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Protocol

The education of children in residential care: A systematic review of the enablers and barriers of educational attainment.

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Background

Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (UNCRC) states that children have the right to an education and that education should be provided to all on an equal opportunity basis. While looked after children have consistently been underachieving educationally (Evans et al., 2017), children in residential care have the lowest educational outcomes of all children in care and this can be seen on a global scale (Sebba et al., 2015). For example, in Northern Ireland, 50% of children in residential care aged 16-18, have no qualifications (Department of Health, 2024). While in Australia, children in residential care were particularly likely to have low educational scores (Maclean, Taylor and McDonald, 2017), as well as in Sweden which found that 28% of children in residential care had their school hours reduced to help with special educational needs compared to the 4% of children in foster care (Lagerlöf, 2016). It appears, children in residential care are not receiving equal opportunities regarding their educational journey with the Independent Children's Home Association indicating that "looked-after children in children's homes are discriminated against" (Parkes, 2019). This was in response to findings from a small scale poll of 53 children's homes which found that 58% felt that the School Admissions Code (Department for Education (DfE), 2021), a code which states that looked after children should be given highest priority allowing the local authority to admit a looked after child in a school regardless of if they have availability, was not being honoured.

Furthermore, a House of Commons (HoC) committee report highlighted the urgent need for attention to be placed on the educational attainment gap for children in residential care in England (2022). The report states that the way to increase educational attainment for children in

residential care is through early intervention however, found that spending on early intervention had declined by 48% while spending on later interventions i.e. youth justice had risen by 34%, illustrating how social services are intervening too late and at the point of crisis (HoC, 2022, paragraph 128).

While early intervention is key, when this is not possible, factors such as number of school/ placement changes, relationships with peers in school, and externalized/internalized behaviours can influence the education of children in residential care (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat, 2021). These factors were taken from a systematic review which looked at the factors that influence the schooling of children in residential care (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat, 2021). They were found to be the most consistent factors across the 26 studies reviewed, however, not all children in residential care have poor educational outcomes (Sebba et al., 2015). For some children residential care is a placement option which helps them find stability and safety (Cameron-Mathiassen et al., 2022). Studies have shown that when educational success was prioritised within the residential setting, young people were more determined to perform better academically (Kelly, Anthony and Krysik, 2019). The young people were asked about the challenges of maintaining educational success with the young people replying that it was strong relationships with residential staff which allowed them to flourish academically (Kelly, Anthony and Krysik, 2019).

While there has been an increase in interest and research assessing the relationship between education and children's residential homes in the last decade (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat, 2021), there continues to be gaps in the literature. There are very few studies, systematic reviews and scoping reviews that discuss the barriers and enablers of educational attainment specific to children in residential care, few studies that are co-produced or that promote the participation of children and young people through gaining their perspectives, and few studies, specifically including the perspectives of residential staff. The aim of this systematic review is to:

- Highlight the barriers and enablers faced by young people in residential care regarding their educational attainment.
- Gain the perspectives of residential staff in supporting young people in residential care with education.

- To ascertain the extent to which current literature covers these issues.

Rationale for study

Most existing systematic reviews, while highlighting important factors that impact educational attainment focus on children in care as a general population with few specifically discussing children's residential care despite this population having the poorest educational outcomes (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat, 2021). A systematic review by Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat (2021) has explicitly looked at the educational outcomes of children in residential care however, it merely states the factors which influence the school functioning of children in residential care. This systematic review however aims to shed further light onto the barriers and enablers to education for children in residential care and highlight the factors which impact the educational outcomes either positively or negatively, including ways in which educational attainment can be improved. In doing so will allow a better understanding into the experiences and perspectives of young people in residential care allowing for a thought-provoking systematic review that may aid in forming policies, practices, and further research. Every child has the right to an education that is of good standard (UNCRC, 1989), and young people in residential care should not be exempt from this. As there are more children entering residential care in the UK (HoC, 2022, paragraph 2), it is crucial that the educational outcomes of children in residential care are outlined clearly with the hope to improve these outcomes.

