

**An exploration of young people in care's
experiences of school belonging in
secondary school**

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Abstract

Young people in care continue to be at an educational disadvantage in comparison to their peers who are not in care, despite government initiatives (Education Committee, 2022; Sebba et al., 2015). School has been acknowledged in the literature as a protective factor for children and young people in care as it is suggested to provide opportunities for success facilitated through consistent and supportive relationships in a safe and predictable environment (Macleod et al., 2021). The importance of belonging for young people in care, adolescence and secondary education has been highlighted in the literature (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019), including the association between school belonging and educational success (Somers et al., 2020). However, a review of the school belonging literature highlighted that limited research has been conducted with young people in care in the UK that centred their individual school belonging experiences from their own perspectives.

Therefore, the current study aimed to explore young people in care's school belonging experiences in secondary school in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three young people in care and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The analysis generated four group experiential themes that were important to the participants' school belonging experiences. These themes related to the importance of relationships with peers and staff, engagement in school activities, perception of support related to their care status and school being a safe place to escape to. Implications for professional practice include the emphasis on ensuring a stable school experience for young people in care and supporting the development of relationships with peers and a key adult in school. This study has highlighted that young people in care are not a homogenous group which emphasises the importance of professionals seeking to understand their individual experiences and listen to their views.

1. Introduction

This study aimed to explore the school belonging experiences of young people in care in secondary school by answering the research question:

How do young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school?

This introduction chapter aims to contextualise the study by outlining definitions of key terms, acknowledging my personal and professional interest in the topic and describing the current context for young people in care, secondary education and school belonging. A brief overview of the rationale, research approach and structure of the thesis will then be presented.

1.1 Terminology

1.1.1 *Children and young people in care*

The legal definition of a child in care, often referred to as a looked-after child, is when they are in the care of a Local Authority (LA) or provided with accommodation by the LA for any reason for more than 24 hours (Children Act, 1989). This can include children who are subject to a care order that places them in foster care, residential care or who are still living at home (Children Act, 1989). This also incorporates children who are subject to a placement order which allows the LA to place a child for adoption (Children Act, 1989). For the purpose of this study, the focus will be placed on children and young people who are either in foster care or in residential care. The term 'children and/or young people in care' will be used throughout this study to refer to children and young people who are 'looked after' by the LA as research has indicated that children prefer this term as opposed to 'looked-after' (NICE, 2021).

1.1.2 *School belonging*

School belonging has been defined in the literature using various terms including school relatedness, connectedness, engagement, membership and identification which have been argued to be very similar in operationalisation (Christenson et al., 2012). It has been suggested that this

variety of terms has hindered the transparency of the term despite them having the same general meaning (Korpershoek et al., 2020). The definition which has been widely used for school belonging is that of Goodenow and Grady (1993) which explains school belonging as a feeling of acceptance, inclusion and being supported by others within the school environment. This is how school belonging is conceptualised in this study.

1.2 Personal and professional interest

My previous experience of working with children in care sparked my interest in this area. In particular, my work as an assistant educational psychologist (AEP) included working closely with children in care to support their engagement in school. It became apparent during this work that the children found it difficult to settle as they felt that they might move school again. This led to a focus on what might help them to feel as though they belonged in their school which subsequently supported their school engagement.

The concept of school belonging was introduced during my training as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) during university sessions regarding supporting behaviour in school. This made me reflect on my previous experience as an AEP. I could, therefore, anecdotally see the benefits of using this concept to support children and young people in care. As a TEP, I have used the concept of school belonging in casework to support emotional and behavioural needs and it has provided helpful insight into the underlying functions of behaviour as well as intervention at the individual and community level.

While I have not yet worked supporting children and young people in care as a TEP, I understand that educational psychologists (EPs) are well placed to support children and young people in care and advocate for their educational rights (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Watson & Kabler, 2012). Within the LA where I am currently on placement, children and young people in care are a priority group given their increased risk of emotional and educational needs (Osborne et al., 2009). As such, there is an interest in the current study at an individual and wider LA level to understand the school

belonging experiences for young people in care so that they are appropriately supported.

1.3 Current context and rationale

1.3.1 Children and young people in care

According to recent statistics the number of children in care continues to increase. Most recent reports indicate that the number of children and young people in care in England is at its highest level (DfE, 2021). The reason children go into care can be varied. Recent statistics indicate that abuse and/or neglect were the primary reasons children go into care for two thirds of this population. Family dysfunction was the next most common reason, followed by family in acute stress (DfE, 2021).

In the UK, the majority of children and young people in care are placed in a foster placement (71%), this can include a relative or friend (15%) or another carer (56%) (DfE, 2021). In terms of placement stability, seven out of 10 children had one placement between 2020-2021, which was slightly higher than in the previous year, but it is likely that the restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic reduced the number of placement moves (DfE, 2021). During this time period, one in 11 children in care had three or more placements in a year (DfE, 2021), demonstrating the high level of instability for children and young people in care.

Despite legislation, guidance and regulations in place to support the welfare and education of children in care, a recent report written by the Education Committee (2022) indicated that system-wide failings are resulting in children and young people in care receiving inadequate education. In England, the latest figures indicate that the attainment of children and young people in care is much lower than their peers who are not in care (DfE, 2021). Educational interventions have attempted to address this attainment gap, using the government's Pupil Premium fund (DfE, 2018b). However the effectiveness of such interventions has been critiqued and it is suggested that a more robust evidence base is required (Evans et al., 2017).

1.3.2 School belonging

Relatively recent guidance for schools on supporting mental health and behaviour in schools (DfE, 2018) acknowledges the importance of school belonging as a protective factor in supporting young people's resilience. It also states that schools should be safe spaces that enable trusting relationships with staff to ensure young people feel they belong (DfE, 2018a). At the same time, government policy also promotes the prioritisation of academic testing that all state schools are required to carry out (Bradbury, 2019; Francis et al., 2019). Therefore highlighting that government guidance requires schools to both enable students to achieve highly, whilst also promoting good levels of social-emotional development.

1.3.3 Adolescence, secondary education and school belonging

School belonging seems to be of particular importance during secondary school as research indicates a sense of school belonging supports adolescent development in areas such as social identity, interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation and transition into adulthood (Allen et al., 2021; Davis, 2012; Hill et al., 2013; O'Connor et al., 2011; Tomova et al., 2021). Despite this, certain organisational structures and instructional practices are suggested to hinder school belonging development in secondary school (Tillery et al., 2013).

For instance, in secondary school, students have a range of teachers that teach them different subjects. It could be argued that this organisational structure limits the opportunities for students to build meaningful relationships with teachers and hinder their feelings of school belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Tillery et al., 2013). Furthermore, instructional practices change from primary to secondary school where there is more emphasis on test performance than mastery and teaching strategies are more passive compared to cooperative and hands-on learning (Tillery et al., 2013). This change in instructional practice has been suggested to create distance between the teacher and the student as well as enhancing students' feelings of incompetence (Davis, 2003), which negatively impacts their sense of school belonging (Anderman, 2003). A third change often seen in the

secondary school context is a stricter view on disciplinary practices which can negatively impact relationships between staff and students and sense of school belonging (Ma, 2003). As a result, it seems unsurprising that feelings of school belonging are suggested to be lower in secondary school in comparison to primary school (Anderman, 2003; Ma, 2003; Whitlock, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006).

The research highlighted above, seems to indicate that promotion of school belonging in secondary school is of importance to support adolescent development and future wellbeing into adulthood. However, the current context and organisational structure of secondary schools seem to contradict the development of school belonging and the subsequent positive outcomes it is associated with.

1.3.4 Rationale

School belonging is recognised as a protective factor in supporting students' emotional wellbeing and academic success. As such it is deemed an important area of research to explore. In particular, a focus on secondary-aged students was taken due to fewer young people feeling as though they belong in school (Allen et al., 2021) and because of the importance of belonging on adolescent development (Allen et al., 2021; Davis, 2012; Hill et al., 2013; O'Connor et al., 2011).

The significance of belonging for young people in care has been highlighted in the literature (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Yuhui & Xiang, 2015) and a sense of school belonging has been associated with positive outcomes (Somers et al., 2020). However, there is currently limited research exploring young people in care's school belonging experiences from their own perspectives in the UK. Therefore, the current study sought to address this gap in the literature.

1.4 Research approach

The study adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, due to the research aim of understanding lived experiences from individual perspectives. IPA is a qualitative research method that is

underpinned by hermeneutics, phenomenology and idiography which aligns with the current research's aim as well as the ontological and epistemological standpoint (see section 3.5 for definitions of these terms). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three young people in care who were between the ages of 14-15 to explore their own individual experiences of school belonging. Analysis using IPA enabled the research to capture the individual nuances of school belonging experiences as well as acknowledging shared experiences and perspectives.

1.5 Study outline

This study will be presented through the following structure:

- Chapter 2: This chapter will present a literature review in three parts. Firstly exploring the research on school belonging. Secondly a systematic literature review is presented exploring school belonging experiences for young people. Thirdly, research regarding children and young people in care will be considered and the importance of school belonging for young people in care will be highlighted.
- Chapter 3: This chapter will outline the methodological approach to the study including the rationale for adopting an IPA approach and detailed description of how the study was conducted.
- Chapter 4: This chapter presents the findings of the IPA.
- Chapter 5: This chapter will discuss the findings of the current study with regards to existing literature as well as an evaluation of the quality of the study and subsequent implications for professional practice and future research.
- Chapter 6: This chapter will conclude the thesis, drawing together the main conclusions in answer to the research question.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to explore the literature on school belonging for young people in care. To meet this aim, the review will begin by exploring the literature on the need to belong and school belonging. The review will then discuss research that explores the importance of school belonging, contributing factors to school belonging, ways to enhance school belonging and barriers to school belonging. The need to explore young people's experiences through their own voices will then be discussed. As a result, a qualitative synthesis of the current UK literature exploring young people's experiences of school belonging using a meta-ethnographic approach was conducted.

The final section of the literature review will focus on children and young people in care where research on the outcomes for children and young people in care will be explored. Next, the concept of school as a protective factor for children and young people in care will be discussed. Due to the importance of school belonging, highlighted in the previous section, a review of the current literature on school belonging and children in care will be explored. The limited research in this area leads on to the rationale for the current study and the development of the current research question.

2.1 Belonging

Belonging has been described as a fundamental human need, which is important in contributing to wellbeing, development and motivation (Allen et al., 2021; Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lieberman, 2013; Maslow, 1943). It has been suggested that belonging serves as a protective function to survive from an evolutionary perspective as it is likely to enhance cohesion within a community of social animals (Allen et al., 2022). It is conceptualised as a need rather than a desire as due to the negative consequences a lack of belonging can be associated with, such as mental health difficulties (Connell et al., 2012; Dutcher et al., 2022; Erzen & Çikrikci, 2018; Jaremka et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2017) and physical health difficulties (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Carter et al., 2019; Jaremka & Sunami, 2018; Robles et al., 2014).

As a result, the following section will explore the literature on the concept of school belonging, why it's important, how it can be developed and how young people themselves experience school belonging.

2.2 School belonging

2.2.1 Theoretical perspectives of school belonging

School belonging can be linked to theoretical perspectives such as attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model of development.

Attachment theory proposes that all children are driven to develop relationships with their primary caregiver and the quality of these relationships will significantly impact the child's future social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) suggests that a secure attachment provides optimal emotional and social development which allows the child to feel safe, trust that their needs will be consistently met and will feel confident to explore the world. Attachment theory has also been broadened out to apply to education and school relations with Bergin and Bergin (2009) suggesting that attachment styles can influence the relationships young people have with their peers and teachers and therefore their sense of belonging.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) proposes that people have physiological needs, a need for safety, love and belongingness, a need for self-esteem and a need for self-actualisation. Maslow suggests that these needs are organised within a hierarchy where higher order needs such as self-actualisation cannot be met until more basic needs such as the physiological needs (e.g. having food and water) are met. This theory highlights the importance of the need to belong.

Despite the links to belonging proposed in the two theories above, this thesis focused primarily on the theoretical perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model of development. This focus was taken because this model acknowledges the young person as part of a broader system and environment that has a key influence on the young person's development when it interacts with the young person's own intrapersonal characteristics.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) do not take into account these wider systems as explicitly and tend to lead to a focus on the individual, their relationships and their needs.

Allen et al. (2018) have demonstrated that through using Bronfenbrenner's (1969) model, school belonging can be seen as a phenomenon that does not just exist within the young person but is also influenced by those around them including family members, teachers and peers (the microsystem); the school's culture (the mesosystem); interactions between multiple different systems (the exosystem); the community culture and government policies (the macrosystem); and time-based aspects (the chronosystem). Viewing school belonging through this lens encourages system wide changes rather than only attempting to change the young person at an individual level.

2.2.2 Importance of school belonging

School belonging has been attributed to a wide range of positive psychological and educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2018; Jose et al., 2012; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Sari, 2012). For instance, research has indicated that school belonging is positively associated with higher levels of happiness and self-esteem (Law et al., 2013; O'Rourke & Cooper, 2010) and fewer experiences of anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts (Steiner et al., 2019; Wyman et al., 2019). Moreover, school belonging has been argued to help students develop optimistic attitudes, enjoy their learning experiences, maintain emotional stability as well as mitigating the risks of academic stress (Abdollahi et al., 2020; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020; Tong et al., 2019). Further research indicates that a positive sense of school belonging can lead to long term benefits within the area of mental health and overall adult functioning (Steiner et al., 2019; Wyman et al., 2019).

On the other hand, if students do not feel a sense of school belonging they may feel helpless, unsupported and rejected (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). This may lead to a negative impact on their peer and teacher relationships, their agency, school engagement and achievement (Fong Lam et al., 2015). Despite the importance of school belonging highlighted in the

research presented above, it is important to note that the causal direction of these influences is unclear (Allen et al., 2018).

2.2.3 Contributing factors to school belonging

Through the ecosystemic lens as suggested by Allen et al. (2018) contributing factors to a sense of school belonging, at the individual level, include personal characteristics and feelings of motivation towards academic school work (Allen et al., 2018). At the microsystemic-level peer and teacher support have been found to be strongly linked to a sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). The educational support from parents and carers has also been found to be important within the literature, where supportive adults can promote the values of education while building young people's sense of competence as capable learners (Allen et al., 2022). Research suggests that teacher support can mitigate negative interactions with peers or parents (Allen et al., 2018), highlighting the key role teachers can play in their interactions with young people in school to help them feel a sense of belonging (Uslu & Gizir, 2017).

While a number of factors have been related to school belonging, it is important to note that the causal direction of these influences is still unclear (Allen et al., 2018) as most studies are cross-sectional in design. For example, school belonging may influence how academically motivated a student may feel but having academic motivation may also influence the young person's feelings of school belonging (Anderman, 2003; Van Ryzin et al., 2009; Whitlock, 2006). It is likely that the relationship between student achievement and sense of belonging is cumulative and reciprocal in nature and further research is warranted to investigate this relationship in more detail (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

2.2.4 Enhancing school belonging

As a result of the positive associations with having a sense of school belonging, ways in which school practice can enhance school belonging have been explored. Such practices include promoting peer friendships, having supportive teachers and being provided with opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Libbey, 2004; Ma, 2003).

Research has suggested that while there is understanding in the literature on the importance of school belonging, it is questionable as to how much of this is translated into school practices (Allen et al., 2021). A systematic review of school-based interventions to support school belonging concluded that while the weight of evidence was generally strong in the studies reviewed, the authors acknowledge that more research is needed to establish and evaluate the outcomes of interventions as well as their sustainability (Allen et al., 2021).

Allen et al. (2018) suggest that viewing school belonging through a bioecological lens, drawing upon the work of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model of human development, can support the development of strategies to develop school belonging. For instance, taking a whole-school approach in acknowledging the range of individual, relational and cultural factors involved in contributing to school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). This view has been supported by subsequent research, such as Greenwood and Kelly's (2019) systematic literature review that explored school staff's perceptions of school belonging for students. Therefore, it seems important to take into consideration the unique context and cultural considerations of each school as different factors may be more relevant to certain schools (Allen et al., 2018). A review of the literature has indicated that successful interventions were those that focused on building students' strengths and promoting positive relationships (Allen et al., 2021). However, it has been suggested that in order to promote a sense of belonging a single strategy will not be effective but a multi-dimensional and systemic approach is necessary (Allen et al., 2022).

2.2.5 Barriers to school belonging

In order to enhance students' sense of school belonging, it is important to acknowledge the barriers students may face to experiencing belongingness in school. For instance, it is suggested that developing a sense of belonging for young people who are refugees is complex due to their experiences of wider educational inequalities and a lack of understanding from staff of their school experiences (McIntyre & Hall, 2020). In addition, students who are refugees can face further barriers to belonging

due to their experiences of racism and bullying in school leaving them to feel socially excluded and marginalised (McIntyre & Hall, 2020). Research suggests that students who experience bullying are more likely to report a lower sense of belonging compared to those who have not experienced bullying (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012; Cunningham, 2007). This has been linked to students' feelings of safety and tending to feel unsafe when they experience bullying (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012).

In addition to refugee status and experience of bullying, socio-economic status (SES) has been suggested to influence students' experiences of school belonging. For instance, research has reported that students who came from high SES families reported a higher sense of school belonging than those from low SES families (Cemalcilar, 2010). Similarly to bullying experiences, SES has been related to students' feelings of safety, where students from low SES families are thought to experience more barriers in having their safety needs met than those in high SES families and communities (Garcia-Reid, 2007; Allen et al., 2022). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs proposes that feelings of belongingness cannot be experienced if basic safety needs have not been met. This provides a potential theory as to why young people who feel unsafe, such as those from low SES backgrounds, experience a lower sense of school belonging compared to students who do not feel unsafe in their community or at school.

Further research indicates that students with SEN report lower levels of school belonging compared to their peers who do not have SEN (Cullinane, 2020). Findings from Cullinane's (2020) qualitative research with students with SEN seemed to suggest barriers such as academic difficulties, bullying and difficulties to participate in school activities due to communication and/or social difficulties.

The research above illustrates the unique barriers students can face and the importance of understanding these barriers in order to support students to feel as though they belong in school.

2.2.6 Young people's experiences of school belonging

To understand the phenomenon of school belonging and how to support it, it is important to understand young people's experiences of it.

Particularly given the importance of including young people in matters which affect them, as highlighted in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). In the growing body of school belonging research, only a small proportion seeks the experiences of young people themselves (Craggs & Kelly, 2018b).

Much of the school belonging research, to date, has approached this topic through quantitative methods, with a focus on correlations. This includes school belonging being associated with success in future employment, education and training (Parker et al., 2022) and less likelihood of school nonattendance and disengagement (Korpershoek et al., 2020). While this research supports the understanding of the importance of school belonging and what may contribute towards it, it could be argued to centre an adult construction of school belonging, through surveys, rather than exploring young people's experiences of school belonging that acknowledges their own unique contexts (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Nichols, 2008; Saraví et al., 2020).

The quantitative and positivist approach to exploring school belonging juxtaposes the view that a sense of school belonging is a subjective experience that is dependent on students' perceptions of their place within the school context and their social identities (Allen et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2018; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Furthermore, Saraví et al. (2020) argue that young people who experience different social and cultural contexts can have unique perspectives on what helps them to feel as though they belong. Therefore, an ecological and sociological perspective, which considers these contextual differences, towards school belonging could enrich the current understanding of school belonging. This is suggested to be particularly important in marginalised and vulnerable groups where power dynamics are at play (Gray et al., 2020; Saraví et al., 2020). As such, qualitative and ethnographic methods of data collection are suggested to be more suited to investigate the nuances of school belonging (Saraví et al., 2020).

2.2.7 Summary

This section of the literature review has given an overview of the school belonging literature. Firstly, the importance of belonging was outlined as a fundamental human need that contributes towards emotional wellbeing, psychological development and motivation (Allen et al., 2021; Allen, 2020; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lieberman, 2013; Maslow, 1943). Schools as organisations were highlighted as providing unique opportunities for students to fulfil this need to belong (Allen & Bowles, 2012). The importance of school belonging was then highlighted through research that suggests school belonging is associated with a wide range of positive psychological and educational outcomes (Allen et al., 2018; Jose et al., 2012; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Sari, 2012). Theoretically school belonging has been linked to Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological model (Allen et al., 2018) which acknowledges that young people are part of a broader system that interacts with their own individual characteristics. As a result, attempts to enhance school belonging have been suggested to acknowledge the interacting systems that influence school belonging such as relationships and cultures (Allen et al., 2018). Finally, it was acknowledged that in order to understand school belonging better there is a need to gain the voices and experiences from students themselves using qualitative research that acknowledges the nuances of school belonging (Saraví et al., 2020).

2.3 Systematic literature review

Due to much of the school belonging research focusing on associated outcomes and quantitative methods (Allen & Kern, 2017), there is a need to explore young people's experiences qualitatively to capture the nuance of this construct (Saraví et al., 2020). Research has indicated that school belonging is influenced by the unique school contexts as well as young people's individual experiences (Allen & Kern, 2017; Osterman, 2000). Therefore, this systematic literature review will focus on the synthesis of qualitative research due to its appropriateness to explore the relationship between young people's school environment and their individual experiences of it (Saraví et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the experiences of students in secondary school will be the focus of this review as research has highlighted the importance of school belonging for adolescents as they experience changing priorities and expectations (Allen & Kern, 2017). Additionally, research seems to indicate that development of school belonging may be hindered in secondary school due to organisational and systemic structures that warrant further exploration (Allen et al., 2021; Tillery et al., 2013).

A relatively recent review conducted by Craggs and Kelly (2018b) explored the small but growing body of qualitative school belonging research seeking the voices and experiences of adolescents which found that school belonging for young people is necessary in order to feel motivated, engaged in their education and safe in relationships with others. However, this systematic literature review included studies from a range of different countries with arguably different school contexts and as such a specific review of the contemporary UK literature is yet to be conducted.

Therefore, this review aims to answer the following research question:

What does the research tell us about young people's experiences of school belonging in secondary school in the UK?

2.3.1 Method for synthesis

A meta-ethnographic approach was used to synthesise studies in this systematic literature review. This approach was utilised due to its interpretative nature (Noblit & Hare, 1988) which aligns with the purpose of this review; to understand the school belonging experiences of young people from their own perspectives. The seven phases to a meta-ethnography approach proposed by Noblit and Hare (1988) were used, which are detailed in the table below:

Table 1

A table outlining the meta-ethnography phases as proposed by Noblit and Hare (1988)

Phase	Description
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1. Getting started	Identifying topic interest
2. Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest	Selecting studies
3. Reading the studies	Repeated reading and noting of interpretative metaphors
4. Determining how the studies are related	Creating a list of the key ideas and concepts and to start to create relationships between studies
5. Translating the studies into one another	Comparing and contrasting key concepts between studies
6. Synthesising translations	Creating an overarching interpretation synthesis
7. Expressing the synthesis	Ensuring the synthesis is intelligible to intended audience

2.3.2 Literature search strategy

To identify, screen and select relevant research papers the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses framework (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009) was used (see Appendix 1 for a visual representation of this process). Databases were selected based on their relevance to research within the field of education and applied psychology. As a result, Web of Science, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and PsycINFO: Ovid online were used.

To address the research question, searches included a range of synonyms for the terms 'school belonging', 'experiences' and 'adolescents' (see Appendix 2 for the search terms used). The search terms were chosen based on a detailed scoping of the school belonging literature as well as

drawing specifically on previously conducted literature reviews in this area (Allen et al., 2016; Craggs & Kelly, 2018a; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). This initial scoping enabled the use of search terms that ensured a range of relevant research articles were found. The literature search was conducted in July 2022. The searches were rerun in May 2023 and results did not yield any further studies.

2.3.3 Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Initial filters were applied to searches so that only peer-reviewed articles that were written in the English language were produced. Due to the focus of this review on studies conducted in the UK, when searching the ERIC database a location identifier for the UK was applied. When searching the Web of Science database searches were refined to only include countries and regions within the UK. When searching the PsycINFO database, it was not possible to refine by location within the search, so this was refined manually. Following the initial searches and refinements 446 studies were obtained. After the removal of duplicates, 436 studies remained. The next stage involved screening the titles and abstracts to establish relevance to the review topic. This led to 418 studies being excluded. The remaining 18 studies were read in full and screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Appendix 3 for details of this criteria).

As a result of this reading, 12 studies were removed due to not meeting the inclusion criteria. Five studies were excluded due to not having an explicit focus on exploring school belonging experiences (Crompton et al., 2022; Francis et al., 2021; Goodall, 2020; Hastings, 2012; McGowan et al., 2022). A further two studies were excluded due to their inclusion of younger age groups (Cockerill, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019). Two studies were excluded due to including the perspectives of adults and so interpretations were not solely based on young people's experiences (Gowing & Jackson, 2016; Greenwood & Kelly, 2020). Three further studies were excluded due to their inclusion of quantitative data as well as qualitative which seemed to influence the overall interpretations of the qualitative findings (Gowing, 2019;

Porter & Ingram, 2021; Shaw, 2019). Therefore six studies were included in this meta-synthesis that met the inclusion criteria.

2.3.4 Overview of studies

All six of the studies were conducted in the UK and had the aim of understanding young people's experiences of school belonging. A total number of 42 participants were included, aged between 11 and 17 years old and were not in care. The qualitative methods used in these studies included individual semi-structured interviews and one study collected data through photo elicitation and video diary entries (Nind et al., 2012). The table below provides an overview of the key details of the studies included in this review.

Table 2

A table presenting descriptive summaries of the included studies.

Author/ Year	Focus of study	Population/ Age range	Qualitative methods	Key Findings
1. Nind et al. (2012)	The voices of girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.	8 female students (11-16 years old)	Photo elicitation, digital comic strips and video diaries	Importance of relational space; identity; community; relationships and belonging.
2. Sancho & Cline (2012)	Views and experiences of students who had recently transitioned from primary to secondary school.	10 students (11-12 years old)	Semi-structured interviews	School belonging related to peer acceptance; relationships with peers or siblings; relationships with teachers and linked to positive emotions and positive behaviour.
3. Cartmell & Bond (2015)	Exploration of the development of belonging for young people who are international new arrivals.	5 students (12-15 years old)	Semi-structured interviews	Belonging related to fitting in; adjusting to a new context and developing friendships; positive

				emotions; personal development and being understood as a person and receiving support from others, respecting cultural and religious differences.
4. Craggs & Kelly (2018b)	Exploring school belonging experiences of young people who have undergone managed moves.	4 students (13-16 years old)	Individual phenomenological interviews	Belonging experiences related to making friends and feeling safe; feeling known, understood and accepted as a person; identification of and support for SEND; supportive vs unsupportive school protocols/practices.
5. Myles et al. (2019)	Exploration of the social experience and sense of belonging of autistic females in mainstream secondary schools.	8 autistic female students (12-17 years old)	Semi-structured interviews	Key friendships, understanding and perceived social competence are in developing a sense of belonging in school.

6. Sobitan (2022)	Exploration of how secondary school refugee students experience school belonging.	7 students (11-16 years old)	Semi-structured interviews	Four superordinate themes were developed: agency, participation, safety and separation.
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2.3.5 Quality appraisal of studies

Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) model was used to assess the quality of the six studies included in this review due to the importance of appraising research in order to inform potential future practices and policies (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007). This framework structures the appraisal into three areas: methodological quality (WoE A), methodological relevance (WoE B) and topic relevance (WoE C). The overall quality of the studies is linked to WoE D which combines the three areas described above to give an overall judgement of the quality of the evidence provided in relation to the review question.

While it has been acknowledged that qualitative research is difficult to measure and appraise, it has been suggested that structured checklists can still be used within this area (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007). Therefore, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative scoring framework was used as a guide to assess the methodological quality (WoE A) of the included papers (CASP, 2018). The checklist comprised of 10 questions that could be answered 'yes' or 'no'. Studies were read in detail and appraised using this checklist (see Appendices 4 and 5). As suspected, due to the papers being peer-reviewed articles, they were all judged highly in relation to their methodological quality (received an answer of 'yes' for 8 or more questions).

When assessing the methodological relevance (WoE B) of the papers, all six studies were judged as being methodologically relevant to the review as the study designs chosen were deemed relevant to explore adolescents' experiences of school belonging (see Appendix 6). This was expected due to the inclusion/exclusion criteria applied during the study selection process.

The appraisal of topic relevance (WoE C) involved judgement on the extent to which the studies appropriately considered and focused on school belonging in their study (see Appendix 7 for details of how studies were assessed as being topically relevant to the review). Five out of the six studies were of 'high quality' as they provided relevant evidence of adolescents' experiences of school belonging. Nind et al. (2012) was appraised as

'medium quality' as they provided information of the students' general school experiences as well as their school belonging experiences.

All studies were appraised highly for WoE D (see Appendix 8). As a result, the quality appraisal of these papers indicates that findings can be viewed with a reasonable level of confidence.

2.3.6 Synthesis of data

As suggested by Noblit and Hare (1988), each study was repeatedly read, and interpretative concepts were noted throughout before comparing these interpretations across the six studies (see Appendix 9). This resulted in eight sub-concepts and four main concepts being generated. The table below presents the main concepts and sub-concepts.

Table 3

A table presenting the main concepts and sub-concepts generated from synthesis.

Main concept	Sub-concept
School environment and culture influence feelings of safety and connection.	Safety through culture and predictability.
	Opportunities for connection.
Relationships with peers and staff support increased safety and belonging	Friendships.
	Staff support.
Acceptance contributes towards school belonging.	Being understood by others.
	Respect for individual differences.
Autonomy and agency supports school belonging	Having control and choice.
	Making a difference.

Theme 1: School environment and culture influence feelings of safety and connection. It was interpreted that the studies included in this synthesis considered the school culture and environment as important aspects of school belonging. It seemed that predictable, fair and consistent school policies that promote a caring school ethos enhanced feelings of

safety for participants. The school environment was also interpreted as providing opportunities and spaces for participants to build connections and relationships with others.

Safety through culture and predictability. For instance, the importance of school policy promoting a caring ethos and having alternative approaches to restraint and exclusion was highlighted (Nind et al., 2012). Additionally, a consistent approach to behaviour management was interpreted as being important, especially with regards to bullying (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). On the other hand, when rules were ineffective and practice was inconsistent, this seemed to have a detrimental impact on school belonging, *“I see my friend, the student hurt him, and teacher look at them, and they didn’t do anything”* (Sobitan, 2022, p. 10). Therefore, it was interpreted that school policies that promoted a caring ethos towards behaviour alongside consistency of rules created a sense of safety for young people in school which ultimately developed their sense of school belonging.

Additionally, it was interpreted that young people needed predictability, order and familiarity within the school environment to support their school belongingness. For instance, a smaller school size which had less people seemed to increase familiarity, *“easy to ‘know everyone’s names”* (Nind et al., 2012, p. 647). Furthermore, the classrooms being *“always neat and tidy”* (Nind et al., 2012, p. 646) was important to participants. This suggests that the predictability and familiarity of routines and order shown in the classroom promoted a feeling of safety and belonging within school.

