



**Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy)**

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**Children Adopted from Care: Teacher Constructions of Need and Support.**

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## **1. Abstract**

Evidence of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) suggest that children who have been adopted from care are at higher risk of difficulties that may impact their ability to access education. In the UK, despite recent improvements, much of the support available to Looked After Children (LAC) is no longer available once children have been adopted. This research therefore sought to investigate teachers' perceptions on whether adopted children have difficulty accessing education, their understanding of the possible impact of ACEs and whether comparisons are made between adopted and LAC. Support systems for adopted children were also explored. Data was gathered in England and Wales through nine interviews with primary school teachers of adopted children and a questionnaire completed by 84 teachers. Descriptive statistics and a thematic analysis of the data revealed that many of the adopted children experienced some difficulties that impacted on their ability to access education to varying extents. Some received in-school support, however, few teachers accessed support from outside agencies. Training for teachers was limited and barriers to training are outlined. Teachers' perceptions on the need for support systems varied, as did their constructions of their role in support.

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## **Summary**

This thesis includes three parts: a literature review, an empirical study and a critical appraisal. Part A, the literature review, looks at theoretical and research literature relating to the impact of ACEs on a child's ability to access education and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Research on Looked After Children (LAC) and children adopted from care in education is explored and the discrepancies in support for these two groups considered. Recent improvements in support for adopted children are described and the rationale for the empirical study explained.

Part B, the empirical study, investigates teachers' constructions of the needs of adopted children and the educational support available to them. This information was gathered through nine interviews with primary school teachers who taught a child adopted from care. Eighty-four primary school teachers also completed a questionnaire. The data was analysed through a process of thematic analysis. Descriptive statistics were provided based on the questionnaire data. The findings are discussed in relation to the literature and relevance to EP practice.

Part C, the critical appraisal, consists of two sections. The first section is a critical account of the research practitioner and reflects on each stage of the research process and how it was approached. The second section reflects on the contribution to knowledge made by this research, in terms of the rationale, relevance to EP practice and the researcher's own knowledge.

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## **List of abbreviations**

ACE – Adverse Childhood Experiences
BAAF – British Association of Adoption and Fostering
CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CIN – Children In Need
DfBIS – Department for Business Innovation and Skills
DfE –Department for Education
DfES – Department for Education and Skills
DoH – Department of Health
EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan
EP – Educational Psychologist
EPS – Educational Psychology Service
GP – General Practitioner
LA – Local Authority
LAC – Looked After Children
LSA – Learning Support Assistant
MRI – Magnetic Resonance Imaging
OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills.
PAC-UK – Post Adoption Centre – United Kingdom
PDG – Pupil Deprivation Grant
PEP – Personal Education Plan
SEN(D) – Special Educational Needs (and Disabilities)
WAG – Welsh Assembly Government
WG – Welsh Government



**Children Adopted from Care: Teacher Constructions of Need and Support.**

**Part A: Literature Review**

**Word Count: 9997**

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Overview of the Literature Review**

The literature review begins by summarising and critiquing attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and evidence of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on development. Statistical and research evidence is then examined regarding the educational difficulties experienced by Looked After Children (LAC) and reasons for the apparent “achievement gap”. UK government initiatives and legislation supporting the education of LAC are outlined.

The next section considers the education of children adopted from care. This group of children is defined and statistics presented. Benefits of adoption are outlined and it is considered whether or not children who have been adopted require additional educational support. The availability and types of educational support for adopted children are explored. This includes a comparison with the support available for LAC and an exploration of recent improvements in the support for adopted children in the UK.

Finally, the rationale and aims of the research are presented.

### **1.2 Description of Key Sources**

Literature was obtained from online sources, including PsycInfo, British Education Index and Google Scholar. Search terms included “looked after children” “education” “children adopted from care” and “adverse childhood experiences”. For detailed search terms, see Appendix T. Further literature was accessed through reference lists of primary sources. Specific journals were also examined for further relevant literature including ‘Adoption and Fostering’ and ‘Educational Psychology in Practice’. Government documents and relevant policies were accessed through Internet search engines and adoption charity websites. Other key sources included books on attachment

theory (e.g. Bombèr, 2011) and websites for post-adoption support. The search was completed between June 2016 and January 2017.

### **1.3 Inclusion/Exclusion of Research**

Research was included based on its relevance to children adopted from care. Research related to international adoption or adoption from birth was excluded to reduce variables related to different types of adoption and to focus on children with experience of the care system.

The research included focused specifically on factors that impacted education for children with experience of care. UK research was primarily used due to difficulties in comparing findings from different care and education systems. Research from the past 10 years was selected where possible due to the extent of recent policy changes and therefore some research was excluded in favour of more recent and larger-scale studies.

### **1.4 Relevance to Educational Psychologists**

This research is relevant to educational psychology because of the potential role for EPs in supporting adopted children. Midgen (2011) suggested five areas in which EPs could support adopted children in education, related to early intervention, the assessment and selection process, supporting staff, supporting parents and strategic development. An example of strategic development by EPs is outlined by Syne, Green & Dyer (2012). Midgen (2011) also highlighted the importance of EPs in contributing to the limited research base on adopted children in education.

### **1.5 Definitions of Terms**

Table 1 provides definitions of terms that will be used regularly throughout this literature review.



<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)	Refers to events that cause children to experience chronic stress, either by directly harming the child (e.g. physical abuse) or the environment in which he/she lives (e.g. domestic violence). (Bellis, Ashton, Hughes, Ford, Bishop & Paranjothy, 2015).
Attachment	An enduring relationship between two individuals. In early childhood, the child is dependent on the attachment figure to meet his/her psychological and biological needs and ensure survival (Bombèr, 2007).
Attunement	When an adult understands a child's emotions and becomes 'in tune' with him/her to facilitate emotional regulation. This leads to self-awareness, self-regulation and the development of empathy (Bombèr, 2007).
Brain plasticity	Refers to structural and functional changes to the brain throughout life due to a combination of environmental experiences and genetic or biological factors (Rees, Booth & Jones, 2016).
Children In Need (CIN)	A child who requires the provision of services for one of three reasons: he/she is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, his/her health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, or the child is disabled. (The Children Act, 1989, section 17).
Internal working model	A cognitive template that provides information about how relationships work based on early and on-going experiences of relationships (Golding, 2008).
Looked After Children (LAC)	A Looked After Child (LAC) has been in the care of the Local Authority (LA) for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, or is subject to a care or placement order (The Children Act, 1989). Also referred to as children looked after, children in care, foster care or out-of-home placement but for continuation they will be referred to as LAC as this is the term most commonly used in the literature.
Second-chance learning	An opportunity for children to re-learn developmentally appropriate ways of dealing with challenge, for example,

	through experiencing dependency on a key adult (Bombèr, 2007).
Secure base	When a significant other provides 'good enough' care to a child he/she becomes his/her secure base. The child can then explore and learn, knowing that he/she can come back to this secure adult (Bombèr, 2007).
Trauma	An overwhelming experience that is not effectively contained for the child and he/she is therefore unable to return to a relaxed state. This has both psychological and neurological consequences and can lead to feelings of panic and loss of control. (Bombèr, 2007).

Table 1. Definitions of key terms.

## **2. Adverse Childhood Experiences**

### **2.1 A Definition of Adverse Childhood Experiences**

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect or exposure to domestic violence, cause children to experience chronic stress (Bellis et al, 2015). The term ACE reflects the increasing complexity of children's lives, to include experiences such as parental mental health or substance misuse rather than limiting adversity to the traditional categories of abuse and neglect.

ACEs impact on children's brain development, as the chronic stress experienced causes them to remain in a high state of alertness in case of further trauma (Anda, Butchart, Felitti & Brown, 2010). This could have a significant impact on these children's ability to access education, as they are likely to be more anxious and less able to regulate their emotions to engage in academic tasks. ACEs can also lead to feelings of low self-worth and harmful behaviours, and result in physical and mental health difficulties (Davidson, Devaney & Spratt, 2010).

In Wales, 46.5% individuals surveyed by Bellis et al (2015) experienced at least one ACE before the age of 18 years and 13.6% experienced four or more<sup>1</sup>. Although there is evidence for the negative impact of ACEs, not all young people are affected to the same extent. This is likely related to the resilience of the individual and provokes the question of which factors increase resilience and how these can be promoted to reduce the impact of ACEs (Bellis et al, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Similar figures have been found in England (Bellis, Hughes, Leckenby, Perkins, & Lowey, 2014).

## **2.2 The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences**

**2.2.1 Impact on brain development.** Babies have demonstrated the ability to learn from within the womb from 30 weeks (Bombèr, 2007). By the time they are born, 25 per cent of babies' brains have developed (Allen, 2011) and by three years 80 per cent has developed. Therefore neglectful or traumatic experiences during that time can have a profound effect on children's emotional, behavioural and cognitive development (Bombèr, 2007). The brain continues to develop past the age of three, however, the earlier trauma or loss occurs, the more damaging the effects on a child's development (Allen, 2011).

The Trauma Tree (Family Futures, 2011 cited in Bombèr, 2011) demonstrates the impact of developmental trauma on brain development and physical development, particularly highlighting the effect on executive functioning, affect regulation and psychological development. These areas are defined and discussed below, with some examples provided to give a snapshot of the impact on each area.

**2.2.1.1 Executive functioning.** This refers to the set of cognitive abilities controlled by the pre-frontal cortex that are used to regulate other behaviours and abilities (Bombèr, 2011). Some key areas in which the impact of developmental trauma may be observed include working memory, planning and organising, making transitions, exercising emotional control and inhibiting impulsive behaviours.

Many researchers have studied the long-term impact of early adversity through longitudinal studies of children adopted from Romanian orphanages in the late 1980s. Behen, Helder, Rothermel, Solomon and Chugani (2008) found that 46% of children who experienced severe deprivation in a European orphanage continued to have difficulties with executive functioning, language and memory. These difficulties persisted despite substantial catch-up in global cognitive functioning. The observed impairments have been linked to the physiological effects of stress (Bremner, 2007), supporting claims that the stress caused by ACEs impacts on executive functioning. These impairments would likely impact on children's ability to adjust to academic and social environments and hence their ability to learn.

**2.2.1.2 Affect regulation.** Affect regulation refers to the ability to know what you are feeling, for emotions to feel safe, to experience appropriate levels of emotions in relation to the context and to have the cognitive ability to evaluate and reflect on the situation (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013). Experiences of human interaction during infancy stimulate neural connections to grow and develop the brain's network (Schoré, 2000 cited in Geddes, 2006). The adult is therefore essential in helping the infant to develop the ability to regulate stress.

The effects of trauma on affect regulation may be seen in terms of understanding emotions, self-soothing, settling down and responding in an over- or under-reactive way (Bombèr, 2011).

**2.2.1.3 Psychological development.** Bombèr (2011) suggests that developmental trauma impacts the formation of attachments. In school, this could lead to difficulties following the lead of teachers, relationship difficulties, a need for control, over-reactions to events, heightened anxiety, 'toxic' shame, inability to understand permanency, fear, trust, feeling unsafe and fear of abandonment.

Geddes (2006) explained the importance of pupil-teacher relationships using the 'learning triangle' in Figure 1. The learning triangle demonstrates the need for a child to trust an adult to contain anxiety when embarking on a challenging task. Children with experiences of ACEs may have difficulty trusting an adult to contain their uncertainty in learning situations having an adverse impact on their successful engagement in learning.

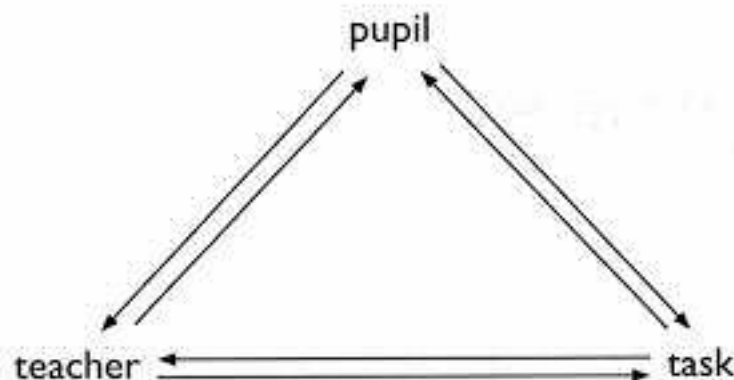


Figure 1. The learning triangle (Geddes, 2006).

## 2.3 Attachment Theory

Many ACEs affect relationships with adult caregivers. A key theory that discusses the impact of this is attachment theory, which was first introduced by John Bowlby in his series “Attachment and Loss” (1969; 1973; 1980). Attachment theory emphasises the importance of the infant’s relationship with his/her primary caregiver in his/her development of interactions with others. Bowlby (1969) suggested that infants are pre-disposed to form ‘attachments’ with others. Early interactions between the caregiver and the child develop into an ‘attachment relationship’, the quality of which will implicate how the child learns about him/herself and others. A secure attachment relationship provides the child with a ‘secure base’, from which he/she can explore the world.

Bowlby (1969) researched the patterns of relationships between infants and caregivers in real life situations and through Ainsworth and Wittig’s (1969) ‘strange situation’ procedure. The strange situation enabled researchers to observe the infant’s responses to stressful situations, specifically the mother leaving the room. The child’s response to the mother returning reflected different attachment styles, with securely attached infants quickly regaining confidence in their secure base, whilst insecurely attached infants treated the returning mother with uncertainty, distress or indifference<sup>2</sup>.

An important aspect in developing attachment relationships is emotional attunement (Geddes, 2006). Infants’ communications need to be interpreted by their caregiver and translated into expressive gestures and language. This helps children to understand and recognise different feelings in order to develop their emotional intelligence and stress regulation. Children with a secure attachment are then able to cope during temporary absences of the secure base.

Bowlby (1980) described an ‘internal working model’ of attachment relationships. A secure attachment results in an internal working model of adults as available, caring and reliable, however, experiences of neglect or abuse may cause the development of an

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<sup>2</sup> Three types of insecure attachment behaviours emerged in the strange situation, categorised as avoidant, resistant/ambivalent and disorganised.

internal working model where adults are absent, unreliable and, in some cases, frightening.

Traditional attachment theory focuses on the importance of the first few years in developing attachments (Bowlby, 1980), however, more recent evidence suggests that attachment is a dynamic construct (Meins, 2017). Therefore forming attachments later in childhood, which provide the opportunity for ‘second-chance learning’, can result in changes to the internal working model (Golding, 2008).

## **2.4 Attachment Theory and the Impact of ACEs**

Although it could be argued that not all ACEs impact on the child-parent relationship, changes to the environment such as substance misuse are likely to impact on the caregiver’s ability to provide the secure base needed by the child. Evidence is emerging that the impact of domestic violence on the parent-child relationship has the greatest effect on children (Boeckel, Wagner & Grassi-Oliveira, 2017).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) may explain some of the impact of ACEs on executive functioning, affect regulation and psychological development described above. It does not provide a complete explanation for the executive functioning difficulties identified by Behen et al (2008), as these children did not only suffer relational loss but also malnutrition and lack of environmental stimulation. However, the lack of an attachment figure could provide one explanation for the high levels of stress that caused physiological changes to the brain.

Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg (2003) suggest that children with available attachment figures use security-based strategies of affect regulation, which alleviate distress and build the child’s capacity to maintain mental health. As they develop, they internalise these security-based strategies and become less reliant on an attachment figure being physically present. This has a positive impact on their resilience, allowing them to draw on internal strategies and, when needed, rely on an attachment figure for support. The lack of an available attachment figure would therefore impact on affect regulation.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides an explanation for the difficulties some children have in forming a pupil-teacher relationship. This could be related to their internal working model of relationships and a lack of experience of adults providing a secure base.

## **2.5 Attachment in Education**

Bombèr (2007) identified a lack of research regarding attachment in education, despite children with attachment difficulties needing specialised support in school. Hughes (2012) argued that without the safety of a secure base, children are unable to develop the desire to learn and the cognitive focus necessary for successful learning. Potential issues in school include the high level of stimulation, requirement to work independently, difficulty managing emotions and evoking angry responses from staff, which lead to feelings of shame.

Those pupils with a secure attachment may respond well to traditional behaviourist teaching principles of reward and punishment (Woods, 2008), however, for a child with an insecure attachment, they could reinforce feelings of rejection and shame (Bombèr, 2007). Bombèr and Hughes (2013) promote use of the PACE model in schools, which focuses on Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy. This allows children to feel safe to express emotions, rely on adults and experience engagement. However, the lack of training and information on attachment theory available to teachers means that many are unaware of different approaches to behaviour management (Bombèr, 2007).

## **2.6 Criticisms of Attachment Theory**



**2.6.1 Brain plasticity.** Evidence of brain plasticity<sup>3</sup> has led to a move away from the term ‘critical periods’ towards the term ‘sensitive periods’, reflecting a more dynamic view of brain development (Rees et al, 2016).

Despite the brain typically reaching 95% of its adult size by the age of 6 years, neuroscientific evidence has demonstrated changes in the volume of both grey and white matter throughout childhood (Rees et al, 2016). The formation and elimination of synaptic connections also continues, however, further evidence is required to establish the extent to which this is environmentally influenced. This therefore challenges Bowlby’s (1969) focus on the early years to consider childhood in its entirety as an opportunity for learning.

The brain is also highly susceptible to change during adolescence (Rees et al, 2016) during which time there are increases in levels of common neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters play an important role in emotional regulation, pain perception, motivation, memory and attention. An increase in dopamine has also been observed in the pre-frontal cortex, which continues to develop and form connections to other parts of the brain required for executive functioning throughout adolescence. This may therefore be a sensitive period for second-chance learning of executive functioning skills. Additionally, young people may be particularly susceptible to the impact of trauma during adolescence.

The neuroscientific evidence base for experience-driven plasticity demonstrates how ACEs can impact on development. This is a developing field of research but current implications for education are that all stages of childhood could be critical periods of development, not just the early years as suggested by Bowlby (1969). Therefore efforts should be made to prevent ACEs and provide opportunities for second-chance learning throughout childhood.

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<sup>3</sup> Rees et al (2016) define the term ‘brain plasticity’ as “The capacity of the brain to change structurally and functionally over the entire life-course, due to experience as well as genetic and biological factors.” (p8)

**2.6.2 Genetic factors.** Harris (1998) argued that our personalities are highly influenced by our genes and parenting does not affect behaviour. However, this begs the question of why there is a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties (McAuley & Davis, 2009) and poor educational and long-term outcomes (DfE, 2016) for those children who experienced adverse parenting in their early years. There may be a role for genetics, especially for those children who succeed in life despite poor parenting, and individual differences may be seen in the types of difficulties experienced. However, there appears to also be a clear role for parenting relationships due to the difficulties experienced by children who do not form secure attachments.

Meins' (2017) more balanced view, suggests that both genes and environment are important in the development of antisocial behaviours, with environmental circumstances leading to the expression of genes linked to these behaviours. She also suggested the potential for the child's genetic characteristics to trigger maltreatment in the parent. It therefore could be argued that neither attachment theory nor genetic evidence alone can explain behaviour.

**2.6.3 The need to be more critical.** Meins (2017) criticised psychologists for taking attachment theory for granted without critically evaluating the research evidence. She claimed that there is little evidence to suggest that secure early attachments have a positive impact on the child's later development.

Meins (2017) makes an important point that professionals must be adaptive in their thinking and incorporate new research and knowledge when considering a theory that was developed 50 years ago. However, considering the extent of difficulties evidenced by children with early parenting adversity, perhaps elements such as individual differences should be considered in addition to, rather than instead of, attachment theory.

Lemma (2003) highlighted that Bowlby's (1969) observations were conducted on children in the Second World War and therefore may not be applicable to less stressful situations. Similarly, the Romanian orphanage studies (Behen et al, 2008) are based on a uniquely high level of deprivation and therefore may not be applicable to the family context. However, it could be argued that ACEs are stressful for children regardless of

wider environmental factors, which places them at risk of the potential impact of the physiological effects of stress on neurocognitive functions (Bremner, 2007).

Sochos (2015), on the other hand, argued that attachment theory is useful for understanding both interpersonal relationships and wider sociocultural phenomena. Rana, Moyhuddin & Rana (2016) also highlighted that there is evidence of attachment theory predicting relationship and coping behaviours.

## **2.7 A Dynamic Model of Attachment**

One of Meins' (2017) key criticisms of attachment theory related to the categorisation of attachments styles. However, there has been movement away from the traditional grouping of behaviours into distinct attachment styles (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) towards a dynamic view of attachment. Crittenden (2006) provided a Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM) of attachment, in which children develop coping strategies to keep them safe when their needs are not being met by familial relationships. Therefore, rather than focusing on attachment styles, Crittenden focuses on identifying self-protective attachment strategies. A key difference is that these strategies can change between contexts depending on perceptions of safety and the availability of alternative strategies.

Another important difference between Crittenden's (2006) DMM of attachment and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory is the emphasis placed on the opportunity for changes in the developmental pathways. The DMM of attachment (Crittenden, 2006) provides a more positive outlook for children with ACEs as it can be used to consider how children's attachment strategies change between contexts and over time. It also addresses another of Meins' (2017) concerns about too great a focus on the early years, as it considers the impact of ACEs throughout childhood. Crittenden (2006) highlighted that although new experiences provide opportunities to correct past error, they also carry risk of the development of new maladaptive strategies. The DMM of attachment can therefore be used to understand the development of attachment strategies and the changes that occur throughout childhood.

## **2.8 Summary**

The impact of ACEs on children's development may affect their ability to access education and could be linked to the importance of forming attachments (Bowlby, 1969)., Golding (2008) argued that attachment theory may not explain causation of difficulties, however, it provides a theoretical framework for understanding the evidence that ACEs impact on children's development and ability to access education. Crittenden's (2006) DMM of attachment addresses many of the criticisms of Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and can be helpful to understand changes in attachment strategies throughout childhood.

It is therefore important that educational professionals are aware of the long-term impact of ACEs on children (Bellis et al, 2015) and adjust their approach to support, for example using the PACE model (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013). Looked After Children (LAC) and children adopted from care are both likely to experience ACEs, therefore the next sections will explore their needs in education and support available.

### 3. Looked After Children

The Children Act (1989) defines a child as “looked after” by a Local Authority (LA) if he or she is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, or is subject to a care or placement order<sup>4</sup>. This same group of children are referred to as children looked after or children in care. The majority of the research discussed uses the term ‘Looked After Children’ (LAC) so this will be used throughout to ensure consistency.

Statistics regarding LAC in England and Wales in 2016 are summarised in Table 2 (Department for Education (DfE), 2016a; Welsh Government (WG), 2016). This highlights that many LAC enter care due to ACEs and experience multiple placements.

	Number of LAC	% who entered care due to abuse or neglect	% who experienced 3 or more placements in the year ending 31 March 2016
England	70,440	60%	10%
Wales	5,662	64%	10%

Table 2. The statistics for LAC in England and Wales on 31st March 2016.

#### 3.1 The “Achievement Gap”

The academic achievement of LAC has become a highly researched area (Holland, 2009). Statistics from 2015 are outlined in Table 3.

	<b>Looked After Children</b>	<b>Non-Looked After Children</b>
% young people who achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C including English and maths (DfE, 2016; WG, 2016)	14% (England) 11% (Wales)	53%
% 17-30 year olds in higher education in England (Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DfBIS), 2015)	6%	47%

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, see part three of the Children Act (1989).

