The changing nature of adoption means that more children being placed have experienced traumas that are likely to affect their educational progress. This is manifest in the raised levels of special educational needs among adopted children. Yet, the benefits of educational fulfillment are especially pertinent for such children, given their disadvantaged backgrounds. This summary of a survey of adoptive parents by Pauline Cooper and Sandra Johnson reveals some satisfaction with existing arrangements but highlights areas for improvement. These include giving parents better information on their child’s educational needs and their future implications, sharing information more effectively between parents and teachers, increasing teachers’ awareness of the needs of adopted children, dealing with children’s unhappiness in school, especially bullying, and facilitating children’s and parents’ access to specialist help.

Introduction
During the second half of the 20th century the population of adopted children changed as permanency plans for many looked after children increasingly focused on adoption as the most desirable outcome. This led to considerable changes in the nature of adoption in terms of both the children’s previous experiences of parenting and the age at which they are adopted.

Nationally, the average age of children placed for adoption is currently four-and-a-half years and many of these children have a history of neglect, abuse and trauma, including pre-birth damage. The effects of this early damage on their future development mean that parents who adopt such children face a more difficult task than was previously recognised (Cairns, 2002; Hirst, 2005). As the adopted child’s learning, behaviour and psychological well-being can all be affected by earlier adverse experiences, there is an increased risk of difficulties within the interconnecting spheres of the family and school (Department for Education and Employment/Department of Health, 2000; Department of Health, 2002, 2003).

The disruption rate for adoptions can be seen as an indicator of the challenging nature of adoption. In Sheffield, disruptions were at 6.25 per cent for the year up to March 2005. This means that one in 16 adoptive placements failed and the child re-entered the looked after system. It is also known from national research that adoptive placements for older children are more at risk of breaking down than are those for younger children and babies. While disruption rates give an indication of the number of cases where the most serious problems have occurred, there are also likely to be ‘hidden cases’ where considerable difficulties are experienced but where there is no official disruption For example, families may ‘soldier on’ or make alternative arrangements within their own extended family or friendship networks.

The effects of some adverse and disrupted life experiences on a child may be relatively short lived but in many instances they endure and affect many aspects of his or her life. In particular, they may have a profound impact on their life at home and school. In turn, these two spheres can influence each other, difficulties at home affecting the child’s functioning at school and difficulties at school affecting the child’s functioning at home. Conversely, a child’s happiness and success at school can have a positive effect within the home.

As adopted children present a wider range of difficulties and related needs than in the past, adoptive parents need a greater level of awareness, information and skills to help them cope with their caring task. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 places duties on adoption agencies (in Sheffield this is Sheffield...
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City Council) to assess and provide adoption support services for adoptive families. This includes giving families access to help with educational issues. The intention is that while adoption agencies are responsible for assessing the need for support, the support itself should be provided by a number of agencies including health, education, social care and voluntary organisations.

A survey conducted in 2002 by Sheffield Family Placement Services identified several concerns among adoptive parents (Burgar, 2002). These were worries about their children’s emotional/mental health (76%), difficulties about identity (63%), problems at school (57%), challenging behaviour (55%) and ability to make and keep friends (34%). All of these problems are likely to have a significant impact on teachers and schools as well as on the children’s families.

This level of concern is echoed in the literature, in training conferences and in other forums for adoptive parents where there is a common emphasis on the need for schools and education services to show greater awareness, to provide better information and offer stronger support with regard to issues likely to affect adopted children.

A significant number of respondents (69%) to the earlier Sheffield survey said they would welcome help with educational issues if it were available. The purpose of the current survey was to explore this in more detail by asking adoptive parents for their views on their children’s education and the kinds of support they think would be helpful. The aim was to assess the extent to which their children were experiencing difficulties in education and the effects of these on family life. Where difficulties were not being experienced or had been resolved, the aim was to identify what had contributed to the positive outcome. It was hoped that the findings would contribute to the development of educational services that offer better support to children and families.

A project plan conforming to the Research Governance Framework for Sheffield City Council was approved by the Head of Access and Inclusion (Education) and the managers of the Sheffield Family Placement Service. A questionnaire was then compiled in consultation with staff from Family Placement Services Adoption Support Team and Sheffield’s Looked After Children in Education Service.

