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 *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*. 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 of high school students" (Moyer & Goldberg, 124). This startling statistic proves that adopted students are disproportionately held back from graduation due to a lack of preparation in early grades (elementary school) and ultimately graduate high school at lower rates. Adoptive students are not only underserved in our existing public school system, their futures are actively harmed by it.

In some instances, it's the curriculum that is harmful to the child. It's all too common for classes to have mandatory family projects- ones where you show pictures of your family, talk about where they're from, and give your life story. For children with checkered pasts or those

who are sensitive to talking about their histories, this can be uncomfortable and ostracizing—especially if it's something which they have to announce to the class. Adopted students may feel othered or less than when hearing about the seemingly perfect stories of their classmates' families. Children and parents alike might be confused as to which family to track: the child's adoptive family, or their biological one. Many adoptive families dread these projects, as they can unearth unpleasant feelings and cause unprepared anguish to the child. Most adopted children aren't aware of their maternal and paternal ancestral lines, making such projects nearly impossible to complete. Left unable to complete the assignment, a student may even question their validity as an adoptive child, since their peers' families look so much different from their own.

That's exactly it- adopted children are not like other children. Statistically speaking, adoptees are more likely to have emotional or behavioral issues, struggle to form positive relationships, and possess learning disabilities or developmental disorders at a higher rate than the general public (Moyer & Goldberg, 124). These characteristics often stem from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) common among many adoptive children and the trauma that accompanies them. As explained in the October 2018 issue of a long-running publication for Counselors called Community Practitioner, "School can be a distressing experience for adopted children, making it hard for them to cope or settle…It's an unfamiliar environment, which can make them feel unsafe." (McConnel, P1). This can be especially true if proper accommodations are not made by the school to make the child dealing with ACEs feel comfortable. Without accessible avenues to combat these obstacles in the classroom, a student might begin to rebel in the form of frequent outbursts or temper tantrums. Unequipped to handle such complex emotions at their young age, a child in crisis can be mistakenly judged as a child with malicious intent.

As a child of adoption myself and a college student, I can personally attest to these struggles which I've previously mentioned. In the beginning, I was ecstatic to go to school- until I wasn't. From the moment I acquainted myself with my very first classroom, it was made abundantly clear to me that not everyone understood my situation. Teachers and peers alike were perplexed as to why my parents didn't look like me- or rather that they looked like my grandparents. I had to quickly get used to eyes ogling at me- watching me like you would a wild tiger in a zoo. I was an attraction of pity. Not only did I have a different type of family, I quickly recognized I was a different type of student- and not in a good way. Simply being in a classroom full of rowdy kids and looming academic expectations was overwhelming. Crys pierced my ears and certain textures made my skin crawl. Years later, well into my schooling career, I would eventually be diagnosed with a Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD). In essence, I have a hard time processing the information I receive from my senses. I can over or under-react to stimuli, which at times can be very isolating. Although the exact cause of SPD is unknown, it is thought to be influenced by genetics and can occur due to prenatal malnutrition- two reasons which are both relevant in my situation. Explaining that I was adopted to my teachers was hard enough, but having to defend myself and the validity of an obscure disorder that controlled my life was soul-crushing. Especially since I was never truly taken seriously. As much as my parents advocated for me, there was only so much that they could accomplish on their own. As a young student, I was left with no other option than to suffer in silence.

I am no outlier case either. Far too often does an adopted student or frankly any "difficult child" slip between the cracks due to ignorance. This is exactly why it's so important to find ways to better support adoptive students through education reforms- specifically by changing the way we as a nation talk about and teach literature to children. A major way to help adopted

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 other vulnerable groups) is to require Trauma-Sensitive School Training among faculty which regularly interact with kids in a meaningful capacity. These training programs are all about understanding the impact of trauma on students and how to better support them while they achieve their academic goals. There are a few core ways to institute Trauma-Sensitive Schooling. One good practice is to clear out quiet safe places for children to go to and take breaks when they get overwhelmed. Depending on the school this could be a desk in the hallway, an empty adjoined classroom, or an outside bench. It's less about the location and more about children having the security of knowing that it's there-- that if things become too much, there is a space

for them to escape in order to recenter themselves. Another helpful accommodation would be to offer alternative assignments for adopted students when dealing with possibly triggering class material (going back to the family tree projects). Simple things like building consistent routines, cultivating close peer relationships, and promoting stimulating classwork for *all* students can work wonders for an adoptee's self-esteem. However, by far the most beneficial way to institute Trauma-Sensitive Schooling to support adoptive students is to meet with the child's parents on a semi-regular basis to discuss the child's progress and wellbeing in class. This is where teachers could learn about specific triggers, any special needs they have, and any accommodations they will need. The teacher can also be educated on the warning signs of a breakdown and how they can work with the parents to make their class a happy experience. Although teachers don't have the power to grant all ideal accommodations, meetings like this can make things easier on the student. The benefits of a Trauma-Sensitive approach to schooling extends beyond just adoptees. The pros of this approach are explored in a journal published by the School Social Work Journal titled "Trauma-Sensitive Schools: an Evidence Based Approach." The author(s) express that research suggests "the majority of the population is likely to have experienced ACEs [adverse childhood experiences]; therefore, it is sensible to make trauma-sensitive practices the norm, not the exception. Democratizing trauma-informed care in schools (making it available to all) will provide children with trauma a more adequate level of support to access educational opportunities" (Plumb & Bush, 43).

       That's really what's the driving point of such reforms- supporting students that need it. The grades and accolades are important, sure, but school teaches you much more than that. It allows you to feel accomplished, foster close relationships, and see that there's more to life than what you're handed. That there's something more to strive for. For many children of adoption-

myself included- we may not see that in ourselves naturally knowing where we came from. But with support from teachers and progressive educational reforms, we can dream to become more than what we were predisposed to be.

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