

**An Exploration of Aspects of Adoption;
Education and Support Experiences of
Adoptive Parents of Children
Adopted from Care**

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Abstract

In recent years there has been increased attention on the process of adoption and a push from the government to see more children adopted from care and at an earlier age. The year 2012- 2013 has seen a record increase in the numbers of children being adopted. However, it is also reported that 3.2% of these adoptions breakdown. This figure for breakdown seem to be closely linked with age at adoption, age at disruption and child to parent violence. Whilst it is positive that more children are being adopted it is also important that these new adoptive families are supported well to prevent breakdown and further experiences of loss and rejection for these children. This study explored the thoughts, feelings and experiences of twelve adoptive parents who have adopted an older (school age) child from care. Individual semi structured interviews were carried out with seven parents and a focus group discussion was attended by another five. These were transcribed and an inductive thematic analysis carried out. Four over-arching themes were found: reconceptualising parenting, the significance of relationships, home/school interactions and necessary resources. The findings from this study highlight the complex interaction between the many systems which the families experienced and the accumulation and impact of vulnerability and protecting factors on their life, parenting capabilities and well-being. Findings from the study have important implications for policy makers and professionals and are discussed as well as areas for further research.

Declaration and Word Count

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Signed

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"In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody's got to be crazy about that kid. That's number one. First, last, and always."

Urie Bronfenbrenner

First and foremost I would like to say a huge thank you to all the parents that took part in my study, who are doing a fantastic job at *"being crazy about that kid"*. Without you kindly sharing your time, experiences, thoughts and feelings with me this would not have been possible.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Current Study

With the Coalition governments renewed focus on finding permanent families for children looked after through adoption, it was felt to be important to highlight and explore adoptive parent's journeys through the adoption process and their experiences of support and the education system post adoption.

Following a review of the literature, it was felt there was a lack of qualitative research that highlighted adoptive parents' views of the above. The current study aims to address this and explore the adoption process, educational experiences and adoption support from the perspective of adoptive parents. This is with a view to gaining an understanding of what impact both the positive and negative experiences have had on their family lives. The following research questions will be considered:

- How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?
- How do adoptive parents experience post-adoption support and what has this meant for their families?
- What is their experience of the education system post adoption?

1.2 Overview

This first chapter aims to provide an overview of the historical, national, international and current context of adoption. I will outline my theoretical perspective, my personal interest in this topic and will consider the current context of educational psychology in relation to working with children looked after and adopted.

1.3 Definitions

Adoption in the current study refers to the legal process that transfers parental responsibility from the birth parent or social services to the adopters. As the Adoption and Children Act (2002) states “an adopted person is to be treated in law as if born as the child of the adopters or adopter” (p. 46). Also within this study I have incorporated families who have a Special Guardianship Order. A Special Guardianship Order is a court order that gives someone else parental control over a child, whilst not cutting all ties with birth parents.

1.4 Personal Interest

Prior to undertaking the doctorate course in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology I spent some time working in a secondary school as a mentor for children looked after. Here I worked closely with an Educational Psychologist who sat on an adoption and fostering panel. During this time, I learnt a lot about the lives and support on offer for children looked after. I also had the opportunity whilst on the doctoral course to speak in-depth with heads of virtual schools for children looked after. I began to consider that most adopted children have been looked after at some point of their lives, but, despite this profile of vulnerability they do not seem to get the same support once they are adopted. I felt that there was a sense that once a child is adopted, all their difficulties are considered to be solved and I began to wonder what impact this had on the adoptive family. Carrying out this research allowed me to explore adoptive parents' perspectives of their experience of the adoption process, the education system and available support. It has also enabled me to raise

awareness of this group of children as one that may be vulnerable in educational settings.

1.5 Bio-ecological systems theory

For this research project I will be taking a bio-ecological perspective. This is in line with my own beliefs about human development and also is representative of the ethos of the Institute of Education doctorate course in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology for which I am studying. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that human development is dependent on inter-related ecological systems.

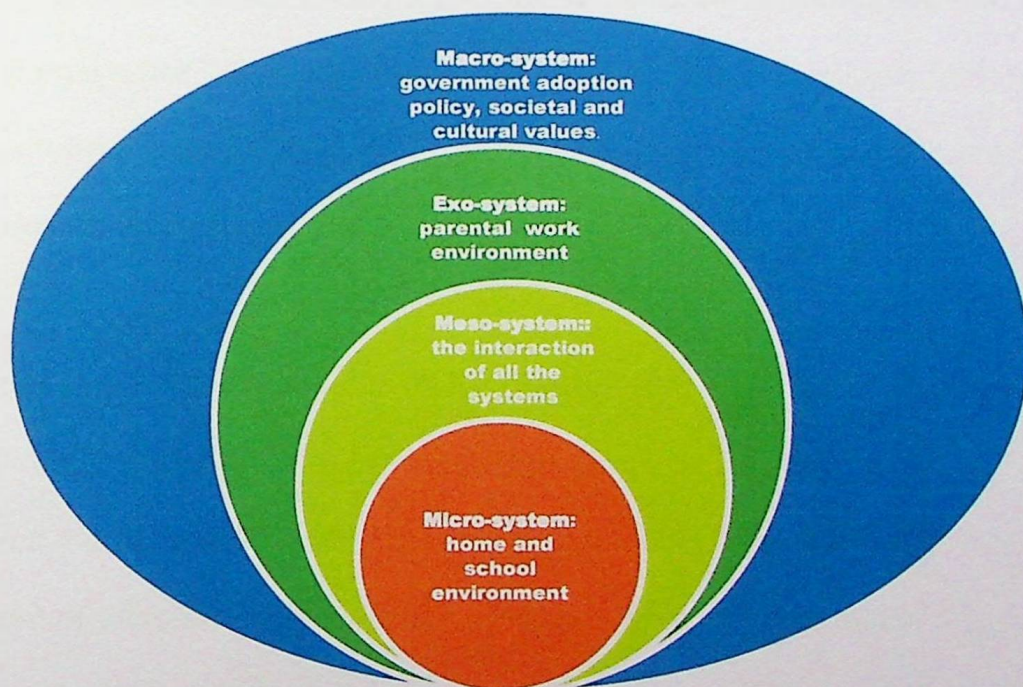


Figure 1: Bio-ecological Systems Theory as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

The above model outlines the different systems that all have an impact on the developing person over time. The Micro-system is the immediate environment with which the person comes into contact. In terms of an adopted child this could be both home and school environments. The Meso-system is described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the "interrelations among major settings

containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life” (p. 515). For an adopted child, this would include the way that government policy impacts on the adopted home environment or the impact policies have on access to support services such as therapy. The Exo-system contains the different social systems that impact on the individual indirectly, for an adopted child this could involve how flexible or stressful their adoptive parents' jobs are. The final system is the Macro-system which incorporates the cultural and societal values that may influence public policy. This is an important area for adoptive children and incorporates government policy on adoption and also societal attitudes to children who are not living with their birth families. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner added a biological component to his model to include amongst other things the temperament of a child and genetic factors. Again, for adopted children this seems particularly pertinent as many have been exposed to drugs or alcohol whilst in the womb.

Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) developed Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model and applied it to maltreated children. Their ecological-transactional model of child maltreatment is particularly relevant to the development of adopted children, many of whom have experienced maltreatment in the form of neglect or abuse in their early life. In addition, Brooks et al (2005) highlight that this model and the risk/ resilience paradigm it sits within has “strong applicability to adoptive family systems” (p.18). Just like Bronfenbrenner they state that family factors, community and culture interact with individual characteristics that “shape the course of child development” (p. 695). They suggest that at each level of the ecology there are enduring vulnerability and protective factors, these are long lasting attributes or

conditions that in their model can either increase or decrease the risk of maltreatment. In addition, they also include transient challengers and buffers; these are normally short term stresses or protectors from stress such as a job loss or improved finance respectively. Cicchetti (1996) like Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that development is a dynamic process in which early experiences need to be viewed in context and in terms of both risk and resilience factors across the different ecological systems. In relation to adopted children and their families this is a useful model to highlight both vulnerability and protective factors in a broad and contextualised way.

These theoretical models as well as the literature review influenced my interview schedule, it was important to ensure that all the complex factors and systems that impact on adoptive families were considered.

1.6 Current context of Educational Psychology

The role of the Educational Psychologist has been constantly changing over the last century in line with the social context and the ever changing legislative landscape. However, in the minds of many the role is still one that is narrowly defined by the statutory process and the psychometric testing of children in schools. To challenge this perspective I feel it is important to highlight the contribution that Educational Psychologists can and are making in working more regularly in an increasingly broad variety of contexts.

In 2000 the DfEE reviewed the Educational Psychologist role in *Current Role, Good Practice and Future Directions* (2000). This highlighted the wide ranging skills of Educational Psychologists that could be used to support those facing

social exclusion (a New Labour government priority). A further review of the role by Farrell, Woods, Lewis, Rooney, Squires, & O'Conner (2006) acknowledged the broad contribution that the profession could make to the five every child matters outcomes. More recently, the DfE (2011) report *Developing sustainable arrangements for the initial training of Educational Psychologists* states the important role Educational Psychologists have in universal early intervention and preventative support. This is in line with the new draft Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2013) which names Educational Psychologists as being well placed to train others so to identify and support children's needs earlier. Others in the profession have carried out work with an increasingly broad range of children, young people, their families and the systems around them. Hill (2013) provides a rationale for, and examples of, Educational Psychologists working successfully with a wide variety of populations including, young offenders, children and young people with mental health difficulties and children looked after.

In relation to adopted children and their families, I argue that Educational Psychologists, have an increasing role to play especially in light of legislative changes which will be discussed further throughout this thesis. As the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (2006) writes, Educational Psychologists can make a contribution when working with children looked after and adopted children by supporting others to understand the impact that "the feelings of rejection and alienation can have on their functioning and sense of belonging" (p. 9). Often, as the above quote suggests, Educational Psychologists work not only with an individual but the systems that surround a child.

Osborne, Norgate and Traill (2009) carried out a study to discover the ways in which Educational Psychologists worked with adopted and children looked after. They reported that 69% were involved in work that related to adoption and fostering, with some sitting in specialist teams and on the adoption and fostering panels. The work of these Educational Psychologists varied and involved reviewing applications, interpreting assessments, giving advice on educational issues and taking part in pre-adoption interviews. Whilst this does begin to highlight some areas in which Educational Psychologists are working this was a study based on questionnaire data, with some questionnaires being completed by more than one person. Responses were also only received from 84 out of 150 Local Authority's and so does not provide a full picture of the work that Educational Psychologists are currently involved in with children looked after and adopted.

I would argue that with a broad understanding of the systems that interact and impact on child development this is an area in which Educational Psychologists can make a great contribution. As such, it is important to carry out further research in this area to develop and strengthen the psychological knowledge base and expand consideration of our role as Education Psychologists in the field of adoption. This is an area that I will come back to and discuss further in Chapter Five.

Throughout the final part of this chapter I will outline the historical, national, international and current context of adoption.

1.7 Historical, National and International context

In the United Kingdom (U.K.) legal adoption was first recognised in the 1920's, then, the focus of adoption was to find homes for orphans and to provide security to children born to unmarried mothers. Or, as Javier, Baden, Biafora and Camacho-Gingerich (2007) state, adoption was a "means for producing the right kind of citizen" (p. 22). Meaning that, adoption was a politically motivated and value laden intervention which, allowed both the child and the mother to avoid the social stigma of being unmarried. Adoption allowed them both to move on to lead socially acceptable lives. Adoptions during these times were also closed, meaning that there would be no contact between the adopted child and their birth parents and often the child would never know they had been adopted.

During the Second World War, there was a steady rise of illegitimate births and a steady rise in children made orphans. However, the demand was also high for babies and children to adopt (Keating, 2009). During this period there was much more of a focus on the adoptive parents finding the right child and the adoptive parents' needs and wishes were key. Adoption agencies at the time were noted to reject babies due to "poor health, or their mothers' dubious morals" (Keating, 2009, p. 200).

Since the advent of birth control, legalised abortion and the removal of much of the stigma attached to being an unmarried mother, adoption now serves a very different purpose. This means that the children that are adopted now have very different profiles to the babies of unmarried mothers from the recent past. To illustrate this, Garrett (2002) reported that in 1968, 12,641 babies

were adopted, in 1998 this figure was just 195 and in 2012 that figure was just 70 (British Association for Adoption and Fostering, BAAF). Garrett (2002) suggests that the children that are being adopted now are older, many have been compulsorily moved from their birth parents and he suggests they are likely to have “disabilities or other special or complex needs” (p. 179). It is also the case now that in the U.K., adoptions are open, with the children having a right to know their own history. This is also enshrined in law with the United Nations rights of the child, article eight; this states that all children have a right to an identity and an official record of who they are. As referred to above, adoption is now more of a means of finding homes for children who have entered the care system. In the year ending 2013, 3980 children were adopted from care (DfE Statistical first release) this is the highest number of adoptions of children from care since recording first began in the nineties. BAAF reports that the average age at adoption from the year ending March 2013 was three years and eight months. They also reported that of all the children adopted in 2012 “72% were placed for adoption due to abuse or neglect, 12% due to family dysfunction, 6% because the birth family was in acute stress”. That means that 90% of our adopted children have experienced less than optimal and probably very stressful early experiences.

The older age at adoption seems to also be true in other countries, Selwyn and Sturges (2001) carried out research into adoption policy and practice and noted that in Scandinavia, New Zealand and in much of Europe most adoptions are now of infant age. The only exception seemed to be France which still had a large number of young infant adoptions, this is possibly due to the government's aim on placing children with families early and within a year.

Within the above study, it is clear to see the political influence on adoption across countries, and how adoption has become socially constructed across contexts. For example, in America adoption is viewed as the “best option” for children and other placement options are discouraged. Scandinavian countries have a commitment to reunification with the birth family and fund preventative strategies. Whereas, in New Zealand, Austria and much of Europe there is a focus on the importance of families and kinship care is believed to be the best option.

In the following section I will begin to outline the recent policy and politics that has informed adoption in the U.K. As stated throughout, it is felt to be important to acknowledge all systems that will be having an impact upon adoption. In line with the eco-systemic models outlined at the beginning of this chapter, adoption policy is one system that indirectly affects child development and it would be very narrow to consider the adoption process separate from the policy and politics of the time.

1.8 Adoption Policy

As Rushton (2003) suggests adoption is now more of an alternative for children who can no longer live with their birth parents and in the last decade there has been an increased focus on adoption and adoption policy.

In 2000 the *Waterhouse report* was released which focussed on the abuse of children looked after in foster care and also residential care. This provoked the Labour government at the time to consider adoption as a solution to some of the concerns that were highlighted. They commissioned a review of adoption

by the Performance and Innovation Unit. This identified that the numbers of children entering the care system were rising. Whereas, the number being adopted from care were falling. This also acknowledged the huge delays in placing children looked after and the wide variation in practices across Local Authorities.

In 2002 the *Adoption and Children Act* was passed. This particularly emphasised the support for adoptive families and listed a variety of support that could be accessed including, financial support and therapeutic services. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) also outlined that couples that were not married would be considered for adoption thus opening up adoption for same sex couples. In addition to this, a wider process of reform was beginning. This focussed on improving the recruitment of adopters, introducing national standards, a review of adopter assessments and targets to increase the numbers of adopted children from care.

This focus continued well into the mid 2000's with the Every Child Matters Agenda (2004). This had the aim of improving outcomes for all children, in all areas of their lives and included children looked after. In *Care Matters: Time for Change* (2007) there was a push for permanence for children looked after and this identified adoption as a suitable option to achieve this aim.

With the coalition government coming to power in 2010, and a senior MP having been adopted, there was a renewed interest in adoption. In 2011 the government proposed a campaign to recruit more adoptive parents and introduced the *Adoption Charter*. This indicated what adopters should expect

from adoption services. In 2012 Michael Gove championed adoption as a way to give the “most neglected and disadvantaged children the new start they so desperately need” (p. 3). He also outlined in *An Action Plan for Adoption: tackling delay* (2012) recommendations to reduce the number of delays due to a focus on ethnic origin. It suggested more and quicker use of the national Adoption Register, more concurrent planning and speeding up the adopter assessment process. Recently, the *Children and Families Act* (2014) has outlined a number of measures aimed at increasing the number of adoptions and making the process more streamlined. These include; placing children more quickly and increasing the number of foster to adopt placements, giving potential adopters more of an active role in the form of adoption activity days and opening up the adoption register so that potential adopters can access it. It also introduced more paid leave for those adopting to help with transition and aims to provide adoptive parents with information regarding local support services and an option of personal budgets to allow for more choice and control of these services. In terms of education, they have implemented a policy that makes adopted children a priority for school intake and plan to extend the free education for two year olds to include adopted children.

With this huge push for adoption as a way forward and the “best option” for some children in care it is important to consider the literature and evidence for this. As has been written on many occasions, the outcomes for looked after children tend to be much worse than their non-looked after peers. They are also not commensurate with their abilities. For example, Peake (2011) writes that 80% of big issue sellers and half of the U.K's prostitutes are from a care background. Jackson (2010) found that half of all offenders in young offenders'

institutes in the U.K have been in care. In relation to education, children looked after are reportedly nine times more likely to have special needs (Jackson and McParlin 2006). In the year ending March 2012 the percentage of looked after children achieving an A* - C grade at GCSE in English and maths was 15.5%, this is in comparison to nearly 59% of the rest of the population. Additionally, in 2011 12% of children looked after had had at least one fixed term exclusion in a year (DfE 2011). Whilst the current study focuses on adoptive parents' experiences, thoughts and feelings, not adoptive child outcomes, it was nevertheless an important area to review. Adoptive children do not function and develop in a vacuum and the support a parent receives will have an impact on their ability to support the child and as such, literature for both of these areas will therefore be reviewed. The next chapter will review literature regarding both adopted child outcomes and adoptive parent experiences.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Below I will outline and review literature regarding outcomes for adopted children relevant to the current research project. I will consider both research from the U.K. and overseas and would like to make explicit at this early point that whilst findings from research overseas may have issues of generalisation that need to be considered, it is still useful and interesting to discuss adoption from an international perspective. Furthermore, I have made the decision to restrict the studies included from the year 2000 onwards (excluding major well renowned theories) this is to allow a contemporary, focussed review of the current national and international context.

I will be taking an eco-systemic approach in the literature review, exploring all the systems that may have an impact on adopted children's development. These will include mental health and educational outcomes, proposed reasons for difficulties, literature regarding the adoption process and finally adoptive parents' perspectives, which, is the focus of the current study. Although the current study will be solely focussing on adoptive parent's views of the adoption process and support, it is still relevant to consider the literature on adopted children's outcomes as the two are inextricably linked.

2.2 Literature regarding outcomes for adopted children

2.2.1 Mental health outcomes of adopted children

One of the most frequently mentioned findings in outcome research related to adopted children is that they are over represented in mental health settings. Tarren-Sweeney (2008) suggests a range of difficulties that adopted children might experience, these include: attachment difficulties, self-harming behaviours, inappropriate sexual and food related behaviours. He also highlights trauma-related anxiety and behavioural difficulties, this is supported by other studies such as Rushton and Dance (2006) and Keyes, Sharma, Elkins, Iacono and McGue (2008). They found that children adopted from care in the U.K. were likely to have some behavioural difficulties even six years after placement. They also noted that the children in their study were found to have higher levels of externalising behaviours and were more often rated as anxious by teachers.

Furthermore, parents of adopted children were found to be twice as likely to seek help for emotional and behavioural difficulties than birth parents (Keyes et al 2008). Golding (2010) supports this view and highlights that whilst adoptive children tend to "have increased stability compared to many children living in care, children adopted from care have often experienced similar, if not more compromising levels of adversity pre- and postnatally, as well as movement in and out of the care system" (p. 574). Therefore, it is not surprising that the research seems to suggest that children adopted from care are over represented in mental health settings. It is important that we do not forget that these children are likely to have also been looked after and therefore, are also likely to have the same or similar needs as those who are

still looked after. However, McGinn (2007) urges caution on interpreting research findings that suggests adopted children are over represented in mental health settings. He claims that perhaps, adoptive parents are more likely to notice mental health difficulties and are therefore more likely to seek support more quickly.

2.2.2 Educational outcomes for adopted children

As stated previously the changing population of adopted children over the last 50 years has meant that it is children who have experienced the care system that are now being adopted. It is clear from the wealth of research and government statistics that children looked after are vulnerable when it comes to educational outcomes. However, unfortunately there are no government statistics looking at educational outcomes for looked after children once they are adopted and very few studies looking at the educational characteristics of children adopted from care. Below, I aim to provide a brief overview of some studies that highlight the education of children adopted from care.

In terms of educational outcomes, van Ijzendoorn, Juffer and Klein-Poelhuis (2005) carried out a meta-analysis in which they compared the intelligence quotient (I.Q) scores of adopted children, their environmental siblings (birth children of the adoptive families or their peers) and children who remained with birth families or in institutional care. Their analysis suggested that adopted children scored as highly as their environmental siblings on I.Q tests and higher than those who weren't adopted and were left with their birth families. However, it also showed that they were not achieving in the classrooms commensurate with these abilities, similarly to what has been

previously found in studies of looked after children. This was a significant finding and seemed to be linked with the age at which they were adopted, with the difference for those adopted in their first year of life being minimal. What was also significant here was the extent of the trauma they had suffered with those experiencing severe neglect and abuse lagging behind in school achievement. As mentioned the meta-analysis consisted of international studies and so because of different systems and cultural factors it should not be extrapolated to the U.K. without caution. However, the findings that adopted children are likely to be achieving academically better than children who were not adopted and remained with birth families or in institutional care is also supported by Selwyn and Wijedasa (2011). They found that adoptive children were more likely to achieve five A*-C's at GCSE than disadvantaged children and children in foster care. Whilst this is an interesting and very positive finding it is important to note there was a small sample size of 34 adopted children interviewed and as interviews were carried out over a six year period there was a high attrition rate. Furthermore, this study used the data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and it has therefore not been designed to access a wide range of adopted children.

Biehal, Sinclair, Baker and Ellison (2010) also support the idea that stability does lead to better educational outcomes. They found on measures of educational progress, there was very little difference between children in long term fostering and children adopted, apart from the fact that those in long term foster care were more likely to exhibit some behavioural difficulties at school. The unstable foster care group was likely to score significantly worse on

educational progress, truancy and exclusions than both the long term fostered and adopted group.

Conversely, studies that focussed on only adopted children such as Selwyn, Quinton, Baxter and Sturgess (2006) found that 95% of adopted children in their study had at least one special need with more than half of the children having four special needs. These included; developmental delay, behaviour problems, attachment difficulties, poor concentration, hyper activity, enuresis, encopresis and physical disabilities. Overall they noted that adopted children's lives were more stable and they suffered from less disruption, but only a quarter were free from some difficulty affecting their life and development. The research does seem to suggest that whilst adoptive children are likely to experience some difficulties with education, they are more likely to do better than fostered peers.

Furthermore, Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) highlight the special needs of the children in their study, in which they explored adoptions that had disrupted (that is where the adopted child had left the house) and adoptions where there were difficulties but the families were still together. Following interviews with 70 adoptive parents they identified that 37% of the adopted children in this study had a statement of special educational needs (higher than the average population of 2.8% DfE 2012). They highlighted that many of the children presented with challenging behaviours in school and due to this some had spent up to a year out of school with five being permanently excluded. Parents in this study also spoke of how they were regularly contacted by the school to discuss their child's aggressive behaviour and that

they had offered to share their knowledge of their child and trauma with school but this had been rejected. This is clearly not generalizable to all adopted children, due to the parents being chosen for interview because they were experiencing difficulty or had experienced adoption disruption. However, it still highlights some parents' experiences of the education system and educational outcomes for some adoptive children.

In terms of information about educational ability, Cooper and Johnson (2007) identified in their survey research that 37% of adoptive parents said they were given no information about the general difficulties that adopted children might experience at school. Pennington (2012) also carried out survey research to look at adoptive parents views of support services. From this study she noted that adoptive parents felt that post adoption educational support was an area of need and "most respondents stated that their children's educational needs were not being met" (p. 8). The parents that completed the survey felt that there was a lack of understanding in schools of how trauma and early negative experiences impact on adoptive children's ability to learn. Dann (2011) supports this view and believes that because adopted children are seen to have a stable family they are often overlooked in education.

In summary, the outcome research seems to show that adoptive children are more likely to show more externalising behavioural difficulties (Rushton and Dance, 2006; Keyes et al, 2008), anxiety (Keyes et al, 2008; Selwyn and Wijedasa, 2011) and report more bullying. Selwyn and Wijedasa, (2006) found much higher levels of special educational needs than the general population for children adopted at a later age. However, there does seem to be strong

research evidence that there is a catch up in I.Q (van Ijzendoorn, Juffer and Klein-Poelhus 2005) and in the U.K. they seem to show good school achievement at GCSE (Selwyn and Wijedasa, 2011). Furthermore, the U.K. based study used a sample not specifically looking at adopted children and does not provide details at what age the children were adopted which seems to be important in predicting long term outcomes for children adopted from care.

As stated above what seemed to be relevant to successful outcomes in many of the above studies was age at placement. In addition to this, the type of trauma experienced prior to adoption seemed to also be significant. Some of the studies provide comparisons between different placement types (Biehal Sinclair, Baker and Ellison, 2010; van Ijzendoorn, Juffer and Klein-Poelhus, 2005; Selwyn and Wijedasa, 2011) and do provide some validation for adoption as a more successful option for some children in comparison to foster care.

In terms of parental views, there is an overwhelming sense that they feel schools do not have an understanding of the impact that trauma has on a child's ability to learn (Cooper and Johnson, 2007; Pennington, 2012; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014) and that their children are not having their educational needs met.

Whilst outcome research is useful and provides an overall descriptive picture and as Palacios (2009) states, in recent years has become much more theoretically informed, it still is mostly quantitative in nature and cannot provide

a rich and detailed understanding of the lives of the people involved in adoption. In addition, whilst it can provide us with statistics on educational outcomes as Palacios (2009) writes there is very little research into the day to day educational lives of adopted children or the impact that educational difficulties have on the family life.

The next section will outline proposed theories and reasons for why children adopted from care may experience some of the difficulties highlighted above. Pre-care experiences, identity, loss and attachment will be explored.

2.3 Literature regarding proposed reasons for difficulties

2.3.1 Pre-care Experiences

As the statistics cited in Chapter One show, many children are adopted from care because of an inadequate early experience with their birth family. McGinn (2007) highlights, that even prior to birth the environment may not be conducive to healthy development. He suggests that often, for children who are adopted, the pregnancy is unplanned and so there is psychological stress for the birth mother, this may result in prolonged anxiety. He suggests that the birth mother may be making unhealthy lifestyle choices such as smoking and drinking alcohol. These are all known to be damaging to an unborn foetus and can result in lower birth weight and foetal alcohol syndrome. Additionally, there may be factors such as domestic violence which will have an effect on the unborn foetus and also the early life experiences of the child.

2.3.3 Identity and loss

Central to being adopted are issues of loss and identity. These are particularly pertinent for children adopted from care who may have experienced multiple foster placements. Erickson (1968) described identity as the developmental outcome of multiple life experiences, this is in line with the social constructivist approach taken within this research. Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler and Lash Esau (2000), separate identity into three areas, self-definition which is based on characteristics that are recognised by other people over time and across social contexts. Coherence of personality, which is how the different aspects of the personality fit together and finally a sense of continuity between the past, present and future. If we apply this to our children adopted from care it creates quite a complicated picture for adoptive identity formation. Grotevant et al (2000) claim that not only do adopted children have to form an identity like non-adopted children but they have to construct an adoptive identity which consists of “how the individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption” (p. 381). Again, this may mean that identity formation for adopted children is complex and potentially harrowing.

