

'Planning for Failure: personal education plans for children in care in Northern Ireland

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Lunchtime Seminar
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Welcome and Introductions



My
background



The
background to
my research

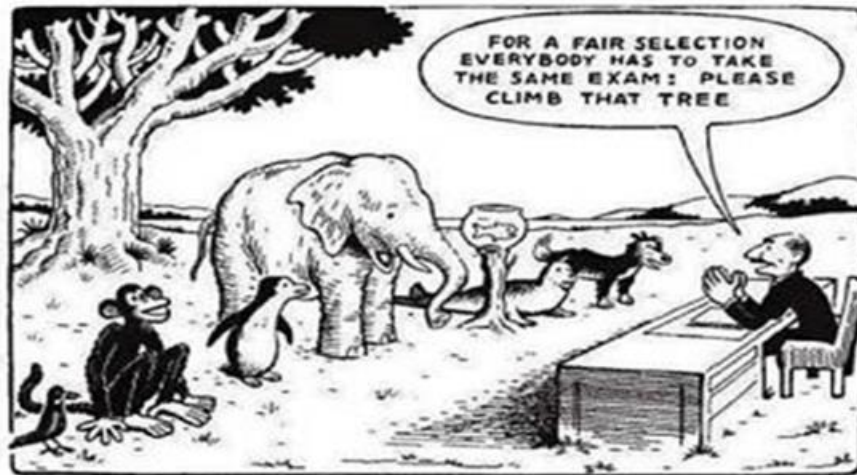
researcher positionality Why I am interested in the PEP

- ▶ 37 years in Social Work practice
- ▶ Worked predominantly with children in care DoH and NIGALA
- ▶ As the first in my family to attend third level education
- ▶ Growing awareness of children's rights
- ▶ Awareness that educational achievement is a known predictor of life success in adulthood (Bowman et al., 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2014).
- ▶ The existing data for children in care in England and NI indicating an attainment gap in primary school years is stark.
- ▶ attainment gap emerges in early primary education and widens over time (Melkman, 2020; Berger et al., 2015)

Education reinforcing social inequalities



- ▶ The education system can reinforce rather than challenge/address existing inequalities (There are also exceptions to these documented patterns).
- ▶ The experiences of disadvantaged groups within the education system leads to disadvantaged life chances (There are also exceptions to the rule).
- ▶ Acknowledging the unequal educational experiences and outcomes can encourage us to move beyond the hegemonic/dominant explanations of professional, parental and individual failure and better support children/young people we are working with.
- ▶ Such considerations enable you to do a wider assessment to account for all the barriers that might influence one's education and thus plan to support young people better.



Our Education System

Prevalence of care experienced children

- ▶ Approximately 105,400 such children in 2021/2022 (DfE, 2023)
- ▶ England- 83,840 children (DfE, 2023), a 2% increase since 2022
- ▶ Northern Ireland- 3,801 children, the highest number recorded since the introduction of the Children (NI) Order (1995), (DoH, 2023).
- ▶ Scotland - 12,596
- ▶ Wales - 7,080
- ▶ In Northern Ireland, the number of children in care has risen by 35% in the last ten years and by 64% since 1999, (DoH, 2023).

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)

Social exclusion of children in care

children in care in Northern Ireland come from the most 'deprived areas' (Rosato, 2019, p.1).

43% of the children received into care came from the 20% most deprived areas within Northern Ireland (DoH, 2023).

Families' socio-economic circumstances were the largest contributory factor in children's chances of being 'looked after' in foster or residential care (Bywaters et al., 2018, 2020)