Table 3. DfE (2016), WG (2016) and DfBIS (2015) statistics regarding the educational achievement of LAC in England in 2015.

LAC are therefore disadvantaged as they move into adulthood, particularly in terms of employability and economic prospects, which is one of the key outcomes for young people identified in Every Child Matters (DfE, 2003).

These statistics focus only on academic achievement and do not consider alternative curricula. This is influential as LAC are four times more likely to have a Special Educational Need (SEN)<sup>5</sup> and ten times more likely to have a statement of SEN or Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) (DfE, 2016), which will affect their ability to achieve academically. However, arguably the most important limitation of these statistics is that they do not investigate why being LAC impacts on education. Understanding the achievement gap for LAC is important, as educational achievement has been identified as an influential factor in socioeconomic inequality (Harris & Herrington, 2006).

### **3.2 Factors that Influence the Educational Progress of LAC**

Research needs to establish whether poor developmental outcomes are due to experience of care or other factors (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes & Rios-Salas, 2015). Two large-scale research studies were completed in 2015.

Mannay et al (2015) evaluated statistical data on the educational attainment of LAC in England and Wales and gathered the views of LAC in Wales through interviews and focus groups. These were conducted with children in primary school, secondary school, and care leavers aged 16-25. A statistical analysis revealed a significant achievement gap between LAC and children not in care at all educational key stages.

In England, Sebba et al (2015) linked care and educational data to look at the progress of LAC in comparison with Children In Need (CIN) and the general population. They interviewed 26 young people in care who were eligible to take their GCSEs in 2013 and adults identified as significant in their education including carers, designated teachers, social workers and virtual school head teachers.

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<sup>5</sup> In Wales, SEN is now referred to as Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in line with the draft Additional Learning Needs Code (WG, 2015).

These are arguably the largest and most recent investigations into the factors that contribute to the low educational outcomes of LAC. Most factors related to the stability of placements, school factors, individual characteristics and adult support.

**3.2.1 Stability of placements.** Sebba et al's (2015) findings suggested that multiple placement and school changes, along with longer time spent in an adverse home environment, had the largest impact on the educational progress of LAC. The LAC in Mannay et al's (2015) study suggested that the greatest impact of instability was on the child's relationships with carers, teachers and peers.

Stability and continuity have also been identified as protective factors for LAC who were successful in education (Jackson & Martin, 1998). Sebba et al (2015) found that the stable environments provided by long-term care placements were most conducive to progress in education, in comparison with CIN who remained at home.

**3.2.2 School factors.** Attending non-mainstream schools and educational instability (through absences, exclusions and changes of school) impacted educational attainments (Sebba et al, 2015). Attendance was highlighted as a protective factor for LAC in education (Jackson & Martin, 1998).

The LAC interviewed by Sugden (2013) identified school as the most influential support for learning, especially by making them feel accepted, allowing them to make choices and personalising learning. Sebba et al's (2015) study also highlighted support from teachers, carers and pastoral support teams and one-to-one tuition.

Mannay et al (2015) added that LAC could be limited in their ability to socialise and participate in after school activities if they travelled long distances to school. They also found meetings with professionals during school hours disruptive. The LAC interviewed by Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge & Sinclair (2002) reported experiencing discomfort at arriving mid-term and recommended more sensitive handling of transitions.

**3.2.3 Individual characteristics.** Sebba et al (2015) found that more LAC had SEN than the general population. The achievement gap was significantly reduced when allowances were made for SEN, especially for those with learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder and disabilities.

Being male and having a high Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire score was strongly predictive of poor GCSE outcomes for LAC (Sebba et al, 2015) and children who entered care in adolescence with more challenging difficulties were less likely to do well educationally.

The large proportion of LAC with SEN raises the question of why so many of these children have SEN. There may be a stereotype placed on LAC, which makes them more likely to be classified as SEN (Sebba et al, 2015). Alternatively, considering the impact of ACEs on development (Bombèr, 2011), LAC may be at higher risk of SEN than the general population.

Although this highlights a number of individual factors that cause LAC to have difficulties in education, neither Mannay et al (2015) nor Sebba et al (2015) identified the individual characteristics that cause some LAC to experience success. Looking at personal strengths could have identified factors that increased the resilience of LAC and supported them to achieve in education.

**3.2.4 Adult support.** LAC felt that school staff had the greatest impact on educational outcomes (Sebba et al, 2015) by providing both academic and emotional support. However, teachers could also hinder educational progress by negative stereotyping and a lack of understanding of the difficulties faced by LAC. Harker et al (2002) emphasised that teachers and peers needed more awareness and understanding of what it meant to be looked after and the impact it had in school and socially.

The LAC in Mannay et al's (2015) and Harker et al's (2002) studies also perceived that the label of LAC carried a stigma, which meant people had lower expectations of them. Jackson and Martin (1998) identified locus of control, or a child's belief in his/her own effectiveness, as a protective factor for LAC in education so it is important that they do not take on the belief that they are not effective learners.



Foster carer support was not the main determinant of educational progress, however, it was reported to have a daily impact (Sebba et al, 2015). Unsupportive relationships or lack of skills to support learning had a negative impact (Mannay et al, 2015), however, carers could have a positive impact by taking an interest in educational progress (Sebba et al, 2015; Harker et al, 2002) and valuing education (Jackson and Martin, 1998).

Mannay et al (2015) identified that key professionals held a pessimistic view of LAC's potential, which was seen to impact on their achievement. They also reported a need for more education and wellbeing support for LAC and better communication between services. LAC wanted their views to be considered regarding the types of support they needed (Harker et al, 2002).

Some LAC did not identify any supportive adults and many felt responsible for their own educational progress (Sebba et al, 2015). This is important in ensuring that LAC are emotionally ready to accept support from adults, as they may have developed an internal working model based on their experiences in which it is not safe to depend on adults for support.

**3.2.5 Summary of factors.** Although there is a need for more research in this area, these studies identified four key areas that impact on the education of LAC in England and Wales, relating to stability, school, individual characteristics and adult support. Instability was highlighted by both Sebba et al (2015) and Mannay et al (2015) as a key risk factor and can be linked to school, home and adult support as it impacts on relationships. Although the risk factors for individual LAC may vary, this provides an insight into possible causes for the achievement gap. Sebba et al (2015) added that some children who were performing well academically may have left the care system, skewing the achievement gap further.

Some factors related to care placement could have a positive impact on educational progress, for example, increased stability and a more nurturing environment (Font & MaGuire-Jack, 2013). Increased emotional resilience has been found for LAC who accessed extra-curricular activities (Peck, Roeser, Zarrett & Eccles, 2008) or had friends who achieved in school (Jackson & Martin, 1998). Sebba et al (2015) found that educational outcomes for CIN were lower than some groups of LAC, suggesting that educational difficulties for LAC cannot all be attributed to the care system. Young

people and their significant adults viewed entry to care as beneficial educationally, although it did not completely compensate for the difficulties resulting from ACEs.

The achievement gap suggests that negative factors such as a change of parents, home and school (Burley & Halpern, 2001) have a significant impact on the educational outcomes of LAC. Mannay et al (2015) found that LAC had positive aspirations for their careers but felt that these factors provided barriers to them achieving these goals. It is therefore important for education staff and professionals to consider how to minimize the impact of these factors when planning support.

### **3.3 Support for LAC in the UK Education System**

Due to the wealth of research into the achievement gap for LAC, there have been vast improvements in support. The Children Act (2004) placed responsibility on the LA to promote the education of LAC. This was followed by the publication of the White Paper, Care Matters – Time for Change (DfES, 2007) in England and Towards a Stable Life and a Brighter Future (WAG, 2007) in Wales. Both documents outline statutory support requirements intended to reduce exclusions, promote stability and improve academic outcomes for LAC.

Five key support systems for LAC in England and Wales are outlined in Table 4.

<b>Support System</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Supporting Legislation or Research</b>	<b>Availability</b>
Personal Education Plan (PEP)	The PEP identifies a pupil's needs and achievements, academic targets, future plans and the support that will be needed. The PEP is written by social workers and the designated teacher and includes the views of the carers and the young person.	The Children Act (2004) placed a duty on LAs to provide a PEP for all LAC.	England and Wales.

Designated Teacher	Designated teachers should be qualified teachers who understand the needs of LAC, can identify their learning needs and are responsible for improving their academic attainment. They have a role in communicating with home and other services and should be trained by the LA to work as part of a multi-agency team to support LAC in education.	The Children and Young Persons Act (2008) outlined the designated teacher as a statutory role for all schools.	England and Wales
LAC Education Coordinators	LAC Education Coordinators oversee the effective implementation of PEPs and the work of designated teachers. They work on a strategic level with the Welsh Government to support LAC's educational needs and promote joint working between social services, schools and the LA. They monitor the attainment of LAC and allow their voices to be heard. They also have a role in challenging exclusions, providing resources and training foster carers.	In Wales, each LA has a LAC education co-ordinator (WAG, 2007) with responsibility for the educational progress of LAC.	Wales
Virtual Schools	The role of the virtual school head teacher is to raise the attainment of LAC by working with school staff and LA teams to ensure that their learning needs are being met. They are	Following a pilot evaluation of 11 LAs by Berridge, Henry, Jackson & Turney (2009), virtual schools	England

	also held accountable for the attendance and exclusions of LAC. The virtual school heads provide a link between social care and education to improve joint working.	were made statutory. Since 2010, virtual school heads have been present within every LA in England (OFSTED, 2012a).	
Funding	LAs provide funding to improve the attainment of LAC and other disadvantaged groups in order to close the attainment gap. In England this is through Pupil Premium and in Wales this is through the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG).	Pupil Premium was introduced in England in 2011 (OFSTED, 2012). In Wales, LAC have accessed PDG funding since 2012 (Pye, Mollidor, Taylor & Huxley, 2015).	England and Wales

Table 4. Support systems for LAC in England and Wales.

**3.3.1 The impact of support.** The DfE (2013) reported that pupil premium money was used to raise attainment and reduce barriers to learning. It funded additional one-to-one and small group support, additional staff, school trips, resources, extra curricular activities and access to specialist services. Sebba et al (2015) reported that pupil premium money was used for one-to-one tuition, as outlined in the PEP, and was regarded as beneficial.

Berridge et al (2009) found that virtual school heads were successful in raising the profile of LAC in education and ensuring they received support through multi-agency working. The pilot LAs showed mainly a positive trajectory for the educational outcomes of LAC, however, it is difficult to draw conclusions from a group of participants with so much movement in and out of the care system. Berridge (2012) suggested that the Government might have interpreted the impact more positively than

the data suggests. This is reinforced by the continuing presence of an achievement gap for LAC.

### **3.4 Summary**

The number of LAC in England and Wales are growing and the achievement gap remains (DfE, 2016; WG, 2016). Sebba et al (2015) and Mannay et al's (2015) research provides an insight into some factors that impact on the educational outcomes of LAC, however, further research in this area is needed to consider other factors such as resilience and the impact of ACEs.

LAC have been identified as a vulnerable group and efforts are being made to support their education. Longitudinal research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual school heads, designated teachers and PEPs, but the impact seems to be positive (Brodie, 2010).

Children adopted from care experience a number of these same risk factors prior to adoption. The next section therefore considers the vulnerability of this group in education and support that is available in UK schools.

## **4. Children Adopted from Care**

Adoption<sup>6</sup> aims to protect children by removing those who are, or have been at risk of, serious harm in their birth family whilst also preventing the known outcomes of spending time in the care system (Randall, 2009). It is viewed as the best possible outcome for LAC (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). Family is a key component of UK culture therefore placing children within a family provides them with a sense of identity and belonging.

Each year, six to ten per cent of LAC are adopted from care in the UK (McNeish & Scott, 2013), with 5,330 LAC adopted during the year ending 31 March 2015 (DfE, 2016a). McNeish and Scott (2013) highlighted that not all children are eligible for adoption due to potential to return to their birth families or options for special guardianship or long-term care placements. Adoptions can also be limited by professionals' beliefs about 'adoptability', which can be influenced by factors such as age, ethnicity, disability and 'damage'. The majority of children adopted in the UK are aged under 5, white and without disability.

### **4.1 Benefits of Adoption**

Adoption is assumed to be helpful because it provides opportunities to develop attachments and increased stability (McNeish & Scott, 2013). Long-term outcomes in relation to these two areas are discussed below.

**4.1.1 Development of attachments.** Quinton and Selwyn (2009) suggested that, in comparison with children in long-term care, adopted children came to placement with a higher level of attachment difficulties but had better outcomes on this measure at follow-up. This is a clear benefit of adoption, however, these children continued to experience emotional and behavioural difficulties, suggesting that despite forming attachments, adopted children remained vulnerable.

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<sup>6</sup> Adoption has been defined as "the legal placement of abandoned, relinquished, or orphaned children within an adoptive family" (Juffer & Van Ijzendoorn, 2007).

Juffer and Van Ijzendoorn (2007) found that adopted children were able to develop normative levels of self-esteem. They hypothesised that the secure attachment relationships developed in the adoptive home could mediate the potential impact of ACEs and make them feel valued, hence improving their self-esteem. However, adopted children were still at risk of difficulties with learning, behaviour and mental health, so overall this does not provide a strong argument for positive outcomes of adoption.

**4.1.2 Stability.** Sebba et al (2015) highlighted stability as influential on the educational outcomes of LAC. Adoption provides an opportunity for stability (McNeish & Scott, 2013), although there are also other forms of placements that provide stability, including special guardianship and long-term care. These placements are not maintained into adulthood and are more likely to break down than adoption (McNeish & Scott, 2013). Nonetheless, adoption does not automatically create stability for a child. The child needs to experience that sense of stability in their daily lives, which could be impacted by a number of factors.

Biehal, Ellison, Baker & Sinclair (2010) suggested that age at placement and the child's level of emotional and behavioural difficulties are strongly associated with placement stability. Rushton and Dance (2006) also linked stability with experiencing rejection from birth parents. They found that 92% of adoptive placements of children aged five to eleven years were stable after one year, however, 23% of placements of children adopted aged over eleven had been disrupted by the age of thirteen. It is therefore important to consider how adopted children experience stability and the time taken for this to have an impact. Further evidence is needed on the impact of stability on long-term outcomes.

## **4.2 Reasons to Support Adopted Children in Education**

Although there are benefits of adoption, these appear to develop over time. Yet there is still a view that the impact of ACEs ends as soon as children are adopted (Syne et al, 2012). In addition to the benefits of adoption, research suggests that there are also many challenges and complications associated with adoption for children and the adults who parent them (Brodzinsky, 2011).

It is not necessarily the adoptive status that leads to difficulties, but more likely the ACEs pre-dating their adoption (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011). It is also important for professionals working with children to be aware of the child's developing understanding of adoption and adoption-related loss (e.g. loss of parents, siblings, family name) and how that impacts on their identity in order to be able to support them (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Every Child Matters (DfE, 2003) highlighted “enjoying and achieving” as one of five outcomes for every child. It is therefore important to consider the impact of adopted children's experiences on their education. The research outlined below examines the prevalence and types of additional educational needs exhibited by this group of children and possible influential factors.

**4.2.1 Additional Educational Needs.** Golding (2010) highlighted that adopted children are not always perceived as vulnerable and are at risk of not receiving support. Regardless of age at placement, adopted children are at significant risk of a variety of psychological problems in comparison with their peers (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010).

Cooper and Johnson (2007) interviewed adoptive parents in an English LA. More than half reported that their child experienced difficulties in school. These difficulties were categorised as social/emotional/behavioural, learning and concentration/organisation. Parents also specified around 30 different diagnostic labels, highlighting the variety of difficulties. A higher percentage of adopted children were placed in specialist provision (14%) in comparison to the general population (1.5%) in that LA. Parents reported that 39% of the children had been identified as having SEN in comparison with the national average of 20%. Also, 23% had a statement of SEN<sup>7</sup>, which is higher than the national average of 2%. These findings reflect the data at the time of the research and are also based on parent constructions of difficulties, although there were a number of medical diagnoses. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that, similarly to LAC, adopted children have a higher level of educational needs than the general population.

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<sup>7</sup> Statements of SEN have now been replaced with EHCPs in England (DfE & DoH, 2014).



A key area of need for adopted children appears to be emotional, social and mental health needs, which may impact on their learning due to consequential difficulties with concentration (Barratt, 2011). A lack of contact with siblings can cause children to be preoccupied with worry about their biological family. This could have a significant impact on their ability to concentrate on learning.

Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) concluded that adopted children were more likely than non-adopted children to be referred to mental health services and were at high risk of adjustment difficulties. Golding (2010) suggested that adopted children are likely to have similarly complex mental health needs to LAC. This may be accurate if they are linked to similar ACEs, however, the long-term stability provided for adopted children may give them opportunities to develop skills, such as affect regulation, due to the experience of loving relationships (Bombèr, 2011).

For adopted children, the risk of failure can be terrifying and lead to avoidance of more challenging tasks (Barratt, 2011). This may be related to the idea of ‘toxic’ shame described by Bombèr (2007) or an inability to rely on the teacher as a secure base (Geddes, 2006). Forming friendships is another area of difficulty for some adopted children (Barratt, 2011; King, 2009).

Adopted children seem to be over-represented in the population of children with SEN (Cooper & Johnson, 2007) and are at higher risk of psychological and academic difficulties (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). However, early research did not explore reasons for these difficulties or factors that helped children to overcome these difficulties. Factors that may impact on the extent of an adopted child’s educational needs are considered below.

**4.2.1.1 Early experiences of trauma.** The majority of adopted children enter care due to relational trauma<sup>8</sup> in the form of abuse or neglect (DfE, 2016a). Langton (2015, cited in Thomas, 2015) reported that those children who are unable to go home are the most likely to have experienced trauma and loss. Research evidence supports this claim, with participants in Cooper and Johnson's (2007) study describing traumatic histories.

Consequently, although adopted children have increased stability, most experienced ACEs in their early years and/or pre-natally (Golding, 2010). This puts them at risk of long-term difficulties in school due to the impact on executive functioning, affect regulation and psychological development (Bombèr, 2011). It is also important to consider that, for many children, being adopted is linked to feelings of not being wanted or adequately loved by their birth parents (Howe, 1997).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides an explanation of how ACEs may impact children's development and Bombèr (2007) and Geddes (2006) describe how this may impact their ability to access education. Attachment theory is commonly referred to when working with LAC, however, it could be equally relevant to understanding the needs of adopted children. Attachment needs were present in the majority of adopted children sampled by Randall (2009).

Howe (1997) compared adolescent behavioural outcomes for children who had been adopted late with those adopted as babies. The children who were adopted late and experienced ACEs showed the greatest number of behaviour problems. Those adopted late without ACEs showed fewer behavioural problems than those adopted as babies or with ACEs. This suggests that the experience of ACEs may be a greater risk factor than age at placement, although it may be difficult to separate these variables if spending longer in the biological home increases the risk of exposure to ACEs.

This research suggests that children adopted from care are likely to need support due to their probable history of ACEs (McNeish & Scott, 2013). However, it is also important

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<sup>8</sup> "Relational traumas and losses are what a child might experience either through intentional or unintentional harm when he or she has to survive extraordinary levels of stress, often in a toxic familial context". (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013, p5)

to remember that professional judgements of ‘adoptability’ also play a part in which children are adopted. This may result in some of those children with the highest levels of needs remaining in the care system.

**4.2.1.2 Experience of the care system and associated risk factors.** In 2015, the average time between entry into care and adoption order was 2 years 3 months (DfE, 2016a). Only 3% adopted children spent less than a year in care prior to adoption (McNeish & Scott, 2013). It is therefore likely that these children have been subjected to a number of the risk factors highlighted by Sebba et al (2015), which could continue to affect their education post-adoption.

Sebba et al (2015) highlighted placement and school changes as detrimental to the education of LAC. Although adoption is likely to result in fewer changes, these children may have experienced a number of changes prior to adoption. The majority of adopted children seen by CAMHS had three or more changes of primary carer prior to adoption (Barratt, 2011). The process of adoption is also likely to involve a change in placement and a change in school, therefore it is important to consider the immediate impact of this.

It is hoped that adoption will increase stability, however, it is also possible that adopted children will continue to be affected by experiences of instability and lack of educational progress during their time in care.

**4.2.1.3 Genetic and developmental risk factors.** Wijedasa and Selwyn (2011) suggested that adopted children may carry genetic risks to development due to parental mental health difficulties. Alcohol and/or drug use during pregnancy is also common and may have affected brain development and hence behaviour and cognition.

The average age of LAC adopted in 2015 was 3 years 3 months (DfE, 2016a). The evidence regarding the extent of brain development during the first three years (Allen, 2011) and the impact of ACEs on brain development (Bombèr, 2011) suggests that these children may have missed out on key opportunities for the development of cognitive, behavioural and emotional functions.

Howe (1997) suggested that children with ACEs exhibited more behavioural problems during adolescence because those children were difficult to manage and therefore more likely to experience adverse relationships with their biological parents. Alternatively, some of these children may be genetically predisposed to problem behaviours due to a family history of antisocial behaviour.

These hypotheses place the behaviour within the child and do not explain why children without genetic predispositions show behavioural difficulties when they experience ACEs. However, the absence of these predisposing genetic factors could explain why some of the children adopted late from chaotic homes did not exhibit problem behaviours in adolescence. This supports Meins' (2017) suggestion of an interplay between genetic and environmental factors.

There is also a danger in measuring behaviours because internalised behaviours may be missed. Golding (2010) suggested that many adopted children's difficulties go unnoticed because they appear to be coping in school, so some may not have been captured by the measures used. This also relates to the idea of 'adoptability' and perhaps those with internalised behaviours were more likely to be adopted than those with externalised behaviours as their difficulties were less obvious.

#### **4.3 Support for Adopted Children in the UK Education System**

Although adopted children are at high risk of educational difficulties, there is still a view in the education system of adoption as a fairy-tale ending (Thomas, 2015). Adopted children are therefore less likely to be classified as vulnerable than LAC (Golding, 2010), which is particularly evident in the lack of statutory advice. The Welsh publication *Towards a Stable Life and Brighter Future* (WAG, 2007) discussed the educational needs of LAC, however, adopted children were not mentioned. This reflects an expectation that adopted children, once 'settled', should catch up with their peers (Barratt, 2011).

Despite evidence that their difficulties do not end at the point of adoption, adopted children are no longer entitled to the educational support provided for LAC (Golding, 2010). Educational support has been found to be lacking in five key areas discussed

below.

**4.3.1 Teacher understanding and awareness.** It has been widely reported by adoptive parents that teachers lack understanding of adopted children's needs (Randall, 2009; King, 2009; Barrett, 2011; Sturges & Selwyn, 2007). Teachers' lack of understanding has led to incidents such as blaming the child, exclusions and teachers setting low expectations, which risk becoming self-fulfilling (Cooper & Johnson, 2007).

Adoptive parents and professionals suggested that school staff would benefit from awareness raising and training, particularly related to the long-term impact of ACEs on learning, behaviour and emotional development (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Randall, 2009). Parents felt that it was important for teachers to show sensitivity in the choice and delivery of curriculum topics (King, 2009) and to communicate with parents around topics that may cause distress for adopted children (Barratt, 2011).

King (2009) is one of few researchers to gather teachers' views on this matter. Secondary teachers did not perceive adopted children to have additional needs or to require support in school. They showed a lack of awareness of the potential impact of ACEs on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. It is possible that the needs were going unnoticed or alternatively, that these children were not displaying obvious needs that impacted on their attainment.