Opportunities for connection. Physical spaces and systems in school were seen as key to provide opportunities to relate to and interact with others (Nind et al., 2012) such as though paired work (Craggs & Kelly, 2018) and the organisation of form groups in secondary schools (Sancho & Cline, 2012). For one participant, the lunchtime club was a physical space for her to feel welcome, *“people from student support run it... So we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like ‘how’s your week’s going’ and that’s a nice thing to do”* (Myles et al., 2019, p. 14). This also included the importance of providing extra-curricular activities for young people and how these opportunities supported social connections (Craggs & Kelly, 2018b) and

were seen as “*a way of experiencing school belonging*” (Sobitan, 2022, p. 13).

Finally, the size of the school’s environment seemed to relate to young people’s experiences of belonging. On the one hand, a small school size enabled closer relationships to form (Nind et al., 2012) but on the other hand some young people felt that a large school size enabled more opportunities to make connections with people (Sancho & Cline, 2012). For instance, “*the larger size of secondary school was seen by some pupils as fostering more of a sense of belonging*” (Sancho & Cline, 2012, p. 68). Ultimately, these studies seemed to suggest that the size of the school’s physical environment can be supportive in strengthening connections to others which influences their sense of school belonging.

Therefore, it is suggested that the school environment can have a positive influence on school belonging through providing predictability, consistency and opportunities to connect to others.

Theme 2: Relationships with peers and staff support increased safety and belonging. The second main concept generated related to relationships with peers and staff can develop feelings of safety and belonging in school. This concept was present in all six studies. It was interpreted that friendships with peers who were trustworthy, relatable and supportive increased feelings of safety within school, supporting a sense of school belonging. Additionally, the support from staff was interpreted to support belonging by being responsive, effective and understanding of past experiences and individual needs.

Friendships. Friendships were interpreted as providing consistent and positive support for young people which seemed to lead to feelings of safety (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012). More specifically, for the young people with refugee backgrounds in Sobitan’s (2022) study, it was important to have peers with shared experiences, “*having peers with shared background and experiences was also essential to safety*” (Sobitan, p. 11). Similarly, the autistic students in Myles et al.’s (2019) study reflected on their difficulties with peer relationships due to not having the same interests as their peers. Therefore, it seemed imperative to

belonging and safety for participants to have peers they could rely on for support and who they could relate to.

Staff support. The responsiveness and appropriateness of staff support was mentioned within studies (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Sancho & Cline, 2012; Sobitan, 2022), *“I think people or teachers that can help, that can help you if you are worried or ever need help with anything whereas in Castleton you had to wait a couple of days to go and speak to someone”* (Sancho & Cline, 2012, p. 70). Furthermore, it seemed important for staff to provide individualised support to young people acknowledging their past experiences (Nind et al., 2012; Sobitan, 2022) and putting support in place to meet additional needs (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). In contrast, not receiving appropriate support from school staff could hinder feelings of belonging, for instance for the autistic students in Myles et al.’s study, *“They just talk to us weird... Like we’re babies... And they sometimes look at us really weird”* (p. 15). Therefore, it was interpreted from these studies that staff support can create a sense of trustworthiness when it is responsive and targeted to the individual which enhances feelings of belonging. On the other hand, support perceived as ineffective by students could hinder school belonging.

As a result, relationships were interpreted as a key contributor to participants feeling of safety and trust within school that influenced feelings of school belonging.

Theme 3: Acceptance contributes towards school belonging. The third concept generated from this synthesis was a feeling of acceptance that enhanced school belonging. This concept relates to the concept of relationships above as feeling accepted for these young people seemed to come through their interactions with others. It seemed important for young people to feel understood, wanted and acknowledged by others.

Being understood by others. For instance, it seemed important for young people to be accepted for being their true authentic selves without the judgement from staff based on their school history (Cartmell & Bond, 2015; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Nind et al., 2012). As a result, it was interpreted that acceptance requires being understood by others, *“Jack made an explicit link between feeling understood and accepted and being able to ‘be himself”*

(Craggs & Kelly, 2018, p. 64). In order to prevent judgement from others, it seemed important for staff to get to know the young people as individuals to support their feelings of belonging as represented by this young person who said *“Cos, I’ve only just started here and all the teachers like know me”* (Sancho & Cline, 2012, p. 69), when asked why they felt like they belonged to their school.

Respect for individual differences. Staff respect for cultural difference was interpreted as a factor contributing to young people’s sense of belonging (Cartmell & Bond, 2015; Sobitan, 2022). This was interpreted to relate to acceptance of the young people’s individual identities and there was a sense that this acceptance led to feelings of safety, *“Participants also experienced safety when they sensed that others respected their cultural and religious identity”* (Sobitan, 2022, p. 11). In contrast, this was coupled with a lack of acceptance through some young people’s experiences of bullying and racism (Sobitan, 2022). Therefore, it seemed that belonging for the young people in these studies was experiencing acceptance of their identity.

Similarly, being accepted, valued and acknowledged by peers was seen as important in young people’s experiences of school belonging (Myles et al., 2019). *“The people I’ve met, I think they’ve accepted me, and I’ve accepted them and so like we’re friends now and so like I’m getting along with people and so like that makes me feel a bit happier”* (Sancho & Cline, 2012, p. 69). Being accepted by peers required a level of understanding from their peers, *“true friends... they actually understand and just don’t not like me for my autism”* (Myles et al., 2019, p. 13).

This highlighted that acceptance from both peers and staff in school seemed to incorporate having their identities understood and respected which, in turn, contributed to a sense of school belonging.

Theme 4: Autonomy and agency supports school belonging. The fourth concept of autonomy and agency was interpreted to relate to young people being given choices. Additionally, autonomy related to being able to make a difference in school and support others which was interpreted to support young people in feeling confident and competent, enhancing their feelings of school belonging.

Having control and choice. For the young people with refugee backgrounds, a lack of control and autonomy in school had a negative impact on their sense of belonging and mental health, *“a general lack of control in school resulted in frustration and also mental health difficulties”* (Sobitan, 2022, p. 8). Similarly, one participant reflected on the importance of staff sharing what they were going to say to her parent in a phone call (Nind et al., 2012). As a result, it was interpreted that feeling included and that their views mattered supported young people’s autonomy and agency which contributed to developing school belonging.

Making a difference. It seemed that being able to make a difference in school enhanced feelings of belonging for young people. For instance, some students felt able to make a difference through supporting other pupils who had similar experiences to them, *“...I’ve told them, there is an iPad, you can take, and you can... talk with people and stuff”* (Sobitan, 2022, p. 10). Having a responsibility in school was also thought to be important in experiencing school belonging by young people, *“use existing skills to make a positive contribution appeared to facilitate a sense of school belonging”* (Craggs & Kelly, 2020, p.66). Therefore, making a difference through supporting others using their strengths was interpreted to support young people’s competence and confidence and feelings of school belonging.

Summary of synthesis. The interpretations offered above from this meta-synthesis suggest that participants experienced school belonging when there was a caring school culture which enabled positive peer and staff relationships to form as well as promoting participants’ sense of autonomy, agency and control. School belonging seemed to develop through trusting relationships that were supportive. These relationships were interpreted to contribute to young people feeling accepted and able to be their true authentic selves. However, when there were difficulties in relationships and a lack of agency for the young people, this hindered their school belonging experiences.

2.3.7 Discussion

The aim of this review was to elevate young people's perspectives of their school belonging experiences which until recently has been limited among the school belonging literature where quantitative data has dominated (Allen & Kern, 2017; Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Chapman et al., 2013; Nichols, 2008). This review focused specifically on the experiences of young people in the UK, where school belonging has recently been acknowledged as a protective factor in promoting young people's resilience (DfE, 2018), so that findings were relevant to the UK schooling experience.

This review explored the findings of six peer-reviewed qualitative studies that included the experiences of 42 adolescents to gain an understanding of school belonging experiences from their unique perspectives. Results from the meta-ethnographic synthesis of these studies seemed to suggest that the school environment, relationships, acceptance and agency were all important in participants' school belonging experiences.

In terms of the school environment influence on school belonging, it has been argued that little is understood of these features (Allen et al., 2018). However, research investigating the school environment seems to suggest that consistent school policies that embody fairness and safety are important (Anderman, 2002; Brutsaert & Van Houtte, 2002; Nichols, 2008).

The importance of a supportive school ethos that enables relationships to form and allows young people to develop their own agency was highlighted in the metasynthesis, which acknowledges the importance of whole school approaches to school belonging. Multiple levels of support contributing to school belonging have been highlighted in the literature where a multi-dimensional framework is proposed by Allen et al. (2018) and Greenwood and Kelly (2019) to guide whole-school support for developing students' school belonging.

The participants in the synthesised studies referred to the environment providing predictability and order (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Nind et al., 2012; Sobitan, 2022) as well as opportunities for social interaction (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Greenwood & Kelly, 2020; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Sancho & Cline, 2012). The importance of providing opportunities for social interaction has been recognised in a systematic review of

interventions to increase students sense of belonging in school that illustrated that successful interventions focused on supporting positive peer and teacher interactions (Allen et al., 2021).

Furthermore, school belonging seemed to be enhanced in the presence of relationships. The importance of peer support and reciprocal friendships was highlighted in all studies (Cartmell & Bond, 2015; Craggs & Kelly 2018; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Sancho & Cline, 2012; Sobitan, 2022). Support from peers has been widely acknowledged in the school belonging literature (Allen et al., 2018; Saraví et al., 2020; Tarabini et al., 2019; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). In Sancho & Cline's (2012) study it was suggested that feeling a sense of belonging supported the development of relationships which has also been suggested by Ibrahim and El Zaatari (2020). This seems to indicate a potential two way relationship between peer relationships and school belonging.

In terms of acceptance, it seemed important for the young people in this synthesis to feel understood and acknowledged by others as well as having their cultural differences respected (Cartmell & Bond, 2015; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Sancho & Cline, 2012; Sobitan, 2022). This aligns with the definition Goodenow and Grady (1993) proposed, where school belonging was thought to be *"the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment"* (p. 80). The idea of acceptance is thought to be particularly important for the age group included in this review, as being accepted and valued by others is critical in the formation of their own identities as adolescents (Saraví et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings largely support what has been demonstrated in the current school belonging literature. In addition, the synthesis of these studies highlights the relevance of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) in supporting young people's sense of school belonging as the theory's key concepts of autonomy, competence and relatedness align with the main concepts produced from this current synthesis. This provides further support that school belonging is closely associated with healthy and positive psychological wellbeing and development.

2.3.8 Limitations of review

Despite the insight into a range of young people's school belonging experiences and the alignment of these findings with previous research, there are limitations that must be considered. For instance, the selection of only peer reviewed articles may have limited the findings as important experiences of young people may have been explored in doctoral theses and other published studies.

It could be argued that a further limitation is the variety of contexts in which the different participants were a part of in the synthesis. However, it was not the aim of this review to generalise findings to all young people but capture the nuance of school belonging experiences from individual perspectives.

This literature review has contributed to the understanding of young people's experiences of school belonging, but it has also highlighted the limited studies available in this area, especially those that utilise only qualitative methods. This suggests that further research is needed in this area. In particular, it appears that certain voices are missing in the current school belonging literature in the UK. For instance, young people in care were not featured, which is a critical gap in the literature, considering young people in care are particularly vulnerable to not developing a sense of school belonging and experiencing educational disadvantage (DfE, 2021; Tilbury et al., 2014).

2.3.9 Conclusion

This meta-ethnographic qualitative synthesis explored young people's experiences of school belonging. The synthesis indicated that young people experience school belonging as feeling safe in the school environment and within trusted relationships. Furthermore, school belonging seemed to relate to being accepted and given opportunities to express agency and autonomy. The synthesis of research using qualitative methods has allowed for sensitive interpretations of young people's experiences of school belonging ensuring that the voices of the young people themselves are prominent. This review also demonstrated the multidimensional contributing factors that can influence school belonging experiences and the importance of a whole-

school approach to establish a positive culture to promote belonging. It has also highlighted the missing voices of some of the most vulnerable students in our secondary schools, such as young people in care (Jackson & Höjer, 2013).

2.4 Children and young people in care

This next subsection of the literature review will take a focus on children and young people in care. Chapter 1 highlighted the current context of children and young people in care and this section will explore the research on their outcomes. Following this the importance of school as a protective factor for children and young people in care will be explored, drawing on theoretical perspectives as to why this might be. These theoretical perspectives will then lead to a focus on school belonging for children and young people in care.

2.4.1 Outcomes for children and young people in care

Despite the legislation, guidance and regulations in place to support the welfare and education of children in care, a recent report written by the Education Committee (2022) indicated that system-wide failings are resulting in children and young people in care receiving inadequate education. Young people in care continue to face educational disadvantage compared to their peers who are not in care which includes having higher rates of school exclusion (Ofsted, 2012). The latest figures indicate that the attainment of children and young people in care is much lower than their peers who are not in care (DfE, 2021).

The attainment gap has been suggested to widen with age. This may be due to those entering care in adolescence having experienced more disadvantage, making it less likely for them to do well academically and those who entered care at a younger age, who may have had better attainment, may have left the care system due to adoption, special guardianship or reunification with their birth families (Sebba et al., 2015).

As well as the attainment gap there is also a higher percentage of children and young people in care who are identified as having a special

educational need (SEN) (DfE, 2021). By the time young people in care reach the end of Key Stage 4, they are three to four times more likely to have an SEN than their peers who are not in care (DfE, 2021). Social and emotional mental health (SEMH) needs were reported to be the most common primary need (DfE, 2021). SEMH is a term used in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (2015) which describes these needs as relating to a wide range of social and emotional difficulties that may present in behaviour that seems withdrawn or challenging.

Despite the statistics on children and young people in care above, research has revealed that their educational experience varies by the interaction of their personal characteristics and qualities, highlighting that they are not a homogenous group (Berridge, 2012; Hedin et al., 2011; Kothari et al., 2021).

Children and young people in care are often confronted with the challenge of being unable to be the student they would like to be due to frequent moves, difficulties with relationships, poor academic outcomes and SEMH needs (Hedin et al., 2011; Ponciano, 2013). As such, children and young people in care are thought of as a vulnerable group that require a significant amount of support to ensure they have healthy and positive futures (Jackson & Höjer, 2013).

2.4.2 Influence of the care system

Research suggests that it is not necessarily being in care that puts children and young people at risk of low attainment but that pre-care experience such as abuse, neglect and chaotic early life experiences puts them at risk of future harm and poor outcomes (Goemans et al., 2015; Romano et al., 2015). Additionally, when accounting for individual characteristics, socio-economic status and educational experiences children and young people's care status was found not to be a strong predictor of educational attainment at age 16 (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018). This research suggests that a more individualistic approach to understanding attainment and outcomes for children and young people in care is needed that acknowledges the individual profile of needs, characteristics and experiences rather than only looking to their care status (Luke & O'Higgins, 2018).

However, some research suggests that the care system also fails to meet the needs of the children and young people in care, and this hinders their progress (Ainsworth & Hansen, 2014; Connelly & Chakrabarti, 2008; Jackson, 2007). A life course study on the educational journeys of care-experienced adults found that, for some participants, their time in care was not positive or helpful for their education due to multiple placement moves (Brady & Gilligan, 2020). One criticism of the care system is that it limits placement options for children in care by prioritising placement into foster care first and foremost which fails to acknowledge the complexities of the care population (Cronin, 2019).

In addition, research with young people in care and their support workers in the UK highlighted how processes and practices that are intended to support young people, such as attending meetings, can often have negative consequences as it positions the young people as 'other' (Jones et al., 2020). The stigma attached to being 'in care' negatively impacts their school experiences through staff holding low expectations of the children and young people's achievements and future prospects (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Farmer et al., 2013; Mannay et al., 2017).

Sinclair et al. (2020) suggest that the label of being a child in care may influence how educational systems respond to children and young people in care, impacting on their subsequent attainment. Therefore, young people in care have to face the demanding process of constantly negotiating their identity (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Despite the negative impact this stigma can have, some young people express agency to resist negative appraisals and are determined to not be like their birth family or be another care statistic (Macleod et al., 2021). This finding highlights the need to challenge assumptions of children and young people in care being vulnerable (Fazel & Newby, 2021) as this is an identity that is often rejected by young people in care (Macleod et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, research suggests that for some young people, entering the care system can lead to an improvement in their lives (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; O'Higgins et al., 2015). Research has highlighted that being in care can provide a protective element to school success particularly if a child experiences early admission into care alongside longer placements (Sebba

et al., 2015; Sutcliffe et al., 2017). Associated positive changes after entering care include feeling like school is important, having family that take an active role in supporting school success as well as further support from friends and teachers (Hedin et al., 2012). Similarly, research indicates that being in foster care can positively influence school performance where placements were found to have a positive impact on children in care's attitudes towards their educational achievement and school in general (Berridge, 2017; Hedin et al., 2011).

2.4.3 School as a protective factor

Engagement with and success in education has been understood to be the most powerful tool in supporting upward social mobility and is suggested to improve the future wellbeing of vulnerable groups (McNamara et al., 2019). For children and young people in care, schools can provide opportunities for them to flourish and provide an education that can improve career opportunities, physical and emotional wellbeing, access to and engagement in broader social and community relationships (Macleod et al., 2021; Mendes et al., 2014).

Relationships with staff in school have been shown to be particularly important for children and young people in care and can help contribute to a positive school experience (Macleod et al., 2021). These relationships seem to be most successful when staff take the time to get to know children and young people beyond their care identity and understand the reasons for their behaviour (Macleod et al., 2021). The importance of teacher relationships highlights the need for teachers to understand the needs of young people in care so that young people feel they can trust them (Berridge, 2017; Day et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2021).

In terms of academic support, research on interventions are limited and have varied in methodological quality (Evans et al., 2017). Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that tutoring and individualised educational support for children in care enhances academic achievements (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018). However, it has been argued that in order to clearly demonstrate successful intervention more thorough research is needed (Kothari et al., 2021). While interventions may be helpful,

they have been focused on attempting to change or solve the issues within the young people themselves (Evans et al., 2017). This fails to address the school and care systems that can protect young people in care from educational disadvantage.

It is argued that the school environment can be a protective factor for children and young people in care as it can provide a place of predictability, structure and safety, providing a sense of control and allowing opportunities to socialise with peers (Höjer & Johansson, 2013). Additionally, for those children and young people who have had particularly disrupted and chaotic early lives, school providing clear expectations of behaviour alongside a willingness to be flexible seemed to create a safe environment for them (Macleod et al., 2021)..

Children in care have expressed that they do not wish to be treated differently because they are in care but instead wanted their care experience to be understood and wished to be listened to and involved in decisions that affect them (Berridge, 2017; Macleod et al., 2021). This relates to the importance of agency for children and young people in care and when it is respected, trusting relationships with adults are more likely to be established (Macleod et al., 2021). Furthermore, when staff have high expectations and belief that children and young people in care can achieve this positively impacts their school experiences (Macleod et al., 2021).

2.4.4 Theoretical perspective: Self-determination theory

The research illustrated above alludes to positive school experiences being linked to students feeling a sense of autonomy, connection with others and high expectations of their abilities (Macleod et al., 2021). Therefore, it seems appropriate to suggest that self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a useful framework and explanation as to how and why school settings can be a protective factor for children and young people in care.

Self-determination theory aligns with the positive psychology movement, where there is a focus on nurturing individual strengths and moving away from a model of wellbeing that focuses on weakness and

illness (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2003). In particular, self-determination theory and positive psychology assume that human beings are active agents in their lives that can influence their own drives, emotions and environments rather than being passively controlled by the internal and external forces in their lives (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2003). Applying a self-determination lens towards children and young people in care encourages a move away from low expectations and stigmatisation while also recognising how much their environment may be acting as a barrier to their own personal growth (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019).

Self-determination theory posits that there are three inherent psychological needs that all human beings require to be met in order to thrive, which are the need for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence relates to the confidence an individual feels in their abilities to achieve their own goals. Autonomy is the need to act within a person's own values, to feel a sense of willingness and choice when acting. Relatedness is the need to feel connected to others and experience care from and for others, which Deci and Vansteenkiste (2003) link to the concept of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Research has indicated the positive effects on performance, psychological health and wellbeing when individuals experience their needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness being met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is argued that the concept of basic need satisfaction provides indication of when and why people will either thrive or become disaffected (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2003).

Self-determination theory within school settings. Applying self-determination theory within education seems to provide a useful framework that supports the development of student engagement in school (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Saeki & Quirk, 2015). Instead of locating the problem of school disengagement within the student (Dutro & Bien, 2014), self-determination theory acknowledges the key role educational environments play in creating opportunities and conditions that enable motivation and engagement to be achieved (Curtis & Butler, 2021; Wang & Peck, 2013).

Within the school environment autonomy has been suggested to be supported through promoting student voice and choice as well as minimising coercion (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Competence in school relates to a sense of understanding and success within students' learning which has been found to be associated with increased school engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). Finally, the need to relate to others is associated with feeling respected, valued and secure within relationships which is positively related to positive attitudes towards school and school engagement (Saeki & Quirk, 2015; Wang & Peck, 2013). When schools do not effectively and consistently meet these basic psychological needs, students' school engagement is negatively impacted (Curtis & Butler, 2021).

Moreover, research using self-determination theory has been used to highlight supportive and unsupportive teaching practice. For instance, Taylor et al. (2012) found that students who had teachers that inhibited student initiative and did not acknowledge student perspectives performed worse academically and reported a low sense of competence. Research suggests that when lessons are designed to address these psychological needs, students become more motivated to engage in the learning (Hsu et al., 2019). As such, self-determination theory seems to provide a useful framework in understanding school engagement.

Self-determination theory and children and young people in care.

There is research to suggest that self-determination theory is a relevant and important framework to use when exploring children and young people in care's outcomes (Geenen et al., 2013; Hyde & Atkinson, 2019; Nagpaul & Chen, 2019; Powers et al., 2018; Powers et al., 2012; Van der Helm et al., 2018). It is argued that self-determination and its links to resilience provides the possibility of empowerment and transformation for groups who may be disadvantaged within society (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019), such as children and young people in care.

Research into self-determination interventions with children and young people in care have found positive outcomes as a result of these interventions in terms of school engagement and achievement (Geenen et al., 2013), employment and independent living (Powers et al., 2018; Powers

et al., 2012). Research has suggested that the need to relate was most salient for care leavers in preparing for adulthood which then enhanced their autonomy and competence to work towards post-16 goals (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019). Similarly, research conducted with adolescents with difficult home lives and emotional challenges, suggests that relatedness was most important and how they often felt frustration to meet this need with their families (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019).

The key influence of relatedness may highlight that for young people in care, feeling connected to others is of significant importance. Yuhui and Xiang (2015) argue that this need to relate is associated with feelings of school belonging. As school settings provide opportunities for children and young people in care to fulfil their need to belong, it seems important to explore school belongingness for children and young people in care.

2.4.5 Children and young people in care and school belonging

As highlighted above, school belonging seems to be an important area to explore for children and young people in care. A recent quantitative study highlighted the importance of school belonging for young people in care by presenting findings that suggest school belonging is connected to academic success for young people in care (Somers et al., 2020). However, previous research seems to suggest young people in care are more likely to feel less connected to school when they have experienced a number of school moves as it impacts on their ability to develop trusting and supportive relationships within the school environment (Tilbury et al., 2014).

Research has highlighted the need to amplify the voices of young people in care and their school experiences as their voices are often missing in the literature (Johnson et al., 2020). Recent research has explored children in care's views on what would support them during school transitions where findings have indicated that social connections, particularly those with peers, feeling safe and belonging were key themes (Francis et al., 2021; Greenwood & Kelly, 2020). While these studies seek the voices of children and young people in care their focus was predominantly on retrieving helpful school practices rather than seeking to explore the nuances of young people in care's school belonging experiences.

Johnson et al. (2020) conducted a study in the US using focus groups with young people in care to find out how they make sense of belonging in high school. The findings suggest that young people's disclosure of their 'in care' status was an important factor in attempting to fit in at school as well as highlighting how educational instability reduced sense of belonging by requiring them to cut ties with their established communities (Johnson et al., 2020). While important findings, it could be argued that the use of focus groups are not appropriate when participants have personal involvement in the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, as young people in care's experiences vary due to their individual contexts (Coman & Devaney, 2011), being part of a focus group where they could hear a range of different experiences may influence their ability to participate honestly for potential fear of judgement and comparison.

In addition, Jones et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study with young people in care which focused on the negative consequences of their care status, including the impact this had on their sense of belonging. This study focused solely on the barriers young people faced due to their care status and highlighted the need for research to explore what enhances young people's sense of belonging in school (Jones et al., 2020).

2.4.6 Summary

Despite government initiatives, an attainment gap between children and young people in care and their peers who are not in LA care persists (Education Committee, 2022; DfE, 2021). It has been suggested that school can act as a protective factor for children and young people in care as it provides them opportunities to flourish through consistent and supportive relationships and being a safe and predictable environment (Macleod et al., 2021). In particular, the research seems to suggest that having a sense of agency, confidence in their abilities and trusting relationships is important for children in young people in care (Macleod et al., 2021) which relates to the psychological needs of autonomy, competency and relatedness proposed by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Research seems to suggest that the need for relatedness is of particular importance to young people in care (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019),

which has been related to a sense of belonging (Yuhui & Xiang, 2015). It is argued that schools are well placed to nurture belongingness for children and young people in care and research highlights that school belonging has been associated with positive outcomes for young people in care (Somers et al., 2020). Current research has highlighted the need to include young people in care within the school belonging research to explore their experiences of school belonging from their own perspectives (Johnson et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020)

2.5 Rationale and research question

The literature review has highlighted the importance of school belonging for students for their emotional wellbeing and academic success. It has been acknowledged that school belonging may be of particular importance for children and young people in care, who face educational disadvantage (Hyde & Atkinson, 2019). Furthermore, the literature highlights the positive outcomes school belonging can have for children and young people in care (Somers et al., 2020)

As has been highlighted in the introduction chapter, the context of UK schooling has changed over the last decade where fewer young people are feeling connected to their secondary schools (Allen et al., 2021). For young people in care, research has indicated that certain school practices may have a detrimental impact on young people's sense of school belonging (Jones et al., 2020). As a result, it seems of critical importance to explore young people in care's experiences of school belonging in the UK.

However, previous research has suggested that the voices of children and young people in care are missing within the literature (Johnson et al., 2020). The qualitative synthesis and further narrative review on the research of school belonging for young people in care has indicated that there is limited research within the UK that focuses on young people in care's school belonging experiences.

Therefore, exploring young people in care's school belonging experiences is of significance to add to the school belonging literature that acknowledges young people's experiences from their own perspectives. As a

result, this study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design to explore the following research question:

How do young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school?

3. Methodology

This chapter will discuss the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research which influenced the chosen exploratory qualitative research design. The rationale for using IPA will then be explained by comparison to alternative qualitative methods, followed by a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of IPA. The limitations of IPA will then be acknowledged. Due to the methodology approach adopted my reflexivity and positionality as the researcher will be discussed. The final section will provide a detailed overview of the research method including details of the participants, data collection and data analysis. Finally, the chapter will end with considerations of the quality of the research.

3.1 Ontology

Ontology refers to the nature of reality and is associated with questions regarding the relationship between our world and our interpretations and experiences of it (Willig, 2013). For instance, is reality separate from our understanding of it or is reality dependent on individual interpretation? Ontology is often thought of as on a continuum between realist and relativist positions (Lincoln et al., 2011).

Realism adopts the view that there is one single reality that is entirely independent from human consciousness, beliefs and understanding (Willig, 2013). Therefore, how something is represented in the world is a true reflection of how it really is (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018). However, the appropriateness of the realist standpoint within social research has been questioned. For instance, it has been argued that realism fails to acknowledge the researcher's influence on research findings and their interpretations of them (Andrews, 2016). Furthermore, a realist ontological position could be argued to reject the influence of social beings on reality and

the notion that reality could change over space and time (Sterling-Folker, 2002).

On the other hand, a relativist ontology rejects the notion of a single truth and reality and instead aligns with the view that there are multiple realities that are constructed by individuals (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Willig, 2013). Relativists would adopt the view that reality is entirely dependent on human interpretation and perception of it (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018). As a result, what can be known changes depending on the context of that reality and how it has been constructed at that place and point in time (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Consequently, relativism implies that, due to multiple realities being constructed, none of these realities can be false or true and they all are equally valid which has led to criticisms of the relativist standpoint in research (Bernstein, 1983; Forrester & Sullivan, 2018). For instance, it may imply that no claim or experience can ever truly be supported or refuted, making it difficult to challenge potentially oppressive and discriminatory practice (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018).

In contrast to the two positions described above, a critical realist ontology proposes that an independent reality does exist but that we can only ever know this reality partially (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is due to the assumption that reality is socially embedded and exists in the minds of individuals who may experience the reality in different ways (Grbich, 2012; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). Therefore, access to individual realities are influenced by individual perceptions, beliefs and experiences as well as the researcher's own interpretations (Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

The current research adopted a critical realist ontology as it allows for individual perceptions and experiences to be treated as a reality (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). This aligns with the research question that assumes a reality exists for young people in care, regarding their school belonging experiences, but this reality is interpreted and experienced in a unique way to individuals due to their own unique contexts and experiences. It has been argued that critical realism is useful for analysing social phenomena, exploring experiences and developing solutions for meaningful social change (Fletcher, 2017) which fits with the current research aim which

hopes to contribute to some form of social change for young people in care by bringing an understanding to their school belonging experiences.

3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge and how it can be known (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016) by looking at the relationship between the knower and the known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Epistemology shapes the view of what counts as meaningful and legitimate knowledge and how it can be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Epistemological positions are thought to lie on a continuum between objectivism and subjectivism (Willig, 2013). While they are presented here as discrete approaches, it is acknowledged that weaker and stronger approaches to each epistemology can be adopted (Feast & Melles, 2010).

Objectivism proposes that the aim of research is to find the 'truth' of a situation (Robson & McCartan, 2016), where the researcher is thought of as independent to the object under investigation. Those who uphold an objectivist epistemology believe it is possible to obtain direct knowledge of the world through observation or measurement of the phenomena under investigation (Robson & McCartan, 2016) as knowledge is thought of as concrete and tangible (Cohen et al., 2017). It is claimed that it is possible to remove contextual factors and limit human bias to discover knowledge of the world (Levers, 2013). There is therefore a view that patterns of reality are stable, predictable and governed by laws of cause and effect (Tuli, 2010). As a result, this epistemological position aligns with research methods of a quantitative nature (Braun & Clarke, 2013), where reliable knowledge is thought to be gained through empirical and experimental methods (Lincoln et al., 2011).