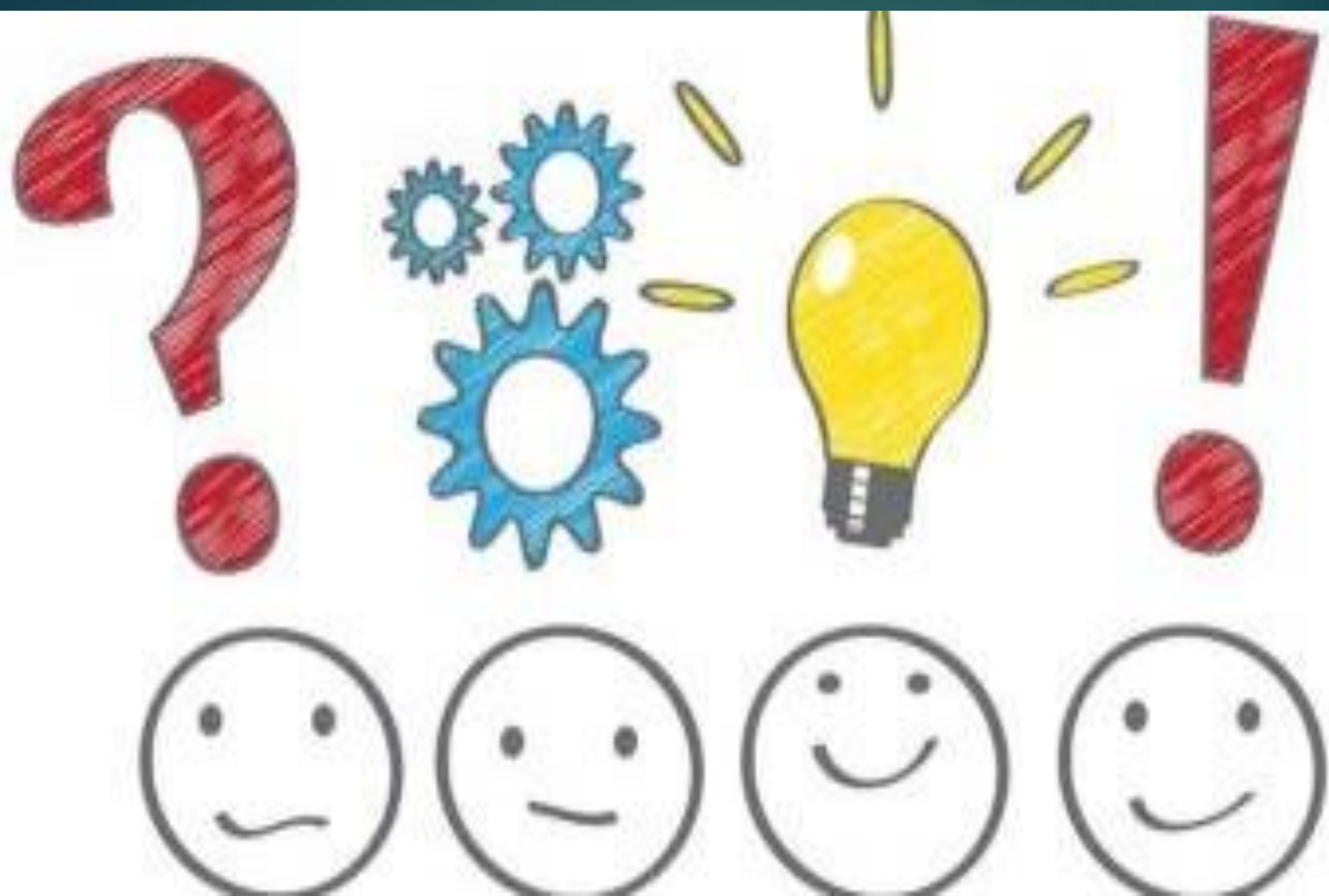
Life outcomes for children in care are, however, generally poorer relative to their peers (Mannay et al., 2017a)

care experienced adults often economically and socially excluded (Brady & Gilligan, 2018; Jackson & Cameron, 2012;).

Globally, children in care evidence consistently poorer academic attainment outcomes than their peers (NSPCC, 2021)

one third of children in care leave school with no qualifications (The Who Cares Trust, 2012)

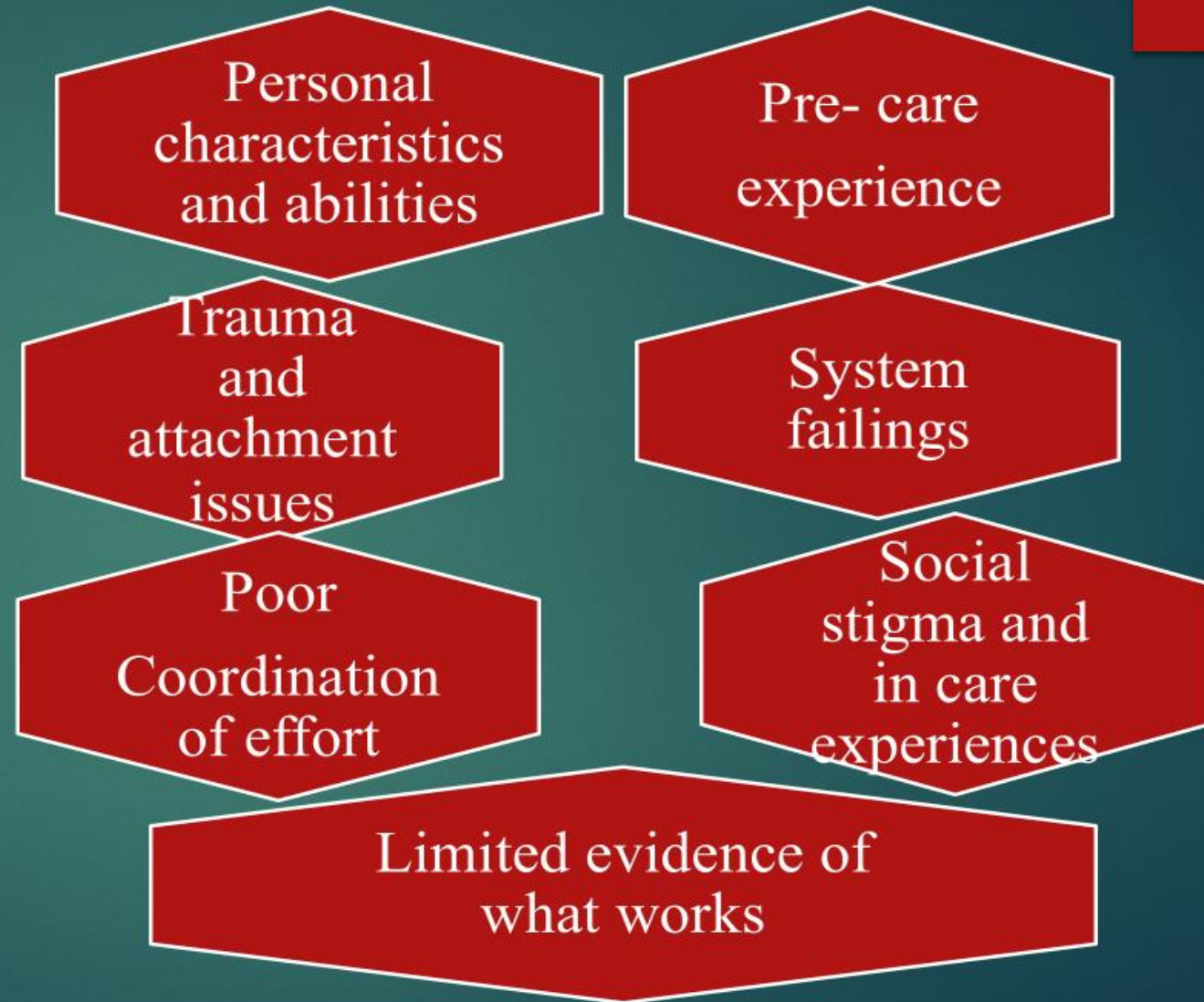
Education is a means of reducing inequality and cycles of deprivation (Caturianis et al., 2017)



