

Navigating Personal Beliefs in Professional Practice: Perspectives of Virtual School Educational
Professionals Working with Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Azra Klempić

A thesis submitted for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Child, Community
and Educational Psychology

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

University of Essex

Date of submission for examination (May 2026)

Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Abstract	10
1 INTRODUCTION	11
1.1 Overview	11
1.2 Context	11
1.3 Positionality	15
1.4 Theoretical Perspectives	17
1.5 Research Aims	19
1.6 Roadmap	19
2 SCOPING REVIEW	21
2.1 Chapter Overview	21
2.2 Stage 1: Identifying the Review Question	25
2.2.1 <i>Aims and Objectives</i>	25
2.2.2 <i>Population</i>	25
2.2.3 <i>Definitions</i>	26
2.3 Stage 2: Identifying the Relevant Studies	26
2.3.1 <i>Search Strategy</i>	26
2.3.2 <i>Search Process</i>	29
2.3.3 <i>Hand Searches</i>	30

2.4	Stage 3: Study Selection	30
2.4.1	<i>Geographical Scope</i>	30
2.4.2	<i>Selection Process</i>	31
2.4.3	<i>Additional Contextual Literature</i>	34
2.4.4	<i>Final Sample</i>	34
2.5	Stage 4: Charting the Data	36
2.5.1	<i>Sample</i>	36
2.5.2	<i>Methodology of the Literature</i>	37
2.5.3	<i>Reflections on the Chosen Literature</i>	40
2.6	Stage 5: Reporting the Results	53
2.6.1	<i>Belief, Policy, and the Professional Landscape</i>	54
2.6.2	<i>Navigating Belief, Ethics, and Identity in Practice</i>	58
2.6.3	<i>Relational Practice within Educational and Care Systems</i>	60
2.7	Conclusion and Research Questions (RQs)	67
2.7.1	<i>Synthesis of Key Findings</i>	67
2.7.2	<i>Identifying the Gap</i>	68
2.7.3	<i>Research Questions (RQs)</i>	69
2.7.4	<i>From Review to Inquiry</i>	69
3	METHODOLOGY	71
3.1	Chapter Overview	71

3.2	Research Positioning and Philosophical Stance	71
3.2.1	<i>Ontology</i>	71
3.2.2	<i>Epistemology</i>	73
3.2.3	<i>Axiology and Researcher Positioning</i>	75
3.3	Research Design.....	76
3.4	Ethical Considerations	78
3.4.1	<i>Ethical Approval</i>	78
3.4.2	<i>Informed Consent</i>	79
3.4.3	<i>Potential Benefits to Participants</i>	79
3.4.4	<i>Confidentiality</i>	80
3.4.5	<i>Data Protection</i>	80
3.4.6	<i>Social Responsibility</i>	81
3.5	Research Quality.....	82
3.5.1	<i>Commitment to Quality</i>	82
3.5.2	<i>Transparency and Coherence</i>	82
3.6	Recruitment Strategy	83
3.6.1	<i>Initial Approach and Challenges</i>	83
3.6.2	<i>Ethical Amendment and Final Strategy</i>	85
3.7	Number of Participants	87
3.8	Data Collection	90

3.8.1	<i>Rationale for Semi-structured Interviews</i>	90
3.8.2	<i>Interview Process and Procedures</i>	91
3.8.3	<i>Interview Schedule Development</i>	93
3.8.4	<i>Interview Quality Considerations</i>	94
3.8.5	<i>Post-interview Procedures</i>	95
3.9	<i>Data Analysis Process and Reflexivity</i>	96
3.9.1	<i>Reflexivity in the Data Analysis Process</i>	96
3.9.2	<i>Methodological Implications</i>	97
3.9.3	<i>Ongoing Reflexivity</i>	97
3.9.4	<i>Interpretive Knowledge Construction and Researcher Subjectivity</i>	99
3.9.5	<i>Limitations of Knowledge Claims</i>	101
3.10	<i>Reflexive Thematic Analysis</i>	101
3.10.1	<i>Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data</i>	102
3.10.2	<i>Phase 2: Coding</i>	103
3.10.3	<i>Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes</i>	105
3.10.4	<i>Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes</i>	108
3.10.5	<i>Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes</i>	109
3.10.6	<i>Phase 6: Write-up</i>	111
4	FINDINGS	113
4.1	Chapter Overview	113

4.2	Theme 1: Belief Woven into Practice	115
4.2.1	<i>Early Experiences Shaping Professional Moral Self</i>	115
4.2.2	<i>Belief Shaping Identity Across Life Domains</i>	121
4.3	Theme 2: Different Ways of Navigating Belief in Practice	123
4.3.1	<i>Making Belief Visible</i>	124
4.3.2	<i>Holding Belief Quietly</i>	127
4.3.3	<i>Stepping Back from Belief</i>	130
4.4	Theme 3: Belief Acting as a Moral Compass	133
4.4.1	<i>Belief Shaping Moral Stance Within Work</i>	134
4.4.2	<i>Belief Reframing Internal Negotiation</i>	136
4.4.3	<i>Belief as a Resource for Perseverance</i>	139
4.5	Theme 4: When Belief Meets Institutional Reality	142
4.5.1	<i>Organisational Power Taking Precedence Over Belief-led Meaning</i>	143
4.5.2	<i>Moral Discomfort and Ethical Strain</i>	146
4.5.3	<i>Micro-resistance and Acceptance of Limits</i>	148
5	DISCUSSION.....	151
5.1	Introduction to the discussion	151
5.2	Understanding Belief as Lived and Relational	152
5.3	Belief in Decision-Making: Beyond Neutrality	158
5.4	Navigating Constraints: Systems, Policy, and Identity	163

5.5	Synthesis and Implications for Practice	168
5.6	Strengths, Limitations, and Reflexivity	169
5.7	Future Research	172
5.8	Dissemination and Impact Strategy	174
5.9	Conclusion and Personal Reflection	175
6	References	178
7	Appendices	191
	Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter.....	191
	Appendix B: Example Email Sent to PEPs.....	192
	Appendix C: Research Recruitment Flyer	193
	Appendix D: Amended TREC Application.....	195
	Appendix E: Interview Questions	245
	Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet	247
	Appendix G: Consent Form	254
	Appendix H: Example of Reflexive Journal Entry	257
	Appendix J: Example of Early Transcript Coding (Interview 2)	259
	Appendix K: Corresponding Coding Table Extract with Reflexive Memos.....	260
	Appendix L: Example of Evolving Interpretive Coding (Interview 4).....	261
	Appendix M: Working Thematic Map Illustrating Early Theme Clusters.....	262
	Appendix N: Refined Thematic Map Following Development and Review (Phase Four).....	263

Appendix O: Placement Research Approval 264

List of Tables

- Table 1:** Overview of the Arksey and O'Malley Methodological Framework for Conducting a Scoping Review
- Table 2:** Search Terms and Boolean Operators Used Across EBSCO Database Searches
- Table 3:** Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Scoping Review
- Table 4:** Summary of the Scoping Review Literature (UK-based studies, 2014-2025)
- Table 5:** Participant Inclusion Criteria and Rationale
- Table 6:** Participant Exclusion Criteria and Rationale
- Table 7:** Summary of Participant Characteristics

List of Figures

- Figure 1:** Thematic Map
- Figure 2:** Three forms belief takes in practice among Virtual School professionals.

Acknowledgements

For Joy, carried for a moment, held in our hearts for a lifetime.

I would like to begin by thanking my research supervisor, Maria, for her guidance, encouragement, and expertise throughout this process. I am also grateful to Lisa for her support and thoughtful guidance. Finally, I would like to thank the colleagues and tutors whose support and kindness carried me through this journey, some more than they know, and in ways I will never forget.

To the participants who took part in this research, thank you for giving your time and sharing your experiences. I am truly grateful.

To both of our families, I am endlessly grateful for your love, encouragement, and belief in me throughout this journey. Your support has been the steady ground beneath my feet, giving me the courage to keep moving forward even in the most challenging moments.

To my dad, thank you for your quiet strength and encouragement.

To my mum, your sacrifices, patience, and guidance have shaped who I am today. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine, and I am forever grateful.

To Dan, my partner and my rock. Thank you for your love, your endless patience, and your understanding. Your belief in me, and the way you carried us through when I couldn't, has been my greatest strength. This thesis may bear my name, but your support is woven into every page.

And to the little one on the way, you've given me something beautiful to look forward to. I can't wait to meet you.

Abstract

Virtual Schools hold a distinctive position within the English education system, operating at the interface of education, social care, and wider multi-agency networks to promote the educational achievement and wellbeing of care-experienced children and young people (CYP). Professionals working within these contexts navigate complex ethical, relational, and systemic demands, often while supporting CYP for whom experiences of trauma, displacement, and identity disruption may make belief particularly significant in their lives. While existing literature explores professional values, ethics, and identity within education and social care separately, there is a notable absence of research examining how Virtual School professionals navigate their own personal belief systems within practice. This research addresses this gap by exploring how educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate the intersection of their personal belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) and their professional responsibilities when working with care-experienced CYP. Situated within a critical realist framework, the study adopted a qualitative design, generating data through semi-structured interviews with seven professionals and analysing them using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings are organised around four themes: belief woven into practice; different ways of navigating belief in practice; belief acting as a moral compass; and when belief meets institutional reality. Belief was found to shape professional identity, decision-making, and perseverance, often below conscious awareness, while institutional cultures offered limited space for reflection on how belief shapes practice. The study contributes to understanding of how belief is navigated within Virtual School practice and highlights implications for Educational Psychologists in facilitating reflective, ethically attuned practice. Limitations relating to sample size and self-selection are acknowledged, and future research directions are proposed, including work centring the voices of care-experienced CYP.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This thesis explores how educational professionals working within Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems in their practice with care-experienced children and young people (CYP). It focuses on the intersection between practitioners' belief systems and their professional decision-making within a context characterised by relational complexity, multi-agency working, and the support of a highly vulnerable population. By exploring how belief is lived, negotiated, and enacted in practice, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of professional practice within Virtual School contexts and its implications for supporting care-experienced CYP, particularly in shaping how Educational Psychologists (EPs) might facilitate reflective spaces and support values-informed practice within these systems.

1.2 Context

Care-experienced CYP are among the most vulnerable populations in the English education system. Many have lived through abuse, neglect, or family breakdown, and for some, entering care brings further loss, of home, of school, of the familiar relationships that hold a sense of self together. Their educational progress, emotional wellbeing, and sense of belonging depend in large part on the quality of the professional relationships and systems around them (NICE, 2021).

Care-experienced CYP, as the term is used throughout this thesis, encompasses those for whom local authorities and Virtual Schools hold a statutory duty to promote educational achievement under the Children and Families Act 2014 and associated Department for Education (DfE) guidance (DfE, 2018). This includes CYP currently looked after under the Children Act 1989, that is, under a care order or accommodated by a local authority for more than 24 hours, as well as those who have previously been in care. This definition also includes Unaccompanied Asylum-

Seeking Children (UASC), who are generally granted looked after status under the Children Act 1989 through Section 20 accommodation, though the specific legal route may vary across local authorities. Although previously looked after CYP include those who have been adopted, statutory guidance positions Virtual School involvement with this group as less direct and more advisory in nature (DfE, 2018), meaning they are typically less embedded within the multi-agency professional networks that are the focus of this study. This terminology reflects contemporary inclusive language that recognises the ongoing impact of care experiences, rather than reducing CYP to administrative categories.

This is also an increasingly diverse population. Recent data indicate that nearly 29% of looked after children come from ethnically diverse backgrounds (DfE, 2025), and the number of UASC within the care system has risen substantially, from approximately 4,150 in 2021 to a peak of 7,440 in 2024 (DfE, 2025). For many of these CYP, personal belief systems serve as foundational worldviews through which displacement, loss, and uncertainty are made meaningful, functioning not merely as coping strategies but as sources of identity, continuity, and belonging in contexts of profound disruption (Scott et al., 2022). Belief, in this sense, is not peripheral to the lives of care-experienced CYP but central to how many of them make sense of who they are and what has happened to them.

It is within this context that Virtual Schools occupy a distinctive position. Virtual Schools are statutory educational services established under the Children and Families Act 2014, which requires every local authority in England to appoint a Virtual School Head responsible for promoting the educational achievement of looked after and previously looked after CYP (DfE, 2018). Unlike conventional schools, Virtual Schools do not operate as physical institutions with enrolled pupils. Instead, they function as coordinating services, working across education, social care,

health, and care placements to monitor educational progress, advocate for individual CYP, and build the capacity of the professional networks around them. This positioning places Virtual School professionals at the intersection of multiple professional cultures, each shaped by its own values, ethical frameworks, assumptions about practice, and conditions for what can be spoken, reflected on, or acted upon.

Professionals within Virtual Schools occupy a range of roles, including advisory teachers, Educational Psychologists (EPs), Speech and Language Therapists, and senior leaders such as Virtual School Heads and Assistant Heads. These are inherently multi-professional spaces, bringing together practitioners across a range of roles whose work is defined not by any single professional identity but by their shared coordination around each child. While focusing on one role, such as the Virtual School Head, given their statutory responsibility for promoting educational achievement, might seem a logical starting point, this would risk overlooking the organisational and relational complexity that characterises this context. Belief navigation does not occur in isolation within a single role; rather, it is shaped through the interactions, tensions, and shared decision-making that unfold across the wider professional network surrounding each child. This study therefore explores how belief is navigated across the workforce as a whole, rather than within any one professional position.

Yet the intersection between practitioners' beliefs and their professional practice with this population has received limited research attention. Despite growing recognition that personal values and worldviews shape professional identity and decision-making across education and social care (Plante, 2014; Dinham, 2018), belief systems remain largely absent from professional guidance, training frameworks, and reflective practice within Educational Psychology and related fields (British Psychological Society (BPS), 2021, *Respect and Integrity*; Health and Care Profes-

sions Council (HCPC), 2023, Standard 5.3). This absence appears particularly notable within Virtual School contexts, where professionals coordinate support across education, social care, and health for care-experienced CYP from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, whose religious and cultural identities may be central to their sense of belonging and continuity in contexts of displacement and loss (Scott et al., 2022). Although professionals supporting UASC represent a particularly relevant group, the present study addresses this gap across the Virtual School workforce as a whole, for the reasons outlined above. It does so by exploring how belief is navigated within Virtual School practice, shaping professional understanding, ethical reasoning, and relational engagement with care-experienced CYP.

The present study is situated within the field of Educational Psychology, where increasing attention has been given to cultural competence and sensitivity to diversity in professional practice (BPS, 2023, Standard 3g; HCPC, 2023, Standards 5.1 & 5.3). While these frameworks acknowledge religion and belief, they tend to frame practitioners' own belief systems primarily as potential sources of bias to be managed (BPS, 2023, Standard 3g; HCPC, 2023, Standards 5.1 & 5.3), rather than as meaningful dimensions of professional identity to be understood and reflected upon. As a result, comparatively little attention has been given to how practitioners' own belief systems are experienced and navigated within practice. This is relevant given evidence that belief can form a central component of professional identity and shape how practitioners approach their work with CYP and families (Plante, 2014; Dinham, 2018). For EPs working within or alongside Virtual Schools, where the cultural and religious diversity of care-experienced CYP continues to grow (DfE, 2025), this gap carries particular practical significance, especially given EPs' potential role in supporting reflective, relational, and systemically informed practice.

For the purposes of this study, a ‘significant personal belief system’ is defined as a strong personal connection to religious beliefs, atheist principles, or secular values that shape an individual's worldview, moral and ethical frameworks, and approach to life. This may be expressed through formal religious practices, personal spirituality, commitment to atheist or humanist principles, or secular ethical frameworks. The term ‘significant’ distinguishes belief systems that actively shape how a person understands and engages with the world, including in their professional role, from beliefs that may be held or endorsed but do not meaningfully inform how they act or engage, whether or not that influence is consciously recognised. This term was chosen deliberately. Rather than pointing only to how strongly a belief is held, which can mean different things to different people, it is meant to capture belief that has a genuine and defining impact on a person's life and practice. This inclusive framing recognises that non-religious worldviews can be as identity-shaping and practice-informing as religious ones (Lee, 2015; Woodhead, 2017) and informs the study's inclusion criteria (see Methodology chapter).

The context under which professionals were invited to reflect on personal belief are themselves important to acknowledge. Data collection took place in 2025 against a backdrop of heightened public and political discourse around immigration, multiculturalism, and religious identity, including increased scrutiny of Muslim and Jewish communities in the context of global conflicts (Becker, 2023; Community Security Trust, 2025; Hopkins, 2007). This climate shaped the conditions in which professionals were invited to reflect on personal belief and is likely to have influenced both who felt comfortable participating and what participants chose to share. These dynamics are considered further in the Methodology chapter.

1.3 Positionality

In this section, I establish my positionality and how it informed the research process.

As a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) with experience navigating different belief systems across cultural contexts, I approached this study recognising that personal worldviews are lived and meaningful, while also socially expressed and interpreted within professional settings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hofstede, 2001).

My positioning as someone who has experienced cultural transition and belief-related identity negotiation provided both analytic sensitivity and potential blind spots. Growing up in Croatia during a period of social and political upheaval sensitised me to how belief systems can shift from private identity markers to publicly charged social forces. This experience shaped my interest in how professionals navigate belief within institutional environments.

My prior experience working within a Virtual School provided contextual familiarity with the professional terrain of this study. During that time, I became aware of how much practitioners brought to their work that went beyond formal training, a particular way of seeing a child, a quiet persistence in the face of systemic barriers, an attentiveness to what mattered to a young person that seemed rooted in something deeper than professional knowledge alone. I found myself wondering whether some of this was connected to who these practitioners were at a more personal level, to the values and experiences that had shaped them long before they entered their professional roles. This curiosity, and the observation that it was rarely explored within professional development or reflective practice, became the starting point for this research.

My Educational Psychology training further shaped this perspective through systemic and relational approaches to practice, which emphasise the interaction between individuals and their social, cultural, and organisational contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This lens informed my interest in how Virtual School professionals navigate belief within complex, multi-layered systems.

At the same time, my role as researcher required reflexive awareness of how this layered familiarity might shape interpretation. Rather than seeking to eliminate subjectivity, I approached my positioning as an analytic resource to be engaged with reflexively (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002). The implications of this stance are developed further in the Methodology chapter.

1.4 Theoretical Perspectives

This study is informed by several interconnected theoretical perspectives that shaped both the research design and the interpretation of findings. Rather than applying a single framework, the study draws on complementary lenses that support attention to the individual, relational, and systemic dimensions of belief system navigation within professional practice.

The study adopts a critical realist ontological and epistemological position (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000), which holds that social phenomena, including belief systems, exist as real aspects of lived experience, while recognising that our understanding of them is always shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This position enabled me to treat participants' belief systems as genuine and meaningful dimensions of their professional identities, while exploring how the expression and navigation of those beliefs were shaped by organisational structures, professional norms, and relational dynamics. These implications are elaborated on further in the Methodology chapter.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological systems theory provides a further orienting framework. Virtual School professionals work within complex, multi-layered systems, operating at the intersection of education, social care, and health, and their practice is shaped by interactions across these interconnected contexts. An ecological lens supports understanding belief system navigation as shaped by relational, organisational, cultural, and policy contexts, rather than solely as an individual process. This perspective is particularly relevant within Virtual School contexts,

where the professional networks surrounding each child involve multiple agencies, each with its own professional culture, values, and expectations.

Finally, the study also draws on psychoanalytic thinking, particularly the work of Bion (1962) on the relationship between emotional experience and thinking, and Menzies Lyth (1988/1960) on social defence systems within organisations. These ideas informed attention to how belief may operate below conscious awareness, shaping how practitioners perceive and respond to professional situations, and to how organisational cultures may function defensively to avoid engagement with the anxiety that genuine reflection on belief and values would require. These ideas are revisited in the Discussion chapter to deepen understanding rather than impose a predetermined framework. Additional theoretical resources are drawn upon there where they offer insight into specific dynamics and practice implications.

Together, these theoretical lenses support an understanding of belief as simultaneously personal and systemic, real and contextually shaped, conscious and implicit. They informed not a rigid theoretical model but a set of sensitising ideas that guided the research process and helped make sense of the complexity participants described. It is also worth acknowledging that the way I conceptualised belief systems shifted over the course of the project. My initial focus was on religious belief, but as I engaged more deeply with the literature and came up against the practical realities of recruitment, I came to understand belief systems more broadly, recognising that secular and atheist worldviews can be just as identity-shaping and practice-informing as religious ones (Lee, 2015; Woodhead, 2017). I develop this further in the Methodology chapter, along with the pragmatic and philosophical thinking behind it.

1.5 Research Aims

The primary aim of this study was to explore how educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems when working with care-experienced CYP. Specifically, it examined the intersection between personal belief systems and professional practice within the distinctive context of supporting this population.

This is a context in which practitioners may hold belief systems or cultural perspectives that may or may not align with those of the CYP they support, and in which the personal worldviews of both professionals and CYP shape the quality and nature of relational practice. The study sought to understand how professionals navigate these dynamics, balancing personal beliefs with ethical, relational, and organisational responsibilities. By attending to both direct relational work and the wider systems that shape care and education, the research aimed to highlight the often-unspoken identity negotiations that occur within these complex professional contexts.

1.6 Roadmap

The thesis is organised across five chapters. Following this introduction, the Scoping Review chapter maps the existing literature across education, psychology, and social care, identifying what is known about how professionals navigate belief systems in their work with care-experienced CYP and establishing the gap that this study addresses. The Methodology chapter presents the philosophical and methodological foundations of the study, detailing the critical realist positioning, the use of semi-structured interviews, and the analytic approach using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022), alongside a reflexive account of the research process. The Findings chapter presents the four themes developed through analysis: belief woven into practice; different ways of navigating belief in practice; belief acting as a moral compass; and when belief meets institutional reality. The Discussion chapter interprets these findings in relation to

existing literature and theory, considers their implications for Virtual School practice and Educational Psychology, and addresses the strengths, limitations, and future directions of the research, including a personal reflection on its implications for my developing practice.

2 SCOPING REVIEW

2.1 Chapter Overview

Building on the rationale established in the introduction, this chapter presents a scoping review undertaken to map the existing literature on belief, professional practice, and work with care-experienced CYP across education, psychology, and social care. Preliminary searches indicated that, although separate bodies of literature examine professional values, cultural competence, and belief systems across education, social care, and psychology, these areas are rarely considered together. While each field offers relevant insights, there is limited research exploring how these domains intersect within Virtual School contexts, the unique educational services supporting looked after CYP.

Scoping reviews are particularly suited to exploring emerging fields where research may be scattered across disciplines, enabling researchers to identify existing knowledge while documenting significant gaps (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Tricco et al., 2016). This methodology was therefore well suited to establishing whether the specific intersection of belief system navigation, professional practice, and Virtual School work had been addressed.

These aims are addressed through Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) five-stage framework, as refined by Levac et al. (2010), applied systematically across education, psychology, and social care literature. Table 1 provides an overview of the framework and the steps taken at each stage of this review, with each stage detailed in the sections that follow.

Table 1

Overview of the Arksey and O'Malley Methodological Framework for Conducting a Scoping Review

The five stages	Steps taken for current review
Stage 1 Identifying the review question	Formulated review question: What research exists on how professionals navigate personal belief systems when working with care-experienced CYP in educational contexts? Defined key concepts: significant belief systems, care-experienced CYP, professional practice in educational contexts. Identified target population: educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools, with broader inclusion due to limited direct literature. Established search parameters to include education, psychology, and social care databases. Clarified purpose as gap-identification and mapping related research domains rather than comprehensive synthesis.
Stage 2 Identifying the relevant studies	A comprehensive search strategy was employed using electronic databases and hand searching to gather both published and unpublished studies. Two systematic searches were conducted using the EBSCO platform across multiple databases, using different search term combinations to vary the breadth of retrieval. These were

supplemented by hand searches using Google Scholar to identify grey literature and recent publications not captured through the database searches.

To balance breadth and comprehensiveness within the capacity of the researcher (Levac et al., 2010), titles and abstracts of studies identified through the searches were read for inclusion and exclusion.

A total of 792 records were screened across both search streams, comprising 482 records from EBSCO database searches and 310 from hand searching using Google Scholar, where titles were screened first before abstracts were reviewed in detail.

The systematic approach demonstrated limited literature directly addressing the intersection of belief system navigation, professional practice, and work with care-experienced children.

Stage 3

Study selection

A transparent selection process followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) and Levac et al.'s (2010) framework.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed iteratively to reflect the review focus (see Table 3). After duplicate removal, 482 records were screened and 88 full-texts reviewed. Three additional studies were identified through hand searching.

	Seventeen studies met the final inclusion criteria and were grouped under three themes.
Stage 4	Extracted key information (author, year, sample, design, focus, findings) into a data-charting table (Table 3).
Charting the data	Applied a thematic organisation process, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance on identifying and organising patterns across data, to compare the studies' aims, conceptual focus, and findings. This supported the development of three overarching themes: (a) belief, policy, and the professional landscape; (b) navigating belief, ethics, and identity in practice; and (c) relational practice within educational and care systems. Summarised study aims, participant groups, and methodological approaches to identify patterns and gaps.
Stage 5	Conducted narrative synthesis linking findings across the three themes.
Collating, summarising and re- porting the results	Analysed conceptual relationships between belief, ethics, and professional practice across education and social care. Identified the evidence gap relating to Virtual School professionals and formulated research questions to guide the study.

2.2 Stage 1: Identifying the Review Question

2.2.1 Aims and Objectives

This review specifically aimed to identify gaps in knowledge and explore how related research domains might inform understanding of the intersection between belief systems, professional practice, and support for care-experienced CYP.

A scoping review was particularly suited to this exploratory aim, capturing the breadth of available research across disciplinary boundaries between psychology, education, and social care (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2015), and enabling identification of what research exists, how it has been conducted, and where significant gaps remain (Levac et al., 2010; Tricco et al., 2016; Munn et al., 2018; Mak & Thomas, 2022).

Consistent with scoping review methodology, no formal quality appraisal was conducted. Instead, I provide reflective commentary that critically considers the scope, focus, and methodological approaches of the included studies, consistent with scoping review guidance that prioritises breadth over evaluative assessment (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This aligns with my critical realist position, which emphasises understanding the mechanisms and assumptions shaping research, rather than ranking studies according to fixed appraisal criteria.

The central review question is: *What research currently exists on how professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate personal belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) in their work with care-experienced CYP?*

2.2.2 Population

The focus of this review is on educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools. Given the limited literature specifically addressing Virtual School contexts, the review necessarily

draws on broader research examining how professionals navigate belief systems in relation to supporting care-experienced CYP across educational and social care settings. This broadening was a methodological decision reflecting how underexplored this area remains within Virtual School contexts, rather than a shift in the review's core focus on Virtual School practice.

2.2.3 Definitions

As defined in the Introduction, the key terms used throughout this study, ‘significant personal belief system’ and ‘care-experienced CYP’, retain the meanings established there and inform the scope of this review.

‘Professional practice’ is used here to encompass both direct work with CYP and the broader decision-making, policy implementation, and strategic and consultative work carried out by professionals in educational contexts, while excluding purely administrative or managerial roles.

2.3 Stage 2: Identifying the Relevant Studies

2.3.1 Search Strategy

While the formal searches were conducted between July and September 2025, a final search was conducted in April 2026 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent literature. EBSCO was selected as the primary search platform because it provides integrated access to a wide range of education, psychology, social care, and health databases relevant to this interdisciplinary topic. While platforms such as ProQuest or Web of Science could have been used, the databases most aligned with the review question, including PsycInfo, ERIC, Education Source, SocINDEX, and MEDLINE, are all accessible through EBSCO. Although no single platform indexes all relevant literature, these databases provided broad coverage across the disciplines relevant to the review

question within a single, consistent search environment. The search therefore accessed multiple databases, including APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection, Education Source, ERIC, SocINDEX with Full Text, MEDLINE, and CINAHL.

Searches were restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed sources published from 2014 onwards, coinciding with the Children and Families Act 2014 which made Virtual School Head appointments statutory (Department for Education, 2018), and limited to UK studies to reflect the relevant policy and practice environment. Keyword searches were conducted across the databases (see Table 2), and results were screened by title then abstract in line with standard scoping review procedure (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Table 2

Search Terms and Boolean Operators Used Across EBSCO Database Searches

Search mapping term	Search terms
Belief systems	"religion" OR "religious*" OR "spiritual*" OR "faith" OR "secular" OR "atheist*" OR "belief system*" OR AND "worldview" OR "personal values"
Professional practice	"professional practice" OR "professional identity" OR "workplace values" OR "work values" OR "professional eth- AND ics" OR "role conflict" OR "professional boundaries"
Professional roles	"teach*" OR "educator*" OR "social work*" OR "psy- cholog*" OR "virtual school*" OR "virtual school head*" OR AND "VSH" OR "educational professional"

Target population	"looked after" OR "previously looked after" OR "care experienced" OR "children in care" OR "foster care" OR "vulnerable children" OR "young people in care" OR "vulnerable young people"
AND	
Geographic limitation	"UK" OR "United Kingdom" OR England OR Britain OR "Great Britain"
AND	
Date restriction	2014 onwards

It is acknowledged that final search term decisions may have limited retrieval. The term “personal values” was included in the belief and worldview search string to capture the personal dimension of belief systems central to the review question. Related terms such as “professional values” and “moral values” were not included, as “professional values” may overlap with literature on codes of practice and professional standards, while “moral values” may retrieve philosophical or ethical theory literature with limited relevance to practice. Instead, terms such as “workplace values” and “work values” were used to retain a focus on values as enacted within professional contexts. Similarly, “professional ethics” was used in place of the broader term “ethics” to reduce retrieval of tangential results, although this may have limited inclusion of some relevant studies. Terminology relating to care-experienced children also varies across local authorities, with some boroughs adopting newer terms such as “children we care for.” The search strategy therefore prioritised terminology commonly used within academic literature and database indexing (e.g., “looked-after children,” “children in care,” “care-experienced,” and “foster care”), which also align with national policy frameworks. While this supports consistency and retrieval within bibli-

ographic databases, it may have excluded studies using less widely adopted or locally specific terminology. The use of a broader search term such as “foster” was considered; however, “foster care” was retained to improve specificity, as broader truncation may have increased retrieval of irrelevant results (e.g., “fostering” used in non-care contexts). These decisions reflect the need to balance comprehensiveness with specificity within an exploratory scoping review (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005) and are recognised as areas that future research might refine.

2.3.2 Search Process

Two separate systematic searches were conducted using carefully constructed search terms with Boolean operators. The searches combined multiple concept clusters using "AND" operators to identify literature addressing the intersection of belief systems, professional practice, and work with vulnerable children. Search terms are presented in Table 2.

The first search yielded 103 results. The second, broader search (with the professional practice terms removed to capture additional relevant literature) yielded 482 results, which included all studies identified in the first search. This decision was informed by preliminary searches, which indicated that the “professional practice” cluster was overly restrictive, as many relevant studies addressed professional roles and decision-making implicitly rather than being explicitly indexed under this terminology. In contrast, belief system and population-related terms were retained as core conceptual anchors, as removing these resulted in a substantial loss of relevance to the review question. After removing duplicates, a total of 482 unique titles were screened for relevance. Following title screening, 74 abstracts were reviewed in detail.

2.3.3 *Hand Searches*

To supplement the database searches and identify additional relevant studies, hand searches were conducted using Google Scholar, which allows broader retrieval beyond database indexing and can capture more recent publications not yet indexed. This process involved screening 310 paper titles, from which 14 abstracts were reviewed. Hand searching yielded three additional relevant studies, which were added to those identified through the database searches for full-text screening.

While the database searches were restricted to peer-reviewed sources to ensure a consistent level of academic rigour and relevance to professional practice, the use of Google Scholar enabled the incidental identification of some non-peer-reviewed material, including a small number of theses. These were retained where they were directly relevant to the review question and provided empirical insight into professional practice with care-experienced CYP. However, a systematic search of grey literature was not undertaken, and the review therefore primarily reflects peer-reviewed research. No dedicated thesis databases (e.g., EThOS) were searched as part of this process. This reflects a pragmatic balance between breadth and feasibility within an exploratory scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

2.4 Stage 3: Study Selection

2.4.1 *Geographical Scope*

UK-based studies were included to ensure relevance to the statutory and professional context in which Virtual Schools operate. The Children and Families Act (2014) made the role of the Virtual School Head statutory in every English local authority, and subsequent DfE guidance (2018) sets out the responsibilities of these services in promoting the educational progress of care-experienced children. These frameworks, alongside professional standards for educational and

psychological services (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2023), create a distinctive regulatory and organisational environment that shapes professional identity and practice. While comparable systems supporting children in care may exist internationally, the statutory configuration of Virtual Schools, associated policy frameworks, and defined professional roles are specific to the UK context. The geographical scope was therefore limited to ensure alignment with the policy and practice context being explored.

2.4.2 Selection Process

The study selection followed Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) scoping review framework, with additional guidance from Levac et al. (2010) to enhance transparency and rigour. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed iteratively to reflect the study's focus on belief systems, professional practice, and work with care-experienced CYP. These criteria were applied across all stages of screening and are summarised in Table 3, which outlines the parameters used to determine study eligibility by population, concept, context, type of literature, and language.

Developing the criteria involved some difficult decisions about what to include and what to leave out. The broader literature on educational professionals and their practice, and research on relational practice more generally, were both areas where the review could easily have expanded. While these bodies of literature offered relevant insights, including them would have taken the review beyond its specific focus. Studies were therefore included only where they directly addressed how belief systems, professional values, or worldviews shaped practice in educational or social care contexts, with inclusion determined by relevance to care-experienced CYP and associated professional systems rather than professional group alone. Research exploring relational or inclusive practice without reference to belief or professional identity was excluded, even where

it involved care-experienced CYP. These boundaries helped maintain a clear focus on the review question throughout.

Across both search streams, 792 records were screened in total, with 88 full-text articles read in full and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine their relevance to the review question, with decisions guided by the study's focus on belief systems, professional practice, and care-experienced CYP.

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 3), 17 studies were included in the final synthesis, 14 identified through database searches and 3 through hand searching. These studies represent empirical, UK-based research examining how belief systems, values, and worldviews influence professional identity, decision-making, and relational practice with care-experienced CYP.

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Scoping Review

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Educational and multi-agency professionals (e.g., teachers, EPs, social workers, speech and language therapists) working within Virtual School contexts or directly with care-experienced CYP in the UK, with inclusion determined by	Studies focusing solely on CYP without a professional perspective; studies set in purely clinical or medical contexts not connected to Virtual School contexts, care-experienced CYP, or closely re-

		relevance to this population rather than professional title alone.	lated education and social care systems.
Concept		Research exploring how significant belief systems, worldviews, or professional values shape identity, decision-making, or practice in educational or social care contexts.	Studies addressing culture, ethnicity, or diversity without reference to belief systems, worldviews, or values influencing professional practice; theoretical papers without empirical data.
Geographic context		UK-based studies.	Non-UK contexts.
Temporal Context / Date Range	Con-	Post-2014 (inclusive) to reflect current policy and professional frameworks.	Studies published prior to 2014, as they do not reflect current policy or professional frameworks.
Professional Context		Studies situated within Virtual Schools, education, or social care contexts.	Studies situated outside these contexts (e.g., health, criminal justice, general public policy).
Focus of study		Studies involving practitioner perspectives, professional practice, or service delivery.	Studies that do not include practice-based data (e.g., policy-only, conceptual, or commentary-only papers).

Type of literature	Peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, and grey literature directly relevant to UK professional practice.	Opinion pieces, policy commentaries, or conceptual essays without empirical evidence.
Language	Published in English.	Non-English language publications.

2.4.3 *Additional Contextual Literature*

In addition to the 17 included studies, a small number of contextual references were drawn upon to support interpretation and discussion (Flanagan, 2020; Pargament & Hahn, 1999; Shah, 2024). While not included in the formal synthesis, these papers helped clarify conceptual boundaries and informed the discussion of implications for Virtual Schools and educational psychology practice.

2.4.4 *Final Sample*

The final sample included qualitative, mixed-method, and evaluative designs. While the review prioritised studies involving professional perspectives, three studies (Cohman et al., 2024; Scott et al., 2022; Warden et al., 2017) focusing primarily on care-experienced CYP or service-user experiences were retained where they offered direct contextual insight into belief systems, identity, belonging, or relational conditions relevant to professional practice. The studies addressed three overarching themes:

- 1) Belief, policy, and the professional landscape: exploring how religion, belief, and policy frameworks influence professional identity, values, and decision-making (Abbas, 2017; Cheruvallil-

Contractor et al., 2022; Dinham, 2018; Scott et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2017; Tedam, 2014; Warden et al., 2017).

- 2) Navigating belief, ethics, and identity in practice: examining how practitioners navigate the relationship between personal worldviews, ethical commitments, and professional standards (Dinham, 2018; Westwood, 2022).
- 3) Relational practice within educational and care systems: focusing on how professionals within education, social care, and Virtual School contexts support care-experienced CYP through evidence-informed teaching and relational approaches, including attachment-aware, trauma-informed, and collaborative practice (Carroll et al., 2019; Cohman et al., 2024; Couprie, 2023; Jaggar, 2018; Matchett, 2022; Murden, 2023; Peterson et al., 2017; Pickles, 2020; Rose et al., 2017).