On the other hand, a subjectivist epistemology adopts the view that it is not possible to uncover a direct 'truth' as it proposes that knowledge is always influenced by the interpretations and perceptions of individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Therefore, research underpinned by this epistemology focuses on exploring the individual perceptions of a reality, taking into account different social and contextual factors (Creswell &

Creswell, 2017) where the interaction between the researcher and participants is thought to be interactive and interrelated (Mertens, 2015). A subjective epistemology aligns with data collection methods that seek to explore and understand different perspectives through naturalistic methods that enable rich description of the object under investigation (Willig, 2013), which aligns with research of a qualitative design (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Phenomenology is aligned with a subjectivist epistemological position which focuses in on individual experiences through the lens of the participant and accepts what is true to the individual (Willig, 2013). As a result, it aligns with a subjective epistemology as it assumes knowledge is generated differently by different perspectives. Therefore, research taking this approach tends to explore questions regarding what an experience is like for individuals (Willig, 2013).

Due to the current research's interest in exploring and understanding individual experiences of school belonging, a subjectivist and phenomenological epistemology is adopted. It has been argued that school belonging is a social phenomenon influenced by relational and contextual structures (Allen & Kern, 2017; Slaten et al., 2016) and as such has been argued to align with qualitative research methods underpinned by a subjectivist epistemology that enables research to capture the nuance of this phenomenon (Saraví et al., 2020).

Moreover, this epistemological standpoint allows for the exploration of subjective meanings from the perspectives of participants as well as the researcher's perspective to develop understanding of participant experiences (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). Therefore, this current research recognises that it is not possible to uncover the exact truth of young people in care's school belonging experiences as that reality is influenced by their own and the researcher's interpretations of these experiences.

3.3 Research design

The ontological and epistemological stance of the current research influenced the research design chosen. A quantitative and fixed research design was rejected as it views the social world objectively and disregards

the influence of human beings constructing reality (Elshafie, 2013). It has been argued that the quantitative approach fails to acknowledge the nuance and complexity of the social world as linear causation is difficult to establish due to the complexities of human nature (Gage, 1989). Furthermore, quantitative methods are more aligned with an objective epistemological position whereas the current research adopts a subjectivist and phenomenological epistemology which acknowledges social and contextual influences on a perceived experience and acknowledges the interactive relationship between the researcher and participants.

Instead, an exploratory and qualitative design was adopted, which aligned with the critical realist ontological and subjectivist and phenomenological epistemological standpoint of the research. While it is acknowledged there is a reality for young people in care regarding their school belonging experiences, access to this reality is thought to be dependent on the interpretations of the participants. Furthermore, knowledge of this reality is thought to be gained only through subjective means due to the contextual influencing factors on this reality. Therefore, by adopting an exploratory research design, which is argued to be sensitive to the heterogeneity of individual experiences (Davies & Wright, 2008), an understanding of how young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school can be explored.

Furthermore, this chosen research design aligns with the subject of the research 'school belonging'. While school belonging has been researched through both quantitative and qualitative methods (Allen et al., 2018), it has been argued that an exploratory and qualitative approach is needed to study this phenomenon due to the influence of social and contextual factors on belonging experiences (Saraví et al., 2020)

3.4 Qualitative research methods

A selection of qualitative research methods were considered to answer the current research question. The following section considers the appropriateness of these methods in line with the aims of the research,

followed by a more detailed exploration of the strengths and limitations of IPA, the method chosen for the current research.

3.4.1 Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) is a qualitative methodology, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), used to generate theories inductively. GT acknowledges the influence of the researcher and takes an inductivist approach to research (Smith et al., 2022) which aligned with the subjective epistemological view of the current research, where social influences on knowledge are acknowledged. However, it is the aim of grounded theory to develop a theoretical framework to help explain and understand the phenomenon being explored (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Willig, 2013) which did not align with the current research question which placed an emphasis on individual interpretations and experiences rather than developing theories.

3.4.2 Discourse analysis

The aim of discourse analysis (DA) is to explore how language is used and how this shapes a person's identity and relationships (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). This approach also aligned with the subjectivist epistemological stance of the current research, acknowledging the various factors that shape knowledge. However, the focus for DA on language and constructions (Larkin et al., 2006) did not align with the research question which was less concerned about how experiences were expressed via language. Therefore, DA was deemed inappropriate to adopt in this research as interpretations of experience were the primary focus.

3.4.3 Narrative analysis

Narrative analysis refers to analysing and making sense of the stories people tell (Sarbin, 1986). It is the belief of researchers using narrative analysis that these stories influence how we behave and shape our identities (Frank, 2010). This approach aligned with the subjectivist epistemology of the current research and the interest in sense making of the current research question. However, the focus of this type of approach is to look at the

structure, content and context (Esin, 2011) of how participants tell their story, rather than exploring the story itself. As a result, this approach did not align with the research question which was more concerned about the interpretation of individual lived experiences.

3.4.4 Reflexive thematic analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) is another qualitative method that was closely considered. Reflexive TA has been argued to not be constrained to a specific methodology but instead acts as a tool that is theoretically flexible, merging with the theoretical assumptions of the particular study in question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach involves the development of themes from codes which requires an analytic and interpretative approach from the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach has been traditionally considered a phenomenological approach, centred around subjective experiences and sense making, which aligned with the current research question and epistemological position. However, reflexive TA has been described as providing a broad understanding of experiences rather than an in-depth analysis of individual experiences due to its thematic development across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Spiers & Riley, 2019). Therefore, this approach was not adopted as the aim of the research was to seek an in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences.

3.4.5 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

IPA is an approach that focuses on how people make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022) and emphasises the voice of the individual and personal accounts, perceptions and interpretations people hold (Snelgrove, 2014). It aims to understand participants' experiences by recognising that access to these experiences is limited (Smith, 1996) and can never be a first-person account but a construction of the participant and researcher's interpretations of that account (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2022). Furthermore IPA engages in a wider analysis which positions the initial experiences constructed into their context (Larkin et al., 2006). This allows for a more interpretive analysis and to conceptualise what it means for the participant to have expressed their experiences in the way they have

(Larkin et al., 2006). Therefore this approach aligned with the critical realist ontology and subjectivist and phenomenological epistemological position of the current research.

3.4.6 Rationale for choosing IPA

IPA was selected for this current research for a number of reasons. Firstly, IPA is rooted in the view that reality is not dependent on us but the exact meaning and knowledge of reality is dependent on us (Larkin et al., 2006). As a result, this approach aligned with the critical realist position of the current research that assumes a reality exists for the participants but access to this reality can only be partial and dependent on their own experiences, constructions and interpretations (Maxwell, 2012; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). IPA also allows for the acknowledgement of the influence of the researcher on the interpretation and analysis of the participants' accounts which aligned with the research's subjectivist epistemology that proposes knowledge is influenced by individual interpretations.

Secondly, IPA is philosophically underpinned by phenomenology, the study of experience, and so was well placed to explore the school belonging experiences of young people in care. Furthermore, the phenomenological approach enabled an interpretative lens to be adopted allowing for the sense-making of individual experiences to be explored (Smith et al., 2022) and connections to existing literature on school belonging to be made (Emery & Anderman, 2020).

Thirdly, the subject matter being explored alongside the sample for this research required a methodology which was sensitive to the varying contexts. This is because school belonging is a subject which research suggests to be influenced by individual and systemic contexts (Allen & Kern, 2017; Osterman, 2000). Furthermore, young people in care are a highly heterogeneous group, in terms of their experiences and life outcomes (Maclean et al., 2017). Therefore IPA was considered the most appropriate qualitative approach as it allowed for an in-depth analysis of individual experiences, valuing the unique context of the young people and their school belonging experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Finally, IPA was chosen due to its applicability in research that aims to capture and illuminate the experiences of often underrepresented groups in research (Emery & Anderman, 2020). As discussed in the systematic literature review, the voices and experiences of young people in care are missing from the school belonging literature in the UK. Therefore, IPA was deemed appropriate to contribute to this limited literature to provide an in-depth analysis of young people in care's experiences.

3.5 IPA's philosophical and theoretical underpinnings

IPA has theoretical and philosophical underpinnings in phenomenology (exploring experiences), hermeneutics (the theory of interpretation) and idiography (individual experiences). Smith et al. (2022) propose that in order to produce more consistent and nuanced analyses, researchers must familiarise themselves with these philosophical underpinnings which are thought to be just as important as the research procedure. The underlying philosophy of IPA will now be described.

3.5.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology was conceptualised by the philosopher Husserl (1931) to understand the context of people's lived experiences and the meaning of these experiences. The development of this approach to study was driven by Husserl's view that experimental research had created a separation from the true human experience and was interrupting our understanding of this experience (Crotty, 1996). According to Husserl, any object is meaningless until it is interpreted consciously (Husserl, 1970). One of the central tenets of phenomenological research is that only those who have experienced a given phenomenon can communicate this experience to others (Todres & Holloway, 2004).

While Husserl founded the phenomenological approach, other phenomenologists have played a key role in shaping using the approach in research. For instance, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty developed Husserl's focus on perceptions of experiences to acknowledge the embodiment of an individual in their relational and cultural worlds (Smith et al., 2022). They move the focus to a more interpretative position where

experiences are personal but are also a product of relationships to the world and others (Smith et al., 2022).

Therefore, the phenomenological underpinnings of IPA emphasise that experience is not simply something that has happened to someone. Instead, it acknowledges the dynamic relationship an individual has with their world, in relation to a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). This highlights the interpretative nature of IPA and the focus on participants' sense making of their experiences.

3.5.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is based on the idea of interpretation and a key influential figure in the application of a hermeneutic phenomenology was Heidegger (Smith et al., 2022). He argued that phenomenology is seeking after a meaning which could be hidden, and as such requires interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, IPA goes further than purely describing experience by providing an interpretive account of what participants express about their experiences bearing in mind their unique contexts (Larkin et al., 2006).

Within hermeneutic approaches it is argued that a person and their experiences are fundamentally interrelated and therefore any interpretation requires a circularity of understanding, also known as the hermeneutic circle (Larkin et al., 2006). Essentially, it highlights that the participant's perspective guides their interpretation of an experience and yet that interpretation is open to revision as the participant's own biases are discovered (Larkin et al., 2006).

IPA acknowledges the requirement of looking at the whole to understand the parts and the need to look at the parts to understand the whole (Smith et al., 2022). As a result, a key tenet of IPA is that the process of analysis is iterative rather than completing one step after another (Smith et al., 2022). Furthermore, within IPA research, the double hermeneutic is acknowledged, which is where the participant is trying to make sense of their own experience while the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participants are making sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2022).

2.5.3 Idiography

Another significant underpinning of IPA is the concept of idiography which concerns itself with the individual (Smith et al., 2022). This is in contrast to the dominant approach in psychology which aims to make general claims at the group level, adopting a more nomothetic approach, to determine laws of behaviour (Eatough & Smith, 2017). In IPA, idiography is adopted at two levels (Smith et al., 2022). First of all there is a commitment to collecting a detailed account and subsequently a thorough and systematic depth of analysis. Second of all, IPA is focused on understanding how the unique experiences of individuals are understood by particular individuals, in their own unique context. While there is a focus on the particular, IPA does not avoid generalisations but develops them more cautiously by locating them within the particular rather than an exact focus on the individual (Smith et al., 2022).

3.5.4 Limitations of IPA

Limitations of IPA will now be considered to give a holistic view of the approach. First of all, the approach has been criticised due to its reliance on the use of language to enable participants to share their experiences with the researcher (Willig, 2013). It has been argued that because of this the researcher can never gain direct access to a person's experience as this access depends heavily on how that person expresses their experience (Willig, 2013). Therefore, instead of analysing the description of an experience, the IPA researcher is analysing the construction of an experience. This raises the question, can findings from IPA research ever be as close to the participant's real experience as possible? In line with the ontological and epistemological stance of the current research it was not the aim to gain direct access to the participants' experiences as it was acknowledged that their reality can only be known imperfectly through their own constructions and perceptions.

This reliance on language could also be an issue for individuals who may have language difficulties and may find it difficult to articulate their experience (Willig, 2013). IPA requires the presentation of detailed accounts of experiences which is quite a complex task. It could be argued that IPA is

only suitable to participants who can articulate their experiences in a detailed way (Willig, 2013). However, it would be discriminatory not to allow those who struggle with language to take part in IPA research and to have their experiences be understood (Tuffour, 2017). Therefore, the need to be able to express experiences verbally was part of the participant selection process for this research but participants were not excluded if they had language difficulties.

Lastly, the small sample used within IPA research could be criticised as it cannot be claimed to represent the views of the wider population. Nevertheless, IPA does not take a nomothetic approach to research and so does not aim to generalise to the wider population. IPA upholds an idiographic underpinning where the aim is to gain an in-depth analysis of a person's experience within their particular context (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore a large sample size is not appropriate in IPA studies which seek to gain an understanding into people's unique lived experiences. While IPA research does not aim to generalise to the wider population it still remains in line with a critical realist stance as the in depth analysis of individual experiences may elicit insight which may be similar or have similarities to the experiences of others. These similarities can support understanding of experiences that can lead to meaningful social change.

3.6 Reflexivity and positionality

Due to the research's alignment with phenomenology, objectivity was not sought but reflexivity and positionality were emphasised. Reflexivity required that I consciously and continuously reflected on my own position, beliefs, prior knowledge and experience and think about how these influenced the research process (Berger, 2015; Langdrige, 2007).

It is acknowledged that I have had an inevitable influence on the production of knowledge within this research due to my engagement with the participants during data collection and the transcripts during data analysis (Yardley, 2008). Therefore, I continuously engaged in a reflexive process which involved critically observing myself to identify how I influenced this research both when collecting and analysing the data (Primeau, 2003).

According to Milner (2007), reflexivity is particularly important when the research involves groups who have been traditionally marginalised within society where biases may not be seen and so careful attention to my own cultural systems was required in order to transparently communicate my positions. The Social Graces model (Burnham, 2018) was used to reflect on my own positionality, what I was bringing to the research and how participants might view me in the research. Questions proposed by Langdrige (2007) were used to structure my positionality below.

My motivation to explore the school belonging experiences of young people in care was driven through my experience of working with young people in care as an assistant educational psychologist. From these experiences, I became interested in listening to and uplifting the voices of young people in care. In particular, I worked with two siblings who found it difficult to find their place in a new school and the relationship I developed with them drove me to seek out how experiences for young people in care could be improved. I continuously reflected on this work experience during this piece of research as to not assume that the young people participating in this study felt the same way about school that the two young people I worked with. In addition, this group of learners are a priority in the LA where I am on placement which highlights the motivation to support this research project within this LA.

It is important to acknowledge the distance and differences between myself and the participants involved in this research. First of all, I am not care experienced and so do not share the experiences of schooling and life that the young people in this research have. In addition, I acknowledge that I have privilege socially and culturally that not all participants might have access to. I am a 29 year old white, middle-class female, with no siblings, who grew up with my biological parents and had continuity of both my home and school environments. As a result, my world view will have differed to participants. It was particularly important to reflect on my different experiences and privileges due to the potential for stigma that young people experience due to their care status (Jones et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021). To reduce the potential for participants to feel stigmatised I allowed them to share their feelings about being 'in care' rather than directly asking them and

did not centre questions around their care status to demonstrate that I was not reducing them to the label of a young person in care.

I was mindful that due to my lack of experience that mirrors that of the participants, there was potential for misinterpretation of the young people's accounts of their school belonging experiences (Langdridge, 2007). To reduce the risk of misinterpretation and to ensure my analysis was rooted in the participants' words I followed the guidance provided by Smith et al., (2022) by continuously returning to the participants' transcripts and checking themes with my research supervisor to ensure participants experiences were reflected in my findings.

Furthermore, it was important to recognise that I am currently on placement within an LA as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) and although the role of researcher was emphasised, there could have been an impact of this affiliation on participant recruitment and participants' views of the researcher. In particular, it was acknowledged that there was a potential for a power imbalance between myself and the participants due to my role and participants could have felt uncomfortable sharing their experiences with me as a working professional, who they may not have related to, particularly if they had negative experiences with professionals previously. To mitigate this risk I ensured that participants felt valued by encouraging them to talk about their hobbies and interests at the beginning of each interview. In addition, I kept interview questions open to enable participants to share their own experiences in their own way that was meaningful to them.

In addition, as a TEP, I brought along my knowledge of psychology to the research and acknowledge that this will have influenced my engagement in this research study. I will also have brought my own experience of working with young people in care, working within a school environment and my own school experiences to the research. As a result, due to my role as a TEP, it was difficult to remain neutral in my approach with participants, where the natural instinct would be to support and help the young people I work with.

Throughout the research, I continuously reflected on the above to ensure reflexivity and to think about the influence I had on the data collection and analysis. Reflexive commentaries are presented throughout this thesis to evidence this.

3.7 Method

3.7.1 Participants

Sample selection. Participant recruitment used purposive and criterion based sampling as it was the aim of the research to gain a detailed understanding of specific individual perceptions of a specific experience (Patton, 2002). This aligned with the IPA position that a sample must include participants who have all experienced a certain phenomenon and can express their perceptions and interpretations of this experience (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, it has been suggested that when using IPA the sample should be homogenous and are selected based on their relevance to the research question (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, the selection criteria for participants was:

- Pupils in years 8 to 11, attending a mainstream secondary education setting.
- Young people who have been 'looked after' by the LA for at least six months.

It was made clear during the recruitment process that pupils who were going through particularly difficult life experiences, such as a placement breakdown or school move, would not be suitable to include in the study to reduce the potential for harm that an interview asking about their experiences might cause.

A focus on secondary school pupils was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, young people within this age group were considered to be better able to engage in a semi-structured interview that required them to reflect on their experiences of school belonging than a younger age group. Secondly, research has highlighted the importance of school belonging for adolescents as they experience changing priorities and expectations (Allen & Kern, 2017). Thirdly, research seems to indicate that development of school belonging may be hindered in secondary school due to organisational and systemic structures that warrant further exploration (Allen et al., 2021; Tillery et al., 2013).

The second criterion of being in care for at least 6 months was chosen so that participants would have care experience to reflect on and would exclude young people who have recently gone into the care system and as such could have been unsettled and unable to engage in an interview about their experiences.

Recruitment process. The aim of this research was to gain at least three participants, which has been suggested to be an appropriate sample size when using an IPA approach so that detailed data could be gathered as well as being able to analyse data across participants (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, the qualitative approach of the current research does not aim to represent a population but instead is more focused on individual experience and as such a large sample size would not have been inappropriate (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Recruitment was initially undertaken in liaison with the Virtual School in the LA where I am on placement as a TEP. The Virtual School is a team of professionals within the Local Authority who work to support the educational attainment and attendance of young people in care. As part of their role they have an established relationship with the young people in care and the adults who care for them as they offer sustained support and advice throughout their education. This recruitment method was unsuccessful in recruiting participants for this study.

An alternative method of recruitment was then used. Study information was shared with EPs, within the LA I am currently on placement. SENCOs and designated safeguarding leads to secondary schools were also directly contacted with the study information.

School staff approached young people who met the selection criteria to go through the information sheets and established whether they wished to take part. Once interest was established, I had a phone call with a key member of staff for each participant to ensure suitability to the study.

Reflexive commentary

Participant recruitment was difficult in this study, so I sought to gain feedback from schools on why their students did not want to take part. One

school responded and explained the young people in care in their school wanted to keep their care status to themselves. This has been reflected in the research that indicates that young people in care may not wish to attend meetings because it draws attention to them, making them look different (Jones et al., 2020). This had important implications for how I approached the interviews with the final sample of participants as it made me reflect on the differing feelings young people will have towards their care status. As a result, I constructed my interview to remain sensitive to the young people's care identity by not centring the interview around their care status. I asked about their care status at a surface level to begin with and only further explored it if the participant seemed willing to do so.

Final sample of participants. A small sample of three participants were recruited due to the idiographic nature of IPA. Smith et al. (2022) suggest that for novice first time student researchers a sample size of three is optimum. Therefore the sample size was considered to be a sufficient number for an IPA study. The sample included participants aged 14-15 who were in years 9-11 at three different mainstream secondary schools. Participants had been in the care of the LA for between 11-18 months.

3.7.2 Ethical considerations.

In order to conduct this research ethically, the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the BPS' Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) were consulted. In addition, the University of Nottingham School of Psychology Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the research to commence (see Appendix 10). The ethical implications of the research were considered with regards to informed consent, confidentiality, reducing harm and the right to withdraw.

Informed consent. Preliminary consent was sought with the adults with parental responsibility for the young people. This was done by school staff sharing initial information sheets (see Appendices 11 and 12) with the young people, their carers and social workers. This initial information sheet gave a brief overview of the study and the data collection procedure. If interest was shown participants, their carers and social workers were then

provided with the detailed information sheets (see Appendices 13 and 14) and consent forms (see Appendices 15 and 16). I provided the young people, their carers and social workers with an opportunity to meet with me to discuss the research prior to providing consent. Interviews did not take place until consent from carers, social workers and the young people themselves were obtained.

Before beginning the interviews, I read the detailed information sheet again with the young people to ensure they understood what the interview would involve, how their data would remain confidential, were aware of their right to stop the interview at any time and knew of their right to withdraw from the study. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions they had about the study before we began the interview.

Confidentiality. To maintain participants' confidentiality, the interview recordings were stored on an encrypted memory stick as well as a password protected folder on my computer. The audio recordings were deleted following transcription. During the transcription process, any personal information that could lead to identification of the participant was anonymised or omitted. It was decided to not give participants pseudonyms as, due to the small sample size, it may have made the participants identifiable due to their gender or cultural background. Therefore participants were named 'Participant 1', 'Participant 2', 'Participant 3'.

Reducing harm. While the risk of harm was perceived to be minimal in this current study, it was acknowledged that because participants were asked about their school belonging experiences, this may have brought up some difficult emotions for participants, particularly if they had negative school experiences. To protect participants' wellbeing, I ensured that before taking part in the research the participants were not going through a situation that would cause them emotional distress e.g., a home or school move at the time of the interview. This was established during initial phone calls with the key adults. Furthermore, the participants were able to have a choice on when and where the interview took place which hoped to ensure the participants felt comfortable during the interview. Participants were also given the opportunity to have a trusted adult present or nearby if they wished, to provide emotional support. The participants in this study did not take up this

opportunity but I was aware where their key adult would be if they were needed. The participants were reminded where their key adult was if they wanted to go and see them at any point. Before the interview began, participants were reminded of their right to stop the interview at any time if they felt they did not wish to proceed.

In addition to this, as a TEP, I have experience of working with vulnerable young people, including young people in care. As a result, I have experience of building rapport with young people and helping them to feel emotionally contained. Through active listening skills I was able to notice any changes in the young person's responses to questions through their verbal and body language and would have immediately stopped the interview if participants became distressed.

At the end of each interview, participants were debriefed which involved reminding the participants of my contact details and that if following participation, they felt distressed, they could contact myself or a key adult in school or their carer. This debriefing gave participants a chance to discuss any thoughts or feelings that the interview brought up for them.

Furthermore, the possibility of developing a relationship with the participants in order to build rapport and gain trust was considered. However, I decided that it would be unethical and had the potential to cause harm to participants if a relationship was built over time and then not maintained following the research adding to the participants experiences of relational loss. Therefore it was deemed more appropriate to have a one-off interview with the participants to keep the relationship with the young people in care within the boundaries of the research.

Right to withdraw. Information sheets provided to the young people, their carers and social workers made it clear that the participant or those with parental responsibility could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also reminded of this right to withdraw before the interview began and during the debriefing.

2.7.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews. It has been argued that the use of semi-structured interviews support the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of participant's lived experience within IPA research (Smith et al., 2022).

Additionally, by using semi-structured interviews I was able to be led by the participant, ask follow-up questions and be responsive to their answers, while also being able to guide discussion so that it remained relevant to the topic of school belonging experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). As a result, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable form of data collection for this current study which takes an idiographic focus.

Focus groups were considered, however they were deemed inappropriate due to the personal stake each individual would have in the topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It may have been difficult for the participants to open up about their experiences in the presence of others. In addition, it was acknowledged that each participant's experiences are unique and have their own value, which may have been lost within a group dynamic. Individual interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method to gain a detailed insight in the lived experiences of participants and enabled confidentiality to be maintained.

Developing the interview schedule. The guidance provided by Smith et al. (2022) was followed when developing an initial interview guide(see Appendix 17 for interview guide developed). As suggested in this guidance, questions were open so that they did not lead the participants or make any assumptions about their experience. The guide was made up of questions based on topics that would lead to the research question being answered (Smith et al., 2022) and based on themes that emerged from the literature on school belonging such as the participants school-based relationships, experiences and their general feelings towards school (Allen et al., 2018). The questions were reviewed with my research supervisor to ensure they were in alignment with the critical realist positioning and exploratory nature of the research. The interviews started with descriptive questions and then finished with more analytical questions with the use of prompts to support the participant to expand on their responses (Smith et al., 2022). In line with the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the guide was not followed rigidly but more fluidly in response to the participants' responses and what they chose to speak about. Following each interview the interview questions were reflected upon and adapted based on how each participant responded.

Reflexive commentary

Before conducting this study, I had limited experience of carrying out semi-structured interviews within a research context. Particularly in my first interview, I realised that I did ask some closed or leading questions in order to support the young person opening up further about their experiences. When transcribing that first interview, I realised that I moved on to a new topic/question quickly without fully exploring the participant's responses further. Upon reflection, I felt very aware of trying to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible so was trying to avoid repeating questions and probing for more detail in case it made the participants feel uncomfortable. However, after supervision and reflection I felt my interview skills did improve as I used more open questions and became more comfortable sitting with the silences. In addition, I found my training and experience as a TEP made it difficult for me to remain neutral during the interviews. My training on active listening skills and rapport building led me to share things about myself and expressed interest in what the participants were saying. I acknowledge that the active listening skills did support rapport building and may have enabled me to gain richer and more detailed data as a result.

Carrying out the interviews. The three interviews were conducted between December 2022 and March 2023 and lasted between 30-45 minutes.

Reflexive commentary

Following the interview that lasted 30 minutes I became concerned over the quality of data that was gathered. The interview lasted 30 minutes due to the interview not starting on time and then the participant having to leave for an appointment. As a result, I felt as though this impacted my interviewing style. I brought this to supervision where we discussed the possibility of interviewing the participant again. Before making this decision, it was decided to listen back to the interview and begin the

analysis process. After listening to the interview it seemed to be of acceptable quality as it provided a sense of experience where the participant's perspective seemed to develop throughout the interview and interpretations could be made. Therefore, I decided against interviewing the participant again as the data seemed acceptable and I felt interviewing the participant again would disrupt the narrative of the interview data.

Each interview was conducted on a 1-1 basis in a room provided by the participant's secondary schools. Before recording the interviews, I spent some time building rapport with participants by engaging them in conversation about their likes and interests. I provided fidget toys for the young people to use, if they thought that would help them, and two out of the three participants used these while the interview took place. This was to help them feel relaxed and comfortable talking with me throughout the interview. The use of visuals were considered to support participants engagement in the interview. However, through supervision, I decided that it may restrict participants accounts on school belonging to the visuals I presented, and I wanted participants to be as open as possible during the interview. By not using visual aids I hoped that participants were sharing experiences that were meaningful to their personal school belonging experiences rather than adhering to my own definition of school belonging displayed in visuals and what that might entail.

At the end of the interview, all participants continued to agree to be included in this research. I provided the participants with a thankyou postcard which gave a summary of my appreciation of them taking part and highlighted the strengths the young people presented with throughout the interview. This was to support the interview ending on a positive note to ensure participants felt comfortable and happy to go back to lessons having talked about their care and school belonging experiences.

2.7.4 Data analysis

To support the analysis of the data, I transcribed verbatim each interview by listening to the audio recordings. Due to the IPA focus on the content of participants' accounts, only what was said was transcribed (Smith

et al., 2022). In order to become fully immersed in the data, transcription software or transcription services were not used. This was deemed an important part of data analysis as in IPA it is thought that transcribing is an interpretive activity in itself (Smith et al., 2022).

While there is no prescribed way of carrying out an IPA analysis, guidance has been offered by Smith et al. (2022) that involves carrying out a series of steps with the intention of it being used flexibly. Throughout these steps I ensured I engaged in supervision with my research supervisor and peer supervision with a fellow IPA researcher to check my own interpretations of the data. The stages I followed that were outlined by Smith et al. (2022) will now be described:

Step 1: Reading and re-reading. The first crucial step was to immerse myself within the data which involved reading and re-reading the transcript data. I listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts to support understanding and interpretation of the interview which Smith et al., (2022) suggests supports a more complete analysis. I then re-read the interview transcripts multiple times noting my initial reactions, recollections and interpretations of the interview. This step ensured I slowed down my thinking and helped me to develop my recollections of the interview and initial observations of the transcript.

Step 2: Exploratory noting. The second step involved focusing on exploring the semantic content and language of the participant's account. I aimed to remain open-minded and noted anything of interest within the transcript. I did this by creating a column on the right hand side of the transcript to note down my interpretations of each line. I colour coded each exploratory note to depict descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes. Descriptive notes were surface level comments, summarising the content of what was said. These were made green in the coding table. The linguistic exploratory notes were coded red and highlighted any repetitions of phrases, contradictions in what was said, and potential meanings of particular words used. The final type of exploratory note used was conceptual comments which drew more on the interpretative element of IPA, searching for a deeper meaning to what the participant has said. These comments were coloured purple in the coding table. This step was about interpretative noting to

support understanding of how and why the participant had expressed their experiences. An extract of coded data is shown in Appendices 18, 19 and 20 for each participant.

Step 3: Constructing experiential statements. The aim of step three was to construct experiential statements which meant reducing the volume of detail from the exploratory noting while at the same time maintaining the complexity. This step shifted the focus away from the transcript and more onto the exploratory notes produced in the previous step. The term experiential statements means that statements should relate closely to the participant's experiences. I turned the exploratory notes into a concise summary of what was important. As a result, the experiential statements reflect my interpretation as well as the participant's own words. These can be seen in the left hand column of the examples of coded tables for each participant in Appendices 18, 19 and 20.

Step 4: Searching for connections across experiential statements. After producing a range of experiential statements across the transcript, I then mapped out how these statements fit together. The aim was to create a structure where the most significant aspects of the participant's account in relation to the research question were highlighted. I cut out the experiential statements and spread them on a large surface to disrupt the initial order of the statements. This is thought to enable a more conceptual ordering. Each statement was treated with equal importance, and I continued to keep an open and flexible mindset about how connections were made. I then clustered the experiential statements for each participant into groupings which seemed to connect them. See Appendices 21, 22 and 23 for photographs of this process for each participant.

Step 5: Naming and organising the personal experiential themes. Following the clustering of experiential statements, each cluster was given a title to describe it also known as a 'Personal Experiential Theme' (PET). These themes are the highest level organisation within the analysis which are then divided into sub-themes, followed by a set of experiential statements which brought the PETs together. See Appendices 24, 25 and 26 to see how each participant's experiential statements were grouped into PETs.

Step 6: Continuing the individual analysis of other cases. Step 6 involved moving on to the next participant's transcript and carrying out steps 1-5 again. It was important to treat each transcript in its own terms and be cautious of reproducing ideas from previous transcripts. This was done for each individual's transcript included in the research.

