
<td>Improve communication with parents</td>
<td>Provide support for peer relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure pupil support plans are regularly reviewed</td>
<td>Develop relationships with external support services</td>
<td>Include adopted children in support planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrange/deliver relevant staff training</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support adopted children to express emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in continuing professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td>Develop emotional regulation support strategies with adopted children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include adoption/family diversity on the curriculum</td>
<td></td>
<td>Support development of self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access relevant professional services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote an empathic approach to understanding behaviour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make school behaviour policies ‘trauma-informed’</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 18. Implications of the findings from phase 1 for DT practice across the adopted child’s ecosystem (RQ3).
6.2 Understanding the Legacy of Trauma and Adoption

6.2.1 Socioemotional needs.

The study-adoptees and children of the study-adopters had experienced a range of significant SEMH difficulties. Identified needs are similar to those found in previous studies. These needs included: emotional expression and regulation difficulties (AUK, 2018; Biehal et al., 2010; Crowley, 2014, 2018; DeJong et al., 2016; O’Reilly et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011); feelings of worthlessness (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Crowley, 2014, 2018) rooted in perceptions that they were unwanted or rejected by birth parents (Neil, 2012); difficulties making sense of their adoptive identity (Biehal et al., 2010; Neil, 2012; O’Reilly et al., 2016); difficulties forming and maintaining friendships with peers (AUK, 2014; Biehal et al., 2010; Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Crowley, 2014, 2018; O’Reilly et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011); experiences of bullying (AUK, 2014; AUK 2018; Cooper & Johnson, 2007; O’Reilly et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011) as well as diagnosed mental health conditions (DeJong et al. 2016; O’Reilly et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2014). The high level of SEMH needs may reflect the above average prevalence of SEMH needs typically found within adopted populations (AUK, 2017; Selwyn et al., 2014), especially during the teenage years (AUK, 2014; Selwyn et al., 2014). However, it is important to acknowledge the wider, national context whereby SEMH needs are fairly common in adolescence (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018). The sample may have captured several young people who fall within this group. Nevertheless, participants frequently attributed socioemotional difficulties to the experience of challenging early life experiences and adoption. This suggests that there is something different about their SEMH needs, compared to children who have not experienced early trauma and adoption. The study provides lived, experiential accounts of the claim that exposure to prolonged, relational traumas and disrupted attachments within early childhood can result in developmental difficulties with emotional regulation and interpersonal relatedness. This offers support for the notion of ‘developmental trauma’, as conceptualised by several theorists (van der Kolk, 2005; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Treisman, 2017a).
Study-adopters and study-adoptees expressed that their/their child’s experiences of being ‘let down’ by their birth parents had jeopardised their ability to trust others. This default position of distrust had led to difficulties forming relationships with adults and friendships with peers in school. The findings highlight the potentially long-lasting effects of early relational trauma and loss on an individual’s subsequent relationships and perceptions of others as relational partners. The findings are consistent with AUK’s (2014) survey (n=1500), in which 75% of parents reported that their child’s experiences of abuse and neglect had affected their social ability in school. They also align with findings from van den Dries et al.’s (2009) study, which found that children adopted after the age of one were more likely to have negative relational expectations (indicated by an insecure attachment style), which persisted years after their adoptions. The negative relational expectations described by participants could be indicative of a ‘negative internal working model’ and insecure attachment style, as posited by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). However, even children who had lived with their adoptive parents from birth (as a result of concurrent planning) were described as having negative relational expectations. This suggests that, even without the experience of abuse and neglect, separation from birth parents and adoption alone can evoke feelings of mistrust, loss, rejection and inadequacy.

Whilst previous qualitative studies involving adopted children and adopters have highlighted the experience of friendship difficulties amongst adoptees (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Crowley, 2014, 2018; O’Reilly et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014), few specifically mention difficulties trusting and forming relationships with adults in school. Possible exceptions to this are Crowley (2014, 2018) and Selwyn et al. (2014), in which adoptees explicitly expressed that their early experiences within their birth families had affected their ability to trust others in general. The current study demonstrates the importance of providing adopted children with opportunities to build positive relationships with both peers and adults in school. The findings highlight the need to develop adopted children’s capacity to trust, by providing them with experiences of reliable, consistent and responsive relational partners. “Relationships need to be the anchor of
change...to provide [them] with new experiences of getting to know people differently” (Treisman, 2017a, p.152); this will be explored further in 6.4.1.

The emotional regulation difficulties experienced by the study-adoptees and children of the study-adopters can be examined through the lenses of attachment theory and neuroscience. Adoptees who did not experience consistent, responsive and sensitive parenting in early childhood will have missed opportunities to develop coping skills in partnership with an adult; limited exposure co-regulation may have impaired the development of their emotional self-regulation skills (Treisman, 2017a). Participants also described emotional reactivity to sensory, environmental cues reminiscent of the adversities that they have/their child has endured, even within safe contexts. This could be indicative of neurological sensitivity to signs of threat (Pollak, 2008) and impairments to the brain regions responsible for executive functioning and self-regulation (Shonkoff et al., 2012), resulting from chronic exposure to danger. Adaptive responses which kept the child safe within adverse birth family contexts had become maladaptive in a world without chaos (Woolgar, 2013). However, these conclusions are only tentative as no assessments of attachment, neurological and/or executive functioning were made. One must also be careful not to apply universal and deterministic generalisations about the impact of adversity, as these explanations do not account for individual differences in responses to, and recovery from, trauma (Meins, 2017; Watsell & White, 2012; Woolgar, 2013).

Although the SEMH needs identified within the findings are commonly reported by adoptive parents within the literature, this study has provided much-needed insight into how young people themselves experience these difficulties in school, building upon the work of Crowley (2014, 2018). It has shown that adopted young people use their understanding of their past experiences to make sense of their current difficulties, demonstrating an awareness of the legacy of their trauma. Of course, it may be that the families of the adoptees in the study have high levels of ‘communication openness’ (Brodinsky, 2006) about their adoptions, facilitating a developing understanding of the impact of their early trauma and loss. Indeed, more open parents may have been more inclined to respond to the research advert. Such clarity may not be found
amongst young people from families with low levels of communication openness.

The study-adoptees described their experiences and support needs with striking eloquence and maturity, yet few had been given opportunities to do so. Whilst parents, professionals and researchers express ethical concerns about asking adopted children about their difficult experiences (Murray, 2005) the findings from this study suggest their trauma is already very present. Perhaps adults have been overly cautious about seeking the views of adopted children, and so silencing a group that have a lot to say. Concern about resurfacing painful memories is understandable, but it is arguably more distressing to feel invisible whilst struggling with serious difficulties in everyday life institutions, such as school. Furthermore, children may feel empowered by supportive conversations which help them to understand their experiences and contribute to decisions about support. There is an ongoing role for DTs and supportive adults in schools to seek the views of adopted children about their support needs. EPs are equipped with the therapeutic skills and tools needed to elicit the voices of children, so could also play a key role here. EPs, who can influence practice in schools and wider systems, are important advocates for adopted children. The profession should campaign on behalf of adopted children to challenge education and adoption policy, placing their voices at the heart of decision making and educational reform.

6.2.2 Adoptive identity.

Identity was a common theme across participants’ narratives. This supports assertions that adolescence is a particularly poignant time for exploration of adoptive identity (Neil, 2000). Study-adoptees and study-adopters portrayed adoption as being an important part of their/their child’s identity, but described having/their children having incomplete, incoherent and/or conflicting narratives about their adoptions. This suggests that some of their/their child’s questions about their adoptions remained unanswered. Study-adoptees voiced a range of positive and negative feelings about their adoptions, replicating Neil’s (2012) finding that children’s understanding of their adoptions can be ‘complicated’. Although study-adoptees generally expressed that they had been adopted because they were unsafe within their birth families, some voiced a deeper-
rooted belief that they were unlovable, unwanted and to blame for their adoptions. This suggests that the generic explanations adopted children are offered about their adoptions might not fit with the inherent sense of rejection and unworthiness that some feel. Drew and Jamie (adoptees) who described such feelings of rejection also described being ‘chosen’ by their adoptive parents. It may be that parents or the young people themselves have created these ‘chosen narratives’ to counteract feelings of rejection. This highlights the importance of supporting adoptees to understand that they were taken away from their birth parents, rather than ‘given up’ (Neil, 2012). Adopted children should be supported to engage in developmentally appropriate but honest discussions about birth family circumstances, to address the complex feelings of shame and self-blame that some might experience. Empathic conversations should explore the reasons why birth parents struggled to care for them, removing blame from both the parents and the child.

The data suggests that adoption can be a very prominent part of a young person’s identity that does not simply ‘go away’ over time. The findings highlight the need for sensitive, high-quality and ongoing life story work; ‘one-off’ discussions about the circumstances of their adoptions are inadequate. Adopted children must be offered regular opportunities to talk with somebody as their life stories develop, deepen and grow. DTs could play an important role here, for example ‘checking in’ with adopted children annually to see whether they would like support to talk about their experiences/adoption, linking with relevant services as required. Life story work should provide opportunities to reflect on the past whilst helping children to understand that they are more than their trauma. It should not solely focus on their early experiences and adoption, but also explore achievements and look forward to the future. Given the shortcomings of life story books, there is an evident need to develop life story work for adopted children (Watson et al., 2015a, 2015b; see 2.4.2). Psychologists could collaborate with social workers to develop life story work methods, embedding psychological approaches (such as narrative, positive and solution-focussed psychology) into the process. There is scope in training EPs (especially those with a specialism in working with care-experienced children) in life story approaches, so that they can work alongside other professionals to
advise schools and parents how to sensitively facilitate conversations about life histories.

6.3 Raising Awareness and Increasing Understanding

6.3.1 The ‘happy ever after’ myth.

The abiding nature of the socioemotional needs experienced by the adoptees represented in the study are contrary to societal perceptions that adopted children will “get over” (Jesse, 16) their early experiences. Study-adoptees and study-adopters had encountered overly positive misperceptions and narratives about adoption, as previously identified in the literature (AUK, 2014; Baden, 2016; Syne et al., 2012; see 2.2.1). It is extraordinary that there is a belief that the needs of care-experienced children will simply disappear once they are adopted into a loving home (AUK, 2014). This ‘happy ever after’ narrative is perpetuated by political rhetoric within England and Wales. Adoption policy presents adoption as the best solution for permanence, specifically stating that it “gives children…a chance to recover from the trauma they may have suffered in early life” (DfE, 2016, p.5). Messages from adoption research may also exacerbate this view. For example, van IJzendoorn and Juffer (2006) argue that adoption is an ‘effective intervention’ which facilitates developmental ‘catch up’ and ‘recovery’. Although adoption may afford preferable outcomes to remaining within birth families and/or care, such broad conclusions arguably contribute to the perception that adoption ‘fixes’ children.

The study-adoptees and study-adopters voiced that sugar-coated societal narratives about adoption within the macrosystem filter into the school microsystem, resulting in a limited recognition and appreciation of the significant impact of the losses associated with adoption in educational contexts. Both society and schools could arguably, therefore, be contributing to experiences of disenfranchised grief amongst adopted children and young people, which could further perpetuate their emotional needs (Brodinsky, 2011). Parents had experienced school staff who had actively dismissed the significance of their child’s difficulties. This highlights a disparity between how parents and teachers might perceive the needs of adopted children, which is in line with Stewart’s (2017) finding that some teachers feel that adopters use their children’s adverse early experiences as an excuse for ‘poor behaviour’. A limited understanding of
the impact of early experiences coupled with the belief that adopted children are ‘fine’ once they are adopted may cause teachers to overlook their support needs. Furthermore, schools will experience adopted children rarely and are therefore unlikely to prioritise this group within the context of huge professional demands and diminishing resources to support additional needs. The exo and macrosystems must, therefore, drive and prioritise support for adopted children in schools. LA services, including EPSs, must have this group clearly on their radar. The ‘core offer’ of traded services should include work with adopted children, so schools can access professional support for free.

