Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

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Exploring the Identities and Educational Experiences of Children Under Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)

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Declaration I, Sinéad Conlan, 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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Impact Statement

This study explored the identities and educational experiences of children under Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) using the voices from key stakeholders (young people and special guardians) alongside the views from wider systems and contexts; schools, Children's Services including Educational Psychology Services, Virtual Schools and Social Services, and charity organisations. It is the second known study to gather the views of the children under SGO and special guardians in relation to their education experiences. The study found that children under SGO have similar early life experiences as other vulnerable populations, such as looked-after and adopted children, presenting with similar social-emotional needs and an identity of trauma, risk and loss. Despite these similarities special guardianship children receive less support than their peers in foster care, with some children not entitled to pupil premium plus funding because they were not 'looked-after' for 24-hours before the SGO was granted. This study found that special guardianship families overwhelmingly needed more systemic support than they were receiving. The lack of appropriate support and feelings of inequality for both children and their special guardians was mirrored by the stigma, shame and assumptions of this population within wider systems. Within the boundaries of this small study, a significant unmet need was uncovered.

The study establishes the value of the Bioecological Theory of Human Development and the PPCT model (person, processes, context, time) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) within kinship, or specifically SGO research and education. Application of the PPCT model enabled exploration of a range of

interactions, influences and factors which impact the identities and educational experiences, and supported the identification of implications for future practice. Four broad implications were found for Educational Psychologists (EPs): raising understanding and awareness within schools and wider systems; supporting emotional needs of young people via direct work and work with schools and families; supporting home-school relationships; advocating for Special Guardianship families in wider policies and practice.

This research established and reiterated the valuable role that EPs have within the field of looked-after, previously looked-after and out-of-home placements for children and young people. The position of the EP across and within various contexts and systems means they are well placed to support positive change across the child's ecosystems. Specific implications for EP practice include:

- Increasing awareness and understanding of SGO via training, workshops and discussion groups, and supervision in schools and with wider professionals.
- Promoting the available charity organisations for special guardianship and kinship peer support groups.
- Identifying and supporting the resiliency factors for the child and family.
- Liaising and working with home-school link workers and family support workers available in schools and communities.
- Attending 'Team Around the Child' meetings and plans for key transition points.

- Lobbying for the removal of the requirement of children to be 'looked-after' for 24 hours to receive pupil premium plus funding.
- EPs supporting home-school relationships through Joint School Family Consultations.
- Attending and engaging in discussions at cluster groups of designated teachers, similar to SENCo cluster groups.
- Raising the use of pupil premium plus for on SGO children during discussions at schools.
- Sensitivity around language used in Consultations and discussions with special guardians, e.g., option of parent/ carer over mother/ father.
- Supporting the implementation of appropriate, evidence-based frameworks and approaches linked to trauma and attachment at schools.
- Encouraging schools to involve EPs as part of early intervention and preventative work, through Consultations.
- Offering the school support around young person and/ or their special guardian support around identity development.
- Encouraging supportive and planned transitions for all children, including those under SGO.

The difficulties experienced in school by some children and special guardians discussed within the study demonstrate the need for a wider-scale exploration of the support needs and outcomes of children under SGO and their

families. The findings suggest that children under SGO should be considered as a vulnerable group within education research and policy.

Abstract

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were introduced in 2005 as an alternative form of permanent placement for children requiring out-of-home care. To date the majority of SGOs go to family or friends, thus it is a type of formalised and regulated kinship care. Despite the increasing need and reliance on kinship care, the potential protective and risk factors of kinship care, the similarity of needs between children under SGO and other care experienced children and the support they may require during their educational journey, there is a dearth of research exploring this population of children and young people. This study aimed to explore the views of young people under SGO, special guardians and the wider professional network in relation to the identity and educational experiences of children under SGO. This included an exploration of supportive factors, challenges and how they could be better supported across the different eco-systems. This qualitative design used semi-structured interviews with young people under SGO (n=2), special guardians (n= 3) and wider professional networks (n= 10). Data was analysed using reflective thematic analysis. Thematic analysis from interviews elicited six themes: conflicted identities; stigmatisation of the SGO family; unsupportive systems; attachment friendly schools; sense of belonging and characteristics of the SGO. Implications include raising the profile of SGO families by increasing awareness and recognition about the unique challenges faced by these young people and their guardians in schools and among professionals, and how they could be supported to have positive educational experiences. It is hoped that by sharing awareness and understanding of children under SGO and their families, outcomes for these children and young people can be improved.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to contextualise the identities and educational experiences of children under Special Guardianship Orders by:

- Describing an SGO and explaining the rationale of the research topic
- Describing the lack of research in this area;
- Discuss what is known about children under SGO;
- Outlining the aims of this study;
- Conveying how the research relates to the educational psychology profession;

1.1 Rationale

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) refers to an order of permanent placement for looked-after children (LAC)[1], whereby the 'Special Guardian' is given parental responsibility of the child via a court process. It was introduced in the UK in 2005, with the hope of reducing the number of children in care, and offering an alternative form of permanent placement, by allowing the option of sustaining contact with the child's birth family. To date, the majority of SGOs have been granted to the child's grandparents, a kinship carer, and in fewer cases to unrelated foster carers, as an alternative for long term foster-care or adoption (Hall, 2008).

My interest in the SGOs began during my role as an advisory teacher in the Virtual School, where I worked with some young people in care and their

[1] It is important to note that participants may not concur with a primary identity of 'children under SGO' or 'previously looked-after children'. Different local authorities use different terminology, such as care-experienced children or children we care for, yet the terminology used in statutory guidance continues to be looked-after children and "previously looked-after children". For the purpose of this study, the term looked-after and care-experienced children will be used interchangeably where appropriate and necessary. The term LAC will not be used moving forward.

carers, who were considered or being considered for an SGO. I was interested in the factors they were having to consider if they proceeded with an SGO, such as a reduction in financial support, and I was struck by the reduction in overall support if they agreed to an SGO. Subsequently, when I first began my EP training, I attended a conference where Dr Best presented her doctoral research on the educational experiences of adopted children (Best, 2019; Best, 2021). This led to discussions with colleagues within the Virtual School, such as EPs and Virtual School Heads (VSH) as to the extent of available literature on the educational experiences of children under SGO. In the autumn of 2020, I was struck by the lack of available peer reviewed research during my literature search, Gore Langton's (2017) paper was the only available peer reviewed paper relating to the school experiences of children under SGO, and I was interested by the authors citations, that misleadingly children under SGO are seen to be "recovered" due to their permanent placements. This paper resounded with my professional experiences and confirmed my motivation to pursue the topic for research and explore the nuances of the educational experiences and sense of identity of this population.

The rationale for this study was that despite the growing awareness of the ongoing needs of children in out-of-home placements and the possible long-term impact of this population's early life experiences on their educational outcomes, such as their lower academic outcomes and results across the key stages when compared with their non-care experienced peers, little was known about these young people and their school experiences.

Furthermore, though there were no significant differences between the mental health outcomes for young people under SGO compared to general population and children in care population (Wellard, 2017; DfE, 2018), I was interested in the characteristics that were similar between special guardianship children and their non- care experienced peers, such as maintaining family ties, alongside different characteristics, such as being removed from their birth parents. I was also interested in what was similar to their care experienced peers, such as adopted children or those in foster care and what was different, hence the rationale to look specifically at identity.

While SGO has been in place for 15 years, most of the available literature on the topic relates to the legal policies and guidance on its implementation in law journals. There has been research in social care journals on the decision making around contact (Thompson, 2019) and one quantitative study on the process of SGO (Woodward et al., 2020). A review of English research studies (Harwin et al., 2020) about special guardianship reviewed a small number of English studies in their report (Harwin et al, 2019; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014; Wade, 2010 and Wade, 2014). One Department for Education (DfE) wide-scale study includes a small number of interviews (n=10) with children (Wade, 2014), and this was in relation to their understanding of the SGO. However, only one study to date, a recent doctoral thesis has explored the views of young people in relation to their educational experiences (Ramoutar, 2021). To date there is a dearth of peer reviewed literature that includes the voice of the child and their educational experiences (Gore Langton, 2017), despite the fact that previously looked-after children

nationwide continue to achieve lower attainment results when compared with their non-looked-after peers across all key stages (DfE, 2020a).

In 2018, Virtual School Heads (VSH) were given responsibility for the education of previously looked-after children, after it was acknowledged that those children in permanent placements, were still vulnerable to the same risks as looked-after children, such as lower attainment results and higher risks of exclusion (DfE, 2018b). It is now becoming more widely known that children's early life experiences, including in-utero events, trauma, insecure attachments, and a range of adverse childhood experiences, can affect their emotional wellbeing and development later in life (Teicher & Samson, 2016).

Kinship (previously Grandparents Plus), a charity which supports kinship carers[2], published the first study to address the outcomes for young people leaving kinship care (Wellard, Meakings, Farmer, & Hunt, 2017). Their findings highlight that youth in kinship care, even those in secure permanent placements, were still at higher risk of developing mental health problems, achieving lower attainment results and having poorer life outcomes, compared to their peers in the general population. The attainment outcomes of those in kinship care are similar for other previously looked-after children, such as adopted children, who achieve significantly less academically than their peers who have not experienced care. In 2019, at Key Stage 2, children who left care

[2] Kinship care relates to all children whose parents are unable to look after them on a short- or long-term basis and are cared for by other relatives, like grandparents, uncles or siblings, or by other adults who have a connection to the child, such as neighbours or a close friend of the family. Kinship care includes those in kinship foster care and those under SGO.

through adoption or SGO were more likely to reach expected levels in reading, writing and maths (41%) than their looked-after peers (37%), but less likely than their non-care-experienced peers (65%) (DfE, 2020). There were similar findings across Key Stage 4 attainment measures. Children who left care through an adoption, SGO or CAO (30.9%) achieve higher academic grades and make more progress than looked-after children (19.1%) but were out-performed by their non-care experienced peers (44.6%).

There is also a systemic narrative, that children who are no longer in care are ‘recovered’ and no longer in need of support (Gore Langton, 2017). This unhelpful narrative does not account for the changing roles played by grandparents, and closer relatives, the ongoing negotiation and planning of contact with parents, the reduced financial and professional support from local authorities, and the psycho-social experiences of these children. There may be an alternative assumption that their experiences of education are similar to looked-after or adopted children as they have been removed from the care of their birth-parents. However, this assumes, that children under SGO’s are a homogenous group, and misses the nuances of this population, who are navigating different challenges. While some children under SGO may have a similar life context, (continued engagement with extended family and/ or less school changes) the effects of poverty, social disadvantage and ongoing contact with dysfunctional family is unchanged for many.

Psychological theories and models, such as psycho-social development (Erikson, 1968) attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) indicate that having a secure sense of self and a sense of

belonging are key for self-confidence, future relationships and increase resilience for future adverse experiences. To date, only one study is available on the educational experiences of children under SGO and their sense of belonging at school (Ramoutar, 2020) and only one study includes some information relating to their sense of identity (Wade, 2014) pertaining to special guardian's navigation of new parental labels. Available literature on looked-after children and identity development indicates that identity is shaped by relationships, can be used as a protective factor, and can be deferred or put on standby (McMurray , Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011). Murray et al (2011) suggested that 'identity on standby' relates to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943), and how a sense of physiological safety and a sense of belonging are an important pre-requisite for self-confidence and actualisation.

This study explored the experiences and identities of children under SGO and their special-guardians, investigating their educational experiences and the supportive factors which contribute to provide a positive schooling experience and a sense of belonging. This study aimed to understand the data with information gained from exploring the perspective of the wider professional networks and how this information can be used to inform practice in schools, Educational Psychology Services (EPSs), Virtual Schools, Social Care and wider systems. The study gave a voice to those missing from the literature, (CYP and their guardians) and provides information and insights for good practice going forward.

Permanently placed children under SGO have received less attention within academic research than children-in-care (Gore-Langton, 2017). In

particular, studies that elicit the perspectives of permanently placed children in relation to their experiences in school including their sense of identity and belonging and the views of their guardians, are missing from the literature, and only one study to date has captured the views of young people and their special guardians about their experiences of school belonging (Ramoutar, 2020). As described earlier, the views of social workers have been gathered in some previous studies, but the views of the wider professional network, including educational professionals have not been triangulated with the special guardian and the child. This study addresses this gap. The aim of this study was three-fold:

(1) To explore the experiences and identities of care experienced children on SGO and their special guardians, investigating their educational experience and the supportive factors which contribute to a positive school experience and a sense of belonging.
(2) To contextualise these experiences with information gained from exploring the perspectives of the wider professional networks such as Designated Teachers, EPs, Virtual School Heads and Social Workers.
(3) To propose how this information can be used to inform practice across the different ecological systems surrounding the child.

1.2 The Role of the EP

Local authorities have a duty to promote the educational achievement of previously looked-after children in their area by providing advice and information to anyone with parental responsibility, education settings and

anyone who has responsibility of promoting the education of previously looked-after children (DfE, 2018a). As a local authority officer working with school and family systems, EPs could have a valuable contribution in supporting children under SGO. To date, there is no available literature on the role of the EP in supporting children under SGO. Previous guidance published by the DECP (Division of Educational and Child Psychology) on EP practice with looked-after children, included some information on adopted children, but this guidance was published in 2006, only a year after the introduction of the SGO (DECP, 2006). There have since been no further publications which includes guidance on practice with other care experienced children such as those under SGO. Other available information on previously looked-after children tends to refer to them as a homogenous group, such as adopted children and permanently placed children. Yet further examination of the findings only shows facts and figures for adopted children and not children under SGO (PAC UK, 2017). This is in part because there is no single source of information available on the total numbers of SGOs that are made (Wade, 2014). Furthermore, where local authorities do provide information and advice about special guardianship orders, the content focuses more on the adopted child, and how schools can support adopted children.

The expansion of the VSH role to include previously looked-after children, such as adopted children and those under SGO, was part of the DfE offering parity of support for looked-after and previously looked-after children. Many EPSs have a specialist EP for looked-after children as part of

their corporate parenting duty (Bradbury, 2006), and most EPs will ask schools about the progress and welfare of these students as part of annual planning meetings (Norwich et al., 2010). However, there has not yet been an audit of EPSs offer to care experienced children, and EPs are not one of the professionals listed in the ‘Services for Children’ section of the 2014 DfE research on Special Guardianships (Wade, 2014). The involvement of EPs is often understood by other professionals to be linked with statutory assessments for this cohort of permanently placed children (Barratt, 2012; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007). Yet EPs are well placed to use their psychological skills and knowledge to work with care-experienced children and their networks (Bradbury, 2006), and could offer a valuable contribution to the support offered to children under SGO, their families, their schools and the supporting professional network, due to their knowledge, skills, experience and their relationships with schools and within the local authority (Gore-Langton, 2017). This thesis gathered the views of children under SGO, their families, and supporting professionals, and considered how the role of the EP could support this population across the different eco-systems and across time.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to:

- Explore the range and quality of existing literature in relation to children under SGO (see appendix A);
- Describe previous research findings to enhance understand and clarify issues;
- Critically appraise relevant research;
- Introduce the conceptual framework;
- Justify the aims of, and orient the present study, in light of previous research

2.1 The child under SGO

2.1.1 Outcomes for the child

One of the factors for considering SGO as a permanent placement for the child, over adoption, is the age of the child, as most adoptions take place when the child is very young (DfE, 2021). Thus, an SGO can be granted as a form of a permanency arrangement for older children. Yet children who are older at the time of SGO are at greater risk of placement breakdown, and being a teenager is the strongest predictor of disruption (Wade, 2014). Most of the children are known to local authorities prior to the SGO being granted, and many have already formed positive and supportive relationships with their SGO families, which is a protective factor for this permanent placement. The table below (table 1) is taken from the Kinship study (Wellard et al., 2017), which was

the first study to look at later life outcomes for youth who were in kinship care. Overall, children under SGO fair better across many outcomes when compared to the looked-after population. One hypothesis of these improved outcomes may be the protective factor of remaining within the family unit. However, when compared with their peers in the general population, children under kinship care had higher rates of teenage pregnancies, lower attainment results at GCSEs, and higher rates of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This highlights the impact that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as the reasons that children are placed on SGO, can have on their life outcomes and for some children remaining in a context where they are continually exposed to those adverse experiences.

Table 1

Comparison of Outcomes for Youth in Kinship Care, Care Leavers and Youth in the General Population

	Youth in kinship care	**Looked-after children and care leavers**	**General population**
At least 5 grades at GCSE	37%	12%	59%
NEET	28%	41%	15%
Mental health disorders/reported anxiety and depression*	22%/ 44%*	25%	20%*
Higher Education	16%	8%	50% **

Learning difficulties	60%	68%	14.9**
Teenage mothers	26%	22%	8%
Committed offences	9%	36%	-

*Note. Figures taken from Wellard et al, 2017. ** Figures taken from DfE data.*

While Wellard and colleagues did not compare children in kinship care with adopted children, previous findings from the DfE found that children who are adopted are more likely to achieve a pass (grade 5 or above) in English and Maths at Key Stage 4 (16.9%) than those who were the subject of an SGO (12.3%). This compared with 7.4 % of children in care, and 39.5% of the general population (DfE, 2020).

Overall, previously looked-after children such as adopted children and those in kinship care achieve similar attainment results at GCSEs. However, it should be noted that the figures for previously looked-after children may not be reflective of the overall population, as local authorities only hold information for children who entered the care system for 24 hours, and are deemed 'previously looked-after'. Children who were taken directly into the care of a special guardian, and were not 'in care' at any point may not be known to local authorities, meaning that there may be a significant proportion missing from the data.

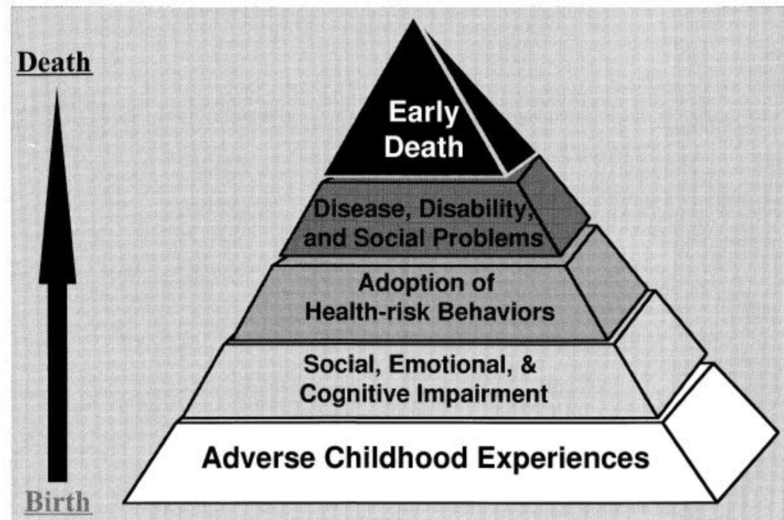
2.2 Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing

2.2.1 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The ACEs study was one of the largest investigations of childhood abuse and neglect, household challenges, and life health and well-being outcomes (Felitti, , et al., 1998). The large-scale study (n=17,337) found that ACEs are common across all populations, but that some populations are more vulnerable to experiencing ACEs because of the social and economic conditions that they grow up in. These findings are particularly important when considering the number of ACEs that children under SGO may report, such as experiences of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, or exposure to a range of household challenges such as domestic violence, substance misuse or parental mental illnesses. Most importantly, the study found that early adversity has long-lasting impact, as a higher ACEs score, correlated with an increased risk for negative health and well-being outcomes, including early death. The potential influences of the ACEs throughout an individual's lifespan are hypothesised is shown in the figure below (Felitti, , et al., 1998, p. 256).

Figure 2

Potential influences of ACEs across the lifespan taken from Felitti et al., (1998)



Further studies have highlighted the impact of early life experiences on the development of the child's brain both during pregnancy and in their early years (Teicher & Samson, 2016). In their review of neuroimaging findings of individuals who were neglected in childhood, or suffered abuse across their life stages, researchers found structural and functional abnormalities in these populations. Overall, researchers found that early deprivation and later abuse have opposite effects on amygdala volume (the part of the brain responsible for our detection of threat, or our 'fight, flight, freeze' response), and that structural and functional differences in the brain may be a direct consequence of abuse. Early adverse experiences initially caused increased amygdala volume in children, but that this early exposure to adversity may also desensitise the amygdala, which could explain the substantial reduction in the amygdala volume later in life. The authors hypothesise that the observed brain changes may be an adaptive response to prioritising survival during times of adversity. Thus, the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills may be delayed

or disrupted for many trauma-experienced children, including those under SGO. While it is accepted that these are trends and individuals will have a diverse range of experiences, for a child to be removed from the care of a parent, it is likely that risk factors outweighed resilience factors.

While there is an increased understanding of the possible long-term impact of abuse on brain function and the role of early adverse relationships on lifelong outcomes (Moullin, Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2014), it is also important to consider the critiques of this literature, such as Rutter and Azis-Clausen (2016) and Sroufe (2016). Both bodies of work present a critique of the concept that individuals cannot overcome their experiences of abuse and neglect, and its impact on their life outcomes. Sroufe (2005) offers a more nuanced explanation of the role of early attachment in development, by recognising that children's development is complex and "established patterns of adaptions may be transformed by new experiences' (Sroufe, 2005,p. 350). Furthermore, Kelly-Irving and Delpierre (2019) argue that labelling children with ACEs places too much onus on the children themselves, rather than on changing the social conditions and systems that perpetuate some of the difficulties. Edwards et al (2017) suggest that labelling children as 'traumatised' inhibits the sense that children can continue to develop and stigmatises sections of society "whose social position or conditions of existence are identified as destined to create dysfunctional individuals" (p.7). Overall, a more holistic approach must be used to study relationships between development and early trauma or adversity (Woolgar, 2013), which is particularly important when considering the strong overlap between the presenting behaviours of hypervigilance of threat and the

signs of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD; Crittenden & Barne, 2007), where the overlap can lead to misdiagnosis of ADHD amongst young people have experienced trauma (Szymanski et al, 2011; Best, 2019).

2.2.1.1 Adversity and resilience

Resilience is a difficult concept to define, and roughly speaks to the individual's ability to "bounce back". Masten (2014, p.9) defines resilience as "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, the function, or the development of that system". Resilience can "change across time, context and situation" and that an individual's resilience often depends on the resilience in other parts of the system (Masten, 2015, p.9).The ACEs study emphasises the importance of reducing the number of these experiences children face in their life, to limit their impact and associated poorer life outcomes. A 2018 study exploring ACEs and resilience (Bellis, et al., 2018) found that based on adult responses to questionnaires, a positive relationship exists between having a high number of ACEs and lower resilience in adulthood. Contrastingly, those reported fewer of ACEs reported increased resilience.

2.2.2 Identity

As suggested, early life experiences impact significantly on later life outcomes, including on the developing identity of the children. Erikson's Psycho-Social Development theory (Erikson, 1968) explains how culture and society play a role in our personality development, which he believed spanned throughout our lifetimes. He believed that our early life experiences facilitated by our parents or carers meant that we went on to develop the virtues of hope,

will and purpose. A negative outcome of traumatic early experiences was developing a sense of fear, shame, and inadequacy. Erikson's theory has been criticised for focusing too much on stages, and assuming that completion of one-stage is a pre-requisite for the next stage. Yet, it does highlight the potential impact of early negative experiences on a child's developing personality and identity, such as the experience of entering care and what happened before entering care.

2.2.2.1 Identity Development

In their study into the identity development of LAC, McMurray et al. (2011) found that identity is shaped by relationships and can be a protective mechanism, which can be deferred or put on standby. At times, care experienced young people presented certain identities as a protective mechanism to avoid revealing their "true" selves. The sample size although small (n=10), provided in depth insights into the identity development of care-experienced children. In addition, the study found that friendships were important to young people and formed a valuable part of their identity, however there was little acknowledgement of the value or significance of friendships by the professionals. This highlights the role that other parts of the child's microsystem, explored below in section 2.3 (friendship) have on the developing sense of identity and belonging, and one that may not be considered by professionals. While the population used was entirely Caucasian, and therefore not representative of the wider UK community, it still holds similarities with findings from other studies, e.g., Ferguson (2018).

Life storybooks are often used as a way of explaining a child's history for children who have been permanently removed from the care of their birth parents. The life storybook work attempts to fill the gaps of a child's biographical memory and provide them with an understanding of their journey. As such, this type of work helps provide children with information about their history and developing identity (Watson et al., 2015). In their review of 20 interviews with children and youth adopted from care, Watson et al. (2015) found that children highly valued their life storybook, as it provided them with a connection to their past and contributed to their identity development. While the majority of participants were White British (n=16); two were of Eastern European ethnicity and two were of mixed ethnicity, and again may not be representative of all adopted children. However, the figures do reflect the overall statistics for looked-after and adopted children in England (DfE, 2017).

Despite a number of criticisms of life story work, children and young people valued having information that contributed towards understanding the reasons for them being adopted, and of having a sense of where they came from. Being able to answer questions such as "*Who am I?"* and "*How did I come to be me?*" are thought to be an important part of an individual's psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963). Therefore, maintaining relationships with the birth parents and wider family may be a protective factor in the development of identity of children under SGO, particularly if the SGO special-guardian is a relative of the child who may be able to provide the child with a narrative about their life story, and the relationships that have influenced their lives. However, it may also mean that the child continues to experience

contexts which reinforce a sense of loss and exposure to sub-optimal experiences.

2.2.2.2 The influence of relationships on identity

The influence that other relationships, such as peers may have on a child's development and sense of belonging, may also be impacted by the child's previous attachments. According to Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment, a child's secure attachment to the primary care-giver lends itself to the child's ability to develop positive, trusted relationships with others later in life. Bowlby's theory stated that the child's attachment relationship with their primary caregiver leads to the development of an internal working model. The internal working model is a cognitive framework encompassing mental representations for a person's understanding of the self, others and the world. A child's interactions with others, such as their teachers or peers, is guided by their previous experiences and expectations, which in turn influences their interactions and evaluations of others (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). According to Bowlby (1969), the primary caregiver acts as a blueprint for future relationships for the child via the internal working model. Therefore, children who do not have experience of secure attachments with their primary care-giver, such as looked-after and previously looked-after children, they may find it more difficult to form trusted relationships with their carers, teachers, peers and friends. However, it is important to note Western attachment theories can have a white centric view, therefore not inclusive of all families and caregivers.

Furthermore, the lack of a secure base and a negative internal working model may also affect the construction and understanding of identity for care

experienced children (Colbridge et al., 2017). Their 2017 qualitative study investigated the factors that influence identity development among female care leavers. In their semi-structured interviews with the care-leavers (n=8), Colbridge and colleagues found that participants construction of identity could be understood in the context of early adverse experiences and developmental trauma. Participants had no sense of a secure attachment base and felt they were "*bad, undeserving and unlovable*", which refers to an internalised sense of self, as understood through early life experiences, care-home experiences and overall sense of rejection. Similar to McMurray et al. (2011) participants also hid parts of their 'self' from others. While McMurray et al. understood this to be a protective mechanism, Colbridge et al. suggests it to be a survival strategy. "By becoming a 'chameleon', participants were able to adapt to different environments and people" (p.11), and avoided people learning about parts of their self that they wished to remain hidden. This finding may provide insight into the elevated mental health needs of this group as outlined in in the table above (table 1).

In the literature on looked-after children, this protection of identity is sometimes referred to as *'disidentification'*, resulting from the child's awareness of the possible stigma associated with their "*looked-after*" status, and wanting to "*Other"* themselves from what may be deemed as '*symbolic degradation'* to manage how others perceive them (Jensen, 2011). Young people may do this by limiting or managing who they disclose information related to their family life.

As suggested by Colbridge et al., the fragmented self may also be understood through a psychodynamic lens and psychodynamic concepts of

defensive mechanisms as a result of early trauma (Freud, 1939). Splitting, which is thought to be one of the earliest defences, refers to defending against feelings of both hate and love for the same object (or person) (Klein, 1935) and can arise due to intolerable conflicting emotions. An individual may idealise the self or someone in one moment and devalue them in the next. For looked-after and previously looked-after children, splitting, may be a way of managing difficult early experiences. For children under SGO, it may also be a way of managing, long-term, difficult relationships and contact with their birth family.

2.2.2.3 Identity, Sense of Belonging and Self Efficacy

Ferguson's (2018) literature review, which used an ecological approach to explore identity development and positive outcomes of UK care leavers, found that the centrality of supportive relationships, continuity and stability was a shared view across the literature. This was found to be important because identity development impacts on the individual's sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Furthermore, for a young person who does not develop a positive sense of self, or of belonging, research indicates these youths may be more at risk of gang affiliation or fundamentalist group memberships (Centre for Social Justice , 2009). These findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the pre-care experiences of children and the impact it can have on their identity development. While support to manage these ongoing difficulties is somewhat more accessible to those in foster-care, where there is still ongoing professional involvement, it is less accessible for those under SGO. Therefore, the task of supporting the identity development of children under SGO falls to their special-guardians.

In their American research on identity-based motivations for disparities in school outcomes, Oyserman (2013) found that a focus on identity as an intervention can help children overcome some structural constraints, as having a positive sense of self contributes to their sense of self-efficacy across school outcomes. Oyserman explains that individuals use their identities to prepare for action and to make sense of the world around them. Thus, for children under SGO, perhaps identity development could play a role in their preparing for educational success and attainment and understanding their sense of belonging within their school community and their SGO families. However, the context of an SGO may also bring risk factors which may limit their identity development, such as an ongoing sense of loss, or for some finding out their SGO status later in life, which may mean reconceptualising their family unit.