The teachers suggested that all children should be given pastoral support based on their individual needs but that there was no need for a support system specifically for adopted children (King, 2009). This meant that any support for adoptive children emerged in a reactive context rather than more effective preventative work.

Teachers reported that they received limited training but were receptive to training on attachment theory, the impact of loss on behavior and legal issues surrounding adoption (King, 2009). However, it was perceived that LAC training would be more of a priority than adoption training, so they were unlikely to invest time and money in this. Although these results provide an interesting snapshot into teachers' views, only four teachers were interviewed, all from the same school.

The view amongst adoptive parents and teachers appears to be that schools need more awareness and understanding about adoption, attachment and the potential long-term

effects of ACEs on educational and social progress (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). It is difficult to draw conclusions around whether the lack of support available is solely due to teachers being unaware of potential needs or whether these children are not exhibiting obvious educational needs.

**4.3.2 Support systems within schools.** Although The Children Act (2004) led to improvements in support for LAC, the same support is not available to children adopted from care. There is currently no statutory requirement for adopted children to access support from the virtual school, designated teachers or PEPs. Most schools do not have formal records of adopted children and the school in King's (2009) study questioned the purpose of this. This reflected the perception that adopted children are not a vulnerable group.

Of the 103 adopted children sampled by Randall (2009), only 13 received extra help in school. This seems a small number considering the risk of these children developing psychological and academic difficulties (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). Barratt (2011) reported that schools often don't have the resources or knowledge to support adopted children's attachment needs and they are just expected to catch up with their peers.

Sturges and Selwyn (2007) studied a group of adopted children one year after their adoption and found that 44% received in-class support. However, many parents felt that more support was needed and experienced difficulties getting their child's needs acknowledged. There was no designated member of staff responsible for supporting adopted children (King, 2009) and adoptive parents suggested that the responsibilities of the designated teacher for LAC should be extended to include adopted children (Cooper & Johnson, 2007).

Schools have an important role in promoting the emotional wellbeing and resilience of adopted children (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). School staff could support social difficulties and should consider issues around adoption in their anti-bullying policies and programmes. Parents suggested a number of strategies to support adopted children, including systems for communication between parents and school staff, a bullying hotline and training for education and school staff. Again, much of the evidence is based on parental constructions and may not reflect the barriers to providing support faced by educational professionals.

**4.3.3 Support from outside agencies.** Across the UK, post adoption support is inconsistent (Rushton & Dance, 2002) and long-term support is lacking (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011). Many families experience difficulties accessing specialist psychological services and respite care (Cooper & Johnson, 2007).

Post-adoption social workers were involved with only 32 of the 103 families in Randall's (2009) study and even fewer had received life story work. A small percentage of the sample accessed specialist health teams, CAMHS, speech and language, portage services and therapeutic support. It is difficult to say whether this is due to the fact that these children did not need this support or had difficulty accessing it. It is also possible that the records held by social services did not contain all information regarding access to other services.

Most outside agency support was received from EPs, doctors, support teachers and therapists (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). Those schools that had worked with other agencies, in particular the EPS and post-adoption service, found this enabled them to support these children more proactively (King, 2009). Parents also reported that the involvement of these services had been positive. Some parents, however, were concerned about the time taken to acknowledge their child's difficulties and unavailability of resources (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; Sturges & Selwyn, 2007).

Golding (2010) highlighted a discrepancy in the development of services for LAC and adopted children. This is despite the fact that adopted children are at risk of attachment and relationship difficulties (Randall, 2009) and mental health difficulties (Rushton, 2010) due to their ACEs. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) sets out an expectation of collaborative working between different agencies but does not provide a specific framework.

It could be argued that adopted children should be allowed the same access to specialist services as LAC (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). However, EPs spend almost double the amount of time working with LAC than adopted children (Osborne, Norgate & Traill, 2009). Lack of support from EPs was hypothesized to be due to the lack of a historic system for adopted children.

Randall (2009) argued that adopted children should have access to CAMHS and therapeutic support. In her work with CAMHS, Barratt (2011) found that once children are adopted they become invisible in education. Those who met criteria for a statement of SEN received more support in school but others struggled to manage their difficulties. Parents whose children exhibited problem behaviours suggested that more clinical support was required from professionals who understood the psychology of adoption (Howe, 1997).

One reason for adoption breakdown has been the failure of health, therapy and education services to meet needs post-adoption (McNeish & Scott, 2013). Poor communication between agencies and lack of support for carers were also influential. McNeish and Scott suggested that a comprehensive support plan should be developed for both adopters and their children.

#### **4.3.4 Information sharing between schools, parents and professionals.**

Communication is crucial for supporting adopted pupils in education, as it is the parents' responsibility to inform the school that their child was adopted (Thomas, 2015). Some parents reported that they were unsure who to talk to and how to ensure that information was passed on to appropriate members of staff (King, 2009). School staff were also unsure how to communicate this information with other members of staff.

In general, parents found informing the school of their child's adoption helpful (Cooper & Johnson, 2007; King, 2009). Nearly all parents had shared information with school and most were satisfied with the school's response, although some reported that teachers lacked understanding (King, 2009). Parents felt uninformed about their child's support in school (Cooper & Johnson, 2007), highlighting a need for better information sharing between parents and schools to ensure that both parties have realistic expectations of the child's adaptation to school.

Randall (2009) noted that partnerships between social services and schools were variable. Communication between different professionals is important in order to give families clear and consistent messages (Barratt, 2011). Improved communication between services would ensure that parents had a better understanding of the support available to children and appropriate referrals could be completed (Golding, 2010).



**4.3.5 Limitations on availability of support.** Government directives provide barriers to supporting adopted children in school (Barratt, 2011). Schools are assessed on pupils' achievement by age so they could not be flexible about educating adopted children in the year group more suited to their maturity levels.

Services can also be limited in their capacity to work with other agencies by restrictive targets and pressures for activity data (Golding, 2010). The effectiveness of multi-agency working is determined by the level of commitment to integrated practice across education, health and social care at a strategic level (Golding, 2010). The new SEND code of practice in England led to the development of EHCPs to replace statements of SEN (DfE & DoH, 2014). This aimed to promote increased multi-agency working between services at a strategic level, however, the effectiveness is yet to be evaluated.

Availability of support for adopted children can cause carers to be reluctant to adopt children due to fears of losing financial help and support (McNeish & Scott, 2013). Considering the benefits of adoption in promoting stability (McNeish & Scott, 2013) and developing attachments (Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007), it is worrying that the lack of resources available for adopted children causes carers not to adopt.

#### **4.4 Improvements in Support for Adopted Children in the UK**

Although there is still a long way to go regarding support for adopted children, there have been recent improvements in support, specifically financial support and charity and LA initiatives.

#### **4.4.1 Financial support**

**4.1.1.1 Pupil premium (England) and PDG (Wales).** Children adopted from care can now receive the same financial support in school as LAC. Adopted children have accessed pupil premium money in England since 2014 (DfE, 2014) and PDG funding in Wales since 2015, with the justification that these children are likely to have had ACEs that could impact on their access to education (WG, 2015a). In order to access pupil premium money, parents need to inform the school of the child's adoptive status. This is therefore improving schools' awareness of the potential vulnerability of these pupils and giving them opportunities to establish support systems.

Coram British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)<sup>9</sup> were commissioned by the DfE to investigate how this money is spent through five case studies (Thomas, 2015). All five pupils received one-to-one support in the form of mentoring, a key worker or individual intervention. Most children were also involved in group work, targeted at academic needs or social skills. Many schools used pupil premium money for staff training and some bought resources specific to the child's needs. Interestingly, only two of the pupils had a specific provision plan.

Thomas (2015) found that the school staff interviewed had learned about the needs of adopted children and attachment through a number of sources. Key professionals included social workers, therapists, EPs and GPs. They also found books written by Louise Bombèr and Dan Hughes to be helpful<sup>10</sup>. Some had also received support from adoption charities and CAMHS.

**4.1.1.2 The Adoption Support Fund.** The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) was established in England following the DfE (2013a) publication *Further Action on Adoption: Finding More Loving Homes*. Since May 2015, it has been available to all LAs in England (DfE, 2016b). The ASF is available for therapeutic support for children adopted from care and can be accessed as soon as they are placed with their adoptive families. Adopted children can access this support up to the age of 21 years.

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<sup>9</sup> Coram BAAF are a UK adoption charity.

<sup>10</sup> See reference list for details.

**4.4.2 Charity initiatives.** A number of charities across the UK offer post-adoption support in education. Post Adoption Centre (PAC) UK introduced education projects to create “adoption- and attachment-friendly schools” (Langton, 2015, cited in Thomas, 2015). They work with individual LAs to develop good practice and support for adopted children on a systemic level. In particular, they aim to improve the capacity of schools to support adopted pupils, to improve the knowledge and skills of adoption support social workers and to promote links between virtual schools and adoption support teams.

Adoption UK and the WG published a schools’ guide for working with adopted children (Adoption UK & WG, 2016). It provides information and advice for teachers from adoptive parents. This may help to raise awareness for teachers, however, the lack of professional input in producing the document is concerning. This could have been an opportunity for EPs to contribute with their psychological knowledge and understanding of working in schools.

**4.4.3 Local authority strategies.** Individual LAs in England have increased support for adopted children. For example, one LA extended the virtual school’s remit to include adopted children, offered PEPs for pupil premium spending, trained all school staff and appointed a virtual school governor with responsibility for adopted children (Thomas, 2015).

EPs in another LA developed an adoption support model to create links between post-adoption support and education (Syne, et al, 2012). Syne et al considered the areas of potential EP work highlighted by Osborne et al (2009) and consequently developed a consultation model and an Education Plan for Adopted Children (EPAC). EPs have a direct role in the consulting team, working preventatively to address the psychological transition to adoption. The consultation received positive feedback and the EPAC improved home-school communication. Although this system is in the early stages of development, these proactive measures appear to be a successful way for EPs to apply their psychological knowledge and skills to support children adopted from care. EP involvement also helped schools to recognise the need to understand the impact of ACEs on adopted children.

Further examples of LA support include evidence-based parenting programmes (Evans

& Dickinson, 2015) and integrated support for education and mental health needs using the ASF (Golding, 2010). These examples suggest that some progress is being made at a local level, however, there is a wide variation in the amount and type of support available in different LAs (Evans & Dickinson, 2015). A discrepancy persists in some areas of the UK between the support available for adopted children in relation to their potential educational needs.

## **5. The Current Study**

### **5.1 Rationale**

There has been little research exploring the experiences and outcomes of adopted children in education in England and Wales (Midgen, 2011), the majority of which sought only the views of parents and not educational professionals. There seems to be a perception that adopted children are no longer vulnerable and a significant lack of training available for teachers on their potential needs. This study will look into the experiences of adopted children in education in England and Wales, through the perspective of primary school teachers, in terms of their needs and the support available.

EPs could have a key role in supporting the education of children adopted from care (Syne et al, 2012; Osborne et al, 2009). EPs are perfectly placed within LAs and schools to promote change at both a systemic and an individual level for children adopted from care. They also have the necessary skills and knowledge to provide evidence-based support. It is therefore important that EPs conduct research to enhance understanding of the needs of this group.

### **5.2 Research Aims**

The current study will aim to investigate teachers' perceptions of the strengths and difficulties of adopted children in education and the extent of teachers' knowledge about their potential needs (Cooper and Johnson, 2009). Teachers' perceptions of LAC and adopted children will also be compared. Support received by adopted children in school will be investigated, with reference to the spending of pupil premium and PDG. Finally, as previous research suggests that adopted children become invisible to support services such as CAMHS (Barratt, 2011) and EPS (Osborne et al, 2009), information will be gathered on which professional support services children and teachers access.

### **5.3 Research Questions**

There are five research questions:

1. Do teachers perceive that children adopted from care exhibit difficulties in school that impact on their ability to access education?
2. What do teachers know about the possible long-term effect of ACEs for children adopted from care?
3. Do teachers perceive there to be any similarities and differences between LAC and adopted children?
4. What types of educational support are in place for children adopted from care?
5. Do children and teachers access professional support from any services?

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**Children Adopted from Care: Teacher Constructions of Need and Support.**

**Part B: Empirical Research Study**

**Word Count: 5986**

## **1. Abstract**

Children adopted from care are a vulnerable group due to their experience of the care system and possible adverse childhood experiences. However, the literature suggests a lack of awareness and support for their educational needs. This research aimed to provide a picture of the current needs and support available to children adopted from care in schools in England and Wales. Nine primary teachers were interviewed to discuss their experience of teaching an adopted child and 84 primary teachers completed questionnaires. The findings revealed a prevalence of emotional, social and behavioural needs amongst adopted children, however, the impact on academic achievement in primary school was minimal. A lack of teacher training and a dependence on parents as information providers were identified. Arguments were presented for and against support systems for adopted children and barriers to support discussed. Implications for educational psychologists and future directions are considered.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are events that cause children to experience chronic stress, either by directly harming the child (e.g. physical abuse) or the environment in which they live (e.g. domestic violence) (Bellis, Ashton, Hughes, Ford, Bishop & Paranjothy, 2015). Every Child Matters (DfE, 2003) highlights the importance of ensuring education leads to economic wellbeing for all young people, therefore it is important to consider the impact of ACEs on education.

**2.1.1 The impact of ACEs on access to education.** The Trauma Tree (Family Futures, 2011 cited in Bombèr, 2011), demonstrates the effect of developmental trauma on executive functioning<sup>11</sup>, affect regulation<sup>12</sup> and psychological development. Research with Romanian orphans demonstrated a long-term impact of ACEs on executive functioning, language and memory (e.g. Behen, Helder, Rothermel, Solomon & Chugani, 2008). ACEs can affect the formation of attachments (Bombèr, 2011), which may prevent successful engagement in learning if children have difficulty trusting an adult to contain their uncertainty (Geddes, 2006). Inability to regulate emotions would also impact on focus and engagement.

Despite this evidence, not all young people are affected to the same extent, which may reflect the resilience of the individual (Bellis et al, 2015).

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<sup>11</sup> Executive functioning refers to the set of cognitive abilities controlled by the pre-frontal cortex that are used to regulate other behaviours and abilities (Bombèr, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Affect regulation refers to the ability to know what you are feeling, for emotions to feel safe, to experience appropriate levels of emotions in the context and to have the cognitive ability to evaluate and reflect on the situation (Bombèr & Hughes, 2013).

**2.1.3 Attachment Theory.** Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) emphasises the importance of the infant’s relationship with his/her primary caregiver on the development of interactions with others. Through early interactions with a caregiver, the child develops an attachment relationship, which will impact his/her social, emotional and cognitive development. Geddes (2006) described an internal working model<sup>13</sup> of attachment relationships that children develop based on their experiences.

Attachment theory provides one possible explanation for ACEs that impact on the parent-child relationship, however, there may be some ACEs it cannot explain. Meins (2017) highlighted the dangers in over-emphasising attachment without integrating recent research findings, for example evidence of brain plasticity throughout childhood (Rees, Booth & Jones, 2016), when considering the impact of ACEs. Crittenden’s (2006) Dynamic Maturational Model (DMM) of attachment explains behaviour in terms of attachment strategies, which are developed to keep children safe when their needs are not being met by familial relationships. These strategies can change in different contexts and through maturation. This provides a theoretical model for understanding the difficulties exhibited throughout childhood following ACEs.

## **2.2 Looked After Children in Education**

Two groups of children at high risk of ACEs are Looked After Children (LAC) and children adopted from care. At least 60% Looked After Children (LAC)<sup>14</sup> enter care due to abuse or neglect (DfE, 2016a; WG, 2016). An ‘achievement gap’ exists between LAC and the general population, as demonstrated in Table 5.

	<b>Looked After Children</b>	<b>Non-Looked After Children</b>
% young people who achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C including English and maths.	14% (England) 11% (Wales)	53%

Table 5. DfE (2016) and WG (2016) statistics regarding the educational achievement of LAC in 2015.

<sup>13</sup> A cognitive template that provides information about how relationships work based on early and on-going experiences of relationships (Golding, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> A child is defined as “looked after” by a local authority if he or she is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours, or is subject to a care or placement order (The Children Act, 1989). Also referred to as Children Looked After, Children in Care, Children in Foster Care.

Mannay et al (2015) and Sebba et al (2015) identified risk factors that may influence the achievement gap for LAC related to placement stability, school factors, individual characteristics and adult support. Children adopted from care may have also been exposed to these factors, as the average time spent in care prior to adoption is 2 years 3 months (McNeish & Scott, 2013).

Evidence of the achievement gap has led to improvements in educational support for LAC in the UK. The Children and Young Person's Act (2008) resulted in the introduction of Personal Education Plans (PEP), designated teachers, pupil premium<sup>15</sup> or Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG), virtual schools (England) and LAC education coordinators (Wales).

### **2.3 Adopted Children in Education**

Adoption<sup>16</sup> provides the opportunity for a child to become part of a family, experience stability and form attachments. However, more adopted children have Special Educational Needs (SEN)<sup>17</sup> than the general population (Cooper & Johnson, 2007). Possible explanations could relate to their experiences of ACEs (Golding, 2010), time spent in care (Barratt, 2011) or genetic and developmental risk factors (Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2011).

Research has identified a lack of support for adopted children in education (e.g. McNeish & Scott, 2013). Particularly in terms of teacher awareness (e.g. King, 2009), support systems within schools (e.g. Randall, 2009), support from outside agencies (e.g. Osborne, Norgate & Traill, 2009) and information sharing (e.g. Barratt, 2011).

However, there have been recent improvements in support in the form of charity initiatives (e.g. Adoption UK & WG, 2016), Local Authority (LA) policies (e.g. Thomas, 2015) and the extension of pupil premium and PDG for adopted children (DfE,

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<sup>15</sup> LAs provide funding to improve the attainment of disadvantaged groups in order to close the attainment gap: Pupil Premium (England) and PDG (Wales).

<sup>16</sup> Adoption has been defined as “the legal placement of abandoned, relinquished, or orphaned children within an adoptive family” (Juffer & Van Ijzendoorn, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> In Wales, referred to as Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

2014; WG, 2015). Syne, Green & Dyer (2012) demonstrated how EPs can be instrumental in developing support systems for adopted children.

## **2.4 Rationale and Research Aims**

Children adopted from care are a vulnerable group at risk of the impact of ACEs, yet a perception persists that once adopted, they are no longer vulnerable (Thomas, 2015). Despite recent improvements, there is a discrepancy in the amount of support available for LAC and adopted pupils (Golding, 2010). It is therefore important to establish the educational needs of adopted children and identify any barriers to support, as there has been little UK research on the experiences and outcomes of adopted children in education (Midgen, 2011).

This research intends to provide a current picture of adopted children's educational needs and support in England and Wales by gathering teachers' perceptions of this vulnerable group. As evidence suggests that adopted children become "invisible" to support services such as CAMHS (Barratt, 2011) and EPs (Osborne et al, 2009), information will be gathered on which professional support services children and teachers access and support that is provided within school. The role for EPs in developing support will also be considered.

## **2.5 Research Questions**

There are five research questions:

1. Do teachers perceive that children adopted from care exhibit difficulties in school that impact on their ability to access education?
2. What do teachers know about the possible long-term effect of ACEs for children adopted from care?
3. Do teachers perceive there to be any similarities and differences between LAC and adopted children?
4. What types of educational support are in place for children adopted from care?

5. Do children and teachers access professional support from any services?



### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Epistemology and Design**

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, it was underpinned by a constructionist paradigm (Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen, 2004). The relativist ontology assumed there would be no ‘truths’ to access (Willig, 2001). Instead the research explored participants’ constructions, which would have been shaped by their experiences and values (Burr, 2003). The subjective epistemological stance assumed that the findings would be created through the interaction between the researcher and participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data were therefore gathered through the qualitative method of interviews. Further data were provided through questionnaires to access a larger proportion of the population. The mixed methods approach allowed participants to express their constructions through different discourses to create a broader picture of the social reality regarding adopted children in education (Mertens, 2012).

It was assumed that each teacher would have formed their own constructions based on personal experience throughout their teaching career. This approach permits the exploration of multiple constructions of adopted children’s needs and support in education. However, it does not allow causal relationships to be established or comparisons to be made with other groups.

#### **3.2 Procedure**

The procedures for the interviews and questionnaires are demonstrated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

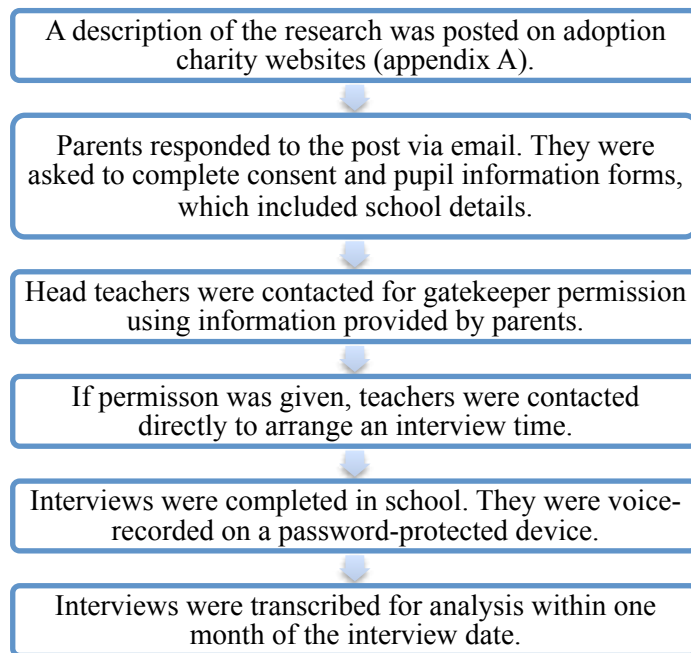


Figure 1. Procedure for interviews.

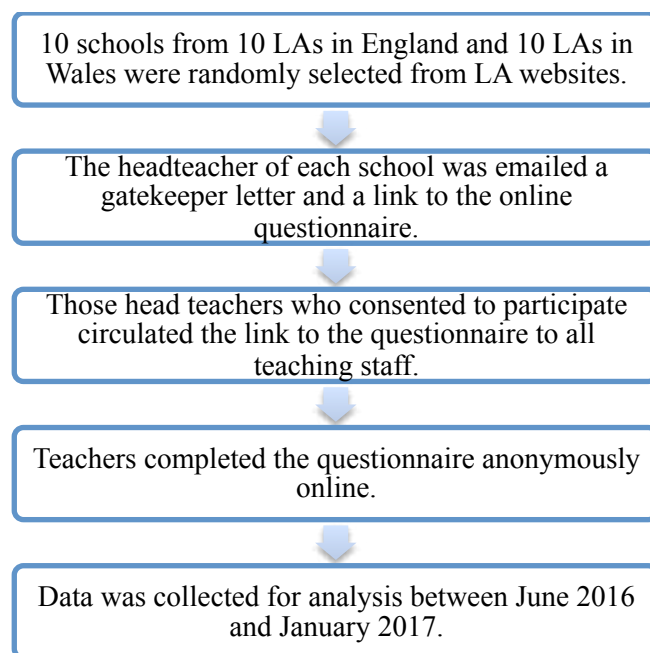


Figure 2. Procedure for questionnaires.