These themes were developed through the thematic organisation process outlined in Table 1, where the studies' aims, conceptual focus, and findings were compared to identify overarching patterns. These themes provided the organising structure for data charting and synthesis in the following section. One study (Dinham, 2018) contributed to both Theme 1 and Theme 2, reflecting the breadth of its conceptual focus across policy, belief literacy, and professional ethics. Unlike the empirical studies in the sample, it offers a conceptual and analytical contribution, proposing a religious literacy framework with direct relevance to both policy and practice dimensions of the review. Taken together, the included studies offer a multi-level perspective on how professionals navigate belief, identity, and ethics within education and care systems, directly addressing the review's central aim.

2.5 Stage 4: Charting the Data

2.5.1 *Sample*

The included studies are listed below in alphabetical order by first author: Abbas (2017); Carroll et al. (2019); Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2022); Cohman et al. (2024); Couprie (2023); Dinham (2018); Jaggar (2018); Matchett (2022); Murden (2023); Peterson et al. (2017); Pickles (2020); Rose et al. (2017); Scott et al. (2022); Stanley et al. (2017); Tedam (2014); Warden et al. (2017); Westwood (2022).

Collectively, the included studies represent diverse professional perspectives on working with care-experienced CYP across UK education and social care contexts.

At the core of this evidence base are studies examining Virtual School and Designated Teacher practice. Three studies directly explored how these professionals implement approaches when supporting care-experienced CYP, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking CYP (Couprie, 2023; Matchett, 2022; Murden, 2023). Carroll et al. (2019) examined how Designated Teachers implement high quality teaching approaches and professional development to support children in care within school settings, offering insight into evidence-informed practice across North East England. Also included was a study examining inclusive educational provision and relational approaches for care-experienced and unaccompanied asylum-seeking CYP within school settings (Peterson et al., 2017). Together, these studies provide the most direct insight into the educational contexts and professional roles central to this research.

Extending outward, the review captured studies examining the broader educational landscape within which Virtual Schools operate. These explored school-based practices around family engagement, belonging, and inclusion (Rose et al., 2017; Cohman et al., 2024; Pickles, 2020), as well as supervision and emotional dimensions of practice in local authority settings (Jaggar, 2018).

The review also included research from social work and multidisciplinary contexts, where professionals' beliefs, values, and identities explicitly shape their practice with minoritised communities. These studies offered crucial insights into how faith, policy, and professional identity influence ethical decision-making and culturally responsive practice (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2022; Dinham, 2018; Scott et al., 2022; Stanley et al., 2017; Tadam, 2014; Warden et al., 2017; Westwood, 2022). Abbas (2017) further contributed insight from an educational governance context, examining how Islamophobic policy discourse and counter-terrorism frameworks racialise Muslim identity in state schools.

This cross-sectoral sample illuminates how belief systems, ethics, and identity operate across the interconnected professional networks that support care-experienced CYP, with particular relevance for understanding Virtual School practice.

2.5.2 Methodology of the Literature

This section outlines the methodological characteristics of the 17 included studies, summarising research designs, data collection methods, and analytic approaches, and highlighting dominant patterns and their implications for the evidence base.

2.5.2.1 Data Collection.

Qualitative designs predominated across the reviewed literature, reflecting the exploratory and interpretive nature of research into professional belief systems, ethics, and relational practice.

Five studies employed semi-structured interviews, enabling in-depth exploration of professionals' values, experiences, and decision-making processes (Abbas, 2017; Couprie, 2023; Matchett, 2022; Murden, 2023; Westwood, 2022). Two further studies used qualitative interviews analysed using IPA and thematic analysis respectively. Scott et al. (2022) conducted individual inter-

views (some with professional interpreters) to explore coping among unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, while Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2022) used semi-structured interviews with adopters and social workers, analysed using an inductive six-phase thematic approach.

Two studies complemented individual interviews with focus groups or group discussions to capture collective reflection and interprofessional dialogue, particularly in research examining collaborative approaches (Carroll et al., 2019; Jaggar, 2018).

Four studies adopted document analysis, surveys, or mixed-method approaches to integrate policy review or quantitative outcome data with qualitative insights (Carroll et al., 2019; Cohman et al., 2024; Peterson et al., 2017; Warden et al., 2017). These designs provided additional context by linking practitioners' experiences with organisational structures, policy frameworks, and educational outcomes.

Finally, several doctoral, grey literature, and evaluative sources contributed additional practice-based insight. Pickles (2020) combined interviews, reflective accounts, and case-based data. Rose et al. (2017) drew on practitioner-generated case studies, analysed thematically using Friedman's Outcomes Based Accountability framework, to examine the impact of attachment-aware school practice on home-school relationships. Three remaining studies drew on non-primary data sources. Stanley et al. (2017) used an autoethnographic design based on composite case narratives analysed through Actor Network Theory; Tadam (2014) conducted a critical literature review drawing on documented cases and existing research without collecting primary data; and Dinham (2018) developed a conceptual framework drawing on secondary literature, policy analysis, and an action research programme in UK higher education.

2.5.2.2 Data Analysis.

Consistent with the qualitative designs described above, most studies adopted interpretative analytic approaches. Thematic Analysis (TA) was a commonly used method to identify patterns within professionals' accounts of belief, ethics, and relational practice (e.g., Jaggar, 2018; Matchett, 2022; Westwood, 2022). This approach enabled nuanced interpretation of interview and focus group data exploring values, decision-making, and relational experiences.

Several studies adopted interpretative or evaluative qualitative frameworks to capture the lived and reflective dimensions of professional experience. For example, Rose et al. (2017) used Friedman's Outcomes Based Accountability framework to structure practitioner-generated case studies, analysed thematically following Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, to assess the impact of attachment-aware school practice on home-school relationships. Couprie (2023), Murden (2023), and Scott et al. (2022) used IPA; Couprie to explore Designated Teachers' lived experiences of implementing attachment-aware approaches, Murden to explore Designated Teachers' lived experiences of supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and Scott et al. (2022) to explore unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people's experiences of coping following forced migration, including the role of religious worldviews.

A smaller group of studies combined thematic and documentary or policy analysis, particularly where data were drawn from reports, policy documents, or evaluation materials (e.g., Carroll et al., 2019; Peterson et al., 2017; Warden et al., 2017). Doctoral and grey literature sources such as Pickles (2020) used RTA to integrate practitioner reflection and organisational insight.

Across the reviewed literature, these approaches reveal a shared interpretive orientation, privileging depth and reflexivity over quantification. Together, they illustrate a methodological

landscape attuned to exploring how belief, identity, and ethics are negotiated within the relational and organisational contexts of professional practice.

2.5.3 Reflections on the Chosen Literature

Taken together, the reviewed studies reflect a predominantly qualitative evidence base that prioritises depth of insight over empirical scope. This orientation aligns well with research across education, social care, and applied psychology, where the aim is typically to generate contextually rich, reflexive understanding rather than generalisable findings. However, many studies rely on small or single-site samples, which limits their transferability to broader professional populations and contexts. Doctoral and local authority evaluations, such as Jaggar (2018), Pickles (2020), and Murden (2023), exemplify this pattern, providing rich, practice-based perspectives grounded in specific organisational settings, often small practitioner cohorts within local authority fostering or educational services. While such work offers authenticity and contextual depth, the specificity of these settings means findings may not translate readily to other professional settings.

Several evaluative and practice-based studies provided limited detail on data analysis procedures or researcher reflexivity. Peterson et al. (2017), for example, offered no discussion of researcher positionality or how the thematic analysis process was applied to the data. Similarly, Stanley et al. (2017) relied on a single practitioner's field notes with no triangulation and offered limited reflexive engagement with alternative interpretations, though the authors do explicitly acknowledge these constraints as inherent to their autoethnographic approach rather than overlooked limitations. This limits the ability to assess analytic rigour and interpretive consistency across the field. In contrast, more recent doctoral work (e.g., Couprie, 2023; Murden, 2023) demonstrates greater methodological transparency, with clearer articulation of analytic procedures, theoretical frameworks, and researcher positioning.

A further limitation concerns professional representation. Much of the literature focuses on school-based practitioners or social workers, with only five studies exploring the perspectives of Virtual School professionals or examining the cross-agency collaboration that characterises their practice. DTs emerged as a particularly relevant professional group within the included studies, though they were not specified as an explicit search term, having been captured through the broader “teacher*” wildcard applied during searching. Consequently, the belief negotiations and relational dynamics occurring within and between professional systems in Virtual School contexts remain underexplored.

It is also worth acknowledging the relationship between this review and the broader literature on relational practice. Studies examining relational and inclusive practice were excluded from the formal synthesis unless they directly addressed belief systems or professional identity, in order to maintain focus on the review question. However, relational practice represents an important and growing field that intersects with the present study's focus, particularly in relation to how professionals enact values through relationships with care-experienced CYP. This boundary was a deliberate methodological decision rather than a dismissal of relational practice as a relevant concept, and the present study can be understood as contributing to this broader literature by exploring how personal belief systems shape the relational and ethical dimensions of professional practice in Virtual School contexts.

Collectively, the reviewed literature provides a valuable yet uneven evidence base. It offers meaningful insight into how belief, identity, and ethics shape professional practice, but would benefit from greater methodological transparency, broader interprofessional representation, and deeper examination of how personal belief systems are navigated within the relational contexts of Virtual School work.

Table 4

Summary of the Scoping Review Literature (UK-based studies, 2014-2025)

Author & Year	Title	Sample	Methodology	Focus	Main Findings
Abbas, (2017)	T. Trojan Horse Plot and the Fear of Muslim Power in British State Schools	One key informant interviewed across three face-to-face sessions in 2015 and 2016, supplemented by access to private correspondence between Alam and school investigators.	Qualitative interview-based study using a grounded theory approach; semi-structured interviews analysed thematically with attention to insider perspective and reflexivity; documentary analysis of investigation reports and media sources.	The impact of the 2014 “Trojan Horse” controversy on Muslim communities and educational governance in Birmingham; the role of Islamophobia and counter-terrorism discourse in racialising Muslim identity in state schools.	The affair reflected entrenched anti-Muslim sentiment rather than evidence of extremism. Counter-terrorism policy frameworks securitised education, marginalised Muslim communities, and undermined successful school improvement, illustrating how faith-based identity becomes pathologised within neoconservative educational governance.
Carroll, Black & Bettencourt (2019)	The Education of Children in Care	456 Designated Teachers (DTs) across 12 local au-	Multi-strategy design comprising an e-survey, face-to-face child	High quality teaching (HQT) practices for children in	HQT for children in care centres on quality of instruction, positive relationships, and fostering independ-

	in North East Eng- land	thorities in North East England; 13 children in care (8 primary, 5 second- ary) from 9 LAs	interviews, lesson ob- servations, and DT fo- cus groups; survey data analysed using descriptive statistics, qualitative data via thematic analysis	care in mainstream schools; additional provision beyond HQT; professional learning and devel- opment (PLD) of DTs	ence. PLD was dominated by attach- ment and SEMH training, with in- consistent implementation across set- tings. DTs identified influencing change and navigating role bounda- ries as professional challenges, sug- gesting tensions in how practitioners manage competing responsibilities within their settings.
Cheruvallil- Contractor, S., Halford, A., & Boti Phiri, M. (2022)	The Politics of Matching: Ethnic- ity, Religion and Muslim-heritage Children in Care in the UK	28 participants: 5 adopters, 4 prospec- tive adopters, and 19 social workers, recruited via gate- keepers, adoption charities, and Mus- lim news outlets.	Qualitative study grounded in the soci- ology of religion; semi-structured inter- views analysed using six-phase thematic analysis with an in- ductive coding ap- proach; reflexive at- tention to researcher positionality through- out.	The impact of the Children and Fam- ilies Act 2014, which removed the legal requirement to consider ethnic- ity in adoption matching, on social work practice and adoptive family de- cision-making in relation to Muslim-	Despite the 2014 legislative change, social workers continued seeking ethnically and religiously compatible matches, and all adopters insisted on children who “looked like them.” Mi- noritised children continued to expe- rience lengthy waits, indicating the law had not achieved its aims. A shortage of Muslim adopters per- sisted due to cultural taboos, theolog- ical misunderstandings, and commu- nity distrust of social care. The au- thors conclude that culturally compe-

						heritage children in care in England.	tent adopter recruitment is needed, and that wider dynamics of societal minoritisation are replicated within the care system.
Cohman, Golm & Sargeant (2024)	The Association Between School Belonging and Wellbeing in Looked After Adolescents: A Pilot Study	17 looked after young people (CLA) and 17 matched non-looked after young people (NLA), aged 11-17 (M = 14.12), recruited through virtual schools, one secondary school and a post-16 setting in the UK	Mixed-methods anonymous online survey incorporating validated measures of school belonging, mental health, affect, life satisfaction, peer relationships, self-esteem and bullying victimisation; analysed using t-tests, Mann-Whitney U, Spearman's correlations and moderation analysis; one open qualitative question on factors supporting school belonging.	The relationship between school belonging and mental wellbeing in looked after adolescents; group differences between CLA and NLA young people across belonging, wellbeing, peer relationships and bullying.	School belonging was associated with mental wellbeing outcomes for all participants. No significant group differences were found on belonging or most mental health measures, though CLA reported significantly lower peer relationship quality. Care status significantly moderated the relationship between school belonging and bullying, with a strong negative association for looked after young people only. Qualitatively, both groups highlighted friends, teachers, school atmosphere, personal characteristics and extracurricular activities as important for belonging.		

Couprie (2023)	An Exploration of the Views and Experiences of Designated Teachers in Helping to Create an Attachment Aware School	Five Designated Teachers (DTs) from primary schools in Southeast England, interviewed retrospectively one year after joining the Attachment Aware Schools Award (AASA) project	Qualitative, exploratory design; semi-structured interviews analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	The lived experiences of DTs implementing an Attachment Aware School (AAS); motivations, facilitating factors, barriers, and observed changes	Five superordinate themes were identified: defining features of the AASA (relational, nurturing, trauma-informed ethos); motivations to join; facilitating factors (leadership support, intrinsic motivation); barriers (staff resistance, emotional exhaustion, competing priorities); and visible changes (improved relationships, revised behaviour policies, changes to the physical environment). The AASA supported whole-school systemic change, shifting practice away from punitive, behaviourist approaches toward trauma-informed, relational pedagogy. Implications for Educational Psychologists' practice were noted.
Dinham (2018)	Religion and Belief in Health and Social Care: The	Action research programme in UK higher education settings; draws on	Conceptual and analytical article using a religious literacy framework; draws on	The inadequacy of health and social care professionals' engagement with	Health and social care professions remain ill-equipped to engage with religion and belief, shaped by secular assumptions and reliance on vague

	Case for Religious Literacy	existing surveys, comparative international studies, and professional standards documents across social work, nursing, and counselling.	secondary literature, policy analysis, and action research; proposes a four-element framework (Category, Disposition, Knowledge, Skills).	religion and belief diversity; the case for developing religious literacy as a core professional competency in a post-secular context.	proxies such as “spirituality”. A four-element religious literacy framework, addressing category, disposition, knowledge, and skills, is proposed as a context-specific, action-research-based response to improve training and practice.
Jaggar (2018)	The Supervising Social Worker in an Inner City: How Practitioners Perceive and Experience Their Role	Five qualified supervising social workers (SSWs) from one local authority fostering service in the East Midlands, UK	Focus group (two meetings); Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); social constructionist epistemology; collaborative and second-order research design.	How SSWs perceive and experience their role supervising and supporting foster carers, explored through a systemic lens.	Three themes emerged: relating to foster carers ('being human'), working with risk and uncertainty, and working within a system ('being professional'). SSWs valued emotional connection and 'making a difference' but experienced tension between relational practice and procedural demands. Discomfort arose when personal values conflicted with agency expectations. Strengths-based and systemic practice models are recommended to better align practitioner

					values with organisational objectives.
Matchett (2022)	'It starts when teachers are training': The role of generalist and designated teachers in the educational experiences of children in care	21 care-experienced young people aged 18-27; 3 senior children's services professionals in an English local authority	Semi-structured interviews (individual and group); qualitative thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2013)	How care-experienced young people perceive support from generalist and designated teachers (DTs).	Generalist teachers were highly valued, often providing support well beyond their statutory role. The DT role was poorly understood and rarely utilised by pupils or colleagues. Relationships with key adults were most effective when naturally co-constructed rather than formally assigned.
Murden (2023)	Designated Teachers' Experiences of Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children within Secondary Schools: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	Five Designated Teachers across three Local Authorities in the South West of England	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	The lived experiences of Designated Teachers supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) in secondary schools, and implications for Educational	Participants understood UASC' experiences primarily through a trauma lens, though some also recognised children's resilience. Exposure to trauma narratives impacted participants' personal lives and emotions in both positive and negative ways, with compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma relevant here. While operationally supported by colleagues, participants felt emotionally isolated,

						Psychology practice.	with limited multi-agency support and barriers to seeking help from family and friends. Coping strategies were employed to manage these demands, and supervision and training from Educational Psychologists were identified as key desired supports.
Peterson, Meehan, Durrant & Ali (2017)	Inclusive Educational Provision for Newly-Arrived Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking and Refugee Children (UASR): A Study in a Single School in Kent	12 UASR pupils (aged 12-16, 11 male, 1 female) from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Iraq and Eritrea; 10 staff members including the Principal, EAL teachers, subject teachers, teaching assistants and a family liaison officer	Single-site case study; semi-structured staff interviews; pupil focus groups; school policy documents and quantitative data (attendance, Kent Steps, attitude to learning scores); thematic analysis	Inclusive practices for newly-arrived UASR children at Hartsdown Academy, Margate; perceived social, cultural and academic outcomes; barriers to progression into further and higher education.	The Ready for School programme produced statistically significant gains in English across all four domains. UASR pupils showed high attendance and attitudes to learning exceeding school averages. Inclusion was supported through EAL provision, carer liaison and a whole-school ethos. Key challenges included competing accountability pressures, hostile community discourses, and underdeveloped post-16 pathways.		
Pickles (2020)	Children in Care: A Systematic Re-	9 Virtual School Heads or related	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews;	How VSHs support autistic children in	VSH teams vary widely in size and capacity. Distinguishing autism from		

	view of Stakeholder Experiences and a Study of Virtual School Heads' Support for Children on the Autism Spectrum	staff across 8 local authorities in England (5 female, 4 male	RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006); social-constructivist and interpretivist epistemology	care and how information about autism diagnoses is shared across agencies.	attachment needs is a consistent challenge. Relationships and clarity around professional responsibility are key to effective support. An adapted Bioecological Model of Development is proposed as a practice framework.
Rose, Gilbert, McGuire-Snieckus, Gus, McInnes & Digby (2017)	Attachment Aware Schools: Working with Families to Enhance Parental Engagement and Home-School Relationships	10 case studies (9 boys, 1 girl, aged 5-13) drawn from 49 collected across two Local Authorities in England; children identified as vulnerable or at risk of exclusion	Mixed methods; case studies generated by practitioners using Friedman's Outcomes Based Accountability framework; thematic analysis following Miles, Huberman & Saldaña	The impact of the Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) programme on home-school relationships and parental engagement; secondary objective of a wider pilot focused primarily on well-being, behaviour and attainment.	Implementing attachment-based strategies, particularly Emotion Coaching, improved home-school communication and parental confidence, promoted shared practice between home and school, and led to improved family dynamics. Parents reported feeling heard and supported, with reductions in behavioural incidents at home and school.

Scott, Mason & Kelly (2022)	“After god, we give strength to each other”: young people's experiences of coping in the context of unaccompanied forced migration	Five unaccompanied young males (aged 16-17) of Sudanese, Syrian, Eritrean and Kurdish origin, living in semi-independent local authority accommodation in or near London; four Muslim, one Christian	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); individual interviews; three conducted with professional interpreters; social constructivist and culturally relativist stance	Lived experiences of coping among unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people in the UK; culturally relative understandings of resilience, independence, and religious faith.	Young people took active roles in managing extensive loss and adapting to a new society. Independence was developed through connection to others and cultural roots. Religion functioned as a foundational worldview rather than merely a coping strategy. Religious struggle was identified as a potential risk factor for isolation and distress.
Stanley, Guru & Coppock (2017)	A Risky Time for Muslim Families: Professionalised Counter-Radicalisation Networks	Two composite autoethnographic case narratives of Muslim families (Mr Malik and Mr Shabir) drawn from one practitioner's field notes	Autoethnographic approach using composite case narratives; analysed through Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT); qualitative and reflexive in design	The impact of the UK Prevent Duty (2015) on social work practice and decision-making with Muslim families; ethical tensions between safeguarding, human rights and counter-	The Prevent Duty has shifted social work toward securitised, pre-crime risk work, marginalising families and suppressing ethical debate. Strengths-based approaches such as Signs of Safety and Family Group Conferencing are proposed as more humane alternatives.

					terrorism obligations.	
Tedam (2014)	Witchcraft Branding and the Abuse of African Children in the UK: Causes, Effects and Professional Intervention	No primary data collected; draws on existing literature, case examples and the author's personal and professional experience	Critical literature review using a children's rights framework; draws on documented cases and existing research	Causes, effects and professional responses to child abuse linked to witchcraft accusations within some African communities in the UK.	Witchcraft branding is an ongoing safeguarding concern in the UK. Causes include unwelcome life events, religious beliefs and cultural values. Effects range from neglect to death. Culturally competent practice, professional training and collaborative working are proposed as key responses, grounded in a UNCRC framework.	
Warden, Scourfield & Huxley (2017)	Islamic Social Work in the UK: The Service User Experience	495 service user database; 42 quality of life assessments; 36 satisfaction surveys; 8 qualitative interviews	Mixed methods: qualitative interviews, satisfaction survey, quality of life assessment tool (adapted MANSA), and database analysis	The significance of an Islamic social work organisation (ISSA Wales) for Muslim service users, including satisfaction, outcomes and reasons for engagement.	78% reported improved well-being, though quality of life data showed no significant change except in social life. Service users valued religious authenticity, cultural understanding, confidentiality and a non-proselytising approach, highlighting the potential value of faith-based organisations for diverse Muslim service users.	

Westwood (2022)	Can religious social workers practice affirmatively with LGBTQ service recipients? An exploration within the regulatory context	70 online comments posted in response to a Community Care article by Felix Ngole, a Christian fundamentalist social work student expelled by the University of Sheffield	Qualitative content analysis of moderated online comments; inductive coding; intersectional, relational and anti-oppressive conceptual lens	Whether religious social workers, particularly Christian fundamentalists, can deliver affirmative, anti-oppressive services to LGBTQ people, examined within UK regulatory and legal contexts.	Deep tensions exist between fundamentalist religious beliefs and anti-oppressive social work values. While some believed compartmentalisation was possible, critics argued tolerance falls short of genuine affirmation and risks microaggressions. Current equality legislation is insufficiently calibrated to address subtle, relational harms. An urgent research agenda is proposed.
--------------------	---	--	---	--	---

2.6 Stage 5: Reporting the Results

This stage provides a narrative synthesis of the selected literature, organised around the three themes identified through data charting:

- 1) Belief, policy, and the professional landscape: focusing on how policy frameworks, institutional discourses, and professional standards shape practitioners' engagement with belief and identity;
- 2) Navigating belief, ethics, and identity in practice: exploring how professionals interpret and balance personal worldviews with ethical and professional expectations; and
- 3) Relational practice within educational and care systems: considering how belief and values are enacted through collaboration, consultation, and relationship-centred work within education and care systems.

Despite these insights, the literature does not directly address how Virtual School professionals navigate personal belief systems, confirming the gap this study seeks to address. Existing research highlights related strategies such as compartmentalisation, selective disclosure, and values translation (Flanagan, 2020; Shah, 2024), but does not examine how these operate within the multi-agency context of Virtual Schools. This is particularly significant given their role in coordinating support across education, social care, and health, each shaped by distinct professional cultures and expectations around belief and neutrality. These professionals work with care-experienced CYP in contexts of increasing religious and cultural diversity (DfE, 2025), while navigating networks shaped by differing paradigms of belief, ethics, and professional boundaries.

The complexity of this work is heightened because care-experienced CYP often face additional vulnerabilities, including trauma, instability, disrupted attachments, and identity displacement, which may intensify the relevance of belief systems in both their own lives and professional responses (Pargament & Hahn, 1999; Scott et al., 2022). For some, belief may provide continuity

and meaning; for others, it may be a site of conflict or loss. Professionals must therefore navigate both their own belief–practice interface and support CYP whose relationships with belief, culture, and identity may be complex or in flux. The following section focuses on belief, policy, and the professional landscape, drawing together evidence from related professional fields to begin mapping this underexplored area of research.

2.6.1 Belief, Policy, and the Professional Landscape

The literature highlights how policy frameworks, regulatory standards, and wider political discourses shape professional engagement with belief and identity in education and social care. Across these studies, belief emerges as a complex and dynamic aspect of professional life, functioning as a source of moral guidance, a possible source of bias, and, in some contexts, a perceived challenge to professional neutrality. This creates a tension between institutional expectations of impartiality and the lived ethical and cultural realities of professional practice.

Three interconnected subthemes are explored below, together illustrating how belief and policy interact to shape professional identity, ethical judgement, and inclusive practice, and how professionals' decisions are shaped by personal values as much as by policy directives.

2.6.1.1 Policy Frameworks and the Regulation of Belief.

Two studies critically examine how policy frameworks structure professional responses to belief in practice.

Stanley et al. (2017) explore the impact of the Prevent agenda, a statutory counter-terrorism duty requiring public sector professionals to identify and refer individuals at risk of radicalisation, and counter-radicalisation frameworks on social work and family support services, arguing that the professionalisation of surveillance redefined care as risk management. While their autoethno-

graphic approach, drawing on a single practitioner's field notes and composite case narratives, offers valuable insight into the moral complexity faced by practitioners, the single-practitioner perspective and composite case design limits the scope of its conclusions. Moreover, the authors' strongly critical stance toward Prevent, though theoretically coherent, may underemphasise examples of professional agency or adaptive practice within that policy environment. Nevertheless, the paper makes an important contribution by exposing how national security discourse can marginalise faith-based identities and redefine professional care in politically charged ways. It also reveals the moral and epistemic tensions that arise when practitioners must balance policy compliance with personal and professional ethics. Although situated within social work, these dynamics could resonate with the experiences of Virtual School professionals, who similarly navigate belief-related dilemmas within safeguarding and inclusion frameworks that demand both ethical sensitivity and policy adherence. Such parallels highlight the need for interprofessional collaboration grounded in shared ethical understanding across education, social care, and safeguarding.

Abbas (2017) similarly analyses the Trojan Horse controversy in Birmingham, situating it within broader narratives of neoconservatism, Islamophobia, and educational governance. His conceptual critique convincingly links policy responses to the racialisation of Muslim identity, yet it offers limited empirical data on the experiences of frontline practitioners such as classroom teachers. Abbas also highlights how belonging in a neoconservative policy landscape becomes conditional on the moderation of religious identity, a dynamic that constrains authentic expressions of belief within professional and educational spaces. While the paper lacks practitioner-level data, it powerfully depicts how political and media discourses produce climates of anxiety that professionals must navigate when negotiating belief, identity, and ethics in educational contexts.

2.6.1.2 Institutional Understandings of Religion and Diversity.

Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. (2022) explore how ethnicity and religion shape adoption practice in the UK following changes to the Children and Families Act (2014). Using qualitative interviews with adopters and social workers, their study reveals persistent tensions between policy directives promoting transracial placements and practitioners' and families' desire for ethnic and religious continuity. Although situated within social work, the study highlights how professionals' interpretations of faith and belonging influence decisions affecting care-experienced children. Their concept of 'minoritisation' demonstrates how policy frameworks can inadvertently marginalise faith-based identity needs, paralleling tensions in educational settings where professionals navigate belief within secular institutions. While conceptually strong, the study relies primarily on practitioner perspectives, offering limited insight into how these policy tensions are experienced by children or families themselves.

Tedam (2014) examines cases of child abuse linked to witchcraft branding within African diaspora communities in the UK, noting that schools were frequently the source of initial referrals. Drawing on literature review and documented case analyses, she argues that effective safeguarding in such contexts requires professionals to balance evidence-informed assessment with cultural and religious literacy. The study highlights how professionals' limited cultural and religious literacy can result in inadequate or inappropriate responses to this form of abuse. While the reliance on secondary case reviews constrains transferability, Tedam's discussion of misunderstanding, fear, and the need for interprofessional collaboration remains highly relevant. Her findings highlight educational settings' role in recognising belief-related harm, with clear relevance for Virtual Schools' statutory responsibilities for promoting the welfare and educational achievement of care-experienced children (Children and Families Act, 2014; DfE, 2018). Both studies illustrate how

institutional frameworks across social work and education can struggle to engage meaningfully with religious and cultural diversity, with significant consequences for care-experienced children.

2.6.1.3 Professional Literacy and Engagement with Belief.

Warden et al. (2017) evaluate an Islamic social work organisation in the UK, exploring how faith-informed practice can complement or challenge secular models of service delivery. Their mixed-method findings suggest that religious literacy, authenticity, and a non-proselytising approach were central to service users' satisfaction, with cultural sensitivity and gender awareness further enhancing accessibility. The use of service user narratives offers grounded insight into how a lack of cultural and religious responsiveness in mainstream services shaped clients' experiences. However, the study's primary focus on service user perspectives means it offers limited direct insight into professional belief navigation itself, and its framing can imply a sharper distinction between 'Islamic' and 'Western' practice paradigms than the diversity within Muslim communities may warrant. Nonetheless, its emphasis on religious literacy and structural awareness offers a useful foundation for understanding how belief shapes ethical and inclusive practice, with clear relevance to educational contexts where practitioners similarly navigate belief, policy, and inclusion.

Dinham (2018) extends this discussion by advocating for religious literacy as an essential component of professional education across health and social care. Drawing on an action research programme in UK higher education, he questions the assumption that secularism equates to neutrality, arguing that belief is central to human experience but is often overlooked in professional training through broad and loosely defined terms such as 'spirituality'. While the work is primarily situated within health and social care, its core ideas are relevant to educational contexts, where culturally responsive practice is increasingly recognised as integral to inclusion. Although the pa-

per relies more on conceptual argument than empirical data, which limits its evidential weight, its clarity enhances its value for training and cross-sector professional development.

Scott et al. (2022) extend this discussion through their qualitative IPA study with unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people, exploring how coping following forced migration is shaped by activity, connection, independence, and religious worldview. Their findings show that religion functioned not merely as a coping strategy but as a foundational worldview providing routine, meaning, and continuity amid displacement and loss. The authors also note that severe distress can unsettle belief, increasing risks of isolation, which highlights the importance of culturally affirming spaces that respect religious identity. Although the small sample limits transferability, the study has clear implications for Virtual School staff supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking CYP. While Scott et al. (2022) approaches belief from the perspective of young people rather than professionals, it helpfully informs the case for professional belief literacy by illustrating what is at stake when practitioners lack culturally grounded understanding of faith.

Together, Warden et al. (2017), Dinham (2018), and Scott et al. (2022) suggest that belief is not peripheral to professional practice but central to how both practitioners and the people they serve make sense of their experiences, pointing to the value of genuine religious literacy rather than procedural awareness alone.

2.6.2 Navigating Belief, Ethics, and Identity in Practice

The second theme explores how professionals balance personal belief with ethical and professional expectations. This theme draws on a small but significant body of literature, with Westwood (2022) and Dinham (2018) providing complementary perspectives on how belief is negotiated within professional practice. Together, they highlight a wider gap in understanding how prac-

titioners interpret their own values in roles demanding impartiality and inclusion; a gap particularly significant for Virtual Schools, operating at the intersection of education and social care.

Westwood (2022) addresses this directly, using content analysis of 70 online responses to a Community Care article by a Christian social work student expelled for posting homophobic content, to examine how practitioners negotiate personal faith alongside anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice. Her data point to a clear tension, as some practitioners argue that belief can be separated from practice, while others suggest that beliefs incompatible with LGBTQ affirmation sit uneasily alongside social work's relational and emancipatory values. Westwood suggests that compartmentalisation may be insufficient, as practitioners can still enact subtle microaggressions that undermine relational practice, even in the absence of explicit discrimination. She further argues that being required to uphold values that conflict with personal beliefs may create a sense of tension within practitioners' sense of identity. However, her reliance on moderated online commentary rather than direct practitioner accounts limits insight into how these tensions are navigated in everyday practice, and the polarised nature of the case may encourage more oppositional positions. Her framing of belief primarily as a source of conflict also risks overlooking how faith can serve as a foundation for empathy and ethical motivation.

Dinham (2018) extends this discussion by suggesting that professionals across health and social care may be underprepared to engage with religion and belief, having been trained within predominantly secular frameworks that position belief as peripheral rather than central to practice. He proposes a religious literacy framework that goes beyond knowledge of religious traditions to include reflective awareness, referring to professionals' capacity to recognise and reflect on their own emotional responses and underlying assumptions about religion and belief. This reflective dimension is particularly relevant here, as it suggests that without structured opportunities to ex-

amine their own belief-related assumptions, professionals may be less able to navigate the ethical dilemmas Westwood identifies. Taken together, Westwood and Dinham suggest that the challenge extends beyond managing competing values to developing the reflective awareness needed to engage with belief, both one's own and others', as a meaningful and complex dimension of professional practice.

The following section explores how belief and values are enacted within relational and systems-based practice across education and care systems.

2.6.3 Relational Practice within Educational and Care Systems

The first two themes explored how policy frameworks shape professional engagement with belief and identity, and how practitioners navigate the tensions between personal worldviews and professional expectations. This third theme moves from the internal dimensions of that navigation to consider how belief and values are enacted through relational practice within the broader organisational systems surrounding care-experienced CYP.

Within Virtual School contexts, this takes on a distinctive character. Virtual School professionals operate largely as coordinators and bridge-builders across the professional networks surrounding each child, positioning them at the intersection of multiple professional cultures, each with its own values and approaches to supporting vulnerable children.

Three subthemes are developed across this section, exploring how reflection and supervision support practitioners in connecting personal values with professional purpose, the emotional demands of sustaining relational practice, and how that practice is coordinated across professional systems.

2.6.3.1 Reflection, Supervision, and Professional Identity.

The first subtheme explores how structured opportunities for dialogue and self-exploration enable practitioners to connect personal values with professional purpose. Two studies highlight this from different but complementary angles: Jaggar (2018) from within social care, and Couprie (2023) from an educational context involving Virtual Schools.

Jaggar (2018) explores the lived experiences of supervising social workers in an inner-city local authority in the East Midlands using IPA with five practitioners. Her findings reveal that participants drew heavily on personal values, particularly a sense of humanity and moral responsibility, to navigate the emotional and ethical demands of their role. A key tension emerged between practitioners' desire for relational, person-centred practice and the increasingly process-driven demands of their organisational context. Participants described discomfort when organisational expectations conflicted with their own values, and a sense of satisfaction when personal and professional goals were more closely aligned. Jaggar also highlights supervision as a potentially valuable space for bringing together the personal and professional self, although she notes that it is not often used in this way in practice. The study's small, single-site sample limits transferability, and the absence of explicit discussion of belief means its relevance here is inferential rather than direct. Nevertheless, it offers a valuable account of how personal values shape professional identity within complex organisational systems.

Couprie (2023) extends this into an educational context, exploring the experiences of five Designated Teachers involved in a pilot Attachment Aware Schools Award project delivered in partnership with an Educational Psychology Service and a Virtual School. Using IPA, she finds that DTs were motivated by strong personal and moral commitments, including compassion and a belief in relational approaches, that drove their engagement with the project. Participants described

satisfaction when the school ethos resonated with these values, but strain when competing priorities or emotional exhaustion limited progress. Couprie also identifies cognitive dissonance as a barrier to change, where staff whose personal belief systems aligned with more punitive approaches to behaviour found it harder to embrace an attachment-informed framework. While belief is not addressed explicitly, participants' accounts suggest that personal values and professional identity were deeply intertwined in how they made sense of their work. The small, homogeneous sample and specific pandemic context limit transferability, though the study offers rare first-hand insight into how values-driven practice is enacted within the systems connecting schools, Virtual Schools, and Educational Psychology Services.

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of reflection in supporting professionals to connect personal values with practice and navigate the demands of their work with vulnerable CYP. However, neither study considers how this unfolds for Virtual School professionals or how personal belief systems shape professional decision-making in this context.

2.6.3.2 Relational Practice and its Emotional Demands.

The second subtheme explores how relational practice with care-experienced CYP is enacted in everyday educational contexts, and what this demands of the practitioners who sustain it. Three studies explore this from different but complementary perspectives: Matchett (2022) from the perspectives of care-experienced young people themselves, Rose et al. (2017) from an attachment-informed whole-school intervention, and Murden (2023) from the lived experiences of DTs supporting UASC.

Matchett (2022) draws on semi-structured interviews with 21 care-experienced young people aged 18 to 27, alongside three professionals in an English local authority. Her findings show that young people consistently valued organic, co-constructed relationships with generalist teach-

ers, developed through regular informal contact and mutual care. In contrast, the formal DT role was often poorly understood and rarely experienced as helpful, with some associating it with an unwanted visibility of their care status. Valued teachers were described as those who went beyond their formal remit, with relationships developing through proximity and trust rather than allocation. The sample was predominantly female and drawn from a single local authority, limiting transferability. Nevertheless, the study remains highly relevant, suggesting that personal qualities such as empathy and genuine interest shape relational outcomes beyond organisational structures.