2.3 The Microsystems of the child

2.3.1 The birth family

The most current data shows that 73.5% of children were looked-after directly before the SGO was granted, with the majority of children coming from families with drug or alcohol misuse, domestic violence and parental mental health problems (Wade, 2014). Nearly two-thirds of the children were reported to have been at risk of neglect and abuse (63.5%). Most children were previously known to the local authority prior to the SGO being granted, (meaning there had been a history of concern for the children) and only 3% of cases involved children not known to professionals (Wade, 2014). While this data does not account for all local authorities (n=152), it does provide some contextual information to further explore the early experiences for these

children. However, there are key areas which require further examination, such as sibling relationships, parental death and poverty.

While little information is provided in the DfE findings to the siblings of children under SGO, smaller scale studies using the views of young people in kinship care (n=53) report that three-quarters had been separated from their sibling at one stage, and one fifth of young people had lost contact with a sibling or were upset at the loss of closeness due to infrequent contact (Wellard, 2017). Furthermore, young people reported feelings of guilt if a younger sibling was placed for adoption, and/or feelings of rejection if another sibling remained in the care of the birth parents, when they had not. Parental death was also not reported in the DfE data, yet Wellard's (2017) study reported that 38% of young people had lost one or both parents, often due to the misuse of drugs and alcohol, which is a key factor in why many children are initially removed from their birth parents.

Interestingly, there is no data systematically collected about the socio-economic background of the families where children are known to children's services. However, a 2017 study by seven British universities which investigated 35,000 children who are either looked-after or on Child Protection Plans, revealed that children in the most deprived areas in the UK, were 10 times more likely to become involved in the child welfare system, than children in the least deprived areas (Byswaters, 2017). The Child Welfare Inequalities Project findings which investigated the local authority level response in all four countries in the UK, found that low deprivation local authorities were around 50 percent more likely to intervene early with families. While the research was not

able to analyse why this was the case, researchers hypothesise that more deprived local authorities have fewer resources to allocate to children's services. These findings may provide some insight into why many grandparents feel emotionally pressurised by social services into agreeing to SGO (Hingley-Jones, et al, 2019), as the SGO reduces local authorities' responsibilities towards these children compared with looked-after children, which is an attractive and cost saving measure during times of financial austerity.

2.3.2 The Special Guardians

This form of kinship care was formalised in 2005, yet informal kinship care is an ancient response to urgent childcare in many cultures and has existed throughout history with family's stepping in to support extended family members and maintain family stability. Research on kinship care emphasises the adaptable and flexible nature of the family. In research on kinship care among African American extended families and kinship care, interviewing 30 young people residing in kinship care households, researchers recommended that services should seek to understand the protective factors linked with kinship care households (Brown, Cohon and Wheeler, 2002). The "*role flexibility"* of extended family members supports the child during times of social and economic adversity, such as employment, marital and housing instability. The wider family network fulfils the essential family functions, which authors summarise as the role of kinship care. While Brown et al's (2002) study explores a different context; general kinship care population in America, it is reflective of the adaptability of the majority of special guardians who are kin relatives of the child.

The majority of SGOs are granted to close family and relatives of the child, with many children being taken into the permanent care of their grandparents, aunts and uncles, or older siblings. The take up for unrelated foster carers is low, with approximately 15% of SGOs being granted to this group. Data presented earlier shows that kinship care correlates with improved outcomes for children when compared with looked-after children cared for by unrelated foster carers or care homes. However, these improved outcomes can come at a cost, both financial and personal, for the special-guardian.

A 2009 study by Grandparents Plus (*Kinship*) found that grandmothers of working age on low incomes were most likely to be providing childcare and had to reduce or give up work in order to do so (Spitz, 2012). A later 2017 study also by Kinship highlighted the vulnerabilities and multiple stresses faced by prospective carers (n=43). Two-thirds of the carers were grandparents, thus had already finished their child-rearing responsibilities, 32% were caring alone and 50% were aged 60-years or more. Additional stressors such as overcrowded accommodation, poverty and physical and mental health difficulties were thought to be factors in the sub-optimal care experienced by 20.5% of the young people. The research reports that aspects of "*sub-optimal care" may* be due to the SGO being the request of the local authority rather than the special guardians initiating the care arrangements. This is reflected in the 2015 review of Special Guardianship regulations, which generated sufficient evidence that the assessment process was not robust enough for the long-term placements of vulnerable children (DfE, 2016). This may be a result of the quick time-frames of the SGO process, which can be as quick as 13-weeks,

compared with the adoption assessment process which can take as long as 18-months. Thus, special-guardians have less time to prepare themselves for a permanent new role as long-term carer/parent for the child or children, and the management of the ongoing contact with the birth parent(s), which research has highlighted can be very challenging for special guardians (Hingley-Jones et al., 2019). In their interviews with 10 sets of grandparents on their journey to SGO, researchers found that grandparent special guardians were often managing the challenging relationships and contact arrangements between the parents and children. The data-set is small (n= 10) and only includes the views of grandparent special guardians, therefore is not representative of all SGOs. However, it highlights the complexities faced by special guardians, often without additional support from professionals.

2.3.3 School

In her literature review of permanently placed children including adopted children and those on SGO, Gore Langton (2017) found that 34% of those on SGOs had accessed therapeutic support and 33% had accessed educational support, but overall, it was felt the involvement was not provided early enough and was too limited. Additionally, Gore Langton shared that there was a paucity of research in this area and suggested that there was scope for EPs to carry out research with young people themselves on their educational experiences and needs. However, much of the overall findings in the paper were related to the adopted population, with less literature available on children regarding SGO (n=2) (Wade, 2010; Wade, 2014). Gore Langton shares those overall views

from schools' staff are that children under SGOs are simply "*living with their grandparents"* and could "*recover",* rather than the school staff seeing them as children who were previously looked-after and are now living separately from their birth parents. This suggests that views about children under SGO need to be included alongside special guardians to develop a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by this population in school.

2.2.3.1 School's view of children under SGO

This aforementioned, simplified view of the child's identity assumes the child's automatic sense of belonging within the new homeplace, the community and the school, despite a drastic and often swift change in a child's circumstances. It denies the psychological distress and sense of loss and abandonment the child might feel and these being reinforced during ongoing contact, especially if other siblings remain with the parent. This simplified view also ignores the child's pre-care experiences, which could include abuse, neglect, exposure to drugs and alcohol, parent's mental health problems, or a parent's death. In addition, it ignores that, for some children on SGO, these pre-care experiences might continue to be a feature of their lives if close contact is maintained with their birth parents. As research progresses, more is known about the impact of abuse and neglect on brain development, structures and functioning (Teicher & Samson, 2016) and even before birth, the impact of in-utero experiences on the developing child (Gregory et al., 2015). Therefore, similar to looked-after and adopted children, it is likely that children under SGO will be impacted in the same way by these adverse childhood experiences. Additionally, some children under SGO may still have access to the same

contexts and experiences that brought them into care, which may continue to impact on their cognitive and emotional development, and changes to their sense of identity.

2.3.3.2 School Belonging

Cognitive functioning has an impact on all aspects of development and ultimately on later life experiences, and extends well beyond influences on educational attainment, to influence the child's sense of belonging and engagement in school, as seen in a 2019 literature review on school connectedness (Bowles & Scull, 2019). Using a review of literature from 1990-2016, researchers proposed a four-level model of school connectedness for all adolescents aged 12-18-years-old. The first stage of their proposed model suggests that students should first be attending (i.e., attending physically and cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally). If this stage is established and maintained, students may begin to belong and maintain relationships. Their model suggests that at the belonging stage, students may feel safe, secure, and valued and aligned with the school community. It is hypothesised that both attending, and belonging are important pre-requisites for engaging with learning. For vulnerable students, such as those under SGO, this research highlights the importance of developing a sense of belonging and identity within school, and how this may need to be nurtured by school staff in order for children to achieve academically.

In her review of research about students' sense of acceptance within a school community, Osterman (2000) concluded that belongingness is an extremely important psychological phenomenon, which impacts on student

motivation and engagement. Osterman reported that children who have a sense of relatedness or belonging had a greater source of inner resources including higher levels of motivation and a stronger sense of identity. However, the review of different studies showed that belongingness was influenced by a number of relationships, both in and out of school, such as parental attachment, relationships with significant adults, peer acceptance, peer friendships and teacher perceptions. Overall, the experience of belonging is linked to more positive attitudes towards the self and towards others.

In her exploration of the views of young people under SGO and their sense of school belonging, Ramoutar (2020) found that the most important feature of school belonging for young people was their peer relationships. In the case study analysis which included interviews with seven young people under SGO, the author found that where relationships were positive, friendships were developed by bridging the home-school community context with shared activities, such as club attendance or sleepovers. Weaker peer relationships which involved negative experiences were a source of distress for the young person, resulting in increased levels of anxiety particularly at secondary school. In most of the seven cases, there was school behaviour indicating difficulties in emotional regulation, which research suggests is higher in those living in guardianship families (Wade, 2014; Selwyn, 2017). The author reports that the young people did not attribute difficulties with emotions or relationships with their early life experiences. However, Ramoutar's findings validate research which recognises the importance of early life relationships, and the impact of

earlier, neglectful relationships on a child's subsequent relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Osterman, 2000).

2.3.3.3 School Experiences

Previously looked-after children have many increased risk factors for poorer life outcomes compared to their typical peers. This includes lower attainment levels, higher rates of SEN, increased risk of having mental health difficulties, an increased risk of being bullied because of their care circumstances, and a higher risk of exclusion (Kinship, 2017) and behaviours indicating difficulties with emotional regulation (Ramoutar, 2020). Recent research that explored the views of families formed by adoption found that the children reported experiences of unsupportive school contexts, misconceptions and prejudices about their adopted status (Best, 2021). The findings are reflective of adopted children's educational experiences, and mirror the experiences highlighted in the limited studies conducted on the SGO population (Harwin et al., 2019; McGrath, 2021; Selwyn et al., (2014; Wade, 2010 and Wade, 2014). Furthermore, recent doctoral research which used semi-structured interviews to explore the views of special guardians of their children's educational experiences found that experiences of education were mixed with five of the eight participants reporting either predominantly positive or mixed experiences, and three of the eight participants reporting predominantly negative experiences (Hillier, 2021). All participants reported that the children in their care experienced social and/or emotional difficulties to some extent, at home, at school or across both settings. The study provides a second-hand account of children's educational experiences, due to disruptions caused by the

Covid-19 pandemic. However, with no currently published research including the voice of the child, Hillier's (2021) findings are relevant to the developing research on school experiences of special guardianship children.

2.4 Support systems for SGO (Exosystem)

2.4.1 Revised guidance for Virtual School Heads (VSH) and Designated Teachers

In September 2018, the roles of the VSH and the designated teacher were expanded to include the provision of information and advice to particular previously looked-after children, including those under SGO. This was a result of changes in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (UK Parliament) which highlighted the disparity of educational support offered to looked-after children and previously looked-after children, and the long-term impact that pre-care experiences can continue to have on children's education. For previously looked after children, the VSH is there to promote the educational achievement of previously looked-after children, and at a minimum to provide information and advice to schools and parents regarding the education of the child and the spending of the pupil premium money (DfE, 2018a). However, it found as each VSH would / had power to decide the extent of their role with their Director of Children's Services, that consequently the level of support can vary as the VSH's are not universally responsible for tracking the educational attainment of this group.

Additionally, Designated Teachers have taken on the role of promoting the educational attainment of this group since 2018. However, schools are reliant on parents and families making them aware of their child's SGO status.

Boesley's (2021) doctoral thesis which explored the relationship between statutory regulations about the designated teacher's role and practice, suggested that virtual school and Local Authorities should provide support around developing centralised systems for monitoring previously looked-after children. Furthermore, Ramoutar's (2020) doctoral thesis which included the views of designated teachers relating to the special guardianship child's experience of school belonging, recommends that Designated Teachers should be offered training, supervision and mentoring to support their work with special guardianship families.

It should also be noted that VSH and Designated Teacher roles have been extended without significant funding or additional support. Online consultations held in 2017 with Virtual Schools and Designated Teachers highlighted this concern, which prompted the government to fund the extension of the role until 2020. The government's long-term hope is that savings in other areas, such as the regionalisation of adoption leading to more efficient processes, will offset the cost of this additional responsibility (DfE, 2018c). It is interesting to note that support for one group of previously looked-after children and young people, including those on SGO, is dependent on the redirection of funding from other groups, like adopted children. While it is important that the revised policies are starting to reflect the long-term needs of this population, policy makers need to be mindful of not merely paying lip-service to a highly vulnerable group in society, without providing the long-term funding and support needed to carry out these additional roles and responsibilities. In her thesis exploring the role of designated teachers supporting previously looked after children, Harris (2021)

comments that special guardians face very similar challenges to adoptive parents who also receive very little support and are also managing the needs of the children who have experienced abuse and neglect. However, Harris shares that this was not a role that special guardians chose to assume. Taking on the role of permanent carer to your grandchild means that your child, the birth-parent is no longer able to care for the child.

As mentioned earlier, some school staff can adopt a simplified understanding of a child living under a SGO, and they may fail to recognise the impact of the adverse factors that led to the SGO on the child's development and well-being because of their permanent care status. Thus, the expansion of the VSH role will help to encourage schools to learn more about trauma-informed approaches and being 'attachment aware' and to consider how to work effectively with other agencies to support wellbeing of all care experienced children, including through the effective use of an EP (DfE, 2018a).

Attachment Aware and Trauma Informed Practice approaches propose the application of similar aspects in their framework for promoting practitioner awareness of attachment in relation to the child's learning and behaviours. The approach focuses on developing knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma awareness and building partnerships with parents and carers. Several studies highlighted the significance of using the research evidence on attachment to inform the development of whole school approaches and targeted intervention to support children with difficulties related to their SEMH needs (NICE, 2015; Parker et al., (2016) Parker, Rose and Gilbert, 2016). In a mixed methods approach to analyse an AAS framework across 40 schools in

two local authorities, findings demonstrated improvements in pupils' academic achievements and decreases in sanctions, exclusions and overall difficulties (Rose et al., 2019) (Rose, Gilbert & McInnes, 2019). The study did not specifically measure the impact of the approach on care experienced children however, the underpinning of the framework does acknowledge the importance of relationships, and of focusing on developing an understanding of attachment and trauma needs. This would be a good fit for supporting children under SGO who present with needs related to their trauma history, and the use of trauma informed/attachment aware approaches are an important part of the EP role in supporting children.

Drawing from the research and literature on typical child development and on risk and resilience, Blaustein & Kinniburgh (2010) developed the Attachment, Regulation and Competency framework (ARC) to address the needs of children with complex and chronic trauma and adversity on an individual level but also at an organisational level in schools. In their application of their ARC treatment with care experienced young people who are adopted, researchers found that ARC treatment was associated with significant decreases in child signs of trauma and caregiver stress from pre-to-post treatment, which were maintained over a 12-month follow up period. There are a few limitations related to their study, including the lack of a control group. However, there is developing interest in attachment based whole school approaches to meet the presenting needs in school, many of which align with theories related to Human Need (Maslow) and Attachment (Bowlby).

2.4.2 Professional and financial support for the SGO

The initial support package for the SGO is decided on a case-by-case basis. Overall, SGO families are provided with some initial support when the child transitions to the SGO family however, there are no formal support arrangements made for future key transitions points in the child's life. Important transitions such as the transition to secondary school or the period of adolescence, which can be a difficult time for many children, but particularly for those who are care-experienced are not supported as would be for those in care. The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) which was set up in 2015 to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive families. In 2016 SGO families became eligible to apply for the fund if they satisfied the relevant criteria following an assessment process by the local authority. The introduction of this financial support for both groups of previously looked-after children demonstrate the growing understanding that permanently placed children can continue to face the same challenges as looked-after children and may need ongoing support. However, the ASF cannot be used for work within schools, despite the fact that this group of children under-perform when compared to their peers in the general population, and thus the responsibility for support within education falls to the school. Additionally, special guardians who have accessed therapeutic support shared that the support was not received early enough, and that it was too limited (Wade, 2014; Gore Langton, 2017).

Since 2014, some children who have left care under an SGO, attract Pupil Premium Plus funding. This funding is to support the social, emotional and educational needs of the child, and to support raising their attainment in education. However, the money is not ring-fenced for an individual child, and it

is up to schools to decide how they spend the money. The governmental guidance only *recommends* that families be consulted about decisions regarding the use of funding (Kinship, 2020), thus, special guardians and families may not have any input into how the school decides to spend the money that is intended to support their child.

In Scotland, kinship carers have become more visible and more vocal over time (Black, 2009) and the work of grassroots groups has highlighted the extent of the unmet need for children and their carers in all forms of kinship care. The group's main campaign message is advocating for more consistency in financial allowances for children in formal kinship care (Gillies, 2015). These support groups, such as Kinship (previously Grandparents Plus) are challenging the situations and offering support linked to the use of the Adoption Support Grant funding, regardless of whether a child was previously "*looked-after"* by the state (local authority) emphasising why special guardians report the system to be unsupportive.

2.5 Attitudes and ideologies regarding SGO (Macrosystem)

2.5.1 Attitudes towards SGO

When SGO was introduced in 2005, research indicated that kinship care made up 85% of the SGO population (Hall, 2008). Legal research of the views of special guardians highlighted that SGO was seen as second-class to adoption (Hall, 2008). In this mixed-methods research, which examined high-court files and sought professional's viewpoints, Hall found that SGO was welcomed by professionals, but only when compared to residence orders (a court order which decides with whom a child should live) or long-term foster

care. Additional study findings indicate that foster carers are more likely to be offered financial support than kinship carers. This study was conducted only two years after the SGO was introduced, indicating that perhaps more time was needed for the legal system and government policies to assimilate them.

Findings from a later 2014 UK study found that adoption was still the most frequently used legal order for children who need a permanent substitute family (Selwyn & Masson, 2014). In their comparison of disruption rates in adoption, SGO and residence orders, the authors found that adoption remained the most stable permanent placement with a disruption rate of 3.2% over a 12-year period. In the UK, adoption is promoted as the best option for permanence in UK adoption policy (DfE, 2016), where it is described as being transformative for children and young people. Yet the first empirical study into carers' experiences of SGO (Woodward et al., 2020) suggest that more time and preparation is needed to ensure that special guardians are better prepared to manage any difficulties that may arise. The study used a mixed method approach which included online questionnaires and focus groups which consisted of social workers and special guardians but did not include the views of young people. Although findings from this study are limited by the small sample size (10 participants), future research recommendations were to include an increased sample size and a qualitative approach to eliciting special guardians' views. While this current study did not seek to compare adoption with SGO, it is interesting to note the wider societal and political views of SGO, when compared to adoption, and the impact that short transitions, reduced financial and professional support may have on SGO families.

2.5.2 Ideologies of the family unit

As aforementioned, SGO was deployed as an alternative form of permanent placement, whereby ties with the birth parents could be maintained, where appropriate for the child. This option for preserving family ties is also seen in other European countries whereby the use of options such as adoption are seen as an infringement on the human rights of the child (Simmonds, 2009). Yet, further examination of studies highlights the tension for the child when they are living with another family member, but in regular contact with their birth parent(s), and the divided loyalties this can cause the young person. These tensions can be further explored through the following DfE findings (Wade, 2014):

1) Contact frequency was higher when the special-guardians felt the contact was positive for the child.
2) Negative ratings of maternal contact were higher in children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.
3) Paternal contact erosion was higher at 55%, compared to maternal contact erosion at 27.5%.
4) Paternal contact was rated higher by special-guardians than maternal contact, despite the lower frequency of paternal contact.
5) Where integration with the SGO family was high, the frequency of maternal contact was low.
6) Where family integration was low, the frequency of maternal contact was high.

7) Where the frequency of maternal contact was higher, there was an increased likelihood that the child would discuss returning to the care of the birth mother.

The authors advocate that more efforts should be made to strengthen the child's sense of belonging and safety within the SGO family, to deter the child from feeling disloyal and distressed. Similar small-scale findings in the Kinship study also suggest the potential negative effects of contact for some children, such as exposing the child to harmful and risky behaviours, continued rejection of young people and unresolved feelings of hurt and anger about what had happened.

Kinship foster carers and their families often face criticism by others for the birth parent's abuse or neglect, and a lack of societal understanding by others as to why they need assistance to provide care for their own family (Kolomer, 2000). In the qualitative study exploring the impact of kinship care on American grandmothers, Kolomer found that these kinship carers felt judged by foster agencies and services they were interacting with. This reflects the views of other grandparents about society in general, who report feeling guilt, embarrassment and resentment for being a kinship provider (Crumbley & Little, 1997). Though these findings are from studies conducted outside the UK, McGrath (2021) suggests that the findings are mirrored in the UK population.

Glynn's (2018) qualitative research which explored how special guardian's made sense of the caring for someone else's child, found that special guardians were striving to be accepted as capable caregivers by others. In the narrative

analysis of the accounts of four female special guardians, the author found that out of necessity and desire, guardians were defending their identities. All four participants felt unsupported, which the author cites speaks to a system in which they are undervalued. Despite the small sample size, the study adds to the available literature which highlights how these carers feel undervalues, stigmatised and judged by others (Kolomer, 2000; McGrath, 2021).

Earlier research has suggested that kinship care is viewed by children as less stigmatising than unrelated foster care (Broad, Hayes & Rushforth, 2001; Messing, 2006). However, Farmer et al. (2013) study found that children received hurtful remarks in school because of their kinship family. More recently, Best's (2021) research which explored the educational experiences of adopted children found that adoption stigma was also experienced by young people related to their status as an adoptee. Best's participants recalled a range of stigmatising misperceptions that they had come across within schools about adopted children and/or adoption, and the shared belief that adopted children were unwanted and abandoned by their birth parents.

2.6 The introduction and nature of Special Guardianship Orders (Chronosystem)

In 2000, there was a government initiative to reduce the number of children in care, which led to an increase in adoptions. Adoption was prioritised as a way of promoting permanency for children and young people placed into care (DfE, 2016). However, in 2005 the government introduced an "alternative" permanency route- Special Guardianship Orders (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). SGO was thought to be for children and young people for

whom adoption is not appropriate, but no clues were given as to where this additional stipulation regarding the appropriateness of adoption came from, nor to its justification (Hall, 2008). The overall aim of SGO was similar to that of the promotion of adoption, to reduce the number of children in care. SGO was seen as a way of respecting Article 8 of the European Union Convention of the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Council on Human Rights (EHRC), 1950) to respect family life by taking the least interventionist route possible. The rationale seems justified and allows the options of the child remaining with a known relative or carer and allows for ongoing contact with the child's birth family. Further qualitative investigation into the views of the special guardians who have been through the SGO process highlights the swift time-frame that this process can take place within, and the lack of preparation and understanding afforded to grandparents, close relatives, and foster carers during this process. Ten grandparents who shared their views via an interview process, outlined the lack of time given to prepare for caring for a child until they are 18 and manage the contact arrangements between the child and birth parents, without the ongoing professional and financial support of the state (Hingley-Jones et al., (2019), Thompson, 2019; Spitz, 2012). The majority of available literature on SGO in the UK across the past 15 years relates to policies and guidance, and despite being in place for 15 years, there is little research available to guide and inform practice for SGO families.

Despite the introduction of the SGO, the number of children entering the care system has continued to increase year-on-year in the last decade. The number of children entering the care system reached 80,080 in March 2020,

which is an increase of 2% on the previous year, with the rate of looked-after children up to 67 per 10,000, up from 64 in 2018, and 60 in 2015 (DfE, 2020). Additionally, the number of adoptions continue to decrease, with a further 4% decrease from 2019, and a similar 4% decrease in the number of children who left care through an SGO. This places councils and local authorities under significant pressure and means a further stretching of resources, as children who remain in foster care cost more money than those placed under SGO. While children's social care services have maintained their already high caseload during the Covid-19 global pandemic, there are fears that children's return to school and school referrals would cause this to further increase in the future (Baginski and Manthorpe, 2020).

The existing research highlights the potential benefits and protective factors associated with kinship carers, such as SGOs where children are placed with kin who they have existing relationships with. The promotion and use made of placing children with family or relatives did not arise from top-down judgments or favourability, and in many cases resulted from bottom up or local decision-making processes due to increased demand for children needing out-of-home placements over time (Hill et al., 2020). In their analysis of the use of kinship care or relative care in Ireland and Scotland, authors found that the pressure of community drug problems and the associated negative impact on the care of children led to the first traces of reliance on formal kinship care placements. Gradually this pattern of *"local ad-hoc decision making"* became formalised and was reflected in the emergence of more recognised form of policy, such as the introduction of SGOs.

Informal kinship care arrangements are common practice across many countries. Within the UK, the rise of children entering the care system (DfE, 2020); significant reduction in adoption rates from 25,000 in 1968 to 3,750 in 2019 (DfE, 2019a) and closure of residential settings in some countries (Hill et al., 2020) has led to an increase in social services reliance on kinship care, however, across the UK the regulation of different forms of kinship care differs significantly. In their comparative study of kinship care in England and Ireland, authors found that the slower growth of kinship arrangements in England was due to the increased regulatory systems when compared with Ireland. The regulation of formalised kinship care can at times conflate with the natural structure and order of families, and the SGO process itself can be experienced as highly distressing for special guardians undergoing local authority assessment of their capacity to care for children. Contrastingly, focus groups with young people who are care experienced revealed that many of them favoured the same judgements and assessment processes for kinship foster carers as they did non-relative carers, citing that being a relative did not automatically make someone a good foster parent (Rights4Me, 2010). Munro and Gilligan (2013) describe the careful ‘dance’ of kinship placements where local authorities need to traverse both regulatory factors alongside cultural factors.

Munro and Gilligan (2013) suggest that culture may also have a role to play in countries which have the highest rates of kinship, such as the Republic of Ireland (Hill et al., 2020). Munro and Gilligan (2013) suggested a greater reluctance in Ireland to sever the family ties may explain this high proportion of

relative care placements. The maintenance of family ties is central to the SGO, and allows the child to remain in contact with their birth parent, and for birth parents to have an opportunity to make changes and rebuild connections with their children. This maintenance of family ties is hypothesised as one reason why social services across many Western nations were reluctant to place children with families or relatives for fear of intergenerational abuse (Jackson, 1999). However, the unanticipated rise in the number of children needing out-of-home placements across many nations continues to rise, which has expanded the use of kinship foster care and more recently the encouragement of SGOs.

SGO is a relatively new legal form of permanent placement, compared to adoption which began in 1926. However, it was hoped that participation from special guardians and professionals in this study, and their experiences across the lifespan of the SGO provides insight into the varying experiences and supportive factors for the SGO since its inception in 2005.

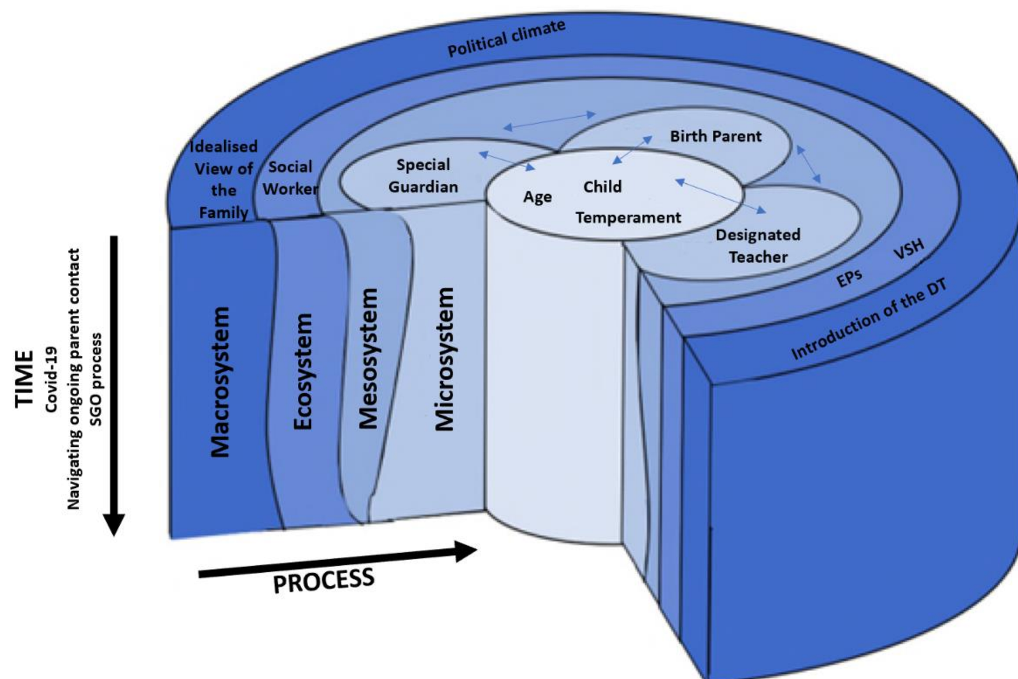
2.7 Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development

To fully consider the different systems and contexts that an individual child's identity and experiences are influenced by it is useful to consider Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD) Model. The initial version of Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective in 1979 was underpinned by the idea that the context in which an individual exists in has an influence on their development, or that both context and the individuals themselves are influential. Though the consideration of their earlier theory provides an overall outline that fits with this research, there are a number of

potential shortcomings of the earlier theory to consider. The initial idea of the eco-systemic theory was self-criticised by Bronfenbrenner for discounting the role the person plays in his or her own development or for focusing too much on context. The most important differences between the earlier and later versions as outlined in a 2009 empirical study on the uses and misuses of the model is the later concern with processes of human development highlighted below (Tudge, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). The most updated version includes the revision of the theory and framework, which now includes four proximal processes which should be considered when directly applying BTHD; processes; person; context; time, which are collectively referred to as PPCT.

Figure 1

Cross sectional Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development (2005) adapted from Tudge et al., (2009).



