

The complex tapestry of relationships which surround adoptive families: A case study.

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Acknowledgements. We would like to thank Dr. Frances Atherton for the guidance provided regarding the primary data collection process. Your support with this aspect of the study is very much appreciated.

Abstract

This small-scale study examines the experiences encountered by a group of parents in their endeavours to support their children to settle and thrive, both in family life and school. The study identifies how a 'complex tapestry of relationships' exists both within and beyond adoptive families, which influences children's developmental and educational outcomes. Conflicting relationships emerged between: foster carers and adoptive parents, paired siblings, and adoptive parents and teachers. Enhanced understanding of the complexities and tensions which may exist will help school practitioners to identify approaches and strategies that can be used with children and families to promote adopted children's self-identity, well-being and their capacity to function and learn inside classrooms.

Key words: Adoption, schools, parents, families, relationships, transitions

Introduction

School has the potential to redress the balance for children who because of loss, trauma or abuse, have been removed from their birth families, by providing them with opportunities where they can begin to readjust and thrive. Conversely, educational settings can be a source of stress, presenting children with additional challenges, which risks exacerbating fragile emotional and mental health impaired by early adversity. The Department for Education has long demonstrated commitment to attending to the educational needs and well-being of looked-after children (Department for Education, 2009) and has more recently strengthened its focus on supporting adopted children (Department for Education, 2018). However, Adoption UK (2018) asserts that schools are failing the latter group of children, reporting that over a third of parents stated how their child had refused to go to school, run away from school or played truant, with the figure rising to 46% for secondary school children. Although many adopted children adjust well in their new families and make progress in school, the impact of early adverse experiences and life changing transitions do not disappear when children settle into nurturing and permanent families, with many children continuing to face periods of distress and difficulty throughout their childhood (Pennington, 2012; Adoption UK, 2018).

Despite the steady improvement for adopted children within mainstream education, many parents continue to struggle to identify schools which meet the needs of their children, with concerns increasing as children transition to secondary school (Adoption UK, 2017; 2018). A lack of understanding and empathy of how trauma and attachment issues affect adopted children, together with insufficient resources, prevents adopted children from having an equal chance to succeed at school (Pennington, 2012; Adoption UK, 2018). With various studies highlighting the ways in which adopted children are disadvantaged in schools, it appears that parents have a cause to feel anxious.

Many adopted children will have experienced significant trauma and turmoil which puts them at risk of negative outcomes across a range of areas, including developmental, interpersonal, psychosocial and academic (Solomon, Niec & Schoonover, 2017). Every day there may be small triggers, both within the home and school, which make schooling and life in general difficult for adopted children. The impact of early trauma may manifest in various ways and these children often require greater support in the educational environment. Adopted children may struggle with executive functioning skills, sensory processing difficulties, managing strong feelings, social skills, forming trusting relationships and coping with change and transitions (Department for Education, 2018). Nearly half of all adopted children have a recognised special education need or disability (SEND) (Adoption

UK, 2017). Although many adopted children have difficulties covering several categories, the primary area of need is social, emotional and mental health (Adoption UK, 2017; Jones, 2018), due to the effects of developmental trauma, loss and/or abuse. As a result, parents and teachers are often required to manage challenging externalizing behaviour (e.g., aggressive, disruptive, hyperactive, impulsive behaviours) and complex internalizing issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, somatic conditions) (Solomon, Niec & Schoonover, 2017). Adopted children are 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded from schools (Adoption UK, 2017) and leave with lower levels of attainment (Department for Education, 2017). At age 16, only 26 per cent of adopted children achieved the expected outcomes of five GCSE grades at A-C, including English and maths, compared to over 53 per cent of their peers (Department for Education, 2017). Adoption UK (2018) asserts how 79% of adopted children feel ‘confused and worried at school’, with 65% of children in primary school and 74% of young people in secondary school, claiming their teachers do not understand their needs. Adopted children who lack the skills required for successful interactions with their peers and the trust needed to form positive relationships with school practitioners can find themselves isolated in school. Over two thirds of young adopted people in secondary education reported they had been teased or bullied (Adoption UK, 2018) because of issues linked to assumptions made about their birth parents, low self-esteem, behavioural differences, health, speech or academic delays (Kramer Ertel, 2018).

Closing the attainment gap between looked-after children and previously looked-after children is a government priority (Department for Education, 2018). However, it is only more recently that adopted children have gained parity with the provision available to looked-after children. In 2013 legislation was amended to give adopted children the same rights as looked-after children by giving schools access to funding to support adopted children via the Pupil Premium Plus (Department for Education, 2013). Then in 2017, under the Children and Social Work Act (HM Government, 2017), the role of the Virtual School Head (VSH) and designated teacher were expanded to act as advocates for adopted children and their families. Since 2009, it has been statutory for schools in England for a designated teacher to work alongside a VSH to promote the educational attainment of looked-after children by developing partnerships with parents/carers, local authorities and specialist agencies and seeing that school staff have appropriate training (Department for Education, 2009).

