Exploring Special Guardians' Experiences of Supporting the Education of Children in Their Care: An Ecological Perspective

Jessica Astley-Marr
Registration Number: 100395349

Submitted in part requirement for the
Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD)
University of East Anglia
November 2025

Word Count (Excluding Contents Pages, Acknowledgements, References, and Appendices): 50,000

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived therefrom must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

Access Condition and Agreement

Each deposit in UEA Digital Repository is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of the Data Collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission from the copyright holder, usually the author, for any other use. Exceptions only apply where a deposit may be explicitly provided under a stated licence, such as a Creative Commons licence or Open Government licence.

Electronic or print copies must not be offered, whether the sale or otherwise, to anyone, unless explicitly stated under a Creative Commons or Open Government licence. Unauthorised reproduction, editing or reformatting for resale purposes is explicitly prohibited (except where approved by the copyright holder themselves) and UEA reserves the right to take immediate ‘take down’ action on behalf of the copyright and/or rights holder if this Access condition of the UEA Digital Repository is breached. Any material in this database has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the material may be published without proper acknowledgement.

Abstract

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) are increasingly becoming a route to legal permanence for children unable to live with their birth parents. The Department for Education (DfE) reports that 57.4% of children who have been looked-after continuously for twelve months (including those who leave care via an SGO) were identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN), and 30.2% have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). As such, children living under SGOs are more likely to have involvement from an Educational Psychologist (EP).

Limited research has explored how Special Guardians (SGs) understand the educational needs of the children in their care. This qualitative research adopts a social constructionist epistemology; seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight SGs to explore SGs' perspectives. The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) as a framework.

Three overarching themes were developed. ***Theme One: Children's Experiences, Needs and Developmental Responses,*** outlined SGs accounts of children's individual needs and experiences, including emotional regulation, learning, adaptation to school environments and trauma (Individual Level/Microsystem). ***Theme Two: Interactions Between the Child, Family, and School,*** the relational aspects of home-school communication, school-child relationships, SGs' experience and knowledge and the impact of parental contact and SG well-being (Microsystem/Mesosystem). ***Theme Three: The Influence of Wider Systems and Life Events,*** which focused on wider professional support, legal and policy contexts, peer and community support and the impact of time (Exosystem/Macrosystem/Chronosystem).

The findings outline the complex and multi-layered nature of the systems around children living in SGOs and how these can impact education. Implications for educational psychology practice are considered both across the ecological levels and also within the role of the EP in consultation, assessment, training, systemic working, and advocacy and policy contexts

Table of Contents

Table of Abbreviations *10*

Acknowledgements *12*

Chapter One: Literature Review *13*

1. Introduction **13**

1.1. Researcher Positionality and Interest 13

1.2. What is an SGO? 15

1.3. Alternative Childcare Orders and Arrangements 16

1.4. Policy and Practice Context 17

1.5. National Priorities 18

1.6. Defining ‘Permanency’ 20

1.7. Prevalence of Special Guardianship in England 21

1.8. An Ecological Understanding 22

1.9. Search Strategy and Approach to the Literature 24

2. The Individual System **27**

2.1. Trauma and Emotional Regulation 28

2.2. Resilience and Adaptation 30

2.3. Special Educational Needs and EHCPs 32

2.4. Educational Attainment of Children Living with Special Guardians 33

3. Microsystem **33**

3.1. Attachment Theory 33

3.2. Parental Responsibility 37

3.3. Contact with Birth Parents 38

3.4. Emotions and Behaviour 39

3.5. Peer Relationships 40

4. Mesosystem **40**

4.1. Role of the Virtual School (VS) 41

4.2. Education Plan for Adopted Children (EPAC) 41

4.3. The Role of Educational Psychology 43

4.4. Systemic Work and Training 43

4.5. Multi-Agency Working ... 44

5. Exosystem ... 44

5.1. Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) ... 45

5.2. Accessible Support for SGs ... 45

5.3. Appropriate Training ... 46

6. Macrosystem ... 46

7. Chronosystem ... 47

7.1. Who are Special Guardians? ... 47

8. Chapter Summary and Research Rationale ... 48

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper ... 52

1. Introduction ... 52

1.1. Terminology ... 54

1.2. Ecological Systems Theory (EST) ... 56

1.3. Gaps in Literature ... 60

2. Research Aim and Questions ... 63

2.1. Overarching Research Question ... 64

2.2. Subsidiary Research Questions ... 64

3. Methodology ... 64

3.1 Philosophical Considerations ... 64

3.2 Design ... 67

3.3 Data Collection ... 72

3.4 Analysis ... 77

3.5 Ethical Approval ... 83

4. Participant Overviews ... 86

4.1. Participant One (Mark) ... 86

4.2. Participant Two (Anna) ... 88

4.3. Participant Three (Olivia) ... 90

4.4. Participant Four (Elizabeth) ... 91

4.5. Participant Five (Emily) ... 93

4.6. Participants Six and Seven (Helen and Colin) ... 95

4.7. Participant Eight (Georgia) 97

5. Findings 98

5.1. Theme One: Children's Experiences, Needs and Developmental Responses 100

5.2. Theme Two: Interactions Between the Child, Family, and School 109

5.3 Theme Three: The Influence of Wider Systems and Life Events 118

6. Discussion 126

6.1. Contribution to the Literature 126

6.2. Research Question 1 127

6.3. Research Question 2 130

6.4. Subsidiary Research Question 1 137

6.5. Subsidiary Research Question 2 141

7. The Role of the EP 144

7.1. Supporting Children (Individual Level & Microsystem) 144

7.2. Working with Families and SGs (Microsystem & Mesosystem) 145

7.3. Enhancing School Practice (Microsystem & Mesosystem) 146

7.4. Facilitating Links Between Home, School, and Services (Mesosystem) .. 147

7.5. Addressing Wider Systemic Barriers (Exosystem & Macrosystem) 147

7.6. Considering Chronosystemic Influences (Chronosystem) 148

8. Implications for EP Practice 148

8.1. Consultation 149

8.2. Assessment and Formulation 150

8.4. Training and Capacity-Building 151

8.5. Systemic intervention 152

8.6. Advocacy and Policy Influence 153

9. Limitations and Future Research 154

9.1. Sample Size and Representativeness 154

9.2. Recruitment and Self-Selection 155

9.3. Child and Young Person Perspectives 156

9.4. Cross-Sectional Design 156

9.5. Scope and Methodological Boundaries 157

9.6. Methodological Considerations 157
9.7. Practical and Ethical Constraints 158
9.8. Limitations of Ecological Systems Framework 158
9.9 Boundary Conditions of Claims 159
9.10. Future Directions 159

10. Conclusion 160

Chapter Three: Reflective Chapter 162

1. Introduction 162

2. Professional Positionality and Identity 163
2.1. Social Work Background 163
2.2. TEP Role 163
2.3. Balancing Perspectives in Research 164
2.4. Implications for Researching SGOs 165

3. Reflexive Decisions in Research Design 167
3.1. Choosing the Topic 167
3.2. Developing and Structuring of the Literature Review 167
3.3. Terminology 168
3.4. Ethical Stance and Proportionality 169
3.5. Recruitment and Sampling Considerations 170

4. Analysing Data 171
4.1. Rationale for Using RTA 171
4.2. Application of the Ecological Systems 172
4.3. Balancing Semantic and Latent Coding 173
4.4. Managing Researcher Influence 173

5. Critical Appraisal of the Research 174
5.1. Strengths of the Design 174
5.2. Limitations 175
5.3. What Would I do Differently? 177

6. Impact on Professional Learning and Practice 177
6.1. Growth in Methodological Confidence 177

6.2. Reflexive and Professional Identity 178
6.3. Developing my Personal Practice as an EP 178
6.4. Practical Applications for EP Practice 179
6.5. Bridging Social Work and EP Perspectives 180

7. Dissemination and Future Directions 180
7.1. Educational Psychology Service 180
7.2. Schools.. 181
7.3. SGs... 181
7.4. Academic Dissemination 181
7.5. Future Research 182

8. Reflective Conclusions 183
8.1. Consolidation of Professional Identity 183
8.2. Learning from the Research Process... 183
8.3. Commitment to Ongoing Reflective Practice 183

References 185

Appendices 239

A: Ethical Approval... 239

B: Participant Information Sheet 241

C: Debrief Sheet.. 246

D: Recruitment Flyer 247

E: Example Transcript Exert 248

F: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule 253

G: Thematic Map... 256

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Phases of RTA (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2021)…………………… 60

Figure 1. Flowchart of Literature Review Strategy …………..………………….. 27

Figure 2. Flowchart of Sampling Strategy………………………...………………….. 72

Table of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AO	Adoption Order
ASGSF	Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ATRCM	Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAO	Child Arrangement Order
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CO	Care Order
DfE	Department for Education
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPAC	Education Plan for Adopted Children
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
FGC	Family Group Conferencing
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HCPC	Health Care and Professionals Council
ICO	Interim Care Order
IPA	Interpretive Phonological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
LAC	Looked After Child
PA	Personal Assistant
PACE	Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy
PLAC	Post Looked After Child
PO	Placement Order
PPP	Pupil Premium Plus
RO	Residency Order

RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SALT	Speech and Language Therapy
SEMH	Social and Emotional Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SG	Special Guardian
SGO	Special Guardianship Order
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
VS	Virtual School

Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr Kimberley Bartholomew, whose expertise, patience, trust, and encouragement have been invaluable throughout this process. Her insight and belief in this project have shaped both the research itself and my own development as a reflective practitioner and researcher.

I am also grateful to the course tutors, directors, and wider programme team, whose guidance and commitment have supported me throughout this doctorate. To my course colleagues, thank you for your humour, solidarity, and countless check-ins that carried me through the long days of thesis writing and training.

To my placement supervisor, I am so grateful for your constant encouragement, curiosity about my research, and practical guidance that helped me balance the competing demands of placement, study, and life.

To my participants, thank you for your openness and willingness to share your experiences. This thesis would not exist without your generosity and time.

To Jordan, my partner, thank you for everything you have done throughout this journey: from the snacks, late nights sat on the office floor as I wrote, words of reassurance, moments of laughter, comfort when it was difficult, patience and belief when I needed it most. You have listened to endless thesis talks; taken an interest in things you never asked to understand, and been by my side (often literally) throughout much of this thesis. This achievement belongs to you as much as to me,

To my family, thank you for believing in me unwaveringly and celebrating each milestone, however small. Your pride and encouragement have been a constant source of motivation.

And finally, to the small and silent companion who has shared the concluding stages of this journey, you have felt every stress and triumph, often unknowingly adding your own energy to this process.

Chapter One: Literature Review

1. Introduction

1.1. Researcher Positionality and Interest

This area of research is closely connected to my professional background and experience of working with children and young people, their families, and wider professional services within the context of statutory Local Authority (LA) services. Before becoming a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), I worked as a Social Worker, whereby I was involved in permanency planning and court process for children who were unable to live safely with their birth parents. Through this experience, I developed knowledge around alternative long-term care arrangements for children, including kinship placements and, more specifically, Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs).

These experiences offered insight into the complex legal, relational, and systemic contexts surrounding children who are unable to stay within their birth families, including the strengths and challenges associated with SGOs. In many cases, an SGO allowed children to remain within their broader family network with familiar adults, thus maintaining important relational ties, including the legal connection to their birth parents, and supporting their sense of identity and belonging. However, I frequently observed that statutory involvement varied across the experiences of foster carers, Special Guardians (SGs), and adopters. Sometimes, certain families had to navigate ongoing challenges independently. These challenges included accessing services, managing relationships with professionals and extended family members, including birth parents. These challenges frequently involved accessing services, managing relationships with professionals, and advocating for children's needs within educational settings.

I developed a particular interest in understanding what happens to families once permanence is established through an SGO. My role as a Social Worker involved supporting the processes leading up to the granting of legal orders and ensuring that placements are both appropriate and stable. However, comparatively less attention is given to how families experience the long-term realities of such arrangements once formal involvement with statutory services has concluded. This raised questions for me, both as a TEP and a researcher, about how SGs support children’s development over time, particularly in relation to education and how schools and professionals understand and respond to the needs of children living with SGs.

Educational Psychologists (EPs) frequently work with children who have experienced early adversity and come from complex family backgrounds. During my TEP journey, I became aware that many children living under an SGO continue to face social, emotional, and educational challenges that are not always fully recognised within the school environment alone. Simultaneously, SGOs have become an increasingly prominent option for permanence within the English Family Courts, yet relatively little research has examined how these arrangements interact with educational systems or how SGs support children's engagement with learning.

My experiences in Social Work, therefore, influenced the topic of this research, particularly my interest in the relationships between families and wider professional systems once permanency has been achieved, including how SGs navigate these systems. Furthermore, my experiences and role as a TEP deepened my interest in the broader systemic perspective, with an emphasis on the interconnected influences of family relationships, school environments, wider systems, and policy contexts.

In qualitative research, recognising researcher positionality is important because researchers bring their experiences and perspectives to the process. Instead of trying to separate these experiences from the research, reflexivity involves understanding how such experiences influence the questions asked, the topics emphasised within the literature, and the interpretation of participants’ accounts. Making my positionality explicit, therefore, offers transparency about the perspective from which the research was conducted and situates the study within the professional context that shaped its focus.

1.2. What is an SGO?

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were established by Section 115(1) of the Adoption and Children Act (2002), which amended the Children Act (1989) by introducing sections 14 A-F on the legal framework for SGOs, setting out their purpose, the process of application, the rights and responsibilities conferred upon SGs, and the circumstances under which such orders may be varied or discharged. This came in response to the government's published White Paper entitled 'Adoption: a new approach', which discussed how adoption was not always a suitable option for children and young people who could not return to their birth parents, and other care arrangements were often associated with a high level of instability. The concept of a new legislative option for permanence was proposed; SGOs were passed into law in 2005, coming into force in 2006.

An SGO is a private law order made by the Family Court that places child(ren) or young person(s) with someone other than their birth parent(s), such as a relative, family friend or foster carer, in a long-term, legally secure placement. It grants the SG parental responsibility for the child until they are eighteen, enabling them to make day-to-day decisions about a child's upbringing, including education, whilst maintaining a link to their birth parents.

It is important to consider that SGOs and their formation can vary widely from family to family, leading to a significant level of variation within this population. While many children become subject to an SGO following public care proceedings and therefore hold the status of a previously looked-after child (PLAC), others enter an SGO through private family arrangements without prior involvement from LA care. This distinction has important implications for the support and resources available to families. Children who were PLAC may remain eligible for services such as PPP and support from the VS, whereas those who enter an SGO through private arrangements may not have access to the same entitlements despite potentially having experienced similar early life circumstances adversities.

Furthermore, SGs can be family members, family friends, or foster carers who have been caring for the child. This means that support from professionals, including access to training, support, or a knowledge base, can differ between families. Consequently, special guardianship should not be viewed as a homogeneous group; rather, children living under SGOs represent a diverse population with different legal histories, former levels of pressure involvement, and access to support. Recognising this variation is important when considering both the educational experiences of children living under SGOs and the support needs of SGs themselves.

1.3. Alternative Childcare Orders and Arrangements

SGOs must also be understood in relation to alternative permanence options within English legislation. Differing arrangements hold different implications for children and their families. Alternative legal orders or arrangements that can be made for children who are unable to continue living with their birth family may include the following.

1.3.1. Adoption Order (AO)

Under section 46 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, an AO permanently ceases the legal relationship between a child and their birth parents. The adoptive parents become the child’s legal parents and hold parental responsibility. Adoption is an irreversible order once the time limit for appeals has passed (21 days) and is therefore deemed to be a last resort, only used when a child is unable to reside with birth parents, a family member or a close connected person, and it would not be in their best interests to be placed in long-term LA care. The granting of such an order is deemed to be a ‘serious interference’ with family life, which overrides Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998) **-** the right to respect for your family and private life.

1.3.2. Care Order (CO)

Under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989, a CO grants the majority of parental responsibility to the LA to make decisions about where a child should live. Children under this order are likely to live in foster or residential placements and maintain regular contact with their birth family.

1.3.3. Child Arrangement Order (CAO)

Under Section 8 of the Children Act 1989 (as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014), a CAO outlines day-to-day care arrangements for children, such as contact and who they live with; it does not give/remove parental responsibility.

1.3.4. Residency Order (RO)

Under the Children Act 1989, the RO was replaced by the CAO. This order was previously used to place children in kinship placements and give parental responsibility to carers, which now requires an SGO. ROs ceased to be granted in 2014; however, any granted before this date remain in place and were not altered.

1.3.5. Informal Kinship Care

This refers to situations where children live on a long-term basis with a relative or close family friend; however, there is no legal arrangement, and the carers do not hold any parental responsibility (Biehal and Wade, 2016). Due to the lack of formality around such arrangements, it is unclear how many children in England are living under such arrangements at any given time. Such carers may seek an SGO after the child has lived with them for over 12 months. In such instances, the child would not hold the status of being a ‘previously looked after child’ (PLAC) and may not have the same rights to support, such as Pupil Premium Plus (PPP).

1.4. Policy and Practice Context

Government policies relating to long-term care arrangements, including SGOs and the arrangements discussed in section 1.3, have a focus on making decisions in the best interests of the children, providing them with a safe and stable home life, independent of professional intervention, until their eighteenth birthday (Bower, 2015). The concept of combining both established or familial relationships with consistent long-term care, as evidenced in demographic data, is increasing as a preferred option for children and young people. It is important to consider how the decision to grant an SGO is influenced by government policy and guidance. The process for assessing and identifying potential SGs is outlined in the Adoption and

Children Act (2002), the Children Act (1989) and the Special Guardianship Regulations (2005) and the subsequent 2016 amendment.

Although policies and statutory guidance on SGOs do not explicitly address the education of children and young people, it is deeply entwined with the concept of a child's 'welfare' and recognised as a shared responsibility of the LA and SGs. The Special Guardianship Regulations (2005) and Children and Families Act (2014) outline both the requirement for SGs to meet the child's physical, emotional and developmental needs, which includes ensuring regular access to an appropriate and consistent education. LAs are similarly required to assess whether prospective SGs can meet these developmental and educational needs as part of the approval process.

Furthermore, the Children Act (1989) reinforces the duty of the LA to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in their area. This duty extends to providing support for SGOs where issues within education arise, for instance, through access to PPP funding and the involvement of the Virtual School Head (VSH). These provisions establish an important, though often unexplored crossover, between policies surrounding SGOs and the educational experiences of children living under such orders, particularly in relation to how SGs navigate school systems, support children, access educational support, and manage the expectations placed upon them by LAs.

As outlined in section 1.2, children living under an SGO do not represent a homogeneous group. Distinctions exist between those who were PLAC and those who entered an SGO through private arrangements. This distinction has important implications for the support available to families through national policies, including eligibility for services such as PPP and support from the VS, the details and implications of which are discussed further in sections 4 and 5.

1.5. National Priorities

To further understand the role of an SGO, as a legal option for children's permeance, it is useful to understanding the national priorities underpinning the drive to keep children within their family networks, where possible. In November 2024, the DfE published ‘Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive: Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunities’, setting out a strategic plan about improving the outcomes for children in England, including a focus upon children living with an SGO; somewhat prompted by the increased popularity of this order, as a long-term plan that enables children to remain within their families (Sinclair and Selwyn, 2016). Acknowledging the opportunities for the use of SGOs where children cannot remain with their birth parents, but do not need to be subject to an AO.

One of the core principles of this publication is the government’s emphasis on ensuring that children grow up in permanent, safe family settings that are free from professional intervention once stability has been established. As such, SGOs are acknowledged as a viable and useful option to achieve the above and create a sense of identity, belonging and permanence for many children.

It also stresses the ongoing need for improved, effective and consistent support for SGs, highlighting how the early life experiences of children create unique needs throughout childhood. Such support should assist SGs in meeting these needs, which often result in additional pressure or strain upon SGO placements – potentially threatening the stability. Hall (2008) identified issues with placement stability shortly after SGOs came into force; similar concerns were identified 10 years later by the DfE.

The above issues are also considered within the context of education and how complex early life experiences may also impact a child’s ability to engage with or access learning, particularly as issues arise or surface. This support links to the importance of individualised plans, such as the EPAC and the use of available funding, such as PPP. The aim of which is the support children to thrive, both socially and academically.

The requirement for support from professionals and strong working relationships is a key focus. This document highlights how SGs, especially those who have not been through the formal adoption process, can face challenges in knowing how to access or navigate available professional support systems effectively, particularly in relation to complex educational needs (Quinton and Reder, 2013). They may also not have any experience or knowledge of how to support children with complex social and emotional health needs, related to things such as attachment, trauma or emotional regulation (Felitti and Anda, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014).

Finally, the need to collaborate across various government departments (e.g., Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, local authorities) is outlined. With a focus upon collaborative practice or approaches between SGOs and professionals such as social workers, schools, EPs, therapeutic and mental health workers, etc. Each professional has distinct knowledge and expertise that can be used to support the outcomes for children and families (Clerke *et al.,* 2017). These evolving priorities also signal the shifting policy landscape over time; a theme further explored within the chronosystem.

1.6. Defining 'Permanency'

The focus upon defining 'permanency' in the context of Family Law in England is a concept that has been well established throughout historic Child Protection procedures both within the current and preceding legislation (Freeman, 2011). In the simplest terms, permanency outlines who will hold parental responsibility and provide a safe, stable home life until the child reaches their eighteenth birthday. However, the lived experience of permanency is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to its legal context (Wright and Collins, 2023; Wade *et al.,* 2014).

With the above in mind, research has sought to outline the importance of the psycho-social aspects of permanence for children, when courts are asked to make decisions about the long-term plans for children who become subject to legal proceedings under an Interim Care Order (ICO), section 38 of the Children Act, 1989. As such, decisions must be made in line with the Welfare Principle (Section 1: Children Act, 1989). This principle outlines how the paramount consideration for the court is the welfare of the child. This includes assessing the child's needs, wishes, and any harm they have suffered or may be at risk of. The court also evaluates the capability of the prospective special guardian (in the case of an SGO), considering factors such as their relationship with the child, understanding of the child's needs, and ability to provide a suitable home.

Munby and Logan Green (2020): In Surrey County Council v Al-Hilli, Baker J suggested that SGOs are particularly suitable for children who require a greater degree of permanence and stability but for whom adoption is not suitable. The factors which are likely to be persuasive will differ with each case, but could include:

I. The child's knowledge of his/her identity,

II. The likelihood of future applications by a birth parent, or

III. The importance of holding parental responsibility where there are challenging parental dynamics.

1.7. Prevalence of Special Guardianship in England

Data published by the DfE highlights that the number of children leaving LA care has been decreasing, while the proportion leaving care via an SGO has continued to rise. In contrast, the number of adoptions has been falling since 2015, following key court rulings (Re B-S (Children [2013] EWCA Civ 1146), which reinforced that adoption should be regarded as a last resort and pursued only when no other viable family placement is feasible, such as a child living with connected persons, like relatives or close family friends. This ruling, alongside evolving child welfare systems, has contributed to the gradual shift from adoption towards kinship-based permanence such as SGOs.

According to the DfE statistics (2024), of all those ceasing to be looked after children (LAC) during the year, approximately 11% did so through an SGO, while 9% were adopted. Although there was a temporary rise in adoptions recorded in 2022, this appears largely attributed to the backlog created by the COVID-19 pandemic, which delayed public care proceedings in 2020-2021. In total, 3,860 children left care via an SGO in 2024 (virtually unchanged from 2023) compared to 2,950 adopted in the same year. Notably, SGOs now account for a greater share of permanence outcomes for children leaving care than adoption, highlighting their growing use and significance.

Complementary evidence from the Child and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) further demonstrates this upward trend. CAFCASS survey data was used to explore the number of children subject to different types of legal orders between 2010 and 2017 (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). The data, in line with that from the Department of Education, highlights how SGOs were becoming a popular permanence option for children and young people who are no longer in the care of their birth parents, through public care proceedings, upon conclusion of Interim Court Orders (Section 31; Children Act, 1989).

1.8. An Ecological Understanding

Given the complexity of SGOs, understanding how SGs and the children in their care experience education requires an approach that goes beyond statistics or legal frameworks. As SGOs have become increasingly utilised as an option for permanence in England, understanding children's outcomes requires a perspective that recognises the interactions between their child and their wider environmental systems, including their relationships, their education, communities, and wider policy and legal frameworks. For children living under SGOs, experiences of stability, belonging, and education are influenced not only by the order itself but also by the quality of relationships, the available support around a placement, and the responsiveness of schools and LAs in supporting education.

This research adopts Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) to develop an understanding of how environmental and social factors surrounding SGs and the children in their care, and how these may be perceived to impact education. Research indicates that the interactions, both indirect and direct, between the child and the different ecological levels of their environment have a role in shaping child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory has evolved through several stages since its initial publication in 1979. Early formulations of EST conceptualised development as occurring through interactions between the child and nested environmental systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These systems were later expanded to include the chronosystem, which encompasses the role of time in shaping developmental experiences, such as transitions and significant life events (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In later work, Bronfenbrenner further developed the theory into a bio-ecological model, incorporating principles of Contextual Change and Continuity Theory (CCCT). This framework outlined how developmental processes unfold over time through interactions between individuals and their environments, emphasising how stability and change within the ecological systems influence developmental outcomes (Tudge *et al.,* 2009).

It should be noted that using EST risks portraying environmental systems as static layers surrounding the child, rather than emphasising the dynamic process through which development occurs (Tudge et al., 2009). Therefore, later developments in Bronfenbrenner’s work aimed to address this by emphasising the role of proximal processes, highlighting how development is shaped through repeated interactions between individuals and their environment over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Additionally, ecological frameworks must be applied carefully in empirical research to avoid merely providing descriptive accounts of environmental systems without examining the mechanisms through which these systems interact (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

While later iterations of EST offer a more detailed account of developmental processes, this research uses EST as its main conceptual framework. EST provides a clear and accessible structure for exploring how children's experiences are shaped through interactions across environmental systems. This framework aligns closely with the systemic approach of Educational Psychology, which emphasises the interconnected influences of family relationships, schools, services, and the wider policy context on children's development. Using EST therefore offers a valuable conceptual lens for organising the literature review and also for considering how the education of children living with SGs may be influenced by broader environmental systems. Accordingly, the rest of this chapter is organised around the ecological systems:

- **Individual Level:** the child’s development, experiences and educational needs.
- **Microsystem:** daily experiences within the home, school or family contact.
- **Mesosystem:** relationships between families, school and professionals.
- **Exosystem:** access to services, resources and training.
- **Macrosystem:** legal and policy frameworks.
- **Chronosystem:** the impact of time, changes and transitions.

A socioecological perspective can be useful in considering the experiences and impacting proximal processes (Tudge *et al.,* 2009) of children who become LAC, including those who come to live with SGs (Coman and Devaney, 2011). The environments of children who come to live separately from their birth parents can be complex, both before, during, and after any orders are made. Key risk factors include disrupted education, attachment issues, trauma, and a lack of stability (Scott, 2011).

1.9. Search Strategy and Approach to the Literature

The identification of literature for this review followed an iterative and reflective process, in line with the qualitative orientation of the study and its social constructionist epistemological stance (Potter & Robles, 2022). Within this paradigm, literature reviews aim to develop an informed theoretical and empirical understanding of a subject rather than providing an exhaustive systematic synthesis (Grant & Grant, 2023). The purpose of the literature review was to identify research and policy evidence relevant to understanding the educational experiences of children living under an SGO and the role of SGs in supporting education.

Initial searches were carried out across several major academic databases, including PsycINFO, Education Research Complete, SCOPUS, Social Care Online, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen to capture literature from multiple disciplinary perspectives, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of Special Guardianship research, which spans education, psychology, social work, and family law. Search terms were developed to reflect the central concepts of the study and included combinations of the following: “Special Guardianship Order”, “kinship care”, “education”, “school experience”, “previously looked-after children”, “attachment”, “trauma”, “resilience” and “educational psychology”. Boolean operators and truncation were used where appropriate to broaden the search scope and identify related studies. These terms were selected to capture the literature relating to both the legal permanence arrangement for Special guardianship and the developmental and educational experiences of children who have experienced early adversity. The inclusion of terms such as *attachment, trauma* and resilience reflected the broader psychological literature that informs understanding of the needs of children who have been PLAC or experienced disrupted caregiving relationships.

During the early stages of the review, two key publications were identified as particularly influential in shaping the direction of the literature search: Wade et al. (2014) and Harwin et al. (2019). These studies provide empirical analyses of SG arrangements within England and are widely cited in research and policy discussions related to kinship care and permanence. In addition, Hillier’s (2021) doctoral thesis offered an important qualitative exploration of SGs' perspectives on the education of children in their care. Subsequent citation tracking also identified further research including Ramoutar (2020), Selwyn et al. (2018; 2022), and Gore-Langton (2019), which further explore the experiences and support needs of families living with an SGO. Collectively, these studies helped to shape the direction of the literature review and provided an overview of the evolving evidence base surrounding SGOs and education.

As a result, they served as important texts within the review process. Reference lists within these publications were examined, and citation tracking was conducted using database tools to identify subsequent research that had drawn upon these studies. This involved both backward snowballing, by reviewing reference lists of key studies, and forward snowballing, by identifying newer research that cited these publications. This process of citation chaining and snowballing enabled the identification of additional literature that might not have been captured by initial keyword searches alone and helped map the development of the research field over time.

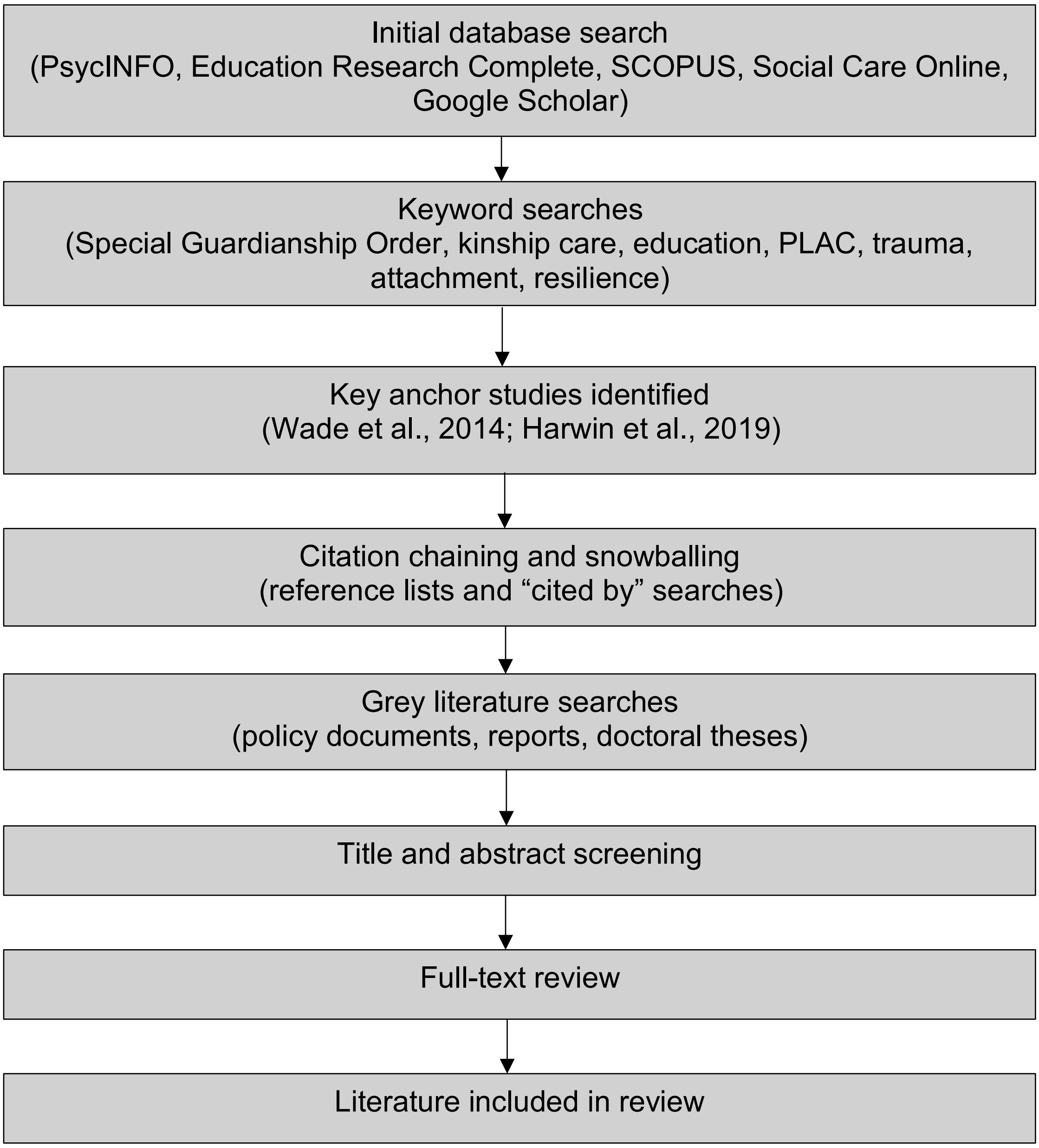
The search strategy also incorporated grey literature, including government reports, policy documents and doctoral theses, recognising that research relating to SGOs is frequently produced outside academic journal publications. Searches conducted through Google scholar enabled the identification of relevant doctoral theses and unpublished research that contributed valuable contextual insights into SGO experiences and policy developments. The inclusion of grey literature was considered particularly important given the relatively limited body of peer-reviewed research examining Special Guardianship specifically in relation to education.

Literature identified through a database search and citation chaining was screened via a staged process. Titles and abstracts were initially reviewed to determine relevance to the research. Studies were included if they addressed Special Guardianship, kinship care, PLAC, or educational experiences relevant to children living within alternative permanence arrangements. When abstracts indicated potential relevance, full texts were examined to assess their contribution to the conceptual, empirical, or policy context of the study. This process allowed the literature review to encompass both direct research on Special Guardianship and related literature that offered insights into the educational experiences of children with similar early life experiences.

Given the limited research specifically on Special Guardianship and education, the review therefore drew upon related bodies of literature concerning kinship care, trauma-informed education, attachment, and the educational outcomes of PLAC. This broader approach enabled the review to situate Special Guardianship within the wider context of permanence and educational research while maintaining a focus on literature most relevant to the research aims.

An overview of the literature search and screening process is presented in figure XX, which illustrates the stages through which literature was identified, screened, and included within the review. Bronfenbrenner’s EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) was used as an organising framework to structure the review of the identified literature. This perspective enabled the literature to be examined in relation to the multiple environmental systems influencing children living under SGOs, including individual developmental factors, family relationships, school environments, professional systems, and wider policy contexts.

Figure 1. Flowchart of Literature Review Strategy


Initial database search
(PsycINFO, Education Research Complete, SCOPUS, Social Care Online, Google Scholar)
Keyword searches
(Special Guardianship Order, kinship care, education, PLAC, trauma, attachment, resilience)
Key anchor studies identified
(Wade et al., 2014; Harwin et al., 2019)
Citation chaining and snowballing
(reference lists and “cited by” searches)
Grey literature searches
(policy documents, reports, doctoral theses)
Title and abstract screening
Full-text review
Literature included in review

2. The Individual System

This level considers the child and their ‘individual’ internal components that shape their interactions with the environment around them. These factors include biological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural characteristics, alongside the developmental impact of early life experiences and trauma. The average age of a child entering an SGO placement ranges from three months to just over 6 years (Wade *et al.,* 2019). Experiences that occur during these early developmental windows, especially those involved in last for instability, can leave lasting imprints on attachment, emotional regulation, and learning (O'Connor, 2017).

Children's individual differences do not emerge in isolation; rather, they influence and are influenced by the quality of care they received, the consistency of relationships, and the opportunities for education and recovery that follow (Masten, 2012). The following subsections consider four major domains, attachment, trauma, resilience, and special educational needs (SEN), each of which might impact how children living with SGs engage with learning.

2.1. Trauma and Emotional Regulation

Trauma is defined as a perceived experience that threatens injury, death, or physical integrity, causing feelings of fear, terror, and helplessness (Dye, 2018). Many people experience some form of trauma, but 'complex trauma' is a more specific and involves multiple, chronic, or prolonged traumatic events, typically of an interpersonal nature and occurring during early childhood (Courtois, 2004; Spinazzola *et al*., 2005). Early experiences of neglect and abuse from a parent or caregiver can lead to experiences of complex trauma and have a significant impact upon emotional, social and physical child development, which may not always be evident in early childhood (Anda *et al.,* 2006).

When considering the concept of trauma and its impact on children living under SGOs, early experience can lead to emerging social and emotional needs which create complex behavioural challenges (Wade *et al.,* 2014), of which SGs are not always equipped with knowledge and skills from training to be able to understand or effectively manage (Department for Education, 2014). It is important to consider how experiences of trauma may impact children, particularly in relation to learning.

When considering ‘Attachment Theory’ discussed above, children who experience trauma may develop insecure attachment styles, which impacts their ability to develop trusting relationships with adults, as they are placed in long-term placements under an SGO (Holt & Birchall, 2020). Such difficulties with SEMH needs and limited Special Guardian support/training can result in challenges with children being able to adjust and settle into placements (Wellard et al., 2017).

2.1.1. Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model

The Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model (ATRCM; Carter, 2023) can be utilised to consider the impact of trauma on a child’s experience of education or a classroom environment. The model, inspired by the Trauma Recovery model (Skuse and Matthews, 2015), Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), Borba’s building blocks of self-esteem (Borba, 1989), and the 3 R framework (regulate, relate and reason; Perry & Ablon, 2019) which runs alongside, outlines a progressive set of needs to support a child, who has experience of trauma in the classroom.

Much like the hierarchy of needs, the ATRCM emphasises the need for children to feel safe at each level before they can effectively engage in learning or move up the pyramid. The stages of the model include:

- **Safety (physical, emotional and interpersonal):** Does the child feel safe? Do the adults feel safe? Does the child feel safe to express themselves?
- **Co-attunement and Connection:** Is there a trusted adult who is offering unconditional positive regard? Are opportunities for connection occurring throughout the day?
- **Affiliation and Belonging:** Is the school proactively addressing the child’s sense of belonging? Are there positive peer attachments?
- **Identity:** Is the child supported to explore who they are, their selfhood and their story?
- **Autonomy:** Is the child supported to feel a sense of agency and control within their education?

- **Resilience and Coping Skills:** Is the child supported with emotional literacy and social skill development? Has the school identified where the child would benefit from further intervention?
- **Future Planning:** Is the child supported to consider their future hopes/dreams/goals and potential pathways to achieve these?

2.1.2. Polyvagal Perspective

The polyvagal theory focuses on the central nervous system and the impact of a traumatic event on this. If the trauma persists or is not treated, then the effects on the nervous system can be long-lasting (Porges, 2022). When the nervous system continues to operate in a maladaptive state and is not functioning as expected, a child may present as being in a fight/flight/freeze/fawn/flop state, which impacts their behaviour (Porges, 2009).

Children may present with hypervigilance, fatigue, and feeling numb or shut down, so much so that it interferes with daily functioning (Rothschild, 2021). This may also impact the relationships the child develops with others, including people whom they identify as safe and trusting (Gupta, 2013). Dahlen (2022) highlights the importance and benefits of teaching through the lens of polyvagal theory. Many children who come to live separately from their birth parents and with SGs have experienced trauma in their early lives (Wade et al., 2014).

2.2. Resilience and Adaptation

Resilience is the ability to recover from perceived adverse or changing situations through a dynamic process of adaptation, influenced by personal characteristics, family, and social resources, and manifested by positive coping, control, and integration (Zouh and Lees, 2019). Considering resilience, though a socioecological lens, gives insights into how children manage challenges in their direct environment, which may impact their development (Darling Rasmussen et al., 2019).

School can promote a child's resilience through providing a regular, consistent and safe routine. It also promotes the opportunity for relationships with key trusted adults and, therefore, the opportunity to develop their emotional literacy (Gilligan, 1998).

Research focusing specifically on Special Guardianship arrangements similarly highlights the role of school environments in promoting stability. Hillier (2021), in a qualitative study exploring SG's perspectives on children's educational experiences, found that many SGs viewed school as an important source of routine, belonging and emotional support for children who had experienced early instability. Schools are often considered key in helping children develop resilience (Cefai, 2008). More specifically, 'academic resilience' can be defined as the ability to effectively deal with setbacks, stress or pressure in the academic setting (Rudd *et al.,* 2021).

Schools can provide a stable and consistent environment for children experiencing significant changes in 'kinship' placements (Cunningham and Lauchlan, 2010; Aldgate, 2009). Children living in special guardianship placements often have a higher level of school attendance and engagement than peers who remained in long-term foster placements (Wade *et al.*, 2014). In addition, many SGs viewed school as a positive and supportive environment for the children in their care (Ashley & Braun, 2019; Hunt & Waterhouse, 2012), developing academic resilience.

However, research also indicates difficult experiences in education, whilst there is some recognition of schools meeting and taking into consideration children's individual needs, others reported a lack of support or understanding of the unique circumstances of the child (Wade *et al.* 2014), acting as a barrier to education. In such instances, there was generally reported to be a limited understanding of trauma or SEMH needs of children (Cunningham and Lauchlan, 2010; Colt and Birchall, 2020). Limited understanding could result in children not developing academic resilience and disengaging from education (Schroer and Samuels, 2019).

EPs may play a role in supporting schools to develop their understanding of the experiences of trauma and how to support children living with SGs (Cunningham and Lauchlan, 2010). Some schools seem to have a misunderstanding of Special Guardianship, instead assuming that because children are able to remain in families that the 'issues' have resolved and do not require further support (Gore-Langton, 2017).

2.3. Special Educational Needs and EHCPs

The DfE (2023) states that 57.4% of CYP who had been looked-after continuously for 12 months had Special Educational Needs (SEN). 30.2% of these CYP had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), the most commonly identified need was ‘Social, Emotional and Mental Health’ and were often reported to have needs relating to executive functioning skills, forming trusting relationships, social skills, managing strong feelings (e.g., shame, sadness, anxiety and anger), sensory processing difficulties, foetal alcohol syndrome, and coping with transitions and change. Promoting the education of this population group is a national priority, and the statutory guidance Promoting the Education of Looked After and Previously Looked After Children (2018) sets out duties for LAs in an attempt to address this.

While there are no figures that distinguish identified SEN among CYP who go on to be subject to an SGO, many of these CYP have previously been looked-after and are consequently more likely to have identified SEN than their peers, with lower overall attainment recorded. As a result, CYP who have previously been looked-after, including those who become subject to an SGO, are more likely to be involved with an EP (Educational Psychologist). Hillier (2021) similarly highlighted the advocacy role that many SGs undertake in seeking educational support for children in their care, especially where children present with additional social, emotional, or learning needs linked to earlier adversity.

Unfortunately, there is inconsistent measurement of outcomes for children who have experienced court proceedings. While some indicative data exists, the measures vary, especially regarding the individual needs and experiences of children in Special Guardianship Orders, all within the context of what is considered ‘normal’ child development or what outcomes might have looked like if an alternative permanency plan had been pursued (Dickens et al., 2019). There is a misconception that children placed in an SGO experience their ‘happy ending’, and the impact of early childhood experiences may be overlooked (Ward, 2016), as these continue to affect them after placement, leading to high levels of social, emotional, and mental health difficulties among this population of children and young people (Gore-Langton 2017).

2.4. Educational Attainment of Children Living with Special Guardians

The DfE (2020) report ‘Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in the UK’ highlighted the academic outcomes for children who were placed under an SGO after being LAC. 38% of CYP subject to an SGO achieved expected outcomes at Key Stage 2, which is lower than their peers in the general population (65%) and CYP who were adopted (42%). Similarly, at Key Stage 4, only 30.8% of CYP subject to an SGO achieved expected outcomes in comparison to their peers in the general population (39.9%) and CYP who were adopted (42%).

3. Microsystem

The ‘microsystem’ consists of a child’s immediate environment, such as carer/parent-child relationships, parenting styles, friendships, siblings, teacher relationships, school environment, health services, religion, and neighbourhood. A child will have daily interactions with their microsystem, which therefore has a direct and profound impact on their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is important to consider the experiences of children, in relation to the microsystem, both before and after living with SGs. Many children experience abuse or neglect, parental alcohol/substance misuse, parental mental health difficulties, and domestic violence in the care of their birth parents (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). These immediate relationships form the context in which attachment, caregiving and educational engagement are experienced.

3.1. Attachment Theory

Within the microsystem, attachment processes are central to a child’s sense of safety and belonging. Bowlby (1973) proposed the concept of ‘attachment’, which is an emotional connection between people. The theory proposes that children form relationships with their caregivers, which serves a survival purpose rooted in evolution, yet also has an impact on the child’s development and later life, such as their emotional responses and understanding of relationships. Ainsworth described three styles of attachment (secure, insecure-avoidant and insecure ambivalent), and Main and Solomon (1986) later proposed a fourth attachment style (disorganised).

Attachment theory can be useful to consider in relation to LAC or those living in SGOs (Furnivall, 2011). Children living with an SG have experienced the separation from living with their birth parents. Some children may have also experienced a number of placement moves before settling into a long-term placement. The impact of separation from caregivers at different stages should be considered in relation to potential attachments. It is also important to consider this theory in relation to the child's prior relationship with the SG and the impact of ongoing direct contact with birth parents (Woodward, 2019). Patterns of attachment have implications for how children experience care within SGO placements and how they engage with systems, beyond the home, including school (Conlan, 2022). Hillier (2021) similarly reported that SGs perceived trusting relationships with adults in school to be an important protective factor for children living under SGOs, supporting their sense of safety and engagement within the school environment. Positive adult relationships in school can support a sense of belonging for children living under SGOs (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024).