These proximal processes are influenced by the characteristics of the person and context and how they vary over time. See Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner revised conceptualisations of human development including the relevance of the biological and genetic aspects of the person, and the personal characteristics that they bring with them into a situation, such as age, past experiences and temperament. These individual aspects affect how children interact with their context and the people within in, which successively impact on the contextual influences on children and young people and vary over time.

As the study will use a multi-informant method of data collection, it will also consider the different contexts that the child is located in; microsystem (special guardians, designated teachers), mesosystems (the relationships between guardian and parent; guardian and child; social workers and special guardians; teachers and children) and the exosystem (VSH, EP, social workers, psychologists and charity support workers), under the context of the current macrosystem (cultural, social and political climate) that these children, families and networks interact in. This multi-informant method considers how their experiences, interactions and contexts vary over a period of time, allowing this study to reflect on the micro-time, what occurs over a specific time period, such as the SGO process; meso-time, the occurrence of consistent actions and interactions, such as navigating ongoing parent contact; and macro-time, the impact of historical events, such as Covid-19.

This study explored and analysed the experiences of children under SGO and emphasised the social constructionist nature of the chosen methodology (explored in chapter three below.) For this study, the PPCT model emphasised

the importance of proximal processes and how they can vary due to the personal characteristics of the children under SGO, the wider contexts in which they are located (SGO family, birth family) and the time period in which the proximal processes take place (the chronosystem). The use of this model supports the conceptualisation of multiple symbiotic influences of organisations, including political systems and relevant legislation and policies, such as the introduction of the Designated Teacher to support previously looked after children, and how these effect an individual's development and on the different services delivered by schools, social services, EPSs and Virtual Schools.

The following research questions will be explored through the views of children, their guardians and the wider professional network:

Research questions

1) How do children, their special guardians and wider professional networks view the identity of children under SGO?
2) What are the experiences of children under SGO in education?
3) How are children under SGO supported to have positive educational experiences?

2.8 Chapter Summary

A review of the literature has identified the long-term impact that adverse early life experiences have on a child's later life outcomes, including educational attainment and experiences, and their sense of identity and belonging. The importance of developing and maintaining trusting relationships is key to a child's sense of belonging and self-efficacy, however, the research

reinforces the influence that early relationships will have on a child's ability to form connections with others later in life, and in turn their view of themselves.

There are numerous similarities between children under SGO, adopted children and looked-after children, such as their trauma history, lower educational attainment rates and increased risk of mental health difficulties, when compared with their peers in the general population. However, there are also differences, such as the availability of financial and professional support, remaining in contact with their birth parents, and in the majority of cases, living with a known relative or family member. There have been some recent changes in legislation to support this population, such as the expansion of the VSH and designated teacher roles and responsibilities. However, this is a relatively recent addition of support, and can vary depending on the local authority that the child resides in. This late introduction of support for SGO families may reflect the wider societal views of this population of previously looked-after children, and the policies and processes which underpin SGO. These include the cost-saving aspect of an SGO, idealised views of the nuclear family and stigma towards kinship and special guardianship families.

Few studies to date have explored the voice of the key protagonists of this population, and in the ones that have (Wellard, 2017; Wade, 2014), young people have shared their hopes for their experiences to be understood, and their views to be heard. Few studies to date have explored the specific educational experiences of children under SGO (Hillier, 2021) , their sense of belonging (Ramoutar, 2021) and their sense of identity. While some studies have combined the views of social workers and special guardians, or children ,

carers and designated teachers, no study has included the views of children, their special guardians and the wider professional network and systems including Virtual Schools, EPs, and social care. The current study aims to address the evident gaps within the literature.

Chapter 3. Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to:

- Describe the philosophical assumption and conceptual framework, research design and method
- Describe and explain the procedures used to recruit participants and data collection
- Describe the method of data analysis
- Describe the impact of Covid-19 and discuss ethical considerations

3.1 Philosophical Assumptions

This research is embedded in a social constructionist epistemology and ontology. Social constructionist researchers assert that the role of the researcher is to understand "*multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge"* where the "*central aim or purpose of research is understanding*" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 25). There is no single truth or objective reality, and research can only obtain individual's perceptions of their reality. A social constructionist position does not have one identifying feature, but rather accepts one or more of the following assumptions: *"a critical stance toward taken for granted information"*, "*historical and cultural specificity*", *"knowledge is sustained by social processes*", and "*knowledge and social action go together*" (Gergen, 1985 as seen in Burr, 2015, p.3). Social constructionism is appropriate to the research questions, which seek to develop a shared understanding of how participants make sense of their/ lived experience and sense of belonging, and how these perspectives can be used to influence

practice in education and children's services. The use of a qualitative design lends itself well to the social constructionist position as both consider the value of context, individual meaning and the quest for understanding multiple constructions of meaning and knowledge, rather than developing an objective reality or view. Additionally, the use of a multi-informant approach is an orientation towards social inquiry that invites participation in dialogue about "*multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished"* (Greene, 2008, p. 20).

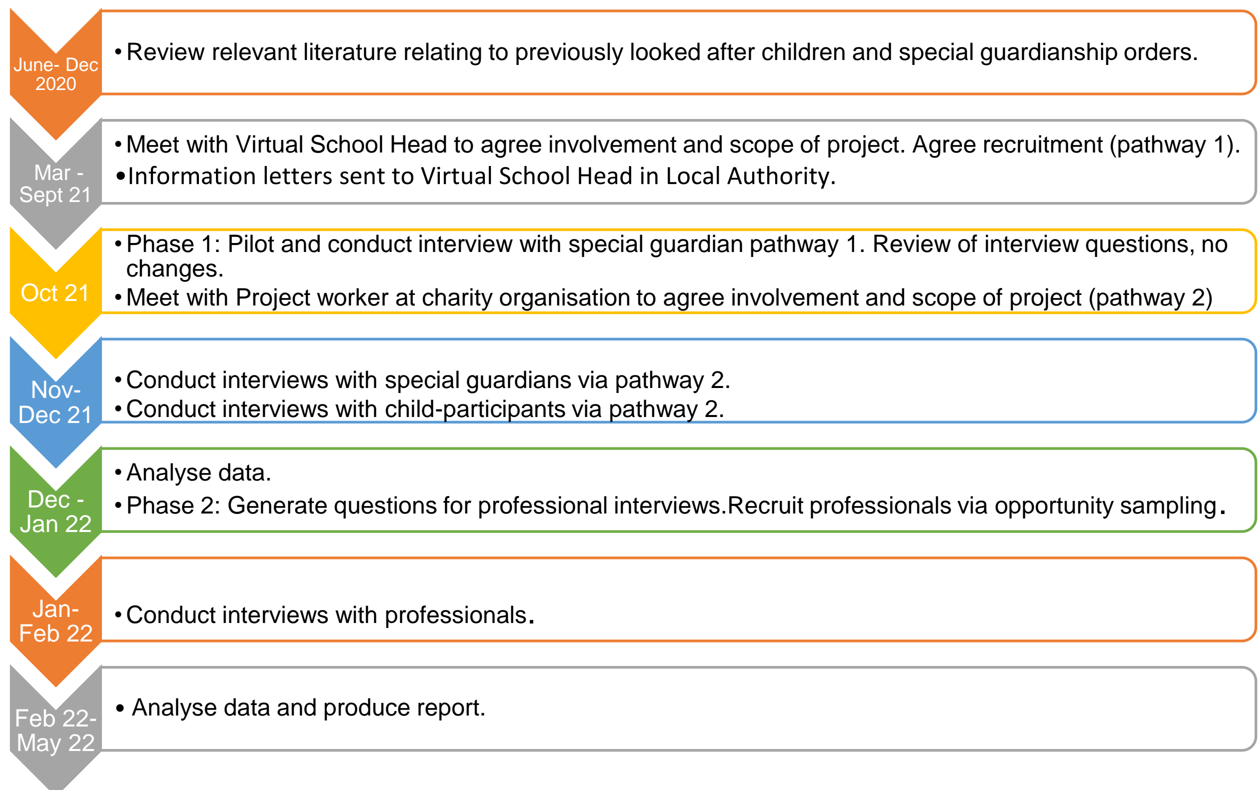
The social constructionist worldview is compatible with the bioecological theoretical framework (Kelly, 2017), and has been used in previous doctoral work (Best, 2019; Best, 2021). Both the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD) and the social constructionist view consider the sociocultural contexts and systems and how these can influence and impact on the lived experience and the formation of knowledge. The use of the PPCT (person, process, context, time) model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) lends itself well to this study, as it allowed an exploration of the different contexts and processes that the person interacts with and is influenced by over time, alongside the consideration of the individual's personal characteristics, and biological and genetic aspects. The inclusion of multi-informants in this study allows for the exploration of the different contexts via the views of special guardians and professionals, while also including the view of the young people at the centre.

3.2 Qualitative Design

Using semi-structured interviews, this study used a qualitative, concurrent design to explore the views of young people under SGO, special guardians and wider professionals who support this population. A qualitative design was chosen as an appropriate research design due to the volume of findings presented verbally, with little use of numerical data or statistical analysis and preference for inductive logic (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Standardised tools, such as the Self-Image Profile-Adolescent (SIP-A) and the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scales were used to generate questions for the interviews with child-participants, especially due to the context of the interviews (remote via telephone). The use of these tools also provided the young people with the opportunity to share their views of their sense of identity and their sense of belonging at school. As a researcher, it provided me with an increased opportunity to build rapport and open the discussion, as I was able to ask them questions most relevant to their context with a focus on their meaning-making, a typical feature of qualitative research (Robson and McCartan, 2016).

The qualitative design used a concurrent approach to data collection and analysis; whereby the data collected from phase 1; interviews with child-participants and special guardians was analysed, and questions for the professionals (phase 2) were generated based on the phase 1 data. The use of a concurrent approach within qualitative research is strongly advised as it helps the researcher "*cycle back and forth between existing data and generate strategies for collecting new, often better data*" (Miles et al., 2013, p.6). The use

of a concurrent approach in this study aligned well with the social constructionist view, as it prioritised the perspectives of the key stakeholders (children under SGO and special guardians) and emphasised the world of experience as it is lived and felt by the special guardianship families in their situations (Schwandt, 2007) with the central aim of understanding their lived experiences of education. It also allowed for the *“healthy corrective for built-in blind spots”* (Miles et al, 2013). An example of this was the special guardian’s accounts of pupil-premium funding, which led to the generation of a specific question related to pupil-premium funding posed to professionals.



3.2.1 Research Timeline

3.3 Phases of study

The data collection of this study was divided into two phases. Phase One involved recruitment of special guardians and children under SGO, collecting and interpreting the data through thematic analysis. Phase Two involved using the findings from Phase One to design interview questions for professionals, recruiting professionals, collecting and interpreting data through reflective thematic analysis. The following section discusses the key feature of these phases; data collection tools and semi-structured interviews. Subsequent sections will discuss participants and recruitment, sample and data analysis in further detail.

3.4 Phase One

3.4.1 Data collection tools

3.4.2 Interview tools with young people

3.4.2.1 Self-Image Profile Adolescent (SIP-A)

To develop interview questions related to the child's self-image, the SIP-A was chosen as one of the standardised scales related to the young person's identity as the internal consistency demonstrated validity at 0.69 for positive self-image and 0.79 for negative self-image (Butler, 2001) (appendix B). Child-participants rated each word, such as 'talkative' and 'hard-working' indicating on a scale of 0-6 to how best it described them. Their results were then used to generate interview questions related to their responses, such as "What subjects do you think you work hard in?" or "Who would you talk to the most?"

3.4.2.2 Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)

To develop interview questions related to the child's sense of school belonging, the PSSM is a self-report, 18 Likert item scale, which includes statements relating to belonging, peer relationships and teacher relationships. The PSSM scale is widely considered by researchers to be the most accurate measure of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016) with an internal consistency of .80, demonstrating it to be a reliable measure for gathering information to develop questions relating to school belonging (Goodnew, 1993) (appendix C). Child participants were asked to rate statements, from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (completely true) such as *"there's at least one teacher or adult in this school I can talk to*" and "*people at this school are friendly to me*". Their answers were used to develop suitable questions relating to their school experience, such as "*Who are the adults you can talk to?"* and "*What makes that adult easy to talk to?"*.

3.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi structured interviews are a flexible and adaptable way of finding things out, as "*the use of human language is fascinating both as a behaviour in its own right and for the virtually unique window that it opens"* (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 286). The exploration of language through interaction aligns itself well with the social constructionist position, which places great emphasis on the interactions between people and how they use language to construct their meaning (Burr, 2015). Semi-structured interviews offer the possibility of flexibility based on the participants response, and allows for follow-up questions and further prompts.

Possible disadvantages to using semi structured interviews were noted and considered, such as the time-consuming nature of semi-structured interviews in terms of their planning, administration and transcription (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Additionally, interviews can be criticised for their lack of standardisation, which raises concerns about reliability as biases are difficult to rule out (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, biases can be mediated by the practitioner researcher through regular reflexive practices, as will be described in later sections. The use of interviews with vulnerable groups, such as children under SGO could also be problematic, as they may be unwilling to disclose sensitive or personal information to someone who is seen as a stranger (Hill, 1997). This fact was also considered in terms of the interviews with special guardians, as they are a group who are difficult to recruit and can have difficult relationships with professionals from local authorities due to power imbalances (McGrath, 2021). However, it was decided that these issues could be addressed via rapport building and by regarding the children and the special guardians as the experts, and reduce the potential power difference between researcher and participants (Coates, 2011).

3.4.4 Semi-structured interviews with young people

A semi-structured interview was conducted with young people participants, following completion of the SIP-A and PSSM scales, to explore the responses given in greater detail as identified above. This provided qualitative data to offer a richer insight into responses on the scales. Both child-participants chose for the interview to take place in their homes. One asked for their special guardian to be present; the other was conducted with no one else

present. To begin, we engaged in some problem-free discussion, and I offered information about myself and the study prior to any task to develop rapport with the children. The child participants answered questions about their school experiences based on the response to the SIP-A and PSSM statements. The child participants were able to elaborate on some questions without prompts. Where they answered, "*I don't know"* or "*I'm not sure*", I was careful not to probe further due to the nature of the telephone interview.

I provided opportunities to use drawing (Ideal School task) to engage in further discussions and elicit dialogue. Previous doctoral research with adopted adolescents found that most of the young people preferred to talk instead of using drawings or other resources (Best, 2019). However, as the young people in this study chose to engage over the telephone rather than online, the drawings provided a better opportunity to engage in discussions. I encouraged the child participants to take a 5–10-minute break before we started the Ideal School task. One child participant took a break, while the second child remained on the call.

3.4.4.1 The Ideal School (adapted)

During the interviews, both child-participants were happy to partake in an adapted version of 'The Ideal School' task (Williams, 2014), which seeks to gather the views of children and young people about their school experiences. The task was adapted whereby the children were only asked to draw and talk about their 'ideal school'; the kind of school they would like, and excluded questions related to the 'least ideal' school; the school they would not wish to

attend. This decision was made in lieu of the nature of the telephone interview over online or in-person interviews, and not being able to assess if the child-participants were upset or triggered thinking about a school they would not wish to attend. They were each asked to bring pencil and paper to the telephone interview. Instructions and questions taken from 'The Ideal School' were posed to the child-participants. See Figure 3.

Figure 3

The Ideal School drawing task

Due to the nature of the telephone interview, it was not possible to see what the child-participants had drawn, so the young people were asked to describe and share the details of their drawings themselves. Lastly, the child-participants

were each asked to compare their current school to their ideal school by a rating out of a ten, to provide insight into their current experience of school. The children participants were asked if they had any further questions before I spoke with their special guardian to explain the next steps of the study.

Caution was taken when interpreting this data, as this task is typically completed face-to-face with the young person and is an interactive task between practitioner and young person. It was not possible to read non-verbal cues and body language, to gauge the appropriateness of asking more sensitive questions relating to school difficulties. Furthermore, information gained from drawing-based activities are typically used alongside other information collected and should not be assessed and/or analysed in isolation (Moore, 2011). Due to the qualitative design of the study, these findings were considered and analysed alongside information gained via the semi-structured interviews with special guardians and professionals.

3.4.5 Semi Structured Interviews with Special Guardians

The study used semi-structured interviews to capture data collected from the microsystem *(special guardians)* for the research questions (appendix D). It is hoped that while the interview was not promoted as being a supportive space, participants may still have received a great deal of support from the overall experience (Robson & McCartan, 2016) as suggested by the final interview question and feedback. The interview schedule explored their child's experiences of school, including what was going well and what was supportive (appendix C). All three participants participated well in the interviews with two interviews taking place online and one via telephone call. While the participants

were advised that the interviews would take approximately 45-minutes, all three interviews lasted over an hour, suggesting that participants were comfortable enough to take part and share their experiences. My reflective journal reflects the emotions and feelings described and spoken about during the interviews: anger, sadness, disappointment, guilt, hope and pride. My journal also recalls the emotions experienced during the transcription phase of the analysis. McGrath (2021) describes a similar experience of emotions during his interviews with special guardians, experienced by participants (special guardians) and researcher.

Data collected from the interviews with special guardians and young people were transcribed and analysed. Overall findings were used to generate questions for the interview schedule for Phase Two; interviews with professionals. These were presented and discuss with thesis supervisors before interviews took place.

3.5 Phase Two

3.5.1 Semi Structured Interviews with Professionals

The use of semi-structured interviews with professionals allowed for the data collection from the microsystem *(designated teachers)* and the exosystem *(VSH, EP, social worker, charity support worker and clinical psychologist)* for the research questions (appendix D). The interview schedule was developed from the findings from Phase One; interviews with child participants and special guardians. All interviews were conducted online with the participants. Due to the increase of online and remote working practices during the global

pandemic, professionals appeared comfortable and able to engage fully in discussions related to their work supporting children under SGO and/or their special guardians.

3.6 Recruitment and participants

3.6.1 Participants

A purposive, criterion sampling strategy was used to recruit the child-participants, special guardians[3] and professionals. The selection criteria were:

- Child participants: young people attending a mainstream secondary school in England or Wales, in years seven to eleven, who are under SGO from Local Authority care in England or Wales.
- Special guardians: special guardians in England or Wales, who are the special guardians of children under SGO in England or Wales.
- Professionals: professionals who work with and support children under SGO and/ or special guardians as part of their role in England or Wales.

3.6.2 Recruitment

Participants who are children and guardians in special guardianship families were recruited via two pathways;

- The VSH in an inner-city local authority; one special guardian was recruited via this route.

[3] It is important to note that participants may not concur with a primary identity of 'special guardian'. For example, they may first consider themselves as parent, grandparent or carer. However, for the purpose of this thesis these participant groups will be referred to as 'study- children' and 'special guardians'.

- A national charity organisation which directly supports and works with kinship carers including special guardians. The majority of participants (n= 4) who were special guardians and child-participants were recruited via the charity organisation.

Participants who are professionals (n=10) were recruited via opportunity sampling. Opportunity sampling was used to identify professionals who support children under SGO and/ or their special guardians. This was done via emails and correspondence with local authorities, charity organisations, university and National Association for Virtual Schools Heads.

3.6.3 Sample

This resulted in the recruitment of:

- Child participants: Two young people (one male and one female) aged 12 and 14 who are under SGO, attending mainstream secondary schools at the time of the research, and living in Wales. The two child-participants are siblings, and are related to one special guardian. At the time of the interviews, both child-participants had been in under SGO for two years. The child-participants had lived with their SGO families for over seven years at the time of interview.
- Special guardians: Three special guardians (three females) of children under SGO. All three special guardians identified as grandmothers. One special guardian is directly related to the two child-participants. At the time of the interview, the average age of the study-guardians' children was 9 years, 10 months.

- Grandchildren of special guardians: In total, six children and young people are discussed in this study; two child participants (above) and four other grandchildren of special guardians, who will be mentioned at points as indirect participants.
- Professionals: Ten professionals were recruited for Phase Two. The interviews with supporting professionals, included professionals with experience of caring for and supporting children across a breadth of ages and stages. Please see Table 2 for a list of participants and recruitment pathway.

Table 2

Recruitment of Participants

Participants	Recruitment pathway
Zita, Special guardian	VSH, inner-city local authority
Annie, Special guardian	Charity organisation, online groups
Diane, Special guardian	Charity organisation, online groups
Katie, Child-participant	Charity organisation, online groups
Jack, Child-participant	Charity organisation, online groups
Hattie, Professional (EP)	Opportunity sampling
Veronica, Professional (EP)	Opportunity sampling
Peter, Professional (Social worker)	Opportunity sampling
Valerie, Professional (EP)	Opportunity sampling
Ava, Professional (EP)	Opportunity sampling

Anna, Professional (EP)	Opportunity sampling
Mary, Professional (Charity support worker)	Opportunity sampling
Mark, Professional (VSH)	Opportunity sampling
Tina, Professional (Designated teacher)	Opportunity sampling
Cora, Professional (Clinical Psychologist)	Opportunity sampling

Due to the sensitive nature of the questions being asked, the age range for the child participants focused on children and young people over the age of 11-years-old. The interviews with special guardians included their experience of caring for and supporting children across a breadth of ages and stages. Table 4 in the following chapter provides further detail about the child-participants and special guardians who were interviewed. The interviews with professionals included their experience supporting children, special guardians and their families across different age ranges.

3.7 Data Analysis

Interviews were listened to a number of times and transcribed by the researcher to increase familiarity with the data. The qualitative data from both phases was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-step process. Responses from special guardians and child-participants were analysed together reflecting the wider views of SGO families. The data was analysed using a sequential approach, meaning that the voices of the young people and their special guardian then informed subsequent

interviews with professionals. Thus, data from the first phase (child-participants and special guardians) was analysed first to generate questions for phase 2; interviews with professionals. Data from phase 2 was analysed separately. Whilst completing steps 1 and 2 of the professional analysis, I noticed a significant overlap between the meanings and codes captured by the child-participants/special guardians and the professionals. It was therefore decided to integrate the two thematic maps and take a comparative and contrastive view of the data from the two groups of participants.

Coding was inductive, which means that data was analysed without pre-developed coding or a specific theoretical perspective in mind to ensure that themes identified during analysis derived from participants' experiences. Thus, the entire dataset was analysed rather than particular parts of interest. However, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2013), the researcher takes an active role in generating codes and themes. Therefore, there was an implicit, researcher-driven, deductive element to the coding process. To ensure participants voices remained at the centre of this research, a second coder, a trainee educational psychologist who received teaching and training in using thematic analysis, reviewed two extracts of interviews. Both researchers independently reviewed sections of the data and discussed the coding and interpretation of the data. Inter-rater coding increases the trustworthiness of the data (Yardley, 2008). While there were some differences of opinion as to the inclusion/exclusion of specific extracts within the themes, there was an agreement that the overall coding accurately represented the dataset. Subsequently, codes thought to encapsulate the existing preconceptions were

revisited and revised to ensure that participants' voices and experiences remained at the centre of the analysis. Outline and actions taken are presented in the table below (see Table 3).

The codes used throughout the two phases were a mix of semantic, surface level meaning and latent, capturing underlying ideas, patterns and assumptions. The initial coding of the SGO data was mainly semantic, to capture the voices of this population. The dataset was then reviewed and revised adding more latent codes where appropriate and relevant (appendix H).

3.7.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen over other forms of analysis as it captures approaches embedded within the values of a qualitative paradigm. Thematic analysis is not bound to a theoretical or epistemological position (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and is therefore appropriately flexible as an approach to use with data obtained through a qualitative approach. Reflexive TA also aligns with the social constructionist position of this researcher, as an inductive approach to qualitative analysis was used alongside regular supervision and ongoing use of a reflective journal to develop codes, themes and subthemes. Additionally, Braun and Clarke posit that "valuing a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher" (p.5) is a crucial characteristic of thematic analysis.

Table 3

Six-Step Process of Thematic Analysis

Stage of analysis	Actions completed	Purpose
1. Familiarisation with the data	Process of immersion via: • Active listening of each interview. • Transcription of recordings. • Checking each transcript alongside recordings. • Observations written on transcripts to capture initial ideas, thoughts and items of interest.	• To become deeply familiar with the content of the dataset. • To check what each participant said. • To become aware of the of assumptions influencing the data.
2. Generating initial codes	• Systematic coding of the dataset using 'pen and paper' methods. • All relevant data to the research questions coded; meaningful chunks of text given a title capturing the essence of its usefulness. • Inductive and data-derived coding. • Codes reviewed by the researcher; codes from transcript extracts discussed with research supervisors and trainee EP colleague.	• To identify segments of the data that appear potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful. • Coding aimed at capturing single meanings or concepts. • Coding taking place over a range of levels; latent (implicit meaning) and semantic (surface meaning). • To capture the researcher's analytic take on the data.
3. Searching for themes	• Active examination and sorting of codes into meaningful groups by hand to develop provisional subthemes/themes. • 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.	• To start identifying shared patterned meaning across the dataset. • To compile a cluster of codes that seem to share a core idea or concept. • Looking for clusters of codes which may

	• Thematic maps created.	prove meaningful to research questions. • To describe broader meaning. • To construct themes based around the data, research questions and researchers experience and knowledge.
4. Reviewing and revising themes	• Review of the data extracts relating to each theme. • 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 • Revision of the datasets and provisional themes.	• To assess the initial fit of the provisional themes to the data, and the feasibility of the overall analysis. • To check if each theme tells a convincing story about an important pattern of shared meaning related to the dataset. • To see if the themes highlight the most important patterns of the dataset. • To consider the relationship between the themes.
5. Defining and naming the themes	• Each theme defined to refine the specifics (appendix I). • Names chosen to capture the essence of the theme; names reviewed with research supervisors and trainee EP colleague.	• To ensure each theme is clearly demarcated and developed around a strong core concept or essence.
6. Producing the report	• Important and vivid examples of data selected for each theme across all participants.	• To weave together the analytic narrative and vivid data extracts, to tell the reader a clear and credible story.

- Presentation of data within findings chapters.

3.8 Reflexivity and the Role of the Researcher

Reflexivity is a valuable part of qualitative research. It requires the researcher to critically reflect on their research process and on factors which may affect their interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I came to this research with a professional and personal interest in looked-after and previously looked-after children. My mother was a social worker who spent her early career working in fostering and adoption in Ireland. As a child I attended events at Christmas, which focused on providing a space for children to connect with their birth parents, and siblings. I have heard different accounts of the trauma endured by some children, both as part of their early life experiences, but also of their experience of the systems set up to support them.

Prior to starting the doctorate, I worked as an advisory teacher for looked-after children in a Virtual School. While the VSH is the person responsible in the local authority for previously looked-after children, my role provided me with opportunities to regularly liaise with teams and professionals who supported adopted children and those under SGO. I also worked with looked-after children and young people who were sometimes being considered for SGO, and whose potential special guardians had to consider the long-term implications of an alternative permanency arrangement, including a reduction in financial and professional support. In my own professional experience, there was often a lack of knowledge and understanding about SGOs among schools, and other professionals. When considering my thesis topic, I sought out the

views of professionals who work with this population, including the VSH from my previous role, and the two link EPs for looked-after children in two different local authorities. Information gained from these discussions highlighted the lack of research in this area, and a dearth of research which included the child's voice and experience.

While these personal and professional experiences allowed me to position myself 'inside' the perceptions of the researched, my personal experiences growing up as a non-care experienced person also meant I was also 'outside' the perceptions of the researched, which Hellawell (2006) argues is central to the qualities of the researcher; the ability to empathise, while also being alien to the researched. Additionally, I have experience working as a teacher and a Virtual School advisory teacher, providing me with an 'insiders' perception of supporting this group. However, for this research, I positioned myself as a researcher thus placing myself as an outsider. Hellaway argues that a consideration by students of where they fall on the insider-outsider continua helps them to reflect critically on their positions and improve the quality of their reflexive diaries. I am aware that my previous role in the Virtual School may influence my role as a researcher. Therefore, I maintained written notes of all meetings including my supervision meetings. Once I started the data collection, I maintained a reflective diary which helped to make me aware of my preconceptions, biases and subjectivity, and minimised the influence of these on the analysis process and overall findings.

Furthermore, research exploring the insider/outsider status of a researcher highlights the complexity inherent for either status, and that the

researcher can move along different spectrums of the status depending on a multitude of factors including gender, race, culture and class (Merriam, et al., 2001). In their four case studies, researchers were challenged to examine various assumptions they held about their participants. The author's found that "positionality, power and representation proved to be useful concepts when exploring insider/outsider dynamics" (Merriam, et al., 2001). Therefore, I was mindful of my current professional role within a local authority and perceived power dynamics that might exist between professionals and special guardians. I was also cautious of not inviting more local authority involvement where it may not be welcomed. However, as this research was not taking place in the local authority I was training in, I was able to present myself as an outside researcher, with insider interest and experience, thus hopefully locating myself in a neutral position for the special-guardians and children. I was also mindful of not stigmatising this population and focusing on a deficit or deficient model of exploration. Thus, using the views already provided in previous studies and research, I deployed the principle of the disability rights movement, *'Nothing about us, without us'.* Recommendations from research conducted in 2017 found that young people wanted "to be able to talk, to be heard and to be understood" and "want people to be more aware of their need for support" (Wellard, 2017, p. 15). Thus, my aim was to bring my personal and professional experiences, and I used my skills as a researcher to elicit the views and experiences of this group and present a shared view of the lived experiences of these permanently placed young people.

3.9 The Impact of Covid-19

Conducting research during a global pandemic brings its own unique set of challenges to navigate and overcome. Covid-19 remained an ongoing discussion point of the supervision and tutorial discussions throughout the planning, development and implementation of this study. It was also considered as part of the ethics process with the application including several clauses relating to Covid-19 and participant and researcher health and safety. Prioritising participant health and safety is paramount when conducting research, thus moving back and forth from in-person to online interviews was commonplace throughout the data collection process, navigating new lockdown measures and governmental instructions to isolate, quarantine and reduce social contact.