In order to best support adopted children, it is essential that teachers consider, and are sensitive to, the experiences and needs of parents. Ensuring that there is constructive and continued communication between schools, parents/carers and specialist agencies, throughout a looked-after child’s education, is a priority (Department for Education, 2009). Adoptive parents typically encounter a rapid learning curve in terms of parenting skills, understanding the needs and behaviours of their children and the education system (Camden Adoption & Permanence Team, 2011). The task of parenting adopted children is rarely straightforward and many parents require far more understanding and skills than required of a biological parent; this may be particularly the case where contact with the birth family is on-going or if more than one child is adopted at a time. Parents are often left coping with a range of social, emotional and behavioural reactions, including their own, the child’s and those of other family members (Camden Adoption & Permanence Team, 2011). Where schools have routine contact with families, rather than just coming together at crisis point, teachers will have increased awareness of the challenges faced by adopted children and their parents.

Whether in the context of the home or school, secure attachments help to foster familiarity, a feeling of safety and a positive self-identity, the key psychological conditions to establishing a sense of belonging to a place (Fullilove, 1996). However, children whose lives have been impacted by traumatic events are rarely able to heal themselves without the help of stable and supportive adults. Fisher (2015:5) asserts that consistent and caring adults have the potential to alter the ‘life course trajectory’ of an adopted child. Adults who embrace a ‘therapeutic approach’ in their interactions can help to fill developmental gaps and repair damage of children who have faced challenging psychological experiences (Pennington, 2012). The three core conditions of the therapeutic approach are: *unconditional positive regard* [accepting and valuing the child for who they are with warmth and without judgement]; *empathy*; and *congruence* [authenticity and honesty] (Pavord, 2014).

Attachment theory will help parents and teachers to understand the impact of pre-adoption trauma, separation and turbulence on the socio-emotional development of the child. Many children encounter multiple placement moves and changes in social workers prior to adoption (Children's Commissioner, 2018). This may place additional strain on the relationships initially formed within adopted families (Meakings et al., 2018) and, in turn, determine how children settle into school. However, it is important that adopted children are not seen homogeneously or as victims. Despite the challenges encountered, some children develop resilience or remain relatively unscathed as a result of early trauma (Fisher, 2015). Even siblings, who have faced the same adversity, will not necessarily have similar needs or difficulties (Jones, 2018) and may have different levels of resilience.

Parents and teachers are often left helping an adopted child to build a positive sense of self. A broken narrative in the child's life, a sense of abandonment and the need to form an authentic self can pose significant challenges to the development of their self-identity (Lifton, 1998). Adopted children typically require support in understanding their past, where they currently belong and who they might become (National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2014; Zeleke, Koester & Lock, 2018). They often search for information such as the appearance and personalities of their parents, if their parents are alive, whether they have birth siblings and reasons for being placed into care (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). It is important that parents and teachers are able to communicate those experiences openly and empathetically. Furthermore, the messages children receive at school about their adopted status can play an important role in shaping a child's self-worth as well as how they feel about their adopted and birth families (Kramer Ertel, 2018), so teachers who have awareness of attachment, loss and self-identity theory, can support parents with this important aspect of the child's readjustment.

The NSPCC (2014) advise that adopters (*also applicable to teachers*) should be prepared to take on a challenge, have good communicative openness and be able to see success in small steps forward in adopted children. A patient, inquisitive and responsive approach, where adults pay close attention to the child's verbal and non-verbal cues, in an attempt to understand their needs, temperaments and actions is also recommended (NSPCC, 2014). Employing an authoritative approach (Baumrind, 1966), where adults are nurturing, yet enforce boundaries with rational explanations and positively reinforce desirable behaviour, may help adopted children to build internalised guided discipline. By depersonalising challenging behaviours, where emphasis is put on assisting the child to self-regulate rather than on the adult containing the behaviour, can reduce conflict and confrontation (NSPCC, 2014). Adopting a participatory style, where children's agency is acknowledged and they are encouraged to partake in the decision-making process with their opinions respected, can promote socio-emotional growth and positive child-adult bonds (Zeleke, Koester & Lock, 2018).