3.1.1. Secure Attachments

It is proposed that children with this attachment style would become visibly upset when their caregivers leave and are happy when they return. Children may also seek comfort from their caregiver. To develop a secure attachment, carers must be attuned to a child's emotional and physical needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Children who experience early neglect and abuse may not develop secure attachments with their caregivers due to inconsistent care.

Children who come to live separately from their birth parents have experienced disruption of an attachment with a caregiver (Conlan, 2022). In some situations, there have been several placement moves. There may be several disrupted caregiver relationships. Long-term permanency placements strive to establish the opportunity for stable care, to enable children to develop their first long-term attachment with a carer (Harwin et al., 2019). SGOs are often granted to people with whom children are familiar, such as a family member, a family friend or a foster carer, therefore with an existing relationship. Children placed with carers, whom they have an existing relationship demonstrate better social and emotional mental health

(SEMH) than children who are placed long-term with unknown carers (Cusworth et al., 2019).

The Children and Families Act (2014) stated that care proceedings under Section 38 should be concluded within twenty-six weeks. This limit was introduced to reduce the time taken to make significant decisions about CYP's futures (Brown and Ward, 2012) and reduce the risk of placement instability and breakdown, with the hope of reducing placement moves experienced by children. Court proceedings can be a frightening and confusing time for CYP, filled with much uncertainty and impacting the development of attachments. It was highlighted in Eileen Munro's (2011) review that such delays in the conclusion of proceedings and decision-making can have a detrimental impact on the development and outcomes of CYP:

> *"Drift and delays in making forthcoming plans for children have serious adverse effects on their development – Two months of delay in making decisions in the best interest of a child or young person equates to 1% of childhood that cannot be restored".* (Munro, 2011).

Following the review, the time for proceedings to reach disposal reduced steadily and in 2016 had finally reached an average of twenty-six weeks. Unfortunately, the most up-to-date data from January to March 2022 indicates that the average length of care proceedings, within UK family courts, was forty-seven weeks, up six weeks from the previous year. The Ministry of Justice (2022) stated that only 24% of public law cases reached disposal within the 26-week limit.

Dearden, Ward and Munro (2006) indicated that delays in decision-making and numerous placement moves for CLA can have detrimental impacts upon outcomes. Ward, Brown and Westlake (2012) found that CYP who experienced neglect or abuse in their family home and were placed in short-term foster care would experience separation from these carers. When this occurred, CYP were more likely to present with developmental delays or behavioural difficulties, which could impact their education. The impact of which would then increase as the number of placements increased. Children who present with SEMH needs were more likely to experience a short-term placement breakdown (Montserrat *et al.,* 2020).

3.1.2. Insecure Attachments

It is important to consider how children who are not able to develop a secure attachment may develop relationships with their caregiver (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is particularly important when considering the attachments and development of children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and separation from their birth parents and/or carers (Tarren-Sweeney, 2013; Edwards and Sweeney, 2007). In such situations, children may develop an insecure attachment, which can impact their emotional development (Steele, 2019) and future relationships (Bowlby, 1973; Main and Solomon, 1986; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Insecure attachments may be ambivalent, avoidant or disorganised.

- **Insecure Ambivalent Attachment:** It is proposed that children with this attachment style are wary and suspicious of strangers, they are distressed by separation but not reassured by the return of the caregiver, and they may even refuse comfort.
- **Insecure Avoidant Attachment:** children with avoidant attachment styles may avoid their caregiver, especially after periods of separation.
- **Insecure Disorganised Attachment:** children with this attachment style may show avoidance or resistance to the caregiver and be apprehensive of receiving comfort.

Research and statistical data highlight how children who experience separation from caregivers are increasingly likely, when compared to their peers in the general population, to experience social, emotional and mental health needs (Hunt, 2020). This is likely to increase with a higher number of transitions (Cunningham & Lauchlan, 2010). Such SEMH needs may transpire as attachment-based needs, such as developing trusting relationships with their caregivers, such as SGs, when in long-term placements (Cameron, 2019). This can result in higher levels of anxiety and depression, higher levels of anger (Holt & Birchall, 2020) or a lower sense of self-esteem and efficacy, all of which may impact education (Selwyn *et al.,* 2013; Wellard, 2017).

It is important to note that children who live with a SG, with whom they had a previous relationship, overall, have lower reported levels of SEMH needs than their peers who are placed with unknown foster carers, as a long-term plan of permanence (Cusworth *et al.,* 2019). These relational dynamics interact closely with the legal and policy structures that define an SGO and the role of SGs. Understanding who holds parental authority and how decisions are made about children's welfare and upbringing, including decisions about education, is therefore essential.

3.2. Parental Responsibility

Parental Responsibility is defined by section 3(1) of the Children Act 1989 as: "all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his property". An SGO provides the guardian with parental responsibility to make decisions about the day-to-day care and upbringing of the child(ren) or young person(s) in their care, until their eighteenth birthday. This makes an SGO a more stable and enduring option than a CAO) yet less secure than an AO.

When determining whether an SGO is appropriate, the court must consider the child's welfare as its paramount concern and apply the welfare checklist set out in section 1(3) of the Children Act (1989). This checklist requires the court to consider factors such as:

- the wishes and feelings of the child, considering their age and understanding
- their physical, emotional and educational needs
- The likely effect on the child of any change in circumstances
- the child's age, sex, background and any relevant characteristics
- any harm the child has suffered or is at risk of suffering
- how capable each parent or other relevant person is of meeting the child's needs.

As Munby and Logan Green (2020) outline, in weighing up these considerations and the available legal options, "*the court must apply the s.1(3) CA1989 welfare checklist.".* They emphasise that the guiding principle is one of proportionality: the court should adopt *“the least intrusive effective option”* (per Peter Jackson LJ), ensuring that the order made safeguards the child’s welfare without unnecessarily disrupting family relationships or parental rights.

3.3. Contact with Birth Parents

Another key feature of the microsystem for children living in an SGO is on-going contact with their birth parents. Regular, direct contact with birth parents is usually maintained once an SGO is granted, as long as this is in the best interests of the child; this is often agreed upon within the court proceedings. The frequency and duration will vary depending on the child’s individual circumstances and needs. However, birth parent contact can add a layer of complexity as family roles adjust between parents and Special Guardians (Woodward et al., 2020). In some instances, birth parents can be a positive experience for children, aiding them in understanding their individual circumstances, developing their sense of identity and belonging (Wade et al., 2014). This is when contact remains consistent and engaging or has appropriate professional support as required (Alrough et al., 2019).

However, birth parent contact can add additional challenges for children and SGs. Such challenges can include inconsistency or decreasing parental engagement (Wade et al., 2014), conflict between parents and SGs, or relationship breakdowns (Wade et al., 2014), parents undermining SGs or expressing their own upset/anger (Thompson, 2019), on-going risks from parents such as alcohol/substance misuse (Alrough et al., 2019) and general challenges with managing and maintaining contact over time (Simmonds et al., 2019).

Children may also experience challenges around birth parent contact, such as the impact of inconsistent parental attendance, which can lead to a sense of rejection (Wellard et al., 2017). They also feel divided between their parents and SGs where there is conflict, with confusion around ‘loyalty’, particularly when there is limited parental support for the placement, and they speak negatively of the carers, placement or situation. Such difficulties can impact a child’s emotional development and lead to placement instability or disruption over time. This was identified as a key factor for a placement breakdown and re-entry into LA care (Wade et al., 2014).

Selwyn *et al.* (2014) conservatively estimated that around 5% of SGO placements would experience disruption. It was further estimated that 36 SGO placements would experience a placement breakdown, out of around 7000-7500 being made annually at that time. This equated to a small number of SGO placements; however, it was noted that this was likely an underestimated figure due to under-reporting and the absence of systematic national data on disruption. It is also plausible to expect that this number has risen as the number of SGOs has increased over the subsequent years. These relational complexities can spill into school life, influencing attendance, concentration, and social interactions.

3.4. Emotions and Behaviour

At least half of children living in Special Guardianship were reported to have SEMH difficulties, and in some instances, having diagnoses relating to PTSD or attachment difficulties (Wade *et al.,* 2014). Such difficulties often relate to children's early life experiences and trauma from separation and transitions. These difficulties often manifest in school, impacting learning due to behavioural presentation (Harwin *et al.,* 2019), such as damaging furniture, anxiety, physical and verbal aggression or inappropriate sexualised behaviour. Such difficulties are likely to impact a child's relationships with key adults and peers, low self-esteem and difficulties with cognitive processes such as attention and memory (Cameron, 2019). Hillier (2021) similarly found that SGs frequently link children's behavioural and emotional difficulties in school to the lasting effects of earlier instability and trauma, emphasising the importance of school staff understanding children's care histories. Studies have shown that many children living with SGs, particularly those with emotional and behavioural difficulties, experience patterns of non-attendance or school exclusion. (Wade *et al.,* 2014). Harwin *et al.* (2019) found that around 10% of guardianship families raised concerns about school exclusion or non-attendance, with some guardians describing their children as "school refusers." In many cases, children are moved between schools when their needs are not met, exacerbating the issue (Cameron, 2019).

Evidence suggests that children in kinship care, including those under SGOs, may face higher exclusion rates than their peers in the general population, with figures indicating that they are up to four times more likely to experience fixed-term exclusions and 50 times more likely to face permanent exclusions (Ashley & Braun, 2019). These exclusions are often linked to behavioural issues stemming from trauma and instability, and placement disruptions have been shown to further increase the likelihood of exclusion (Farmer, 2010).

3.5. Peer Relationships

Peer relationships are a key aspect of any child's school experience and can act as a key component in a child's sense of belonging when they are living with SGs (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). Positive peer relationships can also act as a protective factor in developing a child's educational resilience (Zouh and Lees, 2019). Positive peer relationships offer opportunities for acceptance, shared identity and can support young people to navigate feelings of difference. Hillier (2021) also identified peer relationships as an important aspect of school life for children living under SGOs, with SGs highlighting the value of supportive peer networks in promoting children's sense of belonging.

Experience of bullying amongst children who are living separately from their birth parents is a common issue (Cunningham *et al*., 2010). Between one-third to two-thirds of kinship children experience hurtful remarks or bullying related to their care status (e.g., Selwyn et al., 2013; Farmer et al., 2013; Wellard et al., 2017), and this is a significant concern of SGs (Wade *et al.,* 2014). Children report bullying about their care circumstances, family financial difficulties, or the reputations of birth parents (e.g., drug use). In response, many children develop strategies to avoid discussing their family situation, such as offering partial information, creating a 'cover story', or even becoming physically responsive (Aldgate, 2009; Farmer et al., 2013). Some children may consequently experience a sense of 'shame' (Baginsky *et al.,* 2017).

4. Mesosystem

The 'mesosystem' considers how different parts of the child's microsystem interact with one another. Changes within components of the child's immediate environment can have a knock-on effect on concurrent microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Examples of this may include carer/parent and school relationships, changes in family structure, and moving house or school. Children who are no longer able to live with their birth parents may experience sudden disruptions in their immediate environment, such as home moves, new community change of carers, altering family dynamics, sibling separation, and a change of school (Selwyn et al., 2014). Sudden and unexpected changes can create a sense of uncertainty within children (Burgess *et al.,* 2010), where they may feel a sense of rejection or find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging or trust with new carers (Aldgate, 2009). These interconnections highlight that the child's progress depends not only on what happens within home or school settings individually, but on how effectively these systems communicate and collaborate.

In consideration of the above, it is the responsibility of the LA to minimise disruptions, where possible, to the education of children under section 10 of the Care Planning, Placement, and Review Regulations (2021). This means that every effort should be made to ensure that placements enable children to continue to attend their current educational provision when moving placements, unless a move is unavoidable, such as out of the area or a significant travelling distance.

4.1. Role of the Virtual School (VS)

Section 4 of the Children and Families Act, the Children Act (1989), and the DfE's (2018) Guidance on the Role of VSH states that the LA, and more specifically, the VS, should support children who were PLAC, including those under SGOs. This includes monitoring the educational progress of children living with SGs, supporting SGs and helping to consider how to utilise PPP (Jackson and Ayers, 2013).

4.2. Education Plan for Adopted Children (EPAC)

The EPAC is a specific plan for adopted children; however, it is also available to those living with an SGO. This plan has a focus on addressing the unique experiences of children and the specific challenges they may face in education. The introduction of EPAC is not outlined within any specific legislation but was created in response to, and is underpinned by, a variety of legislation and statutory guidance.

The Children and Families Act (2014) and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (2015) both outline principles for supporting PLAC that align closely with the ethos and structure of the EPAC. In addition, the Adoption Support Services Regulations (2005, as amended) and the DfE *Guidance on Supporting Children Adopted from Care* further emphasise the need for PLAC to receive appropriate social, emotional, and developmental support, alongside clear recommendations for educational provision. Together, these frameworks collectively reinforce the expectation that educational planning for PLAC should be individualised, holistic, and responsive to their developmental needs, aligning with the principles that are directly reflected in the format and aims of the EPAC.

The EPAC can also serve as a mechanism for identifying and agreeing upon the most effective use of PPP funding to support a child's educational progress. In some cases, it may additionally provide a framework for accessing supplementary resources through the ASGSF. However, eligibility for the ASGSF and PPP is limited to children who were previously in LA care; consequently, it is not available to those living under an SGO unless they meet this specific criterion.

Beyond funding, the EPAC is a valuable tool for promoting a more individualised and collaborative approach to education planning. It provides a structured opportunity for schools, SGs, and professionals, including EPs, to identify barriers to learning and emotional well-being, agree on clear targets, and monitor progress over time. The EPAC functions as a mesosystem mechanism, linking the perspectives of schools, SGs, and professionals to promote continuity and shared understanding. This collaborative process also reflects the ecological principle that effective educational outcomes arise from alignment across multiple relational settings.

For children living under an SGO, who may have experienced early adversity, disrupted attachments, or gaps in schooling, such structured support can help ensure that educational needs are recognised and met within education settings. In this sense, the pack is not only a mechanism for coordinating resources, but also a means of translating the principles of post-looked-after policy into intangible educational practice, making it directly relevant to the research's focus on how SGs support the education of the children in their care.

4.3. The Role of Educational Psychology

Gore Langton (2017) highlights the important contributions of EPs in supporting adopted children and those under SGOs, specifically in relation to the five core functions of EP work, consultation, assessment, intervention, research, and training (Currie, 20), which provide EPs with a unique position from which to support children and SGs.

There is a need to develop awareness of Special Guardianship, particularly in relation to the unique experience of these children, the challenges they face and how they may be best supported (Harwin and Simmonds, 2019). EPs have a key position in being able to facilitate some of this awareness through their work with others, using psychological theory and relevant literature. Effective multiagency working and systemic change could be considered through the lens of the EST and the potential, indirect benefit it may have for children and their SGs.

4.4. Systemic Work and Training

A fundamental role of an EP is working with others (including professionals and families), both in consultation and training-based roles. As a result, it could be argued that EPs are best placed to deliver training with professionals, schools and SGs, drawing on their knowledge around trauma, early life experiences, relational approaches, and SEMH needs and how these may present in behaviour or barriers to learning for a child living in Special Guardianship (Gore Langton, 2017) and increase children's sense of belonging (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024).

In addition to the above, barriers to education faced by children living in Special Guardianship may also be targeted through systemic work, such as targeting bullying or Emotonally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). To reduce bullying, Selwyn et al. (2013) recommend that schools introduce initiatives to teach children about the different types of family structures, normalising various family situations. Removing stressors such as bullying and peer difficulties and providing teachers with the skill set and knowledge to understand trauma and EBSA, barriers to education may be reduced. Such systemic work not only improves understanding of children's needs but also strengthens the relational links that define the mesosystem.

4.5. Multi-Agency Working

Effective multiagency collaboration represents the mesosystem in action, and EPs play a crucial role in multiagency working to support children in care and those facing barriers to education. EPs are uniquely positioned to collaborate with social workers, teachers, and other professionals to assess children's needs, identify potential learning difficulties, and develop tailored interventions (Cunningham & Lauchlan, 2010). Edwards & Sweeney (2007) found that improving collaboration between professionals and families had a beneficial impact on the overall educational engagement and well-being of children in kinship care. Stronger communication between professionals and families enhances continuity of support and reinforces the ecological connections underpinning children's educational experiences.

5. Exosystem

The 'exosystem' consists of aspects of the child's environment, which they may not have a direct interaction with, yet can have a quick and significant impact on their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Examples include parents/carers' employment, family economic status, neighbours, community resources, the media, and government policies. These wider systems shape what resources, training, and opportunities are available to SGs and schools, indirectly implementing the support a child receives within their immediate environment.

SGs do not routinely have access to training and support around key areas such as trauma or associated needs (DfE, 2014). As a result, many SGs may not be equipped with the skills and knowledge to effectively support children in their care, in relation to their early childhood experiences, which will impact their ongoing development. In addition, many families with an SGO may experience the financial challenges of supporting additional children (Wade *et al.,* 2019). Such financial and systemic pressures within the exosystem can limit what is realistic and achievable within the microsystem.

5.1. Pupil Premium Plus (PPP)

The Children and Families Act (2014) introduced PPP, a funding initiative in the UK, developed to improve educational outcomes for PLAC, including those living with SGs, as specified by the DfE (2014). SGs can liaise with schools to determine how this funding can be used to support the education of the child in their care. Additional support can include additional tutoring, therapeutic intervention, activities directly with the child, or indirectly for additional classroom-based interventions (e.g. an intervention for a group of children by combining funding). The PPP funding is currently £2,630 per child, per annum and is available whilst they remain in full-time education up to the age of eighteen. PPP therefore, represents a key exosystem mechanism through which national policy and funding structures can directly impact the educational opportunities within a child's microsystem.

It is important to note that children who become subject to an SGO, without the intervention of a LA, are not eligible for PPP as they were not previously 'LAC', despite likely having similar early life experiences. Such children may be eligible for Pupil Premium if they meet the socio-economic criteria (e.g., being eligible for free school meals). This funding is often coordinated through mechanisms such as the EPAC, highlighting the importance of joined-up planning across ecological levels.

5.2. Accessible Support for SGs

The support for SGs may differ across each LA's Local Offer (Wade et al., 2014). Whilst avenues of support are available, such as via the VS or the EPAC, the ability to access such services is not always easy and may require awareness from the SG or school on how to access these avenues of support. This uneven access means that the quality of support available to families can depend heavily upon local policies rather than children's needs.

In addition to the above, and discussed earlier, there are the PPP and the Adoption and special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) available. However, schools are not required to allocate Pupil Premium to a child directly; the ASGSF has strict eligibility criteria, and children who become subject to an SGO, without LA involvement, are not eligible for either. Many SGs are not aware of Pupil Premium, or how it is being utilised (Ashley & Braun, 2019), and many do not feel that it is effectively benefiting the child (Cameron, 2019). Such inconsistency demonstrates how the exosystem, through funding structures and policy interpretation, can constrain or enable effective microsystemic practices.

5.3. Appropriate Training

As highlighted in the publication ‘Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive: Breaking Down Barriers to Opportunities’ (DfE, 2024), there is limited support or training surrounding Special Guardianship in comparison to children who remain LAC in a long-term foster placement or adopted (Sebba and Berridge, 2019). Some schools seem to have a misunderstanding of Special Guardianship, instead assuming that because children are able to remain in families that the ‘issues’ have resolved and do not require further support (Gore-Langton, 2017). This gap in professional understanding can lead to children's SEMH or trauma-related behaviours being misinterpreted as non-compliance rather than as a communication of need.

Such missing training opportunities potentially leave some children lacking in adequate support from their SGs, school or external professionals such as EPs. Children living in Special Guardianship have unique experiences that require support and understanding to effectively support them in education (Wade *et al.,* 2014). Without adequate access system support, such as consistent training, clear local policy, the implementation of trauma-informed practices can become fragmented and dependent on individual school capacity (Maynard *et al.,* 2019).

6. Macrosystem

The ‘macrosystem’ outlines the broader cultural and societal context in which a child is living. This system includes social norms, values, laws, customs, and ideologies that can influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These broader narratives determine how children and families are positioned within society, shaping both the legal framework and public expectations surrounding SGOs.

When considering this level of the ecological systems, it is important to consider how wider legislation and culture shifts are likely to impact SGO placements (Sinclair and Selwyn, 2016). The DfE (2024) highlights a current strategic legislative focus on SGO and supporting children to safely live within families wherever possible. This includes a focus on support for SGs and the children who live with them. In addition, changes to public funding, for example, the effective implementation of PPP, can have a significant impact on a child's education indirectly. In this sense, national policies, legislation, and cultural assumptions, such as the belief that permanency equates to a 'happy ending', influence not only the legal process but also how support is allocated and prioritised and lower ecological levels (Ward, 2016).

7. Chronosystem

The 'chronosystem' refers to time, highlighting that development is not static; Time shapes not only individual development but also the evolution of legal and policy practices surrounding SGOs. It considers both the individual's life events (e.g. moving home, a new sibling, parental separation) and broader historical or societal changes (technology, pandemics and economy) that affect development over time. Timeliness in decision-making is particularly important, as discussed earlier, delays in care proceedings can have cumulative effects on attachment instability, which can impact educational engagement (Munro, 2011). Children who come to live with SGs may experience numerous placement moves or face placement instability in future (Wade *et al.,* 2014). In addition, an SGO may be revoked at a later date, or children may be exposed to inconsistent parental contact or issues surrounding further sibling births, particularly if they, too, are separated from the birth parents.

7.1. Who are Special Guardians?

SGs cannot be the birth parent of a child and must be over the age of eighteen when making an application to the court and should notify the Children's Services of the LA in which they live of their intent to apply at least three months in advance. The LA has a duty to assess the applicant's and placement's suitability for Special Guardianship. Data published by the Department for Education indicates that 89% of SGs are relatives or friends, while the remaining 11% are previous foster carers.

Wade *et al.* (2019) stated that the average age of children subject to special guardianship was between 3 months and 6 years and 4 months.

A connected person, such as a family friend, can make an application to the court if the child(ren) or young person(s) have lived with them for three of the last five years and have not ceased to live with them in the three months before making the application. A relative of the child(ren) or young person(s) can make the application when the child has been living with them for a year. Carers who already hold a CAO can also apply. In such cases, the child(ren) or young person(s) have not previously been LAC by the LA.

When a child has been subject to public care proceedings and is in the care of the LA, a child may be placed with a kinship carer for the duration of these proceedings, with a Special Guardianship Order granted upon conclusion. Alternatively, where a child is residing in an LA foster placement, a placement with kinship carers may be recommended during proceedings, which results in a placement move. In such cases, the kinship carer may initially be a foster carer for the child until a Special Guardianship order is granted. Similarly, a foster carer may apply for Special Guardianship for a child in their care for the previous year. In such cases, the CO would cease, and Parental Responsibility would be transferred from the LA to the Special Guardian. In such cases, the child(ren) or young person(s) are recognised as PLAC.

In some cases, children living under a Special Guardianship Order are also subject to a Supervision Order, giving the LA the duty to 'advise, assist and befriend' the child (Section 3; Children Act, 1989) for a period of time, usually a year. A Supervision Order does not give any Parental Responsibility to the LA; it is the responsibility of the legal guardian to enable the LA to maintain reasonable contact with the child(ren) or young person(s).

8. Chapter Summary and Research Rationale

This chapter has examined the education experiences of children living under SGOs through the lens of brown from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST. The literature indicates that the educational experiences of children living under SGOs are shaped by a complex interaction of individual and environmental influences that operate across ecological systems.

At the individual level, research consistently highlights the developmental implications of early adversity for many children who later live under an SGO. Experiences of abuse, neglect, disrupted caregiving relationships, and instability prior to permanence have been associated with elevated levels of SEMH needs, attachment-related difficulties, and barriers to emotional regulation (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Harwin *et al.,* 2019; Cameron, 2019). These experiences can influence children's capacity to engage with learning and develop trusting relationships within school environments. Additionally, literature on resilience explores how children’s development is not determined solely by early adversity. Protective factors, including supportive caregiving relationships and stable educational environments, can foster adaptation over time (Masten, 2012; Cefai, 2008). This underscores the importance of considering children’s experiences within the broader relational and systemic contexts in which development occurs.

Within the microsystem, the immediate relational environments surrounding the child play a crucial role in shaping educational experiences. Relationships with SGs, teachers, and peers can influence children’s sense of belonging, identity, emotional literacy, and engagement with learning. Research indicates that many children in kinship or Special Guardianship arrangements benefit from maintaining family connections and familiar caregiving relationships, which can support stability and identity development (Wade *et al.,* 2019; Conlan, 2022). However, the literature also highlights ongoing challenges in these placements, including managing the impact of trauma, supporting children with SEMH needs, and navigating complex relationships with birth families (Woodward *et al.,* 2020; Wellard *et al.,* 2017). In educational settings, children living under SGOs may also face difficulties related to behavioural regulation, school attendance, peer relationships, and exclusion (Ashley & Braun, 2019; Cameron, 2019). The mesosystem examines the influence of interactions between home, school, and broader professional systems. Effective cooperation among SGs, schools, and professionals has been recognised as a vital factor in supporting children’s educational engagement and well-being (Cunningham &

Lauchlan, 2010). Mechanisms such as the VS, PPP, and EPAC aim to facilitate coordinated responses across these systems. However, research also shows that schools and professionals may not always fully understand the specific experiences of children under SGOs, sometimes assuming that the granting of a permanence order solves earlier difficulties (Gore-Langton, 2017). Consequently, children's ongoing needs may be misunderstood or not adequately supported within educational settings.

The exosystem and macrosystem highlight how wider policy, legal and resource contexts influence children's educational experiences. The introduction of SGOs through the Adoption and Children Act (2002) represented an important policy development, intended to provide children with greater stability while maintaining connections with their birth families. Since their introduction, SGOs have become an increasingly prominent permanence option within England, with national statistics indicating a continued rise in the number of children leaving care through this route (DfE, 2024). However, research suggests that support available to SGs varies considerably across local authorities, particularly in relation to financial support, training and access to services (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Ashley & Braun, 2019). In addition, eligibility for resources such as PPP and the ASGSF is limited to children who were previously looked after, meaning that some children living under SGOs may not have access to the same levels of support despite experiencing similar early life adversity.

Finally, the chronosystem emphasises the importance of recognising how children's experiences develop over time. Children living under SGOs may have undergone multiple transitions before achieving permanency, including placement changes, disrupted schooling, and shifts in caregiving relationships (Selwyn *et al.,* 2014). These experiences can accumulate developmental impacts, especially when combined with delays in care proceedings or ongoing contact arrangements with birth families (Munro, 2011; Wade *et al.,* 2014). The growing use of SGOs in the English family court system reflects broader policy shifts towards family-based permanency arrangements and a reduced reliance on adoption (Harwin *et al.,* 2019).

Overall, the literature shows that the educational experiences of children living under SGOs are influenced by a complex mix of personal histories, relational environments, and systemic factors. While previous research has examined outcomes for children in kinship care, adoption, and PLOS populations more broadly, comparatively little focused specifically on the experiences of SGOs in relation to education. In particular, there is limited, yet emerging, qualitative research on how SGs understand and navigate educational systems, support children’s engagement with learning, and interact with schools and professionals after the grant of an SGO.

Addressing this gap is crucial given the increasing prevalence of SGOs and the vital role that education plays in children’s long-term development and well-being. Therefore, this study seeks to explore SGOs’ experiences of supporting the education of the children in their care. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST as a conceptual framework, the research aims to investigate how these experiences are influenced across ecological systems, including individual, relational, and systemic factors. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to explore these research areas questions.

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper

1. Introduction

In England, every child of compulsory school age is lawfully entitled, under Section 7 of the Education Act (1996), to a suitable full-time education (Menter *et al.,* 2014). Education, therefore, plays a central role in children’s overall development, extending beyond the acquisition of academic skills. Education provides children with opportunities to socialise, to develop their sense of identity and belonging, and to promote independence skills for adulthood (Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Education is also closely linked to children's well-being, resilience, and long-term life outcomes and opportunities (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Literature relating to education consistently highlights how schools act not only as learning environments, focused on academic attainment, they play a key role in developing a relational environment or children and young people, promoting the development of emotional security, a sense of belonging, important and consistent relationships, and identity (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2016). With this in mind, it is important to consider how school environments can significantly shape the development of children, particularly those who have experiences adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how they can be sources of academic resilience.

However, children's experiences of schooling are rarely consistent, and children living under alternative care arrangements are likely to face distinct challenges in accessing and engaging with education (Driscoll, 2011). Research highlights that PLAC, as a broad group, are more likely to face educational disadvantages compared to their peers (Carey, 2024). This can include overall academic achievement, a higher rate of exclusion, and difficulties with attendance and engagement, resulting in higher levels of EBSA (Parsons, 2023). Large-scale research examining the educational experiences of PLAC often reports patterns of disadvantage, including lower academic achievement, increased levels of emotional and behavioural needs, EBSA, and difficulties in peer relationships (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). Such trends in the literature are also often associated with earlier experiences of adversity, instability in caregiving relationships, experiences of trauma, and the ongoing emotional impact of these experiences on learning and development.

In addition, research has increasingly highlighted the importance of relational and trauma-aware school environments in mitigating some of these challenges, developing educational resilience, and reducing the long-term impact of ACEs. For example, Gore-Langton (2017) outlined the role of supportive teacher and pupil relationships and inclusive school cultures in promoting engagement and resilience among PLAC. Furthermore, Ramoutar and Hampton (2024) emphasised the importance of collaborative home-school relationships in supporting children living under an SGO, who have experienced adversity, noting that effective communication and a shared understanding between SGOs and schools can enhance children’s sense of belonging and participation in education.

One such group includes children subject to SGOs, a legal arrangement introduced in England and Wales in 2005 (Davis, 2014). SGOs provide a unique form of permanence where parental responsibility is transferred to SGs (often family, friends, or foster carers) while maintaining the legal link with birth parents (Wade et al., 2014). This arrangement was originally designed to offer an alternative pathway to permanence for children who could not safely remain with their birth parents but for whom adoption was not deemed appropriate (Harwin et al., 2019). Many children enter an SGO after experiencing adversity, instability, or trauma (Garstang et al., 2025). As a result, SGs serve a dual purpose, providing consistent day-to-day parenting and supporting children's adjustment and development following adverse experiences (Harwin et al., 2019). Research into SGOs indicates that SGs often undertake these responsibilities with limited preparation or formal training, especially when compared to adoptive parents or foster carers, often relying heavily on personal experiences, informal support networks, or their own research when navigating educational and professional systems (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). Therefore, understanding the educational experiences of this group is crucial for effective practice in EP.

While increasing attention has been given to the educational experiences of PLAC, the specific circumstances of children under SGOs, as a distinct focus, remain relatively under-researched compared to other permanency options, such as adoption or long-term foster care**.** Much of the existing literature exploring education in alternative care contexts focuses on foster care or adoption placements (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014), meaning that the educational experiences of children living under SGOs remain comparatively less visible within the research base. This lack of evidence contrasts with the steady rise in the number of SGOs being granted and the fact that many children stay in these arrangements throughout compulsory school age. However, without research that specifically examines the lived experiences of SGs, the unique challenges and support needs that shape how they navigate and support children's educational journeys risk being overlooked. Therefore, this research seeks to address this gap by exploring SGs' perspectives on supporting the educational experiences of children in their care.

1.1. Terminology

Clarity of terminology is important when discussing children in alternative care arrangements. An SGO refers to a legal order granted under the Children Act (1989), as amended by the Adoption and Children Act (2002). An SGO assigns parental responsibility to one or more individuals, typically relatives or family friends, but it may also be a foster carer, whilst maintaining the child's legal connection to their birth parents (Hammad et al., 2025). Children under SGOs are therefore legally and experientially distinct from those in foster care or adoption (Harwin *et al.,* 2019; Wade *et al.,* 2014). These distinctions are important within research and professional practice, as different legal arrangements shape the types of support and educational entitlements available to children and their caregivers (Harwin et al., 2019).

This unique legal status creates both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, SGOs can provide stability within a familiar family environment, often avoiding the disruption associated with multiple foster placements (Woodward *et al.,* 2021). On the other hand, SGs may not always have access to the same level of financial, therapeutic, or educational support that is more readily available to foster carers or adoptive parents (Woolgar *et al.,* 2025). Research exploring families with an SGO indicates that this reduced access to formal support can leave SGs navigating complex systems such as education and health services with limited guidance and knowledge, where professionals may have a limited understanding of their specific legal circumstances (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). This can leave both SGs and children navigating education without adequate guidance or recognition of their particular and distinct legal circumstances (Hingley-Jone *et al.,* 2020).

The issue of terminology extends beyond legal definitions to questions of research and policy characterisation. In academic and professional contexts, children under SGOs are sometimes grouped with 'LAC, or 'PLAC' (Hamilton & Blades, 2025). While there are overlaps, such as histories of adversity, disrupted attachments, and engagement with children's services, conflating these categories risks obscuring the specific educational challenges associated with Special Guardianship (Connolly & Morris, 2011). Research highlights that while children under SGOs may share similar early experiences with other PLAC groups, their legal status and support structures often differ significantly, meaning their educational experiences may also be significantly different (Selwyn *et al.,* 2013; Harwin *et al.,* 2019).

Terminology also matters at the level of identity and lived experience; SGs may describe themselves as parents, carers, or something in between. These identities will likely shape how they interact with educational professionals and services (Conlan, 2022). Children, likewise, may understand their family and school experiences differently, depending on whether they are categorised as being 'LAC', 'PLAC', 'living in kinship care', or 'under an SGO arrangement' (Shuttleworth, 2021). These categories influence not only access to support but also the narratives of belonging, permanence, identity, and difference that children and families negotiate (Glynn, 2019). Research examining kinship and permanence arrangements suggests that such labels can impact both professional expectations and children's own understandings of their identity and place within school environments (Conlan, 2022).

For this research, the term children 'living with SGs' or 'under an SGO' will be used consistently. This phrasing reflects the specific legal and familial contexts, avoids conflation with broader categories of 'looked-after' or 'previously looked-after' children, and maintains the focus on the distinctiveness of SGOs. It also aligns with the research's broader constructionist stance by recognising that language is not a neutral descriptor but a social construct that shapes meaning, identity, and social understandings.

1.2. Ecological Systems Theory (EST)

To understand the educational experiences of children living under SGOs, it is useful to adopt a framework that recognises the multiple, interacting influences on their lives. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST offers such a framework by conceptualising development as occurring within several systems that interact dynamically over time. This perspective shifts the focus away from individual child factors alone to a broader set of relationships, interactions, and societal/service structures that shape children's educational experiences either directly or indirectly (Amali *et al.,* 2023). Ecological approaches have been increasingly used within educational and child welfare research to understand how children's experiences of adversity, caregiving and education are shaped across wider systems (Darlington, 2007). Applying EST, therefore, provides a useful conceptual lens for understanding the educational experiences of children living under SGOs, within broader relational and systemic contexts.

1.2.1. The Individual Level

Children in SGOs often carry histories of adversity, including experiences such as neglect, abuse, loss, or family disruption (Harwin et al., 2019). These experiences can impact attachment, self-esteem, and emotional regulation, all of which influence how children engage with learning and education (Begin & Bergin, 2009; Tomac, 2011). Many children may also present with additional needs, including SEND, which research shows are more common among care-experienced children than their peers in the general population (Cummings & Shelton, 2024). Literature exploring children in kinship care and other permanence arrangements similarly report higher levels of emotional, and educational needs, often associated with earlier experiences of instability or adversity (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). Recognising these within-child factors is important; however, EST reminds us that they are never experienced in isolation; rather, they interact with family, school, and wider community contexts (Darling, 2007).

1.2.2. The Microsystem

The microsystem includes children's immediate relationships, such as those with SGs, teachers, and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For children under SGOs, the SG-child relationship is key. SGs often take on parental roles in challenging circumstances, sometimes with little preparation or formal support (Conlan, 2022). Research exploring SGOs indicates that SGs frequently provide stability and continuity following early life disruption, although may also face challenges associated with limited access to formal support compared with foster carers or adopters (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). Positive, nurturing relationships within the microsystem can foster belonging, promote engagement in school, and support educational resilience (Allen, Vella-Brodrick & Waters, 2016). Conversely, strained or disruptive relationships might worsen existing difficulties, especially when SGs feel ill-equipped or unsupported in their parenting role (Harwin *et al.,* 2019).

Relationships with teachers are just as important as a microsystem. Sensitive and responsive school staff can act as protective figures, shielding children from the effects of early adversity and encouraging resilience (Jennings, 2018). Literature exploring the educational experiences of PLAC suggests that consistent realtionships with trusted adults in a school setting can act as an important protective factor for developin educational resilience and emotional well-being (Gore-Langton, 2017). However, where teachers have limited awareness of Special Guardianship, their ability to offer this support to children living in SGOs might be restricted.

Teachers also play a key role in shaping children’s peer experiences (Brown, 2019). By promoting inclusive classroom environments, tackling bullying, and promoting diversity (including various family structures), they can support children living with SGs in developing their sense of belonging and identity (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). When peer relationships are supportive, they can enhance resilience and engagement; however, experiences of stigma or exclusion by peers may reinforce feelings of difference, making the teacher's role in mediating these dynamics particularly important (Haddow, Taylor & Schwannauer 2021).

1.2.3. The Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to the connections between the microsystems, such as home-school relationships and communication (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For SGO families, these links can be especially important. Positive collaboration, where schools listen to and value SGs' insights, can result in more consistent and tailored support in the classroom (Cox, 2005). Research highlights the importance of home–school relationships, esepcially where SGs' knowledge of children's experiences informs school responses and support strategies (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). In contrast, weak or conflictual home-school relationships may result in misunderstandings, conflicting efforts, or under-recognition of children's needs (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012).

Parental contact also forms part of the mesosystem. Arrangements with birth parents can directly influence school engagement, for instance, where visits disrupt routines and affect children's emotional readiness to learn (Hall, 2023).

1.2.4. The Exosystem

The exosystem comprises settings that children do not directly participate in, but which nonetheless influence their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For children under SGOs, this includes, but is not limited to, LA policies, access to educational support services, and the resources available to SGs (Piel *et al.,* 2017). SGs often report difficulties in accessing consistent input from Children's Services or specialist professionals, with provision varying considerably between LAs (Woodward, Melia & Combs, 2021). Similar concerns have been identified within systematic reviews of SGOs, which highlight variability in the availability of financial, therapeutic, and educational support across local authorities (Harwin et al., 2019). Barriers at this level may compound challenges within the microsystem, such as strained home-school relationships when difficulties occur, by limiting the external support available (O'Farrell, Wilson & Shiel, 2023).

1.2.5. The Macrosystem

The macrosystem reflects the cultural values, societal attitudes, and national policies that provide the broader context for SGOs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, perceptions of kinship care, as well as policies in schools or wider support systems, can shape how SGOs are recognised or supported. Access to therapeutic support through mechanisms such as the ASGSF has historically excluded SGOs, reflecting wider systemic inequalities (Woolgar *et al.,* 2025). Children who become subject to an SGO through private proceedings are not eligible for PPP, despite being just as likely to have experienced adverse life events (Bainham, 2013). These disparities have been widely noted throughout research, which highlights ongoing policy differences in the support available to children living under SGOs compared with other care arrangements (Harwin et al., 2019). Recent social care reforms have also begun to acknowledge these disparities, but provision remains inconsistent, and SGOs are still less visible and well-known than other permanence routes (Stabler, 2025). These macro-level dynamics can filter down into schools and services, influencing how professionals understand and respond to families with an SGO (Poole, 2025).

1.2.6. The Chronosystem

The chronosystem highlights the importance of time, transitions, and context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Many children under SGOs have experienced significant life transitions, such as moving between carers, placements, or schools, which can disrupt continuity of learning and relationships (Garstang *et al.,* 2025). Research indicates how repeated transitions can influence children's emotional security and engagement with education over time (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014).

Changes in parental contact arrangements also belong within the chronosystem. Inconsistent, unsafe, or legally contested contact with birth parents can destabilise children's routines and sense of security over time, with consequences for both emotional well-being and subsequently educational engagement (Hall, 2023).

1.2.7. Bringing the Systems Together

When brought together, ecological systems offer a holistic perspective to understand how individual and systemic factors interact and combine to influence the educational experiences of children in SGOs (Spours, 2024). This view emphasises that these experiences cannot be simply reduced to ‘within-child difficulties’ or ‘school problems’ but must be seen as the result of multi-level interactions over time (Mullarkey, 2025). Existing research highlights how children’s educational experiences are shaped through individual histories, caregiving relationships, school environments, and wider support systems (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014; Harwin et al., 2019). For this research, EST functions as a conceptual lens to position the accounts of SGs within the broader ecological contexts that shape and limit them.

1.3. Gaps in Literature

Although there is extensive research on PLAC as a broad group, especially among those in long-term foster care or adoption, the literature on SGOs remains comparatively limited. Much of the existing research has focused on policy and practice aspects, including the legal processes involved with SGOs, placement quality and stability, and the provision of support services (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). While this research offers valuable insights into how SGOs function, at a systemic level, considerably less is known about the daily lived experiences of SGs, particularly in relation to their experiences of supporting the children in their care to access education. Research exploring educational experiences among PLAC more broadly has outlined the importance of understanding how caregiving relationships, school environments, and wider systems interact to shape educational engagement (Selwyn et al., 2013; Gore-Langton, 2017). However, these perspectives have rarely been explored specifically within the context of SGOs. Such research moves beyond quantitative indicators such as statistics, developing a deeper, qualitative understanding of how SGs perceive children’s education and how they support learning within the context of their unique family circumstances.

When discussing educational outcomes, they are also often presented in broad, aggregated terms, with limited breakdown between children subject to SGOs and other care-experienced groups (Conlan, 2022). This makes it difficult to identify the distinct barriers and enablers faced by children in SGO arrangements, whose circumstances and family dynamics may differ markedly from those in long-term foster care or adoption (Harwin et al., 2019). Children living in kinship care or under SGOs may also experience different support structures, caregiving dynamics, and relationships with services compared with other care-experienced groups (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). Furthermore, much of the available literature emphasises quantitative outcomes such as attainment, attendance, or exclusion rates. While such measures are important, they provide only a partial picture and risk obscuring the complex ways in which SGs and children themselves interpret education, considering their histories, identities, and relationships.

There is also a notable gap in the perspectives represented, as many studies on education and care focus on the voices of professionals, who interpret children's experiences from their professional viewpoint (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). In contrast, the voices of SGs themselves remain relatively absent from the literature. This is significant because SGs often serve as children's main advocates in education, managing home-school relationships and liaising with professionals. Their insights are therefore vital to understanding how educational experiences develop for the children in their care and which forms of support are most effective. (Atkin, 2025). SG knowledge of children’s histories and emotional needs can play a key role in shaping educational support and engagement (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). However, the perspectives of SGs in relation to these processes remain comparatively underrepresented within the literature.

Moreover, existing studies often focus on challenges within a single domain, such as family (e.g. attachment or parenting practices) or education (e.g. resources or teachers’ approaches), rather than exploring how these factors interact (Harwin *et al.,* 2019; Wade *et al.,* 2014). This results in a fragmented view that underrates the dynamic interactions across systemic levels. For example, difficulties with school engagement may be influenced simultaneously by the child's previous trauma experiences, the SG's capacity to advocate effectively, relational practices in school, and wider policy pressures (Blodgett & Dorado, 2016). Research indicates that educational outcomes cannot be understood through isolated variables but instead emerge through interactions between children's histories, caregiving relationships, school environments, and wider service systems (Selwyn et al., 2013; Gore-Langton, 2017). To date, few studies have utilised ecological frameworks to conceptualise these multi-level influences, despite their recognised value in educational research more broadly (Amali *et al.,* 2023). Together, these gaps highlight the need for research that:

1. Distinguishes children under SGOs from other care-experienced groups, in relation to education.
2. Moves beyond quantitative outcomes to capture the lived and narrated experiences of SGs supporting the education of children in their care.
3. Considers the perspectives of SGs, whose voices are more often absent in research and policy.
4. Applies an ecological lens to understand how individuals, relational, institutional, and systemic factors can all interact to shape educational experiences.

This research, therefore, aims to contribute to the literature by examining the experiences of SGs in supporting the education of the children in their care, through a qualitative constructionist approach that emphasises SGs' perspectives, while also acknowledging the wider systemic context in which these experiences are situated. This research therefore directly addressed gaps within the literature where there is a need for greater focus the educational experiences of children living in SGOs, and for research that considers how these experiences are shaped through interactions across ecological systems (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014; Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). By doing so, it addresses a significant gap in the literature and provides insights with implications for EP practice.

2. Research Aim and Questions

Building on the gaps identified in the literature review, this research aimed to address gaps in the existing literature by exploring the educational experiences of children living under SGOs as understood and described by their SGs. While the educational experiences of children in foster care and adoption have been relatively well studied, little is known about the distinct challenges and opportunities facing children under SGOs, particularly in relation to their education (Harwin *et al.,* 2019; Wade *et al.,* 2014).

Special Guardianship is a relatively recent legal framework in England and Wales (Lush, 2014), and children placed under such orders often have complex life histories involving adversity, disruption, and changes in caregiving arrangements (Garstang et al., 2025). Their educational outcomes are influenced not only by individual needs but also by the wider environmental contexts in which they are embedded (Conlan, 2022). To account for this complexity, the research adopts Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST as a guiding framework, enabling exploration of how children's educational experiences develop and are affected across multiple levels of their environment. These include SG-child relationships, SG-school interactions, access to professional support, and the broader cultural and policy narrative surrounding Special Guardianship and education.

