

# Coherent lives: Making sense of adoptees' experiences in education through narrative identity

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## Abstract

Children adopted from care become part of a hidden, but no less vulnerable, group in the education system and may be overlooked for allocation of additional support and guidance. Adoption is a relatively unique experience and adds layers of complexity, difference and vulnerability to young people's lives that are poorly understood and under-researched. Adopted adolescents face significant challenges in social, emotional and behavioural aspects of school life. An attainment gap persists throughout their educational career. Adoptees are strikingly absent from many conversations regarding care-experienced young people yet their needs and challenges are comparable with those of their peers remaining in the care system. Assumptions are made about adoptees' opportunity and capacity to recover, concealing challenges faced in adjusting to adoptive life, including education. The impact of adoptees' early experiences could lead to complex identity formation processes during adolescence, with potential implications for education experience and performance. This paper explores the potential of applying a *narrative adoptive identity* perspective to answer questions about how adopted children and young people experience school as an *adopted* person, i.e. how does their lived experience as an adopted member of a school community impact on their engagement with school, schoolwork and peer networks? The concept of 'communicative openness' is used to illustrate the vital role the school community plays in enabling adopted children

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to transition into and thrive in school. Taking a narrative adoptive identity approach may enable teachers to better meet adoptees' specific learning and teaching needs as dictated by their unique experiences and enhance opportunities for better educational progress.

#### KEYWORDS

adoption, identity, narrative, school

### Key insights

#### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper explores the potential of applying a 'narrative adoptive identity' perspective to answer questions about how adopted children and young people experience school, i.e. how does their experience as an adopted member of a school community impact on their engagement with school, schoolwork and peer networks?

#### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The importance of wider school experiences (e.g. socialisation of adoption) and individual developmental challenges (e.g. identity formation) for adoptees is acknowledged. Taking a narrative adoptive identity approach to understanding adoptees' unique challenges may enhance their opportunities for better educational progress.

## INTRODUCTION

A persistent and enduring educational attainment gap exists for children experienced of the care system, including those who are later adopted, despite decades of interest and research (Berridge et al., 2020; Howe, 2009). The putative effects of significant early adversity on educational, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and health domains of child development are inexorable and enduring (Oh et al., 2018; Paine, Perra, et al., 2021). Care-experienced children and young people, whether subsequently adopted, returned to the birth family or remaining in some form of out-of-home care arrangement (e.g. foster care, residential care), will have been exposed to a certain level of early adversity and are potentially vulnerable to the effects of those experiences (Brodzinsky et al., 2021; Sempowicz & Carrington, 2023).

Adoption is a relatively unique experience and adds a layer of complexity and difference not experienced by the majority of adoptees' peers (Brodzinsky, 1987). Consequently, adopted children and young people form a vulnerable group in the education system. This paper acknowledges the importance of wider school experiences and individual developmental challenges outside of academic attainment. In particular, concepts of narrative adoptive identity, socialisation of adoption and communicative openness are employed to further explore school experience and performance for adopted children and young people. Although the concept of identity is well documented in adoption research, it is seldom applied in an education context to explain and understand the challenges faced by adoptees as they

navigate the complex social and cognitive milieu of school. The synthesis of ideas presented in this paper will not only be of interest to teachers and support staff in schools, but also to associated professionals who support adoptive families.

## EDUCATION AND CARE EXPERIENCE

For most children, the school journey will be one of relative stability and will be characterised by experiences of success. However, navigating the educational system can be problematic for many children, but particularly for those who have experienced early adversity (Berridge et al., 2020). In England, the Department for Education (DfE) annually collates details of pupil attainment in statutory assessments. The assessment and reporting system for education attainment in England is complex and has undergone recent changes, leaving direct comparisons across time ambiguous. Where available, the most recent headline outcome figures paint a bleak picture for care-experienced children when compared with the general pupil population (Table 1) and they mirror those published every year for over a decade (DfE, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b).

It would be logical to account for the attainment gap between care-experienced pupils and the general pupil population by considering the relatively high proportions of children and young people with an identified Special Educational Need. While special educational need status may account for some of the variance, an attainment gap persists (albeit less pronounced) once this is accounted for (Berridge et al., 2020). Participants in the Berridge et al. (2020) study identified four main explanations for the discrepancies in educational progress:

- the experience of stability and continuity in helping children to overcome previous harmful experiences;
- children's social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) and the extent to which these were being addressed;
- school strategies and responses to deal with the difficulties of CIN [children in need] and CIC [children in care], and whether these were perceived as understanding and helpful;
- children's problems with their peer relations, influenced by their SEMH.