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

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

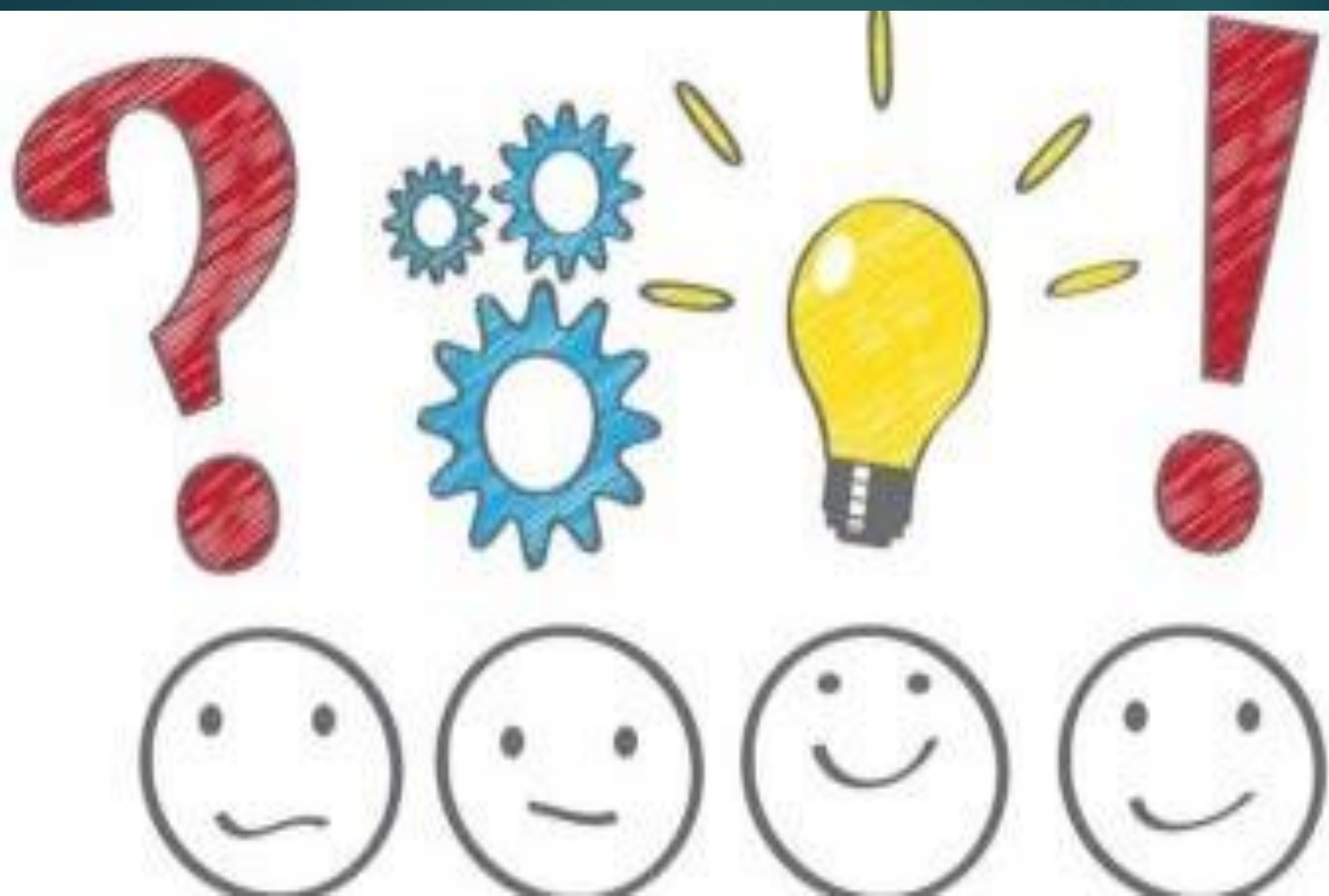
Key Relationships
Trauma informed practice
Specialist roles

