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Sarah Race

Clark University, srace@clarku.edu

Shay Sotelo

Clark University, ssotelo@clarku.edu

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Adoptive Parents and Teachers Reflect on Adoptees' School Challenges: A Qualitative Analysis

Shay Sotelo '22 & Sarah Race '22, Sponsor: Dr. Abbie E. Goldberg

Abstract

This qualitative study explored reflections of 6 teachers with varying experience in K-12 settings and 5 parents on their children's experiences navigating school challenges, relationships, and extra supports. These factors affect parents' and adoptees' experiences with teachers and consequently, adoptees' psychosocial development and academic outcomes. Results suggest that most parents and teachers report negative feelings leading to a lack of communication and inaccessibility to adequate school-based supports. Findings hold implications for more comprehensive, trauma-informed, and adoption competent training for teachers and support staff.

Introduction

Adopted individuals, and especially those adopted by LGBTQ+ parents, are frequently subjected to stigma and adoption microaggressions. This is particularly true of transracially adopted children, as they hold multiple intersecting minority identities and are often more visibly distinguishable as adopted, based on their physical appearance (White et al., 2021).

A child's physical environment strongly contributes to their psychosocial and identity development, emotional wellbeing, and positive academic performance. The significant amount of time that children tend to spend in a school setting means the experiences and relationships that are formed in this microsystem are critical to a child's identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Adoptees and children in foster care have generally lower academic success than their non-adopted peers due to the limited opportunities and frequent placement changes or moves (Emerson & Lovitt, 199).

Furthermore, adoptive parents often act as liaisons between their children and teachers regarding information about their child's adoptive status, developmental disorders, and academic challenges. The relationship between parents and teachers or school administration must be cohesive and collaborative in order to better support adoptees in decreasing negative school views and poor academic outcomes (Novara et al., 2018).

Current Study

The current study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Intersectional Feminist Theory.

The Ecological Systems Theory states that one's environment impacts development, with microsystems and mesosystems most directly impacting the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Intersectional Feminist Theory takes into consideration multiple interlocking oppressed identities and the stigma that people with these identities face, as well as acknowledges the complexity and nuance of identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Feminist theory posits that gender-based stigma is widespread and is visible in conventionally hierarchical structures, such as education (Allen, 1988).

Research Question

How do parent-teacher relationships, level of education and training among teachers, and availability of school supports impact the experience of adoptees, adoptive parents, and teachers within a school setting?

Methods

The current exploratory study consists of four focus groups with a total of 6 teachers and 5 parents who spoke on behalf of 6 adoptive children around the ways in which parent and adoptee positive or negative experiences with teachers and school administration affect adoptee's psychosocial development and academic outcomes.

Most teachers are women (83.3%), white (83.3%), and have taught in public schools (83.3%). As for the parents, all are women, and a majority identify as queer (60%) with adopted children of color (66.7%). Parent focus group participants had children who (a) ranged in age from elementary to high school age, (b) were mostly of color, and (c) some of whom were adopted from the child welfare system and some of whom were adopted privately and domestically.

Focus groups were 1-hour semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom and transcribed in 2021 as part of a larger longitudinal study exploring diverse adoptive families and their adoptees experiences with a variety of topics related to navigating the world with their adoptive identities. Thematic analysis, an adaptable method for identifying and categorizing significant patterns within a qualitative data set, was utilized in examining the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Select demographics are listed in Table 1.

Participant Characteristics

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Teachers (n=6) (n, %)	Parents (n=5) (n, %)	Children (n=6) (n, %)
Gender			
Female	5 (83%)	5 (100%)	4 (66%)
Male	1 (16%)	0 (0%)	2 (33%)
Race			
White	5 (83%)	3 (60%)	1 (16%)
POC (unspecified)	2 (33%)	2 (40%)	4 (66%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (16%)

Results

Parent, Teacher, and School Administration Relationship

A majority of parents reported more negative encounters with teachers and school administration than positive encounters, leading to negative feelings such as anger and disappointment which creates a sense of distrust and an overall lack of communication or understanding within the relationship exemplified by this mother's experience:

No matter which school you go to, no matter what type of school it is—they all try but it's almost as though there's this written narrative about your child because of their background, because of when this happened, and they were adopted. That this is just going to happen because of that, not that we can't try something different— 'Well this is just why'— the narrative has been established.

Most teachers reported that a lack of communication between parents, teachers, school administration, and other supports such as social workers, occupational therapists, and paraeducators regarding adoptive or foster children's adoptive status, existing mental and developmental disorders, and overall academic or home life issues create barriers in understanding the ways teachers can effectively support adoptees as best reported by this teacher's account:

When I think about information and how important information can be: a few years ago, I had an ELL student who was a refugee but was also in foster care, who had a bad background [...] So, it's really important, I find, because we can interpret the behavior as being naughty or we can interpret the behavior as language because something's bothering this kid, or they're having an issue right now that they don't have the language to deal with.

Adoptee School Struggles

Many parents reported that the ability to advocate and obtain extra supports were not easily accessible and further perpetuating negative feelings of being misunderstood leading to parents viewing teachers and school administration as unhelpful and lacked motivation to create comprehensive academic support plans for their children as outlined by this parents' statement:

[Youngest child] had a para to help him deescalate—he can't deal with noise, really crowded situations like assemblies, and the principal literally took my son's para, and assigned it to another kid, and then had [youngest child] go with the class to an assembly and was surprised when he lost his mind in the assembly. So, there were a lot of things, a lot of teachers not even reading the IEP. So, it's been a struggle every year.

Training and Further Education for Parents, Teachers, and School Administration

All teachers recognized that while some may have training and knowledge on mental health and trauma, none had any comprehensive training that specifically focused on adoptive or foster families and children leading to negative feelings against the general school system for the lack of accessible and available trainings to further their knowledge of adoption and foster care and how to better support adopted students exemplified by this teacher's experience:

There's got to be some way to get this information out to the people who need it most. And the other thing is that I still feel like I'm tip-toeing about how to even talk about it. Because I feel like I'm talking about something that's negative, and it isn't necessarily. And it's just part of someone's experience. And being in a foster home could mean so many different things. There's so many different scenarios that it could be, that I think it comes back to: "I don't know how to talk about it, so I can't address it. Because I don't have enough labels to categorize and describe it in a way that feels comfortable and informative and not negative and isolating.

Conclusion

Parents and adoptees often report negative experiences when advocating for more school-based supports and trauma-informed, adoption competent care from teachers and school administration. Findings hold implications for school systems to potentially create opportunities for teachers, school counselors, and general school staff and administration to further their education and receive trauma-informed and adoption and foster care competent training. Schools must acknowledge the unique challenges and vulnerabilities that adoptees and adoptive families encounter and its effects on school functioning. Parents and teachers alike must recognize that an open line of communication and collaboration acts as a protective factor for adoptive and/or foster children's needs and experiences as students.