The interview schedule did not include any specific questions related to Covid-19, yet it was mentioned and discussed by the majority of participants. Covid-19 and the necessity for children to access learning remotely during different periods of lockdown, isolation and quarantine meant that households needed technology to access education for their children. Information gained from findings suggests that this highlighted the disparity faced by many SGO families who experienced “technology poverty” during this time, and highlighted the deep social divide in the UK (Andrew et al., 2020).

The data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Andrews, et al., 2020) has highlighted how that period of home schooling accelerated the attainment gap between the poorest and richest in our societies. The study reports that the most advantaged pupils will have accessed considerably more educational

input per day (approx. 75 minutes) than their poorest peers. The move to online learning necessitated effective internet, which poorer families do not always have with many children accessing their learning via a shared smart phone (Hill, et al., 2020). Moving data collection online meant consideration of the technology available to participants alongside the time and space available to conduct such interviews. Many special guardians reported the necessity to fit in the interview around their work hours, school drops and collections, therapy sessions for the child and availability of consistent Wi-Fi connections. Thus Covid-19 was an extreme condition of this study, and impacted the proposed method of data collection, as explored below.

Given the lack of research in this area, a focus group of special guardians initially offered the best opportunity to collate a source of detailed dialogue about the special guardians' experiences in relation to their children in their care (Liamputtong, 2011). This was hoped to be achieved through focus groups, however due to the pandemic, this was not possible. Focus groups are a useful way to explore the experiences and views of a group, that share a common characteristic, to develop an overall understanding of an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This study aimed to use an existing time and space where special guardians met within the local authority to facilitate the use of focus groups. The impact of Covid-19 meant that existing in-person support groups for special guardians were no longer running face-to-face, which significantly impacted the recruitment of these participants. This reduced the opportunity to meet with a group face-to-face and increased the risk of gathering a larger group for research purposes. Thus, the decision was made to

switch from focus groups to semi-structured interviews for both phases of data collection.

It was hoped that interviews with young people would take place in-person to build rapport and trust before asking sensitive questions about school and home experiences. Due to Covid-19, the interviews were moved to online, however, the young people's home had weak Wi-Fi signal, so the participants requested on the day of data collection that the interview be conducted via telephone. This resulted in the exclusion of certain sensitive questions owing to difficulties not being able to read participant's body language and facial expressions in response to questions being asked.

Three interviews were postponed over the course of data collection due to the participants contracting and becoming unwell with Covid-19, which included one guardian and her grandchildren. Due to the sequential design of the study, this resulted in a 4-week delay to Phase 1 data collection, and a 2-week delay to Phase 2 data collection. Though such delays can be anticipated and managed appropriately within a well-planned study design, it highlights the additional complexities of research during an extreme condition and its influence across systems and contexts over a time-period.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This research was approved ethically by the department of Psychology and Human Development at the UCL Institute of Education. I adhered to the Human Research Ethics (2014), and the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2010). This research study included working with young

people. Careful consideration was given to the ethics of including this vulnerable group within the research, as children are deemed vulnerable participants in research (British Psychological Society (BPS), 2014). Thus, the children in this study are thought to be particularly vulnerable, given their early life experiences. However, due to the lack of children's voice from the available research, I would argue it would be unethical not to provide them with the option to share their views and experiences. Care was taken throughout the process with all participants to ensure participants about their right to withdraw, maintain confidentiality and anonymity and manage any power imbalances between the participants and myself.

As previously discussed, all data collection from participants was collected online and via telephone. Topics discussed were often of a sensitive nature, and I spent time thinking about the opportunities to build rapport and create a safe space online and via telephone based on my experience as a Trainee EP and building attuned interactions with children, schools and families. This also included various email threads between the special guardians prior to interview, and time spent before the interview engaging in problem free talk. In addition, adults have become accustomed to working and meeting on online platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore online interviews were judged to be a safe and appropriate space to speak with the special guardians and professionals. However, this researcher wishes to be mindful of the equality and equity of only including special guardians who were able to access and participate in an online forum. This was reviewed with research supervisors and may be a limitation of this study as discussed later in

the study. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants names. See appendix F for ethics form.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the proposed methodology and explained the philosophical assumptions and conceptual framework of this study. It has explained how the research was conducted, describing the recruitment of participants , data collection, analysis and ethical considerations, as well as considerations of the Covid-19 pandemic which affected the proposed methods of data collection. To begin, semi structured interviews with special guardians from different local authorities and geographical areas was conducted. Semi structured interviews with secondary-age young people were then conducted, based on information gained from their completion of the PSSM and the SIP-A by the child-participants. Following analysis of the information from these child-participants and special guardians, questions were generated for the professionals. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 10 professionals who support special guardians and children under SGOs. Reflective thematic analysis was used to analyse the dataset and generate themes and subthemes. The next chapter will present and discuss the findings.

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to:

- Outline the characteristics of the study-children, special guardians, children of the special guardians and professionals represented in the study.
- Subsequently, it will present and discuss the themes identified within the views of the study-children, special guardians and professionals related to research question one; understanding the child's identity.
- Finally, it will present and discuss the themes identified within the views of the study-children, special guardians and professionals. Children in relation to research question two and three; educational experiences and what supports them.

As noted in the earlier chapter, data from both phases of data collection were analysed concurrently and separately. Due to the similarities in themes captured within each phase, the findings in which views are shared will be presented together. Findings where there are different views are highlighted in the thematic map.

4.1 Characteristics of the Special Guardianship Participants; children and special guardians

The data from the first phase related to two groups of children under SGO; first the study-children (direct participants) who were directly interviewed during

data collection and secondly, the children of the special guardians (indirect-participants). Information about the children under SGO represented in this study (direct and indirect participants) was collected from the special guardian's using the Information Request Form and was completed at the end of the interview process as guardians had highlighted the limitations on their available time to partake in the interview process (appendix G). These characteristics will be further discussed alongside information gained from the semi-structured interviews later in this chapter.

Table 4

Demographic Information in Relation to the SGO Participants.

Name	Gender	Number of children under SGO	Relation to guardian/ child
Zita	F	1	Maternal grandmother
Annie	F	2	Paternal grandmother (of Jack and Katie)
Jack	M	2	Paternal grandchild (of Annie)
Katie	F	2	Paternal grandchild (of Annie)
Diane	F	3	Maternal grandmother

The average age at the time of their SGO placement was 4 years, 11 months. This is similar to the national figures for 2018/19, where 36% of SGOs

are made to children between age 1-4 years old, with 27% of orders made for children aged 5-9 years, 18% for children aged 10-15 years and 17% of orders made for children under 1 years-old (DfE, 2019a).

Table 5

Characteristics of the Study-Children and the Special Guardians' Children Represented in this Study.

	Children under SGO
Mean age:	9 years, 10 months
Mean Length of time for SGO process:	8 months
Mean age at time of SGO placement:	4 years, 11 months
Mean age when/if taken into care:	3 years, 3 months
Mean timeframe when SGO support from local authority ceased:	Immediate

There was variation in the make-up of sibling relationships, ranging from one child who had no other known sibling to children where siblings who had been adopted, or others where subsequent siblings (children born after the SGO was granted) were living with a birth-parent. Special guardians reported that some children (n= 3) had knowledge of these siblings, but had no current relationship with them. As these children (n=3) were not direct participants, it was not possible to explore the impact of their awareness and understanding of other siblings, and whether the lack of contact was a source of distress or sadness for them (Wade, 2014). See table 6.

Table 6

Information about the Siblings of Children under SGO (Study-children and the Children of Special Guardians) in this Study

	Rosie, child of special guardian	Jack, study-child (direct participant)	Katie, study-child (direct participant)	Billy, child of special guardian	Liam, child of special guardian	John, child of special guardian
No. of siblings	0	2	2	3	4	4
Siblings also on SGO	0	1	1	2	2	2
Siblings adopted	0	0	0	1	1	1
Siblings living with birth parent	0	1	1	0	1	1

Special guardians were asked to describe how they felt the SGO was going. All special guardians described the SGO arrangement to be '*going very well'* or '*going well with some challenges*.' They provided information relating to the contact arrangements for each child and shared if the contact was supervised or unsupervised by the guardian.

Table 7

Contact Arrangements for the Study-Children and Children of the Special Guardians

	Contact with birth mother	Contact with birth father
Rosie	Yes (unsupervised)	Father is unknown
Jack	No	Father is deceased
Katie	No	Father is deceased
Billy	Yes (unsupervised)	Yes
Liam	Yes (unsupervised)	Telephone
John	Yes (unsupervised)	Telephone

Special guardians were also asked whether their child had any learning needs and/or socioemotional needs. Learning needs were less prevalent, but findings revealed a higher prevalence of SEMH needs, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Learning and SEMH Needs of Children of Special Guardians

	Learning Needs	SEMH Needs
Children of special guardians (6)	17% (1)	33% (2)

Lastly, special guardians were asked to state their current employment status and their previous employment status (before the SGO). All three special guardians were previously in full-time employment prior to the SGO with two no longer in full-time employment and one in part-time employment. All three

special guardians reported that the reason for their change in employment was due to their new parental roles as a result of the SGO. One special guardian referred to having to take unpaid leave, and others referring to the impact that the part-time work is having on their pension for later in life.

4.2 Demographics of Professional Participants

At the start of each professional interview, participants were asked questions relating to their role supporting children under SGO and/or their special guardians. To protect the anonymity of all participants, names have been changed and some other demographic information in relation to professionals, for example specific role descriptions/ job titles were omitted. However, the main responsibilities of professionals' roles have not been altered (table 9). Interview extracts in this chapter can be read with participant's professional position in mind, since this is likely to be an important influence on their views, perceptions, and expressions of these in an interview situation.

Table 9

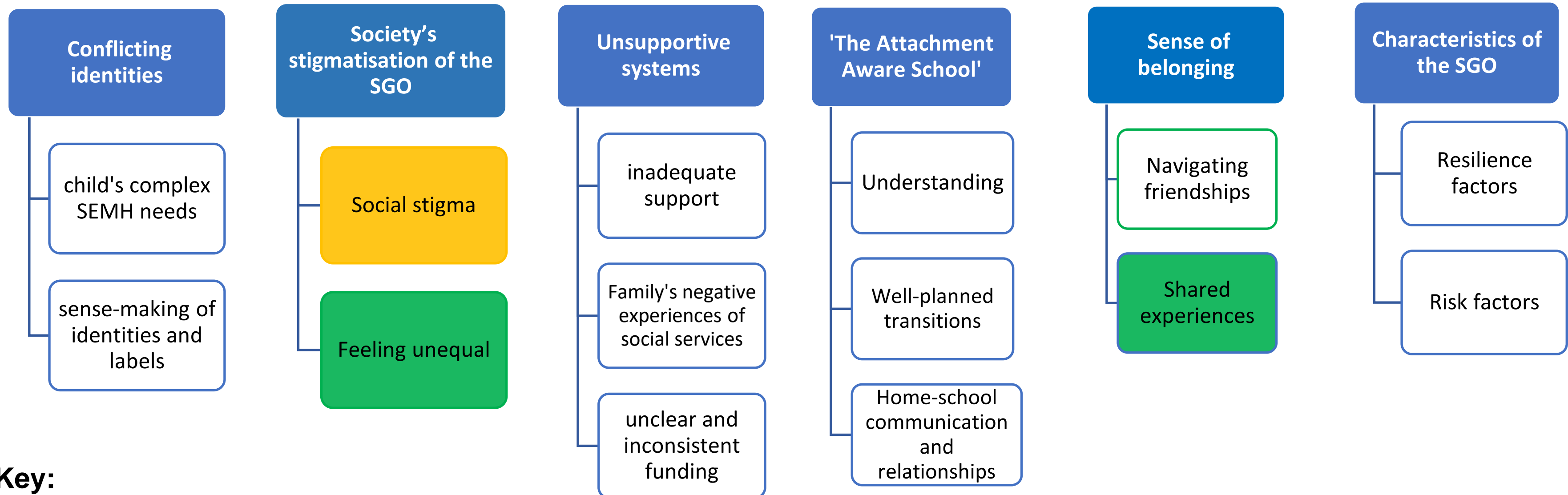
Demographic Information of the Professional Participants.

Name	Gender	Job Title	Time in role specific to SGO
Hattie	F	Educational Psychologist	5 years
Veronica	F	Educational Psychologist	3 years
Peter	M	Social Worker	11 years
Valerie	F	Educational Psychologist	10 years
Ava	F	Educational Psychologist	6 years
Anna	F	Educational Psychologist	4.5 years

Mary	F	Charity Support Worker	2 years
Tina	F	Designated Teacher	3 years
Cora	F	Clinical Psychologist	8 years
Mark	M	Virtual School Head	8 years

4.3 Thematic Map

Six overarching themes and related subthemes were identified within the study-children, special guardians and professionals view shown in Figure 4.



Key:

Blue: Common themes of phase 1

Green: Phase 1 (children and special guardians)

Orange: Phase 2 (professionals)

Figure 4 *Themes and subthemes identified within study-children, special guardians and professional's views.*

The following discussion will explore each theme related to the child's identity (RQ1), beginning with the conflicting identities of the child, then considering the stigmas and inequalities faced by SGO families (Stigmatisation of the SGO) and the lack of support received by the exosystems (Unsupportive Systems). This will be followed by school experiences and factors that support positive school experiences (RQ2 and RQ3), (The Attachment Friendly School and Sense of Belonging). Lastly, the risk and resilience factors (Characteristics of the SGO) will be explored and discussed. The interactions, relationships and influences within the themes and subthemes will be presented where relevant. These 'processes' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) will be explored throughout the findings and discussion.

RQ1: How do children, their special guardians and wider professional networks view the identity of children under SGO?

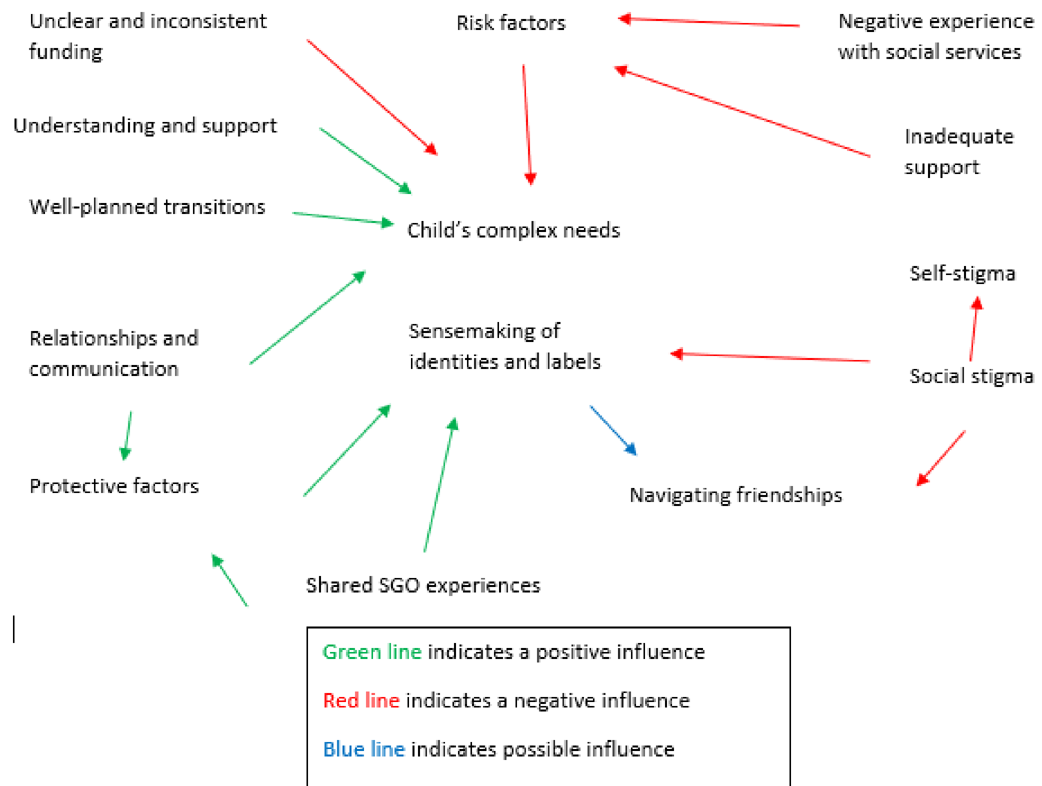
4.4 Conflicting Identities

The theme 'conflicting identities' represents the child's lived experience of being legally removed from their birth parents yet remaining within their family system. All special guardians and professionals reported the impact of the adverse and early life experiences of the children, the reasons for removal from their birth family whilst also remaining within the wider family. Some participants (special guardians and professionals) referred to the child's questioning, sense-making and understanding of the SGO arrangement. The subtheme 'child's complex SEMH needs' relates to the child's early life experiences and developmental trauma. The subtheme 'sensemaking of identities and labels' refers to the child's understanding of their identity, the identity of their parents,

grandparents and the use of labels at home and at school. The relationships between these subthemes and other subthemes are highlighted in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Relationship between Themes and Subthemes Related to 'Conflicted Identity'.



4.4.1 Child's complex SEMH needs

Study-guardians and study-professionals described the children's experiences of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and the impact or awareness of the possible impact this does or could have on the children. Some special guardians described the observed impact these experiences had on the child:

But he went through more trauma than she did. And when he started school, he... he did, he did mix. But he used to get quite angry (Annie, Special Guardian)

The accounts of anger often illustrated an emotional response outside of their conscious control:

"I'm not really sure off the top of my head, but a lot of things can make me angry." (Jack, child, 14)

The externalising of intense emotions was not universal to all children discussed in the interviews. For one special guardian, it was a comparison of other children's experiences and the impact of this on those children at school:

"Rosie is very easy, 'cause she don't carry trauma. Where them other children that have behaviour problems…. that have got alcohol-dependency and all them kind of things… I know that their experiences has been completely different in school to Rosie" (Zita, Special Guardian)

In the instances where the child was not presenting with social and/or emotional needs, the age they entered care seemed to be an important factor to consider. Both Rosie and John were living under an SGO with a grandparent from an earlier age (between birth to six months) and both have birth mothers who are now more stable, consistent figures in their lives.

Some professional interviewees referred to the *"lifelong set of needs"* for this population of children (Valerie, EP), and the need at times for ongoing support and involvement to manage these long-term needs:

This child is traumatised. That child is going to be like that for the rest of their life (Peter, Social Worker).

The trauma is often due to a range of different adverse childhood experiences, such as parents with *"substance misuse problems"* (Ava, EP); witnessing domestic violence "*He was having very violent outbursts… his anger was just off the scale" (Diane, Special Guardian); "neglect, abuse" (Veronica, EP); and "ongoing experiences of loss" (Ava, EP).*

Many professionals reported that some of the children they work with had also received diagnoses which are considered significant, long-term and complex, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and foetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD). For some children, these presenting SEMH complex needs led to permanent exclusions and/ or to them being moved to a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU):

"His older brother, there were definitely issues with him and he had a lot more emotional issues and he's been diagnosed with ADHD and autism and is now in a PRU" (Tina, Designated Teacher)

Overall, the needs of the children described by special guardians and professionals are similar to many care-experienced children, thus contributing towards an identity of risk, adversity and loss. Many professionals commented that the children's needs are identical to and should be treated the same as an adopted child or a child in foster care. In contrast to these other care experienced populations, the majority of children under SGO are placed in the permanent care of a relative, such as a grandmother or aunt. They may

continue to be surrounded by their family and have ongoing access to their family unit, thus are maintaining many aspects of their identity, which could be viewed as a protective factor. However, there are also the risk factors to consider, as they may be continuously exposed to, or reminded of the childhood adversities that led to them being placed on an SGO. One professional (Peter, Social Worker) highlighted that *“there’s real positives around (SGO) identity, but there’s some real negatives”,* a complexity which will be addressed by the next subtheme.

4.3.2 Sense-making of labels and identities

Special guardians and professionals depicted the child’s understanding of the SGO arrangements and how the child made sense of the change in their care circumstances. For some children, figuring out which parental labels and terms to use took some navigating:

> *“I remember her questioning, "am I calling you mam?" And I went well you can call me what you want… cause I'm still your gran, that hasn't changed, but if you feel comfortable calling me Mam, that's entirely up to you” (Annie, Special Guardian)*

Some professionals hypothesised about the questions the child may be asking themselves or others at this stage of the process when they are taken into the care of a guardian:

“I think it's more questioning, like who am I? Like where do I come from? Who do I belong to? Is it my mum and dad or is it like my aunt and uncle” (Anna, EP)

Some children may have ongoing access to their birth parent(s) through supervised or unsupervised contact, while for others, it may be embraced within their day-to-day lives:

“When I’ve done assessments in the field, you’ll often go around to the family home and there will be photographs of the mum on the wall of the grandparents’ house. So, the child is surrounded by their identity” (Peter, Social Worker)

School and peer relationships also impacted on how a child presented their identity to others, which may differ from the terms and labels they use at home. Zita (Special Guardian) described her younger granddaughter’s experience with using labels at school:

“Cause of the other children at the school, coming out going, “mummy, daddy!” So yeah, I just go with it and say “hello darling, did you have a good day? Come on, let’s go”, kind of thing “

For older children, they may wish to adapt their story to preserve or protect their identity when they reach secondary school:

“That notion of their shifting identity… and you see this, particularly as they come to the end of primary school. They prepare for transition thinking about

developing a narrative to explain why they don't live with their parent" (Valerie, EP)

One professional referred to research to explain this change in a child's narrative, and hypothesised that a child may feel a sense of shame and stigma about their identity:

> *"They can maybe lie about their parents and say actually, oh, "My parents died," rather than wanting to admit that their parents have been abusive or struggling with drugs and alcohol, mental health" (Peter, Social Worker)*

This possible shame and self-stigma about your family circumstances is likely the result of a wider societal view of this population, and the stigma attached to being or caring for a child under SGO.

This theme explored the conflicting identities for children under SGO. One identity explored through the subtheme of "Child's Complex SEMH Needs" relates to the child's identity of trauma, risk, adversity and loss, similar to the identities of many other vulnerable and care experienced children and young people. The average age of an SGO is 5 years, 7 months (DfE, 2014a), similar to the average age of children in this study. Thus, for many children under SGO who experience these adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), their initial neurological development is at risk of being significantly impacted. These early life experiences, such as bereavement, witnessing domestic violence and parental substance misuse can have considerable impact on a child's early development and correlate with long-term physical, emotional and mental

health needs and outcomes, such as SEMH difficulties, complex needs related to FASD or developmental diagnoses such as ADHD and autism.

Research indicates that the most significant damage is done when the brain is being formed during their earliest months and years, with the most serious damage taking place before birth and within the first two years post-birth (Allen, 2011). Children at this early age are dependent on their primary caregiver for the emotional development of their brain. For many young children in this study, such as Rosie, Liam and John this role fell to their maternal grandmothers, their special guardians thus providing some resilience against the risk factors or the ACEs they may have otherwise been exposed to.

The other identity issue explored through the subtheme of “sensemaking of labels and identities” correlates with the child’s understanding of the SGO, how some relationships change over time, such as the grandmother becoming the parent figure and changes to parental contact. The SGO child is often surrounded by their family identity, as the majority of children remain within their natural family. Yet, they are also navigating society’s idealisation of the nuclear family and making sense of why they are not in the care of their birth parents. This navigation of how others may perceive their family structure is influenced by a number of proximal processes, including the child’s life stage and age, such as when the child starts attending school and their interactions with new contexts, such as peer relationships at school (Erikson, 1968). Younger children may observe their peers using parental labels and mirror these interactions, while older children may be curious about how others at school (adults and young people) understand their family structure and situation and

may seek to protect their own and/or their family's identity. Older children are three times more likely to be secretive about the reasons for a kinship arrangement and are more likely to be open about their family structure if their parent is bereaved (Farmer, Selwyn & Meakings, 2013). Researchers hypothesised that the death of the parent was less likely to carry stigma than a parent who was using drugs or incarcerated and could no longer care for their children. The protection of identity can be referred to as 'disidentification' (Jensen, 2011) in response to societal stigma about family structures. Young people may do this by limiting who they disclose information to related to their family, this protecting and preserving their identity, while they themselves make sense of it.

The nuances of the SGO arrangement are the options of the child remaining in contact with the birth parent(s) if possible and appropriate. The existence, quality and frequency of contact with parents for children in this study was varied as shown earlier in this chapter (table 7) suggesting that this may impact on how they perceive their relationship with their parent. Farmer et al's (2013) analysis of children's responses to survey questions found that 69% of the children included at least one parent in their 'inner circle' deeming them as important to the child. Children more often saw parents as important when they had face-to face or letter contact with them, though it was important that the contact was frequent, reliable, positive and did not expose the child to parental problems (Farmer et al.,(2013).

The study also found that many children had unanswered questions about their parents or why they were living with their kin and found that children often

avoided asking their kinship carers about this as they were aware of the upset it may cause. Establishing what the birth-parent means to the child and how they understand and make sense of the parent's past may support a child in understanding their sense of belonging within the family. Creating a sense of belonging often manifests itself within the complex and dynamic process of identity construction. By making sense of the relationships and boundaries and placing those important to us inside or outside those boundaries supports us to establish our own identity (Epstein, 1993).

For a young person living out-of-home and often with a family or relative, their identity will be a combination of sameness to other 'natural' or 'nuclear' families as they remain within the boundaries of their extended family. Yet, also different as they are not in the care of their birth-parent, thus making them more akin to an adopted child or a child in unrelated foster care. Therefore, identity is complex and conflicted as it "hinges on an apparently paradoxical combination of sameness and difference' (Lawler, 2008, p.2).

4.5 The stigmatisation of the Special Guardianship Family

This theme represents the societal stigma regarding SGO families, specifically where it's a kinship relationship and the impact this has on the special guardian's self-esteem and feeling "second class" to other permanent carers, such as adoptive parents and foster carers. There were nuances in the responses of the special guardians and the professionals. Many professionals described the stigma and shame felt by the families and the assumptions made about this population and the impact it had on their self-worth. Guardians experienced described feelings of inequality. The subtheme 'Social Stigma'

refers to the professionals' views of the stigma, shame and assumptions made about SGO arrangements. The subtheme 'feeling unequal' relates to the special guardians feeling unequal to foster carers and noticing the difference in the support received.

4.5.1 Social Stigma

A number of professionals described the special guardians' feelings of inadequacy and the possible judgement of society:

> *"And they're ready to feel that they've not met up to society's expectations. Which is essentially what's happened to their children, isn't it, if they've had their children moved, of not been good enough" (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)*

It was hypothesised by many professionals that families may feel shame and guilt for not being able to protect the children in their family:

> *"That family feel sort of shame for the fact that that's something that went on in their family. Guilt that maybe they would be able to support the parents or prevent these things going the way that they did" (Anna, EP)*

Some professionals who supported special guardians reported that special guardians often feel like their own parenting is being judged or penalised:

> *"I've actually had carers say to me. I feel like I'm being punished for my adult child's mistakes. Uhm, or even their own parenting mistakes. You know, we know it happens" (Mary, Charity Project Worker)*

These feelings of blame and shame were not limited to the special guardians. Peter shared that the birth-parents are often denigrated and can experience

blame from the family if the child is placed for adoption, which severs all biological-family ties:

“They are vilified. So, it’s like having your child die and then you’re blamed for it, and you’re vilified for it. It’s horrible, horrible circumstances for parents to be in” (Peter, Social Worker)

These societal assumptions were also made about the children for reasons other than their SGO status. One professional reflected on an experience where the child under SGO was placed in a family where there were cultural differences that the birth-family were coping with relating to the child’s SGO arrangement and their new school placement:

“I think that was probably an element of unconscious bias and whether, I think the schools made an assumption that OK she's from a minority background and she's not going to be able” (Anna, EP)

These societal stigmas can lead to internalisations for the individual resulting in low self-esteem, avoidance and feelings of rejection, and in this study a justified sense of inequality.

4.5.2 Feeling unequal

Overall, there was a sense of inequality among the SGO population reflected in the special guardians’ own experiences. Special guardians reported feeling ‘penalised’, ‘divided’ and ‘second class’ to other formal carers:

“We're being penalised when other people are having other stuff thrown at them for doing the same thing” (Annie, Special Guardian)

One guardian spoke to the ‘fight’ necessary to access support:

“I know it sounds horrible, but you think of foster carers and you think of us, we always feel like the second-class ones. Because we're the ones that have to fight for everything” (Diane, Special Guardian)

When asked about why it was difficult to recruit special guardians for this study, one special guardian queried whether it was due to the grandparents navigating the stigma of having to assume the parenting role that their own children could no longer do:

“But it may be a case with some that there's a stigma that their children have done something wrong and that's why their grandchildren are with them” (Annie, Special Guardian)

However, this special guardian shared that this was not something she experienced, as her adult-child had died rather than “abandoned” the children, which she felt was less stigmatising. Yet, she too referred to a feeling of being punished or ‘penalised’ for being a relative rather than a non-kinship foster carer. Diane proposed that the reason for the difference in support received was because of their biological relationship with the child:

“Why is there such a big divide? That is the biggest thing that we, we fight for is this divide to be closed. Because we're doing exactly the same job, the only difference is we're related” (Diane, Special Guardian)

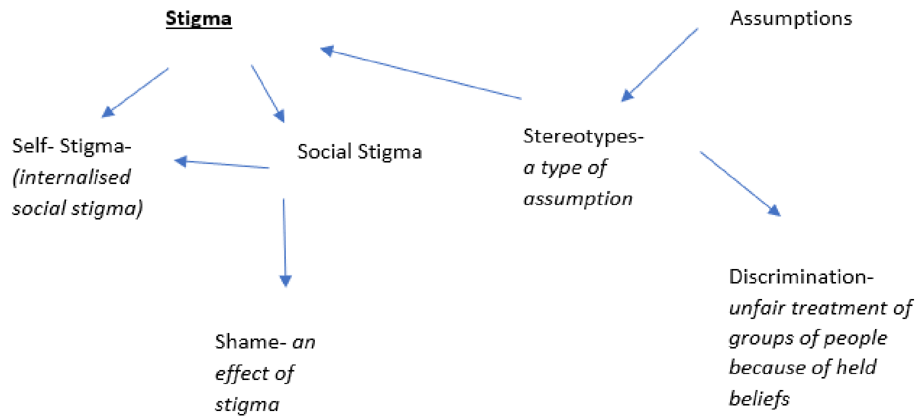
This theme explored a number of different findings related to social stigma and inequalities, such as professionals’ perceptions of guardian’s

feelings of guilt, shame and inadequacy. Special guardians reported feelings second-class to other types of carers, such as foster carers. It was postulated that guardians who were grandparents may experience their own failures as a parent if their child (the birth parent) couldn't care for their own children. However, it is evident that many of these differences go beyond stigma, and relate to being treated unequally and less favourably than foster carers, highlighting the systemic bias as a result of unequal governmental and policy bias.