6.3.2 Developing understanding about adoption.

The findings suggest there is a limited understanding about adoption and the support needs of adopted children in schools. This has been found in other studies and there seems to have been little progress in teachers’ understanding in over a decade (AUK, 2014; AUK, 2019; Cooper & Johnson, 2007, Gibbs, 2014). There is an evident need to raise awareness in schools about the enduring vulnerabilities that can arise from early trauma and adoption, firstly by including this topic within initial teacher training and introducing mandatory training on attachment and trauma in schools (Treisman, 2017a). EPs could play an important role in developing and providing such training. Offering ‘train the trainer’ courses for DTs would enable them to cascade the training to school staff on a rolling programme. It is important that any ‘trauma-informed’ initiatives within schools explicitly include information about adoption to challenge the misperception that children’s needs disappear once they are adopted. It is encouraging that the ‘Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools’ document recognises children-previously-in-care as a vulnerable group (DfE, 2018h). EPs can also increase the visibility of adopted children in schools by raising them as a vulnerable group within planning meetings. The remit of EPs with a specialism in children-in-care should also be extended to include adopted children (and indeed other groups of care-experienced children). These designated EPs could take the lead on identifying adopted children within schools to build a better understanding of the numbers of adopted children within LAs (DECP, 2006), and investigate educational outcomes for this group (Gore-Langton, 2017).
The study-adoptees and study-DTs identified the importance of including adoption on the curriculum to increase understanding about adoption amongst adoptees’ peers and address adoption stigma, celebrating family diversity with children from a young age. EPs could work in partnership with DTs to support schools to develop their Personal, Health, Social and Economic education curriculum to include these topics. Coram (2016) have provided a helpful toolkit, developed with adopted young people, to support the delivery of these sessions. Study-adopters also highlighted the important role of the media in educating wider society about the complexities of adoption. It is important to involve adoptive families and informed professionals when planning these initiatives to ensure that they achieve an accurate and balanced view of adoption, and avoid contributing to negative stereotypes.

6.3.3 Recognising adoptees as a marginalised group.

The study-adoptees and study-adopters had been subjected to a range of direct and indirect discrimination about adoption, adopted children and adoptive families. Much of the stigma relating to adoption was rooted in misunderstandings about what adoption is and why it occurs. These beliefs had been encountered as explicit attacks but were also experienced in more subtle ways, whereby the perpetrator may not have been aware of their discriminatory or insensitive beliefs. Study-adoptees had been teased about their adoptions, replicating findings from AUK’s (2019) larger-scale survey, suggesting that concerns about sharing their adoptive status with peers is warranted. It was particularly alarming to find that adoptees living in disparate parts of the country had been teased with the same ‘adoption song’.

The experience of adoption stigma supports Garber and Grotevant’s (2015) assertion that adoptees are a marginalised group within society, extending their findings from America to Britain. The findings suggest that society continues to undermine adoption as a valid family structure (Palacios, 2009; French, 2013). Participants had encountered several of the adoption microaggressions identified in the literature including: being asked overly intrusive questions; adoptive families perceived as second best; public outing of adoptive status; using adoption against the adoptee; adoptees portrayed as different to individuals from birth families; negative stereotypes about birth parents;
stereotypes of adoptees as orphans and ‘bad seeds’; and negative societal portrayals of adoption (Baden, 2014; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). The study also identified additional microaggressions: ‘dismissal of adoption stigma’ and ‘over-worrying adopters’. Firstly, discrimination about adoption was not always taken seriously by teachers suggesting that schools do not appreciate the potentially damaging effects of adoption stigma. Secondly, parents felt undermined by school professionals and as though they had been labelled as “neurotic” (Ashley, adopter). Both represent the denial and devaluing of the experiences of adopted children and adoptive parents.

The findings illustrate how the negative perceptions about adoption which exist at a societal level filter through to schools. Adoption stigma had been experienced by study-adoptees in school as teasing/bullying and some described how this had changed their own views about their adoptions. This replicates Neil’s (2012) finding that children’s neutral beliefs about their adoptions can be challenged within the social context of school. As posited by social constructionism, adoptees’ understanding about adoption had been influenced by social discourse (Burr, 2003). Teasing had communicated that adoption is viewed as ‘abnormal’ from the outside, causing adoptees to feel different and out of place in school. Experiences of teasing had affected adoptees’ willingness to share information about their adoptions with peers, with some explicitly voicing regret that they had disclosed their adoptive status in school. This is in line with assertions from Crocker and Wolfe’s (2001) contingency of self-worth theory. When adoption was perceived as a socially devalued contingency, study-adoptees expressed a desire to conceal this important part of their identity to protect their self-esteem and social status (French, 2013). We therefore need to create social contexts which are tolerant of difference so that adopted children feel comfortable to share their adoptive identity with others. Furthermore, as suggested by Cooper and Johnson (2007), schools should amend their bullying policies to include issues relating to adoption. EPs could direct and support DTs and schools to do this.

The study-adoptees also commented upon a general intolerance towards any type of difference within schools, suggesting that educational initiatives aimed at increasing cohesion, such as The British Values agenda which aims to
“encourage respect for other people” (DfE, 2014b, p.5), are not working. This perhaps reflects the intolerance in wider society, in which the ‘othering’ of those different to a perceived norm is rife. Held (2006) asserts that the government has an ethical duty to foster caring relations to develop respect and tolerance within society. After all, a civilised society relies upon trust between its citizens. If schools were better equipped to develop caring relationships and trust within their communities (explored in 6.4.1), perhaps wider society would become more caring, trusting and respectful (Held, 2006). This exact sentiment is echoed by Bronfenbrenner (2005, p.14): “No society can sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings”.

6.4 Meeting the Support Needs of Adopted Children

6.4.1 Prioritising relationships in schools.

Despite reports of enduring socioemotional needs, the study-adoptees and study-adopters had experienced inadequate and inconsistent support for these difficulties in school. Support was described as being ‘too little, too late’ and school itself was perceived as exacerbating socioemotional needs. This is consistent with findings from AUK’s (2018) large scale survey in which: 74% of secondary-aged adoptees reported that teachers do not fully understand or support their needs; less than a quarter of adopters felt completely confident that their child’s teachers understand their needs; more than half of adopters of secondary-aged children felt that schools do not know how to support their child’s mental health and wellbeing; and 40% of adopters of secondary-aged children reported that school is a source of stress most or all of the time. As reported by adopters in previous studies (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Gibbs, 2014; Selwyn et al., 2014; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007), the study-adopters attributed this lack of support to a limited understanding of the impact of complex trauma and uncertainty about how to support needs associated with adverse early experiences within schools.

Supportive relationships were identified as integral to effective pastoral intervention in school. This supports findings and recommendations within the adoption literature, which highlight the importance of supporting adopted children to develop friendships (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Crowley, 2014, 2018;
King, 2009; O’Reilly et al., 2016), and relationships with adults in school (AUK, 2018; Gore-Langton & Boy, 2017; King, 2009). The inclusion of adoptees within the study has uncovered the high value that adopted children place upon close relationships with adults in school, extending findings from studies involving adopters. Caring adults were described as important sources of companionship and emotional support. However, despite the significance of these relationships, most study-adoptees could name just one or two caring adults across their education. Given that several adoptees described ongoing difficulties trusting adults, it seems that the allocation of a single key adult for adopted children teaches them that one adult in school is reliable, rather than supporting them to learn that (most) adults are trustworthy. This has two important implications. Firstly, adopted children should be offered a “network of safe adults” (DT5, Primary School) (e.g. DT, Class Teacher, Teaching Assistant, member of Senior Leadership Team), as opposed to a single member of staff (Gore-Langton & Boy, 2017). Ideally, the child should be able to choose who makes up their network rather than having adults imposed upon them. Secondly, there is a greater need to provide adopted children, and indeed all children, with opportunities to develop trusting relationships in school, including with peers. Although the recent drive towards ‘attachment awareness’ within schools is encouraging, a better focus would be supporting children to develop trusting relationships. Whilst attachment is specific to primary caregivers, trust is essential for all relationships. This moves away from a within-child discourse about insecure attachment and places the onus on schools to provide children with positive relational experiences.

The study-adoptees trusted adults who had demonstrated compassion, availability, curiosity, empathy, humour, acceptance and a non-judgemental attitude. These characteristics map onto the ‘PACE approach’; Hughes (2006) advocates that children feel safer when adults interact with playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy, and thus these qualities facilitate positive child-adult relationships. Although PACE has been recommended for use in schools (Bomber & Hughes, 2013; Gore-Langton & Boy, 2017), little research has explored its use/impact in educational settings. The current study is the first (to my knowledge) to find a preference for teaching staff who interact using the characteristics associated with PACE amongst adopted young people.
Adults who adopt a PACE approach communicate that they are attentive and responsive to the child’s needs (Hughes, 2006). Attentiveness and responsiveness show the child that: they are recognised by others (Honneth, 1995), they ‘matter’ (Smith et al., 2017), and they are cared for (Noddings, 2015). Held (2006) considers caring relations to be a building block of trust, arguing that “trust is built, bit by bit, largely by practices of caring” (p.42). Care is, therefore, at the heart of trust. The findings support this claim; trusted adults in schools were also caring adults. Similarly, trusted friends were those who demonstrated care by providing emotional support during difficult times. For children with traumatic experiences of untrustworthy adults, it is hugely significant to learn that others are trustworthy. Within this study, trusting relationships with adults and peers had offered important opportunities to challenge the adoptees’ negative relational expectations. This supports Treisman’s (2017a, pg.18) assertion that healthy relationships provide traumatised children with “a second chance secure base (which) can support them in revisiting, refining, and re-evaluating their relationship templates and assumptions”. Even for Alex (14), who described being unable to trust anybody (“I don’t even fully trust my family”), the close relationship with a caring adult had been beneficial, facilitating her to open up about her emotions.

Whilst participants identified individual adults in school who practice care, the depiction of unempathic school contexts suggests that care is not a core value within our education system (Held, 2006). School contexts were described as lacking empathy, compassion and positive student-adult relationships. This was attributed to a focus on academic attainment and the pressure on to schools to maintain their reputation. Echoing teachers in Hutchings (2015) survey, study-adoptees and study-adopters highlighted the negative impact of these pressures on teachers’ relationships with students and pupils’ emotional wellbeing. It seems that the government’s attainment agenda, which places most value on educational achievement, is creating a barrier to relational practice in schools. Sadly, whilst schools continue to be judged primarily on academic achievements, the incentive to invest time in improving pupils’ socioemotional wellbeing and resilience is limited. It is difficult “to cultivate caring relations when the messages from the “community” promote, instead,
the values of egoism, competition, and the victory of the fittest” (Held, 2006, p.43).

Recent government initiatives aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing in schools may be redundant whilst schools are under intense pressure to boost grades. This is ironic, given that children with increased wellbeing perform better academically (Public Health England, 2014); Biehal et al. (2010) also found that a key predictor of adopted children’s poor participation and progress in education was the severity of their SEMH difficulties. Some study-adoptees and children of study-adopters had missed significant amounts of schooling due to the severity of their socioemotional needs. Although academia and mental wellbeing are often seen as a dichotomy, they are actually dependent on each other. The findings provide a strong argument for holding schools accountable for the emotional wellbeing of their learners (Hutchings, 2015). It is encouraging that the proposed Ofsted (2019) framework recognises academic attainment is just one aspect of a school’s performance, but I agree that it does not prioritise relationships and socioemotional support enough (AUK, 2019; States of Mind Student Working Group, 2019). There remains an important role for the EP both within schools and at a policy level to ensure that schools effectively support mental health and emotional wellbeing. It is disappointing that the profession has been largely overlooked within national guidance on children’s mental health. EPs need to promote their knowledge, expertise and valuable contribution within this area.

Crude behavioural systems which rely upon discipline and punitive consequences were also identified as a barrier to an empathic, relational approach in schools. These systems carry an assumption that all behaviour is a deliberate choice and hold all children responsible for all behaviours. In doing so, they fail to recognise and support the underpinning emotional experience. Noddings (2015) argues that traditional, disciplined behavioural approaches prevent children from feeling cared for. For children with a negative internal working model, these blaming, isolating and rejecting practices can confirm and perpetuate their internalised sense of badness and/or worthlessness, leading to an overwhelming sense of shame (Bomber, 2010). Indeed, Sam (adopter) expressed that punitive approaches have been “damaging” for her son, which is
consistent with the finding that 50% of adopters feel that their child’s school’s approach to managing behaviour is unhelpful (AUK, 2018). This highlights the potentially harmful effects of inappropriately matched behaviour strategies for adopted children, also identified by O’Reilly et al. (2016).

Given the high exclusion rates amongst adopted children (AUK, 2018), it seems that the current approach to supporting behaviour in schools is not working for this group. Growing evidence demonstrates the benefits of relational and empathic behavioural approaches for all children (such as Emotion Coaching - Rose, Gilbert & McGuire-Snieckus, 2015). However, the government’s ‘Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools’ guidance continues to be informed by a punitive approach and recommends that whole school approaches to mental health and behaviour “should be underpinned by a clear system of rewards and sanctions” (DfE, 2018h, p.8). The words ‘empathy’ and ‘compassion’ do not feature within the document. Government policy needs revising, so that schools are guided towards a more empathic approach to understanding and supporting children’s behaviour. Interestingly, within the DT workshop, participants highlighted the need to adapt their behaviour policies to ensure that they support staff to better understand what children are communicating through their behaviour. Schools need policies which emphasise the importance of empathic and compassionate relationships. These policies need to be used flexibly, recognising that a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not meet the individual needs of pupils. EPs should work with leadership teams and DTs to develop and enforce such policies.