Rose et al. (2017) extend this into attachment-informed practice, reporting on case study findings from the Attachment Aware Schools pilot commissioned by two local authority Virtual Schools. Using an outcomes-based case study approach across ten cases, the study focuses on home-school relationships and the use of Emotion Coaching as a shared relational strategy. The findings suggest increased home-school engagement, greater alignment between school and family practices, and improvements in family dynamics, with Emotion Coaching supporting more reciprocal rather than purely transactional collaboration. The study has several limitations, including a small sample, no control group, limited follow-up, and a focus on positive outcomes. In addition, the authors' involvement in founding Emotion Coaching UK introduces a potential conflict of interest. Even so, the study offers valuable insight into how attachment-informed approaches can shape the relational systems around CYP, with clear relevance to Virtual Schools working at the intersection of school, family, and care.

Murden (2023) shifts attention to the emotional experiences of practitioners themselves. Her IPA study with five DTs supporting UASC in the South West of England found that participants tended to understand children's experiences through a trauma lens, and that ongoing exposure to these narratives had a significant impact on their personal lives and emotional wellbeing.

The participants described experiences consistent with compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, though they also spoke of fulfilment and a sense of privilege in the work. A consistent finding was a sense of emotional isolation. While practical support from colleagues was available, participants often felt alone in managing the emotional demands of the role, alongside limited multi-agency collaboration and barriers to seeking personal support. Supervision was widely desired but largely inaccessible. The small, relatively homogenous sample and specific focus on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children limit how far the findings can be applied more widely. However, the study shows that without adequate support, practitioners may be less able to sustain the relational quality identified as important in Matchett's study.

Taken together, these three studies suggest that effective relational practice depends on both the conditions that enable it, including attachment-informed frameworks, home-school collaboration, and whole-school ethos, as well as the personal and professional resources of the practitioners who carry it. The following subtheme turns to the broader systems within which this practice is embedded.

2.6.3.3 Relational Practice and Collaboration Across Systems: Roles, Responsibilities and Outcomes.

The third subtheme explores how relational practice with care-experienced CYP is coordinated across professional systems, and what this requires of the practitioners and organisations responsible for it. The studies gathered here span different roles, including DTs, Virtual School Heads, and whole-school teams, and different populations, including looked after children, UASC, and autistic children in care. Together, they highlight the structural conditions that enable or constrain effective collaboration, the professional challenges of navigating competing responsibilities

across complex systems, and the consequences for CYP when those conditions are well or poorly aligned.

Carroll et al. (2019) provide the broadest empirical base for this subtheme, drawing on a multi-method study of DT practice across twelve local authorities in North East England. The study combined a survey of over 400 DTs with child interviews, lesson observations, and focus groups. High-quality teaching for children in care was found to centre on the quality of instruction, positive classroom relationships, and the promotion of independent learning. Professional development was largely focused on attachment and SEMH training, although its implementation was inconsistent. DTs described navigating competing role demands and influencing change within their schools as ongoing professional challenges. Carer involvement emerged as the most commonly reported form of additional support, while cross-professional conferencing was identified in focus groups as a valued collaborative practice. Although the descriptive design means the study cannot show cause and effect, the scale of the study strengthens the argument that effective practice depends as much on coordination across systems as it does on individual professional skill.

Pickles (2020) shifts the lens to the strategic level, exploring through qualitative interviews with nine Virtual School Heads (VSH) across eight local authorities how VSHs support autistic children in care and how information about autism diagnoses is shared across agencies. Her findings highlight that VSHs are centrally motivated by relationship-building across professional systems, acting as bridges between education, social care, and health to advocate for autistic children in care. Structural variation across local authorities, alongside ambiguity around professional responsibility, creates significant tensions for VSHs navigating competing organisational demands. Pickles proposes an adapted Bioecological Model as a practice framework, emphasising the importance of clarity around roles and sustained inter-agency relationships. Read alongside Carroll

et al. (2019), her study suggests that the relational coordination identified at the DT level depends on enabling conditions at the strategic level that are far from uniformly in place, with direct relevance to how Virtual Schools function as systems rather than simply as collections of practitioners.

Peterson et al. (2017) extend this discussion to a specific inclusion context, examining provision for newly arrived UASC in a single Kent secondary school through a mixed-methods design combining staff interviews, pupil focus groups, and quantitative school data. Inclusion was sustained through relational practices linking schools, carers, and local authorities, supported by whole-school leadership, a multicultural ethos, and active community engagement. Pupils described largely positive experiences within school but reported religion-based discrimination in the wider community, highlighting the importance of the school as a protective relational space. The single-site design limits generalizability. Still, the study illustrates how cross-agency relationships between schools, carers, and local authority services can function as ethical spaces where values of care, respect, and cultural understanding are enacted in practice, highlighting their direct relevance to how Virtual School professionals navigate inclusion and belonging for care-experienced and asylum-seeking CYP.

Cohman et al. (2024) bring a different but complementary perspective by attending to what is at stake for CYP when collaboration across systems succeeds or fails. Their pilot mixed-methods study, exploring school belonging and wellbeing in 17 looked after and 17 matched non-looked after adolescents, found that school belonging was associated with mental wellbeing across both groups, with no significant difference in belonging scores between them. The study's most notable finding was that care status shaped the relationship between school belonging and bullying. For looked after young people, lower belonging was strongly associated with higher levels of bullying victimisation. Looked after young people also reported lower quality peer relationships, and were

less likely to describe friends as a source of belonging. The small sample, cross-sectional design, and restriction to foster care placements limit transferability. Nevertheless, the study suggests that relational factors, particularly peer relationships and protection from bullying, may be especially important for care-experienced young people. This highlights that professional practices within these systems are not abstract, but have direct consequences for the young people at the centre of Virtual School work.

Together, these studies suggest that effective relational practice depends not only on individual commitment but on the quality of the systems within which it is enacted. Carroll et al. (2019) and Pickles (2020) highlight structural tensions and role ambiguities, while Peterson et al. illustrate what values-driven collaboration can look like in practice. Cohman et al. (2024) add an outcomes perspective, showing that poor relational conditions may disproportionately affect care-experienced young people. However, how professionals' personal belief systems shape their navigation of these systems remains underexplored.

2.7 Conclusion and Research Questions (RQs)

2.7.1 *Synthesis of Key Findings*

Across these themes, the literature suggests that belief is not a peripheral or private aspect of professional practice, but a dynamic and often implicit force shaping how practitioners interpret, respond to, and relate to care-experienced CYP. Policy frameworks, organisational expectations, and professional standards construct belief as something to be managed, regulated, or rendered neutral, yet the studies reviewed consistently demonstrate that personal values and worldviews remain embedded within decision-making, ethical judgement, and relational practice.

Professionals are therefore required to navigate a complex and often unarticulated tension between personal belief systems and expectations of impartiality, particularly within multi-agency

contexts where differing professional cultures shape what is considered acceptable, ethical, or appropriate. This tension is not resolved through simple strategies such as compartmentalisation, but instead appears to be negotiated relationally, emotionally, and contextually, often without explicit support or shared frameworks.

At the same time, the literature highlights that relational practice, widely recognised as central to supporting care-experienced CYP (Matchett, 2022; Rose & Gilbert, 2017), is shaped not only by organisational structures but by the personal qualities, values, and emotional capacities that practitioners bring to their work. However, across all three themes, there remains little exploration of how these dynamics unfold in the context of Virtual School professionals.

2.7.2 Identifying the Gap

Despite a growing body of literature exploring belief, ethics, and professional identity across education, social care, and health, there remains a notable absence of research examining how these dynamics are experienced and navigated by educational professionals working within Virtual Schools.

This absence is particularly significant given the distinctive role of Virtual Schools in coordinating support for care-experienced CYP across education, social care, and health systems. Professionals in these contexts are likely to encounter complex and sometimes competing expectations around belief, neutrality, and professional responsibility, yet little is known about how they experience and make sense of navigating their belief systems in their direct work with care-experienced CYP.

While existing research identifies strategies such as compartmentalisation, selective disclosure, and values translation, it offers limited insight into how personal belief systems shape professional decision-making and approaches to supporting care-experienced CYP from diverse

backgrounds. In addition, although the literature highlights the importance of relational and systemic factors, there is limited attention to how practitioners understand and interpret the conditions that support or challenge them in balancing personal belief systems with professional responsibilities.

Taken together, these gaps point to the need for research that centres the lived experiences of Virtual School professionals, explores how belief is translated into practice, and examines how beliefs are shaped, negotiated, and enacted across these systems. These gaps are addressed through the following research questions.

2.7.3 Research Questions (RQs)

To address this gap and fulfil the study's overarching aim in exploring how educational professionals in Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems in their work with care-experienced CYP, this research is guided by the following questions:

- RQ1: How do educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) when working directly with care-experienced CYP?
- RQ2: In what ways do personal belief systems influence professional decision-making and approaches to supporting care-experienced CYP from diverse backgrounds?
- RQ3: How do educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools perceive the factors that support or challenge them in negotiating their personal belief systems within their professional responsibilities, and what conditions shape these experiences?

2.7.4 From Review to Inquiry

This scoping review has established both the importance of belief systems in professional practice and the absence of research examining these dynamics within Virtual School contexts. In

doing so, it has confirmed the rationale for an exploratory, qualitative approach that centres the perspectives of Virtual School professionals themselves. This study builds on these findings by examining how Virtual School professionals understand and navigate their personal belief systems within everyday practice.

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to address these research questions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a detailed account of the methodological foundations of the study, showing how philosophical positioning informed and shaped the research process. It begins by establishing the study's critical realist ontological, epistemological, and axiological positioning, including the role of researcher reflexivity, before presenting the research design and rationale for adopting a qualitative approach. Rather than treating philosophical considerations as procedural formalities, the chapter explores how these interconnected positions actively shaped decisions across all stages of the research, from the formulation of the research approach through to analysis and write-up. Reflexivity is treated as integral to this process throughout, with the chapter detailing the strategies used to maintain reflexive awareness and analytic transparency. From this philosophical foundation, the chapter moves through the practical dimensions of the research process, addressing participant recruitment, data collection using semi-structured interviews, and analysis through RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It concludes with the strategies used to ensure quality and ethical rigour, with particular attention to the sensitive nature of exploring belief systems in professional practice and the unique considerations of working with professionals who support care-experienced CYP.

3.2 Research Positioning and Philosophical Stance

3.2.1 *Ontology*

Ontology concerns the nature of reality and what exists independently of human perception (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this study, I adopted a critical realist stance, which holds that reality consists of both observable and unobservable phenomena that exist independently of human perception. However, critical realism also acknowledges that our understand-

ing of these phenomena is inevitably shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Bhaskar, 1975).

This position rejects both positivist views that reality can be fully captured through observation alone and relativist views that reality is entirely socially constructed (Sayer, 2000; Al-Saadi, 2014). Instead, critical realism recognises a stratified reality where phenomena exist at different levels, from empirical observations to underlying structures and mechanisms that influence lived experience, even when not directly observable (Danermark et al., 2002). This includes attention to generative mechanisms, underlying processes that produce observable effects but may not themselves be directly observable (Bhaskar, 1975).

For this study, I treated personal belief systems as real phenomena, while recognising that how they are expressed, narrated, and made sense of in professional contexts is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional conditions (Sayer, 2000). These beliefs represent genuine aspects of participants' worldviews and identities, influencing their values, decision-making, and practice approaches regardless of external validation.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this ontological position recognises that cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects of functioning develop through ongoing interaction with interconnected social, cultural, and organisational systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). This systemic perspective underpins much Educational Psychology practice, emphasising attention to individuals' needs, abilities, and difficulties as real aspects of functioning, alongside sensitivity to the social, cultural, and institutional contexts that shape these experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant within Virtual School contexts, where professionals' work with care-experienced CYP is shaped by multiple, interacting systems. This position reflects a commit-

ment to ethically grounded and evidence-informed practice that balances attention to individual experience with sensitivity to contextual influence.

This ontological position enabled me to attend to participants' belief systems as authentic and meaningful dimensions of their experiences, while examining how Virtual School contexts shape their professional navigation. This is consistent with expectations that practitioners identify and reflect on their personal values and address tensions between personal and professional commitments (BPS, 2023, Standards 2g & 2i; HCPC, 2023, Standard 5.3). Critical realism therefore offers a coherent foundation for this study, accommodating the complexity between personal beliefs and professional practice by acknowledging that beliefs genuinely influence decision-making while recognising this influence is mediated by organisational structures, professional norms, and the needs of vulnerable CYP.

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology concerns how knowledge is constructed, validated, and understood, addressing fundamental questions about what constitutes valid knowledge, how we come to know reality, and the relationship between researcher and researched (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Consistent with my critical realist ontological stance, I adopted a critical realist epistemological position. This position holds that while reality exists independently of our perception, our knowledge of it is always partial, socially conditioned, and historically situated (Bhaskar, 1975). Importantly, as Al-Amoudi and Willmott (2011) emphasise, critical realism acknowledges that knowledge claims are always shaped by social and historical conditions, while still holding that reality itself exists independently of how it is described. This position therefore sits between positivist epistemologies, which seek objective and generalisable truth, and purely constructionist ap-

proaches, which would treat belief systems as entirely constituted through language and social interaction (Sayer, 2000).

From a critical realist perspective, knowledge about belief systems and professional practice emerges through interaction between real phenomena and the contexts that shape their expression (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer et al., 2016). Central to this stance is Bhaskar's (1975) distinction between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of knowledge. In this study, the intransitive dimension refers to the objects of knowledge, including belief systems, professional experiences, and organisational structures, that exist independently of the research process. The transitive dimension refers to the theories, concepts, and interpretive frameworks through which those objects are understood, which are always socially produced and historically situated. This distinction is important because it maintains that belief systems are real and consequential in professionals' lives, while acknowledging that what can be known about them through research is necessarily partial and shaped by the conditions under which knowledge is produced.

For this study, this meant that the knowledge produced was understood not as a definitive account of how belief systems function within Virtual School practice, but as a contextualised engagement with how these particular professionals understood and navigated belief within their specific professional and organisational settings. What counted as valid knowledge was not prediction or generalisation, but a situated understanding of the processes and conditions through which belief shaped professional experience, including processes that may operate beyond participants' immediate conscious awareness. I remained aware that critical realism, as encountered through my academic and professional training, is itself grounded in Western philosophical traditions (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011; Harding, 1998), which reinforced the importance of treating it as a guiding framework rather than a fixed template, and of prioritising participants' own fram-

ings of belief and professional practice rather than fitting accounts into predetermined theoretical categories.

3.2.3 Axiology and Researcher Positioning

Axiology concerns the role of values in research, specifically how researchers' beliefs and values shape methodological choices and interpretative processes (Thompson, 2010; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Savin-Baden and Major (2023) identify three central considerations for researcher positioning: recognising one's own stance and underlying assumptions; reflecting on the relationship between researcher and participants; and acknowledging how values influence all stages of the research process. In qualitative inquiry, this aligns with the understanding that subjectivity is not a threat to rigour but a resource for generating insight, particularly within reflexive approaches such as RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Finlay, 2002).

My approach to this study was shaped by values developed through a range of formative personal and professional experiences. Growing up in Croatia during the war in the 1990s offered early insight into how belief systems can both unite and fragment communities. Later, immigration to the UK further shaped my understanding of identity negotiation in intercultural contexts. These perspectives were refined through professional work with diverse communities and, more specifically, within Virtual School contexts, where I observed how educational professionals navigate complex intersections of identity in their work with care-experienced CYP, often in ways that went beyond formal training and seemed rooted in deeply held personal values.

Taken together, these experiences shaped my view that seeking to understand different perspectives is more constructive than judging them. While my early experiences highlighted the divisive potential of ideological differences, subsequent professional work led me to understand that

individuals holding markedly different values can collaborate effectively and even enrich one another's practice when interactions are grounded in mutual respect and openness.

My personal values centre on inclusion, equity, and the recognition that individuals, regardless of their belief systems, should be understood within their own frameworks of meaning. This informed a commitment to research that attends to the complexity and fluidity of identity navigation, rather than imposing fixed analytic categories. These considerations informed how belief was approached throughout the study, from recruitment framing through to analysis.

This axiological positioning, in combination with the study's critical realist ontological and epistemological stance and the focus of the research questions, informed the overall methodological design. These were not simply background considerations, they made a qualitative approach not only pragmatically appropriate but philosophically coherent. A methodology that prioritised participant voice, contextual depth, and the researcher's active interpretive role was a coherent choice given the values and philosophical commitments outlined above.

3.3 Research Design

Building on the study's critical realist ontology and epistemology, a qualitative exploratory design was adopted to examine how Virtual School professionals navigate the relationship between personal belief systems and professional practice. This approach aligns with the study's aim to explore how belief is understood and navigated in practice, rather than test predefined hypotheses or variables, and resonates with the emphasis placed by both the BPS (2023, Standards 2i & 3g) and HCPC (2023, Standards 5.3 & 10.3) on reflective, inclusive, and contextually informed practice, particularly when working with diverse and vulnerable populations.

This design was well suited for exploring this under-researched and sensitive area, selected for its capacity to capture the complexity and nuance of professionals' perspectives at the intersection of personal belief, ethical responsibility, and the organisational and multi-agency contexts of Virtual School practice when supporting care-experienced CYP. It enabled participants to reflect on and articulate perspectives that are not yet well understood within the existing evidence base and that may not easily surface within more structured or quantitative methodologies. By prioritising participant voice and contextual depth, this approach supported nuanced exploration of ethical, relational, and identity-based dimensions of professional practice.

Existing professional frameworks tend to position belief primarily as something to be monitored rather than explored as a meaningful dimension of professional identity and practice (BPS, 2023, Standard 3g; HCPC, 2023, Standard 5.3; Plante, 2014), an area this study sought to address. Semi-structured interviews were therefore selected as they enabled participants to articulate perspectives on belief and professional practice in their own terms, with greater flexibility than more structured or quantitative methods would allow (Finlay, 2002), while allowing flexibility to pursue issues relevant to individual professional contexts. This method supported exploration of belief system navigation across varied roles, settings, and organisational structures.

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) was selected as the analytic approach as it is theoretically flexible, compatible with a range of ontological and epistemological positions, and well suited to a critical realist framework that treats participants' accounts as accounts of real professional experiences while recognising the researcher's active role in constructing meaning from them (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Unlike other approaches to thematic analysis that prioritise agreement between multiple coders or the application of predetermined coding frameworks, RTA positions researcher subjectivity as a resource rather than a threat to quality, consistent with the axio-

logical commitment to reflexivity outlined above. Its capacity to support both semantic and latent analysis, and to develop themes from participants' accounts rather than from predetermined theoretical categories, made it particularly appropriate for exploring how belief systems are understood and negotiated within professional practice.

This approach also differs from phenomenological methodologies such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which typically seeks a homogeneous participant group to explore shared individual experience of a phenomenon in depth. By contrast, this study purposively recruited a heterogeneous group of professionals across varied belief positions and roles, with the aim of identifying patterned meaning across that diversity rather than exploring individual experiential essence.

Reflexivity was treated as integral to the research process rather than as a procedural addition, informing decisions across all stages of the study, from recruitment and data generation to analysis and write-up, requiring ongoing critical engagement with how my values, assumptions, and identities shaped the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Finlay, 2002). This reflexive stance supported analytic transparency and coherence, ensuring that interpretations were understood as situated and partial rather than neutral or universally generalisable.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

3.4.1 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was initially granted by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) in March 2025 (see Appendix A). Following lower-than-anticipated recruitment and further conceptual clarification of the study focus, an amendment was submitted in June 2025 and approved in late August 2025 (see Appendix D). Ap-

proval to conduct the research was also obtained from the Principal Educational Psychologist at my placement service, who reviewed and signed off the research proposal prior to data collection (see Appendix O). The amendment is discussed in detail in ethical amendment and final strategy section below.

The research adhered throughout to the ethical principles outlined in the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021), the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021), and the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2024), ensuring respect for participants' autonomy, dignity, confidentiality, and wellbeing.

3.4.2 Informed Consent

Participants were provided with detailed information about the research, both in a written information sheet and verbally prior to the interview (see Appendix F for Participant Information Sheet and Appendix G for Consent Form). Given the sensitive nature of exploring personal belief systems in professional contexts, particular care was taken to ensure that participants fully understood the focus of the study. All participants provided written consent confirming their understanding of the study's aims, data handling protocols, and their right to withdraw. Full details of the consent process, including ongoing consent and the right to withdraw, are described in the data collection section below.

3.4.3 Potential Benefits to Participants

Although the study was not designed to provide emotional or therapeutic support, participants may have benefited from the opportunity to speak with a fellow educational professional who understands the complexities of working within Virtual Schools and the nuanced role that personal belief systems can play in professional practice. Engaging in a focused, respectful dis-

cussion with someone who recognised the significance of personal belief systems in shaping values and practice may have provided a sense of validation and space for personal reflection.

This combination of shared professional understanding and openness to belief-related identity may have helped create an environment in which participants felt heard, respected, and safe to reflect on perspectives that may not routinely be explicitly discussed within everyday professional dialogue. For some, the opportunity to articulate how they navigate personal beliefs in complex educational contexts may have brought clarity or reassurance. While not intended as a form of support, the interview process may have facilitated reflective engagement with personal and professional values in a way that participants found meaningful.

3.4.4 Confidentiality

All interview data were de-identified to protect participant identities. Pseudonyms were assigned, and identifying details such as names, schools, or locations were removed from transcripts. However, participants' belief system identities (religious, atheist, or secular) were retained where relevant to understanding the data, with participants' explicit consent, as belief identity was central to the analytic focus of the study. The importance of confidentiality was reiterated during the consent process and again before each interview began. Participants were made aware that, due to the small number of participants and the specificity of their roles in Virtual Schools, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed even with pseudonymisation.

3.4.5 Data Protection

Data were handled in accordance with GDPR and relevant Trust and University data management policies. De-identified data will be retained for 6-10 years in line with Trust policy, with access restricted to the researcher and supervisor. Full details of recording, transcription, storage, and deletion procedures are described in the data collection section below.

3.4.6 Social Responsibility

My position as a TEP with prior Virtual School experience required careful consideration of relational boundaries. Several participants were known to me professionally prior to the study, through previous roles within Virtual School contexts or shared local authority networks. In one instance, I had previously held a line management role in relation to a participant, although no current managerial or supervisory relationship existed at the time of recruitment.

These prior professional connections positioned me in a partial insider role and required explicit attention to power, familiarity, and the potential for perceived obligation. To mitigate this, recruitment materials emphasised the voluntary nature of participation, and no direct invitation to participate was issued where there had previously been a line management relationship. All participants initiated contact independently following circulation of study information. At the outset of each interview, I reiterated that participation was voluntary, that there were no professional consequences associated with involvement, and that the conversation was research-focused rather than consultative or supervisory.

Care was taken to avoid offering advice or professional input during interviews, even where discussions touched on ethical tensions or practice dilemmas. This supported the maintenance of appropriate boundaries and reduced the likelihood of role confusion or evaluative dynamics. Despite these steps, I acknowledge that prior professional relationships, particularly where a line management role had previously existed, may have shaped what participants felt comfortable sharing or how they related to me during the interview.

Beyond relational considerations, safeguarding responsibilities were also carefully considered. Although participants were discussing their professional work rather than personal clinical matters, their roles involved vulnerable care-experienced CYP. Clear procedures were in place

should safeguarding concerns or significant ethical issues arise during interviews, including signposting to appropriate organisational support structures where necessary. No such incidents occurred.

3.5 Research Quality

3.5.1 Commitment to Quality

The study was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) evaluation questions for RTA, which provided a framework for ensuring that the analytic process was transparent, well-justified, and closely tied to the dataset. These questions supported a reflective and methodical approach, helping to maintain both depth and flexibility in interpretation. Yardley's (2000) qualitative research principles further informed the study's approach, supporting attention to sensitivity to context, commitment to rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance throughout the research process. This commitment to quality was embedded across all stages of the research, from refining inclusion criteria in response to recruitment challenges to sustaining recursive engagement during coding and theme development.

3.5.2 Transparency and Coherence

The analytic process was supported by regular supervisory meetings, which created structured opportunities to interrogate assumptions and refine interpretive decisions rather than simply reaching agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Supervisory dialogue functioned as a critical space for examining the coherence, distinctiveness, and evidential grounding of developing codes and themes.

Transparency was further supported through the systematic documentation of analytic decisions during coding and theme development. Reflexive memos were produced alongside coding

tables (see Appendix H for example), capturing emerging interpretations, points of uncertainty, and shifts in analytic focus. This documentation enabled me to trace how initial codes were reorganised, refined, and ultimately drawn upon in generating themes.

Together, supervisory dialogue and reflexive documentation supported analytic coherence and ensured that interpretive claims remained grounded in participants' accounts while remaining open to critical scrutiny.

3.6 Recruitment Strategy

3.6.1 Initial Approach and Challenges

The initial recruitment strategy involved contacting Educational Psychology services (EPS) in local authorities to recruit participants from Virtual Schools. Following ethical approval (see Appendix A), Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) in London boroughs and wider local authorities were contacted and asked to circulate study information to Virtual School professionals within their services using an example email (see Appendix B). However, this approach proved largely ineffective. The multiple layers of communication made it difficult to directly reach eligible participants, limiting the reach of recruitment and reducing opportunities for timely engagement.

In response, and consistent with the approved approach of extending recruitment through broader professional networks where initial responses were insufficient, the strategy was revised to include direct engagement with Virtual Schools. A publicly available list of Virtual School Head (VSH) email addresses across England, obtained from a Freedom of Information request to the Department for Education (published via WhatDoTheyKnow), was used to contact Virtual Schools directly. Each VSH was contacted by email with an overview of the study and the recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) and invited to participate if their role involved direct work with care-experienced CYP, or to share study information with relevant team members who met the inclusion criteria.

Alongside this direct approach, recruitment was also advertised more widely through professional networks. Specifically, the recruitment poster was shared on professional social media platforms, an email was circulated via the EPNet mailing list, and study information was sent to the Children in Care, Adopted & Otherwise Permanently Placed special interest group on edpsy.org.uk. These additional channels were intended to increase reach among educational professionals with direct links to Virtual Schools.

Despite this multi-pronged approach, the initial response was limited. Three professionals contacted me expressing interest in the study but indicated they did not meet the inclusion criteria as they did not identify as religious. It is also possible that the wider socio-political climate at the time of recruitment, marked by heightened public scrutiny of religious and cultural identities, may have contributed to the low response rate, with some professionals potentially feeling uncomfortable disclosing personal belief positions in a research context (see Section 3.9.3 for further discussion of this context). Across recruitment channels, professional networks and social media platforms generated no responses, while direct contact via VSHs proved the most effective route, albeit still constrained by both the restrictive nature of the original criteria and the broader contextual factors outlined above.

In light of the low response rate, an additional recruitment strategy was implemented. I contacted 15 colleagues from the doctoral programme and asked them to forward study information to their Virtual School colleagues or to Principal Educational Psychologists acting as known gatekeepers. This approach resulted in one further expression of interest.

3.6.2 *Ethical Amendment and Final Strategy*

The limited response rate suggested that the original inclusion criteria, which focused on professionals with a religious identity, may have been too narrow to capture the diversity of belief systems present within Virtual School teams. This prompted recognition that non-religious belief frameworks can be as identity-shaping and practice-informing as religious beliefs, and may similarly influence professional values, decision-making, and approaches to supporting diverse populations (Lee, 2015; Woodhead, 2017). In light of this, an amendment to the ethical approval was submitted in June 2025 and granted in late August 2025 (see Appendix D for amended TREC application), broadening the inclusion criteria to encompass professionals who self-identified as holding a significant belief system, religious, secular, or atheist, that meaningfully shaped their worldview and professional practice (see Tables 5 and 6 for full inclusion and exclusion criteria and rationale). This coincided with the summer holiday period, when many educational professionals were on leave, creating additional challenges during the initial post-amendment phase. Importantly, the amendment did not alter the core research questions, methodology, or data collection procedures. Rather, it clarified and extended the conceptual framing of belief systems to better reflect both the literature and the diversity of professional identities encountered during recruitment.

Following approval of the amendment, professionals who had previously expressed interest, as well as new contacts reached through the same recruitment channels using the revised inclusion criteria, became eligible to participate. In addition, snowball sampling was employed, with participants invited to share study information with colleagues who met the inclusion criteria. These adjustments increased the pool of potential participants and strengthened the feasibility of recruitment, ultimately securing participation from seven professionals working in Virtual

Schools. Recruitment outcomes meant that several participants worked within the local authority where I was on placement, which is acknowledged in the strengths and limitations of the study. Participants represented a range of self-described belief positions and professional roles, providing sufficient diversity of perspectives to address the study's research questions, despite ongoing recruitment challenges. This recruitment journey highlighted the importance of flexibility in qualitative research design and the value of direct engagement with target populations rather than relying solely on institutional gatekeepers.

Table 5

Participant Inclusion Criteria and Rationale

Criteria	Rationale
Must be an educational professional working directly with care-experienced CYP in Virtual Schools within the last academic year or three terms.	Ensures participants have recent, relevant experience with the target population.
Must identify with a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that shapes their worldview and professional practice.	Ensures participants can provide insight into how personal beliefs influence professional decision-making.
Must be willing to reflect on and discuss their belief system in relation to their professional practice.	Ensures participants can engage meaningfully with the research questions.

Table 6*Participant Exclusion Criteria and Rationale*

Criteria	Rationale
Professionals in purely administrative or managerial roles.	Ensures participants have direct experience of working educationally with care-experienced young people. Virtual School Heads were not excluded where their role included direct work with CYP.
Individuals who do not identify with a significant belief system that shapes their worldview and practice.	Maintains focus on the research question regarding belief-informed professional practice.

3.7 Number of Participants

Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance that sample size decisions in RTA should be treated as provisional and guided by analytic purpose rather than fixed numerical targets, this study aimed to recruit a small to moderate number of participants. Braun and Clarke emphasise that qualitative researchers make informed estimates at the design stage based on the study's focus, participant specificity, and method of data generation, while remaining open to adjusting sample size in response to the nature of the data produced.

An initial target of six to eight participants was therefore set. This reflected the study's narrow and specialist focus on belief system navigation within Virtual School contexts, the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, and a commitment to reflexive, inductive analysis across the

dataset. At the outset, it was not possible to know the richness of the data in advance; rather, this estimate reflected the anticipated potential for depth given the professional expertise of participants and the exploratory nature of the research questions.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) emphasis on analytic depth, and informed by the concept of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), decisions about final sample size were made iteratively during data collection rather than being fixed in advance. The narrow analytic focus, high specificity of the participant group, and the reflexive, in-depth nature of the dialogue supported smaller-sample feasibility within this framework. Recruitment continued until the interview data were judged to be sufficiently detailed and meaningful to support robust engagement with the research questions.

In this study, sufficient data were understood not as thematic saturation but as the point at which participants were able to reflect in depth on belief system navigation in professional contexts, where conceptually similar issues were recurring across accounts, and where each research question could be addressed through multiple, analytically relevant perspectives. Interviews were engaged, reflexive discussions of belief, identity, and practice, characterised by increasing convergence around key tensions and strategies in professional navigation.

Recruitment ultimately resulted in a sample of seven participants, accessed through multiple channels: previous professional contacts, a doctoral programme colleague, and snowball sampling. Participants were professionals working within Virtual Schools across different local authorities in England and included Educational Psychologists, advisory teachers, Virtual School Assistant Headteachers, and Speech and Language Therapists. Although Speech and Language Therapists are typically situated within health services, those participating in this study were employed within Virtual School contexts, working directly with care-experienced CYP under an ed-

educational remit, and are therefore understood as educational professionals within the scope of this study. The range of professional roles represented offered insight into how belief system navigation varied across different professional positions within the same organisational context, though the study did not seek to systematically compare these roles.

Participants identified with significant belief systems that shaped their worldview, values, and daily life, including two practising Christians, three with spiritual perspectives (encompassing Buddhist-influenced values and personal spiritual exploration), and two with secular/atheist worldviews emphasizing humanistic and professional ethical frameworks.

The table below summarises key participant characteristics. Consistent with the confidentiality considerations outlined above, and with participants' consent regarding the reporting of belief identity, professional roles are reported at group level rather than linked to individuals, so that only non-identifying characteristics are presented here.

Table 7

Summary of Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Self-described belief position
P1	Female	Spiritual (Buddhist-influenced)
P2	Female	Spiritual (Buddhist-influenced)
P3	Male	Secular / atheist (Catholic upbringing)
P4	Female	Spiritual (personal exploration)
P5	Female	Secular / atheist
P6	Female	Christian (Catholic)
P7	Male	Christian

The adequacy of the final sample was therefore judged in relation to the study's narrow analytic focus, the specificity of the participant group, and the depth and coherence of the data generated, rather than by reference to numerical thresholds. While additional participants may have offered further perspectives, both the depth of the dataset and the constraints of the doctoral timeline supported the decision to proceed with analysis rather than extend recruitment further.

3.8 Data Collection

The following section outlines the data collection procedures, focusing on the use of semi-structured interviews to explore participants' experiences of belief system navigation within their professional practice.

3.8.1 *Rationale for Semi-structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method of data generation for this study because they enabled participants to reflect on and describe how they experienced and made sense of navigating personal belief systems within professional practice. This aligned with the study's critical realist epistemological position, which understands knowledge as situated, partial, and shaped through social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This method enabled professionals to articulate their experiences within their own frameworks of meaning, while allowing for exploration of how belief systems are expressed within organisational and relational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Danermark et al., 2002).

A shared set of core questions (see Appendix E) provided sufficient structure to support cross-case pattern identification through RTA, while the flexibility to follow up on individual accounts allowed exploration of the varied belief positions, professional roles, and organisational contexts represented across the sample. This was important given that participants held diverse belief systems and occupied different roles within Virtual Schools, meaning that a fully standard-

ised approach would have risked constraining the depth and relevance of their accounts. Individual interviews were also preferred over group formats given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of discussing belief systems within professional contexts, where participants may have felt less comfortable disclosing or reflecting openly in the presence of colleagues.

In this study, participants' accounts were understood as offering situated insight into belief system navigation within Virtual School professional practice. However, consistent with the study's epistemological stance, these accounts were not understood as transparent reflections of reality. Rather, they were recognised as shaped by multiple contextual influences, including professional discourse, organisational expectations, and the interview context itself, including participants' awareness that they were speaking to me as a researcher in a formal setting. The knowledge produced through these interviews therefore offered a situated understanding of how these particular professionals understood and navigated their personal belief systems within professional practice, rather than universal principles applicable across all professional contexts.

3.8.2 Interview Process and Procedures

Participants who expressed interest in the study contacted me by email. Eligibility was confirmed against the inclusion criteria, after which a suitable interview date and time were agreed. Participants were offered a choice between online and in-person interviews to support accessibility and comfort. Six participants chose to be interviewed online, while one opted for an in-person interview.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, as detailed in Section 3.4.2. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted between June and October 2025. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Six inter-

views were conducted online via Tavi Zoom, the institution's secure video-conferencing platform, and one interview took place in person at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.

Offering both interview formats served several practical and methodological purposes. It enabled participation from professionals located across different local authorities in England, reducing geographical and time-related barriers. Providing choice also supported participant autonomy and comfort, which was particularly important given the sensitive nature of discussing personal belief systems in professional contexts (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Online interviews additionally accommodated the demanding schedules of Virtual School professionals and allowed participants to take part from familiar environments. Previous research suggests that this can facilitate openness and disclosure, particularly when discussing personal or potentially sensitive topics (Janghorban et al., 2014).

Consent to audio-record interviews was obtained through the consent form and verbally reconfirmed immediately prior to recording. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private settings to minimise distractions and safeguard confidentiality. For online interviews, I participated from my home office, while participants joined from private workspaces or home offices. All online participants chose to have their cameras switched on, which supported the interviewing process by enabling me to observe non-verbal cues and respond sensitively to participants' comfort and engagement. The in-person interview was conducted in a private meeting room at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, providing a professional and confidential environment that similarly supported direct observation of non-verbal communication. The secure Tavi Zoom platform ensured that confidentiality and data protection standards were upheld, with audio recordings stored directly to the University of Essex OneDrive system rather than on local devices, with access restricted to myself and my supervisor. Tavi Zoom's automated transcription feature was used

to generate initial transcripts, which were then manually reviewed against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. This was particularly important for correcting errors in specialist terminology related to Virtual School practice and education. During this process, all identifying information, including names of individuals, schools, and local authorities, was removed to protect confidentiality. Participants' belief system identities were retained alongside pseudonyms in line with the consent agreement, given their analytic relevance.

3.8.3 Interview Schedule Development

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed in relation to the research aims and questions and was designed to explore how participants experienced and made sense of navigating personal belief systems within their professional roles in Virtual School contexts (see Appendix E). The schedule comprised a small number of open-ended questions organised broadly into background, experiential, reflective, and closing sections. It was designed to balance structure with flexibility, ensuring that key areas relevant to the research questions were explored while allowing participants to shape the direction and emphasis of the conversation in ways that reflected what was most meaningful to them. While the core questions provided a shared structure across interviews, follow-up questions were generated responsively during the interview itself, informed by participants' accounts and the direction of the conversation. These follow-ups were used to encourage elaboration, clarification, and reflection, particularly when participants discussed complex or sensitive aspects of belief system navigation, without steering them toward particular interpretations.

