

# The School and Transracially Adopted Children

As more and more white middle-class families adopt children of other races, educators need to be even more sensitive to the individuality of their students.

I had just taken my daughter's temperature and was getting ready to put the baby down for a nap when the phone rang. It was the vice principal of my son's middle school.

"Mrs. O'Neil, you need to come down to the school immediately. Ben is in bad trouble."

This was not what I needed to hear at that moment, nor was it the kind of day where I could drop everything at a moment's notice, what with a newly adopted baby and a sick child at home. To complicate matters further, my car was in the garage for repairs. I tried to explain this to the vice principal, but he was adamant. "You need to come to the school right now. You can bring all your children with you." It took time, but I finally convinced him that I simply could not come to the school that day. He reluctantly agreed to an appointment the next morning.

When I arrived at the vice principal's office, he said to me, "I'm sorry I cannot see you now. I have an appointment with a parent." I was confused, and then it hit me: he was expecting the embodiment of his mental image, an American Indian woman with a gaggle of kids clinging to her skirts. He had not looked at the records to see that Ben was an American Indian child adopted into a white middle-class family.

As the vice principal and I talked, it became more evident to me that the problem, which had involved a number of children, was to have been solved by making an example of one child, Ben. Because of his minority status, he was perceived to come from a family that probably would not back him up.

The vice principal and I had a long discussion that day. I was blunt in telling

him how his prejudiced attitudes affected me as a parent, and I tried to explain how important education is to our family, including Ben. Our talk seems to have had an effect; since then, the vice principal's behavior toward me and toward Ben has changed considerably.

—Linda O'Neil

Educators today have children in their classes and schools from diverse family structures. Three persistent factors have affected family patterns in the United States recently: an increase in abortions, a decline in the birth rate, and changes in the lifestyles of individuals of childbearing years

Photograph courtesy Linda O'Neil



The experiences of the O'Neil family, shown here, can serve to raise awareness levels about the needs of multiracial families everywhere. From left to right: Nicolas, age 2 (Filipino), Jim (father), Benjamin, age 14 (Native American), Tameka, age 8 (white), Stefanie, age 11 (white), Linda (mother).

(Simon and Altstein 1987). Couples may defer pregnancy, choose not to have children of their own but to adopt, or suffer from infertility. In addition, more single men and women are joining the ranks of adoptive parents. At the same time, however, more unmarried pregnant teens are opting to keep their babies. The result of these patterns is an increase in the demand for adoptable babies and a decrease in the supply of adoptable healthy white babies.

### **Transracial Adoption on the Rise**

What these circumstances mean is that many American families are looking to babies of other races, especially from third world countries, for potential adoptions. For example, 85 percent of children placed for adoption in New York in 1984 were foreign-born (Simon and Altstein 1987). Most American children available for adoption are "older, nonwhite, physically or emotionally handicapped, or part of a sibling group" (Simon and Altstein 1987, p. 132). In fact, transracial adoption is the *only* form of adoption on the rise today (Simon and Altstein 1981).

Those who adopt transracially are generally a "well-educated, economically successful, middle-class suburban American couple who already have children of their own" (Ladner 1977, p. 29). The children these families adopt, rather than maintaining the characteristics of their cultural or racial backgrounds, will take on the characteristics of their adoptive families. They will speak the same language, have the same values, and share the same family celebrations and rituals.

Teachers and administrators, in their training, have gained an understanding of cultural and ethnic diversity and have been sensitized to the needs of minorities. But this new population of children in the schools is neither white middle class nor minority, but a blend of these two. The information presented here, drawn from the experiences of adoptive families and from the literature, may help teachers and administrators deal more



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sensitively with such children and their families.

### **About Stereotypes, Negative and Positive**

We are all susceptible at times to forming stereotypes based on physical appearances, and educators are no exception. One white family, for example, in placing its adopted Korean child in kindergarten, confronted an educational system that would not acknowledge the child's proficiency in English. Although she had been in the family for 18 months and was fluent in English, the school insisted on placing the child in an English-as-a-Second-Language class solely because she was foreign-born. It took months of arguments, including a legal case, to have the child placed in a non-ESL classroom, where she subsequently did very well.

A somewhat different stereotype, one that could be viewed as a "positive" prejudice, is occasionally faced by parents who have adopted Asian children. Teachers of these children often automatically expect high achievement, particularly in science and math, thus projecting the values of typical Asian families onto the white middle-

class adoptive families of these children, rather than assessing the characteristics of each child.

A related "positive" prejudice has been reported by parents who note that some teachers single out transracially adopted children and shower them with attention and enthusiasm (McRoy and Zurches 1983). Doing this unfortunately serves only to isolate such children from their classmates as teacher's pets, inhibiting their integration into the social system of the class.

A serious concern about expectations expressed by adopted children and their families relates to the native culture of the child. Although adoptive parents usually try to instill knowledge about and pride in the child's culture, they are not able to provide a full background in the culture. Yet teachers may expect a child to share something from his or her native culture if that culture is being discussed in class (McRoy and Zurches 1983, Simon and Altstein 1981). For example, one parent reported how upsetting it was for her child when a teacher said, "We will be talking about different cultures of the world next month. Leslie, can you bring something Vietnamese to share with us?" Leslie, who was adopted as an infant by white middle-class parents, has had no contact with other Vietnamese. Since Leslie is not living her biological culture in her home, she views that culture as an outsider, as any other white middle-class child would. Such expectations are confusing to Leslie, resulting in ambivalence about her identity.

Racial characteristics can also lower the academic expectations of teachers (Verma and Bagley 1979), as when transracially adopted Hispanic, black, or American Indian children are expected to do less than other children. Teachers often maintain "reduced performance demands for the child while keeping those standards high for the white child," according to one study (McRoy and Zurches 1983, p. 84). Thus, these children can be thrust into a cycle of failure and negative expectations. When the system minimizes their children's gains and focuses on their shortcomings, adoptive parents

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experience frustration and discouragement. As one parent said:

My son's teachers always tell me how far behind he is in his reading rather than that he has improved, which I can see on a daily basis at home. Even his test scores show that he has made strides. Why do they have to keep telling me that he is *still* behind rather than saying, "Hurray, he's doing better"?

Lumping a child into a single category based on his or her native culture is not a realistic strategy for serving students well. Careful communication with parents and proper evaluation of each child are imperative to avoid placing a child in a program not based upon his or her needs and to ensure productive expectations about that child's instruction and progress.

### Bridging Two Worlds

The desire to be treated like everyone else, to fit in, is common to us all. Because transracially adopted children almost always live in affluent families, they may find themselves in a very small ethnic minority in their schools (Simon and Altstein 1981) and in their neighborhoods. This may pose an added challenge for the teacher, who

may have dealt primarily with white middle-class children. The child may need added help in becoming assimilated in a positive way (McRoy and Zurches 1983).

Families with transracially adopted children may experience some needs that are not typical of those of other children and families. Teachers can help by being aware of community resources that may be of service to them as they endeavor to participate in community life.

Although the desire to fit in is great in each of us, we also want to be recognized as individuals. Teachers and administrators, in their vital role in shaping the identity and self-esteem of all children, can help transracially adopted children bridge the two worlds they share—those of their biological and their social heritages (Simon and Altstein 1987). By helping them fit into the social framework of the classroom while treating them as individuals with unique social, emotional, and academic needs, educators can give transracially adopted children the opportunity to live up to their potential. □

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