6.4.2 Improving post-adoption support.

Whilst adoption terminates a child’s status as a child-in-care, the findings suggest that it signifies the start of another journey for which they may need a great deal of support. Adoptive families need ongoing support and easily accessible services. However, post-adoption support is often judged as being inadequate and difficult to access (Hamblin, 2018; King et al., 2019). At present, LAs have a duty to carry out a needs assessment for post-adoption support but there is no statutory responsibility to provide the support that this recommends (Hamblin, 2018). Tarren-Sweeney (2010) suggests that acute mental health services are inadequate for adopted children with complex trauma histories and
enduring needs. The impact of individual therapy without wider support for families has also been questioned (King et al., 2019). Families are often left to cope with the adverse experiences endured by their children on their own, which can have a significant impact on family life. This is demonstrated by the finding that two study-adopters had given up work as a result of their children’s support needs. Better support for adoptive parents is vital to prevent families sliding into poverty as a result of having to give up work to support their children.

EPSs, post-adoption support services and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) should work together to develop a joint offer of support for adoptive families (Golding, 2010; Tarren-Sweeney, 2010). Given the national backdrop of budget cuts and reduced services, it may be most realistic to begin by offering universal support for adoptive families at particular times when their difficulties might manifest. Research suggests that adolescence can be a particularly difficult time for adoptees (AUK, 2014; Selwyn et al., 2014) therefore an increase in post-adoption support for families at this time might be most beneficial. Ideally, however, post-adoption support would be ongoing and readily available to all children and families. There is a strong argument for the extension of the DT role and PP+ into post-16 settings, so that adopted young people continue be offered additional support within education as they transition into adulthood. This is an under-researched area, with just one published study conducted in Britain with adopted young people aged 16 to 19 to date (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011). EPs could play an important role in supporting the transition across settings and into adulthood, given that they work with young people up to the age of 25. The profession could also contribute to action research with this age group to add to the limited evidence base.

**6.4.3 Supporting parents and teachers.**

Study-adopters described the need to strongly advocate for their child in school, as found by Gibbs (2014). Sturgess and Selwyn (2007) suggest that it is the “perseverance” (p.25) and “tenacity” (p.26) of adopters which facilitates the stability of adoptive placements. It seems that they may also need these qualities to ensure that schools recognise, understand and support their children’s needs, in order to preserve school placements. Whilst the availability
of a parental advocate is an incredibly positive aspect of adoption, parents should not have to go to such lengths to be heard. Parents are experts in their own children and must be viewed as such. Of course, adoptive parents may be more sensitive to their child’s needs and highlight issues to schools that other parents might not. Parents’ descriptions of being “on permanent tenterhooks” (Chris) and needing to be “one step ahead” (Frances) would support this argument. However, this additional sensitivity is warranted, given the significance of their children’s early experiences. Adoptive parents have a wealth of knowledge about the impact of trauma and loss, and schools should embrace opportunities to learn from them. Treating parents as “equal partners” (DECP, 2006, p.10) would facilitate collaboration between home and school (Cooper & Johnson, 2007).

Indeed, effective home-school communication and partnership were cited as an essential components of support for adoptive families by the study-adopters, as found in other studies (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Gibbs, 2014; King, 2009). This had facilitated an improved understanding of their children’s needs and resulted in the provision of better support. The extension of the role of the DT to adopted children will hopefully fulfil parents’ expressed desire for a named, key person in school who can advocate for adopted children and for parents. It was encouraging that the study-DTs made pledges to work more closely with parents. DTs can lead important conversations with children and parents about their needs, supportive strategies and what information should be shared with whom. Schools should work with parents to decide how best to spend PP+ funding (AUK, 2018; DfE, 2018d). EPs can support these conversations through consultation, providing an opportunity to collaboratively problem solve difficulties, deepen understanding about the child’s needs and plan appropriate intervention (Osborne & Alfano, 2011). It would be beneficial to create personal education plans for adopted children which can be regularly reviewed, as is mandatory for children-in-care. Relevant professionals (e.g. post-adoption support services, CAMHS) should be involved in this process, to facilitate multidisciplinary working and joined-up thinking.

It is also important to consider the emotional demands placed upon adoptive parents and professionals working with adopted children with complex needs. A
number of terms have been coined to describe the impact of raising and working with children who have experienced trauma, including ‘compassion fatigue’, ‘secondary trauma’ and ‘vicarious trauma’ (Treisman, 2017a). These key adults must also be supported. Gore-Langton (2017) argues that EPs are equipped with the therapeutic and supervisory skills to provide support to adoptive parents and school staff through: i) training sessions for parents; ii) adopter support groups; iii) Video Interactive Guidance (VIG)\(^9\) interventions with parents and school staff; iv) supervision for school staff. EPs could support the development of DT networks across LAs through the provision of group supervision sessions for DTs. Supervision for school staff could be ‘bought in’ using PP+ funding. Treisman (2017a) stresses the importance of promoting self-care and emotional wellbeing amongst staff working with traumatised pupils. EPs could play an important role in supporting leadership teams to develop organisational cultures which prioritise staff wellbeing through training and policy development.

6.5 Summary of Implications

Throughout the discussion, I have considered the implications of the study’s findings for schools, EPs and EPSs, wider systems and policy. Figure 19 summarises and maps these implications across the contextual layers of the adopted child’s ecosystem.

6.5.1 Key implications for EPs.

The key implications of the study’s findings for EPs and EPSs can be summarised across the themes identified within the DT data:

- Raising awareness: EPs need to raise awareness in schools about the enduring vulnerabilities that can arise from early trauma and adoption through the delivery of training to schools. They can also increase the visibility of adopted children by raising them as a vulnerable group within planning meetings. The ‘core offer’ of traded services should be extended to include adopted children.

\(^9\) VIG aims to develop the interaction skills of those parenting and working with children. It is one of the few interventions considered to meet the evidence-base threshold within the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (2015) guidance for working with care-experienced children with attachment needs.
- Developing relationships: EPs should support schools to develop their understanding of whole-school relational approaches and improve their relational practice. Through consultation they should work to develop effective home-school relationships, so that adopters and school staff can work in partnership to meet the needs of adopted children. EPs should also lobby at a policy level within government for educational reform, which places relationships at the heart of the school system.

- Supporting emotional needs: EPs should help schools to develop their provision of socioemotional support for adopted (and all) pupils. There is role for the EP in supporting the emotional needs of those parenting and working with adopted children, such as through the provision of training and support groups for parents, and supervision for school staff. EPSs should work with other services to develop a holistic, multi-disciplinary offer of support for adopted children and their families.
| Microsystem | EPs/DTs | • Allocate a team of key adults to all adopted children.  
• Use caring, empathic and relational approaches within interactions with pupils.  
• Provide appropriate socioemotional support for adopted children.  
• Seek the views of adopted children regularly re. support needs and decisions about adoption disclosure.  
• Elicit and share the views of adopted children within practice and research. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Mesosystem | EPs/DTs | • Work in partnership with parents.  
• Create personal education plans for adopted children which are regularly reviewed with parents and relevant professionals (DTs to take the lead on this).  
• Raise awareness of adopted children in schools (e.g. in planning meetings).  
• Use consultation with parents and school staff to: further understanding of adopted children’s support needs; develop effective home/school relationships; and facilitate appropriate information sharing.  
• Advocate for adopted children and their parents within schools to ensure that they are involved in decision making. |
| Ecosystem | EPs | • Identify adopted children.  
• Provide all staff with training about the impact of trauma and loss, and how to support children with adverse early experiences.  
• Adopt an empathic approach to behaviour and develop flexible behaviour policies.  
• Ensure that the PSHE curriculum celebrates family diversity, including adoption.  
• Amend bullying policies to include issues relating to adoption.  
• Share appropriate information with staff about adopted pupils’ support needs.  
• Allocate additional time and resources for the DT role.  
• Provide training for school staff in: i) understanding the impact of early trauma and adoption; ii) developing relational practice; iii) supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing; iv) techniques to elicit children’s views.  
• Work with schools to prioritise support for the mental health and wellbeing of children and staff.  
• Challenge punitive behavioural approaches and support schools to develop empathic and flexible approaches to behaviour.  
• Provide supervision for school staff and DTs working with adopted children.  
• Provide support for adoptive parents, such as through parent support groups and training, in partnership with post-adoption support services.  
• Extend specialist posts for children-in-care to include adopted children.  
• Work with social workers to develop life story approaches.  
• Include work with adopted children in EPS’ core offers.  
• Update and expand the DECP (2006) guidance for working with adopted children so it reflects implications identified in recent adoption research (including this study).  
• Adoption research must include the views of adopted children.  
• Research must not under or overstate the possible needs of adopted children.  
• Adopted children should be considered as a vulnerable group within research. |
| Macrosystem | EPs/Wider systems and policy | • Advocate for adopted children at a policy level.  
• Lobby for educational reform and against potentially harmful educational and adoption policies.  
• Challenge overly positive or negative narratives about adoption.  
• Promote the valuable contribution of the EP within the field of children’s mental health.  
• Include a module on trauma and loss in initial teacher training and mandatory school training.  
• Extend the role of the DT and PP+ into post-16 settings.  
• Include adoption in the national PSHE curriculum.  
• Adopted children should be considered as a vulnerable group within education policy.  
• Rethink school accountability measures, moving away from academic attainment to include thorough assessment of socioemotional support for vulnerable pupils.  
• National guidance for school behaviour policies should promote empathic and compassionate approaches to understanding and supporting children’s behaviour.  
• EPs should contribute to and be included within policies regarding children’s mental health.  
• Adoption policy should better reflect the realities of adoption, rather than portraying it as the ‘solution’ to childhood trauma.  
• Increase funding for and availability of post-adoption support services.  
• Develop a joint offer of support for adoptive families, to include EPSs, post-adoption support and CAMHS services.  
• Allocate more funding to early intervention for vulnerable families, to reduce the number of children entering care and adoption.  
• Help schools to continually monitor and respond to the changing needs of adopted children and share information over time (e.g. at times of transition). |

*Figure 19. Summary of the implications of the study's findings.*
6.6 Strengths and Limitations

6.6.1 Strengths.

The qualitative approach adopted within the study enabled a rigorous and in-depth exploration of the educational experiences of adopted young people. The findings offer rare insight into the lived experiences of adopted children, whose voices are usually missing from adoption research. It is one of just four known studies to use a qualitative methodology to directly seek the views of adopted children about school in Britain (of which just one is completed and published - Crowley, 2014, 2018). The findings significantly extend existing knowledge about adopted children’s experiences of school, which is largely based on data from parental surveys. The clarity with which the study-adoptees described their experiences demonstrates the valuable insight that can be gained from including adopted children within research.

Data collection from multiple sources (adoptees, adopters, DTs) facilitated a greater understanding of the topic being studied, achieving multivocality and crystallisation, adding to the credibility of the findings (Tracy, 2010). Throughout, I was committed to discovering new meanings based upon participants’ experiences. For example, the use of open questions within the interviews and focus group enabled participants to express their viewpoints freely, without being led by the researcher (Yardley, 2008). During the analysis, the use of a predominantly inductive coding approach enabled the identification of themes rooted in participants’ views. The DT workshop provided an ecologically valid method to explore how DTs can use the voices of the study-adoptees and study-adopters to inform their role; the findings have already influenced thinking and practice in schools, demonstrating their practical significance. The workshop has the potential to be rolled out to various groups of professionals.

The richness of the data gained from the study-adoptees and study-adopters suggests that they felt at ease within the interviews/focus group. Although the study-adoptees expressed difficulties verbalising their feelings, most described their emotional experience eloquently. Reflecting together after the interviews, they proposed reasons why this might be:
• Good intentions: knowing that the research has the long-term aim of improving the lives of adopted children;
• Freedom from judgement: feeling safe in the knowledge that I was there to hear their stories and value their perspectives, not to judge them;
• One-off interview: knowing that they would not see me again meant that they felt comfortable being honest;
• Confidentiality: knowing that others would not be able to identify them within the research.

The bounded context and explicit purpose of the interview seemed to facilitate emotional disclosure. This may be because there was minimal relational risk – being honest would not have relational consequences. The interview itself may have provided a therapeutic opportunity to ‘offload’ difficult feelings in a safe environment. Similarly, study-adopters expressed an appreciation for the supportive nature of the focus group, highlighting the positive ethical implications of taking part in research.