At the start of each interview, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the study, and clarified the research-focused nature of the conversation. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw, were discussed prior to

commencing. Given my position as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I also explicitly distinguished the interview from professional consultation or supervision, to reduce role ambiguity and support open reflection.

Consistent with a critical realist orientation, the questions were designed to access participants' interpretations of real professional experiences while attending to the organisational, relational, and cultural contexts in which these experiences occurred. The emphasis was on inviting participants to describe experiences in their own terms, rather than eliciting predetermined categories or positions.

Questions were phrased to avoid assumptions about whether or how belief systems influenced professional practice. For example, rather than asking whether beliefs affected participants' work, questions invited reflection on experiences of navigation and intersection. This approach supported the inclusion of diverse belief positions and allowed participants to articulate their experiences within their own frameworks of understanding.

Interviews were concluded once participants indicated that they had shared what they felt was important about their experiences, ensuring that accounts were participant-led while remaining aligned with the study's research focus.

3.8.4 Interview Quality Considerations

Rather than conducting a formal pilot interview, all interviews were included in the analysis, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) position that early interviews within an RTA approach are analytically meaningful data in their own right rather than preliminary test cases. Treating the initial interview as a pilot would have risked excluding a conceptually rich account from a small and specialist dataset. Instead, interview quality was supported by my existing experience of conducting research interviews, having previously used semi-structured interviews for a the-

matic analysis study during my Master's degree, as well as my ongoing professional practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, which involves regular consultation with schools and families requiring similar skills in sensitive questioning, active listening, and creating conditions for open reflection. These skills were further developed through additional strategies.

These strategies included extensive supervisory review of the interview schedule prior to data collection, with particular attention to question phrasing, ethical sensitivity, and alignment with the research aims. Ongoing supervision throughout the data collection phase provided structured opportunities for reflexive evaluation of interview conduct, question focus, and researcher positioning. This process allowed interviewing skills to develop iteratively while maintaining methodological consistency across interviews. Throughout, interview quality and analytic rigour were the priority, consistent with the sample size rationale outlined in Section 3.7.

3.8.5 Post-interview Procedures

Following each interview, participants were offered a debrief period in which they could reflect on their experience of participation and ask any questions. They were reminded of their right to withdraw their data within the four-week period prior to de-identification and were provided with contact details for both myself and my supervisor should any concerns arise. Information about external support services, including Education Support Partnership, Mind, and Samaritans, was also provided, although no participants indicated a need for additional support. In line with ethical approval and data protection requirements, original audio files were permanently deleted in accordance with the study's data management and confidentiality protocols.

Following each interview, I also recorded brief reflexive notes documenting my immediate impressions, emotional responses, relational dynamics, and emerging analytic questions. These

reflections formed part of the reflexive audit of the analytic process and informed subsequent coding and theme development (see Appendix H for an example).

3.9 Data Analysis Process and Reflexivity

3.9.1 Reflexivity in the Data Analysis Process

Consistent with a critical realist epistemology and an RTA approach, reflexivity was treated as integral to the analytic process rather than as a standalone declaration of researcher identity. While my positionality informed the design of the study, reflexive engagement was particularly central during data analysis, where decisions were made about meaning, patterning, and theme development across participants' accounts. Analysis was understood as an active, inductive process engaging with participants' accounts of real professional experiences, while recognising that both those accounts and my interpretations were shaped by organisational, relational, and socio-cultural contexts.

My prior professional experience within a Virtual School, alongside my position during the research as a TEP, located me in what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as the “space between”, occupying a partial insider-outsider position. This positioning provided contextual sensitivity to participants' accounts while also requiring ongoing reflexive attention to how familiarity, professional assumptions, or perceived proximity might shape interpretation.

In addition, my broader experience of navigating multiple, intersecting identities informed reflexive sensitivity to how belief systems were described as integrated, backgrounded, or foregrounded within professional practice. Rather than presuming the relevance or impact of belief systems in advance, reflexive attention supported an analytic stance that prioritised participants' own framings of when and how belief systems became meaningful in their work. Participants self-categorised their belief identities during interviews, most commonly as religious, secular, or spir-

itual. These self-descriptions were not treated as fixed analytic categories; instead, I remained reflexively attentive to how they might shape interpretation, including through my own assumptions and prior positioning. This approach aligned with the study's inductive analytic commitments and strengthened the credibility of theme development by making the interpretive role of the researcher explicit and transparent.

3.9.2 Methodological Implications

Within this study, reflexivity functioned as an ongoing methodological practice shaping analytic decision-making. During coding and theme development, reflexivity involved remaining open to varied and context-dependent accounts of belief system navigation, resisting the imposition of predefined narratives (e.g., tension, conflict, or coherence), and allowing patterns of meaning to emerge inductively through sustained engagement with participants' accounts.

Reflexive strategies, including supervision and reflexive journalling, were used as structured mechanisms for examining moments of resonance, surprise, or uncertainty in the data. These moments prompted scrutiny of analytic choices and supported the development of themes grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher expectation. This process supported openness to multiple, non-exclusive interpretations, consistent with a critical realist commitment to situated and partial knowledge.

3.9.3 Ongoing Reflexivity

The interviews were conducted in 2025 during a period of heightened global and political tensions, including conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine, intensified public discourse around immigration and multiculturalism, and increased scrutiny of religious and cultural identities, particularly affecting Muslim and Jewish communities (Becker, 2023; Community Security Trust, 2025; Hopkins,

2007;). This wider context formed an important backdrop to the study and shaped the ways in which discussions of personal belief systems took place within professional settings.

The sensitivity of this context became apparent during recruitment. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the initial low response rate was interpreted as potentially reflecting both the restrictive framing of belief and the wider socio-political climate. From a critical realist perspective, this suggests that willingness to participate may have been shaped by multiple interacting factors, including professional relevance and participants' comfort in disclosing personal beliefs within a potentially scrutinised environment.

In response, I adopted a reflexively cautious approach during interviews, explicitly acknowledging the sensitivity of the topic, foregrounding confidentiality, and allowing participants to determine the depth and direction of discussion. This supported participant-led accounts and reduced pressure to articulate beliefs in ways that felt evaluative or uncomfortably exposing.

Beyond these practical considerations, ongoing reflexivity also involved attention to how the philosophical stance underpinning the study shaped knowledge production. Critical realism provided a useful framework for engaging with belief systems as real aspects of social life whose expression is shaped by social, relational, and institutional contexts (Bhaskar, 1975; Sayer, 2000). At the same time, as outlined in the epistemological discussion earlier in this chapter, I remained aware that critical realism itself is situated within particular cultural and intellectual traditions, which reinforced the importance of treating it as a guiding framework rather than a fixed template throughout the analytic process.

Reflexivity in this study operated at three interconnected levels: attending to the wider political and social context in which participation took place, remaining aware of the cultural and

historical situatedness of the philosophical stance adopted, and engaging critically with my own positioning in relation to the research context. Taken together, these layers of reflexivity supported an analytic approach that centred participants' voices while making my interpretive role as researcher explicit, thereby strengthening the credibility and transparency of the analysis.

3.9.4 Interpretive Knowledge Construction and Researcher Subjectivity

Recognising that knowledge is always partial and contextually shaped raises important questions about the researcher's role in constructing it. From a critical realist epistemological perspective, knowledge is understood as contextual and interpretive, while still referring to phenomena that exist independently of how they are described (Collier, 1994). In this study, understanding how Virtual School professionals navigate personal belief systems was developed through sustained interpretive engagement with participants' accounts of their professional practice, analysed through RTA with attention to patterns of meaning across the dataset, recognising these accounts as contextually shaped interpretations of underlying professional experiences.

Analysis was not treated as the discovery of pre-existing themes, nor as the imposition of meaning onto participants' accounts. Rather, meanings and themes were actively developed through sustained, reflexive engagement with participants' accounts, while recognising that access to these experiences, and participants' own interpretation and understanding of them, was mediated by language, professional norms, and the research context. This approach maintains a clear distinction from both naïve realism and strong social constructionism.

Within this framework, researcher subjectivity was not viewed as bias to be eliminated but as an analytic resource when engaged reflexively (Finlay, 2002). My experience of engaging with religious and secular belief frameworks across different contexts, alongside professional training and cross-cultural transition, supported sensitivity to the nuanced ways belief systems may be nav-

igated in practice. At the same time, this positioning required ongoing critical attention to potential assumptions or blind spots that could shape analytic focus.

Analytic decisions, including how data were coded, patterns identified, and themes developed, were therefore understood as interpretive acts shaped by my positioning as a researcher and TEP, while remaining grounded in participants' accounts. Rather than treating similarity between participant accounts and my own experiences as confirmation, moments of resonance or uncertainty were approached as prompts for closer analytic scrutiny, supported through reflexive journaling and supervision.

Alongside the researcher's interpretive role, the forms of understanding that participants themselves bring to their accounts are equally central to how knowledge is produced in this study. Participants were approached as knowledgeable practitioners whose accounts reflect situated forms of professional reasoning, drawing on multiple forms of understanding including experiential knowledge from professional practice, values and commitments rooted in belief frameworks, cultural perspectives, and institutional or professional training. Rather than privileging one type of knowledge over another, the analysis attended to how these different sources of understanding were integrated within participants' descriptions of practice. This orientation aligns with contemporary professional guidance within Educational Psychology, which emphasises reflective, relational, and contextually informed practice, including respect for service users' values and autonomy and sensitivity to culture and diversity (BPS, 2023, Standards 2i, 3a & 3g; HCPC, 2023, Standards 2.5, 5.1 & 10.3).

From a critical realist perspective, the knowledge generated through this research represents an interpretive engagement with participants' accounts of real professional experiences, rather than a claim to objective or exhaustive truth. Findings are thus presented as situated and par-

tial, shaped by the research context and analytic process, while offering meaningful insight into how belief system navigation is understood and experienced within Virtual School professional practice.

3.9.5 *Limitations of Knowledge Claims*

The epistemological position adopted in this study recognises that there are limits to the claims that can be made through this research. Findings represent contextualised understandings of belief system navigation within specific organisational and professional contexts rather than generalisable truths (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000), and reflect the perspectives of seven professionals working in Virtual Schools at a particular time. The strengths and limitations of the study, including the methodological implications of these epistemological commitments, are addressed in further detail in the discussion chapter.

3.10 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

This section outlines the analytic process undertaken using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis was approached as an iterative and interpretive process, through which patterns of meaning were actively generated through sustained engagement with the dataset, rather than treated as pre-existing within it. Consistent with the study's critical realist positioning, participants' accounts were treated as accounts of real professional experiences, while recognising that both these accounts and my interpretations were shaped by relational, organisational, and socio-cultural contexts. Within this framework, belief systems were not treated as fixed categories or variables but as meaningful dimensions of participants' professional lives, understood through their own framings. RTA supported this approach by enabling patterns of meaning to be explored without reducing belief to predefined typologies, while requiring ongoing reflexive engagement with how my positioning shaped analytic decisions.

The phases of RTA are described below to illustrate how codes and themes were progressively refined, reorganised, and conceptualised over time. Reflexivity is foregrounded throughout, not as a discrete stage, but as integral to analytic decision-making and theme development. This account aims to demonstrate analytic coherence and transparency in how the final thematic structure was constructed. Throughout, analytic rigour was supported through recursive engagement with the data, sustained reflexive interrogation of interpretive decisions, and ongoing attention to the coherence, distinctiveness, and conceptual depth of developing themes.

3.10.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with Data

As described in the data collection section, initial transcripts were generated using Tavi Zoom's automated transcription feature and then manually reviewed and corrected by me against the audio recordings. This review process was treated as an initial stage of familiarisation rather than a purely technical task (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Listening to the recordings while transcribing supported immersion in tone, pacing, and moments of emotional emphasis. This process facilitated early engagement with both the content and affective dimensions of participants' accounts, enabling sensitivity to nuance, hesitation, and emphasis. Audio files were securely stored and deleted four weeks after transcription and de-identification, in line with the consent agreement and data management plan.

Following transcription, I engaged in repeated reading of each transcript alongside analytic note-taking. Initial notes captured early impressions, tensions, resonances, and questions arising from the data. Familiarisation involved both immersion and critical engagement, attending not only to what participants said but to how they constructed meaning in relation to belief systems and professional practice. In line with RTA, I asked analytic questions such as: How is belief po-

sitioned within this account? What assumptions underpin this framing? What moral or professional worlds are being constructed? What alternative interpretations might be possible?

I also engaged in reflexive self-questioning throughout this phase, attending to my own emotional and intellectual responses to the data. Early analytic questions and areas of curiosity were captured in a provisional reflexive analytic map created during this phase (see Appendix I), reflecting the exploratory nature of familiarisation rather than the development of formal themes. I considered why particular extracts stood out to me, what personal or professional assumptions may have shaped my interpretations, and how my positionality could influence what was foregrounded or backgrounded. This reflexive interrogation aimed to cultivate analytic depth alongside critical distance.

By the end of this phase, I had developed a broad conceptual 'lay of the land' (Braun & Clarke, 2022), including sensitivity to variation across participants' accounts and early patterns of meaning. Rather than constituting fully formed themes, these ideas represented provisional analytic directions that I would later interrogate, refine, and potentially discard. They were treated as tentative and subject to revision, forming part of an ongoing, recursive analytic process rather than fixed interpretations.

3.10.2 Phase 2: Coding

Coding began alongside continued immersion in the dataset. During the early stages, I engaged in extensive, fine-grained coding characterised by close attention to participants' language, emotion, values, professional actions, biographical references, and systemic contexts (see Appendix J for example of early transcript annotation and Appendix K for corresponding coding table extract).

Initially, coding was conducted manually using printed transcripts and marginal annotations. This approach supported close engagement with the textual material and allowed flexibility in tracking emerging ideas, questions, and analytic observations directly alongside the data. Transcripts were colour-coded to reflect developing analytic interests and points of interpretive importance.

However, as the volume and granularity of codes increased, I found it increasingly challenging to hold the breadth of codes and cross-case connections in view. In response, I transferred all manual codes and annotations into an Excel spreadsheet, creating a structured coding table that enabled ongoing re-engagement with, and refinement of, codes across the dataset. This shift was pragmatic rather than epistemological; it supported analytic transparency and traceability without altering the interpretive stance underpinning the analysis.

During this phase, I produced extensive reflexive memos alongside coding. Reflexivity was embedded within the analytic process itself rather than confined to a separate diary, with memos capturing questions, assumptions, emerging interpretations, and moments of uncertainty directly linked to specific excerpts of data.

Early coding generated a large number of detailed semantic codes. This was not treated as evidence of analytic imprecision, but reflected maximal engagement with the dataset, supporting sensitivity to nuance and contextual meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding operated along a semantic–latent continuum rather than as a fixed binary, with interpretive depth developing through sustained engagement with the dataset.

As coding progressed, the analytic focus shifted from generating additional codes to engaging more explicitly with interpretation. While early coding primarily captured what participants

said, felt, and did, later coding increasingly attended to how these meanings operated in practice, for example, how beliefs were used to justify decisions, navigate organisational expectations, manage ethical tensions, or sustain professional identity within the constraints of the systems in which they worked.

This shift became particularly evident during the coding of Interview 4 (see Appendix L), which marked a clear turning point in the analytic process. Where earlier coding had been predominantly descriptive, this interview prompted a move toward more explicit interpretive engagement, with greater attention to underlying assumptions and meaning-making processes. This evolving analytic sensitivity shaped subsequent engagement with the dataset, with attention directed toward patterns of meaning taking shape across the dataset, while remaining open to new and different insights.

Throughout this phase, coding remained recursive and reflexively shaped. Codes did not mechanically accumulate into themes; rather, they functioned as analytic resources that I drew upon in constructing themes as patterns of shared meaning across the dataset. Themes were not treated as inherent within the data awaiting discovery, but as interpretive outputs generated through sustained, iterative engagement with the data, coding tables, reflexive memos, and supervisory dialogue.

3.10.3 Phase 3: Generating Initial Themes

Following coding, I began the process of generating initial themes by exploring patterns of shared meaning across the dataset. In line with RTA, this stage was treated as generative and provisional rather than confirmatory (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The aim was not to finalise themes, but to experiment with different ways of clustering codes in order to identify broader organising ideas relevant to the research questions. Consistent with a critical realist position, this involved attending

not only to surface patterns within participants' accounts, but also to the underlying assumptions, moral orientations, and structural conditions shaping those accounts.

To support this process, I returned to the original coding table and associated reflexive memos, revisiting extracts and manually reorganising codes into provisional groupings. Although codes had been collated within Excel for traceability, theme development involved stepping back from the spreadsheet and engaging more flexibly with the material. I printed code lists, annotated clusters, and drafted visual thematic maps to explore possible relationships between codes (see Appendices J, K, and M). This process enabled the flexible reorganisation of codes and candidate themes as conceptual relationships were tested, questioned, and revised.

Early clustering produced a number of overlapping candidate themes, including: belief and identity; moral discomfort; advocacy and resistance; system pressures; emotional impact; professional judgement; power tensions; and resilience. These clusters reflected different ways of organising patterned meaning, rather than settled analytic conclusions. Many codes could plausibly sit within more than one grouping. For example, extracts describing sadness or frustration could be read as emotional impact, but also as manifestations of moral discomfort or responses to systemic constraint. Similarly, instances of challenging authority could be understood as advocacy, as expressions of professional judgement, or as negotiations of power.

Throughout this phase, I engaged in sustained reflexive questioning. I repeatedly asked: Is this pattern primarily about belief? Or is it about power? Care? Emotional survival? Advocacy? At times, I also felt a strong pull to organise candidate themes directly around the research questions. While this approach initially appeared efficient and coherent, I became increasingly aware that forcing early clusters into a question-led structure risked narrowing the analytic possibilities prematurely. Instead, I worked to remain open to patterns that cut across, complicated, or extended

beyond the research questions, allowing the analysis to develop conceptually before imposing structural alignment.

This stage was characterised by ongoing analytic negotiation. Provisional clusters often overlapped conceptually, raising questions about whether patterns reflected distinct thematic groupings or different facets of a broader organising idea. There was also tension between retaining descriptive richness and moving toward greater abstraction. Some clusters appeared compelling at a semantic level but lacked a unifying conceptual thread when considered across the dataset. Rather than seeking premature coherence, I allowed clusters to remain tentative while continuing to interrogate what, analytically, held them together.

Visual thematic mapping (see Appendix M) supported this process by making visible the relationships, overlaps, and tensions between candidate themes. Through iterative reorganisation and continued engagement with the data and memos, certain clusters began to cohere around a more integrated organising concept. The analytic focus gradually shifted from discrete experiential categories (e.g., emotional impact, system pressures, advocacy) toward a broader understanding of belief as shaping professional moral sense-making within institutional contexts, recognising that participants' accounts reflected both lived experience and the structural conditions within which professional judgement was exercised. This conceptual condensation did not occur linearly, but through recursive movement between codes, clusters, extracts, and reflexive reflection.

By the end of this stage, the analysis consisted of a smaller set of more conceptually developed candidate themes, which were subsequently refined and reviewed in the next stage of analysis.

3.10.4 Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes

As the candidate themes began to take shape, the analysis moved into a phase of further development and review. Consistent with RTA, this stage was not a simple process of checking whether themes “fit,” but an active and recursive phase of further development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It involved re-engaging with both the coded data extracts and the full dataset to refine the scope, boundaries, and conceptual coherence of each candidate theme.

The first level of review focused on the internal coherence of candidate themes in relation to their collated extracts. I examined whether the data within each theme meaningfully cohered around a central organising concept, rather than representing a collection of related but analytically disconnected topics. Where candidate themes appeared overly broad, fragmented, or descriptively organised, I returned to the extracts to interrogate what shared meaning, if any, held them together. In several instances, early clusters required reworking. For example, what initially appeared as distinct groupings (e.g., emotional impact, advocacy/resistance, power tensions, system pressures) were found to be conceptually interwoven when examined more closely. Rather than representing separate thematic patterns, they reflected interconnected dimensions of how belief was enacted, negotiated, or constrained within institutional contexts.

The second level of review involved returning to the full dataset to ensure that developing themes adequately captured the breadth and nuance of participants’ accounts. This required reading extracts back within their interview context, checking that thematic interpretations remained grounded in the wider narrative of each account. It also involved attending to patterns of tension and contradiction. In line with RTA, contradictions were not treated as analytic inconsistencies to be resolved, but as potentially meaningful features of the data. In some cases, tension itself became

central to the developing theme, particularly where belief appeared to operate simultaneously as moral resource and site of strain.

Throughout this phase, I was attentive to the distinction between topic summaries and shared meaning themes. Some provisional clusters risked functioning as descriptive categories (e.g., resilience or professional judgement) rather than analytically developed patterns organised around a coherent idea. To guard against this, I repeatedly asked: What is the organising concept of this theme? Does it tell a meaningful story about belief and professional practice, or does it simply summarise content? This interrogation supported further refinement of the analysis, enabling the development of a more integrated organising concept.

Developing and reviewing themes was therefore characterised by recursive movement between codes, extracts, thematic maps, and the full dataset. Visual thematic mapping (see Appendix N) supported this process by making visible overlaps, boundaries, and relationships between candidate themes. Through iterative refinement, provisional clusters were reorganised into a smaller number of more conceptually integrated themes that together told a coherent analytic story about belief as shaping professional moral sense-making within institutional realities.

By the end of this phase, the thematic structure was conceptually clearer and more cohesive, while still grounded in participants' accounts and responsive to the research questions. This process enhanced the overall quality and rigour of the analysis.

3.10.5 Phase 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

This phase focused on refining, defining, and naming the themes in a way that clearly conveyed their analytic meaning, ensuring that each theme represented a coherent pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept rather than a descriptive summary of what participants

discussed. For example, early candidate themes included 'system pressures,' which gathered extracts about line management constraints, capacity, and procedural framing, and sat closely linked to 'power tensions,' capturing patterns of hierarchical silencing and authority overriding professional judgement. Returning to the extracts and asking what connected these early themes, I recognised that neither was about system pressure or power in itself, but about what happened when participants' belief-informed values came up against institutional realities. This led to the development of Theme 4, 'When belief meets institutional reality,' which brought these patterns together under a single organising concept, capturing the friction, discomfort, and micro-resistance that arose at that intersection.

Refinement involved returning to collated extracts and the full dataset to interrogate the scope and boundaries of each theme. I asked a series of guiding questions, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2022) criteria for theme development: What is the central organising concept here? What holds these extracts together? What does this theme include, and what does it exclude? How is it distinct from other themes? How does it contribute to answering the research questions? This process required careful consideration of overlap between themes, particularly where issues of identity, morality, power, and institutional constraint intersected. In some instances, boundaries were adjusted and extracts relocated to ensure conceptual clarity and analytic distinctiveness.

Writing concise working definitions for each theme proved particularly valuable. Drafting and redrafting these definitions enabled me to test whether the themes captured patterned meaning across participants' accounts, rather than relying on intuitive coherence. Where definitions felt overly broad or descriptive, I returned to the data to clarify the underlying organising idea. This iterative process strengthened both internal coherence within themes and clarity between them.

Naming the themes was treated as an analytic act rather than a cosmetic one. Theme titles were crafted to reflect their interpretive framing and organising concept, rather than simply their content. Care was taken to avoid labels that reduced themes to topics (e.g., “emotional impact” or “system pressures”) and instead to select names that conveyed process, positioning, or relational dynamics where appropriate. In some cases, wording was refined multiple times to ensure that names captured analytic depth while remaining accessible to the reader.

Throughout this phase, reflexivity remained central. I considered how my own professional and personal positioning may have influenced the framing and emphasis of themes, and supervisory dialogue supported further interrogation of their conceptual robustness.

By the end of this stage, the final themes and subthemes were clearly defined and formalised. The resulting thematic structure (see Figure 1) presents a coherent analytic account of how belief systems are navigated within professional practice in Virtual School contexts, demonstrating both shared patterns and meaningful variation across participants’ accounts.

3.10.6 Phase 6: Write-up

The final phase of RTA involved crafting a coherent and analytically compelling account of the findings. In line with Braun and Clarke (2022), writing was treated as a further stage of analysis rather than a neutral reporting exercise. This required continued reflexive engagement with the data to ensure that themes were conceptually clear, internally coherent, and grounded in participants’ accounts.

Each theme was introduced through a concise analytic overview outlining its central organising concept, followed by subthemes that elaborated key dimensions of the pattern (see Figure 1 for an overview of the final thematic structure). Data extracts were selected to illustrate analytic

claims and were integrated with interpretive commentary, ensuring that participants' voices were foregrounded while analysis remained explicit.

Where variation or tension appeared within or across accounts, these were treated as analytically meaningful rather than as inconsistencies to be resolved. Consistent with a critical realist position, the themes are presented as interpretive constructions generated through sustained engagement with the dataset, offering a situated account of belief system navigation within Virtual School professional practice.

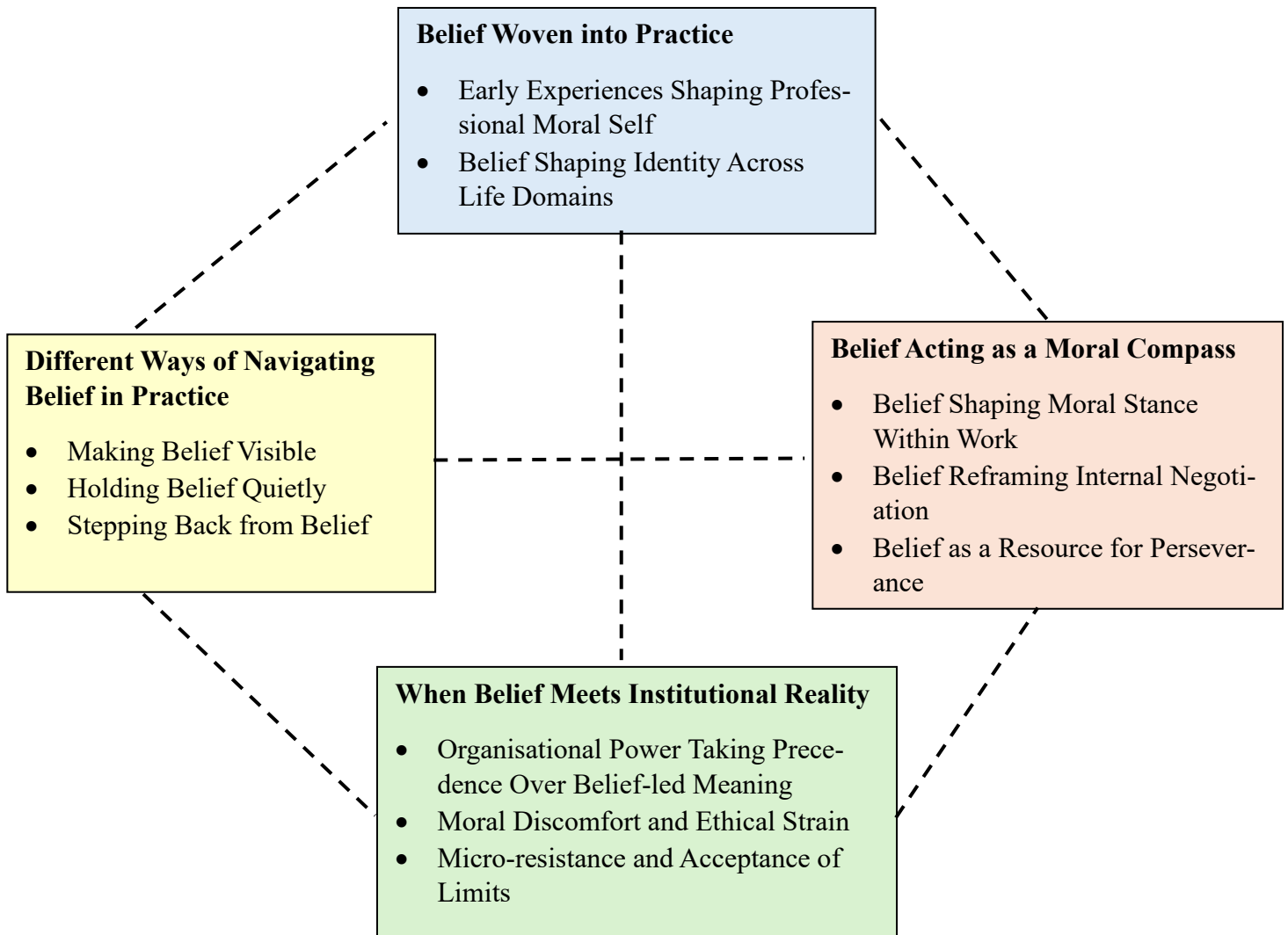
4 FINDINGS

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings of the study, organised around four themes. The structure is designed to capture both the distinct dimensions of participants' experiences and the connections between them. The thematic map (Figure 1) shows how the themes relate to one another, not as a hierarchy, but as an interconnected account of how belief operated in the professional lives of Virtual School educational professionals working with care-experienced CYP.

The four themes explore different aspects of this process. Theme 1, *Belief woven into practice*, focuses on how belief became part of professional identity, shaped through early experiences. Theme 2, *Different ways of navigating belief in practice*, explores how participants expressed, held, or stepped back from belief depending on context. Theme 3, *Belief acting as a moral compass*, examines the role of belief in guiding judgement, supporting sense-making, and sustaining engagement with the work. Theme 4, *When belief meets institutional reality*, explores what happened when belief-informed values came into tension with organisational structures and expectations.

Each theme and subtheme is explored in detail, with data extracts used to illustrate the analysis. Ellipses (...) are used where portions of extracts have been omitted for clarity, without altering their meaning. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' identities. Interpretive commentary accompanies each extract, making the analytic reasoning explicit and transparent. Where variation or tension within themes is important to the analysis, this is acknowledged and explored rather than resolved, consistent with the study's reflexive thematic analytic approach.

Figure 1*Thematic Map*

Note. The themes represent interconnected aspects of participants' experiences. Bullet points within each theme are presented as subthemes, but are not intended to reflect a hierarchical structure. The dotted lines indicate connections between themes and do not represent direction or sequence.

4.2 Theme 1: Belief Woven into Practice

For all participants, belief was not experienced as something brought to work from outside, but as something already woven into how they understood themselves as professionals. Rather than existing as a separate, private dimension of identity that required conscious management at the threshold of professional life, belief had become integrated into participants' ways of seeing, relating, and responding, to the point where, for some, the boundary between personal belief and professional orientation was difficult to locate. This theme explores how early experiences shaped a professional moral self, and how that self-extended beyond professional life to shape how participants understood themselves across all domains of living. Taken together, the two subthemes suggest that for all participants, belief-informed professional identity was not constructed in the workplace but brought to it, and understanding how it was then navigated, expressed, and tested within that workplace is what the themes that follow explore.

4.2.1 *Early Experiences Shaping Professional Moral Self*

For all participants, early experiences, whether of religious upbringing, personal biography, or formative encounters with difference and hardship, left an enduring moral imprint that shaped how they understood themselves as professionals in adult life. These early experiences did not simply provide a moral code to follow; they shaped a way of being in the world that subsequently became inseparable from professional identity. Importantly, this was not always immediately visible to participants themselves. For some, it only became apparent through the reflective process of the interview, suggesting that early biographical shaping had become so embedded that it operated as a taken-for-granted orientation rather than a consciously held position.

Participant 3 (P3) described how a Catholic upbringing, while no longer practised in adult life, had nonetheless left a lasting moral imprint. Rather than experiencing the transition away from

religious practice as a rejection of his earlier self, he understood it as a continuity, the values cultivated through early religious life had persisted even as formal belief fell away:

I never... felt like I ever was rejecting the values of of of my, of my upbringing in my religion. I never rejected the values...I just became an adult and it's just that my rational brain can't get, can't really accept the sort of, you know, supernatural side of things, you know, and all that. It's not, it's not about rejecting values. (P3)

He elaborated on what those early experiences had actually cultivated:

... my experience as a child was religion was was a very nurturing one at home and at school it was a very caring and very nurturing, very much about, you know, looking after other people... There's a very charitable, you know, aspect to the whole thing. So of course that that nurtured my mind in that way. (P3)

For P3, it was the quality of his early religious experience, its emphasis on care, nurture, and looking after others, that had shaped his moral orientation, rather than the doctrinal content of the belief system itself.

A similar pattern emerged in Participant 2's (P2's) account, where a Buddhist-influenced worldview had developed gradually from early experiences and personal reflection. She described how forming her own beliefs involved both inheritance and conscious choice, taking what resonated from her upbringing and actively moving away from what did not:

...based on our own experiences growing up, own parenting experience, you know experiences of being parented and the culture that we grew up in, which kind of shapes us, but then equally as we grow up... we form our own beliefs and there are bits that we might

have grown up with that we absolutely hated. And then I think you can make a very conscious choice. (P2)

This reflexive relationship with early experience was grounded in a complex personal biography, including an emotionally restrictive family environment, years of personal therapy, and her own experience of adopting children. Rather than leaving these experiences behind, P2 described them as having shaped her capacity for empathy and compassion directly:

...looking back years of analysis later... making peace with my own story through my own psychotherapy over a long time and kind of gradually piecing my own life story together has helped me... I've kind of processed my own life experiences... I guess I've lived through quite a lot of complexity and I guess it hopefully just... allows you to be... a little bit less judgmental. A little bit more compassionate. (P2)

For P2, professional moral identity had not been constructed through professional training alone but through the long work of making sense of her own life, a process that had produced both a deep commitment to non-judgement and a strong belief that it is probably no coincidence that she ended up doing the work she does.

For Participant 6 (P6) and Participant 7 (P7), religious upbringing provided a more explicitly foundational moral structure that continued to shape professional identity in adult life. P7 described his Christian faith as having laid the groundwork for the principles that now guided his professional practice: "I feel that if I didn't have that foundation, I don't think I would have certain principles that I have now." (P7)

For P7, this was not experienced as constraint but as resource, a settled moral ground from which professional decisions could be made with clarity and confidence, without the need for ongoing negotiation or doubt.

P6's relationship with her Catholic upbringing was more nuanced. While she identified as a practising Catholic, she was clear that faith functioned as a guide rather than a rulebook, something she drew on selectively, shaped by lived experience rather than doctrinal prescription:

I think the main tenant of my kind of faith is ensuring that I help others and do the best for them as much as possible. And I don't always believe in everything that the Catholic Church says... but in terms of my belief, it's just always helping others, always being kind. I kind of view my faith as a bit of a road map. (P6)

For P6, early religious formation had cultivated a core ethical orientation, kindness, helping others, speaking up when something is wrong, that translated directly into her professional practice, even where the institutional content of that religion felt less relevant or applicable.

Participant 1's (P1's) account showed how early personal experience had directly shaped her professional empathy. She described growing up with a mother whose poor health meant that circumstances beyond her control shaped family life significantly, an experience that had cultivated a deep understanding of how life situations, rather than personal failings, can determine outcomes for families:

I grew up with my mum, who didn't have, hasn't had very good health... I think then you start to think actually things could have been very different. You know, for someone who's in very different circumstances and doesn't have that support network around them... I

suppose it probably that does impact on my work in terms of trying like spending more energy, trying to understand their needs and trying to advocate for them. (P1)

For P1, this early biographical experience had produced a professional orientation grounded in equity and non-judgement, a belief that people should be seen as people, and that circumstances, not character, explain behaviour. This translated directly into how she approached assessment, report writing, and advocacy within her Virtual School role.

Participant 5's (P5's) account was distinctive in that her moral orientation was not rooted in any named religious tradition. She was explicit that she had not been brought up religiously and did not identify as religious. Instead, her values constituted what she described as a personal code, inseparable from who she was, centred on social justice, advocacy, hearing children's voices, and doing what is right. This had been shaped through lived experience and personal reflection rather than through religious formation. For P5, the biographical roots of professional moral identity were less about a specific formative event and more about an accumulating sense, developed over time, that her values and her work were inseparable.

Participant 4's (P4's) account was the most distinctive in this regard. She began the interview with notable hesitancy around the language of belief, describing her initial instinct as being to separate professional principles from personal belief entirely. However, as the interview progressed, it became increasingly clear that her deepest professional commitments had biographical roots she had not initially connected to her professional identity. Most significantly, she described growing up in a family shaped by intergenerational trauma, with both parents having experienced abuse in childhood and her father having spent time in and out of care:

Both my parents were... experienced abuse in their childhood... my dad grew up in and out of care... I kind of feel like I can relate to some of the experiences of our children in care in a way that perhaps someone that hasn't grown up in that context can't. (P4)

For P4, these early experiences had cultivated a form of relational understanding, a capacity to imagine what care-experienced CYP go through, that she described as something no amount of professional training alone could have produced. That this connection only became visible through the reflective process of the interview is itself telling, suggesting that the shaping influence of early experience on how practitioners understand and relate to the CYP they work with can operate below the level of conscious awareness until reflective space is created to examine it.