More recently, Neil (2012) suggests that “legally, adoption in the UK makes a child irrevocably and permanently a member of their adoptive family but the success of adoption depends on these legal relationships being reflected in the psychological integration of the child into the adoptive family” (p. 409). She carried out a study in which 43 English adoptees were interviewed in middle childhood. Seventy per- cent of them were placed from care as babies, toddlers or pre-schoolers. She found that almost all of the children felt happy in their adoptive homes but that there was a difference between those who

had been adopted over the age of three. These children described a much more active integration process and could remember life before adoption. She also noted that those who described adoption as complicated were older at adoption and older at interview than those who had not thought about adoption or those that saw adoption as unproblematic. The group who saw adoption as complicated often used emotive language to describe their birth family and often feelings of rejection were spoken of either implicitly or explicitly. One third of the children she interviewed said they had sad or strange feelings about being adopted. Finally, she noted that many children described that they did not like other children's questions about being adopted as they found it embarrassing and personal. She also found that some reported being teased because of their adoption or reported that other children pitied them, which they did not like.

Bowlby (1969) argued that children as young as four years old could be found to long for a parent. He suggested that they experience conflicting emotions of hope that the parent will return and sadness and anger when they realise they will not. Brodzinsky (1990) outlined that the loss that older adopted children feel is overt and can be very traumatic whilst the loss that younger children feel emerges more slowly as they begin to understand what happened. He suggests understanding emerges at between the ages of five to seven years old, prior to this, he believes, they are simply repeating back stories they have heard not really understanding what it means to be adopted. As Brodzinsky (1990) states at this age they begin to be able to see adoption not just in terms of "family building but also family loss" (p. 13). McGinn (2007) writes that these issues of loss are relevant not only to the adopted child but also the birth

mother and the adoptive mother. The birth mother will experience the loss of her child and for the new adoptive family, adoption is often due to infertility, so the adopted child is coming into a family at a point of celebration but also loss & mourning of the biological child that the family cannot have. Golding (2010) supports this idea and suggests that "families often adopt against a backdrop of failed fertility and loss, potentially leading to complex adjustment issues" (p. 574). McGinn (2007) adds to this and claims that adolescence can be a difficult time for those that are adopted as this is a time of individuation and when children tend to separate from parents this can "reactivate feelings of rejection and abandonment" (p. 69).

2.3.4 Attachment

Another suggested reason for some of the difficulties outlined previously is attachment difficulties. As Gauthier, Fortin, & Jeliu, (2004) suggest adopted children with experience of neglect, trauma and loss are at increased risk of experiencing attachment and relationship difficulties. Attachment theory as suggested by Bowlby in the 1960's suggests that a child has an innate need to attach to another. Bowlby (1969) believed that attachment had the purpose of developing internal working models. These working models act as the beginning of a mental framework that helps a child understand and predict others and the world around them. Bowlby (1969) wrote that having a responsive mother gives a child "a sense of worth, a belief in the helpfulness of others and a favourable model on which to build future relationships" (p. 378). Bowlby also believed that a secure attachment allowed for cognitive gains as it enables a child to confidently explore their environment. He suggested that the feelings of success that this brings, promote the child's sense of competence. A child experiencing this would be securely attached.

Alternatively, those who had experienced an un-responsive or neglectful early care experience would have an internal working model that believes others are unhelpful and would have a poor sense of self-worth. For many children that are adopted at an older age with neglectful or traumatic early experiences they will have developed an insecure working model in which people are not helpful and do not provide comfort. Those with an insecure working model will often see the world as a scary and unpredictable place and as Bowlby stated these children will behave accordingly and shrink away from the world or fight it.

Supportive of attachment theory are the developments in neuroscience which have allowed the impact of early experiences on the physical development of the brain to be seen. It is now known that babies are born with all the neurons (cells that transmit electrical signals around the body) that they need for life, as the baby develops, especially in the first few years, synapses that connect the neurons develop (Paus, Castro-Alamancos and Petrides 2000). These form from experiences and social interactions. For example, Schore (1994) showed that looks and smiles help the brain to grow. He reported that more positive experiences early on in life produce brains with more neuronal connections. However, a lack of exposure to positive environmental experiences leads to neural connections being inhibited. More neural connections means better performance and increased ability to use certain areas of the brain whilst a limited number will inhibit performance and development. Unfortunately, Chugani, Behen, Muzik, Juhász, Nagy and Chugani (2001) managed to show the extreme importance of interactions during early childhood when studying

Romanian orphans who had been severely neglected. They noted that without attachment relationships key parts of the brain did not grow.

Furthermore, Gerhardt (2004) suggests, on the basis of neuroscience, that for a baby or toddler the most stressful experience of all is to be separated from their main care giver. She highlights that this early separation can increase cortisol in the brain and that this increased level of cortisol can have a damaging effect. However, it is not only early separation that can cause stress and increased cortisol but also prolonged frightening or neglectful experiences such as domestic violence. This type of persistent stress can lead to baby's brains being flooded with cortisol which in turn can lead to cell damage in areas of the brain (Tarullo and Gunnar, 2006) such as the amygdala, hippocampus and the pre-frontal cortex (Brown and Ward, 2013). High levels of prolonged stress are related to an overactive amygdala which can result in reactive, impulsive behaviours and hyper-arousal. These children often present with behaviours that would lead to them receiving a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactive disorder. Damage to the hippocampus can affect memory, mood, cognitive and socio-emotional skills, whereas damage to the pre-frontal cortex can have an impact on a child's executive functioning skills, which Blair (2002) states is the biological underpinning to school readiness. These relatively new findings from neuroscience highlight the enduring and wide reaching impact of early attachment difficulties. It is likely that many of the children adopted from care will have experienced early trauma or neglect which may have an impact on their developing brain.

van den Dries, Juffer, van Ijzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2009) looked at the research on adopted children's attachment. They wanted to find out if adopted children showed "catch up or delays in the domain of attachment after transition into their new families" (p. 19). To do this they conducted meta-analyses of thirty-nine adoption studies and eleven fostering studies. The methodology was sound with transparent inclusion/rejection criteria and detailed explanation of measures used. They found that overall adopted children were as securely attached as non-adopted children but that age of adoption was a significant factor in the security of attachment. That is, children who were adopted prior to twelve months of age were just as securely attached as children who were not adopted. Those adopted after this time showed less secure attachments than non-adopted children. Additionally, they also noted that adopted children overall, showed more disorganised attachment than the general population and that this was independent of the age of placement. In terms of the children being adopted in this country, as stated very few are adopted at under one year of age and therefore it would suggest that it is likely many of the adoptive children will have less secure attachments than non-adopted children.

Another study that supports the attachment ability of adopted children was Rushton, Mayes, Dance and Quinton (2003). They carried out a study to look at the attachments of children placed from care in to long term foster homes or adoptive families. They studied 61, five to nine year olds and collected data on their attachment, behaviour and any emotional difficulties through interviews and the Expression of Feelings Questionnaire. They found that by the end of the first year 73% of children had formed an attachment to at least one parent.

Those who did not manage to form an attached relationship were described as having more emotional and behavioural difficulties and it was found that these children were more likely to have experienced active rejection from their birth parents. They also noted that the non-attached children had more difficulties interacting with their new parents and in turn the parents then had more difficulties in responding to the children in a warm and sensitive way.

The above findings are supported by Lieberman (2003) who reviewed 83 clinical charts of children adopted from care. She interviewed adoptive parents and carried out observations of interactions between the parent and adoptive child as well as seeking information about the adoption and family history. From this she concluded that adoptive parents need to have specialist skills to understand the subtle cues that a child shows and to be able to respond to them appropriately to meet their psychological needs. She noted that often adoptive parents misinterpreted certain behaviours from their children such as "seeing temper tantrums and oppositional, defiant behaviour as negative communications towards them rather than the child's expressions of anxiety and fear of loss" (p. 281). Additionally, she noted that some adoptive parents that were having difficulty with attachments often responded with disciplinary measures instead of "firm but comforting behaviour that would have reassured the child" (p. 281). Therefore, the research would suggest there is a need for support and training for all adoptive parents to help them understand what their child's behaviour is communicating and how best to respond. This is an area that Educational Psychologists could further contribute to.

2.3.5 The interaction of these difficulties

Just as Rushton (2003) stated, and in line with the Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) models these experiences and difficulties do not act in isolation. Lowe, Murch, Borkowski, Weaver, Beckford and Thomas (1999) suggested that attachment issues at home might well interact with school and the broader social world. Ruston (2004) agrees, and suggests difficulties can have a substantial impact both at home and at school and can lead to placement disruption, which, for the adopted child, is yet another experience of loss and rejection. There have been several small studies that have put the disruption rates of children adopted from care at 17% Selwyn et al (2006), 23% Ruston and Dance (2006) and Biehal, Sinclair, Baker and Ellison (2010) found it to be 11%. However, a more comprehensive and recent study looking at the national disruption rate put it at 3.2% much lower than previous estimates (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014).

Rushton and Dance (2006) aimed to evaluate the impact of placing children from public care into adoptive homes and to identify some of the factors that influenced outcomes. Their study was a prospective design and they carried out face to face interviews with adoptive parents, collected information from social workers and case files at both one and six years after the adoption. From their interviews they identified three categories of placement; continuing positive placement, continuing placement with on-going difficulties and disrupted placements. They found that at the six year follow up the placement was more likely to be at risk of disruption if the child was older at placement, had behavioural difficulties, if the child was placed alone (they argued this may have been because more "difficult" children are likely to be placed alone), had

experienced pre-placement maltreatment (this was especially true for emotional abuse and preferential rejection) or had frequent moves before the adoption. Whilst they did find that 23% of these placements had broken down, over half were reported positively and, whilst a further 28% were reported to have on-going difficulties the families were still continuing. This may suggest in line with the Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) model an accumulation of vulnerability factors and stressors need to be considered when viewing adoption breakdown.

In support of these findings Biehal, Sinclair, Baker and Ellison (2010) also found that age at entry to care had a significant impact on their trajectory, with those being adopted by strangers the youngest at entry and those that were now in an unstable foster care placement were the oldest. They found that 11% of children adopted or placed for adoption had experienced disruption whereas, 28% of foster placements had disrupted. However, because the age at entry to care was different it was difficult to compare placement type. Furthermore, similar to Rushton and Dance (2006), they noted the severity of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties influencing the stability of placement and added a further two factors including the parenting style of the carers and events in the carers' lives such as marital discord or death of a family member. Again, suggesting a contextual and holistic view of adoption disruption and the accumulating risk factors are important to consider.

Finally, a recent study by Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014), aimed to provide the first national statistics for adoption disruption, highlight factors associated with disruption and illuminate the experiences of some adoptive

parents, adopted children and adoption social workers. They carried out surveys of adopted parents that had adopted between 2002 and 2004 from 13 Local Authorities. In addition, an online survey was carried out that was open to all Adoption UK members, despite year of adoption. From the survey four groups of parents were identified; those for whom adoption was “going well”, those who were having “highs and lows but mostly highs”, those having “major difficulties” and those whose adopted children had “left prematurely”.

Following the survey, 35 parents from the “major difficulties” (but with children still at home) group and 35 parents from the “left prematurely” group were interviewed to gain an insight in to some of the contexts where difficulty arose.

As stated they noted that the adoption disruption rate for those who adopted between 2002 and 2004 was nationally 3.2% with a variation in Local Authorities from none to seven percent of adoptions disrupting. They noticed numerous interesting factors that seemed to be associated with disruption, and again their findings highlight the need to consider an eco-systemic framework for accumulative risk when considering adoption disruption. They noted the following as important; age at disruption, the risk factor was ten times higher for teenagers than for children under four and two thirds of the adoptions that had disrupted did so during secondary school years. Also found to be more at risk were children that were older at placement and those who had experienced a longer wait between placement and the adoption order going through. In the adoptions that had disrupted the following factors were also noted; the children were more likely than those who had remained in the adoptive family to have experienced abuse and neglect, leading up to the disruption these children were often described as being out of parental control

with difficulties escalating in school in the previous months and children truanting or receiving exclusions. The police were also involved with many of the children who experienced an adoption disruption. Furthermore, in 80% of the families that had experienced disruption there was child to parent violence or child to child violence. There were only seven disruptions that that did not involve violence and these broke down for a combination of reasons including; relationship difficulties, serious mental health difficulties, behavioural and cognitive difficulties, school problems, sibling jealousy and/ or a pre-occupation with the birth family. This is a useful study and is the first to track the national rate of adoption disruption.

Again, the research evidence seems to show that adoptions of children in care can be successful for many, but a realistic and pragmatic approach needs to be taken in that a “happy ever after” ending does not always happen. As Ruston and Dance (2006) and Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) showed lots of the children in their study had on-going difficulties and so the simple view that being placed with a stable family is enough to solve all problems for all children is not true. Rushton and Dance (2006) also argue that because of this, support for families should continue for many years post adoption. As do Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) who also suggest that post-adoption support should additionally be offered when the adopted children reach puberty which they found was the time when most adoptions breakdown.

As stated previously, adoption is often constructed in line with the social and political context of a time, as Sykes (2001) writes “adoptive families are at risk

of being at the mercy of constantly shifting social policy trends” (p. 296). As such I consider it important to look at the literature for the process of adoption including the matching, the children that are adopted, and the support for families post adoption. These will all have an impact on the adopters and the lives of the children being adopted. I will consider wider systems, culture of the social services and policies that might impact upon the lives of adoptive families.

2.4 Literature regarding the adoption process

2.4.1 Linking and Matching

One of the few studies that actively sought adoptive parents' views of the process was carried out by Adoption UK (2010). They carried out a survey of 179 of Adoption UK's members to explore their experiences of being recruited and the assessment and preparation process for becoming adopters. Whilst of a small scale, descriptive in its findings and possibly subject to response bias due to the self-selected sample, this did have some interesting findings including; over 27% of prospective adopter's being turned away from applying to adoption agencies. The reasons for this varied from agencies not currently recruiting, potential adopters not being the right “fit” for children, being too old or not of the right ethnicity. Considering the need for adoptive parents, 27% being turned away is a huge concern. Once their adoption application was accepted 77% of respondents had their application submitted to panel in under a year. However, this means that 23% of the respondents in this study had to wait over a year to have their application go to an adoption panel. More recently, Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) from interviews with adopted parents found that they reported the linking process to be competitive and stressful.

Dance Beecham, Bonin and Ouwejan (2010) conducted a survey of adoption agencies which aimed to identify and categorise differences in policy and practice in linking and matching in adoption. One hundred and sixty-eight Local Authorities were contacted along with 29 voluntary adoption agencies, of the Local Authorities 44% responded and 55% of voluntary adoption agencies responded. They found variations in the proportion of children adopted by existing foster carers, a wide variation in children that were placed with siblings (between 14% and 80%), and a large variation between rates of children that were placed with disabilities or health needs (between 0 -29%). Dance et al (2010) found that many of the authorities and agencies in their study reported difficulties in recruiting adopters for children with additional needs, sibling groups and also for children of a minority ethnic background. However, a quarter of respondents said they had not operated targeted drives for adopters looking to adopt these children despite the need for them.

Selwyn et al (2006) carried out a study with the aim of looking at why some children are more easily adopted and to consider the support needs of older and more challenging adopted children. They noticed that the children that tended to be adopted were younger and had had a quicker decision made about adoption when they first entered the care system, those who showed overt sexualized behavior prior to the age of three were significantly less likely to be adopted. Selwyn et al (2006) reported that 68% of the adoptive parents they interviewed shared that they had not received all of the information on their child and they had highlighted the important role that foster carers had in bridging the move from foster care to adoption. Adopted parents in their study

also reported having a lack of knowledge of the services that were on offer post-adoption. They also shared that the adoption had put financial pressure on the family, with one eighth of families purchasing private help from speech and language therapists and additional support for education. This is an additional financial burden for some families and could be seen to contribute to difficulties.

Other studies seem to allude to more systemic factors for not placing different types of children. Selwyn, Harris, Quinton, Nawaz, Wijedasa and Wood (2008) carried out a study in three Local Authorities looking at the comparison of white and ethnic minority entry routes to care and decision making for adoption. They also considered how decisions for adoption were taken forward for black, Asian and mixed ethnicity children and interviewed social workers to understand how they took into account the ethnicity of these children. They found that children of mixed ethnicity were often described as “hard to place” this was very much based on their ethnicity and not on the child themselves, this was even true for a young mixed ethnicity baby who should be easy to place. They also noted that social workers used culture and ethnicity interchangeably and that on the children’s files there was very little about the child’s cultural experience and the desire for a same race placement often dominated their descriptions. Selwyn et al (2008) also noticed that black and mixed ethnicity children were more likely to be adopted at an older age and that social workers were likely to stop looking for a potential match much quicker than they were for white children. Furthermore, they surmised that whilst there were few ethnic minority adults that wanted to adopt there were other barriers to the adoption such as a concentration on same ethnicity

placements, negativity of social workers believing the children were hard to place and they also reported some qualitative evidence that social workers were reluctant to place children with potential adopters in ethnically mixed relationships. In summary in light of the research discussed earlier, the later placement of these children will have implications for their long term outcomes.

On looking at choosing which family to proceed with, Dance et al (2010) found some key factors that arose when professionals were making the decision. Firstly, practice, process and organisational issues were taken in to account such as not working outside of the boundaries of adopter's preferences, involving foster carers and ensuring adequate preparation. Secondly, adopter's characteristics were taken in to account, adopters' attitudes and understanding of the task of becoming an adoptive parent and finally emotional connectedness or "chemistry" between the adopters and the child was considered. Numerous barriers were cited by Local Authorities and voluntary adoption agencies in this study including social worker attitudes. Again, it was suggested that they may become too focussed on searching for the ideal family rather than a good enough family and again, there was an emphasis on reflecting ethnic heritage which caused delays in placement. Another barrier cited was financial in terms of interagency fees. This will become increasingly important during times of cuts and very low Local Authority budgets.

2.4.2 Support Services

As part of their study Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) interviewed 70 adoptive parents about their views on adoption support. Again, as stated previously findings from this study are not generalizable to all adoptive parents

as they only interview those experiencing major challenges or those where the adoption had disrupted. However, they noted that these parents were generally dissatisfied with support offered. They cited numerous barriers including; difficulty accessing support, disagreements over funding and a criteria for services that often excluded adopted children. Parents felt that as situations escalated and more specialist support was needed social workers did not know what to do or could not offer any more support because of budget cuts and an inability to commission other services. There was a variation in experiences with CAMHS with many reporting a difficulty in access and not always being offered the support that was needed. More worryingly some parents that sought support were often then subjected to a child protection investigation. Despite this, a quarter of those interviewed identified consistent and understanding social workers and therapeutic support useful. As well as half of the parents reporting a good service from educational professionals including Educational Psychologists.

Pennington (2012) carried out a survey of Adoption UK's members. This looked at adoptive parents' views of support services. Pennington (2012) found that from her sample many adoptive parents were not aware of the support services on offer to them. The parents interviewed identified numerous barriers to accessing adoption support service which were; level of understanding and experience of adoption among professionals, money/finances, agencies not seeing their problems, some identified the working relationships between different agencies and 15% were worried about being seen as a failure by their agencies.

Rushton and Monck (2009) conducted a study in which they contacted 178 families that had adopted children between the ages of three and eight. Each family was asked to fill in a questionnaire and 38 of these agreed to be interviewed. They found that many of the parents understood and accepted that adoption would be difficult but, many were shocked by the realities of the difficulties that their child experienced. Lots of the parents did not feel skilled enough to manage these difficulties even though they felt they had been made aware of them. Forty per- cent of those interviewed felt they needed more knowledge of child development and more than 50% said they would have liked more input about attachment and how to deal with aggressive behaviours. Rushton and Monck (2009), suggest that a more skills based approach might be useful when preparing adoptive parents. They also suggested that there should be more contact between the foster carers and adoptive parents so that more information and knowledge about the child could be shared. Additionally, they suggested more training for social workers to give them the confidence in preparing adopters to deal with specific problems. It is important to consider the sample of this study. Perhaps, those that agreed to be interviewed might have been those least satisfied or those needing the most support and so it may be bias. Nevertheless, this study is supported by Lieberman (2003) who noted that in her experience many parents felt they were not prepared by the adoption agencies about some of the possible challenges of raising a child who had experienced foster care. She noted that "educating adoptive parents about the predictable psychological and behavioural problems of children who were deprived of a consistent attachment figure must be an essential cornerstone of the adoption process" (p. 282).

It is also important to provide more specialist support with respect to diversity, both to parents and also to agencies that work with them. As stated in Chapter One, since the Adoption Act (2002) there has been a more diverse group of prospective adopters. One such group is that of lesbian and gay parents. Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok (2013) explored the experiences of heterosexual and homosexual adopters. They noted that although lesbian and gay parents were still only a small proportion of the total number of adopters, they accounted for 120 adoptions annually. Many of the adopters that were interviewed suggested that the agencies that worked with them lacked experience of lesbian and gay families. This led to a sense of awkwardness and would suggest that there is a need for further diversity training so that agencies are able to support these families successfully. Furthermore, figures of black and ethnic minority adopters are also low despite high levels of black and ethnic minority children waiting to be adopted (Rule 2009). Action for Children (2010) found that having an "ethnically and culturally sensitive" (p.3) recruitment process can change these low numbers. They also found that many of the parents who went on to adopt through the Adoption Black Families team had previously had a negative experience of trying to adopt through Local Authorities. Again, this would suggest that further diversity training on culture and ethnicity is needed within Local Authority services. Furthermore, Action for Children recommends that the adoption workforce should be more diverse and reflective of the client groups they work with.

In summary, much of the research conducted into parental experiences of the adoption process is carried out by surveys. Whilst this is a useful and cost effective way to access large numbers of participants it does have drawbacks including, biases in self reporting and being unsure who has completed the questionnaire. Additionally, there are sometimes concerns about the response rate and the participants that choose to respond. Again, survey research is descriptive and can only provide a limited insight into people's lives and experiences of adoption. Due to the limited studies in this area this does offer a useful insight into some parents' experiences of post adoption support. However, there seems to be a gap in the existing literature for qualitative research that is able to gain a deeper and psychological understanding of the experiences of adoptive parents undergoing the adoption process and the implications it has for their family life. Whilst Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) study goes some way to fill this gap, their interviews are selective in that only the parents who are or have experienced difficulties were interviewed and the main focus of their study was to elicit contributing factors to disruption. This study intends to address the current gap in the literature with a focus on the whole experience of adoption including post adoption support and the education system.

2.5 Summary of literature regarding the adoption process

The literature above outlined the variations between Local Authorities in placing siblings and children with disabilities. It highlighted the perceived difficulties in recruiting adoptive parents for these children but the lack of targeted recruitment drives (Dance et al 2010) and the rejection of potential parents (Adoption UK, 2010; Selwyn et al, 2006). It also uncovered the focus

on ethnicity in adoption and raises a suggestion there may be a culture amongst the social work profession of searching for an ideal family or a perfect ethnic match (Selwyn et al, 2006; Adoption UK, 2010). This has now been addressed by recent legislation. The research suggests there is a general lack of information and preparation for adoptive parents about their children and also highlights the important role foster carers have to play in the sharing of information (Selwyn et al 2006; Selwyn et al, 2008; Rushton and Monck, 2009; Lieberman, 2003; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings 2014). A lack of awareness of the support available to adoptive parents was also found (Pennington 2012).

Most of the studies into the adoption process were survey based some with a qualitative element. As mentioned survey research is a cost effective method to access a large number of people but as is well known has some of the following pitfalls. Traditionally, surveys do not elicit high response rates, there is often a response bias and whilst these survey studies paint a good picture of some of the issues relating to the adoption process there is little mention of what effect these have on the lives of adoptive families. There is very little detailed and quality research taking a qualitative approach to understanding the process of adoption and how it feels for those involved. The qualitative research that is available is often focused on one specific area of adoption and so does not provide a broad and holistic picture of the lives of the adoptive family.

2.6 Rationale

Taking into consideration the literature, it is clear that adopting older children from care is a feasible option to provide some of these children with a secure and stable home. However, it is important to remember that these children are the same children who are looked after and are identified as our most educationally vulnerable. However, once adopted they are not afforded the same status in education and are not offered the support and protection that looked after children are. Additionally, as Rushton (2003) writes it is "important to know what contribution educational difficulties have on placement stability and quality of life" (p. 23) and that there is a dearth of small scale "consumer's views of adoption support" (p. 30).

As identified above there is a real gap in the existing literature of quality and holistic qualitative research to provide a rich understanding of the lives of those having experienced adoption and its many elements. Many of the qualitative studies into adoption from the parents' perspectives focus on one small element of the process and on adoption of children prior to school age. With this in mind, the current study aims to address these omissions and carry out research to look at the different and cumulative impacts that the adoption process has on adoptive parents and their views of support (or lack of) and the impact this has on their family life. Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval (2005) write that listening to adoptive parents is crucial as it is their expectations and goals that will influence satisfaction with the placement and ultimately the success of the adoption. With studies estimating the breakdown of adoptions at between 3.2% (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014) and as much as 23% (Rushton and Dance, 2006), it is hoped that the current study will help to

highlight some of the protective and vulnerability factors during and after adoption and therefore can support professionals and Local Authorities when considering adoptive family needs.

In addition, it is hoped that this study will add to the professional knowledge of adoption and further add to the Educational Psychological knowledge base for adoption which, at present, is quite limited. This is also a timely piece of research coming at a time when there is an emphasis on finding more potential adopters for the many children waiting in the care system. This increased attention on adoption makes it even more important to understand how adoptive parents experience the process. Only then, can we target making the process better and supporting the needs of the families in a holistic manner.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Overview

Within this chapter I will outline the aims of the study, the research questions and the epistemological standpoint. I will also outline the methodology, how the interview schedule was constructed and the sampling method used. In addition, I will cover any ethical issues that need to be considered.

As stated previously adoptive parents are the focus of this study. Whilst it would have been interesting to explore adopted children's views, as the literature review suggests, it would have been impossible to interview children within the timeframe of this study. The ethical issues around interviewing potentially vulnerable children regarding sensitive issues would have required much more time to arrange and conduct these interviews.

Aim: The aim of the current research is to explore the thoughts and feelings about the adoption process, in particular the educational experiences and post adoption support of parents of children adopted from care. Additionally, I aim to explore the wider impact, if any, that these experiences have had, and what were deemed to be vulnerability and protective factors by participants throughout the process.

Research Questions:

- How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?

- How do adoptive parents experience post-adoption support and what has this meant for their families?
- What is their experience of the education system post adoption?

3.2 Epistemological and Ontological Assumptions

At this point, for the purpose of transparency, it is felt to be important to reiterate my epistemological and ontological standpoint. As mentioned throughout the first chapter I situate myself within the constructivist paradigm. I believe that truth is socially constructed through language and that knowledge is subjective and based on background and experience. This is also in line with the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review, which emphasises the importance of context, history and culture in shaping how individuals view and make sense of the world.

Ontology relates to “how things really are” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, p.201) and the “nature of the social world and what can be known about it” (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston 2014, p.1). Burr (2009) suggests that ontology is the “attempt to discover the fundamental categories of what exists in the world” (p. 92), whereas, epistemology is concerned with how knowledge is obtained or produced. As stated, my personal stance is one of social constructivism relating to both ontology and epistemology. Like Burr (2003) I believe that reality can only be known through socially constructed means and therefore epistemologically it was appropriate to study social conversation. In this study, that refers to the semi-structured interview between myself and the adoptive parents.