### 3.3 Participants

All participants were primary school teachers. Previous research has been published with secondary teachers (King, 2009) and parents of primary aged children (Cooper & Johnson, 2007), however, there was a lack of research gathering primary teachers'

views. Primary teachers have more contact with individuals and detailed knowledge of their needs and support. Children are most likely to be adopted before the age of 5 (McNeish & Scott, 2013) and therefore primary school children would be more likely to be undergoing a critical transition period.

**3.2.1 Interviews.** A convenience sample was recruited through two stages, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

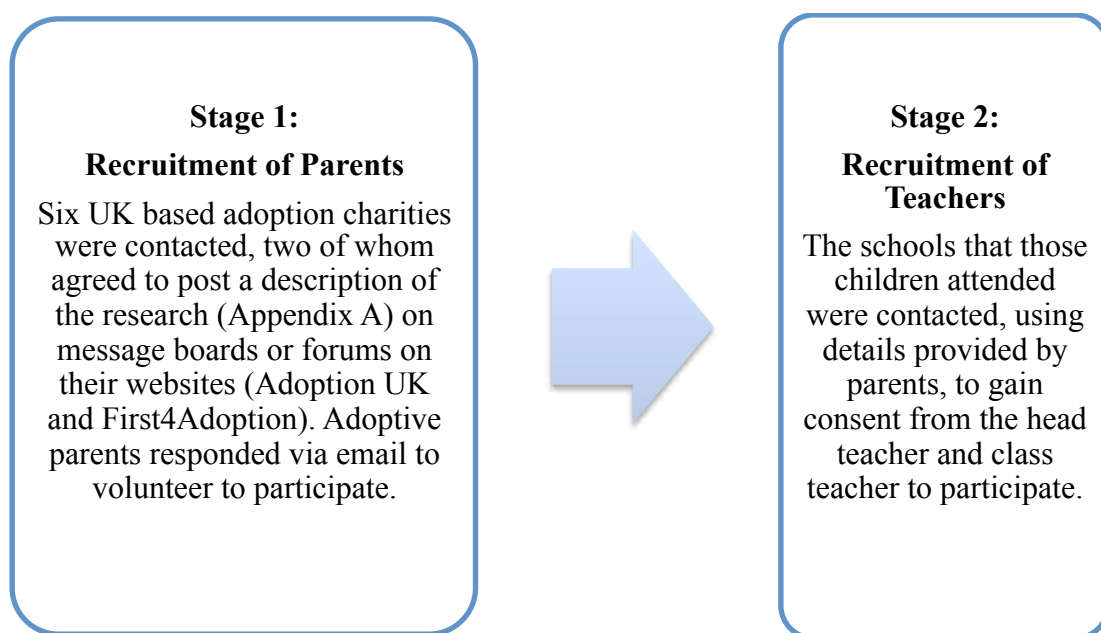


Figure 3. The two stage process of recruitment for interview participants.

**3.2.1.1 Inclusion/exclusion criteria.** The inclusion/exclusion criteria are outlined in Table 6.

<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion criteria</b>
The child had experienced at least one care placement prior to adoption.	The school was unaware of the child's adoptive status and therefore would have been informed through participation in this research.
The process of adoption had been completed and the adoptive parents had parental responsibility.	The school had been made aware of the child's adoptive status less than three months prior to recruitment for this research.
Both the child and the child's	The child was unaware of his/her status as an

school were aware of the child's adoptive status prior to recruitment for this research.	adopted child. Although there was no direct contact with the child, it would be impossible to guarantee that he/she would not become aware of his/her adoptive status in the process.
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Table 6. Inclusion/exclusion criteria for interview participants.

Participants were excluded from the research if any of the exclusion criteria were met at the point of recruitment. The inclusion criteria ensured that these children had not been adopted from birth and were therefore more likely to have experienced ACEs. This reduced the potential heterogeneity of the sample and the impact of variables associated with international adoption or adoption from birth. Length of time adopted was not restricted to allow for investigation of long-term effects of ACEs.

**3.2.2 Questionnaires.** Primary teachers from 200 schools in England and Wales were invited to complete a questionnaire. Ten schools were randomly selected<sup>18</sup> from ten LAs in each country to allow for a cross section in terms of geographical location, school characteristics and LA policies. Head teachers were asked to send the link to all teachers in their school.

### 3.4 Measures

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<sup>18</sup> Numbers were randomly chosen to select ten schools from alphabetical lists of primary schools on LA websites.

**3.4.1 Form for adoptive parents.** Adoptive parents completed a form with details such as the child's age, gender and number of care moves (Appendix I) and questions regarding the exclusion criteria.

**3.4.2 Interviews.** The interview questions (Appendix G) were developed after completing a literature review to ensure that the questions would provide novel findings (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Questions were deliberately broad and open-ended to allow for a range of detailed responses. Due to the nature of a semi-structured interview, the specific questions asked varied within the prescribed themes to allow participants to discuss their constructions without being limited to the areas that have emerged in previous research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008).

**3.4.3 Questionnaires.** The questionnaire was accessed online via a web link and included open and closed questions relating to the education of children adopted from care (Appendix H). The questions were designed to gather as much relevant information as possible within a short time frame. Five-point Likert scales were included to allow participants to indicate their response along a continuum without requiring the time invested in written responses (Rattray & Jones, 2005).

### **3.5 Pilot**

A pilot study was completed to ensure that the test materials were appropriate for the research questions and the population. Five primary teachers completed questionnaires and two were interviewed. They found the questions comprehensible and could answer them within the suggested time. The data produced were relevant to the research questions and were therefore included in the analysis, as no changes to the materials were made and all pilot participants met the inclusion criteria.

### **3.7 Analysis**

The questionnaire data were presented using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data from the interviews and questionnaires were analysed using thematic analysis, which was chosen to make the findings from the large data set more accessible (Braun &

Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis were followed (see Appendix K).

It is acknowledged that the researcher has an active role in constructing the themes for analysis (Taylor and Ussher, 2001) and hence could be influenced by her own experiences and values. Two further researchers undertook stages of thematic analysis and only those themes identified by all three researchers were included in the final analysis.

### 3.3 Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on this research, ethical approval was granted by the Cardiff University ethics committee. Key considerations are outlined in Table 7.

Ethical issue	How addressed
Informed consent	<p>Consent was obtained from parents (Appendix B), confirming that they had parental responsibility for the child and that the child knew he/she was adopted.</p> <p>Head teachers were then contacted via email for gatekeeper consent (Appendices C &amp; D) prior to sending consent forms to teachers (Appendices E &amp; F).</p> <p>Interview participants completed hard copies of the consent form whereas questionnaire participants agreed to the consent form electronically prior to completing the questionnaire.</p>
Debrief	<p>All participants received a verbal and/or written debrief (Appendix J) following participation. This was given to interview participants in person and attached electronically to the end of the questionnaire.</p>
Withdrawal	<p>Questionnaire participants were able to omit questions that they did not wish to answer and interview participants were given the opportunity to withdraw participation at any point, prior to transcription.</p>
Confidentiality and anonymity	<p>The interviews were completed in person and the recordings were held on a password-protected device to ensure</p>

	confidentiality. They were transcribed anonymously and deleted within one month of the interview date. The questionnaires were completed anonymously as participants did not provide any personal details. All data were therefore stored anonymously.
Protection from harm	The focus children of this research are part of a vulnerable group therefore it was important to ensure that they would not be harmed through this research. The inclusion criteria ensured that no participants would be informed of a child's adoptive status through this research and questions were worded to ensure that they were unbiased and did not promote a negative view of the child.

Table 7. Ethical issues and how they were addressed.

## 4. Findings

A total of 84 questionnaires were submitted. 71% of the teachers surveyed had taught LAC and 60% had taught children adopted from care.

Fifteen parents volunteered for the interviews, 11 of whom completed the consent and information forms. Eight head teachers provided gatekeeper approval, resulting in a sample of 9 teachers. All were female, 8 taught in England and 1 in Wales. Pupil characteristics are outlined in Table 8<sup>19</sup>.

	<b>Pupil characteristics<sup>20</sup></b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male (5) Female (5)
<b>Year group</b>	Reception (1) Year 1 (2) Year 2 (1) Year 5 (4) Year 6 (2)
<b>Age at adoption</b>	8 months - 4 years 6 months
<b>Number of care moves</b>	1 - 8
<b>Reasons for going into care (some participants selected more than one)</b>	Neglect (6); Parental difficulties in looking after their child (6); Parental substance misuse (3); Sexual abuse (1)

Table 8. Characteristics of adopted pupils from interview sample.

Section 4.1 presents the information from the closed questionnaire questions and section 4.2 analyses the interview and open questionnaire responses.

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

61% questionnaire respondents had received training on the impact of ACEs. 100% participants felt that an understanding of this would be helpful when working with LAC or adopted children.

Teachers' confidence in their understanding of this impact varied, as demonstrated in Figure 4.

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<sup>19</sup> For further characteristics, see Appendix L.

<sup>20</sup> There are a total of 10 pupils because one teacher taught adopted twins.



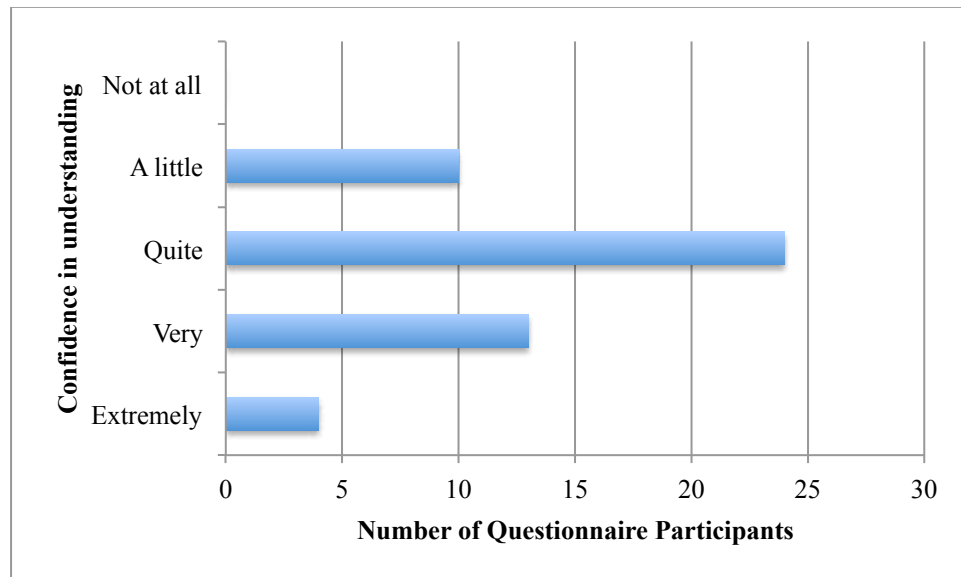


Figure 4. Participants' confidence in their understanding of the impact of difficult early life experiences.

Questions 7 and 9 asked participants to rate on a five point scale:

7. How vulnerable do you perceive children in care to be?
9. How vulnerable do you perceive children who have been adopted from care to be?

The responses, outlined in Figure 5, show a difference in perceptions of vulnerability between adopted and LAC. Explanations for responses (Q8 & 10) are explored in section 4.2.

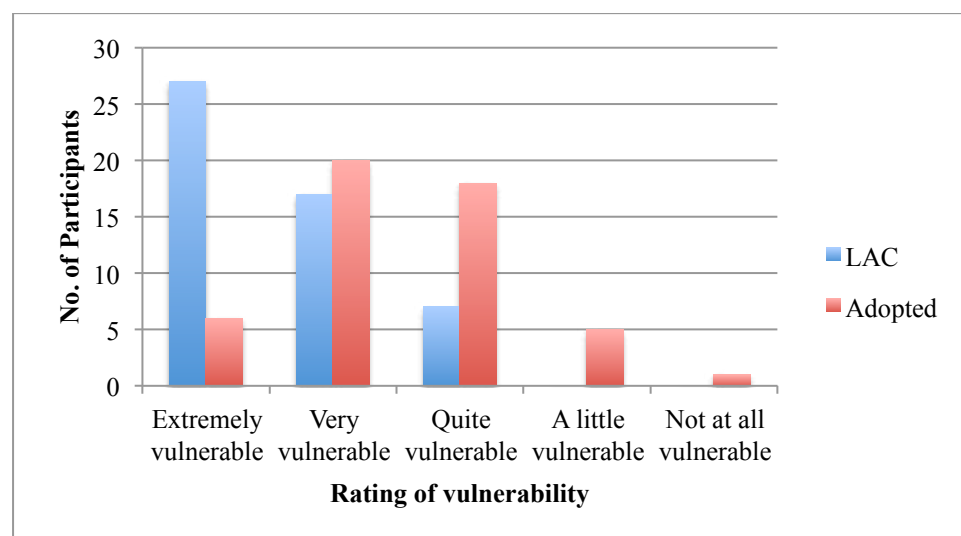


Figure 5. Participant ratings of vulnerability.

Questions 11 to 13 asked participants to compare adopted children with other groups of children. 92% identified similarities between LAC and adopted children and 86% identified differences. 70% reported differences between adopted children and children living with their birth parents. These similarities and differences are explored in the thematic analysis below.

Questions 14 and 15 considered support available for adopted children. 61% participants were aware of resources, interventions or support that they could access within school. Participants identified a number of services they would access, as shown in Figure 6.

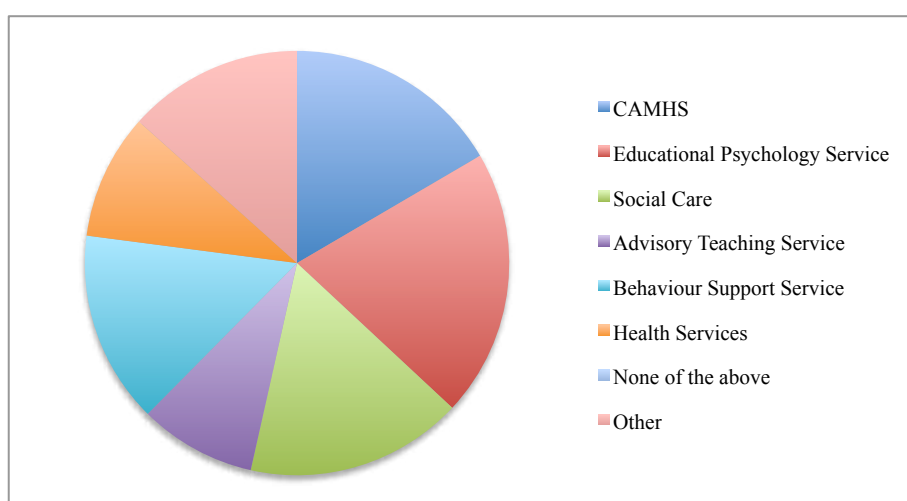


Figure 6. Support services teachers would access for a child adopted from care<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> For responses categorised as 'Other' see Appendix U.

## 4.2 Thematic Analysis

**4.2.1 The process of analysis.** The nine interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses were analysed following Braun & Clark's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis (see Appendix M). At step 4, Attride-Stirling's (2001) steps to creating a thematic network were followed and themes were grouped into three levels: basic, organising and superordinate themes. The table in Appendix N demonstrates how the three levels were grouped.

The themes from the interview and questionnaire data were grouped into the same four superordinate themes and have been combined to create a thematic map (Figure 7) to provide an overview of the data<sup>22</sup>.

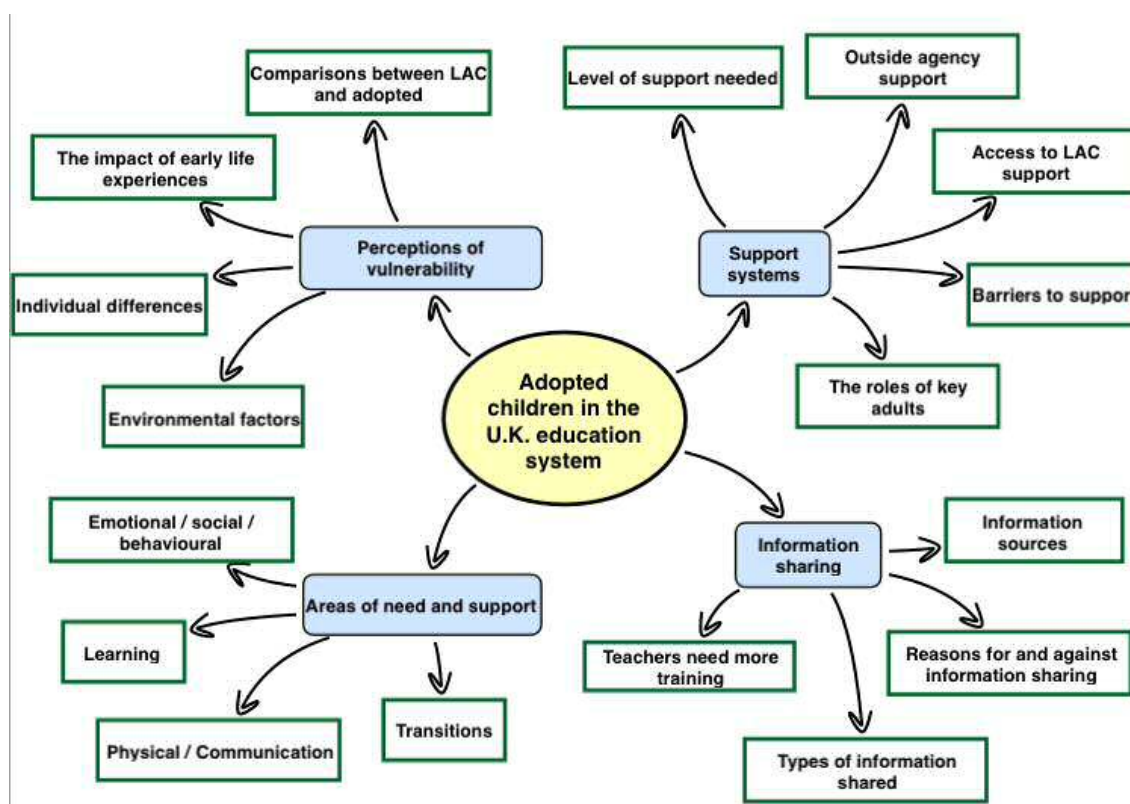


Figure 7. A thematic network of the superordinate and organising themes.

The four superordinate themes are discussed below. The participant (P1-9) and line numbers of the transcript are provided to reference supporting evidence<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> The tables in Appendices 1 to 4 (USB) provide evidence for the development from codes to themes.

**4.2.2 Theme 1: Areas of need and support.** This theme summarises the areas of need and strength demonstrated by adopted children in the interview sample and support that was accessed within school. (See Appendix O for more detail).

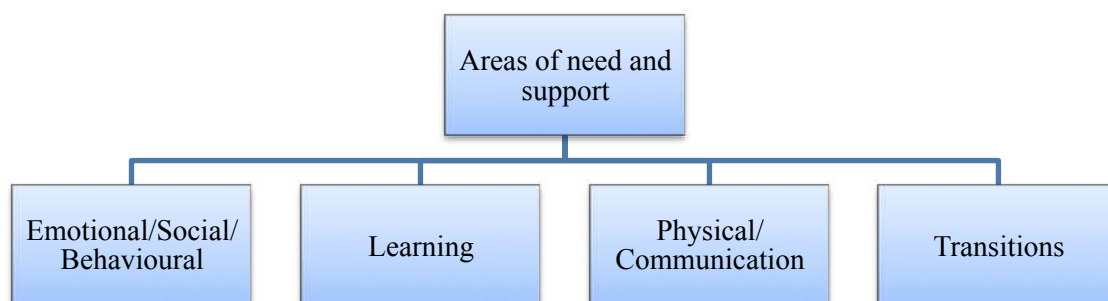


Figure 8. Thematic network for 'Areas of need and support'.

**4.2.2.1 Emotional/social/behavioural.** All but one interview participant reported that the child had emotional difficulties and many had social and/or behavioural difficulties. Examples of each area of difficulty are outlined in Table 9.

Area of difficulty	Quote	Location
Emotional	“He is emotional ... highly emotional to the extreme, when something significant happens.”	P9: 180-181
	“Her own emotions, how to deal with other people’s emotions, knowing that emotions were fine as well, that you could feel different things and talking about them.”	P3: 85-87
Social	“She sometimes has difficulty with relationships with her peers. She sometimes over reacts in certain situations and can be sometimes a bit over-dramatic about things. She does have a tendency to blame other children for some things that might be her own doing.”	P5: 33-36

<sup>23</sup> For example, if referring to Participant 2’s account and the quote appears on lines 5-6, it will be written as follows <sup>(P2: 5-6)</sup>. Evidence from the questionnaires is referred to by participant number (Q1-84), page and line number <sup>(Q15: 26:41)</sup>.

Behavioural	“So what she does is kind of puts up a barrier, and will not follow instruction and then when you remind her of the instruction, she will then answer you back and then it can become quite a negative conversation and spiral.”	P8: 20-23
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Table 9. Examples of interview responses regarding emotional, social and behavioural difficulties.

Six participants also identified strengths in these areas. Examples are presented in Table 10.

Area of strength	Quote	Location
Emotional	“If you speak to him about it then he is able to calm himself down”	P6: 64-65
Social	“They’ve got good friends in school”	P7: 138-139
Behavioural	“He’s very responsible, as much as I said that he’s immature he’s good at, you know I can trust him to do things if I need a job done or whatever I can trust him to do that and he’s honest most of the time.”	P9: 47-50

Table 10. Examples of interview responses regarding emotional, social and behavioural strengths.

Despite these strengths, most adopted children experienced some emotional, social or behavioural difficulty. Emotional literacy support was perceived to be important for adopted children:

“The emotional literacy support is really important because obviously they do come with baggage that, as a class teacher, you don’t have the time or the resources to deal with.” (P3: 474-476)

The types of support accessed by interview participants are presented in Figure 9.<sup>24</sup>

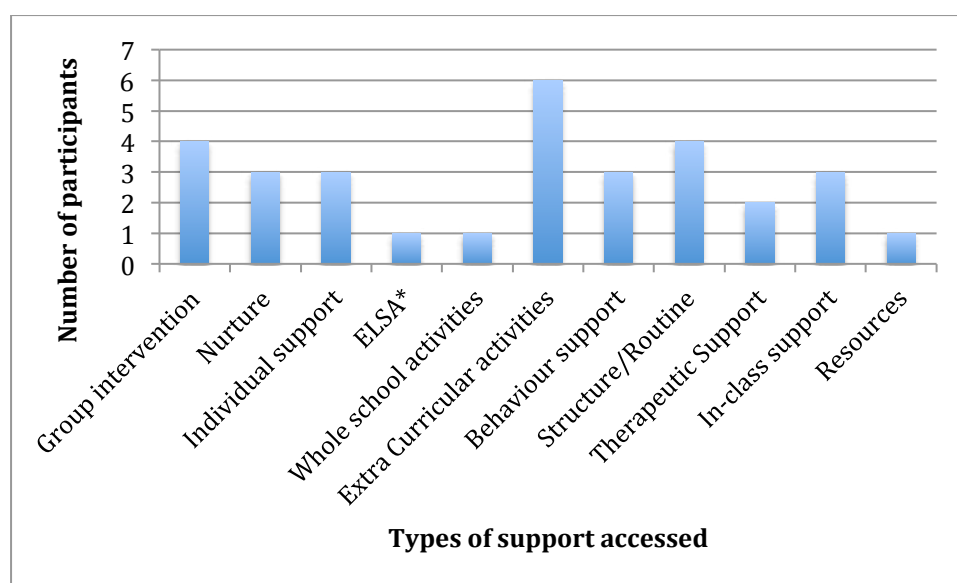


Figure 9. Emotional/social/behavioural support accessed by interview participants.<sup>25</sup>

**4.2.2.2 Learning.** Most of the interview participants reported that the child was doing well academically. Examples of learning strengths are provided in Table 11.