Reflexive commentary

I was very aware when carrying out the analysis that I might interpret transcripts similarly after completing Steps 1-5 for each participant. Therefore I ensured there were breaks in between the analysis of each transcript of at least one week. This was to help me to analyse each transcript within its own unique context.

Step 7: Developing group experiential themes across cases. The final step was to look for patterns across the PETs and develop a set of 'Group Experiential Themes' (GETs). The aim was to emphasise the similarities and differences across the participants' accounts. I started by looking at the PETs and then took a dynamic approach by looking back and more closely at the sub-themes and experiential statements too. I cut out the subthemes relating to each PET for each participant while also looking back at the table of PETs and transcript for each participant to ensure GETs reflected what participants had said. See Appendix 27 for a photograph of the grouping of subthemes themes across cases to create GETs. The GETs identified will be further explored in the analysis chapter.

Reflexive commentary

As a first-time IPA researcher, I found the experience of conducting an IPA study quite daunting. However, I found the flexibility of the process alongside the guidance provided by Smith et al. (2022) to be reassuring. I also found discussing the analysis process with another TEP also carrying out an IPA study and my research supervisor was supportive. A challenge for me was achieving the balance between ensuring an idiographic analysis, staying close to the participants' words and also being

interpretative enough to establish themes within the data. As such, I continually went from looking at individual transcripts, PETs and GETs to ensure themes reflected participants' words but also provided an interpretation of what those words meant in relation to the research question. Therefore, the analysis process continued through writing up the findings chapter as further sense-making was developed.

3.8 Quality in qualitative research

The quality of qualitative research and quantitative research is assessed differently as they have different research aims. For instance, qualitative studies, such as this one, does not seek generalisability or objectivity and therefore using the same quality criteria would be inappropriate. Furthermore, IPA is interpretative in nature and recognises the researcher's influence on the data and therefore the criteria for reliability would be meaningless (Yardley, 2000). The criteria proposed by Yardley (2000) was chosen due to its flexibility and alignment with the underpinnings and values of IPA research (Smith et al., 2022). The four principles Yardley (2000) suggested and how the current research aligns with these principles is outlined in the table below.

Table 4

A table presenting measures taken to align with Yardley's (2000) quality principles.

Principles	Measures taken
Sensitivity to context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature review was used to support the understanding of school belonging experiences and the context for young people in care. Sensitivity to IPA by using a small sample size allowing for an idiographic approach. Semi-structured interviews enabled sensitivity to participants experiences and allowed for flexibility.

Commitment and rigour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity to participant wishes through providing them choice in where and when interview took place. • Findings were sensitive to the participants' accounts by including verbatim quotes to demonstrate how themes were developed. • Small sample size allowed for data to be analysed in great detail. • Continuous development of the interview schedule following interviews. • Transcripts transcribed manually which allowed immersion in the data and supported in-depth analysis. • Guidelines for conducting IPA were carefully followed.
Transparency and coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each stage of research has been clearly described in detail. • Transparency about my own positionality on school belonging, my own experiences and relatedness towards participants has been detailed. • Data analysis has been transparently described through extracts and quotes from transcripts. • Coherency of research shown in the argument presented in the discussion chapter with links to relevant literature.
Impact and importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of research shown through systematic literature review which identified a gap and rationale for the current research. • Implications have been provided for both school staff and EPs to consider.

- To ensure impact, research will be shared in the educational psychology service where I am on placement and with local secondary schools.

3.8.1 Criteria specific to IPA

While Smith (2011) acknowledges the usefulness of using generic qualitative guidelines such as the ones presented above by Yardley (2000), it is suggested that there is a need to assess the research more specifically in line with the qualitative approach taken. As a result, the IPA quality evaluation guide created by Smith (2011) was used to evaluate the quality of the current research from a specific IPA standpoint. The guide states that research must meet four criteria to be of acceptable quality for an IPA piece of research. The table below outlines how the current research meets the quality criteria proposed by Smith (2011) specific to IPA studies.

Table 5

A table presenting how this research meets Smith's (2011) quality criteria for an acceptable piece of IPA research

Acceptable	Current Research
1. Clearly subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA: it is phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic.	Phenomenological due to focus on young people in care's lived experiences of school belonging. Hermeneutic due to interpretative nature of the study, interpreting participant's accounts of their experiences. Idiographic due to the focus on the individual participants in their unique contexts.

2. Sufficiently transparent so reader can see what was done.	Detailed above under Yardley's principle of 'transparency and coherence'.
3. Coherent, plausible and interesting analysis.	Detailed above under Yardley's principles of 'transparency and coherence' and 'impact and importance'.
4. Sufficient sampling from corpus to show density for each theme	Extracts are presented from every participant for each theme.

4. Findings

This chapter will present the findings of the current study, which used IPA to answer the following research question 'How do young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school?' It is important to note that, in line with the interpretative and subjectivist epistemology of IPA, these findings are influenced by my own interpretations of the participants' sense-making of their experiences and so conclusions made about the data reflect this interpretative process.

Firstly, the participants' context will be discussed, followed by a presentation of the overarching Group Experiential Themes (GETs) and associated subthemes. The chapter will then move on to a more in depth discussion of each GET, their associated sub-themes, using quotes from participants and my own interpretations to illustrate the meaning and significance of the themes.

4.1 Context

Due to the idiographic nature of IPA and its phenomenological underpinnings, it is important to acknowledge the individual contexts the

participants are situated in (Smith et al., 2022). Due to the small sample size, in-depth details about each participant will not be included to protect their anonymity. Participants included two females and one male. Two participants were 14 years old, and one was 15 years old. Participants had been in the care of the LA for between 11-18 months. Two participants resided in residential homes and one participant lived in foster care. One of the participants actively chose to be in a residential home as they did not want to live with another family. Participants had experienced at least one placement move since going into care, with one participant experiencing several emergency foster homes before settling into a residential home. All participants went to different mainstream secondary schools. Participants had stable secondary school experiences as they had remained at the same secondary school since year 7.

4.2 Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

From the analysis described in Chapter 3, eleven subthemes were generated that encompassed the participants' experiences and perceptions of school belonging. These eleven subthemes were grouped into four GETs, as shown in the table below. This indicated a level of similarity among participants as to what was important to their experiences of school belonging, but the meaning participants attributed to these themes differed slightly which highlighted the uniqueness of the participants' experiences. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, despite some differences, all subthemes were included in the written analysis below to capture the nuance of the data gained in the interviews. Participants were asked what the term 'school belonging' meant to them during their interviews. Participant one explained that, for them, it was when they felt accepted, and they could speak openly. Participant two shared that school belonging was a feeling of being at home and feeling safe. Participant three was not quite sure how to define the term and so I offered my own interpretation to support the elicitation of their experiences by explaining that I saw school belonging as feeling connected and accepted and participant three added to this that, for them, they felt like school belonging was not

feeling alone. Table 4 below indicates which participant expressed experiences related to the different subthemes.

Table 6

Summary and distribution of GETs and subthemes among participants.

GET	Subtheme	Participant
Relationships with others provide a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection.	Feeling accepted for who you are.	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3
	Friendships prevent loneliness.	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3
	Connection to a key adult.	Participant 1 Participant 2
School belonging relates to enjoying and feeling safe to engage in school activities.	Enjoyment of lessons fostered through interest and connection.	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3
	School engagement influenced by feelings of safety and confidence.	Participant 1 Participant 2
Perception of school provision influences feelings of school belonging.	Flexibility or inflexibility of school provision impacts feelings of school belonging.	Participant 1 Participant 3
	Unfair treatment ignites a sense of injustice and hopelessness.	Participant 1 Participant 2

	Acceptance of additional help relates to identity as a young person in care.	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3
School as a safe place.	School provides an escape from home life.	Participant 2 Participant 3
	Familiarity with school supports school belonging.	Participant 1 Participant 2
	Stability and consistency of school fosters feelings of safety.	Participant 1 Participant 2 Participant 3

4.2.1 Relationships with others provide a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection.

The first GET suggests that, for the participants in this study, relationships in school provided a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection to others. All of which was interpreted to support feelings of school belonging and generally enhance school experiences. This theme was interpreted to be particularly important to participants as it was discussed a great deal by all three participants. The subthemes which contributed to this GET were how accepted participants felt by others, how friendships prevented loneliness and the value of feeling connected to a key adult in school.

Feeling accepted for who you are. This first subtheme of feeling accepted seemed to be linked to feelings of school belonging for participants, where experience of acceptance enhanced feelings of belonging and a lack of acceptance hindered feelings of belonging. Acceptance for participants was interpreted to mean feeling similar to peers but also feeling safe to have a unique identity that is valued by others. On the other hand, a lack of acceptance seemed to enhance feelings of being disliked, unwanted and subsequently hindered feelings of school belonging.

For Participant 2, it was interpreted that they felt accepted within their friendship group due to feelings of similarity with their friends but also because their friends accepted the participant's own identity.

Basically me and my friends yeah, we are all a bunch of goof people. Some of them are smarter than the others which is fair and I'm the one that's like the loudest like and if I don't like it, I'll say it straight to their face and stuff like that. (Participant 2, 155-158)

This quote demonstrates that Participant 2 related to the group identity of being 'goof people' giving a sense of commonality with them. It also highlights the group's differences and Participant 2 sharing this seemed to suggest that these differences were accepted within their friendship group.

Acceptance from friends was also illustrated by Participant 1 who felt they most belonged, "when I'm prattin around with my friends and that" (Participant 1, 256). This suggests that Participant 1's friends accept them for who they are as they are able to have fun with them. By stating it is when they feel they most belong in school, this acceptance from friends and having fun with them seems to be an important part of belonging for Participant 1.

Similarly, Participant 3 shared that they felt they belonged in school because there was always someone to talk to, "so if you're having a bad day you can talk to people or your friends" (Participant 3, 432-433). This indicates a level of acceptance Participant 3 feels from others to be able to share their thoughts and feelings with them.

Furthermore, Participant 3's experience of acceptance not only came from friends but school staff too. It was interpreted that being welcomed back to school after having a period off school supported their feelings of being accepted by the school and those in it.

I had quite a long time off school so when they all got told I'm coming back I think they were all so happy. They were all so happy and my first week back they all kept saying 'Welcome back... and I'm like 'oh thank you'. (Participant 3, 296-299)

Participant 3 highlights in the quote above how grateful they were that others seemed to be happy that they had returned to school which supports the interpretation that people in school seemed to accept them and want them back in school. Being accepted, wanted and welcomed back seemed to help

ease the transition back to school for Participant 3, *“It’s really nice and it’s just nice to know that you’ve been missed. And all your friends missed you and I’m like ‘yay’. So it was good to come back.”* (Participant 3, 311-313). Participant 3 spoke positively about feeling missed and how this increased their happiness of being back in school.

On the other hand, Participant 1 experienced the opposite of acceptance amongst some of their peers in school. Participant 1 spent a significant amount of time in their interview talking about their negative experiences with peers. This was interpreted as Participant 1 experiencing a lack of acceptance from their peers which Participant 1 understood as their peers being less tolerant of difference. For instance, Participant 1 shared their experience of being ridiculed for the way their uniform looked.

It’s to make it so nobody gets bullied for clothes they wear because if there was no uniform kids would be coming into school like full designer clothes then you get kids who are in benefits households, like I was, who won’t have much to be fair so then school uniform can take the mick out of you anyway. So I come to school with the smallest crease in my blazer or in my top, people take the mick out of ya. Like there was a while where I was wearing a studded belt and that and people were taking the mick out of me for that, so I stopped it. (560-567).

This quote highlights that Participant 1 experienced ridicule from their fellow peers and how school uniform emphasised how they might not fit in with their peers. As a result, this led Participant 1 to feel disliked by a certain group of peers where they felt responsible for their friendship group being ridiculed by others. This sense of rejection was interpreted to hinder Participant 1’s sense of school belonging.

There are quite a few groups that get the mick taken out of them. Like my friend, my friend group is one of them. Mainly that’s because they speak to me. For some reason I come to a school where kids don’t like me. (Participant 1, 337-340)

The quote above indicates that Participant 1 felt disliked by some peers in school and that their friendship group was ridiculed because of their association with them. Feeling disliked was seen as the opposite of acceptance and therefore contrasted to Participant 1’s experience of feeling

like they most belonged when they were with their friends. Therefore, this sense of peer rejection was interpreted to hinder feelings of school belonging for Participant 1.

Friendships prevent loneliness. Linked to feeling accepted by others, all three participants spoke about the importance of friendships. It was interpreted that participants' experience of friendships was a way of preventing loneliness. This seemed to mean that participants felt less alone at school, they were more likely to enjoy school and subsequently enhanced their feelings of school belonging.

In terms of the quantity of friends, it was interpreted that having a large group of friends appeared important to all three participants as they all commented on having more friends and more opportunities to make friends in their secondary school. This higher quantity of friends was interpreted to mean that there was less chance for participants to feel lonely. For instance, when comparing their primary and secondary school experience Participant 1 shared that they felt their experience of secondary school was better because they had more friends to support them, "*There are more people that back me. Like I've got more friends here than I did there.*" (Participant 1, 223-224). This highlights that Participant 1 enjoyed having more friends in secondary school compared to primary school. Similarly, Participant 2 reflected on there being more opportunities to develop friendships at secondary school in comparison to primary school. This seemed to be important as it meant they were more likely to find friends who they could relate to.

I mean you can find a bunch of friends that are like similar to you so I guess that's a positive whereas in primary school you just have like a small friend group because you all grew up together but like at the same time there's only 30 people in that classroom whereas when you're in like year 7 and da de da de da there's 150 people more than that and obviously the more people there is the bigger the friend group." (Participant 2, 110-115).

This could suggest being in secondary school enhanced the chances of making friends for Participant 2. Their use of the word "*similar*", seems to indicate that the more people there were the higher chance there was of

finding peers who were like them. When asked why it was important to have friends at school Participant 2 shared, *“because then you’re not by yourself innit, you have someone there”* (Participant 2, 160). This links back to the meaning of this subtheme, that friendships prevent loneliness as Participant 2 highlights having friends ensures there is always someone there and there is less chance of being alone.

Similarly, Participant 3 explicitly said that school belonging is not feeling alone, *“you’re not feeling alone or whatever”* (Participant 3, 430). Participant 3’s experiences shared in the interview seemed to indicate that having a lot of friends was important to Participant 3 as they mentioned a few times throughout the interview that they had *“got loads of friends here”* (Participant 3, 342). It was interpreted to be particularly important to Participant 3 due to their previous primary school experiences of not having friends.

I’ve got really good friends here. So that’s really nice. Because this is the only school, I’ve had friends in. Every other school I didn’t have friends in so it’s nice to know you’ve got friends. So I know I’ve got loads of friends here. Yeah I went to, how many schools did I go to before here? I know growing up I went to quite a lot of primary schools, lots. And erm I went to a private one and then after that I didn’t even finish primary school I don’t think. I came straight to high school so I came here and I was like ‘I’ve got friends now, yay’. (Participant 3, 339-346)

Participant 3 highlights in the quote above how positively they feel towards their friends because of their previous school experience of not having friends. This supports the interpretation that having a lot of friends is particularly important to Participant 3 because of this past experience.

All three participants spoke of their friends as being there for them emotionally. Participant 2 and Participant 1 seemed to indicate that friends can provide a type of support that school staff cannot because friends are more understanding and can relate to their experiences more.

Yeah cus like obviously cus my friends have like all seen me like like at my downer and at my highs and stuff and stuff like that they would know what to say whereas a teacher hasn’t seen that complete side of

it whereas my mates have and they've been through it as well so like I feel closer to them rather than the teachers. (Participant 2, 168-172)

They listen and answer honestly. CAMHS, they are given like a script to say. (Participant 1, 123-124)

The quotes above suggest that Participant 2 and Participant 1's friends have more of an appreciation of their full emotional experiences, that school staff do not see and can therefore provide more effective support than adults can. Therefore, it was interpreted that the understanding friends offer during difficult times is why having friendships in school are important to prevent feeling alone.

Connection to a key adult. The final subtheme for this GET is about how valuable the experience of connecting to a particular adult in school is towards school belonging. The participants felt they could trust these adults as the adults had experience of supporting them through emotionally difficult times. These connections seemed to help participants to feel safe within the school environment and seemed particularly important to participants because of their care status.

For Participant 2, this was connecting to a teacher through sharing their nationality and first language. It seemed that this ability to speak in their first language together allowed Participant 2 to become closer to this adult and drew Participant 2 to spend their free time with this adult.

I think it's just cus we were [nationality] and like whenever when I had my er lunch time break I always used to go to her office and we always used to talk in [language] and like we basically like got to know each other more. (Participant 2, 312-315)

The quote above highlights that by choosing to spend time with this adult, Participant 2 felt at ease with the adult and could connect to their cultural roots. Participant 2 reflected on the impact this had on their school experience saying, "*my journey was quite like easy in a way*" (Participant 2, 293), and then explaining that their connection to and the support received from this teacher helped to make their school experience easy. This demonstrates how this connection to an adult who shared a similar background with Participant 2 supported them to feel at ease in school.

Participant 2 also reflected that this was particularly important for them because they were in foster care and in this situation, there was less opportunity for them to feel connected to their cultural roots.

And especially cus I'm, obviously I'm in foster care. You can't always have what you want in the foster family. So right now I'm living in a British household and no offence to them yeah it just like sometimes I feel homesick just because I don't have my [nationality] side with me and like I'm always with British people and I don't mean it in a bad way it's just that I miss it sometimes. (Participant 2, 318-323)

This quote emphasises how Participant 2 was unable to make a choice with their foster care placement which led to being placed in a family that does not provide a connection to their cultural roots. As such, it was interpreted that school was able to provide this connection to Participant 2's culture that their foster home could not.

Participant 1 shared their experience of connection to their previous history teacher which was interpreted to feel valuable to Participant 1 because of their closeness. Participant 1 shared, *"Well last year I got bored and I made him sign an adoption certificate, yeah because I was bored, and it was funny."* (Participant 1, 453-454). Through Participant 1 making an adoption certificate, it demonstrates the closeness of this relationship and the value they placed on it to help them feel connected to him. It seemed as though this adoption certificate fostered the continuation of connectedness to those they valued most, *"Now I walk through the corridor shouting Dad and one of my friends who I've adopted shouts Grandad."* (Participant 1, 460-461). Therefore, suggesting that Participant 1's experience with this teacher was valuable and provided a sense of connection in school for them.

In addition, there seemed to be a level of trust in these connections to key adults that made these adult relationships different to that with other members of staff. Participant 1 shared, *"Then he just, he doesn't say anything about it like if you mention something unless he actually needs to, he's not going to go tell people."* (Participant 1, 454-456). It seems that Participant 1 feels comfortable to talk to this adult because they trust that what they say will not be shared unless it has to be. Participant 1 also expressed that this teacher has seen them when they had a difficult time

regulating their emotions, again illustrating the trust and connection they feel to this adult that he will support them more than other teachers would be able to.

There's teachers I like but it's not the same kinda thing it's like. Him I've got like, he's the one that I ran into after I battered the wall and that so. And then he's also the one I've gone to when I've been really annoyed because I've been dragged there kinda thing. (Participant 1, 471-474)

Here Participant 1, explicitly draws a comparison to other teacher relationships and how going to this teacher in times of distress indicates some level of trust that this teacher can support them.

In a similar way, Participant 2 shared that their key adult supported them through difficult times with their family and going into care illustrating the safety and trust they feel with her because of this support.

And then also throughout that process I had like this one teacher she was a ... teacher and she was my favourite and then she like basically helped me and my actual Mum like through other struggles that we had and then when I was in foster care she was always there for me...
(Participant 2, 294-297)

Here, Participant 2 shows their fondness of this key adult and how they could rely on her during difficult times with their family. As a result, Participant 2 seems to find this adult trustworthy to support them.

Furthermore, Participant 1 shared that it was the length of time they had known this teacher which supported their connection compared to their relationship with other teachers.

I can get along with both. Last year I had an English teacher and I got along with her. I get along with my English teacher now. It's just not the same as I would with him. It's just I've known him longer, talked to him more. (Participant 1, 481-484)

This quote demonstrates that while Participant 1 can like other teachers, their connection with his key adult is different and more substantial because of their familiarity with him and the length of time they have known him. As a result, it seemed that this connection to a key adult in school was more than just liking teachers, it was a deeper connection that formed over time and through non-judgemental support.

4.2.2 School belonging relates to enjoying and feeling safe to engage in school activities.

The second GET captures the experiences of participants that were interpreted to suggest that school belonging relates to both enjoying school activities and feeling safe to engage in them. This theme comprises of two subthemes. The first suggests enjoyment of lessons is enhanced through interest in the content of lessons and the second implies that feeling safe and confident improves engagement in school activities.

Enjoyment of lessons fostered through interest and connection.

All three participants discussed enjoyment of lessons, to some extent. This was interpreted as contributing to their feelings of school belonging. The enjoyment of these lessons was felt for different reasons by the participants.

A sense of autonomy to choose subjects seemed to ensure that Participant 1 enjoyed their school lessons. It was interpreted that being able to have a choice in what lessons they were taught enabled Participant 1 to engage in lessons. During their interview, Participant 1 shared that they preferred the lessons they were able to choose, *“I do them all. I prefer the chosen options obviously but”* (Participant 1, 60). Here, Participant 1 draws a comparison between the lessons they chose and did not choose, emphasising the interpretation that chosen subjects were deemed to be more enjoyable.

Furthermore, the content of the lessons was seen as a reason as to why Participant 1 and Participant 3 enjoyed lessons. It was interpreted, that Participant 1’s fondness of their lessons was due to an interest in them and a familiarity with them, *“History been doing it for a while and understand it. And social care basically a thing to help people, Psychology’s interesting innit.”* (Participant 1, 65-67). This quote highlights that feeling familiar and confident in understanding a lesson enhances enjoyment of it as well as being interested in the content that is taught.

Participant 3’s interest in the Zones of Regulation at school seemed to be because of its interactive nature which enhanced their enjoyment of it as they expressed it as their favourite lesson, *“It’s just more than just sitting down isn’t it. Sitting down and just talking, so it’s fine.”* (Participant 3, 290-

291). Therefore, it seemed important for Participant 3's enjoyment of lessons to ensure lessons were interactive and dynamic. Participant 3 also shared how much this lesson helped them with understanding and managing their emotions. This was interpreted to mean that Participant 3 also enjoyed Zones of Regulation as it taught them skills that supported their emotional regulation which made the content relevant to their daily life, "*So that's helped me quite a lot the past year. It's helped with quite a lot. So I do like that lesson.*" (Participant 3, 286-287). As a result, the helpfulness and usefulness of this lesson seemed to be why Participant 3 enjoyed it.

Moreover, Participant 2's interest in history seemed to be driven by a sense of connection to their class teacher as well as to their grandma who had first introduced them to learning about history. In terms of their connection to their teacher, Participant 2 seemed to attribute liking the class teacher their enjoyment of history, "*Yes, and I like my history teacher as well.*" (Participant 2, 40). Participant 2 also shared how they enjoyed history because of their early life experiences with their grandma.

It's basically like. I don't know how to describe it. But basically me and grandma used to always watch like these historical movies, and it was like our time together and we just really enjoyed it and she always used to tell me like histories and stuff like that and I liked it so. (Participant 2, 45-48)

This quote demonstrates how Participant 2 could feel a connection to their grandma during their history lessons that sparked their interest because of their experience of learning about history when they were younger.

Further to connecting to the subject through teacher relationships and through family memories, Participant 2 attributed their enjoyment to history to their ability in the lesson. Therefore, it was interpreted that feeling confident in their ability in history led to further enjoyment of the subject, "*Yeah and then also I'm in set one for history so come on.*" (Participant 2, 57). As a result Participant 2, seems to be implying that being in the highest set in history means they are capable and therefore finds it an enjoyable subject.

School engagement influenced by feelings of safety and confidence. The second subtheme relates to school engagement being enhanced if participants feel safe and confident to participate in school

activities. It seemed that having agency, feeling confident and safe enhanced participants school engagement and therefore feelings of school belonging. Whereas feeling rejected by peers and fearful of engagement hindered school belonging.

It was interpreted that Participant 1's perception of not feeling comfortable to engage in lessons was linked to feeling unsafe among their peers to be their true self without fear of ridicule. *"Yeah because if you don't feel like you belong, you're not gonna work as well like if you don't feel comfortable, you're not going to behave, you're not going to do what you actually need to do."* (Participant 1, 283-285). Participant 1 made the link between feeling comfortable and belonging by implying that feeling uncomfortable hinders the ability to engage appropriately in lessons. It was interpreted that this use of the word '*comfortable*' was synonymous with feeling safe, at ease within lessons and belonging for Participant 1. Therefore, Participant 1 seemed to be suggesting that engagement in lesson was hindered when they did not feel safe and confident enough to engage which also disrupted their sense of school belonging.

Additionally, it was interpreted that Participant 1's perception of belonging related to being able to engage freely without fear of judgement which seemed to relate to how others responded to them within lessons, *"To feel like you're accepted, and you can speak openly."* (Participant 1, 244). It seemed important for Participant 1's sense of belonging to feel like they were accepted and that they could speak their mind. Furthermore, it was interpreted that Participant 1's experience of peer rejection in lessons negatively impacted their engagement and their acceptance of support.

They've both got idiots in who, they're idiots in the fact that they take the mick out of pupil for stupid stuff not the fact that they're physically stupid but then if they're getting the answers right all the time, putting their hand up and all that crap, I'm not going to put mine up. (Participant 1, 308-312)

Well I don't use my laptop. It draws too much attention and people start to ask like why can you use it and that kinda crap so. I use it every now and again for assessments. Other than that I just leave it. (Participant 1, 498-500)

These quotes illustrate that Participant 1 was less likely to engage in the lessons and accept support where they seemed to fear the chance of being ridiculed for what they had to say in class or the support they had. Through doing this it appears that Participant 1 is wanting to protect themselves from the possibility of negative interactions with peers. However, through feeling uncomfortable it appears to be hindering Participant 1's experience of belonging in school.

Furthermore, it was interpreted that, while Participant 1 does not want to draw attention to themselves in lessons or seem different to others, they feel uncomfortable in school uniform as it seems to prevent them from feeling like an individual, *"I don't see the point in uniform. Because I don't feel comfortable wearing it. Everyone's the same. It's not. If everyone's the same, you can't like properly feel like you belong then."* (Participant 1, 540-542). This quote highlights again Participant 1's connection between feeling comfortable and feeling a sense of belongingness in school. However, this time they attribute not being able to express their individuality in school uniform which they felt hindered feelings of comfort and therefore their sense of school belonging.

On the other hand, Participant 2's experience of feeling comfortable and confident to engage related to their role in the student leadership team. It seemed that they put themselves forward so that they could make a difference in school. This was interpreted to mean that Participant 2's confidence to engage in this school activity further enhanced their sense of belonging in school.

"I'm part of the SLT so I can change the school in a way." (Participant 2, 251).

Basically it's scholar leadership team and I'm in that team and basically we're supposed to be doing this weekly but sir hasn't like come and collected us and we're basically together like brainstorming ideas on how we are actually going to work and how we're going to make the school better and stuff like that. For example right now we are trying to make the school a bit more environmentally friendly. Basically trying to help other people who are like struggling or who are on the streets and stuff like that. (Participant 2, 253-260)

Therefore, Participant 2's positive engagement in this school project seemed to enhance their belongingness in school as they were part of something that could make a difference and help others. This demonstrates that Participant 2 feels a sense of autonomy in their school where they could be part of decision making and making changes that supports their feelings of belonging.

4.2.3 Perception of school provision influences feelings of school belonging.

The third GET relates to the perception of support within school. The experience of support for participants included flexibility and inflexibility of school practice and expectations, ineffective and unfair consequences for behaviour, sensitivity of support towards their care status and being involved in key decision making processes. There were similarities in the support the participants perceived supported or hindered their school belongingness but also key differences.

Flexibility or inflexibility of school provision impacts feelings of school belonging. The first subtheme of this GET relates to the flexibility and inflexibility of support participants experienced and how this either fostered or hindered their sense of school belonging. Flexibility of support enhanced school belonging as it seemed to develop a sense of trust that adults could provide effective support whereas inflexibility seemed to hinder sense of belonging because of feeling restricted.

Participant 3 shared their experiences of school staff being flexible to support their needs, which they spoke positively of. One way they experienced flexibility of support was through having different options available to them to support their emotional regulation in school. These different options seemed to support Participant 3 feel safe and supported within school, contributing to their sense of school belonging. When explaining the support school provides for them in difficult times Participant 3 shared, *"Sometimes I'll go sensory room and that will make me feel better"* (404-405) and *"Sometimes I'll stay at school, sometimes I'll go home."* (408). Participant 3 spoke positively of this flexibility of support in allowing them to go home if school becomes too overwhelming, considering the difficult

experiences they had going into care. Additionally, Participant 3's school allowed them to come back to school gradually after time away from school when going into care, which Participant 3 felt supported that transition.

Because I had so much time off, I was settling back in. The offer was there to do 8.25 when it starts until 3 and I'm like 'yeah I'm not going to be able to do that on my first day back'. So I think I spent the first week doing 9 to 3 instead of 8 to 3. So I just did 9 to 12 for the first week and for the second week back I tried all day erm I managed until like half 1. Then I got told, then I got to go home and I was like 'thank goodness'. (Participant 3, 324-330)

There seems to be a clear sense of relief from Participant 3 in the above quote that the school were flexible with their expectations after settling back into school. As a result, it was interpreted that Participant 3 thought that school practice being flexible to meet their needs was supportive and beneficial.

On the other hand, Participant 1 expressed an inflexibility in some school practice that impacted negatively on their freedoms within school, leading to a negative opinion of the school and their disconnect to it. Participant 1 shared that they disliked certain rules in school, "*Rules are rubbish*" (Participant 1, 134) such as, "*Can't leave lesson for the toilet and that. All toilets apart from one set are locked.*" (Participant 1, 140-141). This restriction of their freedom seemed to create a disconnection to school where they thought school was "*crap*" (Participant 1, 132) partly because of these rules.

Unfair treatment ignites a sense of injustice and hopelessness.

The second subtheme that related to this GET is about participants' perception of unfairness in staff treatment. The unfairness seemed to ignite a sense of injustice in the school system and a hopelessness that it would ever change. Participant 1 and Participant 2 drew on their experiences of what they deemed to be unfair treatment from staff while they were in school. This was discussed in terms of what participants disliked about school in their interviews and so it was interpreted that the perceived unfairness of treatment in school contributed to feelings of disconnect to school staff and the school system.

For Participant 2, they mentioned their dislike for being singled out by a teacher and how unfair this treatment was. There was a sense that this unfair treatment directed to Participant 2 from a teacher ignited a sense of injustice that Participant 2 felt they had to defend themselves against. This was interpreted to hinder their relationship.

