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# Adopters' views on their children's life storybooks

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## **Adopters' views on their children's life storybooks**

### **Abstract**

**This research, conducted jointly between University of Bristol and Coram, aimed to address the absence in the academic literature of adopters' perspectives on their children's life storybooks. Forty adopters from England and Wales participated in either focus group or telephone interviews.**

**Whilst some of the accounts were of positive experiences, there was a broad consensus that: many books were of poor quality, children had been poorly prepared to explore their histories, adoption professionals and agencies did not seem to prioritise life storybooks, and that adopters felt poorly prepared in how to use and update life storybooks with their children. Clear messages for adoption agencies can be elicited regarding the preparation and use of life storybooks, such as improved training for professionals and monitoring of the quality of books produced and better access to support and guidance for adopters to engage in this crucial work with their children over time.**

### **Key words**

**Life storybook, adopted children, identity, adopter perspectives.**

## **Introduction**

Life story work and the preparation of life storybooks for looked after children should be regarded as a right in respect of the child's access to information on their early history and background prior to adoption (Feast, 2010). The importance of direct work with children was reinforced in the Children Act (DfES, 1989), the Adoption and Children Act (2002) and updated in the Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014a). The 'national minimum standards in adoption' focus on the importance of life story work and state that it should 'represents a realistic and honest account of the circumstances surrounding the child's adoption' (DfE, 2014b, 2.5, p. 13). The statutory guidance (DfE, 2014c) specifically states that 'all children with a plan for adoption must have a life story book' (3.10, p.45). This guidance requires that life storybooks be given to the child and adoptive parents in stages, and the completed book presented within ten working days of the adoption order (DfE, 2014c). Recent Ofsted inspections have highlighted the need for improvements in life story work in Local Authority Adoption Agencies. In the last four inspections reported across England where the adoption performance has been judged as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' each report has highlighted the insufficiencies in the provision of life storybooks (Ofsted, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d).

Theoretically, life story work is based upon attachment and loss theory (Ryan and Walker, 2007) and the role of narrative in identity development (Treacher and Katz, 2001) in order that children can come to better understand their family history, as well as their adoptive status (Brodzinsky et al., 1984, Brodzinsky, 2011, Rushton, 2004) and the production of a life storybook is one aspect of this direct work. Social work interest in life story work and the production of life storybooks for looked after children can be traced in the UK to practice guidance in the mid-1980s (Ryan and Walker, 1985) and based on social work assertions that 'knowing the facts of one's past is a necessary part of the development of a sense of personal history, identity and culture' (Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988, p.11). The engagement of a child with a life storybook, it is suggested 'places a sense of permanence in the hands of the child' (Cook-Cottone and Beck, 2007, p.195) as the child is able to reminisce and co-construct their past with the help of the narrative and memories in the book and this is believed to contribute to their construction of self, playing an important role in the 'attunement' of the individual with other people and their environment (*Ibid.*).

Guidance for professionals on how to engage in both the *process* of life story work and the creation of a *product* (life storybook) for and with children has since proliferated, for

example, (Hammond and Cooper, 2013, Harrison, 1998, May et al., 2011, Rees, 2009, Rose and Philpot, 2005, Ryan and Walker, 2007, Stringer, 2009) as well as guidance aimed at children (Shah and Argent, 2006). The importance of the distinction between ongoing life story work, as well as providing support to children to explore their feelings with trusted adults; and the life storybook that is produced, is relevant to acknowledge here as the two can sometimes be conflated and the production of a book does not signal the completion of life story work. The book provides the contexts and explanations for, as well as evidence of the child's history, often based on '*informed guesses about complicated issues*' (Livingston Smith, 2014, p.163, Italics in original); whilst life story work is open ended (*Ibid.*) and can be done through multiple media (not just a 'book'), but always with the child involved and should be flexible to accommodate children's own changing perceptions and feelings (Rose and Philpott, 2005).

Many organisations have published web based resources for use with foster and adopted children to discuss their life histories, such as online worksheets to complete (Howard, 2010); DVD materials published in the USA (Johnson and Howard, 2008); and the 'In My Shoes' computer assisted tool developed by BAAF in the UK (Calam et al., 2005) which has been shown to have positive outcomes with adopted disabled children (Cousins and Simmonds, 2011).