3.3 Qualitative methodology

Due to my philosophical standpoint and the nature of the research questions outlined above, I see it as important to undertake a qualitative methodology to allow for the exploration of individuals' experience, thoughts and feelings. As Merton (2005) writes this is a research aim that lends itself to qualitative methodology because it aims to "understand beliefs about the nature of the problem" being addressed (p. 228).

Creswell (2007) explains that a qualitative methodology should be used when a topic needs further exploration, when a more detailed account is needed and when research should be carried out in a naturalistic setting. From the literature review it was highlighted that there are very few detailed accounts of adoptive parents' experience and therefore a qualitative methodology was thought to be useful to provide a richer picture of some parents' experiences. Creswell (2007) also states that a qualitative methodology allows for a complex and holistic view of what is being studied. This was felt to be important when speaking with adoptive families and was considered to be a respectful approach that did not reduce individuals lived experience to numbers. A qualitative methodology is also sensitive to and able to highlight emotional experiences of participants. In the current research this is crucial as the research evidence is aiming to contribute to the existing literature base aimed at supporting families and helping to reduce the breakdown of adoptions.

3.4 Quality in qualitative research

At this point it is useful to consider the quality of the study. As Braun and Clarke (2013) write there is a widely agreed upon criteria for evaluating quantitative research and often this is “presented as the criteria for evaluating all research” (p. 278). For qualitative research the criteria is not so clear and many researchers have developed differing ideas based on different theoretical approaches. In terms of the current research, Yardley’s (2000; 2008) four quality principles were considered when designing the study. These are as follows; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence and impact and importance.

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Interviews and focus group

As stated it was felt to be important to seek the views of the participants in as natural a way as possible. As Kvale and Brinkman (2009) write “if you want to know how people understand the world and their lives, why not talk with them?” (p. xvii). As such it was decided that semi-structured interviews would be carried out. As Smith and Osborne (2003) write, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility so that the researcher can follow new areas that participants believe to be interesting or of a concern. Having a flexible interview schedule also builds rapport which leads to much richer data being provided by the participants (Smith and Osborne 2003). However, it is also argued that semi-structured interviews are at risk of participant social bias, which is the tendency for participants to want to present themselves in the best light. Fisher (1993) states that sometimes participants are “unwilling or unable to report accurately on sensitive topics” (p. 303). This is important to bear in mind as adoption is a sensitive topic. However, I will again clarify and emphasise

my belief as a social constructionist that there is no absolute truth and as such this study is not concerned with seeking the truth or an accurate description. Rather, it is concerned with seeking people's thoughts and feelings about adoption and looking for similarities within a number of different interviews. Another deliberation when considering the interviews was that their success is largely dependent on the skills of the interviewer and their ability to build rapport. As Kvale (1996) writes the "interviewer is him- or herself the research instrument" (p. 147). Whilst taking in to account the above, it was still felt that in terms of the research questions, semi structured interviews were a useful way to answer the broad and exploratory research questions that were posed.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, a focus group was also carried out. In the process of recruiting participants and contacting different adoption agencies it came to my attention that one of the agencies was conducting research for the Department for Education about post adoption support. They offered me the opportunity to lead one of the focus groups and incorporate my questions with theirs.

The following eight questions were asked during the focus group;

- What has been your experience of pre-adoption support and training?
- What challenges if any, have you faced with the education system?
- What was or would have been useful to support you with this?
- What are the needs/challenges you would like to be addressed by Post Adoption Support Services (P.A.S.S)?
- What barriers have you faced in finding and using P.A.S.S?
- What would make it easier for you to access P.A.S.S?
- What P.A.S.S have you accessed and how would you rate them?

- Do you have any other thoughts or views you wish to share on any of the topics covered today?

The initial three questions were proposed by me with the final five being suggested by the adoption agency. The focus group was carried out at the adoption agency with five participants and lasted for two hours.

Whilst this was not a pre-planned methodological approach it was felt that this would be a good way to enrich the agencies data by including questioning about education but also to enrich the data for this research by accessing a wider range of participants and allowing a methodological triangulation of views (Denzin, 1978). Carrying out within method triangulation allows for a deeper and comprehensive picture of individuals experience to develop (Tobin and Begley, 2004). The use of the focus groups and semi-structure interviews were complementary, allowing for both a broad outline of some of the issues and a more in-depth discussion of personal experiences. Ideally, the focus group would have been carried out first and the data used from that to structure the semi-structured interview questions. However, this was not possible due to difficulties recruiting participants.

As stated one of the strengths of carrying out a focus group was that it allowed for methodological triangulation, other strengths were also felt to be gained from using the focus group methodology. Brown (1999) highlighted that within a focus group participants are usually homogenous which enables them to empathise with each other's experiences and thus facilitates deeper conversation. In addition, Wilkinson (2003) suggests focus groups can allow for more naturalistic conversation. This was observed in the current study,

participants seemed to enjoy each other's company and sharing stories of their experiences. Furthermore, allowing naturalistic conversation can reduce the feelings that the researcher is an authority figure and therefore allow participants to take ownership. This can result in a "deeper understanding" of what is being studied (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2013, p. 41). However, as Hollander (2004) writes the data from focus groups "cannot be considered separate from the social context in which it was collected (p. 602)." This is an important point to consider within the current study. I feel that whilst there was naturalistic conversation and the participants did take ownership of the topics discussed, some participants did not always share everything they wanted to with the group. I felt this was due to a lack of group consensus and issues of social desirability. Whilst it was felt that this did not alter the authenticity of the data it did mean that topics in the focus group remained "safe". I will return to and expand on this point when discussing the methodological strengths and weaknesses in Chapter Five.

3.5.2 Constructing the interview schedule

The draft interview schedule was produced after a thorough reading of the literature and key themes from this were used to structure my interview schedule and prompts. The key areas that were of interest were the pre-adoption stage; which included; preparation, the matching process and support and the post adoption phase which included; educational experiences and post adoption support. When forming these questions I was conscious I wanted to elicit description and kept the questions open ended. As Hugh – Jones (2010) suggests it is crucial that the questions are kept open ended and that the interview starts with easy to answer non-threatening questions. This

helps the participant relax and creates trust and rapport. I also included in my schedule prompts on areas that I wanted to discuss further with participants.

The questions for the focus group were agreed upon collaboratively by myself and a member of staff at the adoption agency. As the adoption agency were focussing on post adoption I chose to focus on questions that covered the other two areas of interest in my research questions, namely pre-adoption support and experience of the education system. Again, I was conscious of the need to keep questions open-ended so to elicit discussion amongst participants. For a full interview schedule for both the one to one interviews and the focus group please see Appendix I.

One participant who had adopted a child from care but prior to four years old agreed to take part in my pilot study and provided feedback on my interview schedule. Following this and consultation with my supervisors minor amendments were made to the interview schedule, for further information please see Appendix II

3.5.3 Participants

A criterion approach to purposive sampling as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used. That is that all participants in the study met the following criteria;

- They must have adopted a child from care or received a Special Guardianship Order
- The child at age of adoption should have been school age (four years or older)

- They must have adopted within the last five years

These criteria were set so that the experience of the adoption process would easily be remembered and so that formal educational experiences were easily discussed. At the age of four many children attend formal schooling in the Reception class prior to compulsory education beginning at age five, whereas at age three many children may be experiencing education but it is more likely to be in a non-school setting. Furthermore, as stated previously, the average age for adoption is currently three years, eight months. However, the government is encouraging more adoption, including the adoption of older children. Therefore, it was important to explore the adoption of children above the average age of adoption, as these might become more typical. These strict criteria meant that participants were difficult to access. Therefore, participants with a Special Guardianship Order were also included in the study as this would potentially result in an increased number of participants. In addition, I would argue that these children are also from the looked after children cohort and whilst the guardians would not experience the matching and linking process they would experience the education system and support.

Participants were approached in numerous ways as outlined below, the numbers in brackets show how many people were recruited from each approach;

- Advertisements placed in a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender magazine about adopting (0).

- Advertisements placed in a post- adoption support group newsletter (0) (to see the adverts placed please see Appendix III).
- Adoptive parents were contacted by the head of post adoption services in the borough in which I work and also another borough with which I have links (4).
- I attended adoption support groups to introduce my research and ask people to participate (0).
- Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCO) in the schools in which I worked were asked to forward on my details to any adoptive parents in their schools (1).
- Two large adoption charities agreed to support my research and recruit participants (7).

The reason for using such a wide variety of participant recruitment methods was twofold. Firstly, it is difficult to access adoptive parents especially those who are adopting children of a school age. Secondly, contacting parents through different routes helped to ensure that as many parents as possible had the opportunity to take part, reducing the prospect of having a biased sample. This said, I acknowledge that those contacting me may have been motivated to do so because they were seeking support or were unhappy with support provided. Alternatively, those who contacted me may have had very successful adoptions and that is why they felt able to share their experiences with me. Whilst I am aware of these issues and that the sample is not representative of the population I do not feel that this is a significant weakness as I am interested in exploring some parents' experiences in-depth and

throughout this thesis I am cautious not to generalise my findings to the whole population of adoptive parents.

Seven individual interviews were carried out; for the purpose of transferability I will provide a brief summary of the characteristics of the participants below.

Table 1: Summary of semi-structured interview participant characteristics

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity of Adopter | No of Birth children | Adoption or Special Guardianship Order (SGO) | Number of Adoptees | Gender of Adoptees |
|---------|--------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Jon | Male | White European | None | Adoption | 3 | 3 boys |
| Edward | Male | White European | None | Adoption | 2 | 2 girls |
| Imogen | Female | White British | None | Adoption | 2 | 2 girls |
| Harriet | Female | Black British | 2 | SGO | 3 | 2 girls 1 boy |
| Sandra | Female | White African | None | Adoption | 3 | 2 boys 1 girl |
| Jenna | Female | White British | 2 | Adoption | 1 | 1 boy |
| Lauren | Female | White American | 1 | Adoption | 1 | 1 girl |

Following recruitment of participants for the semi-structured interviews, an email was sent out which outlined the research in more depth and explained issues of consent and confidentiality (Appendix IV).

Those taking part in the focus group were recruited by the adoption agency and following agreement to take part a letter was sent out outlining the structure of the focus group and again issues of consent and confidentiality. These points were also covered at the beginning of the session, when participants were asked to sign consent forms (Appendix V).

Five participants took part in the focus group and again for the purpose of transferability a brief summary of the characteristics of the participants is provided below.

Table 2: Summary of focus group participant characteristics

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity of Adopter | No of Birth Children | Adoption or Special Guardianship Order (SGO) | Number of Adoptees | Gender of Adoptees |
|--------|--------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Karen | Female | White British | None | Adoption | 1 | 1 girl |
| Mary | Female | White British | 2 | Adoption | 1 | 1 girl |
| Amanda | Female | White European | None | Adoption | 1 | 1 girl |
| Louisa | Female | White British | None | Adoption | 2 | 2 girls |
| Sammy | Male | White British | None | Adoption | 2 | 2 girls |

3.5.4 Location of Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were offered in the homes of participants as Smith and Osborne (2003) state the best interviews will be in a place where the participants feel most comfortable. This also helped with the ecological validity of the study, ensuring that the interviews felt as natural as possible. As

all of the participants have had a Criminal Record Bureau checks and had passed the thorough and rigorous process to adopt, visiting their houses alone did not pose a significant risk. Despite this to ensure I remained safe, I followed the home visit policy from the Local Authority in which I work that involves letting colleagues know the address of where you are and informing them when you arrive and leave.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints and the variation of participant locations it was not always possible to meet face to face at their homes. Below I have outlined the details of each individual interview.

- Three participants were interviewed in their homes.
- One participant was interviewed in a school and this was to fit in with her work schedule.
- Three interviews were carried out over the telephone, again this was for the convenience of the participants.

The participants were told that the interviews would take between one to two hours depending on how much information they wanted to share. Most interviews lasted about fifty minutes to an hour, except one that lasted one hundred minutes. This is nearly double the amount of time of the other interviews and it was felt to be important to reflect on why this could be.

There are numerous factors that made this interview different to the others, firstly this participant had initially got in touch to say they would like to help me recruit others for my research. This allowed us to have a detailed conversation

about the research. Following this, we had email contact and a further telephone conversation. This continued contact over a period of time I believe, helped the participant relax with me and allowed a trusting relationship to develop prior to the interview taking place. In addition, I also think the personality of the individuals contributed to the length of interviews. The interviewee of the hundred minute interview was very eloquent and a good story teller, she had also shared that one day she would like to write a book about her experiences and so is clearly happy to share the experiences she has had with others.

At this point it is also important to consider the impact that the different contexts and my role may have had on the individual interviews, this is also in line with the social constructivist stance that this research takes. From a social constructivist standpoint, knowledge is co-constructed communally between the interviewee and the interviewer. In this study the interaction between the participants and I led to a version of knowledge being produced, this may have been influenced in part by my actions, the context of the interviews and also the wider social context of adoption.

During the interview that was held in the school I was aware that the participant referred a lot to the difficulties that there had been with social services and when she did speak about difficulties with school she was often referring to previous schools the children had attended, not the school where the interview was taking place. This may have been purely a coincidence but I did reflect on whether holding the interview in the school limited some aspects of what the participant was willing to share. In terms of the interviews at home,

most participants seemed to be comfortable and seemed to be at ease with me. During the telephone interviews the participants seemed to need a bit more time to warm up. This was why the initial question of “tell me about your family” was felt to be very important particularly for the telephone interviews.

The focus group was carried out at one of the adoption agencies offices. This was somewhere that all participants had visited previously and it is likely to have held differing memories for each participant. It may have been associated with the joys of having their child or difficulties going through the adoption process. I was aware during the focus groups that even when being critical of the adoption agency participants would follow this with a positive comment about what the adoption agency did well. This may or may not have been due to the location.

3.6 Analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed (for a full example of an interview transcript please see Appendix VI) and a thematic analysis was carried out to identify themes in the transcripts. Braun and Clarkes (2006, 2013) six stage approach was used to carry out an inductive thematic analysis. Below I will outline why it was decided to use this approach.

Prior to undertaking this research a number of alternative qualitative methods for analysis were considered and rejected. Two qualitative methods that were originally considered were grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis.

In terms of the research questions, it was felt that grounded theory, particularly the constructivist version by Henwood and Pidgeon (2006) would adequately answer the research questions. However, practically in the time given and with the limited number of participants it was decided that it would be very difficult to complete a full grounded theory analysis. In addition to this, the course requirements are that a full literature review is submitted prior to data collection, in grounded theory it is important to not engage with the literature prior to the data analysis and so on this basis it was decided to rule out this form of analysis.

Again, interpretive phenomenological analysis fits well with the aims of the study and also the research questions that focus on understanding an individual's experience. However, this approach was rejected on the basis that it is important to have participants that are in some way homogenous. Due to the nature of the participants and the difficulty in recruiting it was felt that homogeneity was unlikely.

It was therefore decided that a thematic analysis would be carried out. This was chosen for its flexible approach. This meant that I did not have to subscribe to the underlying theoretical approaches of other qualitative methods. In addition, as Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest, thematic analysis allows flexibility in terms of the sample size. This was important in my decision making as adoptive parents who adopted children of a school age are a difficult sample to access. Despite extensive recruitment efforts, seven individual interviews were carried out and just one focus group: this was fewer than expected. Therefore, I felt it was important to provide pen names so that,

throughout Chapter Four, the reader could link quotations by the same participant and follow their individual story, thus strengthening the data. In addition, participant characteristics, including number and gender of adoptees are outlined in table 1 and table 2 to ensure transferability and transparency.

An inductive approach to the analysis was to be taken, using the data itself to develop themes, similar to the approach taken in grounded theory, rather than fitting the data in to an already existing coding framework. This decision was due to the limited amount of previous literature about adoptive parents' views and it also allowed me to consider and potentially include everything that the participants shared and not just focus on certain aspects of the interviews. Whilst I was taking this approach, it is important to acknowledge that I had carried out a thorough literature review prior to carrying out the study so I was not looking at the data from a totally new perspective.

At the time of writing I was aware that there were very few detailed step by step texts as to how to carry out thematic analysis. I was aware of the Saldana (2009, 2013) book for coding and both the Braun and Clarke article (2006) and book (2013). It was decided that the Braun and Clarke approach to thematic analysis would be taken; the decision for this was three fold. Firstly, there was a pragmatic element to the decision in that I have previously used this approach and felt competent in using it. Secondly, Braun and Clarke have published many reputable articles using their step by step approach to thematic analysis and finally Braun and Clarke are explicit in that their approach is thematic analysis whereas Saldana (2009, 2013) himself states " the manual does not maintain allegiance to anyone specific research genre

or methodology” (p. 2). Therefore the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) were used as a guide to carrying out the analysis.

Phase 1 – Transcription and Familiarisation

Transcription was the first step in the analysis, transcribing the data myself allowed me to become very familiar with it and acted as the first step in considering codes and themes. Following this, the data were read and re-read purposefully.

Phase 2 - Descriptive coding

The data were then descriptively coded (please see Appendix VII for an example of a descriptively coded transcript). In this study, descriptively coding the data was done line by line, using data led coding. This means that whilst I did have previous knowledge of the subject area from my literature review I had not developed a coding schedule and so was free to analyse all the data.

Phase 3 – Searching for themes

During this phase themes were searched for within the descriptively coded data. This involved trying to conceptualise the data by looking for overarching themes and sub-themes.

Phase 4 - Reviewing Themes

Once overarching and sub-themes were found a process of reviewing began. This was initially done alone and involved re-reading each theme and looking to ensure there was a coherent pattern within each. This process of reviewing led to some themes being discarded and others being subsumed by a different

theme. Following my initial review, the refined themes were shared with peers and supervisors which allowed for additional themes to be identified. This also enabled the triangulation of perspectives. As Yardley (2008) writes, the sharing of the data can “highlight clarifications or modifications of codes that might be needed in order to increase the consistency and coherence of the analysis” (p. 241).

Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes

As Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) write this stage of the analysis involves finding the “essence” of each of the themes. This involved reviewing the themes again and defining what it was that each one captured in a short sentence. At this stage it was important to name the themes conceptually and not just provide them with a descriptive label.

Phase 6 -Writing

The final stage of the analysis was to produce a coherent written narrative of the data and to choose rich illustrations to support the argument that I was making.

3.7 Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and agreed by the Institute of Education Ethics committee. For the agreed ethical approval form please see Appendix VIII.

Throughout the study ethics were considered of high importance and the British Psychological Societies (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2010) and Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) were referred to. In line with this I

endeavoured to identify and plan for any risks prior to the study being carried out.

3.7. 1 Sensitivity

Within this study the risk of harm to participants were considered to be minor.

However, I am aware that Adoption is an emotive and potentially sensitive topic, especially if people were having a challenging time and had experienced fertility problems. Therefore, I was conscious that the interviews need to be handled with care and sensitivity. Due to my training as an Educational Psychologist I felt that I was skilled to discuss emotive topics with parents and I was supervised throughout the research. During individual interviews, I ensured that if a participant seemed upset I would ask them if they wanted to take a break and checked with them if and when they wanted to continue.

In addition, I ensured that I had plenty of time immediately following the interview in case participants had become upset and needed a longer debrief. I also had the contact details of the Adoption UK support line to share with participants if needed. During the focus group there was a qualified social worker supporting the session and able to leave the room with a participant if they became distressed.

3.7.2 Informed Consent, Confidentiality and the Right to Withdraw

All participants were fully informed about the aims of the study and what would be expected of them. This was provided in writing in advance of the interview and participants were only asked to contact me again if they wanted to be involved. This was so that participants had the time to consider the study and did not feel pressured to take part. As the BPS Code of Human Research

Ethics (2010) states it is important to give participants enough time “to absorb and consider the information given about the research and what is expected of their participation before they are asked to make a decision regarding participation” (p. 18). A detailed letter was sent out to participants covering the following;

- My role
- Aims of the research
- Confidentiality
- Anonymity
- Storage of their data
- Right to withdraw
- Time commitment from them

Please see Appendix IV to see the letter that was sent to participants.

Participants were again reminded of the above verbally prior to and following the interview.

A particular issue for the focus group that needed to be addressed as part of the introduction was confidentiality following the focus group. Participants were asked to agree to not discuss with partners the names of other members of the focus group and specific or identifiable features of their stories.

3.7.3 Safeguarding

In line with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, I felt it was important to share with participants that whilst the interviews and focus groups would be confidential, if I felt that something said was a child protection concern I would

have to breach confidentiality and share this with the relevant people. For the individual interviews it was agreed with my supervisors that if during an interview information arose that I considered was a child protection concern I would share this with them and report it to the duty social worker in the Local Authority. If a child protection concern arose during the focus group it was agreed that I would report this to the adoption agencies child protection officer.

3.7.4 Debriefing

All participants were given my professional contact details and the opportunity to contact me again following the interviews and focus groups to ask any further questions.

3.7.5 Storage of Information

Participants' interview recordings were saved to a laptop and Dictaphone recordings deleted once this was done. Recordings saved to the laptop were given a security password until the transcripts had been typed. Once the anonymised transcripts had been produced the saved recordings were deleted. Participants were informed that once the doctoral course had finished and the viva completed, I would delete their saved transcripts.

3.7.6 Dissemination of Findings

Participants were informed that once the thesis had been written they would be provided with a summary of findings and results. This raised an ethical dilemma for me. I felt it was extremely important to use the data and share the findings of my report, however, I was also concerned that many of the parents had been very open with me about their experiences. I contemplated that if I

sent out a detailed copy of findings with quotes, in years to come the children may find it, read it and be able to recognise their stories. Therefore, I decided that only a summary would be sent to participants.

Chapter Four

Analysis

4.1 Overview

The previous chapters outlined the literature relating to adoption and explained the qualitative methodological approach taken by the researcher. The issue of adoption has grown in political importance over the last four years and concerns regarding the process and the support offered have been raised. Whilst this is the case, as discussed in previous chapters there has been very little previous research focusing on the adoptive parent's experience. This chapter aims to illuminate adoptive parents' experience of the adoption process and begins to address the following research questions;

- How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?
- How do adoptive parents experience post-adoption support and what has this meant for their families?
- What is their experience of the education system post adoption?

4.2 Overview of Themes

As stated in Chapter Three a thematic analysis was carried out based on the six stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013). Following this, four overarching themes were found, they are as follows;

Reconceptualising Parenting; this overarching themes explains the shift in ideas/ pre-existing schemas around parenting and family life following

adopting a child from care. The participants spoke about this in numerous ways. Three sub-themes were identified to further illuminate this.

The sub-theme “***More than just a Parent***” captures the experiences of participants needing to become knowledgeable about new and sometimes quite complex systems and areas. This also incorporates the need for participants to be very resourceful and even therapeutic in their parenting. The Sub-theme ***Culture Shock*** explores the experience of disorientation that the participants described when first becoming a family and the need for parents and those around the children to re-evaluate behavioural and age appropriate developmental expectations. Finally in this theme, ***Preparing Contexts*** captures the way participants described the need to both prepare well for the arrival of their children but also the need to prepare wider contexts including schools and extracurricular activities for their children.

The Significance of Relationships: this overarching theme conceptualises the important role that others play in supporting adoptive parents, promoting their sense of belonging when with other adopters and the impact these relationships have on their appraisals of self. This impact can be seen both positively and negatively throughout the theme. Three sub-themes were noted.

Normalisation, this captured the parents’ experience of being with other adopters and the importance of others understanding and empathising with their experiences. The sub-theme **Availability and Containment** captured what participants felt were important and helpful features of their social worker

when managing some of their difficult emotions during the adoption process.

Judgement and blame was a sub-theme that many participants referred to and this encompassed how some participants felt throughout the process.

Home - School Interaction; this is an overarching theme that focusses on participants' experiences of liaising with school staff, working with other agencies in relation to school and dealing with difficulties in the school environment. Again, three sub-themes were found.

Lack of understanding and knowledge conceptualises participants' perceptions of school staff's knowledge when working with adopted children.

The Interface with Education sub-theme captures the important role that the participants believed social workers have in relation to education. The last sub-theme **Exclusion from the class and teacher** reflects the participants' concerns regarding the schools response to difficult or challenging behaviour.

Necessary Resources; this is the final overarching theme and conceptualises participants' difficulties in accessing resources for their children but also the pressure that adopting children puts on their own resources. Again, there were three sub-themes extrapolated from the data.

Financial Constraints highlights the financial worries that participants experienced. **Accessing Post Adoption Support Services (P.A.S.S)** captures some of the barriers that participants noted when trying to access support and resources following the adoption. Finally **Fragmentation**

illuminates the participants' perceptions and difficulties associated with support services and resources being disconnected.

Throughout this chapter, I will provide illustrative quotes to support my arguments. Any names or locations have been changed or deleted from the text to protect the participants' anonymity.

4.3 Reconceptualising Parenting

As stated above this theme conceptualises the shift in pre-existing ideas associated with parenting following adopting a child from care.

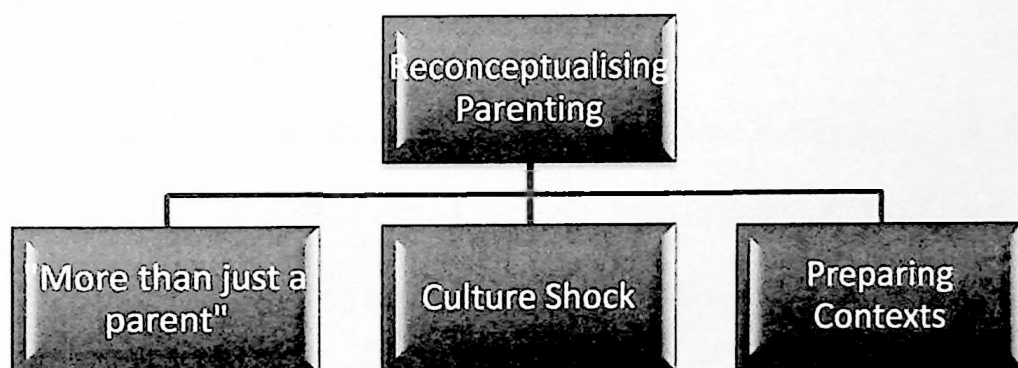


Figure 2: Theme One, Reconceptualising Parenting

4.3.1 "More than just a Parent"

Within this first sub-theme participants outlined the need to be eloquent, knowledgeable and resourceful. Many participants stated they had read a lot. Whereas, others stated that they had needed to be more hands on, for example;

Lauren: *"You know, I am the chair of governors, every day I am making sure...we have bi-monthly meetings which we introduced."*

In essence this parent is explaining that they are taking a lead role in school, ensuring there are regular review meetings of her child. Others also referred to the importance of becoming very involved in school life with another stating they too had become **Sandra:** *"a governor at the school"*. There was a general perception from participants that without them being fully involved and proactive parents, their child's needs would not be fully met by the school.

Jenna: *If I was not a pushy parent I don't know what they would have been doing with her. []. But I don't think that she would have got what she did get, which was a lot more T.A support basically.*

There appears to be a lack of trust from the participants that schools will meet their child's needs without their active involvement. This lack of trust was something that was also supported by the participants in the focus group in terms of schools using the pupil premium.

Mary: *So here they are with £2000 and they don't know what to do with it and nobody is supporting the parent as they would with a looked after child. Erm I do think that's a really big problem. My daughter is doing ok but she is getting that money and I want it to help her and fulfil what her potential and it is very difficult to get schools to address the more social emotional issues.*

An additional feature of this need to be resourceful not only meant that their children's need were being met but also as one participant put it succinctly:

Jon: *Thankfully we are resourceful. Parents might not be able to do what we do or might not have the energy, this could prevent many breakdowns.*

Here, this participant is referring to their family's experience of needing to be resourceful to find and draw on a range of support services. Not only to help them manage some very difficult and challenging behaviour but to keep their family together. This highlights the importance of supporting families to access resources and suggests that those who may not be so resourceful may be more likely to experience adoption breakdowns. This is a topic that will be discussed further when covering the accessing resources theme.