It is likely that the research benefitted from my dual role as a researcher and practising trainee EP. Firstly, parents may have been reassured by my level of experience/knowledge in the field of child and educational psychology, and therefore felt more willing for their child to take part in the study. This is likely to have supported the recruitment of adopted children. Secondly, my training and experience as a trainee EP has equipped me with the skills needed to sensitively facilitate conversations with vulnerable children and parents, such as empathic listening, maintaining a curious stance and formulating helpful questions. This may have enabled participants to share their experiences openly with me. Finally, my in-depth knowledge of educational contexts supported me to consider the practical implications of the findings within schools and wider systems.

The study has demonstrated the utility of using Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) BTHD to study complex social issues (Simmonds, 2009). To the author’s knowledge, it is the first time the BTHD has been used to explore adopted children’s experiences of school. This has provided a holistic understanding of what
contributes to the educational experiences of adopted children and led to a wide range of implications for schools, EPs, policy makers and researchers.

**6.6.2 Limitations.**

The recruitment process confirmed that adopted children are a difficult group to access (Murray, 2005). I had to take advantage of existing professional relationships with adoption organisations to promote the research and travel over 1500 miles to conduct the interviews. Future researchers may want to consider alternative methods to efficiently access adopted children, such as video calling. However, this could jeopardise rapport building and positive relationships with participants.

Caution must be taken in applying the findings to the wider adopted population, due to the possible bias of the sample towards adoptees with SEMH needs who had experienced at least some challenges in school. It seems that adopters who have encountered educational issues were more motivated to respond to the advert than those not experiencing difficulties. It is also likely that these parents are more engaged with the post-adoption charities and online adoption community through which the study was advertised. However, I did not intend to represent all adopted children and the findings should not be judged as such.

The study aimed to identify ways to improve support in school for adopted children and found a group of young people with powerful stories to tell. The findings have uncovered the possible breadth and depth of adopted children’s support needs well beyond school which might not have been revealed by, for example, a survey aimed at a representative sample of adoptees/adopters. Given that professionals are most likely to become involved with adopted children who are experiencing difficulties, the findings provide useful insight into the possible support needs of this group. If schools are to include all adopted children, they need to support those with higher levels of need; this is a case for whole school inclusion. Whilst the findings are not generalisable, they are transferable to the real world of education and educational psychology practice.

Although most study-adoptees openly shared their experiences, two seemed more reluctant to disclose information. One young person in particular provided very short answers to the interview questions, which made it difficult to establish
meaning and ensure that his views were fully represented within the final themes. These young people may have benefitted from establishing a trusting relationship with me over time, so that they felt better able to discuss their experiences. Alternatively, it may be that they struggled with the language demands of the interviews; although I used some child-friendly tools to facilitate the conversation, the interviews were heavily reliant upon a verbal exchange. Furthermore, upon reflection, the activities available were not visually enticing and therefore may have had limited appeal. Future research should seek to use a wider range of engaging tools to elicit the views of adopted children.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the majority of the study-DTs were from primary schools. This might limit the relevance and applicability of the findings from phase 1 of the research, based on the experiences of secondary aged children, to their settings. Nevertheless, the study-adoptees and study-adopters spoke about experiences across their/their child’s school careers and therefore many of the quotes and findings related to their lives in both primary and secondary school. It would be interesting to run the workshop with secondary school DTs only and compare the implications generated with those found in phase 2 of the current study.

The study’s design elicited more data from an individual perspective, at the level of the child, than from a family or institutional perspective. This might be perceived as a limitation in that the BTHD gives equal weighting to all elements. However, this was a study of children’s educational experiences and therefore it was important to weight it in this direction. There are other perspectives that have not been included, such as education professionals’ experiences of working with adopted children, which future research may want to consider.

6.7 Future Research

The significant difficulties experienced in school by the adoptees represented within the study demonstrate the need for a wider-scale investigation into the support needs and outcomes of adopted children in Britain. Within schools research it is important that adopted children are considered as a vulnerable group, given that they are more likely to have SEN and are at greater risk of exclusion than the general population (AUK, 2017; Cooper & Johnson, 2007;
DeJong et al., 2016; Selwyn et al., 2014; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007; see 2.4.3). An important issue for future researchers to consider is the tension that exists in relation to parental decisions about adoption disclosure and willingness to take part in adoption research. A strong sense of family belonging may mitigate against adoption research. Adoption is a difficult area of family life to study, as a difference between adoptive and other families is highlighted simply by doing the research. It is important that work within this field is conducted sensitively, so that studies positively add to the evidence base and avoid contributing to adoption stigma.

To better understand what contributes to positive educational experiences of adopted children, future research should investigate the experiences of adoptees who have not experienced significant challenges within school. It would be interesting to compare the experiences of adopted children attending ‘attachment aware’ schools to those in schools without this accolade, to examine the impact of this initiative specifically on adoptees. Extending beyond adopted children, it would be extremely valuable to study the relational processes that occur within schools in general and explore how these influence pupils’ development over time. This might provide important evidence for high quality relational practice and expedite much-needed educational reform.

This study raises questions about how adopted young people with enduring socioemotional needs manage within post-16 settings and into adulthood. To the author’s knowledge, just one British study (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011) has explored adoptees’ transitions into adulthood. Future studies should explore the educational experiences of adopted young people within post-16 settings and the post-adoption support available to adoptees at this time. This should include exploration of the role of the EP, given that the profession works with young people up to the age of 25.

By virtue of this study’s focus on adopted young people attending mainstream secondary schools, it did not include adopted children who attend special schools or are home educated. Future studies should investigate the educational experiences of these groups to develop a greater understanding about different cohorts of adopted children.
6.8 Concluding Comments

This study explored the educational experiences of adopted children, and examined how the voices of adoptees and adopters can be used to inform practice. It is one of few qualitative studies to elicit the voices of adopted children and adoptive parents in relation to school, addressing a significant gap in the research. The adoptees represented in the study had experienced a range of emotional, psychological and social difficulties, perceived to be rooted in their early adverse experiences. These SEMH needs were largely unmet and had significantly impacted upon adoptees’ development, learning and educational experiences. Schools were portrayed as being unwilling or unable to provide appropriate socioemotional support and described as fundamentally lacking empathy, compassion and caring relationships. This was attributed to: the primary focus on academic attainment in schools; the pressure on schools to maintain their reputation; the crude behavioural policies used in schools; and a limited understanding about adoption and the possible needs of adopted children in both schools and wider society. Study-adoptees and study-adopters had encountered various forms of adoption stigma, supporting the argument that adopted children are a marginalised group (Garber & Grotevant, 2015).

The findings suggest that school itself can undermine the sense of safety, security, identity and belonging that adoption sets out to achieve. A key message from the research is the importance of establishing good quality relational practice in schools, so that adopted children (and all children) feel safe, supported and cared for. The study highlights the valuable role of the DT in meeting the needs of adopted children, identifying three key functions: raising awareness of adoption and the needs of adopted children; developing relationships with adopted children and adoptive parents; and supporting the emotional needs of adopted children. However, the findings suggest that the support needs of adopted children can extend beyond school. Services must work together to ensure that adoptive families have access to high-quality, holistic post-adoption support. EPs have a vital and wide-ranging role within the field of adoption. Their unique positioning with schools, Local Authorities and wider systems enables them to facilitate change across the adopted child’s ecosystem, to ensure that the needs of adopted children and their families are recognised, understood and supported.
References


Research, policy and practice (pp. 327-344). London: British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).


British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). (2010). Children miss out on adoption because of ‘myths and legends’. Retrieved from www.baaf.org.uk/node/2955


Lansdown, R., Burnell, A., & Allen, M. (2007). Is it that they won’t do it, or is it that they can’t? Executive functioning and children who have been fostered and adopted. Adoption & Fostering, 31(2), 44-53.


Appendices

Appendix A: Literature Review Search Strategy

The initial literature search involved accessing the following databases: British Education Index, ERIC (EBSCO), ERIC (Proquest), Child Development and Adolescent Studies, JSTOR, PsychArticles and PsychINFO, Google Scholar. The following search terms were used: “Adoptee” OR “adopted child*” OR “adopted young person” OR “adopted teenager” OR “adopted adolescent” OR “adoptive famil*” AND education* OR school OR college.

To ensure the quality of the literature review, a limit was applied so that results only included articles from peer reviewed journals. Given the changing nature of adoption in modern times (Simmonds, 2009), only articles published since 2000 were included. Adoption practices vary widely between countries, with practices in the United States (US) and Canada being most similar to the United Kingdom (UK; Simmonds, 2009); therefore, studies from countries other than the UK, US and Canada were excluded from the search. This study focuses on the experiences of children adopted from care within the UK, therefore research involving internationally adopted children was also excluded with the exception of meta-analyses including British children.

Additional searches were also conducted to access literature within particular areas of focus (e.g. adoption AND attachment, adoption AND mental health, adoption AND educational psych*, adoption AND school psych*). The same parameters were applied to these searches: since 2000; peer reviewed; conducted in the UK, US or Canada; not international adoptions. I also conducted searches within British adoption and educational psychology journals, including Adoption & Fostering, Educational Psychology in Practice, Educational & Child Psychology, and Division of Educational and Child Psychology Debate.

The abstracts of articles returned within the search results were scanned and those most relevant to the current study were accessed.

Similar searches were conducted using UCL Libraries Explore service to access relevant books and materials within the university’s libraries. Relevant statistics and legislation were accessed via the GOV.UK website. A search of publications released by adoption organisations (e.g. Adoption UK) was also conducted.

In addition to a systematic search, a snowballing strategy was also used, whereby I accessed relevant material from articles’ reference lists. I was also signposted to relevant articles by my research supervisors, which have also been included.
Appendix B: Characteristics of the Sample Adoptees

The data from phase 1 of the study relates to two groups of adopted children: i) the study-adoptees who were directly interviewed during data collection; ii) the children of the study-adopters. The following tables detail the characteristics of the adoptees represented in the study (i.e. the study-adoptees and the children of the study-adopters). This information was provided by the parents of the study-adoptees, and the study-adopters in the Young Person Information Request Forms. Please note that, in line with the ‘data minimisation’ principle of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidance, I did not collect data on participants’ ethnicity as this was not the focus of the study.

**Characteristics of the Study-Adoptees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age at Time of Interview (Years: Months)</th>
<th>Year Group</th>
<th>Age at Time of Adoption Placement (Years)</th>
<th>Category/Categories of Identified Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12:1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12:5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cognition and Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12:11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13:4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communication and Interaction; Cognition and Learning; SEMH; Physical and Sensory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13:9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14:1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14:7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Communication and Interaction; SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14:9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16:3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Cognition and Learning; SEMH; Physical and Sensory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16:3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cognition and Learning; SEMH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16:5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>None identified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10 Article 5(1) of GDPR requires that personal data shall be “adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed.”

11 Rounded to the nearest year to maintain anonymity.
The SEMH needs of the sample adoptees (as identified by their parents) included attachment difficulties, anxiety, depression, emotional regulation difficulties, self-harming behaviour, sleep disturbance/nightmares, low self-esteem and social interaction/friendship difficulties. Cognition and learning needs included limited/delayed academic progress, mild learning difficulty, specific learning difficulties, concentration difficulties and executive functioning difficulties. Diagnoses amongst the sample adoptees included Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Reactive Attachment Disorder, Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder, Dyspraxia, Hearing Impairment and Tourette’s Syndrome.
Appendix C: Research Adverts

Adoptee Interview Advert

Are you an adoptive parent with a child in secondary school? Would your child be interested in talking to me about their experience of school?

Project Title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform educational psychology practice.

My name is Becci Best. I am training to be an Educational Psychologist at the UCL Institute of Education. For my doctoral research, I would like to interview adopted children and young people about their experience of school. I am looking to recruit children adopted from care in England and Wales, who currently attend a mainstream secondary school.

Why is this research important?
- Parents, teachers and researchers report that some adopted children experience emotional, social and academic challenges at school.
- Whilst researchers write a lot about how they think adopted children should be supported in school, few explore the perspectives of the young people themselves.
- Therefore, I would like to talk to adopted young people to hear about their educational experiences and find out what helps them in school.

What will my child be asked to do?
Your child will be asked to take part in an individual interview in a setting of their choice. Interviews will take approximately one hour. They will take place between February and July, to suit your child and avoid the exam period.

How can I find out more?
If you are interested and think your child might like to take part, please email rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk for more information.

Thank you!
Adopter Focus Group Advert

Are you an adoptive parent with a child in secondary school? Would you be interested in talking to me about their experience of school?

Project Title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform educational psychology practice.

My name is Becci Best. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist, training at the Institute of Education, UCL. For my doctoral research, I am talking to adopted children and their parents about their experiences of school. I am currently looking to recruit parents of children who were adopted from care in England and Wales and are currently attending a mainstream secondary school (years 7-11).

Why is this research important?