The needs of adopted children, and the relationships that exist within their families, are so complex it is important that school practitioners have access to high quality initial teacher training, continuing professional development and specialised support where required. However, Adoption UK (2018) claims the current provision of information and training is patchy across the UK and asserts that more needs to be done to ensure that teachers are better equipped with the knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of adopted children. It calls for increased awareness of attachment theory, the impact of adverse childhood experiences on development and learning, a safe base in every school staffed by trauma and attachment trained practitioners, and content on foster care and adoption addressed through the curriculum (Adoption UK, 2017; 2018). It also states that teachers require appropriate time and space to form meaningful relationships with adopted children and their families.

It is the intent of this paper to raise awareness among school practitioners about the complexities and tensions which exist within the tapestry of relationships surrounding adopted families that may impact on the child's self-identity, well-being and their capacity to function and learn inside classrooms.

Method

This small-scale qualitative study, which draws upon an interpretivist paradigm (O'Donoghue, 2007), is focused on understanding the experiences of a small group of adoptive parents/foster carers in their endeavours to help their children settle into family life and school, with a key focus on the relationships formed and challenges encountered. Data was gathered via a phenomenological focus group. This

technique was deemed appropriate because a conversation between a small group of familiar participants can encourage individuals to talk more freely and share views, yielding rich insight into how they perceive particular phenomena (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013; Stuart, Maynard & Rouncefield, 2015). A focus group also allows for interpretivist tenets, such as immersion (Cottrell, 2014) and responsive questioning (Melvin, Price & Edmond, 2012), which is important when attempting to understand the multiple realities and meanings that adopters are likely to attach to their experiences. The sensitive nature of the research dictates the need for an open and trusting relationship between the participants and the researcher. This was ensured as the fieldwork researcher/focus group facilitator Kevin is one of the parent participants, which contributes to the uniqueness of the study. Kevin and his husband have established a close bond with two other adoptive couples and one couple who have become long-term foster carers of birth siblings. For the purpose of this study, all participants will be referred to as 'parents'.

The focus group between the four parent couples (eight adults) of one sibling group (consisting of five children), took place in January 2019, nine years after the first child had moved into their permanent family and three years after the last child had been placed. All parents had several years' experience of supporting their children through the education system. Table 1 (p. 5) shows the details of the parents and their family. To protect the anonymity of those involved, pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper and any information that could expose the identity of individuals has been replaced or removed. The focus group conversation, which was digitally-recorded and lasted for two hours, centred round the following four predetermined themes: early introductions, children's relationships, experiences with schools and, challenges of parenting. These themes were selected as they were topics which normally arose between the families on sibling contact days.

The quality of data produced from a focus group is dependent on the ability of the facilitator to get participants talking in-depth about the topic (Coe, Waring, Hedges & Arthur, 2017). As Kevin already had a shared understanding of the group's history, a mutual discourse and a degree of trust, it is suggested that the participants are likely to have been more open in their discussion and less guarded in their responses, thus resulting in a greater depth of conversation. Kevin found that using themes and prompts rather than rigid questioning promoted the synergy of the group and empowered participants to share their views and experiences. The challenge for Kevin was to manage the cascading effect of talk which emerged out of the different topics and remain mindful of power dynamics within the group (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). As Kevin is familiar with the individuals involved he was able to pick up non-verbal cues to notice when some of the more reserved parents were having difficulty in putting their opinions forward and encouraged them to participate.

Challenges associated with a focus group approach, some of which may call into question the validity and reliability of the study, include i) potential disagreements between parents ii) parents feeling they are being judged iii) the limited number of parent participants iv) the subjectivity brought about by Kevin in his role as parent-focus group facilitator. However, because the group already have an established relationship, built on common experiences, and the conversation was facilitated by an in-group member, it is believed that issues relating to 'disagreements silencing some parents' and 'feeling judged' were minimised. Each participant had been notified of the themes that would be discussed prior to the focus group, they did not have to participate to certain themes and, could withdraw themselves from the process at any stage. Furthermore, the parents had been advised to think of the focus group as a public meeting rather than a private meeting (Coe, Waring, Hedges & Arthur, 2017) as this would allow them to decide what information to share.

It is acknowledged that Kevin may bring a degree of 'bias and subjectivity' to the study. However, his common ground with the participant group allows for greater immersion in the research process and being part of the group, may have helped to prevent participants feeling 'othered' (Lahman, 2007), increasing the likelihood of him obtaining the perspectives of less confident parents (Coe, Waring, Hedges & Arthur, 2017). It is argued, that because of the very nature of Kevin's role, he is in the best position to contextualise the participants' responses to gain a deeper understanding of their responses, experiences and multi-layered meanings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Key priorities for Kevin included: maintaining positive group relations, the sensitive handling of data, adopting a

critical and objective stance, and accurately reflecting the experiences and voices of the individuals involved. In an attempt to reduce subjectivity, Kevin used additional questions to clarify certain responses and to explore any emotions that may lay behind them. He also presented a copy of the typed transcript to the parents for their perusal so that they could see how their contributions had been represented and made it clear that they could discuss any aspect where they felt they had been misrepresented.

