

# “There Is So Much to Consider”: School-Related Decisions and Experiences Among Families Who Adopt Noninfant Children

Abbie E. Goldberg, Reihonna L. Frost, & Kaitlin A. Black

Parents who adopt noninfant children often find that these children have academic and behavioral difficulties and may have experienced trauma—challenges that may have implications for school decision making and experiences. This qualitative study examined school selection processes and experiences among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents who had adopted children over the age of 24 months ( $N = 18$  families) 5 years earlier. Practical factors (e.g., cost and location) and the unique needs of their children (e.g., diagnoses, trauma history) were often more pressing than race and family structure (i.e., lesbian/gay-parent headed) considerations in selecting schools. Parents encountered complex challenges in establishing and maintaining appropriate school supports and services. Parents and school staff should work collaboratively using trauma-sensitive approaches to help adopted children succeed in school.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Families with multiple minority statuses (e.g., lesbian/gay parent, adoptive, multiracial) may experience hindered acceptance in school settings; intentional and authentic efforts should be made to engage and support these families.
- Since initial or historical school testing of noninfant adopted youth may be inaccurate, advocacy is needed for children to be retested outside of the legally required schedule in order to best represent the child's actual needs.

Within the literature on adoptive families, limited work has addressed parents' interactions with schools (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a), and even less has examined their school selection process (what factors they consider and how they make decisions about schooling; Goldberg & Smith, 2014b). This gap is significant when considering the multiple school-related challenges faced by parents who adopt noninfant children (i.e., via child welfare or internationally). Infancy (0–2 years) is a critical period for physical, social, and cognitive development, and adverse life experiences (e.g., disruptions in caregiving environments and/or neglect) during this time can have long-lasting consequences (Zeanah, Gunnar, McCall, Kreppner, & Fox, 2011). Children adopted postinfancy are at risk for attachment, emotional, behavioral, learning, and language-related difficulties (Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Zeanah et al., 2011), which may affect school adjustment (Baker, 2013). Further complexity is introduced when children are adopted transracially (i.e., are a different race than their parents) or by lesbian/gay (LG) parents, in that

they are unlikely to be surrounded by other children whose families look like them and may face teasing related to their family structure (Goldberg, Black, Sweeney, & Moyer, 2017). Schools often lack understanding of the unique circumstances of adopted children—particularly those adopted via foster care (FC) or internationally (IL). Insight into the varied factors that may affect the learning and behavior of adopted children, and a willingness to work collaboratively with parents, can enable teachers and social workers to maximize children's school adjustment (Baker, 2013).

The goal of this study is to examine selection processes and experiences related to schools among adoptive parents ( $N = 18$  families with 28 children), using data from 32 parents (in 14 couples, both parents were interviewed; in four couples, one was interviewed). All parents adopted children over 2 years, via FC ( $n = 13$ ) or IL ( $n = 5$ ). The sample includes lesbian ( $n = 8$ ), gay ( $n = 3$ ), and heterosexual-parent families ( $n = 7$ ), most of whom adopted a child of color ( $n = 15$ ). LG couples are least four times as likely as heterosexual couples to adopt, and at least 40% of adoptions in the United States are transracial; LG parents are more likely to adopt transracially (Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014). Thus, the sample encompasses multiple elements of diversity among today's adoptive families, with whom school social workers and teachers are increasingly likely to interact. Of interest is how parents consider diversity factors (race, adoption, and family structure) alongside children's socioemotional or learning needs in choosing schools and how parents experience schools (the challenges they face and their responses).

We next review research on (a) the school experiences of children adopted at an older age and (b) school selection among adoptive parents, LG parents, and parents of children with special needs.

## Adopted Children's School Experiences

Adopted children are overrepresented in special education services in part because of the developmental and social challenges they experience related to their early life circumstances (e.g., multiple caregivers, neglect; Taymans et al., 2008; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005). Children who endure high levels of preadoption adversity experience more emotional/behavioral and academic problems (Gibbs, Barth, & Houts, 2005; Tan, 2009), and an older age at adoption—an indicator of preadoption diversity—is related to poorer behavioral (Eanes & Fletcher, 2006; Goldberg & Smith, 2013) and academic (Tan, 2009) outcomes. Compared to children adopted as infants, children adopted postinfancy (i.e., after 1.5 or 2 years old) are more likely to show emotional/behavioral difficulties (Goldberg & Smith, 2013), attachment difficulties (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010), and lower cognitive functioning (Nelson et al., 2007).