### **Adopters' and Children's Views**

Whilst the last 30 years has witnessed a burgeoning of practice guidance; knowledge of adopters' and children's experiences of life story work and books is based on small data sets, with a dearth of research on the topic widely acknowledged (Gallagher and Green, 2012, Gallagher and Green, 2013, Livingston Smith, 2014, Shotton, 2010, Willis and Holland, 2009) particularly related to perceived efficacy of the intervention (Baynes, 2008, Rushton, 2004, Quinton et al., 1998). As Livingston Smith (2014) notes there is one small published study (with eight matched pairs of foster children) from the 1990s (Kliman et al., 1996) that attempted to explore the impact of life storybooks on placement stability and which concluded that the books had been effective as tools to enable children to communicate about difficult experiences. Yet the study by Rushton and colleagues (Rushton et al, 1997) that explored the quality and effectiveness of pre-placement direct work with 61 children aged five to nine years found life story books to have no impact on their outcomes. Lack of adequate training for social workers in undertaking this and other direct work with children

was emphasised in this study (*Ibid.*). However, Livingston Smith (2014) also acknowledges that the impact of life storybooks on children is hard to articulate and measure and they lack theorisation as interventions.

More recently, the study by Selwyn and colleagues (Selwyn et al., 2014) for the Department for Education in England reports views from 70 adopters where there has been placement disruption or where parenting had become very difficult. In this research context, life story work and life storybooks were discussed in interviews. Adopters' accounts are generally negative, with concerns raised about the poor quality, incompleteness or inaccuracies of life storybooks and of the challenges of writing material that is suitable for children as they grow older. In some cases life story work was reported to be detrimental to children and as having a direct impact on the escalation of children's difficulties.

Our review of the literature has, however, revealed few studies primarily focused on capturing adopters perspectives on their child's life storybooks. Two studies by Shotton explored adopters' views of life story work in the form of a specific intervention called 'memory store' which encourages carers to record memories of events of the child's time in their care alongside the child, in order to focus on experiences that are shared (Shotton, 2010, Shotton, 2013). These studies engaged small numbers of foster carers and adopters engaging with children in a particular approach to life story work that does not claim to capture the child's pre-adoption life story in a complete way. Whilst acknowledging there are some reported insights into adopters' perspectives on life storybooks, the study reported in this paper engaged adopters specifically on this issue.

Of the few studies that have reported children's views (Gallagher & Green, 2012; Neil, 2012; Selwyn et al, 2014; Willis & Holland, 2009) only one focused specifically on children's reflections on life story work (Willis & Holland, 2009). The study by Willis and Holland (2009) involved interviews with 12 looked after young people aged 11-18 years in one local authority in South Wales about their experiences of life story work which included the production of a life storybook. Overall the authors reported the importance and value that young people afforded the life story work, although it provoked strong emotional reactions including tedium, boredom, anger, sadness and pleasure; feelings that contributed to one young person completely destroying her work (*Ibid.*). In particular the importance of birth family photographs included in the book was noted in this study and others (Neil, 2012;

Selwyn et al, 2014). Children in the study by Neil (2012) also regularly reported gaps in understanding due to lack of information in their life storybooks.

## **Methods**

Given that the focus of our study was to capture adoptive parents' views on their children's life storybooks, an interpretative qualitative design was used. A combination of four focus group interviews with small groups of parents (n=24) and individual telephone interviews (n=16) were conducted. Focus groups were the preferred method as they provide opportunities 'to elicit people's understandings, opinions and views, or to explore how these are advanced, elaborated and negotiated in a social context' (Wilkinson, 1998, p.187). However, they do need careful facilitation to ensure that certain views do not dominate and that individuals are not silenced, particularly when researching an emotional subject. Whilst the groups were brought together on the basis of their shared experience of being adopters of children who had life storybooks, the experiences also varied and these differences allowed for members to interject new ideas and even to share examples of life storybooks that they had done with their child; these exchanges added to the richness of the discussions (Kitzinger, 1994). Telephone interviews were conducted when it was not possible for a parent to participate in a focus group due to geographical location or pressures of time. Both methods were conducted using the same semi-structured schedule that explored parents' experiences of receiving, using and developing life storybooks for their adopted children; exploring how they used the books with their children; their overall appraisals of the books; difficulties encountered and their support needs in using life storybooks with their children.