- Parents, teachers and researchers report that some adopted children experience emotional, social and academic challenges at school.
- Whilst researchers write a lot about how they think adopted children should be supported in school, few explore the perspectives of young people or their parents.
- I would like to talk to you about your child’s educational experiences and find out what helps them in school.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to take part in a group interview with 6-8 other adoptive parents. This will last for approximately an hour and a half and will take place at the Coram Campus (WC1N 1AZ) in July 2018.

How can I find out more?

If you are interested in taking part, please email rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk for more information.

Thank you!
THE EXTENSION OF THE DESIGNATED TEACHER ROLE: USING THE VOICES OF ADOPTED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES TO INFORM PRACTICE

➢ Date: Thursday 24th January 2019
➢ Venue: [Redacted]
➢ Time: 9.00 – 4.00 pm (registration from 09:00-09:30)

Virtual School, Adoption Service and the Educational Psychology Service are excited to announce a development day for Designated Teachers in early 2019. The aim of this day is to provide teachers with an insight into the lives of adoptive children and their parents, and the challenges they face throughout their education journey. There will also be a unique opportunity to contribute to ongoing research* in this area and to hear in person from adoptive parents about the needs of their children and how to support them.

Over the course of the day we will be exploring:

➢ Changes to statutory guidance and the impact of this on Designated Teachers.
➢ An insight into the Adoption process, led by [Redacted] Adoption Service.
➢ Emerging research: Child and Parent perspectives on education
➢ Our Journey: Talk and Q&A with parents of adopted children.
➢ “The Battle Hymn of the Adoptive Mother” – talk and Q&A led by Daniela Shanly, the co-founder of Beech Lodge School, Berkshire.

Please make bookings through the Virtual School on [Redacted]

There is a fee of £50 per delegate for this training session. Lunch and refreshments will be provided along with all materials.

* Please refer to the attached Designated Teacher information sheet and research consent form for more information. You are welcome to attend the development day without taking part in the research.
Appendix D: Information Sheets

Adoptee Interviews: Parent Information Sheet

Institute of Education

Parent Information Sheet

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology Practice.

What is this research and why is it important?

- Parents, teachers and researchers report that some adopted children experience emotional, social and academic challenges at school.
- Whilst researchers write a lot about how they think adopted children should be supported in school, few ask for the views of the young people themselves.
- Therefore, I would like to talk to adopted young people to hear about their educational experiences and find out what helps them at school.
- The findings from this part of the study will be shared with a group of Educational Psychologists to consider how adopted children’s views can be used to inform educational psychology practice.

The researcher
I am Becci Best, a Year 2 Trainee Educational Psychologist, on the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education University College London. I am passionate about listening to what adopted young people can tell us about their experiences of school to inform professionals’ ways of working and enhance outcomes for this group.

What will my child be asked to do?
Your child will be asked to take part in an individual interview in a setting of their choice. Interviews will take approximately one hour. They will be asked about their experiences at school (e.g. what a good day at school looks like, what challenges they face at school, who helps them at school).

Talking about adoption
I will ask your child about whether they think being adopted has affected their life at school. We might talk about which people know they are adopted at school, and whether they think it is important for people to know. I will also ask about any advice they would give to teachers to help them support adopted children and young people.

As the interview is semi-structured, additional questions may be asked to gain more information about your child’s responses. However, they will not be asked about their experiences before, or the circumstances of their adoptions. I will also ensure that your child knows they can pass on answering a question and stop the interview at any time, should they feel uncomfortable.

I will also ask you to fill in a brief questionnaire about your child (see attached).

The process
1. If you are happy for your child to take part in the project, please show them the young person’s information sheet and video (https://vimeo.com/202896133).
2. If your child would like to take part in the research, please sign and return the enclosed consent forms to me. I need parental consent as well as consent from your child.
3. I will contact you to arrange an initial meeting with yourself and your child; this gives you an opportunity to meet me and to ask any questions. If you are both still happy to go ahead, we will arrange a time to do the interview. I will also collect the completed questionnaire from you.

4. I will interview your child. They can choose whether they would prefer this to take place at home or school - permission must be gained from their Headteacher if they would like it to take place at school. Interviews are expected to take one to one and a half hours.

5. Once the interviews have been analysed, I will send a research briefing to you and summary poster to your child, explaining the findings.

What will happen to the information provided by myself and my child?

- All data will be anonymised and every effort made to ensure that your child can’t be identified.
- The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed; these transcriptions will be stored separately from any contact details or personal information provided on the consent forms and questionnaire, which will be stored securely and not shared with anyone.
- The interviews will be confidential; this means that I won’t be able to share what your child tells me with you. If your child discloses any information which suggests he/she or others are at risk of significant harm, then I will need to pass this information on to an appropriate adult/professional.

What should I do now?

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me by telephone [redacted] or email (rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk). If your child would like to take part, please sign and return the consent forms to me. Please note that your child can withdraw from the study at any time.

Supervision and ethical approval

This research is being supervised by Professor Claire Cameron, Deputy Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and Vivian Hill, Programme Director of the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education. The project has ethical approval from the department of Psychology and Human Development, which means that the committee has carefully considered the risks and benefits of the research.

Data protection notice

The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data. If you are concerned about how your, or your child’s, personal data is being processed, please contact UCL’s Data Protection Officer Lee Shaller - data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you can also contact the Information Commissioner’s Office. Details can be found at https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr.
Adoptee Interviews: Young Person Information Sheet

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology Practice.

You can watch a video about the project here https://vimeo.com/202896133– (the password is beccibest)

Who am I?
I am Beci Best. I am training to be an Educational Psychologist. I often work with young people to find out what helps them at school.

Why am I doing this research project?
We know that some adopted children have had a tricky start in life and sometimes need extra support in school. I would like to speak to you about how you find school, what things you find helpful and whether you think being adopted has affected your life at school.

What will you be asked to do?
• An interview which will take about 1 hour.
• I will ask you some questions and do some activities with you.
• You can choose whether we do the interview at home or at school (we will have to ask your Headteacher if it’s OK to do it in school).
• I will record the interviews using an audio recorder.

What questions will I be asked about adoption?
• I will ask you whether you think being adopted has affected your life at school.
• We might talk about which people know you are adopted at school, and whether or not you think it is important for people to know.
• I will also ask you about any advice you would give to teachers to help them support adopted children and young people.
• You will not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

What will happen to the information you tell me?
• I will type up the recording and then write a report about what I have found out.
• I will share the findings with other people but I won’t use your real name. This means that people won’t know that it is you who has told me the information.
• I will give you a summary of the findings at the end of the project.
• What you tell me is confidential so is private between you and me, but if you tell me anything which makes me think you or anybody else are in danger I will need to tell somebody.
What do I do now?
- If you have any questions, email them to me (rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk).
- There is a consent form for you to fill out to tell me whether you would like to take part. Give this to your parent(s) who can send it back to me.
- If you decide to take part I will meet you first so that you ask me any questions. We will then arrange a time to do the interview.
- If you change your mind about taking part, you can pull out at any time without giving me a reason.

Do you want to take part?

Yes please!

Complete the consent form and give it to your parent(s) to send to me. I will email to arrange to come and meet you at home.

First meeting: I will meet you at home or on Skype. We can get to know each other a little and you can ask me any questions you have about the project. If you would still like to take part, we will arrange a time for the interview.

The interview: I will meet you for one to one hour to do the interview. I will ask you questions about your life at school. I will also do some activities with you to help you answer the questions.

Writing up: I will type up our interview. I will use the information from you and the other people who take part to write a report.

Summary: I will send you a summary of what I found out.

No thank you.

No worries! Thank you for reading about the study. Circle ‘I would not like to take part’ on the consent form and give it to your parent(s) to send to me.

I will not contact you again.

If you have any questions about the research, please email Rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk

Thank you!
Adopter Focus Group: Parent Information Sheet

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology practice.

What is this research and why is it important?
- Parents, teachers and researchers report that some adopted children experience emotional, social and academic challenges at school.
- Whilst researchers write a lot about how they think adopted children should be supported in school, few ask for the views of young people and adoptive parents.
- Therefore, I would like to talk to adopted young people and adoptive parents to find out about the educational experiences of adopted children and what helps them at school.
- The findings from this part of the study will be shared with a group of Educational Psychologists to consider how the views of adopted children and adoptive parents can be used to inform educational psychology practice.

The researcher
I am Beci Best, a Year 2 Trainee Educational Psychologist, on the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education University College London. I am passionate about listening to what adopted young people can tell us about their experiences of school to inform professionals’ ways of working and enhance outcomes for this group.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to take part in a group interview with other adoptive parents. I will ask you about your child’s experiences of school. This will include things that are going/have gone well, any areas of difficulty and things that have been supportive of their progress. We will also discuss what you think schools should be doing to support adopted children.

What will happen to the information that I provide?
All data will be anonymised and every effort made to ensure that you cannot be identified. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed; these transcriptions will be stored separately from any contact details or personal information provided on the consent forms, which will be stored securely and not shared with anyone. The findings will be presented within my thesis. They may also be used in subsequent reports and presentations. Your name will not be used within any write up.

What should I do now?
Hopefully this sheet will have answered the questions you have about the study. If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me by telephone or email (rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk). If you would like to take part, please sign and return the consent form to me. Please note that you can withdraw from the study at any time.

Supervision and ethical approval
This research is being supervised by Professor Claire Cameron, Deputy Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and Vivian Hill, Programme Director of the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education. The project has ethical approval from the department of Psychology and Human Development, which means that the committee has carefully considered the risks and benefits of the research.
Data protection notice
The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data. If you are concerned about how your, or your child’s, personal data is being processed, please contact UCL’s Data Protection Officer Lee Shailer - data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you can also contact the Information Commissioner’s Office. Details can be found at https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr.
Designated Teachers Information Sheet

Research project title: The Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Adopted from Care: Using the Voice of the Child to Inform Practice

What is this research and why is it important?
This research is about the educational experiences of adopted children and young people (CYP). Data suggests that, as a whole, adopted CYP achieve poorer educational outcomes than the general population. Parents, teachers and researchers report that many adopted children experience emotional, social and academic challenges at school. These challenges are often attributed to early adverse experiences in-utero and/or before being taken into care. Although several authors discuss ways to support adopted children in school, research often fails to hear the voices of the children themselves. This study will explore the educational experiences of adopted CYP and how these can be used to inform the practice of Designated Teachers. It has two aims:

- To investigate the educational experiences of adopted CYP, exploring their educational needs and factors they consider to be supportive of their progress in school;
- To examine how Designated Teachers can use the voices of adopted CYP and their parents to inform their own role and plan effective, person-centred support for adoptive families.

The researcher
I am Becci Best, a Year 2 Trainee Educational Psychologist currently undertaking the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education, University College London. My interest in the needs of adopted children developed whilst working at Beech Lodge School, an alternative provision set up by an adoptive parent to meet the emotional, social and educational needs of children who have experienced developmental trauma. I am passionate about listening to what adopted young people and their parents can tell us about their experiences of school to inform professionals’ ways of working, with the aim of enhancing outcomes for this group.

The study
This study consists of two phases. You are being asked to take part in phase 2:

- Phase 1 – interviews with adopted CYP and a focus group with adoptive parents, to explore adopted CYP’s experiences of school, including the difficulties they face and what families consider to constitute effective support.
- Phase 2 – a workshop with Designated Teachers to explore how the findings from phase 1 can be used to inform their practice in schools. The group will be presented with the findings from phase 1 and then be asked to consider how they can be used to plan support for adopted children and their families.

The process
The workshop will run during XX’s Virtual School’s training event, “The Extension of the Designated Teacher Role: Using the Voices of the Adopted Children and their Families to Inform Practice” on Thursday 24th January 2018. During the event you will be asked to take brief notes of small group discussions, which
will be collected at the end. If the whole group gives permission, I will also audio record group discussions which would be transcribed. The data from the session will be analysed and the findings will be documented in the write up of my thesis. You will be sent a research briefing summarising the findings.

What will happen to the information that I provide?
All data will be anonymised and every effort made to ensure that you cannot be identified. If audio recordings are taken, these will be transcribed; these transcriptions will be stored separately from any contact details or personal information provided on the consent forms, which will be stored securely and not shared with anyone. The findings will be presented within my thesis. They may also be used in subsequent reports and presentations. Your name will not be used within any write up.

What should I do now?
Hopefully this sheet will have answered the questions you have about the study. If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me by email (rebecca.best.16@ucl.ac.uk). If you would like to take part, please sign the consent form. Please note that you can withdraw from the study at any time.

Please note that you can still attend the workshop if you would prefer not to take part in the research. Your contributions will not be recorded and added into the analysis.

Supervision and ethical approval
This research is being supervised by Professor Claire Cameron, Deputy Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and Vivian Hill, Programme Director of the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at the Institute of Education. The project has ethical approval from the department of Psychology and Human Development, which means that the committee has carefully considered the risks and benefits of the research.