Another quality that participants referred to during the individual interviews was the need to be psychologically minded or as one participant stated:

Edward: *"you have to be really careful sometimes you have to be a psychiatrist or psychologist."*

This was another important area that was noted from the data. In line with this, participants also often referred to psychology professionals supporting them to have a better understanding of their child's behaviour and development. For example:

Jon: *It was also very useful when we started with CAMHS, that me and my partner had sessions every two weeks where we would talk through his behaviour and they would help us understand why he was doing that and support to help us manage his behaviour.*

Other parents also received this type of support from the Child, Adolescent, Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Here participants appear to be explaining that being able to engage in a deeper type of psychological thinking was needed. This helped them to better understand the complexities of their child's behaviour. In addition to this, some participants reported that the support from CAMHS and other therapies helped them to engage in self-reflective monitoring. For example:

Harriet: *"I didn't think I was that bad, but it was pointed out by CAMHS that every time I spoke about her I got really angry."*

Here the participant is explaining about having her anger towards the birth mother labelled for her, this enabled her to acknowledge and confront this. Other's also talked about the need to acknowledge how they felt especially in relation to their child. They recognised the usefulness of support from professionals for this. This is a theme that was spoken about in individual interviews and the focus group:

Louisa: *"I have ended up being a little bit challenged by some of the things that were pointed out, so the unhealthy dynamics in our relationship, it's been really unsettling but I think it's essential to address these as a family otherwise*

they could go on for years and years. There are themes, so mistrust of adults, and it's hard to live with on a day to day basis and how it manifests itself not big disruptive behaviours but lots of low level ones that are continuously chipping away at one's self."

Karen: *"and actually just thinking back to what the stem story says really helps me understand what's going on"*

Sandra: *"I found it very hard to look after him, I'm much better now but at the time I was really irritated by him and the fact he was so literal. So I went for counselling just for a few months to talk through my feelings about him."*

It maybe that these participants are beginning to explain the importance for adoptive parents to engage in self-reflective monitoring or the need to think metacognitively. They are expressing the importance of having support to enable them to have a deeper understanding of their own thoughts and the cognitive and emotional factors underlying them. This ability appeared to be important in helping participants respond appropriately to their child. Through this deeper understanding, they suggested, that they were better able to fulfil their child's psychological needs.

4.3.2 Culture Shock

The second sub-theme outlines the initial culture shock and disorientation of the arrival of the children into the family. Participants explained this in terms of the mismatch between expectations and knowledge of behaviour compared with the realities of when their children arrived at their homes:

Edward: *"Even now they find it difficult to establish night and day they had no concept of time, even now they still can't feel time."*

Sandra: *"So then he went on the trampoline and pulled down his pants and he just wee'd."*

Imogen: *"Taking them to the shop was an exercise in its self, now they are a bit calm but at the beginning..."*

Theses quotes provide interesting examples of the surprise that participants experienced when discovering some of the behavioural difficulties and knowledge gaps that their children had when first arriving. It is interesting to make a comparison to quotes from participants referring to the preparation they had prior to adoption. For example:

Sandra: *We did a lot on adopters coming in talking about the issues and I was thinking I can't do this, I would look at him talking about all these issues and think this is bad. You think you will beat statistics, it's part of human nature that you think it won't be like that for me. It will be amazing I won't do it that way.*

Jon: *I think when we went through the training you didn't really visualise what sort of children and what sort of challenges. They told us about all these challenging children and examples, but we just couldn't relate to them because you feel that was not going to happen to you.*

Participants shared that there was an overwhelming denial that the child they adopted would have difficulties, or that in some way the extent of their difficulties was in their control. The tendency of participants to underestimate difficulties that they would encounter, despite the preparation given, poses thought-provoking questions for how to prepare adoptive parents. Whilst the reason for this is not clear from the data it may be associated with the desire to have a child over-riding any risks and also the participants' belief in their own ability and control over the situation. In addition:

Sam: *"A lot of it is theoretical, going to classes, we went to a series of classes in the evening which do get... you to begin to think in the right kind of way erm and then like the home study thing prepares you to some extent but it is all talking about a theoretical event. Erm I think there needs to be as much involvement of adopters."*

Here he is saying that whilst the preparation is useful and helps prospective parents consider some of the difficulties they may experience it will always be theoretical until the children arrive at their home. Again, this raises important questions for how to prepare parents for that.

An additional feature of this sub-theme was participants' feelings of being overwhelmed when their children first arrived:

Harriet: *I was given the SGO there in court and I was like 'wooah what happened'. The social worker then went off on holiday for 4 weeks and I had*

nobody to ask about it. I'm like... Helen came to me with no preparation no provisions and she is just there in my house.

Sandra: *I was sorry I let Sam go then, I should have just... but at the time I was also so overwhelmed and I just couldn't wait for him to go to school.*

How quickly the adoption went through seemed to be closely related to how overwhelmed participants felt when the children first arrived. For example, both of the participants above went through a very quick process. In fact, during the focus group, participants stated the importance of not feeling rushed in to adoption straight away.

Mary: *One thing about the challenges is that there should be no need to rush the adoption through. I know with our family, with our daughter, we didn't adopt her for three years because we wanted her to be looked after when she started secondary school so she would get priority status. She came to us in Year Five and we didn't adopt her until Year Seven and I don't recognise what people are talking about here. We had lots of support, we had a great social worker and we became great friends.*

Amanda: *Our experience was similar, our adoption went through about a year after they were placed with us.*

Finally in this sub-theme two participants hinted at a culture clash when the children first arrived.

Sandra: *You know you have come from this dainty middle class kind of background and suddenly you see these children just grabbing ice-cream from the fridge*

Mary: *The importance of a name and we were focussing on the importance of identity and you know that was something that came up for us in our adoption.*

This was a very interesting acknowledgement by these participants and might be particularly salient for children who are adopted at an older age.

4.3.3 Preparing Contexts

This sub-theme leads on from the above and highlights the importance of preparing participants well for the children's arrival. It also highlights the need for others in contexts around the children need to be well prepared. As stated in the previous sub-theme participants' expressed their doubt that you could ever fully prepare someone for the realities of adoption. In addition, parents spoke about a denial in the early stages of the process about what was important to them. For example:

Amanda: *"You read here you know my child or adopted children, you read they often have difficulties making friends and you think aaah you know that's not such a big one but when you are a mother it's a huge one."*

Sandra: *"I remember the family finder saying you both have degrees and think education is important how would you feel if he doesn't go down an academic*

route and at the time we were like no we just want him to reach his potential.

Obviously in your heart that is important, education is important to us."

Here participants seem to be explaining that whilst professionals are trying to prepare them they are not yet ready to listen. It may also be that these participants feel that they cannot be honest because they are still very much in the process of being assessed and matched with these children. Expressing their honest opinions may mean that they lose out on a child that would have otherwise been matched with them. Again, it seems as if the desire to have a child overrides any acknowledgement of the difficulties that they may experience.

A large emphasis was placed on the difficulty in supporting their child to access other provisions and the need to explain and educate other contexts about their children. However, many parents felt they were unable to access them or ended up paying for private clubs and activities:

Jon: *"We sent the boys to a group but Michael couldn't handle it and so we didn't have anywhere for them to go and it was difficult for other parents to help us out."*

Imogen: *"The problem we are finding is we have tried to take them to summer clubs so they can have some fun and we can go to work but then we get complaints, they are too childish. They are not actually naughty, they just have irritating behaviour and things that are meant to be carefree for children we can't actually take them to."*

Lauren: *"You pay for the private ones because when he was in the group by the time it was his turn he was under the water, he was like what am I supposed to be doing?"*

This sub-theme also captured the importance of preparing schools.

Participants had very mixed views on their experience in terms of this;

Harriet: *"They hadn't had the prep they were just focussing on what they saw. [] So for Helen I used my initiative and contacted them, we did visits and staggered when she started. So even though she is still not good they know about her difficult background and are working to help her. It's a different experience this time."*

This participant explains her experience of schools not being aware of her children's needs and it being explained too late to schools by social workers. Unfortunately this led to exclusions. However, she talks about how she has learnt and things are different for her younger daughter because she has been pro-active in raising awareness and preparing the school. Other parents had a much more positive experience of schools taking the lead.

Sandra: *"I explained to her (the Head teacher) that I was going to adopt 3 children and the challenge and that I don't know how it will be, she said no problem we are here to help, she was you know open. She said we will come and visit the children at the house first. I thought that was amazing. She came*

first and then the next time she came with the teachers then we took them in to school to visit and then they went."

A key factor in the positive experiences of preparing schools seems to be good communication to support their understanding of the child, getting support in place early, allowing time and staggering the process. Whilst it is not clear in the data the possible reason for this, maybe, it allows schools time to process the information shared with them and also allows the child to have an easier transition into school life.

4.4 The Significance of Relationships

The significance of relationships is an overarching theme that outlines the impact, both positive and negative that others have on adoptive parents' experience. It captures the participants' experience of being with other adopters, the role others can play in supporting them to manage difficult emotions and also the negative impact that professionals can have on their emotions and beliefs.

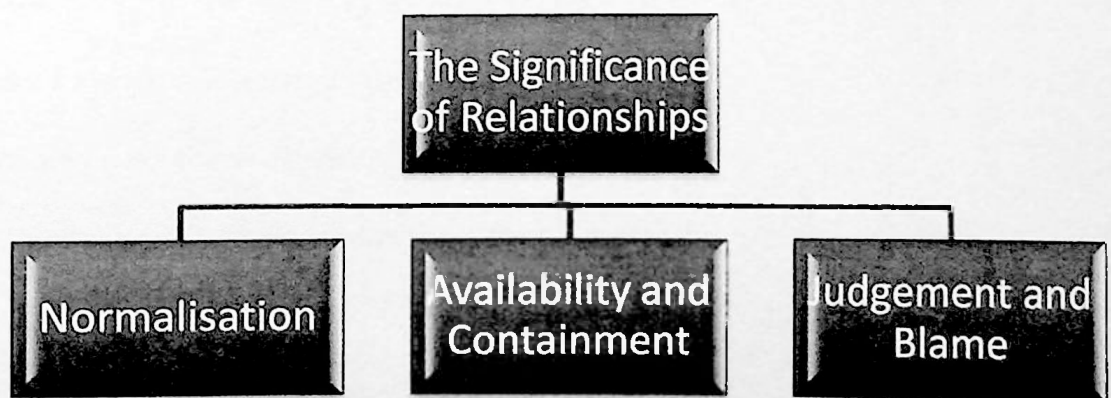


Figure 3: Theme Two, the Significance of Relationships

4.4.1 Normalisation

This sub-theme captures participants' experience of and the support function that being around people who understand their situation serves:

Jon: *"It was a good group of prospective adopters who we are still in contact with today and that offered us lots of support."*

Jenna: *"So yeah, parent networking it's just a huge support system that we're getting right now."*

Many of the participants referred to the support they got from knowing and meeting with other adoptive parents. There was a tendency from the participants to value highly contact with other adoptive parents. There was a sense that the parents were 'all in it together' and were sharing similar experiences, it seemed that this contact served as a strategy that increases connectedness and a sense of belonging for the participants. Supporting this idea is another possible reason outlined below:

Louisa: *"It's the same thing when you are at the school gates there is a keenness to normalise things that maybe, well, definitely, are caused by their background and there is something important about having a community of people who have experienced similar and you are not isolated."*

Sam: *"It was just very joyful and there is a richness in the conversation which did tend to be about very mundane things like how they treat their cats – the*

children I mean. Very mundane stuff, but it's very enriching that's what life is made of those little things."

Participants expressed the supportive role that speaking to other adoptive parents had. The above quote expresses very eloquently the human need to relate and share with others who do not judge, but also the motivation to belong, share a common interest and normalise their experiences.

Participants expressed that whilst they may have support from more traditional networks such as, other parents and their families, these could not fully understand or normalise the participants' experience like the other adopters. In fact, these more traditional support networks only served to highlight difference:

Imogen: *"If we had had birth children then the advice we would have got from our family would have been about us their birth children and that would not work for them. If I had had one or two birth children then I think the adoption would have broken down."*

Jenna: *"I have all the parents that I knew from before, parents I've met through X's class. But nobody in those groups knows anything about adoption and trauma."*

Edward: *"We are on our own here in London. But I think if they had have been here the adoption may have broken down, because it was just the two of us we relied on social workers for advice and so we came through it. When our*

families are here they give us advice that doesn't work, they insist it has to work and they say why this, why that, but they don't understand."

Jon: *"When you adopt the children it is very difficult to talk to other parents, family friends because they have not been in the same situation."*

Participants that could not access adopter networks or groups expressed that this is something that would have been beneficial to them. Again, possibly highlighting the psychological need for relatedness and a sense of belonging.

Lauren: *"So to talk to someone about that, about a similar situation would be good."*

Karen: *"I would've loved to have a mentor that's an adopter somebody who... there are plenty of adopters that would do it. Just a phone number so you could call somebody who has been through a vaguely similar thing."*

4.4.2 Availability and Containment

One important factor that participants referred to was availability especially in relation to the characteristics of their social workers. How available individual social workers were seemed to be a factor in how the participants experienced the adoption process. Some spoke of the impact that had on helping them manage difficult situations:

Sandra: *"One thing was having a social worker that you could ring and to just talk through the behaviour. That helped me a lot because once you talk through it you think of solutions."*

Jenna: *"She was just available basically. You know, we were probably, for that point in time one of her, you know, one of I don't know probably five cases or something, that were really active. So, you know, if I emailed her she'd email me back, if I called her she'd call me back."*

Lauren: *"I could chat to her for ages about anything and I would be on the phone. I would just go on and on and on. And she is very open, and she was lovely, she always had time, always had time."*

Here the participants are referring to having someone that can help them problem solve and someone that is available to guide and empower them through the more difficult times. They talk about the social worker "having time", this phrase is synonymous with caring and perhaps by these social workers "having time" for the participants they are showing they care about their situation and providing support at a much deeper, more emotional level.

Conversely, other participants spoke about the impact of social workers and other professionals not being available or having the time for them:

Harriet: *"They wouldn't speak to me, there was nothing, I even went to their office and nobody would come down and speak to me. I was just left."*

Jon: *"We asked for a crisis meeting with our two lots of social workers and it took six weeks for them to organise a crisis meeting!"*

Both of these participants proceed to explain the impact that this lack of availability had on them and their parenting capacity:

Harriet: *"You know you can't push me into being a head case through a stressful situation where I end up being depressed and then say look after the child."*

Having someone who was available seemed to enhance participants' ability to manage difficult feelings. Closely linked to this is the concept of containment, this is when another creates a sense of safety, which enhances the ability to deal with and work through difficult situations. This in turn makes them more manageable. Many of the participants seemed to be referring to professionals helping them achieve this:

Sandra: "Jenny was helpful and was really calm and it felt for me, the first time I spoke to her, because I was obviously having fertility issues, and it felt like I'd been in a swimming pool and it was like aaaaaah and like I came up and breathed for the first time. I just thought you know what, its ok."

Harriet: "It really was good for Alice and it was good for me to offload my feeling and emotions to someone."

It seems that these participants value professionals that are available and that can help them to manage some of the difficult feelings associated with the adoption process. A lack of responsive support it is suggested may also be seen as placing the adoptive process at risk.

4.4.3 Judgement and Blame

This sub-theme captures the feelings of judgement and blame that participants stated that they often experienced throughout the adoption process.

Whilst in the previous sub-theme participants spoke about the supportive and positive relationship they had with professionals some also spoke about the intrusion by professionals into their lives and how this led to feeling judged.

Lauren: *"To tell you the truth, I'm happy we didn't go to the last meeting for me and X because they were boring into your soul."*

Harriet: *"If I'm honest I don't want contact with social services because of the intrusion they rip you apart and make you feel so rubbish."*

Imogen: *"Everything we do is constantly questioned and commented on."*

It is interesting to compare this with some of the positive discourse about professionals. As seen previously it appears that participants value professionals that are "open", "understanding" and that have time for them. The descriptions above present professionals as insensitive and judgemental.

In two of the three quotes above, participants are actively avoiding engaging with professionals. These professionals should be offering a support function but are actually doing the opposite; making families feel judged and undermining their capabilities.

Conversely one participant explained that:

Sandra: *"I never once felt judged at all it was a really positive experience that was down to Jenny and (adoption agency) as whole, even the person answering the phone. We went to some groups there and even during them you didn't feel assessed."*

Whilst it is not clear in the data the reason for this I would suggest that it maybe to do with both the professional's personality, their experience and how they see their role. Jenny the social worker described above was very experienced in adoption and has since retired. This participant also often spoke of her and Jenny going through the process together and that Jenny "never made us feel that it was final. We need to find out as much as we can then make our decision." She often referred to Jenny as talking about "our children". The use of this language situates Jenny and the participant together as opposed to a hierarchical relationship where one has power over the other like, for example, in the following excerpt where the professional situates himself as the one being knowledgeable about the participant's life and feelings:

Lauren: *"And when I said I love my children unconditionally they turned around and said there's no such thing as unconditional love. And I had to bite my tongue."*

An additional feature of this sub-theme that participants highlighted was a tendency when things weren't going well to blame:

Jon: *"The head started to blame us for doing things at home."*

Sandra: *"It was extremely tough and we had review meetings and I remember saying something like the children are horrible or something like that and ermm obviously everybody was like well if she is saying that what else does she do?"*

Imogen: *"Then it becomes a reflection on us, people are saying oh how do you bring them up at home?"*

Here these participants appeared to be expressing that during times of difficulty instead of working together there can be a divide between parents and professionals. Again, I think there is something important being suggested about the professional's personality and their ability to understand the family's circumstance. At this point I think it is important to note that this theme did not arise during the focus group, which was held in the premises of the adoption agency, this omission is something that will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

4.5 Home –School Interaction

This overarching theme captures some of the tensions that arose from liaising with the education system as well as some of the more supportive factors.

These included a lack of understanding and knowledge, the interface with education and exclusion from the class and the teacher.

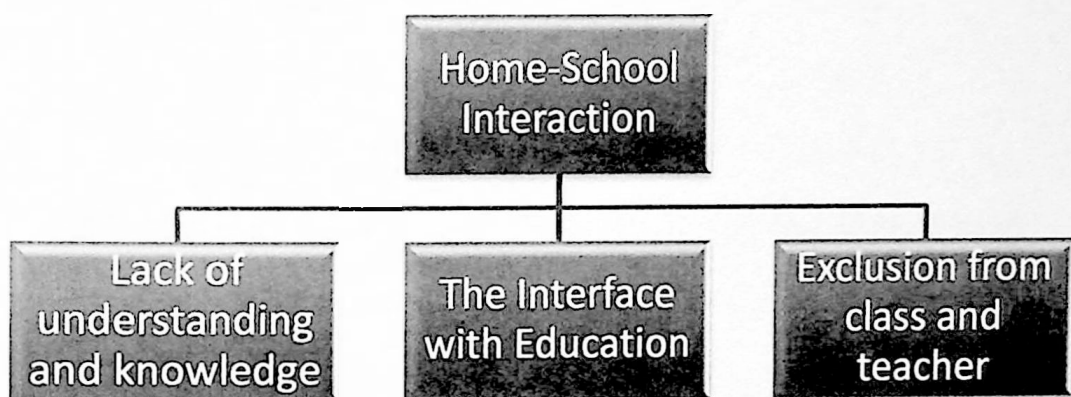


Figure 4: Theme three, Home-School Interaction

4.5.1 Lack of understanding and knowledge

This sub-theme captures many of the parents' feelings that the staff in schools lacked an awareness and understanding of some of the issues relating to adopted children. This was an area that both those in the focus group and the individual interviews felt could be improved:

Edward: *"I have also found that with adopted children the school aren't properly trained to deal with all the unusual or different behaviours. The school was useless for both of them. The schools are not trained they have no idea how to deal with the problems."*

Amanda: *"Just getting an understanding of trauma they think it's the past and that's that. There's a will there in my girls' school but they just don't understand, there should be some special training offered for teachers of adopted children."*

Louisa: *"They interviewed her teachers about her and the teacher said well we have focussed on the social emotional now we need to focus on the learning as if when one is finished you can just move on."*

Participants appear to be attributing this lack of understanding to limited training about the impact of trauma and attachment on learning and behaviour. Following on from this, and more positively participants also seemed to suggest that whilst school staff did not have this knowledge it did not stop them from being open to learning. Some participants seemed to be of the perception that this was part of their role as an adoptive parent:

Jenna: *"So I think every year you have to educate every teacher your child has and I think that's part of the game, that's part of the deal that you sign up for."*

Sandra: *"So it is about educating people around the adopted child to understand and do something about it."*

This need to educate others may be a strategy to enhance understanding and reduce judgement in schools of both their family life and their child's

behaviour. Other participants spoke about a general lack of sensitivity from school staff which they felt showed a lack of understanding:

Edward: *"I know there was one teacher that in Year Five said that Jane was driving her potty."*

Sandra: *"One time she told me that Sam was the most challenging child in the whole school."*

Amanda: *"It's just about general sensitivity issues, and then she did the circle round and I thought, well, I just left it, I thought let's hope she is not going to make it all about my daughter and her teeth, let's hope she is going to make it a general topic with that as part of it. No it was all about it. My daughter came home and said I didn't want that and you think that's basic, its psychology."*

It seems that these participants overwhelmingly have experienced a lack of understanding and sensitivity from schools. One participant attributed this to a sense that her children were *"public property and people can say whatever they feel about them."* Once again it is not clear from the data but it maybe that others around the family are subscribing to the "real parent" / "adoptive parent" dichotomy. So they feel that what they are saying is not offensive as the child is not theirs by birth and therefore the adoptive parent is not responsible for the behaviour or learning needs.

4.5.2 The Interface with Education

This sub-theme incorporates participants' feelings about the role of social care in relation to education. From the data it would seem that participants appreciated support from Social Care regarding education and that this is an area where they would like more support:

Amanda: *"What we felt was very helpful was when the social worker came to the school to have that first conversation with the school. I think they take it more seriously if the social worker is there."*

Imogen: *"Yes the social workers went to the school to interview them."*

Jon: *"What was really helpful was the head of social care being like a go between and she said quite clearly that the school didn't understand what we were going through."*

It seems those who were offered on-going professional support when interacting with schools seemed to find this beneficial. Whilst it is not clear why, it may be associated with the emotional turmoil and state of flux that the parents are in prior to and when their children first arrive. This is supported by one participant who stated:

Louisa: *"It was good that it wasn't too close to when they were arriving because when they come it all happens so quickly and we had to make a choice."*

In these circumstances, it seems that the social worker can act as an advocate for the children in supporting the schools to understand their needs and to take some of the pressure off adoptive parents. Other participants felt that they would have liked more involvement from their social worker when it came to education:

Karen: *"I think it could be part of the social workers role, I know it's difficult but to check that the adopters have done sufficient... because I hadn't and I wasn't sure how to and so much other stuff was happening."*

This participant is describing her uncertainty of whether she had done enough when researching schools and is expressing that at the time she did not even know how to approach this task. For her and others it would have been beneficial to have further input from their social workers. If we relate this to previous themes it seems that the social worker personality and again how they see their role has a huge impact on how supported participants feel during what must be a very stressful time.

4.5.3 Exclusion from Class and Teacher

This sub-theme captures the removal of children from the class, participants' experiences of their child's exclusions and the wider impact this had on families. Whilst school exclusion was discussed by a minority of participants (three out of seven in the individual interviews and none in the focus group), those that did refer to it spoke about the impact of exclusions as being far reaching and so it was felt important to include this dimension.

Participants shared that students missed out on teaching by the class teacher and regularly had their education delivered by a teaching assistant:

Jenna: *"The T.A that does a lot of the sort of hands on work with her and the teacher."*

Sandra: *"The teacher would put him and another "naughty boy" on the computer whilst the teacher is teaching just so she can teach. When I saw that I thought that's not right."*

Jon: *"He was going down the line where he would be only with that lady all the time and being separated from the class."*

Furthermore, these same participants go on to explain that the schools began to regularly exclude their children:

Jon: *"The journey up to this was horrendous because what happened is that the school were starting to exclude him. So nearly every day we had to pick him up. They were forcing us to, if we didn't co-operate, and have a standard plan that he would only be in school two full days and three half days. On top of this we were having the exclusions. We had to say yes to that."*

Sandra: *"Things weren't working and they had to ring me and tell me to pick him up because he is on a white card. So when they ring I have had to say sorry I will not pick him up, do not ring me, don't ring me again I won't pick him up."*

The tendency to send children home when schools encountered difficult behaviour suggests a denial of their responsibility to educate these children.

For the above participants, their experiences differed in terms of their confidence in dealing with the system. Whereas Sandra stated that she had a friend who advised her to: *"put it back on the school"* Jon shared: *"we didn't know what to do and the social workers didn't react on it."* Trying to manage this alone without any support or advice led to a really difficult and stressful time for this participant. He explains it was: *"really really hard, it's hard even to put words to it."*

He goes on further to describe the competing demands:

Jon: *"You are at the same time trying to look after the other two and trying to keep your head over the water with work and everything because you know you still have to pay the bills. Every day there was something. []. I had to take lots of time off, luckily I could be flexible and work from home but you know it meant you couldn't achieve what you needed to at work. You couldn't hit your targets, things were questioned and I actually changed my job two months ago because of this."*

This highlights the much wider impact of school exclusions on family life, especially in the context of adoptive families. Not only did it cause this participant stress in relation to their child's education but it also had implications for his job and in turn the family's financial and mental well-being.

This shows the impact of the accumulation of stressors at a difficult time for families.

Again, this was not something that was spoken about in the focus group and again it is important to highlight this omission and draw the reader to potential reasons for this that will be covered in the methodological strengths and weaknesses in Chapter Five.

4.6 Necessary Resources

This theme conceptualises some of the difficulties that the participants experienced accessing support and resources for their children. In addition, it looks at some of the financial difficulties that parents have experienced.

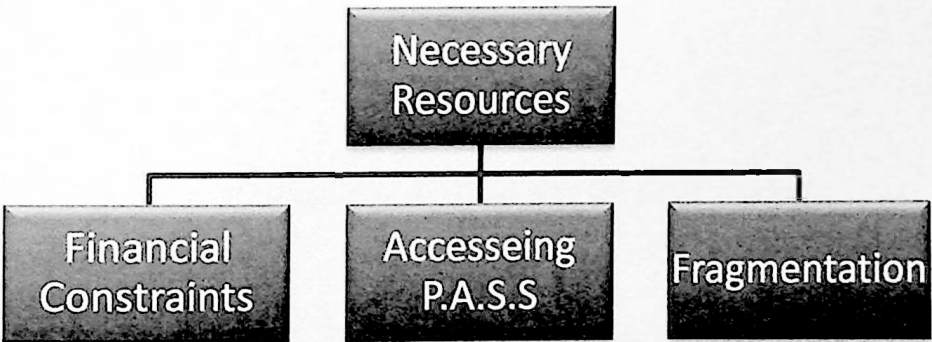


Figure 5: Theme four, Necessary Resources

4.6.1 Financial Constraints

Many of the participants expressed the difficulty of financial constraints when adopting a child from care. Numerous participants commented on the need to move or extend their houses, this was based on judges' recommendations following the matching process:

Imogen: *They said they insisted on a garden and them having a room each. We said we haven't got time and they said well you don't have to buy just rent. But even renting is difficult, we found a little house that answered the criteria and they said that was fine."*

This participant goes on to state that all the families savings were used up moving house and this was prior to the adoption panel agreeing. Again, it is implied in the data that the speed of the process is important and that some of the participants were being rushed into making quite big life decisions. For example, this participant had been waiting to be matched with a child for a long time and had "*about three to four meetings for potential children*" then all of a sudden there was a huge rush to move these children in with them and as the participant stated: "*we exchanged, completed and moved on the Friday and on the Monday we went to panel.*" Again, it is highlighting an additional stressor at an already stressful time.