The aim of the research is therefore to develop a nuanced, multilayered understanding of education as experienced by children in SGOs, through the perspective of their SGs. This approach both elevates the view of SGs, a significantly under-researched group in educational studies, and underscores the relational and systemic factors that may either support or hinder children's engagement with education.

These research questions are grounded in a social constructionist epistemology, which sees SGs' accounts as situated and co-constructed rather than as neutral representations of reality. Simultaneously, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST offers a guiding framework for placing these accounts within broader relational, institutional, and policy contexts. Together, these perspectives ensure that the research considers both the meanings SGs attribute to children's educational experiences and the systemic conditions that influence them meanings.

2.1. Overarching Research Question

- How do SGs perceive and make sense of their role in supporting the education of the children in their care?
- According to SGs, what factors across ecological system levels (e.g. home, School, community, policy) shape children's educational experience under SGOs?

2.2. Subsidiary Research Questions

- What challenges and barriers to education do SGs identify, and how do these relate to children's individual, relational and systemic contexts?
- What proactive factors, supports, or practices do SGs describe as enabling or enhancing children's educational engagement and outcomes?

3. Methodology

3.1 Philosophical Considerations

All research is shaped by philosophical assumptions, whether explicitly stated or implicitly embedded within its design (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Such assumptions concern ontology, or beliefs about the nature of reality, and epistemology, or beliefs about how knowledge of that reality can be generated (Scotland, 2012). Making these positions explicit is important in research because they provide the foundation for methodological decisions and help to demonstrate coherence across the research design (Drake & Heath, 2010). This research, which explores SGs' perspectives regarding the educational experiences of the children in their care, adopts a social constructionist epistemological stance, with implications for ontology, methodology, and analysis.

3.1.1. Ontology and Epistemology

Social constructionism presupposes a relativist ontology: reality is not singular or objective but multiple, contextually dependent, and shaped by social processes (Andrews, 2012). From this standpoint, phenomena like SGOs or educational experiences cannot be understood as fixed entities but rather as concepts whose meanings are continually shaped and negotiated through discourse, social practices, and cultural contexts (Gee & Green, 1998). Epistemologically, constructionism rejects the idea of a neutral researcher simply 'discovering' truth and instead sees knowledge as something co-constructed between participants and the researcher within the research encounter (Hiller, 2016).

This orientation contrasts with positivist epistemology, which assumes a realist ontology and the possibility of producing objective, generalisable knowledge (Yucel, 2018). It also differs from critical realism, which accepts that social phenomena are shaped by underlying structures but still assumes a reality independent of the mind that can, to some extent, be apprehended (Pilgrim, 2019). While critical realism has gained popularity in educational research, it was not adopted in this context because the research question focuses on how SGs experience supporting the education of children in their care, rather than identifying underlying causal mechanisms (Luke, 2009). Constructionism thus provides a better fit with the aims of exploring lived experiences, meanings, and narratives (Esin, Faith, and Squire, 2014).

3.1.2. Implications for the Research Topic

Considering SGOs, though, a constructionist lens emphasises that the term lacks a fixed essence. Its meaning, therefore, partly stems from its legal definition, but equally from how professionals, families, and wider society interpret and enact it. SGs may identify as parents, carers, or something in between, and these identities shape how they navigate supporting the education of children in their care, including the challenges and protective factors. Likewise, educational success is not a neutral outcome but a socially constructed benchmark, influenced by policy agendas, school cultures, and broader social expectations regarding childhood and educational achievement.

This means that the participants' accounts are not viewed as transparent windows into truth, but rather as partial, context-dependent narratives. Each account is embedded within cultural discourses (e.g., about family, responsibility, or success) and institutional contexts (e.g., schools, LAs, social care systems). Recognising these challenges, the notion that there is one definitive version of guardianship or educational experience. Instead, the research focuses on how SGs discuss and frame their experiences, and how these accounts both reflect and reproduce broader social realities and understandings.

3.1.3. Reflexivity and Positionality

Within constructionism, the researcher's influence is not regarded as 'bias' to be eliminated but as an unavoidable and valuable resource for meaning-making (Spivey, 2023). The researcher's background in education and social care fostered an awareness of issues related to Special Guardianship and education. However, it also risked shaping assumptions about what might be significant (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). Reflexive practices, including keeping a research diary, writing analytic memos, and participating in supervisory discussions, were therefore essential to the research process, facilitating a critical examination of how positionality affected interpretation (Hopman, 2021), in line with the need for transparency and rigour in qualitative research (Coombs, 2017).

3.1.4. Limitations of Constructionism

While social constructionism provides a powerful perspective for examining how meanings are created (Burr, 2024), it also has its limitations. Some may argue that social constructionism risks overlooking inequalities or constraints within social structures, such as poverty, trauma, or systemic barriers, which clearly influence children's educational experiences (Sayer, 1999; Hammersley, 2018). To address this, the research employs Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST as an interpretive framework in the analysis, facilitating focus on both discursive constructions and the structural contexts in which they take shape (Ungar, 2004). This approach reflects a nuanced constructionist stance that recognises the dynamic relationship between discourse, experience, and material conditions without reverting to essentialism (Hosking, 2008).

3.1.5. Coherence Across the Research

Adopting a social constructionist stance offers philosophical consistency across ontology, epistemology, methodology, and analysis (Weinberg, 2008). A relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology underpin the decision to employ semi-structured interviews, which enable participants to co-construct their accounts (Roulston, 2019). They also guide the use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which considers themes as interpretive constructs rather than objective findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity is essential, positioning the researcher as an active participant in knowledge production and allowing the research to explore the complexity of SGs' accounts of education. This highlights how meanings are negotiated within personal and systemic contexts (Braun *et al.,* 2023).

3.2 Design

A qualitative research design was selected as the most appropriate approach to explore the educational experiences of children living with SGs. This research is focused on how meanings are constructed and interpreted, rather than on measuring variables or generating generalisable results (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Quantitative approaches, whilst valuable for identifying broad trends, would not capture the nuanced, layered, and context-dependent accounts that emerge from SGs' lived experiences (Usman Al-Hendawi & Bulut, 2025). Qualitative research, by contrast, offers the flexibility to attend to detail and context during analysis and interpretation, aligning closely with the research's broader social constructionist orientation (Denicolo, Bradley-Cole & Long, 2016).

3.2.1. Analytic Framework: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

RTA was selected as the analytic framework because it provides a flexible yet rigorous approach to working with qualitative data (Bryne, 2022). Unlike other analytic methods tied to specific theoretical traditions, RTA is adaptable and particularly suited to constructionist research (Braun and Clarke, 2021). It acknowledges that themes do not simply reside in data waiting to be discovered but are actively generated through the researcher's interpretive engagement with participant accounts (Trainor and Bundon, 2021).

In this research, the aim was not to uncover a singular 'truth' about special guardianship and education, but to examine how experiences are described, negotiated, and made meaningful across the levels of EST (Finlay, 2009). RTA supports this orientation by emphasising researcher reflexivity in interpretation, and the iterative process of analysis, rather than relying on prescriptive coding frameworks that aim for objectivity (Terry and Hayfield, 2020).

3.2.2. Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection. This format provides sufficient consistency across participants to enable comparison, while also allowing participants to describe their perspectives in their own terms (Dearnley, 2005). The guided structure of the interviews created opportunities for unexpected insights to arise, recognising that meaning is often generated through dialogue rather than fixed questions (Jennings, 2005).

From a constructionist standpoint, interviews are not neutral tools for extracting information, but rather sites of knowledge construction, where both the participant and the researcher shape the account (Irwin, 2011). This means attention must be given to power within the research encounter. While the researcher inevitably shapes the interview through decisions about structure and prompts, participants are positioned as experts on their own lived experiences (Gubrium & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). Balancing these forms of expertise was central to the design from the outset. The interviews were approached as collaborative conversations, creating space for the SGs to emphasise what mattered most to them, while the researcher retained responsibility for ensuring sufficient depth and coherence in the discussion (Bishop, 1997).

3.2.3. Reflexivity in the Research Design

The design reflects the constructionist understanding that the researcher is never a neutral observer but an active participant in meaning-making (Krauss, 2005). Reflective practices were therefore embedded from the outset. These included maintaining a reflexive journal to capture assumptions, emotions, and decisions; engaging in supervisory discussions to explore interpretations; and developing awareness of how the researcher's professional background in education and social care influenced the research lens (Mann, 2016). RTA explicitly demands this attention to positionality, recognising that meaning is produced through the interaction of the researcher, participant, and cultural context. In this research, reflexivity was viewed as a mark of quality, rather than a threat to validity (Darawsheh, 2014).

Although qualitative in focus, descriptive contextual information such as participants' demographics, professional involvement, and educational contexts was also collected. This information provided background that enriched interpretation, without detracting from the emphasis on socially constructed meanings (Hatch, 2023).

3.2.4 Limitations of the Design

The chosen design has strengths but also carries limitations. RTA does not aim for statistical generalisability; instead, it prioritises depth and a layered, interpretive insight (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While findings cannot represent the experiences of all SGs, they can provide transferable insights that may highlight dynamics in other contexts where children's education is impacted by an SGO (Burchett *et al.,* 2013).

Participants were selected purposefully to generate rich and detailed accounts of SGs' perspectives of children and their educational experiences, rather than producing a statistically representative sample (Suri, 2011). SGs were invited to participate on the basis that they were currently caring for a child under an SGO, for a minimum of six months, and were willing to discuss their experiences of the child's education. The inclusion criteria ensured that accounts were relevant to the research question (Stern, Jordan & McArthur, 2014), while allowing variation across contexts, such as family circumstances, educational needs, educational settings, and LA contexts.

3.2.5. Sampling Strategy

The participants recruited for this research were SGs with a school-aged child in their care. The SGs were selected as the participant group because they occupy a central role within a child's ecological system, serving as a key bridge between home, school, and professional services. Existing research examining special guardianship is largely focused on placement stability and family support needs, with comparatively limited research exploring how SGs themselves experience supporting children in education. Recruiting SGs therefore enables the study to access perspectives from individuals who regularly navigate education systems on behalf of children in their care.

Participants were mainly recruited through online social media platforms, including Facebook and LinkedIn. Recruitment posts were shared within online communities and support groups for SGs and kinship carers. These online spaces often function as peer support networks where carers share experiences, seek advice, and advocate for improved support for SG families. Some individuals active within these networks also act as advocates for SG families, contributing to discussions related to policy and professional practice. A research flyer outlining the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and researcher contact details was shared within these groups, with permission from group administrators where necessary. Interested individuals were invited to contact the researcher directly via their university email address to receive further information about participating in the research (participant information sheet).

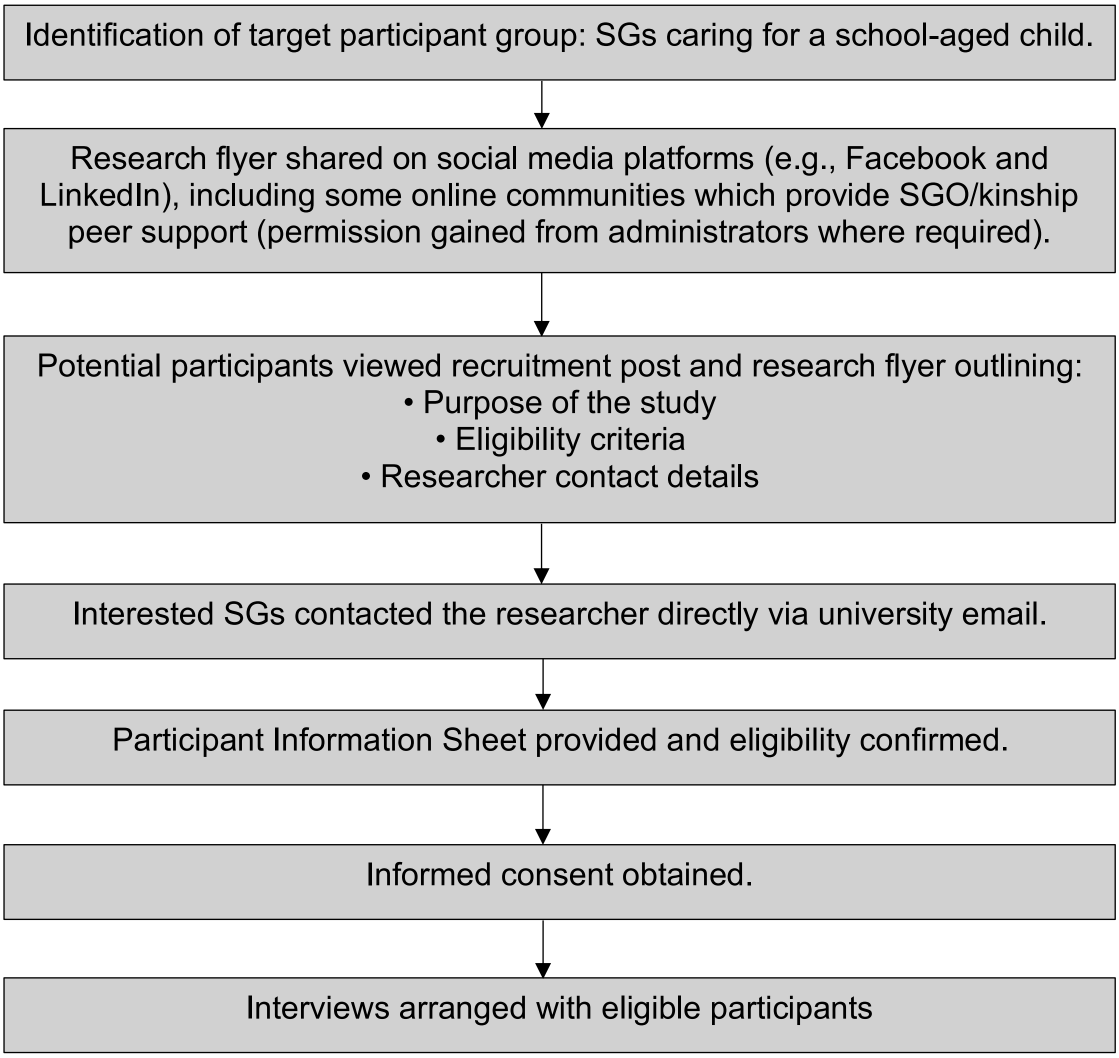
As is common in qualitative research, the eventual sample was also shaped by practical considerations, such as who could be reached and who felt comfortable participating (Robinson, 2014). The sampling approach was therefore purposive, in that participants were intentionally recruited because their experiences aligned with the aims of the research, while also incorporating elements of convenience sampling based on accessibility participants.

RTA does not prescribe a minimum or a maximum number of interviews. Instead, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that the adequacy depends on the richness of the dataset and the analytic goals of the research, rather than numerical thresholds. Published examples of RTA vary widely, with datasets ranging from fewer than 10 in-depth interviews to larger samples of 20 or more, depending on scope and context (Braun *et al.,* 2023). Eight SGs participated in the study**,** with seven interviews conducted**.**

In earlier qualitative traditions, researchers often worked with the principle of saturation, the point at which no new information or codes are identified in the data (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). However, this concept has been critiqued as being better suited to approaches such as Grounded Theory, which aim to generate explanatory models and seek theoretical completeness (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Within reflexive approaches, saturation is considered problematic because meaning is understood as multiple and dynamic, and therefore never fully ‘exhausted’ (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020).

Within this research, sample size was guided by the principle of information power, which suggests that the adequacy of the qualitative sample depends not on numerical thresholds but on the richness and relevance of the data in relation to the research's aims (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016). In this case, the focus on a specific group of SGs and, therefore, the in-depth nature of the interviews, and the quality of dialogue meant that a relatively small sample size was sufficient to generate meaningful insights (Das *et al*., 2016).

Figure 2: Flowchart of Sampling Strategy


Identification of target participant group: SGs caring for a school-aged child.
Research flyer shared on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn), including some online communities which provide SGO/kinship peer support (permission gained from administrators where required).
Potential participants viewed recruitment post and research flyer outlining:
• Purpose of the study
• Eligibility criteria
• Researcher contact details
Interested SGs contacted the researcher directly via university email.
Participant Information Sheet provided and eligibility confirmed.
Informed consent obtained.
Interviews arranged with eligible participants

3.3 Data Collection

In line with the social constructionist stance, data collection was designed to generate rich, situated accounts of how SGs support the education of their care. Because constructionism views knowledge as produced through interaction (Andrews, 2012), methods were selected that enabled participants to share and construct their own understanding through open and dialogic exchange (Vall Castelló, 2016).

3.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, supplemented by contextual information to support interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they offer a balance between consistency and flexibility (Ruslin *et al.,* 2022): a guiding framework ensured coverage of areas relevant to the research questions (e.g. school engagement, perceptions of support, barriers encountered), while open-ended questioning allowed participants to lead the discussion and emphasise what mattered most to them (Kallio *et al.,* 2016). This format both created a space for unanticipated insights to emerge and reflected the research's emphasis on meaning as co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee (Knight, 2017).

This approach was considered particularly appropriate given the sensitivity of the research topic (Fylan, 2005). Unlike focus groups, which risk constraining participants through group dynamics, there are concerns about confidentiality. One-to-one interviews provided a safe and confidential space in which SGs could speak freely about potentially difficult experiences (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Similarly, more structured approaches, such as surveys or questionnaires, were rejected because they impose predefined categories that may not capture the complexity of participants' perspectives (Lakeshman *et al.,* 2000). Semi-structured interviews, by contrast, privileged participants' own language, stories, and meanings, aligning with a constructionist emphasis on knowledge as situated and dialogical (Roulston, 2019).

The semi-structured interview schedule used in this study is included in appendix xx. The development of the interview questions was informed by the relevant literature and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, which provided the conceptual framework for the research. Questions were therefore designed to explore experiences across different ecological systems around the child and the SG. For example, participants were invited to reflect on children's individual experiences within education, relationships with schools and teachers linking to the microsystem, interactions between home and school linking to the mesosystem, and the influence of wider services and policies such as the VS or PPP within the exosystem and macrosystem. In addition, insights from previous research examining Special Guardianship and kinship care (Wade et al., 2014; Harwin et al., 2019; Gore-Langton, 2017; Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024) informed the inclusion of questions exploring themes such as educational support, relationships with professionals, and barriers encountered by SGs when engaging with professionals and services.

The construction of the interview schedule was also influenced by my own professional personal experiences; prior work in social care and as a TEP informed my understanding of the systemic context within which SGs often navigate education systems. This shapes the inclusion of prompts related to home-school relationships, professional communication, and how SGs approach children's educational needs. Reflexivity was therefore important in recognising how professional perspectives shape both the framing of questions and the interpretation of participants' accounts in this respect.

A total of eight SGs participated in the research, with eight semi-structured interviews conducted. Interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. Online interviews were chosen for several practical and methodological reasons. Firstly, recruiting participants through online support networks meant that SGS were located across different geographical areas, making in-person interviews impractical. Online interviews, therefore, enabled the inclusion of participants from multiple LA contexts, reducing travel and logistical barriers. Secondly, previous research has demonstrated that online qualitative interviews can provide a flexible and accessible method of data collection, particularly when working with participants who may have caring responsibilities or limited availability (Archibald et al., 2019). Conducting interviews online therefore supported participation by allowing SGS depart take at a time in a location convenient to them. Online interviewing has become increasingly common in qualitative research and can facilitate Access to participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach, particularly within dispersed or specialist communities (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The use of online methods also raises important considerations related to equality, diversity, and inclusion. Participation requires access to suitable digital resources, including a reliable Internet connection, hardware such as a smartphone, tablet, or computer, and a private space to conduct the interview to ensure confidentiality. These requirements may unintentionally exclude individuals who face digital barriers or limited access to technology (Archibald et al., 2019). In this study, flexibility was therefore maintained in how interviews were organised, and participants were offered options regarding scheduling and modes of communication to support accessibility. Reflecting these considerations, online interviews were viewed as both an enabling and potentially constraining method, necessitating careful attention to issues of digital access and participation within the research design.

3.3.2. Rationale for Focusing on Special Guardians

The decision to focus exclusively on SGs reflects both the under-researched nature of their role and their unique position in supporting the education of the children in their care. Although much research into care-experienced children has focused on foster care or adoption (on occasion in conjunction with SGOs), a distinct focus on special guardianship remains comparatively invisible within educational research. Yet, SGs occupy a pivotal position; they negotiate the everyday challenges of parenting and caring while also managing complex relationships with schools, local authorities, their extended families, professionals, and broader systems (Harwin *et al.,* 2019).

By drawing directly on SG accounts, this research highlights the voices of those who often act as children's advocates in education but are rarely consulted in research or policy development. Their narratives offer insight not only into daily school-related experiences but also into the broader relational and systemic factors that shape children's educational opportunities and challenges. Focusing on this group, therefore, generates valuable knowledge about how educational experiences are mediated within SGO arrangements.

Each interview was conducted in a conversational style to encourage storytelling and reflection rather than eliciting short, standardised responses. (McCormack, 2004). This format was essential, given the sensitivity of guardianship experiences, as it enabled participants to share their accounts in ways that felt authentic to them (Fylan, 2005).

3.3.3. Procedures and Documentation

All interviews were conducted in accordance with informed consent procedures. Each conversation was audio-recorded with participants’ permission and transcribed verbatim to preserve the detail of participants’ language.

Immediately following each interview, the researcher compiled field notes (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018) that documented contextual features, such as location, atmosphere, interruptions, and nonverbal cues, as well as preliminary impressions of emerging issues. These notes also contained reflexive observations about the researcher’s role and reactions (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). Field notes served three purposes:

1. To enrich transcripts with contextual and practical details.
2. To support reflexive engagement with the research process.
3. To provide a resource for supervision and analytic cross-checking.

The length of interviews varied according to participants’ preferences and availability but typically ranged between 45 and 90 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to invite detailed reflections, while follow-up prompts encourage participants to elaborate on areas of particular interest or relevance (Neuert *et al.,* 2021). For example, participants were asked to describe specific interactions with schools or professionals, reflect on children's experiences of education, whether positive or challenging, and consider the kinds of support that had been helpful or could have been different.

Practical and ethical considerations also shaped the conduct of interviews. Arrangements were tailored to ensure participants’ comfort, with flexibility offered around scheduling. Clear information was provided about confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the option to pause or stop at any point. These steps aimed to reduce power imbalances and create conditions in which SGs could speak openly about their experiences (Kostenius, 2007).

3.3.4. Reflexivity in Data Collection

Reflexivity was embedded throughout the data collection process. As a researcher with a professional background in education and social care, it was recognised that prior knowledge and identity could shape both the questions asked and the responses given (Jamison, Govaart & Pownall, 2023). For example, participants may have emphasised certain issues or downplayed others based on their assumptions about the researcher's understanding of schools or the care systems (Dodgson, 2019).

To critically examine these influences, reflective notes were maintained, alongside field notes, documenting personal reactions, assumptions, and moments of resonance or discomfort. These notes supported ongoing reflection on how positionality shaped the research encounter (Deer, 2014). Reflexive dialogue in supervision further allowed these influences to be explored and, when necessary, challenged (McCabe & Holmes, 2009).

This approach is consistent with RTA, which rejects the notion of the neutral researcher and instead positions the researcher as an active meaning-maker whose lens is inseparable from the interpretive process (Denicolo, Bradley-Cole & Long, 2016). Rather than treating reflexivity as a limitation, the research embraced it as a source of insight, transparency, and rigour (Darawsheh, 2014).

3.4 Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews formed the sole dataset for this research and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's RTA framework (Braun *et al.,* 2023). This approach was chosen because it aligns closely with the researcher's social constructionist epistemology (Braun & Clarke, 2021), emphasising the active role of the researcher in meaning-making and recognising that themes are generated through interpretation rather than discovered as objective truths (Braun & Clarke, 2023). RTA provides a flexible and rigorous method for identifying patterns of meaning across the dataset (Bryne, 2022), making it particularly well-suited to the exploration of complex, socially constructed experiences, such as those described by SGs.

3.4.1. Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

RTA was selected over alternative analytic approaches for several reasons. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), for example, is highly ideographic, focusing on the detailed lived experiences of individual participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). While valuable in certain contexts, IPA was not appropriate here because the research aimed to explore shared and divergent patterns of meaning across participants, rather than focusing on individual case studies (Oxley, 2016). Grounded Theory, in contrast, is designed to generate explanatory models and is rooted in a different epistemological tradition that seeks theoretical saturation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). By contrast, RTA is theoretically flexible and can be adapted within a constructionist paradigm, allowing the researcher to generate rich thematic accounts while emphasising the co-constructed nature of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2020).

3.4.2. The Iterative process of Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2021) framework, analysis proceeded through an iterative process that incorporated the following stages:

1. Transcription
2. Data familiarisation
3. Coding
4. Searching for themes
5. Reviewing themes
6. Defining and naming themes
7. Producing the Analytic Report

Although presented sequentially, these phases were not followed rigidly or linearly. Instead, the process was recursive, involving movement back and forth between phases (Bryne, 2022), with earlier decisions revisited and refined as familiarity with the data deepened (Braun *et al.,* 2023). The cyclical engagement demonstrates the reflexive and interpretive nature of RTA, where meaning is constantly re-evaluated and negotiated. (Savin-Baden, 2004).

Table 1. Phases of RTA (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Phase of RTA	**Description**
Transcription	Interviews were recorded on Microsoft Teams and transcribed verbatim. Transcription enabled early immersion in the data.
Reading and familiarisation	The researcher read transcripts repeatedly while listening to recordings, noting early impressions and reflections.
Coding	Codes were generated inductively by labelling meaningful features of the data relevant to the research questions.
Searching for themes	Codes were grouped into potential themes by examining patterns of shared meaning across participants.
Reviewing themes	Candidate themes were reviewed, refined, and sometimes split, merged, or discarded, ensuring coherence and distinctiveness.
Defining and naming themes	Themes were clearly defined, capturing their essence and scope, and assigned names reflecting their core meaning.
Producing the analytic report	The thematic map was finalised, analytic narrative produced, and themes contextualised within EST and existing literature.

3.4.3 Data Familiarisation

Familiarisation began during the transcription process, where listening closely to recordings allowed for early recognition of tone, pauses, and emotion (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2001). Beyond producing a textual record, transcription served as the first stage of immersion, attuning the researcher to both context and texture of participants’ narratives (Salana, 2011). Draft transcripts were then read repeatedly whilst re-listening to audio files. Each reading was accompanied by marginal notes highlighting key pieces of information or emotionally charged moments (Terry & Hayfield, 2020).

Early impressions were captured in analytic memos, which were not treated as fixed interpretations but rather as provisional ideas to be revisited later (Trainor & Bundon, 2021). For instance, some early observations referred to as ‘challenges in school’ later became dispersed across themes relating to ‘teacher attitudes’ or ‘barriers to professional support’. Visual methods, such as clustering ideas, using post-it notes, and mapping links between concepts, were also employed to stimulate engagement with the data in a more exploratory manner. This stage outlined the active, interpretive role of the researcher, moving beyond surface description towards early meaning-making (Hutchinson, 2019).

3.4.4. Coding

Although the interview schedule (appendix xx) provided an initial structure for data collection, the coding process went beyond the predefined questions used during the interviews. Instead of organising analysis according to the sections of the interview guide, trump scripts were coded line by line to identify meaningful features of the data relevant to the research questions. This ensured that the analytic process was driven by the participants' responses rather than by the structure of the interview schedule itself. While the interview guide served as a tool for facilitating conversation during data collection, the analytic process remained open to patterns of meaning that extended beyond the original prompts.

Coding began inductively, with attention to both semantic content and the latent meanings underlying participants’ accounts (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Codes were applied to segments of data that appeared meaningful in relation to the research questions, whether in the form of short phrases or longer extracts (Stuckey, 2015). Codes ranged from descriptive categories (e.g. ‘challenges in school’ or ‘sense of identity’) to interpretive labels (e.g. ‘SGs advocating’ or ‘how SGs support SEMH needs’).

NVivo software was used to organise codes and enable efficient retrieval across transcripts. However, NVivo was treated strictly as a data management tool rather than an analytic tool. The interpretive work of developing, collapsing, and refining codes was carried out by the researcher through repeated engagement with the data set. Coding was reflexive and evolving; codes were renamed or merged as their relevance shifted, reflecting the non-linear nature of RTA (Braun *et al.,* 2023).

At this stage, the analysis was primarily inductive, prioritising participants' voices and allowing codes to emerge from the data without the imposition of external categories (Ahmed *et al.,* 2025). This orientation reflected the research's epistemological commitment to constructionism and the goal of highlighting participants' perspectives (Kuczynski, 2003).

3.4.5. Searching for Themes

Once coding had been conducted across the dataset, attention turned to examining relationships between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes were related and clustered into shared meanings that appeared to capture broader patterned responses (Williams & Moser, 2019). Working thematic maps were then developed to visualise possible relationships between clusters and hierarchies (Field, 2022).

Although the initial search for themes was inductive, it became increasingly valuable to draw on Bronfenbrenner's EST as a framework. Importantly, the ecological framework was not used to generate codes or impose pre-determined categories on the data, but rather to assist in organising and interpreting patterns that had already emerged through the inductive coding process. This provided useful information, as there was a lot of data that related to varying wider systems around children and difficult to coherently blend without a framework in which to organise. This theoretical lens was not imposed deductively from the outset but was introduced iteratively to help refine how codes and provisional themes related to one another across different systemic levels (McGowan, Powell & French, 2020). For example, teacher-SG interactions within the microsystem, and policy changes related to government policy and professional roles in supporting families to keep children within their families, in the macrosystem.

3.4.6. Reviewing Themes

Candidate themes were reviewed and refined through a back-and-forth movement between the dataset and thematic map (Spencer *et al.,* 2021). Some themes were retained in their inductive form, while others were reconstructed through reference to EST. For example, codes were initially clustered under ‘child factors’, ‘school’, ‘guardians’, ‘wider community’, ‘wider family’, but these were later divided into microsystem processes, such as ‘teacher-SG interactions’, and exosystem processes, such as ‘the availability of specialist support services’. This refinement was informed by reflecting on both participants’ accounts and the ecological organisation of influences on children’s education. In this way, the analysis retained its inductive grounding while benefitting from a theoretical framework that enhanced coherence and interpretive depth (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006)

3.4.7. Defining and Naming Themes

When defining and naming themes, EST was used as a conceptual lens for making sense and meaning from patterns. Subthemes captured variation within broader categories, and systemic positioning helped highlight how seemingly personal experiences were shaped by wider relational and systemic dynamics (Spencer *et al.,* 2021). For instance, SGs’ narratives of advocating for children in school meetings were read both as microsystem events and also as reflections of exosystem constraints within LA policy and processes.

This dual approach recognises that inductive and deductive reasoning are not mutually exclusive but can work together, with theory aiding in structuring and conceptualising meanings that initially emerge from the data itself (Goel & Waechter, 2017; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

3.4.8. Producing the Analytic Narrative

The final analytic narrative was constructed by integrating the identified themes into a coherent interpretive account of the dataset. Quotations were chosen to illustrate patterns while preserving anonymity and respecting participants’ voices (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006). Reflective commentary was also interwoven throughout, acknowledging the researcher’s role in shaping interpretations (Savin-Baden, 2004).

To situate the findings, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST was used as a theoretical framework enabling themes to be conceptualised across multiple systemic levels

(Fife & Gossner, 2024). This step ensured the analysis captured not only the individual and relational dimensions of SGs' accounts but also the wider structural and cultural forces influencing educational experiences.

All interviews were described verbatim, capturing participants' words as spoken. In presenting extracts within the 'findings' section, quotations have been lightly edited for readability. This involved the removal of non-verbal utterances (e.g., "umm", "you know"), repeated words, and filler sounds, as well as the use of ellipses (…) where sections of speech were omitted. Square brackets [ ] were occasionally used to insert clarifications, for example, to anonymise names or specify the child being discussed. These edits were made solely to enhance clarity for the reader and did not alter the meaning of the participants' accounts. Full verbatim transcripts were retained in NVivo and are available as part of the audit trail, ensuring transparency.

3.5 Ethical Approval

This research received full ethical approval from the University of East Anglia's Ethics Committee and was conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance, and Ethics (HCPC, 2016). Ethical considerations were central throughout, given the sensitivity of the topic and the potentially vulnerable position of participants (Alexander, Pillay & Smith, 2018). Special Guardianship is often associated with family disruption, loss, or exposure to the care system (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). The research design, therefore, sought to balance the need for rigorous, meaningful data collection with the responsibility to safeguard participants' well-being and autonomy (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018).

3.5.1. Informed Consent

Ensuring that participants could make an informed choice about their involvement was a key priority (Nijhawan *et al.,* 2012). Potential participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the research, the nature of participation, and their rights, including the right to withdraw, before agreeing to take part (Manti &

Licari, 2018). Information was written in clear, accessible language, avoiding academic or legal jargon, to support comprehension across a wide range of educational backgrounds (Dunn & Jeste, 2001).

SGs who wished to participate were invited to contact the researcher directly, thereby reducing any risk of organisational pressure or perceived obligation. Written consent (Microsoft Forms) was obtained before the interviews, and verbal confirmation was sought again at the beginning of each session. This process-consent approach recognised consent as ongoing rather than one-off, ensuring that participants could reaffirm or withdraw their agreement as the interview progressed, and also after (Liddell & Richards, 2009).

3.5.2. Voluntary Participation and Right to Withdraw

Participation was entirely voluntary. SGs were reminded that they could withdraw at any stage, including after the interview, without giving any reason. They were also informed that they could withdraw their data, up to two weeks after their transcripts were shared with them. These measures safeguarded participants' autonomy and minimised the risk of coercion (Marshall *et al.,* 2006).

3.5.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Given the relatively small community of SGs, careful steps were taken to preserve confidentiality. Transcripts were anonymised, pseudonyms were used in analysis and reporting, and identifying details, such as specific schools, LAs, or geographical locations, were removed. Only the researcher and the research supervisor had access to the original data, and the participants' contact details were stored separately from their transcripts (Ethicist, 2015). These steps reflected both data minimisation principles and GDPR requirements, as well as ethical concerns regarding the prevention of deductive disclosure, which can occur even when names are removed (Morse & Coulehan, 2015).

3.5.4. Data Protection

All data handling complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) and the Data Protection Act (2018). Interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams were recorded only with participants' explicit consent (Caride, 2021). Recorded files were stored securely on the University's encrypted OneDrive system and deleted once transcripts had been completed. Password protection and encryption protocols were maintained throughout to ensure the security of sensitive information (Ceross, 2018).

3.5.5. Managing Sensitive Topics

Because Special Guardianship is often linked to histories of disruption, trauma, or bereavement, interviews had the potential to evoke distress (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). The interview schedule was designed with flexibility, enabling participants to guide the depth of discussion and to skip or pause questions at any time (Dempsey *et al.,* 2016). This approach aligned with trauma-informed research practices, which emphasise choice, safety, and empowerment (Isobel, 2021). In consideration of the sensitive nature of SGOs and the potential background experiences, the decision was made to interview SGs and gather their views, instead of interviewing children.

At the close of each interview, participants were offered information about relevant support services, should they wish to access further assistance (Sage & Dietkus, 2025). This step was not only precautionary but also an ethical obligation to ensure that the research did not expose participants to harm without offering avenues of support.

3.5.6. Reflexivity and Duty of Care

The researcher's professional background in education and social care inevitably shaped the research process. While this provided sensitivity to SGs' circumstances, it also carried the risk of assumptions about what might be significant. To address this, reflexive practices, as discussed previously, were adopted to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than preconceptions (Engward & Davies, 2015).

Supervision also provided a space to discuss ethical dilemmas arising from the material, including moments where participants disclosed distressing experiences (Hazell *et al.,* 2025). Such discussions supported the researcher in managing the emotional impact of the research, which is recognised as an important aspect of the duty of care for both participants and researchers (Dickson-Swift *et al.,* 2008).

3.5.7. Minimising Power Imbalances

Recruitment through self-referral ensured that SGs retained full control over the decision to participate (Weatherston, 2024). During interviews, a conversational style was adopted to encourage partnership and to position participants as experts in their own experiences (Cameron, Kothari & Fiolet, 2025). Efforts were made to reduce hierarchical demands by following participants' leads in storytelling, using active listening techniques, and acknowledging their authority over the narratives they shared (Moorcroft, 2016).

3.5.8. Ethical Transparency in Reporting

Finally, ethical considerations extend beyond data collection to how findings are presented. Participants' voices were represented respectfully and carefully (Nicholls et al., 2016). Direct quotes were included selectively, used only when they supported themes without compromising anonymity (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). The research aimed solely to generate knowledge that could inform practice in EP, while avoiding stigmatisation or harm (Gabbidon & Chenneville, 2021). This aligns with a need for ethical reflexivity in reporting qualitative research, which emphasises responsibility to both participants and academic audiences (Reid et al, 2018).

4. Participant Overviews

4.1. Participant One (Mark)

4.1.1. Background

Maya and Daniel's maternal uncle, Mark, was granted an SGO following the death of their mother. The children, aged 13 and 10, already had an established relationship with Mark and his wife prior to their mother becoming terminally unwell. The decision for them to live with Mark was a family-led arrangement in which their wishes were taken into consideration. Maya and Daniel have lived with Mark, his wife, and their children for one year. Before this, they lived solely with their mother and had not experienced any other placements. This was a private family law matter; therefore, the children were not ‘LAC’ under a public law order and are not eligible for PPP.

The transition into Mark’s household represented a significant change, as the children had to adapt to a new home, routines, and family relationships. This adjustment was further compounded by a move across LAs, which involved changing schools and reducing contact with their friends. Mark acknowledged that the adjustment had been emotionally demanding but emphasised his determination to provide stability and foster a sense of belonging for the children. He also reflected on balancing the family’s individual experiences of bereavement with the ongoing demands of providing stability, including managing work, finances, schooling, and wider family support.

4.1.2. Education

Mark reported that Maya and Daniel gradually settled into their new mainstream school settings, made new friends, and got involved in school sports and extracurricular activities. He has also encouraged ongoing contact with peers from their previous school, where possible, to help maintain friendships and ease the loss associated with moving. He described their teachers as being approachable and mindful of the circumstances, which he felt had contributed positively to their adjustment. Communication between home and school has generally been open and supportive.

No SEND has been identified for either child, and there has been no requirement for an EHCP. Academically, both children are reported to be making good progress, working at or above age-related expectations.

4.1.3. Professional Involvement

Following the transition, the younger child presented with difficulties with eating and sleeping. Concerned about this, Mark independently sought psychological support, which he felt was highly beneficial in helping the child process grief and begin to regulate emotions. In addition, both children have accessed bereavement counselling, which Mark believes has provided them with important coping strategies to manage their loss and adjustment to a new home environment. There has been no involvement from an EP or other specialist services.

Mark has not received formal support or training from organisations in relation to his role as a special guardian or in meeting Maya and Daniel's emotional needs. Instead, he sought peer support from a trusted friend and has paid for training to develop his own therapeutic skills, to provide ongoing support to the children within the family setting, in his role as their SG.

4.2. Participant Two (Anna)

4.2.1. Background

Anna is a paternal aunt who has been caring for Amelia, now aged 14, under an SGO since 2015. Before this, Amelia experienced neglect and disrupted care, linked to maternal substance misuse and the absence of her father.

Amelia was born prematurely, with complex congenital health conditions, requiring multiple surgeries and extended hospitalisations from infancy onwards. Following removal from her mother's care, Amelia was placed in foster care, before living with Anna, her husband, and their children, and is therefore recognised as PLAC. Anna and her family had an established, yet limited, relationship with Amelia before the SGO.

Anna and her husband stepped forward to be considered for an SGO upon discovering that Amelia was residing in a foster placement and was subject to a plan of adoption. Anna reported minimal preparation or training when they became SGs, leaving them to learn about Amelia's health and developmental needs independently.

Parental contact was initially arranged but over time proved inconsistent and, at times, unsafe. Direct contact between Amelia, her SGs and her birth parents has since ceased entirely.

4.2.2. Education

Anna shared that Amelia's complex health and developmental needs have significantly impacted her educational experience. She has needs relating to ongoing cardiac issues, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and communication difficulties. Amelia was initially placed in mainstream provision; however, Anna reports that her additional needs were under-recognised, with concerns around dyslexia and broader learning difficulties, initially overlooked.

Anna sought and funded an independent EP assessment, which led to the implementation of an EHCP. A specialist education setting was subsequently identified as better suited to meeting Amelia's needs, offering targeted provision and therapeutic support. This marked important progress, providing a more appropriate educational environment than the previous mainstream setting.

Despite this, Anna reported that provision has continued to be implemented inconsistently, particularly in relation to Amelia's health and learning needs. Consequently, disputes about the suitability of the placement and delivery of agreed provision have impacted both attendance and engagement in education over time.

4.2.3. Professional Involvement and Support

Anna reflected that her journey as an SG has required persistence, resilience, and extensive self-education. She described limited professional preparation when the SGO was granted and a lack of consistent support since, leaving her, at times, feeling unprepared to meet the complexity of Amelia's needs.

While valuable input has been accessed at key points, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and Theraplay, these were often obtained through determined advocacy. Although Anna acknowledged the contribution of many supportive professionals, she also emphasised that systemic gaps remain, with families often carrying the responsibility of ensuring children's complex needs are appropriately recognised and met.

Anna described herself as the primary advocate, frequently challenging decisions to promote the timely implementation of provision and access to professional support.

Alongside this, she has drawn on her advocacy skills to co-develop a local peer network for parents and carers navigating the EHCP process, providing mutual support and exchanging resources and knowledge.

4.3. Participant Three (Olivia)

4.3.1. Background

Olivia, a paternal grandmother, has cared for Sophia, now aged 11, under an SGO since she was one year old. Sophia became a CLA at birth, as her mother was in foster care. Ongoing concerns around neglect led to Sophia being placed with her grandparents. The move was sudden and unplanned, with no preparation or training provided to the SGs. At the time, they were already caring for their own children.

Upon her arrival, Olivia reported that Sophia presented with signs of early trauma, including frozen affect, limited speech, and difficulties forming attachments. Sophia also presented with delays in mobility and communication. Olivia described adopting a nurturing approach and reported seeing rapid progress. Within weeks, Sophia was walking and gradually began to develop speech. Nevertheless, signs of trauma have persisted, including separation anxiety, regression following stressful events, and difficulties forming peer relationships.

Parental contact has been another area of challenge. Whilst the relationship with Sophia’s father has been stable, contact with her mother has been inconsistent and, at times, emotionally disruptive. Olivia reported that Sophia often displays regressive behaviours following contact, requiring careful support and reassurance at home.

4.3.2. Education

Sophia has consistently attended mainstream education and has been noted by teachers to be articulate, often achieving above age-related expectations. However, her SEMH needs soon became more evident, impacting the consistency of her learning and classroom engagement.

Olivia has been an active advocate, ensuring schools recognise the impact of early trauma. She has worked with staff to implement consistent strategies, particularly during transitions between year groups, which have been times of heightened anxiety for Sophia. Strategies have been introduced to support Sophia's regulation in the classroom (e.g. calm boxes or discreet check-ins). Although Sophia does not have an EHCP, she receives PLAC support, including an EPAC and has had an online EP consultation.

Sophia's school experiences have varied. In her first placement, responses to behaviour at times lacked trauma awareness, with sanctions leaving Sophia feeling unsafe. A later school move was more positive, with staff demonstrating greater flexibility and creativity. Key adults provided consistency and a sense of relational safety, which supported Sophia's engagement. Challenges remain in balancing high expectations with Sophia's emotional needs, particularly around sensitive curriculum topics and her upcoming transition to secondary school.

4.3.3. Professional Involvement and Support

Professional input has been inconsistent across Sophia's placement. Early involvement from health visitors and Speech and Language Therapy (SALT was valuable; however, long waiting lists often meant that Olivia had to seek advice independently. Theraplay supported Sophia's attachments before starting school, and more recently, life story work has been provided.

Olivia reflected on how limited support meant that she and her husband had to educate themselves about trauma, attachment, therapeutic parenting and available services. It is worth noting that they possess professional experience in psychology and education. They have drawn on peer networks, specialist organisations, and self-directed learning to build their knowledge and skills. Advocacy has been central to securing Sophia's educational needs, and Olivia has frequently had to challenge services that underestimated the long-term impact of early adversity.

4.4. Participant Four (Elizabeth)

4.4.1. Background

Elizabeth, a paternal step-grandmother, has cared for George, aged 12, under an SGO since 2018. His early life was marked by instability, neglect, and parental substance misuse. George initially spent increasing amounts of time with Elizabeth, particularly when he felt unsafe at home. Following a crisis in his mother's care, professionals asked Elizabeth at short notice to provide temporary care, which became permanent when the SGO was granted.

Elizabeth described this process as rushed, with little explanation of long-term implications or entitlements. She recalled feeling pressured to accept the arrangement, with limited preparation or training. She reflected that SGOs, much like adoption in her own experience, are often positioned as a ‘quick fix’.

Parental contact has remained a sensitive issue. While there has been some stability with certain relatives, contact with others has been inconsistent or disruptive. George has sometimes shown regressive behaviours following contact, highlighting the ongoing impact of family dynamics on his well-being.

4.4.2. Education

George remained in mainstream education after moving to live with Elizabeth. His early speech difficulties required intervention, but overall, he has been described by teachers as bright and articulate. Academically, he achieves in line with age-related expectations, though he is often perceived as doing the ‘minimum required’. Elizabeth worries that this reflects low confidence and underlying anxiety rather than a lack of ability.