Exactly, and it was basically just me who was like in the classroom, so I was talking to the teacher yeah and I told her yeah, I understand that I did something wrong, but I don't think it's fair that it's only me that's getting kept behind even though it wasn't just me and I made my point quite clear because she let me go after. (Participant 2, 417-421)

For Participant 1 the unfairness seemed to relate to punishments not being fairly given to peers or having the desired effect and adults not acting upon their complaints about other pupils. It was interpreted, that Participant 1's experiences of unfairness seemed to stem from feeling unheard, not listened to and their views not being valued enough to act upon them. Additionally, there was a clear sense of hopelessness around Participant 1's feelings around the unfairness of support offered.

"It's annoying, can't do anything about it." (Participant 1, 537).

"the kids that deserve to get punished don't get punished." (Participant 1, 328).

When there is constant complaints about someone, again and again for the past 2, 3 years to actually do something about it. Instead of just letting it keep building up and saying no we don't have enough to kick them out or do anything like. (Participant 1, 513-516)

As a result, there seemed to be a sense of injustice for Participant 1 in terms of how staff handled the difficult experiences they faced with certain peers and how there was a lack of trust that anything they do will change things for the better. The quotes above, highlight the length of time Participant 1 had been reporting peer incidences to staff which emphasises how ineffective they feel staff support has been to them and how they perceive the consequences in school to be ineffective. These experiences were thought to contribute to a lack of belonging for Participant 1 as they felt nothing could change to make their school experience more positive and there was a lack of trust in adults to support them appropriately.

Moreover, there appears to be a sense of frustration for Participant 1 that staff support is ineffective as it does not change the difficulties they face in the long term. For instance, in a classroom situation when they had a negative interaction with a peer, they shared that a teacher would “*Tell them to shut up basically, they shut up for like five minutes then it carries on.*” (318-319). This demonstrates how Participant 1 perceives staff’s punishment of students to be ineffective in improving their school experiences. In addition, Participant 1 perceives school punishments to be ineffective in changing behaviour, again adding to a sense of hopelessness that anything will change, “*No they isolate people, detentions, that don’t do nothing for kids because eventually they are just going to get used to it. It’s just going to become a daily routine kinda thing.*” (Participant 1, 592-594). For Participant 1, it seems as though they feel staff intervention is unlikely to lead to behaviour change in their peers which has a negative impact on their school experience.

Acceptance of additional help relates to identity as a young person in care. The third and final subtheme in relation to school support encompasses the experience of support the participants received due to their care status. It was interpreted that participants’ perceptions of the additional help offered in school because of their care status seemed to relate to whether participants identified positively or negatively as a young person in care.

For Participant 1, there was a sense that they did not want to stand out from their peers at school which may be related to their negative peer experiences highlighted in previous themes. As such, they expressed that being in care does not impact their school life unless they shared that information with others, which they had decided not to do other than with their close friends.

I don’t think it affects your school life unless you tell people about it. Like the only people who know about me being in it is friends and that. Other kids just think I live with my parents, but I moved out a year ago.” (Participant 1, 604-608).

This quote highlights that they would like to keep their care identity to themselves and between their close friends. It was interpreted that accepting

support from adults may make their care status more known among different peers which they did not want.

Furthermore, it was Participant 1's perception that they should not receive support just because they are in care but that other students, who, in their eyes, need the support more, should receive it.

Yeah so I don't see why I should get the support just because I'm in care where the other lot don't. (Participant 1, 395-396)

Like there was a point I was offered to go speak to a counsellor or something in school, turned it down, didn't want to do it. I think there are other kids in school who need it, offer it them, simple. (Participant 1, 404-406).

Again, this highlights that Participant 1 does not align themselves with being in care and in need of help and as such seems less accepting of any support offered to them.

Whereas, for Participant 2, they felt positively about the extra support they received because they are in care as they felt it was a good thing that they received positive treatment, extra support and funding. It was interpreted that Participant 2 felt positively about this support as it gave them a sense of agency and autonomy over decisions that concerned them in school.

Basically, I don't know what it's called yeah but you have meetings that discuss like what you want from school, LAC and PEP. And basically, I get special treatment yeah and I get money from the school that lets me get stuff so I'm like 'I get special treatment' (437-440).

This quote indicates that Participant 2 views being involved in these meetings as "special treatment" which they enjoy. This may reflect that Participant 2's need for autonomy and agency is being met by being involved in decision making and feeling listened to about what they would like from school.

While Participant 3 also talked positively about the support they received in school because they are in care, they seemed to value the sensitivity staff would show to certain topics. Staff seemed to adapt their expectations to meet their needs around this.

If we talk about like our family or like because like we do like worship on a Tuesday morning and we were learning about Mother's Day and the teacher who runs it said that I don't have to stay because it might be hard so it's just like you don't have to and I'm like 'thank goodness I don't have to' because you have to think of like words to describe your mum and I don't even know. I don't know how to describe her so it's just a funny way for me. (522-528).

Therefore, this quote illustrates that valuable support seemed to be less about extra support, for Participant 3, but more about support that was sensitive to Participant 3's history, context and the current needs they present with.

As a result, it appears that when participants aligned more positively and comfortably with their care status, they were more accepting of the support that came with it. Additionally, the support that seemed important to participants was support that provided a sense of agency and that was sensitive to their context.

4.2.4 School as a safe space

All three participants indicated that school was a safe space for them, particularly for Participant 2 and Participant 3. For instance, Participant 2 explicitly shared that school belonging means *"Like it's a safe place for something innit"* (69). Moreover, Participant 2 and Participant 3, described school as being an escape from their home lives and thus a safe space for them. Participant 1 and Participant 2's interviews indicated an importance of familiarity with school and finally, all three participants commented on the stability of school always being there as a positive contributor to feelings of school belonging.

School provides an escape from home life. School was interpreted to be a safe place because, for Participant 2 and Participant 3, school provided an escape from their chaotic experiences at home. Experiences included feeling disconnected to their foster family, not feeling part of it and feeling unsafe in the care of their biological family. As a result, school became a place to get away from these difficult home environments. It was interpreted that school provided a sense of belonging that their home lives

could not, which increased their feelings of connection towards school in comparison.

I mean cus of the way I was brought up and like my real family, my type of escape was to go to school. So in my head it's just basically an escape.” (Participant 2, 78-80).

Erm yeah because I used to feel alone when I was at home. I used to feel alone so. On the weekend I was like ‘is it a Monday so I can go back to school?’ (Participant 3, 433-435)

For Participant 2, there was a sense of disconnection from their home life, particularly their foster care placement, and school provided connection that was missing.

Chaotic, very loud, a lot of fights and if I witness something I have to tell Lorraine which is my foster mum about it and basically say ‘yeah this and this happened’ and she’s like ‘right okay you two are both getting in trouble’. But basically if I witness it then I have to say what happened. I’m just there. (Participant 2, 356-360)

The phrase “*I’m just there*” was interpreted to mean that they do not feel part of the family but more of a passive onlooker. Participant 2 also commented on the difference between their foster family and their biological family calling their biological family their “*actual family*” (Participant 2, 10), again suggesting a separation between them and their foster family. This seems to contrast Participant 2’s feelings towards school as a safe place and an escape, indicating a sense of belongingness towards it.

Moreover, Participant 3 commented on the difference between when they were at home with their parents compared to how they feel now in their new residential home which has slightly shifted their feelings towards school. While Participant 3 was with their parents there was a sense of desperation to return to school to not feel alone but now, they are happy, settled and feel safe in their residential home they look forward to going home. This was interpreted to mean that school used to be the only place Participant 3 could feel as though they belonged but now their residential home also provides a sense of belonging. “*I used to enjoy school but now because I feel safe at home, I still enjoy school but it’s like ‘is it three o clock yet?’*” (Participant 3, 437-437). Participant 3 commented that they still enjoy school but that their

need to attend school for a sense of belonging has shifted since they feel as though they belong in their home.

Familiarity with school supports school belonging. The second subtheme of school being a safe place, incorporates a sense of familiarity that enhances feelings of belonging in school. This familiarity seemed to relate to feeling comfortable and at ease with their schools' physical environment. By feeling comfortable and at ease with the surroundings it was interpreted that familiarity supported participants feelings of belonging in school.

Participant 2 explicitly stated that, for them, a sense of school belonging is when *"you feel at home"* (Participant 2, 67). This was interpreted to mean that there is a sense of familiarity with school feeling comfortable and homelike, something you are familiar with. For Participant 1, the familiarity came from becoming more familiar with the school site over the Covid-19 pandemic and because they were able to attend school without the whole school being there. This supported the transition to secondary school because of the opportunity to attend school despite the national lockdowns taking place. *"I already knew my way around this site because of lockdown and that because I had supervision here."* (Participant 1, 14-15). By Participant 1 knowing their way around the school site they are indicating that they do feel familiar with their surroundings which they shared supported their transition into secondary school.

A sense of familiarity also came from Participant 2 talking about being at school for a significant period of their life which is why they felt it was important to feel a sense of belonging towards school and for it to feel like home, *"I guess it's important because like you're basically there for most of your what five years ten years of your life, so it has to be good."* (Participant 2, 71-72). This suggests that by spending a significant period at school, the familiarity towards it increases.

Stability and consistency of school fosters feelings of safety. Participants' accounts seemed to reflect an importance of school experiences being stable and consistent in order to contribute to feelings of safety. It was interpreted that having stability and consistency in school gave a sense that school is reliable and a place participants could depend on. This

stability of school experience seemed to support the maintenance of feelings of school belonging.

All three participants spoke of experiences that related to the subtheme of stability and consistency. However, all three participants spoke of this in slightly different ways. For Participant 1, there was a sense throughout their interview that they did not think positively of school. Despite this, they mentioned that they would not like to move school, which was interpreted to mean that the stability of staying at one school was important to Participant 1 and that there is some sort of pull to school that makes them not want to leave. *“Crap school in my opinion but don’t want to move so yeah.”* (Participant 1, 132). Participant 1 seems to want to stay at the school even though they think negatively of it which suggests that stability of placement is most important for Participant 1 to feel safe. However, it is acknowledged that Participant 1 may not have had the option to move even if they had wanted to due to being in care.

For Participant 2, there has been stability and consistency in their feelings towards school throughout their secondary experience. While they expressed that they felt like they belonged to school, they suggested that because it has always been this way, they do not think about it in much detail, it is more of an automatic, natural feeling for them, *“Yeah. Like I don’t feel, I mean I do feel like I belong but at the same time its always felt like that from Year 7 so.”* (Participant 2, 128-129). Here, Participant 2 explains that they do feel like they belong, but it is not something they have thought about explicitly because it seemed their school journey had been smooth and without disruption.

Finally, for Participant 3 the consistency they spoke of was to do with the support that had been provided to them before, during and after their transition into care. It was interpreted that the consistency in their school’s approach was important to Participant 3, to still be able to do the things they used to do in school because they do not like change.

Hmm no not really, I still do the same things I used to do in school. That’s probably because I don’t like change. I don’t mind it but then I don’t deal with it very well. Like if I don’t have a week warning. So if it just happens, I’m like ‘wait what?’ (Participant 3, 513-516).

Participant 3 shared the above response when asked if anything changed for them at school after going into care. This reflection on not liking change supports the interpretation that consistency and stability is important for Participant 3 to feel safe. Additionally, Participant 3 commented that they felt supported by their school before and since being in care and that stability and consistency of support has been a positive experience for them, giving a sense that school is reliable and dependable to support her, *“Erm, they help me with quite a lot since being in care. Well they used to help me quite a lot before then so they’ve helped me through my whole life really.”* (Participant 3, 397-399). As a result, Participant 3’s positive school experiences seem to relate to them being stable and consistent, creating a sense of safety for Participant 3 amongst the significant life experiences they had encountered through going into care.

4.3 Summary of findings

The analysis above identified four GETS that were shared among all three participants with some variation in each which demonstrates the nuance of school belonging experiences. Despite differences there were some overarching themes that were shared in participants experiences and what that meant to them. First of all, relationships could support belonging through acceptance, support and trust but they could also hinder belonging through experiences of rejection and unfair support. Secondly engagement in school activities seemed to reflect feelings of belonging. Experiences of withdrawal were linked to peer rejection, feeling uncomfortable and unable to be their true selves. On the other hand experience of engagement reflected feeling confident and safe. Thirdly, school support that was flexible, sensitive and provided a sense of autonomy supported belonging whereas inflexibility hindered belonging. Accepting support related to their care status seemed to be associated to the participants’ comfort with being a young person in care and what that meant to them. Finally, school seemed to be a place to escape difficult home situations. It was also perceived as familiar and consistent which supported feelings of safety and belonging.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to contribute to the school belonging literature and highlight the school belonging experiences of young people in care in secondary school. Through the literature review, the benefits of school belonging on emotional wellbeing and academic success were highlighted (Allen et al., 2018). It was also suggested that school belonging is of particular importance for adolescents as they form their identities (Allen & Kern, 2017) and due to the changing expectations and organisational structures in secondary school (Allen et al., 2021). Additionally, it was suggested that developing school belonging for young people in care may be important to meeting their need to belong when they may experience a lack of belonging or connection in other aspects of their lives (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019). Previous research has suggested that young people in care's voices are often missing within the literature (Johnson et al., 2020). The systematic literature review highlighted that research exploring the school belonging experiences of young people in care from their own perspectives in the UK was missing. Therefore, the following research question was developed:

How do young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school?

The research adopted a critical realist ontology and a subjective, phenomenological epistemology due to the research's interest in exploring and understanding individual experiences from their own unique perspectives. It was acknowledged that there is a reality for young people in care, regarding their school belonging experiences, but that this reality can only be interpreted and imperfectly known by others. To answer the research question and in line with the ontological and epistemological positioning, the research adopted a qualitative exploratory research design that involved conducting individual semi-structured interviews with three young people in care. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using IPA.

The following discussion chapter will begin by summarising the study's findings in relation to the research question above. Each of the four group experiential themes will be considered and evaluated with reference to the current school belonging literature. Next, a methodological review of the study will be conducted, highlighting the strengths and limitations of the

study. Following this, implications for practice will be considered, including implications for schools, educational psychologists (EPs) and for LAs and wider government. Implications for future research will also be discussed. The chapter will then end with an overall conclusion of this research.

5.1 School belonging experiences for young people in care

5.1.1 Relationships with others provide a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection.

All three participants spoke of relationships being integral to their school belonging experiences at secondary school. This echoes what is suggested in the school belonging literature for other groups of young people (Allen et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2018; Arslan et al., 2020; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Cartmell & Bond, 2015; Craggs & Kelly, 2018b; Greenwood & Kelly, 2020; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Sancho & Cline, 2012; Shaw, 2019; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). In particular, participants in this study seemed to imply that their relationships in school provided them with a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection to others. Their reflections on these relationships seemed to indicate that positive and supportive relationships enhanced their feelings of school belonging.

Acceptance and ability to be authentic self. Acceptance or lack of acceptance from others was interpreted from participants' relational experiences at school. Participant 2 and Participant 3's accounts seemed to suggest that they felt accepted for who they were by feeling able to be their true selves around their friends. This included being confident in their own unique characteristics and sharing their thoughts and feelings with their friends. A qualitative meta-synthesis exploring adolescents' experiences of school belonging (Craggs & Kelly, 2018a) supports the view that acceptance within relationships fosters school belongingness. Furthermore, qualitative research with young people who have undergone managed moves (Craggs & Kelly, 2018b), children transitioning to secondary school (Sancho & Cline, 2012) and adolescent autistic females (Myles et al., 2019) have identified peer acceptance as being salient in contributing towards school belonging. This seems to indicate that the young people in care included in this study

shared similar perceptions towards the importance of acceptance as other young people included in previous research. Indeed, the US study also exploring young people in care's experiences of school belonging similarly found that relationships affirmed the young people's feelings of acceptance which provided them with a sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2020).

On the other hand, a lack of acceptance from peers is not so explicitly explored in the above studies, although it is implied. Participant 1 spoke at length about the negative peer interactions they had experienced at school which was interpreted to suggest a lack of acceptance Participant 1 felt from their peers. For Participant 1, it appeared that others were less tolerant of difference which enhanced their feelings of being disliked. Similarly, Hamm and Faircloth's (2005) research into the role of friendship in adolescents' sense of school belonging found, through interviews with students, that perceptions of a lack of acceptance from other students challenged a positive sense of school belonging.

The impact of this lack of peer acceptance could be explained through self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory argues that autonomy, competence and relatedness are innate human needs in order to function optimally and, as such, influence motivations and behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In particular, relatedness has been linked to school belonging (Yuhui & Xiang, 2015). It could be interpreted that the peer rejection Participant 1 experienced hindered their need to relate, which could be why there was a sense of low motivation at school and a negative attitude towards school during Participant 1's interview (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Friendship support. Nevertheless, supportive friendships have been suggested to minimise the emotional impact of peer rejection (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005). Participant 1 did share their experience of positive friendships, which may have fulfilled their need to relate, as did Participant 2 and Participant 3. Having friends has been positively associated with school belonging within the research (Allen et al., 2018). It was interpreted that, in this study, friendships ensured participants did not feel lonely as they felt physically and emotionally supported. In particular, Participant 1 and Participant 2 reflected positively on their mainstream secondary schools having more opportunities to make friends and having larger friendship

groups. This was interpreted to mean that a larger population of students in secondary school allowed Participant 2 and Participant 1 to find friendship groups that shared the same interests and accepted them for who they are.

As a result, it was not simply having friends that was deemed important but having friends that could provide emotional support when it was needed. The importance of supportive friendships has been highlighted in the research, which suggests friends support young people to feel confident, understood and safe in school (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Johnson et al., 2020). These findings seem to relate to the experience of participants in the current study. Moreover, it was interpreted that participants' experiences of supportive friendships were linked to their enjoyment of school and enhanced their feelings of school belonging.

Connection to a key adult. As well as peer relationships being integral to participants feelings of school belonging, connection to a key adult in school was interpreted to be important for Participant 1 and Participant 2 who both described a closeness to a particular teacher in their schools. Previous research has indicated that positive relationships with teachers who are caring, fair and empathetic supports feelings of belonging in school (Allen et al., 2018; Bouchard & Berg, 2017; Nind et al., 2012). The participants in this study separated these relationships from their relationships with other teachers by saying these key adults had qualities that enhanced their closeness. Similarly to what has been found in the literature, Participant 1 and Participant 2's key adults seemed to embody fairness, care and empathy towards them. In particular, these adults supported them through emotionally difficult times.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that student-teacher relationships is the most important predictor in adolescents' sense of school belonging (Uslu & Gizir, 2017), highlighting the significant impact teacher relationships can have on students feelings of belonging in school. It appeared, that in this study, these close teacher relationships supported participants to feel safe within the school environment, which may have been particularly important to participants because of their care status (Nagpaul & Chen, 2019). This finding seemed to contrast with the US research study with young people in care who found it difficult to sustain teacher relationships in high school

which contributed to feelings of social exclusion (Johnson et al., 2020). This difference could be because participants in this study had experiences of a stable and consistent secondary school placement which enabled these relationships to form in comparison to the disruptive high school experiences participants in Johnson et al. (2020)'s study had. Therefore, stability of school placement could be an important factor in ensuring positive teacher relationships can be formed for young people in care to foster their feelings of school belonging.

5.1.2 School belonging relates to enjoying and feeling safe to engage in school activities.

As the literature review detailed, school belonging has been found to be associated with school engagement where a lack of school belonging can have a negative impact on school engagement (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Korpershoek et al., 2020). In the present study, participants connected their feelings of school belonging with their participation in school lessons and extracurricular activities. It was interpreted that school engagement, for these participants, related to the enjoyment of lessons and feeling safe and confident to engage.

School enjoyment. All three participants spoke of their enjoyment of lessons for a range of reasons such as having the autonomy to choose subjects, the content of the lessons being interesting, interactive and relevant to them, their level of experience and ability in those lessons and liking the subject teacher. These reasons for enjoyment have been supported in the literature with research suggesting that students view successful relationships, variation in learning and having some control in their learning as supportive factors contributing to their enjoyment of school activities (Gorard & See, 2011). Participants' discussion of enjoyment also relates back to self-determination theory, having autonomy, feeling competent and feeling connected (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research suggests that when lessons are designed to address these psychological needs, students become more motivated to engage in the learning (Hsu et al., 2019).

Enjoyment of lessons seems to be less explored in the school belonging literature explicitly. However, research has recognised the

importance of the school climate being conducive of school belonging (Saraví et al., 2020). Aspects of school climate, such as lessons being dull, detached from real-life situations and less interactive resulted in students disengaging from lessons in a qualitative study conducted with adolescents in Mexico City (Saraví et al., 2020). This links to the participants in this study discussing their enjoyment of lessons as a reason for their engagement in school and feelings of school belonging. However, it is not clear in the present study whether participants' enjoyment and engagement in lessons led to their feelings of school belonging or whether their feelings of school belonging led to their enjoyment and engagement in lessons. Participant 1 did suggest that a lack of school belonging hindered engagement in lessons which has been supported by quantitative research that seems to suggest that increased feelings of school belonging enhances school engagement (Allen et al., 2016; Eryilma & Altinsoy, 2021; St-Amand et al., 2022).

Feeling unsafe to participate. As well as enjoyment in lessons, two participants, Participant 1 and Participant 2 spoke of feeling safe and confident to engage with differing experiences. In some of Participant 1's lessons they became less engaged to not to draw attention to themselves out of fear that their peers may ridicule them. This fear of attention being on them in the classroom also prevented Participant 1 from accepting additional support and adjustments that might benefit their learning experience. As a result, it was interpreted that Participant 1's feelings of belonging in those lessons were hindered due to not feeling able to engage openly and be themselves. Research exploring the engagement of primary school children following peer rejection indicates that peer rejection inhibits children's classroom participation (Ladd et al., 2008). Similarly, research conducted with adolescents suggested that experience of peer rejection was negatively associated with adolescents' self-esteem and school engagement (Danneel et al., 2019). This could relate to Participant 1's lack of engagement in lessons as a coping strategy of managing the risk of peer rejection. Research indicates that young people who have been socially excluded may respond by withdrawing from the situation where they felt excluded (Molden et al., 2009). Furthermore, a review of the importance of belonging in adolescence indicated that adolescents often avoid risk taking in social

situations as a strategy to avoid the negative impacts on mental health that can follow social exclusion (Tomova et al., 2021). Therefore, Participant 1's withdrawal and lack of engagement seems to reflect a key adolescent coping strategy to avoid risk of social exclusion and protect the need to belong.

Confident to participate. Participant 2's experiences differed greatly from Participant 1's, where they seemed to show confidence to engage in school activities, more specifically through applying and being accepted onto a student leadership team that was focused on making the school a better place. It seemed as though Participant 2 was proud of their engagement in this school project and looked forward to the prospect of being able to make a difference. Research has suggested that participation in extracurricular activities is associated with increased levels of school belonging (Libbey, 2004). Furthermore, research carried out with students who had undergone managed moves found a key theme in promoting school belonging was involvement in extra-curricular activities that used students skills to make a positive contribution (Craggs & Kelly, 2018b). Participant 2 being able to have a say may be of particular importance because of their care status and professionals usually being responsible for making decisions on important aspects of their lives, such as where they live and who cares for them. The importance of meeting young people in care's need for agency has been highlighted in the research. It has been suggested that when adults listened, heard and understood the views of young people in care, this had a positive impact on their wellbeing (Berridge, 2017; Miller et al., 2021).

5.1.3 Perception of school provision influences feelings of school belonging.

Feelings towards participants' provision at school was another theme that was identified in the participants' accounts of their school belonging experiences. There were differences in perceptions of school provision which had consequences on whether they felt this provision fostered or hindered their sense of school belonging. Within the school belonging literature, school level factors such as policy, practice, additional help and ethos have been suggested to be important in developing a sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Craggs & Kelly, 2018b; Nind et al., 2012; Sobitan, 2022).

Flexibility of practice. Participants reflected on how flexible and inflexible school practice was which either supported their emotional needs or hindered their need for autonomy and freedom. Participant 3 reflected on how important it was that their school was flexible in their support and allowances they made for them when they were settling back into school following being placed into care, such as adapting the length of the school day. The importance of flexibility of support in school was also highlighted in research exploring the educational experiences of children in care (Berridge, 2017; Miller et al., 2021). For young people in care, it has been highlighted to be particularly important for school staff to understand their unique needs so that trusting relationships can develop (Day et al., 2012; Sugden, 2013).

On the other hand, inflexibility of school provision was highlighted in Participant 1's school experiences which they described as a reason for their negative view on school. For Participant 1, there was a sense of feeling restricted by school rules leading to a lack of freedom in their school experience. This is a similar finding to that of participants in a qualitative study that was investigating the student-teacher relationship using ecological systems theory that found participants negative opinion on school rules influenced their dislike of school (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). The strict rules as perceived by Participant 1 have also been found to be a hinderance to school engagement in previous research, which suggested that stringent disciplinary rules limited young people's autonomy in school and left them feeling not listened to (Fredricks et al., 2019).

Unfair treatment. As well as this feeling of restriction, Participant 2 and Participant 1 reflected on their sense of unfairness in treatment from teachers. For both participants there was a sense of injustice in how other students were disciplined. Participant 2 shared an experience where they felt singled out by a teacher and Participant 1 discussed how they felt unheard by teachers when they did not act on their complaints about other students' behaviour. This seemed to lead to a sense of hopelessness for Participant 1 that their difficulties with peers in school were unlikely to change. Similarly to participants in this current study, the literature on students' views on school practice suggests that ineffective punishments and teachers who used rules inconsistently were thought of as unfair (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020;

Morrison, 2018). Furthermore, when exploring adolescents' beliefs around belongingness, research seems to indicate that the perception of how fair teachers treat students influences their feelings of belonging in school (Nichols, 2008). Research has also indicated that students who reported high victimisation felt less safe in school, less belonging and perceiving adult support as ineffective (Goldweber et al., 2013), which seems to align with Participant 1's school belonging experiences.

Impact of care status and identity. Moreover, participants spoke of their experiences and feelings towards school practice and provision that related to their care status. It was interpreted that participants' sense of identity as a young person in care influenced how they viewed support provided to them. This was interpreted to have a subsequent impact on their experiences of belonging within school. For Participant 2 and Participant 3, they seemed to feel at ease with their care status and acknowledged how going into care had helped them and as such reflected on school provision in relation to this positively. For Participant 1, they appeared to identify less as a young person in care and did not want to share this with others. Therefore, it seemed that because Participant 1's identity did not align with being a young person in care they were less accepting of support as they felt that they should not get support just because they were in care.

Participant 1's views on keeping their care identity to themselves was also found within the research where young people in care felt that by keeping their care status to themselves it enabled them to better fit in and protect the belongingness to school they had felt before going into care (Johnson et al., 2020). Further research has suggested that young people in care feel the stigma of being labelled a young person in care in school and implied that this was an unwanted part of their identity and distancing themselves from it was a way of seeking normality (Jones et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021). The impact of this was, young people felt less inclined to share their experiences and seek support from school staff (Miller et al., 2021). This also seems to mirror Participant 1's feelings towards their care status and not accepting the support offered to them. Furthermore, research has suggested that for young people in care, engaging in support in school may produce risks for them such as a loss of social status, a fear of failure and

experience of being let down by adults who they came to trust, something they may have experienced prior to entering care or while in the care system (Berridge, 2017). As a result, Participant 1 not accepting support may indicate a lack of trust in adults that their support would be successful and as such this hindered their sense of belonging within school.

Feeling valued and understood. Conversely, Participant 2 seemed to be more accepting of support from school that was related to their care status. In particular, it was interpreted that they felt valued and understood by school because staff included them in meetings with other professionals. This was interpreted to enhance Participant 2's feelings of belonging in school because they felt valued and listened to. Research has indicated that for young people in care feeling like they have a voice, are being heard and have an influence in decisions that concern them contributes to feeling successful in school (Miller et al., 2021). This seems to link to self-determination theory and the psychological need of autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The importance of having agency is attributed to being particularly important for young people who have experienced trauma and consequently feeling powerless (Wall, 2021). This could reflect the experiences of the participants included in this study who may have experienced trauma prior to going in to care or by being separated from their biological family. Therefore highlighting why having agency over school provision seemed to be important in contributing to their school belonging experiences.

Sensitivity of support. Furthermore, Participant 3 felt supported at school due to the sensitivity shown by staff during their difficult period of entering care and being mindful of what may upset them while at school and trying to mitigate that. Research supports the importance of school staff supporting young people in care through difficult times in their lives (Höjer & Johansson, 2013). This was interpreted to mean that this experience supported Participant 3's sense of belonging as the school accepted Participant 3 for who they were and what they had been through and supported them appropriately based on this acknowledgement.

5.1.4 School as a safe place.

The final theme that was interpreted from the participants' accounts was that school was a safe place for them, although Participant 2 and Participant 3 spoke of school more fondly than Participant 1 which is consistent with their view on school discussed previously. Safety was also a key theme found in research with refugee students in secondary school, that indicated a sense of safety enhanced feelings of school belonging (Sobitan, 2022). For participants in this study safety related to the escape school provided from their home lives, a sense of familiarity with the environment and the importance of stability and consistency of school.

School as an escape. In terms of school as an escape for Participant 3 and Participant 2, it was interpreted that school provided a sense of connection and safety that their home life could not. For Participant 3, this was when they were still in the care of their parents and for Participant 2, this was about their feelings of disconnect towards their current foster family. Previous research that conducted interviews with young people in care in Sweden indicated that these young people felt a similar way, that school provided a sense of safety from their chaotic home life which seemed to have a positive impact on their well-being and success within school (Höjer & Johansson, 2013). Further to this, research with Canadian care leavers highlighted that for these young people, school was one of the only places that they did feel safe, in comparison to their home lives (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). This positive view of school as a safe place seems to differ to other research with young people in care that suggests because of their lack of safety and instability at home participants were unable to prioritise school which hindered their connection towards it (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Therefore suggesting, that while school can provide a much needed safe haven for young people in care, it could also be that a lack of stability and safety at home prevents young people from engaging with school enough to feel as though it is a safe haven for them. This highlights the unique and individual experiences young people in care and that their feelings towards school will subsequently differ depending on this.

Familiarity with school. Familiarity was interpreted to relate to the participants' sense that school was a safe place. Participant 1 reflected on the helpfulness of feeling familiar with the school's physical environment whereas Participant 2 reflected on familiarity as a sense of comfort as well as somewhere you spend a significant part of student life. A sense of familiarity was found to be a key theme that contributed to secondary school students' sense of school belonging which included familiarity with the school environment, the people in it and the school's ethos (Shaw, 2019). In the current study, participants identified being familiar with the physical environment and the general feeling towards school which seemed to enhance their connection towards it. This may be of particular importance to young people in care who have to navigate unfamiliar environments and people in their home lives when entering and while in the care system (Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020).

Stability of school. Unlike some young people in care (Somers et al., 2020), the participants in this study experienced a stable secondary school experience by not having any atypical school moves during secondary school. Participants' school belonging experiences seemed to suggest stability and consistency contributed to their perception of school as a safe place. However, this was experienced in different ways which seemed to relate to the participant's overall feelings towards school and their sense of belonging there.