Data protection notice
The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Office provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data. If you are concerned about how your, or your child’s, personal data is being processed, please contact UCL’s Data Protection Officer Lee Shailer - data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, you can also contact the Information Commissioner’s Office. Details can be found at https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr.
Appendix E: Consent Forms

Adoptee Interviews: Parent Consent Form

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology Practice.

Name of researcher: Becci Best

☐ I have read and understood the attached information sheet giving details of the project.

☐ I have had the opportunity to ask Becci any questions that I have about the project and my child’s involvement in it.

☐ I understand my role and my child’s role in the project.

☐ I understand that I am free to ask the researcher any questions about the study at any time.

☐ My decision to give consent for my child to participate is entirely voluntary.

☐ I understand that the interviews will only be conducted if my child has agreed to participate. I understand that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and that if they choose to do so the data they have contributed will not be used.

☐ I understand that the interview with my child is confidential and that Becci won’t be able to share the information that my child tells her with me.

☐ I understand that if my child discloses any information which suggests he/she or others are at risk of significant harm, Becci will need to pass this information on to an appropriate adult/professional.

☐ I understand that the interview will my child will be audio recorded.

☐ I understand that the information gathered in this project will be used to form the basis of a report, and that the findings may be used in future reports and presentations.

☐ I understand that my child’s name will not be used in any report, publication or presentation, and that every effort will be made to protect their confidentiality.

Name

____________________________________

Signature

____________________________________

Date

____________________________________
Adoptee Interviews: Young Person Consent Form

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology Practice.

Name of researcher: Becci Best

I would like/would not like to take part in this study (circle the one which applies to you).

If you would like to take part, please circle yes or no to each statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have read and understood the information sheet and/or video about the project.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had the opportunity to ask Becci questions on the phone or by email.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I confirm that it is my decision to take part is my own and not anybody else's.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that I am free to ask Becci any questions about the study at any time.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know that I will be interviewed by Becci and asked questions about school, including whether being adopted has affected my life at school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that I do not have to answer questions I do not want to and can pull out at any time without giving a reason.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that the interview will be recorded and typed up.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand that Becci will use the information I tell her to write presentations and reports which will be shared with others, but that no one will be able to identify me from what I’ve said.</td>
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<td>I understand that Becci will not use my real name in the report or presentation, and that she will make every effort to protect my identity.</td>
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<td>I understand that if I tell Becci anything that makes her think I or anybody else is in danger, she will have to tell somebody.</td>
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Name: ________________________________

Signature: ____________________________  Thank you!

Date: ________________________________
Adopter Focus Group: Parent Consent Form

Research project title: Using the educational experiences of adopted children and young people to inform Educational Psychology practice.

Name of researcher: Becci Best

I would / would not like to take part in this study (please circle)

If you would like to take part, please read the following terms and sign below.

☐ I have read and understood the attached information sheet giving details of the project.

☐ I have had the opportunity to ask Becci any questions that I have.

☐ I understand that I am free to contact the researcher at any time.

☐ I agree to take part in a focus group with other adoptive parents.

☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If I withdraw, I understand that the researcher will do her best to eliminate any data that I have contributed.

☐ I am happy for the focus group to be audio recorded.

☐ My decision to participate is entirely voluntary.

☐ I understand that the information gathered in this project will be used to form the basis of a report, and that the findings may be used in future reports and presentations.

☐ I understand that my name will not be used in any report, publication or presentation, and that every effort will be made to protect my confidentiality.

Name: ____________________________

Signature: ____________________________

Date: ____________________________
Designated Teacher Informed Consent Form

Research project title: The Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Adopted from Care: Using the Voice of the Child to Inform Practice

Name of researcher: Becci Best

I would / would not like to take part in this study (please circle)

If you would like to take part, please read the following terms and sign below.

1. I have read and understood the attached information sheet giving details of the project.

2. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions.

3. I understand that I am free to contact the researcher at any time.

4. I agree to take part in Becci’s workshop, which forms part of the Surrey Virtual School’s training event, “The Extension of the Designated Teacher Role: Using the Voices of the Adopted Children and their Families to Inform Practice” on Thursday 24th January 2018.

5. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If I withdraw, I understand that the researcher will do her best to eliminate any data that I have contributed.

6. I am happy to/for others to take written notes about group discussions, including about my contributions to these group discussions.

7. My decision to participate is entirely voluntary.

8. I understand that the information gathered in this project will be used to form the basis of a report, and that the findings may be used in future reports and presentations.

9. I understand that my name will not be used in any report, publication or presentation, and that every effort will be made to protect my confidentiality.

Are you happy for group discussions to be audio recorded? Yes/No

Name

_____________________________

Signature

_____________________________

Date

_____________________________
### Appendix F: Young Person Information Request Form

| Gender: |  |
| Date of birth: |  |
| Year group: |  |
| Local authority in which school is located: |  |

*Please leave blank any questions that you do not wish to answer.*

| Age at time of adoption order: |  |
| Age at time of adoption placement: |  |
| Age when taken into care: |  |
| Number of moves whilst in care: |  |

Which statement best describes how the adoption is going?

- [ ] Going very well
- [ ] Going well but with some challenges
- [ ] Challenging
- [ ] Very challenging

Which statement best describes your child’s experience of school?

- [ ] Going very well
- [ ] Going well but with some challenges
- [ ] Challenging
- [ ] Very challenging

Does your child have any learning difficulties/needs? If yes, please provide details.

Does your child have any emotional and/or social difficulties/needs? If yes, please provide details.

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your child?

Participant number:
Appendix G: Research Tools

Adoptee Interviews: Interview Schedule

Warm up activity: Let’s start by drawing/telling me about your school.

What do you like about school?

Who do you like to spend time with at school?

Is there anything that you find tricky at school? Can you tell me about these things?

Who helps you in school? How do they help you?

We have spoken about the people that help you. Is there anything else that helps you in school?

Can you describe what would make things better/even better for you at school?

If there was one thing you could change about school what would it be?

Let’s think about your time at both primary and secondary school. Let’s work together to think about the important things that have happened during this time and add them to the timeline. Examples of important things might be: starting a new school, meeting a close friend or starting a new hobby.

What do you like to do outside of school?

I’m interested in whether being adopted affects children’s/young people’s lives at school. Can you tell me whether being adopted has affected your life at school?

Do people know you are adopted? How do you feel about people knowing? Do you think people at school should/need to know? Do you feel you are different to other children who are not adopted or the same? In what way?

How do you think teachers and other staff in schools could help adopted children/young people do their best at school?

Let’s imagine that you are a school inspector. You are visiting a school that is very good at helping adopted children/young people. What sort of things would you see?

We are coming to the end of the interview. Is there anything you would like to tell me? Or ask me?
Adopter Focus Group: Focus Group Schedule

Opening question: Please remind the group of your name and tell them a little bit about your son or daughter, including which year group they are in. Try to think of one word to describe their experience of school.

What is going well in school for your children at the moment?
- What has gone well in the past?
- What is it that has made a positive difference?

What challenges, if any, are your children currently experiencing in school?
- What challenges have they experienced in the past?
- Are there particular times when things have been more difficult in school/particular triggers?
- To what extent do you think these challenges/needs are specifically related to their status as an adopted child?
- How did your children cope with the transition from primary to secondary school?

What extra support, if any, do your children receive in school?
- What support have you found to be most helpful?
- Professional involvement

To what extent have your children’s experiences in school affected family life at home?

To what extent do you think being adopted has affected your child’s life at school?
- To what extent do you think that your child’s needs are related to their status as an adopted child?

Do you feel any different as an adoptive parent or family within the school community? In what way?

What do you think schools should be doing to better support adopted children and young people?

Thank you for your time. Is there anything else anybody would like to add?
**DT Workshop: Scenarios**

Scenario 1: You have overheard several non-adopted children using the phrase “it’s because you’re adopted” as ‘banter’ in the playground. What could you say or do to stop this happening in the future?

Scenario 2: David believes that adults are untrustworthy, unreliable and frightening. He believes that he is unlovable and unlikable. David does not have any positive relationships with any adults or children in school. What support could be offered to build David’s self-esteem and sense that he belongs in your setting?

Scenario 3: Anya is an adopted child. She experiences high levels of anxiety and has sudden emotional outbursts throughout the school day. You have been asked to devise a support plan for her emotional needs. How would you go about this and what might you include?

**DT Workshop: Individual Pledge Template**

My promise to the adopted children in my school is to...

- 
- 
- 

To reach this promise, three things I plan to do after today’s session are:

- 
- 
-
Appendix H: Extracts from Transcripts

Extract from Adoptee Interview Transcript

Int: Alright can you tell me a little bit about your school?
Drew: Erm like what?
Int: Just a bit about what it’s like
Drew: Well it depends like from day to day it changes so like I don’t know it depends what day it is
Int: OK is that a day of the week or that some days are good, some days aren’t so good?
Drew: Well it depends what the other people are feeling like cos if they’re in a bad mood then they’ll have a go at me for like about being adopted but like if they’re in a good mood then they’ll leave me alone. It also depends whether like my friends are there. It’s like if they’re not at school then it’s harder. I don’t know how to describe it like
Int: So you said there that people have a go at you about being adopted sometimes, can you tell me a bit more about that?
Drew: Well they’ll just take the mick out of it and they’ll say it’s like my fault that I was adopted and like they’ll blame it on me but it’s because they don’t know about it like I’ll be like if they knew more about it then they’d stop it because they’re trying to make it a bad thing when it’s actually a good thing if that makes sense so like if they knew about then I don’t know how to describe it
Int: So in what way are they making it like it’s your fault?
Drew: Like they’re saying “oh you were adopted because you were difficult” or they’re saying “ah you’re really hard work so no wonder they didn’t want you”. They’re just being they’re just like making comments about it like that and they’re saying like I don’t know like they’re saying that I don’t know
Int: How does that affect you?
Drew: I get really angry like really easily because it’s just like it’s a simple thing and they should be able to understand it I feel. And I feel like it’s not the hardest concepts on earth like yeah I was adopted what’s wrong with that? It’s like there is nothing wrong with it but they just don’t see it as that they sort of see it as a bad thing.
Int: So how do you think they understand adoption?
Drew: Well they think it’s a bad thing and they just they just basically don’t get it that it’s a good thing and they try and make it really like as negative as possible.
Int: So you said there that adoption’s a good thing. So can you tell me more about that?
Drew: Well because if I wasn’t adopted I probably would be in a bad place like I don’t know cos like you’re adopted obviously for a reason like cos obviously because your parents aren’t able to look after you or something then you’re obviously taken away from them or like adopted you’re adopted because you’re not safe where you are to get into a better place so it makes stuff better for you where and like I was chosen so it’s a good thing
Int: So when you say you were chosen what do you mean by that?
Drew: Like well my Mum and Dad always wanted a boy and a girl but they only had my brother so they wanted me ((laughs)) and as soon as they saw me they wanted me

Int: So it’s but other people seem to be seeing it negatively but you actually see it in a more positive light?

Drew: Yeah but once they started having bullying me about it then I then think it’s a bad thing like I find it a positive thing normally but then once they start making negative comments it then puts me in a negative mood so then I see it badly.

Int: And you said that you get angry when they’re saying things. So what happens when you get angry?

Drew: I just shout at them ((laughs)). I just shout at them or walk out of lessons if they’re in lessons with me saying stuff I always try and get away from them.

Int: And so people at school then know that you’re adopted. And is that because you told them?

Drew: Well originally I only told my best friend like at the end of year 7 cos I’ve been friends with her since the day before we started or the week before we started year 7 and I hadn’t ever fallen out with her so I trusted her by half nearly a year so I told her like she were fine with it but then somebody that I absolutely hated overheard what I said. Like we were just I can’t remember where we were we were just in school like at lunchtime she just walked past like minding her own business like she hadn’t said out and then she overheard and she like spread it round. So people have known since like the end of year 7.

Int: And so what was that like when people first-

Drew: ((in overlap)) People just kept asking me questions and then it started going wrong in like year 8. People then started being like horrible about it in year 8

Int: And how would you explain what adoption is to other people?

Drew: Erm ((long pause)) basically like ((pause)) I don’t know how to describe it so basically like you been taken away from your birth Mum and Dad into a better place I think that’s the best way to describe it.

Int: And so how do you think - so you spoke about teasing - do think being adopted has affected your life school?

Drew: A bit because sometimes like people just like are so bad that I just don’t go to lessons so it’s obviously like affecting education which isn’t gonna help in the future if you want a job

Int: So do you feel as if you’re missing lessons to try and avoid particular people?

Drew: Yeah that sums it up exactly

Int: So thinking about school in general what do you enjoy about school

Drew: What like lessons

Int: Yeah anything

Drew: I like music cos I’m a drummer I’ve been a drummer for three years. Em I like geography. I like RS.