Method

A systematic review is a rigorous method for bringing together existing studies, ensuring that a full picture of current research is provided allowing for an in-depth analysis (McCafferty and Garcia, 2024) of education in children's residential homes. This systematic review will be conducted in accordance with the SCIE methodology for systematic reviews found in "SCIE systematic research reviews: guidelines" paragraphs 64-78 (Rutter et al., 2010).

Key questions. This systematic review will focus on several key questions:

1. How do residential childcare settings impact on young people's education?
2. What factors enable positive educational outcomes for young people in residential childcare settings?

3. What factors act as barriers for positive educational outcomes for young people in residential childcare settings?
4. What are young people's perceptions and experiences of education in a residential childcare setting?
5. What are the residential staff's perceptions and experiences of supporting young people's educational journey in a residential childcare setting?

By answering these questions, the complex relationship between education and residential childcare settings will be amplified. The review will consider qualitative and quantitative studies that provide a complete overview of the current state of research. While there are few current studies that discuss the impact of residential childcare settings on young people's educational success, this systematic review aims to amplify the low educational attainment of children in residential care as well as provide recommendations on how educational success can be improved.

Criteria for inclusion of studies in the review- Inclusion Criteria PICo (Lockwood, 2020).

Population: Young people of mandatory school age in a residential setting. In the UK, children in residential homes are aged 11-16 however, this age can differ depending on which country the children are in. Spain for example, has children of mandatory school age living in residential homes between the ages of 6- 16. Therefore, children and young people between the ages of 6-16 will be included in this review.

Interest: The review will include concepts on the enablers and barriers to educational attainment in children's residential care.

Context: Social work.

Types of studies: The search will be limited by the year of publication. The year of publications included will be begin from 2011 as a systematic review discussing the factors which impact school functioning for children in residential care found that research regarding this topic has increased over the last decade (Garcia-Molsosa, Collet-Sabé and Montserrat, 2021). Only studies in the English language which have been peer reviewed will be included. Both qualitative and quantitative studies will be included. This ensures the validity and reliability of the studies included (Kelly, Sadeghieh and Adeli, 2014). This systematic review will only use peer-

reviewed journals to ensure objectivity through reputable standards (Alfandari and Taylor, 2023). This certifies that articles included are of sound quality and reliable. This systematic review will comply with the guidance outlined by SCIE in their publication “SCIE systematic research reviews: guidelines” (Rutter et al., 2010). Other sources such as grey literature i.e. dissertations, policy documents, and theoretical material, although beneficial, are excluded as they are typically not peer reviewed and can be difficult to access.

Based on guidance by Rutter et al., (2010) the full exclusion criteria is presented in table form for ease and clarity (see appendix 1).

Searching

Key search terms will include (education OR school*) AND (“residential care” OR “group care” OR “residential cent*” OR orphanage OR “residential program*” OR “children’s home”) AND (child* OR kid* OR adolescen* OR teen* OR minor* OR “young people” OR “young person*” OR youth*). This search string was created by working with the Queen’s librarian who assisted in the identifying and inclusion of the terms mentioned. Broader terms such as “looked after children” were not included in the search string as, from the articles that I have read, this tends to refer to children in foster care and rarely, if ever, includes a large sample of children from residential care. Therefore, the search string is specific to children in residential care to ensure only articles, with a main focus on the educational attainment of children in residential care are included. An example of this search strategy for the Scopus database has been included in appendix 2, which was piloted beforehand to ensure it covered a wide range in searches. As Scopus is a multidisciplinary database, it was used to do a preliminary search displaying which subjects are closely aligned with my research questions. My initial search in Scopus showed that subjects such as social sciences and psychology were associated with my search string. I, therefore, used this information to search specific subject databases to ensure I was uncovering all articles regarding my research questions. Therefore, the searches will be conducted within databases representing social work, education, psychology and social sciences. Databases selected are within the remit of availability of databases within Queen’s University Belfast, thus I will be searching the below databases:

1. Scopus
2. Social Services Abstracts
3. Education Source
4. PsychInfo
5. International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS)
6. Social Science Citation Index (SSCI)

7. Cochrane library
8. Campbell collaboration

The search strategy will be further piloted and refined on all selected databases and will be adjusted accordingly.