For instance, Participant 1 reflected on their negative school experiences in their interview but still expressed that they did not want to move school. Therefore it seemed that stability of school placement was important to Participant 1 and there was a pull to school that made them not want to leave. Furthermore, Participant 2's stable experience seemed to ensure that they felt as though they belonged in school but because they had a stable experience of belonging, it was not something they thought about until the interview. The importance of school stability has been suggested in previous research where instability of school placement hindered young people in care's sense of school belonging (Johnson et al., 2020). This was further highlighted by Miller et al. (2021) who suggested that educational

instability can have a negative impact on young people in care being understood by school staff.

Consistency of support. Participant 3 was slightly more specific about their experience of stability and consistency which related to the consistency of support provided to them before, during and after their transition into care. As a result, it was interpreted that school was safe, trustworthy and reliable in terms of supporting them effectively. Similarly, consistency of support has been highlighted in the literature as contributing to young people in care's school success (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). This consistency provides a sense of predictability which is deemed important for young people who have experienced trauma, like Participant 3, where there have been experiences of unpredictable situations (Wall, 2021). This consistent treatment also seems important as research has highlighted that differential treatment from staff because of care status hindered connections and relationships with staff (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020).

5.2 Comparison of current IPA themes to the meta-ethnographic review

In Chapter 2, a systematic literature review that adopted a meta-ethnographic approach to explore young people's experiences of school belonging in secondary school within the UK was conducted. Key themes were generated from the data and interpretations in the included studies. This review highlighted that young people in care's voices and experiences were missing in this literature, adding to the rationale for the current study. These themes were compared to the group experiential themes generated in the present study to consider how young people in care may experience school belonging differently or similarly to that of other groups of young people.

Table 7

A table comparing meta-ethnographic review concepts with current IPA themes.

Concepts from meta-ethnographic review	Themes from current IPA study
Relationships with peers and staff support increased safety and belonging.	Relationships with others provide a sense of acceptance, togetherness and connection.
Acceptance contributes towards school belonging.	School belonging relates to enjoying and feeling safe to engage in school activities.
Autonomy and agency supports school belonging.	Perception of school provision influences feelings of school belonging.
School environment and culture influence feelings of safety and connection.	School as a safe place.

5.2.1 Comparison of meta-ethnographic concepts and IPA GETs

The present study adds to the current literature on young people's school belonging experiences by including the experiences of young people in care. As can be seen by the table presented above, the findings of the current study largely mirror what was found in the meta-ethnographic review, with some slight differences that may relate to the participants' care statuses.

Relationships and acceptance. The concepts of relationships and acceptance in the meta-ethnographic review seem to link to the first GET of relationships in the current IPA study. The relationships participants in the current study spoke of enabled them to feel accepted in a similar way the meta-ethnographic review interpreted acceptance for other young people in secondary school. This suggests that feeling accepted by others may be a shared school belonging experience among adolescents. In addition, the importance of friendships seemed to be both important for the participants in this study and for those in the meta-ethnographic review. A shared finding

was that friendships that were emotionally available for participants were particularly important to their feelings of school belonging. A key difference in the current study was the importance of a connection to a key adult in school, which was not found to be salient in the meta-ethnographic review. In the meta-ethnographic review, participants reflected on their relationships with staff by way of them supporting and helping them in school rather than their connection to individual staff members. This could suggest that developing a close connection with a key member of staff in school is important in supporting young people in care's school belonging experiences.

Participation in school. The second GET in the current study that related to the enjoyment of and sense of safety to participate in school activities had some connection to the concept of acceptance generated in the meta-ethnographic review. It could be argued that a lack of acceptance experienced in the current study contributed to feeling unsafe to participate in school lessons and subsequently hindered school belonging. Similarly the meta-ethnographic review findings indicated that acceptance, feeling understood and individual differences being respected all contributed towards feelings of school belonging. However, enjoyment of lessons was not something that was found through the meta-ethnographic review. This suggests enjoyment of lessons may not be consistently reflected in young people's school experiences. On the other hand, the reasons given for enjoyment in this study have some overlap with other themes within the meta-ethnographic review such as autonomy and connection with the class teacher, suggesting some similarity in experiences.

Support in school. The third GET of perception of school provision in the current study seems to link to both staff support, included in the concept of relationships, and the concept of autonomy and agency in the meta-ethnographic review. This seems to indicate school provision that promotes the need for autonomy for adolescents is important in developing school belonging. While it was suggested that this may be particularly important for young people in care because of their lack of choice, at times, in their home life, autonomy and agency also seem to be of importance to a range of other adolescents in secondary school.

However, the current study did add to the meta-ethnographic review as participants related their experience of help from school as either hindering or promoting their sense of school belonging. It was interpreted that young people in care's alignment with their care status had an impact on how they viewed and accepted the support provided to them. This finding highlights the need for a person centred approach that is flexible and sensitive to supporting young people in care as young people may perceive their care status differently.

Sense of safety. The final GET generated in the current IPA study was the importance of school being a safe place. This seemed to align with the meta-ethnographic concept of the importance of school culture in promoting safety. As a result, it seems prominent for young people in secondary school to have consistency, stability and familiarity in their school experiences to promote their sense of school belonging. In contrast to the meta-ethnographic findings, participants in this study reflected on school being an escape from their home life. This study has therefore contributed to a more in depth exploration of the experiences of young people in care's school belonging experiences by adding further detail on why it is important for school to be perceived as a safe space.

5.2.2 Overview of similarities

The similarities found in the meta-ethnographic review and the current IPA study seems to indicate that the young people in care's school belonging experiences largely reflect what has been found for other groups of young people in secondary school. This suggests the importance of promoting school belonging for young people in care in a similar way to what research has indicated is important in adolescence in general such as peer relationships, acceptance, autonomy and consistency. However, it is acknowledged that the current study reflects only three young people in care. These young people had 18 months or less care experience and so further research is warranted to establish whether other young people in care's school belonging experiences reflect what was found in the current study.

5.2.3 Original contribution of current study

The present research has been able to gain a more detailed understanding of young people in care's school belonging experiences that have highlighted some slight differences to other groups of young people from the meta-ethnographic review. This may indicate that young people's care status has some influence on how they experience school belonging. First of all, the importance of a connection to a key adult is a unique finding to this study. The second difference was the emphasis on the perception of support provided based on their care status. It was interpreted that the young people's identities as being 'in care' influenced how accepting they were of this support. This seems to suggest that a flexible and sensitive approach to supporting young people in care is warranted. The third difference was the detail in school being a safe place for participants due to the disruptiveness of their home life, indicating a perhaps more prominent importance for school to feel safe, predictable and consistent for young people who have had a chaotic home life.

5.3 Synthesis of findings

Overall, the findings from this study seem to suggest the school belonging experiences of young people in care are evidenced in the wider school belonging literature. For the participants in this study, school belonging was enhanced when relationships provided them with a sense of acceptance and safety be their authentic selves. Important relationships for participants in this study seemed to be with their friends and a key adult in school. When acceptance and safety were experienced, participants seemed better able and more confident to participate in school activities whereas experience of a lack of acceptance seemed to have the opposite effect.

Additionally, experiences of feeling valued and understood as individuals seemed salient in the participants school belonging experiences. In particular, how participants aligned with their care status impacted their perception of support they received. As a result, this implied an importance for staff to include young people in care in decision making and providing

sensitive support that meets their individual needs to enhance their sense of school belonging.

These findings seem to align with self-determination theory, in that the participants experiences of school belonging seemed to meet the three psychological needs proposed; relatedness, competence and autonomy, which are shown to be important in motivation and emotional wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In order to develop relationships, feel accepted and understood, it seemed as though it was important for participants' school experiences to be stable and consistent. This seemed to be of particular importance for participants as school provided an escape from their disruptive home lives.

5.4 Methodological Review

An evaluation of the quality of the current study will now be discussed. The purpose of the study was to explore the school belonging experiences of young people in care. The ontological standpoint was critical realism, and the epistemological standpoint was phenomenology and subjectivity. Therefore the research was concerned with the subjective and individual school belonging experiences of young people in care. The study addressed its purpose adequately by conducting individual semi-structured interviews with young people in care that allowed the participants to express their experiences in their own words from their own perspectives.

Despite this, the young people's care identity was not the main focus of the interview and so the influence of care status on school belonging was not fully addressed in the current study. This was due to wanting to centre the young people's school belonging experiences from their own perspectives rather than leading participants to discuss their care status, particularly if this was not something they were comfortable with. There was one question that related to care status within the interview which enabled some interpretation of the influence of care status on school belonging in the findings. If participants mentioned their care status within the interview, I was responsive and was led by the participant. However, I did not continually seek reflections on how the young people's care status impacted on their

school belonging experiences. Therefore, it is acknowledged that further research may be warranted to understand in more detail how care status may influence school belonging, building on the research conducted by Jones et al. (2020) that explored the stigma of being labelled a young person in care.

Furthermore, the use of IPA was appropriate to analyse these interviews as it generated a detailed, phenomenological interpretation of participant data. A strength of IPA is that it creates a rich, phenomenological interpretation of participant data which coincides with the need to have a small number of participants (Wagstaff et al., 2014). However, a small sample could also be seen as a limitation as the present study only included three participants, from the same LA. As a result, the young people who participated in this research cannot be considered representative of the wider in care population. Despite this, IPA does not aim to generalise to the wider population but instead aims to develop understanding and insight into the individual sense-making of an experience, which may shed light onto similar experiences for others (Smith et al., 2022), therefore the small sample size is not of concern for the aim of this research.

Additionally, IPA as a methodology relies on a certain level of language to ensure in-depth responses from participants are gathered during the interview process (Willig, 2013) and interviews tend to last around 60 minutes due to these rich responses (Noon, 2018). However, in this current study interviews were between 30-45 minutes as it was difficult for the young people to further expand on their experiences and give more detailed responses. This could have been because of the age of participants or due to the relationship with the researcher. Due to ethical reasons, it was decided to be more ethically sound to just meet with participants once to carry out the interview rather than developing a relationship with them over time. This was decided to avoid any further experiences of relational loss young people would experience when the research was over. However, because of this, it could have been that participants were less open and comfortable with the researcher, despite rapport building efforts at the beginning of each interview.

In relation to the interview process, it could be considered a limitation of the study that a pilot interview was not conducted to appraise the interview questions which could have provided additional information about their appropriateness in answering the research question (Aung et al., 2021). A pilot study was not conducted mainly due to the difficulties with recruitment experienced for this current study. Despite this, the interview guide was carefully constructed with regard to the school belonging literature and with feedback from my research supervisor. Furthermore, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the interviews were conducted flexibly with the participant in mind and so the lack of a pilot study seemed less detrimental to the study findings. Instead, reflections were made following each interview and the schedule was developed in response to these reflections.

On reflection, it is acknowledged that the research could have been strengthened through the use of co-production with participants. However, due to the difficulty with recruitment and time constraints of the project, this was not possible.

A further limitation of the current study could be that participants were selected by school staff. Due to the reliance of staff to share the study information with potential participants, it could be that participants were selected because they had a positive view of the school and so findings may only indicate positive experiences of school. Despite this potential flaw in the recruitment process, it is acknowledged that Participant 1 felt able to draw upon their negative school experiences meaning there were some differences in participants' experiences and perhaps staff were not only sharing information with young people who would speak highly of the school. However, it is worth noting that there have been some voices and experiences missed in the current study because of recruitment difficulties and relying on school staff as gatekeepers to participation.

Additionally, it is acknowledged that, as the researcher, I had a significant influence on the findings as I was the only person to analyse and interpret the findings. Therefore it could be considered a limitation of this study, in that my own prior knowledge and experience may have influenced the findings. However, the analysis was conducted with an awareness of my

own influence on interpretation, and I remained reflexive throughout the process. For instance, reflections and initial thoughts were written down as suggested by Smith et al. (2022) during the analysis process to try and remain open-minded when analysing the transcripts. I also ensured each transcript was analysed separately at around a week apart so that previous analyses did not influence the analysis of later interviews. Furthermore, I utilised support from my research supervisor and a fellow IPA researcher to support the analysis process and discuss interpretations and the themes generated. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that it would be impossible to completely separate my own views and experiences within the interview process but recognise that this is part of the hermeneutic circle of IPA.

Despite limitations, using both qualitative guidelines (Yardley, 2000) and IPA specific guidelines (Smith, 2011), the current study seems to be of an acceptable quality (see section 3.8 for further detail). For instance, the study clearly subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA through being phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic. The study centred lived experiences, that were analysed based on the participants' sense-making and my subsequent interpretation of the accounts. It was also idiographic as can be seen by the detailed interpretation of individual experiences in the findings chapter. It is also transparent by showing extracts from each participant in relation to each theme as well as evidence of each stage of the IPA process. As a result, the study has been able to reflect the nuance of school belonging experiences for the young people included in this study, which adds to the wider school belonging literature and provides further understanding of young people in care's experiences.

5.5 Implications for practice

School belonging has been found to contribute to a range of positive outcomes for young people (Allen et al., 2018). This study has helped to highlight what was important for the young people in care who took part in it, raising the voices of young people often missing in the literature (Johnson et al., 2020). The young people in care's experiences in this study might provide insight into how other young people in care may feel towards school

and what contributes to their sense of belonging in school. As a result, the following section will use the findings from the current study and the relevant literature drawn upon in the above section to discuss the implications for professional practice. This discussion will begin with the implications for schools followed by the implications for EP practice and finishing with implications at the LA/government level.

5.5.1 Implications for schools

A key implication for schools that has been highlighted in this study and previous research is the importance of gaining young people's views and allowing them to have a voice (Berridge, 2017). As has been shown in this study, young people in care are not a homogenous group and it is important to listen to their views and act upon them. In particular, young people in care often have things happen in their lives which are out of their control, where they do not have a say in decision making (Dixon et al., 2019). This therefore highlights an opportunity for schools to be a place where their voices are listened to, and young people can develop a sense of agency.

Furthermore, an understanding of young people in care's stories and their own identity within these narratives will be integral to understanding what support would be appropriate for them. This requires school staff to be sensitive towards young people's care status and their views upon this so that the young people do not feel stigmatised but instead feel valued and accepted for who they are. As a result, this warrants school practice that is flexible and person-centred to be able to meet young people in care's individual needs that align with their own views, interests and goals while bearing in mind their own unique histories and stories. By taking this approach in school, young people may begin to feel like they belong in because, by giving them agency, they may feel valued and accepted. Additionally, by listening to young people in care, staff will understand better what helps them to belong.

Moreover, the importance of relationships with others has been highlighted in this study and in the previous school belonging literature (Allen et al., 2021). As has been highlighted in research with adolescents, peer relationships are a key factor in students' school experiences and their sense

of school belonging. This appears to be no different for young people in care. As a result, school staff should support young people in developing friendships and supporting young people to meet other peers who they can relate to and who will understand them. In addition, it appears that a whole school ethos of acceptance seems important in promoting school belonging. Experience of peer rejection or not feeling accepted by others hinders belonging and can make the school environment feel unsafe (Goldweber et al., 2013). Therefore, steps should be taken to ensure the school culture is one that is accepting of difference and celebrates this, to minimise any difficulties between students.

As well as relationships between peers, this research, as well as others, has highlighted the importance of staff relationships in contributing to a feeling of school belonging (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). In this study, participants reflected on their relationships with one particular member of staff that supported their feelings of belonging towards school. It appeared that these staff supported the young people by being fair and showing genuine care and empathy towards them. The practice of ensuring young people have a 'key adult' has been developed in school to support those that would benefit from having someone they can rely on in school, such as children in care (Blackwood & Farrow, 2023). What this study highlights is the importance of young people choosing their own key adult organically through their own interactions and seeing who they are drawn to, rather than a key adult being placed upon them who they may not naturally connect with.

Finally, as has been suggested in the previous section, school can be a safe haven for young people in care and provide a connection, a sense of belonging that they may not feel in their home life (Höjer & Johansson, 2013; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018). Therefore, this study has highlighted, that in order to ensure school does feel safe for young people in care, it seems important to ensure it feels predictable and consistent. This could be in terms of the overall school routine as well as the support it provides. As well as the consistency, it also seems important, from this study, that school support is flexible to the needs of young people and that some 'one size fits all' behaviour policies may not be fit for purpose (Berridge, 2017; Miller et al., 2021). While the young people in this study were provided with support it

was perceived differently based on their identity as a young person in care. Therefore, school practice needs to be flexible to the young person, their needs and bearing in mind that there may be a lack of trust in adults to be able to support them based on their previous experiences.

5.5.2 Implications for educational psychologists

Educational psychologists are well placed to support young people in care develop a sense of school belonging due to their relationships with schools, their psychological knowledge and understanding of working within complex systems (Norwich et al., 2010; Osborne et al., 2009; Palmieri & La Salle, 2017; Watson & Kabler, 2012). Therefore, findings highlighted in this study and previous research indicate implications for the work of EPs in this area. For instance, EPs can advocate for, promote and highlight the voices of young people in care during their assessment work. This could contribute to supporting schools to developing a sense of belonging for these young people based on the views elicited by EPs.

Furthermore, EPs can take a multi-disciplinary approach in their work supporting young people in care so that a clearer understanding of young people's stories and identities can be gained (Osborne et al., 2009). This could include consultations with all professionals and key adults involved in the young person's life as well as including the young person, as appropriate, to gain a clear understanding of the young person's experiences. EPs could ask young people and/or their key adults how they feel about their care status and how they identify with it so that support is sensitive to their context and their feelings towards their care status.

The importance of young people's identities and their own unique stories, as highlighted in this research, is something that EP services could reflect on more broadly as part of their work to promote equality, inclusion and diversity. EP services could reflect on how they are sensitive to unique identities and experiences in their work to ensure support and interventions are appropriate and suitable to individuals.

Additionally, EPs can highlight the importance of school belonging in their assessment and consultation work, by exploring how young people in care may feel or not feel they belong in school. This could be done by

exploring factors that contribute to school belonging highlighted in this study and others such as accepting and trusting relationships with peers and staff, promotion of agency and autonomy, flexibility of practice and developing safety through predictable and consistent practice. The importance of these factors could also be raised in whole school training to develop school staff's understanding and subsequent practice.

In addition, EPs are well placed to work with schools to develop strategies, practice and policies that work for the schools and their own practice that are based on evidence and psychological theory. Action research could be a way of EPs using their skills and knowledge to ensure school belonging is being promoted and has a positive impact for young people in care that is sensitive to their own unique contexts.

As well as supporting young people in care specifically, EPs could use the findings of this research to support other vulnerable groups such as those who have had disruptive home lives but may not necessarily be in care, those with SEND or those from a minority background. In particular, EPs could consider school belongingness when carrying out Educational, Health and Care Needs Assessments as part of their statutory duty. This could support young people with SEND to feel included, accepted and as though they belong in school.

5.5.3 Implications for LAs and wider government

A key implication for LAs and wider government, that has been highlighted in this research and previous research, on school belonging for young people in care is the importance of having a stable school experience (Johnson et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2021). The young people in this study had experienced educational stability during secondary school which may have contributed to their experiences of school belonging. Findings highlighted that being familiar with people, lessons and the environment contributed to participants feeling safe and like they belonged. As a result, measures should be taken to ensure, as much as possible, young people in care can experience educational stability in order to support their feelings of belonging in school and the subsequent benefits on their emotional wellbeing this can have.

5.6 Implications for future research

As identified in the literature review chapter, a focus on young people in care and school belonging was limited within the literature. As a result, there are many possible areas of future research that would be worthy of exploration. The current study kept the definition of 'young people in care' broad and so this study included young people with different 'care' experiences. It may be of interest to carry out studies that focus more specifically on certain groups of young people in care such as young people in foster care, residential care, kinship care etc. This may ensure findings are specific to the 'in care' context of participants. A finding from the current study was how school belonging may be influenced by the 'in care' status and how young people identify with their 'in care' status. Further research could therefore explore more specifically about how school belonging experiences are mediated by care status.

Furthermore, the current study focused only on school belonging experiences in mainstream secondary schools and as a result other school contexts are currently missed in the literature. Future research could explore school belonging for young people in care in different educational settings such as alternative provisions and specialist settings. This would capture the voices of different young people in care with different school setting experiences and contexts.

Additionally, the participants included in this study were all still currently in school and so findings may have been influenced by their current and previous school experience rather than reflections on their complete school experience. A retrospective study with care leavers may provide a wider view on secondary school experience overall, although it's recognised that there are limitations on reflecting on experiences retrospectively that may be influenced by their subsequent life experiences.

Finally, as mentioned in the implications for EPs, action research may be of interest in this area due to school belonging being uniquely perceived by students and schools based on their individual and unique contexts. Working with young people in care to develop school practice that would help

to promote school belonging could ensure strategies are sensitive to the views and contexts of the young people in care at that school. This approach to research has been successfully conducted by Francis et al. (2021) with young people in care regarding their transition into secondary school.

6. Conclusion

The importance of school belonging has been widely acknowledged in the literature but research exploring how young people in care experience school belonging was limited. Therefore, this study explored the school belonging experiences of young people in care in secondary school through the use of semi-structured individual interviews with three young people in care. The study adopted an IPA methodology that aligned with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research. The following research question was addressed:

How do young people in care make sense of their school belonging experiences in secondary school?

Four GETs were generated from the interview transcripts that related to the importance of relationships, feeling safe to engage, perception of support and school being a safe place to escape to. School belonging seem to be linked to having relationships that provided participants with a sense of safety and acceptance to be their authentic selves. In particular, friendships and connections to a key adult in school seemed to provide the emotional support participants needed in school.

Furthermore, participants linked their engagement and enjoyment of lessons to their sense of school belonging. It seemed that the acceptance and safety felt through relationships with others enabled participants to be more confident to engage in school activities whereas if a sense of peer rejection was experienced this hindered both participation in school activities and a sense of belonging in school.

Moreover, perception of support seemed to be influenced by participants' experiences of feeling valued and understood as individuals which also impacted the extent to which they felt they belonged in school. Importantly, it seemed that participants' identities as young people in care

impacted their perception of support they received. Those young people who were comfortable with their care status seemed to perceive support more positively compared to the participant who did not seem to want to identify as a young person in care. Finally, school belonging for the participants seemed to reflect feeling as though school was safe through experiencing stability and consistency in their overall school experience. This seemed particularly important to two participants who acknowledged school as an escape from their disruptive home experiences.

These findings highlighted that much of the participants' school belonging experiences aligned with the wider school belonging literature that explored different groups of young people's school belonging experiences in secondary school, with some key extensions that may reflect participants' care status. These extensions included the importance of a key adult, sensitivity of support towards their identity as a young person in care and the importance of school being an escape to provide a sense of safety. As a result, the findings hold key implications for those working with young people in care and those who are responsible for their wellbeing such as school staff, educational psychologists, social workers, foster carers, residential care workers, Virtual School caseworkers and the LA where they reside. These include supporting the development of positive relationships with both peers and staff where young people are accepted for who they are, understanding the young person and their identity in order to support them sensitively and appropriately as well as ensuring young people in care receive a stable and consistent school environment.

This study has provided an important insight into the school belonging experiences of young people in care that had not been addressed using an IPA approach previously. Due to the limited research within this area, it is suggested the future research continues to explore the school belonging experiences of young people in care to understand how different contexts and experiences influence school belonging.

Reflexive commentary

Overall, it has been a privilege to conduct this research with young people in care, highlighting their school belonging experiences, which are rarely seen within the school belonging literature. The process of conducting this research has impacted me both professionally and personally. I am grateful to the participants in this study who took their time to share honestly and openly their school belonging experiences as well as their 'in care' experiences, which I appreciate may have been difficult to do. It has highlighted to me the insight young people in care can provide and how it should be a priority to gain their voices and experiences so that support can be sensitive and relevant to what they need. I will therefore endeavour to share the important work of listening to young people in care's views, perceptions and stories in my work as a TEP and future EP.

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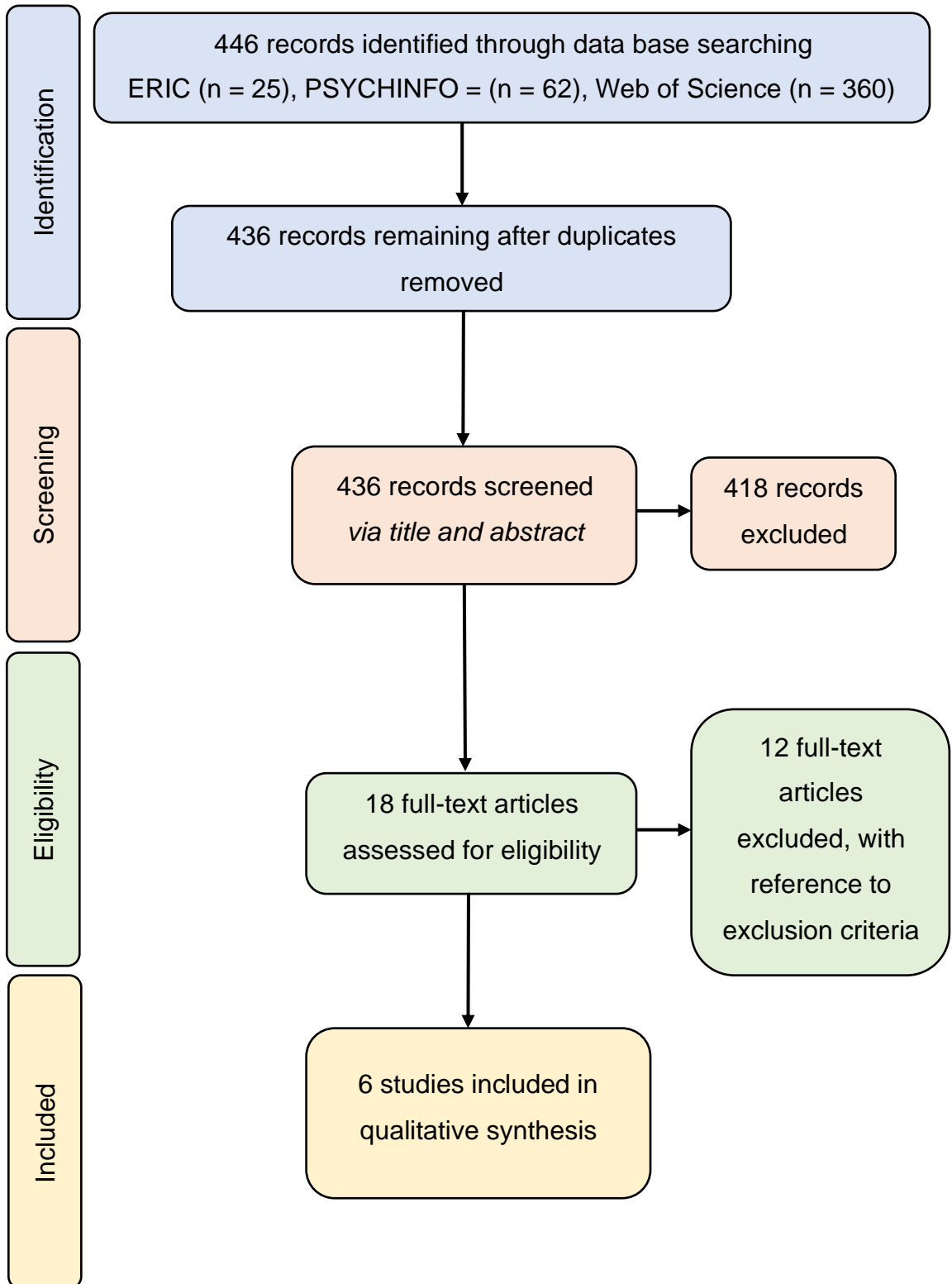
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Appendix 1
PRISMA flow diagram



Appendix 2

List of search terms

Search terms were applied, then limiters added to meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The search was completed in July 2022.