Data was analysed using the concept of general inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006). The focus group transcript was read several times. The first stage highlighted conceptions (ideas, thoughts, feelings or experiences) expressed by individual participants. The second stage involved noting the frequency of similar words, phrases and patterns of meaning and exploring relationships among the emerging conceptions (themes). Finally, the emerging themes were compared to the extant literature to determine relationships and alternative perspectives.

Savin-Baden & Howell Major (2013) warn against trying to use the results of a single focus group to make general statements and representations about a larger community. However, it is not the intent of this paper to draw firm conclusions, instead its purpose is to offer further insight into the complex mesh of relationships and tensions that exist around adoptive families in the hope that it is relatable to school practitioners who are supporting adopted children and their families.

Findings and discussion

The findings which follow represent the experiences and views of eight adoptive parents of five birth siblings. Through critical analysis of data gathered, the following themes have emerged: i) *early introductions – challenges and tensions*, ii) *maintaining links with the past and developing felt security in the present*, iii) *schools - peer relations and teacher sensitivity*, of which, positive and respectful relationships is central to all. In 2013, The Care Inquiry identified relationships as being the ‘golden thread’, the lens through which all work with looked-after children and their family members/carers, including policy development, should be viewed. The findings from this study reiterate the importance of that message but have shown further complexity in a wider range of connections surrounding adoptive families, which influence the quality of relationships established and the challenges faced. Thus, the view of a ‘complex tapestry of relationships’ is proposed, with a specific focus in this study on the relationships formed between adoptive parents and previous foster carers, siblings, adoptive families and schools. Teachers who understand the powerful impact complex relationships can have on adopted children throughout different life stages, can identify approaches and strategies that will support children to settle, belong and thrive academically as well as personally. Before outlining the key themes, it is first necessary to provide an overview of the families and the children’s journey into care.

Table 1: Participant details

Parents	Children	Age of child when introduced to parents and age during research	Adopters’ previous parenting experience
Julie and Andrea	Abby and Kerry	Abby 7 years old (15 years old) Kerry 5 years old (13 years old)	No previous experience. Limited contact with children through wider family members
Karen and Paul	Nick (and Lisa* adopted from another birth family)	Nick 2 years old (11 years) *Lisa 1 year old (5 years old)	No experience before Nick. Lisa came to live with them three years after Nick.
Tom and Kevin* (*fieldwork researcher)	Sarah	5 years old (12 years old)	No previous experience. Contact with children through wider family members and friends.

Vicky and Lee (long-term foster carers)	Colin (in long term foster care)	11 years old (14 years old)	Fostered for 4 years 6 months prior to Colin.
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The five siblings were born to two white English parents, who had misused substances throughout their parenthood, with the children exposed to criminal activity. The children were severely neglected; they received little interaction with their parents and lived within one room of the house, with little opportunity to go outside. They were poorly clothed, rarely attended nursery/school and competed against each other for food and other necessities. When the children entered care via an emergency order, their general health was so poor that they required dental and medical intervention. After intervention with the birth parents proved unsuccessful the children were separated across several emergency foster carers while waiting for adoption. They were placed into three groups: Abby and Kerry; Sarah and Colin; and Nick, who was placed alone. Sarah and Colin were later separated because the pairing was deemed not to be emotionally in the best interest of either child.

i) *Early introductions – challenges and tensions*

A child's experience of transition to adoption has been found to play a significant impact on their emotional well-being and the building of positive relationships within their new family (Lewis, 2018). During the focus group, parents recalled some of the difficulties encountered throughout the introduction week and early placement. Much of the discussion related to the lack of information they believed they, and their child, had received about each other and the conflict endured with foster carers. Although Sarah's transition into her family was planned, unlike Colin who entered his family via an emergency placement, both cases demonstrate how little information the parents or children had about each other. Newly constructed families are soon expected to engage with the expectations and rules of schools and classrooms and, due to a gap in their personal knowledge about each other, both parent and child may struggle to comply. This is acknowledged by Camden Adoption and Permanence Team (2011) who state how new parents, particularly those who do not have a gradual introduction to the education system, often fail to have the information required by schools. This is where the support of the VSH and designated teacher can be invaluable in helping the child and their parents adjust to new demands and surroundings.