Screening of material

Once the search is completed, the data will be exported to Endnote and then uploaded to Rayyan for screening, with duplicates being removed. A two-stage screening process will be utilised for this systematic review. The first stage will be to screen titles and abstracts retrieved from the searches on databases which will be screened by Caoimhe McCormick, with a random 20% of data being allocated by Caoimhe McCormick to Paul McCafferty and Davy Hayes. This data will be reviewed against the inclusion criteria for the review, ensuring consistency, accuracy, and reliability. Studies which pass the title and abstract screening stage will proceed to the second stage: full text screening (Rutter et al., 2010). This includes reading the full text for relevance, quality assessment, and data extraction of the included studies which will be completed by Caoimhe McCormick, with Paul McCafferty and Davy Hayes, being, again, allocated 20%, to ensure accuracy, consistency, and reliability. If, after full text screening, any studies are excluded, explanations will be reported in the systematic review. If there are any disagreements that arise during the screening of material, this will be resolved through discussion.

The screening of studies will be documented using a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021). The template of this has been included in Appendix 3.

Data extraction and key wording

Data extraction will follow the aims and research questions outlined above. I will use the data extraction tool as outlined in Appendix 4 (Taylor, Killick, and McGlade, 2015). This data extraction tool is designed to reveal explicit topics and review questions. This will be piloted and amended by the reviewer before data extraction takes place.

Quality appraisal of studies

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) quality appraisal checklist for qualitative studies will be utilised for this systematic review (NICE, 2012). The outline of this checklist has been included in Appendix 5. This checklist will assess the theoretical approach, study design, data collection, trustworthiness, analysis, ethics, and overall assessment (how well the reviewer feels the study was conducted) for each study included in the systematic review (NICE, 2012).

Quality assurance of processes

To ensure quality assurance in areas such as screening for inclusion, data extraction and quality assurance, Paul McCafferty and Davy Hayes will act as reviewers. As mentioned, Paul McCafferty and Davy Hayes, will be allocated, at random, 20% of the screening material during both the, title and abstract screening and full text screening, stages. This will ensure appropriate studies are being included and that data extraction tools, and quality appraisal of studies are being used correctly.

Data management and synthesis

As this systematic review will be reviewing qualitative and quantitative studies, narrative synthesis will be used (Popay et al., 2006). Guidance by Noyes et al., (2008), indicates that narrative synthesis can be utilised in any review, including both qualitative and quantitative reviews. There are four main aspects to narrative synthesis outlined by Popay et al., (2006):

1. *“Developing a theory of how the intervention works, why and for whom”*- informing decisions regarding the review questions.
2. *“Developing a preliminary synthesis of findings of included studies”* – organising findings to allow for patterns to be described.
3. *“Exploring relationships in the data”*- considering factors that could explain differences among study findings.
4. *“Assessing the robustness of the synthesis”*- assessing the strength of evidence included in the review.

A table describing the full framework for narrative synthesis has been included in appendix 6, taken from Popay et al., (2006), figure 2.

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Author contributions

Caoimhe McCormick and Norma Menabney (QUB librarian) refined the search strategy.

Dr Paul McCafferty and Professor Davy Hayes acted as reviewers and supervisors of Caoimhe in the production of the protocol.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest in this project.

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Appendix 1: Example of exclusion criteria for screening of papers.