Search Terms	Electronic Database	Limiters Applied	Articles Retrieved
"school belonging" OR "school connectedness" OR "school affiliation" OR "school membership" OR "sense of belonging"	ERIC	Peer reviewed	25
		English language	
		UK	
AND views OR perceptions OR experiences	PsycINFO	Peer reviewed	62
		Journal article	
		Qualitative studies	
AND "high school students" OR "secondary pupils" OR "secondary students" OR "adolescents" OR "young people"	Web of Science	Articles	360
		English language	
		UK universities	

Appendix 3

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explores adolescents' experiences of school belonging in their own words• Empirical studies only collecting qualitative data• Focuses on the adolescent age group (11-18 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited use of adolescents' own constructions of school belonging• Studies using quantitative methods of data collection• Focuses on students in primary school settings or at university

Appendix 4

Weight of Evidence A (methodological quality): CASP scoring detailed example

Items	Sobitan (2022)	Answer
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes - to understand how refugee students experience school belonging in the Northeast of England.	✓
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes - seeks to interpret subjective experiences.	✓
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes – explained critical realist approach of research underpinned reasoning for qualitative research design.	✓
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Yes – recruitment process transparently explained, recruited through Local Authority organisations that support refugee families with education.	✓
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes – use of semi-structured interviews to encourage free and open discussions.	✓
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Yes – acknowledgement of research influence, detailed researcher’s potential similarities to participants.	✓
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Yes – ethically approved by the Newcastle University Ethics Committee and explained key ethical considerations.	✓
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Yes - description of the analysis process, clear how the themes were derived from the data.	✓

9. Is there a clear statement of findings? Yes - findings, limitations, and areas for further study were made explicit. ✓
10. How valuable is the research? Discussed implications for educational psychology practice, compared it to existing literature and identified new areas where research is necessary. ✓

Appendix 5

Weight of Evidence A (methodological quality): CASP overall ratings

Items	Nind et al., (2012)	Sancho & Cline (2012)	Cartmell & Bond (2015)	Craggs & Kelly (2018)	Myles et al., (2019)	Sobitan (2022)
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	x	x	x	✓	x	✓
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. How valuable is the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
WoE A Judgement	High	High	High	High	High	High

Key:

x = no ✓ = yes - = can't tell

Appendix 6

Weight of Evidence B (methodological relevance): Criteria and judgement

Criteria	Nind et al., (2012)	Sancho & Cline (2012)	Cartmell & Bond (2015)	Craggs & Kelly (2018)	Myles et al., (2019)	Sobitan (2022)
Qualitative methods of data collection used.	Yes – photo elicitation, digital comic strip journeys and video diaries.	Yes – semi-structured interviews	Yes – semi-structured interviews	Yes – individual phenomenological interviews	Yes – semi-structured interviews	Yes – semi-structured interviews
Robust qualitative data analysis.	Yes – thematic analysis (TA).	Yes – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Yes – TA	Yes – IPA	Yes – TA	Yes – IPA
WoE B Judgement	High	High	High	High	High	High

Appendix 7

Weight of Evidence C (topical relevance): Criteria and judgement

Criteria	Nind et al., (2012)	Sancho & Cline (2012)	Cartmell & Bond (2015)	Craggs & Kelly (2018)	Myles et al., (2019)	Sobitan (2022)
Focus solely on obtaining the school belonging experiences and perceptions of young people in secondary school in the UK.	No – also included participants’ general school experiences as well as school belonging experiences.	Yes – interviews focused on school belonging experiences only.	Yes – interviews focused on what helped and hindered school belonging.	Yes – focused on experiences of school belonging and what would enhance it.	Yes – interviews focused on perceptions and experiences of school belonging.	Yes – interviews focused on school belonging experiences.
WoE C Judgement	Medium	High	High	High	High	High

Appendix 8

Weight of evidence D (overall appraisal judgement)

Authors	WoE A	WoE B	WoE C	WoE D
Nind et al., (2012)	High	High	Medium	High
Sancho & Cline (2012)	High	High	High	High
Cartmell & Bond (2015)	High	High	High	High
Craggs & Kelly (2018)	High	High	High	High
Myles et al., (2019)	High	High	High	High
Sobitan (2022)	High	High	High	High

Appendix 9

Interpretation comparisons of synthesised studies

Nind et al. (2012)	Sancho & Cline (2012)	Cartmell & Bond (2015)	Craggs & Kelly (2018)	Myles et al. (2019)	Sobitan (2022)
'the school's policy, caring ethos, positive alternatives to restraint and exclusion' (p. 646) <i>Environmental safety</i>	'the larger size of secondary school was seen by some pupils as fostering more of a sense of belonging' (p. 68) <i>Environmental safety</i>	'INA pupils' having opportunities to develop friends with peers in school and them not being on their own' (p. 97) <i>Environmental safety</i>	'Going starting boxing...it's...taken away playing on the Xbox or whatever' (p. 66) <i>Environmental safety</i>	'It's just a place to go like away from everybody and people from student support run it... So we sit there as a place to go and they chat about like 'how's your week's going' and that's a nice thing to do' (p. 14)	'Participants also expressed confusion over school rules about behaviour and bullying as these sometimes appeared inconsistent' (p. 10) <i>Lack of Environmental safety</i>
'Heidi identified three key spaces within Kahlo as best bits; she valued tidy classrooms, the	'The larger secondary school setting was also seen as helpful in giving pupils opportunities to	'you know you belong to this school if you go to school and	find some new friends; she, erm, she showed me where the place is where other people like stay at break time and lunchtime... I had a		'I see my friend, the student hurt

comfort offered by a communal space inclusive of the whole school community and understood the R&R room space as supporting the students' independent regulation of emotions, behaviour and learning' (p. 651)	work and make friends with a larger range of people' (p. 68)	the teachers... help you much. If you do something good at this school they call home and say your son has done something good' (p. 96)	good day that day' (p. 67)	<i>Environmental safety</i>	him, and teacher look at them, and they didn't do anything.' (p. 10)
<i>Environmental safety</i>	<i>Environmental safety</i>	<i>Relatedness</i>	'having an effective approach to bullying and a range of channels for reporting it' (p. 69)	<i>Environmental safety</i>	<i>Lack of Environmental safety</i>
'relationships in which 'we all	'it was noted that relationships with peers had particular salience in their responses to the interview questions so that it was a central theme in all of the accounts' (p. 68)	'The teachers are good with you... they have a laugh with you, talk with you' (p. 96)	'Being able to make friends at the receiver school as by far the most prominent theme associated with a sense of school belonging, mentioned by all participants, and was positioned as an essential precursor' (p. 62)	<i>Relatedness</i>	'Thando expressed how being part of a sports team in school could be beneficial to belonging' (p 10)
	<i>Relatedness</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>		<i>Relatedness</i>	<i>Environmental safety</i>
				'Like you sort of have to have friends so you can go around with them and if you don't	'... great teachers treated me well, which helped me

look out for each other' (p. 646)	'but like we're together we have conversations together and all that and we can share ideas and things, problems you might have and so I feel together and I could trust everyone in my form' (p. 68)	'importance of being culturally sensitive to different perceptions of belonging and how it is best supported in schools' (p. 97)	<i>Relatedness</i>	have friends there's nowhere really to go' (p. 13)	to integrate with them and learn the language quickly' (p. 10)
<i>Relatedness</i>			'I wanted to move school where I could get some friends and be more socialised' (p 62)	<i>Relatedness</i>	<i>Relatedness</i>
'Keira's identification with Angie was highly significant as she had internalised Angie's expectations, moral code and discourse' (p. 650)			<i>Relatedness</i>	'true friends...they actually understand and just don't not like me for me autism' (p. 13)	'having peers with shared background and experiences was also essential to safety' (p.)
<i>Relatedness</i>		<i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Relatedness</i>
	'This morning it was really cool and I felt like I fitted in because everyone was chatting to me				'Participants also experienced safety when they sensed that others respected their cultural and religious identity' (p. 11)
'A school she likes was one where she 'felt listened to and			'the head teacher acknowledging he was now part of the receiver school helped him to settle in' (p. 64)	'It's like wanting to be there and feeling that people want	
			<i>Acceptance</i>		

given a chance' (p. 647) <i>Acceptance</i>	and sometimes the people in our form are really funny' (p. 69) <i>Relatedness</i>		you there... I guess it's just nice to have people to talk to and sort of like realise you're there and... kind of interact with' (p. 14) <i>Acceptance</i>	<i>Acceptance</i>
'I don't think Angie and Kath [Kahlo teachers] really read my file. I think they got to know me for me' (p. 649) <i>Acceptance</i>	'The people I've met, I think they've accepted me and I've accepted them and so like we're friends now and so like I'm getting along with people and so like that makes me feel a bit happier cos I know I've got friends who have		'use existing skills to make a positive contribution appeared to facilitate a sense of school belonging' (p. 66) <i>Autonomy</i>	'enhanced belonging when the various aspects of their identity and experiences were respected and affirmed within the school' (p. 12) <i>Acceptance</i>
'choice of meals' (p. 646) <i>Autonomy</i>			'Now I'm a peer mentor... Like, I think it's made me a better person, because now I know that because I've been through things I could help people not go through it' (p. 66) <i>Autonomy</i>	'a general lack of control in school resulted in frustration and also mental health difficulties' (p. 8) <i>Lack of autonomy</i>

accepted me' (p.
69)

Acceptance

'Cos I've only just
started here and
all the teachers
like know me' (p.
69)

Acceptance

'Obed also
expressed that
contributing in
some way to the
school was
important to his
school belonging'
(p. 10)

Autonomy

Appendix 10
Ethical approval letter



School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1421R**

Monday 25th April 2021

Dear Erin Rodgerand Russell Hounslow,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'An exploration of young people in care's experience of school belonging'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely




Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 11

Initial information sheet for young people


SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Initial Information Sheet for Participants



UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA


KEY DETAILS


Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care's experiences of school belonging. 

Ethics Approval Number:





Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)




Hello, my name is Erin Rodger, and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Nottingham. 

My Research Project

- I am doing a research project exploring young people in care's experiences of feeling connected to school and I would like to invite you to take part in this project. 
- This will involve meeting with me and chatting about how you feel about school and your experiences of being included, accepted and supported. I will also talk to you about whether you haven't felt connected to school and what that experience has been like for you. 
- We can meet at your home or at school – wherever you would feel most comfortable. You can also have an adult with you if you'd prefer. 
- I would like to talk to you for around 45 minutes, but this can be longer if you would like to. 


Interested in taking part?

If you would be interested in taking part and would like to find out more, please let the adult responsible for your care know. 

Please feel free to get in touch through the email address at the top of this page.


Appendix 12

Initial information sheet for adults



SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Initial Information Sheet for Adults with Parental and Caring Responsibilities



The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

KEY DETAILS

Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care's experiences of school belonging.

Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

This is an invitation for the young person in your care to take part in a research project which will explore young people in care's experiences of school belonging.

- The research will involve the young person in your care taking part in an interview, to talk about the extent to which they feel included and part of their school.
- The interview will begin with some activities to help the young person to feel at ease, they will then be asked a series of open-ended questions about their school experiences.
- The interview will last around 45 mins but may take less or more time depending on how the young person is engaging with the interview.

NEXT STEPS


If you would like to find out some more information about the research, please contact the researcher via the email address presented above.

Appendix 13

Detailed information sheet for young people


SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Detailed Information Sheet for Participants



UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

KEY DETAILS


Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care's experiences of school belonging. 


Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)


Who am I?




Hello, my name is Erin Rodger, and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Nottingham. 

This means that I work with young people, their families and school staff to support their education.


What is this study about?

- As part of my training, I am doing a research project about young people who are in care and want to find out about their experiences of feeling connected to school.
- I hope that this project will help schools to understand what young people in care experience in school and how they can provide the best support for young people in care. 

Why am I being asked to take part?

- I am looking for young people in care who attend a mainstream secondary school and would be interested in talking to me about their experiences of school. 

Do I have to take part?

- No, you don't have to take part in this study if you don't want to. 

If I take part, what will I have to do?

- You have the option of meeting with me first before you take part to ask any questions you have.
- If you agree to take part, I will ask you about your feelings towards school, whether you feel connected to it or not and why that might be.



Where will we meet?

- We can meet wherever you feel most comfortable. We will discuss this when you have agreed to take part.

How long will we meet for?

- We will meet for around 45 mins, but this can be longer if you would like.

Who will be there?

- You can have a trusted adult with you in the room or have them in a nearby room.

Can I stop the meeting?

- Yes, you can stop the meeting at any time if you feel uncomfortable or you do not wish to continue for any reason.

Recording our meeting

- I will record our meeting using a voice recorder, so that I can remember what you have told me.
- Nobody else will listen to the recording.
- The recordings will be deleted after I have transcribed them.



What will happen after I have taken part?

- After I have talked to all the young people that have agreed to take part in my study, I will write about what I have found out.
- I will not use your real name or any information that lets people know who you are.
- If you wish, I can meet with you again to go through the findings or I can send you a summary report.



What if I change my mind about being involved?

- It is okay if you change your mind about being involved about this research study.
- You can withdraw from the study at any time.
- Please let an adult know and they can get in touch with me, or you can email me yourself.




What next?

- Thank you for taking the time read this information sheet.
- If you'd like to take part in the project, please sign the consent form.
- Please do not hesitate to get in touch through my email, which is at the top of this document, if you have any questions.




Appendix 14

Detailed information sheet for adults



SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Detailed Information Sheet for Adults with Parental and Caring Responsibilities



The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

KEY DETAILS

Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care's experiences of school belonging.

Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)

WHO AM I?

- My name is Erin Rodger, and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Nottingham.
- Educational psychologists work with young people, their families and school staff to help overcome any barriers young people may have to their education so that they can reach their full potential.
- As part of my training, I must undertake a research project which is detailed below.

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

- This study seeks to explore the extent to which young people in care feeling included and part of their school.
- I am specifically looking to talk to young people in Years 8-11 who attend a mainstream secondary school.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?

- You and the young person in your care can meet with me or have a phone call before agreeing to take part.
- If you and the young person in your care consent to take part, the young person will be asked to take part in an interview with myself to talk about their school experiences.
- The interview can take place wherever the young person feels most comfortable.
- The young person can have a trusted adult present if they wish to.
- I have an enhanced DBS clearance and can assure you that all the work will be carried out professionally and sensitively.

- The interview will last around 45 mins but may take less or more time depending on how the young person is engaging with the interview.
- The interview will be recorded so that in depth analysis of the interview can take place.
- Audio recordings will be deleted once they have been transcribed.
- All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only.
- It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act.

IS IT VOLUNTARY?

- Yes, participation in this study is completely voluntary and the young person in your care is under no obligation to take part.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER PARTICIPATION?

- After the interview is complete, the data will be analysed and used for research purposes.
- I will provide a summary of the research findings to you and the young person in your care.

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE CHANGE OUR MINDS?

- You or the young person in your care are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

WHAT NEXT?

- If you are happy for the young person in your care to take part in this research, please sign the consent form provided.
- Enclosed is an information sheet and consent form for the young person in your care. Please take the time to discuss these forms with them.
- I am offering to meet with young people before they consent to take part in the project if they wish to do so. In this meeting, I can explain fully what the research will involve. If this is something your young person would like to do, then please let me know.
- If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask.
- I can be contacted before, during or after participation through the contact details at the top of this document.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk


Thank you for taking the time to consider this information.

Appendix 15

Consent form for young people

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Consent Form for Participants



The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM • CHINA • MALAYSIA

KEY DETAILS

Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care's experiences of school belonging. i

Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)

Please answer the following questions

You should answer these questions independently.

Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?	YES/NO
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?	YES/NO
Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)?	YES/NO
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? (At any time and without giving a reason)	YES/NO
I give permission for my interview to be recorded using a voice recording device.	YES/NO
Do you agree to take part in this study?	YES/NO

Signed consent

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time."


Signature of the participant: _____ Date: _____

Name (in block capitals): _____

I have explained the study to the above participant, and they have agreed to take part.


Signature of researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix 16
Consent form for adults



SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Consent Form for Adults with Parental and Caring Responsibilities



The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

KEY DETAILS

Title of Project:
An exploration of young people in care’s experiences of school belonging.

Ethics Approval Number:

Researcher: Erin Rodger (erin.rodger@nottingham.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Russell Hounslow (russell.hounslow@nottingham.ac.uk)

PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

These questions should be answered independently by adults with parental and caring responsibilities for the participant.

Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?	YES/NO
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?	YES/NO
Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)?	YES/NO
Do you understand that the young person in your care is free to withdraw from the study? (At any time and without giving a reason)	YES/NO
I give permission for the young person in my care’s data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected.	YES/NO
I give permission for the young person in my care’s interview to be recorded using a voice recording device.	YES/NO
Do you agree for the young person in your care to take part in this study?	YES/NO

Participant Details

Age:	Ethnicity:
School year group:	Time spent in care (in years):
Gender:	No. of atypical school moves:

SIGNED CONSENT

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree for the young person in my care to take part. I understand that the young person and I are free to withdraw at any time."

Name (in block capitals):

Date:

Relationship to young person:

Signature:

I have explained the study to the above person, and they have agreed for the young person in their care to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Appendix 17

Interview guide

The following questions acted as a guide to structure the interview process, with questions in bold being the initial focus question and questions underneath acting as prompts. It is acknowledged that the interviews were semi-structured so direction was taken by participants and so how, when or if questions were asked in the interview were determined by the individuals taking part in the study.

Questions to prompt:

- *Could you tell me more about that?*
- *Why?*
- *How?*
- *Can you tell me what you were thinking?*
- *How did you feel?*
- *What is it about...*

1. What is it like being a student at this school?

- a. Can you tell me what a typical day looks like for you?
- b. What stands out to you?
- c. What do you like about this school?
- d. What do you dislike about this school?

2. Tell me about your school experiences so far.

- a. How would you describe these experiences?
- b. What was it like moving from primary school to here?
 - i. How did that feel?
 - ii. Can you describe the similarities or differences between school experiences in primary compared to secondary school?

3. Can you tell me what you think it means to belong to school?

- a. How would that feel?

4. How important do you feel it is to belong at school?

- a. Why do you feel this way?
- b. How important is school in your life?

5. Do you feel like you belong to this school?

- a. How do you feel about school?
 - i. Why do you feel this way?
- b. What experiences have led you to feel this way?
 - i. When are the times you feel like you belong?
 - 1. What were you doing? What were others doing?
How did you feel?
 - ii. When are the times that you feel like you don't belong?
 - 1. What were you doing? What were others doing?
How did you feel?
- c. Can you tell me how you felt when you first moved here?
 - i. How has it changed?

6. How do you think your experiences differ to others?

- a. Why do you think that is?
- b. How are your experiences different/similar to young people who are not in care?
- c. How have your care experiences impacted how you feel you belong at school?

Appendix 18

Extract of Participant 1's coded transcript

Experiential statement	#	Original transcript	Exploratory notes
			Descriptive/linguistic/conceptual
Associates belonging with being able to work to your best ability which comes from feeling comfortable.	283	I: Do you think it's important to feel like you belong somewhere?	Feels it's important to belong so that you can work hard When you don't feel it you won't behave and do the work Feeling uncomfortable makes them not want to engage in lessons Mental barrier to taking in information when not comfortable, no learning
	284	P1: Yeah because if you don't feel like you belong you're not gonna	
	285	work as well like if you don't feel comfortable, you're not going to	
	286	behave, you're not going to do what you actually need to do.	
	287	I: Yeah, why do you think that is?	
	288	P1: Like if I don't feel comfortable somewhere I'm not gonna start	
	289	putting my hands up and answering questions and I'm not going to take	
	290	in information which means I'm not going to learn	
	291	I: Yeah that's really interesting. Is there any erm, lessons that feel better	
	292	than others in terms of being able to put your hands up, feel settled, feel	
Feeling uncomfortable prevents engagement in lessons and subsequent learning.	293	like you're able to learn	Contradiction – no one that knows them properly in psychology so can understand it Even though they don't understand English, they feel comfortable 'Not the worst' – feels like they have some ability 'Not the best' – downplaying their abilities? Feels able to engage in those lessons because of understanding them
	294	P1: Psychology and English	
	295	I: Yeah, what is it about those lessons that feels better?	
	296	P1: Psychology is, there is no one in there which I know properly. It's	
	297	like there's one of my friends in there but they sit away from me so I	
Friends as a distraction from meaningful engagement in lessons.	298	understand psychology to a certain degree and that. English I don't	
	299	understand it and I can, I'm not the worst and I'm not the best but yeah	
	300	I: So those two subjects are the places that you don't feel	
	301	P1: No they are the ones where I feel I can raise my hand, answer	
	302	questions, that kind of crap	
	303	I: And that's kind of because you understand	
304	P1: Yeah I understand them ones a bit more		
305			

Belonging is increased when you understand lessons.	306 I: Any lessons where you feel like you shut down or you don't feel like you belong there? 307 308 P1: Maths and health and social 309 I: Yeah what is it about those two?	Less belonging in lessons with disruptive peers who make fun of others Fear of being ridiculed? Prevents engagement, makes them feel uncomfortable? 'All that crap' Feeling like a target, trying to not draw attention to themselves?
Peers who make fun of them and others prevent belonging and engagement for fear of being ridiculed.	310 P1: They've both got idiots in who, they're idiots in the fact that they 311 take the mick out of pupil for stupid stuff not the fact that they're 312 physically stupid but then if they're getting the answers right all the 313 time, putting their hand up and all that crap, I'm not going to put mine 314 up 315 I: Yeah because they're being mean to people? 316 P1: They'll find some way to take the mick out of me for it so I just 317 leave it 318 I: So yeah if you said something they'd find something to pick at. And 319 the teachers what do they do? 320 P1: Tell them to shut up basically, they shut up for like 5 minutes then it 321 carries on 322 I: Sounds really annoying. Erm so it's mainly in maths and health and 323 social care. Do you think erm any other kids in the school feel 324 differently to you? Either they feel like yeah they love the school they 325 really belong here	Teacher intervention only helpful in the immediate, doesn't stop it completely
Teacher intervention only temporarily resolves issues.	326 P1: I don't think any kids love the school. I think they all just come 327 because they have to. 328 I: Oh really, can you tell me a bit more about that?	Necessity of having to come to school rather than loving it
Students do not go to school because they want to but out of necessity.	329 P1: Because the amount of time that kids complain about school, the 330 rules, how the kids that deserve to get punished don't get punished 331 I: Hmm, sounds like you feel like a lot of things are unfair, in this 332 school. Do you think it's just this school, do you feel like, do you know 333 anybody in other secondary schools that like it? 334 P1: No I don't know anyone	Everyone complains about the rules Students not getting fairly punished Feels most people don't like his school

Unfairness of punishment creates a distrust in staff.	<p>335 I: You don't know anyone. So you feel like there's a general feeling in 336 this school that kids don't really like it.</p> <p>337 P1: Yeah</p> <p>338 I: Do you think anyone struggles more than anyone else?</p> <p>339 P1: There are quite a few groups that get the mick taken out of them. 340 Like my friend, my friend group is one of them. Mainly that's because 341 they speak to me. For some reason I come to a school where kids don't 342 like me.</p>	<p>Some groups are vulnerable to being picked on Their friendship group are vulnerable because of their association with them Feels others do not like them 'For some reason' – not sure why?</p>
Feels responsible for their friends being targeted because other students do not like them.	<p>343 I: Oh no</p> <p>344 P1: There's two kids in my friend group who they don't speak to me or 345 another guy in our group they'd be way more, everyone would, they'd 346 be able to get on with everyone but because they speak to me, they, me 347 and the other guy they get the mick taken out of them, they have things 348 used against them and they get used against us lot so</p> <p>349 I: Oh gosh, what do you think it is why people don't like you?</p> <p>350 P1: Well primary and like how I reacted, people expect a reaction out of 351 me now</p>	<p>Feel like friends wouldn't get picked on if they didn't speak to them</p> <p>People assume they will react how they did in primary school – reason for why people do not like them Primary school experiences following them into secondary, difficult to change reputation and other's views of them Feels like if they acted differently in primary people would act differently towards them now</p>
Reputation from primary school is negatively impacting peer relationships in secondary school.	<p>352 I: Ah you feel like it's your history then?</p> <p>353 P1: Yeah well I know if I didn't give them a reaction in primary they 354 wouldn't be doing it now, simple. They would have realised I'm not 355 going to do anything so there's no point doing it.</p> <p>356 I: Yeah so do you feel it's hard to shake your past history. Yeah and 357 they are still trying to get a reaction from you</p> <p>358 P1: Yeah that's why they keep doing it until they get a reaction, which 359 is big enough to where someone will get hurt</p>	<p>Others trying to get a reaction from them, leads to someone getting hurt</p>

Appendix 19

Extract of Participant 2's coded transcript

Experiential statement	#	Original transcript	Exploratory notes Descriptive/linguistic/conceptual
Belonging is a feeling of familiarity, safety, comfort.	65	I: Yeah, can you think of how you would describe the feeling that you	Belonging is feeling at home Home – comfort, familiar
	66	belong?	
	67	P2: Like you feel at home	
	68	I: How would you describe feeling like you belong at school?	
	69	P2: Like it's a safe place for something innit	Belonging is feeling safe I guess – not sure?
	70	I: How important do you think it is to feel like that at school?	
Belonging to school is important as it's a significant period of your life.	71	P2: I guess it's important because like you're basically there for most of	Important to belong to school because of the length of time you spend there
	72	your what five years ten years of your life so it has to be good.	
	73	I: Why do you think it is important?	
	74	P2: Because some kids don't like to be at home so their type of escape	School as an escape from home realities
	75	is basically school	
Belonging to school is important to 'escape' difficult home situations.	76	I: Hmm so yeah that safe space. So would you say, is it important for	Important to belong to school to gain an education. School has always been an escape for them, due to their upbringing
	77	any other reason do you think?	
	78	P2: Apart from your education, I don't. I mean cus of the way I was	
	79	brought up and like my real family, my type of escape was to go to	
Belonging to school is important to gain an education.	80	school. So in my head it's just basically an escape.	Feels like they belong Has always felt this way
	81	I: Yeah so something else to think about it. So has school been that safe	
	82	space for you would you say?	
	83	P2: Yeah	
	84	I: Cool. So, do you feel like you belong here at school?	
Feels like they belong to school	85	P2: Yeah	
	86		

because it has been an 'escape' for her.	87 88	I: Yeah. And do you feel like you've always felt that way? Has it changed from Y7 to 11?	Not really – is there more they aren't saying here?
	89	P2: Not really	
	90	I: Yeah, you've just always felt like you've kinda fitted in	
	91	P2: Yeah	
	92	I: That's really nice to hear. So do you feel any different in compared to	
	93	your primary school to secondary would you say there's been	
	94	differences	
	95	P2: Teachers	
	96	I: Okay	
	97	P2: Definitely	
	98	I: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?	
	99	P2: Basically now because we're like doing specified subjects you get	
	100	different teachers for every single subject and in primary school it's just	More teachers in secondary school
	101	one. And also in primary school you have a lot smaller class like you	More students in secondary school
	102	don't have like what's it called a hundred and 50 students in one class	
	103	you have 30. Whereas in a year group you have x amount of people but	
Secondary school provides more opportunities for finding close peer relationships with people who are like you because of the amount of students there are.	104	in a class you have thirty which is like basically like primary school but	
	105	when you're all grouped together basically like a massive change	Big change from primary to secondary
	106	I: So do you think that helps with belonging or doesn't help with	
	107	belonging?	
	108	P2: I mean you can find a bunch of friends that are like similar to you	More students = more change of gaining friends
	109	so I guess that's a positive whereas in primary school you just have like	Secondary school provides more opportunities to gain friends who are similar
	110	a small friend group because you all grew up together but like at the	
	111	same time there's only 30 people in that classroom whereas when	
	112	you're in like Y7 and da de da de da there's 150 people more than that	
	113	and obviously the more people there is the bigger the friend group	Important to have friends who are similar to you, important to have a bigger support network
	114	I: Yeah, can you think of any specific experiences that have made you	
	115	feel like yes I belong here?	

Important to have peers you can relate to.	116 P2: I don't think so 117 I: Nothing specific 118 P2: No 119 I: Hmm, just kind of a feeling	No specific experiences that relate to their feelings of school belonging
Important to have a large support network of peers.	120 P2: It's like, it's just there 121 I: It's just there 122 P2: It's just there 123 I: Like it's always there	Repetition – 'it's just there' School belonging as a concept difficult to put into words
School belonging is 'just there', not an experience, not a feeling.	124 P2: Yeah. Like I don't feel, I mean I do feel like I belong but at the same time its always felt like that from Y7 so 125 126 I: Like you didn't know any different 127 P2: Yeah 128 I: Do you feel like it's not something you have to think about really 129 because it's just there 130 P2: Yeah	Always feeling like you belong means you don't think about it – automatic, natural
Having a sense of belonging towards school because of the stability of it always being there.	131 I: I see and how do you feel about teachers? 132 P2: Yeah well if I don't like a teacher they'll know it. 133 I: Have you noticed certain things that you don't like, certain things you do like 134 135 P2: Hmm I mean if I don't like something, they will know, if I like it they will know as well. 136 137 I: Hmm how do you think they know? 138 P2: You can just tell by my face and by the way I kinda speak to them if I don't like it 139	Teachers will know if they don't like them Confident to express their own views/feelings
Friends are the most important aspect of school.	140 I: What would you say is your, the most important thing about school to you? (pause) so for example is it what it looks like, is it the people like the teachers your friends, is it lessons, is it clubs? 141 142 143 P2: I think its mainly my friends. 144 I: It's your friends?	Expresses views through facial expressions and tone of voice – not necessarily being explicit Mainly – all about friends

	145	P2: Yeah	Friends are the most important thing about school
	146	I: Tell me a bit more about that	We are all goof people – weird, odd
	147	P2: How? Like what do you mean?	United in their similarities
Feels connected to friends through their shared oddness.	148	I: Tell me about your friends, why you think it's important at school	Is being smart important to them?
	149	P2: Basically me and my friends yeah we are all a bunch of goof	Comparing their friendship
	150	people. Some of them are smarter than the others which is fair and I'm	Identity as the loudest not the smartest?
	151	the one that's like the loudest like and if I don't like it I'll say it straight	Is smart what they wants?
Important to have own identity and role within the friendship group.	152	to their face and stuff like that	Friends are important because they are there for you
	153	I: And why do you think it's important for school to have that?	Friends help with certain feelings and loneliness. Always – consistently there
Friendship prevents loneliness at school.	154	P2: Because then you're not by yourself innit, you have someone there	Friends provide support that teachers cannot
	155	I: So it's important for you to have someone there	Friends have experience of their emotional experiences which has helped them to know what to do
Friends are consistently there for you and provide support teachers cannot.	156	P2: Yeah	Teachers do not see the whole truth – being true self with friend, only being part of self with teachers – which makes connections to peers closer
	157	I: Why do you feel like that's important?	Relate to friends because they've experienced it to. Do not see that side of teachers – less of an equal relationship?
Friends allow you to be your true self.	158	P2: Because like if you feel lonely sometimes and like if you have a	Been in a range of friendship groups – difficulties sustaining friendships
	159	certain feeling and you don't want to talk to a teacher you can always	
Relatedness towards friends means that relationship is closer than that with teachers.	160	talk to your mate about it	
	161	I: Are you more likely to talk to your mates than your teachers?	
	162	P2: Yeah cus like obviously cus my friends have like all seen me like	
	163	like at my downer and at my highs and stuff and stuff like that they	
	164	would know what to say whereas a teacher hasn't seen that complete	
	165	side of it whereas my mates have and they've been through it as well so	
	166	like I feel closer to them rather than the teachers	
	167	I: And have you kind of kept the same friendship group or has it	
	168	changed over the years?	
	169	P2: Oh no erm I used to be in like basically every single friend group all	
	170	throughout the years but I think I found the ones I think because I've	
	171	stayed with them since Y10 whereas usually I switch my friend group every single year so	

Appendix 20

Extract of Participant 3's coded transcript

Experiential statement	#	Original transcript	Exploratory notes Descriptive/linguistic/conceptual
Enjoys the lessons at school, particularly learning about the Zones of Regulation.	277	I: So, let's move on to school then. What's it like being a student here?	Likes school. Likes the lessons. Too many lessons to remember. Enjoys the Zones of Regulation.
	278	P3: Er I don't mind it, I like this school.	
	279	I: Hmm, can you tell me anymore.	
	280	P3: Erm, we have good lessons. Don't know what lessons, there's too	
	281	many in a week. Erm, but my favourite lesson is the Zones of	
Zones of Regulation helped them to cope with difficult emotions they had experienced since going into care.	282	Regulation.	ZoR helped them with emotional regulation. No other lessons stick out for them. Lesson is more interactive.
	283	I: What's that?	
	284	P3: Erm, when you talk about how you're feeling and what you can do	
	285	to get out of that feeling. Like when you're feeling upset, what you can	
	286	do to get back in the green or whatever. So that's helped me quite a lot	
Enjoys Zones of Regulation because it's interactive.	287	the past year. It's helped with quite a lot. So I do like that lesson. And I	Lesson supported them going through going into care. Going into care meant they had a long time off school. People were happy that they were coming back.
	288	don't know what else I do.	
	289	I: Why do you think you like that Zones of Regulation?	
	290	P3: I don't know. It's just more than just sitting down isn't it. Sitting	
	291	down and just talking, so it's fine.	
Felt welcomed back to school by staff and students	292	I: And you mentioned that you needed that, what did you mean?	Lesson supported them going through going into care. Going into care meant they had a long time off school. People were happy that they were coming back.
	293	P3: Like it's just helped me like when I first got put in care I didn't	
	294	know what to feel so it's just helped me quite a lot. So when I first got	
	295	put into care I had four months off school. So I went about four months	
	296	without coming here. I had quite a long time off school so when they all	
297	got told I'm coming back I think they were all so happy. They were all		
298			