(Berridge et al., 2020, p. 9)

**TABLE 1** Proportion of pupils in England achieving expected level of attainment at each key stage statutory assessment, by care experience status.

Pupil group	Key stage 1 (ages 5–7 years)		Key stage 2 (ages 7–11 years)		Key stage 4 (ages 14–16 years)	
	Reading	Maths	Reading	Maths	GCSE <sup>a</sup>	Attainment 8 <sup>b</sup>
General population	75	76	73	79	64.6	46.7
CLA	52	49	49	51	17.9	19.1
CIN	48	48	45	48	19.8	19.2
Adopted <sup>c,d</sup>	62	62	57	56	37.4	32.2

Abbreviations: CIN, children in need; CLA, children looked after; GCSE, General Certificate of Education.

<sup>a</sup>Benchmark GCSE indicator is a Grade 4 and above in both English and maths.

<sup>b</sup>Attainment 8 – Recent benchmark indicator introduced in 2016. Figures are a relative scale score, with a possible range of 0–90.

<sup>c</sup>2019 Key Stage 1 data for adopted children unavailable, figures reported are for 'disadvantaged pupils', which include free school meal eligibility, has been in local authority care for 1 day or more in the last year or left local authority care in England and Wales through adoption, special guardianship order, residence order or child arrangement order.

<sup>d</sup>Partial data – estimated 73% coverage at Key Stage 2, 52% at Key Stage 4 (Source: DfE, 2019b, 2020b, 2020c).

These explanations, gleaned from interviews with over 100 pupils, school staff, parents and carers, are poignant because they refer to factors indirectly related to the learning process (as opposed to cognitive difficulties, curriculum or school type, for example). It may be that the needs of care-experienced pupils, while compromising learning potential, may not be at such a level that they trigger assessment by professionals outside of the schools' ordinary provision. Consideration of indirect, but still important, factors does raise a question of what constitutes 'success' at school and whether measurement in a points-based academic attainment system, that highlights challenges and concerns, adequately captures vital gains in development and recovery for pupils entering school at a relative disadvantage.

Adopted children in particular frequently struggle in school (Brown et al., 2017; Semowicz & Carrington, 2023) and their parents report that the needs of their children are often not recognised or appropriately managed by the education system (Barratt, 2012). The nature of adopted pupils' struggles in school is echoed in surveys of adoptive families. From a survey of 2676 adopters with a child of school age, 80% reported that their child required more support in school than their peers and 60% indicated that supporting their child through school was one of the top challenges they faced (AUK, 2020). In addition, a majority (70%) of adoptive parents felt that their child's educational progress was negatively affected by challenges related to well-being at school and that almost two-thirds of their children experienced problems outside the classroom at school (AUK, 2018).

An added layer of complexity for children adopted from care exists that may further exacerbate difficulties in resolving experiences of early adversity and adjusting to adoptive life, particularly at school. Children adopted from care become part of a hidden, but no less vulnerable, group in the education system and may be overlooked for the allocation of additional support and guidance (Barratt, 2012). The needs of children adopted from care (and their families) may be obscured for several reasons. First, the legal duty to monitor academic attainment and well-being at local authority level ceases once an adoption order is made. Adopted children are subsumed into the general pupil population and are no longer monitored as a specific, separate group – the impact of early adversity and consequent needs, however, remains. Second, it is not a requirement that schools are notified about the adoptive status of any of their pupils (as opposed to intervention from Children's Social Care for Children Looked After and Children in Need where schools are usually aware of the need to comply with statutory safeguarding requirements and to make appropriate adjustments to teaching). Ignorance of adoptive status in an educational setting increases the risk of interactions that are perceived as negative or hurtful, no matter how well intentioned, from peers and staff, further compounding challenges already faced by children adopted from care. Third, adoption is often seen as a panacea for earlier troubles; consequently, expectations that children will flourish in an adoptive placement may be raised. Fourth, the notion of permanence (i.e. achieving a stable family context) is the underlying philosophy of most child welfare practice and policy (Neil & Beek, 2020; Samuels, 2009), which may inadvertently add increased expectations on the part of adopted child(ren) and adoptive parent(s) for successful adjustment to the new *permanent* family context.