The focus groups and the telephone interviews were conducted by an experienced adoption social worker, assisted by a Coram colleague who took notes in the focus groups. It was essential that the researcher was knowledgeable about adoption and was experienced working with adopters in order to be trusted and afforded credibility by participants. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Ethical approval for the data collection was provided by Coram's ethics committee and in collaboration with researchers at the University of Bristol, including the lead author who led the analysis and writing.

## **Participants**

Focus groups were conducted in Cambridgeshire, Kent and London and participants were approached through Coram's contacts in these areas; through an online request on *Adoption UK* and *Coram's* website; and via social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

The forty participants had adopted 57 children, including 15 groups of siblings. The ages of adopted children ranged from two to 15 years of age (average age 8 years). Age at adoption ranged from nine months to eight years, with an average of 2.8 years. This means the children had been in their adoptive placement between one to eight years (average 5.5 years).

Telephone interview participants were recruited in the same ways and participants were interviewed from Dorset, Lancashire, Essex, Kent, London, Suffolk, Cardiff, Derbyshire and Cambridgeshire. In order to protect the anonymity of participants the locations have been omitted. The majority of participants were women (n=36) and most of the participants reported their ethnicity as White British (77%), with only slightly more ethnic diversity reported amongst their children who were recorded as 73% White British. Three adopters identified themselves as same sex adopters and two as disabled.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcripts and notes from the focus groups and telephone interviews were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Thomas, 2006) in order to elicit key themes across the data. Coding resulted in themes related to adopters' overall appraisal of their children's life storybooks, the story that was told and support accessed or required in using and developing life storybooks. These themes form the headings in the next section. Given the nature of focus groups in facilitating discussion and debate it has not been possible to identify individual voices at all times in the transcripts and we have chosen not to do so in order to ensure anonymity for participants and their children. Focus group data are attributed to individual groups e.g. 'FG1' rather than individuals, and the telephone interviewees have been put together as one group denoted as 'TI'.

### **Findings**

In reviewing the data it is evident that adopters found it difficult at times to separate their views of life story work and the life storybook that their child was given. Where appropriate we have made this distinction for the reader, but it is important to acknowledge that for adopters, the two processes were often perceived to be entangled and it was difficult for them to comment on one, without reference to the other.

Adopters were asked to make an overall numerical assessment of their children's life storybooks at the beginning of the data collection in response to a five-point likert scale



where '1' was 'terrible' and '5' was 'excellent'. A third of those who attended the focus groups and slightly more (44%) of the telephone interview group rated the books as 4 or 5 ('good' or 'excellent'). The TI group were more satisfied with the quality of the books with only three (19%) of the 16 adopters rating the books as 'terrible' in comparison with 10 (42%) of the focus group participants.

Clear geographical effects were evident in adopters' appraisals, which may or may not relate to the Local Authority, adoption agencies involved or specific professionals involved in compiling the life storybooks. It is also important to note that it was at times difficult to disaggregate parents' comments in respect of sibling or multiple adopters as some adopters provided different scores for each child's book (in which case an average has been recorded). In at least nine cases in the focus groups it was also clear that adopters were rating life storybooks they had produced (and these were the ones rated as 'good' or 'excellent'), usually because their child had not been provided with one at all and they had no other benchmark against which to make a judgment. Several of these adopters brought their own books to the groups and were very proud of what they had produced. Three of the telephone interviewees had also produced their own book for their child.

Across the groups the *idea* of a life storybook was one that was welcomed by adopters; indeed, one commented they were just happy 'that we have one – many of our fellow adopters don't' (TI). Although, one adopter, after hearing stories from the others concluded:

*I feel pleased that they didn't give me one now. I produced mine and had complete control over it. I thought deeply about every picture and words that went in there (FG3).*

The majority of the adopters however, were critical of the *execution* of them. The question, 'What aspects do you dislike about your child's book?' elicited a great deal of discussion in all of the focus groups and more than double the number of comments than in response to the questions about which aspects they liked about their child's book. Many of the points raised have contributed to the themes presented below.