Stigma is defined as a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality, or person. It is always negative in nature and develops because of a stereotype, such as the cognitive belief that grandparents are to blame for their own children's parenting difficulties. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2022), stigmas that develop because of stereotypes can lead to discrimination; the unfair treatment of groups of people because of held beliefs, such as the differences in support received by different types of carers and guardians. See figure 6.

Figure 6

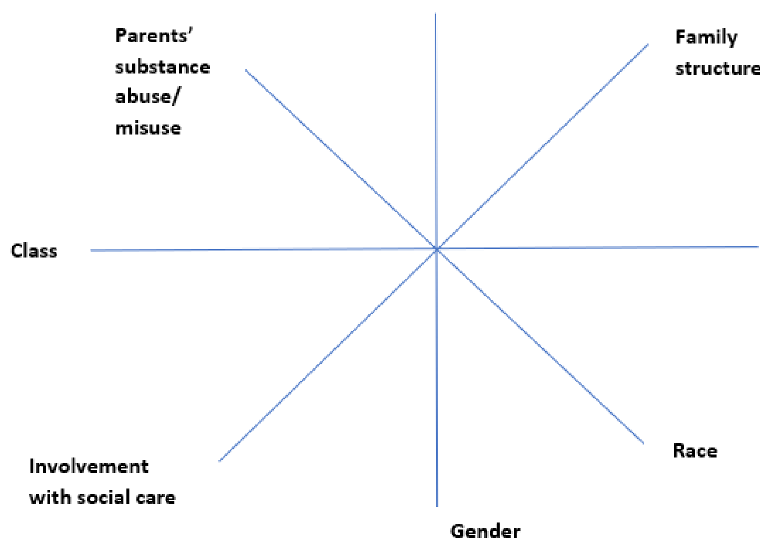
Relationships between stigma, shame and unequal treatment.



This stigmatisation and discrimination of an individual's social identity relates to the intersectionality analytical framework (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Figure 7 below outlines the different social and political identities that may create discrimination and privilege for an individual under SGO.

Figure 7

Intersectional Framework of the SGO Family Identity



Family structure and family identity affects an individual's sense of privilege and contributes towards the disadvantages they face in society, such as bullying, stigma, stereotyping and disparities in treatment (Best 2021; Messing, 2006; Broad et al 2001) . Yet, despite being recognised by top-down systems, findings from this study suggest that stigma of extended family or relative care remains an ongoing issue for many children and their special guardians. Some researchers postulate that this ongoing stigma relates to the societal assumptions of what a family is, and overly idealised and idolised perception of the 'nuclear family' despite "*a limited historical and social existence"* (Brown, Cohen & Wheeler, 2002, p. 55). Yet, kinship care families and SGO families do not imitate the 'nuclear family', as based on available data the special guardianship family may include older carers, whose adult children may still be residing in the same household. Brown et al explain that these families can appear 'chaotic' because of ongoing adaptability and change, and because they do not reflect the socially, culturally and politically idealised nuclear family structure. This Westernised and culturally idealised perception of the nuclear family may inform why kinship and SGO families experience stigma, and why they feel unequal to foster care families and adoptive families, which are often state assessed and structured families based on the nuclear family.

Finally, the professionals' reports of kinship guardian's experiences of blame, shame and sense of failure as a parent relates to the use of the intersectionality analysis framework. Grandparents are blamed for their own failures as a parent if their child cannot fulfil their own parental duties. This simplified view ignores the wider contextual influences on the birth-parent, such as their socioeconomic

status, their risk of poverty, their geographical location and exposure to drugs, and the continued cuts and reductions to public spending since 2010 which have significantly impacted on the community based, preventative interventions and supports available to parents in need of early help.

4.6 Unsupportive Systems

The theme 'unsupportive systems' refers to the lived experiences of the children and special guardians and supporting professionals before, during and after the SGO. In the subtheme, 'inadequate support' participants reported that there was insufficient support offered or received, with some professionals querying the political agenda behind this lack of support. The second subtheme refers to the family's negative experiences of social services prior to, during or after the SGO. Some professionals emphasised the impact that an early negative interaction with services had on their willingness to access support thereafter. The final subtheme refers to the pupil premium plus spending. Though this refers to a funding provided to school, it is evident from findings that the lack of clarity relates to the wider systems knowledge and understanding about how it is used and disseminated. Though the participants point blame at social services and wider systems throughout this theme, some professionals helpfully highlighted the constraints that many of these front-line workers are navigating when trying to support this group.

4.6.1 Inadequate support

Overall, the support received from the wider system was felt to be inadequate and at times non-existent.

"I literally signed the paperwork and that was it. Never heard from social services again." (Zita, Special Guardian).

Zita's reference to the ceasing of support once the SGO was granted mirrored by another guardian:

"I feel once you get an SGO, that's it…. They kind of wash their hands of you. You know you don't need us anymore; you don't need this support. So, all the support that's in place, kind of disappears."(Diane, Special Guardian)

One professional participant, with in-depth knowledge of the SGO process described the reasons behind the disappearing support and the reason why local authorities may provide initial support prior to the order being granted:

"If the Local Authority supports you they will try and get you across the finish line. They, yeah, they will support you as much as they can to prevent that child coming into care because that costs a lot." (Peter, Social Worker)

The idea that SGOs save money lends itself to the notion that the formalising and regulating of formal kinship care is a political one. One professional wondered about whether the support for birth-parents prior to the care order was as available as in previous periods of government:

"I think I, possibly they're less well supported. That's a political sort of statement. I think they are probably less well supported then they were earlier in this period of government actually." (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)

Furthermore, findings indicate that advice for schools trying to support their SGO families was also difficult to access:

“It was so hard trying to get some support… there was some sort of grandparent’s association, but they don't automatically have a social worker anymore or they didn't seem to be anyone where we turn to get specific advice and help.” (Tina, Designated Teacher);

“You could say, yeah, we're here to support previously looked after children, you can come to me for advice, information, training or whatever, but that doesn't necessarily mean it actually happens in practice because it can be a little bit hit and miss.” (Mark, Virtual School)

Lastly, there was a lack of financial support and/ or adequate financial support. Valerie (EP) reflected on the challenges of caring for a child, who has likely experienced trauma, without any financial support:

“I think financial support is a really big one. Especially, in the earliest cases… there didn't seem to be any financial support and they were treated very much like potential adoptive parents who are just expected to take the child in and carry on as normal.” (Valerie, EP)

Though there have been changes to the financial support received by some special guardians it is often not sufficient enough to cover the wider needs of the child:

"You know Rosie has after school clubs, she goes to gymnastics on Saturday- that costs a lot of money. That probably cost the whole amount of SGO money for the month." (Zita, Special Guardian)

Furthermore, this support can vary according to different local authorities and families can often feel conflicted about accessing support:

"They're crying out for help whilst being sometimes a bit wary of the systems that are traditionally there to help them and then not being able to access the same level support that an adopted family would have." (Ava, EP)

This weariness of services may relate to the special guardians' previous experiences with services, or their experience of the SGO court process, which Mary (Charity, Project Worker) described as*: "a very unhappy process".*

4.6.2 Family's negative experience of social services

All special guardians portrayed a negative experience of their interactions with social services before, during and after the SGO process. Some participants reported an experience of manipulation from their local authorities and felt the special guardians were coerced.

"Almost emotionally blackmailed into taking him {their grandson}" (Ava, EP). Zita (Special Guardian) believed that her local authority had started planning once her teenage daughter became pregnant:

"They had their agenda from the minute they found out my daughter was pregnant; they had that agenda straight away. And I told her that, you see

you're going to have to work triple, quadruple to keep this baby." (Zita, Special Guardian)

Contrastingly, Annie (Special Guardian) reported *"begging social services to help me get the children into school"* when her grandchildren first came into her care. As aforementioned, the support available is decided and delivered differently across many local authorities. As one participant pointed out, once the SGO has been granted, there is reduced statutory responsibility on the local authority and the systems within. This study reinforced that for many special guardians

"The system (pause) doesn't really work. Or it didn't work for me and didn't work for the children." (Annie, Special Guardian).

Many professionals reported an increased pressure to assume the permanent caring role for the children, for fear that *"if you don't take him, he's going into foster care."* (Ava, EP). These instances were echoed by special guardians:

"Basically, I failed two assessments and I thought that was it, the children would be taken away, they're going to adoption." (Diane, Special Guardian)

And by the professional network:

"The baby was being threatened with being removed permanently and adopted. And at the age of 19 she took in her sister's baby, and she was very much being a carer and advocate for her sister as well". (Valerie, EP)

These negative experiences were thought to impact on whether the special guardians were willing to access help and support after the SGO had been granted:

> *“I've got one family who are rejecting of social care and family support because they had quite a negative experience with that service when they thought the child was coming into their care and they felt like they were quite scrutinised.” (Ava, EP)*

One participant explained that *“Parents don’t want support because they’re scared. If they say they’re struggling, they’ve already witnessed a parent losing a child.*” (Peter, Social Worker). For others it may have been historical family interactions with social care, which influences their actions:

> *“They may come from a family where there’s been involvement with social care… and there's been social care involvement in their lives when they were bringing up their children. And so their relationship with services is really complicated.” (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)*

For others, this complicated relationship with services may stem from the SGO process, and their own experience in court where decisions are made about who the SGO should be made to:

> *“The carer’s like “well you’ve just ripped into me for two hours in a witness box. There’s no way that we’re going to make ourselves vulnerable to you, to be intimate about our psychological issues.” (Peter, Social Worker)*

These feelings of anger, fear and frustration are also felt by birth-parents whose children have been removed from their care. Ava (EP) outlined that for one SGO family she supported:

“There’s been anger and frustration at social care for feeling that… British Values were being sort of imposed on them… they were parenting was how they felt was in the best way to raise their child.“ (Ava, EP)

Mary (Charity Project Worker) outlined that those social workers and associated professionals *“get a bad rap because they're the front-man so they get attacked when anything goes wrong”,* which emphasises the wider socio, political and economic context for these SGO families and the social services who are allocated to support them.

4.6.3 Unclear and inconsistent funding

The special guardians and professionals reported mixed views and experiences of the spending of the pupil premium plus spending, which may relate to the lack of clarity in policy and guidance around how it should be spent. One special guardian shared that it was the only thing that her and the school disagreed about:

“No, but the one thing I tend to clash about is the Pupil Premium Plus (PP+). I’m always on about it. What’s happening for that PP+ for Rosie? What’s that doing for Rosie? What are you doing for Rosie about it?” (Zita, Special Guardian)

Speaking from her experience supporting and talking to kinship carers, one interviewee reported that navigating discussions in school around the funding can be met with confusion:

“If the special guardian approaches that school for support around people premium, they kind of get a blank stare of. We don't know what you're talking about or, or we can't, we can't use that for your kid and child.” (Mary, Charity Project Worker)

Most professionals interviewed were not clear on the specifics of this funding for children under SGO as it was not part of their everyday role and responsibility:

“My understanding is that pupil premium plus it gets given to schools for the child, but it's not spent necessarily on that child.” (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)

Mark, the Virtual School Head shared how is role is often to provide advice and guidance for previously looked after children and clarify information regarding this funding:

“A lot of schools tend to not realize that the previously looked after children people premium is meant to be spent specifically on those children, so unless they are explicitly told, and that’s what I do.” (Mark VSH)

Diane (Special Guardian) described the creative ways that her grandchildren’s school had used the funding for her grandson, including paying for Occupational Therapy (OT) assessments and other therapeutic interventions. This flexible and responsive use of the funding was also reflected in Tina’s

(designated teacher) account, though she queried the accountability of the spending of the funding:

"*If we chose not to, maybe is anyone really holding us accountable? I mean, we could be because they'll get art therapies."* This view was shared by other professionals: "*I did senior management in schools for years, but if it's not ring fenced, you were finding it somewhere else."* (Veronica, EP).

As identified in earlier themes, the system can often work against families, therein the case of the pupil premium plus for previously looked after children, whereby families who have taken children directly into their care are penalised by the funding system:

> *"Where a child has moved straight into kinship care…. never been in the care system. They haven't spent even the 24 hours in care that you need, so there are then some things that they're not eligible for, Pupil premium plus, for example." (Hattie, EP)*

This technicality means that many children under SGO are not entitled to the additional funding that others are, because they did not spend the required 24 hours in care. Mark (VSH) highlighted that *"most virtual school heads would say that… it should be given automatically whether you've been in care or not",* but that this required the DfE to change the guidance. Changes to such guidance to make things automatic was also welcomed by another professional:

> *"We need to make life as easy for kinship carers as possible. We need to be saying, "Let's just make this automatic. Let's make allowances automatic. Let's*

make pupil premium plus, automatic, that it just goes to that child." (Peter, Social Worker)

The overall message from special guardians and professionals was that special guardianship families do not receive enough support, particularly once the SGO has been agreed. This is reflective of wider research which reported that special guardians were surprised by the lack of support once the SGO was granted and noticed an abrupt drop-in support received (Harwin et al, 2019). Harwin (2019) and Wade, Dixon and Richards (2010) referred to the difficulties special guardians can face in their new roles, such as managing contact, supporting the child's emotional needs and navigating the day-to-day stresses such as increased outgoings, reduced finances and a reduction in employment opportunities, all without additional support. Where support was made available via support group sessions, special guardians were reluctant to attend due to the presence of the social worker at the groups.

The process of SGO can be experienced as distressing for many special guardians, and the decisions are often made at a time of family crisis impacting on many aspects of grandparent special guardian's lives; financial, employment and relational (Jones et al., 2020). Grandparents are often left on their own to develop a sympathetic, psychosocial and systemic perspective on what causes children's abusive experiences and attempt to undo their adverse early life experiences. Jones et al., (2020) describe the "withdrawal of the state" in these instances and report that grandparent special guardians expressed surprise that such little support was offered or made available after the SGO had been granted. However, the DfE (2014a) found that most special guardians were

responsive to their new role and were meeting the needs of the children highlighting the motivation of these kinship carers to support the children in their family.

The requirement to be “looked-after” is also relevant to be eligible for pupil premium plus funding, which stipulates that a child under SGO, must have been “looked-after” for at least 24 hours before the SGO was granted before they are deemed eligible to receive the funding. This can often cause confusion for both schools and guardians, with designated teachers reporting that they found it challenging to identify previously looked-after children and expressed uncertainty about these statutory expectations (Boesley, 2021). The Pupil Premium Plus funding is paid directly by the government to the school once they are notified that a child who meets the condition of the grant is on roll. The DfE (2021) highlights that the funding is not ring-fenced and is not for individual children, stipulating that schools are best placed to determine how the additional funding can be deployed and used to ensure maximum impact. The DfE’s examples include using the funding to train staff on recognising and responding to attachment related issues or that if a child needs tailored support that is in excess of the £2300 received by the school. However, as Boesley (2021) suggests the virtual school and LAs should provide support around developing systems for monitoring this group. Furthermore, Harris (2021) suggests that designated teachers would likely benefit from peer support in a similar model to that used with SENCo cluster meetings and support groups. Finally, with a dearth of research exploring the designated teacher’s new role in supporting previously looked-after children, future research may wish to explore

how schools are using this funding and what impact it is having on the needs of children under special guardianship orders.

This theme contributes to the limited existing literature which reports on the insufficient support received by special guardians and the variation in the support received across different local authorities. Furthermore, families may be reluctant to access support that is offered or available for fear of further assessment of their lives, due to the intense and emotional experience of the SGO process. Requesting help and support after the SGO means a full assessment by social services, which many families are fearful or mistrusting of following their previous encounters with these systems. This theme also highlighted the perceived unfairness of the technicalities of the policies for families who assume immediate care of the child, i.e., the requirement to be 'looked-after' for 24-hours.

RQ2 and 3 are discussed in the following section together due to the overlapping nature of their content.

RQ2: What are the experiences of children under SGO in education?

RQ3: How are children under SGO supported to have positive educational experiences?

The themes and the findings within each theme related to RQ2 and RQ3 are mapped out below across the different contexts of the BTHD which highlights the children's current school experiences and what supports them to have positive educational experiences. See Figure 8.

Child’s experiences in education

Factors that support positive educational experiences

Time (Chronosystem)	Macrosystem	Exosystem	Meso system	Microsystem	Person → (child)
Covid and home learning Virtual School Heads become responsible for previously looked-after children Designated teachers become responsible for previously looked-after children Shift in the function and nature of kinship care over time Austerity cuts to funding impacting upon social services	Societal stigma, shame and assumptions Societal ideology of ‘nuclear’ family Society not understanding SGO family structure Negative media portrayal of SGO/ kinship in the media **Positive media and advertising portrayal of SGO**	Unclear and inconsistent use of PP+ funding Lack of awareness and understanding amongst many professionals Lack of teacher training about the impact of relational trauma and SGO care Professional’s lack of knowledge about FASD Specific programmes to support transitions **Prioritising the need for support with transitions** **External professionals raising awareness and understanding through training**	Families’ negative experience with social services Home- school communication and relationships Shared experiences with other SGO families Navigating friendships and peer relationships Special guardian’s experiences with education Impact of early experiences on life in school and the SGO family **Maintaining contact and relationships with birth parents +/ -** **Named person/ link for special guardians in school**	Special guardian’s motivation to support child Special guardians preparing for transitions Special guardian’s feeling that school understand their child’s needs Navigating friendships Friendship difficulties Schools’ lack of knowledge re: PP+ Bullying School’s use of exclusions **Well-planned transitions** **School’s understanding and support**	Complex needs relating to earlier adverse experiences Diagnoses of ADHD and autism Experience of exclusion Diagnosis of FASD Social and/ or emotional needs Sense-making of identities and labels Protection or preservation of family structure
	Process ⟷				

Figure 8

Summary of findings in relation to RQs 2 and 3, across the child’s ecosystems based on Best (2019).

4.7 'The Attachment Friendly School'

This theme reflects the mixed experiences of different participant's views of children's educational experiences. Young people and special guardians reflected predominantly positive and/ or supportive approaches school experiences. Professionals reflected a mixed experiences for the children they had worked with, based on their observations of supportive practice, and in other instances, suggestions were offered by professionals. This theme represents the aspects of the attachment aware and trauma informed approaches and practices necessary to support all learners, including children who may have experience adversity or stress in their early lives, such as children under SGO. The first subtheme refers to the availability and benefit of a sense of understanding and support from school staff. The second relates to the importance of planning transitions, and the third emphasises the importance of the relationships and consistent communication between home and school.

4.7.1 Understanding and Support

The findings from this study suggest that overall *"the schools have been quite supportive"* (Annie, Special Guardian) for the special guardians and study-children interviewed in this study. Special guardians recognised the importance of feeling that the school understood their children's individual needs related to their kinship status:

"I think so far, her teachers have been so understanding. Um, yeah, her teacher and the teacher assistants have been amazing. And I feel like, they just do take on board that you know she is a kinship child." (Zita, Special Guardian)

Diane (Special Guardian) was comforted knowing that support was available should her youngest grandchild require it:

“I think it's just understanding them. I mean like I say John does not need any extra help, but if he does need it, it's there.” (Diane (Special Guardian)

Many professionals praised the schools that they support and felt support was *“immediate and responsive”* with *“no bureaucracy to navigate”* (Valerie, EP). EPs saw an important role for training for the “development of understanding the needs of his particular population” (Hattie, EP) and others acknowledged the benefit of embedding this understanding in school systems:

“In my experience, some schools are really good. They understand. They go out of their way. They train their teachers in attachment and trauma informed practice. They understand maybe that some of the children’s behaviour is communication, not naughtiness.” (Peter, Social Worker)

Tina (Designated Teacher) shared that her school had recently started similar trauma informed training and reported that:

“The staff are on board and they’re understanding, and you know about why children might present with different things.” (Tina, Designated Teacher)

The extracts above portray the positive instances of support and understanding. However, many of the participants acknowledged that there was room for improvement:

"I don't think there is enough understanding. Even for me when I qualify as an EP you know I wasn't aware of the difference. It's only through my work where I kind of understand it differently now." (Anna, EP)

Speaking on behalf of the special guardians she directly supports, Mary (Charity Project Worker) highlighted that for many special guardians:

"The biggest piece is {schools} not understanding what a special guardian is like" and knowing that the special guardians *"have legal rights".(Mary, Charity Project Worker)*

This was mirrored in one guardian's personal experience of filling in a form on behalf of her grandson:

"I've signed Jack's {form}, and 'relationship' I've put grandmother, but they will still phone me, and say, well why have you signed it? 'Well, it has to be a parent', 'well it can't be a parent because they live with me'." (Annie, Special Guardian)

Speaking on behalf of the schools he supports as a Virtual School Head, Mark reported:

"I think from a school perspective, I think it's about…It's around, have a greater understanding about what these children have been through just in the way that you do…. And there's a huge amount of work to do in schools." (Mark VSH)

4.7.2 Well Planned Transitions

Supporting transitions is key to supporting any student at school. For children

who may have experienced multiple changes in their early lives, prioritising supportive transitions can be key to the child's sense of safety and sense of belonging. Many special guardians reflected on the importance of the year-to-year transitions within the child's journey:

"I've always made sure that she has a fantastic handover. I've always spoken with her teachers about having a handover to the next teacher, especially about her emotions and her sensitivity…. I've always made sure that the handover has been really good." (Zita, Special Guardian)

Annie (Special Guardian) described how primary school had been a difficult time for her grandson Jack. However, once settled he found the transition to secondary school a positive experience and shared the possible reasons for this:

"Comprehensive School is easier for him to walk away because he's bigger, and you mix with different people then. I think he's finding it easier." (Annie Special Guardian)

Similar to Jack, Liam also experiences emotional difficulties and Diane (Special Guardian) thought that her grandson benefitted from a well-planned transition each year:

"I think every stage of Liam's transitioning into another class, they've always thought about it, they've always put a plan in place." (Diane, Special Guardian)

Involving special guardians in the different transitions was identified as important, as it allowed the staff in the child's receiving secondary to get to know the child under SGO and find out how they could be supported within the school:

"I think sometimes there's more of a need to engage SGO carers in a very active way over those transitions, over settling at secondary school. Think about how to maintain those relationships, think about how the designated teacher might also be reaching out to those children subject to special guardianship whether or not their care experienced." (Hattie, EP)

Information sharing with others especially as the child gets older, conflicts with what research tells us the child may wish to do. However, not disclosing the information about the child's potential needs may pose greater risks later on. It may be that a case of "*just recognizing and anticipating that transitions pose greater threats to these young people" (Valerie, EP),* ensuring those who need to know (the designated teacher or form tutor) know and that the young people are:

"On the radar for the receiving (secondary) school that they don't just get processed like everybody else, that there's a proper handover and recognition that their identify is a potential vulnerability so that they're watching to see how the transition goes." (Valerie, EP)

Many professionals reported that their services and/ or local authorities had developed and implemented programmes and projects to support transition

periods. Some of them were developed specifically for care experienced children:

“It's a new project to look at trying to kind of support children who are in in care or new to care in in managing or big transitions that they face in their life.” (Anna, EP)

Or for vulnerable children:

“This borough is quite good 'cause there's a good offer on with lots of different support for different things. She got some targeted youth support and was taking part in the program that supported her… before she joined Year 7.” (Tina, Designated Teacher)

Other transition programmes were aimed specifically at supporting secondary school transitions:

“We actually offered transitioning into secondary school workshops because we knew that there wasn’t anything in place for a lot of kids that were going into secondary school. So yeah, it’s a bit hit and miss.” (Mary, Charity Project Worker)

While other teams were developed at supporting all vulnerable learners, with the option of supporting the secondary school transition if necessary:

“They’re an amazing team and I think that in the last few years they've set up this additional transition to secondary support system... and then they offer additional sessions to help them transition more smoothly.” (Ava, Educational Psychologist)

Overall, supporting transitions is a necessary and important part of a child's journey through the education systems. The success of these transitions is dependent upon ongoing communication between home and school where necessary and appropriate and is underpinned by positive and trusting relationships.

4.7.3 Home-school communication and relationships

The importance and value of relationships and communication with and within was evident throughout the interviews. Special guardians were reassured by the existing relationships they had with the staff at their child's school:

"So, the teachers knowing me and me knowing the school was very, very, very positive." (Zita, Guardian)

Some of the home-school relationships dated back to the guardian's experiences of school when their own children attended the school and in these instances were positive and supportive factors:

"And I knew the headmaster and teachers, they always called me Gran because they knew me anyway and they knew the relationship." (Annie, Guardian)

Two of the special guardians referred to designated members of staff who were available to fulfil that role of the maintaining communication between home and school:

"But I've also got a good family support worker. She's really good, she's really helped me a lot." (Diane, Special Guardian).

Relationships were also identified as important to the young people. Jack didn't always feel that teachers were interested in him. However, Jack spoke highly of the one member of staff who had developed a positive and trusting relationship with him, and who communicated regularly with him:

"He's (teacher) just nice to talk to sometimes." (Jack, study-child, 14)

The importance of relationships was also reflected by professionals, who felt that it was the "important" and "crucial" aspect of school support:

"I think a really, really good working relationship with the special guardian. As always that's going to be the case with it in any situation of any complex need, that relationship between home and school is going to be absolutely crucial." (Hattie, EP)

"The most important thing I think is the relationships and so having if the adults in the school who are there to make those positive relationships and connect to them on that level, nurture them that makes the biggest difference."(Ava, EP)

At times, professionals had to use their roles to advocate for this home-school relationship and communication, but also communication with social care where necessary:

"Sometimes there being a little bit more… joint communication so a school might have quite a lot of contact with the family and then separately social care might have quite a bit of contact, but it's not necessarily that joined up all the time." (Anna, EP)

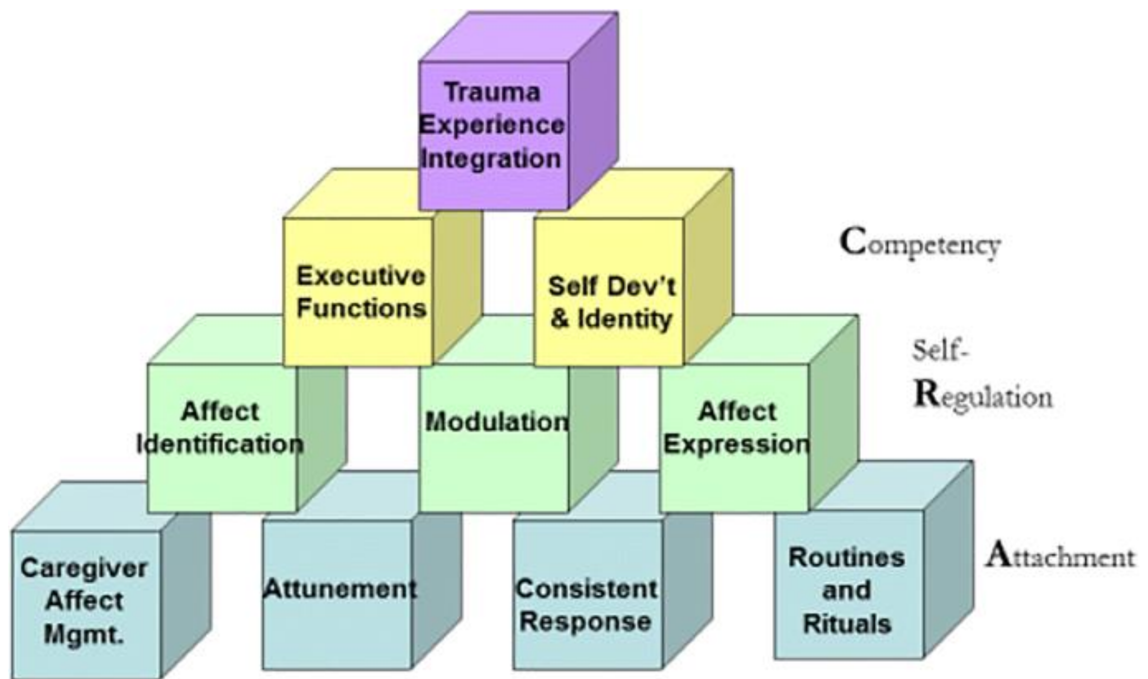
One professional reported that fostering these practices is often about developing and embedding a wider-school culture to support these vulnerable children:

> *"When I work with schools, we talk about… the importance of everyone in the school sort of being able to develop a relationship with the child, about connectedness around, you know, empathy around nurture, so it is a cultural thing." (Mark, Virtual School Head)*

Overall, this theme reflects many trauma-informed and attachment aware approaches and frameworks, with a focus on building relationships, consistent communication, understanding the needs of the child, adult self-regulation, and supporting transitions and routines. Many of these relate to the building blocks of supporting child development, self-regulation and self-efficacy for children and adolescents and children who have experienced complex trauma, along with their caregiving systems (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). See Figure 9.