It is worth pausing here to reflect on my own positioning in relation to this subtheme. The accounts that stayed with me most during analysis were those where early hardship had been transformed into professional compassion, particularly P1, P2, and P4. Having my own professional background working alongside care-experienced CYP, I was conscious of being drawn to these narratives, and of the possibility that this pull might lead me to give more weight to accounts that reflected values I already held. I tried to hold this awareness throughout the analysis, not as a reason to set these accounts aside, but as a reminder to keep checking whether the significance I was giving them came from what participants themselves were saying, rather than from my own resonance with their experiences. Coming back to the data repeatedly, the biographical rooting of professional values and ways of relating did feel genuinely central across all seven accounts, even where it looked different or emerged less readily, which gave me more confidence that this pattern reflects something real about how belief and professional identity develop in this kind of work, rather than something I had read into the data.

Looking across all seven accounts, something consistent emerges that goes beyond individual biography. Early experiences, whether of religious upbringing, family hardship, personal loss, or encounters with difference, seem to leave a particular kind of moral imprint that does not simply fade over time but becomes woven into how practitioners see and respond to the world. From a critical realist perspective, these experiences appear to work as generative mechanisms, shaping professional moral orientations at a deeper level than conscious choice or professional training alone can account for. What makes this particularly interesting is that for several participants, this shaping had become so embedded that it was no longer visible to them as something that had shaped them, it had simply become who they were. The fact that it only surfaced through the reflective space of the interview suggests that this kind of deeply rooted moral orientation often goes unnamed and unexamined in professional life. For those working with care-experienced CYP in Virtual School contexts, where the emotional and ethical demands of the role are significant, this matters, because what sustains practitioners, and what shapes the quality of their practice, may be something that existing professional development frameworks rarely create space to acknowledge or explore.

4.2.2 Belief Shaping Identity Across Life Domains

For most participants, belief did not operate only within professional life but shaped how they understood themselves across all domains, including work, family, relationships, and community. Rather than compartmentalising belief as something belonging to one area of life, participants described their values as running consistently through everything they did, making the boundary between personal and professional identity difficult, and for some impossible, to locate.

P7 expressed this most directly and with the greatest sense of clarity. For him, Christian faith was not something he brought to work and left at home, it was simply part of who he was in every context:

They're married together. Yeah, I would say definitely. Even not just with your young people you work with... it's your colleagues as well. It's the way you interact with a member of public... it's not just down to work, it's everything, even including family. (P7)

For P7, this integration was uncomplicated and experienced as a source of consistency and strength, belief provided a stable ethical thread that ran through all areas of life, and professional practice was simply one context in which that thread became visible.

A similar pattern emerged in P3's account, though rooted in a secular humanist rather than religious worldview. He described the boundary between who he was at work and who he was outside of it as essentially non-existent: "I don't see a dividing line in that sense. I am at work who I am not at work." (P3)

For P3, the values he brought to his professional relationships, a belief in shared humanity, the importance of relating to people as people rather than categories, were the same values he carried into every other area of his life. Professional identity was not a separate role to inhabit but a natural extension of a consistently held worldview.

However, not all participants experienced this integration as clear or straightforward. For P5, whose moral orientation was rooted in a personal code rather than any named belief system, the integration of belief across life domains was real but also experienced as something that had to be actively managed: "It's much harder to separate, isn't it? Because it's just that that's who I am... if it's just like a code that you live by it's very hard to leave that behind or separate it." (P5)

For P5, belief being woven across all domains of life was not a source of stability in the way it was for P7, it was also a source of weight. The fact that her values were inseparable from her identity meant that the ethical demands of professional life were never fully left behind, and the emotional toll of the work was carried into personal life in ways that were difficult to contain. This tension between integration as strength and integration as burden is one that surfaces again in subsequent themes

Looking across the subtheme, what emerges is that belief shaping identity across life domains was a consistent pattern, but one that felt different depending on the nature and clarity of the belief system involved. Where belief was experienced with internal clarity and coherence, the integration across life domains felt sustaining and largely uncomplicated. Where belief was more fluid or less named, that same integration could feel both grounding and demanding.

As someone who also experiences the boundaries between personal values, professional ethics, and lived experience as genuinely blurry, I was conscious of a particular resonance with this subtheme. I tried to remain attentive to whether this familiarity was drawing me toward certain accounts, and to keep returning to what participants themselves were saying rather than what felt intuitively recognisable to me.

4.3 Theme 2: Different Ways of Navigating Belief in Practice

Theme 1 established that belief was woven into professional identity for all participants, shaped by early experiences and carried consistently across life domains. Where that theme traced the roots of that integration, this theme turns to how belief was carried and expressed in practice, not as a fixed or uniform approach, but as something participants navigated differently depending on context, relationship, and the degree of psychological safety they experienced in a given professional setting.

Three patterns of navigation were identified across the data. The first, making belief visible, captures those moments where participants actively drew on or expressed their beliefs in practice, through advocacy, speaking up, challenging colleagues, or allowing values to shape professional decisions openly. The second, holding belief quietly, captures a different but equally purposeful stance, carrying belief into work without foregrounding it, allowing it to inform practice from the background rather than the foreground. The third, stepping back from belief, captures moments where participants consciously set belief aside, either because professional evidence or judgement took precedence, or because the context made expression feel inappropriate, unsafe, or counterproductive.

It is important to note that these are not fixed categories or ways of being. Most participants moved between all three positions at different points, depending on context, and for some, particularly P5, this movement was a conscious and ongoing negotiation rather than a settled pattern. What the three subthemes capture, therefore, is not who participants were, but how belief was navigated, a set of situated practices rather than fixed dispositions. This distinction is consistent with the study's critical realist understanding of belief as something that operates through mechanisms that are activated differently depending on context, relationship, and institutional structure.

4.3.1 Making Belief Visible

For several participants, belief was not something held privately or carried quietly into work, it was something that surfaced actively in practice, shaping how they spoke, what they challenged, and how they advocated for CYP. Making belief visible was not experienced as a deliberate performance of values, but as an embodied and often unavoidable response to situations that felt ethically wrong or inconsistent with deeply held commitments.

P6 described this most vividly. For her, faith created a sense of moral obligation that made silence in the face of injustice feel impossible, even when speaking up carried professional risk:

If something is wrong, I can't not say anything, and I don't know if that's how I was brought up or if that's my faith... maybe it is my faith because we're always told to kind of speak the truth. And I find if there's anything that is not ethical, even if I go against my service and it does not make me popular, which has happened, but if it's in my ethics, I will do it.
(P6)

For P6, making belief visible was not a choice so much as a deeply felt obligation rooted in her Catholic upbringing and professional ethics working together. Belief and professional identity had become so aligned that acting against one felt like acting against both. This was evident in concrete professional moments. For example, challenging a class teacher who spoke badly about a child in front of a parent, advocating with her manager for additional assessment time to ensure a child's views were heard; and actively reframing negative professional discourse around CYP through strengths-based practice. This alignment illustrates how belief operated not as an external influence on practice, but as an internalised moral structure shaping professional judgement.

P1 offered a different but equally revealing example of making belief visible. Rather than through direct confrontation, her beliefs surfaced through professional documentation, using reports as a vehicle for advocacy and contextual understanding:

I think it just makes me want to emphasise that more within my reports to make sure that other professionals understand where these children are coming from... emphasising the links and that these behaviours or this communication is because of this... to make sure that they understand the reasons behind. (P1)

For P1, making belief visible operated through the written word rather than spoken challenge. Her commitment to equity and non-judgement became visible in how she framed children's behaviour, ensuring that contextual factors were foregrounded rather than allowing deficit interpretations to go unchallenged. Belief here was not announced but enacted, woven into the texture of everyday professional tasks.

However, as P5's account illustrates, making belief visible was rarely unconditional. While she described moments of clear and confident advocacy, for example stopping a Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting to challenge fear-based framing of a child, or challenging senior leadership about the unequal representation of CYP's cultural and religious backgrounds in VS' events, she was equally clear that the decision to make belief visible was always a calculated one:

I navigate spaces. So I guess as a professional, if I feel safe that I can have an opinion then I will really run with it... if I feel that this is going to put me or the team or the children in a bit of a difficult position then I might just drop it completely. I won't say anything. (P5)

For P5, making belief visible was therefore not a stable or consistent practice but a contextually sensitive one, something she moved in and out of depending on her reading of the environment, the relationships involved, and the likely consequences of speaking. What this conditionality reveals is that the visibility of belief in practice is not simply a function of how strongly it is held, but of the structural and relational conditions that make expression feel safe or possible.

That gap between what P5 believed and what she felt able to express was something I found myself sitting with during analysis. With P6 and P5, I was aware of a pull toward admiration for the way both held CYP's voices in mind even when speaking up carried real professional risk, and I tried to remain attentive to how this might shape what I privileged in their accounts, particularly

given my own commitments around advocacy and participation. Returning to P5's data however, what also struck me was that her account was not a romanticised one, the emphasis on calculation, restraint, and emotional demand suggested something closer to fatigue than courage, which felt important to hold onto analytically. With P1, the resonance was quieter but equally worth naming, a shared belief in the importance of contextual explanation that I was conscious might lead me to overweight her use of documentation as advocacy.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that making belief visible was less about assertiveness and more about the alignment between deeply held values and the perceived safety of the professional context. Visibility took different forms, from direct spoken challenge to advocacy enacted through professional documentation, shaped not only by strength of belief but by professional role, relationships, organisational culture, and anticipated consequences.

4.3.2 Holding Belief Quietly

Not all participants expressed belief through visible advocacy or direct challenge. For some, belief operated differently, informing professional judgement, shaping relational practice, and guiding how situations were interpreted, without being named, announced, or foregrounded. Holding belief quietly was not a passive or less committed stance; it was an equally purposeful way of carrying values into practice, one where belief worked from the background rather than the foreground.

P3 illustrated this most clearly. His humanist values, a deep commitment to shared humanity, non-judgement, and relating to people as people rather than categories, were evident across how he described his work. Yet he rarely named these as beliefs in any explicit sense. They operated as a quiet but consistent lens through which he approached colleagues, families, and care-experienced CYP:

...you know you've met so many people from so many different faiths and cultures and backgrounds and I can honestly say, and I would always say this to people, I can honestly count on one hand the amount of people who who have been anything other than open and generous and warm and and and communicative and cooperative and caring about me... I really believe that the vast majority of people in the world are good and generous... (P3)

For P3, this orientation was so embedded in how he understood himself and his work that it required no conscious activation or management. Belief was not something he brought to professional encounters so much as something he simply was, a worldview so integrated into his way of seeing that it operated beneath the level of deliberate choice. I was aware during analysis of a strong personal resonance with this emphasis on shared humanity, and I tried to remain attentive to the risk of reading his account too readily as confirmation of a worldview I already held, returning to the data to ensure I was attending to what was specifically his meaning-making rather than a reflection of my own.

P4's account offered a different but complementary illustration of holding belief quietly. As established in Theme 1, she initially resisted the language of belief altogether, preferring to speak through professional commitments and practice principles rather than named values. Yet throughout the interview, her child-centred orientation, the practice of empathetically imagining what each child's experience felt like, writing reports in a way that treated the child with respect and dignity, as if addressing their future adult self, holding the child in mind amid the noise of multi-agency meetings, revealed a deeply held moral stance that shaped everything she did: "I spend quite a lot of time in my thoughts, trying to imagine what life is like for them, facing these particular experiences and history." (P4)

For P4, belief was held quietly not as a deliberate strategy but because it had become so thoroughly integrated into professional practice that it no longer presented itself as belief. It was simply how she worked, a taken-for-granted moral orientation that only became visible through sustained reflection. What stayed with me during analysis was precisely that initial resistance to belief language, rather than reading it as an absence of belief, I found myself interpreting it as evidence of how thoroughly belief can become embedded in professional identity, to the point where it is no longer experienced as belief at all, but simply as professional practice, as the unremarkable, taken-for-granted way of doing the job. That interpretive move felt important to name, since it shaped how I approached her data throughout the analysis.

P7 offered a third variation. His Christian faith was internally clear and settled, as established in Theme 1, but in professional contexts he held it quietly, allowing it to inform his non-judgement and compassion without naming it explicitly:

My core values on religion said that you can't judge, only God. So I am not in a position to judge that person. I may not agree with what they've done or what they're involved in, but again I don't judge. I just need to carry out my job and show compassion. (P7)

For P7, holding belief quietly was not about concealment but about translation, faith provided the moral foundation, and professional practice was where that foundation expressed itself, quietly and consistently, through how he showed up in every encounter.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that holding belief quietly was not an absence of deeply held beliefs, but a deeply integrated way of practising. Belief worked as a background orientation, shaping how situations were read, how relationships were approached, and how professional judgement was exercised, without needing to be named or announced. Rather than being

held back, belief found its way into everyday professional life through how practitioners showed up, related, and responded.

4.3.3 Stepping Back from Belief

The third pattern of navigation was in some ways the most analytically complex. Stepping back from belief did not mean abandoning values or acting inauthentically, rather, it captured those moments where participants consciously chose to set belief aside because the situation demanded a response that belief alone could not fully guide. In this sense, stepping back from belief was itself a values-driven act, shaped by the same belief-informed professional stance that informed the other two patterns of navigation.

P6 provided the most vivid and precise illustration of this. When a young child disclosed to her for the first time that they did not want to be a boy anymore, P6 found herself in a moment where her Catholic faith offered limited guidance, and where she made a conscious choice to step back from it:

At that point, I didn't feel really informed. I wanted to know the research, the evidence, rather than lean on my faith in those particular circumstances. I guess my faith at that point was just, love this person as they are. (P6)

What stands out here is not that P6 abandoned her faith, but that she drew on a different dimension of it, distilling it to its most fundamental principle, love and acceptance, while consciously setting aside doctrinal uncertainty. Professional evidence and the child's immediate need took precedence, and her belief adapted rather than disappeared. This moment illustrates how stepping back from belief was rarely a complete withdrawal but a selective and situationally sensitive repositioning.

Analysing this moment was ethically complex, given that it involved a child's disclosure of their gender identity. I was conscious of the need to represent P6's account accurately and without judgement, while also remaining attentive to the child's perspective embedded within her narrative. What struck me most was not her uncertainty about doctrine but her instinct to protect the child, which itself felt like belief in action, even in the moment she described stepping back from it.

P2's account illustrated a different form of stepping back, one driven not by doctrinal uncertainty but by the recognition that a belief framework, applied without question, risked obscuring rather than highlighting what mattered. Reflecting on the experience of children being moved between placements with their belongings in a carrier bag, she described a moment where her Buddhist-influenced values met a reality they could not easily fit: "...the whole Buddhist thing is, you know, possessions, you know, it's not about possessions. But actually, if it's not about possession, surely it's about feelings and connections." (P2)

What this moment captures is the movement within the statement itself. P2 began by reaching for a familiar belief framework, one that might have offered reassurance or a way of making sense of the situation from a distance, and then caught herself, recognising that applying it here would mean stepping over the child's lived experience rather than toward it. The stepping back was not from belief altogether but from one layer of it, a shift toward what she understood to be a deeper principle, that if material possessions were not what mattered, then feelings and connections must be, and those too were being disrupted. In this sense, P2's stepping back worked differently from P6's. Where P6 set aside doctrinal content in favour of a more fundamental faith principle in response to a child's immediate need, P2 questioned her own philosophical framework in the moment, holding it up against the reality in front of her and finding that it needed adjusting rather

than simply applying. Both, however, shared a common underlying logic. Stepping back from belief was not a withdrawal from values but a deeper engagement with them, prompted by the recognition that the situation asked for something more than belief in its most familiar form could offer.

P7 offered a quieter but equally revealing illustration. When a young person on his caseload went to prison, he described the situation using the word "unfortunately", a word that reflected his belief-informed reading of the situation as genuinely sad, regardless of what it meant for performance statistics. His manager challenged this:

Senior management thought, why are you saying unfortunately? That's a good thing. And I was like, it's unfortunate that the young person has gone to prison... for them it's not unfortunate because their stats look good, but for me, on a personal situation, it's like unfortunate because that person is now in custody and away from their family. (P7)

P7 changed the word. In that moment, he stepped back from his belief-informed way of naming the situation in response to organisational expectation. What makes this analytically interesting is its subtlety, this was not a dramatic ethical confrontation but a small, precise moment where belief and institutional priority pulled in different directions, and where P7 made a quiet accommodation. Unlike P6's and P2's stepping back, which were internally motivated by the child's immediate need, P7's was externally prompted, shaped by organisational pressure rather than professional judgement. Together, the three accounts suggest that stepping back from belief could be driven by very different forces, and did not always feel the same from the inside.

Taken together across all three subthemes, belief navigation was rarely straightforward or fixed. Participants moved between making belief visible, holding it quietly, and stepping back from

it depending on context, relationships, and the demands of the situation. What remained consistent was not the form belief took, but its presence as an orienting force. Crucially, these shifts were shaped less by the intensity of belief itself than by relational safety, professional role and power, organisational norms, and anticipated consequences. Belief navigation therefore emerged as a situated practice, shaped through the ongoing interplay between internal moral orientation and external institutional conditions. What these patterns of navigation did not fully capture, however, was what belief was doing internally, the inner work of orienting, sustaining, and making sense, which is where Theme 3 turns.

4.4 Theme 3: Belief Acting as a Moral Compass

Where Theme 2 explored the different ways in which participants navigated belief in practice, this theme turns to what belief did internally, how it oriented participants morally, helped them make sense of ethically complex situations, and sustained them through the emotional and professional demands of working with care-experienced CYP. Where Theme 2 captured the outer expression of belief, this theme captures its inner function, the way belief acted as a moral compass, providing direction, stability, and meaning in contexts where both were sometimes difficult to find.

Three dimensions of this inner function were identified across the data. The first subtheme, belief shaping moral stance within work, examines how belief provided participants with a consistent ethical orientation, a way of showing up in professional relationships that was grounded in values rather than procedure. The second, belief reframing internal negotiation, explores how participants drew on belief to make sense of difficult moments, conflicts, and uncertainties, using it as a lens through which challenging professional experiences could be interpreted and held. The third, belief as a resource for perseverance, examines how belief sustained participants through the

cumulative emotional and ethical demands of their roles, providing something to draw on when the work felt overwhelming or the system felt immovable.

4.4.1 Belief Shaping Moral Stance Within Work

For all participants, belief provided more than a set of values to draw on, it shaped a fundamental moral stance toward the people they worked with, and toward the work itself. This stance was not something participants consciously activated in each professional encounter but something that had become embedded in how they showed up, colouring how they interpreted behaviour, how they related to families and colleagues, and how they understood their professional responsibility toward care-experienced CYP.

P7 illustrated this most directly. For him, Christian faith provided a clear and settled moral limit around judgement, one that shaped his practice with a steadiness that required no ongoing negotiation:

...my core values on religion said that you can't judge, only God. So I am not in a position to judge that person. I may not agree with what they've done or what they're involved in, but again I don't judge. I just need to carry out my job and show compassion. (P7)

For P7, belief functioned as a moral anchor, structuring how care and compassion were understood without the need for reflexive reworking or internal struggle. What struck me analytically about P7's account was its distinctiveness within the dataset. Most participants described belief as something still being explored, questioned, or negotiated. P7's account of settled ethical certainty felt different, and I was conscious of the risk of reading that difference as less sophisticated or less reflexive simply because it appeared uncomplicated. Returning to his data, what became clear was that the consistency of his moral stance was itself meaningful, suggesting that for

some practitioners, belief and practice can sit comfortably together without ongoing tension, and that this too is a meaningful way of navigating professional life.

P6's account added another dimension to this. For her, Catholic faith had shaped a professional stance rooted in curiosity and forgiveness, a way of approaching behaviour that resisted reactive judgement in favour of understanding:

...the idea of forgiveness and the idea of having a better understanding and being curious and not holding onto big emotions all the time... how can you be mad with someone when you know all their circumstances?... it's that frame of mind, isn't it? The meta of thinking of what's going on for people. (P6)

For P6, forgiveness had been translated into professional curiosity, a reframing that made judgement feel not only ethically wrong but practically unnecessary. What I found analytically interesting here was the question of whether this translation was consciously managed or had become so absorbed into professional habit that it operated automatically. Her language, “that frame of mind”, suggested the latter, raising the same question that ran through Theme 1: at what point does belief become indistinguishable from who practitioners are and how they orient themselves toward the people and situations they encounter?

For P1, the moral stance was rooted not in religious faith but in a humanist commitment to equity and shared humanity, a belief that people should be seen as people, and that circumstances rather than character explain behaviour:

So I think I'm trying to take a more empathetic view in terms of... there were pressures within the systems and I think that all systems are kind of stretched and overworked. So just trying to have more empathy and understanding things from their points of view. (P1)

For P1, this stance extended beyond her work with CYP and families to how she approached other professionals, resisting the judgement of colleagues who were themselves working within stretched and overworked services. Belief here functioned as a consistent ethical orientation that shaped not just what she did but how she saw, making empathy less a professional technique and more a way of being in the world.

Across all three accounts, what emerges is that belief shaping moral stance was not about applying a set of rules to professional situations but about inhabiting a particular way of seeing, one that had become so integrated into professional identity that it operated as a taken-for-granted orientation rather than a conscious choice.

4.4.2 Belief Reframing Internal Negotiation

Where the previous subtheme explored how belief shaped a consistent moral stance toward others, this subtheme examines something more dynamic, the internal work belief did when participants faced uncertainty, difficulty, or conflict within themselves. For some participants, belief provided a way of reframing challenging professional experiences, making sense of them, or holding them without being destabilised. This was not about resolving tension but about finding a way to sit with it that felt meaningful rather than simply burdensome.

P4's account provided a particularly detailed illustration of this. As established in earlier themes, she initially resisted the language of belief, yet throughout the interview it became increasingly clear that her professional sense-making was deeply shaped by a set of values she had not initially named as such. One of the most striking moments was her description of how she held difficult professional situations, particularly those where she felt her judgement was being over-ridden or her approach misunderstood:

There are times when I feel I have spent so much time reading, thinking, talking about a certain young person, and then it may be that I am in supervision... and my supervisor questions my approach. I always feel like because I'm... because I feel like I know what is needed when I'm challenged, that I need to be doing something differently... I struggle with being open to that. (P4)

What is analytically interesting here is not the conflict itself but how P4 held it. Rather than becoming cynical or disengaged, she returned repeatedly to her child-centred values as a reframing device, using them to make sense of why the tension existed and to reconnect with what mattered most in her work. Belief did not resolve the conflict but gave her a way of understanding it that preserved her sense of professional purpose. Reflecting on this, I was struck by how much of P4's internal negotiation only became visible through the interview itself, and I remained conscious throughout the analysis that my questioning may have created a reflective space that scaffolded her articulation of something that had previously operated below the level of conscious awareness. That possibility shaped how carefully I tried to represent her account, attending to what she said rather than what I might have invited.

P3 offered a complementary illustration. His optimism, a deeply held belief in the fundamental goodness of people, was not simply a passive worldview but something he actively maintained in the face of experiences that might have challenged it. What makes this relevant to this subtheme is the internal negotiation that underpinned that maintenance. P3 was not naively optimistic but consciously aware that his belief in human goodness was a perspective he had to actively hold, shaped by his own relatively privileged experience:

Maybe I'm just lucky because maybe it just comes from the fact that I've lived a life, quite a long life now, and very, very rarely met people who don't meet that expectation... But of

course, you could move somewhere and have a terrible experience the first week and that could immediately shape your view of people. (P3)

For P3, belief reframed internal negotiation not by resolving doubt but by providing a conscious and considered stance toward it, acknowledging the limits of his own perspective while choosing to maintain an optimistic orientation as something that sustained both his professional and personal sense of self.

What struck me here was how explicitly P3 named the contingency of his own worldview, acknowledging that his belief in human goodness was not a universal truth but a perspective shaped by his particular life experiences. This reflexive awareness was distinctive within the dataset, and I noted in my memos that I was conscious of how much it resonated with my own tendency toward optimism. I tried to remain attentive to whether that resonance was leading me to privilege this reflexivity in his account more than the data warranted, while also recognising that his willingness to interrogate his own belief system was itself a meaningful finding.

P6's account added a further dimension to this subtheme. Unlike P4 and P3, whose internal negotiation centred on holding difficulty or maintaining an optimistic stance, P6's account revealed something about the mechanism of reframing itself. When asked where her faith sat in relation to her professional role, she paused before offering a reflection that appeared to emerge in the moment rather than from a pre-prepared understanding:

It's funny because I don't really explicitly feel like... I feel like through this conversation my faith is being externalised and I can imagine it as this little thing right next to me and how often is that little thing a little reminder in my work. (P6)

What is striking here is not the content of the reframing but the fact that P6 was discovering it as she spoke. Her use of the word “funny” and the shift into present tense suggest that this was not a rehearsed account but something surfacing through the reflective space of the interview. The image of faith as “this little thing right next to me” captures a form of internal negotiation that is neither dramatic nor deliberate, but quiet and ongoing, a background presence that gently redirects attention toward values when the demands of the role might otherwise pull it elsewhere. This adds something important to the subtheme. Where P4’s reframing involved returning to child-centred values in the face of professional challenge, and P3’s involved consciously maintaining optimism despite its acknowledged limits, P6’s reframing operated at a level she had not fully recognised until the interview made it visible.

Within this subtheme, what emerges is that belief reframing internal negotiation was not about achieving certainty or resolution but about finding a way to stay oriented in the face of difficulty. Belief provided not answers but a way of holding questions, making the internal negotiation feel purposeful rather than something that pulled practitioners away from their professional footing. Importantly, this reframing took different forms, from the conscious and deliberate to the barely recognised, suggesting that the internal work belief does in professional life is not always visible to practitioners themselves until reflective space is created to explore it.

4.4.3 Belief as a Resource for Perseverance

The final aspect of belief acting as a moral compass was its capacity to carry practitioners through the cumulative demands of working with care-experienced CYP. Working with care-experienced CYP in Virtual School contexts meant regular exposure to complex trauma, barriers in the system, and situations where the gap between what participants believed should happen and what actually happened was significant. In those instances, belief functioned as a resource that

made it possible to keep going, not by removing the difficulty but by giving it meaning, or by providing something to draw on when professional and emotional reserves felt depleted.

P2's account illustrated this in a way that was both reflective and clear. Her Buddhist-influenced values, particularly the emphasis on compassion, staying present, and accepting what cannot be controlled, provided a way of holding the cumulative weight of the work without becoming overwhelmed by it. She described the emotional toll of working within systems that felt stretched beyond capacity, and the ongoing effort of maintaining her values within them:

Sometimes you just feel... quite helpless like you just can't... make an inroad in that system. Sometimes the systems are just so complicated and such a mess... that can leave you feeling really quite sad... you can feel quite sad, quite helpless. (P2)

Yet despite this, P2 described continuing to make mental notes, returning to situations, and persisting in the face of systemic resistance. For her, belief in the importance of the relational and contextual dimensions of practice sustained a kind of steady tenacity, a refusal to let systemic pressure erode what she understood to be essential to good work.

P5's account developed this further. For her, advocacy functioned not only as a professional practice but as a way of holding the emotional impact of the work, transforming distress into action in the absence of formal containment structures:

When I first started it did really hit me quite a lot actually... you're hearing very, very sad stories every single day... I think that is quite heavy... but then on the plus side then you just advocate more... So then maybe the children end up with the better service. (P5)

For P5, belief sustained perseverance by giving distress a direction, converting what might otherwise have felt paralysing into purposeful action. It is worth pausing here to note a reflexive

tension in how I read this account. There is something compelling about advocacy as a response to emotional weight, and I was aware of a pull to read it as principled and resourceful. At the same time, I tried to hold in mind that relying on advocacy as a containment strategy in the absence of clinical supervision also raises questions about whether practitioners are adequately supported within the systems and services they work in, and that romanticising this as belief-led resilience risks obscuring what might also be an unmet need.

P6's account illustrated how belief helped practitioners keep going through challenging aspects of their work. She described faith as something that actively replenished her capacity to keep going, using a vivid and precise metaphor that she returned to more than once:

...I think having that faith fills up my bucket and reminds me of my values that are in my practice. It's definitely like a road map. Like to kind of really guide me into thinking about what's important for my practice. (P6)

For P6, faith was not simply a background orientation but an active resource, something she consciously drew on to reconnect with her values when the demands of the role felt depleting. The image of faith filling her bucket captures something important about how belief functioned in this context; not as a solution to difficulty but as a renewable source of meaning and direction that made sustained engagement with difficult work feel possible.

Across this subtheme, belief emerged as a resource for perseverance, though not in any simplistic sense of optimism or resilience. Rather, it functioned as a process of meaning-making, a way of understanding why the work mattered, even when its conditions made it difficult to sustain. From a critical realist perspective, belief can be understood as a generative mechanism, real in its effects yet not always visible in practice. As a generative mechanism, belief here did more

than shape how practitioners interpreted their work; it also shaped whether they were able to remain engaged with it over time, particularly where structural conditions within the system offered limited support.

4.5 Theme 4: When Belief Meets Institutional Reality

Where Theme 3 explored what belief did internally, how it oriented participants morally, sustained them through difficulty, and helped them make sense of complex professional situations, Theme 4 turns outward. It examines what happened when belief-informed practice encountered the external realities of institutional life, including organisational power structures, constraints within systems, and professional cultures that did not always align with participants' values. Where Theme 3 captured belief as an internal resource, this theme captures the friction that arose when that resource met structures and expectations that pulled in a different direction.

Three aspects of this friction were identified across the data. The first subtheme, organisational power taking precedence over belief-led meaning, examines those moments where institutional expectations, hierarchical authority, or priorities within the system overrode participants' belief-informed professional judgement. The second, moral discomfort and ethical strain, explores the emotional and ethical consequences of that institutional encounter, the discomfort and strain that arose specifically when organisational structures or professional cultures made it difficult or impossible to practise in ways consistent with participants' values. The third, micro-resistance and acceptance of limits, examines how participants responded, the small, purposeful acts of resistance they enacted within constraints, and the moments where they came to accept that some limits could not be moved.

4.5.1 Organisational Power Taking Precedence Over Belief-led Meaning

For several participants, there were moments where institutional structures, hierarchical authority, or organisational culture actively took precedence over belief-informed professional judgement. These were not moments of general organizational pressure but precise encounters where the power differential between individual practitioners and the institutions within which they worked became visible, moments where what participants believed should happen was overridden by what the institution required or expected.

P5 described this most vividly. Despite holding clear and strongly felt values around advocacy, participation, and speaking up for CYP, she described contexts where the presence of louder voices, more senior authority, or an unsafe team culture made expressing those values feel impossible: “So you don't, you just, you know, follow the rules, do what you meant to do, clock off, clock in.” (P5)

For P5, organisational power did not simply constrain belief-informed practice, it temporarily suspended it. The language of clocking off before clocking in is itself worth noting. Whether intentional or not, the reversed order subtly captures the experience P5 is describing, that disengaging from her values came first, with simply turning up and following rules becoming the only thing that remained. This suggests a disconnection between professional identity and professional performance that belief-informed practice, under different conditions, worked to close. What struck me here was the political dimension of her account, the way organisational culture and hierarchical power shaped not just what she could do but what she felt safe saying. I was conscious of a strong resonance with this, given my own professional experience of navigating institutional cultures where certain values are more welcomed than others. I tried to remain attentive to whether this resonance was shaping how I weighted her account, while also recognising that the pattern she

described was not unique to her, appearing in different forms across the dataset, which gave me greater confidence that it reflected something real about the structural conditions of Virtual School practice.

P4's account illustrated a different form of the same dynamic. Her resistance to conducting cognitive assessments with care-experienced CYP, rooted in a genuine concern that such assessments could be retraumatising, was repeatedly met with institutional expectation that assessment was precisely what her role required:

I think they bandy the word assessment around and they don't really stop to think what that means... she said to me, when are you going to start your assessment?... it kind of became clear that she was talking about a cognitive assessment... I had to kind of stop myself from saying what do you think we're doing sitting around here all together, gathering, talking about this young person. (P4)

For P4, organisational power operated through professional language, the word “assessment” carrying institutional expectations that narrowed what her role was understood to be, regardless of her own professional judgement about what the child needed. Unlike other participants who drew explicitly on belief as a framework for their practice, P4 understood her resistance through the language of professional ethics and child-centred values rather than named belief. From a critical realist perspective however, her professional judgement was nonetheless shaped by deeper biographical experience and values that, as established in Theme 1, operated below the level of conscious articulation. Whether or not she experienced it as belief-led, the friction between her approach, grounded in both professional knowledge and deeply held values, and institutional expectation was real, requiring ongoing effort to explain, justify, and negotiate her practice within a system that had predefined expectations of what an EP should do.

P6 illustrated yet another dimension of this dynamic. When she was asked to provide an addendum to another EP's report, with no additional time allocated and no opportunity to gather the child's views, she experienced a direct conflict between her belief that children's voices were ethically non-negotiable and the institutional expectation that corners could be cut:

I've been given an addendum advice of six hours of another EP's report and it has no views, and it has no assessment and I'm not going to be given extra time. And this goes against my ethical... my ethics and my beliefs, because this child has had a form of an assessment where their views have not been considered. (P6)

For P6, this was not an abstract ethical concern but a concrete moment where institutional resource constraints directly overrode her belief-informed professional standards. Her response, arguing with her manager for additional time, illustrates the friction that this theme is concerned with, and anticipates the micro-resistance explored in the third subtheme.

Across these accounts, what emerges is that organisational power taking precedence over belief-led meaning was not experienced as a single dramatic confrontation but as a recurring pattern of encounters, moments where the gap between what participants believed and what the institution required or expected became impossible to ignore. The mechanisms through which this occurred varied: silencing through organisational culture, narrowing through professional language, constraining through resource allocation. But the pattern was consistent. In each case, participants experienced moments where their belief-informed professional judgement came into direct tension with institutional priorities, and where the institution held greater power to determine the outcome

4.5.2 *Moral Discomfort and Ethical Strain*

Where the previous subtheme outlined the structural mechanisms through which institutional power overrode belief-informed practice, this subtheme turns to what that experience felt like from the inside. For several participants, the tension between their belief-informed values and institutional or professional cultures that did not recognise or support those values generated a particular kind of discomfort. This was not simply frustration or disagreement, but a deeper ethical strain linked to feeling unable to practise in ways that aligned with their sense of self.

P1 illustrated this in a relatively contained but persistent way. She described the discomfort of working within a team culture where colleagues were judgmental toward other professionals, social workers in particular, in ways that conflicted directly with her own values around empathy and systemic understanding: “Sometimes it can be hard to... listen to other views when they're not quite so empathetic or sympathetic towards others.” (P1)

For P1, this was not a dramatic confrontation but a quieter, recurring strain, a sense of holding values that felt out of step with the culture around her. What made it ethically significant was not the disagreement itself, but the ongoing effort it required, sustaining her own values while continuing to function professionally within a team she experienced as misaligned with her belief-informed stance. The strain was less about conflict than about the ongoing labour of holding a different way of seeing in a context that did not always make space for it.

P5's account illustrated a more acute and sustained form of ethical strain. For her, the experience of having to silence herself, of navigating spaces where her values felt unwelcome or unsafe to express, had a cumulative emotional and psychological toll that went beyond professional discomfort: “I felt squashed like I felt like you didn't have a voice. You can't speak and like at times like that was quite frightening, quite intimidating.” (P5)

For P5, the ethical strain was not only about specific moments of silencing but about what those moments did over time, eroding her sense of professional agency and making the expression of belief-informed values feel increasingly conditional and risky. What is particularly meaningful here is the language of fear, “frightening” and “intimidating” suggest that the cost of expressing belief-informed values in certain contexts was experienced not just as professional risk but as something more personally threatening. I found P5's account particularly difficult to sit with during analysis, the intensity of her experience of being silenced resonated with something I recognised, and I was conscious of the risk that this emotional response might lead me to weight her account more heavily than others. I tried to hold that awareness throughout, returning to the data repeatedly to check whether the significance I gave to her experience was warranted by the data, and on reflection, the pattern she described was sufficiently consistent with other accounts in the dataset to justify the attention given to it here.

What emerges within this subtheme is that moral discomfort and ethical strain were not occasional or easily resolved experiences but persistent features of professional life for these participants. The strain arose not from belief itself but from the gap between belief-informed values and the professional cultures and institutional structures within which those values had to be expressed, or, in some cases, suppressed. This gap, and the ongoing effort it required, is what distinguishes this subtheme from the internal negotiation explored in Theme 3. Where Theme 3 explored how belief helped practitioners hold and reframe difficulty from within, here the difficulty arose because institutional conditions actively undermined the conditions needed for that holding to be possible.

4.5.3 *Micro-resistance and Acceptance of Limits*

The final subtheme explores how participants responded to the institutional friction described in the previous two subthemes. For most, the response was neither straightforward resistance nor straightforward compliance but something more nuanced, a combination of small, purposeful acts of resistance enacted within constraints, and a gradually developed acceptance that some limits could not be moved. Micro-resistance demonstrates that participants were not passive recipients of institutional power, and acceptance of limits reflects an honest and sometimes difficult recognition that belief-informed practice could not always be fully enacted within the structures within which it operated.

P2 illustrated micro-resistance in its quietest but most persistent form. Rather than direct confrontation, her response to systemic constraint was to keep returning, making mental notes, revisiting situations, and maintaining her relational and contextual approach even when the system did not make space for it: “Sometimes you just feel quite helpless like you just can't... make an inroad in that system... that can leave you feeling really quite sad... but you just keep going, don't you, because that's what you do.” (P2)

For P2, micro-resistance was less about challenging the system directly and more about refusing to let it erode the belief-informed values she understood to be at the heart of good practice. Her persistence was quiet but deliberate, a sustained commitment to relational, compassionate practice that continued even when systemic conditions made it difficult. Reflecting on this, I was conscious of a pull to read her persistence as principled and admirable, and I tried to remain attentive to the possibility that what might also be at work here was an absence of adequate support within her organisation and service, leaving practitioners to sustain belief-informed practice

through their own persistence rather than meaningful support from within the structures they worked in.