A consistent theme has been George’s tendency to ‘mask’ his difficulties at school. Teachers often view him as ‘compliant’ and ‘eager to please’, yet Elizabeth believes this hides his emotional distress linked to trauma. She is concerned that professionals underestimate his SEMH needs because he does not present with dysregulated behaviour.

Entitlement to PLAC support was not recognised until years into his placement. Once eligibility for PPP was confirmed, Elizabeth reported resistance from the school to using the support effectively or transparently. Nonetheless, George has access to mentoring and some small group support, which have been valuable in supporting some of his needs

4.4.3. Professional Involvement and Support

Elizabeth reflected that professional input has been inconsistent across George's placement. Early intervention around speech and language was helpful, but further support was often crisis-led. She highlighted gaps in communication around entitlements, particularly financial support and therapeutic provision, which left her feeling that much of the responsibility fell on her as an SG.

Bereavement has further shaped George's SEMH needs, following significant losses within his family. He has received bereavement counselling, school-based mentoring, and therapeutic life story work, which Elizabeth described as helpful in supporting him to process loss and strengthen resilience. However, she felt access to these interventions was reactive, rather than proactive.

Elizabeth shared that much of her knowledge has been self-taught or drawn from peer support. She has established a local kinship support group to share experiences and resources. She continues to highlight that early trauma and ongoing challenges around contact are underestimated risks in SGO placements, and that SGs often carry the responsibility of ensuring that children's needs are met within education, health, and social care systems.

4.5. Participant Five (Emily)

4.5.1. Background

Emily, a maternal grandmother, has an SGO for her granddaughter Eleanor, now aged 7. Eleanor experienced significant adversity in her first months of life, including a physical brain injury that required hospitalisation. After a brief period as a foster carer with Emily, and an attempted reunification with her mother, Eleanor was placed permanently with Emily and her husband at around two and a half years old, when the SGO was granted.

Emily described the decision to take on an SGO as 'non-negotiable', though the transition felt rushed and lacked preparation or training. Whilst committed to Eleanor's care, she reflected on the emotional strain caused by repeated legal processes and ongoing issues around parental contact. Contact with her mother has been inconsistent and sometimes disruptive, leaving Emily concerned about its impact on Eleanor’s stability.

4.5.2. Education

Eleanor attends a small, mainstream primary school, which her grandparents deliberately chose to ensure she would feel supported in a nurturing environment. Teachers describe her as bright and creative, often achieving above age-related expectations.

School staff are reportedly sensitive to Eleanor’s family circumstances. Teachers maintain careful communication with the family, adopting language that supports Eleanor’s identity and avoids confusion between her SGs and birth parents. The school has also adapted lessons on topics such as family structures to ensure inclusivity. Despite some behavioural outbursts and difficulties with emotional regulation, staff report that Eleanor is often engaged in learning and contributes positively to the classroom.

Curriculum topics are managed thoughtfully, with staff working closely with Emily to anticipate challenges. Contact-related anxieties are occasionally reflected in Eleanor’s behaviour, but teachers have generally responded with understanding and flexibility. Emily emphasised the value of strong home-school links, which she views as central to Eleanor’s progress.

4.5.3. Professional Involvement and Support

Early medical follow-up continued for years after Eleanor’s injuries, but she has since been discharged. During this period, a Clinical Psychologist, within the hospital, considered Eleanor’s emerging needs and discussed the impact of early adversity, making recommendations for both the school and Emily to implement at home. More recently, referrals have been made for therapeutic input, including Theraplay, to support emotional expression and regulation. Emily welcomed these interventions, but described long waiting lists and fragmented access, requiring her to advocate persistently for Eleanor’s needs.

As an SG, Emily reflected on the lack of structured preparation offered when the SGO was granted. Despite her professional background in social care, she found the system difficult to navigate, particularly around entitlements, identity issues, and therapeutic provision. She described the process as a series of ‘battles’ with agencies rather than a supportive framework.

Professional involvement has, at times, been positive, particularly when individual practitioners have demonstrated an understanding of Special Guardianship. Emily recalled valuing the insight of one social worker, who was also an SG, describing this as the first time she felt genuinely understood. Overall, however, support has been inconsistent, leaving much of the responsibility with her to identify resources, develop knowledge, and manage Eleanor’s needs.

4.6. Participants Six and Seven (Helen and Colin)

4.6.1. Background

Helen and Colin have cared for their grandson, Noah, now aged 12, under an SGO since infancy. The order was granted when he was around 10 months old; however, he had lived in their home since birth, alongside his mother, after it became clear that his mother, who continues to struggle with substance misuse, could not provide safe or consistent care.

Direct contact between Noah and his mother has ceased; however, Noah continues to have regular overnight contact with his father. Although differences in parenting approaches, particularly regarding routine and diet, create challenges in maintaining consistency between households, this contact remains consistent.

From infancy, it is reported that Noah’s developmental differences were evident, particularly in speech and play. Noah was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the age of 3 and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) at the age of 9. These diagnoses have shaped his daily life and understanding of his educational needs. Faced with long waiting lists, the family sought a private ADHD assessment to secure timely support. He currently takes prescribed medication, though Helen and Colin also explore alternative supplements to balance benefits against side effects, such as fatigue and weight changes.

4.6.2. Education

Helen and Colin shared that Noah's experience of education has been impacted by disruption. Noah initially had positive experiences in Infant School but struggled during transition to Junior School, where support was inconsistent and provision was inadequate. He often spent time in a sensory room with little teaching and an outdated EHCP, unchanged for years, which restricted Noah's access to appropriate education.

Helen and Colin sought legal advice and advocacy to secure better provision for Noah. After two years of instability, Noah transferred to a therapeutic specialist school. He now benefits from smaller class sizes, consistent routines, and access to outdoor and sensory-based learning. They described this as a more positive environment; however, educational challenges remain.

Practical issues with school transport have also affected Noah's attendance and engagement. Multiple PAs were initially rotated through his taxi provision, and he found it difficult to adjust to the differing staff who did not consistently interact with him. Helen and Colin noted that he responds far better to a consistent and supportive Personal Assistant (PA) who takes time to engage with him during the journey, which has improved his overall school experience.

4.6.3. Professional Support and Involvement

Helen and Colin describe professional support as inconsistent and reactive. They report that many services only respond after prolonged pressure, leaving them to take the lead in advocating for Noah's needs. While interventions such as speech therapy, medication management, and therapeutic school provision have been helpful, Colin and Helen highlighted the lack of coordinated planning across agencies.

Both bring professional insights, drawing on backgrounds in early years and the justice system. They invested time in learning therapeutic parenting and regulation strategies. Alongside this, they supported other kinship carers through helplines and peer groups, reflecting their commitment to building stronger networks. They emphasise that systemic barriers and gaps in support create stress, rather than difficulties being related to their role as Noah’s SGs.

4.7. Participant Eight (Georgia)

4.7.1. Background

Georgia, a maternal grandmother, is an SG for her two granddaughters, Charlotte and Eloise. Charlotte, now of primary school age, was the first child to come into Georgia’s care, following concerns about neglect and unsafe circumstances with her parents, whereby an older sibling had a brain injury. Eloise was later removed from her mother’s care at birth due to domestic violence concerns.

When Eloise was born, she was placed in foster care, despite Georgia’s established role as an SG. The LA initially opposed Georgia's application; however, following the involvement of an sndependent social worker, placement was eventually secured after a court process lasting almost two years. Georgia reflected that the delay prevented the siblings from being together in their earliest moments and caused avoidable emotional harm, with long-term implications for attachment and security.

4.7.2. Education

Charlotte attends mainstream primary school, while Eloise is in nursery. Georgia reported that Charlotte is generally settled and achieving well academically, though she has been emotionally affected by her family experiences. Signs of anxiety and grief linked to the loss of her sibling (associated with the brain injury), as well as the longer uncertainty around Eloise’s placement, have at times been evident in her behaviour. Teachers have been responsive, maintaining communication with Georgia and showing sensitivity in adapting lessons where family history could be a trigger.

Eloise is described as healthy and developing typically, with positive reports from nursery staff about her engagement with peers and staff. Georgia emphasised that her focus has been on ensuring both girls experience stability and consistency across home and education, and that school staff remain aware of the wider family history. She highlighted the importance of inclusive approaches in schools and nurseries, ensuring girls feel secure in their sense of identity, while also being supported in their educational and social development.

4.7.3. Professional Support and Involvement

Georgia reflected that her experiences with professionals have been inconsistent and, at times, adversarial. She felt that children's services often opposed her applications unnecessarily, despite her proven ability to provide a stable, nurturing and caring home. Georgia described the legal process, particularly in relation to Eloise’s placement, as distressing and unnecessarily prolonged, leaving Georgia to feel scrutinised rather than supported by professionals.

She reported limited access to structured support for either child, particularly therapeutic input to help process bereavement and disrupted attachments. While some professionals have demonstrated understanding, Georgia described feeling that much of the responsibility has fallen on her to identify resources and advocate for the children. She emphasised that the delays, lack of early sibling placement, and absence of meaningful support represented systemic failings that placed additional strain on the family.

Despite these barriers, Georgia remains committed to raising Charlotte and Eloise together, providing them with safety, stability, and love. She described advocacy, persistence, and therapeutic parenting as essential tools in helping them to thrive, while continuing to highlight the need for systemic recognition of the unique challenges faced by SGs and the impact on children by their education providers.

5. Findings

Data was coded and themes were developed inductively, allowing patterns to emerge from participants’ accounts. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST was subsequently used as an overarching framework to organise and interpret these themes. EST provided a means of situating participants' accounts within the multiple layers of influence, ranging from individual child characteristics and experiences to the wider social and policy environment of SGOs and education. Structuring the analysis in this way enabled the identification of patterns, both within and across interviews, highlighting how SGs perceive and support the educational experiences of the children in their care, and how these roles are shaped by the dynamic interplay of personal, relational, and systemic factors.

The findings are presented as three overarching themes, each of which reflects different levels of the EST model:

1. Children's Experiences, Needs, and Developmental Responses (Child Factors and Microsystem)
2. Interactions and Relationships Between the Child, Family and School (Microsystem and Mesosystem)
3. Wider Systemic Influences and Life-Course Events (Exosystem, Macrosystem and Chronosystem)

Each overarching theme comprises several sub-themes, which provide more detailed accounts of specific challenges or protective factors identified by the SGs. These are analysed extracts from the interviews to highlight participants' voices and capture the nuance of their lived experiences. While EST offers an organising structure, the analysis also acknowledges the complexity and interconnections across different levels of influence, emphasising that any single factor in isolation cannot explain children's educational journeys.

It is important to note that the themes presented are not intended to reduce the richness of participants' accounts into rigid categories. Rather, they reflect patterns of meaning generated through a reflexive and iterative process of analysis, consistent with the social constructionist perspective. From this standpoint, the findings are understood not as objective truths but as situated accounts, shaped by participants' interpretation of their experiences and the researcher's interpretive lens. This approach highlights both commonalities across the interviews and distinctive elements of individual narratives, whilst also recognising that meaning is always constructed within broader social and relational contexts. Direct quotes are used to analyse key points, with anonymity maintained throughout.

Finally, constructing the findings in this way allows for direct engagement with the research aims and questions, particularly the central aim of exploring how SGs perceive that children’s educational experiences are shaped within the context of the SGO, as well as the factors that either support or hinder their experiences. Accordingly, this section begins with the child at the centre, focusing on the individual level, and then moves outward to consider their relationships with family and school, before situating these within the wider systemic and temporal context.

5.1. Theme One: Children’s Experiences, Needs and Developmental Responses

(Child Factors and Microsystem)

This theme focuses on the child at the centre of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, capturing SG’s understanding of the educational needs of the children in their care, including strengths and difficulties in learning, emotional and behavioural regulation, and sense of belonging. Across the seven interviews, SGs provided detailed accounts of how children's developmental histories, health, and emotional needs shaped their day-to-day experiences of school and learning. While some accounts highlighted resilience, progress, and motivation, others reported challenges linked to attainment, developmental needs, behavioural adjustment, and sense of identity. These findings highlight how children's microsystems are profoundly shaped by early adversity, trauma, and the relational context in which they are embedded.

Five sub-themes were identified:

1. **Attainment and Learning** (academic progress, engagement, transitions, recognition of potential)
2. **Development and Health** (speech and language, neurodevelopmental needs, physical health, early adversity)

3. **Behaviour and Adjustment** (emotional regulation, coping strategies, masking, relational responses)

4. **Identity and Belonging** (family roles, naming practices, peer relationships, reflections on difference)

5. **Experiences of Trauma** (bereavement, neglect, instability, early life experiences)

5.1.1. Attainment and Learning

SGs frequently reflected on children's academic progress. Their accounts ranged from descriptions of children as ‘bright and thriving’ in school, to some concerns about engagement, attendance, or the ways schools conceptualised ability and progress. Academic attainment was rarely discussed as an isolated concept. Instead, it was framed in relation to children’s prior experiences, emotional readiness to learn, and the support available in school contexts.

Many SGs shared examples of resilience and success. Some described children as thriving academically. Even when attainment was described as ‘midstream’, this was often framed positively, in light of children’s life histories and earlier adversity:

> *“So, despite all of that, he did well at school… he gets by, he’s like middle of the road… which is amazing when you think of what was happening to him, and I think actually, it’s probably a safe place to be.”*

In some cases, schools and SGs recognised that assessment could be detrimental to a child’s well-being. One SG reflected on how the child’s SEND and previous experiences shaped the decision not to sit SATs in Year 9:

> *“She didn’t do the SATs. We’re like, she’s not going to cope. So, she was dispelled from them.”*

SGs also shared hopes and concerns about progression. Some highlighted anxieties about transitions, particularly about the move to secondary school, where expectations might shift and allow less flexibility:

> *"Our worry is that when she gets to secondary school, they'll measure everything against greater depth. And we're not expecting her to be on a straight trajectory from greater depth to… high grade GCSEs."*

Others spoke of attendance and alternative provision shaping academic pathways:

> *"I mean, her school don't do GCSEs… it's all about life skills."*

Some SGs questioned whether schools fully recognised children's abilities, reflecting concerns that expectations were sometimes lowered:

> *"School tend to teach him at a lower level than he's capable… we know that he can do more than that. But I mean, that's been a feature throughout his school life."*

There were also accounts of children excelling in ways that went beyond formal measures of progress. SGs emphasised talents, creativity, and ambition:

> *"Because she's really bright… we actually think she's way brighter than her school performance suggests."*
>
> *"She actually wrote a book a few months ago. She wants to be an author when she gets older."*

For some children, academic attainment was seen as part of a broader concept of thriving within an SGO, although this could also lead to assumptions that other areas of life were free from difficulty. One SG observed:

> *"It's so hard, because I know a lot of these children have more overt difficulties, but because she is doing so well, and she's obviously, she has thrived in our care… because she's not struggling academically. The expectation is that everything else is fine."*

Together, these reflections suggested that attainment was understood as a dynamic construct, shaped not only by children's capabilities but also by prior adversity, emotional readiness, and systemic responses. SGs also emphasised the importance of contextualising progress, celebrating resilience, and recognising children's potential without overlooking the wider challenges they navigated.

5.1.2. Development and Health

Health and developmental needs were a recurring theme across SGs’ accounts. Many described children who had been referred for developmental assessments had histories of delayed speech and language needs or exhibited heightened sensory sensitivities within the classroom context. Several children were awaiting or undergoing assessment, or had diagnoses for conditions such as ADHD or ASD, often after long delays in referral processes.

> *“His speech was quite delayed… children at the age of two should know between 50 and 200 words, and he knew 10.”*

Other accounts focused on early developmental concerns, including difficulties with milestones, attachment, or health complications linked with early adversity:

> *“She didn’t have great vocabulary… even though she was three, she was quite delayed… she was diagnosed with global development delay.”*

Similarly, Olivia described the impact of neglect in infancy:

> *“Literally, she was so frozen. If you put her down, she would just stay there. She had no words… but she did blossom in our care.”*

Health-related complications were also discussed, including the impact of premature birth and a brain injury from physical abuse in infancy.

> *“She had two very severe brain injuries… she has lost some brain mass, but her milestones are all being met.”*

Some SGs also spoke about the use of medication to manage neurodevelopmental needs and the impact of this on behaviour and presentation, which impacted daily functioning and engagement in learning:

> *“He has got ASD and ADHD… we tried him on standard medication… it was a bit like giving ecstasy to someone who’s already manic. So, we stopped. Then we tried Intuniv… but it made him very sleepy and sluggish.”*

These accounts illustrate how children's health and development cannot be understood in isolation from their lived experiences of adversity, bereavement, and instability. SGs often linked early health and developmental challenges with ongoing struggles in relation to emotional regulation, concentration, or participation in the classroom. From an ecological perspective, these vulnerabilities were not positioned as fixed deficits ‘within-child’ but were shaped and mediated by the relational and environmental systems around them.

5.1.3. Behaviour and Adjustment

Children's behaviours were frequently discussed by SGs, ranging widely from withdrawal and anxiety to anger, defiance, and masking strategies. Importantly, SGs rarely framed these as ‘naughty’ or deliberate ‘misbehaviour’. Instead, they were often described as coping responses to overwhelming stress, fear, or past trauma.

For some children, distress manifested in physical behaviours or withdrawal. One SG recalled how grief after bereavement led to eating and sleep changes:

> *“I can say that after one month when their mum passed away… she couldn’t eat.”*
>
> *“The youngest… was having difficulties in sleeping.”*

Another SG described the way hunger could trigger traumatic memories, with small adjustments making noticeable differences in school:

> *“And that’s literally all she needed was that afternoon snack because she was getting hungry. Obviously, it was taking her back to trauma of being hungry, and she couldn’t control it… because she was having a snack at two o’clock, it was like this model child all of a sudden in school.”*

Emotional withdrawal was also reported, with some children retreating into solitary or avoidant behaviours. An SG described how even years later, anxiety persisted in daily routines.

> *"[CHILD] will not leave her bedroom at night to go to the toilet, and she wears a nighttime nappy… she knows it's safe, but she will not leave that bedroom."*

Alongside these internalising responses, externalising behaviours were also noted. SGs spoke about sudden eruptions of anger or disruptive behaviours:

> *"She would literally strip off, rip everything off, pull her whole room to pieces… she was unreachable, and I would sit outside the door saying, I'm here, you're safe, for hours until she was able to be reachable."*

Others described how behaviours could be unpredictable, with triggers not always easily identifiable:

> *"it's like when he had a meltdown. Sometimes you never knew when it were going to happen. It just erupt and bang."*

Masking emerged as a recurring theme across interviews, with SGs concerned that children's difficulties often went unnoticed in school:

> *"She's the queen of masking… people have no idea what's going on. It takes up huge emotional energy and effort."*

In addition, high levels of 'compliance', with the child seemingly preferring to be unnoticed in school, impacted the identification of needs:

> *"My biggest concern with [CHILD] is… he's very, very compliant, very friendly, very kind… Any issues is easily overlooked. He will go under the radar."*

This highlights how behaviours were understood as 'communication' rather than 'problems' to be managed. SGs consistently linked emotional and behavioural responses with children's experiences of trauma, loss, or neglect, and described how transitions, hunger, or perceived rejection could trigger these. In line with trauma-informed approaches, they emphasised that behaviour was ‘always telling us something’, and that supportive relational responses were important in helping children to feel safe. Within EST, these behaviours represent points of interaction between children's individual vulnerabilities and their relational systems, including family, schools, and peers, that could either exacerbate or reduce distress.

5.1.4. Identity and Belonging

A strong theme across interviews was children's negotiation of identity and belonging, both within their families and in their school or peer groups. SGs reflected on how children developed a sense of self, often shaped by complex family histories and the knowledge that they were living under an SGO.

While many SGs described allowing children to choose the names they used for family members, others preferred to maintain clear family roles. Mark reflected positively on being addressed as a parent figure.

> *“They do call me dad.”*

In contrast, Helen and Colin emphasised the importance of reinforcing their roles as grandparents, even though they provided the daily care.

> *“That’s because we have got role of mum and dad. He still calls us Nanna and Grandad. Because I always say, well, you’ve got a mum and dad.”*

Such contrasting perspectives illustrate how identity within kinship care is negotiated differently across families. For some, flexibility in naming was seen as supporting children's agency and sense of belonging, while for others, maintaining generational roles was an important way of preserving family identity and clarity.

Others spoke about children oscillating between different labels for family members, sometimes reflecting shifting emotions.

> *“She floats between grandma and granddad and mum and dad depending on what mood she’s in… All of our friends know that we’re grandma and granddad… it’s [CHILD] who sometimes chooses to call us mum and dad.”*

At times, identity was closely tied to emotional experiences. One SG described the impact of a contact visit when her child was very young.

> *"When she was two and a half on a contact visit, her mum said to her that she was going to get her back. And it completely devastated her. From that moment on, she asked to call me Mama, and she regressed so much."*

Similarly, another SG highlighted the emotional toll of even naming birth parents.

> *"She couldn't bear the thought [of hearing] the name of her mum or her dad… she thought, I don't want to talk about them*."

Truth-telling was another theme, with SGs emphasising children's need for honesty in order to feel secure. Elizabeth described her child's response when he discovered he had not been told the full truth about his family circumstances.

> *"George said… he has to know the truth of everything. He can't stand being lied to… and that was really, really awful."*

Belonging at school also featured strongly. Some SGs described positive peer connections as protective. Emily reflected on the value of her child having a close friend who was adopted.

> *"That's good for Eleanor… she's got another child in her class who doesn't live with their natural parents… she's got a bit of an ally there."*

However, other accounts suggested belonging was fragile and could be undermined by stigma or bullying linked to being in kinship care.

> *"What we know about children in kinship care [is] they can suffer quite a significant amount of bullying, like children in LA care. We don't want that to become an issue."*

Some SGs also described children beginning to articulate individual reflections on identity and difference, questioning how their past experiences shaped them compared to peers.

> *"She said to me the other day, and it nearly broke my heart, she said, Do you think people who've had the experiences like me in their early life? Do you think it makes a difference to how they develop afterwards, she said because none of my friends are like me."*

From an ecological perspective, identity and belonging were negotiated within the microsystem of family and peer relationships but were also shaped by broader discourses about SGOs. For SGs, reinforcing stability in affirming family identity was seen as a protective strategy; however, these measures could not always shield children from external pressures.

5.1.5. Experiences of Trauma

Across all cases, SGs reflected on children's experiences of trauma, often describing them as profound yet only partially understood. SG is frequently highlighted as the full extent of children's early experiences was unknowable, with fragmented accounts pieced together from professionals, court documents, or children's own memories. This uncertainty created ongoing challenges for both children and SGS in making sense of behaviours, emotions, and identities.

Several SGs spoke about the deep impact of bereavement and loss. One SG recalled the overwhelming effect of the parent's death, describing a child's physical response to grief and bereavement.

> *"They had to grieve… she was vomiting because she lost her mum."*

Others reflected on the effects of neglect and instability, noting that children had lived through inconsistent care and frightening situations.

> *"We don't know how much neglect she suffered… there's a huge amount of trauma for her."*

SGs also described how trauma was embodied and could be triggered by sensory reminders or routine events.

> *"Her body remembers things she hasn't got words for."*

The long-term impact of trauma sometimes shaped how children related to school and professionals. SGs recounted how seemingly ordinary situations, such as school assemblies or interactions with authority figures, could evoke fear because of associations with earlier experiences. These could be either conscious or unconscious.

There was also recognition that trauma could span generations, with children's difficulties situated in wider family patterns of adversity.

> *“Early life trauma is the biggest problem… it goes from generation to generation, and it needs real support to stop it.”*

Importantly, SGs often reframe children's behaviours as rooted in these histories, emphasising that what might appear as defiance or withdrawal was better understood as an adaptive response to early harm.

> *“This is not ADHD. This is trauma.”*

Children's experiences of trauma were described as often hidden. Yet they were also understood as only ever partially knowable, reconstructed through fragments of memory and observation. Within an ecological perspective, trauma was not located solely within the child but linked to the interplay of individual histories, family systems, and wider societal pressures. For SGs, recognising trauma as part of a child's story was essential in providing care, while also advocating for schools and services to respond with understanding, patience, and sensitivity.

5.2. Theme Two: Interactions Between the Child, Family, and School

(Microsystem / Mesosystem)

This theme explores how children's immediate systems, families, schools, and professionals interact to shape their educational experiences. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, the mesosystem highlights the interconnections between microsystems such as the home, school, and peer group. For children under SGOs, these interconnections are especially significant as SGs navigate the demands of things such as therapeutic parenting, ongoing contact with birth parents, and advocacy within schools and services.

Four interrelated subthemes were identified:

1. **SGs' Experience and Support** (training, learning, sense of responsibility, wellbeing)
2. **School Relationships and Communication** (attunement, behaviour policies, routines, settling in)
3. **Home–School Links and Advocacy** (SGs as advocates, research, knowledge, bridging systems)
4. **Pressures of Contact and SG Strain** (burnout, ongoing court activity, birth family involvement)

5.2.1. Special Guardians' Experience and Support

SGs often described the weight of responsibility they carried in relation to both everyday caregiving and navigating professional systems. Many framed this as an unquestioned duty and commitment.

> "I've been there to take care of these children." "It is my responsibility, and my wife has been coming into, you know, help me."
>
> "It's all fighting all the time, yeah, being there to look after him and clean his bedroom and change his sheets and feed him and clothe him. It's all the underpinning stuff."

These accounts outline how Special Guardianship can both be taken on willingly and simultaneously experienced as challenging. The work of 'ordinary parenting' often intersects with extraordinary circumstances of trauma, instability, and complex needs. SGs' sense of duty provides children with stability, but it also leaves little space for respite.

At times, SGs expressed doubts about whether they had done the right thing, particularly when legal processes or birth parents' challenges unsettled children's placements.

> *"So, we were the option or adoption. And it's not an option, in my mind. So, you know, it wasn't even a choice." "In my head, I was questioning it… Would she have been better being adopted? Would it have been better for Eleanor to not have these interruptions in her life?"*

Such reflections illustrate the emotional weight of decision-making, where SGs must balance permanence, family identity, and the realities of ongoing parental responsibility. This aligns with ecological perspectives. Wider systemic and legal contexts continually shape SG's immediate caregiving role.

SGs also highlighted the stress of advocacy within education and health systems. Many described having to become 'fighters' on behalf of their children.

> *"When I get my teeth in something, I will not let it go." & "I said, I'm not allowing the school to get away with this. Amelia needs to know that she can trust me, that I've got her best interest at heart, and I am there to advocate for her."*

Persistent advocacy was often experienced as exhausting, yet SGs positioned it as essential to protecting children from further rejection or failure. Here, the relational bond between child and SG was reinforced by the SGs' willingness to challenge systems that were perceived as slow, inconsistent, or dismissive.

The emotional toll of Special Guardianship was a recurring theme. Some described burnout or secondary trauma.

> *"You're going to have to step in… because I'm literally burnt out."*
>
> *"I can't do anything because I'm George's only hope to try and keep him safe. So, so stressful."*

These reflections highlight the hidden costs of Special Guardianship, while children gained security, SGs sometimes faced cumulative strain, health impacts, and isolation. Unlike foster carers, many noted they lacked formalised respite or support.

Despite these challenges, some SGs emphasised resilience in proactive approaches. Several described educating themselves through research, training, and therapeutic models.

> *“So, I threw myself into learning everything. I need to know.”*
>
> *“We absolutely… were doing therapeutic parenting from day one.”*
>
> *“I taught myself Read Write Inc, and now I still use it when I’m reading with him.”*

These examples show how SGs sought to compensate for the limited formal preparation they received, often drawing on professional experience, self-research, or creative strategies. This proactive stance fostered a sense of agency and was perceived as protecting children from the consequences of systemic gaps.

Finally, while many accounts focused on challenges, SGs also spoke about the deep bonds and meaning found in their roles.

> *“I love them very much.”*
>
> *“I basically wore her, I got a sling, and I wore her, talked to her a lot, and she bloomed.”*

Such moments remind us that Special Guardianship is not only marked by stress and advocacy, but also by growth, pride, and joy in children’s progress. These dualities, the exhaustion of care and the rewards of witnessing resilience, are central to understanding the lived reality of Special Guardianship.

5.2.2. School Context and Relationships

Schools were described as central spaces where children's past experiences of trauma and current needs intertwined with expectations of learning, behaviour, and social participation. SGs frequently reflected on the fit between school environments and children's needs, with experiences ranging from highly supportive to deeply frustrating.

Some accounts highlighted schools that adapted flexibly and showed attunement.

> *“They were really attentive to her situation and invited us in so we could clarify who was who in her family.”*

> *“I think we’ve got quite a good relationship now with this school… if there’s any changes, anything, we let them know.”*

These examples highlight the potential for schools to act as protective environments when staff actively listen, communicate openly with SGs, and respect the complexity of family structures. Such practices fostered a sense of belonging and predictability for children.

However, many participants described experiences of frustration and exclusion, particularly where behaviour policies or standardised expectations failed to accommodate children's emotional regulation needs.

> *“She’s four years old. She didn’t come out from behind the bush because she was scared. And then you punished her in a way that no four-year-old should be punished.”*

> *“I said, I’m not allowing the school to get away with this… Amelia needs to know she can trust me, that I’ve got her best interest at heart.”*

Here, a tension emerges between mainstream behavioural approaches and trauma-informed perspectives. SGs often positioned themselves as advocates, protecting children from practices they perceived to be potentially re-traumatising.

Several accounts highlighted specific school policies or routines that clashed with children's histories of adversity.

> *"So, we then went through the whole routine with his dad… hoping it would be similar at school, because Noah likes to set the table, he has this particular toy … he has to put them to bed at a certain time."*

> *"She'll tell me the school day is so long… it's such hard work just trying to work out who I'm supposed to be while I'm in school."*

These quotes reflect how daily routines, though seemingly minor, can be overwhelming for children carrying histories of trauma. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) terms, the microsystem of the classroom can either exacerbate or mitigate wider distress depending on its flexibility and responsiveness.

School transitions were also identified as moments of vulnerability.

> *"We had another meeting… and the school accepted they would update the EHCP… On the 13th day they cancelled. I went ballistic."*

> *"We're worried it's gonna fall apart in secondary school, where you have to learn new things all the time."*

SGs' concerns about transitions often extended beyond academic readiness to fears about whether schools would recognise and respond to children's hidden needs.

Despite challenges, many participants also described instances where schools provided vital support through resources, relationships, or specialist provisions.

> *"They're saying that because she's got Pupil Premium Plus, she might be able to get some play therapy at school."*

Such examples highlight the importance of both targeted interventions and broader enrichment opportunities in fostering resilience.

Overall, SGs' accounts illustrate how schools are both potential sources of stability and significant stress. Success often depended not only on formal policy, but also on the quality of relationships between staff, children, and SGs, echoing mesosystemic dynamics where home and school connections interact to shape children's experiences.

5.2.3. Home-School Links and Advocacy

SGs consistently described themselves as key advocates for children, often acting as mediators between home and school. Many felt it was their responsibility to ensure schools fully understood the child's background and needs, since this information was not always shared systematically by professionals.

> *“So, she started school. We got her a meeting before she started to say, look, there’s a child with a trauma history. She’s doing really well, but there are things you need to be aware of.”*
>
> *“I had to speak with the teacher, be very friendly with them, and try to get them comfortable. Hear from them… if there are any issues, they should be open-minded.”*

Such proactive engagement demonstrates the importance of strong mesosystem connections, where effective communication between home and school can pre-empt difficulties and reduce misunderstandings.

At times, however, SGs experienced schools as withholding information or dismissing their expertise.

> *“His report was kept from me… I didn’t get my hands on that report until March, six months later. How on earth have you not discussed this with me?”*
>
> *“No warning for us, no consideration… we’d said to them, there are certain triggers we need to know about in advance.”*

Here, professional systems constrained SGs’ abilities to support children, leaving them feeling excluded from decision-making processes that directly affected children’s well-being and learning.

Some accounts reflected more collaborative and responsive practices.

> *"The school invited us in so we could clarify who was who in her family… they said to us, what do you want us to call you?"*

> *"We've got quite a good relationship with this school… if there's any changes, they let us know."*

These examples show the positive impact of schools recognising SGs' expertise and involving them in shaping approaches, particularly around sensitive issues of identity and belonging.

The role of other professionals, such as EPs and social workers, was also significant. While some provided essential advocacy and insight, others were seen as inconsistent or absent.

> *"Our social worker said she'd be quite happy to go through it with me… but if it's down to me, I wouldn't [do contact updates], it's really hard."*

"They did about 48 unannounced visits on me in the first year… on top of all the planned visits. It was crazy."

Such accounts reflect the uneven quality of professional involvement, at times supportive, at times overwhelming or undermining.

Overall, home-school links emerged as a key determinant of how SGs experienced supporting children in education and how they felt this impacted child in education. Where communication was transparent and respectful, children were perceived as more likely to thrive. Where it broke down, SGs often felt isolated, overburdened, and left to manage complex situations alone.

5.2.4. Wider Family Dynamics and Contact

Relationships with the wider family (birth parents and extended family) were a significant part of the mesosystem shaping school-day life. SGs described two co-existing patterns: (a) the presence of extended networks that could sometimes offer stability; and (b) complex or volatile contact arrangements that unsettled routines, emotional regulation, and school engagement.

Several SGs noted the practical value of friends or relatives stepping in during demanding periods of care.

> *"So, I now had two children, and I was a single carer, so heavily reliant on my friends… I couldn't have done it without them."*

However, far more frequently, SGs described the reverberations of ongoing or restarted birth-parent contact into the school week, with visible shifts in behaviour, sleep, and readiness to learn.

> *"We try and arrange contact at the very beginning of any school holiday, so she's got time to recover… when she comes home from contact… she sucks her fingers, wets the bed, has nightmares… and she's not like that any other time."*

Where cooperative co-parenting with birth parents was not feasible, SGs highlighted the effort required to manage boundaries and safeguard consistency around routines that supported learning.

> *"It's… because his routine's different at dad's… we went through the whole routine with his dad… hoping it'd be similar… we're just trying to keep the continuity, but it doesn't happen."*

Legal processes and renewed applications could also destabilise children sense of security, with SGs explicitly linking this to a potential educational impact.

> *"She's very stable… Educationally, she's doing amazing. I'm just aware that whatever the outcome of court could be, could unstabilise her… not just emotionally, but educationally."*

These accounts show how wider family dynamics operate as a moving context around the child's school life. When stable and predictable, they can scaffold attendance and concentration; when unpredictable or conflictual, they can heighten anxiety, disrupt sleep, and reduce classroom engagement. From an ecological perspective, the mesosystem interplay between family contact and school highlights the need for sensitive planning around contact timing, predictable routines before and after contact, and open communication with schools so they can anticipate and provide low-arousal, relational support on contact-adjacent days.

5.3 Theme Three: The Influence of Wider Systems and Life Events

(Exosystem / Macrosystem / Chronosystem)

The final theme captures the broader systemic and temporal influences shaping children's educational experiences under Special Guardianship. These are drawn from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework and extend beyond the immediate family and school, to encompass professional systems, legal and policy contexts, cultural norms, and life-course changes. SGs’ accounts consistently highlighted how these wider structures both constrained and enabled opportunities for children.

Four sub-themes were identified:

1. **Professional Support Systems and Systemic Barriers** (access, coordination, variability, therapeutic input)
2. **Legal and Policy Context** (SGO support, entitlements, funding, attendance and curriculum expectations)
3. **Recognition and Peer Support in Wider Society** (stigma, invisibility, kinship networks, advocacy and campaigning)
4. **Transitions and Life-Course Changes** (placement moves, court processes, contact, societal crises)

5.3.1 Professional Support Systems and Systemic Barriers

Across interviews, SGs described navigating a system of education, health, and social care support that was often under-resourced, inconsistent, and reliant on their own assistance. Whilst some professional support was described as transformative, access was typically characterised by long waiting times, variable thresholds, and gaps in coordination.

Timely support was valued highly when it was available. One SG reported how quickly support helped her to reframe her understanding of the child's needs.

> *"We got access to a clinical psychologist within a week… that's when we started to learn about all the developmental trauma… she explained it really well… what we needed to do to help her."*

Yet such examples were rare. More commonly, SGs reported delays in assessment that led to private funding of services, particularly where there was a lack of public resources.

> *"We had to get [the ADHD] diagnosis privately… CAMHS… was a three-year wait… we found a paediatrician… she did the diagnosis."*

Even when support was secured, coordination across agencies could be fragile. One SG described the value of professionals meeting jointly with the school to support trauma-informed approaches, while others reported fragmented support or repeated changes of workers.

> *"We had three or four different workers… it wasn't very straightforward."*

Participants also reflected on variability in professional knowledge. Some praised practitioners who had some personal or professional experience of SGOs, describing them as *"fabulous"* and *"understanding"*.

There were also concerns about missed opportunities. Elizabeth noted that PPP had not been granted for several years, despite being eligible. Meanwhile, two SGs described how an EHCP had not been updated, reflecting the needs of a much younger child and acting as a barrier to securing a specialist placement.

Financial pressures compounded these systemic gaps. Some SGs reported having to pay for EP reports or therapeutic interventions themselves, which created further inequalities.

> *"If they don't listen… I'm gonna have to pay for an EP… that's a couple of thousands of pounds."*

While barriers were frequently described, SGs also highlighted the transformative impact of effective support. Counselling and therapeutic approaches, including Theraplay and life-story work, were valued for helping children process experiences and strengthen relationships.

> *“They said, right, we’ll put her forward with some Theraplay… about 15 months… and it just all started to come together.”*

Several SGs reported how therapeutic life-story work was arranged for children, emphasising the importance of interventions that directly address trauma and a sense of identity.

Other positive examples included VS involvement, where staff with lived experiences of SGOs were described as empathetic and supportive.

> *“The virtual school… she’s really nice… she’s got a very good understanding.”*

SGs also recognised a gradual cultural shift in some services towards trauma-sensitive practice.

> *“I was talking to the duty sergeant… he started talking about early life trauma… and I was thinking, wow, things are changing.”*

These examples suggest that where services responded proactively, with trauma-informed understanding and continuity, children and SGs experienced tangible benefits. The challenge, as participants described it, lay in ensuring such good practice was consistent and accessible, rather than dependent on postcode or chance.

5.3.2. Legal and Policy Context

The SGO itself was described as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it provided children with permanence and stability, but on the other hand, it signalled the withdrawal of financial and professional support that might otherwise have been available under fostering arrangements. Several SGs reflected that, once the order was granted, they felt they were just left to ‘get on with it’ despite the ongoing complexity of caring for children with trauma.

> *“As an SGO, there is very little support… the government has reduced the funding for the adoption and support… that’s so short-sighted.”*

SGs emphasised that this reduction in SGO support had direct implications for education. Without access to therapeutic input or consistent professional assessments, schools often lacked the information required to understand children's needs. This meant that adjustments were delayed or never implemented, leaving children vulnerable to falling behind. In some cases, missed nursery provision or delays in securing an EHCP meant children entered school without the scaffolding that might have supported a smoother adjustment.

Several SGs compared the entitlements of foster carers or adoptive parents with their own experience as SGs. There was also a disparity in SG entitlements between LAs, with SGs noting significant inequalities.

> *“When I’ve gone into meetings… I felt like a lot of professionals were judging me. We get treated really poorly compared to foster carers who get red carpet rolled out.” “First, I’d like to do I’d like to see every single school get have the training. You know, that’s what I’d like to see.”*

This disparity was not only felt emotionally but translated into educational disadvantage, where children could not easily access therapeutic support, extracurricular funding, or additional tutoring, leaving them feeling excluded compared to peers in other LAs or placement types. SGs expressed frustration that such inequalities risked widening gaps in attainment and well-being for children.

Policy environments in education and SEND provision were also described as inflexible. SGs highlighted how attendance requirements and curriculum expectations often failed to accommodate children's complex needs.

> *“What can you do, and where does her education kind of lie?… we’re probably now at 60% attendance, and it’s year nine… her school don’t do GCSEs… it’s all about life skills.”.*

Others described how rigid coding of absences or expectations of a ‘straight trajectory’ through assessments positioned children as not succeeding, when in reality their difficulties reflected the impact of trauma, bereavement, or ongoing family contact. Such inflexibility risked compounding stigma and undermining children’s sense of belonging at school.

At the same time, there were examples of positive policy levers when applied consistently. Some SGs spoke of the difference made by access to PPP or VS involvement, which provided targeted funding and advocacy.

> *“It wasn’t until we applied for him to go to secondary school that I discovered that he was Pupil Premium Plus… and he’s eligible for this since 2005.”*

These accounts highlight that when policy mechanisms are recognised and implemented, they can provide meaningful support and resources. However, the inconsistency of access across LAs meant that for many families, policy frameworks represented barriers rather than enablers.

From an ecological perspective, this sub-theme illustrates how macrosystemic structures, legal frameworks, educational policies, and funding entitlements shape children's daily educational experiences in powerful ways. For SGs the legal permanence of the SGO offered stability, but the associated withdrawal of support risked undermining children's educational opportunities, unless schools and professionals were proactive in recognising and addressing these gaps.

5.3.3. Recognition and Peer Support in Wider Society

SGs frequently discussed how kinship care and SGOs were often poorly understood in both professional and community contexts. Some described feeling judged by schools or other parents, either because of their caregiving role or their children's behaviours.

> *"When I've gone into meetings with social workers initially… I felt like a lot of professionals were judging me. I felt like a lot of professionals were looking down their nose at me."*

These experiences of invisibility and misunderstanding could reinforce feelings of difference, particularly when schools or services failed to recognise the specific challenges and strengths of SGO families.

At the same time, SGs emphasised the importance of peer networks and collective bonds as sources of recognition and validation. Several described involvements in local or national kinship groups, which provided both emotional support and practical advice.

> *"I spoke to somebody this week… she said, it's so nice to talk to me. And I said, don't ever think you're on your own, because you're not."*
>
> *"One of the things that Kinship… have helped with is their Someone Like Me programme. So, when another SG is struggling, they sometimes just want to talk to somebody who's in the same boat."*

Online communities and charities also provided SGs with a platform to share knowledge and advocate for change.

> *"We started a support group for EHCPs, and we've now got 800 members… because I've learned so much about the laws and what they can do, what they can't do, and I want to pass that knowledge on to people."*
>
> "I've got the group… it's really growing, we're on 3,500 people now. With all of our collective lived experiences, that's powerful."

For some, collective action extended beyond peer support to public advocacy and campaigning, reflecting a growing sense that wider recognition of kinship care was slowly gaining momentum.

> *"I went on that march on Saturday as well, with Kinship, to march for the funding cuts."*

These accounts highlight that societal attitudes towards SGOs are complex and shifting. While stigma and misunderstanding remain barriers, many SGs created spaces for recognition, solidarity, and influence through peer support networks, advocacy groups, and collective campaigning. From an ecological perspective, these wider societal processes shaped children's experiences of belonging and visibility, reinforcing the idea that educational outcomes are connected not only to family and school, but also to the broader cultural and systemic recognition of kinship care and SGOs.

5.3.4. Transitions and Life Course Changes

Chronosystemic influences were particularly pronounced in the accounts of SGs. Many children had experienced bereavement, parental separation, or multiple placement moves, with life events that continued to reverberate across their educational experiences.

One SG recalled the destabilising effects of moving between caregivers and placements, with each transition disrupting routines and relationships.

> *“She’d been with us from five months to about 18 months, and then she was probably about 28 months when she came back… so she’d been through that disruption twice.”*

A further source of disruption was the ongoing involvement of birth parents and family court proceedings. Several SGs described repeated hearings, inconsistent contact, or new siblings being born into unstable circumstances. These events often reignited children's anxiety, leaving them with uncertainty about their place in the family. Emily highlighted how even after years of stability:

> *“if the other parent decides to restart things… it can massively destabilise that child”*

Elizabeth reflected on the impact of siblings being born into unsafe circumstances, noting how this compounded her child's feeling of insecurity. Similarly, Georgia described the challenges of long court battles and the difficulty of keeping siblings together:

> *“It took 21 months, back and forth to court… she was initially placed in foster care even though I already had her sister at home”*

Contact itself could also be distressing, with SGs observing how children's behaviour changed in response to uncertainty around parental visits after they had become unsafe. Anna, it described how the child's physical distress reflected this:

> *“She threw up in the car on the way because she was so anxious about going… she just kept saying, I don’t want to go.”*

School transitions were another identified point of vulnerability. Moves between primary and secondary schools, or between schools following placement disruption, often coincided with heightened anxiety, reduced attendance, or interruptions to academic progress.

> *“Trying to cope in a new place, also in a new environment, and also… create new playmates, in school and out of school.”*

Broader societal events further shaped experiences. SGs described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted routines and sometimes reinforced children's reliance on the safety of home. The cost-of-living crisis was another commonly mentioned factor, with some SGs reflecting on financial pressures that limited access to extracurricular opportunities or private assessments.

Overall, these accounts demonstrate that children's educational experiences cannot be understood in isolation from the broader temporal and historical context in which they are situated. From experiences of bereavement, placement disruption, ongoing parental difficulties, court proceedings, and wider societal crises, transitions at multiple levels shaped how children engaged with school, peers, and learning. For SGs, providing stability meant continually supporting children through these life-course changes, while advocating for schools and services to recognise the impact of events often beyond children's control.

6. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore how SGs perceive their role in supporting the education of the children in their care, including challenges and protective factors shaping those experiences. The research also sought to examine the factors across the ecological system levels that influence children's educational experiences using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST. Framing children's educational experiences ecologically allowed a move beyond solely within-child explanations of difficulty or success, towards an understanding that recognises how development occurs through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments over time (Meadows, 2017; Darlington, 2007). This perspective is especially significant given the policy, research, and practice focus in England, which has primarily centred on adoption, foster care, kinship care, or PLAC more broadly. At the same time, despite their increasing numbers, SGOs remain comparatively under-researched (Shuttleworth, 2023).

Across the dataset, three interrelated themes were identified: 1. Individual experiences, reactions, and responses (microsystem - child factors); 2. Interactions between the child, family, and school (microsystem/mesosystem); and 3. The influence of wider systems and life events (exosystem/macrosystem/chronosystem). The discussion is therefore structured in relation to the research questions guiding the research, exploring the findings in relation to existing research and theoretical perspectives, while highlighting the implications for understanding the SGs' perspectives of the education of children in their care.

6.1. Contribution to the Literature

The findings build on previous research in four ways. Firstly, they corroborate evidence that children in SGO placements often face increased educational challenges (e.g., higher rates of SEN, barriers to attendance or participation, and lower achievement levels compared to their peers), while also revealing diversity and resilience. This again moves away from deficit-based language and supports calls for personalised, context-aware support for children living with SGs (Bows, 2021).

Secondly, they emphasise the voices of SGs, who are somewhat underrepresented compared to adopters or foster carers. SGs face the dual challenge of SGO care (managing intense emotional and bureaucratic duties) while also feeling pride in children's achievements, referred to as a ‘double-edged sword’. Their role of navigating multiple systems becomes apparent here (Shuttleworth, 2021).

Thirdly, they make visible the mechanisms by which system-level gaps in SGO support translate into daily school experiences (e.g., some experiences of delayed assessment, some inflexible attendance or behaviour policies, and misunderstandings or preconceived beliefs from professionals), thereby adding ecological specificity to considerations of policy and wider systemic functioning (Dudley, 2023; Sowton, 2023).

Finally, the application of EST in a Special Guardianship context also contributes to the literature (Binder *et al.,* 2013), demonstrating how exosystemic arrangements (service thresholds), macrosystemic factors (policies and procedures), and microsystemic or chronosystemic changes (bereavement, court activity or changes to funding such as the reduction in ASGSF) cascade into the microsystem of classroom and can impact learning and belonging.

6.2. Research Question 1

How do SGs perceive and make sense of their role in supporting the education of children in their care?

The research aimed to explore how SGs perceive and support the educational experiences of children in their care within the context of an SGO. The findings emphasise the complex role SGs play in supporting children's education. Participants consistently describe their responsibilities as extending beyond traditional parenting roles to include engagement with professional services, advocating for needs and experiences, providing emotional support for children who have experienced early adversity, and seeking further knowledge or information.

These findings align with existing research, which suggests that kinship carers (including SGs) often take on an advocacy role within education and social care systems (Wade et al., 2014; Harwin et al., 2019). This includes acting as a link between children, their schools, extended family, and wider professional networks. SGs possess a deep understanding of children and their individual experiences, which can help inform and improve understanding of a child's needs in systemic settings (Hillier, 2021). The accounts shared by SGs in this research further emphasise the importance of their role, including their knowledge base and how better relationships and communication with professionals and systems within ecological systems can positively influence recognition of needs and development outcomes.

6.2.1. Advocacy and Navigating Educational Systems

SGs often describe this role as both rewarding and exhausting. Many described a steep learning curve involved in navigating educational systems without the preparation or stricter training typically offered to foster carers or adoptive parents, for example. These experiences echo research suggesting that SGs often enter their caregiving role with limited preparation or professional support, leaving them to develop knowledge through lived experience (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). Participants described learning to navigate school systems, SEND processes, and professional services largely through trial and error, rather than through formal guidance. Support frequently came from informal networks such as friends, relatives, or online peer groups, rather than structured professional training or support systems. Similar patterns were identified by Hillier (2021), who found their SGs frequently relied on peer networks to develop strategies for navigating schools and professional support services.

The reliance on informal networks also reflects wider systemic inequalities within the support structures available to SGO families. Researchers repeatedly highlighted inconsistencies in the support available to SGs across differing LAs (Harwin *et al.,* 2019), with some families receiving therapeutic and educational support while others relied heavily on personal resilience within informal networks. Participants' accounts within this research reinforce this disparity, suggesting that access to support is often dependent on SG persistence, location, knowledge, and ability or confidence to navigate complex professional systems.

6.2.2. Emotional Impact on SGs

The emotional impact involved in being an SG and the ongoing pressures of supporting education were particularly evident in the accounts of SGs. Participants frequently described advocating for children's needs through emails, meetings, and continuous communication with schools and LAs. These experiences align with previous research that highlights the pressures faced by kinship carers who must manoeuvre through complex bureaucratic systems while managing family life and children's emotional needs (Testa, 2013; Woodward, 2019). Several participants expressed feeling responsible for ensuring that children's needs were recognised by school contacts, occasionally feeling compelled to ‘fight’ for appropriate support. Such experiences sometimes led to tension in home-school relationships, especially when SGs felt that schools lacked understanding of the children’s early experiences or ongoing emotional needs.

6.2.3. Home-School Relationships

Within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST, the findings illustrate how home-school experiences can influence everyday educational experiences within the mesosystem. SGs play a vital role in connecting children’s home experiences with their school lives. Previous research has similarly emphasised the importance of strong home-school relationships for children who have faced early adversity (Gore-Langton, 2017; Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). When communication between SGs and schools is collaborative and responsive, children tend to feel more able to settle, engage, develop a sense of belonging, and progress in learning. Conversely, when SGs feel excluded from decision-making or misunderstood by the school, they often feel a greater need to advocate for the child and may experience more tension within their relationship with the school.

6.2.4. Pride, Resilience and the ‘Double Edged Sword’

SGs also described significant pride in children's achievements and resilience. Participants often emphasised moments of progress, particularly where children demonstrated persistence and motivation in learning despite their early life experiences. These narratives reflect wider research which highlights the resilience demonstrated by many children living within kinship care arrangements (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Harwin *et al.,* 2019). However, several SGs also described this process as a 'double-edged sword', whereby more visible academic success sometimes leads professionals to overlook ongoing emotional relational needs. Similar patterns were identified by Hillier (2021) who noted that when children appeared to be progressing academically, schools sometimes assumed that individual needs were not present or had resolved.

6.3. Research Question 2

According to SGs, what factors across ecological system levels (e.g. home, school, community, policy, shape children's educational experiences under SGOs?

SGs' accounts described a range of interacting factors influencing children's education experiences. These included children's developmental needs and relationships at home and school, often within the context of broader systemic influences such as service provision and policy frameworks. Concerning the research question, these findings demonstrate how educational experiences are shaped by the interaction of multiple ecological system levels rather than by individual characteristics alone. These findings emphasise the importance of using an ecological perspective to understand educational experiences (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Previous research examining SGOs and education has similarly emphasised the complexity of children's experiences across multiple ecological contexts (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Harwin *et al.,* 2019). Hillier (2021) also highlights that the educational experiences of children living under SGOs are shaped not only by individual needs but also by the ways in which caregivers, schools, and wider professional systems respond to those needs.

6.3.1. Attainment and Learning

Attainment profiles varied across children; sometimes they fluctuated, with areas of difficulty and strengths in other specific areas being consistently identified. The SGs often attributed progress more to contextual factors (e.g., sleep, regulation, classroom safety, and transition quality) rather than to fixed academic ability. In relation to the research question, these findings suggest that SGs perceive children's learning experiences as being highly influenced by their school environment and relationships with professionals in school, as opposed to their academic abilities. This aligns with evidence that executive functioning and working memory are highly sensitive to experiences of arousal and threat in childhood, as outlined in polyvagal theory, with subsequent effects on literacy and numeracy performance (Johnson *et al.,* 2021). Similar patterns have been identified within research on children living in kinship care and other permanence arrangements, where educational progress and experience are often linked to relational stability and supportive school environments rather than within children's abilities (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Harwin *et al.,* 2019). Moments of progress often followed improved co-regulation at home or consistent support from key adults in class, implying that improvements occurred when cognitive load was reduced, again aligning with trauma-informed practices (Dahlen, 2022).

Transitions (between teachers, key stages, or schools) are often pinch points. When transitions were scaffolded (through early visits, named adults, and staggered entry), engagement stabilised; where they were not, SG*s* described dips in attendance and "starting again" academically (Sims, 2019). These patterns reflect transactional models, in which ongoing processes are a prerequisite for consolidating new learning (Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003). Through an ecological lens, these transitions represent changes across children's interacting microsystems, highlighting how shifts in relationships and routines can significantly influence engagement with learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Importantly, SGs emphasised the importance of recognising potential: children's topic interests, persistence, and creativity often surpass standard metrics, challenging deficit framings and supporting a strength-based approach to assessment, which research indicates improves learning and educational outcomes (Reis *et al.,* 2025). This focus on strengths also aligns with resilience-focused approaches within EP practice, that recognise protective processes within children's ecological systems (Roffey, 2015).

6.3.2. Development and Health

Speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) and developmental differences (e.g., attention, sensory processing, or needs linked to a diagnosis of ASD/ADHD) were present daily, with some individuals also experiencing physical health needs. These accounts emphasise how developmental factors played a significant role in the ecological context shaping children's experiences. SGs' 'meaning-making' is rooted in histories of early adversity, aligning with evidence that neglect or bereavement can impact the neural systems responsible for areas of development or learning, such as language, attention, and interoception (Tottenham, 2020). Previous research examining kinship and permanence arrangements similarly identified higher levels of developmental and health needs among children with early adversity (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). SGs reported delays in accessing SLT, OT, or CAMHS to support with developmental or health needs; when access was finally granted, targeted interventions improved participation but were limited in duration. This reflects national concerns about lengthy waiting times and thresholded access for vulnerable groups (Edbrooke-Childs & Deighton, 2020). This is particularly relevant to the reduction in the ASGSF; many of the children cared for by SGs in this research had access to therapeutic support (e.g., Theraplay, bereavement counselling or life story work) through this fund, highlighting the importance of targeted funding mechanisms in enabling children to access trauma-informed support and/or interventions, such as life story work, or Theraplay.

Critically, SGs interpreted developmental profiles through a trauma-informed lens: SLCN was seen as constraining self-advocacy; sensory hyper- or hypo-responsivity as signalling overload; and fluctuating attention as a mood-dependent rather than trait-related. Such interpretations reflect trauma-informed perspectives that understand children's behaviour and developmental needs as adaptive responses to earlier experiences. This shifts school responses from fixing issues to designing environments (visual scaffolds, reduced sensory load, predictable routines) that enable access, as routinely documented in research about effective learning environments (Kirk 2025).

6.3.3. Behaviour and Adjustment

Behavioural presentations included internalising behaviours (such as anxiety and withdrawal) and externalising behaviours (like anger and oppositionality), often occurring around stressors such as contact incidents, court proceedings, or staff changes (Bubier & Drabick, 2009). In relation to the research question, SGs perceived children's behavioural responses as closely linked to the relational and systemic contexts surrounding them, rather than due to the individual child's traits or needs. SGs described behaviour as a form of communication of needs and defence against becoming overwhelmed, consistent with polyvagal-informed and trauma-aware models of regulation, which aligns with research in the field of trauma-aware practice (Benjamin, 2025). Such interpretations are consistent with research examining children who have experienced adversity within kinship and permanence arrangements, where behavioural responses are frequently understood as adaptive responses to earlier experiences rather than deliberate disruptive behaviours (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Hillier, 2021). They also reported masking at school, maintaining compliance, or saying, "I'm fine," during the school day, only to later experience dysregulation at home, indicating that classroom quietness should not be mistaken for a lack of distress (Maloney, 2024).

Relational responses were significant, characterised by consistent and attuned adults who detected early cues and provided co-regulation, thereby helping to expand the children's window of tolerance and having positive effects on attendance and persistence with tasks (Bornstein & Esposito, 2023). Conversely, zero-tolerance policies narrowed that window, increasing avoidance or fight-or-flight responses (Gittins, 2014). These processes demonstrate bi-directional person-context interactions at the core of EST: adult attitudes do not merely respond to behaviour; they also influence it (Cunningham, 2001). From an ecological perspective, these interactions illustrate how children's behaviour emerges through ongoing exchanges between the child and the relational environments surrounding them, particularly within home and school microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

6.3.4. Identity and Belonging

Identity work was a consistent theme. Children navigated complex family roles (e.g., “grandma as mum”), sensitivities regarding naming practices in school records and classrooms, and reflected on feeling “different” from their peers. These accounts highlight how children’s sense of identity is shaped not only by family relationships but also by how schools recognise and respond to diverse family structures. When schools acknowledged diverse family structures in everyday activities (e.g., admissions paperwork, greetings, displays, and PHSE examples), children's sense of belonging grew; when assumptions defaulted to a mother-father model (e.g., Family tree tasks without adjustments, Mother's or Father's Day activities), this sense of belonging could be impacted. This aligns with evidence that school belonging mediates the link between adversity and achievement as well as mental health (Conlan, 2022). Research examining kinship care has similarly highlighted the importance of recognition and validation of family diversity within educational settings in supporting children’s emotional security and engagement in school (Selwyn et al., 2013; Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024).

Peer relationships acted both as a buffer and a risk; sensitive discussions around diverse family structures seemed to develop peer understanding and the child’s sense of belonging, while bullying or questions that highlighted differences undermined attendance and self-concept, aligning with research that indicates well-being can be linked to peer relationships (Slee & Skrzypiec, 2016). SGs also described children at different stages of life story work, and supportive adults who paced discussions and validated mixed feelings served as protectors (Savage, 2023). Within an ecological framework, these experiences demonstrate how children’s identity and belonging are shaped through interactions across multiple relational systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

6.3.5. Experiences of Trauma

A common theme in SGs’ accounts was the lasting impact of trauma. However, individual cases varied, and SGs consistently emphasised that children's early experiences of neglect, loss, or exposure to violence, which were never fully known, continued to influence their educational journey. In relation to the research question, SGs therefore perceived children’s educational experiences as shaped by the ongoing influence of early adversity alongside current relational and environmental contexts. This aligns with research indicating that ACEs can have widespread and long-term effects on cognition, behaviour, and well-being (Bhutta *et al.,* 2023). Importantly, SGs warned against assuming a complete or unchanging story of trauma; children's histories often contained unknown elements, and meaning shifted as children matured (Kirmayer, 2016). Research examining Special Guardianship similarly highlights that children’s histories are often only partially known to caregivers and professionals, requiring ongoing interpretation as children develop and ask new questions about their past (Harwin et al., 2019; Hillier, 2021).

Trauma influenced daily functioning in various ways; some children exhibited increased anxiety and struggled with concentration, while others experienced difficulties with trust and emotional regulation (Perry, 2003). School-related triggers such as routine changes, separations at the start of the day, or insensitive curriculum tasks could trigger memories of loss or rejection, resulting in avoidance or dysregulation (Rinerson, 2025). These accounts underscore the ecological principle that the microsystem (e.g., the classroom) can either amplify or buffer the impacts of previous adversity, depending on how adults interpret and respond to it (Lopez *et al.,* 2021).

At the same time, trauma did not define children's identity. SGs described children’s humour, creativity, and strong attachments, especially when adults supported recovery through relational safety. Therapeutic life story work, counselling, and consistent achievement were valued as protective measures, helping children process past experiences without becoming overwhelmed (Golding, 2014). Similar findings have been reported in research examining kinship care, where stable caregiving relationships and relational safety are associated with improved emotional adjustment and educational engagement (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Selwyn *et al.,* 2013). This aligns with trauma-informed frameworks that promote relational and systemic practices, rather than placing sole responsibility on the child or viewing them as a ‘problem’ (Southhall *et al.,* 2023).

In educational settings, these findings emphasise the importance of moving beyond behaviourist interpretations towards trauma-aware practice, where regulation is recognised as a survival response rather than defiance (Carter & Borrett, 2023). They also highlight the need for careful communication, as whilst understanding trauma histories is important, children's privacy must also be carefully maintained, and information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis to preserve dignity, trust and confidentiality (Graham, 2025).

6.4. Subsidiary Research Question 1

What challenges and barriers to education do SGs identify and how do these relate to children's individuals, relational and systemic contexts?

Participants identified a range of structural and relational barriers affecting children's educational experiences. Many of these barriers were linked to systemic factors within educational and professional systems rather than individual child needs. From an ecological perspective, these barriers often emerged within the mesosystem, where interactions between home, school, and professionals' support were perceived by SGs to shape children's daily experiences. The connections between systems could either be supportive or sources of tension (Woodward, 2019; Conlan 2022).

6.4.1. School Relationships and Communication

Schools emerged as being spaces where children either felt recognised or marginalised. SGs' accounts highlighted stark contrasts: relational, trauma-informed staff who listened and adapted were described as protective, vs rigid or inconsistent approaches which worsened difficulties (Thomas, 2025). Some SGs reported that schools did not fully understand SGO arrangements, occasionally treating them as 'just being with family' or more informal (Konrad, 2019). This lack of recognition complicated communication, leaving SGs feeling dismissed or excluded.

Positive relationships were maintained when communication was proactive and empathetic; for example, schools providing advance notice of curriculum topics likely to cause distress. This aligns with research indicating that relational practice and open communication promote a sense of belonging for children with complex family backgrounds (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). Conversely, poor communication, such as withholding reports or failing to inform about staff changes, was associated with increased anxiety for both children and their SGs (Cross, 2011).

6.4.2. Home–School Links and Advocacy

The quality of home-school partnerships varied considerably, with some SGs describing collaborative working, where schools valued their knowledge of the child and involved them in decision-making. In such cases, SGs reported feeling respected as partners, and children benefited from consistency between home and school (German, 2017). Conversely, other accounts revealed cycles of blame, where schools attributed difficulties to parenting, and SGs perceived schools as unwilling to adapt (McGovern, 2018). These tensions illustrate how misaligned mesosystem relationships can compound children's challenges (Cumming *et al.,* 2006).

Advocacy often served as the mechanism through which SGs aimed to bridge gaps. For some, this man persisted in emailing, attending multiple meetings, or escalating concerns within the LA. While sometimes effective, this advocacy could also increase strain and reinforce adversarial dynamics (Rios & Hong, 2025; Pleasence *et al.,* 2014).

6.4.3. Pressures of Contact and SG Strain

A distinctive feature of SGO contacts is the ongoing involvement of birth family contact, which is impacted by school life in complex ways (Thompson, 2018). SGs reported that such contact could disrupt children's routines, leading to increased anxiety, sleep disturbances, or emotional dysregulation that extended into the classroom (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2009). As one SG noted, planning contacts at the start of holidays allowed recovery time before school resumed, exemplifying how system coordination can help buffer these effects.

Where family relationships were conflicted, SGs describe the strain of shielding children from tension whilst also managing their own stress. This added pressure sometimes reduced their capacity to engage constructively with schools (Sugg, 2020). The combined demands of advocacy, education, and boundary setting in family contact highlight how SG strain can ripple across microsystem and mesosystem interactions (Bergren, 2022).

6.4.4. Professional Support Systems and Systemic Barriers

Some SGs report barriers in accessing timely and appropriate support. Long waiting lists, high thresholds, and unclear service pathways contribute to frustrations. These barriers often leave schools and families feeling isolated when managing complex needs (Punton *et al.,* 2022), echoing critiques of fragmented provision for children's SGOs.

The accounts highlighted the exosystemic nature of these difficulties, such as decisions made within health, social care, and LA systems reverberating in children's school lives, often shaping attendance, behaviour, and access to learning (Bodycote, 2022). SGs' advocacy frequently became the mechanism for overcoming blockages, but this reinforced the sense that systemic responsibility was being displaced onto families. Such findings align with research indicating that kinship carers often find themselves navigating professional systems without a clear understanding of such systems or procedures (Baskin, 2021).

6.4.6. Legal and Policy Context

The legal status of the SGO itself was central to how families engage with support. SGs value the permanence and stability provided by the order but frequently describe it as a 'double-edged sword'. Compared to fostering, some SGs often felt they had reduced access to financial allowances, respite, or structured professional oversight (Woodward, 2019). This disparity reflects wider critiques that the SGO framework transfers parental responsibility while reducing state involvement and support (Woodward *et al.,* 2021).

Education policy also shapes experiences, with SGs noting that rigid attendance and behaviour frameworks clash with the needs of children affected by trauma, bereavement, or SEND (Emmerson, 2022). Similarly, navigating the SEND Code of Practice (2015) and the EHCP process was described as inconsistent and inequitable, with some families receiving supportive responses while others faced resistance or delay (Richards, 2020). These accounts reflect broader concerns about the variability and inequality in SEND provision nationally (Lewis *et al.,* 2010).

6.4.7. Recognition and Peer Support in Wider Society

At the macro system level, societal recognition and misconceptions have a significant influence (Wessells & Dawes, 2006). Some SGs describe positive shifts in awareness, such as support groups or online communities that validate their experiences. These networks offer both emotional reassurance and practical guidance, fostering resilience and reducing feelings of isolation (Juliano & Yunes, 2014).

However, despite this, there is widespread stigma and misunderstanding, including assumptions, which lead to judgment from professionals. Such accounts align with research highlighting the cultural invisibility of kinship care compared with adoption and fostering (Glynn, 2019). Stigma not only undermines SGs' confidence but also shapes children's sense of difference in school, affecting their belonging and peer relationships (Conlan, 2022).

6.4.8. Transitions and Life-Course Changes

The chronosystem emphasises how significant transitions and societal events can disrupt children's educational pathways (O'Toole *et al.,* 2014). Bereavement, school moves, and placement changes are described as points where increased ability is observed, with SGs noting regression in learning or behaviour during these times (Wilder & Lillvist, 2018). For some, the COVID-19 pandemic initially provided relief from school-related anxieties, but reintegration into formal education proved challenging, highlighting how broader societal shifts intersect with children's individual circumstances and experiences.

Economic pressures, especially the cost-of-living crisis, further impacted educational opportunities (Schofield, 2024), with some SGs struggling to afford extracurricular activities or therapeutic input. These accounts of how socio-historical contexts influence not only immediate well-being but also children's long-term sense of stability and opportunity (Schoon & Motimer, 2017).

6.5. Subsidiary Research Question 2

What enabling factors, supports, or practices do SGs describe as enabling or enhancing children's educational engagement and outcomes?

Alongside the barriers described above, SGs also identified several factors that supported children's educational engagement, well-being, sense of belonging, and educational progress. These enabling influences were most often described as relational and systemic rather than as individual characteristics of the child. Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, protective factors can be present across the microsystem, mesosystem, and wider systemic contexts. Findings therefore emphasise the importance of understanding children's educational experiences as emerging through the interaction of relationships, environments, and broader structural supports over time (Darlington, 2007; Meadows, 2017).

6.5.1. Supportive Relationships with School Staff

Supportive relationships with teachers and school staff are often described as key enabling factors in children's educational experiences. SGs highlight the importance of school staff who adopt an empathetic and flexible approach to teaching, alongside possessing a practical understanding of trauma-informed practice. When teachers recognise the impact of children's early experiences and tailor their responses accordingly, SGs felt that children appeared to feel safer and more able to engage with their learning.

These findings align with existing research outlining the role of relational school environments in supporting children who have experienced early adversity (Gore-Langton, 2017). Literature examining the educational experiences of children in kinship and alternative permanence arrangements similarly highlight the importance of consistent and attuned adults in school contexts, who provided children with emotional security and were able to therefore support engagement with learning (Wade *et al.,* 2014; Harwin *et al.,* 2019). Within the context of EST, these relationships represent key processes within the classroom microsystem, whereby daily interactions between children and key adults shaped opportunities for effective learning and development.

6.5.2. Positive Home-School Partnerships

Collaborative home-school partnerships were also recognised as important enablers; where schools actively acknowledged SGs' perspectives and appreciated their knowledge of the child, participants reported feeling respected as contributors to the educational process. In these situations, strategies used to support children with emotional regulation, behaviour, and learning were more likely to be applied consistently across both home and school contexts.

Previous literature emphasises the importance of effective home-school communication in supporting children who have experienced early adversity or disrupted caregiving and family life (Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). Research examining kinship care arrangements similarly recognised that caregivers often possess valuable contextual knowledge about children's experiences and needs, which can inform school adaptations when communication is collaborative (Selwyn et al., 2013; Wade et al., 2014). Within the context of EST, these interactions reflect the functioning of the mesosystem, where connections between home and school environments can either support or influence children's educational engagement.

6.5.3. Peer Relationships and School Belonging

Peer relationships were also described as important sources of resilience for children living under SGOs. SGs reported that positive friendships and supportive peer groups contributed to children's confidence, sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and willingness to participate in school activities. Inclusive school environments that recognise diverse family structures were also perceived as important in developing a sense of belonging and identity.

These findings align with research demonstrating that school belonging plays a significant role in developing resilience and managing the impact of adversity in educational outcomes (Conlan, 2022). Research examining the experiences of children in kinship care more broadly similarly highlight the importance of inclusive school cultures that recognise family diversity and support children's identity development (Selwyn *et al.,* 2013; Ramoutar & Hampton, 2024). Within the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) peer relationships form an important part of the school microsystem, influencing children's emotional security and engagement with learning.

6.5.4. Access to Supportive Services and Interventions

Access to therapeutic and specialist services was also sometimes described as an important enabling factor, when required or available. Some SGs reported positive experiences where children received therapeutic support, counselling, life story work, or trauma informed interventions through services such as the ASGSF. These supports were perceived as helping children process earlier experiences, develop emotional regulation skills, and participate more confidently in school environments.

Previous research examining alternative permanent arrangements similarly emphasise the importance of access to therapeutic support in fostering children's emotional development following early adversity (Harwin et al., 2019; Wade et al., 2014). However, research also highlights considerable variability in the availability of such services across LAs (Selwyn et al., 2013). Within the context of EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), these services represent exosystem influences, where decisions made within wider service structures indirectly shape children's daily experiences within the home and school environments.

6.5.5. Informal Support Networks and Caregiver Resilience

Informal support networks were also described as an important enabling factor for SGs themselves. Participants frequently referred to support from extended family members, peer support groups, and online communities as valuable sources of support including advice, reassurance, and shared experience.

Research examining kinship care arrangements similarly identifies informal support networks as significant sources of resilience for caregivers (Juliano & Yunes, 2014). Such networks can reduce feelings of isolation and enhanced carers’ capacity to advocate for children within educational and professional systems (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). Within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST, these wider relational networks form part of the broader social context surrounding the child and the caregiver, influencing the stability in the support available within the child's immediate environment.

7. The Role of the EP

The findings of this research highlight the interacting factors shaping the educational experiences of children living under SGOs. Drawn from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, the data suggest that children's experiences are co-constructed through dynamic influences at the individual, relational, and systemic levels. EPs are distinctly positioned to support these children, their families, and schools through their ability to work across systems, promote collaboration, and translate psychological theory into practice (Ashton & Roberts, 2006). This section considers the role of the EP in addressing challenges identified in the research, organised across ecological levels of influence (Berger, 2013; Wilding & Griffey, 2015).

7.1. Supporting Children (Individual Level & Microsystem)

At the level of the child, the findings highlighted needs related to attainment, development and health needs, understanding behaviours in the context of wider experiences, and children's developing sense of identity. EPs can play a central role in supporting schools and SGs to understand these needs through holistic assessment, formulation, and intervention planning (Atkinson, Barrow & Norris, 2022). Direct work with the child is not the only route through which EPs can effect change at this level (Young, Smillie & Hamilton, 2019). By consulting with key adults in the child's immediate environment, EPs can shape daily interactions in classroom practice that positively impact the children's learning and well-being (Nolan & Moreland, 2014).

Rather than focusing narrowly on diagnostic categories, EPs can also provide psychological formulations that integrate children's backgrounds, experiences of loss or trauma, and current educational needs (Hill, 2013). For example, behaviours such as withdrawal, hypervigilance, or difficulties with attention might be reframed as adaptive responses to earlier experiences of adversity, rather than as 'deficits' or 'disruptive' (Graham *et al.,* 2016). Such trauma-informed re-framing around perceptions and language (Carlson, 2024) not only validates the lived experiences of children but also steers schools towards relational and supportive responses.

Identity and belonging also emerged as recurrent areas of need. Some children expressed anxiety or confusion about being different from their peers due to their family structure. EPs can support schools in developing inclusive practices that celebrate diverse family forms and affirm children's identities (Beveridge, 2013). Interventions might include peer mentoring, pupil voice projects, or small group work that offers multiple pathways to developing their sense of belonging (Petosa & Smith, 2014; Rubenstein, Scott & Peake, 2022; Hughes, 2010). These approaches align with findings that acceptance from both peers and teachers significantly shaped children's emotional well-being and capacity to engage in learning (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl & Thomson, 2010).

7.2. Working with Families and SGs (Microsystem & Mesosystem)

SGs frequently described feeling underprepared for the emotional and educational demands of their role, reported limited access to training, and at times, a sense of isolation. EPs can strengthen SGs’ capacity through consultation, multi-agency working, psychoeducation, and collaborative problem-solving (Hendricker, Bender & Ouye, 2023).

Consultative work would provide a reflective space for SGs to share experiences and co-construct strategies tailored to the children’s needs (Farragher & Coogan, 2020). For example, when SGs experience challenges with behaviour, EPs could help reframe these behaviours as communication of unmet needs (Leslie *et al.,* 2025). This reframing can reduce stress and prevent the escalation of conflict when behavioural challenges arise (Howard, 2009). This is important, as whilst not identified in this research, statistics indicate that some children experience placement ‘breakdowns’ when persistent challenges arise (Selwyn & Masson, 2014).

This research also showed that SGs often sought out knowledge independently (e.g. reading, research, or peer learning), reflecting both resourcefulness and an unmet need among SGs. EPs can respond to this by offering accessible psychoeducation on topics such as trauma, attachment, or polyvagal theory (Brown *et al.,* 2020). Practical workshops or guidance sessions may build SGs’ confidence while reducing their reliance on informal sources, which may be inconsistent or inaccurate (Ruffolo, Kuhn & Evans, 2005).

Furthermore, EPs can facilitate connections between key adults, such as SGs and professionals (Hendry, 2010). As SGs sometimes felt dismissed by professionals, EPs' ability to act as a neutral facilitator is vital for rebuilding trust and ensuring SGs' knowledge is recognised and valued within educational planning (Landreman, 2023).

7.3. Enhancing School Practice (Microsystem & Mesosystem)

Schools were sources of both considerable support and challenge. SGs described contrasting experiences: some schools adopted trauma-informed and flexible practices, while others relied on rigid behaviour policies and inconsistent staff responses (Ungar *et al.,* 2019). EPs are particularly well placed to influence these patterns systemically (Pellegrini, 2009).

Training and consultation can help shift schools from policy-driven to relational models of behaviour management (Robinson, 2006). By grounding staff understanding in psychological theory, such as attachment-informed approaches or polyvagal perspectives, EPs can encourage schools to interpret behaviour as an indicator of need rather than intentional disruption (Brown *et al.,* 2020).

EPs can also promote consistent relational practices, such as designating a key adult for daily check-in, supporting teachers to recognise triggers and understand behaviours, and embedding low-arousal responses and co-regulation (Valenzuela, 2024; Porter, 2014; McDonnell *et al.,* 2024). The findings highlighted how inconsistency across staff responses could impacts children's sense of safety, suggesting that whole-school approaches are particularly valuable (Roffey, 2016).

In addition, EPs can advise on strategies to enhance belonging and engagement at a systemic level (Allen *et al.,* 2018). Examples include mentoring, peer buddy programmes, or curricular adaptations that acknowledge diverse family structures (Stapley *et al*., 2022; Tzani-Pepelasi *et al*., 2019; Mishra, Hota & Khamari, 2019). These strategies not only address inclusion but also mitigate the worries that SGs reported children experienced about differences in identity and promote a sense of belonging.

7.4. Facilitating Links Between Home, School, and Services (Mesosystem)

The mesosystem findings indicated that some relationships between SGs, schools, and professionals were frequently strained, particularly where issues were arising, with cycles of blame and miscommunication. EPs can help bridge these divides by facilitating joint formulations and shared understandings. For instance, where SGs attribute a child's behaviour as a response to trauma but school views it as oppositional, the EP can draw on psychological theory to synthesise these perspectives. Shared formulations can provide a coherent and collaborative framework for planning, reducing disagreements and supporting consistency across ecological systems.

One key role is the facilitation of collaborative meetings, such as Solution Circles, joint assessment meetings or group consultation, to promote joint ownership of strategies. SGs shared feeling valued when their insights were taken seriously; therefore, EP facilitation is particularly important in shifting professional power dynamics from adversarial to collaborative.

7.5. Addressing Wider Systemic Barriers (Exosystem & Macrosystem)

Although EPs cannot directly alter structural inequalities, they can play an important advocacy role within the exosystem and macrosystem levels (Mainwaring, 2014). SGs reported significant frustration when accessing services such as CAMHS or therapeutic support, often facing high thresholds and fragmented provision. By drawing on their knowledge of local systems, EPs can support carers through signposting and effective information sharing with professional support networks (Andrews, 2017).

EPs also occupy a unique position within LAs, which enables them to contribute to strategic planning at multi-agency panels (Mayat, 2024). By highlighting gaps in provision for children living under SGOs, they can potentially influence resource allocation and service delivery (Lee & Woods, 2017).

At a macrosystem level, EPs can help counter preconceptions associated with Special Guardianship. Through professional training, school development work, and dissemination of research, EPs can challenge deficit narratives and promote recognition of family strengths (Birch, Frederickson & Miller, 2023; Sedgwick & Stothard, 2021). In doing so, this can contribute to a more inclusive policy and practice environment for children living under SGOs (May & Bridger, 2010).

7.6. Considering Chronosystemic Influences (Chronosystem)

The chronosystem highlights how life transitions and broader societal events shape children's developmental experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bereavement anniversaries, birthdays, renewed court proceedings, or national crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can all destabilise routines and well-being (Stasulane, 2017). EPs can help anticipate and plan for these events and advise schools and SGs on protective strategies to mitigate their impact (Morrison *et al.,* 2006).

For example, when children face the anniversary of a bereavement, EPs might assist staff in creating sensitive adjustments, such as reducing demands, providing opportunities for expression, and conducting relational check-ins (Toland & Carrigan, 2011; Brogan, Chapman & Brogan, 2025). Similarly, during school transitions to new institutions, EPs can collaborate with both settings to promote continuity and reduce anxiety (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018). EPs are well placed to modify interventions as needs change over time, supporting both immediate adjustment and long-term resilience. This can be achieved by developing ongoing community relationships with local schools and professionals (Bevington, 2013).

8. Implications for EP Practice

While Section 7 considered the broad role of the EP, through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, the current section outlines the practical implications for EP practice. EPs have a unique role in working across systems, integrating psychological theory, and supporting both individual children and the networks around them (Fallon, Woods & Rooney, 2010). Importantly, EP influence does not lie in isolated, child-focused work, but rather in shaping the relational and systemic contexts that underpin educational engagement (McGuiggan, 2017; Broughton, 2025). This discussion is therefore organised into five key domains of EP practice consultation, assessment and formulation, training and capacity-building, systemic intervention, and advocacy, each mapped onto relevant ecological levels (Farrell & Woods, 2015).

8.1. Consultation

Consultation is a key role within EP practice (Jones & Atkinson, 2021), and the findings of this research reinforce the applicability of consultation in the context of SGOs. SGs described feeling dismissed by schools, while SGs reported that teachers sometimes felt unsupported or overwhelmed by the complexity of children's needs. EP consultation, therefore, provides a structured, facilitative space where these perspectives can be shared and integrated (Wagner, 2008).

8.1.1 Microsystem

At the level of the child and SG, consultation can help SGs or schools to reframe behaviour, identify underlying needs, and outline positive and possible next steps and actions (Beaver, 2011). For example, where school refusal might be perceived as a ‘choice’, a consultation could be utilised to reframe in the context of theories, such as trauma awareness, or polyvagal theory, shifting strategies towards co-regulation and relational approaches (Porges, 2024).

8.1.2. Mesosystem

Consultation also enables joint problem-solving between home and school (Smith *et al.,* 2021). Structured models, such as Solutions Circles, or involving SGs and staff to co-construct strategies, reduce perceptions of blame and foster a sense of shared ownership and autonomy (Grahamslaw & Henson, 2015; Woolfson *et al.,* 2003). Importantly, consultation redistributes expertise, recognising SGs’ lived experiences of the child as valuable, alongside acknowledging schools’ professional knowledge (Farrell & Woods, 2015). Effective EP consultation can also contribute to psychological theory to bridge perspectives across microsystems (Taylor, 2017).

8.1.3. Exosystem

EPs can also consult within multi-agency professional systems, ensuring the educational and psychological perspectives inform health and social care planning, particularly where contact arrangements or therapeutic interventions intersect with education (Warwick, 2013). EPs, alongside other professionals, are positioned to offer a distinct contribution, and can utilise consultation to provide a foundation for increased knowledge sharing within multi-agency working (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009).

8.2. Assessment and Formulation

Assessment in EP practice extends far beyond psychometrics and cognitive abilities. The SEND Code of Practice (2015) emphasises the requirement for a holistic understanding of children's strengths and needs (Atkinson, Barrow & Norris, 2022). This research highlights the importance of formulation-driven approaches that consider all systems influencing children’s needs (Corrie & Lane, 2018).

8.2.1. Microsystem

For children living with SGs, assessment should integrate all areas of need and carefully balance these with consideration of their experiences, including trauma. EPs can draw on eco-systemic assessments, narrative and life story approaches, and personal construct psychology approaches such as the ideal-self, or ideal-school (McGuiggan, 2017; Josselson & Hopkins, 2015; Antonini *et al.,* 2023) to explore how bereavement, disrupted attachment, or identity can shape learning and behaviour. Such approaches move away from static measures of attainment, offering insight into how children interpret their experiences and how these meanings shape their engagement in school (Henderson & Cunningham, 2023).

Importantly, EPs do not always need to work directly with children to make an impact at this level (Gillingham, 2022). By equipping adults with psychologically informed formulations, through assessments, EPs can indirectly shape children's daily educational experiences (Sinclair-Harding, 2023).

8.2.2 Mesosystem

Formulations should explicitly link home-school perspectives (Cox, 2005). For example, when SGs attribute difficulties to ‘contact-related anxiety’ and schools interpret them as ‘behavioural challenges’, an EP-led formulation can integrate both views into a shared, psychologically informed understanding (Thrower *et al.,* 2024). This fosters coherence across settings and provides a foundation for the consistent strategies across different microsystems (Crosnoe, 2015).

9.2.3. Chronosystem

Assessment should also be sensitive to time, within the chronosystem. Children's needs often shift at key transition points, such as starting secondary school, birthdays, anniversaries of bereavement, or placement moves (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018). EPs can therefore use their assessment skills to gather information that supports an understanding of and preparation for where and when support may need to be increased, altered, or updated (Kellems *et al.,* 2016).

8.4. Training and Capacity-Building

SGs often reported a lack of preparation for the challenges they faced in their role and felt that schools varied widely in their awareness of SGOs. EPs are well placed to address these gaps through targeted training and psychoeducation (Fletcher, Hawkins & Thornton, 2015). Such training not only equips key adults with knowledge but also challenges deficit-based narratives, promoting an understanding of children as resilient learners navigating complex histories (Lukens & McFarlanw, 2004).

8.4.1. Microsystem

Psychoeducation can help SGs understand trauma responses and anxiety and provide them with practical strategies to support children's regulation and learning at home (Whitworth, 2016). Training modules based on PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy) or Emotion Coaching approaches can strengthen SGs’ confidence (Hughes & Golding, 2012; Gus, Rose, Gilbert, 2015).

8.4.2. Mesosystem

EPs can also deliver staff training on trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice (Parker, 2024). Research suggests that when teachers adopt relational rather than rigid, policy-driven approaches, children with complex histories experience greater inclusion (Brennan & King, 2022). Training may also cover practical strategies, such as adapting homework policies, recognising triggers, or preparing for contact-related difficulties (Lawson-Watford, 2023).

8.4.3. Exosystem

EPs can extend capacity-building into multi-agency practice by providing joint training for teachers, social workers, and health staff (Duggan, Corrigan & Social, 2009). This fosters a common language around trauma and resilience, reducing fragmentation of support (Busch & McNamara, 2020).

8.5. Systemic intervention

The findings highlighted both protective and risk factors within schools. Positive experiences were associated with flexible, relational practice, while negative experiences reflected rigidity and lack of awareness. EPs can influence these systemic conditions directly (Young, Smillie & Hamilton, 2029).

8.5.1. Microsystem

EPs can work with schools to design or evaluate interventions to promote peer connection, such as mentoring, Circle of Friends approaches, or co-operative learning activities (Stapley *et al*., 2022; Tzani-Pepelasi *et al*., 2019; Frederick, Warren & Turner, 2005). Given that friendships have been identified as both protective and risk factors, carefully structured peer support can foster a sense of belonging without overwhelming children with more formal interventions (McBeath, Drysdale, & Bohn, 2018).

8.5.2. Mesosystem

At a broad level, EPs could help schools engage with or signpost families to kinship care networks or local community organisations, develop awareness of SGOs and ensure that children and their families are not isolated (Green & Gray, 2013)

In addition, EPs can support the development of whole-school policies, helping schools review their behaviour policies to ensure they are consistent with trauma-informed principles, rather than adopting a zero-tolerance approach (Watson & Astor, 2025). Instead, policies can embed graduated responses, relational repair, and restorative practices (Avery *et al.,* 2021).

8.5.3. Chronosystem

EPs can also lead enhanced transition planning, recognising the chronosystemic impact of life-course events (Lindsay *et al.,* 2018). This may include phased entry into a new school, improved information-sharing protocols, and opportunities for children to meet key adults in advance (Harper, 2016).

8.6. Advocacy and Policy Influence

This research also identified frustrations at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, including difficulties in accessing external services, inequalities between SGOs and other permanency arrangements, and societal misconceptions around non-traditional families. While EPs cannot resolve systemic underfunding, they can act as advocates across multiple levels (Rogers & O'Bryon, 2008). Such activity positions EPs not only as practitioners but also as agents of systemic change (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). Advocacy throughout EP work can facilitate change, before a need arises.

8.6.1. Macrosystem

EPs can contribute to policy development by participating in multi-agency panels or disseminating research findings (Gaskell & Leadbetter, 2009; Sedgwick & Stothard, 2021). They can also raise awareness of SGO arrangements within schools and professional communities, challenge deficit-based narratives, highlight the resilience of families and take a strengths-based approach throughout their work (Wilding & Griffey, 2015; Pearson, Sharp & Hampton, 2025).

8.6.2. Exosystem

Additionally, EPs can utilise their role within LAs to highlight cases where thresholds for CAMHS or specialist support are high. While they cannot directly alter service capacity or thresholds, they can identify needs and provide consultation or training to develop strategies, interventions, and knowledge within schools (Fallon, Woods & Rooney, 2010; Hill, 2013). EPs can also support SGs in navigating complex processes, for example, by providing psychological evidence to strengthen EHCNAs and the subsequent provision specified in an EHCP (Hellawell, 2025).

8.6.3. Chronosystem

Advocacy must also address the temporal dimension. As children grow, contact arrangements, anniversaries of key dates, birthdays, or changes in family composition may reactivate vulnerabilities (Henshaw, 2025). EPs can anticipate these points and advocate for support to be sustained rather than withdrawn once children appear stable (Bagley & Hallam, 2017).

9. Limitations and Future Research

This section considers the limitations of the research, reflecting on issues of scope, design, and methodology. While the research offers valuable insights into the educational experiences of children living with SGs, it is important to recognise its constraints, both in terms of what was possible within the research and in areas for improvement in future research. Suggestions are also provided for how subsequent research could expand upon these findings.

9.1. Sample Size and Representativeness

A key limitation of this research is the relatively small sample size. Seven interviews with eight SGs provided rich, in-depth accounts that can satisfy the requirements for an effective RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021); however, they cannot capture the full heterogeneity of SGs' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As is typical in qualitative research, the findings should be viewed as illustrative rather than statistically representative (Brunswick, 2023). Transferability, the extent to which insights can be applied beyond the sample, must be treated with caution (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010).

Special Guardianship arrangements are diverse, encompassing differences, such as children's ages, reasons for placement, geographical locations, involvement from external professional services, and socioeconomic circumstances (Harwin *et al.,* 2019). The voices included here offer important windows into lived experience, but they inevitably reflect a narrow cross-section of the wider SG population (Mohajan, 2020).

Future research could build on this by recruiting larger and more varied samples across multiple contexts or LAs, enabling comparative analysis (Owen-Smith. & Cost, 2017), for example, between SGs with and without access to kinship support services, or SGOs granted in public and private proceedings. With greater variation, subgroup comparisons might also be possible (Keller, 2019), for example, between maternal and paternal SGs; between family, friends and foster carers; or between children with identified SEND and an EHCP, and those without. Such exploratory research would strengthen the evidence base and enable a more holistic understanding of how educational experiences are shaped by both individual and contextual factors (Rubin & Bellamy, 2012).

9.2. Recruitment and Self-Selection

The recruitment strategy presents another limitation; SGs were recruited through an online flyer and opted in voluntarily, creating the potential for self-selection bias (Elston, 2021). Those who chose to participate may have been particularly motivated, resourceful, or confident in sharing their stories. Conversely, SGs experiencing higher stress levels, disengagement from professional systems, limited interest in research, or lacking access to online support networks, may have been underrepresented (Heckman, 2018). This dynamic highlights how recruitment methods can shape whose voices are amplified and whose remain unheard (Alarie & Lupien, 2021).