The reasons outlined above are problematic for adoptees who are required to simultaneously navigate potentially stressful environments, such as school, while managing the likely impact of early adversity, the nature of which presents barriers for successful navigation. Children spend a significant amount of time in a school setting. It is therefore crucial to understand the impact of the interaction between early adversity and adoptive status on children's experiences of school, including their capacity to form and maintain relationships with peers and adults within the school community, develop a positive and sustainable concept

of self that enables growth into well-functioning members of society (Bornstein & Suwal-sky, 2021) and acquire new knowledge, experience and skills.

Despite a wealth of empirical studies demonstrating various challenges (educationally, psychologically, physically) faced by children and young people experienced of the care system (e.g. McGuire et al., 2021; Sinclair et al., 2020; Somers et al., 2020) there is a dearth of studies delineating these challenges for children who have left care through adoption, and their families, within the UK in relation to school and education (Howe, 2009; Paniagua et al., 2020).

## ADOPTION

Adoption is the provision of a permanent family, where a formal transfer of parental obligations and rights to adults other than birth parents is made (Palacios et al., 2019). Children whose birth family are unable or deemed unfit to provide an appropriate level of care may receive provision of interventions and focussed support from state social care services. Should the child's well-being, lifelong safety needs and welfare continue to be at risk from maltreatment and relational uncertainty, the child may be placed in an alternative family setting. Adoption can provide the most personal, social and legally stable option for many children (Palacios et al., 2019). Families established through adoption are distinctive in their formation, composition and development (March & Miall, 2000). Pathways to adoption are numerous and complex; children have different pre-placement experiences, are adopted at different ages and experience a range of family contexts. Consequently, a general *adoption experience* does not exist: 'being adopted is a heterogeneous life experience' (Brodzinsky et al., 2021, p. 2).

In the UK, a child may be adopted within the wider birth family (kinship adoption) or with an unrelated family (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). Adoption is a relatively established practice in the UK but, internationally, few countries offer adoption as one of the main pathways out of care (e.g. US, Canada, Spain, Portugal). This number has grown in recent years as concerns mount regarding the lack of stability and permanence in foster care (Neil et al., 2018). Adoption from care mainly occurs in response to serious risks in the family environment; children for whom such alternative care is sought are prone to having a range of complex needs (Selwyn et al., 2015) as a result of the early adversity experienced pre-placement. Exposure to early adversity can have far-reaching, long-term developmental consequences for children (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; McSherry & McAnee, 2022). Adoption, however, can provide opportunities for children to achieve some recovery from the negative effects of early adversity (e.g. Brodzinsky et al., 2021; Neil et al., 2018; van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). On the whole, adopted children benefit from placement into a stable and nurturing environment (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), although this alone may not be enough to mitigate the impact of early adverse experiences, and additional support from external agencies is often required (Meakings et al., 2016). Post-placement support for adoptive families appears to make an essential contribution in providing opportunities for adopted children to make positive gains and recover from experiences of early adversities, and for families to flourish (Atkinson & Gonet, 2007; McKay et al., 2010).

As domestically adopted children in the UK pass through the care system at some point, and for a certain amount of time before adoptive placement, it is reasonable to assume that adopted children may well have been exposed to early adverse experiences comparable with those of their peers who remain in and around the care system (Tregeagle et al., 2019) and that the resulting vulnerabilities do not disappear once they are placed in an adoptive family. Adopted children's needs and challenges are like those of children in need and children looked after in many ways, but assumptions may be made about their abilities and

capacity to recover once in an adoptive family, thus concealing challenges faced in adjusting to adoptive life, including education.

While there are many similarities between types of placement, the extant differences may impact on the child's development in several ways. One of the main differences may be related to the notion of permanence. An adoptive placement, from the outset, has an expectation of permanence (Biehal, 2012; Samuels, 2009) and this may be shown in overt and covert attitudes and behaviours amongst family members within the placement and associated professionals. Much of the emphasis, in the transition to an adoptive placement, concentrates on what the child gains from the move, including the notion of a *forever family* and legal permanence (Brodzinsky, 2011, 2014). Consequently, adopted children may feel the weight of expectation that the placement should be successful and some may burden themselves with that responsibility (Neil, 2012; Soares et al., 2018).