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**

Pierre Bourdieu

(informed both by Marxist and symbolic interactionist approaches)

French- 1930 –2002



Influenced primarily sociology of education and cultural sociology. His concepts can illuminate educational disparities. He asked amongst other things why we have disparities and what can determine social mobility?

Students/people have differential access to different forms of capital.

Bourdieu and educational disparities

Bourdieu argued that inequalities are socially reproduced not only by the economic capital of the students and their parents but also through the social and cultural capital

According to Bourdieu **intelligence is overlooked by trivial factors such as accent, tastes, experiences, perceptions and dress** (Fairtlough et al.2014).

Bourdieu's theory

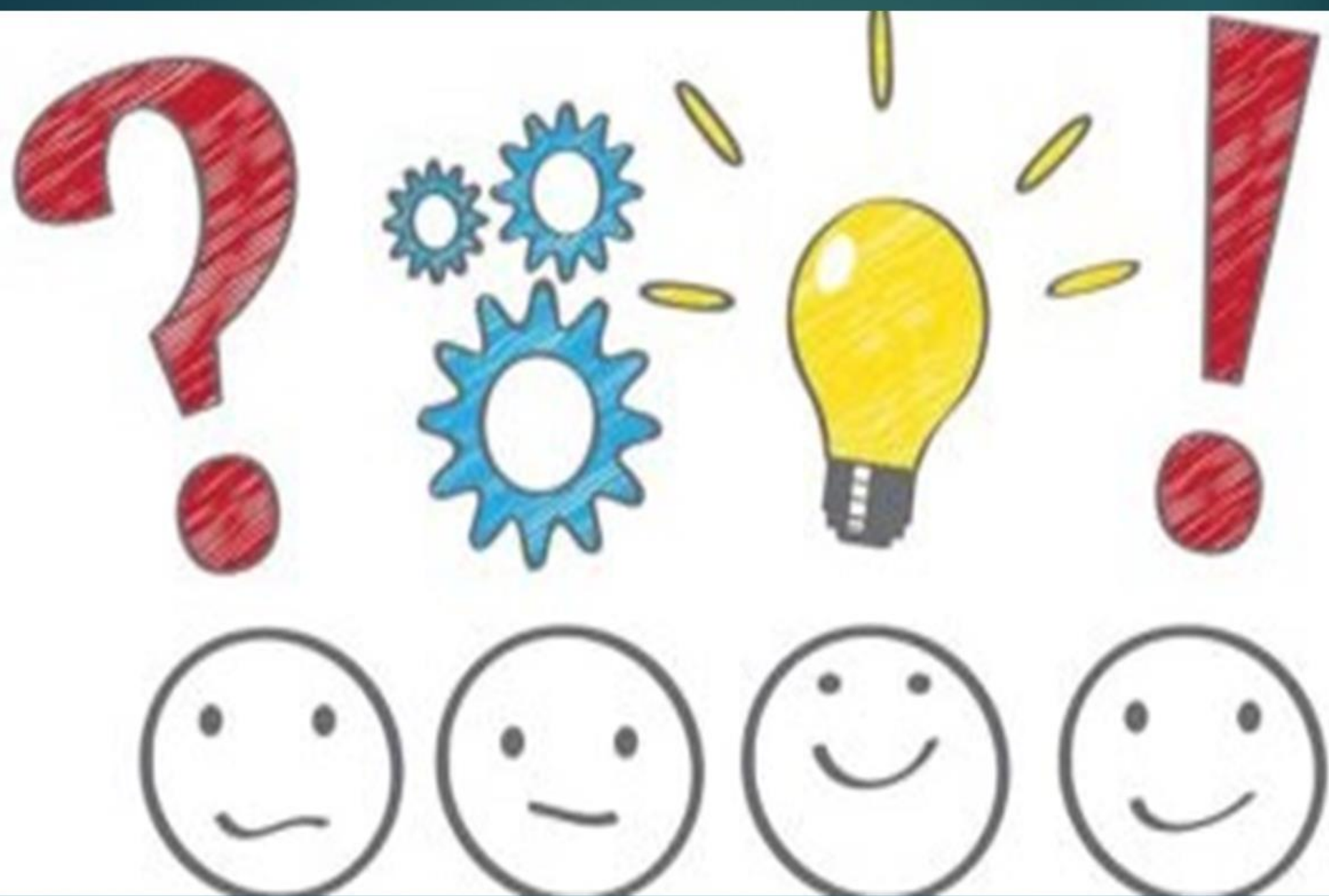
- ▶ Social reproduction- the role of education in the reproduction of inequality and social separation (Bourdieu, 1996a; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990)