Int: What to do you think it is about those lessons that mean you enjoy them?

Drew: Well I like RS cos it’s what I’m doing as a GCSE option for year 10. I like geography cos I’ve got like a really nice teacher who I’ve liked
since the start pretty much since on transition day he was probably the first teacher I spoke to and he was he’s like really nice cos he’s like I don’t know how to describe it when the word comes to me he’s like approachable there we go like you can go and talk to him and he’s nice.

Int: How else would you describe him? So he’s approachable, he’s nice

Drew: He’s like friendly. Like if you tell him something depending on what you’re telling like he’ll keep it to himself and like in his lessons he says like if anyone says out then he’ll give them a written comment like tell them off whereas other teachers just don’t do anything about it

Int: So is that in relation to people saying things to you?

Drew: Yeah

Int: Yeah

Drew: Like he’ll like tell them off and is like nice to me and he doesn’t confiscate like that ((shows fiddle toy)) off me whereas some teachers take it off cos they think I’m just trying to get out of doing work when I’m playing with it but I don’t I multitask so I have it in like one hand and then write with the other hand

Int: So you find this things like the tangle

Drew: Yeah and this like just constantly playing with stuff cos I like having something in my hand, doing something

Int: And how does that help you then?

Drew: Cos sometimes I wanna punch walls and I used to punch walls like at the start of year 9 I probably punched a wall about 20 times or something but then since I’ve started playing with stuff I don’t, I punch this instead

Int: So does it calm you down then?

Drew: Basically like if I don’t punch the wall I’ll throw this at the wall and take the anger out through this

Int: And so that anger some of that anger’s coming from what other people are saying?

Drew: Yeah

Int: Is there anything else that makes you angry at school?

Drew: Like when teachers don’t listen to me and tell me off for being angry but don’t tell the people off for doing what’s made me angry and then I just get told off for being angry and being like annoyed and then sometimes when I’m really annoyed I just can’t concentrate and then I get told off for not being able to concentrate but like I’ve got this thing called a time out card so I’m allowed to leave the lesson and walk around for like five ten minutes until I’ve like calmed down and then come back and it annoys me when teachers don’t let me leave and when I get told off for stuff that’s like not my fault

Int: So what kind of things do you get told off for that aren’t your fault then?

Drew: So like when I’m angry if I can’t concentrate then I don’t like if people are already writing and then I don’t start writing straight away or like don’t write for like five minutes then I’ll get told off or like sometimes when I’m really angry I stand up and walk around, I get told off for that and for shouting at people, which I can kind of understand.
So is there anything more we think schools could be doing?

Jules: There’s lots ((laughs)). Well there’s lots of things like even the assignments that trigger children, something like say doing things on the family tree and the teacher says “oh I gave them alternative” and it’s like well it’s really just they should know better they should and also he doesn’t want to choose the alternative because then people say “well why aren’t you doing the main assignment?”

Ali: They hate feeling special or singled out. We’ve found that anyone that actually takes [my child] out of the classroom is immediately rejected because he doesn’t want to be singled out by coming out of the classroom. So he does have a mentor, he actually has both an adult and a student mentor but they just interact in the playground in what would otherwise be normal conversations and if the mentor was taking him out of class he couldn’t deal with that system.

Sam: But [my child] loves to be taken out of class, he’d do anything to get out of class ((laughs)), he’d scrub the toilet floor to get out of class ((laughs)).

Frances: But actually also maybe it’s the teachers all being given a training of to the kind of behaviours that might be expected if they have an adopted child in the class. But as you say even though you tell the school that you spoke to a teacher who had no idea that your child was adopted so it feels like yeah they should all be given a list of the possible kind of behaviour that you may expect to see and that’s the reason but just to make sure that it gets to every single teacher is- I mean to make sure that every single teacher knows they’ve got an adopted child in their class seems like quite a basic thing to be able to do but obviously not, I’m sure there are teachers that [my child] has that didn’t know or don’t know some of the circumstances.

Ali: You do need that sort of year on year relationship because it’s exhausting for us and it doesn’t really work if we have to re-explain all the stuff every year. We have found that if that if you have the same SEN person or we’ve also had the same head of year consistently. You tell them once and they are able to convey every year to the new set of teachers. And yeah occasionally we’ve found that stuff didn’t quite to work and they need a reminder but at least we don’t have to go through the whole process again.

Ashley: I know but if it’s exhausting for us doing that think what it’s like for them.

Ali: Oh I completely agree. I completely agree.

Chris: I mean I offered to go in and actually teach the school about attachment disorder cos one or two of the teachers just did not get it and I also got in touch with Coram and they volunteered to send somebody out for like half hour briefing. School refused initially, they just didn’t want to know, and it wasn’t until all of a sudden they actually realised some of the issues were actually true that we were talking about that they actually started to do
their own research and they actually went off and got somebody of their own in to come in and do the background. Again it’s who you talk to. I’ve not had much joy with the SENCo, I don’t know what other people’s experiences of working with the SENCo are but my experience has been pretty rubbish. But there’s always- I don’t know how to put it – there’s always one gem teacher somewhere who if you can get hold of that gem teacher and I found mine and I ain’t gonna let him go for many, many years and he’s absolutely brilliant. And he’s not a career teacher although he’s heads of his year now, but he don’t care about anything but the kids and that is so important and yet I’ve had some career teachers

Ashley: Yeah it’s just it’s you know getting them to understand the kids but it’s also getting them to actually accept that as adoptive parents you know what you’re talking about.

Chris: Yeah

Sam: Yeah

Frances: Yes, you know your own child ((laughs))

Ashley: Yeah, about your own child and about the process and that actually before they let us anywhere near a child we’ve got to kind of learn a lot you know it’s more than when you have a birth child. And you are- I am have just felt treated like oh you’re a hardened, neurotic middle-class parent kind of you know - which may also be true but not in this case you know ((laughs)). And right up to last year when we you know this big- I mean [my child] didn’t really he hardly attended school after Easter, really from February there were problems. It came when he got a report which it turned out cos he thought he’d be trying really hard, he got a report saying you know all these problems that had been happening in the Christmas term. Turned out it had been written in October, not dated and sent out in February. I only found that out in the summer and that’s what absolutely sent him absolutely spiralling off. He said “I’ve tried so hard and they’re saying all these things about me and I thought I was doing better, what’s the point”. He said “what’s the point in going in, it doesn’t matter how hard I try, I’m going to get into trouble anyway, I’m not going to bother with this”. And really it took [my child] not going to school for weeks before even when it first started he’d already started school refusing and I sat with the deputy head who I really liked and he was one who was honest and he said “I’m going to say something to you, you might not like, as one parent to another, I think you’re over-worrying”.

Sam: Oooh

Ashley: Oh boy you know I just looked at him and you could see him kind of shrink ((laughs)) and then you know and it was only after he school refused for weeks and weeks then suddenly “what can we do, what can we, yes we’ll come to PAC even though it’s taken us three years, yes we’ll (inaudible) and it took it took my son to be broken before they did anything.

Sam: Yes

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Ashley: And you know I said to them, “Look you can try and get a square peg in a round hole. You’ve got a choice, you can bang bang bang which is what you’re doing and the peg will shatter. Or you can carefully, carefully shave away, help, cajole and eventually the peg will fit”, you know. And that’s what they couldn’t get, they couldn’t get near what I was talking about.

Sam: Yep and sorry I’ve just suddenly thought of another thing that really helped me was contacting the governors. In fact that was probably the big changing moment to the way they treated him. And so that and I think that every governing body has a governor who is responsible for looked after children, I don’t know if you all know that, but sure you do and I wrote directly to them and said something needs to be done and the next day I was called in for a meeting with all of the appropriate people. You know, they’re really scared of the governors.

Ali: I was that governor when my son was in primary school. ((Laughter from several participants))

Chris: Do you tend to find that – I mean I tended to find that I’m far more involved with the school than most other parents

Sam: Yep

Chris: And I don’t just mean on a complaining basis I mean I actually go in and I help out doing repairs repairing their physics equipment, and I also help run a little chess club for the kids that wanna play chess, so you do tend to find that you become more involved with the school and that does help, it’s almost like it helps to break down the barriers a bit cos otherwise they just see you as a threat you know barriers are straight away up before you’ve even walked through the door.

Ashley: It depends if school let you do it. I was quite involved at primary school, my husband was a governor and I did loads with the PTA and I went in and taught drama workshops for them and things like that but in secondary school there’s absolutely no opportunity

Frances: No I’d agree with that. I did loads at primary, you know you’re involved and I did it really because I wanted to be really witnessing what was going on and I knew [my child] was a quiet little thing but yeah in secondary it’s not been easy at all to feel as involved really.
Appendix I: Example of ‘Initial Noticings’ on Transcript

P4: That I don’t really want them to know stuff like why em my birth parents like didn’t like like they think it’s the birth parents didn’t want them so like they just put them up for adoption but like I didn’t wanna tell them why they couldn’t look after me or why em I’ve got two Mums now so

Int: So it’s that you don’t want to tell them kind of about the circumstance of your adoption?

P4: Yeah and that’s the main question that they want to ask “why are you adopted?” and “why have you got two Mums?” INSECURITY Minus Qs!

Int: And do you think that people do you mind people in school knowing that you’re adopted?

P4: Sometimes yes but sometimes no. It depends on how they interpretate it and how they like find like a way to come back at me with it. Some just say em some people won’t say anything but some people have a reason that they can bring up adoption and then bring me into it like er ah I can’t remember who but em they just kept going on about me being adopted and there was a bullying incident right at the start of year 7 and it was all about me being adopted and there were quite mean comments going around on Instagram saying stuff about my em my Mums also like me being different so yeah.

Int: That must have been really difficult.

P4: Em yeah but then em I did know that my friends were there for me and every time that something happened my friend showed me because she has social media and I don’t. But she didn’t like show me in a mean way saying “ah they’re saying this they’re saying that there was she was saying it in like quite she was looking out for me in kind of way because she didn’t want me to not know about this but everyone did and me not knowing why people were laughing at me or something so she did it in quite a gracious way but then when I found out I got quite upset because it had like comments like “I hope she chokes on her Dad’s used condoms” and that was like the worst one for me because I don’t have a Dad and that was quite upsetting because they knew I don’t have a Dad and
Appendix J: Sorting Codes into Subthemes and Themes by Hand
Appendix K: Examples of Codes and Data Extracts Within Each Theme

Please note that different quotes have been selected to those used in Chapters 4 and 5 to provide the reader with a broader sense of the data.

**Adoptees and Adopters**

**Theme: Inner Turmoil**

**Subtheme: Intense Emotions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example codes</th>
<th>Example quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bottling up feelings</td>
<td>…she never told me any of this because she can’t she doesn’t she can’t talk about things (Frances, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overwhelming feelings</td>
<td>…she can get very, very angry and have massive, massive outbursts and you know total utter meltdowns (Chris, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggers rooted in the past</td>
<td>My mood can change very dramatically…I can be bouncing off the ceiling one minute and then in like within five minutes I can snap just like that (Jesse, 16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blaming self for adoption</td>
<td>I got chose by a family cos the old one couldn’t cope with me (Corey, 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure dilemma</td>
<td>Int: Do you mind people in school knowing that you’re adopted? Charlie (12): Sometimes yes but sometimes no. It depends on how they interpret it and how they find like a way to come back at me with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure out of child’s control</td>
<td>We’ve never really been able to hide the fact that our kids are adopted because they have two Dads so clearly there was something non-biological in the process (Ali, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption makes me different</td>
<td>Int: Do you feel different at school because you’re adopted? Jamie (12): Yes sort of, yeah. Int: In what way? Jamie: Like I think I’m the only one that is actually adopted at school that I know of but there’s people that are fostered or have step families and they sort of don’t talk about it and I’m the only one talking about it.</td>
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### Theme: Social Disconnection

#### Subtheme: Negative Expectations Within Relationships

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<tr>
<td>Distrust as a default position</td>
<td><em>He also – younger experience – has got reason not to trust adults (Ashley, adopter)</em>&lt;br&gt;I’ve never relied on people because you never know who’s gonna stab you in the back do you? (Dylan, 15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Let down by birth family</td>
<td><em>Int: It sounds as if there’s a lot of you’re feeling a lot of hurt connected to people that you’ve cared about&lt;br&gt;Corey (16): ((in overlap)) Who were meant to love me&lt;br&gt;Why wasn’t I respected, why wasn’t I protected, why did I have to be born in a family like that? (Alex, 14)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of abandonment</td>
<td><em>Int: What are you worried about if you let someone close to you?&lt;br&gt;Charlie (12): That they’re just gonna go like gonna run.&lt;br&gt;I was terrified that she wasn’t gonna to come back and pick me up… cos at that time I’d never known someone that didn’t leave…even now when I leave for periods of time I’m scared that I won’t go back but I know that she will like come back (Alex, 14)</em></td>
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#### Subtheme: Friendship Difficulties