Most children who were the subject of a care order and subsequently left care through adoption will have faced challenges related to the reasons for removal into care as well as moves within care (Anthony et al., 2019). The effects of such early adversity on mental health persist over time (Paine, Fahey, et al., 2021). Recent research has shown that, on average, children adopted from care have been exposed to more Adverse Childhood Experiences (Blake et al., 2021; Felitti et al., 1998) than the general population, with negative implications for their mental health after placement (Anthony et al., 2019). Adverse experiences of care in childhood (e.g. abuse, neglect) may increase the risk of neurological and physical impairment (Waid & Alewine, 2018) and, in turn, lead to poorer social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural outcomes (Romano et al., 2015; Teicher & Samson, 2016).

If adoption were a panacea for the impact of early adversities on development, then parity in outcomes between adopted children and their non-adopted peers, including educational attainment and progress, should eventually be seen. This is not the case. Collectively, we know that adopted children are vulnerable to poorer outcomes in key domains of psychological functioning that are related to the capacity to thrive in school and achieve good academic outcomes. The DfE data summarised in Table 1, which shows that attainment for care-experienced pupils, including adopted pupils, is consistently lower than their peers, is corroborated by empirical research (Anderman et al., 2021; Paniagua et al., 2020; Zill & Bramlett, 2014) and parental surveys (AUK, 2020, 2021). Relatedly, we know comparatively little about adoptees' experiences in school, how these experiences relate to adoptive identity and, in turn, the role of these psychological processes in relation to mental health and academic achievement.

For children where instability in family life exists, or concerns around safety are apparent, school may become challenging in a variety of ways. A minority of those children do particularly well in terms of achieving qualifications, despite substantial challenges, and some progress to further and higher education (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Harrison, 2020). For a significant minority, however, the effects of early adversity and a sub-optimal home environment may pose insurmountable cumulative challenges for positive intra- and interpersonal development (e.g. social, emotional, relationship and learning challenges) (Guyon-Harris et al., 2019).

## IDENTITY

The term identity refers to the 'organisation of self-understandings that define one's place in the world' (Schwartz et al., 2006, p. 5). A consistent and meaningful understanding of one's identity is essential for individuals to successfully manage their lives (Berzonsky et al., 2011). Identity provides a reliable set of standards on which to call when encountering situations that require decision making or problem solving. Identity formation is

theorised to be a particular task for adolescents (Erikson, 1968) as they develop autobiographical reasoning and abstract thought (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), which challenges current perceptions of self. At this time, young people are theorised to begin to ask, and are being asked, questions about themselves such as 'Who am I?', 'What am I doing with my life?', 'What do I want to be?'; resolution of these questions may involve conflict with existing family or societal belief systems (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; Kroger et al., 2010; Schwartz et al., 2013).

The concept of *identity statuses* (Marcia, 1966, 2002) operationalise the processes and outcomes of identity formation set out by Erikson (1968). Marcia (2002) describes the journey to successful identity formation (*identity achievement*), where choices and commitments are finalised, as passing through a *psychosocial moratorium*, characterised by detailed scrutiny of one's place in society (Lotan et al., 2023). A clearer sense of self is achieved through intimate interactions with others, including forming and maintaining relationships outside the family. The moratorium phase is seen as a beneficial process, whereby adolescents experiment with several possible identities before settling into an informed and stable identity (Figure 1).

Where exploration does not occur and no commitments are made, the individual may be in a state of *identity diffusion* which may manifest as apathy and lack of direction. Individuals who are in a state of *identity foreclosure*, on the other hand, have a sense of direction and have made commitments but, crucially, these are made without their own exploration of the values of significant others (e.g. parents, teachers) from which the identity is 'conferred' (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 34). Each identity status therefore involves a different combination of exploration and commitment.

## IDENTITY AND ADOPTION

All adopted children have in common the loss of birth family and heritage. Adoptees' early experiences may lead to a complex identity formation process during adolescence, with potential implications for education experience and performance. For *adopted* adolescents, the process of identity formation is potentially challenging because their notion of family and the past contains additional layers that may not be fully formed, known or understood. Absence of this information may prevent the exploration of possible life options by limiting a thorough rumination of information and past experiences, required in Marcia's conceptualisation of identity formation. The reaching of identity achievement is therefore at risk and adopted adolescents may be unable to fully resolve questions about themselves. Exploration of the

		COMMITMENT	
		YES	NO
EXPLORATION	YES	Achievement	Moratorium
	NO	Foreclosure	Diffusion

FIGURE 1 Exploration and commitment in relation to identity status (Marcia, 2002). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

negotiated discourse (or narrative) within adolescents' social contexts may shed light on the processes underlying identity formation.