Some adopters were concerned about the lack of communication about the life storybook and the lack of opportunity for them to feedback their assessment to the person who had compiled their child's book. Instead there was a feeling that adopters had little control over the production and then were left to deal with the consequences with their adopted child:

*We did not have the opportunity to discuss but what I would have said was this is rubbish- all of it is rubbish. Except for the photos, there is no story line, ours was done by a student as well- we can't use this. It was a difficult situation because it was so bad it's like, "Where do you start?" (FG3).*

This prompted another parent in the same group to state:

*It is really difficult because you don't know what to do with it. You can't use it so it is just there unless you burnt it (FG3).*

Another parent in the same group reiterated the lack of overall utility of her child's book:

*I can never show my daughter hers because there is stuff in there that I don't ever want her to see ... even when she reaches 18- I don't know if she will be able to handle it (FG3).*

In another focus group, one adopter (FG4) explained that he and his partner produced their sibling children's books themselves, as the Local Authority (LA) they adopted from did not produce life storybooks. Instead the LA provided the adopters with the raw materials and information to do it themselves. He explained that he had put in illustrations to help the children visualise the sort of problems their birth parents had experienced i.e. a head with a sad face and a tangle of wool or wire going round and round the face to depict mental illness. He shared this with the other adopters who were inspired by the approach he had taken although most commented on their lack of creative skills to produce something similar.

### **The Life Storybook**

The following section includes three distinct sub sections relating to the *content*, *presentation* and the *focus* of the life storybook, as described by the adoptive parents

#### **Content**

Life storybooks varied in their composition with a range of mementoes and information mentioned. Books contained, for example, birth family photographs, hospital photographs, hospital bracelets, a lock of baby hair, letters from extended family members and foster carers, medical information related to birth family, birth certificate, a map of the country where the child was born, adoption orders and greetings cards. Adopters were also keen to discuss other mementoes that their child had and that had been collected as part of the wider life story work conducted, such as cuddly toys, jewellery and baby clothes. It was difficult at

times to ascertain what was in the life storybook and what was as a result of wider life story work. For example, one child was said to have a 'DVD publicising her for adoption' (TI); another had a DVD recording of a contact session with her birth parents (FG4). One adopter also had a memory box, compiled by her child's foster mother. This contained, amongst other things, a little outfit given to the child by the birth mother, which she commented, 'Was good to have – and had been given to her by a very experienced foster carer who knew that such things mattered' (FG1). Yet for other adopters the content was a disappointment, for example: 'Not much.....a flag from the place where the birth father is supposed to have come from' (TI). Another child had been given a teddy with a recording of his mother's voice saying 'I love you very much' which the adopter described as being very difficult to manage and stated: 'We've buried that teddy now' (FG3). The balance between too much and too little information and the appropriateness of material included was really highlighted by one adopter who commented that:

*They should have given me some stuff in a separate envelope.... the stuff with the headlines "baby found in a plastic bag" and "baby dumped" how do I explain that? No one wants to hear that they were dumped (FG3).*

The biggest consensus amongst adopters was the importance of the child's book having photographs of the birth family, as well as anecdotes and clear descriptions of what the photos related to. One adopter commented on the inclusion of sibling photos: 'She (child) said she likes that she can remember what her siblings look like' (TI). Photos of the adopted child as a baby were also seen to be of great value; as one mother commented: 'He loves looking at himself and of who is who in his family' (TI). Poignantly one mother commented on the importance of birth photos as, 'It's all they have left of their own babyhood' (FG1). Photos that were perceived to be ill-chosen were, however, criticised strongly. For example one mother stated, 'A photograph of birth mum with the siblings but not with this adopted child: better to leave it out altogether' (TI).