Inclusion/ exclusion criteria		Guidance	Comments and queries
1	EXCLUDE: Date of publication before 2011	Exclude if published before 2011	
2	EXCLUDE: Language not English		
3	EXCLUDE: Publication type Not journal or research report	Exclude books, dissertation abstracts, trade magazines, policy and guidelines,	
4	EXCLUDE: Population anyone younger than 6 and older than 16	Must include children and young people of mandatory school age in residential childcare settings	
5	EXCLUDE: Scope Studies must be specific to children in residential childcare settings and focus mainly on their educational attainment.	Not about children in care or looked after children without explicitly stating that residential childcare settings are included. Not about the impact of COVID-19. Not about educational outcomes specific to children and young people in residential childcare settings for disabilities/ unaccompanied minors. Must include education of children and young people in residential care.	Include outcomes: mental health; social or wellbeing; service use; or socio-economic determinants
6	EXCLUDE: Research type Not empirical research	Must be empirical research or evaluative or synthesis (of	Include randomised experimental and controlled experimental studies.

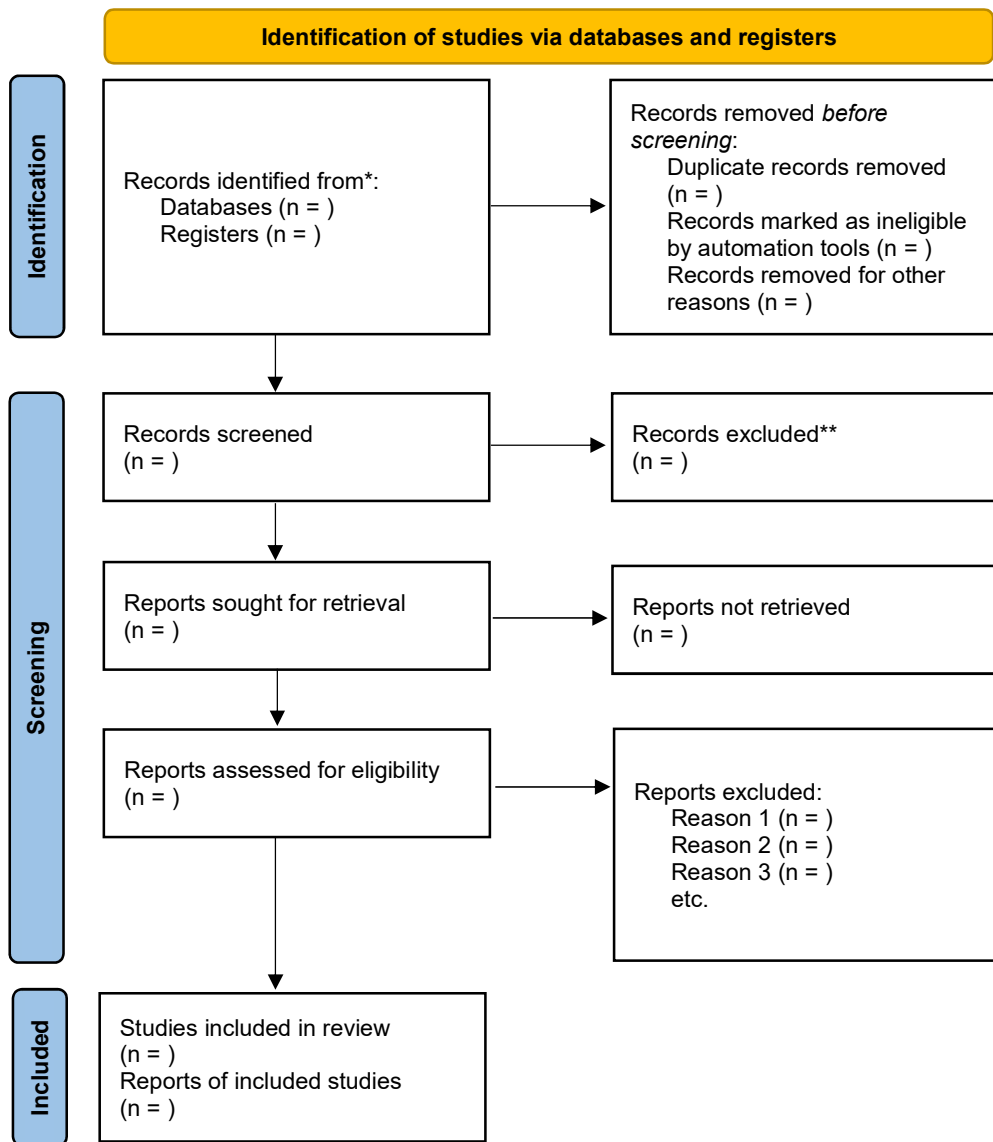
		empirical studies) or review	<p>Comparative or longitudinal studies, evaluation studies or reviews citing evidence. Include case studies</p> <p>Exclude descriptive studies, editorial, commentary, opinion piece, vignette, briefing or ephemera. Can include qualitative studies if they include young people or residential staff's perspectives.</p>
7	EXCLUDE: Insufficient details to identify reference, or make an informed decision		