We had three half-days and two full days. We had an introduction pack about Sarah but we didn't find out nearly enough information about her and she didn't find out anything about us except the family book we created. (Kevin)

We got a ten-minute phone call, giving us a brief history and the next thing he's on the doorstep. He was picked up from school by a social worker and dropped at our house with no knowledge. He was in a state of shock. (Vicky)

The parents considered the adoption process to be a rushed and passive experience, which had left them feeling disempowered, particularly where relations with foster carers had felt strained. The comments below suggest how some foster parents might find it difficult to let go of a child where strong bonds have formed. Such negativity might stem from a desire to protect the child they have emotionally invested in against what foster parents perceive to be conflicting lifestyles, values and parenting styles.

During the introduction week Sarah's foster parents were not willing to let go of their structure, rules and routines, and allow her to detach from them and start building with us. (Tom)

The foster carer didn't like me...she was threatened because I was taking her little boy. She didn't like me going into her home. (Karen)

The introductions were really difficult...From the start she put them against us. Abby looked down her nose at us and that was backed by the foster carers. (Andrea)

The foster carers tried to block the placement because we were two women and lived in X. They said, 'We thought they'd go to somewhere better.' The girls went from extreme deprivation to a wealthy home with a big house, designer clothes, speed boat... They sent expensive birthday presents which we had to complete with. We had to tell them to stop. (Julie)

The parents believed that difficult pre-adoption events had delayed or hindered a positive attachment with their child. While there has been development in the adoption transition in recent years, there is evidence to suggest that some parents remain dissatisfied with the content, venue and timing of the introduction process (Lewis, 2018). Although literature regarding relationships between foster carers and adoptive parents is scarce, Selwyn & Meakings (2018) also identified adopters feeling intimidated, undermined and judged due to highly charged emotions with foster parents. When foster parents struggle to cope with a child's departure, and where a child has a close bond with their foster carers, it can have a detrimental impact on the way the child feels about their new parents, particularly if they are aware of any hostility (Meakings et al., 2018). However, where a child has a strong connection with a stable adult it is perhaps in their best interest that the relationship is sustained, as having one strong bond is better than not having one at all.

A child who is struggling to come to terms with the loss of a foster carer and embrace a new family who they feel unconnected with, may present their disapproval through extreme behaviours in the home and classroom. This appeared to be the case for Abby as throughout the focus group her parents discussed the difficult relationship they had with her, issues linked to family life and school. Being the oldest sibling, Abby will have more memories of living with her birth parents and foster carers than her sister, making the task of forming secure bonds with her adoptive parents more difficult, with problems known to intensify during adolescence (NSPCC, 2014). Julie and Andrea firmly believed that the foster carers' disapproval of their sexuality, together with differences in their socio-economic status and neighbourhood, had damaged their attachment with Abby.

Despite the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HM Government, 2002) making it legal for same-sex couples to apply for adoption, it seems that prejudice remains. However, misconceptions such as same-sex parenting should be used only as a last resort because it damages a child's psychosocial development (Sharples, 2017), appear unfounded as there is no evidence that development is compromised (Amato, 2012), with the quality of parenting, rather than their parents' sex, having significantly more bearing on healthy psychological functioning (Paraschakis & Katsanos, 2015). It is suggested that diversity/equality awareness is a central feature of training programmes for foster carers and adopters and, that schools pay additional attention to supporting diverse families who are at risk of inequality/prejudice.

It is important that teachers are aware of the conflict that some families experience, especially in the early stages of adoption. Parents spoke about a 'honeymoon period' where initially some of the younger children had tried hard to please them but had later become extremely difficult. Knowing when to '*pick battles*' suggests empathetic regard, where the parent chooses what to address and what to let go of, in order to protect the bonding process. However, the word '*defiant*' was often used which may suggest that some parents, irrespective of the pre-adoption training received, may not fully grasp the extent of the challenges faced by their children in the early stages.

We got a honeymoon period where Sarah was delightful, then slowly her true personality came out. (Tom)

Nick wanted to be the perfect little boy, to be loved and taken care of in his new home with his mummy and daddy... (Karen) and then the defiance. (Paul)

You come into it with expectations that it's going to be wonderful and they are going to do what you want them to do and they don't. That set me back. (Karen)

We pick our battles or we get into conflict and it becomes a downward spiral. (Julie)

The parents' discussion shows how children may enter their new family with a set of behaviours which are at odds in their adoptive families. This may present a considerable challenge for adopters who are trying to understand, contain and nurture their child to recover from adversity. Facing constant battles with children who may not be ready to show any warmth can be disheartening for parents who have waited a long time to adopt (Pennington, 2012). Many adopters admit to parenting being much harder than anticipated and require support with attachment difficulties and behaviour management (Meakings et al., 2018). The discussion on early challenges was lengthy. It led Vicky to stress the importance of starting with 'tiny baby steps', gradually introducing new rules and routines.