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<tr>
<td>Difficulty fulfilling expectations within friendships</td>
<td><em>I don’t want everyone knowing and it’s quite hard to say “no I don’t want to tell you” to people who are your school friends (Charlie, 12)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transient friendships</td>
<td><em>…we sort of became enemies and then we were friends and then we were enemies and now we’re friends (Jamie, 12)</em>&lt;br&gt;Int: So you kind of feel used to friendships changing quite quickly?&lt;br&gt;Corey (16): Yeah.&lt;br&gt;Int: And how has that affected you do you think?&lt;br&gt;Corey: Just made me feel that friends aren't important really.*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity within friendships</td>
<td><em>I mean it’s really difficult especially for someone like me when you’re prone to get depressed then not being able to socialise very well with your own year makes things worse so you kind of get caught up in your own like “oh god I can’t talk to any of them, I feel bad, I feel like I’m bad” (Jesse, 16)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Theme: Unsupportive School Contexts

#### Subtheme: Unrecognised Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significance of needs undermined</td>
<td>It doesn’t seem to be acknowledged as the same way if a child is dyslexic or dyspraxic or had you know ASD (Sam, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>…you say they’re adopted and so transitions are difficult and they’re always saying “yes but it’s difficult for all, all adolescents are going through it, all teenagers are you know” (Frances, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of staff training</td>
<td>I don’t think teachers get really taught how to deal with that sort of thing so I think they don’t really know how to deal with it if it does occur…it’s not like you go into a teacher training thing “OK here’s how you deal with students being horrible to someone about adoption” (Billy, 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think teachers find it incredibly difficult to deal with it and they needed a lot of preparation (Ali, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum hotspots overlooked</td>
<td>…there’s lots of things like even the assignments that trigger children, something like say doing things on the family tree and the teacher says “oh I gave them alternative” and it’s like well it’s really just they should know better (Jules, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In English I had to write a family tree so I was sort of stuck which family I should do (Jamie, 12)</td>
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</table>

#### Subtheme: Inadequate Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fight for support</td>
<td>I eventually got the deputy head…it took a long long, long time to get a conversation with him or even a reply for an email…even then the communication with everybody else was so bad. We eventually after 3 years got them to engage with PAC (Ashley, adopter)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>[School] say…“oh well you need support but we won’t provide it to you for about 3 years” so it took my Mum about three or four years to convince them to help and by then I was already slipping (Jesse, 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Band aid solutions</td>
<td>[Teachers will] help me out temporarily…they’ll help me sit out of class or something, only for a little while then they’ll make me go back in. But that doesn’t get rid of the problem. If anything it makes it worse because I have to readapt again (Alex, 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ineffective behaviour management</td>
<td>Nowadays the only thing they’ve got to deal with behaviour is isolation, where you just sit there in silence or on the laptops and all the students just get out their phones (Billy, 13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme: Relational Repair

Subtheme: Caring Adults

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The power of kindness</td>
<td>I can safely say when he gets kindness, he really responds and really flourishes (Ashley, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They speak to him kindly and they give him time and they tell him that they like him and they demonstrate that they like him (Sam, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking beyond behaviour</td>
<td>They just seem to look at the bigger picture than just what they see…I really admire that the fact that they will look beyond just what you’re trying to show, they can read you most of the time (Alex, 14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having an adult to talk to</td>
<td>My history teacher Mr. P I’m good friends with because if I go and see him at lunch I chat with him about what’s going on (Robyn, 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This old librarian used to pull me out of class, used to talk to me and that helped a fair bit, just talking about it (Dylan, 15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtheme: Peer Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers as a source of emotional support</td>
<td>Apparently the group of girls she walked with they told their parents that [my child] would stand and cry because she couldn’t go in to the school gates with them and she would just stand and cry and they would have to try and help her in (Frances, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer mentoring</td>
<td>...a sixth former…I sort of checked in on her and she was quite nice to me and I also knew her from Guides so then we sort of talked about it every Wednesday and then every day she was checking if I was alright (Jamie, 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He does have a mentor…they just interact in the playground in what would otherwise be normal conversations (Ali, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends look out for me</td>
<td>I surround myself with people who know I’m like that so they can tell me just get out of this so there’s lots of people who help me with that…if they see someone’s trying to hurt me they’ll remove me from whatever situation or change of topic of conversation so I don’t have to like lash out or get mad at people (Dylan, 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We’re quite a good kind of group. We all stick up- not like that not good behaviour, but we all stick up for each other. Our group never really have any problems with each other (Brook, 14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme: Misperceptions and Prejudice

Subtheme: Misunderstandings About Adoption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People have limited knowledge about adoption</td>
<td>I do remember when we were going through the you know the training and stuff and the person I was working for at the time...I was telling her all about what was all involved...and she actually said, “so it’s much more difficult than having your own baby?” (Frances, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to educate others about adoption</td>
<td>The teachers...didn’t understand a lot about children that were adopted because they knew that I was adopted but they didn’t understand what that like fully like meant (Robyn, 12)</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>Bullied about adoption</td>
<td>...wherever possible you want to teach the other children that being adopted, fostered, whatever you are, it doesn’t mean you’re messed up it just means that you’ve got extra burden to carry (Jesse, 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming adoptee for adoption</td>
<td>people should educate other people on what it’s like having different problems and stuff...what it’s like to be adopted on an everyday basis, what it’s like to grow up as adopted child, what it’s like to maybe be in care...what it’s like to have issues that go along with being adopted and what could help and what couldn’t (Alex, 14)</td>
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Subtheme: Adoption Stigma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullied about adoption</td>
<td>Well when I was at my primary school everyone made fun of it because no one else in my school was adopted I don’t think (Frankie, 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blaming adoptee for adoption</td>
<td>I think there is still a perception still amongst people who otherwise should know better than children who are adopted are unwanted which is not the case (Jules, adopter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regretting sharing adoptive status</td>
<td>They’ll just take the mick out of it and they’ll say it’s like my fault that I was adopted and like they’ll blame it on me but it’s because they don’t know about it (Charlie, 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regretting sharing adoptive status</td>
<td>It’s like someone’s put a post-it note stuck to my forehead “adopted”. I wanna rip it off and throw it in the bin (Billy, 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regretting sharing adoptive status</td>
<td>In high school...they said “tell us one thing that no one knows about you” and me being a fool thought “I’m adopted” which didn’t really go down that well because there’s a beautiful song that can be made out of it called “your mum, your dad, the ones you never had, you’re adopted” so they just repeated that… that’s the thing I’ve regretted (Corey, 16)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
## Designated Teachers

### Theme: Raising Awareness

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify adopted children</td>
<td>[I promise to] as best we can ensure we know who these children are (DT12, Primary School)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Help staff understand pupil needs | [I promise to] help staff understand you and your needs (DT7, Primary School)  
[I will] talk with staff about needs of individuals – create a plan/pupil profile (DT7, Primary School) |
| Include adoption on curriculum | [I will] speak to PSHE curriculum coordinator about embedding adoption (DT12, Primary School)  
[I promise to] educate staff and children on adoption – look at our curriculum (DT8, Primary School) |
| Cascade training to staff  | [I promise to] share what I have learnt today particularly around adapting classroom strategies to support and reduce anxiety (DT1, Secondary SEMH setting)  
[I will] offer attachment training to all staff (DT17, Primary School) |

### Theme: Developing Relationships

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| Partnership working with parents | Home/school link book (group task)  
[I promise to] to work with parents and value their contributions (DT6, Infant/Junior School) |
| Providing opportunities to develop social skills | Structured play, set up lunch club (group task)  
Promoting team work/games (group task) |
| Multiple key adults         | Key adults – key time throughout the day (group task)  
[I promise to] establish a relationship between you and members of staff (key adults) (DT7, Primary School) |
| Working with other services | [I will facilitate] good communication with parents and other professionals (Early Years Advisor 1)  
[I promise to] access help which is available with statutory or voluntary access (DT11, Primary School) |
### Theme: Supporting Emotional Needs

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to a safe place</td>
<td>[I promise to] ensure you have a place to go...when things are overwhelming/challenging for you (DT5, Primary School)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Calm/safe space (group task)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of praise to increase self-esteem</td>
<td>System of positive praise/encouragement (group task)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[I will provide] lots of praise for small, regular achievements (Early Years Advisor 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking beyond behaviour</td>
<td>[I promise to] continue to empathise with the child, considering the cause of behaviours (DT3, SEMH setting)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>[I will] embed open minded interpretations of behaviour (DT3, Primary SEMH setting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular check-ins</td>
<td>[I will] make time to touch base with any adopted children at least 2 x per week (DT5, Primary School).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Check in time/reflection (group task)</td>
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</table>
Appendix L: Ethical Considerations

Informed consent
- All participants received an accessible information sheet outlining the purpose and content of the study before giving consent.
- A video was made to explain the research to interested young people.
- All participants were offered the opportunity to ask questions via email, phone or in person.
- Written consent was gained from all participants after they had been offered the opportunity to talk to me about the study and ask any questions.
- Consent forms contained an opt-out selection as well as opt-in to ensure that participants had the opportunity to decline to take part.
- Consent forms were revisited with participants before conducting the interview/focus group/workshop.

Right to withdraw
- Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point (on the information sheet, consent form, at beginning and end of the interview/focus group/workshop).
- An exit strategy was agreed with study-adoptees before the interviews (e.g. a hand signal to show that they would like to skip the question or stop the interview). Study-adopters and study-DTs were informed that they could walk out of the research space at any time.

Anonymity and confidentiality
- All data was anonymised – study-adoptees and study-adopters have been allocated a pseudonym within the research report.
- Parents of the study-adoptees were informed from the outset that the information shared by their children would be confidential.
- Consent forms were stored in a secure, locked cupboard.
- Audio recordings were stored on an encrypted memory stick and transcribed in a timely manner. Audio recordings will be permanently deleted once the study write up in complete.

Disclosures and safeguarding
- I have a valid, enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check.
- Parents of study-adoptees were told that they must be in the house during interviews taking place in their homes.
- All participants and parents of the study-adoptees were informed of my responsibility as a professional to pass on any safeguarding concerns (i.e. issues which suggest that the participant or others are at risk of harm) at the beginning of the interview/focus group/workshop.
- Information collected about each child’s Local Authority on the Young Person Information Request Forms so that safeguarding concerns could be passed on, if necessary.
- When I had a concern about a study-adoptee following an interview, she discussed this with her supervisor, and it was decided that no further action was required.
Power imbalance

- I adopted a warm and casual communication style throughout.
- Study-adoptees were offered choice and enabled to make informed decisions wherever possible (e.g. location of interview, whether parent accompanied them, use of activities within the interview).
- I carefully considered my seating position during the study-adoptee interviews (often on the floor).
- I volunteered appropriate information about myself during rapport building activities with study-adoptees.
- The semi-structured nature of interviews and focus group enabled me to follow participants’ lead.
- I stressed the valuable insight and expertise of DTs as professionals working in schools, to manage potential imbalance if DTs consider EPs to be ‘experts’.

Sensitive topics, anxiety and/or distress

- Interview and focus group schedules shared with study-adoptees and study-adopters at least one week before they took place.
- Rapport building activities completed prior to study-adoptee interviews to develop our relationship and help them feel at ease.
- Participants told that they did not have to answer questions they did not want to.
- Study-adoptees were not asked direct questions about the circumstances of their adoptions. If study-adoptees did talk about their early adverse experiences, I responded empathically and avoided asking probing questions.
- I carried cards with the number for Childline, in case it was felt that study-adoptees would benefit from additional support. I gave these to several study-adoptees.
- Study-adoptees were offered an opportunity to stay and complete an activity unrelated to the research (e.g. colouring, play a game) with me following the interview.
- A follow up ‘check in’ phone call was made to a parent of a study-adoptee who expressed a high level of distress within an interview, and a study-adopter who became distressed during the focus group.

Researcher safety

- Effective use of a reflective journal and research supervision to explore any distress experienced by myself, as a result of the discussion of sensitive topics.
- Parents of study-adoptees were told that they must be in the house during interviews taking place in their homes.
- I ‘checked in’ with my partner before and after interviews in study-adoptees’ homes.
Ending the relationship

• The research process and researcher involvement were explained clearly to all participants within the information sheets. A visual timeline of my involvement was included on the study-adoptee information sheet.
• Study-adoptees were reminded that the interview was a one-off occurrence at the outset of the interview.
• All participants were sent a letter/email thanking them for taking part in the research. They will all be sent an accessible summary of the research findings and informed about how the information is going to be used in the future.