P5 illustrated a more explicitly strategic form of micro-resistance. As established in earlier themes, she was acutely aware of when it was safe to speak and when it was not, and her navigation of that boundary was itself a form of resistance, preserving her values and her professional agency within conditions that did not always welcome them:

Sometimes I don't say anything... sometimes I don't do them as well because I just think it's going to rock the boat too much or I can't be bothered with the argument with someone that has a louder voice than me or whatever. (P5)

What this highlights is not only the resistance but the acceptance of limits that accompanied it. P5 was explicit that she sometimes dropped things entirely, not because she had abandoned her values but because the effort of pushing against louder voices or an unreceptive culture felt, at times, simply too costly. This acceptance was not always a sophisticated strategic choice but sometimes something closer to self-protection and exhaustion, a recognition that individual agency had limits, and that sustaining belief-informed practice sometimes meant knowing when not to spend it.

This combination of micro-resistance and acceptance of limits appeared, in different forms, across other accounts. P4 described a persistent effort to negotiate her professional role from within institutional expectations, advocating for child-centred practice in small, incremental ways rather than through direct confrontation. P6 similarly described using her faith as a sustaining resource that allowed her to keep pushing where she could while accepting what she could not change, her road map guiding her through constraints rather than around them.

Across this subtheme, what emerges is that micro-resistance and acceptance of limits were not opposing responses but complementary ones, two dimensions of the same pragmatic and values-informed way of working within institutional reality. Participants did not simply accept institutional power, nor did they resist it entirely. Instead, they found ways of preserving what mattered most within the constraints they faced, while being honest with themselves about where those constraints could not be moved. From a critical realist perspective, belief appears here not only as something that shaped how practitioners understood their work, but as a resource that helped them find and hold onto moments of agency within structures that did not always support them.

Taken together, the four themes presented in this chapter show that belief is not incidental to Virtual School practice, it is central to how practitioners understand their role, sustain their engagement, and navigate ethical complexity. They also show that the institutional conditions within which these practitioners work do not always create space for that belief to be expressed, supported, or acknowledged. The implications of this are taken up in the discussion chapter that follows.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction to the discussion

This study explored how educational professionals in Virtual Schools experience and make sense of navigating their personal belief systems when working with care-experienced CYP. Three research questions guided the inquiry: how practitioners navigate their personal belief systems within their professional role; in what ways do personal belief systems influence professional decision-making and approaches to supporting care-experienced CYP from diverse backgrounds; and how do practitioners perceive the factors that support or challenge them in negotiating their personal belief systems within their professional responsibilities, and what conditions shape those experiences

The findings demonstrate that belief was not incidental to participants' professional lives but central to them. Across all four themes, belief functioned as an active moral lens operating simultaneously at multiple levels, shaping professional identity through early biographical experience, informing the varied and contextually sensitive ways practitioners expressed or held back belief in practice, sustaining them through the emotional and ethical demands of the work, and encountering the structural and organisational realities of Virtual School contexts in ways that were not always enabling. Crucially, this was consistent across diverse belief positions, though the forms it took varied considerably across individuals and contexts.

This discussion takes up these findings across three levels of analysis, each mapping onto the research questions. The first, understanding belief as lived and relational, explores the biographical and identity dimensions of the findings, addressing how practitioners experienced and made sense of belief as part of their professional selves. The second, belief in decision-making: beyond neutrality, considers how belief shaped professional judgement and practice, and what this

means for how neutrality and decision-making are understood in this context. The third, navigating constraints: systems, policy, and identity, examines the institutional and structural dimensions, addressing what supports or challenges practitioners in balancing belief with professional responsibility. Each section integrates relevant literature, considers theoretical implications, and identifies implications for practice. The chapter then addresses strengths, limitations, and reflexivity, before turning to future research, dissemination, and a closing personal reflection.

5.2 Understanding Belief as Lived and Relational

Addressing the first research question, which explored how Virtual School professionals navigate their personal belief systems when working with care-experienced CYP, this section suggests that belief was not something brought to professional work from outside. It was already there, woven into how participants understood themselves as professionals, shaped through early biographical experience, and carried consistently across all domains of life. This section considers what this means analytically, how it connects to existing literature, and what it implies for practice within Virtual School contexts and for Educational Psychology within those contexts.

The way the professional moral self is shaped through early and personal experience, evident across Theme 1, finds little direct parallel in the existing literature. Research has focused predominantly on practitioners' skills, knowledge, and role boundaries, rather than on the deeper formative processes shaping who they are in practice. However, the present findings resonate with Jaggar's (2018) observation that supervising social workers drew heavily on personal values, particularly a sense of humanity and moral responsibility, to navigate the emotional demands of their role. This suggests that professional identity in relational work with vulnerable CYP is shaped by something more foundational than training alone. Couprie (2023) points in a similar direction, finding that DTs' engagement with attachment-aware practice was driven by strong personal and

moral commitments that were already in place before their formal professional development. What the present study adds is a more explicit focus on how those commitments are shaped through personal and biographical experience, and on the specific role of belief as the framework through which they were cultivated and sustained across all seven participants, regardless of their professional role or belief position.

This finding speaks directly to the gap Dinham (2018) identified across health and social care that professionals are often trained within secular frameworks that treat belief as peripheral, leaving them underprepared to engage with their own belief-related assumptions. This observation has particular resonance within Virtual School contexts, where practitioners navigate complex, multi-agency work with care-experienced CYP from increasingly diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (DfE, 2025) yet rarely have structured opportunities to examine how their own belief systems are shaping that navigation. While Dinham's work highlights the importance of religious literacy, the present findings point in a complementary but distinct direction. What the findings demonstrate is the need for practitioners to develop reflexive awareness of their own belief systems. These are often so embedded within professional identity that they are not recognised as belief at all, but experienced simply as how one works, or who one is as a practitioner. It also has implications for EP training specifically. The BPS and HCPC standards that shape EP training emphasise cultural competence, reflective practice, and sensitivity to diversity (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2023). Belief is named within both frameworks, with the BPS requiring trainees to demonstrate understanding of religion or belief as relevant to professional practice (BPS, 2023, Standard 3g) and to reflect on personal values and their implications for practice (BPS, 2023, Standard 2i), and the HCPC requiring registrants to recognise the potential impact of their own values, beliefs and personal biases on practice (HCPC, 2023, Standard 5.3). However, in each case belief is framed

either as a dimension of diversity to understand in others, or as something to recognise in oneself for the purpose of ensuring non-discriminatory treatment, rather than as a dimension of professional identity requiring sustained reflexive attention. The present study suggests this is a meaningful gap, both for Virtual School professionals and for the EPs who work alongside them. Knowledge acquisition alone is insufficient to address this gap. What is needed is something closer to reflexive awareness, the capacity to examine what one is already doing, and why, through sustained reflection, supervision, and dialogue that can bring implicit assumptions into conscious awareness.

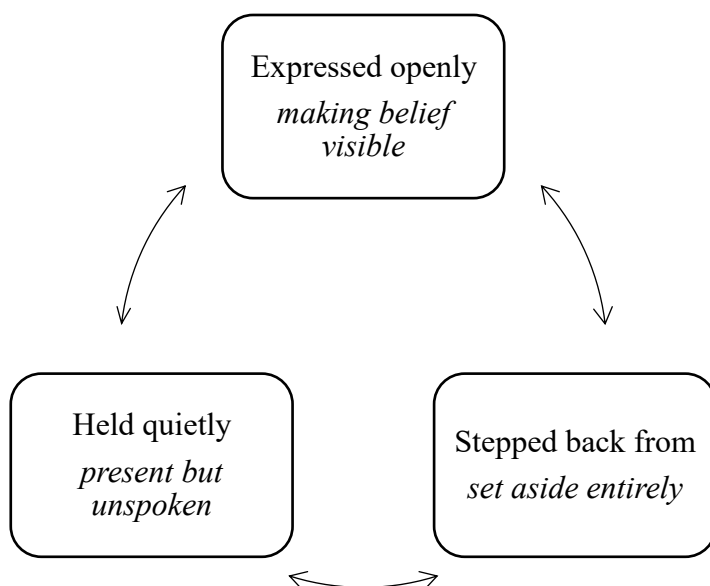
Bion's (1962) thinking offers a helpful way of understanding this. Bion argued that thinking emerges from the processing of emotional experience, suggesting that what we feel, and how we have learned to process those feelings, shapes what becomes available to conscious thought. Applied to these findings, this helps explain why belief often operated below conscious awareness for participants. The moral imprint shaped through early experiences, whether through religious upbringing, family hardship, or encounters with difference, had become part of how participants made sense of and responded to their professional experiences. Rather than being applied to situations, these orientations shaped how practitioners perceived and engaged with them from the outset. This moves beyond the compartmentalisation model found in some literature (Westwood, 2022; Flanagan, 2020), which implies belief and professional practice exist as separable domains to be actively managed. Even research that recognises this intertwining of worldview and professional identity (Arthur et al., 2019) tends to focus on what is consciously held or articulated, leaving the less visible processes through which integration takes place largely unexplored. The findings suggest that belief operates as a lens shaping professional understanding and practice. From a critical realist perspective, this positions belief as a generative mechanism. It is real in its effects

and shaping practice at a deeper level, yet not always visible in professional behaviour or conscious reflection. For EPs working within Virtual School contexts, this has a clear implication. Understanding how belief operates in practice requires attention to context and relationships, rather than relying solely on practitioners' stated values.

Theme 2 extends this understanding further. The way belief was expressed in practice was neither fixed nor uniform. The three navigation patterns identified: making belief visible, holding belief quietly, and stepping back from belief, are better understood not as fixed ways of being, but as dynamic ways of responding shaped by professional role, relational safety, organisational culture, and anticipated consequences. Seen in this way, the findings further complicate Westwood's (2022) account of compartmentalisation, which tends to present separation as a more stable and consciously managed process. Instead, a more fluid picture is revealed. Practitioners move between positions, and whether belief is expressed openly, held quietly, or stepped back from entirely depends as much on structural and relational conditions as on the belief itself. As P5 captured it, practitioners "navigate spaces", reading the environment and adjusting how belief is expressed accordingly. Figure 2 illustrates the fluid movement between these three forms, reflecting the contextually sensitive nature of belief navigation in practice. Belief navigation, in this sense, is better understood as a situated practice, carried out in context (Schön, 1983), rather than a fixed attribute of the individual practitioner.

Figure 2

Three forms belief takes in practice among Virtual School educational professionals.



It is also important to consider what the quieter forms of navigation reveal. The existing literature focuses on moments of explicit tension or disclosure, when belief becomes visible through conflict or ethical dilemma (Stanley et al., 2017; Westwood, 2022). The present study suggests that holding belief quietly may be equally significant, precisely because it is less visible and therefore less likely to be explored or supported in practice. This includes Virtual School professional development structures such as supervision, continuing professional development (CPD), and reflective practice spaces, as participants' accounts suggested. This extends equally to EPs working within Virtual School contexts, where opportunities for this kind of reflection are not always available.

Taken together, these findings carry important implications for practice within Virtual School contexts. Virtual School professionals occupy a corporate parenting role, carrying a statutory responsibility to promote the wellbeing and educational achievement of care-experienced CYP (DfE, 2018). One framework that speaks directly to this, and one that some participants explicitly named in describing their work, is Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010). Central to ARC's attachment domain is the recognition that effective caregiving requires caregivers to recognise, understand, and manage their own emotional and physiological responses as an ongoing relational process. This principle is equally relevant to Virtual School professionals in their corporate parenting role. If belief shapes emotional responses and relational orientations below conscious awareness, practitioners need structured opportunities to reflect on how their own belief-informed ways of seeing are influencing their practice, particularly when working with care-experienced CYP, whose own belief systems may act as important sources of continuity and identity (Scott et al., 2022). Extending ARC in this way is less a conceptual leap and more a recognition that Virtual School professionals are part of the wider caregiving network around care-experienced CYP. Like the caregivers ARC was originally designed to support, they bring their own histories, belief systems, and emotional orientations into these relationships, and these warrant similar attention.

The Social GRACES framework (Burnham, 2012) offers a practical way of supporting this kind of reflection within Virtual School contexts. Developed within systemic practice, GRACES supports practitioners to consider multiple dimensions of social identity, such as gender, race, religion, culture, and spirituality, that shape how they engage with others, often outside of conscious awareness. Applying this framework within supervision or reflective spaces can help Virtual School professionals approach belief not as something to be managed, but as part of who they are

in their professional role, shaping perception, relational style, and judgement across the complex, multi-agency contexts of their work. For EPs working in Virtual School contexts, where space for reflective work exists, it can offer a structured way to open up these conversations with Virtual School colleagues.

In practice, however, supervision and reflective practice spaces capable of holding this kind of exploration are, according to participants' accounts, largely absent from current Virtual School structures. Practitioners described carrying the emotional and ethical weight of their work without formal containment, relying instead on personal belief, individual resilience, or informal peer support. Addressing this gap is where EP involvement becomes particularly significant. Creating reflective spaces within Virtual School teams, where belief, identity, and their influence on practice can be named and examined, falls naturally within the EP role of building systemic capacity (BPS, 2023, Standards 7g & 7h; Fallon et al., 2010). It is not an additional layer of intervention. It is what thoughtful, systemically informed EP practice looks like in this context, and it begins with EPs being willing to engage in this reflexive process alongside the practitioners they support.

5.3 Belief in Decision-Making: Beyond Neutrality

This section addresses the second research question, which explored the ways in which personal belief systems influence professional decision-making and approaches to supporting care-experienced CYP. A central finding was that belief was not incidental to how participants made professional decisions. Rather, it shaped them, quietly, consistently, and often without conscious awareness. Understanding this requires a shift away from the assumption that professional decision-making can or should be neutral. Instead, the focus turns to what belief actually does in practice when it meets the everyday demands of Virtual School work.

Seen in this way, the expectation of professional neutrality runs deep across education and social care, with practitioners routinely expected to set aside personal beliefs in favour of objective, evidence-based responses (Dinham, 2018). Yet in relational work, setting belief aside may be less straightforward than professional frameworks assume (Westwood, 2022). The findings of this study suggest that neutrality, understood as the absence of belief in professional judgement, is not quite what it appears. For participants, belief shaped how they interpreted CYP's behaviour, how they positioned themselves relationally, how they decided what to say and what to leave unsaid. It was present in the room even when it was not named. Stanley et al.'s (2017) analysis of the Prevent agenda illustrates how the expectation of neutrality can silence practitioners' moral responses, re-framing care as risk management and leaving little space for the ethical complexity that relational work actually demands. The present findings suggest something similar operates more quietly within Virtual School contexts, not through explicit policy directives, but through professional cultures that treat belief as something to be kept private, and neutrality as the default professional stance.

Melanie Klein's (1946) thinking offers one way of understanding why this split between the professional and the personal is so persistent. Klein described a tendency to divide experience into opposing categories as a way of managing anxiety, often between what feels known and manageable and what feels uncertain or threatening (Klein, 1946). Applied here, the insistence on neutrality can be understood as a form of splitting, where belief gets placed on the problematic side of the divide and objectivity on the safe side. This makes intuitive sense. In professional contexts, acknowledging personal belief can feel risky, as though it might undermine credibility or complicate relationships with colleagues. But there is a cost to this. When belief is split off from professional identity rather than held within it, it does not disappear. It simply operates without scrutiny.

Menzies Lyth (1988/1960) extends this thinking to the organisational level. Her analysis of social defence systems shows how organisations develop practices and routines that protect staff from the anxiety inherent in their work. Over time, these defences can become normalised and largely invisible, taken for granted as part of everyday practice. Applied to education and social care contexts more broadly, and to Virtual Schools in particular, the expectation of neutrality can be understood as one such social defence. It offers practitioners a socially sanctioned position that reduces the need to sit with the moral and emotional complexity that belief in practice can bring. Uncomfortable questions, such as *What am I bringing to this interaction?* or *How might my values be shaping this decision in ways I have not yet explored?*, become easier to avoid when neutrality is the professional default.

Bion's (1962) thinking sharpens this further. Where Menzies Lyth (1988/1960) attends to the organisational, Bion turns to the individual mind. His account of thinking as the processing of emotional experience suggests that claims to neutrality may function as an avoidance of thought, a way of closing down the uncomfortable questions that genuine reflection on belief would require. Participants who described stepping back from belief or holding it quietly in contexts where expression felt unsafe, were not simply being professionally cautious; they were navigating real emotional and relational risks. Without spaces in which those risks could be held and explored, the kind of thinking Bion describes, including tolerating uncertainty, sitting with discomfort, and asking what one is bringing to a relationship, was often unavailable to them.

These dynamics extended beyond individual practitioners and played out across the professional networks surrounding each child. From an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), educational professionals working within Virtual School contexts operate at the intersection of multiple systems, including schools, social care teams, health services, and foster families, each

shaped by its own professional culture, values, and assumptions about belief systems and neutrality. The connections between these systems, the conversations between carers, teachers, and VS professionals about CYP's needs and progress, are where belief-informed interpretations meet, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in tension. A VS educational professional whose belief system cultivates a strong orientation toward relational trust may find themselves navigating a school culture oriented toward behavioural compliance, or a social care framework oriented toward risk. These intersections are where decision-making happens, and where the influence of belief on practice is most significant yet often remains unspoken. The implications of this silence extend directly to care-experienced CYP, whose needs may be understood and responded to very differently across professional networks, depending on the belief systems of those involved, without those differences ever being named or explored.

These dynamics have important implications for how EPs work within Virtual School contexts. As discussed in the preceding section, EPs are well placed to create reflective spaces in which belief can be named and explored. Building on this, the focus here extends beyond recognising belief to understanding how it shapes decision-making in practice, particularly in work with care-experienced CYP from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, where belief may play a central role in identity and belonging (Scott et al., 2022). One way of supporting this is through an adapted use of the Reflecting Team approach (Andersen, 1987). Originally developed within systemic family therapy, the Reflecting Team creates a structured space in which a small group observes a consultation or case discussion and then offers reflections, not solutions, but observations about what they noticed, what stood out, and what felt significant. Adapted for use within Virtual School professional development or case consultation, this approach may help to create the kind of non-

defensive environment in which practitioners can begin to notice what they are bringing to their thinking about a child, without the pressure of immediate response or evaluation.

Alongside Reflecting Teams, the Social GRACES framework (Burnham, 2012) offers a supportive structure for this work. When used in this way, it provides a structured way of noticing how dimensions of identity, including religion, culture, and belief, may be shaping how CYP's situation is understood and discussed. This is not about exposing practitioners' beliefs, but about creating the conditions in which belief-informed assumptions can surface and be explored with curiosity rather than judgement.

The ARC framework (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010) remains relevant, particularly its focus on regulation. ARC recognises that adults need to be sufficiently regulated themselves in order to support the children in their care. Where belief shapes emotional responses below conscious awareness, and where organisational cultures of neutrality discourage reflection on those responses, practitioners may find themselves dysregulated in ways that are difficult to name or address. Framing this not as professional failure, but as an unmet need for support, opens a more compassionate and productive way of understanding what Virtual School educational professionals require to carry out their work effectively.

In this context, the role of EPs becomes less about challenging neutrality directly, which may invite defensiveness, and more about creating the reflective spaces in which practitioners can begin to consider what they bring to their work without fear of judgement. This represents a shift from promoting neutrality towards supporting reflective capacity, a shift that sits comfortably within the EP role as a facilitator of systemic reflection and professional learning within Virtual School contexts.

5.4 Navigating Constraints: Systems, Policy, and Identity

So far, belief has been explored as something lived, relational, and active in professional decision-making. This section shifts focus to the wider contexts in which that practice is situated. The third research question asked what supports or challenges practitioners in balancing personal belief with professional responsibility, and what conditions shape those experiences. Findings from Theme 4 suggest that the most significant challenges participants described were not primarily internal. Participants were not generally uncertain about what they valued or how they wished to practise. Instead, difficulty arose at the intersection between belief-informed practice and the organisational cultures, power dynamics, and structural constraints within which that practice had to operate.

A consistent pattern across participants' accounts was the experience of institutional power taking precedence over belief-informed professional judgement. This took different forms, from silencing within team cultures, to professional language that narrowed how roles were understood, to resource constraints that overrode ethical commitments. What united these experiences was not their specific form, but their structural character. The friction participants described was not interpersonal, but systemic, arising from the gap between what belief-informed practice required and what institutional structures allowed or expected.

This resonates with Stanley et al.'s (2017) analysis of how dominant policy discourse can constrain practitioners' moral responses, leaving limited space for the ethical complexity that relational work demands. While the mechanisms differ, the parallel is meaningful. In both contexts, practitioners are navigating tensions between deeply held professional values and institutional frameworks that do not always allow those values to be enacted. The present findings offer a

clearer account of how this tension is lived in everyday professional practice, often in ways that remain unspoken and rarely explored within the systems in which practitioners work.

These tensions are not solely the product of local organisational cultures. They are, in part, built into the policy framework itself. The statutory guidance (DfE, 2018) requires every local authority to appoint a Virtual School Head but offers relatively little direction about how Virtual School teams should be staffed beyond this. In one sense, this is understandable. It allows services to respond flexibly to the specific needs of their local cohort of care-experienced CYP, and different local authorities will face different challenges. But it also means that the professional expertise available within any given Virtual School can vary considerably with meaningful implications for practice. Practitioners are working across the intersection of education, social care, health, and safeguarding, and the present findings suggest that belief, identity, and relational dynamics are quietly shaping practice in ways that often go unexplored. In this context, the question of who is in the room, and what knowledge and skills they bring, is not a minor one. The EP role, grounded in systemic thinking, reflective practice, and psychological formulation (BPS, 2023, Standards 5d, 7g & 10b), has something distinctive to offer here. Where that involvement is limited or absent, it remains an unrealised resource for the professionals and, ultimately, the CYP they support.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework offers a useful way of understanding why these tensions extend beyond any individual practitioner's experience. At the level of the macrosystem, the broader cultural, institutional, and policy contexts that shape everything beneath them become particularly relevant. The statutory frameworks, professional cultures, and organisational assumptions participants described are not simply neutral contexts. They actively shape what belief-informed practice is permitted to look like, and whose values are granted institutional legitimacy. The moral discomfort participants described was not a personal failing. It was a structural

consequence of working within systems whose governing frameworks do not always make room for the values-informed, relationally attuned practice that care-experienced CYP need.

Menzies Lyth's (1988/1960) analysis of social defences remains relevant here. Where the preceding section applied her thinking to the individual practitioner's management of neutrality, Theme 4 reveals the organisational dimension of that same dynamic. The institutional cultures participants encountered, those that normalised silencing, narrowed professional roles, or positioned belief as irrelevant to practice, can themselves be understood as social defence systems. They offer practitioners and organisations a way of avoiding the anxiety that genuine engagement with belief, values, and their influence on practice would require. The cost, as participants' accounts suggest, is not only felt by practitioners in the form of ethical strain, but ultimately by the care-experienced CYP whose support depends on those practitioners being able to bring their full professional and ethical selves to the work. There is also a quieter question here. If the systems within which practitioners work respond to belief, values, and difference with silence or suppression, what does this model for the care-experienced CYP moving through those same systems? For CYP whose own belief systems, cultural identities, and ways of making sense of the world may already feel marginalised or unrecognised, encountering professionals who cannot openly engage with these dimensions of experience may reinforce, rather than challenge, that sense of invisibility.

What makes it possible for practitioners to speak, think, and reflect within these conditions is not simply a matter of individual confidence or professional training. As outlined earlier, where organisational cultures operate as social defence systems, the capacity for reflection becomes shaped by the relational climate of those systems. Edmondson's (2018) concept of psychological safety speaks directly to this. Where it is absent, people tend to comply on the surface while re-

maintaining silent about what they think or feel, prioritising self-protection over genuine engagement. Participants' accounts reflect this pattern closely. Across the dataset, speaking up carried real interpersonal risk, and the organisational conditions that might have supported genuine reflection were largely absent. Silence, in this context, was not professionalism, but a predictable response to an environment in which the interpersonal costs of honesty felt too high.

What Edmondson's framework (2018) adds is clarity about where the responsibility for change actually lies. Psychological safety is not created by telling practitioners it is safe to speak. It is created through how leaders behave, whether they treat the work as genuinely complex and uncertain rather than already resolved, whether they invite real participation rather than compliance, and whether they respond to honesty and challenge in ways that make speaking up feel worthwhile rather than risky. For Virtual School contexts, this matters both for how teams are led and for how EP involvement is understood and positioned. Where leaders model curiosity about their own assumptions, hold space for ethical uncertainty, and respond to practitioners' doubts with interest rather than anxiety, the conditions for genuine reflection become possible. Where they do not, silence will continue to be misread as agreement, when it may simply reflect the fact that speaking felt too costly.

From this perspective, the EP role comes into sharper focus. If psychological safety is created through leadership behaviour, through modelling curiosity, inviting genuine participation, and responding to uncertainty with interest rather than anxiety, then EPs are well placed to support this process. This is not through imposing frameworks or providing answers, but through bringing that quality of engagement into the spaces where Virtual School professionals think together about CYP.

As discussed earlier, approaches such as the Reflecting Team (Andersen, 1987) and the Social GRACES framework (Burnham, 2012) offer practical ways of structuring these conversations. They create conditions in which practitioners can begin to notice and name what they bring to their thinking, including the belief-informed assumptions that often operate below the level of conscious awareness, without fear of judgement or evaluation. In this sense, EP involvement within Virtual School contexts is less about delivering expertise and more about shaping the conditions in which reflective practice can take place. It is about making it possible for practitioners to engage in the kind of thinking that the findings of this study suggest is both necessary and, at present, largely absent from their professional experience.

What participants' accounts ultimately showed is that belief-informed practice was not only constrained by institutional structures, but also sustained by practitioners in small, often unseen ways. This was evident in acts of persistence, careful navigation, and a continued commitment to values that were not always recognised or supported in the systems in which they worked. That this sustaining work was largely carried by individuals, often privately and without formal containment, highlights a consistent theme in the discussion that the conditions needed for reflective, values-informed practice are not yet consistently in place within Virtual School contexts. Addressing this is not a matter of individual professional development, but an organisational and systemic question. While EPs are well placed to support Virtual School teams in beginning to explore it, the structural conditions within which they work are also shaped by policy frameworks that could provide clearer direction on the staffing, supervision, and reflective infrastructure needed for this kind of practice. The findings of this study suggest that strengthening these conditions warrants further attention, both within Virtual School services themselves and within the policy frameworks that shape how those services are organised.

5.5 Synthesis and Implications for Practice

Looking across the findings as a whole, the findings suggest that belief in Virtual School professional practice is not a single thing operating at a single level. It is simultaneously biographical, shaped through early experience and personal history; relational, present in how practitioners interpret, decide, and engage with care-experienced CYP; and structural, encountering institutional conditions that can either support or constrain belief-informed practice. The contribution of this study is to make that simultaneity visible within Virtual School contexts, where it has previously received limited attention.

This points toward several practice implications, both for Virtual School services and for Educational Psychology.

For Virtual School services, the findings suggest a need to focus on the conditions that make reflective, values-informed practice possible:

- Reflective spaces and supervision capable of holding ethical and emotional complexity, rather than only procedural concerns.
- Frameworks such as ARC (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010) and Social GRACES (Burnham, 2012) to open conversations about belief, identity, and how they shape practice.
- Greater attention to the staffing and structural conditions that determine whether this kind of reflection can take place at all, including consideration of the policy frameworks within which Virtual Schools operate.

For Educational Psychology, the findings point to a distinctive contribution:

- EPs are well placed to support the reflective practice that participants described as both necessary and largely absent. This involvement is less about delivering expertise and more about shaping the conditions in which Virtual School colleagues can think together about belief, identity, and their influence on practice.
- Approaches such as the Reflecting Team (Andersen, 1987) and Social GRACES (Burnham, 2012) offer practical structures for this work, and the EP role of building systemic capacity (BPS, 2023, Standards 7g & 7h) provides a clear professional foundation for it.
- The findings also have potential implications for EP training, where belief is currently framed as a dimension of diversity to recognise in others or as bias to manage in oneself, rather than as a meaningful dimension of professional identity warranting sustained reflexive attention.

The cost of leaving these conditions unaddressed is not felt only by practitioners, but ultimately by the care-experienced CYP whose support depends on practitioners being able to bring their full professional and ethical selves to the work.

5.6 Strengths, Limitations, and Reflexivity

In keeping with the study's critical realist and reflexive qualitative positioning, the strengths and limitations of the research are understood not as separate methodological checklists, but as interconnected aspects of a study shaped by context, researcher positioning, and the conditions in which knowledge was produced. This study addresses a gap in the literature by centring the lived experiences of Virtual School professionals and examining how personal belief systems shape professional identity, decision-making, and practice. Semi-structured interviews enabled

participants to articulate experiences that are not explicitly explored in the existing literature and rarely find space in professional discourse, while RTA provided an approach capable of attending both to what participants said and to the wider meanings shaping their accounts. The study's critical realist positioning gave the work a coherent philosophical foundation, treating belief as real and having an impact while remaining attentive to the social and institutional conditions that shape how it is expressed and understood.

The study also benefited from being conducted by a practitioner-researcher with direct experience of Virtual School contexts. This positioning supported contextual sensitivity and professional credibility, both of which were important when exploring a topic that does not often find clear space in professional discourse. Participants were speaking with someone who understood the professional terrain they were describing, which may have supported openness and depth of reflection. At the same time, this positioning was not neutral. The same familiarity that supported openness also carried the possibility of assumption and selective attention, making reflexive scrutiny necessary throughout the research process.

The findings should also be read with several limitations in mind, beginning with the size and shape of the sample. The study drew on a small sample of seven participants, which was appropriate to its narrow analytic focus and in-depth interview design, but it also limits the breadth of perspectives represented. All participants were willing to reflect on personal belief in a research context, and that willingness is unlikely to be universal. Those who experienced the topic as too uncomfortable, professionally risky, or irrelevant to how they understood their work are not represented in the dataset, and their accounts may have led the analysis in different directions. The findings therefore offer a situated and partial account, transparent about what they can and cannot claim.

The recruitment process also shaped the dataset and forms part of the reflexive account of how this knowledge was produced. The initial inclusion criteria, focused on religious identity, proved too narrow, and an ethical amendment was required to broaden participation to include secular and atheist belief positions. This was both methodologically appropriate and conceptually strengthening. It is also important to note that much of the eventual recruitment took place through professional networks, doctoral programme contacts, and snowball sampling. Some participants were known to me professionally before the study, and in one case a prior line management relationship had existed. Careful attention was paid throughout to voluntary participation, role clarity, and the avoidance of perceived pressure. However, it would be difficult to claim that these relational conditions played no part in shaping what participants chose to share. The data cannot be understood as separate from these conditions, but as produced through them.

During analysis, my insider-outsider positioning required particular reflexive attention. The professional familiarity that had supported rapport and sensitivity during data collection also carried the risk of assumed understanding in interpretation, of hearing what felt recognisable rather than attending carefully to what was actually being said. Reflexive journalling, supervisory dialogue, and ongoing engagement with the data were therefore used throughout the analytic process to interrogate moments of resonance, surprise, and uncertainty, and to keep the analysis grounded in participants' accounts rather than my own. These strategies supported analytic transparency without suggesting that researcher subjectivity could be set aside, which would be neither appropriate nor consistent with the epistemological position underpinning the study.

The use of interviews also introduces some limitations. Participants' accounts reflect how they make sense of their experiences and how they choose to represent them in a research conversation. They cannot fully capture the complexity of everyday professional practice, nor the ways

belief systems may shape action below the level of conscious reflection, which was itself one of the study's key analytic insights. The interview context may have enabled some articulation of these processes, but it could not access what remained unspoken, implicit, or expressed in practice rather than reflected upon.

Finally, the broader socio-political climate in which the interviews were conducted may also have shaped the data that were generated. Participants reflected on personal beliefs during a period of heightened public and political attention to immigration, multiculturalism, and religious identity (Becker, 2023; Community Security Trust, 2025; Hopkins, 2007). This wider context may have shaped who felt comfortable participating, what participants chose to disclose, and the language available to them for describing their beliefs. The findings should therefore be understood as accounts shaped not only by professional experience, but also by the wider social and relational conditions in which speaking felt possible. Taken together, these considerations do not diminish the study's contribution, but locate it clearly as a situated, reflexively produced account of how belief system navigation is experienced and understood within Virtual School practice.

5.7 Future Research

This study points to several directions for future research, emerging both from what the findings revealed and from what the current methodology could not fully capture.

One clear direction for future research is to hear directly from care-experienced CYP themselves. This study focused on the professionals who support them, but if belief shapes how practitioners understand, relate to, and make decisions about the CYP in their care, then hearing from CYP themselves feels like an essential next step, particularly for those whose own belief systems, cultural identities, and ways of making sense of the world may already feel marginalised or unrecognised. Future research that centres their voices directly, exploring how they experience the be-

liefs, values, and orientations of the professionals around them, would make a meaningful contribution to both the literature and to practice.

The interview-based methodology of this study was well-suited to exploring how participants made sense of their experiences but could not capture how belief operates in the moment of professional practice. Future research using observational methods, or approaches that sit closer to the everyday texture of Virtual School work, would offer a complementary perspective, capturing what is enacted rather than what is reflected upon, and attending to the gap between the two.

A larger and more diverse sample would also extend these findings. Including professionals who might not readily identify with a significant belief system could give insight into whether and how the patterns identified here hold across a wider range of professional identities and organisational contexts. Comparative research across local authorities with different organisational cultures and levels of EP involvement would be particularly valuable in understanding how context shapes belief navigation. Similarly, future research might explore how belief system navigation varies across different professional roles within Virtual School contexts, a dimension the present study was not designed to examine systematically but which the diversity of the sample suggested may be worth exploring in greater depth.

Finally, future research could look more closely at EP practice within Virtual School contexts specifically. How EPs navigate their own belief systems in consultative and reflective work remains unexplored, and whether the kind of reflective spaces this study advocates for are currently being created, and what makes them effective when they are, would be worth exploring directly. Beyond description, there is also scope for evaluative or practice-based research that trials what it actually looks like for EPs to facilitate this kind of reflection within Virtual School teams, and

what difference it makes for the practitioners involved. That kind of research would move the conversation from what should happen to what does happen, and what works.

5.8 Dissemination and Impact Strategy

The findings of this study are relevant to multiple audiences. For the academic community, submission to *Educational Psychology in Practice* is the primary target, given the journal's focus on EP research with direct implications for practice. *Debate*, the professional magazine of the Division of Educational and Child Psychology (DECP), offers a complementary route to reach a broader EP readership in a more accessible format, allowing the key arguments to reach practitioners who may not regularly engage with peer-reviewed literature. Presentation at the DECP Annual Conference would provide a further opportunity to share the work with colleagues and invite critical dialogue.

Beyond academic and professional audiences, a central aim of dissemination is to support practice change. I plan to share the study's findings with the local authority in which I will be working as a newly qualified EP, with a view to collaborating with Virtual School colleagues to explore how reflective spaces might be developed and trialled in practice. From there, the aim is to connect with other Virtual Schools and local authorities to share what is learned and support wider engagement with these ideas. Alongside this, there is potential to develop CPD opportunities for Virtual School professionals and EPs, drawing directly on the frameworks discussed in this thesis, including Social GRACES and ARC, as practical tools for supporting reflection on belief and professional identity. This represents an opportunity to move the conversation from what the research advocates for to what it might look like in applied practice.

At a policy level, the findings make a case for greater clarity around EP involvement within Virtual School structures, an area where current statutory guidance remains limited. Sharing find-

ings through professional networks and special interest groups, including the National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH), EPNet, and the Children in Care, Adopted & Otherwise Permanently Placed EP-CCAPP interest group, offers a route into that conversation and a way of reaching the practitioners and leaders best placed to engage with and respond to what this research raises.

Finally, this study points toward the need for reflective spaces that attend to belief and worldview as dimensions of professional identity, alongside the range of social and cultural differences that frameworks like Social GRACES already invite practitioners to consider. Belief can sit quietly alongside these other dimensions, shaping practice in ways that go unexplored even within spaces designed for reflection. One of the hopes for this research is that it helps bring that dimension more explicitly into view, so that reflective practice within Virtual School contexts can engage more fully with what practitioners bring to their work.

5.9 Conclusion and Personal Reflection

This research began, in some ways, long before I started writing it. Growing up in Croatia during a period of war and political upheaval, I learned early that belief systems are rarely just private, they become social forces, shaping how communities hold together or fracture, how people are seen or unseen, how identity is claimed or contested. Immigration to the UK taught me something different. Navigating multiple worlds and multiple ways of being requires a particular kind of attentiveness to what people carry with them that is not always visible on the surface. These experiences did not give me answers, but they gave me a question, one that eventually found its way into this research. How do professionals hold, express, and navigate belief within the institutional environments they work? And what does it mean when that question has remained unexplored?