## NARRATIVE ADOPTIVE IDENTITY

Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) developed a narrative perspective on identity development for adopted children and young people, which is concerned with meaning making. How the process of identity exploration results in a socially constructed story about oneself which is then presented (or tested) in interactions with important others (e.g. family and peers) is central to a narrative identity (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; McAdams, 2011). Coherent narratives are likely to make it easier to negotiate change and new adoption-related experiences, as young people progress through late adolescence and into emerging adulthood. The coherence sought by an individual provides a sense of meaning or understanding of how the past, present and future are linked. As the social world of the adolescent grows wider and more complex, so do opportunities for life-story conversation occurring outside of known family contexts. In the early stages of family life, adoptive parents and professionals provide the source for interpretation of the adoption narrative, i.e. parents translate the pre-adoption history through stories and sometimes artefacts such as *later-life letters* and *life-story work* (Watson et al., 2015, 2020). The level of comfort shown by the adoptive family in acknowledging that birth parents and adoptive parents are different, influences the adoption narrative (Lo et al., 2021). During adolescence, however, the growth of abstract reasoning, coupled with competing views of their existing narratives (e.g. from peers, social media) may cause adopted adolescents to reconsider the received narrative. For example, some information may be missing, or unknown to the adoptive parents, that may raise questions for the adolescent about events and decisions that preceded, accompanied and followed their adoption.

Adolescents may re-frame their narrative as they begin to integrate the revised version into their larger sense of self. To fully understand the contribution of adoptive identity as a key part of wider psycho-social development, the influence of the range of social contexts (e.g. home, school) needs to be acknowledged. Psychological adjustment to adoptive life that enables a sense of continuity, belonging, coherence and purpose (Lotan et al., 2023) occurs when identity is formed congruently with the social and cultural environment (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

Critical to narrative identity construction is the iterative process of exploration, as psychological and contextual factors influence the propensity to explore (Grotevant et al., 2017). The cognitive and affective outcomes of exploration influence future orientation in terms of identity. An openly communicative family context, where emotionally meaningful social interactions are facilitated, is seen as beneficial for the development of a positive adoptive identity (Brodzinsky, 2014). An important mechanism to enable open communication is the recognition of emotional expression that leads to conversation sharing (e.g. about contact with birth family). The act of conversation provides opportunities to reconstruct and re-interpret past events, often repeatedly. Characteristics of adoptive parent–child communication influence the coherence of the adoption narrative and act as a vehicle to convey its meaning to self and others (von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). It is reasonable to extend the contribution of parent–child communication in identity development to the context of school. Open communication between members of the child–parent–school triad act as further opportunities to develop a positive adoptive identity and engender healthy adjustment to adoptive life (D. Brodzinsky, personal communication, 2021).

Much of the general identity research is concerned with domains of identity over which the individual has a certain degree of choice, e.g. political, religious, occupation. An adoptive



identity may be described as an *assigned identity*, i.e. one where the individual has little or no choice (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). In this case, the question is not one of deciding to accept or reject an identity, but to ask, 'What does this adoptive identity mean to me?' It is possible that the challenge of identity formation is heightened by the lack of control over the assigned identity, in this case an adoptive one. For adopted adolescents, the issues of assigned identity and the renegotiation of an adoption narrative add layers of complexity to the overall process of identity development not experienced by most of their peers. Consequently, a deep understanding of this complexity and a knowledgeable, sensitive approach to interaction are demanded.

## ADOPTIVE COMMUNICATIVE OPENNESS

Communication about adoption plays a vital role not only in how children think and feel about adoption (Brodzinsky, 2011), but also in family interaction (Aramburu Alegret et al., 2018; Brodzinsky, 2006; Soares et al., 2018), through providing opportunities for adoptees to make sense of their pre-adoption experiences (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). The concept of *adoptive communicative openness* developed by Brodzinsky (2014) is talk about adoptive status, especially in developmentally appropriate ways. Acknowledgement of a dual identity (birth and adoptive) and displaying empathy about fluctuating feelings concerning adoption forms a critical part of adoptive communication openness within the family. The ability for adults (including those at school) to engage meaningfully in these conversations is integral to helping children and young people understand adoptive identity and alleviate future concerns. Openness and comfort in communication are key to the development of positive attitudes towards the concept of adoption and for the adopted person individually. This applies to communication within the immediate family and the wider social network which inevitably includes the school community (Soares et al., 2017).