Learning problems are more common among adopted children than nonadopted children (Baker, 2013), particularly those adopted IL (Windsor, Glaze, Koga, & Bucharest Early Intervention Project Core Group, 2007; Zeanah et al., 2011). Early abuse and neglect, which are not uncommon among children in FC, can have long-term effects on socioemotional functioning, classroom behavior, and educational attainment (Dann, 2011; Heath, Colton, & Aldgate, 1994). In the school context, the effects of difficult early life circumstances and multiple caregivers may manifest as disruptive behavior, social difficulties, disorganization, and distractibility, all problems noted by teachers regarding adopted children (Baker, 2013; Dann, 2011; Rijk, Hoksbergen, & ter Laak, 2008; van IJzendoorn et al., 2005). Teachers and school social workers should seek to approach such behaviors in the context of children's early experiences (e.g., trauma, neglect). An adoption-sensitive lens will help school personnel to reframe interpretations of problematic behaviors and thus better support adopted students who are struggling in the classroom (Dann, 2011).

Failure to consider adopted youths' background (e.g., trauma) can result in inaccurate assessment or diagnosis and lack of proper educational supports (Baker, 2013). Hill and Koester (2015) studied adoptive parents of 10 youth adopted via FC and found that parents often described inaccurate or incomplete disability identification in children's preadoptive Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). These were often corrected postadoption, when parents requested more testing, enabling better-quality plans and greater access to general education settings.

Beyond the possibility of behavioral or academic challenges, possibly exacerbated by trauma, adopted children may experience unique identity-related con-

cerns that impact their school experience. Transracially adopted children (typically children of color with White parents) may struggle with racial identity concerns, as they do not share their race with their parents and may not attend school with many same-race peers (Barratt, 2012; Samuels, 2009). Although little work has assessed LG-parented children's school experiences, there is evidence that they are vulnerable to bullying related to their family structure (Farr, Oakley, & Ollen, 2016) and may encounter curricular marginalization of LG, adoptive, and multiracial families (Goldberg et al., 2017).

## School Decision Making

Parents who adopt noninfant children may consider their history and/or current challenges in choosing a school. Parents who have adopted transracially and/or who are members of an LG-parent family may also consider identity and diversity-related factors.

In general, parents choose schools *de facto*, based on where they live; that is, most children go to their neighborhood schools (Davies & Aurini, 2011), although families with greater income and education have more choice in where their child attends schools and are more likely to select private schools (Davies & Aurini, 2011). Research on school selection among heterosexual parents indicates that they tend to consider practical factors (cost, location, and convenience) and quality-related factors (curriculum, reputation, and class size; Burgess, Greaves, Vignoles, & Wilson, 2011; Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999). Most parents are ultimately most impacted by convenience and cost, leading them to select local public schools (Burgess et al., 2011), due to financial, time, and transportation constraints (Smrekar & Goldring, 1999).

For parents who are adoptive, LG, or have a child of color, another set of considerations may be relevant. Parents may consider the racial diversity and/or family structure diversity of schools, as the presence of others who mirror the child has implications for identity development and social adjustment (Benner & Crosnoe, 2011). In choosing day care options, lesbian mothers seem to value diverse and inclusive settings, believing that exposure to children and teachers of different social classes, genders, and ethnicities will benefit their children (Gartrell et al., 1999). In choosing preschools, among parents who adopted children of color, LG parents more strongly emphasized racial diversity than did heterosexual adoptive parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2014b). Parents with more educational and financial resources were more likely to consider racial diversity and the presence of other adoptive families, whereas parents with fewer resources were more likely to consider location and cost (Goldberg & Smith, 2014b), indicating how structural constraints may limit the range of what

parents feel they can “afford” to consider. Thus, there is evidence that LG and adoptive parents may consider children’s racial, adoptive, and/or LG-parent status in selecting primary schools, such that affirming, inclusive settings are valued (Goldberg et al., 2017)—yet they may weigh these factors against other needs, priorities, or constraints, especially when parenting children with challenges.

The research on parents of nonadopted children with special needs suggests that they also face unique considerations and challenges in choosing schools. In addition to considering generic factors such as class size and reputation, they also consider special services and transportation (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011; Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2016). Depending on their children’s needs and the availability of services at various schools, parents often feel that they have few options or must compromise their values (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011, 2016). When public schools are seen as poor fits in terms of size and addressing children’s needs, parents may select private or charter schools (Finn, Caldwell, & Raub, 2006) or homeschool their children (Cook, Bennett, Lane, & Mataras, 2013). These choices, however, do not necessarily eliminate all of the challenges in accessing services or interacting with school administrators and staff (Taylor, 2005).

In sum, parents who adopt noninfant children are often juggling many considerations (e.g., diversity inclusion and special needs accommodations) and structural realities (e.g., cost and time). An additional complication is that parents who adopt noninfant children often have to make schooling decisions fairly quickly, before children have fully settled into their new families. Thus, children may be adjusting to multiple transitions simultaneously, including “trying to feel part of a new family alongside entering the mysterious culture of a new school” (Barratt, 2012, p. 142).