Working within a Virtual School before undertaking this research gave me a sense of the context. I had seen how much practitioners brought to their work, not just skill and knowledge, but something more difficult to name. A particular way of seeing a child. A refusal to give up on a situation that others had written off. A quiet attentiveness to what mattered to a young person that went beyond what any training had specifically taught. I found myself thinking, without yet being able to articulate it, that some of this was connected to who these practitioners were at a deeper level, to the values and experiences that had shaped them long before they arrived in their professional roles. This research gave me the language and the framework to begin understanding what I had observed.

What I did not fully anticipate was what the data itself would teach me. Returning again and again to the transcripts, sitting with participants' words, resisting the pull toward premature interpretation, this was itself a kind of lesson in the value of patient attention. The same openness and curiosity that underpins critical realism as a philosophical stance, the willingness to hold complexity rather than resolve it too quickly, turned out to be not just an epistemological commitment but a personal one. I think it is probably why I spent so long in the data. There was always something more to notice.

What struck me most, across seven accounts that were in many ways very different from each other, was how much richness there is in that difference. Each participant brought a distinct belief position, a different set of early experiences, a different way of making sense of the world, and yet across all of them, something recognisably shared. A commitment to the CYP they worked with that went beyond role definition. A deep sense of responsibility about what it means to show up for CYP whose lives have often been shaped by circumstances beyond their control. The form that commitment took differed, and what motivated and sustained it was rooted in very different

places. But it was unmistakably present, rooted in early experiences and personal belief, shaping who these practitioners were, not just what they had been trained to do.

That feels like the most important thing this research has given me to carry forward. We are all shaped by our early experiences, by what we were taught to value, by what we witnessed, by the ways we learned to make sense of the world. Those experiences do not disappear when we enter professional life. They come with us, quietly or not so quietly, shaping what we notice, how we respond, what we find hard to walk past. And as EPs working alongside care-experienced CYP, we are ourselves part of the early experiences of the CYP we work with. That is an invitation to bring the same curiosity and reflexivity to ourselves that this research has tried to bring to the practitioners who participated in it. To keep asking what we carry, our beliefs, our early experiences, our ways of making sense of the world, and what that means for the CYP in whose lives we play a part.

6 References

Abbas, T. (2017). The 'Trojan Horse' plot and the fear of Muslim power in British state schools.

Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, 37(4), 426-441.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2017.1313974>

Al-Amoudi, I., & Willmott, H. (2011). Where constructionism and critical realism converge:

Interrogating the domain of epistemological relativism. *Organization Studies*, 32(1), 27-46.

Al-Saadi, H. (2014). *Demystifying ontology and epistemology in research methods*.

ResearchGate. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260244813>

Andersen, T. (1987). The reflecting team: Dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work. *Family*

Process, 26(4), 415-428

Archer, M. S., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T., & Norrie, A. (2016). *Critical realism:*

Essential readings (New ed.). Routledge.

Arksey, H., & O'Malley, L. (2005). Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework.

International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 8(1), 19-32.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616>

Arthur, J., Moulin-Stožek, D., Metcalfe, J., & Moller, F. (2019). *Religious education teachers*

and character: Personal beliefs and professional approaches. Jubilee Centre for Character

and Virtues, University of Birmingham. <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/research/religious-education-teachers>

<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/research/religious-education-teachers>

- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1997). Writing narrative literature reviews. *Review of General Psychology*, 1(3), 311-320. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.1.3.311>
- Becker, E., Rinaldo, R., & Guhin, J. (2023). Classifying Muslims: Contextualizing religion and race in the United Kingdom and Germany. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 62(4), 749-769. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12865>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Anchor Books.
- Bhaskar, R. (1975). *A Realist Theory of Science*. Harvester Press.
- Bhaskar, R. (1978). *The Possibility Of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique Of The Contemporary Human Sciences*. Routledge.
- Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. Heinemann.
- Blaustein, M. E., & Kinniburgh, K. M. (2010). *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency*. The Guilford Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201-216.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.

British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of ethics and conduct*.

<https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/BPS%20Code%20of%20Ethics%20and%20Conduct.pdf>

British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of human research ethics* (4th ed.).

<https://york.citycollege.eu/files4users/files/BPS-Code-of-Human-Research-Ethics-2021.pdf>

British Psychological Society. (2023). *Standards for the accreditation of doctoral programmes in educational psychology*. <https://cms.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-12/Educational%20Psychology%20Handbook%20-%20Standards%20for%20Accreditation.pdf>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). Ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design, 1979. *Child Study Journal*, 9(4), 292-293.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). *Ecological models of human development*. In T. Husen & T. N.

Postlethwaite (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (2nd ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1643-1647). Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.

Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in social GRRRAACCEESSS: Visible–invisible and

- voiced–unvoiced. In I.-B. Krause (Ed.), *Culture and reflexivity in systemic psychotherapy: Mutual perspectives* (pp. 139–160). Karnac Books.
- Carroll, C., Black, E., & Bettencourt, M. (2019). *The education of children in care in North East England*. UCL Centre for Inclusive Education, Institute of Education, in collaboration with the North East Virtual School Region. [Carroll _education-of-children-in-care-in-north-east-england-march-2019.pdf](#)
- Chase, E. (2013). Security and subjective wellbeing: The experiences of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum in the UK. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 35(6), 858-872. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9566.2012.01541.x>
- Children Act 1989, c.41., <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/20>
- Children and Families Act 2014. (2014). c. 6., [Children and Families Act 2014](#)
- Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Halford, S., & Phiri, M. (2022). The politics of matching ethnicity, religion and Muslim heritage children in care in the UK. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52 (8), 4571-4587. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac068>
- Cohman, A., Golm, D., & Sargeant, C. (2024). The association between school belonging and wellbeing in looked after adolescents: A pilot study. *Adoption & Fostering*, 48(3-4), 371-397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759241295589>
- Collier, A. (1994). *Critical realism: An introduction to Roy Bhaskar's philosophy*. Verso.
- Community Security Trust. (2025, February 12). *Antisemitic Incidents Report 2024*. <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2025/02/12/antisemitic-incidents-report-2024>

- Couprie, A. (2023). *An exploration of the views and experiences of Designated Teachers in helping to create an attachment aware school* [Doctoral thesis, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust / University of Essex].
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: Sage.
- Danermark, B., Ekström, M., Jakobsen, L., & Karlsson, J. (2002). *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. Routledge
- Deakin, H., & Wakefield, K. (2013). Skype interviewing: Reflections of two PhD researchers. *Qualitative Research*, 14(5), 603-616. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794113488126>
- Department for Education. (2025). *Children looked after in England including adoptions, reporting year ending 31 March 2025*. [Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)
- Department for Education. (2018). *Promoting the education of looked after and previously looked after children: Statutory guidance for local authorities*. (Updated 2022). [Promoting the education of looked after children and previously looked after children](#)
- Dinham, A. (2018). Religion and belief in health and social care: the case for religious literacy.

- International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, 11(2), 83-90.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHRH-09-2017-0052>
- Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54-63.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105>
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.
- Ellis, R., & Hogard, E. (Eds.). (2021). *Professional Identity in the Caring Professions: Meaning, Measurement and Mastery*. Routledge.
- Fallon, K., Woods, K., & Rooney, S. (2010). A discussion of the developing role of educational psychologists within Children's Services. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 26(1), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360903522744>
- Finlay, L. (2002). "outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531-545.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>
- Finlay, L. (2002). "Negotiating the swamp": The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 209-230.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205>
- Flanagan, R. (2020). Teachers' personal worldviews and RE in England: a way forward? *British*

Journal of Religious Education, 43(3), 320-336.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2020.1826404>

Gale, N. K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S., & Redwood, S. (2013). Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multi-disciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 13, 117. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>

Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, 26(2), 91-108.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Sage.

Harding, S. (1998). *Is science multicultural? Postcolonialisms, feminisms, and epistemologies*. Indiana University Press.

Health and Care Professions Council. (2023b). Standards of proficiency - Practitioner psychologists. <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/standards-of-proficiency/practitioner-psychologists/>

Health and Care Professions Council. (2024). *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics*. London, UK: Author. <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/globalassets/resources/standards/standards-of-conduct-performance-and-ethics-2024.pdf>

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and*

organizations across nations (2nd ed.). Sage.

- Hopkins, P. (2007). Global events, national politics, local lives: young Muslim men in Scotland. *Environment & Planning A*, 39(5), 1119-1133. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a38129>
- Jaggar, C. (2018). The supervising social worker in an inner city: how practitioners perceive and experience their role. *Adoption & Fostering*, 42(4), 383-399. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575918799008>
- Janghorban, R., Roudsari, R. L., & Taghipour, A. (2014). Skype interviewing: The new generation of online synchronous interview in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, 9(1), 24152. <https://doi.org/10.3402/qhw.v9.24152>
- Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 27, 99–110.
- Lee, L. (2015). *Recognizing the non-religious: Reimagining the secular*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198736844.001.0001>
- Levac, D., Colquhoun, H., & O'Brien, K. K. (2010). Scoping studies: Advancing the methodology. *Implementation Science*, 5(1), 69. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-5-69>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Mak, V., & Thomas, M. S. C. (2022). Steps for Conducting a Scoping Review.

Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 14(5), 565-567. <https://doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-22-00621.1>

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753-1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>

Matchett, E. (2022). ‘It starts when teachers are training’: The role of generalist and designated teachers in the educational experiences of children in care. *Adoption & Fostering*, 46(2), 120-133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03085759221091326>

Menzies Lyth, I. (1988). A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety. In I. Menzies Lyth, *Containing anxiety in institutions: Selected essays* (Vol. 1, pp. 43- 85). Free Association Books. (Original work published 1960)

Munn, Z., Peters, M. D. J., Stern, C., Tufanaru, C., McArthur, A., & Aromataris, E. (2018). Systematic review or scoping review? Guidance for authors when choosing between a systematic or scoping review approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 18(1), 143. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0611-x>

Murden, S. (2023). *Designated Teachers Experiences of Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children within Secondary Schools: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis*. [Doctoral thesis, University of Bristol]. [Designated Teachers Experiences of Supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children within Secondary Schools - University of Bristol](#)

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. (2021). *Looked after children and young people (NG205)*. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng205>

Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2022). A practical guide to reflexivity in Qualitative Research: Amee guide no. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 45(3), 241-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2022.2057287>

Pargament, K. I., & Hahn, J. (1999). Trauma and development: A faith perspective. *Pastoral Psychology*, 48(1), 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021362303960>

Peters, M.D, Godfrey, C.M., Khalil, H., McInerney, P., Parker, D., Soares, C.B. (2015). Guidance for conducting systematic scoping reviews. *International Journal of Evidence Based Healthcare*. 13(3), 141-6. [10.1097/XEB.0000000000000050](https://doi.org/10.1097/XEB.0000000000000050)

Peterson, L., Rutter, A., & Smith, K. (2017). *Inclusive educational provision for newly arrived unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Kent*. Canterbury Christ Church University. https://www.academia.edu/100104307/Inclusive_educational_provision_for_newly_arrived_unaccompanied_asylum_seeking_and_refugee_children_a_study_in_a_single_school_in_Kent

Pickles, J. (2020). *Children in Care: A Systematic Review of Stakeholder Experiences and a Study of Virtual School Heads' Support for Children on the Autism Spectrum* [Doctoral thesis, University of Southampton]. [Pickles_Jen_27067785_Thesis_Final_Submission.pdf](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/media/100104307/Pickles_Jen_27067785_Thesis_Final_Submission.pdf)

Plante, T. G. (2014). Four steps to improve religious/spiritual cultural competence in professional

- psychology. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 1(4), 288-292.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/scp0000047>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Analyzing qualitative data* (pp. 173-194). London, UK: Routledge.
- Rose, J., Gilbert, L., McGuire-Snieckus, R., Gus, L., McInnes, K., & Digby, R. (2017). Attachment aware schools: Working with families to enhance parental engagement and home-school relationships. *Open Family Studies Journal*, 9(Supp-1, M8), 160-171.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2174/1874922401709010160>
- Savin-Baden, M., & Howell Major, C. (2023). Qualitative Research.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003377986>
- Sayer, A. (2000). *Realism and social science*. Sage.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books
- Scott, J., Mason, B., & Kelly, A. (2022). ‘After god, we give strength to each other’: young people’s experiences of coping in the context of unaccompanied forced migration. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(2), 178-194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2118033>
- Shah, S. R. (2024). Reconciling British values with professional identity: The pursuit of ontological security among Muslim teachers in England. *Religions*, 15(11), 1353.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111353>

Smith, L. T. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.).

Zed Books.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis:*

Theory, method and research. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Stanley, T., Guru, S., & Coppock, V. (2017). A Risky Time for Muslim Families:

Professionalised Counter-radicalisation Networks. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 31(4), 477-490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2017.1394829>

Tedam, P. (2014). Witchcraft branding and the abuse of African children in the UK: causes,

effects and professional intervention. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(9-10), 1403-1414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.901015>

Thompson, E. W. (2010). *Epistemological axiology: What is the value of knowledge?*. TRACE:

Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange.

Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., Moher, D., Peters,

M. D. J., Horsley, T., Weeks, L., Hempel, S., Akl, E. A., Chang, C., McGowan, J., Stewart, L., Hartling, L., Aldcroft, A., Wilson, M. G., Garritty, C., ... Straus, S. E. (2016). A scoping review on the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 16, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-016-0116-4>

Tudge, J. R. H., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B. E., & Karnik, R. B. (2009). Uses and misuses of

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 1(4), 198-210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2009.00026.x>

- Warden, R., Scourfield, J., & Huxley, P. (2017). Islamic social work in the UK: The service-user experience. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(3), 737-754. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26364170>
- Westwood, S. (2022). Can religious social workers practice affirmatively with LGBTQ service recipients? An exploration within the regulatory context. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 44(2), 205-225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2022.2067652>
- Woodhead, L. (2017). The rise of “no religion” in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority. *Journal of the British Academy*, 5, 245-261. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/005.245>
- Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and Health*, 15(2), 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08870440008400302>
- Zhou, Y., Chen, J., Wang, Y., & Li, M. (2025). Impact of childhood trauma on meaning in life among middle school students: The mediating role of self-esteem and resilience. *BMC Psychology*, 13(1), Article 186. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02746-5>

7 Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval Letter

Dear Azra,

Thank you for your patience while we process your application. I apologise for the delayed response.

I am pleased to inform you that your **application** has been **approved**.

You may now proceed with your research project as outlined in your proposal.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including modifications to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC for review.

Failure to obtain prior approval for such changes may result in academic and/or research misconduct.

With regards to privacy, please ensure that meetings with yourself and your participants are conducted in a safe environment, ensuring confidentiality is fully maintained.

Your updated TREC form is also attached for your records.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Best wishes,



The Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust

www.tavistockandportman.nhs.uk

Michael Franklyn (he/him)

Academic Governance and Quality Officer

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

mfranklyn@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix B: Example Email Sent to PEPs

Dear Virtual School Colleagues,

I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study exploring how professionals navigate their religious identity alongside their professional role when working with care-experienced young people. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, I am seeking participants who:

- Have worked directly with care-experienced children in educational settings within the last year (this can include even a single in-person encounter with a child);
- Have a deep religious identity that shapes your worldview and values (this can be spiritual in nature; regular church/worship attendance is not required);
- Are willing to discuss how these aspects intersect in your professional practice.

Participation involves a single 60-90 minute interview (in-person or online). This research has been approved by the Tavistock Research Ethics Committee, with all data handled confidentially and in accordance with GDPR.

By participating in this research, you will contribute to:

- Developing more culturally sensitive approaches for supporting care-experienced young people;
- Understanding how to better navigate the intersection of personal beliefs and professional practice;
- Enhancing policies and support systems in Virtual Schools.

I have attached a detailed information leaflet to this email. Anyone who might be interested can contact me directly at aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk. The leaflet provides comprehensive information about the research aims, eligibility criteria, and confidentiality measures.

Thank you for your support.

Best wishes,

Azra Klempic
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix C: Research Recruitment Flyer



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Do your personal beliefs shape your work as a Virtual School professional? I am researching how staff navigate their belief systems (religious, secular, or atheist) alongside their professional role when working with care-experienced young people.

Share your experiences with us.

Who Can Participate?

You may be eligible if you:

- ✓ Have worked directly with care-experienced children and young people in educational settings within the last academic year or three terms
- ✓ Have strong personal beliefs (religious, secular, or atheist) that shape your worldview, values, and daily life.
- ✓ Are open to reflecting on your personal beliefs in relation to your professional practice

What's involved?

- ✓ One-to-one interview lasting 60–90 minutes
- ✓ Choice of in-person interview at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust or online via Tavi Zoom
- ✓ Discussion of your experiences navigating personal beliefs in your professional role.
- ✓ Opportunity to contribute to understanding how belief systems influence support for care-experienced young people.

By sharing your experiences, you will help:

- ✓ Develop more culturally sensitive approaches for supporting care-experienced children and young people.
- ✓ Improve understanding of how professionals balance personal beliefs with professional practice.
- ✓ Contribute to enhancing support systems in Virtual Schools.



Confidentiality

- All interviews will be confidential
- Data will be de-identified and stored in line with GDPR
- Participation is entirely voluntary



Contact

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact me, Azra Klempic, Trainee Educational Psychologist at aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk

This research has been approved by the Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

Appendix D: Amended TREC Application

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

FOR ALL APPLICANTS

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval

Is your project considered as ‘research’ according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	Yes
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	No
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	No

SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS

Project title	Navigating Personal Beliefs in Professional Practice: Perspectives of Virtual School Educational Professionals Working with Care-Experienced Children and Young People		
Proposed project start date	March 2025	Anticipated project end date	May 2026

Principal Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Dr Maria Wedlock	
Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval	
Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	YES (NRES approval) ☐ ☐ YES (HRA approval) ☐ Other ☒ NO
If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.	

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Azra Klempic
Programme of Study and Target Award	Child, Community and Educational Psychology (M4), doctorate course

Email address	aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Contact telephone number	07887722935

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research? YES ☐ NO ☒ If YES, please detail below:
Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES ☐ NO ☒
Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement? YES ☒ NO ☐ If YES, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:
Clear separation of roles will be maintained between my placement work and research activities. Any discussions about research participation will occur outside of regular professional interactions.

Participants will be explicitly informed that their decision to participate (or not) will have no impact on our professional relationship or their work within the Virtual School.

During interviews, I will establish clear boundaries between my role as a researcher versus my role as a trainee Educational Psychologist (EP), making it explicit when we are engaging in research activities versus professional work.

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation). *Please note that ‘external’ is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	YES ☐ NO ☒
If YES, please add details here:	
Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval? If YES, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	YES ☐ NO ☒

If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:	
If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:	
I will work through Educational Psychology (EP) services in other local authorities to recruit participants from Virtual schools	
Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant) Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record	YES ☐ NO ☒ NA ☐

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.

I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.

I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research

I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.

I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Applicant name)	(print Azra Klempic
Signed	
Date	30/01/2025

FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Dr Maria Wedlock
--	------------------

Supervisor -	
Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?	
YES ☒ NO ☐	
Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?	
YES ☒ NO ☐	
Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?	
YES ☒ NO ☐	
Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?	
YES ☒ NO ☐	
Signed	
Date	29.01.25

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD

Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES ☒ NO ☐

Signed

Lisa Bostock

Date

30/01/2025

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)

This research seeks to explore how educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief system identities when working with care-experienced children and young people (CYP). The study is particularly timely and relevant given the increasing religious and cultural diversity among care-experienced CYP, with 29% of Looked After Children (LAC) coming from diverse backgrounds (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). This includes rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in England, for whom religious or personal belief system identity often plays a crucial role in their sense of stability and belonging (Chase, 2013; DfE, 2023). The role of professionals, who bring their own varied religious,

atheist, or secular belief systems alongside their cultural identities - becomes increasingly significant in this context. However, regardless of whether a CYP and their supporting professional share similar or different backgrounds, these dynamics can influence how support and guidance are given, and ultimately, how the professionals navigate their own identity. The study aims to understand how professionals balance their personal belief systems with their professional responsibilities while supporting these vulnerable students, recognising that this intersection can significantly impact the culturally sensitive support provided to care-experienced CYP (Nelson & Yang, 2023; Everington et al., 2011).

I am seeking to interview 6-8 educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools across local authorities in the UK who work directly with care-experienced CYP. To be eligible, participants must:

(1) have worked directly with care-experienced CYP through their Virtual School role within the last academic year or the last three terms (which may span over two academic years), where direct work means:

- Providing individual or group support sessions with CYP
- Delivering educational interventions to CYP
- Conducting assessments directly with CYP
- Meeting with CYP for mentoring or educational planning
- Facilitating learning or wellbeing activities with CYP

These interactions can occur either:

- In-person, i.e. at educational settings
- Through video meetings

This work must be:

Part of their Virtual School responsibilities;

- NOT including work with care-experienced CYP that occurs solely through statutory assessment or traded work outside of their Virtual School role;
- NOT including work that is exclusively consultative with adults around the CYP;
- NOT including purely administrative or managerial responsibilities.

(2) identify with a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that shapes their worldview, values, and daily life

(3) are open and willing to reflect on and discuss their belief system identity in relation to their professional practice.

A significant belief system is defined as a strong personal connection to religious beliefs, atheist principles, or secular values that shapes one's worldview and approach to life. This may be expressed through formal religious practices, personal spirituality, adherence to religious beliefs, commitment to atheist/humanist principles, or secular ethical frameworks.

Participants will be excluded if they do not demonstrate a belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that significantly influences their worldview, values, or daily life.

Participants will be invited to take part in semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted either in person at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust or via Tavi Zoom, based on participant preference. The interviews will explore how professionals experience and manage the intersection between their personal belief systems

and professional roles, particularly when supporting care-experienced CYP who may come from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds (McMurray et al., 2011; Simkiss, 2019). In line with UK GDPR, participants will have the right to withdraw their data up until the point of de-identification, which will occur 4 weeks following their interview. After this date, all research data will be de-identified through the removal of identifying information such as names and places from the transcripts, except religious or personal belief system identity, which will be identified in the research findings where relevant to understanding the data. This approach is essential given the study's focus on how belief system identity influences professional practice. Following transcription, all digital recordings will be securely destroyed. Participants will not be required to provide any reason for withdrawing from the study.

The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodology will allow for an in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes.

Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)

The intersection of religious identity and personal belief systems with professional practice in educational settings, particularly in supporting care-experienced children and young people (CYP), presents a complex and understudied area of research. As educational environments become increasingly diverse, professionals engage in ongoing processes of navigating their per-

sonal beliefs - whether religious, secular, or atheist - alongside their professional responsibilities (Nelson & Yang, 2023; Everington et al., 2011).

While studies have examined how teachers navigate religious identity in diverse educational contexts (Moulin, 2015; Jarvis, 2008), there is a significant gap in understanding how professionals in Virtual Schools manage this intersection. This gap is particularly notable in the context of supporting care-experienced children, who often present complex needs and diverse backgrounds (McMurray et al., 2011; Simkiss, 2019).

Furthermore, there is an even more pronounced absence of research exploring how professionals with secular, atheist, or non-religious belief systems navigate their personal values in similar professional contexts, despite growing recognition of the significance of non-religious identities in contemporary society (Lee, 2015).

Recent research demonstrates that atheist and secular worldviews, like religious beliefs, can be important parts of a person's identity and may shape professional decision-making, values, and approaches to supporting diverse populations. Lee's (2015) UK-based research distinguishes between "insubstantial" secularity (merely absence of religion) and "substantial" secularity (involving beliefs, ritual practices, and identities that are alternative to religious ones), showing that secular identities can be just as meaningful and identity-shaping as religious ones. This is supported by additional research showing that secular and atheist worldviews can involve identity navigation processes similar to those shaped by religious beliefs, particularly in professional contexts (Lee, 2014; Woodhead, 2017; Brewster et al., 2016). Given the emergence of a new secular cultural majority in Britain (Woodhead, 2017), understanding how both religious and

non-religious belief systems influence professional practice with diverse populations is increasingly important.

The research aims to investigate how educational professionals in Virtual Schools experience and make sense of navigating their personal belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) when working directly with care-experienced children and young people. It focuses on understanding how these professionals balance their personal belief systems with their professional responsibilities, considering both the relational interactions with care-experienced CYP and the broader systemic aspects that shape their work.

This research is particularly timely given the rise in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in England (DfE, 2023), which adds significant complexity to professional practice due to these CYP's diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. For UASC, who are typically considered looked after children under local authority care, religious identity often plays a crucial role in their sense of stability and belonging (Chase, 2013).

The findings have the potential to significantly impact policy, practice, and professional development in educational psychology. By exploring the complex interplay between belief systems (religious, secular, and atheist), professional practice, and support for vulnerable CYP, this study aims to contribute both practical and theoretical insights to the field. Ultimately, this research seeks to foster the development of more inclusive and effective practices that better serve the needs of care-experienced CYP while supporting the professionals who work with them.

The study addresses a critical gap in current understanding about how personal belief systems influences professional practice in educational settings, particularly in supporting vulnerable

groups (Hartwick, 2014; Arthur et al., 2019). In doing so, it aims to enhance culturally sensitive support in increasingly diverse educational environments.

Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)

This study will employ a qualitative approach to explore participants' experiences and perspectives of navigating personal belief systems in their professional practice. The data will be analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research is grounded in a critical realist ontological position, acknowledging the subjective nature of individual experiences and the role of interpretation in understanding these experiences.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with 6-8 educational professionals from Virtual Schools. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be conducted either in person at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust or via Tavi Zoom, based on participant preference. All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Tasks for Participants: Participants will engage in a semi-structured interview exploring how they experience and manage the intersection between their belief systems (religious, secular, or atheist) and professional roles, particularly when supporting care-experienced CYP who may come from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

Data Analysis: The analysis will follow RTA's six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including:

- Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading
- Systematic coding of the entire dataset
- Generating initial themes
- Reviewing and developing themes
- Refining, defining, and naming themes
- Writing up the analysis

The analysis phase will acknowledge the researcher's active role in the analytical process, acknowledging how their own positioning and theoretical assumptions shape the identification and interpretation of themes. This methodological approach will enable a rich, contextualised understanding of how educational professionals experience and manage the intersection of their personal belief systems and professional roles when working with care-experienced CYP.

Data storage and security:

- Interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim;
- Transcripts will be downloaded and stored on the secure University of Essex OneDrive server;
- All transcripts will undergo de-identification, after which original recordings and de-identified transcripts will be permanently deleted;

De-identification will include removing:

- Personal names
- Location identifiers

- Specific events that could identify participants
- Any other identifying information except religious identity which will be retained where relevant to understanding the data.

Long-term data management:

- De-identified data will be retained for 6-10 years in accordance with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust Data Protection and Handling Policies;
- If used for future research or publication, de-identified data will be transferred to a password-protected device;
- All data storage and handling will comply with GDPR requirements and Trust policies.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)

Participant sampling will be purposive, where the researcher relies on their own judgment to choose participants in line with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The study aims to recruit 6-8 educational professionals from Virtual Schools¹ across local authorities in the UK. This sample size aligns with RTA methodology recommendations (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for in-depth analysis while capturing a range of experiences.

Recruitment Process:

Initial contact through Educational Psychology Services:

Contact EP services by:

- Searching for publicly available contact details of Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs) on Local Authority websites or contacting EP services via general service emails.
- Reaching out to Local EP services where I have existing professional connections through training placements
- Share research information with EP services who work with Virtual Schools;
- Request EPs to facilitate introduction to their linked Virtual School;
- Offer to either share research flyer/poster (see Appendix E) or present briefly at team meetings.

Following EP facilitated introductions:

- Connect with Virtual School Head;
- Share detailed information about the research;
- Begin snowball sampling where initial participants may suggest colleagues who meet the criteria.

After two weeks, if insufficient responses:

- Follow up through EP contacts and Virtual School Heads.
- Extend recruitment through broader professional networks.

Once potential participants express interest:

- Provide detailed information sheets (see Appendix A)
- Upon reviewing information, participants complete consent form (see Appendix B)
- Arrange interview at preferred location/format.

The information sheets will detail

- Research aims and purpose
- What participation involves
- Data de-identification and storage procedures
- Right to withdraw and data destruction protocols
- Confidentiality assurances

Inclusion Criteria

Participants must have worked directly with care-experienced CYP through their Virtual School role within the last academic year or the last three terms (which may span over two academic years). This ensures participants have recent, relevant experience working with the target population. Direct work means:

- Providing individual or group support sessions with CYP
- Delivering educational interventions to CYP
- Conducting assessments directly with CYP
- Meeting with CYP for mentoring or educational planning
- Facilitating learning or wellbeing activities with CYP
- These interactions can occur either:
 - In-person, i.e. at educational settings
 - Through video meetings

This work must be:

- Part of their Virtual School responsibilities;
- NOT including work with care-experienced CYP that occurs solely through statutory assessment or traded work outside of their Virtual School role;
- NOT including work that is exclusively consultative with adults around the CYP;

- NOT including purely administrative or managerial responsibilities.

Participants must identify with a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that shapes their worldview, values, and daily life. A significant belief system is defined as a strong personal connection to religious beliefs, atheist principles, or secular values that shapes one's worldview and approach to life. This may be expressed through formal religious practices, personal spirituality, adherence to religious beliefs, commitment to atheist/humanist principles, or secular ethical frameworks.

Participants must be open and willing to reflect on and discuss their belief systems in relation to their professional practice. This ensures participants can engage meaningfully with the research questions.

Exclusion Criteria

Professionals who hold purely administrative or managerial roles This ensures participants have direct experience working with care-experienced young people.

Individuals who do not demonstrate a belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that significantly influences their worldview, values, or daily life.

Location

Interviews will be conducted either:

- In person at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
- Via Tavi Zoom This flexibility in location aims to make participation accessible while ensuring appropriate privacy for discussions.

The criteria are designed to ensure participants can provide rich, detailed accounts of navigating religious identity in their professional practice while working directly with care-experienced children and young people.

Informed consent process

An information sheet (see Appendix A) will be used to explain the research to participants. Consent processes will include:

verbal explanation of the aims of the project, boundaries of confidentiality, right to withdrawal, data protection rights detailed, opportunity for questions and discussion, details about data storage and security measures, information about how findings will be used and disseminated, clarification of time commitments and expectations, clear explanation that this is a research interview, not a therapeutic conversation, information about available workplace support services (e.g., occupational health), and explanation that they can pause or stop the interview at any time.

I will confirm consent in writing. Participants will have adequate time to review all information and ask questions before providing written consent.

The consent form (see Appendix B) will document their agreement to participate in recorded interviews, the use of de-identified quotes, data storage procedures, and publication plans. Throughout the research process, consent will be treated as ongoing, with verbal reconfirmation obtained at the start of each interview and regular reminders of participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Personal belief system disclosure:

Participants will be explicitly informed that:

- Their personal belief system identity will be identified in the research findings where relevant to understanding the data;
- Their real names will be replaced with pseudonyms, but their personal belief system identity may be mentioned alongside these pseudonyms when discussing specific experiences;

- Due to the small sample size and specific nature of their roles, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed even with pseudonymization;
- They can withdraw from the study if they are not comfortable with this level of disclosure. This will be clearly communicated during recruitment, detailed in the information sheet (see Appendix A), and explicitly included in the consent form (see Appendix B).

¹*The structure and staffing of Virtual Schools can vary across local authorities, with decisions about roles and responsibilities made at the discretion of the Virtual School Head, as outlined in the Department for Education's statutory guidance (DfE, 2022). While participants may hold different roles within their respective Virtual Schools, the inclusion criteria ensure a cohesive participant group through their shared experience of working directly with care-experienced children and young people, having a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular), and being willing to reflect on how these intersect in their professional practice.*

Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.

If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.

Interviews will be conducted in one of two ways, based on participant preference:

In person:

- Location: Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust;
- Interviews will be audio-recorded using Tavi Zoom's recording feature on a laptop, with video disabled;
- Interviews will be conducted during standard working hours;

- The location provides a professional, secure environment with appropriate support staff present.

Online:

- Platform: Tavi Zoom (institutional platform);
- Interviews will be recorded using Zoom's built-in recording feature, capturing audio only;
- Recordings will be stored securely following Trust data protection protocols;
- Participants will be informed when recording begins and ends;
- All recordings will be saved directly to the secure Trust network, not to local devices;
- Ensures confidentiality and data security;
- Participants can join from a private location of their choosing.

No interviews will be conducted in private residences or outside standard working hours. All interviews, whether online or in-person, will be scheduled during regular business hours to ensure appropriate institutional support is available if needed.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust provides a safe, professional environment with established security protocols and staff presence, minimizing risks associated with lone working. For online interviews, the use of the institutional Tavi Zoom platform ensures secure and confidential communication.

Will the participants be from any of the following groups? *(Tick as appropriate)*

- ☐ Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.
- ☒ Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).
- ☐ Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)¹
- ☐ Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.

☐ Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.

☐ Adults in emergency situations.

Adults² with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).

Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).

Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).

☐ Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).

Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent³ relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).

☐ Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).

☐ Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.

☐ Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

¹If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability³, any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

² *'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.'* (Police Act, 1997)

³ *Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.*

Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES ☐ NO ☒

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)

their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).

where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable

children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?

N/A

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check *within the last three years* is required.

Please provide details of the “clear disclosure”:

Date of disclosure:
Type of disclosure:
Organisation that requested disclosure:
DBS certificate number:

*(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance>). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research?

YES ☐ NO ☒

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue

influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)

Not applicable. All participants will be professionals working in Virtual Schools who use English in their daily work. No children or individuals with special communication needs are involved in this study.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

Does the proposed research involve any of the following? (*Tick as appropriate*)

- ☐ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
- ☐ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
- ☐ use of written or computerised tests
- ☒ interviews (attach interview questions)
- ☐ diaries (attach diary record form)
- ☐ participant observation
- ☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
- ☒ audio-recording interviewees or events
- ☐ video-recording interviewees or events
- ☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
- ☐ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process

- ☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
- ☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation
- ☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
- ☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants
- ☐ administration of any substance or agent
- ☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
- ☐ participation in a clinical trial
- ☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
- ☐ research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES ☒ NO ☐

If YES, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

While the physical risks are minimal, there are potential psychological risks that may exceed those encountered in everyday life. The in-depth discussions about religious identity and professional practice may:

Prompt participants to reflect more deeply than usual on potentially challenging situations they have encountered;

Surface complex emotions or ethical dilemmas they have faced when balancing religious identity with professional responsibilities;

Lead to psychological discomfort when exploring the interplay between religious identity and professional duties.

To mitigate these risks, participants will be:

Informed of these potential risks before participating;

Reminded they can pause or stop the interview at any time;

Given access to appropriate support resources;

Offered breaks during interviews if needed;

Provided with post-interview debriefing.

Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

While there is potential for psychological distress during in-depth discussions about religious identity and professional practice, I have relevant experience at multiple levels. During my Master's research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with adults, developing skills in

research interviewing. I also have previous experience working in a Virtual School, which provides me with valuable insight into the professional context of the participants.

In my current role as a trainee Educational Psychologist, I regularly engage in sensitive dialogues with staff and families, which involves active listening, maintaining professional boundaries, and creating safe spaces for discussion. These consultations often involve complex and emotional topics, requiring careful management of feelings and responses.

In terms of managing any potential discomfort or emotional responses that may arise during interviews, I have received training in psychoanalytic concepts such as transference and projection through the Tavistock training. This theoretical understanding will help me make sense of and contain any feelings that emerge during the interviews. I will ensure participants are informed of potential risks before participating, reminded they can pause or stop at any time, and offered breaks as needed.

I will be supported through multiple supervision channels, including:

- Monthly personal supervision
- Weekly placement supervision
- Regular research supervision

All supervision is provided by qualified Educational Psychologists with extensive research experience at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust

Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)

NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students, they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

The participants in this study may benefit from the opportunity to reflect deeply on their professional practice and belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) in a structured, supportive environment. This kind of focused reflection is not often available in busy professional settings yet can contribute significantly to professional development and self-awareness.

Through participation in the research, professionals may:

- Gain deeper insights into how they navigate their belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) in their work;
- Develop greater awareness of their decision-making processes;
- Have protected time to reflect on their professional practice;
- Contribute to developing more culturally sensitive approaches in their field.

The study's findings will contribute to a broader understanding of how belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) influence professional practice in educational settings, particularly when supporting vulnerable groups. This knowledge may help:

- Inform professional development practices in Virtual Schools;
- Enhance support systems for professionals managing complex identity intersections;
- Develop more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to supporting care-experienced children and young people;

- Bridge the gap between belief system identity research in educational practice and support for care-experienced children.

Participants will be offered a summary of the research findings, allowing them to:

- See how their experiences connect with those of other professionals;
- Gain insights into shared challenges and strategies;
- Apply these insights to their own practice;
- Contribute to developing more effective support systems in their field.

These benefits align with the study's broader aim of enhancing culturally sensitive/responsive support in increasingly diverse educational environments while supporting the professionals who provide these services.

Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)

Given that discussions about personal belief systems and professional practice can be sensitive, the following measures will be in place:

At the beginning of the interview:

- I will explain the sensitive nature of the topic and acknowledge that some questions (see Appendix C) may prompt deep reflection;
- I will explicitly state that participants can choose not to answer any questions without needing to provide a reason;
- I will ask participants how they would prefer to indicate if they are feeling uncomfortable or would like to pause;

- I will establish clear signals or phrases they can use to indicate distress or need for breaks.

During Interviews:

- I will monitor participants' emotional state throughout the interview;
- I will offer breaks or opportunity to pause if needed;
- I will check in with participants about their experience at the end of the interview;
- I will maintain clear professional boundaries regarding the distinction between research interviews and therapeutic conversations.