Figure 9

The ARC Framework (Blaustein and Kinniburgh, 2010)



The role of the designated teacher to support and promote the education of previously looked-after children is a relatively new initiative (DfE, 2018c). Yet, recent doctoral theses findings suggest that designated teachers are keen to develop their overall understanding of the children they work with (Harris, 2021). Though they often raised concerns about time and workload pressures, many designated teachers reported feeling effective in their role supporting looked-after and previous looked-after children (Boesley, 2021). Their sense of effectiveness was influenced by children's academic and wellbeing outcomes, understanding and meeting children's needs among other factors.

Having a named person to build relationships and communicate between home and school was noted as important and valuable by most participants whether that be the designated teacher, SENCo, family support worker or form tutor. The need to experience a sense of connection may also be central to the

role of the designated teacher supporting children under SGO (Boesley, 2021). Where designated teachers experience a sense of connection, alongside having decision-making capabilities and an understanding of their role, increasing their role efficacy.

4.8 Sense of Belonging

This theme relates to children and guardian's sense of belonging. Data relating to 'navigating friendships' was a finding that this researcher expected to find as peer relationships and friendships are common features of a child's school experience. However, information relating to the guardian's relationships with fellow special guardians and kinship carers was an unexpected finding which relates to an unmet need for many SGO families; finding other families with similar family structures, experiences and values.

4.8.1 Navigating friendships

According to their interview answers based on the SIP-A and PSSM both Jack (14) and Katie (12) shared that they perceive themselves to 'fit in" among their peers, "don't feel too different" (Jack, 14) ', and 'feeling accepted by others'. Annie, their guardian reported that Jack has had to navigate peer interactions:

> *"He can't take teasing and I think when you're a boy, when people know you can be teased, and they'll push you too far I think they just knew." (Annie, Special Guardian)*

Though Annie didn't think that the teasing was related to his SGO status, professionals reported that it is not uncommon for care experienced children,

adopted children or those on SGOs to experience to *"have bullying, stigma"* (Peter, Social Worker). Valerie (EP) reported from research that she was involved with that "*there could be quite a lot of bullying of children where their family context is different"* and that there are songs and rhymes circulating on playgrounds targeting this population.

Another EP, Anna reported that bullying was also evident for a young person she was supporting, except in this instance the bullying related to the child's race:

"*The young person's been reporting sort of experiencing racial bullying within school." (Anna, EP)*

This highlights the importance of professionals using an intersectional lens when considering the challenges that some children on SGOs may be navigating while at school, and that for some children, their SGO status may be one of many prejudices and difficulties that they are navigating in their social interactions with peers.

For other study-children, they saw their role at school as an advocate for other students. Zita (Special Guardian) reported that her granddaughter stands up for a student with SEN in her class *"She really, really looks after him (child with SEN) and makes sure that he's part of the class".* However, as Zita outlined, her granddaughter was not necessarily confident about her own friendships or sense of belonging within those friendships:

"You know, 'do you like me?', things like that to her, to these friends. 'Do you like me?' and we're kind of a bit like, you don't have to ask that question." (Zita, Special Guardian)

However, Zita explained that for her granddaughter, "*that question needs to be answered for her to join".*

In the Ideal School task, both young people described their ideal school as a big building, but with less people indicating a possible preference for space. This view was also shared by their guardian, who felt that their secondary school has been a more positive experience and thought that the availability of older peers and role models was a factor that supported this. Furthermore, the special guardians of the three young people attending secondary school gave the children the choice about what information they could share with peers and adults related to their family structure, with all three choosing to protect and preserve this information from peers and adults at schools.

4.8.2 Shared SGO experiences

Two of the three special guardians were part of a peer support group for kinship carers facilitated by a charity organisation, and both spoke highly of being part of this network. *"If I'm honest it's the kinship group I belong to because they're in the same situation as me… they understand" (Diane, Special Guardian).* This was echoed by Zita who felt the group provided reassurance to her:

"Definitely meeting other kinship carers and speaking to other kinship carers. That was the biggest out of all, because that actually made me realise that we're doing so okay." (Zita, Special Guardian)

Though Annie did not report to being part of a formal support group, she acknowledged the importance of having a "*good support network in the beginning":*

"I've got friends who had children my son's age, and then my grandchildren's age, so we, we had the same interests, so they blended in, in that sense." (Annie, Special Guardian).

This sense of belonging and feeling the "same" was also experienced by other special guardians:

"Because we belong to a Kinship group… the children know then they're not the only ones looked after by their Nan…. I think it's made it a lot easier for them to find their own." (Diane, Special Guardian)

It was not clear to me whether these guardians were also part of a local authority run support group, which two professionals were involved in supporting as part of their roles, though reported it to be difficult to arrange:

"We've tried to get that going for kinship carers and we just can't get it off the ground. That may be something to do with the complexity of their lives, but we just haven't been able to make it happen." (Hattie, EP)

Cora (Clinical Psychologist) wondered whether this groups' access to or confidence in using technology may have affected their online involvement or attendance:

“We ran groups during the COVID pandemic over the Internet. And we found that for the Special Guardian group, the Kinship care group, it’s much better in person.” (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)

Mary, whose organisation is responsible for facilitating the peer support groups outlined that the charity offered both in person and online peer support groups, both long-term and short-term with “*the option of getting one to one support from another kinship”.*

The reason why special guardians access charity run, or local authority run peer groups may relate to a number of reasons, which future research may seek to explore. Nevertheless, having access to others who share your experiences, empathise with the difficulties of being a special guardian and provide a platform where SGO children can see versions of their own family type is identified as valuable, supportive and important to this group:

“I would argue that peer support is probably the most beneficial support families can get.” (Peter, Social Worker)

Developing and constructing a sense of belonging among peers was identified as important for young people and their special guardians. There is little to no research on the sense of belonging experienced by children under SGO. However, research on the sense of belonging experience by looked-after children suggests that many can be made to feel ‘othered, such as the use of the terminology LAC, similar to a word with the same sound ‘lack’, suggesting a sense of being insubstantial, missing something or less than (Jones et al, 2020). Not living with your parents can be a stimulus for many care-experienced children to become the victims of the bullying by their peers

(Cooper & Johnson, 2007). Yet, some children report that living with kinship carers can provide a buffer to this bullying, as there is less stigma attached to living with family than non-related carers (Broad, et al, 2001; Messing, 2006). Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings from phase 1 suggest that these children are navigating peer-relationships but are not currently reporting significant difficulties relating to bullying or difficult friendships. While it is not generalisable due to the small sample size, and the age of these young people, who have been on SGOs for some time, it is interesting to compare and contrast the findings within the available literature.

According to Erikson's fourth stage of psycho-social development, a child's peer group when they start school will gain greater significance and will become a major source of the child's self-esteem. The child feels the need to gain approval by demonstrating specific competencies that are valued by society. This may explain why younger participants used parental labels with their special guardians around their peers, to seek approval and demonstrate competencies deemed valuable by their peers, such as being part of a 'nuclear' family. The next stage of Erikson's theory proposes that during adolescence, children develop an increased sense of independence, and begin to look at their futures and the roles they may wish to belong to in society. During this stage, the young person may explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity. However, failure to establish a sense of identity within society, can lead to role confusion which involves an individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society, which relates to earlier themes (conflicting identities). As outlined in the literature review, there are arguments against the linear

nature of Erikson's theory and individuals may experience the different stages at different times in different contexts, such as potential role confusion of a grandparent assuming the role of 'parent' for their grandchild and establishing a sense of identity and belonging in society within this new role.

A sense of belonging is important for young people, as a way of enhancing emotional well-being, and the importance of school in this is particularly pertinent for those young people who may have experienced adverse or challenging lives to date. Peer relationships are seen as the most important feature of school belonging (Ramoutar, 2020). Belonging is about emotional attachment, or secure relationships with others, about feeling 'at home' or about feeling 'safe' (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Much of the literature of social psychology outlines the individual's need to conform to the groups they belong to out of fear of exclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), i.e., feeling unsafe within their social group. The protective mechanism some young people may utilise regarding the information sharing at secondary school may provide them with a temporary sense of safety while they navigate the values and expectations of peers and continue to make sense of their own sense of self.

Special guardians and kinship care support groups may provide both special guardians and subsequently their children with an increased sense of belonging in society. However, belonging is not just about construction of individual and collective identity, attachments and relationships, but also about the ways these are valued and judged relating to the ethical and political factors associated with belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Political boundaries separate the world population into 'us' and 'them' (Crowley, 1999). For special guardians and other

kinship carers, there is little social and political recognition of their social group, such as the names and terms used to describe the support they can access if eligible, The Adoption Support Fund. Similarly, the funding available is for Previously Looked-After Children, which is applicable for many SGO children as they were technically never 'looked-after' at any time point. This lack of recognition within systems and services may explain the value special guardians feel to be part of a kinship support group which describes how they see themselves in society and provides them with a place and title that supports their sense of belonging. Using the Bioecological Theory of Human Development (BTHD) model as a framework, it is interesting to note the recent increase in political awareness of these groups alongside the growing grassroots organisations and non-LA organisations supporting and promoting kinship carers, and the influence of different processes between contexts over different time periods (Kinship, 2022).

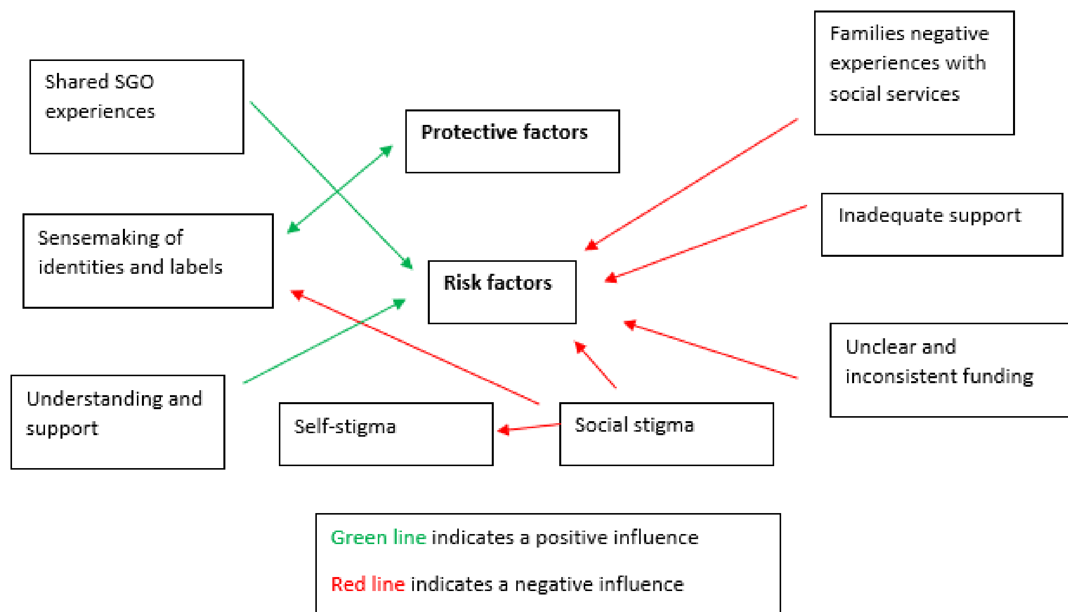
4.9 Characteristics of the SGO

The theme 'characteristics of the SGO' represents both the risk and resilience factors of this form of permanent placement for the child and family. Interviewees described the protective factors of the SGO, such as family's motivation to support their own grandchildren, the security and safety that the permanent order brought to the family and the reparation of the parent-child relationship where a birth parent had overcome previous difficulties. This was contrasted with the risk factors associated with the SGO, such as the difficulty navigating complex contact arrangements within the family and significant

impact the SGO had on carers' health and wellbeing. The links between subthemes are highlighted throughout this chapter.

Figure 10

Positive and Negative influences on Resiliency and Risk Factors



4.9.1 Resiliency factors

Special guardians and professionals outlined the different resiliency factors associated with the SGO. The special guardians interviewed in this study were kinship carers/ grandmothers, thus they highlighted the protection that SGO provided for their wider family:

> *"I mean I think they felt safe that's the word I would pick for them that they felt safe with me. For me, it (the SGO) was giving them the security they needed." (Diane, Special Guardian)*

In one situation the children were living with their grandmother for five years prior to the application for an SGO. One guardian highlighted the accountability that the order placed on her:

"I think they liked though that it's more secure. Its (pause) not that I'd ever walk away but I can't walk away now, the court order says I can't just walk away." (Annie, Special Guardian)

Guardians described a sense of pride at knowing that their motivation and responsibility for their grandchildren was having a positive impact on the child's progress and development:

"Where's now, I'm actually like do you know what, I am amazing, I'm doing such a good job for my grand-daughter. My granddaughter is doing so well." (Zita, Special Guardian)

In some instances, this pride extended to their own child, for overcoming the difficulties that resulted in their grandchildren being taken into care:

"Mum's turned her life completely around. She's found a nice partner; she's got a good job. She drives now. She does a lot for the children." (Diane, Special Guardian)

This emphasizes the careful and complex navigation of maintaining parent contact and how the SGO can impact on the grandparent/ parent or relative/ parent relationship in cases where the SGO is made to a relative or kin relationship. Professionals highlighted the importance of networks recognising the contact arrangements:

“Sometimes the purpose of the SGO is that actually it’s acknowledged that there is going to be more contact with the child’s birth family that this more open and more acknowledged.” (Hattie, EP)

One professional commented on the shared societal narrative that birth family contact was always ‘negative’ and ‘difficult’, and that it was important for the wider professional network to hold in the mind the positive impact that contact arrangements could have for the child and the family:

“I spoke to so many families where contact was a really positive thing, where their adult child was coming and spending a weekend with them as a family.” (Peter, Social Worker)

This contact and consistency of relationships also relates to the sibling relationship. One EP reflected on her ongoing work with a number of families where there was an SGO in place. Whilst recognising the challenges that this meant for the guardians to care for more than one child, the EP highlighted the value of the siblings maintaining those links and relationships.

“*I think one of the biggest benefits the special guardianship order is the sibling connection” (*Ava, EP).

Many professionals reported on the difficulties and challenges associated with an SGO as outlined in the next subtheme, ‘risk factors’. This may relate to the fact that these professionals are often requested for involvement when things are at a crisis point rather than at a preventative stage, which is often the case with EP casework for example where EPs often report less time for preventative work (Lyonette et al., 2019). However, when provided with the

opportunity to reflect at the end of the interviews, some professionals reflected on their smaller SGO casework and wondered about the reasons for this:

“There are some young people, who are raised with me who are under and SGO… but actually it's quite a small number and I wonder whether that may reflect that…. there's lots of protective mechanisms that are in place for these young people.” (Anna, EP)

From this study findings, it is unclear to this researcher whether this smaller number of SGO casework relates to whether the families need support, or whether they are not coming forward to seek support for other reasons, such as lack of trust in systems and services. Research suggests that there are a multitude of protective factors with SGOs, specifically where the SGO is made to a kinship carer, who knows and has an existing relationship with the child coming into their care (Wade, 2014; McGrath, 2021). Nevertheless, these protective factors are often contrasted with a number of risk factors.

4.9.2 Risk factors

Many participants reported on the different risk factors associated with the SGO. One guardian spoke openly and honestly about the mental and emotional challenges they experienced taking on this considerable and long-term responsibility:

“I was cracking, I was losing the plot, I was worried and anxious. I’ve never had anxiety in my life and then anxiety that came with that was huge, like bad

panic attacks like it was me, like it was me that was actually needing the additional support, rather than Rosie." (Zita, Special Guardian)

This experience of heightened stress also impacted on the guardian's physical health:

"So basically, I have epilepsy and I suffer with chronic migraines as well, and that's come, that kind of come back once Rosie was born." (Zita, Guardian)

These long-term health difficulties resulted in the carer leaving her role in the workforce. Changes to employment status was a shared experience of all three guardians. However, as one professional Peter (social worker) highlighted, the system is not set up to support these guardians when they need to leave work or reduce their roles to part-time to fulfil this legal responsibility as permanent carer for a child, who may otherwise enter the care system:

"Often carers are told, "You've got to give up work," because that's what we say to foster carers and adoptive parents, but then the DWP[4] will say to carers, 'Well, you can't give up work because you've got to go and seek work.'" (Peter, Social Worker)

These changes to special guardian's financial situation have long-term implications for guardians and their family, including the child under SGO, such as impact to pension contributions:

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[4] Department for Work and Pensions

"I would have ever taken them on for money, that wasn't so much of an issue, but it would have been helpful… I should have been full-time working now to boost my pension. I can't do that because I've got them." (Annie, Special Guardian)

For other guardians and families, this reduction to income results in immediate poverty, due to the increased outgoings of housing, clothing, feeding and caring for an additional child or children in many cases:

"But the main issues kinship families face, the first one really is poverty. So, we see this all the time. Taking on someone else's child costs a lot of money. Raising a child just costs money." (Peter, Social Worker)

Currently, there is a wider systemic push for gender equality, including closing the gender pay-gap. Yet, in this instance, females (who represent the majority of SGOs) are being forced to enter poverty, give up their roles in the workforce and make considerable sacrifices to their long-term financial stability. For many guardians, it may mean that meeting the basic needs of the children in their care is a challenge, yet one they are navigating alongside many others, including navigating parental contact and breakdown to their own parent/child relationships:

"Obviously, our relationship really broke down during the SGO, 'cause it was all "You took my children away from me and everything else." (Diane, Special Guardian)

Peter, a professional with insight into the arrangements relating to SGOs, emphasised the impractical constraints placed upon relatives of the birth-

parent, such as prohibiting contact between the birth parent and the family, which is more common-place with adoption order and fostering arrangements:

"Often then families have really unrealistic restrictions put around them, because it's like, they treat them as if they were foster carers or adoptive parents." (Peter, Social Worker)

Additionally, special guardians have to navigate the contact arrangements and agreements, holding in mind what might be best for the child, whilst possibly trying to protect your own child:

"Then when you have contact with them, you try… You know that that's important, but how do you make it happen without feeling completely… you know you might get abuse from that young person and your child." (Cora, Clinical Psychologist)

In many cases, the courts and local authorities leave the decisions pertaining to contact up to the special guardians to navigate. At times, this might include navigating the parental factors, such as abuse, domestic violence, that brought the child into care:

"Huge, huge issue and the stress that that would cause because again a lot of kinship carers are just left to deal with the contact…. and some of the biological parents are very volatile, some are aggressive and violent." (Mary, Charity Project Worker)

Many of the professionals spoke to the challenges of special guardians trying to support a family system, whilst also belonging to that same system. Some

professionals spoke to the possible sense of complicity felt by some special guardians if their own relatives were the root of the abuse or neglect to the children coming into their care:

"If you're talking to a foster carer or an adoptive parent who… had no role in any of those early experiences, it's a very different conversation from somebody whose own sibling… or child… was unable to care for the child." (Hattie, EP)

Special guardians described how helpful it was or might have been to have someone to speak to about these complex difficulties:

"Like just having someone to talk to about my worries, my strains. You know all the stuff that can come up about you know having Kinship children." (Zita, Special Guardian)

This theme highlighted the balancing act of the SGO, and the challenges faced by special guardians, families and professionals trying to navigate the risk and resilience factors, with the overall aim of reducing the child's exposure to stressful experiences:

"I think SG children faced the additional complication and it can be a negative or a positive that they are within an existing family network." (Mark, Virtual School Head)

This theme explored the characteristics of the special guardianship family as identified by the participants of this study. SGOs where the child is placed with a kinship carer provided the child with a sense of permanency, security and

safety. Though there is still little research on SGOs, much of the literature on children in kinship care report better outcomes in relation to behaviour difficulties, psychiatric disorders, wellbeing and placement stability than those in non-kinship foster care (Winokur et al, 2009) Kinship care supports the child's continuing sense of belonging and identity (Farmer and Moyers, 2008) and results in increased contact with the birth mother and other extended family members (Lernihen and Kelly, 2006) which is not the case for other forms of permanent placement such as adoption,

Alongside the potential benefits and protective factors of remaining within the family network, this encouragement of SGOs may also relate to the reduced cost of these permanent placements when compared to the cost of a child remaining in foster care. Subsequently, the absorption of these costs of child rearing fall to the special guardian, who is many cases is a grandmother as found in this study. Children in kinship care families are disproportionately living in some of the poorest households (Farmer, Selwyn & Meakings, 2013). Kinship carers often have lower incomes and live in rented, or social accommodation (Nandy et al, 2011; Wijedasa, 2017). There is also considerable variation in the availability of financial allowances for relative carers across countries (Hill, Gilligan and Connelly, 2020), thus carers often have to navigate complex and contradictory systems to access financial support.

This additional strain is not limited to finances, as identified by the special guardians in this study who reported the impact the SGO had on their emotional wellbeing and overall health. Carer's stress may be explained by many factors

such as social stigma, inadequate support, unclear and inconsistent funding and navigating birth-parent contact.

Contact with birth-parents is one of the nuances of the SGO arrangement. Contact can be supervised or unsupervised, a decision normally made by the courts, though at times left to the special guardian to decide and arrange. The concept of contact is commonplace among foster care arrangements, whereby the courts decide if/ when the child sees their birth parents and can be facilitated by the related or unrelated foster carer. Using systems and processes traditionally used for state-arranged families, does not consider the complex relationships and links associated with SGO families. It leaves the special guardian to balance and navigate their dual roles; carer and protector of the child (usually their grandchild, niece, nephew) and their other respective roles as parent, relative of the birth-parent, nuances and complexities not featured in other forms of child placement arrangements.

Contact is often cited as one of the main pressures and stressors for special guardians and can be viewed negatively by external professionals (Thompson, 2019). Findings from this study viewed under the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) indicate that contact changes over time and can be influenced by the change to relationships within different contexts, such as the repair of grandparent/ parent relationship, and the person's age and motivation to overcome their difficulties, such as the birth parent getting older, forming positive adult relationships and gaining employment. Thus, the concept of contact can move from being negative, challenging and unreliable to positive, consistent and supportive. As highlighted in table 7 family contact is not

straightforward to conceptualise. Biological parents are not always known to children and some children lose their parents to death.

Overall, there is a careful balance of risk and resiliency factors to consider when exploring the SGO family. This theme has highlighted the importance of supporting and enhancing the protective factors, such as allowing for relational repair between child and birth-parent, and grandparent and birth-parent. This theme highlighted the importance of professionals balancing trying to apply regulation and guidance that will protect the child, while being responsive to family needs without being intrusive (Munro and Gilligan, 2013), an approach that the authors acknowledge is difficult to deliver within the existing structures and systems. The impact of the SGO on the special guardian's health and wellbeing, and financial circumstances was also considered as a risk factor and is explored in the theme 'Unsupportive Systems'. Specialist professionals may wish to hold these possible risks and resiliency factors when working with children under SGO, alongside the nuances of the individual case and family circumstance.

4.10 Chapter Summary

Reflective thematic analysis of the data from both phases found six overarching themes: Conflicting identities; The Stigmatisation of the SGO family, Unsupportive Systems, The Attachment Aware School, Sense of Belonging and Characteristics of the SGO. Findings were discussed in relation to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3 where relevant. The children interviewed and discussed were described as having similar needs to other care-experienced children,

particularly in relation to their SEMH needs or needs likely related to their early experiences. Unlike their care experienced peers, many had ongoing contact with their birth-parent(s) and wider extended families, which they were trying to make sense of and understand. As these children get older, some start to protect and preserve these family structures, possibly for fear of stigma. This experience of stigma and shame was outlined and explained by professionals, with special guardians reporting a sense of unfairness at how they are treated and feeling second class to other carers. This sense of unfairness was further examined in the theme unsupportive systems, where the legislation and the systems make it difficult for families and children to receive support, with some children not officially being identified as 'previously looked-after' children, adding possible further confusion and conflict to their identity and the identity of the family. The special guardians described the positive and supportive aspects of schools they attended, their children attended or that they supported. Professionals also added to what they conceptualised as supportive approaches to supporting children under SGO. The foundations of the approaches described related to the importance of relationships, and the benefit these relationships had on the school's understanding of the child's needs, and their proactiveness in meeting these needs, such as well-planned transitions. The final theme outlined the risks and resilience factors that influence the child's development, and are important for school and external professionals to hold in mind when working with these families.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to:

- Review the findings of this study and present wider implications across contexts
- Discuss implications for the Educational Psychology profession
- Consider strengths and limitations of the current study , implications for future research and the contribution to practise.

The aim of this research was to gain a greater understanding of the identities and educational experiences of children under SGO, through the views of young people, special guardians and wider professionals. The identity of children under SGO is complex and conflicted as it hinges on a paradoxical combination of sameness and difference compared to other care experienced children. One factor influencing their identity relates to their possible experiences of loss, adversity and trauma similar to other care experienced children. The other relates to the sense-making of parental labels and relationships, particularly where children maintain regular contact with their birth parent. Special guardians and professionals spoke of the changes to the child's understanding over time, and the influence of peers on which identity they present to society. The influence of wider views was also reflected in the feelings of inequality experienced by special guardians, which may reflect societal idealised views of the 'nuclear family'. The feelings of inequality experienced by special guardians was also reported in the lack of support available before, during and after the SGO was granted. Overall, there was a negative view of social services, though some professionals reflected on the

lack of statutory responsibility and resources available to social services and wider systems to provide more support, including educational funding. There were mixed views on the use of pupil premium plus spending, and professionals highlighted the unfairness of the funding for children who were not eligible for it, such as those who have not spent 24-hours ‘in care’.

Overall, there were mixed experiences of education. Special guardians reported a predominantly supportive educational experience, though it was acknowledged that this was not the experience of all special guardians. Professionals reported a mixed school experience for children they supported, highlighting experiences of bullying or school’s not understanding the child’s needs. The factors that supported or were suggested by professionals described an Attachment Friendly Approach, similar to the approaches suggested for other care experienced or vulnerable children, such as consistent communication, supportive relationships, understanding needs and prioritising transition-planning. However, if we acknowledge that these children should be given similar treatment to all care experienced children, then there is a need to ensure they also access the same resources, such as pupil premium funding to reduce inequalities.

Children and young people in this study were currently navigating their friendships and peer relationships, with a mix of typical and atypical experiences at school. The young people interviewed appeared to have a good sense of belonging at school, which wider research suggests may be supported by the sense of belonging they experience as part of their kinship family structure and the reduction of placement and school moves when compared to

children in care (Wade, 2014; Wellard, 2017, Selwyn, 2013). Furthermore, the wider kinship structures were supported and strengthened by other special guardians as part of their shared experiences as kinship carers in support groups. Promoting and supporting special guardians appears key to supporting the children in their care.

Within this study a number of significant unmet needs and stigmas have been uncovered. This is important because lack of support, understanding and funding can undermine the sense of security, belonging and identity that the SGO sets out to prioritise for the child. The findings also show that the needs of SGO families extend beyond school and that young people, special guardians and SGO families can be left to survive with the impact of the child's early experiences on their own, which significantly impacts on the child and their special guardian. The wider professionals who support these families and their schools across the different contexts must work together to raise awareness, promote understanding, develop home-school relationships and support and champion the well-being of children under SGO.

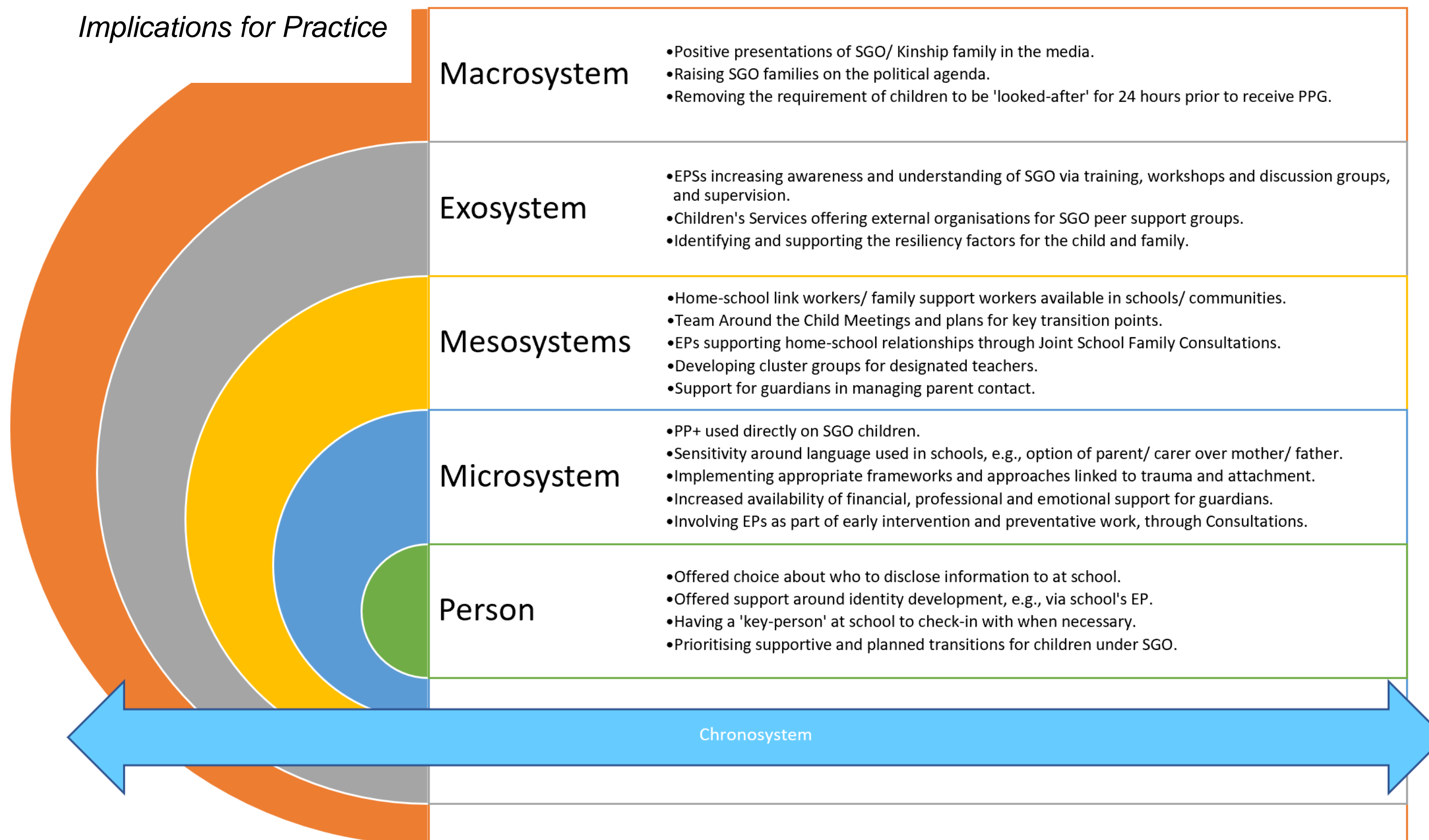
5.1 Implications for practice

One of this study's aims was to propose how the information gained from the data collected and the analysis of findings can be used to inform practice across the different ecological systems surrounding the child. Throughout the previous chapter, I considered the implications of the study's findings for schools, Virtual Schools, EPSs, Social Services, wider systems and policy. The implications are based on what the child, special guardians and supporting professionals highlighted as best or preferred practice, alongside evidence-

based research findings and practice. This is presented in Figure 11 using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model as a framework. It captures the data presented and discussed in the last two chapters, and maps the implications of the findings across the contextual layers of the child's ecosystem.