## The Current Study

Prior research on family–school relationships has generally focused on heterosexual-parent families with biological children; the limited work on adoptive families and schools has focused on parents who adopted infants (Goldberg & Smith, 2014b). This study builds on existing work to examine the school experiences of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents with children adopted at the age of 2 years or older who are currently in grade school. Our research questions are:

1. How do parents of children adopted postinfancy make decisions about and select schools? What considerations are most salient and why? How do they balance and prioritize considerations related to their children’s and family’s unique needs and characteristics?

2. What types of challenges do parents of adopted children navigate in the school setting? What strategies do they employ to handle these challenges?

## Method

### Sample

Data come from 32 parents in 18 couples (both members of six lesbian couples, one member of two lesbian couples, both members of three gay couples, both members of five heterosexual couples, and one member of two heterosexual couples; there were no single parents; all names used in the article are pseudonyms) who participated in individual interviews about children’s schools. They reported on all children adopted 5 years prior ( $n = 28$ ). In families who adopted multiple children at once, parents focused primarily on the youngest child in the sibling group (the “target child”). Due to the small number of families in each family type, we present descriptive statistics for the full sample. The mean family income was \$107,528 ( $SD = \$70,527$ , median = \$95,000, range = \$16,000–\$280,000). In 11 families, both parents worked full-time; in four families, one parent worked part-time and one full-time; and in three families, one parent worked full-time and one was not employed. The average education level was 4.44 ( $SD = 1.22$ ) where 4 = bachelor’s degree (BA) and 5 = master’s; four (13%) had less than a BA, 19 (59%) had a BA, and nine (28%) had some graduate education.

Regarding ethnicity, 88% of parents were White. In four families, one parent was White and one parent was of color. Target children were 4.38 years old, on average, at placement ( $SD = 1.74$ , range = 2–8 years). Ten families adopted one child (six boys, four girls). Eight families adopted multiple children: Six adopted a sibling group of two (one boy, one girl), and two adopted a sibling group of three (two boys, one girl; two girls, one boy). Adoptions took place via child welfare for 19 children (68%), and nine (32%) were IL. In 14 families (13 who adopted via FC and one IL), children had a history of abuse or neglect; in three FC families, there was known prenatal drug exposure; and in nine FC families, children had more than one prior placement. Children were of color in 24 of 28 cases. The racial breakdown was three Latino, two African American, two African American/Latino, two Filipino, one Korean, one Taiwanese, and the remainder biracial or multiracial.

Six target children were in Grades 1 and 2 (33%), eight were in Grades 3 and 4 (44%), and four were in Grades 5 and 6 (13%). In 16 families (88%), children attended public schools; in two families, children attended private schools for children with special needs.

**Recruitment and Participant Selection**

Participants in this study were drawn from a larger group of adoptive parents, who were all assessed 5 years after becoming first-time parents to one or more children via adoption. All of the couples who participated were originally recruited through adoption agencies to participate in a study of the transition to adoptive parenthood and were recontacted by email 5 years post-adoption to participate in a follow-up. We selected our current sample from this larger group of parents based on two criteria: (a) They adopted a child via FC or IL, and (b) children were at least 2 years at placement. This cutoff was chosen because children adopted at 24 months or older demonstrate higher rates of psychosocial, cognitive, and academic problems compared to younger adoptees (e.g., Gunnar, van Dulmen, & The International Adoption Project Team, 2007; Zeanah et al., 2011). Data are drawn from these 5-year postadoption interviews. This study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at Clark University.

**Procedure**

Participants took part in a one-hour telephone interview with the principal investigator or a graduate student. The interview questions in our analysis included: (a) Tell me about the school(s) your child has attended. (b) Tell me about your decision-making process in choosing a school for your child (Probe: What factors did you consider? What was important to you?). (c) What challenges did you encounter in deciding upon a school for your child? (d) Did you feel you had limited options for any reason? (Probe: due to financial constraints, geographical location, child’s needs for special accommodations, and/or other things?) (e) Tell me about your experiences with your children’s schools and teachers.

**Data Analysis**

We transcribed the interview data and examined them using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Our analysis was informed by an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), whereby we attended to aspects of the parent–school and child–school relationship, in the broader context of the family’s educational experiences. We also applied an intersectional perspective, whereby we considered how parents’ identities, and those of their children, interact to shape their choices, opportunities, and challenges in relation to schools (Crenshaw, 1989).