Although self-selection is common in qualitative research, often yielding rich and engaged narratives, it risks skewing findings towards participants who are already reflective and proactive (Elston, 2021). Future research could mitigate this by employing multi-channel recruitment strategies (Flanigan *et al.,* 2020), such as through schools, LA kinship teams, EP services, and community-based support groups. Such strategies may diversify the sample and capture perspectives from SGs who are less connected to formal or online networks. However, these approaches raise important ethical considerations (Gyure *et al.,* 2014). Invitations must be carefully framed to avoid any perception of coercion, especially in populations already navigating sensitive and stressful circumstances or strained professional relationships (Smith, 2008).

9.3. Child and Young Person Perspectives

Another limitation is the absence of children's direct perspectives (James, 2007). While SGs' accounts provide valuable insights into SGs' caregiving perspectives, they offer only second-hand access to the lived experiences of children (Peters & Kelly, 2015). This contrasts with the principles of hearing the 'voice of the child' which underpins much EP practice (Donaldson, 2020). This omission inevitably limits the completeness and depth of the data.

Future research should consider incorporating children's voices using ethically sensitive and age-appropriate methods such as creative interviews, play-based activities, or photo-elicitation (James, 2007). Incorporating children's perspectives alongside those of SGs would enable triangulation of data and provide a richer understanding of how children living under SGOs experience education from multiple perspectives (Peters & Kelly, 2015).

9.4. Cross-Sectional Design

This research is cross-sectional, providing a single snapshot rather than capturing processes of change (Maier *et al.,* 2023). This design limits understanding of how experiences evolve across developmental stages or in response to significant transitions, such as moving schools, entering adolescence, or changes in family contact arrangements (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017).

Longitudinal research could explore how children's educational experiences shift over time, and how interventions, support services, or policy changes influence outcomes (Grant, Meissel & Exeter, 2023). Such designs would also help identify protective factors and risk factors that operate differently across the life course (Melkman, 2020).

9.5. Scope and Methodological Boundaries

This research focused exclusively on SGs' accounts, meaning perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as teachers, SENCOs, social workers, or health professionals, were absent. As a result, the findings present a partial picture of how systems interact around the child (Andrews, 2017). For example, tensions between home and school perspectives, or mismatches between policy intentions and classroom practice, could not be fully explored.

Future research would benefit from a multi-informant or case research design, capturing voices across children's ecological systems (Kaurin *et al.,* 2016). This would allow for systemic mapping of support and challenge, identifying both areas of alignment and points of disconnection between professionals, families, and children (Stuart *et al.,* 2023).

9.6. Methodological Considerations

The use of RTA was well-suited to the research aims, allowing for a focus on meaning-making and alignment with social constructionist perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, as with all qualitative methods, findings are co-constructed between participants and researcher (Bell, 2013). This raises questions about subjectivity, interpretation, and rigour (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Reflexivity was used to mitigate these concerns, yet it must be recognised that different researchers may have produced different conclusions or interpretations

(Reid *et al.,* 2018). Future studies might enhance rigour through methodological triangulation, for example, combining interviews with classroom observations, documentary analysis, or quantitative measures (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

9.7. Practical and Ethical Constraints

Conducting interviews online via Microsoft Teams was pragmatic, enabling geographically dispersed SGs to participate. However, online interviews can limit rapport building and observation of non-verbal cues (De Villiers, Farooq & Molinari, 2022). Some participants may have felt less comfortable sharing sensitive material in a virtual format, potentially constraining the richness of accounts (Shah, 2024).

Future research could offer a choice of online or face-to-face interviews, allowing participants to select the format they would feel most comfortable engaging in (Jones *et al.,* 2022). Additionally, participatory methods, such as reflective journals, collaborative workshops, or visual elicitation, could provide more varied ways for SGs to articulate their experiences (Glen, 2003).

9.8. Limitations of Ecological Systems Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST offered a valuable lens for organising the findings, but it has limitations. The framework risks being applied rigidly, with boundaries between systems that may be presented more distinctly than they appear in actual lived experiences (Boulanger, 2016). Moreover, EST is primarily descriptive rather than exploratory, mapping influences without necessarily explaining the mechanisms of change (Onwuegbuzie, Collins &Frels, 2013).

Future research could adopt a theoretically pluralist approach, integrating EST with complementary frameworks such as resilience theory, attachment theory, or socio-cultural perspectives (Clarke *et al.,* 2015). This would allow for more dynamic accounts of how children adapt and how protective processes buffer against adversity.

9.9 Boundary Conditions of Claims

The findings are most relevant to the legal and policy frameworks of England, where SGOs are a specific route to permanence. While some mechanisms may resonate internationally, applying them directly to other contexts should be done with caution (Wilson *et al.,* 2010). Similarly, the emphasis on SGO means that claims should not be assumed to be applicable broadly to kinship care (Lewis *et al.,* 2003); the unique features of SGOs are exactly what this research aimed to highlight.

9.10. Future Directions

In summary, this research provides important insights into the educational experiences of children living with SGs; however, its limitations must be acknowledged. The small, self-selected sample, absence of children's own voices, and cross-sectional design all place boundaries on the scope of its findings (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Consequently, these limitations point towards valuable directions for future research.

Subsequent research would benefit from expanding upon the current research by the recruitment of larger and more diverse samples across multiple contexts (Sudgen & Moulston, 2015). Including children's voices alongside SGs and professionals would offer a more holistic understanding of educational experiences and support systems (Grover, 2004). Adopting a longitudinal approach could also provide valuable insights into how experiences and relationships develop over time (Ludlow *et al.,* 2011). In addition, using multi-informant approaches may help to capture perspectives across differing ecological systems, such as home, school and LA contexts (Martel, Markon & Smith, 2017). Combining qualitative and quantitative methods could strengthen triangulation and enhance the validity of findings (Hussein, 2009). Finally, using theoretical frameworks in combination may offer richer explanatory power and deepen our understanding of the complex relationships between systems (Evans, Coon & Ume, 2011).

By addressing these issues, future research can deepen understanding of the complex interplay between individuals, relational, and systemic factors shaping the education of children living under an SGO and contributing to the development of more effective policies and practices to support them.

10. Conclusion

This research explored SGs' understanding of their role in supporting the education of children in their care, including perceived challenges and protective factors, using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST as a framework. The research examined how children's learning, well-being, and adjustment are shaped by individual characteristics, close relationships, professional systems, and broader social influences.

At the individual level, SGs felt that children's experiences reflected both challenges and resilience. SGs described needs linked to bereavement, disrupted attachments, trauma, sense of belonging, and, in some cases, SEND. Alongside this, children's motivation and capacity to thrive were often discussed; when supported effectively, they were frequently shared with pride. Identity and belonging emerged as recurrent themes, with some children at varying stages of understanding their unique life stories (Barger, 2018; Biehal *et al.,* 2011)

Within the microsystem and mesosystem, school approaches and home-school relationships were pivotal. Trauma-informed and relational practice was identified as promoting inclusion (Bombèr, 2020; Helping, 2009), while rigid behaviour policies and inconsistent responses seemed to exacerbate difficulties. SGs often felt underprepared and isolated, with limited training or recognition of their expertise (Nandy & Selwyn, 2013).

Furthermore, at wider ecological levels, systemic barriers were evident. SGs highlighted difficulties in accessing services, the relative lack of support associated with SGOs compared to other permanency options (Harwin *et al.,* 2008), and the influence of societal misconceptions or a lack of awareness (Farmer & Moyers, 2008). Broader life events such as transitions, renewed court proceedings, and changes in wider family circumstances further shaped children's educational engagement by having unexpected impacts on SEMH needs.

Together, these findings highlight that educational outcomes for children living under SGOs cannot be explained by individual, within-child factors alone but are produced through the interaction of multiple systems. This research contributes to the field by situating Special Guardianship within an ecological framework, illustrating both its protective potential (e.g., stability and continuity) and its vulnerabilities (e.g., reduced support or systemic gaps).

Implications arise for EP practice, as EPs can readily support at the micro- and mesosystem levels through early identification, trauma-informed consultation, and strengthening home-school relationships and collaboration (Cameron, 2006). They can also contribute at a systemic level through advocacy, multi-agency working, and raising awareness of both the potential strengths and vulnerabilities of SGOs (Warick, 2023).

In summary, this research highlights the importance of recognising the ecological complexity of children's lives under SGOs. Progress often depends on collaborative, empathetic, and systemic responses that enable both children and their SGs to be better supported in education.

Chapter Three: Reflective Chapter

1. Introduction

Reflexive and reflective involves critically examining experiences to generate new insights into oneself, one's practice and the broader contexts in which Educational Psychology can be applied (Andrews, 2018). The HCPC outlines expectations for TEPs to demonstrate reflexivity, ethical awareness, and ongoing learning. This also aligns with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), which requires TEPs and EPs to uphold four core principles: respect, competence, responsibility, and integrity in research.

This chapter offers a structured reflection on the doctoral research project, which explores SGs' experiences of supporting the education of the children in their care. In this research, RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was utilised, and the findings were situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems framework. This approach acknowledges that the researcher is not separate from the research but instead plays an active role in shaping its design and subsequent interpretations (Maxwell, 2013). In this chapter, I reflect on how my personal and professional background influenced my decisions, how I managed the challenges of reflexivity, what I learned about research and practice, and how the findings can be shared and further developed within the field of EP practice.

An essential part of this reflection's positionality is how my professional identity has been shaped (Caza & Creary, 2016). Initially, my professional identity was shaped by my career in social work, and more recently by training as a TEP. These two perspectives offer distinct yet complementary views. While social work primarily deals with a child's home life, permanency, and safeguarding, the role of an EP focuses on children's learning needs and their school setting. Whilst both professional fields emphasise the importance of systemic factors and support networks. Recognising the researcher's role and potential biases is a key aspect of RTA (Crowther & Grecic, 2022). Holding both perspectives in mind provides benefits, such as a deeper understanding of each field, but also poses challenges for the researcher, who may risk unintentionally favouring one lens (Berger, 2015). Exploring these dynamics openly, through RTA and reflection, is important in ensuring that data interpretations remain transparent and enabling the research to contribute meaningfully to practice (Muir, 2023).

2. Professional Positionality and Identity

2.1. Social Work Background

My understanding and knowledge of SGOs began during my earlier career as a social worker. In practice, I frequently worked with families as they navigated permanency options and kinship, either through private arrangements, Family Group Conferencing (FGC) and court proceedings where SGOs were granted. Through my work, I was able to work with numerous families and SGs, whereby I saw the considerable strengths of Special Guardianship arrangements, where children remained within their family networks, thereby maintaining family relationships (Conlan, 2022). Additionally, I observed the hidden challenges, including the difficulties faced by families and children with an SGO, as well as the strain of navigating services, which can sometimes be unexpected (Woodward, 2019). I often wondered, after statutory involvement ended, how families managed daily life and how children's journeys unfolded once my involvement as a social worker concluded.

I inevitably carried these perspectives and experiences into my research methods. As I transitioned into the role of a TEP, I considered how my role as a social worker, the knowledge I gained, and the experiences I had could be applied in my future practice as an EP to promote positive outcomes for children and their families.

2.2. TEP Role

Training as an EP offered a different systemic lens; during my placement, I encountered the EPAC, worked with Special Guardianship families in EHCNAs, and researched outcomes for PLAC (including those living under an SGO) which were significantly lower than those of their general peers. The research also prompted me to change how I positioned myself as both a professional and a researcher. Making sense of that data required explicit reflection on my experiences and knowledge in the RTA process (Crowther Grecic, 2022). This involved noticing the tendency for my 'professional roles' to overlap with my role as 'researcher' and deliberately asking myself, 'Am I interpreting this through a social work, EP, or researcher lens?' or 'Am I using a combination of the three?' (Sirris, 2022). This awareness developed throughout the research process: during interviews, I was conscious of managing the different roles ethically and relationally, whereas during analysis, I reflected more on how my professional assumptions shaped interpretation. This was particularly relevant to emotive moments, particularly when becoming more familiar with the data, for example, feeling like I had a professional view of how a situation should have been approached by professionals. It was important to consider how I could balance these overlapping perspectives in the research process and RTA.

2.3. Balancing Perspectives in Research

It was essential to balance the social work, EP and research lenses when engaging with the data. As a social worker, I had worked with SGs and had some preconceived notions about what they might or might not experience in their journey, based on my own previous experiences. Similarly, my role as a TEP also led me to gain knowledge of working with schools and the EHCP process, which influenced my personal beliefs and expectations, as well as the experiences of children and their SGs. Finally, my role as a researcher in the interviews could not be isolated from my professional position; however, I was conscious of maintaining neutrality and aiming to hear the participants' experiences (Berger, 2015; McNair *et al.,* 2008). Each lens was valid; however, without reflexivity, they risked becoming improperly balanced, which could impact the interpretation and analysis of the data (Mantzoukas, 2005).

Additionally, there are also advantages to balancing these perspectives. Social work experience provided a foundation for my understanding of legal procedures and some of the support services available to SGs, which clarified certain aspects during the interview. Whilst the EP lens helped me relate these experiences to educational experiences and systemic elements of EP practice. Together, when utilised in an RTA, they can enhance data analysis, allowing me to trace the interlinked factors and systems surrounding children living under SGOs. This duality could become a strength when kept explicit, but a potential bias when left unexamined (Trainor &

Bundon, 2021). Each lens was valid in the research process and useful to consider; however, reflexivity was consciously considered to prevent perspectives from becoming imbalanced and to consider the impact of each lens upon the interpretation and analysis of the data at each stage (Mantzoukas, 2005).

Throughout the research process, I was also aware that specific cases from my previous experiences in Social Work and more recent experiences within my TEP role often influenced how I engaged with the data. These cases did not form part of the research itself; however, they shaped how I initially noticed and interpreted aspects of participants' accounts, especially when I had strong feelings stemming from personal professional experiences with families. For example, when SGs described navigating relationships with schools or how they felt they had limited access to support in some instances, I found myself recalling situations where families had experienced similar challenges during my work with them. Recognising this tendency became an important aspect of reflexivity. Instead of allowing these experiences to implicitly guide interpretation, I aimed to acknowledge when prior professional experiences were influencing my thinking and to return to the participants' words to develop meaning within the data. My positionality as a former Social Worker and a TEP did not merely represent background experience but actively shaped the interpretive lens through which the research was conducted. Making my professional position and personal feelings, derived from experiences, visible was therefore an important part of managing transparency within the analytical and reflective process.

2.4. Implications for Researching SGOs

Making positionality explicit in research is important not only for personal and professional awareness but also because it influences methodological and epistemological choices (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). I had initially planned to undertake case study research, which reflected my desire to gather multiple perspectives, similar to the routine triangulation of data I use in my professional assessments. It also highlights the importance of hearing children’s voices and ensuring their inclusion in the assessment process.

However, I initially found it difficult to recruit participants. I received a lot of interest quickly; however, after sharing information with potential participants and following up on emails, I received no responses despite advertising efforts. I discussed this with my research supervisor, and we agreed to approach the ethics governance panel for an amendment to allow interviews solely with SGs. Reflecting on this, I considered the ethical risks involved with children who had already experienced involvement from multiple professionals, often in challenging or traumatic situations (Hallett & Prout, 2003). I decided that SGs were well-placed as knowledgeable individuals, offering detailed perspectives while safeguarding children from possible harm that could arise from relaying upsetting information during an interview (Glynn, 2019).

Additionally, many families may have had strained relationships with professionals, including those in schools, which could hinder recruitment for case studies (Weiss *et al.,* 2013). At the same time, my EP training gave me the confidence to think critically about the loss of triangulation and how meaning could still be derived from the singular perspectives of SGs; reflexivity, therefore, involved recognising this trade-off rather than concealing it (Rabbidge, 2017).

Similarly, my focus on terminology (Gardiner *et al.,* 2022), choosing 'children living under an SGO' rather than 'kinship care', reflected both perspectives. From social work, I recognise the legal specificity of an SGO and the importance of clarity around parental responsibility arrangements. From my TEP role, I realised that the language used could influence how schools or other professionals interpret and understand the circumstances (Scarino, 2014; Meyer, 2008).

Overall, my positionality as a social worker, a TEP, and researcher, either in isolation or in combination, is not something to be separated from the research to ‘increase’ reliability or rigour, rather something to be explored and acknowledged through reflexive analysis (Darawsheh, 2014). It is likely, despite my efforts, that my roles shaped the questions I asked, how I interpreted responses, and how I framed implications for practice (Mantzoukas, 2005). Reflexivity here was not simply self-awareness, but a continuous process of reflecting upon which lens was in play (Scotto-Lavino, 2025), how it influenced interpretation and how to present the findings in a way that balanced both the complexity of SGs' experiences and the practical need for professionals to support them with evidence-based research.

3. Reflexive Decisions in Research Design

Designing the research involved a series of reflective decisions, each shaped by the interaction of professional identity, ethical considerations, and practical realities (Ryan & Carmichael, 2016).

3.1. Choosing the Topic

The research began with a broad interest in children's education when they have an allocated social worker, reflecting my professional background and desire to use this to benefit children and young people in my new role. However, my initial literature review showed that children living under SGOs were often included in wider research groups, such as 'kinship care' or 'PLAC'. Literature and policy tended to homogenise experiences, overlooking the distinct legal and relational features of SGOs compared to other permanency options, such as parental responsibility, court proceedings, family links, contact arrangements, and PPP/ASGSF entitlements.

From a professional perspective, these factors have practical implications for how SGs experience caring for children, the sense of security in the placement, and how schools engage with families regarding the support children can access. Narrowing the scope to SGOs allowed me to emphasise the uniqueness of this permanency option, while maintaining the research's feasibility and coherence (Olohan & Baker, 2009).

3.2. Developing and Structuring of the Literature Review

Within the early stages of the literature review, I encountered a substantial and diverse body of literature relating to children's educational experiences involving social work involvement. Through further exploration, I noted that research related to SGOs was often situated within broader areas of research, including but not limited to kinship care, PLAC, and children with a social worker more generally. While these bodies of literature provided valuable insights, it was initially challenging to structure the review in a way that reflected the complexity of children's experiences that may impact their educational journey, alongside developing an understanding of the legal contexts of an SGO and still maintaining conceptual coherence.

Without a clear organising framework, the literature risks becoming a collection of related topics rather than offering an integrated understanding of the factors shaping educational experiences of children living with SGs. As my reading progressed, it became increasingly clear that many issues discussed within the literature related to influences operating across multiple interacting systems, including family relationships, school practices, wider family networks, professional support structures and broader policy contexts. This process reflects the iterative nature of qualitative research design, where engagement with literature and emerging conceptual ideas can influence how research is framed and organised (Maxwell 2013).

Deciding to organise the literature review around Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) EST provided a conceptual framework that allowed these different strands of literature to be arranged and examined more coherently. The EST enabled the review to move beyond isolated thematic discussions and instead consider how children's educational experiences could be shared through interactions across multiple systems. This shift significantly influenced the organisational focus of the literature review, allowing research to be viewed in relation to influences at the level of the child, their immediate environments such as home and school, interactions between these environments, and wider structural contexts like policy and service provision. Consequently, the review was developed into a more integrated analysis of how systemic factors interact to shape the educational experiences of children living under SGOs. This perspective also developed an understanding of the importance of SGs as a key system around individual children, which plays a significant role in their education care and provided a basis upon which to focus on these individuals as interviewees in the current research.

3.3. Terminology

Language has been one of the earliest and most intricate challenges (from developing the research topic at the point of the initial literature review; Snow &

Uccelli, 2009), as terms such as ‘kinship care’, ‘LAC’, and ‘children with a social worker’ are commonly used within education and social care systems. However, each term bears specific and distinct legal and funding implications. For instance, whether a child qualifies for PPP may depend on whether they were LAC before the SGO was granted. The casual use of labels or terms can therefore result in errors in entitlements and lead to misunderstandings among professionals (Myers, 2021).

I therefore deliberately adopted the phrasing ‘children living under an SGO’ to make the legal arrangements explicit for the purposes of ensuring a precise research aim and clear recommendations for EP practice. This highlights and respects the lived experiences of families and the circumstances in which their views were shared, while also outlining the need for professionals to acknowledge and understand SGO-specific issues, rather than grouping experiences into ‘kinship care’ or ‘PLAC’ more generally.

Similar challenges arose with my use of language and how it was represented in the findings, discussions, and implications for practice (McNamara, 2001). My reflexive decision was to describe the difficulties within the contexts of both relational and systemic systems that impact a child and their family, and to reframe deficit-based language that locates the ‘problem’ as something ‘within the child’ (Cox, 2022). These choices reflected both aspects of my positionality. From social work, I had learned that terminology can either empower or stigmatise families. From EP training, I recognised that language also shapes formulation and intervention in schools (Hill, 2006). Reflexivity required me to remain aware of how my phrasing might influence both interpretations and subsequent recommendations (Savin-Baden, 2004).

3.4. Ethical Stance and Proportionality

Ethical considerations were a central focus of the research, especially because families with an SGO may have histories of loss, trauma, and strained personal and professional relationships. Focusing only on SG interviews still provided valuable insights into children’s educational experiences. This choice also demonstrated proportionality: methods should match the sensitivity of the topic and the potential benefits of participation (Sartor, 2018).

Consent was viewed as a continuous process rather than a one-time event. Information sheets were readily accessible, participation was voluntary, and participants could pause or withdraw at any point (Plankey-Videla, 2012). Safeguarding boundaries were clearly defined, and trauma-informed interview practices were implemented, such as flexible scheduling, offering breaks, and debriefing after sensitive discussions (Isobel, 2021). Reflexivity involved being aware of the dual role of interviews; they served not only as data collection tools but also as potentially reflective spaces for participants who might not have had the opportunity to share their experiences openly (Riach, 2009).

3.5. Recruitment and Sampling Considerations

Recruitment poses practical and ethical challenges. I avoided approaching families I had worked with in any capacity, as it would be a conflict of interest. Instead, I used gatekeepers to share my research flyer. Additionally, I advertised it on LinkedIn and Facebook (particularly in support groups with the consent of the group admin), which helps create some distance between myself and the participants, preventing them from feeling pressured to participate. However, it may also have skewed the sample more towards SGs with stronger digital access networks and utilising online support networks (Benedict *et al.,* 2019).

Maintaining clear boundaries was central (Watson, 2010), as a TEP with a social work background, I could easily have been perceived as representing services. To mitigate this, I used a dedicated research email, clarified that participants would not be affected by their relationships with any services, and maintained transparent communication (Miettinen, 2004). Here, 'reflexive' meant recognising how my dual identity could both ease rapport building and risk blurring the lines between research and practice (Etherington, 2004; Goundar, 2025; Li, 2025).

This recruitment approach also had implications for sampling in the nature of the findings generated within the study. Recruiting participants through online networks and support groups may increase the likelihood of engaging SGs already connected to inform all online support communities, or of SGs feeling confident sharing their experiences in the context of research (Benedict et al., 2019). Consequently, the perspectives represented within this research may reflect those of individuals who are more actively engaged with support networks, while SGs experiencing greater levels of isolation or limited digital access may be underrepresented.

Additionally, using online recruitment and voluntary participation allowed individuals to engage with research at a time and location convenient to them, potentially improving accessibility for participants who might otherwise have difficulty engaging through more formal recruitment routes. This approach also enabled participation from SGs across different geographical areas, rather than limiting recruitment to specific LAs or regions. Consequently, the recruitment strategy reflected considerations of quality and inclusion by allowing individuals to participate without being connected to a particular service or professional network (Etherington, 2004). These factors inevitably shaped the nature of the findings, which reflect the experiences of SGs willing to participate in the research.

4. Analysing Data

Data was analysed using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), selected for its flexibility and compatibility with the social constructionist epistemology (Bryne, 2022). The process was iterative rather than linear, and reflexivity was essential throughout (Udayanga, 2025).

4.1. Rationale for Using RTA

Quantitative data already highlight disparities in achievement for PLAC children, including those living under an SGO. However, there have been few studies exploring how everyday lived experiences and contexts shape these differences. A qualitative approach allowed me to investigate individual experiences of SGs and interpret the data (Hastie & Hay, 2012). RTA was particularly suitable because it recognises the active role of the researcher, whereby themes are not just discovered but co-constructed through engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

This stance aligns with my professional identity, which emphasises that individual experiences and narratives are influenced by context and power dynamics, highlighting the importance of facilitating collaborative meaning-making (Hakanurmi, 2017). RTA, therefore, offers both a philosophical and practical fit for this research, allowing me to balance structured research with my values and beliefs (Dougherty *et al.,* 2019).

When I began the process of inductive coding and transcribing (Terry *et al.,* 2017), I became overwhelmed by the large number of codes. This is when I turned to considering psychological frameworks that I had explored in depth during my TEP journey to support the organisation and interpretation of the data. The EST Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) resonated with my views and interpretation; rather than concentrating only on an individual child, I began to recognise that the experiences shared by SGs during interviews were shaped across multiple systems. For example, the same child could thrive in a school that employs relational and trauma-informed practices, but struggle in an alternative environment with rigid behaviour policies.

4.2. Application of the Ecological Systems

To structure complexity without over-determining it, themes identified in the data were mapped across the individual child, microsystems, including home and school, mesosystem interactions, and exo- or macrosystem influences such as policies and wider services, alongside how all of these may be impacted by time.

The use of EST aligns with my professional perspective, which often involves systemic thinking (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Using EST enabled me to structure my data analysis, which included numerous themes and complex circumstances, with many layers or wider influences on educational experience, without reducing it to the individual or focusing solely on the child's needs. This approach is beneficial for the research’s application to EP practice, where change and impact can be achieved through working in multi-agency settings systemically, without the need to work directly with a child (Van de Berg & Paige, 2009). One day of systemic work may improve outcomes for many children, whereas one day of individual work can only influence the outcomes for one child (Morris *et al.,* 2001; Weiss *et al.,* 2013).

4.3. Balancing Semantic and Latent Coding

I began with semantic coding, closely following the SGs’ words; this use of their language was crucial in avoiding early interpretation of the data, as it allowed me to become familiar with it during the initial stages of analysis (Goddard, 2011). Over time, latent coding allowed me to recognise underlying patterns (Rivas, 2012). Here, reflexivity was essential; my previous and current professional experiences could influence the codes I developed, as well as how these were condensed into themes. It was beneficial to reflect consciously on my professional perspectives as a social worker, TEP, and researcher throughout this process and the use of a psychological model was useful in aiding this process. Journaling and supervision also helped me ground and consider these positions, as well as how to balance my data analysis and interpretation (Meyers & Willis, 2019).

4.4. Managing Researcher Influence

Throughout the analysis, I kept a reflective journal, which provided a space to document analytic decisions, emotional responses to the data, and moments where my professional experiences seemed to shape my interpretation. At times, I noticed that particular cases from my previous experiences came to mind when participants described challenges in navigating professional systems or advocating for children's needs. Recognising when these experiences were being held in mind became an important part of the reflexive process. I noted moments when a professional script appeared to influence interpretation, such as an instinct to frame SGs' difficulties as service gaps or to explain accounts with strengths-based language, but using a reflective journal prompted me to refocus the interpretation in my analysis and revisit the data. By making these tendencies explicit, I was able to observe them rather than enact them (Ortlipp 2008).

I did not seek inter-coder reliability; within an RTA framework, reliability statistics are not the standard of quality and can give a false sense of objectivity (Wilson-Lopes *et al.,* 2019). Instead, I pursued rigour through transparency by documenting analytic decisions, coherence, alignment between research questions and themes, and resonance, producing interpretations that practitioners could recognise as plausible and practical (Bonello & Meehan, 2019).

To preserve contexts, I retained longer extracts, where helpful, and mapped codes to ecological levels. Visual tools, such as mind maps (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009), supported me in distinguishing between themes (patterns of shared meaning) and topic summaries (descriptive categories without interpretive depth). This discipline prevented me from drifting into overgeneralisation or losing the situated nature of accounts (Thorne, 2025) (Appendix F).

5. Critical Appraisal of the Research

Reflective practice involves not only describing decisions but also critically evaluating their impact (Bassot, 2015). This section discusses strengths, limitations and what I would do differently.

5.1. Strengths of the Design

One strength is the heterogeneity of the sample, as SGs came from different LAs and cared for children across various ages, educational stages, and routes to permanency. This variation allows me to identify recurring patterns across different histories, thereby increasing the likelihood of emerging themes (Lin, 2020). However, as previously discussed, it is important to consider self-selection bias and how this may have limited the variation within the sample. SGs with limited access to social media/online support networks, or who have negative experiences with professionals, may have been excluded by the recruitment strategy (Elston, 2021).

Another strength was the choice to focus solely on SGs in the research (Hackshaw, 2008); their perspective is theoretically supported within an ecological framework, as SGs are situated at the intersection of home, school, and other professional services, often bearing the responsibility of translating policy into everyday routines. Their accounts, therefore, offered insights into both educational experiences, and relationships with professionals in a way that would be less apparent from other viewpoints. However, there is a clear absence of the child's voice, whilst this research offers a useful perspective, SGs' accounts cannot be used to understand the direct lived experiences of children (Peters & Kelly, 2015).

Additionally, RTA provides a clear guide for meaning-making through data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) offers a scaffold for organising complexity. The alignment between the research question, design, and analysis enhanced credibility (Johnson *et al.,* 2020). Rigour was also supported through reflective journaling, audit trails, and challenges in research supervision to challenge professional lens assumptions (Carcary 2020).

Finally, ethical proportionality was carefully upheld. Focusing on SG interviews reduces the burden on children while being trauma-aware and respectful of participants' circumstances. Confidentiality and data protection procedures were followed, safeguarding participants from potential deductive disclosure in small communities (Turcotte-Tremblay & McSween-Cadieux, 2018).

5.2. Limitations

Within qualitative research, limitations are often viewed in relation to the trustworthiness of the study rather than through traditional ideas of statistical generalisability. Yardley (2011) suggests that qualitative research can be assessed using principles such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. These concepts offer a helpful framework for critically reflecting on the limitations of this research.

One limitation relates to credibility, especially concerning perspective. By design, the research prioritised the voices of SGs; therefore, the viewpoints of school staff, wider professionals, and children themselves are not represented (Ochieng, 2009). This restricts opportunities for triangulation and limits the ability to understand educational experiences from multiple viewpoints (Hackshaw, 2008). As a result, the findings should be seen as reflecting SGs' individual perspectives and their views on children's experiences rather than definitive accounts of those experiences.

Limitations are also present in relation to transferability, particularly concerning sampling and recruitment. Participants were recruited through online networks and gatekeepers, which may favour individuals with greater digital access or confidence engaging with services (King et al., 2014). As a result, SGs experiencing higher levels of stress, or those less connected to support networks, may be underrepresented within the sample. While the sample size is relatively small and self-selecting, the purpose of the research was to generate in-depth insights rather than statistical representation. The detailed accounts presented may therefore offer analytic insights that readers can consider when assessing the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Keiding & Louis 2016).

A further limitation related to dependability is the cross-sectional design of the research. Interviews captured participants' experiences at a single point in time, which may influence the accounts through recall or recency effects (Cohen *et al.,* 2017). This design does not describe how experiences might evolve across key transitions, such as changes in schooling (moving school or transitioning from primary to secondary school), contact arrangements, changes in birth parents' circumstances, or access to support services at different stages. As a result, the findings offer insight into participants' experiences at a specific moment rather than showing how these experiences may develop over time.

Finally, considerations of conformability are important given the interpretive nature of RTA. As discussed early in this chapter, my professional background in Social Work and training as an EP inevitably shaped how I engaged with and subsequently interpreted the data. While reflective practises such as journaling and research supervision were used to support transparency in the analytic process, it is possible that alternative interpretations of data could be generated by researchers with different professional, theoretical, or epistemological perspectives positions.

5.3. What Would I do Differently?

Given more time and resources, I would utilise a multi-voice case design (Hancock *et al.,* 2021), including interviews with SGs and school staff, and, where suitable, with children and young people. Document analysis (Bowen, 2009), such as examining behaviour policies or EHCPs, would also help explore the alignment or dissonance between policy and lived experiences. Additionally, longitudinal research (Caruana *et al*., 2015), such as follow-up interviews during transitions, would add depth and capture changes over time.

Recruitment could also be facilitated beyond the digital channels used in this research, utilising community services or professional services to attract a more diverse range of participants (Hill *et al.,* 2018). Involving an SG support group in co-developing interview prompts and reviewing the language would also add participatory value and increase relevance (Krystalli *et al.,* 2021).

6. Impact on Professional Learning and Practice

Beyond its substantial findings, the research journey has been transformative for my professional learning and identity. Here, I reflect on four areas of growth: methodological confidence, reflexivity, identity, practical applications for EP practice, and bridging social work in EP perspectives.

6.1. Growth in Methodological Confidence

Before this research project, my research experience, preferences, and interests were mainly quantitative. Committing to a qualitative design, therefore, required me to develop new skills outside my comfort zone, in interviewing, coding, and RTA. Initially, I relied heavily on codes being descriptive, as previously discussed, remaining close to the SGs' language before analysing in greater depth and creating meaning from data.

I also became more disciplined in distinguishing themes from topic summaries, naming themes to reflect mechanisms such as “SGs supporting emotional well-being" rather than vague labels like "behaviour," and documenting decision trials (Carey, 2017). NVivo was helpful in organisation and analysis, but never replaced interpretation. These practices improved both rigour and my confidence in qualitative research that can be applied and utilised in future research (Rolfe, 2006).

6.2. Reflexive and Professional Identity

Engaging deeply with reflexivity has transformed my understanding of my professional identity (Hughs, 2013). I became more aware of how my background as a social worker and my current role as a TEP influence my interpretation of situations (Mahony & Fenton, 2024). This process therefore deepened my understanding that reflexivity is not merely about self-awareness but also about ethical responsibility to recognise how my lens shapes what is seen, said, and acted upon (Etherington, 2004). It reinforced the importance of transparency in representing the experiences of participants without distortion, while also acknowledging that all analysis is interpretive (Jacobs *et al.,* 2021), a useful skill that can also be applied to my future EP practice.

6.3. Developing my Personal Practice as an EP

Engaging in this research has influenced my developing practice as an EP. Although I have not specifically undertaken casework related to a family with an SGO, I have worked with families where children are living in kinship care arrangements. In these instances, the insights gained through the research have informed how I approach my work, including consultation and formulation, particularly in recognising broader relational and contextual factors that may shape a child's educational experiences.

Through the research process, I developed a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the factors that can accompany alternative care arrangements, including legalities and systemic issues, which, while not directly assumed of a kinship family (with an RO in place), provided a basis for developing my information gathering during assessment. I used co-production to create a shared home-school understanding of the child's needs and to ensure that all parties agreed on the recommended outcomes and provision for the young person, focusing on their strengths. Overall, this has prompted me to be more attentive to how family structures and prior relationships with services may impact the experience of working with an EP or in a home-school setting relationships.

In addition to the above, the insights gained from this research have also been applicable beyond casework where children are living in alternative care arrangements. Many of the themes that emerged from the accounts of the SGs resonated more broadly with issues that arise in EP practice, particularly concerning caregivers acting as advocates for children’s needs and fostering relationships between caregivers and professionals. As a result, the research has influenced how I approach consultations more generally, encouraging me to place greater emphasis on understanding parent/carer perspectives, support networks, and the relational and systemic influences on children’s experiences of education.

These reflections align with the systemic values underpinning EP practice and with the ethos of the service within which I work. The research has reinforced the importance of recognising families as partners in the educational process and of ensuring that children’s voices are meaningfully represented in discussions about their support. In this sense, the research has not only contributed to my understanding of the specific context of an SGO but has also strengthened my broader commitment to collaborative, relational, and systemic approaches when working with children, their families, and schools.

6.4. Practical Applications for EP Practice

The research has already impacted my practice as a TEP. I am now more deliberate in understanding legal and relational contexts in my work, for example, by checking parental responsibility arrangements, contact expectations, and the implications of permanence routes for school engagement where an order is in place.

I also pay more attention to home-school relationships as a way of providing support or causing strain (Warhurst *et al.,* 2022). SGs’ accounts highlight how communication and consistency between home and school can be the difference between inclusion and exclusion. This has made me more aware of the relational and systemic aspects of attendance, behaviour, and identity work, which might otherwise be seen narrowly as child-level issues in other areas of my practice.

Additionally, the focus on language has also shaped my practice. I am more cautious when using deficit labels, such as “school refusal” or “challenging behaviour,” without examining their assumptions. Instead, I aim to use mechanism-oriented descriptors that highlight the need for adult support or intervention, for example, “co-regulation needs” or “relational safety” (Fisher *et al.,* 2025).

6.5. Bridging Social Work and EP Perspectives

Perhaps more importantly, the research has enabled me to integrate my social work and EP identities more constructively. Initially, I perceived them as somewhat competing, but through reflective practice, I began to see them as increasingly complementary. This bridging has implications for practice, emphasising the importance of sharing information, knowledge, and perspectives in effective multi-agency work (Atkinson *et al.,* 2007). I aim to continue developing my practice and consider the importance of multi-agency, coordinated thinking and support both generally and especially in families where there is an SGO.

7. Dissemination and Future Directions

Dissemination is both an ethical responsibility and a professional task (Kara, 2018). Having invited SGs to share sensitive experiences, the findings must not be left on the page but must be translated into usable tools for those working with SGO families. My dissemination plan is multi-layered, tailored to different audiences.

7.1. Educational Psychology Service

Within the EPS, findings can be shared through professional learning and supervision (Budden & Michener, 2017). This could include a seminar that explores the ecological analysis and highlights practical implications for areas of EP practice, such as consultation and formulation, training, working with SGs, or supporting policy development (Sedgwick & Stothard, 2021). Additionally, a one-page implementation brief can be employed to outline and summarise prompts for practice, such as checking parental responsibility arrangements, explicitly attending to contact expectations, anticipating transition pinch points, considering how an SGO may affect formulation, and developing a collective professional approach dialogue.

7.2. Schools

For schools, it would be useful to translate findings into practical and achievable everyday practices (Marzano, 2003). A brief overview for senior leaders and SENCOs could be used to present key findings in clear language, with a focus on:

- Reviewing behaviour policies to promote relational practice (Vaslic, 2022).
- Incorporating predictable routines and regulation opportunities throughout the school (Yolanda *et al.,* 2025).
- Explicitly recognising diverse family structures in classrooms and other communication or consent processes (Amatea, 2013).

This can be supported by a short slide pack with facilitator notes, allowing staff meetings to be run entirely without requiring ongoing external input or a slide presentation with embedded video narration.

7.3. SGs

Accessible communication for SGs is also important. I could prepare a two-page summary using clear language to outline the purpose of the research, what was discovered, and the support that schools or EPs might reasonably offer (DePanfilis, 2015). This should include a list of reputable resources and signposting routes, available in both print and digital formats. When participants have requested feedback, the summary can be shared directly, with an option for follow-up questions (Thomas, 2017).

7.4. Academic Dissemination

Beyond local practice, following a viva, the research could also contribute to broader professional research. For example, a submission to a journal would share findings with EPSs nationally, and findings could also be presented at conferences, inviting critique and peer engagement (Dinham Scott, 2001).

In addition, visual tools, such as ecological systems maps, could be used to help promote accessibility and usability of the research. This could clearly illustrate how individual, relational, and systemic factors interact, helping audiences understand both complexity and potential points for support or intervention.

7.5. Future Research

This research highlights areas for future research, including case research-based research (Cousin, 2005) to incorporate the views of SGOs alongside those of school staff, other professionals, and, where appropriate, children and young people. This would enhance triangulation and sharpen practice recommendations, providing greater depth and clarity of practical application.

Secondly, comparative studies could examine similarities and differences across permanency routes (Esser & Vliegenthart, 2017), such as SGOs, adoption, long-term foster care, etc., to clarify what is distinctive about SGO. Comparative research could also further differentiate among SGO families, such as those who were foster carers, family or friends, have an EHCP, or not, and whether they were PLAC or not, with the aim of better tailoring support.

Additionally, further research could investigate the effectiveness and practical applicability of recommendations derived from this research. For example, structured home-school consultations explicitly addressing SGO context, or transition planning packages that foreground contact and identity work. Furthermore, linking qualitative insights into routine outcome data, such as attendance experiences, would strengthen the evidence base.

Across all these aspects, participation and accessibility are important. Involving SGs in the development of research tools can improve relevance, and providing non-digital recruitment options could broaden sample diversity (Sudgen & Moulson, 2015).

8. Reflective Conclusions

8.1. Consolidation of Professional Identity

This research has been both academically and personally challenging. Reflective practice has been more than an academic exercise; it's been the means through which I've navigated my professional identity, critically examined my own assumptions, and sought to represent participants' experiences with integrity in my research and future role as an EP.

I began this research with a strong foundation in social work, which shaped my interest in exploring 'children with a social worker' from the very start of my literature review. Through this research, I have examined how the two professional perspectives work together and may sometimes diverge. It has been helpful for me to consider how my knowledge and background experiences can be useful and informative in my role as a TEP and subsequently as a qualified professional EP.

8.2. Learning from the Research Process

The research has taught me to tolerate uncertainty, to adapt designs when recruitment fails, and to maintain ethical proportionality at the heart of decision-making (Hermeren, 2012). I learnt to use theory pragmatically, treating EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a helpful framework rather than a rigid template. I have become more disciplined in distinguishing themes from topics, in naming processes rather than categories, and in documenting decision transparency.

Equally important were the personal lessons, the need for containment strategies when engaging with emotionally heavy data, the value of supervision that prioritises reflexivity, and the responsibility to represent participants without condensing their experiences into oversimplified narratives.

8.3. Commitment to Ongoing Reflective Practice

Looking ahead, I hope to build on the skills and insights I have gained. In EP practice, I would pay more explicit attention to the legal context of children's lives, to the home-school relationship as a means of inclusion, and to the power of language in shaping support. I will continue to integrate my dual professional roles, drawing on social work knowledge in my practice as an EP to better understand and consider broader systemic issues and structures.

Above all, I leave the research with a stronger belief that reflexive practice is not a supplementary activity but an important professional obligation. It is through reflexivity that we remain ethically grounded and attentive to the complex realities of the children and families we work with, aiming to improve outcomes for them.

References

Adelman, H. S., & Taylor, L. (2007). Systemic change for school improvement. *Journal of educational and psychological consultation*, *17*(1), 55-77.

Adoption and Children Act 2002. (2002). London: The Stationery Office.

Ahmed, S. K., Mohammed, R. A., Nashwan, A. J., Ibrahim, R. H., Abdalla, A. Q., Ameen, B. M. M., & Khdhir, R. M. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health*, *6*, 100198.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Alarie, S., & Lupien, S. J. (2021). Self-selection bias in human stress research: A systematic review. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, *131*, 105514.

Aldgate, J. (2009). Living in kinship care: A child-centred view. *Adoption & Fostering*, *33*(3), 51-63.

Alexander, S., Pillay, R., & Smith, B. (2018). A systematic review of the experiences of vulnerable people participating in research on sensitive topics. *International journal of nursing studies*, *88*, 85-96.

Allen, K. A., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Waters, L. (2016). Fostering school belonging in secondary schools using a socio-ecological framework. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, *33*(1), 97-121.

Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational psychology review*, *30*(1), 1-34.

Amali, N. K., Ridzuan, M. M., Rahmat, N. H., Seng, H. Z., & Mustafa, N. C. (2023). Exploring learning environment through Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. *Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, *12*(2), 144-162.

Amatea, E. S. (2013). Building culturally responsive family-school relationships.

Andrews, R. (2017). *Reaching for a shared understanding: Exploring the views of Educational Psychologists (Eps) and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) about the role of the EP in supporting mental health and psychological well-being in schools* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).

Andrews, S. (2018). *The role of reflective practice for educational psychologists* (Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University).

Andrews, T. (2012). What is social constructionism?. *Grounded theory review*, *11*(01), 39-46.

Antonini, R., Bucaria, C., Nasi, N., Torresi, I., & Zanoni, G. (2024). My ideal school. Children as policy makers. Pilot action activity handbook.

Archibald, M., Ambagtsheer, R., Casey, M. & Lawless, M. (2019) *Using Zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants.* International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18.

Ashley, C., & Braun, P. (2019). The role of schools in supporting kinship care families: Exploring practice from the perspectives of carers and teachers. *Child & Family Social work, 24*(3), 364–371.

Ashton, R., & Roberts, E. (2006). What is valuable and unique about the educational psychologist?. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *22*(02), 111-123.

Atkin, J., & Bastiani, J. (2025). *Listening to parents: An approach to the improvement of home/school relations*. Taylor & Francis.

Atkinson, C., Barrow, J., & Norris, S. (2022). Assessment practices of educational psychologists and other educational professionals. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *38*(4), 347-363.

Atkinson, M., Jones, M., & Lamont, E. (2007). Multi-agency working and its implications for practice. *Reading: CfBT Education Trust*, 28-42.

Avery, J. C., Morris, H., Galvin, E., Misso, M., Savaglio, M., & Skouteris, H. (2021). Systematic review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches. *Journal of child & adolescent trauma*, *14*(3), 381-397.

Bagley, C., & Hallam, S. (2017). Is there a role for educational psychologists in facilitating managed moves?. *Educational psychology in practice*, *33*(3), 323-333.

Bainham, A. (2013). Private and public children law: an under-explored relationship. *Child & Fam. LQ*, *25*, 138.

Banks, S., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2018). *Ethics in participatory research for health and social well-being*. London: Routledge.

Barger, B., Rice, C., & Roach, A. (2018). Socioemotional developmental surveillance in young children: monitoring and screening best identify young children that require mental health treatment. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, *23*(3), 206-213.

