

Same and Different

Supporting Transracially Adopted Asian Americans

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“Transracial adoption is a reality of contemporary American life,” note the authors of a recent landmark study. “Since 1971, parents in this country have adopted nearly a half-million children from other countries, the vast majority of them from orphanages throughout Asia, South America, and, most recently, Africa. Additional tens of thousands of multiracial families have been formed during this period with boys and girls adopted from foster care, with the rate of such adoptions from the domestic system growing from 10.8 percent in 1995, when there were about 20,000 total adoptions, to 15 percent in 2001, when there were over 50,000. In the vast majority of these cases — domestic and international — children of color have been adopted by Caucasian parents.”

Given these numbers, it’s no surprise that a significant as well as increasing number of transracially adopted children are enrolled in independent schools. And yet, there is very little in the research and literature that specifically addresses how schools can help these individuals form a positive identity. Of particular concern is how schools work to support children adopted from Asian countries. Since nearly half of all foreign-born adopted children in 2009 are from Asia, and one in ten Korean American citizens entered the United States through adoption, transracial adoption is an increasingly significant Asian American issue.

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published its study of identity development in adults who were adopted as children. Previous research involving identity development of adopted individuals focused primarily on the experiences of children and youth. The institute’s study offers us a more complete perspective

of how these adults have integrated “adoptedness” and race/ethnicity into the whole that comprises their sense of identity. The study included 468 adults — 179 of whom were born in South Korea and adopted by white parents, and 156 of whom were U.S.-born whites adopted by white parents. Comparing the responses of these two groups resulted in important findings and recommendations that specifically address the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals transracially adopted from Asia — and included some clear lessons for schools.

The School Experience of Transracially Adopted Children from Asia

The central findings of the Donaldson Adoption Institute’s study, combined with existing research and literature about racial/ethnic identity development and transracial adoption, provide a significant window into the struggles transracially adopted students of Asian origin face in school.

Adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for adopted people as they grow up, and remains significant even when they are adults.

Regarding their adoption status, Asian-born students who have white parents don’t have the same privilege of invisibility as white students who are adopted. Rather, they face an immediate reminder of their adopted status every time they enter a new school or new environment within a school. Peers, and even teachers, often ask questions that have a profound impact on these students. These questions, such as — *Are you adopted? Is that your real mom/dad? Where are you from? What are you? How do you speak English so well?* — may be asked out of a sense of innocent curiosity, but for the transracially adopted children, they are more often than not injurious.

These micro-aggressions — brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults, whether intentional or unintentional — serve

to remind youth that they are adopted and foreign-born, and imply that their relationship to their parents may not be legitimate.

In addition to the impact of innocent but damaging questions, transracially adopted students of Asian origin face a host of other school-related issues. For instance, they are more often than not subject to unfairly high academic and social expectations stemming from the myth of the model minority and the quiet and submissive Asian. At some point in their school careers, they are given assignments that require background information and connection to biological roots (family tree, ancestors, genetics, baby pictures, etc.). In addition, in independent schools, they are subject to admissions materials that presume the same race of parents and children.

Race/ethnicity is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for those adopted across race and culture.

Although the Korean-born participants in the Donaldson Adoption Institute study reported a stronger sense of ethnic identity than their white counterparts, they were also less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group. Other research describes the “between two worlds” status of many transracially adopted Asians. Many report not feeling a part of the white world as a result of the physical attributes that make them stand out as different, and thus they were compelled to connect with their “Asianness.” And yet, many also report not being part of the Asian world because they do not have the same language and cultural knowledge necessary to feel a full sense of belonging or worth. Indeed, many transracially adopted individuals report feeling a full sense of belonging *only* with other transracially adopted people.