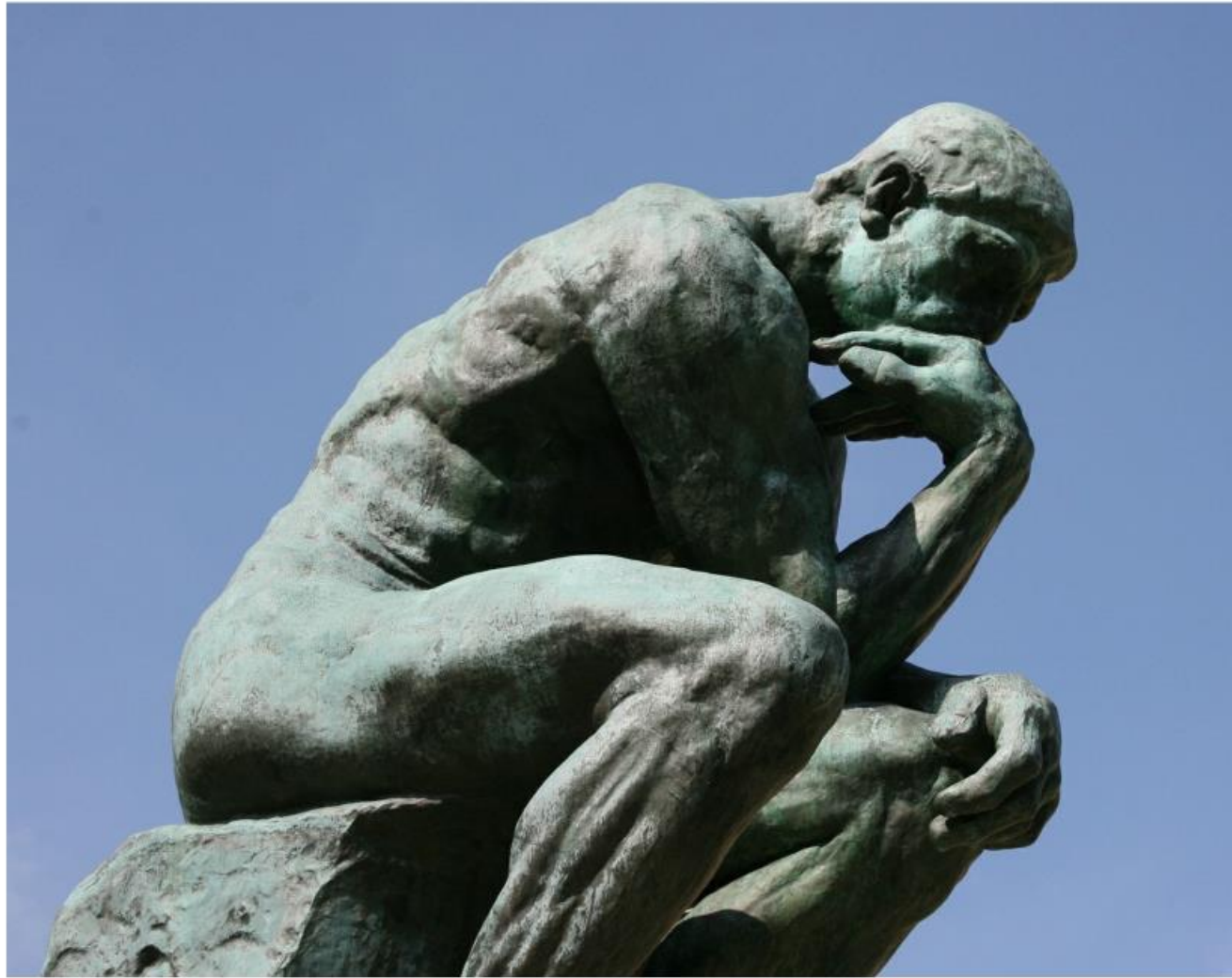
Interconnected thinking tools of-

- ▶ **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).