Area of strength	Quote	Location
Academic ability	“His maths is, is secure and he’s brilliant at reading. He’s my top reader in this class.”	P1: 36-37
	“He’s shining in those academic things too”	P6: 54
Academic progress	“She’s currently made very good progress in reading”	P2: 36-37
Enjoyment of learning	“They’re doing really well, they’re really reflective learners and they really enjoy learning and they enjoy being challenged ... so I think that’s actually what they really enjoy, just getting on with work in school”	P7: 333-337
Creativity	“I’d say she’s quite a creative young lady, she	P4: 32-34

<sup>24</sup> Further support suggested by questionnaire participants is outlined in Appendix O.

<sup>25</sup> \*ELSA and Thrive are social/emotional interventions, for more information see Appendix S.

	loves making things so art and design and things like that she's really quite strong in too."	
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Table 11. Examples of learning strengths identified by interview participants.

However, some children were perceived to experience difficulties with learning due to factors such as focus/concentration, reluctance to engage and academic difficulties. Examples are presented in Table 12.

Area of difficulty	Quote	Location
Focus/concentration	"She does have difficulties with concentrating on that activity, especially if she's worrying about other things like that."	P2: 48-50
Negative attitude towards learning	"Sometimes, I mean his attitude, sometimes he's lazy and his Mum will admit to that and he can play on not being able to do something."	P9: 321-322
Academic difficulties	"She's finding literacy hard so reading and writing she finds particularly hard and maths as well."	P4: 38-39

Table 12. Examples of learning difficulties identified by interview participants.

Six interview participants provided learning support for adopted children in the form of resources, specialist curriculum, individual support and/or intervention groups.

**4.2.2.3 Physical /communication.** Six of the children had physical or communication difficulties that impacted on their ability to access education, ranging from poor eyesight to cerebral palsy. An example for each area has been provided in Table 13.

Area of difficulty	Quote	Location
Physical	"In terms of her learning there are other difficulties that she faces, in terms of vision and cerebral palsy and stuff."	P2: 187-188
Communication	"So he was just very behind, had learning difficulties, speech problems, hearing problems"	P9: 17-18

Table 13. Areas of physical/communication need for adopted children.

Four pupils had access to resources and three accessed intervention for these needs.

**4.2.2.4 Transitions.** Support was accessed for three types of transition, as demonstrated in Table 14.

Area of support	Quote	Location
Transition to secondary school	“When he goes to high school he’ll be one of the children that they get extra transitions so instead of having one visit or two visits to the high school he’ll have about six or seven. So the transition is less overwhelming. “	P9: 308-310
Transition into school	“We did home visits so went into her house and met her Mum and Dad and her brother. So that was a good part of the transition. I also went into her nursery and spoke to her in nursery and we did story time visits as well.”	P4: 20-23
Transition from home to school	“We’ve got a breakfast club in school that children are invited to who might have difficulties with the transition from home and school so they come in early, they’re given breakfast.”	P6: 381-384

Table 14. Interview responses regarding supporting transitions.

**4.2.3 Theme 2: Perceptions of vulnerability.** This theme referred to teachers’ perceptions of the vulnerability of adopted children in relation to the four areas summarised below (see Appendix P for more detail).

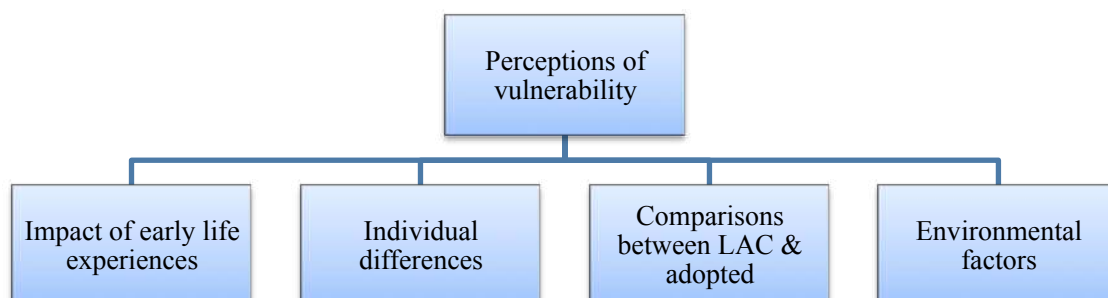


Figure 10. Thematic network for 'Perceptions of vulnerability'.



**4.2.3.1 The impact of early experiences.** Six interview participants felt the child had been impacted by their early experiences. Table 15 provides examples. Suggested reasons for this impact related to four areas, as shown by Figure 11.

Quote	Location
“I think because they haven’t had that foundation of a positive family life, that the foundation they’ve got isn’t the same as other children really. So they’re sort of vulnerable in that way”	P5: 257-259
“Yeah and I think as well just having an insight into how much emotionally and socially and the way that you can deal with so many different things, is formed in those early months, and if you have bad experiences in that time then that kind of affects your whole life potentially.”	P6: 248-251
“Some of the behaviours she sometimes shows might be as a result of her attachment disorder or her experiences as a child.”	P5: 87-88

Table 15. Examples of interview responses about the impact of ACEs.

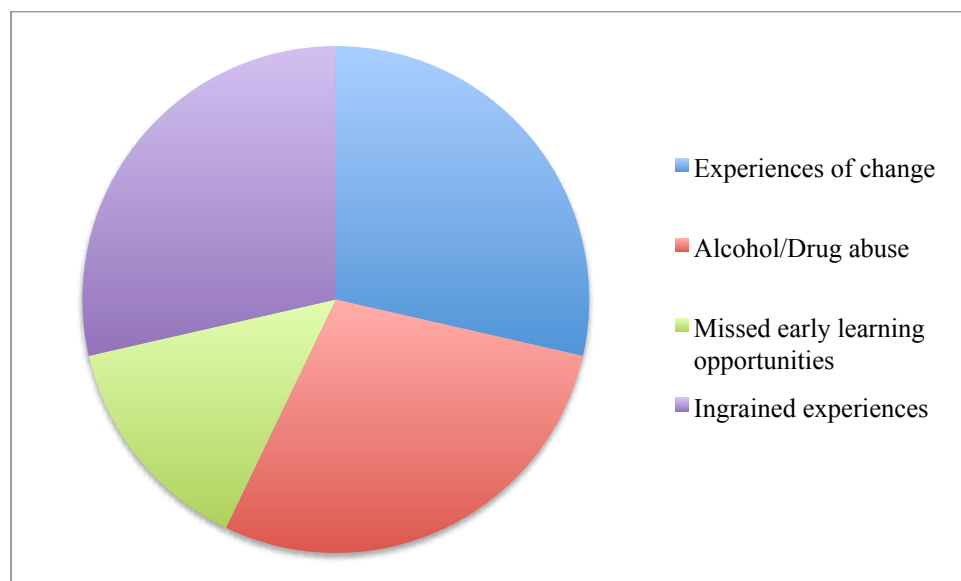


Figure 11. Suggested reasons for the impact of ACEs.

Some participants considered the impact to be long-term whereas others felt that vulnerability reduced once adopted, as demonstrated in Table 16.

<b>Length of impact</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
Long-term	“The impact of early life experiences can continue to have a big impact despite the child being in a stable setting.”	Q6: 7:41-42
Short-term	“Perhaps if they were adopted when they were very young, that could be, you know they can get over those things.”	P7: 140-142

Table 16. Examples of participant responses regarding the length of impact of ACEs.

**4.2.3.2 Individual differences.** Many participants emphasised that the child should be viewed as an individual:

“They are all individuals. Every child who comes into a class is an individual.” (P3: 225-226)

Parents were reported to link all behaviours to adoption, however, a number of alternative explanations for the child’s difficulties were suggested, examples of which are presented in Table 17.

<b>Individual Differences</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
Age	“Age issues - the younger they are adopted, it would be hoped that the more settled they would be”	Q68: 121:2-3
Intelligence	“I understand that the level of intelligence, age and experience of the children affect their vulnerability.”	Q42: 69:31-32
Other difficulties	“I don’t know just a mixture of probably just what all his diagnoses are and the problems that they present give him a slightly, I don’t know whether unbalanced probably isn’t the right word but a slightly unbalanced sort of view of emotions and attachments and things.”	P1: 302-305

Table 17. Examples of responses providing alternative explanations for difficulties.

**4.2.3.3 Comparisons between LAC and adopted.** Interview participants discussed the similarities and differences between LAC and adopted children. Questions 11 and 12 in the questionnaire also addressed this. Example responses have been presented in Table 18.

		<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
Similarities	Experiences	<p>“I guess that’s why they’re similar because it’s those perhaps feelings of, yeah insecurity or not stable in terms of where you’re going home to.”</p> <p>“Their experiences of broken relationships”</p> <p>“Early life experiences - not receiving stimulation at an early age.”</p>	<p>P7: 144</p> <p>Q21: 29:15-16</p> <p>Q29: 44:13</p>
	Areas of need	<p>“I think if any child has experienced negative things in their early lives then that will affect them later on or could affect the way that they feel about themselves, about whether they’ve got low self-esteem because they’re, they’re thinking ‘well why has this happened to me?’”</p> <p>“They can both lack focus and concentration in class.”</p> <p>“Difficulties forming relationships”</p>	<p>P6: 359-363</p> <p>Q27: 41:8</p> <p>Q47: 82:11</p>
Differences	Experiences	<p>“Because I think she gets a family situation. She gets a one-to-one or one-to-two. So I think that it’s the time that’s invested into a child that children in care</p>	<p>P3: 261-263</p>

		often don't have.”	
		“Children who have been adopted can start to build a sense of belonging and learn to trust others in a stable home”	Q73: 129:47-48
		“Children who have been adopted can have a greater sense of stability.”	Q6: 7:47-48
	Areas of need	“he doesn't present the extreme ups and downs of some children in care”	P9: 214-215
		“Children in the care system tend to be less settled and less trusting and more immature.”	Q27: 41:2-3

Table 18. Examples of similarities and differences between LAC and adopted children identified by participants.

**4.2.3.4 Environmental factors.** Questionnaire and interview participants suggested a number of environmental factors that impact on vulnerability. Table 19 provides two examples.

	<b>Environmental factors</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
Pre-adoption	Type of early experiences	“it will depend on the child and their prior experiences”	Q50: 87:46
Post-adoption	Quality of parenting	“parents of adopted children can put pressure on children to achieve and to compete with their peers academically and socially.”	Q42: 70:38-39

Table 19. Examples of environmental factors that influence vulnerability.

**4.2.4 Theme 3: Information sharing.** An important theme throughout the interviews and questionnaires related to sharing of information and reasons for and against information sharing. (See Appendix Q for further detail).

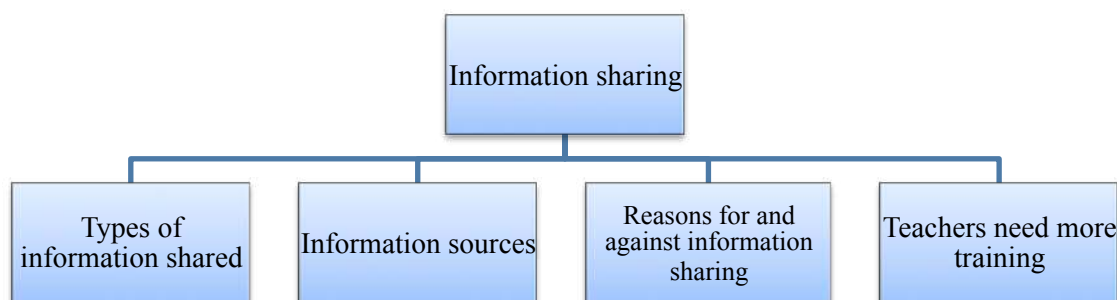


Figure 12. Thematic network for 'information sharing'.

**4.2.4.1 Types of information shared.** Although one teacher was provided with detailed information, most teachers felt that they knew little about the child's experiences, as shown in Table 20.

Quote	Location
"I don't know anything about those early ... I can't really relate that to how she's behaving now because I don't know what happened ... I'm not aware of the reasons why she was adopted."	P2: 128-131

Table 20. Example quote about teacher knowledge of ACEs.

Types of information shared are presented in Figure 13.

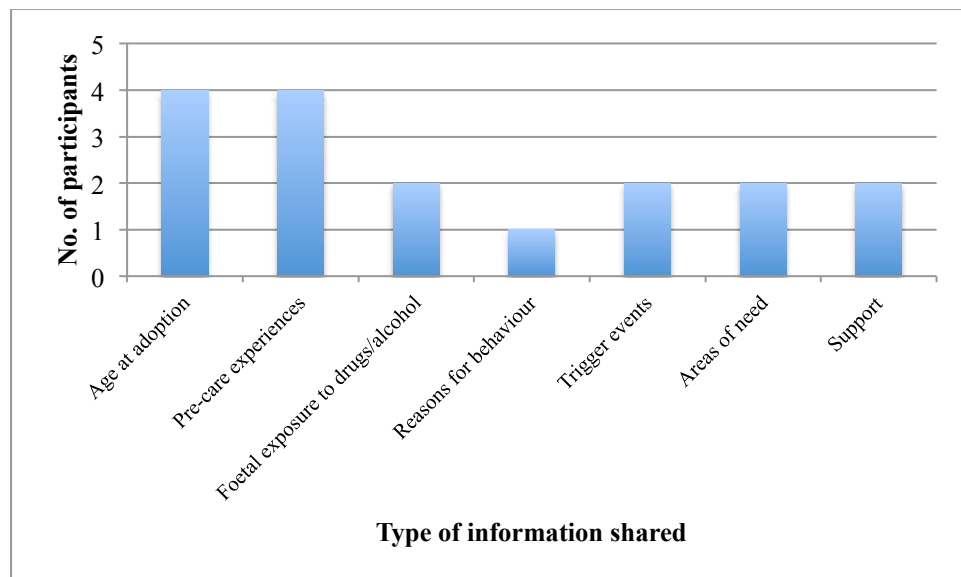


Figure 13. Types of information shared with interview participants.

**4.2.4.2 Information sources.** Most teachers received information through parents, other teachers or their own research. All information sources are presented in Figure 14.

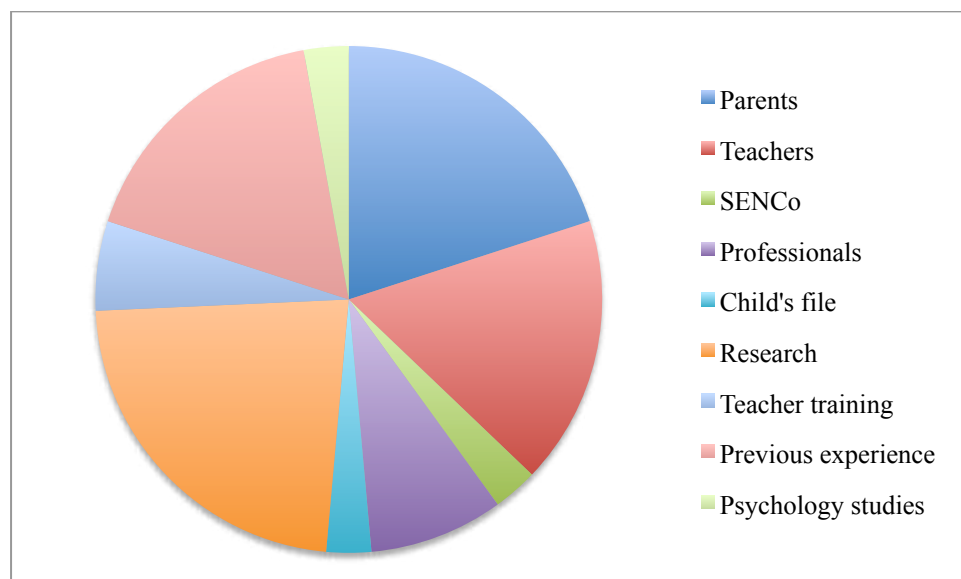


Figure 14. Information sources for teachers from the interviews and questionnaires.

**4.2.4.3 Reasons for and against information sharing.** Participants identified a number of reasons why parents should or should not share information about their child’s early experiences. Examples are presented in Table 21.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Argument</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
For	Information increases empathy	“you can have so much more empathy with him, which you have with children anyway, but I think in terms of his, you can, at that age he wasn’t able to tell us that he would have been kind of emotionally vulnerable”	P9: 100-103
	Information changed approach to support	“It’s a lot easier to deal with his academic delays knowing his background because you can use a different approach, a more nurturing approach. So you can just adapt your style to his needs.”	P9: 103-105
Against	Parents have the right not to share	“But then equally I understand that sometimes it’s not for me to know. And I just have to teach the child that I get given rather than knowing why she is like she is.”	P2: 139-141
	The approach to support would not change	“I think in terms of knowing this additional information, it’s helpful to know things but I don’t think it will dramatically change what we’re doing.”	P6: 167-169

Table 21. Examples of arguments for and against information sharing.

**4.2.4.5 Teachers need more training.** It emerged that teachers and parents were not confident in teachers’ understanding of the impact of ACEs, as demonstrated in Table 22.

	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
Teacher confidence	“I mean you can tell by the way I answered the question about [child], I’m not confident at all. I would need to know much more information.”	P9: 166-167
Parent confidence	“I think I did feel confident, but I don’t think the parents thought that I was confident. So I think maybe the parents felt that more should have been made of the fact that she was adopted and there may be issues.”	P3: 194-196

Table 22. Examples of teacher and parent confidence in teachers' understanding of the impact of ACEs.

Seven of the teachers interviewed had not received any training on the impact of ACEs and most wanted more training<sup>26</sup>. Teachers were unsure whether children’s experiences were related to their difficulties in school and suggested that teachers would benefit from greater understanding of the needs of LAC and adopted children. It was proposed that the small number of adopted children and the government focus on academic achievement means that training in this area is not a priority. For examples, see Table 23.

<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
“As a teacher of many years, I wasn’t really aware of some of the issues with adopted children and maybe that needs to come in to more early sort of training and things.”	P3: 499-501
“Teachers would benefit from ... understanding the experiences of adopted and looked after children ... they make up such a small proportion of our children I can see that that isn’t always a first priority ... it would be really useful to have that training for everybody ... so we’re all aware of why that child is the way they are.”	P8: 468-473

Table 23. Examples of teacher views on training.

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<sup>26</sup> Training regarded as helpful and perceived benefits of attachment training are outlined in Appendix Q.



**4.2.5 Theme 4: Support systems.** This theme summarises views on educational support for adopted children. Many schools did not have support systems in place and teachers differed in their opinions of the need for such systems (see Appendix R for detailed findings).

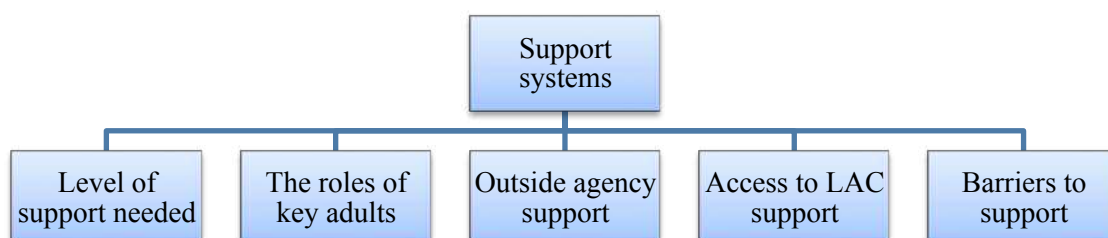


Figure 15. Thematic network for 'Support systems'.

**4.2.5.1 Level of support needed.** Teachers disagreed on whether or not support systems should be in place for adopted children. Some arguments are outlined in Table 24.

	Argument	Quote	Evidence
For	Support systems would raise awareness of potential needs	“I think if it was in place then it means that everybody that needs to be is still aware of everything to do with that child.”	P6: 444-445
	Adopted children have similar difficulties to LAC	“Children in care and adopted from care should be seen as the same thing. Just because a child may have a new family it does not mean that their anxieties and struggles are instantly removed.”	Q24: 34:44-45
	Most adopted children will need support	“Admittedly there may be some children who go through the process fine but they should be seen as the exception not the rule.”	Q24: 34:46-47

Against	Support may have a negative impact by highlighting differences	“children come to school ... they want to not experience what they’re experiencing at home so they have to just fit in, you know, you don’t want to do anything that’s going to make them seem like they’re really different.”	P7: 155-158
	Not all adopted children need support	“I think it completely depends on the case. If they’ve been adopted and they’re in a secure family and they ... seem like they’re managing ... they’re doing well, then we don’t need to put extra things in place for them because actually you’re adopted and you are, this is now your new family, so it depends on the child.”	P7: 197-201
	Additional paperwork for busy teachers	“I don’t think it necessarily needs to be statutory and the reason I say that is because ... I’ve already got nine children who have an individual education plan, or SEN support plan, and I think you need to assess the individual circumstances because if the child is fine academically and socially and everything that presents in school appears in line with what you’d expect I think that’s just paperwork for the sake of it and as teachers we have so much.”	P8: 260-268

Table 24. Arguments for and against support systems for adopted children.

**4.2.5.2 The roles of key adults.** Parents, teachers and SENCOs were perceived to have key roles in supporting adopted children. Some examples are presented in Table 25.

<b>Key Adult</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Quote</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Parents</b>	Information providers	“I’ve had lots of information that [child]’s parents have provided that is specifically about children who are adopted.”	P6: 233-235
		“It’s been quite helpful talking to her parents about how she sort of behaves at home and how she behaves in school. Some of it sort of links together.”	P5: 487-488
<b>SENCOs</b>	Gatekeeper to support	“I would go to our SENCO purely because he’s then in the loop of everything that’s going on and he knows more about if there are any training things that are available. He knows more about any documentation that is to do with any kind of vulnerable group. So he would be my first port of call”	P6: 486-489
		“I would approach our school SENCO for support. I am not sure which services she would access; this would be dependent on the child's needs”	Q59: 25-26
<b>Teachers</b>	Not experts in this area	“There’s lots of things as teachers that I guess you have to deal with with a class, and we’re not experts on every one, you know, on all those different things that can affect children.”	P7: 87-89
		“I HAVE NO IDEA. Ask the SENCO”	Q10: 14:21
<b>Others</b>	One-to-one support	“With some children I can imagine they might want some, you know, mentoring or a kind of one-to-one that they can have every now and again.”	P7: 240-242

Table 25. Example quotes regarding the roles of key adults.

**4.2.5.3 Outside agency support.** Support services accessed by interview participants and helpful types of support are presented in Figure 16 and Table 26.