<p>when they had a period off school following going into care.</p>	<p>299 so happy and my first week back they all kept saying ‘Welcome back 300 Amy’ and I’m like ‘oh thank you’. 301 I: Who was that, the students or the adults? 302 P3: Both. Like all my friends were happy and my best best friend, she 303 was here at the time. She was like ‘you’re back’. I’m like ‘yeah I’m 304 back, you got to speak to me every day still’. 305 I: So when did you come back?</p>	<p>Feeling liked and like they mattered at this school. Friends and adults were happy they came back. Spoke to their best friend despite being off school.</p>
<p>Enjoyed the feeling that people were happy to see them and they were missed.</p>	<p>306 P3: Oh god when did I come back. I was in year 9 I came back; I can’t 307 remember what day. I can’t remember what day I started this school, so 308 never mind when I came back to it. I’ve got too many dates to 309 remember already. I don’t have to remember them, I just put them in 310 my phone. It’s easier. 311 I: Yeah and how did it feel when people were welcoming you back? 312 P3: It’s really nice and it’s just nice to know that you’ve been missed. 313 And all your friends missed you and I’m like ‘yay’. So it was good to 314 come back.</p>	<p>Some confusion about when they came back to school.</p> <p>Felt nice to feel missed. Happy that people were glad they were back.</p>
<p>Did not want to talk about going into care with their friends straight away.</p>	<p>315 I: And how did it feel having 4 months off school? 316 P3: It was really strange to get used to because I got put in care in the 317 Easter holidays so when I came back and I’m like ‘I’ve had a really 318 long Easter holidays’ so when they ask me, all my friends, asked me 319 how it was, and I’m like ‘let’s not talk about it, it was good, but then not 320 so good things’ so then I’m like ‘let’s talk about yours instead’. So we 321 just talked about them and then when they got told I’m only there until 322 like 12 o clock, they were like ‘bye Amy’ and I was like ‘I’m back 323 tomorrow, don’t worry’.</p>	<p>Difficult to talk to friends about going into care at the time.</p>
<p>School adapted their timetable</p>	<p>324 I: Oh so how come you were only in until 12? 325 P3: Because I had so much time off, I was settling back in. The offer 326 was there to do 8.25 when it starts until 3 and I’m like ‘yeah I’m not 327 going to be able to do that on my first day back’. So I think I spent the</p>	<p>Had a settling in period after having time off. Thought it would be difficult to go straight back into full time school.</p>

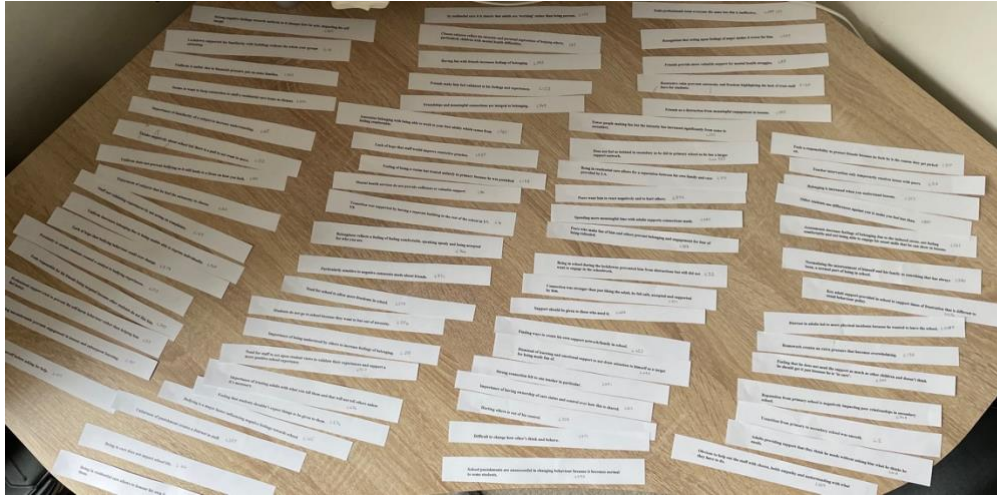
after time off which helped them to settle back in.	328 first week doing 9 to 3 instead of 8 to 3. So I just did 9 to 12 for the first 329 week and for the second week back I tried all day erm I managed until 330 like half 1. Then I got told, then I got to go home and I was like ‘thank 331 goodness’.	Tried full time in the second week but did not manage it. Relieved that school let them go home.
Upset from experience of going into care made it difficult to attend school full time. They like school because of the friends they have. Enjoys the feelings of their friends being there for her. Large group of friends is important to them. Feels even more special because they did not have friends before. Previous school experiences were unsettling because of primary school moves. Difficult experience of being in a	332 I: How come you got told to go home? 333 P3: Erm I was upset so I thought, I was like ‘what am I going to do?’ I 334 still felt upset. I managed to do until half 1 so after dinner. So I went 335 home about half 1. Only half hour early, only two hours early so yeah. 336 I: So did that sort of help you do you think, the school letting you 337 P3: Yeah settling back in slowly, that helped me. 338 I: So what do you think you like about this school? You said Zones of 339 Regulation, anything else? 340 P3: I’ve got really good friends here. So that’s really nice. Because this 341 is the only school I’ve had friends in. Every other school I didn’t have 342 friends in so it’s nice to know you’ve got friends. So I know I’ve got 343 loads of friends here. Yeah I went to, how many schools did I go to 344 before here? I know growing up I went to quite a lot of primary schools, 345 lots. And erm I went to a private one and then after that I didn’t even 346 finish primary school I don’t think. I came straight to high school so I 347 came here and I was like ‘I’ve got friends now, yay’ 348 I: How come you went to lots of different primary schools? 349 P3: I used to get bullied for being in a wheelchair or whatever 350 I: Oh you were in a wheelchair 351 P3: Yeah I spent four years in one. Maybe longer. But I was in a 352 wheelchair for some of my life so. So that wasn’t fun. 353 I: You got bullied because of that. 354 P3: I got bullied because I couldn’t walk or talk because I was late 355 doing both. So I, being bullied isn’t nice. You wouldn’t believe it now. 356 Like when I say to my friends ‘I’ve been in a wheelchair’ they’re like	Would get upset at school. Wasn’t quite sure how to cope with the feelings. ‘Only’ not that bad. Adapted timetable helped to ease them back into school. They have really good friends at school. Did not have friends before coming to this school. Nice to know people are there for you. Loads of friends – large support network. Lots of change in primary schools growing up. Doesn’t remember ‘finishing’ primary school. Really happy about having friends. Negative experiences with peers prior to coming to this school. Experience of being in a wheelchair was not nice. Was late to walk and talk. Shock from others that they had been in a wheelchair.

<p>wheelchair made it difficult to connect with peers and be accepted by them.</p>	<p>357 ‘have you actually’ and I’m like ‘yeah’. You just wouldn’t believe it 358 because I worked quite hard to not be in one. So I say I worked quite 359 hard but I didn’t do anything. 360 I: Was it just one day you learnt</p>	<p>Contradicting self – worked hard vs didn’t do anything</p>
<p>Moved schools because of difficult peer relationships and schools not being able to meet their needs. Repeated experience of being turned away from schools became normalised. Experience of one teacher putting in extra effort to support them was unforgettable.</p>	<p>361 P3: Yeah I used to go physiotherapy as well that helped me. Not that I 362 enjoyed it, I didn’t. it was like ‘is this session over yet?’ 363 I: Yeah they can be hard can’t they 364 P3: Yeah, hard. 365 I: So you moved because of the bullying you think in primary schools? 366 P3: Yeah my mum and dad just kept moving me. And I think one of the 367 schools told my dad not to bring me back. And I’m like ‘wow’. Because 368 they couldn’t deal with my needs. And I’m like ‘hmm okay, yeah’ 369 I: How did that make you feel? 370 P3: I was fine with it. I’m like it’s not the first school it probably won’t 371 be the last. So I came here after the private school. And when I went to 372 the private school that’s when I learnt to walk as well. Erm one of my 373 old primary teachers they spent their break time and dinner time with 374 me helping me so. I will never forget that teacher. So yeah. 375 I: So then did you come here in year 7? 376 P3: 8. 377 I: So you were in the private school in year 7 or?</p>	<p>Physiotherapy support helped them, but they didn’t enjoy it</p> <p>Rejected from one of the schools because they could not meet their needs.</p> <p>Shock at this.</p> <p>Normalising school not being able to meet their needs.</p> <p>One teacher in particular spent more time helping them in the private school. That teacher was important to them, put in the extra work.</p> <p>Gaps in education that they do not remember.</p>
<p>There is nothing that they do not like about this school.</p>	<p>378 P3: No I don’t even remember doing year 7. I don’t think I did it. 379 Unless I did I just don’t remember it. I don’t remember doing year 7, I 380 might have, I might have not, I don’t know. 381 I: That’s okay. Is there anything you don’t like about this school? 382 P3: Erm no not really. Don’t think there is.</p>	<p>There is nothing they do not like about the school.</p>

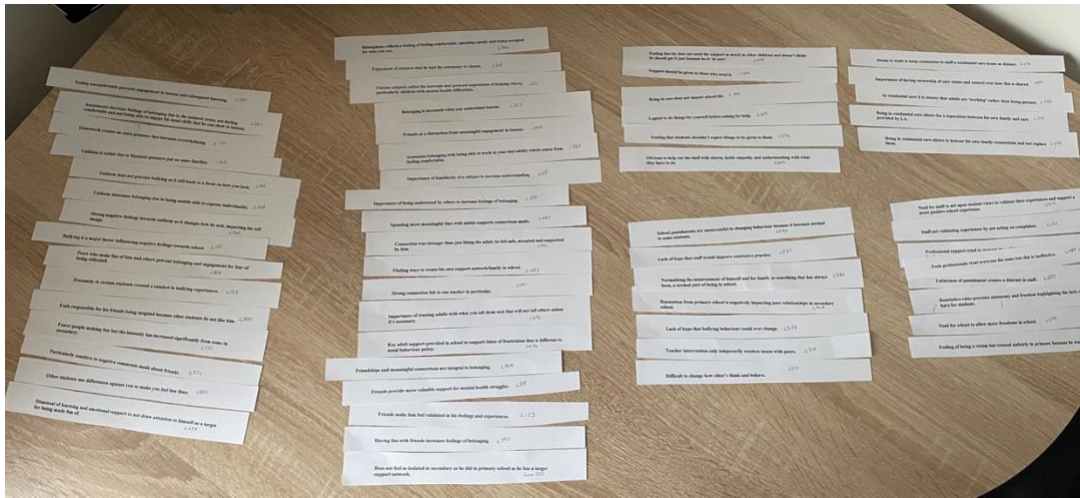
Appendix 21

Photographs of grouping experiential statements into PETs for Participant 1

Experiential statements pre-grouping



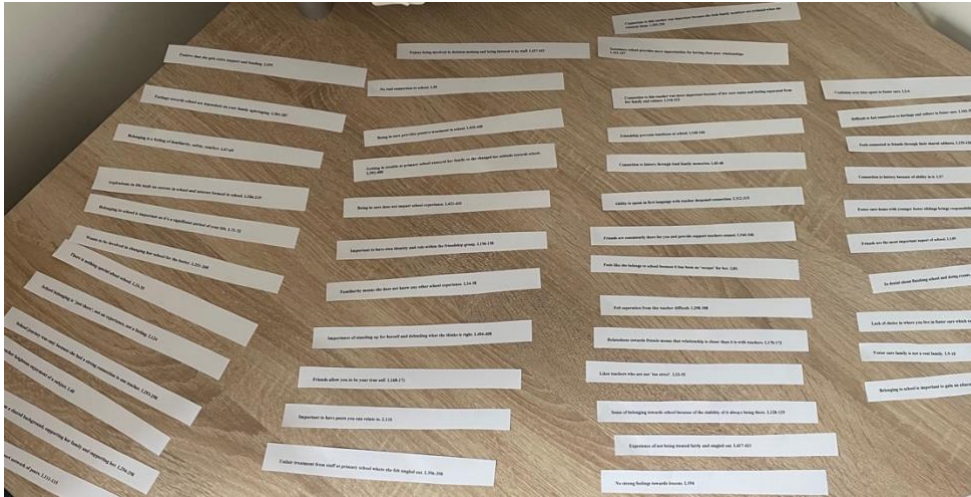
Experiential statements post-grouping



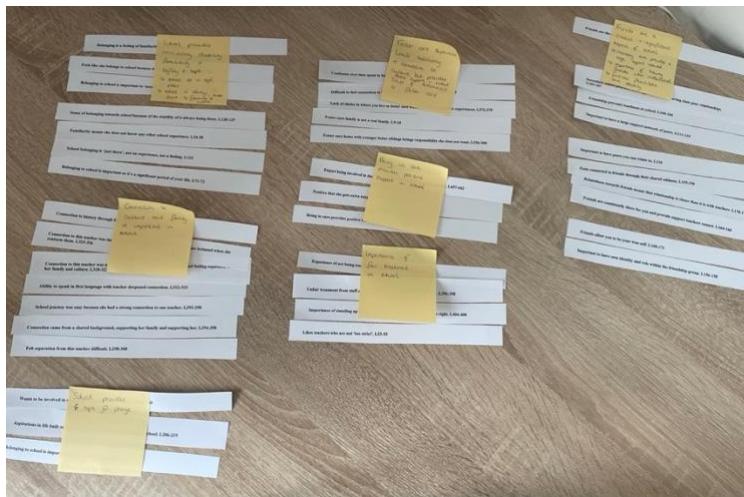
Appendix 22

Photographs of grouping experiential statements into PETs for Participant 2

Experiential statements pre-grouping



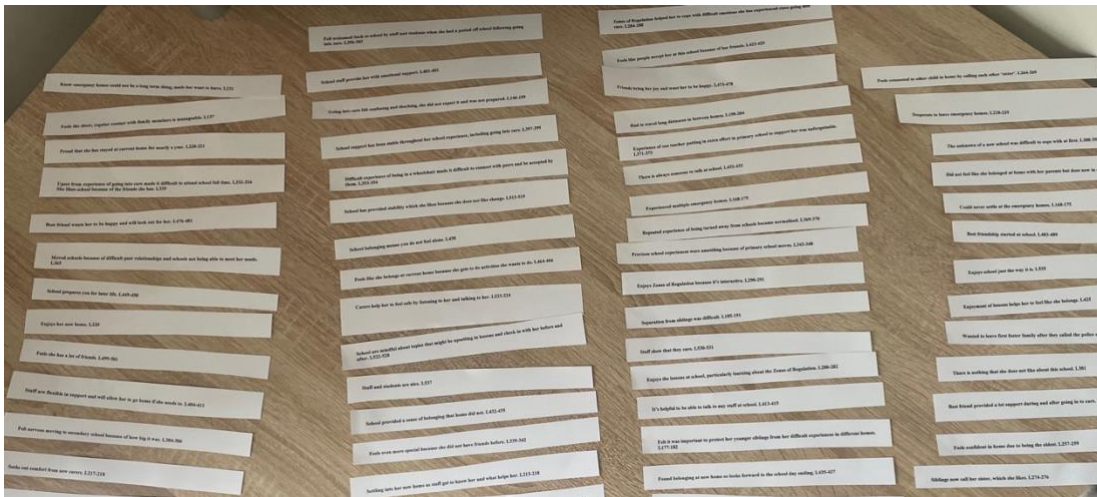
Experiential statements post-grouping



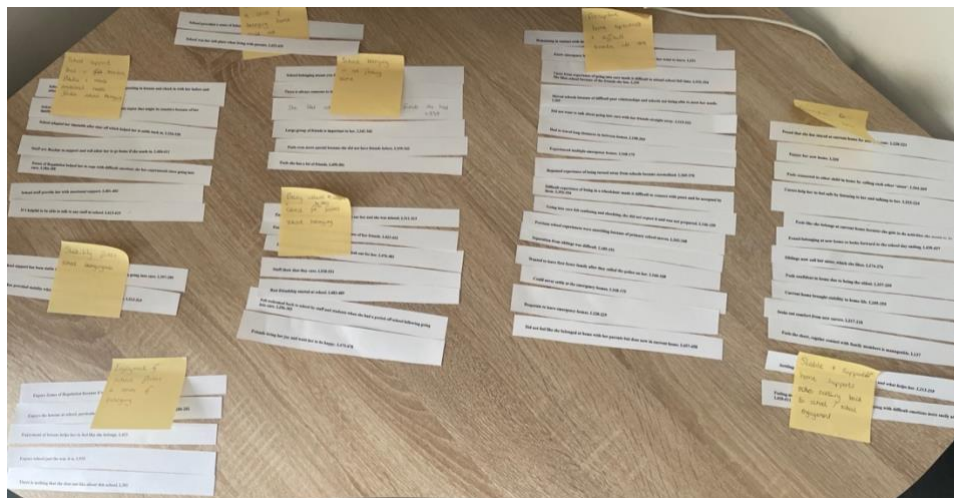
Appendix 23

Photographs of grouping experiential statements into PETs for Participant 3

Experiential statements pre-grouping



Experiential statements post-grouping



Appendix 24

Table of PETs for Participant 1

A. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS IMPACTS SCHOOL BELONGING

Supportive friendships help you to feel like you belong.

Friends provide support and prevent isolation. p. 8

'There are more people that back me. Like I've got more friends here than I did there.'

Having fun with friends supports feelings of belonging. p. 9

'Like when I'm prattin' around with my friends and that.'

Friends validate feelings and experiences. p. 4

'They listen and answer honestly.'

Connection to trusted adult fostered school belonging.

Familiarity with adult supported connection to them. p. 16

'It's just I've known him longer, talked to him more.'

Connection was stronger than just liking the adult. p. 15

'There's teachers I like but it's not the same kinda thing...'

Actively sought connection to adult. p. 15

'Well last year I got bored and I made him sign an adoption certificate...'

Being able to trust adults with what you tell them. p. 15

'he doesn't say anything about it like if you mention something unless he actually needs to, he's not going to tell people.'

Difficult relationships with peers hindered school belonging.

Not being understood by peers makes classroom environment difficult. p. 9

'when no one else is there who I actually know, know me properly. It's just meh, it gets annoying.'

Does not want to seem different to reduce peer ridicule. p. 16

'You have something other people don't have they're going to take the mick.'

Does not want extra support because it draws attention to you. p. 16

'Well I don't use my laptop. It draws too much attention and people start to ask like why can you use it and that kinda crap so.'

Engagement in lessons reduced due to fear of being ridiculed. p. 10

'they're idiots in the fact that they take the mick out of people for stupid stuff not the fact that they're physically stupid but then if they're getting the answers right all the time, putting their hand up and all that crap, I'm not going to put mine up.'

Feeling uncomfortable because of peers prevents engagement and learning in lessons. p. 10

'Like if I don't feel comfortable somewhere I'm not gonna start putting my hands up and answering questions and I'm not going to take in information which means I'm not going to learn.'

Intensity of negative peer interactions increased in secondary school. p. 8

'And some people grow up and that and they stop it, but others are kinda like ten times worse.'

Feels responsible for their friends being targeted. p. 11

'Like my friend, my friend group is one of them. Mainly that's because they speak to me. For some reason I come to a school where kids don't like me'

Protective of friends being picked on. p. 12

'Like whatever I don't care but it's when they say something about my friends that's when I step in.'

Reputation from primary school is negatively impact peer relationships in secondary school. p. 11

'Well primary and like how I reacted, people expect a reaction out of me now.'

Appendix 25

Table of PETs for Participant 2

A. BELONGING TO SCHOOL PROVIDED CONNECTION AND SUPPORT HOME COULD NOT

Connection to school because of stability and familiarity.

School belonging is a feeling of familiarity. p. 3
'like you feel at home'

Stability of school placement supports belonging. p. 5
'it's always felt like that from Y7 so'

Significant time spent at school so belonging is important p. 3
'it's important because like you're basically there for most of your what five years ten years of your life so it has to be good'

School provided connection home life could not.

School provided safety and an 'escape' from difficult home situation. p. 3
'the way I was brought up and like my real family, my type of escape was to go to school'

Lack of choice in where you live when in care. p. 11
'You can't always have what you want in the foster family.'

Foster care family is not a real family. p. 1
'and then I went back to my actual family.'

Feeling disconnected to own culture in foster care . p. 11
'I don't have my [nationality] side with me and like I'm always with British people and I don't mean it in a bad way it's just that I miss it sometimes.'

Not feeling part of foster family. p. 12
'But basically if I witness it then I have to say what happened. I'm just there.'

Being in care provides extra support in school.

Being in care provides positive treatment in school. p. 14
'I get special treatment because I'm in foster care.'

Being in care provides extra support and funding. p. 14
'and I get money from the school that lets me get stuff.'

Enjoys being involved in decision making and being listened to. p. 14
'you have meetings that discuss like what you want from school'

B. RELATIONSHIPS FOSTER SCHOOL BELONGING

Friendships are a crucial factor to belonging at school.

Friends are consistently there for you and provide support teachers cannot p. 6

'if you have a certain feeling, and you don't want to talk to a teacher you can always talk to your mate about it.'

Friends allow you to be your true self. p. 6

'friends have like all seen me like, like at my downer and at my highs'

Relatedness towards friends means that relationships is closer than it is with teachers. p. 6

'whereas a teacher hasn't seen that complete side of it whereas my mates have, and they've been through it as well so like I feel closer to them rather than teachers.'

Feels connected to friends through their quirks. p. 5

'me and my friends yeah we are all a bunch of goof people.'

More students provides more opportunities to find peers that are similar to you. p. 4

'you can find a bunch of friends that are like similar to you so I guess that's a positive whereas in primary school you just have like a small friend group'

Friends prevent loneliness in school. p. 6

'because then you're not by yourself innit, you have someone there'

Connection to trusted adult with same nationality fostered school belonging.

Connection to adult with same nationality made school journey easy. p. 10

'my journey was quite easy in a way. And then also throughout that process I had like this one teacher she was a [nationality] teacher and she was my favourite.'

Ability to speak first language with an adult strengthened their relationship. p. 10

'and we always used to talk [language] and like we basically like got to know each other more'

Connection strengthened through supporting them and their family. p. 10

'she like basically helped me and my actual Mum like through other struggles and then when I was in foster care she was always there for me'

Connection to adult was especially important because of their care status.

'And especially cus I'm obviously I'm in foster care'

C. FEELING ENGAGED IN SCHOOL FOSTERS BELONGINGNESS Enjoyment and connection to lesson supports school belonging.

Feeling singled out in class hinders belonging. p. 14

'but I don't think it's fair that it's only me that's getting kept behind even though it wasn't just me.'

Connected to lesson through fond family memories. p. 2

'me and grandma used to watch like these historical movies and it was like our time together and we just really enjoyed it and she always used to tell me like histories and stuff like that and I liked it so.'

Liking teacher heightens enjoyment of a subject. p. 2

'I like my history teacher as well. I just like the way he teaches.'

Doing well in a lesson increases enjoyment of it. p. 2

'Yeah and then also I'm in set 1 for history so come on.'

Being involved decision making at school supports belongingness.

Wants to be involved in changing their school for the better. p. 8

'I'm part of SLT so I can change the school in a way.'

Appendix 26

Table of PETs for Participant 3

A. SCHOOL PROVIDED A SENSE OF BELONGING HOME COULD NOT

School provides stability.

School provided stability during the transition into care which helped because they do not like change. p. 17

'I still do the same things I used to do in school.'

School support has been consistent. p. 13

'Well they used to help me quite a lot before then so they've helped me through my whole life really.'

School provided an escape.

Looked forward to going to school. p. 14

'On the weekend I was like "is it a Monday so I can go back to school?"'

Home felt lonely compared to school p. 14

'because I used to feel alone when I was at home'

B. SCHOOL BELONGING IS FEELING SUPPORTED, ACCEPTED AND CARED FOR BY OTHERS

Having a large support network fosters school belonging.

School belonging means you do not feel alone. p. 14

'you're not feeling alone or whatever.'

Feels like they have a lot of friends. p. 11

'I've got loads of friends here.'

Feels even more special because they did not have friends before. p. 11

'Every other school I didn't have friends in so it's nice to know you've got friends.'

There is always someone to talk to at school p. 14

'so if you're having a bad day you can talk to people or your friends or whatever.'

Having people that care for you fosters school belonging.

Best friend looks out for them. p. 16

'So, yeah, so she makes me happy and that. Yeah because she hates seeing me sad, hates it.'

Friends bring them joy and want them to be happy. p. 15

'They just always make sure I'm happy and that.'

School staff show they care by checking in with them. p. 17

'Erm they will just make sure I'm okay afterwards or whatever'

Helpful to talk to any staff at school. p. 10

'So you can go to any teacher, not just one. So that's nice.'

Feeling accepted and valued fosters school belonging.

Feels like people accept them at this school because of their friends. p. 14

'Yeah I feel accepted here. I just have loads of friends'

Felt welcomed back to school after being off school due to going into care.
p. 10

'They were all so happy and my first week back they all kept saying

"Welcome back [name]" and I'm like "oh thank you"

Enjoyed the feeling that people were happy to see them and they were missed. p. 10

'It's really nice and it's just nice to know you've been missed.'

C. SCHOOL BELONGING IS FOSTERED THROUGH JOY AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Enjoyment of school fosters a sense of belonging.

Enjoys school just the way it is. p. 17

'Nope, no. I enjoy it here..'

There is nothing that they dislike about this school. p. 12

'Erm no not really. Don't think there is.'

Enjoys the lessons at school, particularly learning about the Zones of Regulation . p. 11

'Er, we have good lessons. Don't know what lessons, there's too many in a week. Erm, but my favourite lesson is the Zones of Regulation.'

Enjoys Zones of Regulation because it's an interactive lesson. p. 12

'It's just more than just sitting down isn't it. Sitting down and just talking, so it's fine.'

Enjoyment of lessons helps them to feel like they belong. p. 14

'and we do some fun lessons'

School support that is sensitive and flexible to emotional needs.

School adapted their timetable which helped settle them back into school.

p. 11

'So I just did 9 to 12 for the first week.'

School are flexible in support and will allow them to go home if they need to. p. 13

'Sometimes I'll go sensory room and that will make me feel better'

'Sometimes I'll stay at school, sometimes I'll go home.'

School are mindful about topics that might be upsetting and adapt expectations. p. 17

'the teacher who runs it said that I don't have to stay because it might be hard so it's just like you don't have to and I'm like "thank goodness I don't have to"'

School helps to develop emotional regulation skills.

Zones of Regulation helped them to cope with difficult emotions since going into care. p. 10

'So that's helped me quite a lot the past year.'

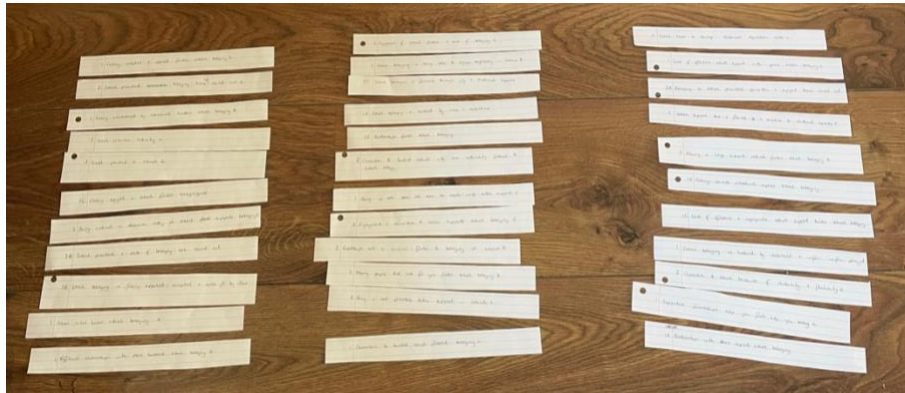
School staff provide them with emotional support. p. 13

'Just with how I'm feeling, if I'm having a bad day or whatever or if I've just got something on my mind, they'll just help me through it..'

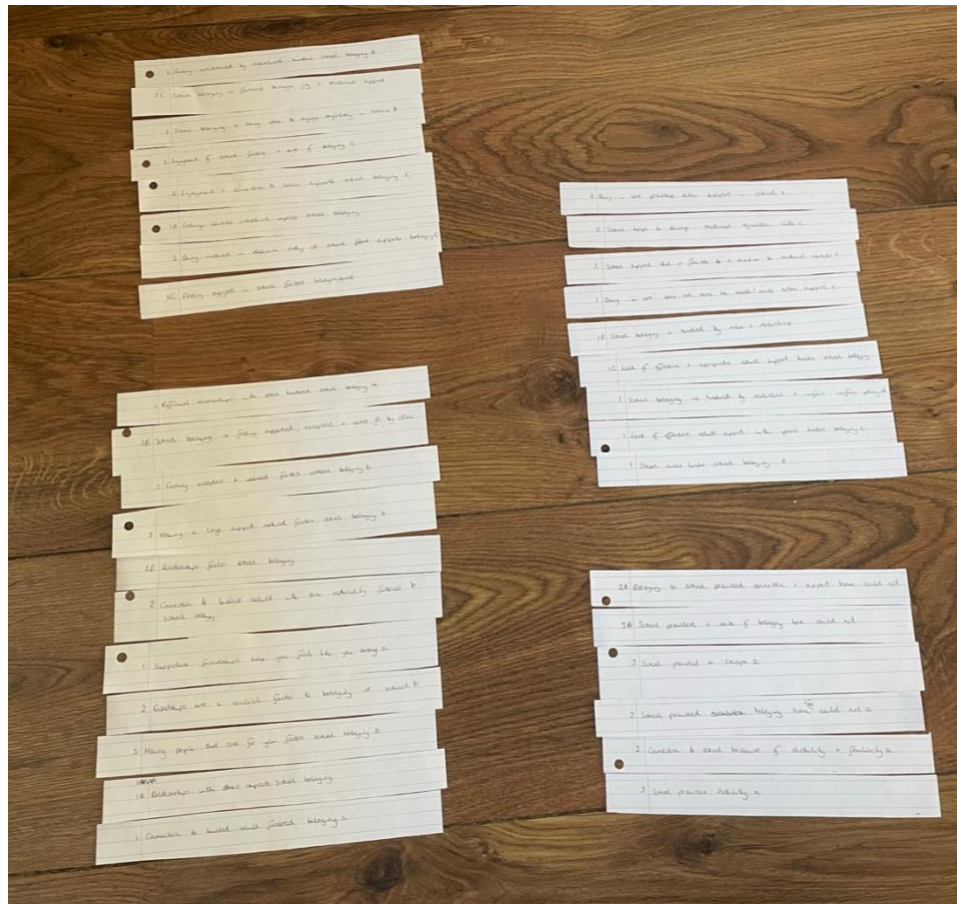
Appendix 27

Development of GETs

Pre-grouping



Post-grouping



Appendix 28

Smith's (2011, p17) IPA quality evaluation guide

Acceptable

The paper meets the following four criteria:

- | | |
|--|-----|
| 5. Clearly subscribes to the theoretical principles of IPA: it is phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic. | Yes |
| 6. Sufficiently transparent so reader can see what was done. | Yes |
| 7. Coherent, plausible and interesting analysis. | Yes |
| 8. Sufficient sampling from corpus to show density for each theme:
N1-3: extracts from every participant for each theme | Yes |
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