A Rights Based approach

- ▶ Ackerly (2018) considers a rights-based approach central to promoting social justice
- ▶ the selection of a rights-based approach to exploration of the research questions is unsurprising given my profession's focus on disadvantaged social groups and the upholding of human rights (Kam, 2014).
- ▶ the study sought to foreground the educational rights of children in care as an issue of social inequality and injustice.
- ▶ The guiding principles of a human rights-based approach (UN, 2003) focus on the realisation of human rights, enhancing the capacities of duty-bearers while supporting rights holders to claim their rights (UNICEF, 2007; Bellamy, 2003).
- ▶ McPherson (2015) developed the human rights methods in social work (HRMSW) scale as a means of assessing human rights-based social work practices, incorporating **participation, non-discrimination, interdisciplinary collaboration, and accountability**
- ▶ Lundy's (2019) six 'Ps' framework for children's rights-based policies, arguing that this should ensure compliance to the provisions of the Convention, assessment of the impact of the activity on children's rights, the participation of children, collaborative working, adequate public funding, and oversight of implementation.
- ▶ The children's rights-based theoretical lens adopted is predicated on the rights as laid out in the Convention (UN, 1989) which articulates the child's right to education in Articles 28 and 29 (UN, 1989).





Themes
in the
findings

The Performing PEP



The diagram consists of three identical rectangular boxes arranged horizontally. Each box has a dark blue outer border and a light gray inner area. The word 'Impact' is centered in the light gray area of the first box. The word 'Ownership' is centered in the light gray area of the second box. The word 'Accountability' is centered in the light gray area of the third box. A thin blue horizontal line is positioned below the boxes.

Impact

Ownership

Accountability

THEMES IN THE FINDINGS-



• The performing PEP-

- The importance attributed of the PEP was not matched by a consensus on the effectiveness of the PEP.
- Limited training on PEP
- inconsistency in the PEP process
- limited contribution to planning for a child's education outcomes
- differences in aims versus operational reality; diverse practices and differential professional power bases impacting on planning interfaces for children in care
- the PEP was ineffective in contributing to wider planning for the child.
- PEP lacked SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound) goals designed to address the educational needs of children in care
- embedded habitus of acceptance of the rules of the game, premised on differential power relations and symbolic capital.

Quotes in the findings- Performance

'There's a really important role for the PEP and it's actually about creating a team around that child that everyone who is working with or involved with the child is actually keeping the child at the centre.' (P7 SSI).

'It's the Transition PEP and I think that they've been really effective.' (P7 SSI).

'Paper exercise, 'It becomes a tick box procedure that gets completed. Is there any real credence given to it?' (P15 SSI).


' (P15 SSI).

'I personally I think that the schools probably do a good bit of it anyway., so there's bits of the PEP that I do think that there's a real overlap to what the schools are already doing'. (P11 SSI).

'in order for it to actually be effective, it would need to be more targeted, measurable targets that were achievable and purposeful..' (P16 SSI).

'I think that their needs to be more (social and emotional content), a huge section of it is all related to Key Stage assessment. I do think that Key Stage data is just farcical, it doesn't tell you anything.' (P15 SSI).

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 Partnering PEP-

THEMES IN THE FINDINGS-



embedded habitus of benefits of collaboration

- a commitment to enhancing the life chances of the children through educational attainment
- multi-agency arrangements were not working effectively
- little improvement or change with the introduction of the revised PEP Guidance
- Teachers occupy a subordinate positioning within the field of the PEP and LAC processes
- perceived learning needs in addressing the emotion work of the PEP
- tensions in multi-professional understandings of knowing the child and the apparent privileging of academic attainment scores to the subordination of knowledge of the social and emotional capital relevant for the child's academic attainment
- concept of symbolic violence with 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

Quotes in the findings-Partnership

PEPs done well and done right give added value to school because you get information in a PEP that you don't really get in any other avenue. ' (P2 FG).

'I think, well I struggle with the lack of communication between health professionals and ourselves in education you know, But I'm not sure maybe the PEP is the right way' (P7 SSI).

'The pandemic has improved the responsiveness and the availability of Social Work support, yes and the reason for that is because of how we communicate now, email as opposed to telephone contact.' (P8 SSI).

'One of the things that has come out of the whole lockdown over the past number of years is that for the first time ever in education the sharing of information through schools is unbelievable.' (P20 SSI).

'There's a large part of this form lends itself towards the academic attainments... that needs to be something more specific for the likes of that child to help them... supports that he or she could benefit from in terms of the trauma and psychological support in relation to their education.' (P4 SSI).

'I think we're great at the whole meeting their educational need, but you know, emotionally, you know, guidance for us actually would be quite good, or even beyond guidance some sort of training, I think there's definitely a gap there.' (P4 SSI).

'What should we as the educationalists expect to get out of this consultation with the child? How do we approach it sensitively? There's probably a lot more involved than I thought maybe initially, a lot more training is maybe required to approach that.'
(Participant 2, SSI).