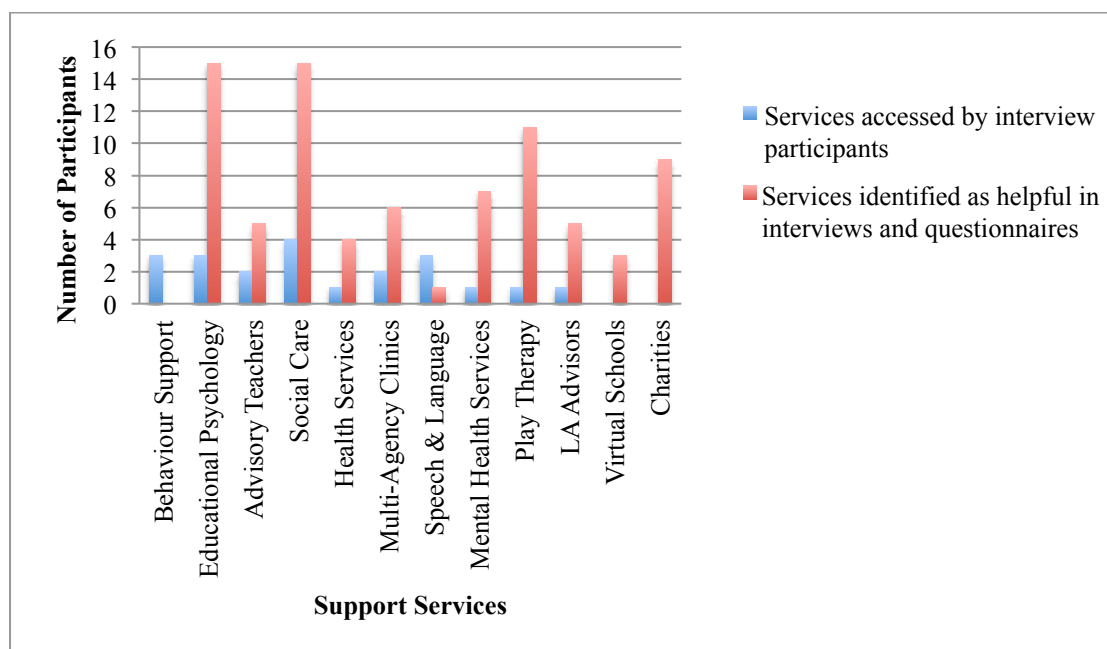


Figure 16. Support services accessed by interview participants and those perceived as helpful.

Helpful Support	Quote	Location
Interventions	“Any specialist intervention that we can’t provide in school would be great for him.”	P9: 388-389
Advice and practical solutions	“The educational psychologist seemed to give quite practical solutions to things that we can try. And it’s nice to have something that you can at least try”	P1: 610-612
Resources	“Resources provided, in terms of like his little blue triangle that he squashes and things like that and the writing slope have been quite useful”	P1: 608-609

Table 26. Examples of helpful support received by interview participants.

Many participants didn’t access support because they felt that it was not needed.

“I haven’t felt like I’ve needed to access anything.” (P7: 337-338)

Areas for further support were identified, including therapeutic and EP support.

“I think in terms of [child] ... she would really benefit from some sort of play therapies.” (P2: 284-285)

**4.2.5.4 Access to LAC support.** Some children accessed multi-agency meetings, support plans or a key person, however, many did not. Support was perceived to end when a child is adopted:

“They were looking into LAC ... because she’s been adopted that ends unfortunately.”  
(P2: 240-241)

All teachers interviewed accessed pupil premium or PDG. Spending of this money is outlined in Figure 17.

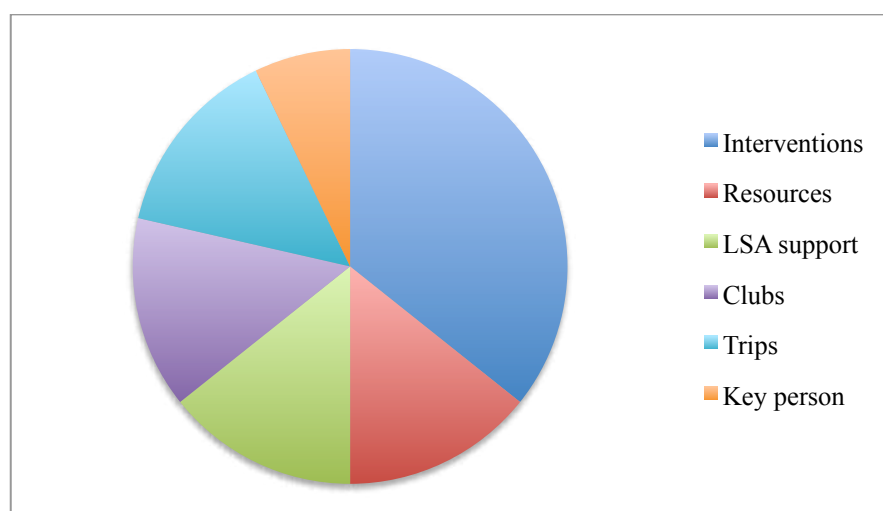


Figure 17. Spending of pupil premium or PDG.

**4.2.5.5 Barriers to support.** Table 27 outlines the barriers to support identified by interview and questionnaire participants.

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Money	3 (interview)
Time	2 (interview)
Lack of resources	1 (interview)
Availability of support for adopted children	3 (questionnaire)
Government pressure for academic achievement	2 (interview & questionnaire)
Prioritisation of needs	1 (interview)

Table 27. Barriers to support for adopted children.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Overview**

Adopted children were generally perceived to be a vulnerable group with a range of difficulties that impacted their access to education to varying degrees. Despite this, teachers did not necessarily believe that support systems were needed. The findings are considered in relation to the research questions, followed by the limitations and strengths of the study, future directions, relevance to EP practice and conclusions.

### **5.2 Do Teachers Perceive that Children Adopted from Care Exhibit Difficulties in School that Impact on their Ability to Access Education?**

The children from the interview sample were perceived to experience difficulties in at least one of four areas, identified as social/emotional/behavioural, learning, physical/communication and transitions, adding to the categories identified by Cooper and Johnson (2007).

The majority were constructed to exhibit social/emotional difficulties, in line with Barratt's (2011) findings. These persisted despite being adopted for many years, which could be seen to support Bowlby's (1969) claim about the importance of the early years for social and emotional development. The long-term impact could be related to affect regulation and an insecure internal working model of attachments. The social, emotional and behavioural difficulties reported were similar to those suggested by Bombèr (2011) as impacts of developmental trauma. However, the constructionist stance of this research does not allow conclusions to be drawn around causation of these difficulties.

The extent of difficulties varied and some children also showed particular strengths. Many had friendships in school, which was valued by the adopted children in Cooper and Johnson's (2007) study. This may have been due to opportunities to change their internal working model of relationships based on relationships in the adoptive home (Golding, 2008) or the development of more adaptive attachment strategies through maturation and experience (Crittenden, 2006). The formation of friendships may act as a protective factor by promoting resilience and reducing the impact of ACEs, resulting in the different degrees of difficulty. This would be an interesting area to explore further.

Many children were achieving at or above the expected level. However, some factors were perceived to impact on learning, such as early exposure to alcohol/drugs and poor focus. This supports Bombèr's (2011) findings that ACEs impact on executive functioning. Some children showed a negative attitude towards learning and it was considered whether this was to do with fear of failure, in accordance with the 'toxic shame' described by Bombèr (2011) and inability to trust adult support (Geddes, 2006).

In summary, most adopted children from the interview sample experienced emotional, social and behavioural difficulties to varying extents, however, teachers did not construct that these had a significant impact on their learning in primary school. In light of the evidence of long-term impacts of ACEs (Bellis et al, 2015), schools need to respond early to any needs to prevent future difficulties.

### **5.3 What Do Teachers Know About the Possible Long-Term Effect of ACEs for Children Adopted from Care?**

Most teachers identified an impact of the child's ACEs. Some felt the impact would be long-term, as suggested by the Romanian orphan studies (Behen et al, 2008). Whereas other teachers felt that adoption would cause improvements over time. Crittenden's (2006) DMM of attachment and brain plasticity evidence (Rees et al, 2016) would support this assumption, as children's brains continue to develop beyond the early years and there are opportunities for the development of new attachment strategies throughout childhood. However, the evidence of a sensitive period for development in the early years (Allen, 2011) suggests that second-chance learning may take time, so it is difficult to know how long adopted children may need support, as reflected by teachers' responses.

Teachers felt that the vulnerability of the child depended on individual differences and environmental factors. Interestingly, some suggested that parents linked all the child's behaviours to ACEs despite teachers feeling that this was sometimes an excuse for poor behaviour. This backs Meins' (2017) finding that many emphasise the importance of the early years without considering other possibly significant factors.



Teachers identified that information about a child's experiences could be helpful, however, few received this information. Parents provided the majority of the information about the child's needs, the impact of ACEs and support. In some cases, this information led to a more nurturing approach but other teachers felt that this information would not change their approach to support. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the impact of ACEs but it equally could have been due to no visible impact on academic achievement.

The interviews revealed a lack of training available for teachers on the impact of ACEs, both pre- and post-qualification, as previously reported (e.g. Randall, 2009). More questionnaire participants had received training, but not everyone who had taught a LAC or adopted child. Teachers felt there should be more training, but because there are so few adopted children in school, training would not be a priority, similar to King's (2009) finding with secondary teachers. Government pressure for academic achievement also took the focus away from social/emotional needs. However, the impact of emotional needs on attainment was observed in terms of negative attitude towards learning and poor focus.

Overall, teachers felt that ACEs had an impact, but the length and extent of this varied. It was emphasised that children should be seen as individuals and other factors should be considered in addition to ACEs. Parents were identified as key information sources, but little information was shared and there was a lack of training for teachers. Although this study focused on one subgroup, knowledge in this area would help teachers to support the broader group of children affected by ACEs.

#### **5.4 Do Teachers Perceive There to be Any Similarities and Differences Between LAC and Adopted Children?**

Teachers identified many similarities in the experiences of LAC and adopted children that related to the risk factors for LAC highlighted by Sebba et al (2015) and Mannay et al (2015). Prior to adoption, some pupils experienced multiple placement and school moves, experiences of instability and missed opportunities for development in their early years. Adopted children also experienced loss of attachment figures, which would meet Bombèr & Hughes' (2013) criteria for developmental trauma and therefore place them at risk of the impacts outlined by Bombèr (2011).

Most teachers perceived adopted children to be less vulnerable than LAC, due to a number of protective factors. Primarily, the stability provided by adoption, as supported by the findings of Sebba et al (2015), who suggested that increased stability improved outcomes for LAC. Adopted children also gain a sense of belonging and the opportunity to form relationships, which may allow them to develop emotional regulation skills, alter their internal working model of relationships (Geddes, 2006) and develop their attachment strategies (Crittenden, 2006).

Overall, teachers felt that adopted and LAC had many similar needs, however, adopted children were less vulnerable due to increased stability and relationships in the adoptive home. The adopted children showed a number of strengths, particularly academically, which suggests that despite their ACEs, there may not be the same ‘achievement gap’ for adopted children as there is for LAC.

### **5.5 What Types of Educational Support are in Place for Children Adopted from Care?**

Teachers’ opinions varied on whether support systems should exist for adopted children. Some teachers felt they were a vulnerable group who would benefit from support as it could increase awareness, especially where the child’s needs were not obvious. However, others felt that not all adopted children would need support and it could have a negative impact by highlighting differences. This is important to consider as LAC in Sebba et al’s (2015) study identified a stigma attached to the label of LAC, so it is important that adopted children do not feel stigmatised. Then again, it is also important that adopted children’s needs are addressed at a young age to reduce the risk of long-term difficulties.

Many children from the interview sample received support in school, with an emphasis on the importance of emotional literacy. Despite some children accessing multi-agency teams and support plans, the general opinion was that support should be based on the needs of the individual child. It was perceived that not all difficulties were linked to ACEs and therefore support shouldn’t be provided solely due to their adopted status,

similar to King's (2009) finding. The discrepancy in support for LAC and adopted children highlighted by Golding (2010) appeared to still be present.

Money was identified as a barrier to support, although much of the support had been funded through pupil premium or PDG, suggesting that this has improved. Teachers also felt limited by time and government pressure for academic achievement above meeting social/emotional needs, as suggested by Barratt (2011).

Teachers' perceptions of the roles of key adults highlighted a dependence on the SENCo and a lack of teacher knowledge. Some suggested that it was not their role to understand the child's needs, however, Sebba et al's (2015) findings suggest that teachers need to understand the difficulties faced by adopted and LAC in order to support and not hinder their educational progress.

To summarize, participants highlighted potential positive and negative impacts of support systems for adopted children. Most adopted pupils did not access LAC support and barriers to support were identified, although all received pupil premium or PDG. Teachers felt that it was not their role to be experts in this area and relied on parents and SENCos as gatekeepers to information and resources.

## **5.6 Do Children and Teachers Access Professional Support from any Services?**

Few teachers accessed professional support for adopted children, as suggested by Barratt (2011). Generally, however, this was due to no perceived need for support rather than barriers to accessing support. Nonetheless, there were some teachers who felt that not enough support was available or that it ceased once adopted.

Similar services were accessed to those reported by Cooper & Johnson (2007). Those who had received support found the majority helpful, as previously reported by King (2009). Some teachers felt they would benefit from more support, particularly from EPs, in line with Osborne et al's (2009) findings that EPs felt they could work more with adopted children.

## 5.7 Strengths and Limitations

Methodological, theoretical and practical strengths and limitations of the research are presented in Table 28.

	Strengths	Limitations
<b>Methodological</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The interviews were completed in 6 different LAs and therefore provided a picture of the range of policies and support systems across England and Wales.</li> <li>• The sampling method was less reliant on teachers volunteering which meant that the teachers who participated had a range of experiences and constructions.</li> <li>• Sampling primary teachers meant that they knew the child well and were aware of any support in place.</li> <li>• Data were gathered from a large number of teachers across England and Wales through questionnaires.</li> <li>• The use of mixed methods allowed for the triangulation of data and the collection of a larger</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research questions covered a broad area and therefore provided less detailed information (Agee, 2009). It may have been more effective to use more specific questions and focus on either perceptions of need or support in order to gain more detailed data for analysis.</li> <li>• Due to the small sample size, these findings cannot be generalised to all children adopted from care.</li> <li>• It is possible that those who participated in the questionnaire had an interest in this area as a high percentage had taught a LAC or adopted child.</li> <li>• The interview sampling method limited participation to parents who visited adoption charity websites. This may have resulted in a sample of adoptive parents who are particularly proactive in supporting their child's</li> </ul>

	<p>data set (Onwuegbuzie &amp; Leech, 2005).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The lack of contact with questionnaire participants would have reduced the impact of social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993).</li> </ul>	<p>education.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many teachers felt that it was beyond their role to know about support services therefore these questions may have been better aimed at SENCos.</li> <li>• The use of interviews as the main method of data collection may have resulted in social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993).</li> </ul>
<b>Theoretical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This research adds to the literature regarding evidence of the impact of ACEs for adopted children, a group that are not often studied as a discreet group.</li> <li>• The adopted children had all experienced ACEs, care placement moves and the process of adoption and were therefore representative of children adopted from care (based on McNeish and Scott's (2013) findings and DfE (2016) statistics).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The data gathered through the questionnaires were hypothetical so cannot be used to draw conclusions.</li> <li>• Although these findings suggest that children adopted from care may be at higher risk of social/emotional difficulties, this research does not identify the mediating factors.</li> <li>• Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) may provide one explanation for the impact of ACEs, however, this study neither supports nor refutes attachment theory but simply highlights adopted children as a vulnerable group.</li> </ul>
<b>Practical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The children had all experienced ACEs therefore these findings may also be relevant to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was suggested that more teacher training is needed about the impact of ACEs. Although this is supported by</li> </ul>

	<p>other groups of children with ACEs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This research topic is currently relevant and it is important that research evidence is provided to support the policy changes and recognition of this population within schools.</li> <li>• It is particularly relevant to EPs, who could be key in bringing about change to support this group in education.</li> </ul>	<p>these findings, it may not be feasible for teachers to access training in this area. Current constraints from government inspection bodies mean that teachers do not have the time to invest in this area and are unlikely to be rewarded for doing so.</p>
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Table 28. Strengths and limitations of the research.

## 5.8 Future Directions

These findings suggest that adopted pupils may have additional needs but the impact of these needs on achievement is not always evident. It would therefore be valuable to gather quantitative data on the academic achievement of adopted children, such as GCSE results, to examine whether an ‘achievement gap’ remains present once children are adopted from care and whether this reduces with the length of time adopted.

Although all teachers reported some degree of social/emotional difficulty, these varied between children. Identifying the factors that promoted the resilience of those children with fewer difficulties could help to promote the resilience of all adopted children.

It would be useful to investigate the impact of the legislative and local changes in support and the introduction of pupil premium and PDG for adopted children on their long-term outcomes. In particular, how the money is spent and the impact of the support provided. It would also be useful to find out how training on the impact of ACEs changes teachers’ views of adopted children and the support provided.

Adopted children's outcomes could be compared with other children with experience of the care system. The most common alternatives to adoption are returning to birth families, remaining in the care system or special guardianship orders (McNeish & Scott, 2013). It is difficult, however, to compare outcomes for children who experience each of these pathways due to differing histories and experience of these pathways.

## 5.9 Relevance to the Practice of Educational Psychologists

EPs are in an optimal position to support adopted children in school (Midgen, 2011). These findings have relevance for EP work at an individual, school and organisational level. Some examples have been presented in Table 29 below.

<b>Individual child/family</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Local Authority/Government</b>
Assessment work to identify the child's needs.	Provide training to all staff to increase awareness of the impact of ACEs.	Develop policy to ensure that adopted children's needs are catered for in all schools.
Consultation with parents to discuss child's educational needs.	Assist schools in becoming "adoption-friendly" by addressing policies and procedures.	Form links between services to promote multi-agency working.
Intervention work with a child and/or their family e.g. therapeutic support.	Introduce Education Plans for Adopted Children (as used by Syne et al, 2012).	Participate in adoption panels (as suggested by Osborne et al, 2009).
Provide parental support through training and techniques from family therapy e.g. reflective practice.	Provide supervision to teachers working with adopted children e.g. through solution circles or reflective practice.	Conduct research into the needs of adopted children in education to provide evidence for policy development.
Assist in the development of a support plan to address the child's individual needs.	Advise schools regarding spending of pupil premium or PDG on evidence-based interventions.	Provide training to adoption teams within social services to improve understanding of educational needs.

Table 29. Examples of work that could be completed by EPs to support adopted children at an individual, school and organisational level.

EPs should be aware that not all teachers of children adopted from care receive training, which may impact on their constructions of adopted children. Adopted children may not be raised as a concern if their social/emotional difficulties are not impacting on academic attainment, however, it is important to promote early intervention to prevent escalation of these difficulties (Allen, 2011). EPs are in an optimal position to use their

psychological knowledge to support teachers in understanding the needs of this vulnerable group.

EPs could advise at the LA and national level to ensure that schools are recognised for their promotion of pupil wellbeing as well as academic achievement. Research completed by EPs could help to inform policy developments in this area and help teachers to develop a more holistic construction of their role.

## **5.10 Conclusions**

This research highlighted a prevalence of emotional, social and behavioural needs amongst children adopted from care, however, these difficulties were perceived to have little impact on academic achievement. Support was minimal as teachers felt pressured to focus on academic achievement. A lack of training on the impact of ACEs was revealed, which may have affected teachers' constructions of the needs of this vulnerable group.

It is therefore important to raise awareness of adopted children in schools. EPs working with schools should be mindful of the lack of training available to teachers and could have a key role in providing this. It is important that EPs continue to complete research in this area to promote change in policy at an organisational level so that teachers experience less pressure to focus on academic achievement at the cost of supporting pupil wellbeing.

In summary, adopted children appear to be a vulnerable group in education, whose needs are not always obvious. However, in order to prevent their emotional, social and behavioural difficulties from escalating, there is a need for early intervention. This is currently prevented by a lack of training available to teachers and pressure to focus on academic achievement from government inspection bodies. There is therefore a need for change at an organisational level in order to enable teachers to gain the skills to support this vulnerable group in education.



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**Children Adopted from Care: Teacher Constructions of Need and Support.**

**Part C: Critical Appraisal**

**Word Count: 5941**

## **1. Introduction**

The critical appraisal details the reflections of the researcher on the impact of the research process on her role as a researcher and a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP).

Section two focuses on the research practitioner, critiquing each stage of the research process including design, implementation, analysis and writing the report. Reflections on the ethical issues raised by this research are included and difficulties in recruitment explored.

Section three focuses on the contribution to knowledge, in terms of providing novel and interesting research relevant to EPs and service users. The contributions to the researcher's own knowledge are also discussed, with future directions suggested. This section ends with reflections on completion of the research.



## **2. Critical Account of Research Practitioner**

### **2.1 Reflections on the Research Design**

**2.1.1 Ontology, epistemology and methodology.** This research investigated teachers' constructions of adopted children's needs, which was identified as a gap in the adoption research. A constructionist paradigm was used so participants could share their constructions through interviews or questionnaires (Talja, Tuominen & Savolainen, 2004). This approach accepted that teachers' constructions would have been shaped by their experience, culture and values and highlighted the importance of language in the construction of knowledge (Willig, 2001).

A limitation of this paradigm is that implying causation of difficulties is not possible. The research literature suggested that adopted children are at risk of SEN (Cooper & Johnson, 2007), however, there has been little exploration into why. Although ACEs may have an impact, there are other issues related to identity and experiences of care that may mediate or moderate this impact. An experimental approach to investigating the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) would have significant ethical implications. However, it may be possible to identify mediating factors for adopted children's difficulties in education, such as number of placement moves or sibling relationships. As the participants highlighted, there may also be individual differences and environmental factors that impact on educational difficulties. If these factors could be quantified then a statistical analysis may reveal mediating factors for the impact of ACEs.

There is a risk that statistics focus solely on academic achievement. A more holistic measure is needed, otherwise the construction that adopted children who achieve academically do not require support would be reinforced. Emotional and social difficulties can be difficult to measure objectively, therefore a constructionist approach may have been the most effective way to gather this information.

The use of mixed methods allowed a larger sample of primary teachers to share their constructions through different discourses (Mertens, 2012). The interviews and open-ended questionnaire questions allowed participants to articulate their constructions,

whilst the quantitative data provided by the questionnaires was embedded to support the qualitative findings (Creswell, 2009).

If a critical realist approach had been taken, the inclusion of statistical data regarding possible mediating factors would have allowed for some investigation of the causation of difficulties. This would also have searched for ‘truths’ whilst acknowledging the impact of social, cultural and other environmental factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, gathering enough statistical power to generalise these findings would have been difficult given the sample size. This could also present ethical issues if sharing this information was distressing for parents or altered the teacher’s view of the child.

**2.1.1.2 Reflections on the use of a constructionist paradigm.** On reflection, it became clear that although a constructionist stance had been taken, there were a number of anomalies within the empirical paper that suggested a more positivist approach. This was due to the inclusion of research question one, which aimed to establish whether or not adopted children experienced difficulties in school. This implied that a truth was being sought and therefore did not align with the constructionist paradigm. The reason for the inclusion of this research question was based on feedback from the ethics committee that it had been assumed that adopted children would have difficulties in education. It was therefore felt that it was important to investigate rather than assume this, however, this created a more positivist question.

Although the question appeared positivist, the method used to investigate research question one fit within a constructionist approach. The supporting data were gathered through interview questions where teachers shared their constructions of the child’s strengths and difficulties in school. A positivist approach would have involved gathering quantitative data to prove the existence of difficulties. It therefore appeared to be merely the wording of the question that was positivist rather than the method of data collection. In order to rectify this, research question one was reworded to say, “Do teachers perceive that children adopted from care exhibit difficulties in school that impact on their ability to access education?” The conclusions drawn in relation to research question one were also reworded to ensure that they emphasised that these were teachers’ constructions of difficulties and not evidence of the existence of difficulties.