Nature of the sample
Three hundred questionnaires were distributed in autumn 2004 by the Family Placement Service, using its database of names and addresses of adoptive parents in Sheffield.

A third of the questionnaires were returned. This is a reasonable response rate for a postal survey, indicating a high level of interest in the issues being explored and a willingness among adoptive parents to share their views. It is important to note that those who chose to participate may be those experiencing the most difficulty with their children’s education and in this sense the sample may be biased in a negative direction. The findings were interpreted with this in mind.

The characteristics of children and families
The families who responded had, in total, 141 adopted children, varying in age from under one to over 16 years of age. The questionnaires provided detailed information about 93 of these children. There was an almost equal distribution of male and female (51% male and 49% female) and most (90%) families shared the same ethnic background as their adopted child.

The majority of children (79%) joined their adoptive families at pre-school age (under four years old) and none were above the Key Stage 2 (upper primary) level in their education at the time of placement. Thus, they had all or most of their school life before them.

At the time of the survey (September–December 2004), 69 per cent of the children were in Key Stages 1–4 (primary to secondary) in their education. Nearly all of them (90%) were at Sheffield schools, the majority attending their local establishment. However, 14 per cent of the children were placed in special
provision, either a special school or an integrated resource. This compares with 1.5 per cent of all schoolchildren in Sheffield for the year 2004/5, suggesting that significant educational needs are more common among adopted children than among the general population.

**Information received by parents before adoption**

A significant minority of parents indicated that prior to the adoption, they had not been given any information or had discussion about schools and education (33%) or about the possible difficulties that adoptive children in general might face in school (37%). A higher number were told about the educational development and academic ability of their child (74%) and alerted to existing difficulties at school (47%), but many expressed a wish to know more.

Inevitably, for some parents, the passage of time meant that they could not remember the information they had been given and for very young children future needs were often unknown. The most common source of information about the child’s development and ability was the adoption medical report, the rest being gleaned via a number of formal and informal routes. This raises the question of how much information is absorbed at the time it is relayed and the importance of giving adoptive parents opportunities to acquire and discuss information on a regular basis as the need arises.

In summary, this part of the survey revealed a need for:

- full written information and discussion about educational issues in the preparation for adoption. This should include the kinds of problems that adopted children might experience, for example, attachment difficulties and how these might affect their education. It should also include information about access to education support agencies and adoption support services;
- information that is readily available, not only in the preparation stages of adoption but also on a continuing basis as the need arises;
- as much specific written information as possible to be given to adopters about their adopted child and his or her history and birth family, including the progress of any siblings. Expectations regarding the child’s development and progress should also be specified. The aim should be to give the adoptive parent(s) as clear a picture as possible about how their child functions on a daily basis and how he or she might progress in future.

While it is recognised that much of this is already happening, the research findings emphasise the importance of ensuring that it is done in as comprehensive and effective a way as possible.

**The child in nursery or school**

Nearly all (90%) of parents had shared some information with the school about their child’s adoption and most of them (67%) were satisfied with the school’s response. The majority of respondents also indicated that they were happy with their child’s progress in school although a significant minority expressed concerns about their child’s learning (26%), behaviour (29%) and friendships (32%).

Nearly three-quarters of parents felt that their child was happy in school but, again, a significant minority (25%) were worried that this was not so, and there were reports (16%) of bullying or teasing regarding adoption. Some also felt that teachers’ misunderstanding about adoption and its antecedents led to poor judgments, such as blaming all the child’s difficulties on the adoption, expecting recovery to be more rapid than it is and setting low expectations that become self-fulfilling.

The survey findings highlighted the need for:

- advice and support to adoptive parents about sharing information relating to the child’s life story;
- awareness raising and training for school staff about the impact of children’s pre-adoptive experiences, issues related to the adoption itself and the likely long-term consequences of these for the child’s learning, behaviour and emotional development. Examples of problems that
have to be addressed are: attachment
difficulties, the development of identity,
foetal alcohol syndrome, physical and
emotional abuse and neglect, and
difficulties surrounding contact with the
child’s birth family;
• information and guidelines for schools
about curricular areas and school events
that may need to be handled sensitively;
• openness and confidence between
parents and schools in sharing informa-
tion to ensure realistic parental expecta-
tions and an understanding of the child’s
adaptation to school. Similarly, there is a
need for realistic school expectations and
understanding of the adopted child;
• schools to consider how their existing
anti-bullying policies and programmes
take account of issues around adoption;
• adults in schools to explore with adop-
ted children issues relating to friendships,
social interactions and bullying.