In the school context, open and sensitive communication about adoption between adoptees, parents, peers, school staff and associated professionals may be integral to successful socialisation of adoption as a continuation of an openly communicative atmosphere and to enable consistency of approach in meeting the educational and psychological needs for adopted children (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2023). When discussing items of a deeply personal nature one must feel comfortable in the practice of doing so. Adoption is a complex experience, indicated by the protracted process of resolving adoption issues. Part of the adjustment to adoptive status involves re-framing and re-establishing deeply sensitive narratives which in doing so contribute to identity achievement (Grotevant et al., 2017; Lotan et al., 2023).

Adopted children are themselves reticent about revealing their adoption status to peers (Barbosa-Ducharme et al., 2015; Neil, 2012). Reluctance on the part of children to reveal their adoptive status to peers may be due in part to previous experiences of a negative reaction following disclosure. Several studies have reported how negative reactions to adopted status manifest in peers' responses, including teasing, jokes, intrusive questioning and rejection (Baden, 2016; Neil, 2012; Reinoso et al., 2016). Despite a growing acceptance of adoption as way of forming a family, negative sociocultural interactions still occur for adopted individuals and families (Garber, 2020), and may contribute to misunderstandings and misperceptions of adoption. The microaggressions framework has recently been used to explore experiences of prejudice related to adoptive family construction and composition (Baker, 2007). Adoption microaggressions are:

common slights, insults, and indignities that can occur almost daily that may be intentional or unintentional but that communicate adoption-related and biology-related judgements, slights, or criticisms about adoption, foster care, or relinquishing care for a child.

(Baden, 2016, pp. 6–7)

Although research into microaggressions as they pertain to adoption is still in its infancy (Garber, 2020), several studies have classified a range of themes and categories that typify microaggressive behaviour in the realm of adoption (e.g. Baden, 2016; Farr et al., 2016; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). For example, *Silence about Adoption and Unacknowledged Identity Status* (Garber & Grotevant, 2015) show how adoption may not be validated or recognised through lack of awareness of the nature of adoption. A salient example in a school context would be curriculum topics exploring family history: an adopted pupil may find engagement in tasks emotionally challenging, notwithstanding likely difficulties in recounting family history narratives or providing artefacts such as infant photographs. Greater awareness of familial diversity in schools might reduce the frequency of microaggressive instances that adoptees must negotiate and provide opportunities for realistic adoption narratives to be shared (Garber, 2020). Anticipation of microaggressions as a reaction to disclosing an adopted status on the part of the adopted child may limit opportunities for adoptive communicative openness as outlined above and hinder progress towards identity achievement.

## SOCIALISATION OF ADOPTION

The social aspects of adoptees' school experiences are under-researched (Paniagua et al., 2020). Although much is known regarding experiences and outcomes for children in and on the edge of care (Barratt, 2012; Midgen, 2011; O'Higgins et al., 2021) few studies focus on the needs of children adopted from care (Howe, 2009; Novara et al., 2020). Socialisation is the transition from child to responsible adult as influenced by society (Berridge, 2017). *Socialisation of adoption* is the process by which society shapes adopted children, through its understanding, attitudes and values of adoption across multiple contexts. Socialisation of adoption is therefore a useful lens through which to view how an adopted child resolves adoptive identity issues and dilemmas in cultures that view adoption in a certain way, or at least how it is perceived to be by adoptees. It is an emerging field of study and is linked with the idea of *lived experience* as suggested by Brodzinsky et al. (2021), i.e. investigating adoptees' experiences of how resolution of an adoptive identity is perceived by adoptees themselves. Simon and Farr (2022) refer to socialisation of adoption as part of 'identity-based socialisation': any form of socialisation related to identity, e.g. race, adoptive status, sexual orientation. Outcomes related to identity-based socialisation include children's understanding of, and open communication about, adoption. The contribution to identity-based socialisation occurring in the school context and the role played by peers, school staff and systems (e.g. curriculum, school admissions policies, behaviour policies, school climate) is particularly germane. Positive socialisation has been related to positive youth outcomes, including increased psychological well-being and self-esteem (Simon & Farr, 2022). The role of the school community in the socialisation of adolescents becomes especially pertinent for adoptees.