Appendix 2- Examples of search string in Scopus

SCOPUS search undertaken on 03/02/25

#	Search	Limits	Results
S1	(education OR school*) AND (“residential care” OR “group care” OR “residential cent*” OR orphanage OR “residential program*” OR “children’s home”) AND (child* OR kid* OR adolescen* OR teen* OR minor* OR “young people” OR “young person*” OR youth*)	English language Peer reviewed Publication dates: 2011-current Document type: articles	1,601

Appendix 3- PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only.



*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71. This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Appendix 4 - Data Extraction tool (Taylor, Killick and McGlade, 2015).

This will be piloted and amended by reviewer of the studies.

Publication name

Date

Author

Country

Research design

Sample

Data collection

Main findings/ themes

Limitations

Strengths

Recommendations

Appendix 5

Checklist taken from Methods for the development of NICE public health guidance (third edition) (appendix H)

Study identification: Include author, title, reference, year of publication		
Guidance topic:	Key research question/aim:	
Checklist completed by:		
Theoretical approach		
1. Is a qualitative approach appropriate? For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the research question seek to understand processes or structures, or illuminate subjective experiences or meanings? • Could a quantitative approach better have addressed the research question? 	Appropriate Inappropriate Not sure	Comments:
2. Is the study clear in what it seeks to do? For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the purpose of the study discussed – aims/objectives/research question/s? • Is there adequate/appropriate reference to the literature? • Are underpinning values/assumptions/theory discussed? 	Clear Unclear Mixed	Comments:
Study design		
3. How defensible/rigorous is the research design/methodology?	Defensible	Comments:

<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the design appropriate to the research question? • Is a rationale given for using a qualitative approach? • Are there clear accounts of the rationale/justification for the sampling, data collection and data analysis techniques used? • Is the selection of cases/sampling strategy theoretically justified? 	<p>Indefensible</p> <p>Not sure</p>	
<p>Data collection</p>		
<p>4. How well was the data collection carried out?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the data collection methods clearly described? • Were the appropriate data collected to address the research question? • Was the data collection and record keeping systematic? 	<p>Appropriately</p> <p>Inappropriately</p> <p>Not sure/inadequately reported</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>Trustworthiness</p>		
<p>5. Is the role of the researcher clearly described?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the relationship between the researcher and the participants been adequately considered? • Does the paper describe how the research was explained and presented to the participants? 	<p>Clearly described</p> <p>Unclear</p> <p>Not described</p>	<p>Comments:</p>