We start with tiny baby steps straight away...don't change too much. We go with the flow ... gradually change the rules. (Vicky)

The notion of 'tiny baby steps', which relies on expecting and valuing success in small steps forward, requires adults to balance clear and consistent guidance with patience and flexibility in order to support the assimilation of change.

ii) *Maintaining links with the past and developing felt security in the present*

In order for adopted children to develop felt security, build resilience and make a new start, parents and teachers need to support children to make sense of their situation. It is important for teachers to appreciate the complex and often demanding role required of parents in helping children to understand who they are so that they can build a positive identity and confidence in their ability to make and sustain relationships. Part of this process usually includes assisting children to remain in contact with birth family members and previous foster carers. Although links with the birth parents had ceased, the parents explained how they encouraged an open conversation about the children's birth family and former carers, including offers to facilitate meetings.

Colin felt guilty because he told the social worker what was going on. He insisted that another child came with him...he only asks now and again when he's going to see his siblings - it's too much effort. He doesn't talk about foster carers. (Vicky)

Sarah used to talk about her foster family... we mention her birth family more than she does, she seems to have detached from it. But she does things on the quiet. She has a memory box... Now and again she'll go through it, take photos to school to show her friends and teachers her brothers and sisters. (Tom)

It took Nick years to realise they are his brothers and sisters. He doesn't ask to see them but he enjoys coming... We've asked him if he wants to get in touch with his old foster family but he says no. (Karen)

The parents appeared to hold firm beliefs about the importance of preserving sibling relationships and discussed how they arrange three meetings a year where the siblings come together. Positive outcomes among adopted children who maintain links with birth siblings have been found to include increased emotional well-being brought about by a shared understanding of one another's adverse experiences and confirmation of identity (Parker & McLaven, 2018). However, the parents said that despite being an open topic, rarely did the children speak about each other in between meetings and almost never about their previous foster carers. It could be that the process of uniting and then separating again is problematic for the children. Alternatively, it could be that some children, like Sarah, may find additional ways to preserve and continue family bonds without the need for direct physical contact. Certain artefacts, such as Sarah's photographs, act as a powerful symbolic and memorialised representation (Rogers, 2018) of her family members, providing a source of emotional security. It is important that parents and teachers recognise the important role transitional possessions can have on the psychological well-being and self-identity of adopted children.

Although Colin, the second oldest child, had been initially concerned what would happen to his siblings upon entering care, his foster carers stated 'it's become too much effort' for him to see his siblings. This could be representative of adolescent behaviour but it could also indicate that the new life

he has built has helped him to move on – to shake free the past pressures and old roles of feeling responsible for his siblings. Reconnecting with birth family members after developing a new life and taking on different roles within a permanent family may prove unsettling for some children, with their sense of unsettlement and confusion presenting through difficult internalising or externalising behaviour at home or within school. Vicky and Lee described how challenging it has been for Colin to adjust from his early experiences, particularly as he has not been adopted like his siblings. They spoke with pride about how recently they have seen his confidence grow and that he has become an active member of the Student Care Council. They discussed how it had been a long process in helping him to build a more positive sense of self and put it down to open conversations about his birth family, together with constant reassurance regarding his permanence within their lives. According to the NSPCC (2014), adults who take a patient, empathetic and honest approach are those most likely to be successful in helping children to readjust.

Colin used to ask why he hadn't been adopted when the others have. We reiterate that we are his family, even though he isn't adopted he is with us forever. We talk to him about his future a lot...being at his wedding... (Vicky).

Talking has helped him to understand what happened in his past. He's part of the Student Care Council now, where he talks openly about being in care. (Lee).

Although significant effort is put on placing siblings together, if safe to do so, (Children Act 1989, section 41, HM Government, 1989), living apart from a sibling might be in the best interest for some children (Parker & McLaven, 2018). This appears to be the case for the two siblings (Abby and Kerry) who had been placed together. Throughout the focus group Julie and Andrea spoke of the challenge of balancing the different parenting styles needed for each child and the persistent conflict which existed between family members.