Baskin, T. A. (2021). *Kinship Care and the Need for Supportive Services* (Doctoral dissertation, Capella University).

Bassot, B. (2015). *The reflective practice guide: An interdisciplinary approach to critical reflection*. Routledge.

Beaver, R. (2011). *Educational psychology casework: A practice guide second edition*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bell, K. (2013). Participants’ motivations and co-construction of the qualitative research process. *Qualitative Social work*, *12*(4), 523-539.

Benedict, C., Hahn, A. L., Diefenbach, M. A., & Ford, J. S. (2019). Recruitment via social media: advantages and potential biases. *Digital health*, *5*, 2055207619867223.

Benjamin, R. (2025). Understanding trauma and the use of trauma-informed practices. *Judicial Quarterly Review*, *2*(4), 75-94.

Berger, M. (2013). The role of the educational psychologist in supporting inclusion at school level.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative research*, *15*(2), 219-234.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative research*, *15*(2), 219-234.

Bergin, C., & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational psychology review*, *21*(2), 141-170.

Bergren, C. (2022). *Caregivers’ Perceptions of the Role Strain Experienced as a Kinship Caregiver* (Doctoral dissertation, Capella University).

Beveridge, S. (2013). *Children, families and schools: Developing partnerships for inclusive education*. Routledge.

Bevington, S. (2013). *Home-school relationships: the communication and engagement practices of schools and the role of the community educational psychologist*. University of Exeter (United Kingdom).

Bhutta, Z. A., Bhavnani, S., Betancourt, T. S., Tomlinson, M., & Patel, V. (2023). Adverse childhood experiences and lifelong health. *Nature Medicine*, *29*(7), 1639-1648.

Biehal, N., & Wade, J. (2016). Kinship care: The role of the extended family in supporting children in care. *Journal of Social work, 18*(3), 237-254.

Biehal, N., Wade, J., Farrelly, N., & Sinclair, I. (2011). *Caring for abused and neglected children: Making the right decisions for reunification or long-term care*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Binder, C. R., Hinkel, J., Bots, P. W., & Pahl-Wostl, C. (2013). Comparison of frameworks for analyzing social-ecological systems. *Ecology and society*, *18*(4).

Birch, S., Frederickson, N., & Miller, A. (2023). What do educational psychologists do?. In *Educational psychology* (pp. 3-26). Routledge.

Bishop, R. (1997). Interviewing as collaborative storying. *Education research and perspectives*, *24*(1), 28-47.

Blodgett, C., & Dorado, J. (2016). A selected review of trauma-informed school practice and alignment with educational practice. *CLEAR Trauma Center. San Francisco, CA: University of California*, *1*, 1-88.

Bodycote, B. (2022). *An exploration of the experiences of parents who seek to resolve school attendance problems and barriers* (Doctoral dissertation, De Montfort University).

Bombèr, L. M. (2020). *Know me to teach me: Differentiated discipline for those recovering from Adverse Childhood Experiences*. Worth Publishing Limited.

Bonello, M., & Meehan, B. (2019). Transparency and coherence in a doctoral research case analysis: reflecting on the use of NVivo within a'Framework'approach.

Bornstein, M. H., & Esposito, G. (2023). Coregulation: A multilevel approach via biology and behavior. *Children*, *10*(8), 1323.

Boulanger, D. (2016). Ecosystem from discursive perspective: critic of Bronfenbrenner’s approach. *Psychology & Society*, *11*(1), 212-230.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative research journal*, *9*(2), 27-40.

Bower, M. (2015). Case law on the best interests of the child: The evolving framework in family law. *Family Law Review, 16*(2), 95-106.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Volume 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. Hogarth Press.

Bows, H. (2021). Focus on Social work with Children and Families. *British Journal of Social work*, *51*(6), 1937-1941.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and psychotherapy research*, *21*(1), 37-47.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *18*(3), 328-352.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, *13*(2), 201-216.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2023). Toward good practice in thematic analysis: Avoiding common problems and be (com) ing a knowing researcher. *International journal of transgender health*, *24*(1), 1-6.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Davey, L., & Jenkinson, E. (2023). Doing reflexive thematic analysis. In *Supporting research in counselling and psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research* (pp. 19-38). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Brennan, A., & King, F. (2022). Teachers' experiences of transformative professional learning to narrow the values practice gap related to inclusive practice. *Cambridge journal of education*, *52*(2), 175-193.

Brogan, J., Chapman, M. A., & Brogan, M. (2025). Check-and-connect: increasing academic performance through intentional interaction. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 1-12.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*(7), 513-531.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed., Vol. 1, pp. 993-1028).

Broughton, H. (2025). *The Role of Educational Psychologists, Virtual Schools and Designated Teachers in Supporting Previously Looked After Children* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).

Brown, C. S. (2019). The importance, and the challenges, to ensuring an inclusive school climate. *Educational Psychologist*, *54*(4), 322-330.

Brown, J. A., Russell, S., Hattouni, E., & Kincaid, A. (2020). Psychoeducation. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.

Brunswik, E. (2023). *Perception and the representative design of psychological experiments*. Univ of California Press.

Bubier, J. L., & Drabick, D. A. (2009). Co-occurring anxiety and disruptive behavior disorders: The roles of anxious symptoms, reactive aggression, and shared risk processes. *Clinical psychology review*, *29*(7), 658-669.

Budden, A. E., & Michener, W. K. (2017). Communicating and disseminating research findings. In *Ecological Informatics: Data Management and Knowledge Discovery* (pp. 289-317). Cham: Springer International Publishing.. Policy Press.

Burchett, H. E., Mayhew, S. H., Lavis, J. N., & Dobrow, M. J. (2013). When can research from one setting be useful in another? Understanding perceptions of the applicability and transferability of research. *Health promotion international*, *28*(3), 418-430.

Burgess, A., Rossvoll, S., Wallace, A., & Daniel, B. (2010). The impact of sudden placement changes for children in kinship care.

Burr, V. (2024). *Social constructionism*. Routledge.

Burton, D. M., & Bartlett, S. (2009). Key issues for education researchers.

Busch, B., & McNamara, T. (2020). Language and trauma: An introduction. *Applied Linguistics*, *41*(3), 323-333.

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & quantity*, *56*(3), 1391-1412.

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & quantity*, *56*(3), 1391-1412.

Cameron, C. (2019). Guardianship and relational needs: An exploration of attachment difficulties and developmental trauma in children under special guardianship orders. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 28*(1), 18–27.

Cameron, C. (2019). Guardianship and school engagement: Challenges and reflections from kinship carers and educational professionals. *Journal of Social work in Education, 21*(2), 15–25.

Cameron, J., Kothari, A., & Fiolet, R. (2025). Addressing power imbalance in research: exploring power in integrated knowledge translation health research. *Research Involvement and Engagement*, *11*(1), 35.

Cameron, R. J. (2006). Educational psychology: The distinctive contribution. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *22*(4), 289-304.

Campos-Gil, J. A., Ortega-Andeane, P., & Vargas, D. (2020). Children's microsystems and their relationship to stress and executive functioning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 996.

Carcary, M. (2020). The research audit trail: Methodological guidance for application in practice. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, *18*(2), pp166-177.

Carey, M. (2017). *Qualitative research skills for social work: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Carey, M. (2024). Towards the privileging of care-experienced children and young people's educational and other 'life chances' within social work practice and education. *Critical and Radical Social work*, *12*(2), 230-244.

Caride, C. G. (2021). Respecting the GDPR in online interviewed focus groups. *Journal of Audiovisual Translation*, *4*(2), 42-61.

Carlson, S. A. (2024). *A Children's Book as a Therapeutic Tool to Reduce Perceived Shame in Complex Trauma* (Doctoral dissertation, Alliant International University).

Carter, J., & Borrett, E. (2023). Considering Ways to Operationalise Trauma-Informed Practice for Education Settings. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *9*(1), 1-7.

Caruana, E. J., Roman, M., Hernández-Sánchez, J., & Solli, P. (2015). Longitudinal studies. *Journal of thoracic disease*, *7*(11), E537.

Caza, B. B., & Creary, S. (2016). The construction of professional identity. In *Perspectives on contemporary professional work* (pp. 259-285). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Ceross, A. (2018). Examining data protection enforcement actions through qualitative interviews and data exploration. *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, *32*(1), 99-117.

Charuvastra, A., & Cloitre, M. (2009). Safe enough to sleep: sleep disruptions associated with trauma, posttraumatic stress, and anxiety in children and adolescents. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*, *18*(4), 877-891.

Children Act 1989, c. 41. London: The Stationery Office.

Children and Families Act 2014, c. 6. London: The Stationery Office.

Clarke, N. J., Willis, M. E., Barnes, J. S., Caddick, N., Cromby, J., McDermott, H., & Wiltshire, G. (2015). Analytical pluralism in qualitative research: A meta-research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *12*(2), 182-201.

Clerke, T., Hopwood, N., Chavasse, F., Fowler, C., Lee, S., & Rogers, J. (2017). Using professional expertise in partnership with families: a new model of capacity building. *Journal of Child Health Care*, *21*(1), 74-84.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). Surveys, longitudinal, cross-sectional and trend studies. In *Research methods in education* (pp. 334-360). Routledge.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). Surveys, longitudinal, cross-sectional and trend studies. In *Research methods in education* (pp. 334-360). Routledge.

Colt, S., & Birchall, J. (2020). Understanding trauma in kinship care: Teacher awareness and the role of attachment. *Educational Review, 72*(1), 5–17.

Conlan, S. (2022). *Exploring the Identities and Educational Experiences of Children Under Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs)* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).

Connolly, M., & Morris, K. (2011). *Understanding child and family welfare*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Coombs, C. (2017). Coherence and transparency: some advice for qualitative researchers. *Production*, *27*, e20170068.

Corden, A., & Sainsbury, R. (2006). Exploring ‘quality’: Research participants’ perspectives on verbatim quotations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *9*(2), 97-110.

Corlett, S., & Mavin, S. (2018). Reflexivity and researcher positionality. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative business and management research methods*, 377-399.

Corrie, S., & Lane, D. A. (2018). *Constructing stories, telling tales: A guide to formulation in applied psychology*. routledge.

Courtois, C. A. (2004). Complex trauma, complex reactions: Assessment and treatment. *Psychiatric Annals, 34*(5), 390–398.

Cousin, G. (2005). Case research research. *Journal of geography in higher education*, *29*(3), 421-427.

Cox, D. D. (2005). Evidence-based interventions using home-school collaboration. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *20*(4), 473.

Cox, E. J. (2022). *Reframing Childhood Disability: Pushing Boundaries in the Rehabilitation Sciences* (Master's thesis, The University of Western Ontario (Canada)).

Crawford, M. (2020). Ecological Systems theory: Exploring the development of the theoretical framework as con-ceived by Bronfenbrenner. *J Pub Health Issue Pract*, *4*(2), 170.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Crosnoe, R. (2015). Continuities and consistencies across home and school systems. In *Processes and pathways of family-school partnerships across development* (pp. 61-80). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Cross, M. (2011). *Children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and communication problems: There is always a reason*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Crowther, M., & Grecic, D. (2022). Reflecting on reflections of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA): exemplar experiences and recommendations for new researchers in sport and coaching. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies (JQRSS)*, *16*(1), 69-86.

Crowther, M., & Grecic, D. (2022). Reflecting on reflections of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA): exemplar experiences and recommendations for new researchers in sport and coaching. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies (JQRSS)*, *16*(1), 69-86.

Cumming, G. S., Cumming, D. H., & Redman, C. L. (2006). Scale mismatches in social-ecological systems: causes, consequences, and solutions. *Ecology and society*, *11*(1).

Cummings, A., & Shelton, K. (2024). The prevalence of mental health disorders amongst care-experienced young people in the UK: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *156*, 107367.

Cunningham, C., & Lauchlan, F. (2010). Educational experiences of children in kinship care: A survey of educational psychologists. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 26*(1), 81–95.

Cunningham, M. (2001). The influence of parental attitudes and behaviors on children's attitudes toward gender and household labor in early adulthood. *Journal of Marriage and family*, *63*(1), 111-122.

Cusworth, L., Biehal, N., Whincup, H., Grant, M., & Hennessy, A. (2019). Children looked after away from home aged five and under in Scotland: experiences, pathways and outcomes.

Dahlen, A. I. (2022). Teaching Through a Polyvagal Lens: Using the Science of Safety to Co-Regulate in the Classroom.

Dahlen, A. I. (2022). Teaching Through a Polyvagal Lens: Using the Science of Safety to Co-Regulate in the Classroom.

Darawsheh, W. (2014). Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International journal of therapy and rehabilitation*, *21*(12), 560-568.

Darawsheh, W. (2014). Reflexivity in research: Promoting rigour, reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International journal of therapy and rehabilitation*, *21*(12), 560-568.

Darling Rasmussen, S., Berman, K., & Ryberg, M. (2019). The socioecological model and resilience in children: A comprehensive approach. *Journal of Child Psychology, 45*(3), 34–42.

Darling, N. (2007). Ecological systems theory: The person in the center of the circles. *Research in human development*, *4*(3-4), 203-217.

Darling, N. (2007). Ecological systems theory: The person in the center of the circles. *Research in human development*, *4*(3-4), 203-217.

Darwin, A. (2011). Social constructionism. *The SAGE handbook of sociolinguistics*, 100-112.

Das, S., Mitra, K., & Mandal, M. (2016). Sample size calculation: Basic principles. *Indian journal of anaesthesia*, *60*(9), 652-656.

Davis, L. (2014). *The social worker's guide to children and families law*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

De Villiers, C., Farooq, M. B., & Molinari, M. (2022). Qualitative research interviews using online video technology–challenges and opportunities. *Meditari Accountancy Research*, *30*(6), 1764-1782.

Dearden, C., Ward, H., & Munro, E. (2006). *Babies and young children in care: Life pathways, decision-making and practice*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Dearnley, C. (2005). A reflection on the use of semi-structured interviews. *Nurse researcher*, *13*(1).

Deer, C. (2014). Reflexivity. In *Pierre Bourdieu* (pp. 195-208). Routledge.

Dempsey, L., Dowling, M., Larkin, P., & Murphy, K. (2016). Sensitive interviewing in qualitative research. *Research in nursing & health*, *39*(6), 480-490.

Denicolo, P., Bradley-Cole, K., & Long, T. (2016). Constructivist approaches and research methods: A practical guide to exploring personal meanings.

DePanfilis, D. (2015). Family connections: using collaborative partnerships to support dissemination. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *2015*(149), 57-67.

Department for Education & Department of Health. (2015). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. Department for Education & Department of Health.

Department for Education and Skills. (2005). *Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005*. The Stationery Office.

Department for Education. (2014). *The Pupil Premium: Allocations and conditions of grant 2014 to 2015*. Department for Education.

Department for Education. (2018). DfE guidance on the role of virtual school heads. Department for Education.

Department for Education. (2020). *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities in England*. Department for Education.

Department for Education. (2023). *Special educational needs in England: 2023*. Department for Education.

DfE (2019). *Characteristics of children in special guardianship*. Department for Education.

DfE (2020). *Special guardianship in England*. Department for Education.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). Risk to researchers in qualitative research on sensitive topics: Issues and strategies. *Qualitative health research*, *18*(1), 133-144.

Dinham, S., & Scott, C. (2001). The experience of disseminating the results of doctoral research. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *25*(1), 45-55.

Dodgson, J. E. (2019). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Journal of human lactation*, *35*(2), 220-222.

Donaldson, A. (2020). *Educational psychologists' experiences of establishing and promoting pupil voice among children in care* (Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University).

Dougherty, M. R., Slevc, L. R., & Grand, J. A. (2019). Making research evaluation more transparent: Aligning research philosophy, institutional values, and reporting. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(3), 361-375.

Drake, P., & Heath, L. (2010). *Practitioner research at doctoral level: Developing coherent research methodologies*. Routledge.

Driscoll, J. (2011). Making up lost ground: Challenges in supporting the educational attainment of looked after children beyond key stage 4. *Adoption & Fostering*, *35*(2), 18-31.

Dudley, S. (2023). *Politicians as Policy Makers in Large-Scale Education System Reform: The Development of Local Schools, Local Decisions in NSW* (Doctoral dissertation, University of New South Wales (Australia)).

Duggan, C., Corrigan, C., & Social, W. R. (2009). *A literature review of inter-agency work with a particular focus on children's services*. Dublin, Ireland: Children Acts Advisory Board.

Dunn, L. B., & Jeste, D. V. (2001). Enhancing informed consent for research and treatment. *Neuropsychopharmacology*, *24*(6), 595-607.

Dye, C. (2018). Trauma and its impact on children and adults: Definitions, causes, and consequences. *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 19*(4), 380–385.

Edbrooke-Childs, J., & Deighton, J. (2020). Problem severity and waiting times for young people accessing mental health services. *BJPsych open*, *6*(6), e118.

Edwards, J., & Sweeney, S. (2007). Attachment disruption in children placed in kinship care: A review of the impact of placement changes on children's attachment relationships. *Child and Family Social work, 12*(2), 114–124.

Elston, D. M. (2021). Participation bias, self-selection bias, and response bias. *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*.

Emerson, A. (2022). The case for trauma-informed behaviour policies. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *40*(3), 352-359.

Engward, H., & Davis, G. (2015). Being reflexive in qualitative grounded theory: discussion and application of a model of reflexivity. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *71*(7), 1530-1538.

Esin, C., Fathi, M., & Squire, C. (2014). Narrative analysis: The constructionist approach. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*, 203-216.

Esser, F., & Vliegenthart, R. (2017). Comparative research methods. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-22.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher-using our selves in research*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher-using our selves in research*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ethicist, P. (2015). Simplifying the complexity of confidentiality in research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, *10*(1), 100-102.

Evans, B. C., Coon, D. W., & Ume, E. (2011). Use of theoretical frameworks as a pragmatic guide for mixed methods studies: A methodological necessity?. *Journal of mixed methods research*, *5*(4), 276-292.

Evans, D., Borriello, G. A., & Field, A. P. (2018). A review of the academic and psychological impact of the transition to secondary education. *Frontiers in psychology*, *9*, 1482.

Fallon, K., Woods, K., & Rooney, S. (2010). A discussion of the developing role of educational psychologists within Children’s Services. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *26*(1), 1-23.

Farmer, E., & Moyers, S. (2008). *Kinship care: Fostering effective family and friends placements*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Farmer, E., Dance, C., & Best, R. (2013). Trauma, attachment, and emotional difficulties in children in kinship care. *British Journal of Social work, 43*(2), 177–197.

Farragher, R., & Coogan, D. (2020). Constructivist grounded theory: Recognising and raising the voice of young people with experience of care systems. *Child Care in Practice*, *26*(1), 38-49.

Farrell, P., & Woods, K. (2015). Reflections on the role of consultation in the delivery of effective educational psychology services. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *1*(1), 2-9.

Felitti, V. J., & Anda, R. F. (2014). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to adult health: Turning gold into lead. *The Permanente Journal, 18*(1), 1–11.

Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *5*(1), 80-92.

Field, K. (2022). *Thematic mapping: 101 inspiring ways to visualise empirical data*. Redlands, California: Esri Press.

Fife, S. T., & Gossner, J. D. (2024). Deductive qualitative analysis: Evaluating, expanding, and refining theory. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *23*, 16094069241244856.

Finfgeld-Connett, D. (2010). Generalizability and transferability of meta-synthesis research findings. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *66*(2), 246-254.

Finlay, L. (2009). Exploring lived experience: Principles and practice of phenomenological research. *International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation*, *16*(9), 474-481.

Fisher, A., Fisher, N., & Fricker, E. (2025). *What Can We Do When School's Not Working?: An Illustrated Handbook for Professionals*. Taylor & Francis.

Flanigan, B., Gölz, P., Gupta, A., & Procaccia, A. D. (2020). Neutralizing self-selection bias in sampling for sortition. *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems*, *33*, 6528-6539.

Fletcher, J., Hawkins, T., & Thornton, J. (2015). What makes an effective psychoeducational report? Perceptions of teachers and psychologists. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, *25*(1), 38-54.

Fonagy, P., Target, M., & Crittenden, P. (2018). Attachment and trauma: The impact of disrupted early relationships on children's mental health. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 25*(3), 315–329.

Frederickson, N., Warren, L., & Turner, J. (2005). "Circle of Friends"—An exploration of impact over time. *Educational psychology in practice*, *21*(3), 197-217.

Freeman, M. (2011). *Children's rights: A bibliography of legal and social research*. Routledge.

Fylan, F. (2005). Semi-structured interviewing. *A handbook of research methods for clinical and health psychology*, *5*(2), 65-78.

Gabbidon, K., & Chenneville, T. (2021). Strategies to minimize further stigmatization of communities experiencing stigma: A guide for qualitative researchers. *Stigma and Health*, *6*(1), 32.

Gardiner, E., Wong, V., Lin, G., & Miller, A. R. (2022). Terminology and descriptions of navigation and related practices for children with neurodisability and their families: a scoping review. *BMC Health Services Research*, *22*(1), 214.

Garstang, J., Taylor, J., Hallett, N., Christie, C., Burch, K., & Moultrie, K. (2025). Practice and outcomes for special guardianship and adoptive families with safeguarding issues: A mixed methods research.

Gaskell, S., & Leadbetter, J. (2009). Educational psychologists and multi-agency working: exploring professional identity. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *25*(2), 97-111.

Gee, J. P., & Green, J. L. (1998). Chapter 4: Discourse analysis, learning, and social practice: A methodological research. *Review of research in education*, *23*(1), 119-169.

German, R. (2017). *The impact of home and school environmental consistency on academic motivation and outcomes*. Ball State University.

Gillham, B. (Ed.). (2022). *Reconstructing educational psychology*. Routledge.

Gittins, D. A. (2014). *Impact of students' perception of safety on academic success* (Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University).

Glenn, J. C. (2003). Participatory methods. *Futures research methodology*, *2*, 1-32.

Glynn, G. (2019). *Becoming and Being: Special Guardians’ Stories of Kinship Care* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).

Glynn, G. (2019). *Becoming and Being: Special Guardians’ Stories of Kinship Care* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East London).

Goddard, C. (2011). *Semantic analysis: A practical introduction*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Goel, V., & Waechter, R. (2017). Inductive and deductive reasoning: integrating insights from philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. In *International handbook of thinking and reasoning* (pp. 218-247). Routledge.

Golding, K. S. (2014). *Using stories to build bridges with traumatized children: Creative ideas for therapy, life story work, direct work and parenting*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Gore-Langton, D. (2017). Post-permanency challenges for children in care: The gap between adoption, special guardianship, and educational support. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 32*(4), 16–26.

Goundar, P. R. (2025). Researcher Positionality: ways to include it in a qualitative research design. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *24*, 16094069251321251.

Graham, A., Truscott, J., Powell, M. A., & Anderson, D. (2016). Reframing 'behaviour' in schools: The role of recognition in improving student wellbeing. In *Challenging dominant views on student behaviour at school: Answering back* (pp. 97-113). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Graham, S. J. (2025). *A Qualitative Research Exploring Training/Challenges for Classroom Teachers When Working with Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure* (Doctoral dissertation, National University).

Grahamslaw, L., & Henson, L. H. (2015). Solving problems through circles. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *31*(2), 111-126.

Grant, J., & Grant, L. (2023). Quality and constructed knowledge: truth, paradigms, and the state of the science. *Medical Education*, *57*(1), 23-30.

Grant, M., Meissel, K., & Exeter, D. (2023). Promoting temporal investigations of development in context: A systematic review of longitudinal research linking childhood circumstances and learning-related outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, *35*(1), 19.

Green, R., & Birch, S. (2019). Ensuring quality in EPs' use of dynamic assessment: a Delphi research. *Educational psychology in practice*, *35*(1), 82-98.

Green, Y. R., & Gray, M. (2013). Lessons learned from the kinship education and support program (KEPS): developing effective support groups for formal kinship caregivers. *Social work with Groups*, *36*(1), 27-42.

Grover, S. (2004). Why won't they listen to us? On giving power and voice to children participating in social research. *Childhood*, *11*(1), 81-93.

Gubrium, E., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2005). Contending with border making in the social constructionist interview. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *11*(5), 689-715.

Gupta, M. A. (2013). Review of somatic symptoms in post-traumatic stress disorder. *International review of psychiatry*, *25*(1), 86-99.

Gus, L., Rose, J., & Gilbert, L. (2015). Emotion coaching: A universal strategy for supporting and promoting sustainable emotional and behavioural well-being. *Educational & child psychology*, *32*(1), 31-41.

Gyure, M. E., Quillin, J. M., Rodríguez, V. M., Markowitz, M. S., Corona, R. A., Borzelleca, J. F., ... & Bodurtha, J. N. (2014). Practical considerations for implementing research recruitment etiquette. *Irb*, *36*(6), 7.

Hackshaw, A. (2008). Small studies: strengths and limitations. *European Respiratory Journal*, *32*(5), 1141-1143.

Haddow, S., Taylor, E. P., & Schwannauer, M. (2021). Positive peer relationships, coping and resilience in young people in alternative care: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *122*, 105861.

Hains, A. A. (1994). The effectiveness of a school-based, cognitive-behavioral stress management program with adolescents reporting high and low levels of emotional arousal. *The School Counselor*, *42*(2), 114-125.

Hakanurmi, S. (2017). Learning to work through narratives: Identity and meaning-making during digital storytelling. In *Digital storytelling in higher education: International perspectives* (pp. 149-166). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Hall, M. (2023). Exploring experiences of birth parent contact in special guardianship families. In *Contact in Context: The Family Futures Conference 2023*.

Hallett, C., & Prout, A. (2003). Hearing the voices of children. *Social policy for a new century*.

Hamilton, S., & Blades, R. (2025). Family Routes research: making decisions about their children’s care.

Hammad, M., Miller, L., & Garstang, J. (2025). Thematic analysis of serious safeguarding practice reviews of children subjected to Special Guardianship Order (SGO): Qualitative document analysis. *Student Voices in Health and Medicine*, *1*(1), 9-23.

Hammersley, M. (2018). *Routledge revivals: What's wrong with ethnography?(1992): Methodological explorations*. Routledge.

Hancock, B., Ockleford, E., & Windridge, K. (2001). *An introduction to qualitative research* (pp. 125-128). London: Trent focus group.

Hancock, D. R., Algozzine, B., & Lim, J. H. (2021). Doing case research research: A practical guide for beginning researchers.

Harper, L. J. (2016). Supporting young children’s transitions to school: Recommendations for families. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *44*(6), 653-659.

Harrell, M. C., & Bradley, M. A. (2009). Data collection methods. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

Harwin, J., Alrough, P., & Yates, A. (2019). Attachment in kinship care: Guardians' perspectives on providing stability and security for children. *Child & Family Social work, 24*(1), 130–138.

Harwin, J., Simmonds, J., Broadhurst, K., & Brown, R. (2019). Special guardianship: A review of the English research studies. *London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. https://www. nuffieldfjo. org. uk/news/reform_special_guardianship_to_protect_and_support_children_and_their_carers Hayes, M.(1996)‘The proper role of the courts in child care cases*, *8*(2), 201-216.

Harwin, N., Alrouh, B., & McKay, S. (2019). *Special Guardianship Orders: Trends and outcomes 2010-2017*. Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

Hastie, P., & Hay, P. (2012). Qualitative approaches. In *Research methods in physical education and youth sport* (pp. 79-94). Routledge.

Hatch, J. A. (2023). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. State university of New York press.

Hazell, C. M., Berry, C., Haywood, D., Birkett, J., Mackenzie, J. M., & Niven, J. (2025). Understanding how doctoral researchers perceive research supervision to impact their mental health and well-being. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, *25*(1), e12762.

Health & Care Professions Council. (2012). *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics*. Health & Care Professions Council.

Heckman, J. J. (2018). Selection bias and self-selection. In *The new Palgrave dictionary of economics* (pp. 12130-12147). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Hellawell, B. (2025). Co-constructing informed parental preferences following an education, health and care (EHC) needs assessment in England. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*.

Helping, T. (2009). Helping Traumatized Children Learn.

Henderson, R. W., & Cunningham, L. (2023). Creating interactive sociocultural environments for self-regulated learning. In *Self-regulation of learning and performance* (pp. 255-281). Routledge.

Hendricker, E., Bender, S. L., & Ouye, J. (2023). Engaging and collaborating with families across multitiered systems of support: Current school psychologists' practices. *Psychology in the Schools*, *60*(8), 2863-2900.

Hendry, R. (2010). *Building and restoring respectful relationships in schools: A guide to using restorative practice*. Routledge.

Henshaw, L. (2025). Trauma-Informed Teaching During Triggering Times. *Trauma-Informed Care in Social work Education: Implications for Students, Educators, Pedagogy, and Field*, 224.

Hermerén, G. (2012). The principle of proportionality revisited: interpretations and applications. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, *15*(4), 373-382.

Hill, H. C. (2006). How characteristics of language complicate policy implementation. *MI Honig (Ed,.), New directions in education policy implementation*, 65-82.

Hill, V. (2013). Working across diverse contexts with wider populations: The developing role of the educational psychologist. *British educational psychology: The first hundred years*, 128-140.

Hiller, J. (2016). Epistemological foundations of objectivist and interpretivist research.

Hillier, C. (2021). *Exploring the educational experiences of children living under special guardianship orders: The perspectives of special guardians* (Doctoral thesis, University of Bristol). University of Bristol.

Hingley-Jones, H., Allain, L., Gleeson, H., & Twumasi, B. (2020). “Roll back the years”: A research of grandparent special guardians' experiences and implications for social work policy and practice in England. *Child & Family Social work*, *25*(3), 526-535.

Hirt, J., Nordhausen, T., Appenzeller-Herzog, C., & Ewald, H. (2023). Citation tracking for systematic literature searching: A scoping review. *Research Synthesis Methods*, *14*(3), 563-579.

Holbert, R. M. G. (2025). Trauma-Informed Pedagogies of Co-Constructed Care: A Framework for Teacher Preparation Course Design. In *Pedagogies of Compassion and Care in Education* (pp. 165-200). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Holt, S., & Birchall, J. (2020). The emotional and behavioral challenges of kinship children: An analysis of anxiety, anger, and self-esteem issues. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 32*(2), 98–110.

Hopman, J. (2021). Fieldwork supervision: Supporting ethical reflexivity to enhance research analysis. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, *44*(1), 41-52.

Hosking, D. M. (2008). Can constructionism be critical. *Handbook of constructionist research*, 669-686.

Howard, P. (2009). *Beyond punishment: reframing behaviour in schools*. London: CfBT Education Trust.

Hughes, B. H. (2013). Making sense of professional identity through critical reflection: a personal journey. *Reflective Practice*, *14*(3), 336-347.

Hughes, D., & Golding, K. S. (2012). *Creating loving attachments: Parenting with PACE to nurture confidence and security in the troubled child*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Hughes, G. (2010). Identity and belonging in social learning groups: The importance of distinguishing social, operational and knowledge‐related identity congruence. *British Educational Research Journal*, *36*(1), 47-63.

Hunt, J. (2020). Emotional difficulties in kinship care: A review of research findings and implications for practice. *Journal of Family Welfare, 28*(3), 21–30.

Hussein, A. (2009). The use of triangulation in social sciences research: can qualitative and quantitative methods be combined?. *Journal of comparative social work*, *4*(1), 106-117.

Hutchinson, D. A. (2019). Making meaning of meaning-making: Understanding experience through story. In *Landscapes, edges, and identity-making* (Vol. 33, pp. 79-95). Emerald Publishing Limited.

Isobel, S. (2021). Trauma-informed qualitative research: Some methodological and practical considerations. *International journal of mental health nursing*, *30*, 1456-1469.

Isobel, S. (2021). Trauma-informed qualitative research: Some methodological and practical considerations. *International journal of mental health nursing*, *30*, 1456-1469.

Jackson, S., & Ayers, M. (2013). Improving the educational outcomes of children in care: The role of virtual schools. *Department for Education*.

Jacobs, A. M., Büthe, T., Arjona, A., Arriola, L. R., Bellin, E., Bennett, A., ... & Yashar, D. J. (2021). The qualitative transparency deliberations: Insights and implications. *Perspectives on Politics*, *19*(1), 171-208.

James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American anthropologist*, *109*(2), 261-272.

Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *17*(4), e12735.

Jennings, G. R. (2005). Interviewing: a focus on qualitative techniques.

Jennings, P. A. (2018). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. WW Norton & Company.

Johnson, D., Policelli, J., Li, M., Dharamsi, A., Hu, Q., Sheridan, M. A., ... & Wade, M. (2021). Associations of early-life threat and deprivation with executive functioning in childhood and adolescence: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA pediatrics*, *175*(11), e212511-e212511.

Johnson, J. L., Adkins, D., & Chauvin, S. (2020). A review of the quality indicators of rigor in qualitative research. *American journal of pharmaceutical education*, *84*(1), 7120.

Johnson, R., & Waterfield, J. (2004). Making words count: the value of qualitative research. *Physiotherapy research international*, *9*(3), 121-131.

Jones, J. E., Jones, L. L., Calvert, M. J., Damery, S. L., & Mathers, J. M. (2022). A literature review of studies that have compared the use of face-to-face and online focus groups. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*, 16094069221142406.

Jones, L., & Atkinson, C. (2021). A framework for developing educational psychologists' consultation practice. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *7*(2), 1-27.

Josselson, R., & Hopkins, B. (2015). Narrative psychology and life stories. *The Wiley handbook of theoretical and philosophical psychology: Methods, approaches, and new directions for social sciences*, 217-233.

Juliano, M. C. C., & Yunes, M. A. M. (2014). Reflections on the social support network as a mechanism for the protection and promotion of resilience. *Ambiente & Sociedade*, *17*, 135-154.

Kallio, H., Pietilä, A. M., Johnson, M., & Kangasniemi, M. (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *72*(12), 2954-2965.

Kaplan, A., & Flum, H. (2012). Identity formation in educational settings: A critical focus for education in the 21st century. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *37*(3), 171-175.

Kara, H. (2018). Ethical dissemination. In *Research Ethics in the Real World* (pp. 141-150)

Kaurin, A., Egloff, B., Stringaris, A., & Wessa, M. (2016). Only complementary voices tell the truth: A reevaluation of validity in multi-informant approaches of child and adolescent clinical assessments. *Journal of Neural Transmission*, *123*(8), 981-990.

Keiding, N., & Louis, T. A. (2016). Perils and potentials of self-selected entry to epidemiological studies and surveys. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A: Statistics in Society*, *179*(2), 319-376.

Kellems, R. O., Springer, B., Wilkins, M. K., & Anderson, C. (2016). Collaboration in transition assessment: School psychologists and special educators working together to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *60*(3), 215-221.

Keller, F. (2019). Subgroup analysis: “What works best for whom and why?”. In *Prevention of substance use* (pp. 247-261). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

King, D. B., O'Rourke, N., & DeLongis, A. (2014). Social media recruitment and online data collection: A beginner’s guide and best practices for accessing low-prevalence and hard-to-reach populations. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, *55*(4), 240.

Kirk, V. (2025). A sensory-friendly learning environment through design: user experience and implementation.

Kirmayer, L. J. (2016). Landscapes of memory: Trauma, narrative, and dissociation. In *Tense past* (pp. 173-198). Routledge.

Knight, K. (2017). Exploring Leadership Conceptualisations in Semi-structured Interviews from Multiple Perspectives. In *Challenging leadership stereotypes through discourse: Power, management and gender* (pp. 119-145). Singapore: Springer Singapore.

Konrad, S. C. (2019). *Child and family practice: A relational perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Kostenius, C. (2007). Interviewing children: an ethical discussion about the imbalance of power and suggestions on how to handle it.

Krauss, S. E. (2005). Research paradigms and meaning making: A primer. *The qualitative report*, *10*(4), 758-770.

Krystalli, R., Hoffecker, E., Leith, K., & Wilson, K. (2021). Taking the research experience seriously: A framework for reflexive applied research in development. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *1*(3), ksab022.

Kuczynski, L., & Daly, K. (2003). Qualitative methods for inductive (Theory-Generating). *Handbook of dynamics in parent–child relations*, 373-392.

Lakshman, M., Sinha, L., Biswas, M., Charles, M., & Arora, N. K. (2000). Quantitative vs qualitative research methods. *The Indian Journal of Pediatrics*, *67*(5), 369-377.

Landreman, L. M. (Ed.). (2023). *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*. Taylor & Francis.

Lawson-Watford, A. D. (2023). *The Trauma Continuum: Vicarious Trauma in Special Education Teachers*. University of Arizona Global Campus.

Lee, K., & Woods, K. (2017). Exploration of the developing role of the educational psychologist within the context of “traded” psychological services. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *33*(2), 111-125.

Leslie, R., Oberg, G., Townley, C., Westphal, T., Rogers, L., & Brömdal, A. (2025). School can’t: a conceptual framework for reframing school refusal and recognising school related stress/distress. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 1-19.

Lewis, J., Mooney, A., Brady, L., Gill, C., Henshall, A., Willmott, N., ... & Statham, J. (2010). Special educational needs and disability: Understanding local variation in prevalence, service provision and support.

Lewis, J., Ritchie, J., Ormston, R., & Morrell, G. (2003). Generalising from qualitative research. *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*, *2*(347-362).

Li, Y. (2025). Ethical Considerations in Practice-Led Research for Professional Development. In *Exploring Practice-Led Research for Professional Development* (pp. 247-274). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.

Liddell, K., & Richards, M. (2009). Consent and beyond: some conclusions. *The Limits of Consent: A socio-ethical approach to human subject research in medicine*, 213.

Lin, L. (2020). Comparison of four heterogeneity measures for meta-analysis. *Journal of evaluation in clinical practice*, *26*(1), 376-384.

Lindsay, S., Duncanson, M., Niles-Campbell, N., McDougall, C., Diederichs, S., & Menna-Dack, D. (2018). Applying an ecological framework to understand transition pathways to post-secondary education for youth with physical disabilities. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, *40*(3), 277-286.

Lopez, M., Ruiz, M. O., Rovnaghi, C. R., Tam, G. K., Hiscox, J., Gotlib, I. H., ... & Anand, K. J. (2021). The social ecology of childhood and early life adversity. *Pediatric research*, *89*(2), 353-367.

Ludicke, P., & Kortman, W. (2012). Tensions in home–school partnerships: The different perspectives of teachers and parents of students with learning barriers. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, *36*(2), 155-171.

Ludlow, L. H., Pedulla, J., Enterline, S., Reagan, E. M., Cannady, M., & Chappe, S. (2011). Design and implementation issues in longitudinal research. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *19*, 11-11.

Luke, A. (2009). Critical realism, policy, and educational research. In *Generalizing from educational research* (pp. 183-220). Routledge.

Lukens, E. P., & McFarlane, W. R. (2004). Psychoeducation as evidence-based practice: Considerations for practice, research, and policy. *Brief Treatment & Crisis Intervention*, *4*(3).

Lush, D. (2014). Guardianship in England and Wales. *Comparative perspectives on adult guardianship*, 137-52.

Mahony, L., & Fenton, A. (2024). Giving voice to young children navigating complex life challenges through a strengths approach. In *Early childhood voices: Children, families, professionals* (pp. 181-195). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Maier, C., Thatcher, J. B., Grover, V., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2023). Cross-sectional research: A critical perspective, use cases, and recommendations for IS research. *International Journal of Information Management*, *70*, 102625.

Mainwaring, D. (2014). Educational Psychologists as advocates of children in out of home care: An innovative program model that empowers young people and the adults who support them. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *31*(1).

Maloney, L. (2024). *Understanding the Magnitude of Stress Experienced by Early Childhood Professionals and How it Relates to Young Children with Challenging or Disruptive Behavior: A Qualitative Narrative Research That Expresses the Individual Voice of the Early Childhood Professional* (Doctoral dissertation, Fielding Graduate University).

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: guided by information power. *Qualitative health research*, *26*(13), 1753-1760.

Mann, S. (2016). Interviews as reflective practice. In *The research interview: Reflective practice and reflexivity in research processes* (pp. 1-29). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Manti, S., & Licari, A. (2018). How to obtain informed consent for research. *Breathe*, *14*(2), 145-152.

Mantzoukas, S. (2005). The inclusion of bias in reflective and reflexive research: A necessary prerequisite for securing validity. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *10*(3), 279-295.

Mantzoukas, S. (2005). The inclusion of bias in reflective and reflexive research: A necessary prerequisite for securing validity. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, *10*(3), 279-295.

Marshall, P. A., Adebamowo, C. A., Adeyemo, A. A., Ogundiran, T. O., Vekich, M., Strenski, T., ... & Rotimi, C. N. (2006). Voluntary participation and informed consent to international genetic research. *American journal of public health*, *96*(11), 1989-1995.

Martel, M. M., Markon, K., & Smith, G. T. (2017). Research Review: Multi-informant integration in child and adolescent psychopathology diagnosis. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *58*(2), 116-128.

Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Ascd.

Masten, A. S. (2012). Resilience in individual development: Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. In *Educational resilience in inner-city America* (pp. 3-25). Routledge.

Masten, A. S., & Barnes, A. J. (2018). Resilience in children: Developmental perspectives. *Children*, *5*(7), 98.

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach: An interactive approach*. sage.

Mayat, F. Y. (2024). Multi-Agency Working Between Educational Psychologists and Services Working With Special Educational Needs Children of 0-5 Years. *PQDT-Global*.

Maynard, B. R., Farina, A., Dell, N. A., & Kelly, M. S. (2019). Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review. *Campbell systematic reviews*, *15*(1-2), e1018.

McBeath, M., Drysdale, M. T., & Bohn, N. (2018). Work-integrated learning and the importance of peer support and sense of belonging. *Education+ Training*, *60*(1), 39-53.

McCabe, J. L., & Holmes, D. (2009). Reflexivity, critical qualitative research and emancipation: A Foucauldian perspective. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *65*(7), 1518-1526.

McCormack, C. (2004). Storying stories: a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations. *International journal of social research methodology*, *7*(3), 219-236.

McDonnell, A. A., Page, A., Bews-Pugh, S., Morgalla, K. A., Kaur-Johal, T., & Maher, M. (2024). Families' experiences of the Low Arousal Approach: a qualitative research. *Frontiers in psychology*, *15*, 1328825.

McGovern, A. M. (2018). *Time to stop blaming parents: A case research of parents' and children's experiences of family life and in marginalised communities with implications for parenting interventions, educational welfare policy and practice*. National University of Ireland, Maynooth (Ireland).

McGowan, L. J., Powell, R., & French, D. P. (2020). How can use of the Theoretical Domains Framework be optimized in qualitative research? A rapid systematic review. *British journal of health psychology*, *25*(3), 677-694.

McGuiggan, C. (2017). *Stepping over the boundary: An exploration of educational psychologists' work with families*(Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University).

McNair, R., Taft, A., & Hegarty, K. (2008). Using reflexivity to enhance in-depth interviewing skills for the clinician researcher. *BMC medical research methodology*, *8*(1), 73.

McNamara, T. (2001). Language assessment as social practice: Challenges for research. *Language testing*, *18*(4), 333-349.

McRobert, C. J., Hill, J. C., Smale, T., Hay, E. M., & Van der Windt, D. A. (2018). A multi-modal recruitment strategy using social media and internet-mediated methods to recruit a multidisciplinary, international sample of clinicians to an online research research. *PloS one*, *13*(7), e0200184.

Meadows, S. (2017). *Understanding child development: Psychological perspectives and applications*. Routledge.

Melkman, E. P. (2020). Educational experiences of children in care across the early education and primary school years: A national cohort research in England. *American journal of orthopsychiatry*, *90*(6), 720.

Menter, I., Gallagher, C., Hayward, L., & Wyse, D. (2014). Compulsory education in the United Kingdom. In *An introduction to the research of education* (pp. 216-243). Routledge.

Meyer, P. (2008). Speaking reality: Language research and lived experience in practical theology. *Lived religion: Conceptual, empirical and practical-theological approaches. Essays in honor of Hans-Günter Heimbrock*, 157-169.

Miettinen, R. (2004). The roles of the researcher in developmentally-oriented research. *Development Intervention*, *1*, 105-121.

Mishra, P. A., Hota, S., & Khamari, P. R. (2019). Curriculum adaptation in inclusive education. *International Journal of Applied Research*, *5*(8), 70-74.

Mohajan, H. K. (2020). Quantitative research: A successful investigation in natural and social sciences. *Journal of economic development, environment and people*, *9*(4), 50-79.

Montserrat, C., Llosada-Gistau, J., & Fuentes-Peláez, N. (2020). Child, family and system variables associated to breakdowns in family foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *109*, 104701.

Moorcroft, C. (2016). *An exploration of the communication skills of active listening, reflexivity, and conscious ownership of communication, and the potential for development of these skills through participation in storytelling workshops* (Master's thesis, State University of New York Empire State College)

Morris, P. A., Huston, A. C., Duncan, G. J., Crosby, D. A., & Bos, J. M. (2001). How welfare and work policies affect children: A synthesis of research.

Morrison, G. M., Brown, M., D'Incau, B., O'Farrell, S. L., & Furlong, M. J. (2006). Understanding resilience in educational experiences: Implications for protective possibilities. *Psychology in the Schools*, *43*(1), 19-31.

Morse, J. M., & Coulehan, J. (2015). Maintaining confidentiality in qualitative publications. *Qualitative health research*, *25*(2), 151-152.

Muir, R. (2023). From data to insights: Developing a tool to enhance our decision making using reflexive thematic analysis and qualitative evidence. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, *72*(2), 150-165.