The experience of being adopted in the school context for 94 Portuguese adoptees ( $M_{\text{age}} = 8.81$  years,  $SD = 0.79$ ) was explored by Soares et al. (2017). Through their analysis of child interviews and psychometric scales, Soares and colleagues suggest that both individual (feelings about adoption) and interpersonal (social communication about adoption) processes interact to explain feelings related to being adopted in the school context. Their study highlights the complexity and nuance of school experience for adopted children, in

which the feelings involved and the comfort in the social communication about adoption provide an emotional characterisation of the adjustment process for adoptees in school. Part of the adjustment process lies in the challenges adoptees experience when transitioning their established adoption narrative into a new or different setting (e.g. from home to school, or when starting at a new school), or when testing out their re-framed adoption narrative with peers or school staff.

## The role of peers in the socialisation of adoption

Peers may be viewed as the child's primary choice of an extended network to facilitate meaning making, or as a test bed for new ideas as adopted young people explore narratives of identity (during moratorium, perhaps; Marcia, 1987). As adopted children grow and develop their meaning of the past, it is possible that they, autonomously, recruit selected peers as a perceived *safe* ground within which to communicate about adoption. Understandably, such recruitment may well occur in typically developing adolescents. In the case of the adoptee, however, the difference lies in the uniqueness of adoption. It is likely that their peers are not adopted and will possess a limited understanding of adoption. It is also feasible for a scenario where adopted peers are specifically sought, as a kindred spirit, with which to share experiences.

Opportunities for experimental discussion about adoption-related matters may be limited in a smaller social network but nevertheless provide an intimate and trusting atmosphere conducive to discussing sensitive topics. Maintenance of quality social relationships, rather than network size, benefits well-being (McMahon et al., 2020). Much of the existing research regarding children's social networks and relationships relies on parent or teacher report; a notable exception, however, is the Brightspots project (CoramVoice, 2021; Selwyn et al., 2017). Gathering over 10,000 responses across 50 local authorities in the UK, the Brightspots online surveys highlighted factors that care-experienced children and young people thought were important to their well-being (Staines & Selwyn, 2020; Wood & Selwyn, 2017). One of the key well-being indicators identified concerned relationships, specifically, having at least one good friend. It may be that the quality of the relationship is key and a large social group may not be fundamental to increasing comfort in discussing sensitive and personal topics, such as experiences of care and adoption (Wood & Selwyn, 2017).

Discussing adoption-related matters with peers is especially difficult if a child is not in an emotionally prepared state to do so, or when their adoptive status knowingly puts them in the minority; feelings of difference or fears of negative reaction may increase (Soares et al., 2018). At the adolescent stage of development, most of the stress related to being adopted is socially dependent (Neil, 2012). Children recognise when peers have negative attitudes towards their adoptive status (Soares et al., 2017) that manifest in the form of microaggressions. The recognition of one's negative standing amongst peers has been termed *status loss* (Brodzinsky, 2014, p. 20) and is yet another form of loss for the developing adopted adolescent to resolve. Status loss in the school context is likely to accentuate feelings of non-acceptance and difference, thus destabilising adopted children's self-esteem and identity construction, i.e. feelings towards their school experience of being adopted (Soares et al., 2018).

## The role of parent–teacher relationships in the socialisation of adoption

Adoptive parents become *meaning makers* of their child's life story (Brodzinsky, 2014). Parents' role as 'meaning makers' is theorised to be achieved through open adoption

communication, whereby parents moderate childhood memories and serve as caretakers of items related to early life; this, in turn, supports adoptive identity development (Brodzinsky, 2014). Optimal family–teacher relationships are also an important factor in enhancing child (and family) well-being (Goldberg, Black, Manley, et al., 2017; Goldberg, Black, Sweeney, et al., 2017). Strong parent–teacher relationships, particularly in the early school years, are associated with positive family outcomes (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Parent–teacher relationships not only act as a model for meaningful relationships with teachers, but also provide teachers with a deeper understanding of a child's developmental needs and strengths (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2023; Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Considering the complexities of families formed through adoption, and the inherent specialised knowledge associated with adoption, strong family–school links would appear to be an essential component of adjustment to adoptive family life, yet research in this area is limited (Iraklis, 2021), particularly in regard to teachers' experiences in supporting adoptive families (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2023). For school staff, adoptive parents act as strong advocates for their children by translating adoption-specific knowledge, as it pertains to their child, and in doing so facilitate transition through the systems of an adoption ecology (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2023; Palacios, 2009).