Abby needs boundaries and challenge and Kerry needs nurture. They get treated consistently but Abby behaves less well and gets less rewards. It reinforces her views of herself in our family, that we don't like her. (Julie)

We've found a balance but it's taken years. I've really struggled with Abby...The biggest challenge we faced is that neither of them wanted to live together and they were really angry that they had been put in this combination. (Andrea)

Such unhealthy family dynamics is likely to be damaging to Abby and the relationship she has with her sister, currently and in the future. Furthermore, identifying the parenting approach needed for each child, suggests a rigid parenting style, with an assumption that the children's needs and behaviours are fixed, which is not in line with the therapeutic approach recommended for supporting children who have experienced adversity. It is important that the family receives appropriate support in dealing with their struggles, as various studies report how strained relationships can lead to depression among parents which is linked to poorer outcomes for children (Harrison-Stewart, Fox & Millar, 2018; Fergeus et al., 2019) and how parents may be fearful of the detrimental impact one sibling may have on another sibling's physical and emotional well-being (Selwyn & Meakings, 2018).

iii) *Schools - peer relations and teacher sensitivity*

Parents discussed issues linked to their children's education in detail. Issues centred around i) the difficulty children had with peer relationships ii) teachers' lack of awareness and sensitivity regarding children's backgrounds and family structures and iii) the transition to secondary school. Opinions regarding the level of support parents believed they and their children received from schools were mixed, but all parents stated how they had sought schools which place much emphasis on pastoral care.

Schools have the potential to build children's resilience as they provide a stabilising routine and opportunities to form friendships. However, the histories of many adopted children (i.e. defective parenting, maltreatment, multiple separations) often makes it difficult for them to regulate their emotions, leading to insecure attachments and poor peer relationships (Sinclair, 2005). So, where

children struggle with this, school can present a significant challenge. The comments below suggest that teachers may not fully appreciate how difficult this aspect of schooling can be for adopted children.

Nick can be very socially awkward around his friends. He'll go to them, then just stop and watch. But his teacher doesn't see that. (Karen)

He's a couple of paces away from his friends every morning. Even when he's having a one to one chat and a group forms around him, he steps back. (Paul)

Put Colin with children his own age and he struggles to fit in, there's no confidence at all. (Vicky)

When they went to high school we said make a wide range of friends but Abby didn't... she's so limited. (Andrea)

Parents and teachers have a fundamental role to play in helping adopted children to develop social capital among their peers (Rogers, 2018), particularly as peer relations which lead to rejection or intimidation can intensify emotional and behavioural problems. Breaktimes can be especially stressful due to their unstructured and unpredictable nature (Camden Adoption & Permanence Team, 2011), so the importance of school staff being observant and helping adopted children to manage this time cannot be underestimated. Teachers who understand the impact that trauma and attachment issues can have on children will be in a better position to promote emotional regulation, pro-social peer interactions and academic achievement (Cefai, 2008).

The parents appeared to have much empathy for the difficulty their children had in forming friendships and outlined various strategies they employed to support their children, including: making arrangements for their children to meet up with classmates, opting for schools with a smaller pupil intake, schools known to have a good pastoral reputation and settings that have a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities.

We based it on pastoral care, what would support her nurture wise, rather than academic success and ones that had a lot of social opportunities after school. (Kevin)

We gave him a choice of three high schools. He had a scoring card when he visited. He needed a bit of leading but he agreed and chose where we wanted him to go. (Vicky)

Parents described how they gave the children a choice of school attended but it seems that this was carefully guided. The example of the 'score card' involves the child in the decision making process but the choice is often influenced by the options provided by parents, which were primarily linked to how effective the school would be in supporting children's social and emotional development. The parents were particularly concerned about their child's transition to secondary school. Their fears may be justified as adopted children are reported to struggle with the larger, more impersonal nature of secondary school (Selwyn & Meakings, 2018), with two thirds of secondary-age pupils alleging they have been bullied because they are adopted (Adoption UK, 2018).

The conversation turned towards teacher awareness and sensitivity of children's birth families and diverse family structures. Parents shared instances where they felt teachers were not as 'clued up' about their children and family background as they should be. Julie and Andrea were upset that a written task had led to Abby writing about the day she was separated from her birth family and was placed into care, especially as the children's details were displayed on the classroom wall.

Schools don't understand adopted children are different. They asked the class to write about the best day of their life. Abby wrote about the day she was taken into care. The teacher displayed her work on the wall, it had all her siblings' details on it ... there for the world to see. Same with Mothers' Day cards, Fathers' Day cards. They don't think about what it's like from their perspectives or their families. (Julie)

They've asked for baby photos and things. (Andrea)

Personal experience writing tasks (e.g. ‘the best day of your life’ and ‘what did you do over summer?’) are a topic of debate, with critics arguing that they can result in children revisiting difficult past events or revealing limited family interaction (Cooper, 2019). However, those in support of such tasks claim that they offer a medium through which children can voice, and make sense of, a negative experience. Whatever the view, it is important that such activities are carefully considered, discussed with parents prior to taking place, undertaken with sensitivity, and include opt-out or work around tasks for children who might find the exercise too challenging to complete. Kramer Ertel (2018) emphasises the need to avoid activities which make adopted children appear different to their peers, discussing how some children may not have access to photographs of themselves as babies with their families.