Figure 11

Implications for Practice



5.2 Key implications for EPs

The key implications of this study's findings for EPs can be summarised across the themes identified within the data:

- Support around emotional and identity development: EPs can support school and families in their navigation of the child's social-emotional needs, such as issues or needs relating to identity. There is a role for the EP in working directly with children, and also in supporting the adults, such as through the provision of training and support groups for special guardians, and supervision for teachers. EPs can encourage schools to use their EP time as part of early intervention and preventative work, such as through Consultations, rather than solely through statutory assessment.
- Raising awareness and understanding: EPs should raise awareness in schools about the needs that can arise from early adverse experiences through the delivery of workshops, training and reflective spaces with school staff. EPs can also encourage schools and local authorities to provide supervision for designated teachers to increase the role-understanding and decision-making capabilities of designated teachers. EP should increase the visibility of children under SGO by raising them at EP planning meetings.
- Supporting home-school relationships: EPs can support their school to develop their understanding of relational approaches and improve the

development of relationships with special guardians. Through Consultation work, such as Joint School and Family Consultation, school and special guardians can be supported to work collaboratively and in partnership to meet the needs of the child under SGO,

- EPs role as advocate: EPs and trainee EPs can contribute to the developing research and evidence base related to the Special Guardianship population by partaking in and facilitating robust research. EPs are well placed to be involved at a policy level within local and national systems for educational reform to ensure that this population are recognised and appropriately supported across contexts and time periods.

5.3 Study Strengths and Limitations

5.3.1 Strengths

There is a distinct lack of research exploring the views of the special guardians of children under SGO. While there is a steadily growing research base in relation to adoptive parents and their experiences of the education system, the research to date in relation to exploring special guardian's experiences has been limited. It is hoped by undertaking this research, this study will support wider services and networks to have a greater understanding of the experiences and needs of special guardians of children under SGO and the ways they can be best supported.

Furthermore, this is only the third study to date which has included the views of children under SGO (Wade, 2014) and the second known study to date to specifically include the voices of children under SGO regarding their educational experiences. The sample size for young people participants was small (n= 2), due to the pandemic, however, I would argue comparable with previous interviews where the sample size was also small (n=10) (Wade, 2014). Nonetheless, it is hoped that their voices can contribute towards the existing research on children under SGO (Wade, 2010; Wade; 2014).

At the time of writing, it is the only known study to capture views across the different eco-systems for a child under SGO in relation to the child's identity and educational experiences. Using a multi-informant method supported the use of the PPCT model, as it allowed the researcher to trace the person's proximal processes over time and across contexts. As this study assumed a social constructionist view through the use of qualitative design, the use of a multi-informant considered the unique perspectives and lived experiences of all participants.

Furthermore, it is the only known study to capture the views of EPs supporting children under SGO. Previous research which has identified EP involvement was linked to the profession's involvement with the agreement (or not) to an EHCP (Barratt, 2012; Sturgess and Selwyn, 2007). Yet EPs are well-placed to provide a range of support for special guardianship children and their families and school. Their independence from other services, such as social care, where special guardianship families may have experienced prior conflict or challenges, may prove helpful in engaging and supporting this vulnerable

group. EPs are well placed to support the different contexts of the child, and support the child through different time periods. Gathering the views of the EPs provided insight into the different ways that EPs are and can be involved in supporting special guardianship children; which may include direct individual work to support the child's identity development as well as assessment as part of an EHC Needs Assessments; consultation with Special Guardians, joint school and family consultations; supporting transitions; facilitating peer support groups for special guardians and training among other ways.

5.3.2 Limitations

The sample size for phase 1 (children under SGO and special guardians) of this study was small (n= 5). Notwithstanding the smaller number of potential participants, there were difficulties external to this research, some of which was outlined in chapter 3 (impact of Covid-19) which made recruiting a larger sample challenging. The recruitment process confirmed that children under SGO are a difficult group to access as they are not necessarily in contact with Children's Services (Farmer et al., 2013). Furthermore, in his recent PhD research McGrath (2021) highlighted the potential difficulties in recruiting with this population, and prioritised existing relationships and networks with charity organisations and third sector organisations over local authorities, due to the potential difficult relationships between local authorities and kinship carers. I had to take advantage of existing professional relationships and links with special guardian support organisations to promote the research and navigate online mediums to access SGO children. Furthermore, those without or

reduced access to adequate technology or IT skills may not have been exposed to the advertisement.

Covid-19 meant that existing in-person support groups for special guardians were no longer running face-to-face. This reduced the opportunity to meet with a group face-to-face and increased the risk of gathering a larger group for research purposes. Thus, the decision was made to switch from in-person to online interviews for all participants. This may have impacted on the recruitment of participants who will have had access to adequate ICT for interviews.

It was hoped that interviews with young people would take place in-person to build rapport and trust before asking sensitive questions about school and home experiences. Due to Covid-19, the interviews were moved to online, however, the young people's home had weak Wi-Fi signal, so the participants requested on the day of data collection that the interview be conducted via telephone. This resulted in the exclusion of certain sensitive questions owing to difficulties not being able to read participant's body language and facial expressions in response to questions being asked. Future researchers may wish to consider face-to-face methods of data collection to efficiently capture the voices of young people.

Due to the possible bias of the sample towards special guardians who reported managing the SGO arrangement 'very well' or 'well with some difficulties', caution must be taken in applying the findings to the wider SGO population. It may have been that special guardians who have encountered positive educational experiences were more motivated to respond to the advert

than those who may be experiencing difficulties. Findings should not be judged as representative of all SGO children and their special guardians. However, it could also be argued that those with more negative school experiences and support may have been more likely to participate, as seen in Best's (2021) research with adopted children and adoptive parents.

5.4 Future Research

Overall, many of the young people and special guardians in this study were currently experiencing relatively supportive educational encounters and/ or supportive systems in school where help was needed. However, special guardians alluded to other special guardians and their children having more negative or unsupportive experiences. Future research should seek to speak with guardians who have not had this positive and/or supportive experience to gain a richer picture of the educational experiences of children under SGO.

The entitlement or lack of pupil premium plus finding was an important finding of this study. As highlighted in the implications, the requirement to be 'in care' for 24 hours should be reviewed and removed as an obstacle for children under SGO. The use of pupil premium plus spending appeared to be mixed amongst participants, and many professionals due to their role boundaries were not aware of the practices related to funding and spending in their schools. Where children are currently entitled to this funding, it would be helpful to assess the impact of pupil premium plus spending amongst children under SGO.

Looked-after, previously looked after children and children living in out-of-home placements have many comparable needs, but not equal rights and

support structures within education. Future research could be undertaken to explore a comparison of the of supporting looked-after and previously looked-after children within educational settings.

Future research may seek to conduct research in face-to-face settings with children and young people under SGO to allow opportunities to build rapport, and to gain more in-depth views from the voice of the child.

Finally, this study included the views of special guardians who are maternal and paternal grandparents to the children in their care. It would be interesting to explore the views of non-related special guardians and grandparents who are kinship carers, such as long-term foster carers but not special guardians.

5.5 Contribution to Practice

This study's unique contribution to practice elicited the views of children at the core of this permanency arrangement, their special guardians and the views of the wider systems in which they operate providing an understanding of the child's sense of identity and lived educational experiences. This study presented the difficulties and supportive factors for this population and provided information for the associated networks for improvements to practice, such as prioritising supportive transitions, maintaining home-school relationships and value of a key-trusted adult at school. In addition, it contributed to the slowly developing academic knowledge base regarding this population and highlighted the inequities and inequalities of this heterogenous group. The study established the value of applying the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) within kinship and

SGO research. Application of this model supported an exploration of a range of factors, influences and interactions which impact the identities and educational experiences of this group, and supporting the identification of implications for future practice.

The study highlighted the position and role of the EP working within the field of looked-after, previously looked-after and out-of-home placements for children and young people. The position of the EP across and within various contexts and systems means they are well placed to support positive change across the child's ecosystems. Four broad implications were found for Educational Psychologists (EPs): raising understand and awareness within schools and wider systems; supporting emotional needs of young people via direct work and work with schools and families; supporting home-school relationships; advocating for Special Guardianship families in wider policies and practice. These implications align well with the ways in which EP's support communities through; consultation, multi-agency work, interventions, research and evaluation, supporting parents, supporting staff development.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Search Strategy for Literature Review

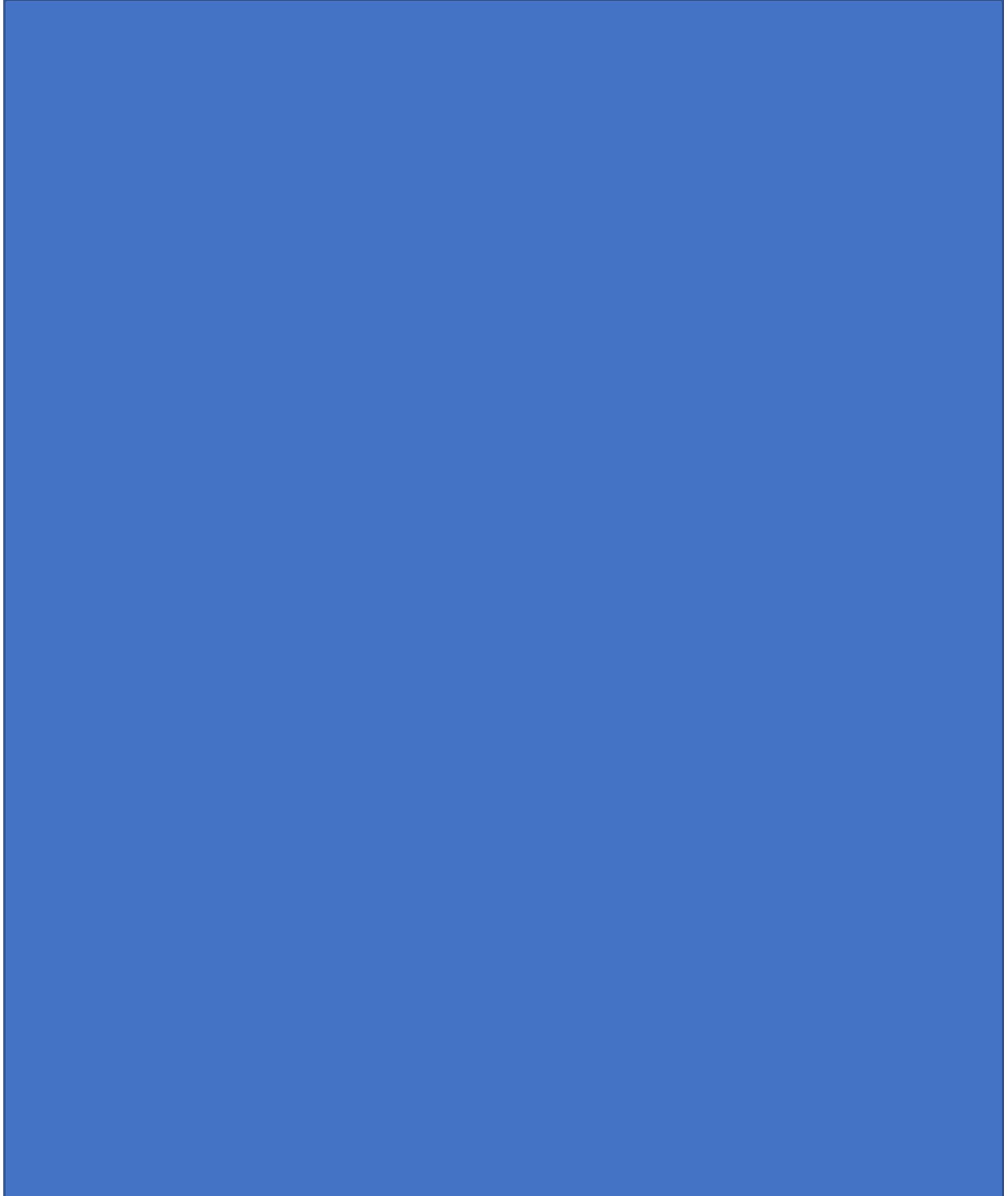
The initial search included the accessing the following search databases during two time points; August 2020-Jan 2021 and April-May 2022 and is not an exhaustive list of the literature searches that were carried out.

- ERIC (EBSCO)
- ERIC (ProQuest)
- BEI
- Scopus
- Psych INFO
- Web of Science

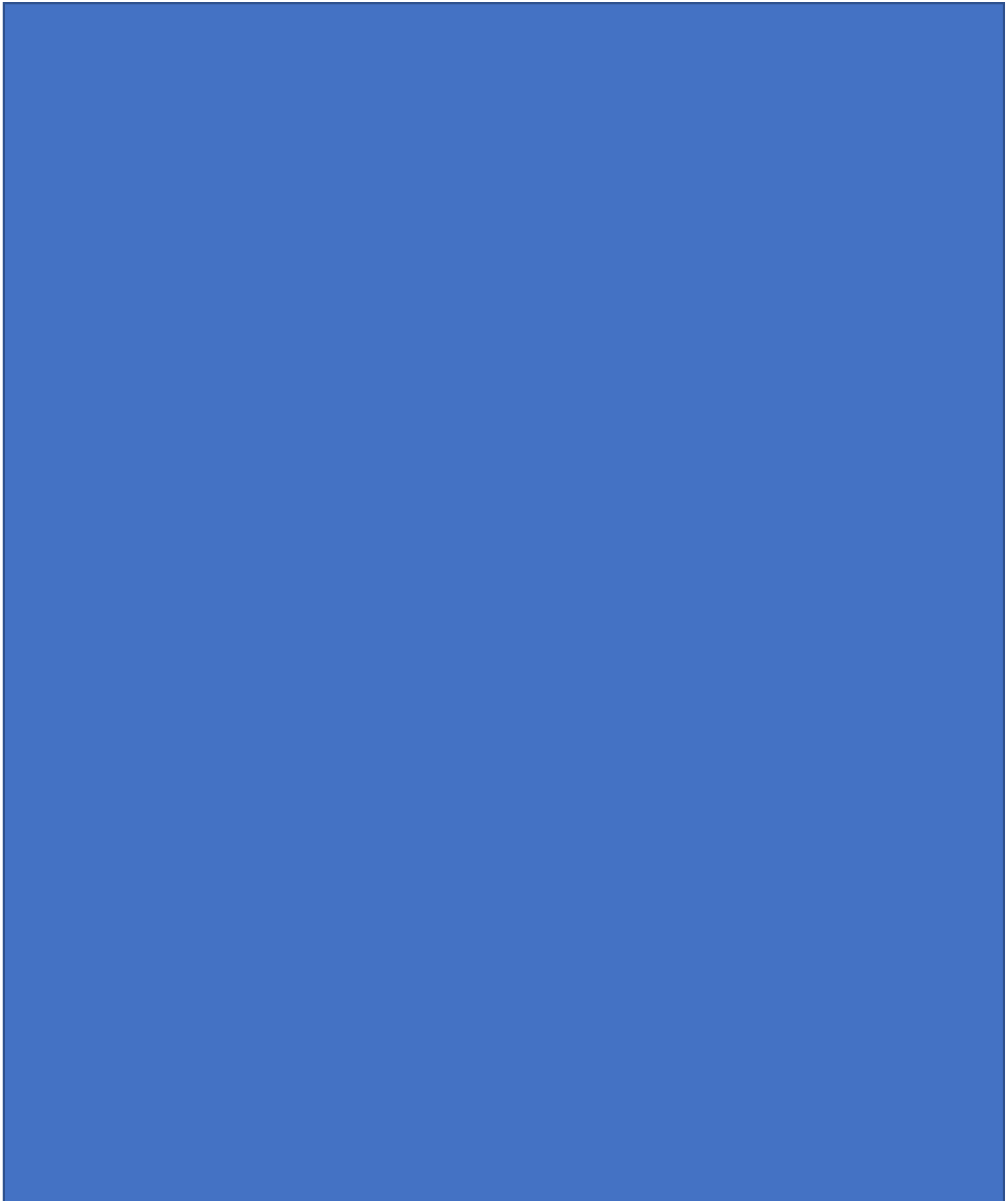
The following search terms were applied: *"Children under Special Guardianship Orders"* OR *"previously looked-after children"* OR *"Special Guardianship Orders"* AND *"identity"* and *"UK".* To ensure the quality of the literature review, a limit was applied so that results only included articles from peer reviewed journals. Given the timeframe of the introduction of SGOs, only articles published after 2005 until 2020 were included. This study focused on experiences of children under SGO within the UK, so initial search limited the search to the UK, and excluded other countries, such as New Zealand which also has a SGO arrangement. Due to the limited availability of peer reviewed studies relating to SGO, additional searches were also conducted to access literature within related areas of focus (e.g. grandparents AND kinship care; kinship care AND identity). Different parameters were applied to these searches during the data analysis stage, such as the inclusion of Ireland and the US where relevant and appropriate. The abstracts of articles returned by the search were read and those with relevance to this study were accessed. Searches were also conducted via UCL Libraries Explore service to assess relevant materials, books and theses within the university's libraries. Relevant statistics and legislation were accessed via the government website. A search of publications released by Kinship Charity Organisation Kinship Care, formerly Grandparent's Plus)was also conducted. Alongside a systematic search, a snowballing strategy was also applied, whereby I accessed relevant material from articles' references lists. Lastly, references to other thesis titles, recommended by supervisors were also reviewed, included and cited where appropriate.

Appendix B- Self Image Profile-Adolescent (SIP-A)

Self-Image Profile A (SIP-A)



Appendix C- Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)



Appendix D- Special Guardian Interview Questions

Warm up questions- how are you? How was your break?

Opening question: Please tell them a little bit about the child in your care, including which year group they are in.

How would you describe your child's experience of the SGO process? Try to think of one word to describe the experience for them.

- What terms does your child use to describe their relationship to you? E.g., mum, foster-carer, aunt/uncle
- Have these terms changed over the course of their time in your care?

What is your child's experience of school at the moment?

- *What has gone well in the past?*
- *Have there been changes in their experiences of school?*
- *What is it that has made a positive difference?*
- *What challenges, if any, does your child experience/have they experienced in the past?*

What factors support your children experiences in school at the moment?

- *Are there any people in particular that you can think of that made a difference for your child, as far as getting on at school?*
- *Is there anything else that helps the child at school?*
- *Can you think of anything specific that helped the child as far as schooling was concerned, in terms of getting on and doing as well as they could have?*

What extra support, if any, do your children receive in school?

- *What support have you found to be most helpful?*
- *What support, if any, did you receive as part of the SGO process?*
- *Professional involvement*

Appendix E- Professional Interview Questions

Warm up questions- how are you? How was your break?

- To start off, I would like to know about your professional role.
    - How long have you been working in this role?
    - How long have you been supporting children under SGO or their families?

1. **What do you think are the main issues facing SGO families?**
- Has this been the case for a while/ previous and current issues?
- What do you think professionals could do differently to better support children under SGO?
- What can professionals do when facing these issues?
- How do you think we can improve the way SGO families receive support from external professionals?
- Changes in legislation? Financial recompense? History of Kinship
- Confidence in other professionals?

2. **How does your LA/School/Organisation support SGO families in the short term and long-term?**
- Your views on the approach?
- What do you think could be done better/differently?
- Has the support changed over time? What's impacted that change?
- Children's developing understanding of their identity- the impact of their life changes

3. **Thinking of the children and young people/families that you support, what is their overall experience of school at the moment?**
- What has gone well in the past?
- What is it that has made a positive difference?
- What kind of challenges, if any, have they experienced?

4. **What challenges, if any, are those children and young people experiencing in school?**
- What challenges have they experienced in the past?
- Are there particular times when things have been more difficult in school?
- To what extent do you think these challenges/needs are specifically related to their status as children under SGO?

5. **What are your views on the use Pupil Premium Plus spending/ how does your LA/school use PP+?**
- More clarity/guidance on how it's used?
- Comparison with EHCP funding?
- Linking it to data from child poverty act- they don't have the money to do recreational activities.

- How do their needs compare with those who are in foster care, adoption or non-SGO Kinship families?
- How are the key transition points best supported?

Appendix F Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

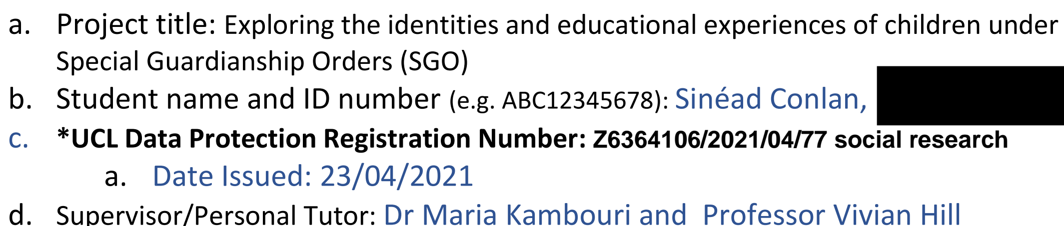
Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students, or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

<u>Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process</u>

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e., data from which a living individual can be identified **you <u>must</u> be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office <u>before</u> you submit your ethics application for review**. To do this, email the complete ethics form to the UCL Data Protection Office. Once your registration number is received, add it to the form* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

Please note that the completion of the UCL GDPR online training is mandatory for all PhD students.

Section 1 – Project details



a. Project title: Exploring the identities and educational experiences of children under Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)
b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): Sinéad Conlan,
c. ***UCL Data Protection Registration Number: Z6364106/2021/04/77 social research**
    a. Date Issued: 23/04/2021
d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: Dr Maria Kambouri and Professor Vivian Hill

Department: Psychology and Human Development

e.
f. Course category (Tick one):
    PhD ☐
    EdD ☐
    DEdPsy ☒
g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed. N/A
h. Intended research start date: April 2021
i. Intended research end date: July 2022
j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: UK

k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: *UCL travel advice webpage*

l. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐
External Committee Name: Enter text
Date of Approval: Enter text

No ☒ ***go to Section 2***

If yes:
- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

☒ Interviews

☒ Focus Groups

☒ Questionnaires

☐ Action Research

☐ Observation

☒ Literature Review

☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study

☐ Use of personal records

☐ Systematic review **– if only method used go to Section 5**

☐ Secondary data analysis ***– if secondary analysis used go to Section 6***

☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups

☐ Other, give details: Enter text

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). Minimum 150 words required.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) refers to an order of permanent placement for looked-after children, whereby the 'Special Guardian' is given parental responsibility of the child via a court process. It was introduced in the UK in 2005, with the hope of reducing the number of children in care, and offering an alternative form of permanent placement, by allowing the option of sustaining contact with the child's birth family. To date, the majority of SGOs have been granted to the child's grandparents, a kinship carer, and in less cases by foster carers, as an alternative for long term foster care or adoption (Hall, 2008). While SGO has been in place for 15 years, most of the available literature on the topic relates to the legal policies and guidance on its implementation in law journals. There has been some research in social care journals on the decision making around contact (Thompson, 2019) and one quantitative study on the process of SGO (Woodward, Melia, & Combes, 2020). However, to date there is a dearth of peer reviewed literature that includes the voice of the child and their educational experiences (Langton, 2017), despite the fact that previously looked-after children overall achieve lower attainment when compared with their peers across all key stages (Department for Education [DfE], 2018a).

In 2018, Virtual School Heads (VSH) were given responsibility for the education of previously looked-after children, after it was acknowledged that those children in permanent placements, were still vulnerable to the same risks as looked-after children, such as lower attainment results and higher risks of exclusion (DfE, 2018b). It is now becomingly more widely known that children's early life experiences, including in-utero events, trauma, insecure attachments, and a range of adverse childhood experiences, can affect their emotional wellbeing and development later in life (Teicher & Samson, 2016). Grandparents Plus, a charity which supports kinship carers, published the first study to address the outcomes for young people in kinship care (Wellard, Meakings, Farmer, & Hunt, 2017). Their findings highlight that young people in kinship care, even those in secure permanent placements were still at more risk of developing mental health problems, lower attainment results and poorer life outcomes, compared to their peers in the general population. These outcomes are similar for other previously looked-after children, such as adopted children, who achieve significantly less than their peers who have not experienced care. In 2018, at Key Stage 4, only 34.7% of adopted children achieved a pass in English and Maths compared to 58.8% of their non-care experienced peers (DfE, 2018b).

There is also a systemic narrative, that children who are no longer in care are 'recovered' and no longer in need of support (Langton, 2017). This unhelpful narrative does not account for the changing roles played by grandparents, and closer relatives, the ongoing negotiation and planning of contact with parents, the reduced financial and professional

support from local authorities, and the psycho-social experiences of these children and young people. Perhaps there is an assumption that their experiences of education are similar to looked-after children or adopted children. However, this assumes, that this is an overall homogenous group, and misses the nuances of this population, who are navigating different challenges.

There is a paucity of literature on the sense of identity or belonging for children under SGO, and their educational experiences. Available literature on looked-after children and identity development indicates that identity is shaped by relationships, can be used as a protective mechanism, and can be deferred or put on standby (McMurray , Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011). Psychological theories and models, such as psycho-social development (Erikson, 1968) attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) indicate that having a secure sense of self and a sense of belonging are key for self-confidence, future relationships and increase resilience for future adverse experiences.

This study aims to explore the educational experiences of children under SGO and their carers, investigating any difficulties that they face and the supportive factors which contribute to a positive schooling experience and a sense of belonging. This study aims to triangulate this data with information gained from exploring the perspective of the wider professional networks and how this information can be used to inform practice in schools, Educational Psychology Services (EPSs), Virtual Schools and Social Care. The study hopes to give voice to those missing from the literature, with the hope of providing information and insights for good practice going forward.

Main research questions:

1) How do children and their carers view the identities of children under SGO?
2) What are the experiences of children under SGO in education?
3) What supportive factors contribute to the positive educational experiences of children under SGO?

Methods

Participants: The target samples for the project are approximately n= 40, whereby *n*=10 are Children under SGO, n=20 special guardians and *n*= 10 professionals.

Participants who are children and carers will be recruited via the Virtual School Head in an inner-city local authority. The age range of the proposed sample of children under SGO varies from babies to young adults. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions being asked, the age range for the children participants group will focus on children over the age of 11-years-old. The interviews with carers, focus groups with carers, and a focus group with supporting professionals, will include experience of caring for and supporting children across a breadth of ages and stages. This researcher hopes to recruit 8-10 children for the interviews, and up to 10 professionals in the focus group. For the discussion group with carers, the World Café model may be used, which will include up to 24 carers. *Please see World Café Principles document.* Individual semi-structured interviews may also be used for data collection with carers if necessary and appropriate.

Sample

Opportunity sampling will be used to first identify carers and children who would be willing to take part. The researcher will provide the link Virtual School Head with the research project advertisements which will be disseminated to the SGOs known to the local authority where this research is taking place. Carers and children will have an opportunity to contact the researcher with any questions. Interested participants will be provided with consent forms and information letters. The carers and children who complete the consent forms will be invited to partake in the discussion groups, and/or their children will be invited to interview. If more than 10 children, and 20 carers (2 groups of 10) wish to partake, purposive sampling will be used to select participants, so a range of experience is represented in the sample.

Opportunity sampling will also be used to identify professionals who support children under SGO and their carers. Again, if more than 10 professionals wish to partake, purposive sampling will be used to select participants who represent the support available to children and carers.

Online Interviews: data collected via MS teams (or similar) will be recorded using the researcher's Dictaphone. Transcribing software used in line with UCL recommendations and software downloaded from the UCL website.

Design

Using semi-structured interviews and focus groups, this study will use a qualitative research design to explore the views of children under SGO, their carers and the supporting professional network. Self-report measures and semi structured interviews will be used to elicit the views of the children.

Data collection

Young People Interviews

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, the young people will be asked to complete the following self-report measures; Self-Image Profile (SIP-A) and Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM). SIP-A was chosen as the as the internal consistency demonstrated validity at 0.69 for positive self-image and 0.79 for negative self-image (Butler, 2001).

The PSSM is a self-report, 18 Likert item scale, which includes statements relating to belonging, peer relationships and teacher relationships. The PSSM scale is widely considered by researchers to be the most accurate measure of school (Allen, 2016) , with an internal consistency of .80, demonstrating it to be a reliable measure (Goodenow, 1993).