<p>6. Is the context clearly described?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the characteristics of the participants and settings clearly defined? • Were observations made in a sufficient variety of circumstances • Was context bias considered 	<p>Clear</p> <p>Unclear</p> <p>Not sure</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>7. Were the methods reliable?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was data collected by more than 1 method? • Is there justification for triangulation, or for not triangulating? • Do the methods investigate what they claim to? 	<p>Reliable</p> <p>Unreliable</p> <p>Not sure</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>Analysis</p>		
<p>8. Is the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the procedure explicit – i.e. is it clear how the data was analysed to arrive at the results? • How systematic is the analysis, is the procedure reliable/dependable? • Is it clear how the themes and concepts were derived from the data? 	<p>Rigorous</p> <p>Not rigorous</p> <p>Not sure/not reported</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>9. Is the data 'rich'?</p> <p>For example:</p>	<p>Rich</p> <p>Poor</p>	<p>Comments:</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well are the contexts of the data described? • Has the diversity of perspective and content been explored? • How well has the detail and depth been demonstrated? • Are responses compared and contrasted across groups/sites? 	<p>Not sure/not reported</p>	
<p>10. Is the analysis reliable?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did more than 1 researcher theme and code transcripts/data? • If so, how were differences resolved? • Did participants feed back on the transcripts/data if possible and relevant? • Were negative/discrepant results addressed or ignored? 	<p>Reliable</p> <p>Unreliable</p> <p>Not sure/not reported</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>11. Are the findings convincing?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the findings clearly presented? • Are the findings internally coherent? • Are extracts from the original data included? • Are the data appropriately referenced? • Is the reporting clear and coherent? 	<p>Convincing</p> <p>Not convincing</p> <p>Not sure</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>12. Are the findings relevant to the aims of the study?</p>	<p>Relevant</p> <p>Irrelevant</p> <p>Partially relevant</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
<p>13. Conclusions</p>	<p>Adequate</p>	<p>Comments:</p>

<p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How clear are the links between data, interpretation and conclusions? • Are the conclusions plausible and coherent? • Have alternative explanations been explored and discounted? • Does this enhance understanding of the research topic? • Are the implications of the research clearly defined? <p>Is there adequate discussion of any limitations encountered?</p>	<p>Inadequate</p> <p>Not sure</p>	
Ethics		
<p>14. How clear and coherent is the reporting of ethics?</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? • Are they adequately discussed e.g. do they address consent and anonymity? • Have the consequences of the research been considered i.e. raising expectations, changing behaviour? • Was the study approved by an ethics committee? 	<p>Appropriate</p> <p>Inappropriate</p> <p>Not sure/not reported</p>	<p>Comments:</p>
Overall assessment		
<p>As far as can be ascertained from the paper, how well was the study conducted? (see guidance notes)</p>	<p>++</p> <p>+</p> <p>-</p>	

Full framework of the main elements in a narrative synthesis.

(Popay et al., 2006, figure 2).

Main elements of synthesis	Effectiveness Reviews	Implementation Reviews
<p>1. Developing a theoretical model of how the interventions work, why and for whom</p>	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform decisions about the review question and what types of studies to review • To contribute to the interpretation of the review's findings • To assess how widely applicable those findings may be 	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To inform decisions about the review question and what types of studies to review • To contribute to the interpretation of the review's findings • To assess how widely applicable those findings may be
<p>2. Developing a preliminary synthesis</p>	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To organise findings from included studies to describe patterns across the studies in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The direction of effects o The size of effects 	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To organise findings from included studies in order to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Identify and list the facilitators and barriers to implementation reported o Explore the relationship between reported facilitators and barriers
<p>3. Exploring relationships in the data</p>	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consider the factors that might explain any differences in direction and size of effect across the included studies 	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To consider the factors that might explain any differences in the facilitators and/or barriers to successful implementation across included studies • To understand how and why interventions have an effect
<p>4. Assessing the robustness of the synthesis product</p>	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide an assessment of the strength of the evidence for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Drawing conclusions about the likely size and direction of effect o Generalising conclusions on effect 	<p>Purpose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide an assessment of the strength of the evidence for drawing conclusions about the facilitators and/or barriers to implementation identified in the synthesis. Generalising the product of

	size to different population groups and/or contexts	the synthesis to different population groups and/or contexts
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