Schools inadvertently create uniquely awkward or painful situations when lessons of Asian history or culture are not facilitated with proper sensitivity. Transracially adopted students of Asian origin report feeling “stared at” by peers or asked to corrob-

orate or refute “the Asian perspective.” As a young woman in one study stated: “It’s always when they’re talking about Korea. If [classmates] say something wrong, they would ask ‘Michelle, is that right?’ And I’d answer, ‘I don’t know.’ It’s like I’m ashamed.... I’m Korean [by birth] but I grew up in this white society.... I just feel really ashamed that I can’t answer their questions.”

The all-too-common stress of isolation and difference compounded by the burden of being a “spokesperson” for one’s group is difficult for any student of color. When the student shares little to no cultural, historical, or language background with his/her racial/ethnic group, there are additional feelings of inadequacy and shame.

Coping with discrimination is an important aspect of coming to terms with racial/ethnic identity for adoptees of color.

In the Institute study, 80 percent of Korean-born respondents reported racial discrimination from strangers; 75 percent reported racism from classmates; 48 percent reported negative racial experiences due to interactions with childhood friends; and, sadly, 39 percent reported race-based discrimination from teachers.

Quite often, especially when transracially adopted youth live in mostly white communities, much of the racial discrimination isn’t directed toward the individuals. Nonetheless, the individuals experience negative self-construal as a result. Sometimes, negative stereotypes and jokes arise about Asians in general or other people of color. When individuals protest or express discomfort, perpetrators often explain, “It’s not directed towards you. We’re just talking about Asians.” Although the intention of these responses is to profess to seeing the person as an individual, to transracially adopted youth these comments are an affirmation of two debilitating facts: they do not fully belong to their racial/ethnic group, and the community around them believes the same negative racial stereotypes portrayed by much of the media.

An additional problem is that transracially adopted youth often find little

comfort or training on how to cope with these racial assaults from their white parents, teachers, or peers. Most parents of color train their children to recognize, cope with, and respond to racial stereotypes and harassment. At the very least, these parents can speak from experience about what racial encounters are like, thus giving legitimacy to the strategies they suggest to their children. But white parents, teachers, and peers attempting to help adopted children in such situations generally don't have the resources or experience to be of help. In fact, the typical approach to comforting transracially adopted youth in these situations — saying, for instance, “Just ignore them,” or “I totally understand what you're going through” — tends to silence youth into thinking racial discrimination is something to be dealt with on one's own — and, therefore, further increases the feelings of difference and isolation.

What Schools Can Do to Help

These basic findings make it clear that transracially adopted children need our concerted effort in order to thrive in schools. There are many steps schools can take, including the following.

Acknowledge the realities of adoption.

As with any important issue in school, the first step is to acknowledge the issue. To this end, schools need to help teachers, administrators, parents, and students understand the realities of adoption — for all adopted children, but especially for transracially adopted children. The next step is to work together as a community to erase stigmas and stereotypes, minimize discrimination, and provide adopted children with more opportunities for positive development.

Consciously support the positive racial/ethnic identity of students.

In particular, the Donaldson Adoption Institute study highlights how, for transracially adopted children, “positive racial/ethnic identity development is most effectively facilitated

by ‘lived’ experiences such as travel to [their] native country, attending racially diverse schools, and having role models of their own race/ethnicity.” The study's respondents appreciated cultural celebrations and other opportunities to learn about their racial and ethnic heritage, but these are singular events and do not offer a wholesale solution to the struggles transracially adopted people face.

As one youth states in a different study: “What's hard for me is that [Korean Culture Camp] takes place only once a year! I finally get to go to a place where I feel safe, where I feel comfortable, where I feel like I'm around people that understand me.... If I would have been able to grow up that way, and if I always had those role models to say, ‘You're Korean, be proud of yourself’ instead of always feeling ‘I'm American, I don't know what that means,’ I think I would be a little more confident.”

Identify and confront micro-aggressions.

All educators need to understand that transracially adopted students constantly face micro-aggressions. Since the research reveals that most adults and students in school are not even aware of this fact, it behooves schools to raise awareness. For instance, teachers can be trained on the accumulated impact created when students are repeatedly asked to represent “their group” in the classroom. They can also be trained to facilitate the conversations that arise when peers ask a student to speak as a representative of his or her group.

