

**The views and experiences of primary school  
teachers regarding personal education plans  
(PEPs) for children in care in Northern Ireland**

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# Background to the research

## Global phenomenon of the educational under attainment of children in care

- overwhelming national and international evidence that the educational outcomes of children in care are poor in comparison to their peers (NSPCC, 2021; O' Higgins, et al., 2015)
- evidence that almost one third of children in care leave school with no qualifications (The Who Cares Trust 2013).
- children who are primarily received into care because of exposure to social deprivation adversity and maltreatment ,often involving those charged with their care and protection appear to be victims of a triple setback. (Bywaters et al., 2020; Braden, et al., 2017; Department for Education, 2020a) ),
- Life outcomes for children in care are, however, generally poorer relative to their peers (Mannay et al., 2017a)
- care experienced adults often economically and socially excluded (Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Jackson & Cameron, 2012;).
- Education is a means of reducing inequality and cycles of deprivation (Caturianis et al., 2017)

Educational attainment	Children in care KS1	General population KS1	Children in care KS2	General population KS2	Country
Reading	52%	75%	49%	73%	England
	47%	73%	45%	76%	Scotland
Writing	43%	69%	50%	78%	England
	37%	67%	38%	69%	Scotland
Communication	79%	87%	70%	79%	Northern Ireland
	62%	82%	56%	62%	Scotland
Mathematics	49%	75%	51%	79%	England
	79%	88%	61%	80%	Northern Ireland

Educational attainment	Children in care KS3	General population KS3	Children in care KS4	General population KS4	Country
Communication	36%	71%			Northern Ireland
Mathematics	39%	73%			Northern Ireland
GCSE grds A*-C			78%	92%	Northern Ireland England
Maths and English			51%	78%	Northern Ireland
Grd 5 Maths and English			7.2%	40%	England

**EXISTING  
THEORY WHY  
CHILDREN IN  
CARE  
UNDERACHIEVE  
IN EDUCATION**



# Interventions to address the attainment gap

## **School based interventions**

Key Relationships  
Trauma informed practice  
Specialist roles

## **Child and family-based interventions**

Paired reading  
Tutoring/mentoring  
Letterbox club

## **Whole System interventions**

Multi-agency working  
Pupil Premium  
Personal Education Plan

# WHAT IS A PERSONAL EDUCATION PLAN?

- DENI *Circular 2011/24* introduced Personal Education Plans in respect of children in care and revised guidance for primary schools was issued in DENI *Circular 2023/03* . Aiming to ;
  - support the educational needs of children in care;
  - enhance multi-agency working; and
  - promote the voice of the child in the Personal Education Planning process.
- **PEP** is a standardised regional Personal Education Plan for all Looked After Children of statutory school age.
  - establishes clear targets and actions to respond effectively to each child's needs and provide a continuous record of their achievements.
  - It should contribute to statutory reviews of the Care Plan for each child in care

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the current legal, policy and practice initiatives for supporting the educational rights of children in care?
- What are the views and experiences of teachers responsible for the educational attainment of children in care of personal education plans?
- What are the experiences of teachers regarding multi-professional collaboration in respect of PEPs
- To what extent are teachers aware of and informed of children's education rights?
- Are there more suitable practice models that might better support children in care achieve their potential in education?



# METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative Constructivist Research Design
- A Research Advisory Group (RAG) incorporating key professionals
- Purposive sample of 20 Primary School Teachers
- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus Group-a small sample of teachers
- Thematic analysis using NVivo.
- **Findings analysed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and his thinking tools of field, habitus and capital along with a children's rights perspective**
- **The discussion considers recommendations for a more child centred rights- based PEP process**

# BOURDIEU'S THEORY

- Social reproduction- the role of education in the reproduction of inequality and social separation (Bourdieu, 1996a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990)

Interconnected thinking tools of-

- Field
- Habitus
- Capital
- Concept of **symbolic violence**- characterised by unfair treatment or denial/limiting of opportunity or resources in relation an individual or group (Webb *et al.*, 2002)
- Concept -of **Misrecognition**- the strong position of the state to impose a constructed reality wherein individuals come to perceive unjust realities as acceptable and natural rather than arbitrary. Such behaviour he termed as misrecognition, characterised by individuals denying and disregarding the extant system of social control (Jenkins, 1982).
- support exploring the operationalisation of discourses in specific social settings
- explore the relationship between policy and practice and illuminate the unconscious and the invisible in education (Grenfell and James, 1998).