Mullarkey, S. (2025). School exclusion to family inclusion: case research of a systemic multi-family school approach to school exclusion. *Educational Review*, 1-20.

Munby, J., & Logan Green, K. (2020). *Surrey County Council v Al-Hilli [2020] EWHC 2213 (Fam)*. Family Court Reports.

Munro, E. (2011). *The Munro review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred*

Munro, E. (2019). Decision-making under uncertainty in child protection: Creating a

Myers, G. (2021). Labeling miscommunication. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, *14*(3), 374-395.

Nandy, S., & Selwyn, J. (2013). Kinship care and poverty: Using census data to examine the extent and nature of kinship care in the UK. *British Journal of Social work*, *43*(8), 1649-1666.

Neuert, C., Meitinger, K., Behr, D., & Schonlau, M. (2021). The use of open-ended questions in surveys. *Methods, data, analyses: a journal for quantitative methods and survey methodology (mda)*, *15*(1), 3-6.

Nicholls, S. G., Langan, S. M., Benchimol, E. I., & Moher, D. (2016). Reporting transparency: making the ethical mandate explicit. *BMC medicine*, *14*(1), 44.

Nijhawan, L. P., Janodia, M. D., Muddukrishna, B. S., Bhat, K. M., Bairy, K. L., Udupa, N., & Musmade, P. B. (2013). Informed consent: Issues and challenges. *Journal of advanced pharmaceutical technology & research*, *4*(3), 134-140.

Nolan, A., & Moreland, N. (2014). The process of psychological consultation. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *30*(1), 63-77.

O'Brien, M. (2012). Issues of contact in kinship care: The impact on families.

O'Connor, A. (2017). *Understanding transitions in the early years: Supporting change through attachment and resilience*. Routledge.

O'Farrell, P., Wilson, C., & Shiel, G. (2023). Teachers' perceptions of the barriers to assessment of mental health in schools with implications for educational policy: A systematic review. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *93*(1), 262-282.

O’Toole, L., Hayes, N., & Mhathúna, M. M. (2014). A bio-ecological perspective on educational transition. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *140*, 121-127.

Oberle, E., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Thomson, K. C. (2010). Understanding the link between social and emotional well-being and peer relations in early adolescence: Gender-specific predictors of peer acceptance. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, *39*(11), 1330-1342.

Ochieng, P. A. (2009). An analysis of the strengths and limitation of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, *13*, 13.

Olohan, M., & Baker, M. (2009). Coherence and clarity of objectives in doctoral projects: A research design workshop. *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, *3*(1), 143-164.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Collins, K. M., & Frels, R. K. (2013). Foreword: Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to frame quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research. *International journal of multiple research approaches*, *7*(1), 2-8.

Ortlipp, M. (2008). Keeping and using reflective journals in the qualitative research process. *The qualitative report*, *13*(4), 695-705.

Owen-Smith, A., & Coast, J. (2017). Understanding sampling and recruitment. *Qualitative methods in health economics. London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Ltd*, 42-58.

Oxley, L. (2016). An examination of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). *Educational & Child Psychology*, *33*(3).

Parker, R. (2024). From Attachment Awareness to Attachment Aware Schools. In *Attachment Aware Schools: A Critical Perspective* (pp. 57-92). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

Parsons, S., Fitzsimons, E., & Schoon, I. (2023). Intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage: Education progression of children of care leavers compared to a general population sample. *British Educational Research Journal*, *49*(5), 875-899.

PART, I. (2018). Data Protection Act, 2018.

Pearson, E., Sharp, L., & Hampton, L. (2025). Resilience in context: a synthesis of theories and practices for educational psychologists. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 1-18.

Pellegrini, D. W. (2009). Applied systemic theory and educational psychology: Can the twain ever meet?. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *25*(3), 271-286.

Perry, B. D. (2003). Effects of traumatic events on children. *The child trauma academy*, 1-21.

Peters, S., & Kelly, J. (2015). Exploring children's perspectives: Multiple ways of seeing and knowing the child. *Waikato Journal of Education*.

Petosa, R. L., & Smith, L. H. (2014). Peer mentoring for health behavior change: a systematic review. *American Journal of Health Education*, *45*(6), 351-357.

Phillippi, J., & Lauderdale, J. (2018). A guide to field notes for qualitative research: Context and conversation. *Qualitative health research*, *28*(3), 381-388.

Phillippo, K. L., Kelly, M. S., Shayman, E., & Frey, A. (2017). School social worker practice decisions: The impact of professional models, training, and school context. *Families in Society*, *98*(4), 275-283.

Phillips, M. J. (2023). Towards a social constructionist, criticalist, Foucauldian-informed qualitative research approach: Opportunities and challenges. *SN Social Sciences*, *3*(10), 175.

Piel, M. H., Geiger, J. M., Julien-Chinn, F. J., & Lietz, C. A. (2017). An ecological systems approach to understanding social support in foster family resilience. *Child & Family Social work*, *22*(2), 1034-1043.

Pilgrim, D. (2019). *Critical realism for psychologists*. Routledge.

Plankey-Videla, N. (2012). Informed consent as process: Problematizing informed consent in organizational ethnographies. *Qualitative Sociology*, *35*(1), 1-21.

Pleasence, P. T., Coumarelos, C., Forell, S., McDonald, H. M., & Mulherin, G. (2014). Reshaping legal services: building on the evidence base.

Poole, T. (2025). Investigating School Belonging Using Socio-Ecological Systems Theory. *in education*, *30*(2), 20-45.

Porges, S. W. (2009). The polyvagal theory: new insights into adaptive reactions of the autonomic nervous system. Cleveland Clinic journal of medicine, 76(Suppl 2), S86.

Porges, S. W. (2022). Polyvagal theory: A science of safety. *Frontiers in integrative neuroscience*, *16*, 871227.

Porges, S. W. (2024). Polyvagal theory: The neuroscience of safety in trauma-informed practice. *The Handbook of Trauma-Transformative Practice: Emerging Therapeutic Frameworks for Supporting Individuals, Families or Communities Impacted by Abuse and Violence*, *51*.

Porter, L. (2014). *Behaviour in schools: Theory and practice for teachers*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Potter, J., & Robles, J. (2022). Constructionism and qualitative research design. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*, *1*, 89-106.

Protection, F. D. (2018). General data protection regulation (GDPR). *Intersoft Consulting, Accessed in October*, *24*(1).

Punton, G., Dodd, A. L., & McNeill, A. (2022). 'You're on the waiting list': An interpretive phenomenological analysis of young adults' experiences of waiting lists within mental health services in the UK. *Plos one*, *17*(3), e0265542.

Quinton, D., & Reder, P. (2013). Supporting kinship carers: The role of social work in special guardianship. *Journal of Family Social work, 16*(1), 5-22.

Rabbidge, M. (2017). Embracing reflexivity: The importance of not hiding the mess. *TESOL quarterly*, *51*(4), 961-971.

Ramoutar, L., & Hampton, L. (2024). Exploring special guardianship: experiences of school belonging from the perspectives of the young people, guardians, and designated teachers. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *40*(3), 279-302.

Reid, A. M., Brown, J. M., Smith, J. M., Cope, A. C., & Jamieson, S. (2018). Ethical dilemmas and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Perspectives on medical education*, *7*(2), 69-75.

Riach, K. (2009). Exploring participant-centred reflexivity in the research interview. *Sociology*, *43*(2), 356-370.

Richards, H. (2020). *Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator perceptions of practice and potential: investigating education and health care plan implementation in early years and primary education* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Worcester).

Rinerson, M. (2025). Impact of Trauma on Learning.

Rios, K., & Hong, H. (2025). What affects defensive responding?: Investigating the effects of parental stress, knowledge, and family empowerment on defensive response in Latinx families of children with disabilities. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 1-11.

Rivas, C. (2012). Coding and analysing qualitative data. *Researching society and culture*, *3*(2012), 367-392.

Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: A theoretical and practical guide. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *11*(1), 25-41.

Robinson, W. (2006). Teacher training in England and Wales: Past, present and future perspectives. *Education Research and Perspectives*, *33*(2), 19-36.

Rocco, T. S., & Plakhotnik, M. S. (2009). Literature reviews, conceptual frameworks, and theoretical frameworks: Terms, functions, and distinctions. *Human resource development review*, *8*(1), 120-130.

Roffey, S. (2016). Building a case for whole-child, whole-school wellbeing in challenging contexts. *Educational & child psychology*, *33*(2).

Rogers, M. R., & O'Bryon, E. C. (2008). Advocating for social justice: The context for change in school psychology. *School Psychology Review*, *37*(4), 493-498.

Rolfe, G. (2006). Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: quality and the idea of qualitative research. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *53*(3), 304-310.

Rothschild, B. (2021). *Revolutionizing trauma treatment: Stabilization, safety, & nervous system balance*. WW Norton & Company.

Roulston, K. (2019). Epistemology and interviews. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*.

Roulston, K., & Choi, M. (2018). Qualitative interviews. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*, 233-249.

Rozsahegyi, T. (2017). Bronfenbrenner's 'bio-ecological'model and its application to understanding children's development. In *Contemporary Issues in Childhood* (pp. 3-14). Routledge.

Rubenstein, E., Scott, J. D., & Peake, J. (2022). Pupil voice groups: The impact on schools and students. *Journal of Youth Development*, *17*(4), 4.

Rubin, A., & Bellamy, J. (2012). *Practitioner's guide to using research for evidence-based practice*. John Wiley & Sons.

Rudd, G., Meissel, K., & Meyer, F. (2021). Measuring academic resilience in quantitative research: A systematic review of the literature. *Educational Research Review*, *34*, 100402.

Ruffolo, M. C., Kuhn, M. T., & Evans, M. E. (2005). Support, empowerment, and education: A research of multiple family group psychoeducation. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, *13*(4), 200-212.

Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M. S. A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured Interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, *12*(1), 22-29.

Ryan, M., & Carmichael, M. A. (2016). Shaping (reflexive) professional identities across an undergraduate degree programme: A longitudinal case research. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *21*(2), 151-165.

Sage, M., & Dietkus, R. (2025) Trauma-Informed Interviewing Considerations and Approaches. In *Issues of Equity* (pp. 106-112). Routledge.

Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. Oxford university press.

Sameroff, A. J., & Mackenzie, M. J. (2003). Research strategies for capturing transactional models of development: The limits of the possible. *Development and psychopathology*, *15*(3), 613-640.

Sartor, G. (2018). A quantitative approach to proportionality. In *Handbook of legal reasoning and argumentation* (pp. 613-636). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Savage, D. (2023). *Experience of High School Students from Nontraditional Families: A Qualitative Research* (Doctoral dissertation, Capella University).

Savin-Baden, M. (2004). Achieving reflexivity: Moving researchers from analysis to interpretation in collaborative inquiry. *Journal of Social work Practice*, *18*(3), 365-378.

Savin-Baden, M. (2004). Achieving reflexivity: Moving researchers from analysis to interpretation in collaborative inquiry. *Journal of Social work Practice*, *18*(3), 365-378.

Savin-Baden, M. (2004). Achieving reflexivity: Moving researchers from analysis to interpretation in collaborative inquiry. *Journal of Social work Practice*, *18*(3), 365-378.

Sayer, A. (1999). Realism and social science.

Scarino, A. (2014). Learning as reciprocal, interpretive meaning-making: A view from collaborative research into the professional learning of teachers of languages. *The Modern Language Journal*, *98*(1), 386-401.

Schofield, C. (2024). The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on online student engagement and future research plans. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *29*(3), 502-519.

Schoon, I., & Mortimer, J. (2017). Youth and the Great Recession: Are values, achievement orientation and outlook to the future affected?. *International Journal of Psychology*, *52*(1), 1-8.

Schroer, S., & Samuels, P. (2019). Trauma-informed schools: A framework for supporting children from kinship care backgrounds. *Journal of Social work Practice, 29*(1), 29–42.

Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the philosophical underpinnings of research: Relating ontology and epistemology to the methodology and methods of the scientific, interpretive, and critical research paradigms. *English language teaching*, *5*(9), 9-16.

Scott, J. (2011). The impact of disrupted attachment on the emotional and interpersonal development of looked after children. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *28*(3).

Scotto-Lavino, B. M. (2025). *Reflexivity: Examining the Role of Self-Awareness and Relational Connection in Ethical Research* (Doctoral dissertation, George Mason University).

Sebele-Mpofu, F. Y. (2020). Saturation controversy in qualitative research: Complexities and underlying assumptions. A literature review. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *6*(1), 1838706.

Sedgwick, A., & Stothard, J. (2021). Educational psychology and the dissemination of evidence to professional practice. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *7*(1), 1-12.

Sedgwick, A., & Stothard, J. (2021). Educational psychology and the dissemination of evidence to professional practice. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *7*(1), 1-12.

Selwyn, J., & Masson, J. (2014). Adoption, special guardianship and residence orders: a comparison of disruption rates. *Differences*, *10*(11), 12.

Selwyn, J., Masson, J., et al. (2014). The experience of children in special guardianship.

Shah, R. (2024). Conducting Qualitative Interviews Online and In-person: Issues of Rapport Building and Trust. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, *55*(4), 537-558.

Shuttleworth, P. (2021). *What matters to children living in kinship care:" another way of being a normal family"* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex).

Shuttleworth, P. (2023). Kinship care for England and Wales in the 2020s: assumptions, challenges and opportunities. *The Future of Children's Care*, 122-144.

Sims, E. (2019). *Supporting children through transitions in early childhood education in England: perspectives of educational psychologists and school staff* (Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University).

Sinclair, I., & Selwyn, J. (2016). Adoption and special guardianship: A policy comparison. *Children & Society, 30*(2), 134-145.

Sinclaire-Harding, L. (2023). *Exploring the contribution of educational psychology services to children in care: towards a framework for trauma-informed educational psychology practice* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Essex).

Sirris, S. (2022). Researchers' role reflexivity when researching values work. In *Researching values: methodological approaches for understanding values work in organisations and leadership* (pp. 205-224). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Slee, P. T., & Skrzypiec, G. (2016). *Well-being, positive peer relations and bullying in school settings*. Switzerland: Springer.

Smith, L. J. (2008). How ethical is ethical research? Recruiting marginalized, vulnerable groups into health services research. *Journal of Advanced nursing*, *62*(2), 248-257.

Smith, T. E., Holmes, S. R., Sheridan, S. M., Cooper, J. M., Bloomfield, B. S., & Preast, J. L. (2021). The effects of consultation-based family-school engagement on student and parent outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *31*(3), 278-306.

Snow, C. E., & Uccelli, P. (2009). The challenge of academic language. *The Cambridge handbook of literacy*, *112*, 133.

Snow, L. (2020). A call for permanency as opposed to adoption medical advisers: a medical adviser's view. *Adoption & Fostering*, *44*(3), 316-319.

Society, B. P. (2014). BPS code of human research ethics.

Southall, A. E., Baxter, L. P., & Gardner, F. (2023). Transforming trauma-informed understanding into trauma-informed practice: The Reflective Circle Education Model. *Australian Journal of Education*, *67*(1), 62-75.

Sowton, C. (2023). Department of Education July 2023.

Spencer, L., Radcliffe, L., Spence, R., & King, N. (2021). Thematic trajectory analysis: A temporal method for analysing dynamic qualitative data. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *94*(3), 531-567.

Spinazzola, J., van der Kolk, B. A., & Ford, J. D. (2005). Trauma and the development of complex trauma in children. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 18*(5), 432–441.

Spivey, N. N. (2023). *The constructivist metaphor: Reading, writing and the making of meaning*. Brill.

Spours, K. (2024). From learning ecologies to a social ecosystem model for learning and skills. *Systems*, *12*(9), 324.

Stabler, L. (2025). *An exploration of sibling kinship care with siblings, policy makers and practitioners in the UK: Identifying pathways for improving understanding and outcomes*(Doctoral dissertation, Cardiff University).

Stapley, E., Town, R., Yoon, Y., Lereya, S. T., Farr, J., Turner, J., ... & Deighton, J. (2022). A mixed methods evaluation of a peer mentoring intervention in a UK school setting: Perspectives from mentees and mentors. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *132*, 106327.

Stasulane, A. (2017). Factors Determining Children and Young People's Well-Being at School. *Journal of teacher education for sustainability*, *19*(2), 165-179.

Steele, M. (2019). Attachment theory and kinship care: The role of secure attachments in the stability of children placed with relatives. *Attachment & Human Development, 21*(2), 195–208.

Stern, C., Jordan, Z., & McArthur, A. (2014). Developing the review question and inclusion criteria. *AJN The American Journal of Nursing*, *114*(4), 53-56.

Stuart, J., Krahe, M. A., Branch, S., & Gibson, M. (2023). Mapping the service system that supports children and families in the context of place-based-disadvantage: Potential leverage points for intervention. *Wellbeing, space and society*, *5*, 100165.

Stuckey, H. L. (2015). The second step in data analysis: Coding qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, *3*(01), 007-010.

Sugden, N. A., & Moulson, M. C. (2015). Recruitment strategies should not be randomly selected: empirically improving recruitment success and diversity in developmental psychology research. *Frontiers in psychology*, *6*, 523.

Sugden, N. A., & Moulson, M. C. (2015). Recruitment strategies should not be randomly selected: empirically improving recruitment success and diversity in developmental psychology research. *Frontiers in psychology*, *6*, 523.

Sugg, K. (2020). *Investigating the stresses children experience and the coping strategies they use* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London)).

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative research journal*, *11*(2), 63-75.

Tarren-Sweeney, M. (2013). Attachment and the social and emotional functioning of children in kinship care: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 54*(10), 1119–1126.

Terry, G., & Hayfield, N. (2020). 38. Reflexive thematic analysis. *Handbook of qualitative research in Education. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited*, 430-441.

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology*, *2*(17-37), 25.

Testa, M. F. (2013). Systems of kinship care: Enduring challenges and emerging opportunities. *Journal of Family Social work*, *16*(5), 349-363.

The Ministry of Justice. (2022). Family Court Statistics Quarterly: January to March 2022. National Statistics; UK.

Thomas, D. R. (2017). Feedback from research participants: are member checks useful in qualitative research?. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *14*(1), 23-41.

Thomas, K. (2025). *Aligning Responses to Challenging Behavior with Schoolwide Trauma-Informed and Restorative Practices* (Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University).

Thompson, D. (2019). Problems with contact in special guardianship: Social workers' perspectives.

Thompson, N. J. (2018). What is the current policy and practice for social workers on planning contact between special guardianship children and their birth parents?.

Thorne, S. (2025). *Interpretive description: Qualitative research for applied practice* (p. 354). Taylor & Francis.

Thrower, N. E., Berry, K., Johnston, I., & Morris, L. (2024). Understanding the factors that contribute to creating a collaborative psychological formulation: A qualitative systematic review. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *31*(3), e2998.

Tobin, G. A., & Begley, C. M. (2004). Methodological rigour within a qualitative framework. *Journal of advanced nursing*, *48*(4), 388-396.

Toland, J., & Carrigan, D. (2011). Educational psychology and resilience: New concept, new opportunities. *School Psychology International*, *32*(1), 95-106.

Tomac, M. M. (2011). *The influence of mindfulness on resilience in context of attachment style, affect regulation, and self-esteem*. Walden University.

Tottenham, N. (2020). Neural meaning making, prediction, and prefrontal–subcortical development following early adverse caregiving. *Development and psychopathology*, *32*(5), 1563-1578.

Trainor, L. R., & Bundon, A. (2021). Developing the craft: Reflexive accounts of doing reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, *13*(5), 705-726.

Trainor, L. R., & Bundon, A. (2021). Developing the craft: Reflexive accounts of doing reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, *13*(5), 705-726.

Tsefos, A. (2024). *An Exploration of Kinship Carers' Experience and Stories* (Doctoral dissertation, Canterbury Christ Church University (United Kingdom)).

Tudge, J. R. H., et al. (2009). Proximal processes and child development: The role of microsystems. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(5), 1243-1252.

Turcotte-Tremblay, A. M., & Mc Sween-Cadieux, E. (2018). A reflection on the challenge of protecting confidentiality of participants while disseminating research results locally. *BMC medical ethics*, *19*(Suppl 1), 45.

Tzani-Pepelasi, C., Ioannou, M., Synnott, J., & McDonnell, D. (2019). Peer support at schools: The buddy approach as a prevention and intervention strategy for school bullying. *International journal of bullying prevention*, *1*(2), 111-123.

Udayanga, S. (2025). Reflexive and iterative thematic analysis (RITA): A design-framework for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941251377282.

Ungar, M. (2004). A constructionist discourse on resilience: Multiple contexts, multiple realities among at-risk children and youth. *Youth & society*, *35*(3), 341-365.

Ungar, M., Connelly, G., Liebenberg, L., & Theron, L. (2019). How schools enhance the development of young people's resilience. *Social Indicators Research*, *145*(2), 615-627.

Usman, A. C., Al-Hendawi, M., & Bulut, S. (2025). Approaches to qualitative research: A narrative literature review. *Advances in Medicine, Psychology, and Public Health*, *2*(2), 81-95.

Valenzuela, M. (2024). *Check-in/check-out as a Means to Improve Student Success* (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Northridge).

Vall Castelló, B. (2016). Bridging constructivism and social constructionism: The journey from narrative to dialogical approaches and towards synchrony. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, *26*(2), 129.

Van de Berg, M., & Paige, R. M. (2009). Applying theory and reserach. *Sage*.

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Books.

Vasilic, B. (2022). Behaviour as relational process: linking theory to practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *38*(4), 379-391.

Vears, D. F., & Gillam, L. (2022). Inductive content analysis: A guide for beginning qualitative researchers. *Focus on Health Professional Education: A Multi-Professional Journal*, *23*(1), 111-127.

Vlachou, A. (2004). Education and inclusive policy-making: Implications for research and practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *8*(1), 3-21.

Wade, J., Biehal, N., & Farrelly, N. (2014). Children's permanence and care: Research review. *Department for Education*.

Wade, J., Biehal, N., & Triseliotis, J. (2014). Special guardianship in England: Evidence from the study of special guardianship orders in England. *Children & Society, 28*(3), 155–167.

Wade, J., et al. (2014). Managing contact with birth parents in special guardianship.

Wade, J., Sinclair, I. A. C., Stuttard, L., & Simmonds, J. (2014). Investigating Special Guardianship: experiences, challenges and outcomes

Wagner, P. (2008). Consultation as a framework for practice. *Frameworks for practice in educational psychology: A textbook for trainees and practitioners*, 135-178.

Ward, H., Brown, R. and Westlake, D. (2012) *Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ward, J. (2016). *" Everyone is safe and good": the search for permanence through reunification*. Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom).

Warhurst, A., Bayless, S., & Maynard, E. (2022). Teachers' perceptions of supporting young carers in schools: identifying support needs and the importance of home–school relationships. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(17), 10755.

Warwick, R. (2023). Perspectives of the educational psychologist's role in a multi-agency children's social care team: A cultural-historical activity theory framework. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *40*(2).

Watson, C. W. (2010). The role of the researcher. In *Conducting Research in Conservation* (pp. 235-247). Routledge.

Watson, K. R., & Astor, R. A. (2025). A critical review of empirical support for trauma-informed approaches in schools and a call for conceptual, empirical and practice integration. *Review of Education*, *13*(1), e70025.

Weatherston, A. (2024). How Can You Address the Power Imbalance between Researcher and Participants?. *Becoming a Teacher-Researcher: A Guide to Your Research Journey*, 219.

Weinberg, D. (2008). The philosophical foundations of constructionist research. *Handbook of constructionist research*, 13-39.

Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., Kreider, H., & Chatman-Nelson, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological systems framework*. Sage Publications.

Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., Kreider, H., & Chatman-Nelson, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Preparing educators to engage families: Case studies using an ecological systems framework*. Sage Publications.

Wellard, S., Baldwin, M., & Burns, L. (2017). The impact of kinship care on educational outcomes: The experience of young people. *Journal of Child & Family Studies, 26*(4), 97–108.

Wessells, M. G., & Dawes, A. (2006). Macro-social interventions: Psychology, social policy, and societal influence processes. In *Toward a global psychology* (pp. 287-318). Psychology Press.

Wheeldon, J., & Faubert, J. (2009). Framing experience: Concept maps, mind maps, and data collection in qualitative research. *International journal of qualitative methods*, *8*(3), 68-83.

Whitworth, J. D. (2016). The role of psychoeducation in trauma recovery: Recommendations for content and delivery. *Journal of evidence-informed social work*, *13*(5), 442-451.

Wilder, J., & Lillvist, A. (2018). Learning journey: A conceptual framework for analyzing children's learning in educational transitions. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *26*(5), 688-700.

Wilding, L., & Griffey, S. (2015). The strength-based approach to educational psychology practice: a critique from social constructionist and systemic perspectives. *Educational psychology in practice*, *31*(1), 43-55.

Williams, M., & Moser, T. (2019). The art of coding and thematic exploration in qualitative research. *International management review*, *15*(1), 45-55.

Wilson-Lopez, A., Minichiello, A., & Green, T. (2019, June). An inquiry into the use of intercoder reliability measures in qualitative research. In *2019 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition*.

Wilson, P. M., Petticrew, M., Calnan, M. W., & Nazareth, I. (2010). Disseminating research findings: what should researchers do? A systematic scoping review of conceptual frameworks. *Implementation Science*, *5*(1), 91.

Woodward, K., Melia, Y., & Combes, H. (2021). Exploring Carers' Experiences and Perceptions of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) over Time, from the Point of Applying to Now. *British Journal of Social work*, *51*(6), 1963-1982.

Woodward, K., Melia, Y., & Combes, H. (2021). Exploring Carers' Experiences and Perceptions of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) over Time, from the Point of Applying to Now. *British Journal of Social work*, *51*(6), 1963-1982.

Woodward, K. (2019). An exploration of the experiences of carers granted Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs): Are there differences in the way that people perceive SGOs from the point of applying for one to the point of having a child in their care? A Q-methodology study (Doctoral thesis, Staffordshire University).

Woodward, L., et al. (2020). Psychological adjustment in special guardianship families.

Woolfson, L., Whaling, R., Stewart, A., & Monsen, J. (2003). An integrated framework to guide educational psychologist practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *19*(4), 283-304.

Woolgar, M., Pinto, C., Cawthorne, T., & Scott, S. (2025). The Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund–Which services are available. *Adoption & Fostering*, *49*(2), 265-267.

Wright, S., & Collins, J. (2023). *Permanency and child welfare: A psychosocial perspective*. Routledge.

Wright, S., & Collins, J. (2023). The complexity of "permanency" in child welfare and Special Guardianship. *Journal of Child Welfare and Family Law, 45*(2), 123-145.

Wright, S., & Collins, J. (2023). The lived experience of permanency: Implications for policy and practice in child welfare. *Department for Education*.

Yardley, L. (2011). Demonstrating validity in qualitative psychology. In C. Willig & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 235–251). Sage.

Yolanda, R., Hapisoh, H., & Khairani, D. (2025). Building Effective Rules and Routines: A Guide for Pre-Service Teachers in Classroom Management. *Indonesian Journal of Integrated English Language Teaching*, *11*(1), 26-31.

Young, J., Smillie, I., & Hamilton, A. (2019). Evolving Educational (Psychology) Perspectives on Systemic Working. *Working with People with Learning Disabilities: Systemic Approaches*, 104.

Yucel, R. (2018). Scientists' ontological and epistemological views about science from the perspective of critical realism. *Science & Education*, *27*(5), 407-433.

Zhou, Y. & Lee, H. (2019). Resilience and mental health: The role of coping, control, and integration. *PubMed Central*.

Appendices

A: Ethical Approval

Study title: Understanding the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People living in Special Guardianship and the Implications for Educational Psychology Practice.

Application ID: ETH2425-1759 (significant amendments)

Dear Jessica,

Your application was considered on 27th March 2025 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **30th September 2025**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Dawn Corby

B: Participant Information Sheet

Understanding the educational experiences of children and young people living with Special Guardians

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (carers)

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research project which seeks to understand the educational experiences of children and young people living with Special Guardians. The findings of this study will help to develop our understanding of how Educational Psychologists, working with children and young people living with a Special Guardian, can best support them in relation to their education.

You have been invited to participate in this study as you are a Special Guardian. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the study. Reading this will help you to understand what is involved if you do decide to participate. Please carefully read this sheet and ask any questions if there is anything you do not understand.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read.
- Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by researcher Jessica Astley-Marr, a Trainee Educational Psychologist in her 3rd year of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (k.bartholomew@uea.ac.uk).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

If you are happy to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview. The interview can be arranged at a time that suits you and can take place in person or online via Microsoft Teams.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview will be approximately 1 hour.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher, or the gatekeeper or anyone at the University of East Anglia, now or in the future.

You will be provided with the opportunity to review your interview transcript.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind, you can withdraw your consent up until the point you have reviewed your interview transcript.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

There will be no consequences for withdrawal.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study. The research will focus primarily on the educational experience of the young person in your care. You are under no obligation to discuss anything you do not feel comfortable sharing or that causes any feelings of distress. If participating in this study does raise any concerns for you or the young person you care for, the following sources of support might be helpful:

- https://www.specialguardiansupport.org.uk
- https://www.sgosupport.co.uk

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

It is likely that your participation will provide insight into the educational experiences of children and young people living with Special Guardians. This will provide useful information to Educational Psychology Services about how they can effectively support children and their families, to promote positive educational outcomes.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information and Jessica Astley-Marr (jessica.astley-marr@uea.ac.uk)

will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have the right to receive feedback on the study. This will be in the form of a one-page summary and will be available at the end of the research.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Jessica Astley-Marr

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH

NR4 7TJ

j.astley-marr@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else, you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Kimberley Bartholomew (k.bartholomew@uea.ac.uk).

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Professor Yann Lebeau, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee.

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The ata controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

If you are happy and consent to take part in the study, please complete the online consent form here: https://forms.office.com/e/i7KZUt4fML

Please note that by completing this consent form you also provide consent for the researcher to engage with the child(ren) or young person(s) for whom you are a Special Guardian.

Please note that expression of interest does not guarantee that you will be able to participate in this research. While your experiences are important and I would love to speak to everyone, this is a small-scale study which will only be able to accommodate up to five cases. If you are not able to participate, the researcher will notify you via email.

(16) OK, I do not want to take part – what do I do next?

Do not contact the researcher or complete the consent form.

(17) Further information

This information was last updated in November 2024.

C: Debrief Sheet

Understanding the educational experiences of children and young people living with Special Guardians

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this research, which aims to better understand the educational experiences of children and young people living with special guardians and how Educational Psychologists can best support them.

The researcher will transcribe your interview and provide you with the opportunity to review this.

Upon completion of this study, you will be provided with summary of the findings if you have requested this.

If any of the issues in this study were distressing and you feel you need additional support, please contact one of the organisations below for help:

For Special Guardians and Professionals:

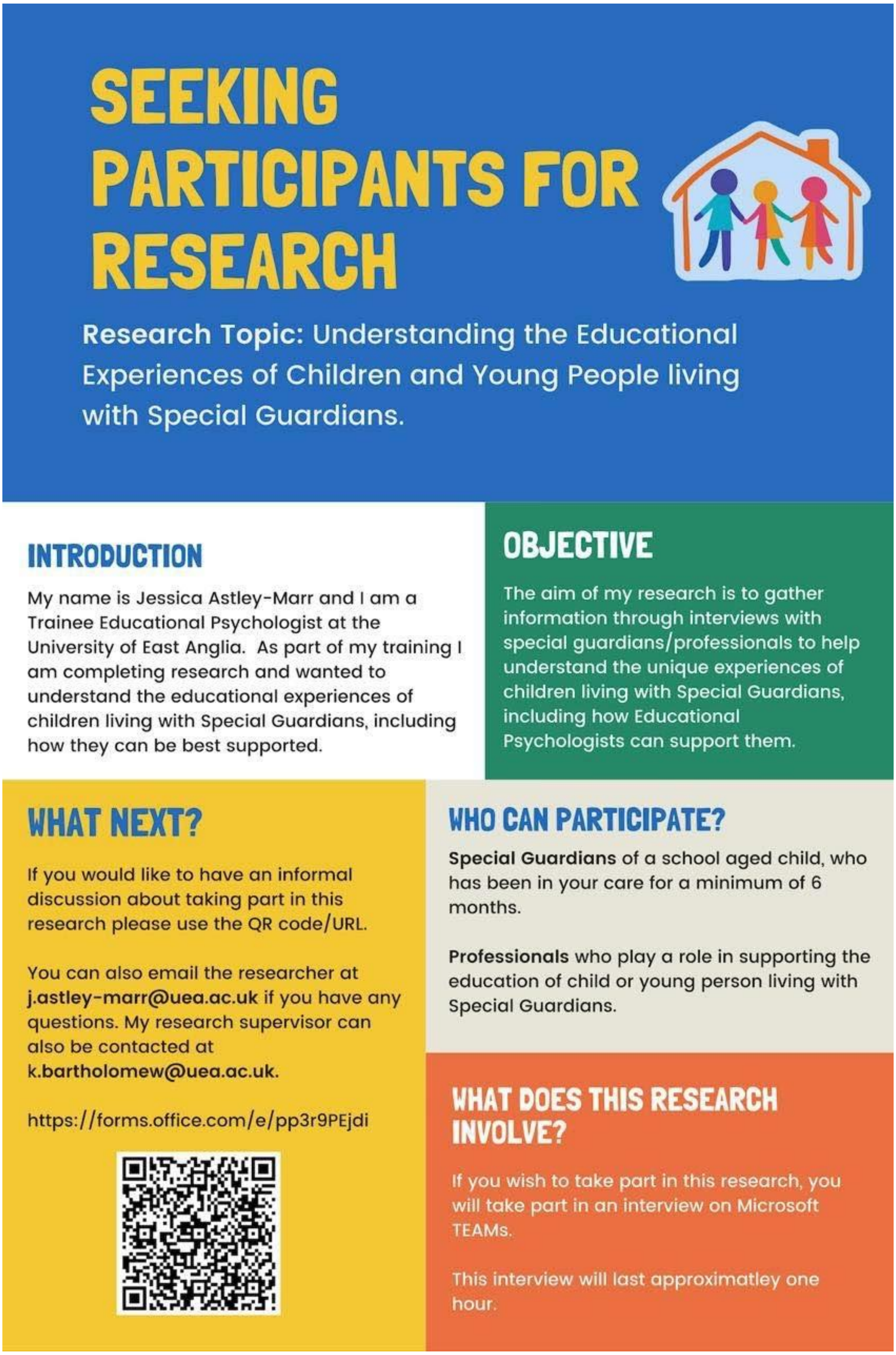
- PAC-UK: https://www.specialguardiansupport.org.uk
- Special Guardianship Support: https://sgosupport.co.uk
- The Kinship Care Charity: https://kinship.org.uk

For Children and Young People:

- Kooth: https://www.kooth.com
- ChildLine: https://www.childline.org.uk

If you have any further questions about the research, you can contact the researcher at j.astley-marr@uea.ac.uk.

D: Recruitment Flyer



SEEKING PARTICIPANTS FOR RESEARCH

Research Topic: Understanding the Educational Experiences of Children and Young People living with Special Guardians.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Jessica Astley-Marr and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia. As part of my training I am completing research and wanted to understand the educational experiences of children living with Special Guardians, including how they can be best supported.

OBJECTIVE

The aim of my research is to gather information through interviews with special guardians/professionals to help understand the unique experiences of children living with Special Guardians, including how Educational Psychologists can support them.

WHAT NEXT?

If you would like to have an informal discussion about taking part in this research please use the QR code/URL.

You can also email the researcher at **j.astley-marr@uea.ac.uk** if you have any questions. My research supervisor can also be contacted at **k.bartholomew@uea.ac.uk.**

https://forms.office.com/e/pp3r9PEjdi

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Special Guardians of a school aged child, who has been in your care for a minimum of 6 months.

Professionals who play a role in supporting the education of child or young person living with Special Guardians.

WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH INVOLVE?

If you wish to take part in this research, you will take part in an interview on Microsoft TEAMs.

This interview will last approximatley one hour.

E: Example Transcript Exert

Researcher 26:06

So I'm thinking about like school. What sort of things in your opinion, do you think have been really helpful that school have done for [CHILD] in the time that she's been with them?

Participant 26:22

I think one of the best things they did was, when she first started, they got really confused about who she was talking about. So chatting to [CHILD], and you can sort of, she'll say grandma, and then you'll be chatting, and she'll go mum, and then she'll go grandma. And they got really confused about who she was talking about, so they invited us in to have a conversation around who was who, when she talks about them, it is because they were like, Oh God, she said she was so she was with she did that with her mom. Did she seeing her mom? So they were really attentive to to her situation, and invited us in so we could clarify who she was talking about, who was in a family. And they sort of said to us, what do you want us to call you? You know, do you want us to call your mum and dad, or do you want us to call your grandma and granddad? And I thought that was really important for [CHILD] that they then understood who everybody was because it is confusing. when we go on holiday it's hilarious because she's in the pool and she's shouting, granddad, Granddad. The next minute, she's going, dad around the pool. Are going to be going this child, but that's just the way it is for [CHILD], yeah. So that's the first thing I think they've done really well. The other thing is, you know, the the line of communication is always there. So the seesaw app, it's got a private messaging function with it, so we can private message the teachers. So you know, if there's an issue, sort of like when her dad was released from prison, I sent over photographs of him and sent his exclusion zone over, because his parents live literally around the corner. Yeah. And he isn't allowed in this area, although he has been in here. So it was around that communication with school, around that around this is a photograph of him. This is what you need to do if he comes and obviously she goes to the same after school club and holiday club that's attached to the school, so that's really good. So she goes from school and they walk up the hill to the church, and then they walk down. So everything's really compact, so I don't have to worry about sort of going too far I know about the staff at both because a lot of the staff who work at the Breakfast Club and the after school club at dinner ladies as well. So she has that real close connection. And then in the school holidays, when she goes to the club, it's the same people again.

Researcher

Brilliant.

Participant

So, really good continuity, I think continuity of care from that school, and just the way, the t…, I just like the way they teach. It's just a really good school. I mean, I suppose the difficulty is my situation is very different to others. So I've got a friend who feels that her daughter's got ADHD, and I've got another friend who feels that her daughter's got autism and they're not having great experiences around that, but I don't have that issue, so I can only speak about what, you know, what I think. And for [CHILD], they've done an amazing job, really, really good, you know, they've got an assistant in the classroom as well. So she doesn't just have one teacher to go to. She has two. And in terms of, like her enuresis, they've been really good as well. So, you know, we've kept in touch around that. She's now got a little watch that they allow her to wear in school, so they're encouraging us to drink loads. So I just, I. Feel like they've been a really, really, really positive, educational start for us. I just think she's got the best.

Researcher

It sounds like they've been really attentive and taking into account her individual needs and, like, made those allowances where needed. Or it sounds like they've been curious, haven't they, like you said, with the example of they were a little bit confused, so they came to you because they really wanted to kind of respond to her in the right way.

Participant

Yeah, absolutely. And they did. They did a thing recently about family trees. Oh, she was so funny. And [TEACHER] messaged me saying we're going to be doing some work around family trees. So just to, like, give you a heads up, you know, [CHILD] might get a bit upset or whatever. And she came home and she said, it's only me and [SCHOOL PEER] in our class who don't have a dad, and [SCHOOL PEER]'s got two mums. What's going on with me? So she was and he said, she just dealt with it really well. He said, You know, some of the children in the class were asking questions about, well, why is your dad? Where's your mum? Why don't Why do you live with your grandma and granddad? And they just managed it really well. But I think [CHILD] managed it well as well. He said she was because they all know a situation, but she's just very much like, you know, I just live with my grandma and granddad, and they're like, you haven't got a Mom, have you? And she's like, yes, my mom's called [BIRTH MOTHER]. So they did work around, you know how people have got different families and people live in different situations, and so they've been really good

Researcher

Did they do that with the rest of the class?

Participant

Yeah, they did it with all the class. So it was really nice. She wasn't upset about anything. She was just a bit curious about why [SCHOOL PEER] didn't have a dad, because he had two moms, and she hasn't got like that at all. So yeah, she's funny. She's got a real good sense of humor [CHILD].

Researcher 31:44

And she's like, making sense of her own, her own, like, her own experience there isn't she? And was just curious. And actually, everybody around her was more than happy to answer those questions at that point.

Participant

Yeah, absolutely. I think the other thing as well is that her cousin goes to the same school. Yeah, her cousin's a year younger, and the only person that's been nasty to her about this dad thing is her cousin, which isn't very nice, but the After School Club, it was after school club one day, and they were doing something. It was Mother's Day, I think, and they were talking about mums and dads and stuff. And her cousin went, well, you haven't got a Dad, have you? She was like, I do. I just don't see him. But again, the staff at the club were like, [COUSIN], that's not a very nice thing to say, is it to [CHILD]? And they said, for [CHILD], it just was like water off a duck’s, she just wasn't bothered at all, but they jumped on it straight away. And they were like, you know, that's not a very nice thing to say.

Researcher

And it’s nice how they have monitored how she's feeling, haven't they in that moment, and she's been okay, but they've been mindful of that.

Participant

Absolutely. And the other thing that's recently started to happen is that and mum's been allowed to send letters to her, yeah, so she's had two now, and she's, she's funny. She was like, I said, Well, you open it and you read it yourself. So obviously I have to read it first to check it's appropriate. And she's reading it, and she's going, how does she know? How does [BIRTH MOTHER] know that I like Taylor Swift, how does [BIRTH MOTHER] know that I go horse riding? I think you've been telling her grandma. I think she only knows these things because you've been telling her, because otherwise, how does she know? How does she know I got a horse horse riding called [HORSE NAME]. So she's she's quite she's not behind the door. She's very bright, yeah. And then when she got a second letter. Oh, this is from [BIRTH MOTHER]. It's got a sticker on the front. I know who it's from. And she just sort of reads it and asks a few things, and then it's put away. She's got it all very boxed off in her head about who, who's who, and who's what. And she just deals with it in her own little way, whereas a mum was sending messages going, has she read my letter? Yes. And, and, what do you think she's gonna have an epiphany? I think she was expecting it to be like this groundbreaking moment. Where [CHILD] was like, Oh, I've got a mum

F: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Section 1: Background and Context

Main question

- Can you tell me a little about your family and the child or children in your care?

Possible prompts

- How long has the child been living with you under a Special Guardianship Order?
- What age was the child when they came to live with you?
- What stage of education is the child currently in?

Section 2: Educational Experiences

Main question

- How would you describe the child's experience of school?

Possible prompts

- What do you feel is going well for them in school?
- Are there any particular challenges they experience?
- How does the child feel about school?

Section 3: Home–School Relationships

Main question

- How would you describe your relationship with the school?

Possible prompts

- How easy is it to communicate with teachers or school staff?
- Do you feel the school understands your child's needs?
- Have there been any positive or difficult experiences working with the school?

Section 4: Professional Support and Services

Main question

- What kinds of support have you received from professionals or services in relation to the child’s education?

Possible prompts

- Have you had any involvement with the Virtual School, Educational Psychologists, or other professionals?
- Have you been able to access resources such as Pupil Premium Plus or other support?
- What support has been most helpful?

Section 5: Challenges and Barriers

Main question

- What challenges have you encountered when supporting the child’s education?

Possible prompts

- Are there particular barriers when working with schools or services?
- Have there been any difficulties accessing support?
- Are there particular times when things felt more difficult (e.g., transitions, behaviour, attendance)?

Section 6: Reflections and Future Support

Main question

- Thinking about your experiences overall, what would help schools or services better support families with Special Guardianship Orders?

Possible prompts

- What advice would you give to schools working with SG families?
- What support do you think Special Guardians need most?
- Is there anything else about your experiences that you would like to share?

G: Thematic Map

- Theme One: Children's Experiences, Needs and Developmental Responses (Individual Level/Microsystem)
  - Attainment and Learning
    - *Academic progress*
    - *Engagement*
    - *Transitions*
    - *Recognition of potential*
  - Identity and Belonging
    - *Speech and language*
    - *Neurodevelopmental needs*
    - *Physical health*
    - *Early adversity*
  - Experiences of Trauma
    - *Emotional regulation*
    - *Coping strategies*
    - *Masking*
    - *Relational responses*
  - Development and Health
    - *Family roles*
    - *Naming practices*
    - *Peer relationships*
    - *Reflections on difference*
  - Behaviour and Adjustment
    - *Bereavement*
    - *Neglect*
    - *Instability*
    - *Early life experiences*

- Theme Two: Interactions Between the Child, Family, and School (Microsystem/Mesosystem)
  - SGs' Experience and Support
    - *Training*
    - *Learning*
    - *Sense of responsibility*
    - *Wellbeing*
  - School Relationships and Communication
    - *Attunement*
    - *Behaviour policies*
    - *Routines*
    - *Settling in*
  - Home–School Links and Advocacy
    - *SGs as advocates*
    - *Research*
    - *Knowledge*
    - *Bridging systems*
  - Pressures of Contact and SG Strain
    - *Burnout*
    - *Ongoing court activity*
    - *birth family involvement*

- Theme Three: The Influence of Wider
  - Professional Support Systems and Systemic
    - *Access*
    - *Coordination*
    - *Variability*
    - *Therapeutic input*
  - Legal and Policy Context Barriers
    - *SGO support*
    - *Entitlements*
    - *Funding*
    - *Attendance and curriculum*
  - Recognition and Peer Support in Wider Society
    - *Stigma*
    - *Invisibility*
    - *Kinship networks*
    - *Advocacy and campaigning*
  - Transitions and Life-Course Changes
    - *Placement moves*
    - *Court processes*
    - *Contact*
    - *Societal crises*