**2.1.2 Participants.** Primary school teachers were interviewed due to little representation of teachers' views in the literature. King (2009) interviewed secondary teachers, however, it is important to investigate understanding in primary schools in order to promote early intervention.

Primary aged children presented fewer sample variables as there are a number of additional physiological, psychological and social factors that could mediate adopted children's difficulties during adolescence (Kipke, 1999). It would therefore be difficult to link adolescent behaviours to children's ACEs. However, this research did not attempt to explain causation of difficulties so secondary children may have been an appropriate group to sample due to higher levels of difficulty reported by adoptive parents<sup>27</sup>.

The average time spent in care prior to adoption is 2 years 3 months (McNeish & Scott, 2013), with most children experiencing multiple placement moves (Barratt, 2011) and entering care due to abuse or neglect (DfE, 2016a). The children in this sample spent an average of 2 years 1 month in care, moved placement 1 to 8 times and all experienced ACEs. Therefore, despite the small size, the sample was representative of children adopted from care in the UK.

Participants volunteered from a range of geographical locations, which was beneficial in terms of representativeness, however, it meant that a large amount of time was dedicated to travelling. It was considered whether telephone interviews might have been more efficient.

The questionnaire response rate was lower than expected, however, few head teachers responded to the gatekeeper email so it is unknown how many teachers received the link to the questionnaire. A large percentage of respondents had taught a LAC or adopted child<sup>28</sup>, greater than the percentage who had received training on the impact of ACEs<sup>29</sup>. It is therefore possible that the sample was biased towards those with an interest in the area due to their experience.

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<sup>27</sup> This became clear in parents' comments on the recruitment post.

<sup>28</sup> 71% had taught a LAC, 60% had taught an adopted child.

<sup>29</sup> 61% had received training on the impact of ACEs.

**2.1.3 Measures.** In line with the constructionist paradigm, the majority of the data were collected through interviews and open-ended questions in the questionnaire, with some quantitative data related to teachers' constructions.

**2.1.3.1 Designing a reliable and valid measure.** To develop questionnaire and interview questions that would provide valuable information related to the research questions, three steps were taken:

1. An extensive literature search was completed and previous findings used to inform the wording of the questions.
2. A pilot study led to refinement of questions for both measures.
3. To reduce the impact of the researcher's beliefs and values, questions were carefully worded to allow for open responses and refined using research methodology text (e.g. Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

**2.1.3.2 Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to talk about areas they constructed as important without being restricted to a strict interview schedule (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008) and enable exploration of topics that had not been previously discussed in the literature. The flexible interview schedule ensured that the topics discussed were related to the research questions and previous literature. These interviews were conducted in person and recorded to enable a trusting relationship to be established (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). However, this incurred large costs in terms of travel and time so telephone interviews may have been more efficient.

**2.1.3.3 Questionnaires.** Online questionnaires provided access to a large sample and allowed for anonymity, hence preventing social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). The questionnaire was deliberately short to accommodate the time limitations of primary teachers. Online questionnaires were cost-effective in terms of the participants returning the questionnaire (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003) and the researcher sampling a large geographical range without associated postal or travel costs (Lefether, Dal & Matthiasdottir, 2007).

Nulty (2008) reported that response rates are higher for paper than online questionnaires, however, only when handed out face-to-face. This would have meant collecting data from fewer LAs, which would have been less representative of the UK

as individual LAs are developing their own policies for adopted children (Thomas, 2015). However, delivering the questionnaires in person during staff meetings may have improved response rates.

**2.1.4 Pilot study.** The pilot study helped to refine and develop the research instruments in relation to the research questions and to assess practicalities such as completion time. Although pilot studies are more often associated with positivist research, Sampson (2004) highlighted their relevance to constructionist research. Pre-exposure to the field can help a researcher to select the appropriate information and observations from a large amount of data and allows for a period of reflection prior to data collection.

Following the pilot study, a fifth research question was included as it was observed that data had also been gathered on the strengths and needs of adopted children in education.

## **2.2 Ethical Issues**

Obtaining ethical approval took longer than anticipated due to concerns that schools may be informed of a child's adoptive status through participation in this research. On reflection, this was overlooked based on the assumption that schools would have been informed. Precautions were therefore applied, making it clear in the recruitment post that the school must have been aware of the child's adoptive status for a minimum of three months prior to volunteering. The head teacher gatekeeper letter and teacher consent form also included a request not to share this information with other staff.

A further concern was that the interview and questionnaire questions assumed that adopted children would have difficulties in education. This was based on experiences in the EP role and knowledge of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). To rectify this, care was taken to ensure that questions were balanced and not leading. Also, the addition of the research question "Do children adopted from care exhibit any difficulties in school that impact on their ability to access education?" meant that this was being investigated rather than assumed.

Consent was first obtained from parents, who were given the option to volunteer to reduce pressure to participate. This led to recruitment difficulties, however, it was felt to be the most ethical approach. All participants received a written and/or verbal debrief with information about resources and support services. This was useful as participants commented that they knew little about the impact of ACEs and support for adopted children. This emphasised the importance of debriefing and the opportunity it provides to share information with participants that cannot be shared during the interview.

## **2.3 The Process of Data Collection**

**2.3.1 Recruitment of interview participants.** The initial aim was to complete 10 interviews and 9 were completed, which produced a rich data set. There were unforeseen difficulties in recruiting participants from such a specific population that extended the time spent on recruitment. Although posting on charity websites allowed parents to volunteer, there were a number of difficulties encountered:

- Two charities had their own ethical processes and therefore did not want to promote research that had not been scrutinised by their ethics team.
- The first post received negative feedback from adoptive parents regarding the inclusion/exclusion criteria. This led to the addition of an explanation of the sample rationale.
- Most parents responded during school holidays so it was not possible to contact schools immediately, which added further delay to the recruitment of teachers.

Initially there was one response to the charity posts. One charity included a link to the post in their monthly email to parents, which resulted in more responses. The link was also sent to professionals in social work teams in England and Wales to share with adoptive families. This was completed anonymously and it was impossible to tell whether participants had been directed to the post.

Eleven out of fifteen parents returned the completed consent and information forms. As the forms had been sent electronically, an offer was made to send hard copies by post if the parents did not have access to a printer. A second reminder email was sent to each

parent following their initial response, however, it was felt that further contact would be applying pressure to participate.

Recruitment via adoption charity websites seemed the easiest way to access this population, however, it limited the parents reached. Parents receiving support from adoption charities may have been experiencing difficulties and therefore their children could have more needs than other adopted children. If parents had concerns about their children's education they may have been more motivated to participate in the research than parents for whom this was not a concern. The low response rate may reflect a lack of parents accessing charity support or a lack of educational concerns.

Ten schools were contacted and eight head teachers agreed to participate<sup>30</sup>. Two declined because the teacher in question was pregnant or too busy maintaining the school's high academic standards. This may reflect a bias in the sample, with those participating schools valuing wellbeing and support for vulnerable pupils. This could be reflective of the school ethos and the teachers' attitudes towards supporting vulnerable pupils. This bias would remain if schools had been contacted directly so would not change the approach to recruitment.

**2.3.2 Recruitment of questionnaire participants.** A link to an online questionnaire was sent to head teachers of 10 schools in 10 LAs in England and 10 LAs in Wales (200 total). The LAs were selected to represent a wide geographical range and the schools were selected randomly from lists of schools on LA websites. This was reliant on LAs publishing lists of school contact details, however, most were accessible.

Questionnaires were received from 84 participants, however, a number of participants skipped questions. Reasons for this were considered, including whether they felt able to answer the questions, whether they felt it was relevant to their role as a teacher or whether those who answered had a specific interest in this area. The latter was supported by the fact that the majority had taught a LAC or adopted child (71% and 61% respectively), which seems disproportionate considering that there are few adopted pupils in schools. It may have been more effective to visit each school and deliver the

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<sup>30</sup> Two of the teachers interviewed worked in the same school.

questionnaire during a staff meeting to promote a higher response rate. Alternatively, accessing teacher forums, unions or conferences may have reached more teachers.

Contacting all schools in one LA may have resulted in a less biased response rate. The rationale for collecting data from different LAs was based on the development of LA schemes to support adopted children (Thomas, 2015).

**2.3.3 Reflections on recruitment.** Adopted children are a difficult group to access because, as reported by Barratt (2011), they become ‘invisible’ to support services. Schools do not keep records of adopted children as they do for LAC and are only aware of a child’s adoptive status if informed by parents. Therefore a recruitment approach was chosen that would directly access adoptive parents.

Alternatively, schools could have been contacted directly and asked if they had any adopted pupils on roll, however, the process of selecting which schools to contact would have limited the sample and it was not possible to contact every school in England and Wales for practical reasons.

The recruitment process reduced bias on the part of the researcher by allowing parents to volunteer their child’s school. The majority of schools agreed to participate so this appeared to be an effective method of recruitment, despite requiring more time and numerous gatekeepers.

The recruitment process took longer than anticipated and involved a larger number of gatekeepers due to poor response rates. The aim had been to complete all interviews in the summer term so that teachers could discuss the child they had been teaching that school year. However, due to the long recruitment process, only the two pilot interviews were completed before the end of the academic year. Therefore, many of the teachers either had to talk retrospectively about a child they no longer taught or discuss a child who they had only taught for a few months and therefore may not have been as familiar with their needs.

## **2.4 Analysis of the Results**



Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that fit in with the constructionist research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a robust method for exploring a novel phenomenon (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013) and therefore seemed appropriate given the shortage of research in this area. Thematic analysis was chosen instead of content analysis because the focus was not on the frequency of themes (Vaismoradi et al, 2013) but to allow themes to be given value if they were deemed interesting or important. This process allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data and develop and refine the themes until they represented participants' constructions.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) would not have been appropriate as although some questions asked about the teacher's experience of teaching an adopted child, others asked about the support available and the child's needs. In order to complete an IPA study, the focus would have been purely on the teacher's experience of teaching an adopted child. Unlike IPA, which is bound to a phenomenological epistemology (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), thematic analysis is not bound to any theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and could therefore be used within the constructionist paradigm.

The analysis was conducted at a semantic level to reduce the level of interpretation by the researcher that could take away from the participants' constructions. After transcription, a process of inductive coding was followed, as codes were not pre-determined based on the literature (Fereday & Cochrane, 2006). Initially, detailed codes were added to the transcripts electronically. Post it notes were then used to group and refine the codes and group them into themes, ensuring that they still represented the evidence. This process allowed the researcher to move the codes into different themes and check the accuracy of each theme in relation to the raw data<sup>31</sup>. The themes were grouped into three levels according to Attride-Stirling's (2001) steps to creating a thematic network, to provide a clear representation of the data.

The use of inductive coding and the time spent refining and checking the codes with the data reduced the potential impact of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions on the findings. The codes were also checked by two independent researchers to ensure that they represented the data and to identify where codes could be refined. The

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<sup>31</sup> See Appendices 1-4 (USB) for tables of codes to themes with evidence.

development of themes required a level of interpretation, however, the detailed coding process and use of independent coders was hoped to reduce this impact.

## **2.5 Writing the Final Report**

**2.5.1 Literature review.** To produce an in-depth literature review and ensure that relevant research was included, an extensive literature search was completed for research related to ACEs, attachment theory, LAC and adopted children<sup>32</sup>. This is a highly researched area and therefore it was initially difficult to find a gap in the research. Once the gap had been identified, time was spent reflecting on which areas of the literature would be most relevant, particularly to the work of the EP, and inclusion and exclusion criteria were created<sup>33</sup>.

Despite these criteria, there was still an extensive amount of research. A longer literature review was written and edited on completion of the research, when it was clearer which aspects of the literature were most relevant to the research findings. Considering the size of the research, it may have been sensible to have fewer research questions, which would have consequently reduced the amount of relevant literature.

Key reflections from writing the literature review relate to the need to absorb oneself in the literature in order to draw out key points. A process similar to qualitative analysis was used, where themes were identified and used to structure the literature review. Care was taken to include a balance of psychological theory, research evidence, legislation and critiques.

**2.5.2 Empirical study.** Time was spent ensuring that a thread ran through the article, linking the rationale, research questions, process and findings of the research. A particularly difficult task was narrowing down the findings. The wording of the research questions meant that they covered a broad area and therefore gathered a large amount of relevant data. Creative approaches had to be employed to accurately represent the data.

To refine the findings, they were related back to the research questions and literature in the discussion to see which results were most relevant. The findings and discussion

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<sup>32</sup> For search terms see Appendix T.

<sup>33</sup> See Part A for details.

were written together, through an iterative process. The findings included will have depended on the researcher's interpretation of which data were the most interesting and relevant to the research questions. To reduce any potential bias, more detailed tables were provided in the appendices.

### **3. Contribution to Knowledge**

#### **3.1 Developing the Research**

The research topic of adopted children in education was chosen due to both a personal interest in the impact of ACEs (as advised by Jacob & Ferguson, 2012) and observations made as a TEP. In particular, working with adopted children having difficulty accessing support, despite displaying significant needs that appeared to be related to their ACEs. This created a question of why support was not as freely available as it would have been had they still been LAC.

**3.1.1 Identifying a gap in the research.** The scoping search identified that there were few publications specifically about adopted children in education. Researchers had gathered parent (Cooper & Johnson, 2007) and EP views (Osborne, Norgate & Traill 2009) and they reported that adopted children did not receive enough support in school. Many of them highlighted a lack of teacher awareness (Cooper & Johnson, 2007) but only one study could be found with teachers (King, 2009). It was therefore deemed important to gather teachers' views on supporting adopted children in education and to understand more about the lack of awareness reported by parents.

**3.1.2 Developing the research questions.** To develop the research questions, a large literature search was completed<sup>34</sup>. As suggested by Agee (2009) this process began with an overarching research question: "How are adopted children supported in school for their educational needs?" This was broken down into four more specific questions based on the literature around a lack of teacher awareness (Cooper & Johnson, 2007), discrepancies in support for LAC and adopted children (Golding, 2010), a lack of support available to adopted children (Randall, 2009) and adopted children's 'invisibility' to support services (Barratt, 2011).

On reflection, these research questions were broad and could each have been overarching questions (Agee, 2009). This resulted in a large data set, which led to difficulties later in the process. It may have been better to focus on one of these questions and develop sub-questions to explore it further, for example, factors that impact on teacher understanding. These questions, although broad, provided an interesting insight into the current situation for adopted children in the UK education

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<sup>34</sup> See appendix T for details of search terms and databases.

system and highlight a number of areas in which EPs could be effective agents of change.

As highlighted by Agee (2009), research questions change as an understanding of the phenomenon and the researcher's role develops. It was discovered that the theoretical standpoint and literature (e.g. Cooper & Johnson, 2007) suggested that adopted children would have educational difficulties so this had been assumed. Hence a fifth research question was added to investigate the presence of educational difficulties for adopted children.

Although the research questions were informed by theoretical underpinnings and previous literature, they were worded in an unbiased manner and did not pose an ethical risk to participants or the children that were being discussed.

### **3.2 Discussion of Findings**

The researcher began with the assumption that adopted children are a vulnerable group who should access the same support as LAC. Arguments against support systems for adopted children highlighted this assumption and enabled reflection based on teachers' contrasting beliefs.

**3.2.1 Key findings.** The needs of the adopted children in this sample were mostly emotional, social and behavioural, which may put them at risk of mental health difficulties (Barratt, 2011). Mental health is being prioritised by the UK government and publications such as Future in Mind (DoH, 2015) promote the role of the teacher in early intervention and the prevention of mental health difficulties. It was also recently announced by the Prime Minister that teachers will deliver 'mental health first aid'<sup>35</sup>. It is therefore key that adopted children are recognised as vulnerable in this area.

The findings highlighted a lack of teacher training on the impact of ACEs, which meant that parents were the main source of information. Despite parents' vast knowledge, teachers may not value this information as it has not come from a professional. Teachers also felt pressured to focus on academic outcomes at the expense of social and

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<sup>35</sup> This green paper is yet to be published but a press release has been shared explaining the plans (UK Government, 2017).

emotional support so the Government need to address this balance to enable schools to support children in a holistic manner.

It was interesting that teachers suggested support systems for adopted children would promote a negative view of the child, as this had not been previously considered. On reflection, it would have been useful to gather children's views on this.

The introduction of pupil premium<sup>36</sup> for adopted children appears to have had a positive impact (Thomas, 2015). However, many of the participants interviewed were unaware that the child's adopted status made them eligible for this. The adoption support fund (DfE, 2016c) was only mentioned by one participant and teachers were unaware of other support available. The improvements in support for adopted children need to be publicised so that schools are aware of support available for adopted pupils.

**3.2.2 Strengths of the research.** Despite focusing on a specific group, this research adds to the literature on the lack of teacher understanding of the impact of ACEs and the support available for children with social/emotional difficulties. An interesting question emerged around the teacher's role in promoting a child's social and emotional needs if they are not significantly impacting on their academic achievement. Cooper and Johnson (2007), however, argued that schools are an optimal environment for developing children's social and emotional skills. Every Child Matters (DfE, 2003) highlighted five key outcomes that promote the holistic development of the child, in terms of both wellbeing and academic achievement.

The findings of this research are relevant to the current changes in support for adopted children in the UK (DfE, 2014). Charity initiatives (e.g. Adoption UK & WG, 2016) and changes at a LA level (Syne, Green & Dyer, 2012) suggest that adopted children are displaying the need for support systems in schools, however, there is currently little national policy regarding this or research into the effectiveness of these systems.

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<sup>36</sup> In Wales, the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) is now available to adopted children (Pye, Mollitor, Taylor & Huxley, 2015)

**3.2.3 Limitations of the research.** As discussed in part B, there are theoretical, methodological and practical limitations to this research. If it were to be completed again, the research questions would be revised and focused on one element of teachers' constructions (i.e. areas of need or support). Instead of gathering further constructions through the questionnaires, it may have been useful to gather statistical data for a larger group of adopted children to attempt to identify mediating factors on the impact of ACEs. However, this was a difficult population to reach and it may have been difficult to gather enough information to make generalised claims.

### **3.3 Applications to Work as an EP**

The table in Part B demonstrates implications for EPs at the individual, school and organisational level. Further ideas are discussed below.

**3.3.1 Individual level.** In consultation, the need for support and advice should be considered in relation to the lack of training available to teachers. EPs can also complete detailed assessments of the holistic needs of these children to provide evidence for hypotheses based on psychological theory.

EPs need to raise the profile of this vulnerable group, for example by highlighting them in planning meetings, as many do for LAC. It should not be taken for granted that teachers understand the impact of ACEs and training and consultation should be offered to improve their understanding.

Teachers' perceptions of their role, as highlighted in this research, did not necessarily include support for social and emotional needs. EPs could reframe teachers' thinking using psychological theory (such as Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs) to emphasise the importance of a holistic approach.

**3.3.2 School level.** EPs could work with the designated teacher and senior leadership team to promote the inclusion of adopted children in support systems for LAC. For example, by providing PEPs for adopted children as implemented by Syne et al (2012). EPs can promote early intervention through programmes of support for social and emotional needs such as Thrive, ELSA or nurture groups. They could also provide training to staff to promote understanding of the impact of ACEs and to enhance their skills in providing appropriate interventions.

**3.3.3 Organisational level.** EPs have been involved in the development of support systems for adopted children in LAs across the UK (e.g. Syne et al, 2012). The EPs interviewed by Osborne et al (2009) suggested that they should be doing more work with adopted children and Syne et al (2012) provide an example of how this can be done. A role for EPs has been identified in terms of consultation, development of support plans and policy development. Training on ACEs could be advertised as part of a service delivery model in all EPSs and an expectation could be placed on schools to access this training e.g. by providing an adoption-friendly schools award.

A number of UK LAs describe policies on their websites and have published research regarding their effectiveness (Syne et al, 2012; Thomas, 2015; Evans & Dickinson, 2015). EPs in other LAs can therefore learn from their colleagues' implementation of these systems and improve support for adopted children across the UK. EPs are placed within the LA and can therefore help to promote communication between services and schools.

The pressure to focus on academic outcomes needs to be addressed at a higher level than individual work with teachers, for example, by working with inspection bodies<sup>37</sup>. Schools should be rewarded for providing a nurturing environment that promotes the wellbeing of their pupils. EPs have the knowledge and skills to advise on this matter, to carry out further research to support this and to raise awareness of the importance of a holistic view of the child.

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<sup>37</sup> OFSTED in England and Estyn in Wales.



### **3.4 Applications to Service Users**

**3.4.1 Adopted children.** These findings highlight adopted children as a vulnerable group and it is hoped that by completing research in this area, the needs of adopted children will be recognised. A need was identified for greater awareness of the impact of ACEs and for schools to provide support for the social/emotional needs of this group. It is hoped that policy changes will continue to be made to ensure that these children are catered for in the UK education system and have more access to support.

**3.4.2 Adoptive parents.** This research highlights the importance of parents as information sources and emphasises their role in helping teachers to understand their child's behaviours. This is a big responsibility for parents therefore raising awareness of the impact of ACEs in schools may help to reduce this burden. EPs could have a role in assisting adoptive parents with information sharing and training school staff.

There could also be a role for EPs in training prospective adopters so that they are aware of the types of educational support their child may need. It would be important for EPs to work as part of a multi-agency team to help adoptive parents to establish the best support for their child.

**3.4.3 Teachers.** These findings could also raise teachers' awareness of the potential vulnerability of this group and the impact of ACEs. Teachers were unaware of support systems for adopted children so it is hoped that highlighting this will result in more publicity of these support systems.

The suggested systemic changes could reframe teachers' constructions of their role. However, this will need to be supported by a reduction in pressure for academic achievement before they feel able to focus on the child as a whole. EPs can have a key role in supporting this by increasing teachers' awareness of adopted children's needs and developing LA support systems.

### **3.5 Taking on the Role of the Researcher**

Emphasising my role as a researcher was important but difficult at times, particularly when participants did not know of any further support for adopted children or lacked understanding of their needs. As a researcher, it was not within my role to provide a

consultation so instead resources for further information were suggested on the debrief form. This seemed the most ethical way to provide information without compromising the role of the researcher.

Despite the difficulties faced, there were benefits of experiencing both roles. Firstly, experience of the EP role allowed me to acquire an interest in this area and to develop a research topic that was both relevant to current practice and interesting. Whilst taking on the role of the researcher enabled me to learn about the practicalities of research, support systems in different LAs and to gather findings to take forward into EP practice. It also made me aware of how my beliefs and assumptions impact on my constructions, which is something that will be more consciously considered in both research and EP work. The experience of completing this research has therefore contributed to my own knowledge as both a researcher and an EP.

### **3.6 Future Directions**

It is important to investigate mediating factors for adopted children's difficulties. Participant 7 taught adopted twins and this teacher reported the least difficulties in school. It was considered whether the sibling relationship was a mediating factor. Participant 8 taught the twins' older sister who had significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. It would be interesting to investigate the impact of family dynamics further, however, this was not included in the empirical paper as it is an anecdotal observation based on one family.