There were concerns raised about a lack of information on previous foster placements in the child's book. One of the telephone interviewees explained her child disliked the fact that there were no photos of other children who were in the foster placement in his book as:

*When he has contact with the foster carer he wants to look at their photos and ask questions. He was there a long time and this gap creates 'loss and confusion' for him.*

Another mother reported that her child had experienced seven foster placements and had no photos of any of these families (TI). Whilst another commented on the damaging affect of foster carers ill-considered comments in the book that could not be erased:

*The foster carer really didn't like my daughter. There is a letter in the life storybook that says, "You were an absolute pain, but we loved you"- just dreadful. I can't take it out because it has another page on the back (FG3).*

Adopter's appreciated it when the life storybook had detail in it, including for example a family tree, details of pre-school and school and house moves. This was deemed to be especially useful when children have experienced multiple moves prior to the adoption as it enables events to be put in order. One of the telephone interviewees described her child's life storybook as,

*Very loving as done by the foster carer who he stayed with for 18 months. Fun, detailed and the right level for a younger child. Lots of photos, mementos: a systematic pictorial history (TI).*

There were reservations amongst all of the adopters about the direct inclusion of a family tree, when it had too much detail, and particularly when there were full names in it. A common concern raised was that, particularly with easily available information on the internet, that if the child's original surname was in the book they could 'google' it and find out contact details or information related to, for example, the 'birth mother's criminal history' (FG4) or use social media to locate birth family. Across all of the groups, four adopters reported that the life storybook used their child's birth surname, (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4). This was also reported in three of the telephone interviews. Other concerns related to fears that children may be left confused and feeling isolated at not knowing the people in the family tree and that this was best kept separate so adopters could introduce this at an older age.

Others raised concern about letters that were included from birth mothers which were seen to be 'quite rambling and emotional' (TI) and concerns were raised about how or when to share these with children. One adopter liked the letter from the birth mother which had been written with the support of the social worker (FG2). Another adopter commented that the birth mother had provided a letter to be included in the life storybook for the daughter and not the son she had adopted as she 'had not liked him' and the adopter did not know how to handle this (FG4). One adopter said that she liked that the book gave a different perspective to the

adoption rather than just the adopter's view (FG2); although others complained about the lack of a balanced story conveyed:

*Only one social worker wrote it and there is no balance. Why he came into care (relinquished child) is glossed over. All birth family first and surnames included (TI).*

The involvement of adopters in the child's life pre-adoption was also felt to be essential to be included, as one commented: 'We are not included in it and yet knew about the child for a year and fought to get him – this should be in the book' (TI).

Many of the discussions with adopters focused on information that was missing in their child's book; such as accounts of the child as a baby, their likes and dislikes, first steps and words, lack of photos and information about fathers and extended family members and incomplete or inaccurate narratives. In some cases photos were incorrectly labelled and information was lacking in a factual basis:

*We had been told that their family might be a little bit Welsh or might not be Welsh. It's not solid information. We don't know from the social worker what fact is and what fiction is (FG3).*

This led another adopter from the same group to critique the inclusion of such material:

*There were details that they had discussed that were a bit sketchy and started to appear in the life storybook. You have to take our book with a pinch of salt. I don't think that they know and that's the problem. I think they need to look at what is fact and be really clear about what goes in the book. It's so important to these kids.*

### **Presentation**

Some adopters described 'scrap-book like' forms of presentation with information stuck down on certain pages while other adopters reported they had loose leaf ring binders that allowed for inserts to be removed and provided when the child was older. Electronic books that could be printed out and updated were also mentioned, usually in a positive way; although one adopter complained that their child's book had been done in a format that they were unable to print out so it was only possible to view on the computer (FG3); and another complained that their child's had content that had been shrunk to such an extent that it was impossible to read (FG1).

Concerns about the scrap book style focused on the inability to remove information or to update, as the child grew older. One adopter explained that there was:

*Too much information on the drugs/alcohol/prison background of her mother and because it's a scrapbook I cannot edit it myself for when she is ready. For example, her mother has two more children now and this is in the book, but the child hasn't been told the information – it's just there (TI).*

Many criticised their books for having bad spelling and / or grammar and for being 'Blue Peter in style' (FG2) with a general feeling that they were rushed; with words like 'amateurish' and 'flimsy' used frequently. Experiences of positive presentation were also mixed and very much reliant on the skills of the person compiling the book, as the comment by one sibling adopter conveys:

*My daughter's book was beautiful- embroidered, really special. But my son's- although it has good information in there it is just in a plastic folder, it isn't special (FG3).*

Inaccuracies in the content were also a major source of concern and one adopter said the person compiling her child's life storybook had actually used the wrong surname throughout (FG1). Books were often completed by social work students; and in three cases out of five reported in one focus group (FG1) the person who made the book had not even met the child. In the same group of adopters, four books (two adopters) were described as being 'inaccurate and incomplete', for instance one woman had adopted twins, another sibling adoptees- in both cases the books allegedly showed confusion about which child was which. Another adopter who has a child with additional needs said her son considered that the pictures could be of anyone due to their poor quality and lack of associated narrative. There was a strong feeling across the groups that when siblings were placed, information was cut and pasted, and is not always checked for accuracy for each child in the sibling group.