The Participative PEP

Exclusionary
practices

Privileging of
adult voice

Paternalism
and
protectionism

THEMES IN THE FINDINGS-



The participative PEP-

- recognition of the importance of child participation as an overarching goal in creating an authentic PEP process
- tensions between rhetoric and reality.
- children were not routinely invited to participate in their PEP;
- Barriers; the child's age and maturity, training needs of teachers and concerns about potential adverse impacts on the child;
- Symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990) in the reported exclusionary PEP practices
- paternalistic and protective approaches toward the children
- 'natural order' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 165-6.) and did not appear to be challenged or resisted by multi-agency partners or the children
- adult-centric approaches to knowing the child
- embodied habitus of child exclusion and adult voices are privileged thus reducing the symbolic capital of the child

Quotes from the findings-Participation

'I suppose it's hard because it's an official document and because it's an official document it's not really child friendly, the actual PEP. So unless there was some way for the older children of making a version of it?' (P3 SSI, Non RRS).

'Em, the voice of the child probably isn't being listened to enough to date'. (P12 SSI, Non RRS).

'Well, I think it would be very important but as I say that's not been, we haven't used the PEP as an opportunity to discuss with the child.' (P1 SSI, Non RRS).

'Well, I suppose they are consulted. They're not consulted by us in school that's a strand of the PEP, isn't it? That their contribution is sought? And it was the Social Worker who had to do this.' (P10 SSI, Non RRS).

'when I'm completing those forms, I'm not involving the child in that and is that more because it hasn't been recommended that I do but yet as a rights respecting school, I should know to do that?' (P4 SSI, RRS).

'The majority of Teachers are never going to have a child with a PEP you know only going to be some every now and again... there is a need for training and awareness raising for Teachers in relation to the Personal Education Plans.' (P10 SSI, Non RRS).'

'Some [schools] may never have them [children in care] at all, how do you ensure that the system has an ability to support them? To tap into something if you have an issue?' (P2 FG).

I think depending on the age of the child as well, the older the child the more capable they are in contributing to what they see as their targets, but probably in P1, P2 or P3 may be able to but I can't really see P1 and P2 being able to make a contribution to that.' (P17 SSI, RRS).

The Rights Promoting PEP

PEP as weak
reflection of a rights
based approach

Variable
understanding of
rights and
professional
responsibilities

Limited training on
rights

THEMES IN THE FINDINGS-

The rights promoting PEP-

tenuous acknowledgement of children's rights within the PEP and reflect a differential between the rhetoric and the reality in respect of the participation of children in PEP processes

importance of children's rights

some clear examples of schools focusing on educating children for literacy around their rights.

variability in understandings of children's education rights

Limited training on children's rights, including some participants within Rights Respecting Schools (RRS)

rights were not explicitly and routinely considered as part of PEP.

Quotes from the findings-Promotion of rights

- ▶ *'I think they're critical (rights), we want all children no matter what their gender, race, religion, social background to have the same opportunities.'* (P2 SSI, RRS).
 - ▶ *'No, I don't think that it (PEP) considers children's rights well enough.'* (P14 SSI, Non RRS).
 - ▶ *'The form that I have at the minute is twelve pages long, of about six of those pages there's no elements on it, and so you have to flick through. So, post-16, special and additional educational needs, well I don't need that because my child is not post-16. Suspensions and expulsions, I don't have that. Expelled, and I then have residential care home support and so on'.* (P15 SSI, Non RRS).
 - ▶ *'Some sort of child-appropriate, age-appropriate template (is needed) that seeks their views in a less clinical way, of yes you can do this, no you can't do this. Because nobody wants to sit beside a child and go let's tick what you can and can't do.'* (P5 SSI, RRS)
- 'I suppose it's an area that we're all learning about really. It's a relatively recent journey and you know there probably is going to be adjustments needs to both planning and implementation in schools as we learn more about the benefits of really respecting children's rights and taking that into account when we are making decisions.'* (P8 SSI RRS).

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

PEP as a rights-based approach

- ▶ This thesis argues that as currently deployed the PEP does not constitute an empowering, rights-based approach (Mapp *et al.*, 2019), reflective of social work professional values and the UN principles of '**participation**', '**non-discrimination**', and '**accountability**' (UNFPA and HUSPH, 2010, p.86).
- ▶ The application of Bourdieu's triad of concepts to the study data raises concerns about symbolic violence, or unfair treatment of children in care in the PEP process in Northern Ireland.
- ▶ This is exemplified by findings of adult-centric, paternalistic and protectionist exclusionary practices, subordinating the voice of the child, privileging academic, target driven knowledge over social and emotional knowledge of the child and encompassing professional power differentials in the PEP process.