Others referred to the cost of resources and support for their children:

Karen: *"But it cost us £1000, we weren't in a position to do the (agency) one so we had to pay the money."*

Sam: *"As I say finance is a big thing when it crops up, you don't want it to be and we are not poor but...lots of the things you saying it costs a £1000 to access."*

Edward: *"We spend about £700 a month on their extras. It was very difficult to buy children's furniture, it's very expensive."*

For one participant the impact of having financial support removed led to a potential break down in the family:

Harriet: *"So that day when the money got stopped I thought I can't do this anymore, so I emailed them a letter and sent Helen to school with a letter saying I've contacted social service I will not be collecting her from school they will be picking her up."*

Whilst this is only one participant in a small study I think it is interesting to note that this participant was, I would suggest, the only one from a working class background and the only single mother in my study. Therefore, if she was not working there was no money coming into the family. I think this raises some important questions about equality in adoption and this will be a point of exploration that I will come back to in the discussion chapter.

In addition, another factor within this sub-theme seemed to be a mistrust of the Local Authority to provide support when it was needed:

Sam: *"Then on the panel there were mixed views and you just get the feeling how willing would the authority be to cough up if they needed therapy."*

Karen: *"We had asked for some financial support and it was very little and they said they would have to do a core assessment. They would interview the*

children we just didn't want that to happen. They were basically going to do the same type of assessment the same model as when you move children from families and they used forms, the forms had a box at the bottom that said should this child be moved and placed in care. It was, the whole experience was completely awful and negative."

Harriet: *"Then I had a visit to my house from the director of Social Services saying sorry and that it had been dealt with really badly. He apologised but I am still going to court because I don't trust them."*

These findings suggest that in general, financial worries act as a big stressor and even a risk factor for breakdown during the adoption process not only to those who do not have financial means but for all participants interviewed. In addition, financial worries and wrangling with the Local Authority seemed to act as a barrier to trust and created negative feelings between two stakeholders that should be working together in the best interests of the child.

The importance of financial constraints on professionals and support services were also discussed by participants:

Louisa: *"With our therapy we had to wait six months for it to come through and that was because of the borough where we live and the borough where the girls were from were discussing who to finance it and whose responsibility that would be and (the agency) was mediating and so for a while we wondered if it was ever going to happen but eventually it did. So you know that's a little bit of waiting and tension."*

Harriet: *"CAMHS are involved, well they used to see Alice twice a week and the person that saw her left and they never replaced her so that got stopped. They were supposed to see Helen but can't accommodate her because of cuts and they were also supposed to see James. What they do instead is see me on a weekly basis."*

Here the participants are referring to support being resource driven and not needs driven, and the consequent stress that this causes.

4.6.2 Accessing Post Adoption Support Services (P.A.S.S)

This sub-theme captures some of the barriers that participants encountered when trying to access post adoption support. Many expressed that there was a need to "fight" to get the support that they needed or that these resources only arrived after a crisis instead of being provided as an early intervention to prevent a crisis.

Jon: *"It was a really big fight, only after pushing, pushing and pushing did we get him into CAMHS."*

Harriet: *"I had to go to my M.P, get evidence from school. I ended up being depressed and on tablets because it just felt so difficult. Your taking on the government, it's so difficult."*

Sandra: *"If you find a parent that isn't eloquent or doesn't want to fight or wants to take the road of the least resistance then there is no hope."*

Participants spoke of this not only in terms of the impact this had on the children but also the impact this had on their own well-being and mental health:

Harriet: *"You can't push me into being a head-case through a stressful situation where I end up being depressed and then say look after the child."*

Particularly in the focus group, participants raised the idea that much of the resources and support was aimed at their children. Whilst they felt that this was important, they also felt it was important to provide support to parents. As one participant stated:

Karen: *all of the support at the moment is focussed on the children, nothing is really focussed on the adults and the adults need the support for the children.*

The above refers to a universal and more holistic approach to support, taking into account the needs of the whole adoptive family. Participants also appeared to be of the view that knowing what resources were available to them would make life easier. Participants spoke about becoming aware of resources only during times of crisis rather than as an early intervention strategy:

Karen: *"There's a bit of an issue about adopters knowing what support is there. We have found (adoption agency) absolutely brilliant when there's a crisis but it's almost as if when things are alright you don't feel you can get*

help but even when things are just alright you are just managing but you still need help."

Imogen: *"Obviously this costs money and so they only provide it when you need it, when they see it will be beneficial, but if we had had it earlier we would have been much better prepared."*

Jon: *"Only when we had the crisis meeting did people tell us about respite for holidays just for a day for four hours."*

Participants seem to be attributing this lack of knowledge of resources to Local Authorities and adoption agencies holding back the information due to cost. Again, what participants are referring to here is that support is resource driven and not needs driven. The idea of early intervention and preventative support seemed to only arise for one participant:

Sandra: *"Jenny also fought for a financial package for us as well. So we had five years that's not means tested I think we are probably the best supported adopters in the country!"*

This participant was very well supported both prior to the adoption order going through and following it. However, the children she had adopted had previously had a failed adoption and as she stated *"everyone was on edge"*. Again, whilst this seemed like early and preventative support it actually was more like crisis management and an anticipation of risk factors.

Another prominent issue regarding accessing post adoption support services was the flexibility:

Edward: *"There are support groups but they are normally during the day and we both work, so they are not really useful for us."*

Harriet: *"I have been offered some training but because I work it's so difficult."*

Karen: *"There needs to be flexibility [] logistically it would have been very difficult for us as a family."*

Being able to access courses and resources seemed to be very dependent on whether or not participants worked. Many participants reported they had given up working or reduced their hours because of the needs of their children, once again this raises important equality issues for who is able to adopt and able to access support.

Finally within this sub-theme participants raised waiting times as a barrier to accessing post adoption support services:

Amanda: *"There are such long waiting lists, six months to a year, by the time they see someone, the profile, the problem may have completely changed by then."*

Edward: *"We felt Jane needs psychotherapy and we are now on the waiting list."*

Jon: *"We were trying to fight to get Michael into CAMHS and there were waiting lists a lack of resources."*

Participants spoke of long waiting lists to see mental health professionals many seemed to find this both frustrating and worrying as one participant put it succinctly:

Jon: *"If a family needs support and your child has been identified as needing psychotherapy the resources need to be there."*

4.6.3 Fragmentation

Following on from the themes above participants noted an additional barrier to accessing resources was when adoptions had taken place out of borough. Participants' perceptions from both the individual interviews and the focus group suggest that this additional layer to the adoption led to a fragmented service and further delays to accessing resources:

Jon: *"We were told we were supposed to receive support, starting when the problems were starting. The social services where we live didn't have the resources and felt it should be the social services where the boys are from that should support us for the first three years of being with us. Because they were far away they didn't have an over view on what was available here and so we were stuck in the middle."*

***Karen:** "Then when you get the adoption order you get this erm, situation where the placing authority has responsibility for three years and when you hit big time crisis like I did, suddenly you are having to deal with social workers miles and miles away who don't know the children, you know, who aren't involved, the whole thing needs to be local. Adopting older children is hard enough, adopting older children from another Local Authority brings its own challenges."*

There was a sense of valuing local knowledge and again going back to the previous theme that the availability of social workers is an important support feature.

4.7 Summary

In summary, following a thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data, four overarching themes were found. These were reconceptualising parenting, the significance of relationships, home/ school interactions and necessary resources. Participants often referred to the challenging behaviours that their children presented with and their need to re-evaluate age and developmentally appropriate expectations. Throughout, the participants spoke about the accumulation of risk factors and challenges (inadequate support, financial challenges, feeling judged and blamed and difficulties with schools) and the wider impact this had on their life, parenting capabilities and well-being. They also spoke about the mediating and supportive effect of available and skilled professionals and interacting with other adoptive parents who could share similar experiences. In the following chapter these findings will be discussed in relation to relevant literature and the three research questions

that were posed. The implications for practice and policy will also be considered.

Chapter Five

Discussion

5.1 Overview

In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the aims and the findings of the present study. I will relate the findings to previous research and highlight anything novel. I will also outline the strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research. Any implications of the findings for policy and practice will also be discussed. In addition, as stated in Chapter One I have taken an eco-systemic view of human development based on the models by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Cicchetti and Lynch (1993). Throughout the discussion I will be outlining how some of the themes and findings fit within these models either as vulnerability or protective factors across the different levels of the eco-system. Towards the end of the chapter I have provided a summary table (see table 3) that draws together these findings and aligns them with the different levels of the eco-systems. Finally, I provide a short summary following discussion of the research questions.

The aim of this study was to explore the thoughts and feelings of adoptive parents regarding the adoption process, educational experiences and post adoption support. Additionally, I hoped to explore the wider impact, if any, that these experiences had, and what was deemed to be helpful and unhelpful by participants throughout the process. To do this three research questions were posed;

- How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?

- How do adoptive parents experience post-adoption support and what has this meant for their families?
- What is their experience of the education system?

These three questions will now be answered below.

5.2 Research Questions

5.2.1 R.Q 1: How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?

When relating the findings from this research question to the ecological-transactional model, participants highlighted on-going issues of loss and the special educational or additional needs of their children as being enduring vulnerability factors within the micro-system. Financial difficulties and the feelings of being judged and blamed by professionals were viewed as transient challenges, whereas being “culturally middle class”, psychologically minded and having a supportive and available social worker were viewed as enduring protective factors in the micro-system. In the exo-system participants viewed contact with other adopters as an enduring protective factor and skills based preparation and early support as transient buffers. Below I will discuss the findings relating to this research question in more depth.

As can be seen from Chapter Four the adoptive parents in this study experienced the adoption process in numerous ways. Much of this variance was determined by factors in the exo-system i.e. context, local services and the way these operate. However, there were numerous themes found across all participants. The first overarching theme that related to this research question was that parents often had to reconceptualise what parenting meant

for them as the adoption process went on. Parents did this in a variety of ways, one prevalent theme expressed throughout the interviews was that becoming an adoptive parent involved being “more than just a parent”, some spoke about the culture shock of becoming an adoptive parent and that the preparation for the adoption process did not or could not prepare them for the reality. It is useful at this point to add in a cautionary note, I will discuss that many parents reported that they acted as an advocate for their child and whilst this is a key finding, adoptive parents are not the only parents who advocate on behalf of their child.

Another over-arching theme that helps to answer this question is the significance of relationships. Within this theme, participants commented on how their relationships with other people, especially other adopters and their social worker, had a huge bearing on how they experienced the adoption process. Below I will look at these in more depth and discuss them in relation to other relevant literature.

There was a sense from the data that adoptive parents needed to be “more than just a parent”. Participants in this study reported needing to be a “*pushy parent*” or that they had become a “*governor*” at their child’s school in order to exert some influence. Others reported that they had to be “*resourceful*” and carry out research about their situation to ensure that their child’s needs were met. In addition, one participant shared “*sometimes you have to be a psychiatrist or psychologist*”. This is in line with other research such as Luckock and Hart (2005), that suggests that modern adoption is not simply concerned with providing a “replicate family” but also “reparative parenting” (p.

127). They argue that adoptive parents have to provide “skilled and resourceful parenting” (p. 127). This is also in line with DfES practice guidance on assessing the support needs of adoptive families (2002). This suggests that “the additional parenting tasks and challenges involved in adoption require enhanced or ‘parenting plus’ skills, resilience and considerable emotional resources” (p. 27). Many of the parents in the current study were providing this type of resourceful parenting. As Jon stated “*Thankfully we are resourceful*” suggesting that perhaps the difficulties they were experiencing would be much worse if they were not. Many participants were adept at dealing with professionals and researching how and where to access support. These parents were then able to advocate on behalf of their child. However, for those who do not want to be an advocate or may not be comfortable in that role or even those with full time jobs who cannot commit time to engage with schools and professionals in this way, may find the adoption process even more challenging and stressful. I would argue that the extent to which an adoptive parent is able to be resourceful acts as either an enduring protective or vulnerability factor within the micro-system.

Furthermore, this raises a question that some parents who adopt needed to be “culturally middle class” by this I mean they had to be prepared to negotiate with school, be advocates for their child, initiate meetings and even spend time “educating teachers” on trauma, attachment and their child’s needs. There was also a sense that being financially stable was also a benefit and reduced stress and pressures on the family. Again, this financial stability seemed to act as a protective factor within the micro-system for some of the families. As I suggested in the previous chapter this raises significant equality

issues for the types of parents that adopt and also raises questions for the types of parents that are likely to have the most successful adoptions. Whilst there is plenty of media attention on white middle class families being rejected from adoption, nearly all the participants in my study were white and middle class. In support of this is the Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok (2013) study, in which they interviewed 137 adoptive families from 71 Local Authorities. They noted that the majority were white and from a professional or managerial background with over half having a degree or higher qualification. In this study many of the families also had to meet certain housing requirements to enable them to adopt, this meant moving house and sometime needing to have, and use savings.

In addition to needing to be resourceful, just as Luckock and Hart (2005) suggest, parents in this study often needed to provide "reparative parenting" (p. 127) and have an understanding of what their child's behaviour meant but also the impact this had on them and their emotions. For many in the present study this involved seeking therapy, support and advice from psychologists and psychiatrists. This is also noted by Lieberman (2003) who also suggests that adoptive parents need specialist skills to understand and respond appropriately to their child's psychological needs. She argues that educating parents about predictable difficulties should be the "cornerstone of the adoption process". However, I would argue that whilst educating adopted parents is important, something more is needed. As well as gaining an understanding of these predictable difficulties I would argue that parents should have more skills based training and ongoing support for the whole family, not just the adopted child.

It was interesting to consider the comments made by participants about the reason for adopting. One participant put forward the idea that most people adopt because they want to have a child and want the opportunity to nurture. However, they also shared that the child they adopted was already being fostered by them and they "*fell in love with him*" and could not let him go. This differentiation between the reasons for adopting is important to consider when expecting people to parent children who have experienced trauma and neglect and need a very therapeutic parenting style. Many will be adopting on top of an experience of fertility problems and as McGinn (2007) and Golding (2010) state for a family who have fertility problems the adoption of a child is both a period of celebration and mourning, and if this is not acknowledged it can lead to complex adjustment problems. Therefore, it is important to make families aware of the possible support they might need early on in the process and to provide on-going support for the whole family including the parents. For families in this study, early support acted as a protective and supportive factor within the exo-system in managing the often turbulent transition to becoming an adoptive family.

The adoptive parents in the present study also referred to feeling overwhelmed and disoriented during the adoption process. Many spoke of their shock at the behaviour and knowledge gaps that their children had when they first arrived at their homes and also their disbelief that their child would have any difficulties despite feeling that they were well prepared and well informed of potential difficulties. This is an important point and area for exploration. How can we ensure that adoptive parents expectations of

adopting a child from care match with the reality and how can we prepare them with the skills to manage the reality? Rushton and Monck (2009) also noted in their study that despite feeling well prepared the adoptive parents felt shocked at the arrival of their child and that the level of behavioural difficulties that their child presented with was a surprise to many. In the present study, during the focus group, participants spoke about the “*theoretical*” nature of the preparation for adoption and that this made it very difficult to apply what they had learnt to their own situation.

It is important to consider the participants’ belief that the preparation was theoretical and consider the view that those who had received targeted skills based support found it very useful. In both Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes (1998) and Ruston and Moncks (2009) studies they argue for a skills based approach to preparing adoptive parents, it would seem that this still is not happening in all situations. It needs to be considered how this can be incorporated in to adoption preparation. In the present study, the preparation and support varied from some adopters having very little, to others taking part in an adapted, adoption specific, twelve week course based on the Incredible Years parenting programme. These types of targeted groups have been found to increase confidence, reduce stress and a sense of isolation for adoptive parents (Henderson and Sargent, 2005; Gilkes and Klimes, 2003; Holmes and Silver 2010). Therefore, I would argue that adoptive parents need a skills based approach and contact with other adopters as well as with foster carers prior to and during the adoption. This way they can better prepare and have an opportunity to seek out important information.

It is also interesting to compare this sense of shock and disorientation in relation to the literature on parenting a child with special educational needs. Stone (1989) writes about the process of adjustment that many parents of children with special educational needs work through. He suggests a five stage model; 1) shock, 2) disbelief and denial, 3) sadness, anger and anxiety, 4) adaption and finally, 5) reorganisation. This model seems to fit with some of the parents' experience of the adoption process and maybe useful when considering preparation. Most of the participants in this study described their children as having some special educational or additional need and similarly in other studies adopted children were highlighted as being more likely than the general population to have special educational needs (Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014; Cooper and Johnson, 2007; Selwyn et al, 2006). This is important to consider, it is likely that not only will parents be coming to terms with the transition of becoming an adoptive family but it will also be highly likely that they will be coming to terms with becoming a parent of a child with special educational or additional needs. Parents will need to be supported with this, prior to, during and after the adoption has taken place.

Another finding from the current study was the significant impact that other people had on the participants' experience of the adoption process. The people and professional's that they interacted with on a daily basis had both a positive and negative impact on how these parents experienced the adoption process. These interactions and relationships acted as either a protective factor or a transient challenge for the adoptive family. Spending time with other adoptive parents seemed to serve as a supportive and normalising experience during the process. Conversely, many traditional support networks

such as families served to highlight the difference. This is interesting to compare with Scabini and Cigoli's (2000) (as cited in Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2005) findings that in Italian families who have adopted the "resources grandparents give is irreplaceable" (p.195). They noticed that the grandparents in their study had a supportive role to play in helping their children keep confident in the face of adversity. Perhaps one explanation for the contrasting findings is due to the different cohorts of children. In Italy a large amount of adoptions are inter-country adoptions and it is unclear the age and background of the children. In the U.K. most adoptions take place at an older age with the average child adopted being 3.8 years old. These adoptions are also likely to take place after abuse and or neglect, making parenting more difficult. In the U.K. this may suggest that perhaps there is a role for wider adoption awareness, training and support to further the understanding of more traditional helping networks such as, extended family.

Similarly to the present study, it can often be found in the literature that parents value the shared experience they get from interacting with parents in similar situations. For example, Crawford and Simonoff (2003) highlighted this for parents of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, Luke and Sebba (2013) for Foster Carers, and Burden and Thomas (1986) noticed that the tolerance of the community around the parents often had an impact on the their ability to manage stress. This seems to be true of the present research, with intolerance and a lack of understanding from others acting as an additional stressor or vulnerability factor for the families in both the micro and exo-systems.

Some aspects of the professionals approach and personality were also recurring themes that had an impact on how the participants' experienced the adoption process. These ideas incorporated being available and the professionals situating themselves working in partnership with the families. This is something that has also been found in social work literature. Mason (2012) noticed that when working with families on the edge of care, relationships were crucial, this is also true of other helping professionals such as Roth and Fonaghy's (2005) work evaluating therapeutic approaches, they too like Mason (2012) and the current study, acknowledged that often the relationship was more important than what the professionals do. Those in this study who had the most positive experiences of the adoption process seemed to be the participants that reported the positive experiences with professionals. This was also true in Mellish et al (2013) study of adoptive parents experience of the adoption process who found those who had a positive experience referred to "supportive social workers who provided encouragement, positive feedback and information" (p. 36).

Howe (1998) reported that relationship based practice in social work is potentially anxiety containing and supports clients to control their emotions leading to a sense of empowerment. This seems to be what some of the participants were explaining when describing the positive role that social workers can have. In this study the containing of anxiety acted as a buffer and a protective factor within the micro-system, allowing the parents to successfully continue in their role as parents during some quite difficult situations. The participants in this study seemed to value being contained and available professionals that worked in partnership with them and took into

account their needs. Similarly to these themes, participants in the Mason (2012) study identified four key themes that helped develop a relationship between social workers and their clients. These were respectful communication which created feelings of safety and trust, shared goals, practical assistance and understanding the parents own needs, reliability and being available. These seem to be very similar themes to those found in this research even though the client group varies significantly.

It is also interesting when considering the reverse, that is, when professionals did not engage in relationship building and partnership working. On these occasions participants reported disengaging with services such as, not returning to CAMHS appointments and avoiding social services. Again, in Mason's (2012) study, despite a very different client group, this way of working led to disengagement with services. This has important implications for the way professionals engage with those adopting children from care and also how social workers could be spending the majority of their time. Schofield (1998) claimed that in an increasingly resource led, resource limited environment the social worker relationship needs to be reclaimed. I would suggest that this is still true now. It is also important to consider this in terms of policy and legislation, for example, if we consider the Children Act (2004) there is a large emphasis on professionals working in "partnership" with parents. For those in this study who seem to have experienced relationship-based practice and partnership working, it has acted as a protective factor and allowed them to manage and cope with some very difficult situations. For others, such as Jon and Edward who experienced a different social worker for each different form they filled in, it meant that the support they should have

received was greatly lacking. Holmes, McDermid and Lushley (2013) note this and observed that continuity of social worker led to adoptive parents feeling more able to ask for help which led to them getting appropriate and targeted support.

In addition, if we compare the relationship –based practice of some social workers and professionals to that of those who made families feel judged and blamed; we can see the difference. Participants in this study spoke of being made to feel “rubbish” and being “questioned” continuously, they shared that being made to feel like this led them to wanting to have as little to do with social services as possible. This is in line with findings from Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014), and Pennington (2012). Many adoptive parents are already concerned about being viewed as a failure by agencies and so initially do not want to engage. If, when they do, their fears are proved correct this will lead to them not accessing the support that they need. Furthermore, Rushton (2004) also outlined that parents are concerned about being blamed for their child's difficulty. This is a theme that will be extended when considering research question three.

5.2.2 R.Q 2: How do adoptive parents experience post-adoption support and what has this meant for their families?

Relating the findings from this research question to the ecological-transactional model, participants highlighted work pressures, financial pressures and their own mental well-being as being transient challenges within the micro-system. In addition, the adoption allowance was identified as

a transient buffer. Within the exo-system, the limited support for adoptive parents was viewed as an enduring vulnerability factor and long waiting lists for support as transient challenges. Within the macro-system, the widely accepted historical view of adoption being for children of unmarried mothers was considered to be an enduring vulnerability factor, as this is something that persists over time, whereas the current government's commitment to Local Authority budget cuts was seen as a transient challenge, as it is a policy that might well soon change. The recent changes in policy were beginning to reflect the needs of adoptive families better, and so were identified as a transient buffer. Below these findings will be discussed further.

Participants' experiences of accessing support post-adoption was a contentious issue and one that most participants in the study felt could be improved. Three sub-themes relating to this were identified; financial constraints, accessing P.A.S.S and fragmentation.

Many participants expressed the financial difficulties they experienced throughout the adoption process. This came from numerous outgoings including house moves, paying for private therapy and assessments. In addition, participants referred to cross borough arrangements which led to delays and money that was promised by the Local Authority being stopped at random. In line with the transactional ecological systems model these difficulties often acted as transient challenges within the numerous eco-systems. These issues led to large amounts of stress for the participants which was coupled with a sense of mistrust towards the Local Authority when it came to paying for services. This is in line with findings from Pennington's

(2012) study that identified money and finances as a barrier to support for adoptive families. As did Selwyn et al (2006), who identified that 45% of their participants claimed they were struggling financially, with many having to reduce their hours at work. They also found that many of the families had paid for private services such as speech and language therapy, again, this supports the previous comment about needing to be financially stable and is consistent with the findings in the current study. Furthermore, the current study adds a deeper understanding of the impact for families who are not being adequately financially supported. Many of the families in this study often qualified their statements about finances with "we are not poor but..." For the only single mother in this study having the financial support she was promised withdrawn caused huge stress and led to her contemplating letting the SGO breakdown. For her and others, post-adoption support was unreliable and in some circumstances inaccessible, this acted as a vulnerability factor in the micro-system for these families.

In terms of the financial support provided to adopters, this is means tested. Local Authorities are legally obliged to provide an assessment of support needs for a child, however, they are not legally obliged to provide the support that has been identified. This seems counter intuitive and for those who cannot afford to pay to have their child's needs met it will cause huge stress, as it did for some of the families in the current study. As well as individual families having to manage financial constraints, the participants also referred to the impact of budget cuts in Local Authorities. Many expressed that finances caused tensions between the agencies they were involved with and led to delays in their child accessing support. This was especially true when

liaising with more than one Local Authority and was viewed as a transient challenge in the macro-system. This was also noted by Holmes et al (2013) who identified limited resources in the Local Authority as a barrier to adoptive families being successfully supported.

The variability in support services raises an interesting question of how in society we are conceptualising the adopted child and adoptive family. Luckock and Hart (2005) put forward an argument that there is a policy of ambivalence to adoptive family support services and whilst there have been some very positive changes in policy I would argue that this is still the case. I would argue that adopted children were previously children looked after and are therefore some of our most vulnerable children who have already, in their lives, experienced rejection, neglect or abuse. Whilst support for looked after children is often targeted we are not yet at that point where it continues to be post adoption. Luckock and Hart (2004) put forward the argument that adoptive children have often been through trauma and neglect and that they also have to adapt and adjust to a new family life. This is not something that a "normal" birth family has to experience and therefore they should have access to additional provisions to support them with this. I would argue that a useful way to conceptualise the move to adoption is as another transitional phase in a looked after child's life. As with any transition, additional support should be provided. Others like Masson (2003) would argue against this and believes that having specialist adoption support might take away resources from more needy families like those on the edge of care proceedings. She argues the resourceful nature of many adoptive parents would lead to them queue jumping and accessing all the resources. This feels like a very crude way to

look at support, and just because these children now have parents who may or may not be willing to fight for their needs does not make them any less vulnerable or needy. I understand that resources are finite but as Luckock and Hart (2005) state "adoption is a different way of doing family life" (p. 133) and therefore, adoptive families need to be reflected as such in policy. At present the government have made important progress in acknowledging that adoptive families are different and do have different needs, especially in respect of education. For example, current government policy ensures they are a priority in school intakes and the pupil premium has been extended to adopted children. Whilst these are very important steps and help to raise the profile of these children in education there is much more that could be done to ensure they and their families are adequately supported.

Participants in the current study highlighted the support services as being focussed predominantly on their child and that there was limited support on offer to help parent's adjust to the changes. This is an important area and it is crucial that the adoptive family as a whole are being supported. Educational Psychologists are well placed to contribute to supporting adoptive parents as Osborne and Alfano (2011) showed. They carried out an evaluation of consultation sessions for adoptive parents and foster carers ran by Educational Psychologists. Following the consultation sessions, parents and carers reported a reduction in concern and an increased confidence in being able to deal with their difficulty. They found the sessions helpful in formulating a plan and valued the space to talk through any issues and the practical advice that was given. This approach could be a useful model to support adoptive parents.

Participants also highlighted numerous barriers that they encountered when trying to access P.A.S.S. Many spoke of a need to “fight” to get the resources that were identified as needed for their children. Also in line with Pennington (2012) and Selwyn et al (2002), participants in this study shared that they were not always aware of what support was available, this made getting the appropriate targeted support much more difficult. They shared that only in a crisis were agencies and Local Authorities forthcoming about additional support. This goes against the ethos of early intervention and prevention which many Local Authorities say they subscribe to. I believe that this is due to a huge lack of resources but unfortunately not providing the early intervention may cost much more in the long run.