The child’s difficulties in school
More than half (59%) of the parents said
that their child was having some difficul-
ties in school, or had experienced pro-
blems in the past. In most cases the
difficulties were described as long term.
Moreover, most of these parents felt that
the information received before adoption
had not prepared them for the child’s
problems.

Parents’ responses indicated that over
a third of the children (39%) had been
identified by the school as having Special
Educational Needs (SEN), with 23 per
cent having SEN statements. As with the
numbers of adopted children in special
provision, these figures are much higher
than for the wider child population.
Nationally, about 20 per cent of children
are estimated to have SEN and about two
per cent have statements (currently 2.9%
in Sheffield).

The types of difficulties described fell
into three broad categories:
• social/emotional/behavioural;
• learning;
• concentration/organisation.

Social and emotional difficulties were
often manifested in low self-confidence
and self-esteem, attachment difficulties,
problems with food, insecurity, anti-
authority attitudes and problems with
bullying and friendships.

Learning difficulties included some
specific disabilities, such as speech,
language and communication difficulties,
as well as sensory and physical impair-
ments. Concentration and organisational
difficulties were reflected in limited
attention spans, a lack of sustained
concentration and poor organisation of
self and belongings.

Around 30 different diagnostic
labels were specified in the responses,
indicating the wide range of problems
that parents and teachers might face and,
given the fact that they cannot be expec-
ted to be familiar with them all, the
importance of getting expert advice.

Although there was a high level of
agreement between parents and schools
about the identification of the child’s
difficulties, half of the parents felt that
their child’s school did not have a good
understanding of his or her needs and/or
the difficulties he or she experienced.
Nine per cent of parents reported that
their child had been excluded at some
point, all but one for short, fixed periods.

Communication between school and
parents was raised as an issue by a third
of parents who either felt uninformed
about what was being done in school to
help their child or believed that it was not
proving effective.

When asked about support from agen-
cies outside the school, parents’ responses
indicated that educational psychologists
(28%), doctors (27%), support teachers
(22%) and therapists (20%) were the
professionals most involved. Again, this
reflects the severity and complexity of the
difficulties experienced by some adopted
children. Most parents (78%) were
generally satisfied with the involvement
of other agencies but between a quarter
and a fifth of them felt uninformed and/
or dissatisfied. Criticisms focused on
frustration about delays in their child’s
difficulties being identified and acknow-
ledged, the unavailability of resources,
waiting too long for appointments and
having to ‘fight’ for recognition and support.

When asked to specify how schools could help their children, the replies echoed these criticisms, with greater understanding and communication as the main recommendations. The details are laid out in Table 1.

The research concluded that adoptive parents are realistic about the sometimes intransigent or complex nature of their child’s difficulties and accept that there may not be specific remedies. However, they also stress that a positive and understanding attitude by school staff can make a difference for their child and are anxious that this be promoted in every way possible.

The survey findings highlighted the need for:

- recognition and support for the important role that schools can play in promoting emotional well-being and resilience of adopted children, and also in supporting their parents;
- awareness and understanding in schools about adoption and attachment issues, and how adopted children’s experiences may have lasting effects on the child’s educational and social progress;
- a high level of communication between school staff, parents and education support agencies about the actions being taken to address children’s difficulties. This may be facilitated, for example, by the expansion of the role of the school’s designated teacher for looked after children to encompass adopted children;
- a willingness by school staff and education support agencies to develop a strong relationship with parents and to work with them to overcome difficulties;
- giving adopted children and their parents the same priority accorded to looked after children in terms of access to specialist services;
- recognition that particular support may be required at times of educational transition, for example from primary to secondary school.

**Adoption support**

Parents gave very positive responses when asked for their opinions about suggestions for developing adoption support on educational issues. Access to information and services was a major theme in the replies. Indeed, 95 per cent of responses indicated that they would value access to a named person with knowledge of adoption issues, 92 per cent to written advice about services and ways of accessing them, 91 per cent to library facilities, leaflets about particular topics and to a local adoption support website. A further 90 per cent would value face-to-face appointments with specialists, 85 per cent a chance to talk to other parents about educational issues or listening to a speaker as part of a group, 83 per cent access to someone who represents their views in discussions with schools, 79 per cent a telephone helpline, 78 per cent a drop-in centre with information and advice on educational matters, and 72 per cent an opportunity for adopted children to meet one another. Some of these are already being developed or provided as part of the Sheffield Adoption Support Service.