### **Focus**

Across all the interviews there was a belief that sometimes the focus of the book was skewed towards telling the story of the birth family, foster family or social worker rather than the child. As one adopter stated: 'the book should be about the CHILDREN rather than about what the social workers had to do' (FG1). There was also a strong feeling expressed in FG1

that the book should start and end with the adoptive family as context for the child's story, rather than adopters being 'squeezed in at the end of the book'. This format appeared to be a familiar practice in one particular LA and resonates with the model proposed by Joy Rees (Rees, 2009). Clearly this has implications for the form of presentation used and a fixed scrap book does not allow for retrospective additions of information.

Achieving the right balance appeared problematic as one adopter commented on what she felt was an excessive focus on the birth family (rather than the child) (FG3) as opposed to another who expressed concern at the focus on the foster carers and how this marginalised the birth family:

*Both life storybooks are virtually the same although one child was removed at birth and the other 4yrs old. Too long a section on one set of foster carers which is in contrast to the birth family information/photos. This lessens what the birth mother is able to contribute (TI).*

In one case a same sex adopter explained that his child's book had described his adoptive parents as 'mummy and daddy' throughout and this had rendered the book unusable to them.

### **The story told**

There was much debate in the focus groups about getting the balance right in terms of the story so it has enough facts, but not too much detail about why the child ended up in care. Those that liked their child's book commented that it told the story well, was age appropriate, and honest, and avoided the construction of a 'fairy tale'. Although there were examples when this was not the case:

*The mother didn't turn up for contact hardly at all and yet the one photo in the book is of her and the children smiling the one time she did. It's an inaccurate depiction and no explanation or balance given so my child gets the wrong idea (FG4).*

For some parents the unrealistic representation of the story such as the inclusion of glossy photos of the birth parents smiling and laughing with the child was a source of concern as they believed this would be storing up 'long term repercussions in adolescence' (TI). Such representations were thought to lead to the child wondering why they could not stay at home, resulting in idealisation of their birth family. One adopter criticised the book for being 'too emotional', and that some of the information about the birth father was 'quite unpleasant', resulting in her comment:

*I find it hard to be positive about the birth family- We're all encouraged to be positive about the birth family, but when we say these thing then the child just asks, "So why did you take me away?" (FG1).*

Adopters were of course also concerned about how to support their child in dealing with difficult birth family stories; but as the comment below conveys, this was perceived by some as not so much about managing the information that children receive; rather it is about how adopters help them to deal with the truth:

*Initially, we worried about the information in the book leading to our son asking us awkward questions and then we realised it is not for us to take out the questions, it is for us to deal with the questions (TI).*

In particular, adopters wanted more medical history and detail to questions like: 'How tall were the birth parents?' This was particularly pertinent for one adopter in FG1 whose child had growth problems.

### **Longitudinal capabilities**

A small proportion of the comments made about the age appropriateness of their children's life storybooks suggested that parents thought they were at the right level and age appropriate (three out of 29 comments recorded) (FG1; TI). More than half of the adopters who commented on this issue felt books were pitched at too old an age and were not helpful for younger children. Some had managed this situation because they were either provided with two books (for different ages) or had been supplied with information in order that they could update their child's book as they got older as part of their ongoing life story work with their child, illustrated by those who felt that their adoptive family life had become more important to focus on over time: 'We decided not to update it with further photographs of our family and instead have separate photo albums of her life now' (TI) with another interviewee stressing the importance of the child's life with them instead of his birth history remaining prominent: 'I will update it with his life with us and also redo the original to include how we heard about him and how we fought for him' (TI).

