

## Adoptive Children: The Invisible Student Population

November is truly a special month. Fall leaves have begun to rain down upon the ground and Christmas lights are already being hung by giddy children and adults alike. November is also something else— adoption awareness month. Adoption is defined as the act of legally claiming another person's child as your own. Although adoption is in many ways a beautiful thing, it remains a taboo topic for many. This bias against non-traditional families not only affects adoptive parents but their children, ultimately presenting obstacles within their youngsters' education. Due to differential treatment, past histories of trauma, and inflexible curriculum, adoptive students of elementary age and beyond often face added challenges when circulating through the US public school system. Educators must commit to supporting this vulnerable group of children by adapting assignments to fit students with diverse backgrounds and instituting Trauma-Sensitive Schooling practices in their classrooms. Embracing these classroom reforms would enable children of adoption to reach their full potential.

Adopted students tend to struggle through the US public school system, as they are often treated differently by school staff in comparison to their non-adopted peers. Once they are made aware of a student's situation, it's incredibly easy for educators with no knowledge or experience with adoption to view these children through the lens of pity. This can make adoptees- especially young elementary school students- feel disconnected and wary of trusting their teachers. This is detrimental to their long-term academic success. Educators may even have lower expectations for an adopted child's performance in class, believing that they are capable of less due to their history or background. Instead of being encouraged to strive for their best like their peers, adoptees in school are generally allowed to simply 'float' through the system. As long as these

students don't bring too much adverse attention their way, they are passively ignored- much like any other type of outlier student. Even in the best-case scenario in which a teacher is attentive to a student's progress, they might still face pressure from their superiors to promote children for the sake of the school's reputation. That usually means teachers promote students- many who are adopted- to the next grade level even if they have not shown adequate academic progression, allowing them to fall farther and farther behind each year.

This explains the graduation rates of adopted children versus non-adopted children of their age. When looking at the effects of a student's adoptive status in school, it's worthwhile to observe literature regarding foster youth, as these two groups have many similarities (a non-biological family/guardian, both have existed within the same welfare system, and often have experienced the same socioeconomic conditions). One such valuable source is "Foster Youth's Educational Challenges and Supports: Perspectives of Teachers, Foster Parents, and Former Foster Youth" which was published in the *Journal of Research and Development in Education*. In said source, the author(s) state that akin to adoptive students, "Approximately 50% of youth in foster care graduate from high school by the time they are 18, compared to 82% of the general population."



As a child of adoption myself and a college student, I can personally attest to these

students through curricular reform would be to reimagine mandatory family projects. Family projects- although seemingly innocent- can be hard to complete for children with “nontraditional” homes. In a Pittsburg Gazette Article, titled “Family Tree School Project Has New Shades of Meanings”, the structure and validity of rigidly required family projects are discussed by both parents and educators of elementary school-aged children. Amid our changing world, where the average family is becoming more and more variegated, New York elementary school teacher Linda Chu explains that when assigning a family tree project in her class, she “let them [students] include whoever is important to them instead of demanding that they fill in the blanks for a mother and father who may not be there” (Holloway, P5). Some teachers might even offer multiple forms of the assignment to fulfill grade requirements- allowing students to turn in timelines, “family orchards”, or essays to tell their story the way that they see fit. This gives the student more freedom to talk about their background in a meaningful way and with pride, not shame. Both modifications would make adopted children feel more comfortable in class, thus improving their performance in the long run. Apart from establishing state-wide standards for family-oriented curriculum, fostering open dialogue about adoption in class can ease the nerves of children unsure of sharing such a personal part of themselves. As explained by The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAP), it can be hard to establish a safe and fulfilling classroom environment for adoptive students, especially when you have no personal connection to adoption. IFAP recommends for teachers to “Discuss adoption as a positive and normal part of families. Include adoption as part of lesson plans about multicultural, blended, or “unique” families; during discussions about genetics or inherited characteristics; or when literature has themes of adoption or foster care in the story” (10). Talking about adoption in a mundane manner

allows the stigma children may feel about themselves or their peers to dissipate, allowing for closer classroom connections and better communication about seemingly “taboo” topics.

However, not every teacher is as flexible and open-minded with their pupils. Many still believe in the superiority of biological families and require their students to trace their genetic familial lines when completing family projects. Educators like Mark Waggoner- a fourth-grade teacher from Wisconsin- claims that “No matter how much they [the student] love the person [non-biological parent], they are not part of a child's ancestry. It would not be a true family tree” (P29). When talking about curricular change regarding the wellbeing of adoptive students, it truly can only go so far. It would be ideal to establish school-wide standards involving how a teacher can interweave family-oriented assignments into their class. However, the preconceived notions a teacher may possess could tarnish any good ground laid. How can you expect teachers to modify family projects and support adopted students when they may not even see adoptive families as valid. In many cases, if you want marginalized children to feel comfortable while receiving their education, you have to educate the teacher as well.

The best way to educate teachers and staff on how to support adoptive children (among







Works Cited

Holloway, Lynette. "Family Tree School Project Has New Shades Of Meanings."

, 7 Feb. 1999, Accessed 20 Nov. 2021.

Moyer, April M., and Abbie E. Goldberg. "Foster Youth's Educational Challenges and

Supports: Perspectives of Teachers, Foster Parents, and Former Foster Youth."

, vol. 37, no. 2, 2019, pp. 123–136.,

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00640-9>.

Okoya, Wenimo Chaunne. "Adoption of Trauma Sensitive Practices in NYC Elementary-Level

Community Schools", Teachers College, Columbia University. ProQuest Dissertations

Publishing, 2019. 13882432.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2242498341?accountid=39846>.

"Community Practitioner." Vol. 91, Iss. 8, London, Oct. 2018.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2129964819?accountid=39846>.

"How to Create a More Inclusive Classroom for Adopted Students", Curriculum Review;

Metuchen Vol. 55, Iss. 3, (Nov 2015): 10-11.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/1735314111?accountid=39846>.