Support Mechanisms:

Participants will have access to contact details for both the researcher and research supervisor;

Participants will be reminded of their usual professional support systems through:

- Written information in the participant information sheet (see Appendix A);
- Verbal reminders during the pre-interview briefing and post-interview debrief;

A debrief document listing available support including:

- Their workplace supervision arrangements;
- Their occupational health services where available.

As a precautionary measure, the following support services will be provided to all participants:

- Education Support Partnership - A UK charity providing mental health and wellbeing support specifically for education professionals;
- Mind - Mental health charity offering information and support services;
- Samaritans - 24/7 helpline providing emotional support.

Safeguarding:

If any safeguarding concerns arise regarding care-experienced young people, these will be addressed through appropriate professional channels and processes, specifically:

- Following the local authority's designated safeguarding procedures;
- Contacting the Virtual School Head and/or Designated Safeguarding Lead as appropriate;
- Documenting concerns according to professional requirements.

Participants will be reminded of their professional obligations regarding safeguarding, for example:

- Their duty to report any concerns about a child's welfare;
- Their responsibility to follow their organisation's safeguarding policies;
- The importance of maintaining clear documentation of any concerns.

Clear protocols for sharing any concerns that arise during interviews:

If a participant discloses information suggesting a child is at risk:

- The interview will be paused;
- The participant will be reminded of their safeguarding duties;
- They will be supported to contact their Virtual School Head and/or Designated Safeguarding Lead;
- The incident will be documented.

If historical safeguarding concerns are discussed:

- I will check whether these were previously reported;
- If not reported, the participant will be supported to report through appropriate channels (see above).
- The incident will be documented.

Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in

the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.

Following each interview, participants will be offered time to reflect on their experience of participating in the research and discuss any thoughts or feelings that emerged during the interview. As established during the informed consent process, participants will be encouraged to understand that while they are engaging in research interviews rather than therapeutic conversations, they have access to various support systems.

Participants will be reminded of their existing professional support networks, including supervision structures within their settings. They will receive information about how to contact both the researcher and the research supervisor if they have any questions or concerns following their participation. They will also be informed about when and how they can access a summary of the research findings, providing them an opportunity to see how their experiences connect with those of other professionals in the field and potentially apply these insights to their own practice. While the interviews are not expected to cause distress, as they focus on professional practice and religious identity, participants will be reminded of support services available through their workplace, such as occupational health services.

Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.

While no significant distress is anticipated from participating in the research, participants will be reminded of their existing professional support networks, including supervision structures within their workplace and any employee assistance programs they have access to.

Additionally, if participants express the need for external support or counselling following their involvement in the research, the following organisations will be suggested for their professional and confidential support services:

Education Support Partnership

Education Support Partnership is a UK-based charity providing mental health and wellbeing support specifically for education professionals. Services include free and confidential helplines, counselling, and online resources.

Website: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>

Mind

Mind is a leading mental health charity offering information, support, and counselling services for individuals experiencing emotional or psychological distress.

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk>

Samaritans

Samaritans is a 24/7 helpline providing emotional support and listening services for anyone in distress, including professionals navigating complex personal and professional challenges.

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org>

These organisations have been chosen for their expertise in providing high-quality support services for professionals in emotionally demanding roles. Information about these services will be included in the debriefing materials provided to participants.

Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research.
(Do not exceed 500 words)

Not applicable. This research involves interviews with professionals about their work experiences and does not involve any medical procedures or interventions requiring aftercare.

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK?

☐ YES ☒ NO

If YES, please confirm:

☐ I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice?

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/>

☐ I have completed a RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.

All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.

If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:

Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.

Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:

The research will be conducted entirely within the UK and follows all UK research ethics guidelines. The study will comply with:

The British Psychological Society's (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021)

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2024)

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements for data protection

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust research governance procedures

As all research activities will take place within UK jurisdiction, no additional international research ethics or governance requirements apply

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES ☒ NO ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

The following is a participant information sheet checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.

☒ Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.

☒ A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.

☒ If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.

☒ A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.

☒ Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

☒ Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

☒ A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the [Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies](https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/).: <https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/>

☒ Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Trust letterhead or logo.

☒ Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.

☒ Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree

☒ Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

☒ Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.

- ☒ If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
- ☒ The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
- ☐ Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
- ☐ Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
- ☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

- ☐ Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
- ☐ The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).

☒ The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).

☐ Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.

☒ Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (i.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)

☒ The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.

☐ Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.

YES ☒ NO ☐

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES ☒ NO ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.

☐ 1-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☒ 6-10 years ☐ 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years

Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.

- ☐ Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
- ☒ Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
- ☒ Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
- ☐ Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).
- ☒ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
- ☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box>

- ☐ Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.
- ☒ Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).

☒ Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.

☒ Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

☒ All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

☐ All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.

Not applicable.

Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:

None.

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? *(Select all that apply)*

- ☐ Peer reviewed journal
- ☐ Non-peer reviewed journal
- ☐ Peer reviewed books
- ☐ Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
- ☐ Conference presentation
- ☐ Internal report
- ☐ Promotional report and materials
- ☐ Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
- ☒ Dissertation/Thesis
- ☐ Other publication
- ☒ Written feedback to research participants
- ☒ Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
- ☐ Other (Please specify below)

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?

The identification of participants' belief system identities in the research findings presents a specific ethical consideration. While this information is integral to understanding the research findings, it requires careful handling to protect participants' privacy while maintaining research authenticity.

Given the sensitive nature of discussing personal belief systems in professional practice, participants may share challenging experiences or negative views about belief system differences. While maintaining a non-judgmental stance to encourage honest dialogue, clear protocols will be established for handling any disclosures that may indicate discriminatory practices, particularly those affecting care-experienced CYP. The research design acknowledges that participants may feel pressure to present their belief system management in socially desirable ways and therefore creates space for discussing both positive and challenging aspects of this navigation.

From a methodological perspective, my own cultural background and experiences with belief systems in different cultural contexts could influence data interpretation. To address this, I will engage in regular research supervision and reflexive journaling to examine and challenge potential biases in my analysis. This regular reflexive practice aims to maintain the integrity of the research while protecting participant wellbeing and professional relationships.

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

☒ Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)

☒ Recruitment advertisement

☒ Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)

☒ Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)

☐ Assent form for children (where relevant)

☐ Letters of approval from locations for data collection

☐ Questionnaire

☒ Interview Schedule or topic guide

☐ Risk Assessment (where applicable)

☐ Overseas travel approval (where applicable)

Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

N/A

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Opening/Background Questions:

1. Could you tell me about your role in the Virtual School?
2. What role does religion/faith/personal beliefs play in your life?
3. What has been your experience of supporting care-experienced young people from different religious and cultural backgrounds?

Main Experience Questions:

4. Could you tell me about your experiences of navigating your personal beliefs/religious identity in your professional role?
5. Can you describe a time when your personal beliefs/religious identity influenced your work with care-experienced young people?
6. What has been your experience of managing your personal beliefs/religious identity alongside professional responsibilities?
7. How do you experience times where your personal beliefs/religious identity and professional practice intersect?
8. Have you experienced/ faced any challenges in balancing your personal beliefs/religious identity with your professional role?

Reflection Questions:

9. How do you think your experiences of managing your personal beliefs/religious identity have shaped your approach to your professional role?

10. How do you understand the relationship between your personal beliefs/religious identity and your professional practice?

Closing Questions:

11. Is there anything else about your experience of navigating personal beliefs/religious identity in your professional role that you'd like to share?

Appendix F: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer, pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

The Research Team

Researcher: Azra Klempic

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Email: aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Supervisor: Dr Maria Wedlock

Email: mwedlock@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this study.

Title of the Study

Navigating Personal Beliefs in Professional Practice: Perspectives of Virtual School Educational
Professionals Working with Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Project Description

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring how educational professionals in Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems when supporting care-experienced children and young people. This information sheet outlines what participation will involve, your rights as a participant, and how your data will be handled. Please read this carefully and ask any questions you may have.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to understand how educational professionals balance their belief systems (religious, secular, or atheist) with their professional responsibilities in supporting care-experienced children and young people. This research is particularly timely and relevant given the increasing religious and cultural diversity among care-experienced children and young people, including the rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in England, for whom religious identity often plays a crucial role in their sense of stability and belonging. The findings aim to contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective practices that better serve the needs of care-experienced children and young people while supporting the professionals who work with them.

What Your Involvement Entails

If you agree to participate, you will:

- Take part in a **semi-structured interview** lasting approximately **60-90 minutes**.
- Choose whether the interview will be conducted **in person** at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust or via **Tavi Zoom** (a secure platform).

- Discuss your experiences, reflections, and views related to the study topic.
- Consent to the **audio recording** of the interview, which will be transcribed for analysis.

There are no physical risks associated with this study. While discussing personal or professional experiences, you may encounter mild emotional discomfort. If this occurs, the researcher will provide appropriate support and refer you to professional services if needed.

Confidentiality and anonymity

- All information you provide will be kept confidential and will only be accessible to the researcher (Azra Klempic) and the research supervisor (Dr Maria Wedlock). All data will be securely stored on the secure University of Essex OneDrive server.
- Your interview transcripts will be de-identified, and once de-identification is complete, all original recordings and de-identified transcripts will be permanently deleted.
- Your identity will be de-identified in all publications and reports.
- All identifying details will be removed or altered in the analysis and reporting process.
- Confidentiality is subject to legal limitations, meaning that if any disclosure of harm to yourself or others occurs, the researcher is legally obligated to report it to the relevant authorities.

Belief System Identity and Data Usage:

- While your personal details will be de-identified, your belief system identity may be identified in the research findings where relevant to understanding the data;
- Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym, but your belief system identity (e.g., religious, secular, atheist) may be mentioned alongside this pseudonym when discussing specific experiences;

- Due to the small sample size and specific nature of roles, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed even with pseudonymization.

Safeguarding

- As a professional working with care-experienced young people, you maintain your usual safeguarding duties throughout the research process
- If any safeguarding concerns arise during the interview:
 - The interview will be paused;
 - You will be supported to contact your Virtual School Head and/or Designated Safeguarding Lead;
 - The incident will be documented following appropriate professional protocols
- If historical safeguarding concerns are discussed:
 - I will check whether these were previously reported;
 - If not reported, you will be supported to report through appropriate channels;
 - The incident will be documented.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to:

- Decline to take part without any consequences.
- Withdraw your data up until the point of de-identification, which will occur 4 weeks following your interview, without giving a reason.
- Request the withdrawal of unprocessed data you have provided.
- After the de-identification date (4 weeks post-interview):
 - All identifying information will be removed from the transcripts;
 - All digital recordings will be securely destroyed;

- De-identified data cannot be withdrawn as it will be part of the research analysis.

Your decision to participate or withdraw will have no impact on your employment or professional relationships.

Data Protection

- Data collected during the study will be retained in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection and Handling Policies, which comply with the **UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)**.
- Research data will be securely stored for **6- 10 years** after the completion of the study and then securely destroyed.

Further information on the Trust's Data Protection and Handling Policies can be found here:

- [Publication - Tavistock and Portman](#)
- [Data protection policy - Tavistock and Portman](#)
- [Privacy policy - Tavistock and Portman](#)

Potential Benefits and Risks

By participating, you will:

- Reflect on your professional practice in a structured and supportive environment.
- Contribute to research aimed at improving support systems for professionals and care-experienced children and young people.

While no significant risks are anticipated, discussing your experiences may evoke emotional responses. Support mechanisms will be available to you, including access to professional resources such as:

- **Education Support Partnership** (<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>)
- **Mind** (<https://www.mind.org.uk>)
- **Samaritans** (<https://www.samaritans.org>)

Contact for Further Information

For more information about the study or your involvement, please contact:

Azra

Klempic

Email: aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

Appendix G: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Title of Research

Navigating Personal Beliefs in Professional Practice: Perspectives of Virtual School Educational Professionals Working with Care-Experienced Children and Young People

The Research Team

Researcher: Azra Klempic

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Email: aklempic@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Supervisor: Dr Maria Wedlock

Email: mwedlock@tavi-port.nhs.uk

This research is being conducted as part of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust.

Please tick each box to confirm you agree with the statement:

[] I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

[] I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I understand I can withdraw my data up until the data is de-identified (4 weeks following my interview).

[] I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

[] I understand that de-identified quotes from my interview may be used in publications, including the thesis and potential journal articles.

[] I understand that while all information will be kept confidential, there are legal limitations to confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self or others may occur.

[] I understand that my belief system identity (religious, secular, or atheist) will be identified in the research findings where relevant to understanding the data, though my real name will be replaced with a pseudonym.

[] I understand that due to the small sample size of this study (6-8 participants), there will be distinct limitations in the level of anonymity that can be afforded, although all reasonable steps will be taken to protect my identity through pseudo-anonymisation in any publications or presentations arising from this research.

[] I understand that as a professional working with care-experienced young people, I maintain my usual safeguarding duties throughout the research process.

☐ I understand that the research findings will be published as a doctoral thesis and may be presented at conferences or published in academic journals.

☐ I understand that my data will be stored securely on the University of Essex OneDrive server and retained for 6-10 years in accordance with the Trust's Data Protection and Handling Policies.

☐ I agree for my de-identified data to be used for the purposes of this research.

☐ I confirm that I have received and read the Trust's Privacy Policy.

☐ I agree to take part in this study.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____ Signature: _____

Name of Researcher: _____ Date: _____ Signature: _____

Appendix H: Example of Reflexive Journal Entry

I was left with mixed reactions... One level I found him warm, articulate & genuinely thoughtful, particularly when he spoke about relating to people as human beings first. His connection between his Catholic upbringing & the humanist values he has now, felt warm & thought about... There was something appealing about his optimism that I felt a connection with.

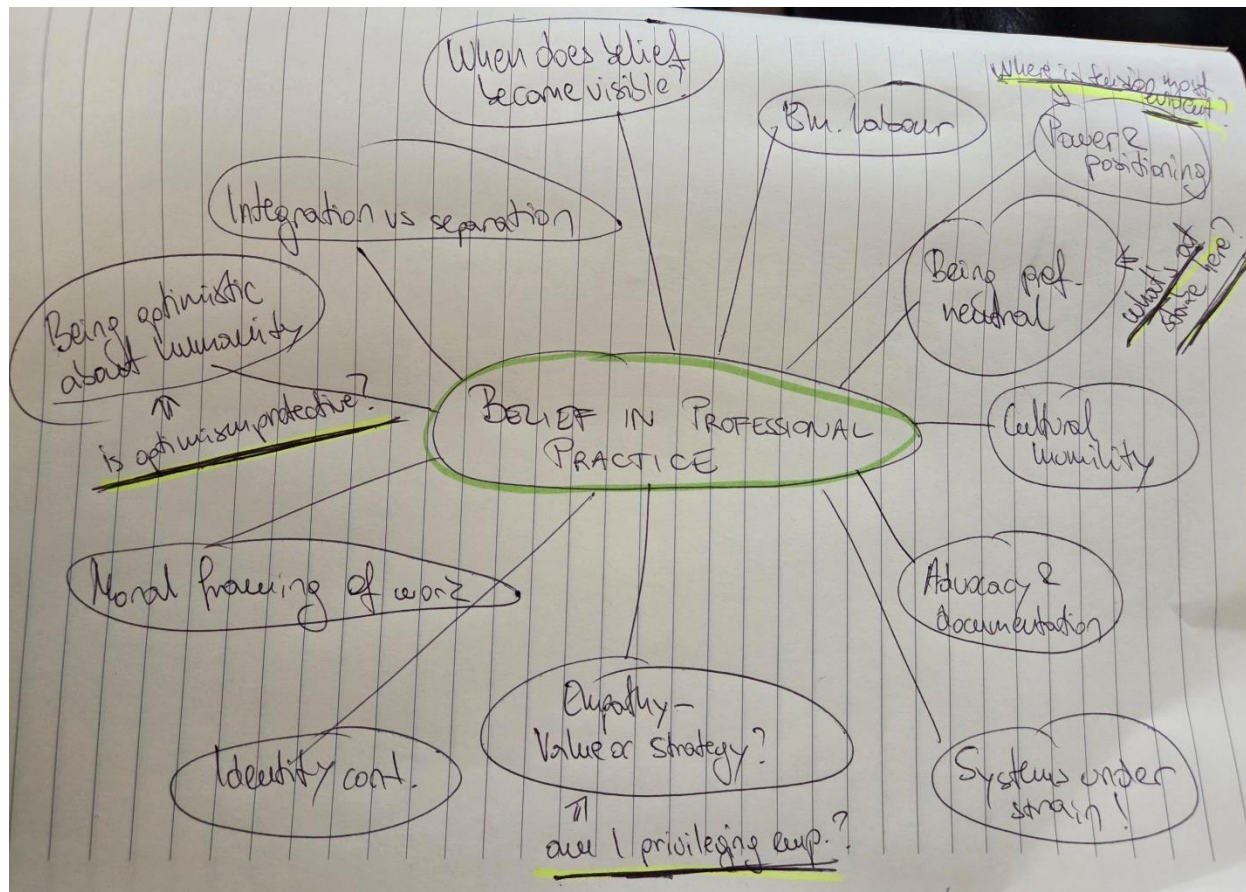
Still, I noticed a judgement rising in me during the interview, thinking: of course it's easy for you to be optimistic. He acknowledged his privilege himself & described his life as "lottery of life" (nothing he had vs drama he works with). But even with that, I wondered whether that optimism, if left unexplored, could dip into sth that diminishes

real difficulty / false optimism that smooths over worrying behaviours or harm (within systems) because it doesn't sit comfortably with his worldview, which is built on things generally working out.

What kind of complicated this further is that I somewhat recognised myself in his account. I often take a similar stance - seeing the good in ppl, leading with trust, choosing to be optimistic in prof. relationships. This made me think - how do people perceive me? Do I come across as genuinely open, or do they see naivety, or worse... maybe as a failure to take seriously what is actually happening in front of me.

Also, it was very interesting that he described very little tension in navigating his beliefs & his role, which I think is worth adding - not for lack of depth but considering what it might mean for some when belief & practice sit comfortably together with ongoing "friction". => It's a finding

Appendix I: Early Reflexive Analytic Map from Familiarisation Phase



Appendix J: Example of Early Transcript Coding (Interview 2)

Excerpt showing initial fine-grained engagement with participants' language and meaning

Participant 2 14:06: You know, I think professionally, but personally too, you know, for me. You know ¹⁵when you stop and think about actually what these children go through, you know, when you actually think about what, what you know. But sometimes it feels like I just kind of, you know that that that whole sense of sometimes they're moved around with us...few bits of belongings in a carrier bag.

Interviewer 14:32: Yeah, yeah.

Participant 2 14:33: You know their world is in a carrier bag. How can that be right in? You know, how can that be right? That...And I know ¹⁶the whole Buddhist thing is, you know, possessions, you know, it's not about possessions.

Interviewer 14:35: Yeah, yeah.

Participant 2 14:50: But actually, if it's not about possession, surely it's about feelings and connections.

Interviewer 14:55: Yeah, yeah.

Participant 2 14:56: And and sometimes I feel like maybe we're not doing... Sometimes I don't think not, and I don't think anybody's doing it because they're deliberately doing a bad job, but I think because of the systemic pressures, I think sometimes we maybe don't get either of those things right. And that's really tricky.

Interviewer 15:09: Yeah. Yeah. And how do you manage that what do you think? Like your personal beliefs alongside your professional role.

Participant 2 15:28: I think. Yeah, it's, you know, some sometimes you could end up feeling quite, you know, like, personally disturbed by it. And you can kind of feel like, actually, no, I'm going to make a mental note. I'm going to go back to that. I'm going to go back in the next team meeting or I'm going to go and talk to that social worker or I'm going to say actually, you know, that kind of didn't really feel quite right. You know, actually, we really didn't get a sense of this or we missed this or, you know, and it'll be that kind of...that becomes a bit like that person on your checklist that you keep actually then going back to check on because.

Interviewer 15:55: Yeah. OK.

Participant 2 16:09: So I sometimes it does that. Sometimes you just feel like you just feel quite helpless like you just can't. You just can't make an inroad in that system. Sometimes the systems are just so complicated and such a mess, and there are so many. You know, so many different people involved and yeah, that that can leave you feeling really quite sad. You know, you can feel quite sad, quite helpless. Ummm But but but because I think, you know, I suppose based on my own lived experience, you know, I've had to be quite tough and quite resilient and you know.

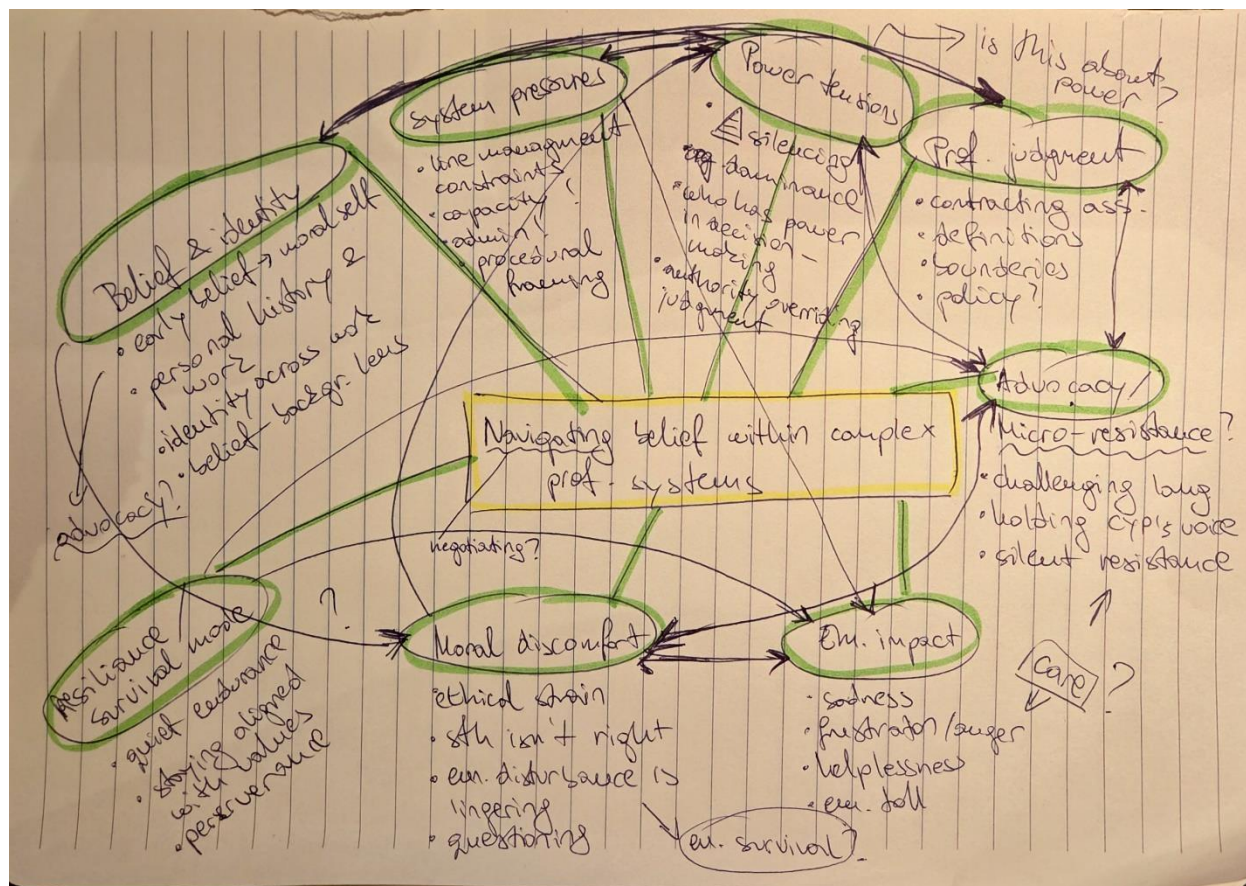
Appendix K: Corresponding Coding Table Extract with Reflexive Memos

		System over care	
2	When you stop and think about actually what these children go through... sometimes they're moved around with us...few bits of belongings in a carrier bag. You know their world is in a carrier bag. How can that be right?	Distress at disruption of stability and belonging Moral discomfort with care system practice Ethical distress at children's lived reality	As she described children being moved with their belongings in a carrier bag, I felt her distress very strongly. The imagery was striking and emotionally affecting, and I noticed a sense of shared moral unease as she questioned how this could be right. I need to remain aware of how this emotional resonance may heighten the salience of this extract for me, while recognising that her distress is explicitly articulated and central to how she
2	...the whole Buddhist thing is...it's not about possessions. But actually, if it's not about possession, surely it's about feelings and	Belief system negotiated in practice. Reinterpreting principles through care Values hierarchy (connection over	
2	And and sometimes I feel like maybe we're not doing... Sometimes I don't think not, and I don't think anybody's doing it because they're deliberately doing a bad job, but I think because of the systemic pressures, I think sometimes we maybe don't get either of those	Systemic pressures leading to compromised practice Non-blaming interpretation of professional shortcomings Moral complexity of working under constraint	
2	I'm going to make a mental note. I'm going to go back to that. I'm going to go back in the next team meeting or I'm going to go and talk to that social worker or I'm going to say actually, you know, that kind of didn't really feel quite right...we really didn't get a sense of this or we missed this...	Advocacy through persistence Holding the thread across meetings Micro-acts of resistance	I was struck by the participant's determination. I experienced her actions as powerful forms of resistance within constrained systems. I noticed a sense of admiration for how she fought back through persistence and follow-up, and I need to remain mindful of how this appreciation may shape the prominence I give to this extract. At the same time, her account clearly illustrates how advocacy can operate through subtle, everyday
2	Sometimes you just feel like you just feel quite helpless like you just can't...make an inroad in that system. Sometimes the systems are just so complicated and such a mess, and there are so many...that can leave you feeling really quite sad...you can feel quite sad, quite helpless	Professional helplessness Emotional toll of system complexity Limits of influence	I felt her sadness and helplessness very strongly, and I noticed an emotional pull toward her account. I will need to be mindful of how this affective response may influence the weight I give to this experience in my analysis, while recognising that her emotion is explicitly and meaningfully articulated.
2	...based on my own lived experience, you know, I've had to be quite tough and quite resilient... so I think that tenaciousness comes	Personal resilience as resource Lived experience shaping practice Perseverance ethic	This made me reflect on my practice and my lived experiences, and how they shape my work, and the field of work in in
	Sometimes it pulls you out of role that when you're in a meeting that you know you can get joined into the fight because the fight is	Role tension (advocacy vs reflective practice) Fight mode vs relational care	

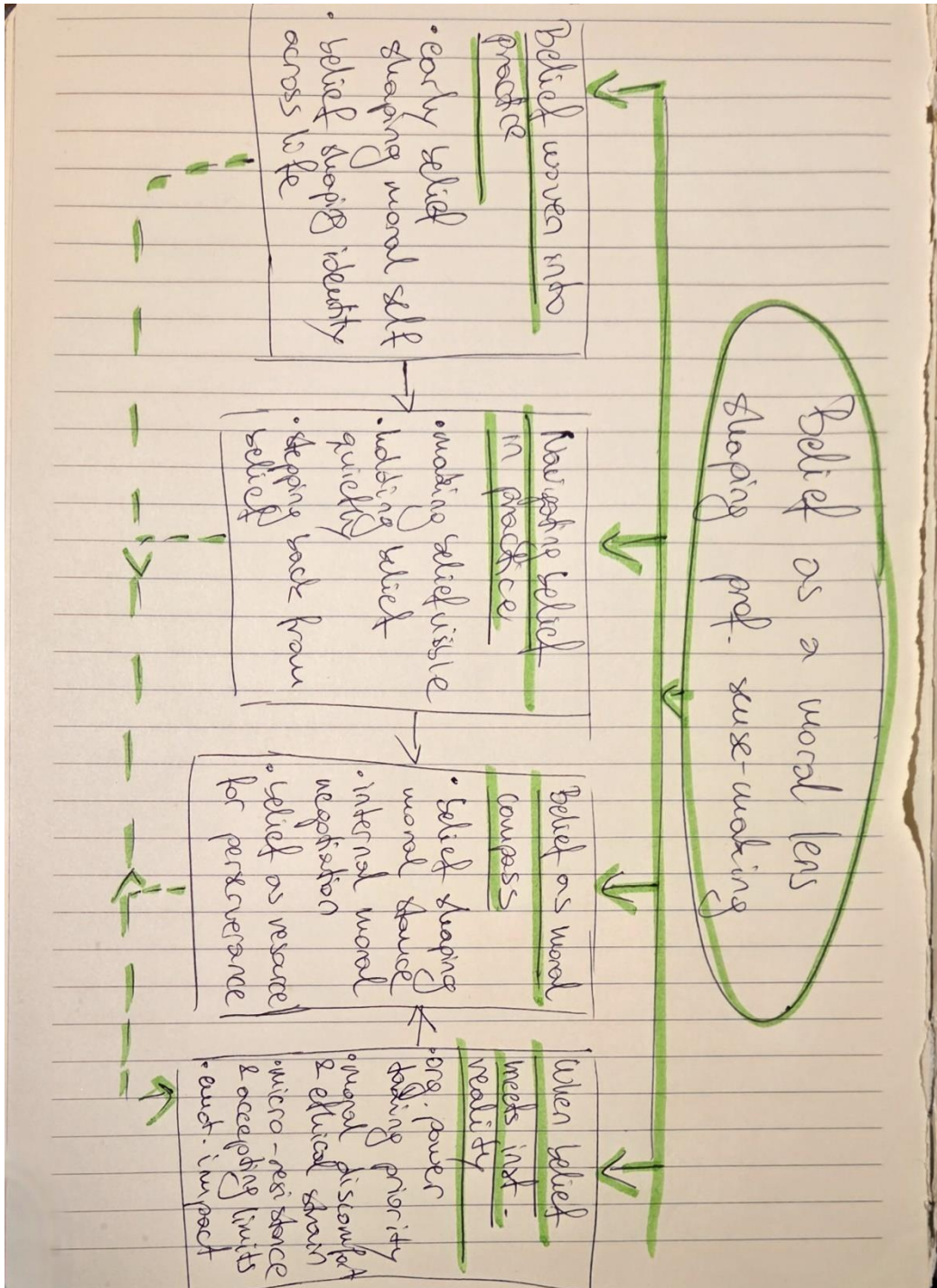
Appendix L: Example of Evolving Interpretive Coding (Interview 4)

4	When I read the situation, and that is ok, I'm not going to force myself on this child, knowing all of the stuff they get pulled out to do the PEP meetings that they have to do every term, you know the children and child looked after review meetings that they have, the social workers that they have to meet. I'm not going to be that person in their life and I can gather the information around them that I need. I definitely have some beliefs around cognitive cognitively assessing children that	Ethical resistance to procedural assessment norms	In this part of the interview, belief–practice tensions are articulated most clearly around assessment. The participant positions her reluctance to conduct cognitive assessments not as avoidance, but as an ethical stance grounded in sensitivity to trauma and to the cumulative impact of repeated professional involvement in care-experienced CYP's lives. Challenges from supervisors and colleagues are experienced less as differences of opinion and more as moments where psychological work and professional judgement feel overlooked or misunderstood. The term assessment becomes a focus through which belief, professional role, and system expectations come into tension, requiring ongoing clarification and negotiation. I noticed a sense of unease and frustration, particularly when she describes when her judgement is questioned by those with greater formal authority but less familiarity with the child. I was aware of feeling aligned with her ethical discomfort, which prompted me to pause and reflect on how my own professional values may shape what stands out to me in this data. Reflexivity itself is described as something actively sustained through training, dialogue, and invitation, rather than as an inherent or stable professional capacity, and its partial loss in service contexts is spoken about with a tone of longing for the reflective space once afforded during training.
		Assessment as potentially retraumatising	
		Child-centred judgement over protocol	
		Rejecting repeated cognitive testing	
4	There are times when I feel I have spent so much time reading, thinking, talking about a certain young person, and then it may be that I am in supervision. Or in a different kind of line management context and my supervisor questions my approach. I always feel like because I'm you know, because I feel like I know what is needed when I'm challenged, that I need to be doing something differently ummm I struggle with	Conditioning professional challenge on informed knowledge of the case	
		Supervision as site of tension	
		Feeling misunderstood by authority	
4	...I think they bandy the word assessment around and they don't really stop to think what that means...she said to me, when are you going to start your assessment?... it kind of it became clear that she was talking about a cognitive assessment... maybe that was me not clearly articulating what it is that I was doing- contracting for that, for the, for the intervention clearly enough	Clarifying professional language to protect ethical practice	
		Limited recognition of the range of EP assessment practices	
		Assessment carrying implicit expectations of cognitive testing	
4	I'm also being slightly held back by my line manager... they're very aware that I'm only one resource in their service of 70 odd adults... They've got my best interests at heart and they don't want me to be so running ragged that I don't want to stick around. ...working with the constraints of the system around me where there's sort of high expectations of of churning through umm umm you know, needs assessments as well as offering a more ummm And a more full and and kind of tailored tailored service for	Noticing and checking her own judgement of others	
		Trying to practise in line with beliefs within system pressures	
		Gratitude alongside frustration	
		Awareness of limited EP capacity within the service	
		Managers are holding system survival in	

Appendix M: Working Thematic Map Illustrating Early Theme Clusters



Appendix N: Refined Thematic Map Following Development and Review (Phase Four)



Appendix O: Placement Research Approval

Research Proposal Overview

Navigating Personal Beliefs in Professional Practice:

Perspectives of Virtual School Educational Professionals Working with Care-Experienced Children and Young People

Research Overview

This research seeks to explore how educational professionals employed by Virtual Schools navigate their personal belief systems (religious, atheist, or secular) when working with care-experienced children and young people (CYP). The study is particularly timely and relevant given the increasing religious and cultural diversity among care-experienced CYP, with 29% of Looked After Children (LAC) coming from diverse backgrounds (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). This includes rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in England, for whom religious identity often plays a crucial role in their sense of stability and belonging (Chase, 2013; DfE, 2023). The role of professionals - who also bring their own diverse belief systems and cultural identities - becomes increasingly significant in this context. However, regardless of whether a CYP and their supporting professional share similar or different backgrounds, these dynamics can influence how support and guidance are given, and ultimately, how the professionals navigate their own identity.

Research Aims

- To investigate how Virtual School professionals experience and make sense of navigating their personal belief systems when working with care-experienced children and young people
- To understand how professionals balance their personal belief systems with their professional responsibilities while supporting vulnerable students
- To explore how belief systems influence decision-making and approaches to culturally sensitive practice in increasingly diverse educational environments
- To contribute to developing more inclusive and effective practices that better serve care-experienced CYP while supporting the professionals who work with them

Methodology

- **Design:** Qualitative study using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)
- **Participants:** 6-8 educational professionals from Virtual Schools across UK local authorities
- **Data Collection:** Individual Semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes)
- **Location:** Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust or via Tavi Zoom
- **Analysis:** Detailed RTA analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Participant Criteria

Inclusion:

- 1) Direct work with care-experienced CYP within last academic year/three terms (which may span over two academic years). Direct work meaning:
 - Providing individual or group support sessions with CYP

- Delivering educational interventions to CYP
- Conducting assessments directly with CYP
- Meeting with CYP for mentoring or educational planning
- Facilitating learning or wellbeing activities with CYP

These interactions can occur either:

- In-person, i.e. at educational settings
 - Through video meetings
- 2) Identify with a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that shapes their worldview, values, and daily life;
 - 3) Willingness to reflect on belief system identity in professional practice.

Exclusion:

- 1) Purely administrative/managerial roles;
- 2) Those without a significant belief system (religious, atheist, or secular) that influences their worldview, values or daily life.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent sought from participants;
- Data protection and confidentiality:
 - Participants can withdraw data up until the point of de-identification (4 weeks following interview);
 - All data securely stored on University of Essex OneDrive server;

- De-identified data retained for 6-10 years in accordance with Trust policies;
- Belief systems will be identified in research findings where relevant to understanding the data;
- Due to small sample size, limitations in anonymity acknowledged.
- Safeguarding protocols:
 - Clear procedures for addressing safeguarding concerns;
 - Participants maintain their usual safeguarding duties;
 - Support for reporting any concerns through appropriate channels.
- Support structures:
 - Research supervision:
 - Monthly personal supervision
 - Weekly placement supervision
 - Regular research supervision at Tavistock
- Access to professional support services:
 - Education Support Partnership
 - Mind
 - Samaritans
- Clear protocols for managing potential participant distress
- Compliance with:

- UK GDPR requirements;
 - Trust Data Protection and Handling Policies;
 - BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct;
 - HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics.
- Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee's (TREC) ethical approval pending

Potential Impact

1. Professional Development

- Enhanced understanding of identity navigation in professional settings;
- Development of culturally sensitive approaches;
- Improved support systems for professionals.

2. Practice Enhancement

- Better support for care-experienced CYP;
- More inclusive educational environments;
- Enhanced cultural sensitivity in Virtual Schools.

3. Knowledge Contribution

- Addresses gap in understanding how Virtual School professionals manage the intersection of belief systems and professional practice.
- Contributes to professional development literature;
- Informs policy and practice in Virtual Schools.

Timeline

- Project Start: March 2025
- Project Completion: May 2026

I confirm that I have reviewed this research proposal and support its progression:

Name: Suzy Francis

Role: Principal Educational Psychologist

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Suzy Francis', written over a horizontal line.