A semi-structured interview will be conducted with participants, following completion of the SIP-A and PSSM scales, to explore the responses given. Questions will be based on

individual's responses to SIP-A and PSSM items. It is hoped this will provide qualitative data to offer a richer insight into the PSSM findings. *Please see Interview Schedule for CYP.*

Focus groups and/or semi structured interviews

Focus groups will be used to capture data collected from the microsystem *(carers, designated teachers in school)* and the exosystem *(virtual school head, educational psychologist, social worker)* for the research questions. Focus groups are a useful way to explore the experiences and views of a group, that share a common characteristic, in order to develop an overall understanding of an issue (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Given the lack of research in this area, a focus group offers the best opportunity to collate a source of detailed dialogue about the carers' experiences in relation to their children in their care (Liamputtong, 2011).

Professionals Interviews/Focus Group

For the professionals interviews/focus group, a maximum of 10 participants will be used including virtual school head, designated teacher, educational psychologists and social workers who support children and families under SGO.

Carers Semi Structured Interviews/Focus Group

An adaption of the World Café Method will be used to structure group discussions for the carers focus group. The World Café methodology is a simple, effective and flexible format for hosting large group discussions. This technique involves facilitating small group discussions about particular key questions (The World Café Community Foundation, 2015). It is hoped each group will discuss each of the 4 questions. It is hoped a maximum of 20 participants (2 groups of 10) will form the Special Guardians discussion group where this researcher will act as moderator.

Individual semi-structured interviews will be offered to the carers if it not appropriate to use focus groups, due to reduced participant numbers.

Individual semi- structured interviews (using the focus groups questions) will be offered to the carers if there are any questions which they feel are too sensitive to answer as part of a larger group.

In light of Covid-19, this focus group will be facilitated during a time/space where the SGO carers usually meet in the local authority as part of a regular support group meeting. This is to reduce the instances of gathering larger groups for research purposes.

Procedure:

- Carers recruited via Virtual School Head in Local Authority
- Children recruited via Virtual School Head in Local Authority
- Supporting professionals recruited via word of mouth
- Information sheets and consent forms sent to carers, children and professionals.
- Participants who have expressed an interest in taking part in interviews and focus groups send consent forms back.

- Use of SIP-A and PSSM tools as self-report measures, followed by semi-structured interview conducted using MS Teams or face-to-face when possible.
- Focus groups conducted using MS Teams or face-to-face when possible.
- Data from interviews thematically analysed using the stages for thematic analysis outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006).
- Carers focus group using World Café Model taking place in person when face-to-face meetings are permitted.

  Considering Covid-19, this focus group will be facilitated during a time/space where the special guardians usually meet in the local authority as part of a regular support group meeting. This is to reduce the instances of gathering larger groups for research purposes.

  5.11.21: Individual interviews will replace focus groups. Interviews will take place online via MS Teams (or similar).
- Data from focus groups thematically analysed using the stages for thematic analysis outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006).

Reporting and dissemination: Findings will be reported in the researchers Doctoral Thesis and in line with UCL guidelines. The project outcomes will be disseminated and shared at relevant conferences in poster and/or oral presentations. At least one manuscript will be prepared from the final thesis and submitted for publication in a relevant journal e.g. British Journal of Educational Psychology.

Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

☐ Early years/pre-school

☐ Ages 5-11

☒ Ages 12-16

☐ Young people aged 17-18

☒ Adults please specify below

☐ Unknown – specify below

☐ No participants

Participants: Children; Secondary aged children and adolescents, Adults; carers of children under SGO, designated teacher, class teacher, virtual school head, educational psychologist, social worker and supporting professionals for carers.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC).

Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?
   Yes* ☐ No ☒
b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?
   Yes* ☐ No ☒
c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?
   Yes* ☐ No ☒

* *Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?
   Yes* ☒ No ☐
b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐

* *Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments.***

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

a. Name of dataset/s: Enter text
b. Owner of dataset/s: Enter text
c. Are the data in the public domain?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   ***If no,** do you have the owner's permission/license?*

Yes ☐ No* ☐

d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐

e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐
f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐
g. **If no,** was data collected prior to ethics approval process?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐

* *Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

*If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to **Section 9 Attachments.***

Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?
   Child participants: Young people under SGO
   Adult participants: Carers of children under SGO, professionals including Educational Psychologists, Social Workers, Designated Teachers.

b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected
   Basic information will be collected from participants in the interviews and focus groups. A pseudonym will be assigned by the researcher for all those participating in a semi-structured interview and focus groups. Basic demographic data to include:
   - Name
   - Sex
   - Age
   - School year group of child
   - How long they have been under SGO/a special guardian for a child under SGO
   - How long they have been in professional role.
   - Contact details [for follow-up interviews]

More in-depth background data will be collected from special guardians and young people in an information sheet. Background data to include:

- Age at which they came into care/under SGO
- The number of placements (if any) before the SGO
- The age of the carer/child when they became an SGO
- The number of siblings (if any) also under SGO
- How long they received support from the local authority after the SGO was granted
- The current employment status of the carer

A log of participant IDs and pseudonyms allocated to participants will be kept confidentially by the researcher.

Is the data anonymised? Yes ☒ No* ☐
Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐
Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes* ☐ No ☒
Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

c. **Disclosure –** Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?

-
- Raw data will be viewed by the researcher along with the two research supervisors and to an additional coder used to quality assure the coding of the thematic analysis.

- Processed data will be disclosed in the following ways:
    - Reported in Doctoral Thesis
    - Dissemination at professional conferences
    - Publication in professional literature

Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?
No.

d. **Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e., UCL network, encrypted USB stick**, encrypted laptop** etc.**

All raw and processed data will be saved on the researcher's password protected laptop and university n drive. Participant names, identifiers, and contact details [for follow up interview] identifying information will be saved in a separate file on UCL network. Access to network is password protected, via a password protected laptop.

*** Advanced Encryption Standard 256-bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes, and departments)?
Yes ☐ No ☒

f. **How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?**

In line with UCL GDPR policy and retention schedule, the data will be kept for 10 years following the end of the project.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)
No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)
Yes

g. **If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g., pseudonymization and short retention period of data'.**

Participants will be assigned a code which will replace any identifying data.
Audio files of interviews and focus groups will be transcribed using pseudonyms and the original audio files kept for not longer than is necessary. Original recordings with potentially identifying data will not be shared beyond the researcher and the supervisors.
Raw data will be kept for no longer than necessary, and anonymised transcripts will replace the raw data.

* *Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

Method: Participants will be fully informed as to the nature of the research ahead of taking part. The qualitative approach is not considered to present a challenge, discomfort nor embarrassment to target participants, though this is not to mitigate the potential risk [see sampling for further detail]. All participants will be reminded of their right to omit questions that they do not want to answer without repercussion or recourse and reminded of their right to anonymity and withdraw before and after the self-report tools, interviews and focus groups.

Sampling: The sample will include adults who are carers to children under SGO, and adults who work to support children and carers under SGO. The sample will also include children under SGO. Participants will be contacted prior to the interviews and focus groups to ask about any accessibility requirements or access arrangements. Reasonable adjustments will be made, where it is possible and safe to do in line with any COVID restrictions which may be in place.

Sensitivity to the nature of the topics being discussed will be demonstrated, with opportunities to withdraw or postpone the interview if needed (see sensitive topic section below).

Participants may be known to the researcher which could pose an ethical issue around anonymity. An anonymisation log will be created containing participant codes and identifying data, including contact details for the researcher to use to follow-up with participants. This will be held securely by the researcher and not retained any longer than is necessary for the study. All transcripts will be fully anonymised and audio recordings of the transcripts held securely for no longer than is necessary.

Recruitment: Opportunity sampling will mean that participants are asked to take part either by the link Virtual School Head in the case of carers and children, or in the case of the supporting professional network, by the researcher directly. This may cause some participants to feel under pressure to agree. Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw ahead of participation and given the contact details of the researcher should they wish to withdraw their data after submission.

Gatekeepers – Recruitment for the carers and children will occur via the link Virtual School Head to gain responses, to ensure there is no contact between the researcher and children or carers before consent has been given, in order to comply with GDPR and appropriate ethical practice. Recruitment for the supporting professionals' group will occur via EP channels to gain responses.

Informed consent: information sheets and consent forms will be prefaced with information as to the nature of the study, a tick box to confirm consent to participate and the researcher's contact details if the participants should wish to withdraw their data until a specified date. Information sheets will be sent to participants ahead of interview and consent forms collected ahead of interview.

Potentially vulnerable participants: The research proposes to work with children. Children are vulnerable participants in research (BPS, 2014) and the children in this study are considered to be particularly vulnerable, given their adverse early experiences and possible SEMH needs. Careful consideration has been given to the ethics of including such a vulnerable

group within the study. However, due to the lack of children's voice from the available research, I would argue it be unethical not to provide them with the option to share their views and experiences. Care will be taken throughout the process 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

The research also proposes to work with an adult population, carers and professionals. However, it is acknowledged that the participants have been working and living through extraordinary times due to the impact of Covid-19. To mitigate the risk of emotional harm, the researcher will check ahead of each interview and focus group that the participant still feels able to contribute to the study. They will be reminded that they can withdraw at any point during the study ahead of their interview/focus group participation.

Safeguarding/child protection: If concerns about a child or young person's safety is disclosed during interview or focus groups, the UCL safeguarding procedure will be followed in discussion with the research supervisors.

Sensitive topics: Discussing their experiences at home and within education could be emotive for children. To counter this, semi-structured interviews will be offered to children to allow more privacy for discussing/sharing sensitive information. Semi-structured interviews will also be offered to carers who don't feel comfortable answering certain questions as part of a focus group.

Information about support organisations will be available to carers e.g., Samaritans, MIND and Kinship (formerly known as Grandparents Plus). It is hoped that the carers focus group will take part in a council building, where the researcher can signpost carers to known professionals in the service who can support them if any issues arise.

International research: N/A

Risks to participants and/or researchers: There is a risk that the participants, the researcher, or the research supervisor may be impacted by the events of COVID-19 at any point during the research project. Participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw and concerns about an individual's wellbeing will be discussed with the research supervisor and appropriate action agreed upon together following UCL safeguarding principles. The researcher will use supervision to discuss the progression of the research should personal circumstances change.

Supervision and maintaining a reflective journal will help to mitigate as much as possible for this. Should events mean that the research supervisor(s) is no longer able to supervise the study, then alternative supervision will be sought from the academic tutors at IoE. Where possible, the data collection is remote and virtual, risks associated with face-to-face data collection are mitigated. Decision on face-to-face data collection (e.g. Carers Focus Group as part of the World Café idea) will made in line with government advice re: Covid-19, and in line with university research guidelines.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Each participant will be assigned a unique pseudonym by the researcher. A log containing the participants basic data and their unique identifier and / or pseudonym will be kept securely by the researcher to identify participants who may wish to withdraw their data at a later stage. The log will be destroyed after the time has passed for participants to withdraw.

Disclosures/limits to confidentiality: Any disclosures made during the research will be shared with the research supervisors with regard to relevant UCL guidelines and policies, e.g., Safeguarding policy.

It is not possible to fully anonymise the raw semi-structured interview and focus group data. Raw data of audio recordings will not be shared beyond the researcher and the research supervisors.

A record of participant identifiers with corresponding basic personal data will be kept securely by the researcher and destroyed once the research has been concluded.

Participants will be able to withdraw their data up until the data is analysed. A specified date they must inform the researcher of their request to withdraw will be shared with the participants when obtaining consent and a reminder given in the debrief.

Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection): All data will be stored anonymously on UCL N: drive which is password protected. Data will not be shared with anyone outside of the research project.

Reporting: When reporting all children, carers and professionals will be anonymised

Dissemination and use of findings: Participants will be asked if they would like a copy of the research briefing when the research concludes. Processed data will be used for manuscript preparation.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes ☒

Section 9 – Attachments.

Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received

a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)
   Yes ☒ No ☐

   Advert for carers and children

   Information sheets for participants

   Consent forms for participants

   Proposed interview questions for young people

   Proposed individual interviews/focus group questions for carers, and professionals

   The World Café principles (upon which the carers focus group will be based on)

b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐
c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☒
d. Full risk assessment Yes ☐

Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes ☒ No ☐

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name Sinéad Conlan

Date 5.11.21

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.

Notes and references

Professional code of ethics

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

British Psychological Society (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

British Educational Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

British Sociological Association (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the Institute of Education Research Ethics website.

Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

Further references

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook.* London: Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Best, Rebecca Katherine, Cameron, C, & Hill, V. (2019). *Exploring the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People Adopted from Care: Using the Voices of Children and Parents to Inform Practice,* Doctoral thesis, UCL (University College London).

Department for Education. (2018a). *Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children: Statutory guidance for local authorities.* Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-the-education-of-lookedafter-

Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2009). *(2009). Focus groups: A practical guide for.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Langton, E. (2017). Adopted and permanently placed children in education: from rainbows to reality, . *Educational Psychology in Practice, 33 (1)*, 16-30.

Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principle and practice.* London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Robson, Colin (2016). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

Templeton, Fiona, McGlade, Anne, & Fitzsimons, Lelia. (2020). ‘My experience of school’: The perspective of adopted young people aged 16–21 years. *Pastoral Care in Education,* Pastoral care in education, 2020.

Wellard, S., Meakings,, S., Farmer, E., & Hunt, J. (2017). *Growing up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood.* London: Grandparents Plus.

Wiles, R. (2013) What are Qualitative Research Ethics? Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name:

Student department:

Course:

Project Title:

Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: Maria Kambouri

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

none

Supervisor/first reviewer signature:

Date: 7.11.21

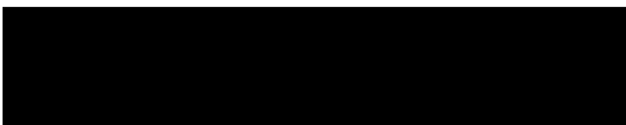
Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: Vivian Hill

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

I feel that Sinead has carefully considered all of the potential ethical issues and I do not anticipate any problems.

Second reviewer signature:



Date: 5.11.21

Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved ☐

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix G Guardian Information Request form

Gender:	
Date of Birth:	
Year Group:	

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

Age at time of SGO process:	
Age at time of SGO placement:	
Age when/if taken into care:	
Number of moves whilst in care:	
Age when SGO support from local authority ceased:	
Carer's employment status at time of SGO process:	
Carer's current employment status:	
Number of siblings:	
Number of siblings also on SGO:	
Number of siblings in care of birth parents:	

Which statement best describes how the SGO is going? Please circle

1. Going very well
2. Going well with some challenges
3. Challenging
4. Very challenging

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

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

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

Appendix H-Example of Initial Coding

Data Extract:	Coded for:
INTERVIEWEE: (laughs). Okay, so in my world, coming from me, I would say that's just in her. but once again, everybody is adamant that I don't us, give ourselves enough credit. Everybody says no, it's the work that you've put into P, me and my partner. You know just what we do, how we bring them up, how we talk about you know, everybody says that's what it is, but I would say it's just in her, she was born that way. But you know everybody's adamant that it's the work that we've put in with P and the communication we have about life and em. But I do think the kindness and stuff like that is in her, cause I'm not a very kind person. (Laughs). I'm not the kindest of people.	**Carer not wanting compliments** **Carer's parenting style** **Societal recognition of carer's parenting** **Carer's self-deprecation**
INTERVIEWEE: So it has to be in her, cause that's not something, like I never went around going you have to be kind. You know I'm quite a tough person, you know I'm more like you have to look after yourself and make sure that you're okay. Not so much of a you know, yeah, I think that spirit definitely came with her.	**Carer's tough character** **Carer's positive perception of child**
INTERVIEWEE: along. Cs it is it's very, very like unique. Like for her teachers to come out every year, every day to say this girl is so thoughtful, she's so kind. And I mean everyday I'm getting told that. You know there's a special needs boy in her class, and he's highly autistic. And P took him under her wing. And it's to the point in time, where the teachers like that's not your responsibility all the time. If sometimes you want to go and play with other children, just let us know. But em you know that she's really took him under wing, and made sure that the class and the children value him for him.	**Teacher's positive view of child** **Recognition of carer's parenting/ care** **Child's care of peers** **Child's role as advocate**
RESEARCHER: I see.	
INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. He's got no communication so he's very highly autistic, but yeah and the teachers say this all the time, that she really, really looks after him and makes sure that he's part of the class.	**Child's care of peers** **Child's role as advocate**

Appendix I- Example of Coding Framework

Theme	Subthemes	Description of subtheme	Examples:
Conflicting identities:	*Child's complex needs/ impact of early experiences*	Needs described as similar to other care experienced children who've experienced trauma, exposure to ACES (adverse childhood experiences)	**ZITA:** they've got it very easy because Rosie carries very little trauma. Like Rosie hasn't got behaviour issues, she hasn't got emotional issues. You know where other children may so… Where if she had trauma or behaviour problems… I think you know, that has a big thing to do with it. That actually P is not showing any behaviour problems or trauma em. **ZITA: Rosie is very easy, 'cause she don't carry trauma. Where them other children that have behaviour problems, and that are carrying you know, that have got alcohol-dependency and all them kind of things, I think, I know that their experiences has been completely different in school to Rosie.** **ZITA**: And when I spoke to other special guardians and heard their stories and heard the trauma that these children are carrying. **ANNIE: But he went through more trauma than she did. And when he started school, he... he did, he did mix. But he used to get quite angry.** **ANNIE**: They both saw the same thing, but he protected her, and I think he was more traumatised. And I can see why he's angry sometimes. **JACK:** like sometimes if I'm angry. It (boxing) lets a lot of anger out. **JACK**: **I'm not really sure off the top of my head, but a lot of things can make me angry.** **JACK:** Well, I used to get more angry in primary. **DIANE:** The middle one… he has behavioural problems. He's in therapy at the moment…. He's a very temperamental child and very, very sensitive. **DIANE:** He's the one probably that this has affected the most. He doesn't really know a lot about his past and he doesn't want to know about his past. **DIANE:** They've struggled so much in their little young lives. **DIANE:** and he said daddy don't really want to talk to me, he wants to talk to Luke, so you know he felt rejected. **DIANE:** he basically chose drink over the children. **DIANE:** it's almost from birth that he hasn't wanted him. It's almost like he's got enough love for one son, but not for two.

			DIANE: He became very violent. He was having very violent outbursts… his anger was just off the scale. **Hattie:** Often they're (SGO families) still on the edges of some of the chaos and the reason why the child came into care. **Hattie:** similar needs to adopted children and children we care for. **Hattie:** on the whole we are thinking about the needs of this whole population who might have attachment difficulties and experiences developmental trauma. **Veronica:** I would say that all the children that come into an SGO have developmental trauma of some sort or another. **Veronica:** They've had poor attendance… changes of school… neglect, abuse. All kinds of things happening to them, that is not going to stand them in good stead to accessing education due to their SEMH difficulties. **Veronica:** They've often not had any containment at all in their lives. **Peter**: **This child is traumatised. That child is going to be like that for the rest of their life.** **Valerie:** Behaviour problems escalated to the point of exclusion. **Valerie:** (children) were being horrendously bullied and victimized in their secondary school because they weren't living with their parents. **Valerie: It's a lifelong set of needs.** **Ava:** Their parents have substance misuse problems, and so there's questions about things like foetal alcohol syndrome. **Ava:** The issue of attachment needs because of the circumstances under which they've come into care. **Ava:** social communication difficulties. **Ava:** real need to be close have attention from adults **Ava:** Several of whom have sleep issues and ADHD. **Ava:** Their needs are ongoing. **Ava:** It was an important part of my formulation that this child has got ongoing experiences of loss. **Anna:** real concerns about self-harm like suicide before. Her mood was really low and that had a huge impact on her. **Anna:** important to think about these children in terms of what their life history has been. Often really thinking about attachment and trauma-based needs. **Mary:** not understanding that a lot of the behavioural difficulties we see children has to do with foetal alcohol syndrome.

			Mary: Children I would say are having more problems with like depression, behaviour. **Mary:** I've heard of kids being bullied at school, saying your dad doesn't live with you anymore, your dad doesn't love you. **Cora:** The carers come with issues around their child's behavioural problems and concerns about their emotional needs as well. I think they come with concerns about behavioural and conduct. **Cora:** the SDQ will come back more commonly to suggest that they're emotional difficulties rather than behavioural difficulties. **Tina: His older brother, there were definitely issues with him and he had a lot more emotional issues and he's been diagnosed with ADHD and autism and is now in a PRU.** **Tina:** His behaviour was much more difficult and triggered from mum suddenly turned up at school one day. **Tina:** His behaviour was really, really challenging and he's found things difficult. **Tina**: his younger brother actually is incredible, but (brother) is on the end of a lot of this abuse at home. He just comes in and gets on with things. She doesn't have any of the issues.
	Sense-making of identity	*Child's sense-making and preservation of parent/ guardian identities and labels*	**ZITA:** When she first started school, she would come out every day and say, "hello mummy" and give me a kiss and cuddle. And I just go with it, but that doesn't seem to happen as much now. **ZITA:** cause of the other children. Cause of the other children at the school, coming out going, "mummy, daddy!" So yeah, I just go with it and say "hello darling, did you have a good day? Come on, let's go", kind of thing. Em, yeah. **ZITA**: And sometimes, sometimes she does call her by her name. she does kind of say Sarah (mother's name) and her mum does say I'm your mum. And Rosie might turn around and say, well you don't come and see me very often, do you? Yeah so, she'll say Sarah (mother's name) sometimes. And I think that's her way of telling Sarah, I'm not quite happy with you at the moment. **ANNIE**: I gave, I allowed it to be their option, explained adoption, not that it's not something I'd want to do, but it changes your family identity adoption. Because if I adopt my grandchildren, their father becomes their brother, their uncle becomes their brother. It changes everybody's relationship, **ANNIE:** it's Gran, it's always been gran.

			ANNIE: They (primary school) always called me Gran because they knew me anyway and they knew the relationship. But since they've gone to Comp, and you have loads of teachers, I tend to get called 'Mum' and Katie giggles. We all, we, I, we used to correct people for a long time, "no, no I'm their gran". Now we just go along with it. **ANNIE**: It doesn't matter if I'm called mam or gran. But they, they, their title for me is Gran. Or sometimes Katie will come home and say, "ah my teacher said perhaps your mum can help you with it?" And she looks at as if to say, 'what do I do with that?'. And I say well he doesn't know, so it's just he means gran. **ANNIE**: Em, I think in the beginning, she, she, Katie more than Jack, in the beginning, I remember her questioning, "am I calling you mam?" And I went well you can call me what you want. If you feel comfortable calling me gran, cause I'm still your gran, that hasn't changed, I'm still your grandmother but if you feel comfortable calling me Mam, that's entirely up to you. **ANNIE:** Her mother she has issues with calling. Cause she doesn't know what to call her mother, **ANNIE**: She's like, em, Mum, or mother. She doesn't have a personal name for her mother. **ANNIE**: Jack says, "our mother", but Katie's not quite sure what title to give her but (pause) and I think that's because she was so young, she can't remember the relationship, it's em. Whereas if they'd had that closeness, I think she would have been Mam, but her mother's given herself this label of Mum. **ANNIE:** Katie questioned it in the beginning, and I left it and I said if you want to call me Mam, but you're used to calling me Gran. That hasn't changed. **ANNIE:** we all go along with it now when people call me Mam. Sometimes say, people will say "oh your mother" but we just along with it, because it isn't always worth explaining sometimes. **DIANE:** we done a lot of life story work because he was the one who knew about the adoption. The two younger ones, they really didn't know what was going on. All they knew was that em, a social worker said they couldn't live with mummy. Em, L doesn't really, hasn't really questioned it apart from the fact that he can't understand why he can't live with his dad. **DIANE**: B would probably say you know, and he does want to live with his mum. He's, he's quite adamant

he wants to live with his mum, he'd rather live with his mummy than live with me.

DIANE: But the other two, like I say I don't think they really understand it. I know, I know it, because we haven't been able to do the life story with them, they don't really understand that there's a bit of paper that says they have to live with me.

VERONICA: Uhm, I suppose changes to their identity as well. Going from living with Mum to grandmother to his grandmother, mom now and all that. What, what I suppose?

PETER: social workers have to make the decision that a child might live in poverty; they might live with carers that swear a bit or maybe smoke some weed. Is that worse than placing them with middle class parents but the identity has gone, that, it's like, that link to the family has gone?

PETER: when I've done assessments in the field is that you'll often go around to the family home and there will photographs of the mum on the wall of the grandparents' house. So, the child is surrounded by their identity.

PETER: the grandmother was saying that she took the child on holiday to the "Same place that they took their mum," and while they sat there kind of … the child's playing in the same areas that the mum did, and she could talk to a child about that. So, there's real positives around identity.

PETER: So, there's real positives around identity, but there's some real negatives. There's often a stigma attached, depending on where you live. If you live in a rural village somewhere where everyone knows your business, everyone knows that your parent might have abused you.

PETER: So, identity is really complicated. We know for kinship care that, so some research, the Growing Up in Kinship Care research by Elaine Farmer kind of really showed that, children, the issues of stigma can be quite strong in children. They can maybe lie about their parents and say actually, oh, "My parents died," rather than wanting to admit that their parents have been abusive or struggling with drugs and alcohol, mental health.

PETER: everyone's open about that and had that more natural family conversation, rather than it being a social worker telling you how bad your mum was, because social workers rightly have to focus on risk, but that isn't the story of that child's identify, and the risk is that you can get this identity of risk that the children get.

			PETER: They don't see their parents and then their parents become idealised. They become superheroes and everyone else gets the blame for the situation because their parents were hard done by, whereas if the child actually has a realistic understanding of the parents, they understand yeah, my mum is not perfect, she struggles and that's okay. **PETER:** you'll probably find that children in special guardianships have a harder time throughout their childhoods because life is harder, but in adulthood, I think their identity issues might be less than adoptive people who have a lot easier childhood because they've got a lot more resources but, their identity issues might come out a lot later. **VALERIE:** So the main things have been that notion of their shifting identity. And I think quite often and you see this, particularly as they come to the end of primary school. They prepare for transition thinking about developing a narrative to explain why they don't live with their parents. **VALERIE**: And so from my point of view, this is something that we've worked on within the virtual school is just thinking about one of the biggest challenges in that transition is this notion of your identity and how you explain your identity to new peer group and much bigger peer group. **VALERIE:** And I think for those children, it's recognizing that this change in identity isn't something that happens and is static. It's constant, so every time they bump into siblings or parents, and if they still live in the same community, it's. It's an ongoing experience is I think. **VALERIE:** I suppose it for the child it's that sense of, you know getting back to identity, but where I belong and how secure is my sense of belonging in that text? I don't know if that ever really been explained or managed. And that's to me where psychology and psychologists talking with the people who are the main caregivers is really important. **VALERIE:** She'd been struggling with how to explain the child's parentage to the child because they hadn't ever told him that she wasn't his mother because she's had him in her care since he was something like 5 months old. And so she's always been. Mummy and his mother is always been aunty. **AVA:** Yeah, I think it's (IDENTITY) quite confusing for them. **ANNA:** (AT SECONDARY SCHOOL) they start to think a little bit more about what it means to be under

			special guardianship and starting to… ask questions about their life story. And thinking about all who are who am I? What does that mean to me? Like questioning their identity? **ANNA:** I'm not sure what direct conversations young people would be saying in terms of like using that terminology like SGO, I don't know if that's something that they use. Em, I think it's more questioning, like who am I? Like where do I come from? Who do I belong to? Is it my mum and dad or is it like my aunt and uncle? **ANNA:** And she really doesn't feel like she's got a sense of belonging anywhere. And I think that's linked back there to what we were saying about identity. Why Do I…do I belong to you? Do I belong to my mum? My dad? Is it my family who I'm now living with like do I belong in my school? **ANNA:** she's experiencing racism, and that shouldn't be ignored and just the impact that that can have, the further trauma that can create. And how it was influencing this girls identity and now she's expressing lots of distress as a result at home. **MARY:** Uhm, you see some kids who don't want grandma and grandpa to drop them off at school 'cause they were shamed. I've heard of kids being bullied at school people saying oh your, your dad doesn't live with you anymore. Your dad doesn't love you, that kind of thing. It's pretty, it's pretty hard, you know **MARK**: I think SG children often feel a degree of conflicted loyalty between, *'But I'm still seeing my mum almost like sometimes every day, but she's not looking after me so.'* **TINA:** I think for her it's really difficult. 'cause there are lots of mixed messages. So Mum was tell her yeah, once they get a job and I get settled again, you can come back and live with me and then aunty will say, no, the SGO is until she's 18 and I have no intention of letting you go. **TINA:** She's really struggling. She's finding things very difficult and in terms of her identity, who she is, what she's, you know where she's from. Why she's in this situation she's in? **CORA**: they might well start calling them mum, you know that's obviously a changing in relationship and it is sort of sense of identity for the child as well. Who it Mom or Dad? **CORA**: You know there's a real adjustment to who is this person? Do I call them their name, or do I give them a, you know or? Who are they to me and what

			does that mean about my birth mom and you know that's all to be worked out. **CORA:** And it's so important for the we've grandparents in their carers, other carers too. But in terms of the children I mean, I just think it's so important to have a story that makes sense. And I guess that would be really helpful both at home and at school, **CORA**: thinking about you know some training on identity and life story work and one of the things that comes back and back. Just do experience of working with families as well as how helpful it is to have, how helpful it is to have a story that makes sense. **CORA:** And identity in school, you know, feeling like you belong in school. It's pretty important. **CORA:** And I've worked with lots of children, whether they're in special guardianship orders or not, who's don't feel like they belong in school or don't feel like they fit somehow. And it's often to do with their identity feeling somehow different because of their story.