Helping children cope with negative reactions about adoption is another facet of the role of meaning maker (Soares et al., 2018). However, parents often do not have access to complete histories of their children's lives but are obligated to take on the mantle of meaning maker *regardless* of the amount (or quality) of information they have about the child's past. Without opportunities to openly discuss adoption within the family, children experience increased difficulties in making sense of past experiences and may encounter difficulties in resolving a sense of identity (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). When a child enters a new school, a further 'loss of meaning maker' (Brodzinsky, 2014, p19) may be experienced. It is possible that adopted children actively seek to resolve this loss by recruiting school staff (and peers) as an extended family of meaning makers (H. Grotevant, personal communication, 6th July 2021). However, teachers may not possess the level of knowledge and understanding about adoption and adoptive families needed to effectively support them in school (Goldberg & Grotevant, 2023). In turn, the risk of inadvertent microaggressions (e.g. assumptions about adopted children based on limited data) by teachers increases.

While the search for surrogate meaning makers may hold true for all typically developing children, the nuance for adopted children is that the life experiences and consequent adjustments needed are more complex. Specialist awareness and up-to-date knowledge of issues related to adoption are required to successfully fulfil this role. The ability of teachers and ancillary staff to provide continuity in the meanings made by adoptive parents could be pivotal in adoptive identity development. Consistent and coherent messages from those in a position of parental responsibility, whether directly in loco parentis or not, should facilitate identity development (Soares et al., 2017) and lead to a more positive experience of school.

## CONCLUSION

For children adopted from care, a persistent and enduring education attainment gap exists. Experiences of schooling are further impacted by wider contextual factors, such as the construction of a consistent and coherent adoption narrative, and the socialisation of adoption. Adopted children are set apart from most of their peers in relation to their experience of early adversities, leading to an entirely different family formation and circumstance, which provides additional layers of complexity in child development and consequent adjustment to adoptive life. Further, adopted children deal with different challenges to children and young people remaining in the care system, in that adoptees contend with a notion of life-long

permanence as they seek to develop a coherent narrative about their life history. Thus, they experience *ambiguous microsystems* – they are members of an adoptive family (physically and psychologically present) and, simultaneously, a birth family (psychologically present) (Brodzinsky, 2014).

The educational ramifications of adoption have the potential to play out in the classroom and school environs. Socialisation of adoption in school, and how this may take precedence when engaging in school life and study, remains an important factor. Education is a dynamic process for pupils and teachers. Understanding how education is experienced has reciprocal benefits for both parties – improvements made to teaching strategy are often because of teachers reflecting on pupils' responses in learning interactions and evaluation of their holistic needs (Pollard & Collins, 2005). The opportunities for all care-experienced pupils, including those adopted, for better educational progress may be enhanced through positive school experiences such as supportive teachers and a safe school environment and through the development of academic resilience (Sinclair et al., 2021). Improving school and teacher awareness of these issues may lead to adjustment of school policy and classroom practice to the benefit of vulnerable pupils. The challenge for school staff is therefore twofold: firstly, to meet adoptees' specific learning and teaching needs as dictated by their unique experiences, and, secondly, to hold the relational and emotional needs of adopted children and their families at the forefront of their approach. Meeting this challenge requires a deep understanding of their role in the formation of a coherent adoptive identity. The education and adoption research communities are also presented with a challenge: to design and conduct practice-facing research that not only brings to the fore adoptees' particular experiences of school, but also helps to figure out how the school community can be supported in its role in enabling a coherent adoptee identity.

At school, families entrust the safekeeping, well-being and development of their children to the school community and the adults working within it. School staff act in loco parentis, meaning that they act *in the place of the parent*, taking on the role, responsibility and knowledge of the parents while children are in their care. Although adoptive parenting retains many of the characteristics required of typical parenting, a *different* set of strategies, approaches and understandings is also often demanded. As such, schools, and the wider communities within which adopted children and young people operate, necessitate an extension of adoptive parenting: perhaps better conceptualised as *parentum loco adoptivi*.

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None identified by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval not required for this paper.

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