For two adopters there was a feeling that the life storybook was: 'Just a snapshot in time which loses relevance' (FG1). Others had young children who had yet to really comprehend the significance of their books; whilst some felt strongly that the books 'infantilised' the importance of the early years (FG1; FG4) and allowed children to become overly focused on



the relevance of what they felt was often a short period in their lives with their birth family. For example, one woman said she felt it was important to 'keep the book in perspective' (FG1) as she explained that one of her boys had been with his birth parents for just six weeks 'and he can get hung up on it [the book]'.

### **Support**

Experiences of support provided to adopters in the use of life storybooks varied and were characterised by two telephone interviewee comments which ranged from receiving 'No training. I need help on how to manage questions and when appropriate to bring it out'; through to:

*We went to a drop in session facilitated by the post adoption team and met other adopters. We were shown anonymous examples of life storybooks which were really helpful. Excellent support from the post adoption team in general, I can phone them for advice any time.*

For those who raised concerns about their access to support in using their child's life storybook, this was often because the support was only offered to them in the early years of the placement and there was a need for ongoing support in life story work with their child. They were concerned that as their child got older their support needs had changed and they had nowhere to go to get the help they increasingly recognised they needed: 'I can see he is troubled and it is linked to adoption' (TI). For some, the impending need to reveal the child's detailed early history precipitated this concern:

*He has a really difficult history and it is going to be hard to stomach so he will need experienced support later down the line – but then surely all adopted children do?*  
(TI)

In many instances adopters had been vaguely advised to 'go through' the life storybook with their child and talk with them about it (FG1). Adopters agreed that although obviously every child was different, they would still have liked to have been given a rough age range when it would be good to start using the book. They would also have liked some training in how to use it, update it and respond to the questions children might ask– for instance they suggested the use of a video of someone using it. Focus group one reported that training is offered at times by the LA, but it often gets cancelled and this is frustrating.

Of the 32 comments about the need for specific forms of support in the use of life storybooks; 13 of these were adopters who claimed to have received no support at all. The remaining 19 comments related to specific sources of support that had been provided and were regarded by adopters as useful, these included music and art therapy offered by their voluntary adoption agency, parenting programmes, Joy Rees training, psychotherapy sessions focused on life storybooks, CAMHS services accessed via the Michael Rutter centre, play therapy, social worker telephone support, drop-in sessions run by the adoption team, an adoption support play group, and a CAF team.

### **Role of schools**

Schools were criticised in all of the focus groups for their lack of understanding and sensitivity in dealing with children who were adopted. It was generally agreed that it would be helpful if schools had greater understanding of attachment issues, in particular. In regard to schools and life storybooks, two adopters recounted stories of school staff whom they felt had dealt with children's life storybooks in highly unprofessional ways as the following quote illustrate:

*She talked about it [life storybook] in circle time and with good friends and the teacher cried (TI).*

Another child (FG2) reportedly took her book to show her learning support assistant (LSA) in school and the LSA cried when she read it. This prompted a discussion on the lack of understanding of adoption in schools. Another child had reportedly told a teacher about some of her past history including her sexual abuse and the teacher commented that 'there are a lot worse off children than you out there' (FG2).

As unacceptable and insensitive as these stories are, it is also important to note that there were more positive examples. One adopter explained that he had edited his child's book taking out information on the birth family before his child took it in to 'Show and Tell' in primary school and had also met with the class teacher in preparation and the outcome was a positive experience for his child.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Adopters welcomed the opportunity to comment on their children's life storybook. For some, the experience of using a life storybook with their adopted children had been extremely positive; for others the experience was far more mixed, and in some cases the life storybook

was unusable and believed by adopters to be damaging and unhelpful to be given to children concerned. Some of the adopters wanted to bury the child's past and focus on the present, despite what is known about the importance of adopters conveying pre-adoption information to children clearly and honestly (Livingston Smith, 2014, Romaine and Tuckey, 2007) and as early as possible in the child's adoption life (Rose and Philpot, 2005). The emotional challenges to adopters in using life storybooks with their adopted children cannot be underestimated, and it is important to acknowledge that their appraisals were of course filtered through their own assessments of the birth family and the understanding of the care trajectory that their child had experienced pre-adoption.