PEP as a rights-based approach Principle of Participation

- keystone of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Rap *et al.*, 2019)
- findings evidence limited compliance to CRC Article 12 (UN, 1989) obligations suggesting a lack of systematic application of the ‘**best interests**’ principle in relation to children in care
- findings of developmentalist and risk-oriented approaches underpinning current PEP processes, thereby impeding children’s participation in their PEP because of their perceived vulnerability and concerns that such participation might be detrimental to their wellbeing
- **stereotypical assumptions** about young children’s capabilities to contribute to decisions about their educational supports potentially perpetuate power imbalances adult centric practices and oppression.
- Findings emphasise the **complexity of participatory practice**, stressing the need to avoid tokenistic approaches to child participation in their PEP
- findings, suggest the requirement to design participation approaches that **foreground the position of the child**, seeking contribution **on an individualised basis** in relation to offering children support in contributing to PEP processes.
- **Training for teachers** is essential in balancing children’s participation rights with their protection rights (Van Bijleveld *et al.*, 2015) and in addressing the educational needs of children in care in sensitive and non-stigmatising ways

PEP as a rights-based approach Principle of Accountability

- ▶ The findings of the PEP as a bureaucratic exercise having minimal impact on the educational supports for children in care suggest the need for a more **child-focused and children's rights impact and educational outcomes-oriented approach**.
- ▶ findings reinforce McPherson and Abell's (2020, p.227) call for enhanced accountability and 'transparency of practice, policy making and evaluation' through a process of critical **reflection against human rights standards (Lundy, 2011)**.
- ▶ Reinforce need for **individualised and needs-led supports** for the education of children in care cited by Townsend *et al.* (2020), endorsing The Children's Commissioner (2013) argument for collation of data other than exam results.
- ▶ Establishing **SMART targets** should be a core element of the PEP
- ▶ Liabo *et al.* (2013) argued that **individualised planning** against clear goals for children in care, particularly those with SEND (Connelly, 2013), supports **the social justice ethos** critical for the realisation of education rights.
- ▶ findings evidence a privileging of academic information over issues of trauma and emotional needs, **potentially undermining trauma informed pedagogical approaches designed to support the diverse educational needs of children in care**

PEP as a rights-based approach Principle of non discrimination

- ▶ The study findings characterise the PEP as a paper exercise with teachers having limited influence and power in the PEP processes which are regarded as the domain of Social Services.
- ▶ The finding that the PEP fails to appropriately inform the education aspect of the child's Care Plan through contribution to the LAC Reviews is significant.
- ▶ Participants outlined training gaps in respect of the PEP and a lack of clarity regarding ownership of the PEP and concomitant professional roles and responsibilities. These findings resonate with those of Zetlin *et al.* (2006, p.170) that 'No one and everyone's in charge of the child; therefore, no one takes responsibility'.
- ▶ These findings reflect those of Waterman (2020), who found that some professionals did not regard the PEP an essential component of the system of educational support for children in care, while evidence of an incoherent approach to effective multi-agency working and the concerns about the reported tensions within the system around the child as to relative import of areas of knowledge of the child in respect of academic progress scores and social and emotional factors raise concerns about the adequacy of the PEP process in encouraging professionals to work together.
- ▶ the evidence of power differentials within the multi-agency system supporting the education needs of children in care raises concerns about how the education rights of children in care can effectively be realised in the context of certain professional groups perceiving themselves to lack power within the system
- ▶ these findings echo those of Atkinson *et al.* (2007), Sloper (2004), and OECD (2016), in relation to deficits in collaborative effort in support of the educational attainment of children in care and reinforce the data on challenges in securing corporate parenting decisions designed to support the education of children in care.

PEP as a rights-based approach Principle of non discrimination

- ▶ The perceived **skill deficit** among some teachers in addressing sensitive issues impacting on the education of children in care, while **simultaneously acknowledging the need for more trauma informed PEP processes** which actively attend to the social and emotional issues impacting on the education rights of children in care, requires attention in light of the evidence of the positive benefits of multi-agency working for the academic success of children (Gilligan 2007; Hesjedal *et al.*, 2013) and supports calls for increased mental health literacy among teachers (Leschied *et al.*, 201).
- ▶ If the educational rights of children in care are to be best realised, **teachers require to be supported and trained** in order that they feel confident and competent in their abilities to support pupils impacted by trauma. This study's findings consolidate previous findings that teachers often lack such confidence and competence (Alisic, *et al.*, 2012; Walter, *et al.*, 2006) and reinforce the literature attesting to perceived gaps in training in the provision of mental health and trauma related issues (Gubi *et al.*, 2019; Reinke, *et al.*, 2011). Such a position **serves to exacerbate the perceived separation between care and education which has been identified as a major factor in the poor academic attainment of children in care** (Jackson and Höjer, 2013)
- ▶ **Confusion about agency roles** within the PEP and differential perceptions of power within these processes corroborate Ferguson and Wolkow's (2012) view that **interagency antagonism and distrust between education and welfare systems constitute barriers to educational progress for children in care and emphasise the need for joint training**
- ▶ The **findings reinforce the international literature** asserting the need to better support multi- agency practice in support of improving educational outcomes for children in care,
- ▶ emphasise the need for collaborative planning and provision between education and social services in addressing the holistic needs of children (Loftus, 2017).
- ▶ **All professionals working with children in care require to be skilled and supported in the management of potentially sensitive and emotional responses and contributions from children in order to demonstrate the necessary rights-based approach which considers children as competent individuals** (Goodyer, 2011).

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 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