In response to the lack of awareness of support on offer, the government have proposed the adoption passport. This outlines support services that should be available to adopters, post-adoption. It encompasses life story books, special educational needs assessments and priority access to council houses amongst other support. It also highlights the adoption support fund aimed at ensuring there is funding available for families to access therapeutic services. Additionally, the “it’s all about me” initiative to recruit and support families who have adopted children who are believed to be hard to place is another positive step, this may have been useful for many of the families in this study. This offers a multidisciplinary assessment of a child’s needs to inform the matching process. It also offers training in therapeutic parenting targeted at their specific child, access to twenty-four hours a day support for two years, respite care, buddies or access to support groups and individualised therapy for the

children. As part of this initiative a longitudinal piece of research is being carried out by the South London and Maudsley Hospital, it will be interesting to see the impact that this has and the potential of this to be rolled out as the standard adoption model for all children.

The post adoption support services were also experienced by the participants as inflexible, many reported that because they worked they missed out on opportunities to access further training, support groups and also certain types of therapeutic input for their children. For example, one family spoke about the adoption agency providing them with therapeutic input for their child on a weekend but they would have to travel for an hour to access it. This meant that their weekend mornings were often fraught trying to organise the family drive to and from the adoption agency. They experienced this as highly stressful and believed that this was counteracting the positive impact of the therapy and so chose to stop attending.

A further difficulty expressed by participants in the current study was the fragmented approach taken by agencies to meeting the family's needs. This was especially true for those who had adopted from a different Local Authority to the one in which they lived. Some expressed frustration at the time it took to co-ordinate services and frustration at delays due to Local Authorities disagreeing over who would be responsible for funding. This view has been supported in other research, for example, Atkinson, Wilkin, Stott, Doherty and Kinder (2002) noted that agencies "bickering over funding" (p. 116) was a key factor resulting in delays for children receiving appropriate provisions. They also reported that in their study fiscal resources were the most common barrier

to multi-agency working. Once again, it is important to highlight that this is particularly pertinent in the current climate of Local Authority budget cuts. This fragmented approach that led to delays for families in the current study acted as a transient challenge in the exo-system; an additional short term stressor for families already functioning in sometimes difficult situations. Golding (2010) supports this view especially when referring to seeking mental health support for adopted children. She emphasises the importance of good multi-agency working to ensure that the mental health needs of these children are met.

In summary, participants experienced post adoption support as inflexible, hard to access and many were unsure of what was available. Participants spoke of the needs of their families being identified but support not being provided and shared that the lack of support had a wide reaching impact affecting work, mental health, parenting capacity and the desire and will power to keep the family together. Positively, many families reported that during a crisis support was forthcoming and most were pleased with what they received.

5.2.3 R.Q 3: What is their experience of the education system?

When applying the findings from this research question to the ecological-transactional model, limited adoption awareness in schools was viewed as an enduring vulnerability factor. Exclusions from school and the tendency for schools to blame parents were viewed as transient challenges. Whereas social workers acting as advocates and schools taking the lead in planning transitions were viewed as transient buffers in the micro-system. In the Exo-system, a lack of training for school staff about the impact of poor attachments

and trauma on learning was felt by participants to be an enduring vulnerability factor. Finally, parental determinism (that parenting failures are the cause of society's problems) espoused by politicians and the media was considered to be an enduring vulnerability factor in the macro-system, as it is an established feature of our culture. Below these findings will be discussed in more depth.

Once again, how the parents in this study experienced the education system differed widely, however, some common themes were noticed. The adoptive parents in this study largely felt that school staff had very little understanding of the needs of adopted children or the impact that trauma and attachment difficulties can have in the classroom this lack of knowledge acted as an enduring vulnerability factor in the micro-system. Many parents appreciated the role that social workers could play in liaising with schools and some spoke about their children being excluded or being separated from their class and teacher.

Due to the perception that staff in schools had a lack of understanding of the impact that poor attachment and trauma can have on learning and behaviour, participants shared that school staff often do not know how to respond or react to their children. When Edward states "*The schools are not trained, they have no idea how to deal with the problems*" he is talking about schools being at a loss as to how respond to some of the presenting behaviours of his child. Some participants' experienced insensitivity from school staff in relation to their child possibly also stemming from a lack of understanding. Whilst other studies support the view that adoptive parents feel that schools have little understanding of trauma and attachment difficulties (Selwyn, Wijedasa and

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Meakings, 2014; Pennington, 2012; Phillips, 2007; Holmes et al, 2013) there is very little research that explores the knowledge that schools have. However, Crawford and Simonoff (2003) noted a lack of training and experience of staff in mainstream schools regarding emotional and behavioural difficulties that may stem from trauma. This said, since 2009 all schools should legally have a designated teacher for children looked after. In the DfCSF statutory guidance it states that all designated teachers should have "appropriate training" (p. 4) and should be a source of advice for others. Therefore, schools should have someone who understands the impact of trauma, neglect and loss on learning and behaviour. Perhaps, it needs to be explicitly shared with schools that adopted children are from the children looked after population and therefore will have the same educational needs. Extending the role of designated teacher to incorporate children who have been adopted may mean that this knowledge is more easily shared amongst staff.

Some of the participants in this study, positively reported that the teachers they had worked with were keen to learn about their children and the impact of past experiences on their presenting behaviours. However, as Jenna stated, *"every year you have to educate every teacher your child has and I think that's part of the game, that's part of the deal that you sign up for"*. This should not be the sole responsibility of the parent's. Schools should have a general understanding of attachment and trauma as these will have an impact on many children in the classroom not just adopted children. There seems to be an openness to learn from schools so perhaps there should be more of an emphasis on this in formal learning. As far as I am aware this is an area not covered by the PGCE or the Initial Teacher Training courses. As I will discuss

later, difficulties with school can be very stressful for adoptive families and it will therefore be important for schools to develop their knowledge in this area. This would suggest that an extension of the role of designated teachers to incorporate adopted children and further formal training for all staff would be useful.

Referring back to the widening role of the Educational Psychologist as discussed in Chapter One, we could also support schools in responding to the needs of adopted children by supporting designated teachers and providing training. As Hill (2013) writes in many Local Authorities Educational Psychologists are part of multidisciplinary teams that “aim to promote positive outcomes for children in public care” (p.138) and all Educational Psychologists will be used to their role as corporate parents for children looked after. Therefore, supporting schools with regard to adopted children would be a natural extension of our work. Further implications for the Educational Psychologist role will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

Families in this study also greatly appreciated the role of the social worker attending meetings with them at schools and acting as an advocate and viewed this as a transient buffer within the micro-system. Those who did not experience this said it would have been useful and it would be helpful if social workers had an overview of local schools, education policy and practice. Families felt that with a social worker present at meetings their concerns or advice for the school was more credible. This could be a further area that Educational Psychologists are well placed to contribute to.

Some parents spoke about their experience with mainstream schools as being stressful and as a transient challenge within the micro-system. Some like Jon, mentioned in the sub-theme judgement and blame that when things began to go badly at school they were blamed. Whilst there is not a literature base relating specifically to adoptive parents feeling blamed for their children's difficulty there is research about parents of children with emotional and behaviour difficulties that suggests parents felt blamed and that teachers do blame parents for "ineffective parenting" (Broomhead, 2013; Crawford and Simonoff, 2003). Peters (2012) writes about Furedi's concept of parental determinism, this is that parenting is seen as a crucial factor in determining a child's future and that parenting can be the problem, and the solution to a number of social problems. Peters (2012) outlines that this parental determinism is upheld in law and is agreed upon by all three major political parties. Nick Clegg (Deputy Prime Minister) was reported (in the Telegraph 2010) as saying that bad parenting holds more children back than poverty, this is also a view often espoused in the media. If this idea is being emphasised by politicians and the media it is also likely to be having an impact on the way adoption is viewed and the way that adopted parents view their role. If good parenting is the solution to bad parenting then the logical argument would be that once a child is placed with "good" adoptive parents any behavioural difficulties they have should disappear. Perhaps this is also the view of schools in this study; that are felt to be blaming adoptive parents for their child's behaviour. It also may go some way to explain the disbelief that the parents in this study had about their potential child having behavioural difficulties. They too may be subscribing to this view that good parents hold all the keys to all success.

Finally following on from this, parents again expressed their experience that the education system was not always inclusive when it came to managing some of the difficult behaviours of their children. Some parents expressed that there were informal, illegal exclusions taking place which some of the parents did not know were illegal and felt pressured to agree to. This was viewed as very stressful and viewed as a transient challenge within the micro-system. This is similar to what was found for children with emotional and social behavioural difficulties (Crawford and Simonoff, 2003) and also for children looked after prior to the corporate parenting role and similar to what Sinclair (2005) noted i.e., the huge stress and challenge that exclusions had on foster carers. It is important here to refer to the Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) study that noted prior to adoption disruption, the child's behaviour at school had become challenging. A change in behaviour or escalation of difficult behaviour for any child should be a warning sign and by excluding these children from school more pressure is being put on families.

5.3 Summary

In summary, the participants in this study experienced a range of protective and vulnerability factors as they navigated their way through the adoption process, the education system and post adoption support. These factors occur across numerous eco-systems and as seen in the data had an impact on the adoptive family's well-being, adoptive parents' ability to manage and cope with difficult situations, their mental health, career and financial status. I argue that it is important to consider these factors and their accumulative impact on families and consider ways in which vulnerability factors can be reduced and

protective factors increased. Below I have summarised some of these common vulnerability factors, challenges, protective factors and buffers that the participants in this study discussed. To do this I have used the transactional eco-systemic model outlined in Chapter One by Cicchetti and Lynch (1993).

Table 3: Vulnerability and protective factors, challenges and buffers

| | Micro-System | Exo-System | Macro-System |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Enduring Vulnerability Factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-going issues of loss for both the adopted child and adoptive parents. Limited adoption awareness in schools. Special educational or additional needs of the child. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of training for school staff on the impact of poor attachment and trauma on learning. Limited adoption awareness. Limited support services available for adoptive parents. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Society's belief in parental determinism. History of the adoption of babies of unmarried mothers still in the minds of many. |
| Transient Challengers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoptive parent work pressures. Additional financial pressures. School exclusions. Adoptive parent's mental well-being. Adoptive parents feeling judged and blamed by professionals. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recession. Local Authority budget cuts. Waiting lists for services. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government commitment to cuts. Policy not reflecting the reality. |
| Enduring Protective Factors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoptive parents that are "culturally middle class". Adoptive parents who are psychologically minded and able to think meta-cognitively. Supportive and available social worker. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social support in the form of other adopters. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Society's belief in children's rights. |
| Transient | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoption Allowance. Social Worker who acting as an | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early support for families. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prominent politician acting |

| | | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Buffers | advocate in schools. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School taking the lead on planning and transitioning the child into school. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Skills based parenting classes. | as champion for adoption. <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy currently beginning to change to reflect family need. |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The above table omits Bronfenbrenner's meso-system as it is an interaction between the different microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes the meso-system as "a system of micro-systems" (p.46). It is the situations or events where two or more micro-systems come together, this can be an ongoing, regular occurrence or a single incident. An example from the current study is when the adoptive parents reported that they volunteered in their child's classroom or alternatively when school staff, social workers and parents attend meetings to provide for the child's needs. These connections between contexts can be stressful for the child as they are expected to negotiate between the two or more roles they are expected to play. For example, in the situation above the child has to differentiate between being a son and a student, both of these roles will have different expectations attached.

As stated the factors from the table above and the interactions between the different systems should be considered when planning for adoption, aiming to increase the protective factors and reduce the risk factors to aid families to have happy and successful adoptions.

5.4 Implications for Professional Practice

Throughout this section I will be drawing on the eco-systemic models cited in Chapter One and will consider a range of systems that impact on adopted

children and their families. I will remind the reader of the relevance for Educational Psychologists and then relate this to the implications for professionals and policy makers.

5.4.1 Educational Psychologists

In line with changing education legislation (*Children and Families Act 2014*) and the growing role of Educational Psychologists (Hill 2013) the above findings from this research would suggest that there is a key role for Educational Psychologists in supporting adoptive children and the systems around the family.

In relation to the children themselves, and as stated previously, most of the children in this study had special educational needs or additional needs that had an impact on their education. This is in line with other research outlined in the literature. Therefore, in light of the governments focus on increasing the numbers of children looked after that are to be adopted, it is increasingly likely that this is a population that Educational Psychologists will be working with more in the future. It will be important to have a good understanding of legislation, initiatives and the needs of adoptive families. In addition, just like children looked after, children adopted from care should be a priority for Educational Psychologists when negotiating work with schools.

In addition, since the move to a three year doctorate in Educational Psychology many Educational Psychologists are now trained in therapeutic approaches. With the move of many services to traded services there should be more flexibility in the types of work carried out. Therefore, Educational Psychologists could support adopted children directly through therapeutic

post-adoption interventions in schools, this would mean that CAMHS services can focus on the very complex cases and hopefully this would begin to reduce waiting lists.

In relation to parents, Osborne and Alfano (2011) provide a good and positively evaluated model of working with adoptive and foster parents. This may be something Educational Psychologists could consider implementing in all Local Authorities. Firstly, it would help facilitate self-reflection for parents about their own responses and their children's behaviours. It would also provide parents with support that within this study they felt they needed. Furthermore, Educational Psychologists could have a key role in supporting parents together in more formal groups. For the participants in this study meeting with other adoptive parents was something they valued. With a good knowledge of child development and the education system Educational Psychologist are well placed to facilitate some of these groups. Whilst there has been nothing written about this, I know of a local charity group that organises meeting run by an Educational Psychologist to discuss educational worries and the systems that are in place in schools. This could be useful, especially, in light of the findings regarding the wide reaching implications that difficulties with education can have on families, the stress that it can cause and the importance of normalising adoptive parents' experiences by meeting others in similar situations.

Further contributions could be made when working with schools, there is a clear role for supporting schools understanding of attachment and trauma in a more systemic rather than individual focused way. This could be in the form of

in-service training but also more crucially some training prior to qualifying. This could be in the form of a module on attachment and trauma and the impact this can have on learning. Educational Psychologists would be well placed to deliver this. However, with the government allowing academies to hire unqualified teachers and more on the job training (Schools Direct, Teach First and SCITT) it will be important to provide both pre-qualification learning and post-qualification learning about the impact of trauma and abuse on learning. Furthermore, I would argue that adopted children should be considered as a sub-group of children looked after for at least three to five years post adoption and therefore, the role of designated teacher should be expanded to include them. Again, Educational Psychologists could be involved in regularly supporting designated teachers through training and consultations.

Again, when working with schools something I am sharing with my colleagues in the borough in which I work, is to acknowledge adopted children in my meetings and raise awareness of the needs of adopted children. One important way to do this is to support schools to target the pupil premium to meet the individual needs of the children. This was brought up at a team meeting in the borough in which I work and Educational Psychologists have agreed this is an area they will cover when planning their work with schools. In addition, it will be important for Educational Psychologists to be aware of the full range of government initiatives that relate to adopted children such as, the adoption passport and personal budgets. This will enable us to fully support schools and families, understanding the implications of new initiatives and help them seek targeted support and provide sign posting to appropriate support.

Finally in light of the Children and Families Act (2014) and the new Draft Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, there is an increasing need for Educational Psychologists to be working in a more systemic and collaborative way. In relation to the present study there is a key role for Educational Psychologists to be more involved in more multi-agency work to support adopted children. For example, many parents appreciated social workers who helped to advocate with schools on the families' behalf. Educational Psychologists could have a key role in training social workers to use Psychological models in relation to education and child development. This would enable them to feel confident advocating on behalf of adoptive parents and their children in the school context.

With better links with social care or commissioned work supporting social care in this area we could make a real difference to adopted children. However, this would need to be supported and acknowledged as an important piece of work by policy makers and the Local Authority so that staff have the time to carry it out. This is why I suggest social care commissioning work by Educational Psychologists. In the borough in which I currently work the Adoption Team has run training on attachment in schools. This really should be the role of the Educational Psychologists but unfortunately schools are not always keen to use their time on training. The Adoption Team were keen to carry out joint work but again, with such limited time and flexibility this was impossible. This could be a very useful piece of work which would benefit schools, adoptive children, the Educational Psychology Team and the Adoption Team and ways in which this could be facilitated in all Local Authorities should be considered.

5.4.2 Adoption Professionals

From the current research there are clear implications for adoption professionals, one of the messages from this research that I shall be sharing at a local level is the positive impact that a social worker can have on a family's ability to manage during difficult times and adjust to their new family life. Following this study, I think it will be important to emphasise the role as not just one of assessing but also one of advocating and supporting families based on ideas of relationship based practice. In this study, the findings seem to show that relationship based practices have the ability to contain and reduce stress for families. However, the relationships can only be built over time which has important implications for social workers working in the adoption team and managers who will need to ensure consistency of social worker and team stability.

Participants in this study seemed to also greatly value a normalising experience of accessing other adopters, this could be something that all adoption professionals aim to support whether that be formal groups or informal buddy systems.

Social workers were greatly valued when they supported participants' interactions with schools and provided support and advice to parents when considering school choice. This may be an area that not all social workers feel comfortable with but again it highlights the need to engage in multi-agency working to meet the needs of these children. Collaborative work with the Educational Psychology team as mentioned previously could lead to benefits

for all involved and more importantly more positive outcomes for the children and families we work with.

5.4.3 Policy Makers

One of the key messages to policy makers from the current research is the importance of time and relationships in making a difference when working with adoptive families. Some of the implications I have highlighted above such as more multi-agency and collaborative work depend on Local Authority staff not being stretched and having the time to plan, share information and deliver interventions, training and work with families. At present, with an emphasis on Local Authority budget cutting, this is not always able to happen.

Again, closely linked to the above, it will be important for policy makers to consider the importance of all teachers having an understanding of the impact of attachment and trauma on learning. Whilst this is relevant for adoptive children it is also relevant for a variety of other children including looked after children and children who may be on the edge of care or who have experienced a difficult early life such as family mental health difficulties or those that have witnessed domestic violence or abuse. Policy makers should consider how we can ensure that all teachers have a basic understanding of this, how this could be incorporated into teacher training and what role Educational Psychologists could play in this. Again, as mentioned previously I would argue that policy makers should extend the role of the designated teacher to incorporate the adopted population.

Further implications for policy makers to consider following this research would be to consider equality issues in adoption, whilst there are some quite provocative headlines that are reported from time to time such as “social workers said we were too middle-class and too white to adopt” (Levin, 2008). I would suggest that while these make interesting and controversial headlines middle class parents will fare better in dealing with the education system, fighting for resources, challenging power and having additional funds to support their child now rather than being placed on a waiting list.

Additionally, it will be important to identify adopted children as vulnerable and ensure policy is reflective of this both in terms of having access to additional support for education but also for adjusting to new family life and supporting mental health. As stated previously, I feel it would be useful to consider the adoption process as a transitional phase and for transition plans and additional support to be implemented to acknowledge that these children are vulnerable. The government are making good progress with this in terms of the pupil premium and priority access to schools. However, I would argue that there is still more to do in terms of support for families. The adoption passport has been introduced to ensure that parents are aware of what they can access in terms of support, whilst a very positive move, it is still vague and at the discretion of the adoption agency or Local Authority as to whether they receive support. A much more promising step is the “It’s all about me” intervention which is aimed at the “hard to place” children. Many of the participants’ adopted children would have been classed as hard to place so it will be interesting to see what difference this makes to the families involved in comparison to the families in this study.

More widely there needs to be a move away from the rhetoric of parental blame from government and policy makers as this is undermining to adoptive parents and other vulnerable families and is leading to a very individualistic, simplistic view that makes it acceptable for schools and government to blame and not take responsibility for vulnerable children and families.

5.5 Original Contribution

This study is one of the first to use a qualitative methodology to seek an in-depth understanding of some parents' experience of adoption, illuminating some adoptive parents' experiences that underpin government statistics about adoption. It provides a holistic account of their overall experience and considers the impact of support or lack of support on family lives, which, previously has not been considered in such a way. In addition, this study focusses on the education of adopted children and the wider impact that difficulties in this area can have.

5.6 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

It is considered important to reflect on both the strengths and limitations of the current research project. This is one of the first psychological studies detailing an in-depth analysis of parents' thoughts, feelings and experiences of the adoption process and a focus on education. Using a thematic analysis allowed for the illumination of the lived experience of some adoptive parents. This is important because only by talking to adoptive parents who have experienced the adoption process can we know what is being done well and what can be done better. Whilst the sample was self-selected, that is they responded to my

letters or advertisements I cannot be sure that they represent the wider adoptive parent population. However, this is not considered a limitation as I have outlined from the beginning that this study is interested in exploring in-depth some parents' experiences and many of the conclusions I have drawn have also been supported by previous research.

One limitation of the current study relates to the focus group, whilst the focus group did bring many positive aspects to the research such as methodological triangulation and ecological validity, it also had a limiting effect on what some of the participants were willing to share. When I reflected on the themes that arose during the focus group they seemed to be very safe, for example, talking about finance and the positive impact of other parents. One participant began to speak about the difficulties she had had with her children at school, however, once other parents had spoken about how well their children were doing at school she no longer contributed about the difficulties she was experiencing. Again, one parent in the focus group touched upon feeling judged and when this was not extended by other parents they did not elaborate any further.

Another limitation in this study was that accessing participants took much longer than first anticipated. The sample were difficult to access and a number of routes had to be explored as outlined in the methodology. This meant that the original plan to visit all participants in their homes to carry out my interviews had to be abandoned. I feel that the parents I met face to face, felt more at ease and were much more open in what they were telling me. I would

have liked to carry out all interviews in this way and probably would have got much more detailed information.

Again, pertaining to time, if I had an opportunity I would have liked to have taken my findings back to the participants and carried out member checking to enhance the quality and validity of the research. Furthermore, some participants were aware that I worked for the borough with whom they had adopted and whilst I told them I was a researcher this may have limited what they wanted to share with me.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

With the government focussing on increasing the adoption of children in care there is a need for further research to ensure that these are stable, happy and lifelong. Following on from this, it will be interesting to see the outcomes regarding the efficacy of the "it's all about me" project supporting adoptive families of "hard to place" children.

In addition, due to the largely unanimous views of parents within this study that schools do not have a good understanding of the impact of attachment difficulties and trauma on learning it would be interesting to explore teacher perceptions of this and their understanding and application of this knowledge in the classroom. Finally, a useful next step would be to explore children's experience of the adoption process and their school experiences. These are largely missing from the literature due to the sensitive nature of the topic, however, to fully understand adoption and support needed in education it will be important to be creative in how we can consider young people's views.

5.8 Conclusion

In summary, as considered in Chapter One, in recent years there has been a flurry of new policy's pertaining to adopting children and a real push and determination from the government to see more children adopted from care. Whilst this is a very positive move forward I raised the question of whether enough is currently known about the needs and experiences of adopted families. In Chapter Two, the literature review highlighted that there was limited qualitative, holistic accounts of adoptive parents' experience of adopting in the U.K. and the impact that support or lack of support had on their families. Following on from this, a qualitative methodology exploring adoptive parents' experiences of the adoption process, support and post adoption educational experience was deemed appropriate.

This study explored the experiences of twelve adopted parents. Seven individual interviews were carried out and a focus group. The parents came from a wide range of areas (London, the Home Counties and the Midlands), backgrounds and were recruited in numerous ways. Due to this, it was decided that a flexible approach to analysis was needed and an inductive thematic analysis was deemed the best method to provide an in-depth rich picture of the participants' lives and experiences.

Following the analysis, four over-arching themes were found these highlighted some of the common experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants in this study. These were; "reconceptualising parenting", "the significance of others", "home/school interactions" and "resources". The participants in the

current study expressed their need to shift their ideas about family life and parenting following adopting a child from care and their shock, disorientation and feelings of being unprepared when their child first arrived. Participants overwhelmingly expressed the impact that others can have both positively and negatively on their adoption experience and it is argued that the way in which professionals interact with parents has an impact on how they feel they can cope with and manage difficult situations. As well as this, parents highlighted some of the challenges and buffers they had interacting with schools and accessing resources and support. The impact of lack of support and difficulties with schools caused large amounts of stress for the participants and had implications for their mental well-being and their jobs.

These findings were then discussed alongside other research. In line with the eco-systemic models proposed in Chapter One, it was clear that the adoptive parents in this study experienced some common vulnerability and protective factors from numerous systems that had both a direct and indirect impact on their family life. These common factors were then mapped on to the ecological-transactional model proposed by Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) and it was argued that these should be considered when planning for adoption, with the aim to increase protective factors and buffers and to reduce vulnerability factors and challenges.

Finally, the study concludes with implications for professionals and policy makers and I argue that the findings are relevant for adoption professionals, Educational Psychologists and policy makers.

On final reflection, carrying out this research has been an illuminating experience which I feel has developed my skills as a Psychologist and enhanced my understanding of the needs and strengths of adoptive families. It has also highlighted the remarkable job that the adoptive parents in this study are doing even when in very difficult and sometimes unsupportive situations. I would like to thank them for sharing their experiences with me from which I have developed the ideas outlined in this study.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Interview and Focus Group Questions

Individual Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me about your family.
 - numbers of children,
 - birth children,
 - type of adoption
 - sibling groups,
 - age
- 2) Can you tell me a little bit about your child's birth family background?

Pre Adoption

- 3) Prior to the adoption what support/training did you receive about becoming an adoptive parent?
 - attachment
 - parenting
 - behaviour
 - contact with birth families
 - education
 - identity
- 4) What did you find useful? What could have been better?
- 5) Tell me about the matching process, what was this experience like for you?
 - stretching of preference,
 - time scales,
 - bonding,
 - social worker support
- 6) Prior to the adoption what types of information was shared with you about your child?
 - family history,
 - early experiences, education,
 - trauma
 - physical and mental health,
 - contact with foster carers.
- 7) What support was on offer to help you and your child to adjust at the beginning?
 - birth family culture
 - how have they have adjusted.
- 8) What was useful? What could have been better?

Education

- 9) How did you go about finding a school place for your child?
- 10) Was any support or advice provided to help with this?
- 11) Did you encounter any difficulties finding a school place?
- 12) Did you share with the school that your child was adopted? Was any support put in place to help them settle in?
 - peers
- 13) Do you feel that the school has a good understanding of the needs of adopted children? Tell me more about this.
- 14) Do you have or have you had any concerns about your child's education?
 - academic progress
 - curriculum content
 - friendships
 - relationships with adults in the school
 - behaviour
 - attention/concentration
 - exclusions
 - bullying
- 15) What support if any have you received for these?
- 16) What impact has this had on family life and how do you cope with this?

Post Adoption

- 17) Post –adoption have you needed any support from any other agencies? Can you tell me about this?
 - Knowing what is available
 - ease of access
 - waiting times.
- 18) Have you received any other support post adoption? What has been useful? What could be better?
- 19) What has been your experience with contact with your child's birth family? Can you tell me more about this?
 - sibling contact
 - type of contact
 - openness about talking about it
 - how often
- 20) What impact has this had on your family?
- 21) Looking back over the whole experience what do you feel should have been done differently?

Focus Group Questions

- What challenges if any, have you faced with the education system?
- What was or would have been useful to support you with this?
- What are the needs/challenges you would like to be addressed by Post Adoption Support Services (P.A.S.S)?
- What barriers have you faced in finding and using P.A.S.S?
- What would make it easier for you to access P.A.S.S?
- What P.A.S.S have you accessed and how would you rate them?
- Do you have any other thoughts or views you wish to share on any of the topics covered today?

Appendix II – Changes to Interview Questions

Following the pilot study with an adoptive parent and discussion with my supervisors' question 22 was added in;

21) Looking back over the whole experience what do you feel should have been done differently?