Importantly adopters who did not use their child's book, or kept aspects away from their child were also those that described a poor quality life storybook. Training of adopters should be developed to help them in understanding the purpose of the book, when to introduce it to their child, how to deal with the details of their child's history and how to ensure the books have relevance for children across childhood and adolescence as part of wider life story work across transitional phases. Support should be readily available to adopters throughout childhood, and particularly as children approach adolescence when questions of identity become even more salient and this reflects concerns raised about the possible negative impact of life storybooks in placement disruption in adolescence (Selwyn et al., 2014). There was a strong consensus that adopters wanted to be a part of making the life storybooks; with the right support and training. Suggestions included working with the social worker to produce the book together or for them to be given a basic book for a younger child and supplied with the material to update later. Some critiques related to missing information that may just not have been available to the professionals compiling the book (e.g. details of the birth father, childhood mementoes), despite the fact that this is identified in the literature as contributing to a positive sense of identity by helping the child to answer questions about who they are (Feast, 2010, Romaine and Tuckey, 2007). Adopters spoke about the need for persistence in seeking out photographs of birth family, especially absent fathers, and the importance of having a neutral person, e.g. a family support worker, who could approach birth families, preferably after court proceedings, had ceased, in order to access these so that the necessary material for the life storybook is available. Concerns about the absent nature of fathers in the life storybooks were common across accounts and arguably results in a skewed presentation of the child's life story, particularly, as Baynes (2008) suggests in cases of male violence

where the story that is told is one of the mother's inability or failure to protect from harm, rather than the father as the perpetrator.

There was some evidence in the data of the impact of a lack of information in preventing children from addressing unresolved feelings (Stringer, 2009) with their birth family as the inclusion of emotional letters and rosy family photographs precipitated children questioning why they had been placed in care. As Brodzinsky argues such positive presentation is sentimental and misguided (Brodzinsky, 2005) as the 'child is tormented by the tantalizing evidence in the life storybook' (Loxterkamp, 2009, p.433) and this is seen as an additional source of harm. Getting the tone of the story right and ensuring that there was sufficient detail on the reasons why the child had come into care was a major concern across all the data and is the starting point in the journey for adopted children in understanding their past (Feast, 2010). As Baynes (2008) argued, the 'untold stories' are the ones that enable children to come to more balanced understanding of their care trajectory; but are often filtered and sanitised by social workers who exert power over the narrative that is told; and there was some evidence that adopters (with the very best of intentions) were also exerting this power over the narrative available to children.

In the majority of cases, adopters' poor appraisals of their child's life storybook were attributed to factors that could have been avoided with better training of the staff compiling them. It is also clear that there is an important role for schools in supporting adopted children to have appropriate discussions about their adoptive histories in school (if relevant) and this requires better knowledge and skills on the part of school staff of adoption generally and life storybooks in particular. These conclusions indicate a lack of importance afforded to life storybooks by professionals and agencies involved in placements and the need for adoption panels to be firmer in their monitoring of this crucial work with children. Given the proliferation of practice guidance available it seems that there is a lack of will and resources amongst some LAs and adoption agencies to really engage with this work, rather than a lack of knowledge or skill in the field and this resonates with criticisms made in the 1990s of poor training for social workers to undertake direct work with children (Rushton et al, 1997).

Whilst this paper reports a relatively small amount of adopters' views, and often the stories presented are very individual, we hope that in conveying them in this way that the range of experiences is captured and that the examples, particularly of poor practice in the production of life storybooks, can operate as warnings of the importance of a life storybook in conveying

pre-adoption life histories and the need for this work to be prioritised. As this paper has also shown this is an under developed field of research with limited insights into the experiences of life storybooks collected with the people who this intervention impacts upon the most (looked after and adopted children and adopters). Future research in this field is very much a priority, particularly in respect of gaining children and young people's perspectives on the utility and impact of having and experiencing life storybooks (Willis and Holland, 2009). Published insights from children and young people are limited and this is a particular concern. However, this is something we have focused on and we also have data from 20 adopted children which will be forthcoming in a separate paper, as there is not space here to do their views justice. In conclusion it is essential to be reminded that linking a child's past and present is crucial 'bridging' work in enabling permanence in placements (Ryan and Walker, 2007); and, as one adopter confirmed: 'a good quality life storybook builds a bridge back to that huge part of her that we didn't see and it is her main link to her past'.

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