Other suggestions, especially those with a school focus, are particularly relevant to the future planning of education support services. They include a bullying...
hotline, access to an ‘expert’ parent, a one-stop shop for adoption support, funded parent-led support groups, training for education and school staff, the dissemination of good practice from elsewhere and a joint forum for adoptive parents and school staff to discuss how they can better help the children. Respondents also stressed the value of making provision for training in educational establishments and making information available about education in written and electronic formats, both for worried parents and schools concerned about individual children.

Children’s views
The questionnaire included a section for children to give their views. They were asked seven questions relating to enjoyment of school, friendships, worries and help from teachers on educational matters. On the reverse of the sheet there was an invitation to draw a picture or write something about their feelings or thoughts about school. Responses were received from 33 children, as in some instances parents indicated that their child was too young or unwilling to respond. While the small number of responses cannot be accepted as fully representative, they do offer some insights and perhaps point the way for further research in this area (Thomas et al., 1999).

The responses to questions about enjoyment of school were varied, and included references to different subjects or activities. For example, 15 per cent of the replies referred to literacy-related subjects, and ten per cent to maths and science. The biggest single group of responses (29%), however, were about playing and friendships.

Almost three-quarters of the children (70%) expressed some dislikes about school and these divided evenly between areas relating to social relationships, interactions and schoolwork. When it came to what makes children happy in school, there were many single responses varying from ‘snack time’ to ‘writing’ and ‘swimming’ but no salient themes. The biggest single group of replies mentioned having and being with friends. Two-thirds of the responses indicated some worries at school, but with no more than one or two mentions for any particular aspect.

With regard to help from teachers, two-thirds of the children suggested something they specifically wanted, with several mentions of help to stop bullying and teasing and one plaintive request to ‘understand why I might not be happy’. There were also several mentions of help with subjects such as maths and reading.

There was a mix of positive and negative responses to the open-ended question asking if children wished to say any more about school but all of the replies were about social interactions, kindness, sharing, friendships and having fun. All the responses highlighted the significance of these aspects, which echo, from the child’s perspective, the adult concerns about attachment, identity and relationships.

Conclusions
The requirements embodied in Every Child Matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) are aimed at ensuring that there are positive outcomes for every child in the country and the provisions of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 seek to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children looked after by local authorities. As education is an important component in the achievement of the five outcomes specified in Every Child Matters, it follows that the development of support services for adopted children and families must have an educational component.

This research was designed to provide quantitative and qualitative data about adopted children’s experiences in education. By inviting adoptive parents to give their views, it was hoped to gain a picture not only of the nature of any difficulties experienced but also of what parents see as effective.

The survey showed that adopted children are more likely to have SEN or to experience difficulties in school. However, despite this, most adoptive parents responding to the questionnaire did not relate any negative experiences or express any critical views about their child’s education, suggesting that, for many adopted children, positive educational
experiences and outcomes are the norm. Indeed, the study concludes that schools which understand the issues that can affect an adopted child, maintain good communication and make strong, supportive relationships with parents can make a significant contribution to the development of a child’s resilience (Gilligan, 2001). The provision of educational support to this vulnerable group of children and their parents is an important way of helping them achieve stability, reduce placement disruption and promote healthy development (Phillips and McWilliam, 1996; Selwyn and Quinton, 2004).

However, it is also the case that a significant minority of parents were clearly dissatisfied with their experiences and their child’s education. The histories they describe confirm that some children are at risk of long-term difficulties in school because of their pre-adoption experiences and adjustment to their new family.

The study indicates a number of ways forward, both in terms of policy development and practical initiatives. At the same time, it is encouraging that discussions with colleagues and partner agencies show that the survey findings concur with their experience about the needs of adopted children and their families and that a number of developments to provide adoption support in Sheffield are in place.

The survey has also raised a number of questions that should be further explored, not least a more detailed investigation and consideration of the educational experience as expressed by the adopted children themselves.

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