# Themes in the findings



# The Performing PEP



Impact

Ownership

Accountability

# The Partnering PEP



The diagram consists of three identical rectangular boxes arranged horizontally. Each box has a dark blue header and a light gray body. The text is centered within each box. The first box contains 'Impact of Covid', the second contains 'Professional tensions and power differentials', and the third contains 'Training needs'.

Impact of Covid

Professional  
tensions and  
power  
differentials

Training needs

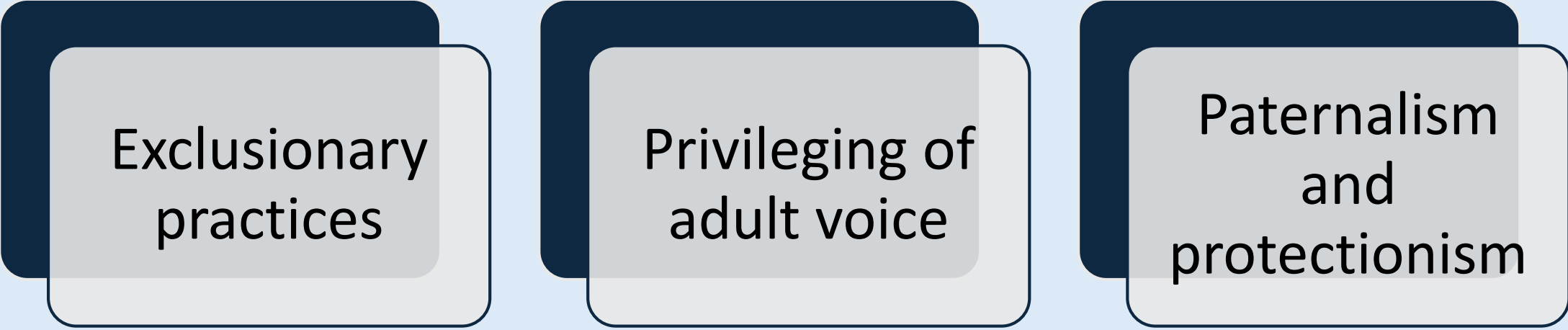
# The Rights Promoting PEP

PEP as weak reflection  
of a rights based  
approach

Variable  
understanding of rights  
and professional  
responsibilities

Limited training on  
rights

# The Participative PEP



Exclusionary  
practices

Privileging of  
adult voice

Paternalism  
and  
protectionism



## CONCLUSION

- PEP as a field of struggle characterised by
- Professional power differentials
- Confusion re purpose and ownership of the PEP
- Privileging of academic knowledge of the child over emotional and behavioural
- Habitual dispositions of professionals adversely impact on the knowledge and information of the child which contributes to their educational plans
- children in care potentially 'set up to fail' (Reay, 2017, p.184) due to insufficient knowing of social and emotional issues impacting on the child's learning
- Violence therefore occurs in the unjust subordination of individuals and is symbolic because of the tacit acceptance of such subordination and coercion coupled with the misrecognition of extant power relations



## THE WAY FORWARD

Ownership, oversight and accountability  
full adherence to existing PEP policy  
Optimise technology for meetings  
a range of flexible approaches to facilitating the  
child's voice were essential;  
establish communities of learning.  
facilitate the voice of the child and to effectively  
promote children's agency as 'democratic citizens  
with equal decision-making power's

specifically reflect children's rights in the PEP form

Enhance Article 12 participation rights in the PEP  
process

Enhance training on rights for professionals involved  
with the PEP

Enhance training and capacity building for  
professionals on social emotional and behavioural  
issues

Augmenting the status of the PEP in educational  
care planning

- Thank you for listening!