One question was taken out as it was felt to sound a little judgemental, the question was;

7) How was this for the family?

Appendix III – Written Material for recruiting participants

Letter sent by Adoption Support Team to recruit participants in two Local Authorities

Dear Adoptive Parents,

My name is Janine Gibbs and I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist at the Institute of Education as part of my doctorate course I have to undertake a piece of research. My area of interest and what I am planning to conduct my research on is adoptive parents' views about adopting children from care.

As I am sure you are aware there is at present lots of government and media interest in the adoption of children from care. Also as I am sure you are aware there is plenty of support for children looked after but once they are adopted this support usually decreases. For my research I want to speak with adopted parents about their experience of the adoption process, educational support and post adoption support.

Whilst there have been numerous studies into these areas there is very limited research that provides a detailed account of adoptive parents' views. I am hoping to capture what impact the support/lack of support throughout the whole process has on the adoptive family.

I am looking for adopters who...

- Have adopted a child from care in the last 5 years who was of school age when adopted.

I have full ethical approval for this study from the ethics committee at the Institute of Education (part of the University of London). I am asking you to be interviewed by me which would take about an hour – two hours depending on how much you want to say in answer to my questions.

This letter is being forwarded to you by the manager of the Post Adoption Support Service in xxx so please be assured I do not have your identifying details and I will not have this information unless you elect to contact me yourself

If you are interested in taking part and would like to know more please contact me on the following; Janine.gibbs@xxx or jgibbs@xxxx

Advertisement Placed in Adoption Magazine and Newsletter

My name is Janine Gibbs and I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist at the Institute of Education, as part of my doctorate course I have to undertake a piece of research. My area of interest and what I am planning to conduct my research on is adoptive parents' views about adopting children from care.

As I am sure you are aware there is at present lots of government and media interest in the adoption of children from care. Also as I am sure you are aware there is plenty of support for children looked after but once they are adopted this support usually decreases. For my research I want to speak with adopted parents about their experience of the adoption process, educational support and post adoption support.

Whilst there have been numerous studies into these areas there is very limited research that provides a detailed account of adoptive parents' views. I am hoping to capture what impact the support/lack of support throughout the whole process has on the adoptive family.

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I have full ethical approval for this study from the ethics committee at the Institute of Education (part of the University of London). I am asking you to be interviewed by me which would take about an hour – two hours depending on how much you want to say in answer to my questions.

If you are interested in taking part and would like to know more please contact me on the following; Janine.gibbs@xxx or jgibbs@xxxx

Appendix IV - Parental Information Leaflet

Dear Adoptive Parents,

Thank you for showing an interest in my study. Please let me share a little more information with you before you agree to take part.

My name is Janine Gibbs, I am currently training to be an Educational Psychologist and am undertaking a piece of research. My area of interest and what I am planning to conduct my research on is adoptive parents' views about adopting children from care.

As I am sure you are aware there is at present lots of government and media interest in the adoption of children from care. Also as I am sure you are aware there is plenty of support for children looked after but once they are adopted this support usually decreases. For my research I want to speak with adopted parents about their experience of the adoption process, educational support and post adoption support.

Whilst there has been numerous studies into these areas there is very limited research that provides a detailed account of adoptive parent's views. I am hoping to capture what impact the support/lack of support throughout the whole process has on the adoptive family.

Below I have outlined some of the questions you might have about taking part in the research.

What is involved?

You will be interviewed and the interviews will be recorded. The interview will take between one and two hours depending on what you want to share with me. Interviews will normally take place face to face at your home, although I am flexible and will fit in with your schedule.

Will my information be confidential?

Yes your information will be confidential. I will transcribe what you share with me and will change any identifiable details. I will change names and areas where you live if they are mentioned.

What if I change my mind about taking part?

You have every right to change your mind and I cannot use your information without your consent. Even if you have taken part in the research you can still ask for it not to be used, if you do change your mind and want to withdraw please let me know as soon as possible.

How will my information be used and who will see it?

I will record the interviews and type them out changing names and places. These typed interviews will then be stored on my computer and will be password protected. The audio version of the interview will be deleted from the Dictaphone as soon as it is saved to a computer and will be deleted from the computer as soon as I have typed it up. The typed and anonymised interviews will only be deleted once I have finished my thesis and the course (just in case I need to make any changes). This will be in summer 2014. Your information will be shared with my supervisors and peers but only once it has been anonymised. I will then use it to write my thesis, I will be looking for themes within the interviews and the focus group that may help understand the experience of adopting and the impact of support. To support these themes I may quote what you tell me but again this will be anonymous.

I would like to share the findings with the Local Authority that I work in, my peers and other adoption professionals to hopefully increase understanding of the adoption experience and to better support provided. Finally, I may get my study published in an academic journal but again nobody that takes part will be identifiable.

I would also like to share my finding with everybody that takes part and am happy to email or post a summary of my research to anyone who is interested.

If you have any further questions at any time or would like to take part now you know more please contact me on the following email address: jgibbs@xxx

Appendix V- Focus Group Information leaflet and Consent form

Parental Information Leaflet for the focus group

Thank you for participating in our focus group. (Adoption Agency) is partnering with Janine Gibbs, who is currently training to be an Educational Psychologist and undertaking a piece of research as part of her PhD at the Institute of Education that is aligned with the project we are delivering for the Department of Education.

Through focus groups and interviews we are speaking with adopted parents about their experience of the adoption process, educational support and post adoption support.

Whilst there has been numerous studies in to these areas there is very limited research that provides a detailed account of adoptive parent's views. We are hoping to capture what impact the support/lack of support throughout the whole process has on the adoptive family.

Below are some of the questions you might have about taking part in this research.

Will my information be confidential?

Yes your information will be confidential. We will transcribe what you share with us and change any identifiable details. Names and areas where you live will be changed if they are mentioned.

How will my information be used and who will see it?

Your information will be shared with Janine's supervisors and peers but only once it has been anonymised. Janine will then use it to write her thesis, identifying themes that may help her understand the experience of adopting and the impact of support. To support these themes Janine may quote what you tell us but again this will be anonymous.

Janine would like to share the findings with the local authority that she works in, her peers and other adoption professionals to hopefully increase understanding of the adoption experience and to better support provided. Finally, she may get the study published in an academic journal but again nobody who takes part will be identifiable.

Within (Adoption Agency), your information will only be shared with the evaluation team that I lead for the DfE project. I will also be taking what you share with us and writing up a report for the DfE around the key themes emerging around post-adoption support. (Adoption Agency) would also like to share this report with local authorities via a seminar in March.

Finally, we would both also like to share our findings with everybody that takes part and are happy to email or post a summary of our research to anyone who is interested.

If you have any further questions at any time please contact me at ... or Janine at jgibbs@ioe.ac.uk.

Consent form for Adoptive Parents

| | Yes | No |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I have read the information leaflet about the study and had the chance to ask questions | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I consent to participate in this study | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I understand that all information will be treated as strictly confidential* *Unless serious child protection issues are brought to light during the research | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I give my consent to the focus group being voice recorded and to written notes being taken | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

First adoptive parent:

Please sign

here.....

Name in

capitals.....

Date.....

Second adoptive parent:

Please sign
here.....

Name in
capitals.....

Date.....

Appendix VI - Full interview transcript

Please note all names and places have been changed or replaced with an x

So the first question is, can you tell me a bit about your family.

(I have removed the information given in this section so the family are not identifiable)

Prior to the adoption what kind of support and training did you receive about becoming an adoptive parent?

I'd say xx was pretty good. We went through xx council. They ran a training workshop before you even, before you can get approved for panel basically. So they do it in the reverse order of lots of places, which I think was a very good thing because it weeds out some people. So I think it was 3 days. Yeah.

And what sort of things did they cover, can you remember?

Yeah, so there was lots of brainstorming about what it feels like to be the child and how difficult transitioning might be from one place to another. There was some of the speakers that came in – so some were social workers themselves that work for xx and then they also had other social workers come in and talk about like the effect of trauma and difficult starts. There was a lot of what would you expect children to be doing at certain ages and what are these children likely to be doing at this age. The difference between chronological age and emotional age. A lot of stuff that's come back to haunt us. It was very useful, it was very useful, and I didn't always feel it at the time because you felt like you were going over the same ground sometimes, you'd thought you'd done this. But you could see for a lot of people you could see, they'd never thought about those things before and it was really useful for the majority of people in there. They had a foster carer come in, to talk about what it was like to be the foster carer on the other side of the equation, and it later turned out that that was the foster carer that had our daughter. So that was rather ironic and really quite cool. Cause she came in, she's an amazing lady just brilliant. They also had people who'd adopted previously come in and tell us about their experiences as well. So then they were very thorough actually.

Is there anything in that process that you think could have been better?

Yeah, at the time I didn't feel like I was getting enough in depth stuff. Although, so you get all of your training before you go to your panel and then you get matched with a child, and there's nothing like after that. So actually, the place, the point in time for more in depth things would be when you kind of know what circumstances you're facing and that's... it's a bit terrifying cause you think I could be dealing with any of this stuff. When you actually know what you're going to be dealing with it would be really useful to have something more about your particular needs. Because that's the point at which you're

ready to dive. Because you do think, I do need to know about all of this but, you know, it's very unlikely my child is going to have all of this. There was a 20 page document that they gave me if I wanted to read more. We did read, I'm trying to think of the name of the guy. There was a book that they recommended that we did read, it was like 'The hurting child' or something with that kind of title.

Was it 'Inside I'm hurting'?

Yes, yes that was it. Yeah, that was good. And then I think that we read enough until we felt like we knew more, and you know, life and work and children was carrying on in the meantime. So I think the pre-panel training was brilliant. I think there really wasn't much when you get matched than there could be and then there's we'll get to this, but you know, there's nothing afterwards.

And can you tell me about the matching process, what was that like for you?

For us it was really fast and really easy. Our social worker happened to be the social worker for our daughter. She got her in November. I know, it was just amazing. So she got X and her book in November and sent it to us pretty much immediately. We were a bit like oh my god when we read her file because it was the first file we'd read. And sort of, we're splitting up a birth family, there's a lot here. I think it's first just that initial shock and then you think actually the scale of things that we've heard about this isn't that bad. It's just that, you know, we don't know, probably know people who have gone through similar things but, it's a bit sad to think about it personally and the hurt that they've gone through. It's a very, it really narrows it down when you... when it's a person.

At that point what support was there from the social workers?

Yeah, X was really brilliant, yeah she was really good.

What was it that was good or made her so good, what was it about her?

She was a very good listener, she answered questions pretty well, you know, she was just available basically. You know, we were probably, for that point in time one of her, you know, one of I don't know probably five cases or something that were really active. So, you know, if I emailed her she'd email me back, if I called her she'd call me back. I mean it was really good. So I would say, you know, she would say "so how are you feeling about it", and I'd say, "Hmm I'm not sure about x and y," and then we'd talk about that for 15 minutes, and she'd be like, "okay I've got to go but, you know, think about it some more and let's talk next week or whatever." She was really brilliant. I mean it's everything, it really is everything.

And prior to the adoption what types of information was shared with you about your child?

So we got her police file, I can't remember what it's called, a CR something. We ended up getting more information because it turned out 2 weeks before we were due to go to matching panel, we found out she had chromosomal abnormality we didn't think she had. That was when the flaws of the system came into fore. We had to wait an entire week before we could even speak to one of their medical team about the chromosomal problem. So, and this event was now a week before matching panel and we were just, you know, tearing our hair out. It was just terrible. Because it wasn't it wasn't X that could answer it, and the two doctors have lots of other appointments and you know, schedule conflicts. It was a nightmare. And so literally every day were going we can do this time, we can do that time, we can do this time, please let us know, and we'd hear nothing. And it was just agonising. You know, you draw on every person that you know that is in any related field. My cousin, who works in America, who specialises in autism found a geneticist who she could talk to. So I could get some information before we spoke to the person at xx, but that was terrible. The wait at that point was not good. But we got the information eventually and we decided to keep the date and go ahead. And the thing that we were really worried about was that she might be autistic and we wouldn't know yet. And that was one of the things that was on my no sheet basically, and you know, it just changed everything. So we went ahead, and we're very glad we did. That was a very low point of support.

In terms of developmentally, did you get any ideas about that?

Yeah, she was behind developmentally. The foster carer was really open, really accessible. I was.. must have talked to her, god, for about 3 hours before matching panel. Because when all this stuff came up with this chromosome things then I finally knew what to ask for, is she showing signs of this, that or the other, and she was able to just set my fears aside basically. Really good, and she's a very, you know, she's someone who's judgement you trust. You know, I knew from seeing her in our workshop that we could rely on what she thought. Whereas, with some people you think, ok well that's going to pass your marker on that area but is it going to pass mine?

So she was very likeminded so that was really helpful as well. You are, you're relying on people's judgements. I mean often in some cases people you've never met, the social worker that comes into your life controls everything. All of this is very subjective, and it's people's lives in the balance. It's an incredibly important job. It isn't well paid, it isn't well recognised. They're your advocate. So if they don't think the kind of child you think is right for you is right for you there's gonna be... and you can't reconcile that, you've got a real ... we've got a friend of a friend who's just got a terrible social worker basically, and she knew probably after approval panel, that she, you know, that she wasn't, that it wasn't going to work, their relationship. She's been waiting now a year and she hasn't had any files given to her, she hasn't been matched, I mean she's nowhere and she's, you know, she's distraught. And there's that whole fear of if you switch social workers, it's kind of going to go against you. No it is luck of the draw I'm afraid.

So when your daughter first came to the house, moved in and met you what kind of support was on offer to help you and your child adjust at that point?

That was X again, so she was very good. We met her daily I think, I talked to her daily. Actually no I didn't that week actually, I was talking to X daily. So we started the introductions. I think we had a meeting half way through the week and then a meeting at the end of the week. But yeah, I felt like X was really there for me and if there was things you know that I really was unsure about. But really at that point X was the key person because she knew X so well.

Was there any support for the children, 'so was there kind of any play support or anything like that to help them adjust?

No it's the social workers, yeah, more than anything else

What was useful at that point and what could have been better?

I think the most useful things was just conversations with X with the foster carer. She was very clear about, she's done this loads of times, so she was very clear about what would happen and when. What she would be doing and what she'd expect us to do. Kind of emotions that might come up, she was just brilliant. So she said, you know, the first day you know I'm going to have them come, I'm going to open the door. She just talked us all through it. You know, we'll have teas, they'll be around in the kitchen, you know we'll just keep it free flowing but if at some point you want to take her off into a different room and read a book to her or something, that's absolutely fine. My house is your house. So she was very clear. And then she said that this one night where we put them to bed and she said that, you know so before we came, she said right, you're going to have her for this number of hours, you're going to put her to bed, this is what she typically does, don't worry about it. It's going to feel weird, don't worry about it. And then you just kind of, you come down stairs after you're done, you give her a look and she gives you one back and you're like ah it's fine.

We still see her, certainly every 3 months and probably every 2. And X can ... actually we were supposed to Skype over Christmas because X started asking about her again. She goes through phases where she's like, you know, I want to talk to X I want to see X or whatever. And we'll pick up the phone or we'll say we're going to see her next week or whatever. She was brilliant, you know, both girls. So X has also got a friend, the girl that was in foster care with her not her sisters but a different girl, got adopted by a woman in xx. So we live a mile and a ½ away from each other and the 2 of them were like sisters. Actually X was closer to this girl than her own biological sister. So they're still friends and they see each other every 2 weeks, the see each other all the time. They do sleep overs, and they do play dates. So she doesn't feel people have fallen off the face of the earth. She knows that she knew people.

In terms of education how did you go about finding a school place for X?

So I contacted the local authorities as soon as I knew this was going to go ahead and they said that you have to wait until you have the actual paperwork. So we missed the deadlines, and I said can't we do it now, and they were like no. So then we went, we had to submit late applications but we got in fine because she's a looked after child in legal terms so that was really helpful.

Was any support or advice provided to help you with choosing the right school ?

No. But I didn't feel like I needed it because I already had X. So even if they said do you need help I would have said no, I'm sorted thank you. I'm also a governor at the school the girls go to so.

Did you share with the school that X was adopted, and how did you go about that and was any support put in place to help her settle in?

I met with the teacher in the first week and just told her. Luckily she'd had friend that's a teacher at the school who had adopted about 5 years ago so she knew some of the things that might come up. So I just kept a really close eye on X in her classroom. Basically I met with the teacher every 5 weeks separate to the parent teacher consultations. Just to say what's happening at home, what's happening at school and they basically said she's absolutely terrible. Towards June/ July she started speaking and taking part in group things. But initially she was just really, really shy. Knowing the girl that she is now, it's laughable how shy she was, cause she's the noisiest most bumptious little thing ever. I was like, ah we had 6 months of silence, and now it's gone away. I'd have appreciated it more rather than trying to coax it out. I said I don't care what she learns this first term I just want her to be happy. To be comfortable in school and they were like, ok that's the approach we'll take. They were very, very good at listening.

So she's still quite young, were there any issues around explaining to peers that she was adopted or has that not come up?

Actually yeah, that's been interesting because I expected that to come up more. At school we're quite well known, and we suddenly showed up with a 4 year old. Nearly everyone knew anyway because I just think it's best to be open about everything just telling them that she was adopted. Some of the kids in her class have, they've asked more about having 2 mums more than about anything, that's much more, it's like in their face I guess. They can see us and we're tangible. Adoption really hasn't come up at all in school. So things like mother's day and father's day come up at school more. And they haven't really done any family tree work. I said to the teacher if you do any family tree work then just let me know so I can talk to X about what she's happy saying.

In your experience do you feel that the school have a good understanding of the needs of adopted children?

No they don't. I think there's no such thing as a school knowing any issue, I think it's all individual people. So even if the head thinks something is

important and tries to teach their staff, you know, you'll get 30% take up. So I think every year you have to educate every teacher your child has and I think that's part of the game, that's part of the deal that you sign up for.

How have you found the staffs approach?

Yeah, really receptive, really open, really wanting to do the best for her. I mean she's just got really the most gorgeous male teacher this year. He's so, he's really slightly shy, really kind hearted Irish guy who just is a joy to work with. You know your kids are so loved at school it's amazing. He plays with them, he sings to them and does all the national curriculum stuff as well. But yeah, no, he's all about who they are as people and he's brilliant!

Do you have any concerns about X's education?

Yes. She's quite behind. She's got some kind of memory problem, I think it's a memory processing disorder. I talked to the school about it last year so we said we're not even going to think about education in the first term, let's just see how she gets on. Then in January we started trying to teach her the alphabet and it was the most excruciating process ever because she learns something one day, her eyes light up she's excited, she's got it, 2 hours later, 2 days later, a week later it's gone. It's just ground hog day. She just has to repeat and repeat and repeat, and it's frustrating for her. She's a bright little soul, she's a very cheery little soul, and thankfully she has the motivation to learn anyway. I think I'd have given up if I was her, I don't need to know these letters. So she really wants to learn, so thank god that's her, that's her personality. So she struggled for the rest of the school year to learn her alphabet and at one point, so we started in January, by mid-February she hadn't learnt any of the 5 sounds of the 5 letters that she was supposed to learn, and that was 5 weeks of doing it daily in school and I ran through them, we had a set of 5 letters, we ran through them every night before she went to bed so hopefully it could kind of sink in whilst she was sleeping. Then all of a sudden things just started clicking and retaining, and then we realised it's just repetition, you just have to do things so many times and it goes into her long term memory. So the teacher was somewhat mystified by this because she's never had a student like it.

X's behaviour was pretty disruptive in the beginning. She's a real follower, so she would just follow what naughty kids were doing without thinking about it and so by the end of the school year she'd gotten that trait under control, which was brilliant. She's learnt almost all of her 26 letters. So we were quite stunned, that you know, you start flailing half way through and you think god is this worth it, and you hit something and she leaps forward. So she did get all of her letters by the end of the school year. I mean all of her class mates are reading, she's just last week began to bring home the reading books and she's just started noticing how much of a difference of a gap there is. She started crying about it and feeling sad about it and saying everyone in the world can do this but me. And you just, you know, your heart breaks for her, because it's so not her fault, you know, it's just so not her fault, it's just her wiring.

So I do have lots of educational concerns. I don't know how the gap was definitely getting bigger not smaller. So I called a meeting with the school and the SENCO and the T.A that does a lot of the sort of hands on work with her and the teacher. I said look, you know, these are my concerns, what are you observing, when can we get her assessed. Because they said from the beginning you have to wait till she's 7 years old to see an Educational Psychologist. I investigated that but no. So I said I think we really need to get her assessed earlier, because there's a clear problem you've said there's a problem I know there's a problem. She needs strategies that are going to help her and the sooner we get those the better everyone is going to be, and they agreed thankfully. So they're going to put her on the referral list and hopefully she'll be seen after Easter.

I mean if I was not a pushy parent I don't know what they would have been doing with her. I think they would have done something, they would have put her in, and they're reasonably good in the lower ability group of kids. Cause there's enough of them basically to constitute a group and therefore get attention. But I don't think that she would have got what she did get, which was a lot more T.A support basically. I think they were ok but yeah, I guess it's just when life throws a squeaky wheel and you point things out, and you're being constructive, I mean not just like moaning. But I met with the teacher multiple times and said look there seems to be a real problem do you have any ideas of how we could do things differently and she never had any ideas. So that was pretty pathetic I thought. So I went above her basically to her senior leader and talked to them and got some stuff in place. But if I hadn't known to do that, and I'd have never have known that if I wasn't a governor then, you know, nothing additional would have happened and I think she'd have never learnt 26 if I wasn't doing the stuff at home either, she'd have probably had about 12, you know. So I don't think, I think the school would have been ok but I don't think they would have been any more than ok.

In terms of this year, because you were saying a little bit about you know she's beginning to notice the difference, are the school putting anything in place to protect her self-esteem or anything like that?

They are now because I called this meeting. So the school didn't call this meeting, I did. I think at the parent teacher consultation, I kind of let it ride for 5 weeks and thought let's see what he's going to put in place. He's an NQT to be fair to him, so I kind of thought I'm going to have to suggest some things. But he didn't even have notes from the SENCO who does X's literacy training, he didn't even have notes from her to give, you know, to talk over with me, he didn't know anything. So that's standard procedure, basically it's a lack of communication I would say. So having raised all these issues and I just got the minutes back from them today about the meeting, they are putting in place stuff and we kind of as a group brainstormed about what we could do to boost X's moral basically. We've come up with some stickers, that she gets in her reading book. I mean she's a real sticker, smiley face girl. And so you know she comes home with stamps and she's like I did good reading look at my hand. So we started doing all of that, so that is now in place but it wouldn't have been.

I said can you give me some work cards for like high frequency words so that, you know, I'll do them at night, you guys do them at school. Can you do multiple things during the day because the more you hit her the better basically. And this hour of literacy is too much for her. So they have an hour of RWI, and I said, you know, I know you do reading for some of it because the whole group, you know, has got concentration issues anyway. But can you do just 5 minutes in the afternoon and 5 minutes before she goes home and so they put that in place. She's also got something with numbers, it's really weird. It's good to have you on the phone I can pick your brain about this. So she absolutely gets counting she knows she can count objects. She understands grouping, taking away, adding, subtracting all of that. But looking at a number like particularly number 2 and 5, 6, 9 and 8, she can't look at those and know what they are. So it's just, it's the most baffling thing, it's just visual for her on numbers. Whereas, visual is how she remembers the letters and we've tried coming up with names for how you write them. So 7 she had problems with, so we had slide like 7, so you do across on the slide and down on the 7 and that one worked. But I haven't come up with anything like that, that gets the other numbers in her brain. It's weird, I mean, we have number 11 on our door, we live at number 11 she still doesn't look at that and know it's an 11. Whenever she's writing she will say, you know, the picture that the letter is associated with to be able to write it. So she's goes, "tower, t," to be able to write it and she remembers, that's how she remembers her letters. Maybe we need to give them a name or something.

They're going to start doing some multi-sensory number stuff to like put her hand in a bag and feel the bumps and figure out it's a number 8. So they've just started that after the meeting so that's good. You do have to wait when you raise it, they're busy, it's a state school they've got lots of kids with more immediate and pressing needs. Cause you know, X now behaves in class, she's lovely, she's smiley and they've got kids hitting other kids so you know you've got to direct your attention where it's most needed sometimes.

Do you think in terms of trauma and attachment, that the school have an understanding of those issues?

No. I think certain people in the school do. I mean the SEN team is great. I don't think the individual teachers do and I think the T.As are the worst case scenario because a lot of them are quite intolerant people. They're very old school and very just shut up and get on with it. So it varies wildly.

Post-adoption have you needed any support from any other agencies?

We did speech and language for a while. So she was on the books in x, so then she transferred over to x. So in the summer when she was with us, we did a session every week at the x speech and language centre. That is the one area she's just made up so much progress. I mean, fantastic. It's just sad that we're not going to be able to do that across the board in a way. But she was about a year behind in speech and language when we got her and she's now slightly above average. I mean her powers of description and being able to use words in her vocabulary and everything. She... it was very hard to

understand her when she first came, her speech was really slurred, she had a really limited vocabulary, I think she probably knew about, if you were lucky, about 50 words. She has just come on like a storm trooper now she's done brilliantly in that.

How easy was it to access the speech and language?

It was very easy, you know, they did all the paper work themselves, they notified us, they set up the sessions. And then the school has a dedicated speech and language therapist as well so they picked her up and took over from x. So all through reception she had once a week sessions with the speech and language person there.

What impact, if any, having access to that made to your relationship with X?

Oh it was brilliant. I mean, I thought what they did with her over the summer was pretty basic but looking back on it you have to start somewhere, you know, at a very basic level. They had some really, really repetitive things, and you also realise, those tests, I hadn't really had to have any for X, so those tests are completely dependent on how comfortable that child is with that therapist. I mean this I never realised. You know you can't take those tests as like be all and end all, yeah completely dependent on what mood they're in. So one day she'd go in and be really excited and trying and then the next week she'd have not slept well or had a nightmare or feel really clingy and she wouldn't feel this woman at all, so she just wanted me and she just wouldn't talk, and she wouldn't talk. She was a selective mute for a while, but that passed when she was in the care of her grandmother. So that was her kind of withholding, another way of expressing herself. So now she's come on leaps and bounds and it was brilliant because they're doing things just so you don't have to do it all basically. You know, we're doing the modelling anyway in our lives so certain things we knew just to slow down basically, and because X was so much older, she was 7, you know you kind of remember what you used to speak like when your child was that age. But it's like ok, now go even slower. Simple words, really clearly with your mouth in an exaggerated way and just repeat things and just keep it low key basically.

Were you offered any kind of support with kind of helping X and X bond?

No we weren't. I think it was ok. I mean it's, it's fascinating the whole thing, sibling relationships anyway, and X and I both came from big families. So we have lots and lots of personal experience to draw on. But it was really hard just to get X to not have this pink eyed, you know, pink tinted vision of what it was going to be like to have a sibling. She wanted a sister forever, she's always wanted a sister and we can't, it doesn't matter how many times you say it's not like when you go visit your friends and you go play with their little sisters, it's different when they're in the house every day and they're in your face. But I don't think anything other than real experience can help with a kid at that age. You know, they just have to experience it. And I think maybe, you

know, it would have been good actually for her to have maybe a session with X about 3 months after X had come. Because she really liked X and she really liked talking to her. Yeah, I remember we heard her speak to her friends and stuff and she was fine, she got lots of support from other people but she did an amazing job, I mean she really did. The problem with her was getting her to not hold everything in, and not feel like she's being bad if she gets upset or angry or cross or wants to say go away. We did lots of go away training for X.

Any other post-adoption support that you received?