Teachers play an important part in increasing the acceptance of diverse family structures. Parents spoke about how schools could do more to support and raise awareness of both adopted families and same-sex parents. Information regarding children’s birth families should be dealt with sensitively, their current family structure represented positively and the choice of language and activities must not make children feel devalued or uncomfortable because their family does not fit the ‘norm’. This is of particular importance as adopted children are more at risk of being bullied (Adoption UK, 2018) and many same-sex parents feel a sense of exclusion within schools and are concerned that their children will be bullied due to their parents’ sexual orientation (McDonald & Morgan, 2019).

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated the complex web of relationships that occur within and beyond adopted families which have bearing on how adopted children settle and thrive in both family life and school. Challenges experienced during the early adoption period are to be expected but the study shows how the impact of early adversity does not easily diminish once children settle into permanent and secure homes, as the families were continuing to struggle with difficult situations and relationships in the longer term. Although the inclusion of children’s voices, along with a higher number of sibling groups and adopters, would enhance the findings of this study, some interesting issues have emerged, including insensitive school practices, difficulties with sibling and peer relationships, and discriminatory views held by foster carers.

The Department for Education (2018) asserts that schools have a vital role to play in supporting adopted children. This will require school practitioners to have enhanced theoretical knowledge and skills relating to attachment difficulties, trauma and loss and how such issues affect children’s ability to learn, together with an understanding of how this can be translated in practice. Although issues of inclusion/diversity and adverse childhood experiences have gained prominence in initial teacher education programmes and in-service training, this study suggests that gaps in teacher awareness remain. With so many diverse social groups to consider, it is argued that *adoption/fostering* is one of the more marginalised topics, receiving limited attention within teacher training and professional development. However, the issues faced by adopted children are so complex, and have the potential to significantly hinder educational and well-being outcomes, that it is essential teachers gain an in-depth understanding regarding the needs of adopted children and their parents. Such knowledge will help to foster positive relationships and an adoption friendly school environment.

Teachers play a fundamental part in promoting the acceptance of diverse family structures and shaping how children view their own family. This study shows how essential it is that teachers are mindful of activities that may be difficult for adopted children to complete, are sensitive to language used, and work towards normalising adoptive families via classroom materials and content. It is also important that school practitioners recognise the difficulty adopted children may have with positive peer relationships, particularly during non-structured events such as breaktime. They can assist by supporting adopted children to develop social skills and manage difficult feelings and, where necessary, warding off any invasive or difficult questions asked by other children.

The study also suggests that there is a need for school practitioners to have additional understanding about the demands faced by adoptive parents, including managing complicated and sometimes conflicting relationships. During the early stages, adopted families are typically in a state of

turmoil, with parents assisting children to cope with numerous losses, unfamiliar surroundings, people, rules and routines. The parents spoke of rushed and difficult adoption transitions where tensions and differences with foster carers had delayed positive attachments with their children. It is advised that where lifestyle factors (e.g. socio-economic, sexuality, cultural, religious) have been particularly diverse within the birth family, across foster placements and the adoptive home, additional support is given to families by social work teams, as such inconsistency can prevent a child from settling. It is also suggested that sufficient emphasis is placed on the impact of personal bias/prejudice within training programmes delivered to foster carers and adopters. Furthermore, extending the adoption transition period would allow children and foster carers more time to manage the separation they are experiencing (Lewis, 2018). Other difficulties highlighted include i) parents feeling alone and disheartened after the 'honeymoon' period when children started to present challenging behaviour and ii) persistent strained relationships in a family where two siblings with very different needs and personalities had been adopted. The need for continued access to timely and appropriate support from a range of specialist services for families as the child grows cannot be underestimated. Awareness of such family tension can help teachers to understand changes in a child's or parent's behaviour, why information about a child could be missing, and to take an informed approach to assist a child in building a more positive sense of self, including the acceptance of their own family diversity.

It is important that open, supportive and respectful relationships exist across a tapestry of networks (e.g. family members, foster carers, other adoptive families, social workers, teachers, and other professionals) as this will give adopted children a better chance in reaching positive outcomes - socially, emotionally and academically. The role to be played by knowledgeable, empathetic and proactive teachers, who can build positive relationships and understand the challenges faced by adoptive families, are more likely to help adopted children feel a sense of security and belonging, optimising the conditions required for learning and enhanced well-being.

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