A number of LAs have developed their own support systems for adopted children (Syne et al, 2012; Thomas, 2015) and it would be interesting to see the impact of these support systems. One of the interview participants taught in a school in one of these LAs and the child had access to much of the same support as LAC. It would be interesting to explore both the impact of that support on the child's long-term outcomes and to assess whether concerns raised about feelings of difference were supported.

This research generated an important question of how to change teachers' constructions of their role in terms of supporting adopted children's social and emotional needs when there is such a focus on academic achievement in schools. Research into changes at the

individual, school, LA and national level would help EPs to understand the factors that impact on this construction.

### **3.7 Completion of the Research**

An important lesson was the subtle impact of the researcher's beliefs and assumptions on each aspect of the process. This was highlighted by the ethics committee when questions were perceived to be biased and was therefore consciously controlled for in the following stages of the research. However, it became clear that it is difficult to complete research without any researcher influence. It was a passion about this area that led to the completion of this research and therefore it could be argued that even at the point of inception this research was influenced by the researcher's beliefs and values.

It was interesting to read Meins' (2017) criticisms of attachment theory and to reflect on whether or not it should be assumed that adopted children's difficulties are related to their ACEs. However, the extent of difficulties shown by LAC and children adopted from care would suggest that these children experienced some impact of ACEs and attachment theory provides one explanation for this. As a constructionist piece of research, no effort was made to imply that adopted children's difficulties are caused by attachment difficulties, however, it is noted that this was the researcher's belief on embarking on this research.

A key lesson learnt was the importance of refining research questions. This would have reduced the difficulties experienced when presenting the findings and reviewing the literature. It was also helpful to reflect on the difficulties encountered in terms of recruitment and to ensure that any future research is given an appropriate time frame to ensure that a representative sample can be reached. Fortunately this was achieved eventually, however, much more time had to be invested than anticipated.

The research was initiated with the assumption that adopted children needed more support in the UK education system and this was supported in some respects and challenged in others. Hearing the perspectives of teachers will be useful in the EP role when working with teachers of children who have had ACEs. It highlighted the

discrepancy in training for teachers and support for adopted children across the UK. It is hoped that the systems that have been researched as part of this process can be shared in future work with LAs and that this research can inspire EPs to become involved at a more strategic level to promote the support of adopted children in the UK education system.

Overall, the research process took longer than anticipated, however, through perseverance and repeated attempts to contact adoption charities, a representative sample was achieved. Although the data were difficult to narrow down for the report, they provided a wide range of interesting findings that are relevant to current issues and policy developments in the UK education system.

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Further appendices are attached on a USB due to their length. These appendices contain the following information:

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Appendix 13: Transcript of interview 9
Appendix 14: Transcript of questionnaire responses to open-ended questions
Appendix 15: Raw data from questionnaire responses to closed-ended questions

## **Appendix A: Description of Research for Charity Message Boards.**

Have you adopted a child who currently attends a primary school in England or Wales?

Did your child experience one or more care placements before he/she was adopted?

Is your child aware that he/she was adopted?

Is the school that your child attends aware that your child has been adopted?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then you could contribute to this research project looking at schools' knowledge of the needs of children who have been adopted from care. This research seeks to clarify teachers' understanding of the potential long-term needs of these young people and the types of support that are available to children who have been adopted from care in primary schools in England and Wales.

If you have adopted a child, aged 4 to 11 years, from care and would be interested in being part of this research, please contact Rebecca Stewart at the email address below. Participation in this research will not involve direct contact with your child. With your permission, your child's current class teacher will be contacted and asked to participate in an interview.

If you express an interest in this research, you will be sent a consent form along with a short questionnaire asking for some details regarding your child's adoption and the school that they are currently attending. All participating parents must have completed the process of adoption and therefore have parental responsibility of the child in question.

If you would like any further information or would be interested in participating in this research, please contact Rebecca Stewart at [stewartr@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:stewartr@cardiff.ac.uk). This research will be supervised by Andrea Higgins (DEdPsy Professional tutor, Cardiff University) who can also be contacted at [HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk). This research has been approved by the ethics committee at Cardiff University who can be contacted at [psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk).

Sample rationale:

Why primary school teachers only?

*For research purposes, it must be possible to identify clear factors related to a child's educational needs. It may be difficult to identify these in secondary school pupils, as there are a number of different factors that could cause difficulties during adolescence. Primary school teachers also spend a greater amount of time with the children and are therefore more familiar with their strengths and needs.*

Why England and Wales?

*Due to differences in the education systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland, teachers from England and Wales will be interviewed in order to obtain a broad picture without the confounding variables of differing education systems.*

Why does my child need to know they were adopted?

*It cannot be guaranteed that your child will not be informed of their adoptive status through their teacher's participation.*

Why does the school need to know my child was adopted?

*It will not be possible for this research to be conducted without alerting your child's school to this fact and it would be unethical for them to find out as a result of this research. The school therefore need to have had knowledge of your child's adoptive status for a minimum of three months before participation.*

Why does my child have to have experienced at least one care placement?

*The focus of this research is on the group of children who have been adopted from care to broaden the research base in this area.*

## **Appendix B: Consent Form for Adoptive Parents.**

### **School of Psychology, Cardiff University**

#### **Consent Form For Adoptive Parents (Interviews) - Anonymous data**

I understand that my participation in this project will not involve any direct contact with my child.

I understand that it will involve allowing the postgraduate student to interview my child's current primary school teacher. The interview questions will explore the teacher's knowledge of my child's needs as an adopted child. They will also ask about the support that is in place for my child in school.

I understand that my child's class teacher and head teacher must both be aware of my child's adoptive status. They must have known this for a minimum of three months prior to participation in this research. I will not agree to participate if my child is not aware that he/she was adopted to ensure that he/she does not become aware of this as a result of this research.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Andrea Higgins (DEdPsy Professional Tutor, Cardiff University).

I understand that the information provided will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to my child. I understand that this information may be retained indefinitely.

I understand that the interview with my child's teacher will be voice recorded on a password-protected device. It will be transcribed anonymously in written form within one month of the interview date, at which time the recording will be deleted. I am aware that once the interview has been anonymously transcribed, it will no longer be possible to withdraw from this study.

I also understand that at the end of the study I will be provided with additional information and feedback about the purpose of the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Rebecca Stewart, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Andrea Higgins (HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk).

Signed:

Date:

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) can confirm that the process of adoption has been completed and that I have parental responsibility for the child in question.

Signed:

Date:

#### ***For further contact or complaints:***

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT  
Tel: 029 2087 0360  
Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

## **Appendix C: Gatekeeper Letter for Head Teachers (Questionnaires)**

School Address

Date

Dear Headteacher,

I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. As part of my doctorate in educational psychology, I am carrying out a study investigating how much teachers understand about the possible long-term impact of difficult early life experiences for children who have been adopted from care. I am also looking into the types of support that are available to children who have been adopted from care in primary schools in England and Wales, in relation to the provision available to children currently in the care system. I am writing to enquire whether you would be interested in/willing for your staff to participate in this research.

I have no knowledge of possible numbers of adopted children attending your school and will not be requesting this information. It is not essential for an adopted child to be in attendance in order for your staff to participate as the questions ask about general awareness and are not linked to any specific child.

In order to do this, I would like to ask your permission to ask the teachers in your school to complete an online questionnaire with questions regarding the needs of adopted children. This is a general questionnaire, not specific to any one child, and is being sent to a number of schools in England and Wales. The questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete and I would like to send you the link to pass on to all of your teaching staff.

The questionnaires will not ask for the teacher's name or the name of the school. All information gathered will be held and reported anonymously, with no reference to the teacher or to your school.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project. Please let me know if you require further information.

Regards,

Rebecca Stewart  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
School of Psychology,  
Cardiff University,  
Tower Building, 70 Park Place,  
Cardiff, CF10 3AT  
02920 874007  
StewartR@cardiff.ac.uk

Andrea Higgins  
Professional Tutor (DEdPsy programme)  
School of Psychology,  
Cardiff University,  
Tower Building, 70 Park Place,  
Cardiff, CF10 3AT  
02920 874007  
HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk

*For further contact or complaints:*

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT  
Tel: 029 2087 0360  
Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

## **Appendix D: Gatekeeper Letter for Head Teachers (Interviews)**

School Address

Date

Dear Headteacher,

I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University. As part of my doctorate in educational psychology, I am carrying out a study investigating the support in schools for children who have been adopted from care. The adoptive parents of (child's name) have expressed an interest in participating in this research. I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing for your staff to participate in this research.

In order to do this, I would like to ask your permission to contact (teacher name) to arrange an interview regarding (child's name)'s needs and how he/she is supported in school. I would like to conduct the interview in the school setting which will last approximately 45 minutes.

All information gathered will be held and reported anonymously, with no reference to the child in question or to the name of your school.

In order to protect the child's right to confidentiality, I would be grateful if you do not share this information beyond the need to know basis.

I would hope to come into the school in June/July 2016 to conduct this research.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project. Please let me know if you require further information.

Regards,

Rebecca Stewart  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
School of Psychology,  
Cardiff University,  
Tower Building, 70 Park Place,  
Cardiff, CF10 3AT  
02920 874007  
StewartR@cardiff.ac.uk

Andrea Higgins  
Professional Tutor (DEdPsy programme)  
School of Psychology,  
Cardiff University,  
Tower Building, 70 Park Place,  
Cardiff, CF10 3AT  
02920 874007  
HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk

*For further contact or complaints:*

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT  
Tel: 029 2087 0360  
Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

## **Appendix E: Consent Form for Questionnaires (for Teachers).**

### **School of Psychology, Cardiff University**

#### **Consent Form For Questionnaire - Anonymous data**

I understand that my participation in this project will involve completing an online questionnaire that will take approximately ten minutes of my time. In the questionnaire, I will be asked questions regarding the education of children who have been adopted from care.

I understand that the researcher is unaware of the number of adopted children in this class or school and that it is not essential for an adopted child to be in attendance in order for me to participate. The questions will be general and are not linked to any specific child.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am not required to answer any questions that make me feel uncomfortable.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Andrea Higgins (DEdPsy Professional Tutor, Cardiff University).

I understand that the information provided by me will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to me individually.

I understand that this information may be retained indefinitely.

I also understand that at the end of the study I will be provided with additional information and feedback about the purpose of the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_(NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Rebecca Stewart, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Andrea Higgins (HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk).

Signed:

Date:

***For further contact or complaints:***

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT  
Tel: 029 2087 0360  
Email: psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk



## **Appendix F: Consent Form for Interviews (for Teachers).**

### **School of Psychology, Cardiff University**

#### **Consent Form For Semi-Structured Interview - Anonymous data**

I understand that my participation in this project will involve an individual interview with Rebecca Stewart (a postgraduate student) that will last approximately forty-five minutes. During the interview, I will be asked to discuss the needs of a child in my class who has been adopted from care. I will also be asked about the support that they require in school.

I understand that the interview will be voice recorded to reduce the interview time. The interview will occur in the school setting.

I understand that participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

I understand that I am not required to answer any questions that make me feel uncomfortable.

I understand that I am free to ask any questions at any time. I am free to withdraw or discuss my concerns with Andrea Higgins (DEdPsy Professional Tutor, Cardiff University).

I understand that the information provided by me will be held totally anonymously, so that it is impossible to trace this information back to me individually or the child in question.

I understand that this information may be retained indefinitely.

I understand that the recording of the interview will be transcribed anonymously in written form within one month of the interview date, at which time the recording will be deleted. I am aware that once the interview has been anonymously transcribed, it will no longer be possible to withdraw from this study.

I understand that there may be members of staff within the school who are not aware that (child's name) has been adopted and I will not disclose this information to anyone without the adoptive parents' permission.

I also understand that at the end of the study I will be provided with additional information and feedback about the purpose of the study.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (NAME) consent to participate in the study conducted by Rebecca Stewart, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Andrea Higgins ([HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:HigginsA2@cardiff.ac.uk)).

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (NAME) confirm that I was aware of (child's name)'s status as an adopted child for a minimum of three months prior to my participation in this research.

Signed:

Date:

***For further contact or complaints:***

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
School of Psychology  
Cardiff University  
Tower Building  
Park Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3AT  
Tel: 029 2087 0360  
Email: [psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk)

## Appendix G: Semi-structured interview schedule

*These questions were developed in relation to the five research questions. This schedule is indicative of the questions that were asked during the semi-structured interview.*

1. How long have you known (child's name)?

*Regarding research questions 1 & 2:*

*Do teachers perceive that children adopted from care exhibit any difficulties in school that impact on their ability to access education?*

*What do teachers know about the possible long-term effect of difficult early life experiences for children who have been adopted from care and how did they acquire this knowledge?*

For the first part of the interview the questions are exploring how (child's name) is doing in school.

1. How has (child's name) settled into your class?
  - a. In what areas are they doing well?
  - b. Is he/she having any difficulties in school?
  - c. In which areas (if any) is (child's name) having the most difficulties? (e.g. behaviour, learning, emotional regulation, friendships)
2. Are you aware of when (child's name) was adopted?
3. How much do you know about (child's name)'s experiences prior to adoption?
  - a. Who provided you with this information?
  - b. Have you found this information helpful or not, and in what ways?
4. Do you believe that (child's name)'s early life experiences have impacted positively or negatively on his/her ability to access education?
  - a. If so, what impact do you believe they have had?
  - b. Do you believe this impact to be short-term or long term? Please explain.
  - c. Are any long-term impacts of (child's name)'s early experiences evident in his/her behaviour or learning?
5. What training or information have you had that has helped you to understand the links between the child's early experiences and the possible impact on their education?
  - a. Who provided this information/training?
  - b. Did you find it helpful?
  - c. Which other groups of children do you think that this would be most applicable to?
6. Do you feel confident in your understanding of how children's early life experiences may impact on their learning?
7. Do you believe that any different approaches to support children would be helpful when working with children who have been adopted from care?

*Regarding research question 3: Do teachers perceive LAC and adopted children differently, and in what ways?*

The next set of questions have been designed to help you to think about any similarities and differences between adopted children and those who have remained in the care system.

8. Have you noticed this child present any similar needs to a child who is in care?
9. Why do you think they do/do not present similar needs?
10. Do you manage these difficulties in the same way that you would manage these difficulties for a child in care?
11. What would you do for a child in care that is not available for (child's name)? (e.g. Do they have the equivalent of a PEP or LAC review?)
  - a. Do you believe that (child's name) would benefit from this kind of support?
12. Are there any differences between this child's needs and a child who is in care?

*Regarding research question 4: What types of support do schools have in place for children who have been adopted from care?*

The following questions are about the type of support that this child is able to access within the school.

13. Can you identify any factors that support the child's ability to access the education system?
14. Can you identify any factors that hinder the child's ability to access the education system?
15. Are there any resources or information sources available to you to support this child within the school?
16. Does this child receive any extra forms of support or intervention in school?
  - a. Is this group based or individual?
  - b. Which areas of difficulty are these interventions targeting?
17. Does this child have access to extra curricular activities?
18. Do you access pupil premium/PDGLAC money in order to support this child in school?
  - a. How is this pupil premium/PDGLAC money spent?
19. Is there a specific member of staff with responsibility for this child?
20. Is there a documented support plan detailing how the school are helping to meet this child's needs?
  - a. Is this plan reviewed and if so, how often?
21. Do you believe that there are any further types of support that would be beneficial to the child?

*Regarding research question 5: Do children and teachers access professional support from any services?*

The last group of questions are about accessing support from outside agencies for yourself and the adopted child.

22. Do you access any support services for this child?
  - a. Have these services been helpful and in what way?
23. Do you access any services to help you to support this child?
  - a. Have these services been helpful and in what way?
24. Does the child access any services from other professionals?
  - a. Have these been helpful and in what way?
25. Are you aware of any support services that you could access, should you need to, when working with a child who has been adopted from care?
26. Are there any services that you would appreciate support from but have not received any?

27. Which services do you believe could be most beneficial for children who have been adopted from care?
28. What has been helpful to you when working with a child who has been adopted from care?
29. Is there any specific information, resource or professional that has been particularly helpful?
30. Is there any further support that you think would be helpful in your work with (child's name) and if so, what form would this take?

Thank you for your participation. Do you have any further comments that you would like to make?

## Appendix H: Questionnaire for Teachers

*Participants will complete this as an online process, at the start of which they will read and agree to the consent form, which gives them the opportunity not to answer any questions or to withdraw at any point.*

1. Have you ever taught a child who had been adopted from the care system?

Yes/No/Unsure

2. Have you ever taught a child who was in the care system?

Yes/No

3. Have you received any training or information on the impact of difficult early life experiences and their impact on learning?

Yes/No

4. How confident are you in your understanding of the impact of difficult early life experiences?

Extremely      Very      Quite      A little      Not at all

5. Do you think that an understanding of the impact of difficult early life experiences on learning would be helpful when working with children who are in care?

Yes/No

6. Do you think that an understanding of the impact of difficult early life experiences on learning would be helpful when working with children who have been adopted from care?

Yes/No

7. How vulnerable do you perceive children in care to be?

Extremely      Very      Quite      A little      Not at all  
Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable

8. Please explain your answer

.....  
.....  
.....

9. How vulnerable do you perceive children who have been adopted from care to be?

Extremely      Very      Quite      A little      Not at all  
Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable      Vulnerable

10. Please explain your answer

.....

.....

.....

11. Are there any differences between children who are in the care system and children who have been adopted? Please list any differences below.

.....

.....

.....

12. Are there any similarities between children who are in the care system and children who have been adopted? Please list any similarities below.

.....

.....

.....

13. Have you noticed any differences between children who have been adopted from care and those who live with their birth parents? Please list any differences below.

.....

.....

.....

a. If you have noticed any differences, why do you believe that these are present?

.....

.....

.....

14. If you were teaching a child who had been adopted from care, are you aware of any resources/interventions/support that are available to you within school? Please describe these below.

.....

.....

.....

15. If you were teaching a child who had been adopted from care, which services would you access for support? (Please circle as many as you feel appropriate)

Educational Psychology Service

CAMHS

Social Care

Advisory Teaching Service

Behaviour Support Service

Health Service

Other

16. Are you aware of any other forms of support that can be accessed for children who have been adopted from care?

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.

.

17. Which services do you believe would be most helpful in supporting teachers of children who have been adopted from care?

.

.

.

18. What forms of support within school do you believe would be most beneficial to children who have been adopted from care?

.

.

.

19. Please list any possible short-term impact of adoption from care on children in school (in areas such as behaviour, learning, emotion etc.)

.

.

.

20. Please list any possible long-term impact of adoption from care on children in school (in areas such as behaviour, learning, emotion etc.)

.

.

.

21. Please list any resources, professionals or other information sources that have been helpful in improving your knowledge of the needs of children who have been adopted from care.

.

.

.

22. Any further comments.

.

.

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## Appendix I: Form for Parents to Provide Information

Dear parents,

Thank you for expressing an interest in participating in this research into schools' knowledge of the needs of children who have been adopted from care. There is limited research around what happens to young people in schools post-adoption. This research therefore seeks to clarify teachers' understanding of the long-term needs of these young people and the types of support that are available to children who have been adopted from care in primary schools in England and Wales.

Please fill in the following details regarding your adopted child. If there is anything that you are not comfortable disclosing please feel free to leave it blank. Please note that this information will not be disclosed to your child's school, it is purely for data analysis. This information will be retained on a password-protected device until the school have been contacted, at which time the child's name will be replaced with a participant number and the information will be held anonymously.

<b>Child's Name:</b>	
<b>Age (in years and months):</b>	
<b>School Attending:</b>	
<b>Month and Year he/she joined the school:</b>	
<b>Current School Year:</b>	
<b>Name of Class Teacher:</b>	
<b>Name of Head Teacher:</b>	
<b>School Address:</b>	
<b>School Phone Number:</b>	
<b>School Email Address:</b>	
<b>Is the school aware that your child was adopted?</b>	Yes/No
<i>** Please note that if you select no in response to this question then your participation in this research will not be possible.</i>	
<b>When were they informed that your child was adopted?</b>	



<i>**Please note that if this date falls within the last 3 months then your participation in this research will not be possible.</i>	
<b>Is your child aware that he/she was adopted?</b>	Yes/No
<i>** Please note that if you select no in response to this question then your participation in this research will not be possible.</i>	
<b>Age at Adoption (in years and months):</b>	
<b>Date of Adoption:</b>	
<b>Number of previous care moves:</b>	
<b>Reason for entering the care system (please circle an appropriate category):</b>	Death of a parent Parental difficulties in looking after their child (e.g. age, learning difficulties) Neglect                      Physical abuse Emotional abuse              Sexual abuse Not known Other (please specify) _____ Do not wish to disclose
<b>Time spent in the care system (in years and months):</b>	
<b>Time spent with biological parents (in years and months):</b>	

Please send this information, along with the signed consent form, to Rebecca Stewart at [stewartr@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:stewartr@cardiff.ac.uk).

***For further contact or complaints:***

Secretary of the Ethics Committee  
 School of Psychology  
 Cardiff University  
 Tower Building  
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 Tel: 029 2087 0360  
 Email: [psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk)

## **Appendix J: Debrief Form**

### **School of Psychology, Cardiff University Debrief Form**

Children who have been adopted from care in the UK education system: teachers' knowledge of their needs and how they are supported.

Thank you for your participation in this research project. The purpose of this project was to investigate teachers' knowledge of the needs of children who have been adopted from care and the types of support that are accessed.

In order to investigate awareness and knowledge of the needs of adopted children, questionnaires were sent out to teaching staff in a number of different primary schools within England and Wales. Interviews were also carried out with teachers who are currently teaching a child who has been adopted from care in order to provide a detailed account of how they are supported.

All data that has been provided through the questionnaires and the interviews will be recorded and held anonymously. You have the right to withdraw your data at any point without explanation, however, once it has been anonymised this will no longer be possible. The interviews will be transcribed anonymously within one month of the interview date.

If you would like to find out more information about support for children who have been adopted from care visit the following adoption websites:

<http://www.adoptionuk.org>  
<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/fosteringandadoption/adoption.htm>  
<http://www.coram.org.uk>  
<http://www.pac-uk.org>

If you would like to find out more about attachment theory and the long-term effects of early childhood trauma the following books are recommended:

"Inside I'm Hurting" by Louise Michelle Bomber.  
"Attachment in the Classroom" by Heather Geddes.  
"Nurturing Attachments: Supporting children who are fostered or adopted" by Kim S Golding.

If you have any further questions, please contact Rebecca Stewart (researcher) or Andrea Higgins (supervisor) at the addresses below.

Kind Regards,

Rebecca Stewart  
Trainee Educational Psychologist  
School of Psychology,  
Cardiff University,  
Tower Building, 70 Park Place,  
Cardiff, CF10 3AT  
02920 874007  
StewartR@cardiff.ac.uk

Andrea Higgins  
Professional Tutor (DEdPsy programme)  
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### Appendix K: Braun & Clarke's (2006) Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

Step 1	<b>Familiarise yourself with the data</b> Data was transcribed and read repeatedly.
Step 2	<b>Generate initial codes</b> Interesting features of the data were coded.
Step 3	<b>Search for themes</b> Codes and were grouped into themes and evidence collated.
Step 4	<b>Review themes</b> Themes were checked against the evidence from the data, grouped into three levels and made into a thematic network.
Step 5	<b>Define and name themes</b> Themes were refined and named to represent the overall story of the analysis.
Step 6	<b>Produce the report</b> Themes and evidence were discussed in relation to research questions and literature.

Table 13. Braun & Clarke's (2006) Six-step process for Thematic Analysis