So it took about a year for, we were supposed to have a post-adoption worker assigned to us and it took about a year before we actually had that. We had a name and he never replied to stuff. He was just crap the first year. Then he had to contact us, because we arranged the first contact visit with her half siblings ourselves, because they were with X and you know it's just easier. Then they moved out of X's and then we had to go through the post-adoption team. We weren't told when the foster placement broke down, we weren't told when they had moved to a new house. There was just complete lack of information. In fact we weren't told when they moved from X's, X told us. So there were 2, yeah they had 2 moves that we weren't even told about. And so then I emailed the team and said look you were the one that was supposed to be advising us because it's my understanding that they've moved again. He finally started replying and so now he's great. So we had our most recent contact visit and I talked to him for, yeah, about half an hour on the phone afterwards because it was hard and he was really great, it was really great that he was on the phone and willing to have the conversation basically. So we had problems with the contact letter because the mother had written inappropriate things in the letter and saying things like she wanted to come see X's school play and it's just, you know. So then I was talking to him about that and he was very accessible about that which was great. So I have to say year 2 it was better than year 1. There was no post-adoption support the first year, none but he has made up for it.

Have you had anybody do life stories or anything like that?

Yeah, the social worker did that when we still had her. She was good at that actually.

In terms of contact it sounds like it's been a bit, kind of, up and down. What's the experience been like for you and X?

The first one, she came to us in April and we had one in August, a face to face in August that was fine that was really easy. The girls, the 2 still in foster care, talked to X, while I happened to be there thank god, about something really nasty that her father had done that X no recollection of. She just looked at me a bit dazed and then I said, yes that happened but X was really young when that happened so let's talk about something else and just diverted them. But they love seeing each other, they love playing and so the contact visits themselves are generally pretty good. Afterwards she was a bit withdrawn but ok. We talked about it over the next week and then it just seemed to be fine. She seems to handle things so much better than I thought she was ever going

to. That's what I was afraid of splitting them up and actually, even though they've played together really well, she's never really missed them. It's kind of an odd sad thing, unfortunate in a way. If they see each other they're happy to see each other but there's not a longing.

In terms of the support around contact, you had some around the letter were you offered anymore?

No, and I asked him to meet with the birth mother as well to get the letter right basically because we really want to keep contact, but we just can't have stuff like that. She can't, probably in common with many, many birth mothers, she struggles to do the writing. So he said well I'll talk to her and I said, can you just, you know, when you see her can you just have her do it with you so you can say you know, if something comes out that doesn't seem good can you just erase that or something. Can you just do it with her, physically with her, rather than sending her away to do it. He was like oh yeah I can do that so. Actually, I did talk to him as well when the second placement broke down at their foster home, basically they're very very needy girls and it was just too much for the first one. They weren't even with her for a year and X really strongly felt and recommended that they got split up because they are so much and they reinforce each other negatively in lots of ways. So I raised all of this with him and I said I know in a way this is not my place and not my business, but I just feel like they're going to be part of our lives anyway, and they're our extended family and I feel like there's no advocate for them. They lost their, it's not a social worker it's something else, but they lost their case worker basically and that vacuum of nobody really advocating for them, it just felt like somebody ought to be. He was brilliant with that, he said no I completely get why you feel this way and we really are taking these things into account, and whether he was just saying those kind of things or not, but at least it was down, it was recorded and I said even if you think it's a ridiculous thing for me to say can you just pass it on to whoever gets them, whoever takes their case over. So that was good, and the woman who's got them now seems amazing, she's perfectly able to handle them and has them on the straight and narrow.. Because if they could just be part of a family, if they could just have a family life then I won't be so scared for them.

Just looking back over the whole experience, what do you feel has gone well and what do you feel could have been done differently?

The matching went really well. The approval process went pretty well. I would say if you've got a birth child you have slightly different issues and you know lots of things that people with no children don't know. So, you know, I always think there needs to be two different streamlines here. Also for people who have adopted before who have to go through the same process, that whole thing. So the approval process in that sense, you know could definitely be done differently. And then there's always emphasis now on times and timing, which in a way is no bad thing for the efficient ones but is a terrible thing for the inefficient ones. It means that the inefficiency is just faster and I mean that's no good. So I think, yeah, the approval process could be split between people who have had kids either adopted or otherwise and people who have never had children. You could have 2 different ways of doing that because

there are very different needs and issues. You're fitting into an existing family that is a completely different dynamic and then you can raise things like the adjusting and the sibling relationships and stuff like that, because it doesn't get done at any point. So that could be done differently. Yeah, the matching was fine. Post-adoptions support, I think it's abysmal, I think it's crap. I think you are at your most needy point and you have your least amount of support.

What support, do you feel should be available post-adoption?

I think there should be ... you know, Adoption UK does all this stuff with networks for parents. Why isn't that part of the process? Why does Adoption UK have to do that? That should be part and parcel of the whole deal. Obviously parents need each other after the ordeal they go through and you need it in the local area you live and not necessarily the borough you get it through. So that is something that's just a huge missing piece right now. We're members. They have been, they were really, really useful in the beginning but what I have found is that the ones, it's like all those kind of like forums, the people have rather extreme issues are the ones that use it the most and when you're in the middle, you're coping fine and actually you just want to vent or just get some advice from somebody, it's that middle group you're left adrift. So I no longer go to the Adoption UK group because their issues are so much more severe than mine and I'm getting, you know, I have all the parents that I knew from before, parents I've met through X's class. But no body in those groups knows anything about adoption and trauma. You know there's one mum actually whose got a downs child and she and I have become really close friends because there's a lot of similarities in the education in particular of our daughters. So you do find people but, yeah, parent networking its just a huge support system that we're getting right now.

The workshops that x and x did were really useful. There was one about education and about things you might need to raise with your child's teacher, and I'm trying to think who the woman who did it was, she works in schools. But she was an outside consultant, I can't remember what her training was but she was basically the one who raised the whole, when they're going to talk about family trees make sure you pre-empt that. And that hadn't even occurred to me, I mean I had to do a bit with X about father's day and mother's day but I hadn't thought about family trees. What else have I used? They do a series of workshops that they invite you to that are really good if you know, if they hit your need. So yeah, it's mostly the parent networking really.

I mean there's also a group, I don't know if you've come across them called new family social. So they're gay adoptive parents. Yeah, they're brilliant, so we meet up with them as well from time to time, and that's been really useful. We went on one of their camping things over the summer. And it's just great for X to see all these kids with gay parents. And all the gay parent stuff we've sort of tried to sort of fit in to it's just never convenient or simple enough. It's always either in central London or it's in North London, you know, you just think argh. I'm not going to have play dates or get togethers when I have to trek an hour, an hour and a half to find you. So yeah, there's a lot more out there but finding everybody.

Anything else that you want to cover that you want to cover or talk about or do you think we've kind of covered everything?

Well I'd be interested, the whole school aspect, I mean. Do schools need to know more but how are they going learn it in reality? I think that's a really big question. Because what they cover on an inset day is probably the best time to get everybody the same information at the same time. So, because I know (School Name) does stuff as well, about kind of going into schools and talking to them about, you know, raising awareness and tolerance and all that kind of stuff. Yeah schools are a tricky institution really. We've got a school of 150 kids, it's probably 8 looked after kids and there's 3 adopted children. So if you're looking at that number as a percentage of the student body, you're priorities are going to be elsewhere. And especially if you've got issues that you're kind of trying to solve on the teaching and learning side.

Thank you very much for you're time. What I'll do, so I'm going to be writing up my research and it'll be finished in the summer. So I'll send you over, well I won't send you over the whole thing because it will be pages and pages, but I'll send you over a concise version and then you can have a read of it. And if there's anything else you want to tell me, or if there's any questions or if you want to withdraw your information you've got my email address haven't you?

Yes I do.

So just feel free to contact me.

Fantastic, thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Appendix VII -Example of a descriptively line by line coded transcript

Please note all names and place have been changed.

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| <p>1) Do you feel that the school has a good understanding of the needs of adopted children?</p> <p>Tell me more about this.</p> <p>I think a lot of adoptive parents feel like what I'm going to say now. I think they just thought that I am a protective mother trying to make something out of nothing. That's the feeling I got. The head teacher talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk. She would say the right things but then on a practical level they didn't happen. In one sense I was lucky because I became a governor at the school, my reason for it was because of the children to have an inside track and I know not everybody is in that position but it helped because she felt that she had to keep me on side. She had to do something, every time she said something insensitive. For example, one time she told me that Sam was the most challenging child in the whole school. So then what I did was put it in writing and I would say what are you going to do? My friend is an Ofsted inspector and she said you need to put it back on the school. In the end in year 1 he was so unmanageable that they made the decision that they wanted to move him in to another class which I agreed to. In hindsight I shouldn't have agreed because it's Sam being moved around again. In the end they moved him he looks back and now says it's because he is naughty. By the time he is in year 2 I sometimes helped in his class and the</p> | <p><u>Descriptive Coding</u></p> <p><i>Perceived as over protective</i></p> <p><i>School not carrying out what they say they will</i></p> <p><i>Felt Lucky Became governor to be involved with education</i></p> <p><i>School insensitive</i></p> <p><i>Putting responsibility back on school</i></p> <p><i>Support from knowledgeable friend</i></p> <p><i>Child being moved class</i></p> |
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| <p>teacher would put him and another “naughty boy” on the computer whilst the teacher is teaching just so she can teach. When I saw that I thought that’s not right, this other little boy... I nearly applauded, because one day he took a ruler and picked out all of the letters of the keyboard and broke it and I thought good for you! Now hopefully the teacher will know that you don’t want to be on the computer. What happened is they then mess around because they haven’t been in the lesson. So I started thinking I can’t do this so I took him to an Educational Psychologist, the school said they would but it took months and months. So I took him to one and his one teacher in Year Two said I think he has ADHD and I thought I don’t mind if he does but its needs to be ADHD. So I took him to the Educational Psychologist and she did a great report and made some recommendations which of course the school have to follow and couldn’t ignore. She said he didn’t have ADHD but he needs to be in an under stimulated environment and being close to the teacher. I sent it to the school they didn’t do anything with it immediately. By the end of that year I had been in that many times and they then agreed to get him one to one support. They said he won’t get statemented because academically he is a little bit above average, they said it doesn’t impact on his learning. He does have problems with fine motor skills he finds it hard to play with lego and so it’s hard for him to do writing, he has great ideas but it’s hard for him to get it on paper. So they got him one to one support, it was this teaching assistant who was about 12 or something, you</p> | <p><i>Naughty label Separated from class</i></p> <p><i>Buying private E.P</i></p> <p><i>School Labelling- ADHD Not understanding impact of trauma???</i></p> <p><i>E.P made good recommendations</i></p> <p><i>School not implementing recommendations initially</i></p> <p><i>Providing 1:1 support</i></p> <p><i>Fine motor difficulties – writing difficult</i></p> |
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| <p>know it was because she was cheap. I think they thought we need to get this mum off our back and it's not like he throws chairs at the teacher but he does things like putting the computer by the wall and is told not to and then does it again. I knew it wasn't going to work so I told them. For Sam it's about the relationship, and building that trust. But I thought I would give it a go because I didn't want to sound ungrateful. You know we will go back and complain about a fridge that isn't working but we won't do it in school for our children, we'll say oh they will think I'm ungrateful. Anyway I went to meet with this teaching assistant and I'd explained to her the whole thing about their background what we do at home. The first term he had the most fantastic teacher who actually turned it around, she said to me, firstly, I teach out of compassion and she said to Sam that whatever happened in the past is gone it always makes me want to cry. Sorry, I just want to cry because it was just when she said that it was always that he was the "bad" boy and she just said you know I understand we are starting a fresh. The first week the T.A wrote that Sam refused to read to me he said he can't. So then I wrote 2 pages back saying that's why you are there – well I didn't say that but that's what I wanted to. I just said about relationships and blah blah blah and that at this point it's not that important that he is reading that one page. So then the good teacher said can we have a meeting so we had a meeting. In the end she also felt it wasn't working and they decided to appoint somebody and I can be in the interview with them. That was amazing. But when she</p> | <p><i>Feeling that school perceive her as pushy</i></p> <p><i>Relationships key for learning</i></p> <p><i>Feeling she might sound ungrateful</i></p> <p><i>Explaining children and background to T.A</i></p> <p><i>Fantastic teacher</i></p> <p><i>Teacher providing a fresh start</i></p> <p><i>T.A writing home saying child is refusing to read</i></p> <p><i>Relationships important</i></p> <p><i>Parent invited to interview</i></p> |
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| <p>walked in I just wrote yes! I knew it and she said she wanted to work with the Year Three boy. So we have the good teacher who is over the top and dramatic and then we had the T.A who is quite regulated and calm that year was amazing never any problems. She never called me in unless it was really significant. Then the T.A moved up with him and it all started again in September. Things weren't working and they had to ring me and tell me to pick him up because he is on a white card. So when they ring I have had to say sorry I will not pick him up, do not ring me, don't ring me again I won't pick him up. That's his ultimate dream and I'm working. That system doesn't work for him. They did have a behavioural therapist come in and observe him and work on a behaviour plan for him. That was good, the one thing that made the biggest difference was I got one free place to a xx conference and I gave it to the school, the SENCO went and it was amazing because I've been saying for ages you know when you are in the womb its powerful. xx says that too and because she said it they listen. She then gave a training session to the other staff. I don't think there is a magic wand and that it will always be there and I worry that he will pay for it.</p> | <p><i>Good combination of staff personalities led to a good year at school</i></p> <p><i>School calling her to collect him because of bad behaviour</i></p> <p><i>Behaviour therapist came to observe him</i></p> <p><i>Conference and training for SENCO made a difference</i></p> <p><i>Training given by SENCO to other staff</i></p> |
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Appendix VIII -Themes and supportive quotations

| Over-arching themes | Sub-themes | Example Quotations |
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| Reconceptualising Parenting | "More than just a Parent" | <p>"So I called a meeting with the school and the SENCo and the TA that does a lot of the sort of hands on work with her and the teacher, and said look, you know, these are my concerns, what are you observing, when can we get her assessed"</p> <p>"We had to find it ourselves maybe there should be a leaflet with all numbers and resources on so that you as an adoptive parent when coming on hard times know who you can contact for help."</p> <p>"You know x has said before that she often wonders if it is morally right to expect that kind of therapeutic parenting from normal people who just want to have a child."</p> <p>"You know, you draw on every person that you know is in any related field. My cousin, who works in America, who specialises in Autism found a geneticist who she could talk to. So I could get some information before we spoke to the person at Kaleidoscope."</p> <p>"It was also very useful when we started with CAMHS that me and my partner had sessions every two weeks where we would talk through his behaviour and they would help us understand why he was doing that and support to help us manage his behaviour."</p> |
| | Culture Shock | <p>"Jane would only eat toast, she wouldn't eat anything else, no vegetables, no fruit she used to eat salt by the spoonful."</p> <p>"They came in June and it just felt like the aliens had landed, in terms of behaviour initially."</p> <p>"I think I was so overwhelmed by it all and just being able to say it out loud that there is a possibility that it might not work and then considering the alternatives."</p> <p>"If you have never been involved with social services it does have an impact if I had been briefed more I had no understanding. I had to be so confused before I understood it if you have 2 kids you don't need a scrambled brain."</p> |
| | Preparing Contexts | <p>"We sent the boys to a group but Michael couldn't handle it and so we didn't have anywhere for them to go and it was difficult for other parents to help us out."</p> <p>"The schools are not trained they have no idea how to deal with the problems and we say people think what we have done is admirable but I think the world isn't ready for adopted children."</p> <p>"I met with the teacher in the first week and just told her. Luckily she'd had friend that's a teacher at the school who had adopted about 5 years ago so she knew some of the things that might come up."</p> <p>"They don't tell you really simple things like the children don't know how to regulate themselves, what do you do with food issues? There's cutting, wetting the bed they don't even talk about these things at the beginning. They don't even tell you those things at the beginning it would help."</p> |

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| The Significance of Relationships | Normalisation | <p><i>"Obviously parents need each other after the whole deal after they go through this and you need it in the local area you live in not necessarily the borough you get it through. So that is something that's just a huge missing piece right now. We're members. They have been, they were really, really useful in the beginning."</i></p> <p><i>"We have been doing this so long now, we get brainwashed we are part of this now, it becomes part of you in your blood. People that haven't been through it say I know how to bring up children I have brought up three of you but this is completely different."</i></p> <p><i>"The problems you have its things that your own family have never experienced, they have never experienced some of the bizarre problems and its most of the time relying on social workers and then when we met with a therapist."</i></p> <p><i>"It was a good group of prospective adopters who we are still in contact with today and that offered us lots of support."</i></p> |
| | Availability and Containment | <p><i>"But nobody would speak to me or answer my calls about what was happening. It went on and on like that."</i></p> <p><i>"Our social worker xx used to keep in touch with me, and sometimes she would come over at six in the night and I think she was the one that updated (the borough) because they didn't even have a social worker."</i></p> <p><i>"I just think it's because they really care they go above that little bit. At the end of the day she always has time for me."</i></p> <p><i>"So every day when I got back I would spend an hour talking to Jenny, an hour to Belinda, I would cry. I would write down what happened what my response was."</i></p> |
| | Judgement and blame | <p><i>"They didn't want to face that it was things at school, but that may be because we were suggesting things and asking them to do things at school and I think she was probably throwing it back at us."</i></p> <p><i>"Prior to the adoption order going through we let them play outside with other children. So our social worker complained and we had a complaint made because they are still looked after children we were meant to sit outside and watch them. That wasn't nice."</i></p> <p><i>"At the beginning it was really difficult dealing with borough x, social services was tricky. If you've never been part of them...you know I felt stripped bare. You know you become the wrong person they judge you on the littlest thing. It drove me nuts, my life wasn't my own I couldn't even have certain people in my house. You know my life just went but I'd taken them. I found social services distressing."</i></p> <p><i>"How the hell does he know how I feel, but I said I love my children and this is the way I perceive my love for my children. And I love them unconditionally."</i></p> |
| Home - School Interaction | Lack of understanding and knowledge | <p><i>"What really stressed us was that people didn't understand, especially the school, they pass all the problems to you. So you have to do all the research and at the same time you have to deal with the problems."</i></p> <p><i>"But I met with the teacher multiple times and said look there seems to be a real problem do you have any ideas of how we could do things differently and she never had any ideas. So that was pretty pathetic I thought"</i></p> <p><i>"That is something that could definitely be better, understanding attachment and early trauma in schools"</i></p> |

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| | | <p>because an adoptive parent you are prepared and you live with it every day but people on the outside just want to hear the good news they do not want to know that it is tough. They think like that's what all children are like you know everyone throws a tantrum. Until you see it you don't know it. So it is about educating people around the adopted child to understand and do something about it."</p> <p>"Just getting an understanding of trauma they think it's the past and that's that. There's a will there in my girl's school but they just don't understand, there should be some special training offered for teachers of adopted children."</p> |
| | The Interface with Education | <p>"What was really helpful was the head of social care being like a go between and she said quite clearly that the school didn't understand what we were going through."</p> <p>"What we felt was very helpful was when the social worker came to the school to have that first conversation with the school. I think they take it more seriously if the social worker is there."</p> <p>"I just wish somebody had said but again it's about facilitating I just wish my social worker had put me in touch with well even the Local Education Authority because I now know they have an understanding that the school we are at is like a real sausage machine. Just somebody that could have talked to me about the different schools in the area because I didn't have kids I had no idea."</p> <p>"I think it could be part of the social workers role I know it's difficult but to check that the adopters have done sufficient because I hadn't and I wasn't sure how to and so much other stuff was happening."</p> |
| | Exclusion from the class and teacher | <p>"They started to take him out from the classroom and treat him very specially, which sounds fantastic but as parents we became concerned that every time he did a bad behaviour, he would be taken out and treated."</p> <p>"The last year he was mostly at home and that was difficult and even at his new school he had psychotherapy one day a week so he hasn't been full time for such a long time."</p> <p>"So when they ring I have had to say sorry I will not pick him up, do not ring me, don't ring me again I won't pick him up. That's his ultimate dream and I'm working."</p> <p>"In the end in year 1 he was so unmanageable that they made the decision that they wanted to move him in to another class which I agreed to."</p> |
| Necessary Resources | Financial Constraints | <p>"Our mortgage tripled but our wages stayed the same. We are very thankful for that we are higher earners and on the top limit for allowance. We are really feeling the cut to child allowance, we asked if they could pick up the difference and they are very generous but we are on the top limit."</p> <p>"They were basically going to do the same type of assessment the same model as when you move children from families and they used forms, the forms had a box at the bottom that said should this child be moved and placed in care. It was so the whole experience was completely awful and negative it was the last thing the children it was a complete and utter barrier and that's what it felt it was and you have asked for a little bit of money and it just felt like they were going through a process."</p> <p>"As I say finance is a big thing when it crops up, you don't want it to be and we are not poor but...lots of the things you saying it costs a £1000 to access."</p> |

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| | | <p><i>"The adoption allowance helped because we have had to change everything I have cut down my hours."</i></p> |
| | Accessing Post Adoption Support Services (P.A.S.S) | <p><i>"There are support groups but they are normally during the day and we both work, so they are not really useful for us. I find all our annual leave is taken off to take care of them in holidays because we can't send them to clubs so we can't attend these support groups."</i></p> <p><i>"We were trying to fight to get Michael into CAMHS and there were waiting lists a lack of resources and our social worker was good and at the time we had signed an agreement that if we needed any support and it couldn't be provided by CAMHS we could go the private route. They felt that if they went private we would need to go to CAMHS first so that didn't help us. It was a really big fight, only after pushing pushing and pushing did we get him into CAMHS. After half a year of the sessions, they felt that his case was so severe that he needed intensive therapy, psychotherapy three times a week but they were not able to give that because of lack of resources."</i></p> <p><i>"Only when we had the crisis meeting did people tell us about respite for holidays just for a day for four hours."</i></p> <p><i>"Post-adoptions support, I think it's abysmal, I think it's crap. I think you are at your most needy point and you have your least amount of support."</i></p> |
| | Fragmentation | <p><i>"With our therapy we had to wait six months for it to come through and that was because of the borough where we live and the borough where the girls were from were discussing who to finance it and whose responsibility that would be and xx was mediating and so for a while we wondered if it was ever going to happen but eventually it did. So you know that's a little bit of waiting and tension"</i></p> <p><i>"Another thing the government need to change is if you are adopting a child from another borough then you should still get support locally, they know what is available in the borough. There has to be something because that was really frustrating, and you want to say don't adopt out of borough but there are some children this has to happen for like ours."</i></p> <p><i>"We were told we were supposed to receive support, starting when the problems were starting. The social services where we live didn't have the resources and felt it should be the social services where the boys are from that should support us for the first three years of being with us. Because they were far away they didn't have an over view on what was available here and so we were stuck in the middle."</i></p> <p><i>"Then when you get the adoption order you get this erm situation where the placing authority has responsibility for three years and when you hit big time crisis like I did suddenly you are having to deal with social workers miles and miles away who don't know the children you know who aren't involved the whole thing needs to be local. Adopting older children is hard enough, adopting older children from another local authority brings its own challenges and then this whole idea of this body way up here having responsibility and then these people over here. It makes the whole thing worse."</i></p> |

AppendixVIII – Ethical Approval

DEdPsy (Y2) STUDENT RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM **Psychology & Human Development**

This form should be completed with reference to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct – available online from www.bps.org.uk

On which course are you registered? Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

Title of project: An exploration of educational support for adopted children. Facilitators and barriers of post adoption support and the impact on adopted children and their families.

Name of researcher(s): Janine Gibbs

Name of supervisor/s (for student research): Charlie Owen and Vivian Hill

Date: 11.12.12 Intended start date of data collection (month and year only): May 2013

- 1. Summary of planned research** (please provide the following details: project title, purpose of project, its academic rationale and research questions, a brief description of methods and measurements; participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria; estimated start date and duration of project). It's expected that this will take approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. Please also give further details here if this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee.

The current study is an exploration of educational support for adopted children. Facilitators and barriers of post adoption support and the impact on adopted children and their families.

Currently adoption has been put back on the national and governmental agenda. The coalition government has made a commitment to increase the number of children being adopted and to tackle the delays in the adoption process. Children who are put up for adoption currently in the U.K. are likely to have been through very different experiences to those in the middle of the twenty-first century, who, were often given up by single unmarried mothers because of the stigma and shame attached to having a child outside of marriage.

As Greene et al (2011) state, in comparison to many other western European nations the U.K has many more children adopted from care and has a relatively small number of inter-country adoptions. This means that children being adopted in the U.K. are likely to be adopted at an older age and therefore may have experienced some of the risk factors associated with going into care. Golding (2010)

suggests that although adopted children may be experiencing more stability than children looked after they will have had “similar, if not more compromising, levels of adversity pre-and post-natally as well as movement in and out of the care system” (pg 574). In March 2011, government statistics showed that fifty-four per cent of children taken in to care had experienced abuse or neglect, some of these children will go on to be adopted. Therefore, it is important that adoptive families are able to get the support they need and that those supporting them have an understanding of the difficulties they might be facing. Without this support and understanding adoptions may break down and this will have a huge impact on the life consequences of those children.

With all this in mind the following research questions will be considered;

- How do adoptive parents experience the adoption process?
- Do adoptive parents feel adequately supported post-adoption?
- What is adoptive parent’s experience of the education system?

Participants will be recruited from an adoptive parents support group from the London borough that I work in. Participants may differ in age and gender but will need to have adopted in the last five years. I am intending to present the aims of my study within one of the support groups and will then give out leaflets and consent letters so participants will be fully informed before volunteering. Semi –structured interviews will be used to collect my data. I expect to start collecting data in May 2013 and it is intended that all data will be collected by September 2013.

2. Specific ethical issues (Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research, and how they will be addressed. It’s expected that this will require approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. You will find information in the notes about answering this question).

All participants will be over the age of 18 years old.

The research will hopefully be of benefit to both adoptive parents and adopted children by raising awareness of the issues around post adoption educational support. It may also in the short term benefit adoptive parents to talk about their experiences and perhaps as some literature suggests taking part in research itself may have a therapeutic effect. In the longer term this research may also benefit other professionals who work with adoptive families again by highlighting their experiences and making professionals more aware of some of the issues around post adoption educational support.

There are minimal risks to participants. However, I am aware that Adoption is an emotive topic and many parents may be adopting because they have been unable to have biological children of their own. Therefore, the interviews need to be handled with care and sensitivity and again it should be made clear to participants that they do not have to talk about anything they do not want to or may find difficult.

I will inform participants about my research both verbally and in writing. I will ask each participant to sign a letter giving their consent to take part in the study. Within

this letter I will outline the aims of the study and inform them that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point even after the data has been collected. I will also explain and document in my letter that all participants' data will be anonymous. Names and locations will be changed and the local authority will not be identifiable. I will inform participants that their data will be shared with my supervisors but only after the interviews have been transcribed and anonymised. Nothing with original names or locations will be printed.

All data will be kept on my laptop and will be password protected; the data and interviews will be stored until three months after my viva so it can be used to make any recommended changes to my thesis. This will be explained to participants and there will be an opportunity upon meeting with me to ask any questions about this.

No financial incentives will be offered

I will end my interaction with the participants by sharing the results in a group setting and sending each of them a thank you card and a copy of the research brief. I will also share my findings with the boroughs Educational Psychology Team and the boroughs Adoption Team.

Another ethical issue that should be considered is my role in the local authority. If parents are experiencing particular difficulties and I have an understanding of how to seek help and support I would be keen to do this. However, this is something that needs to be discussed with participants either individually or as a group. With their prior consent and permission I would be happy to signpost them to support services.