The goal is not only to help reduce these micro-aggressions, but also to help transracially adopted students deal with them. In addition, they need support as they seek to negotiate difficult situations in schools so that their identity as an adopted person is neither ignored nor highlighted as a deficit.

Psychologist April Harris-Britt describes training to deal with the realities of race and racism as “Parental Race Socialization.” Schools can augment this parental effort by providing “School Race Socialization.” Harris-

Britt's studies suggest that a certain amount of this training is necessary to ensure resilience through painful encounters of prejudice and discrimination. At the same time, her research also suggests that too much of this training — defensive by definition — could result in youth approaching life in a white-majority society with fatalism and suspicion. Racial pride, on the other hand, is something that can be taught in abundance without negative side effects. Whether by parents or role models of the same race/ethnicity, this socialization is clearly a necessity in the transracially adopted youth's life.

Provide affinity group space that's welcoming to transracially adopted students.

As the diversity in schools increases, more and more schools find value in offering affinity groups for students. Students adopted from Asian countries can benefit from an Asian American affinity group. It is also important to ensure that this group welcomes everyone, regardless of cultural or language knowledge or access to a parent with such knowledge. Better yet, schools can provide a space specifically for students who are transracially adopted.

Focus on developing a welcoming, diverse culture in the school.

Schools can — and should — provide support, role models, information, and understanding that, when it comes to race/ethnicity and discrimination, they need to supplement parental efforts and provide a safer climate for all. A diverse student body and faculty/staff population can provide mirrors of experience and positive role models for transracially adopted students. Affinity groups can offer a space where experiences and strategies are shared and discussed. Beyond diversity and safe spaces, however, school must help raise the critical consciousness for all. The discussion must go beyond how people of color can cope with prejudice and discrimination and venture into *what* these acts of prejudice and discrimination are and *how* so many of us perpetrate them overtly or implicitly.

When there is a common community understanding and commitment to undo bias, transracially adopted students no longer carry alone the burden of needing to know how to recognize and combat acts of racial/ethnic aggression. Rather, these actions become a community charge.

Consider school publications from the perspective of adopted students.

Admission brochures and other school publications are designed to accurately put forth the best possible image of the school. But if there are no images of transracially adopted children and no references to such families in any publication, an unintended message of indifference is being sent to such students and their families.

One Educator's Perspective

I am a teacher and Asian and Pacific Island Affinity Group co-facilitator at Seattle Girls' School (Washington). We have 117 girls, 40 percent of whom are girls of color, and many of these girls are Asian American. A vast majority of these Asian American students are multiracial or transracially adopted. As a Korean-born immigrant with two Korean parents, I attempt to provide students with a positive role model, create a safe space where students can openly discuss challenges, and teach them a little about what it is to be a confident Asian woman in a society that does not always make it easy. I will never know what it's like to have white parents and navigate the world with this compass, but I can show them full acceptance for exactly who they are: Asian, adopted, culturally white, and more. With the school's anti-bias core belief that "it is fundamental to understand and address issues of difference and oppression," we attempt to have dialogue in the classroom and as a whole school about the realities of the world as well as provide students critical thinking skills and practical tools to change the world for the better.

Given this context — and given the location of Seattle, Washington, a racially diverse city with a large transracial adoption community — the

transracially adopted students at my school have a better shot at establishing positive self identity. As one of my students said to me, "I like it here — you don't get stereotyped.... I like being Asian, and I like being adopted.... I like that my parents aren't the same race as me, because it's like we're special."

Not every transracially adopted student will attain this enlightened state of self-awareness, and the school and I will continue to stumble and make mistakes as we try to support these girls well, but doing right by them is a critical challenge and opportunity we welcome. I invite your schools to continue to do great work as you open your approach and practices to include as fully as possible these vibrant, *truly* multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-racial families that constitute a growing part of the norm of the American family.

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