To develop themes, each of the three authors independently coded the data. This process ensured that multiple interpretations were considered, enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Patton, 2002). We engaged in an iterative process of coding that involved a continual back and forth between the data and our analysis. We read each transcript multiple times. We initially wrote

memos on all participants, which aimed to distill key themes related to school selection and experiences. For example, concerning school selection, we identified a key theme as “child’s challenges and needs take precedence over all other considerations.” Likewise, concerning school experiences, we found that parents typically described different issues related to short- and long-term adjustment; therefore, we discuss these separately. We met weekly to discuss emerging themes, which led to the creation of a tentative coding scheme. Over time, we merged, eliminated, and added codes. Once we had formed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to sort the data. These codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective, became the basis for the “themes” developed in our analysis. We then returned to the transcripts and reapplied this final coding scheme to all interview data to ensure that the scheme adequately and comprehensively captured parents’ experiences.

Although in most families both parents were interviewed, our analysis led us to examine their data as a unit rather than to differences between partners. We noted few discrepancies in their reports; parents tend to be unified in their approach to schools (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

**TABLE 1.** *Children’s Diagnoses/Delays and Academic Supports*

Family ID	Diagnosis or delay	Academic supports
Lesbian #1	LD	IEP
Lesbian #2	LD	504
Lesbian #3	Autism	IEP, SPED class
Lesbian #4	Was below grade level at placement, now at grade level	Previous IEP
Lesbian #5	Trauma, behavior problems	504
Lesbian #6	ADHD, below grade level	IEP
Lesbian #7	Downs Syndrome	IEP, SPED class
Lesbian #8	LD, dyslexia, anxiety, below grade level	IEP
Gay #1	None	No
Gay #2	None	No
Gay #3	ADHD	Previous IEP
Hetero #1	Autism, LD, dyslexia	IEP, special school
Hetero #2	Physical disability (blind)	IEP
Hetero #3	ADHD, RAD	504
Hetero #4	ADHD	No
Hetero #5	Below grade level	No
Hetero #6	ADHD, sensory integration issues	504
Hetero #7	Trauma, behavior problems	IEP

*Note.* 504 = 504 Plan, ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, IEP = Individualized Education Program, LD = learning disability, RAD = reactive attachment disorder, SPED = special education.



## Results

Of the families in this study, who adopted 28 children, 15 families reported that at least one child had a developmental disability or delay, learning disability, or emotional/behavioral problem, and 12 reported that at least one child received formal support or intervention through an IEP (eight) or 504 Plan (four)<sup>1</sup>; see Table 1. Nine families had switched schools since placement.

### *School Decision Making and School Selection*

All 18 families had carefully considered practical factors such as cost and convenience in choosing schools. In most families, both parents worked full-time, and thus they needed full-day school schedules, aftercare, and accessible transportation. They therefore sought to make the best choices for their children within the limited options available to them. Marianna, a lesbian mother (LM) who adopted via FC, had reluctantly taken her daughter (who had "severe emotional issues") out of a school that was meeting her needs well (and was racially diverse and had other two-mom families) because of the commute and cost: "We were [paying for] before- and afterschool care. Lorraine and I were both working full-time ... commuting sometimes an hour. We were stressed all the time, so we decided to move closer to work. It was a really hard decision. We left a wonderful school." Eric (gay father [GF], FC) had placed his son in private school initially "because [while in FC] he had some struggles, particularly with math, and we thought he could benefit from individualized attention"—yet ultimately they "put him in public. The private school was too much of a burden [and] the transportation was killing us."

More than half of families considered private schools, but these were ultimately regarded as "out of the question" due to financial constraints (especially when they adopted multiple children at once) or the inability of such schools to meet their children's needs ("we can afford private, but our kids need the services offered by public"). In addition, one family (FC) was rejected by a private Catholic school because of their two-mom status. The school had been ready to accept their daughter—who carried a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD)—but then "decided that because she lives in a house with two moms, that is against the school's values."

<sup>1</sup> An IEP, or Individualized Education Program, is a plan for each child with a disability, which must include measurable goals that are monitored by specially trained staff. The school is held accountable for demonstrating measurable progress (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). A 504 Plan comes from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and provides modifications to the school environment or teaching methods with the goal of making the education accessible to those with disabilities. Specific goals or progress are not required (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Most parents had considered children's special needs and trauma background when evaluating school options. Andrea (heterosexual mother [HM], FC) and her husband chose the smallest public school in the district out of worry about how her son—who was academically behind at placement and had attentional challenges—would fare at a big school. Constrained by logistical factors (e.g., she and her husband worked full-time), they tried to make the "best choice" for their son within the limited choices available. One couple (FC, LM), who adopted a sibling group, considered boarding school due to the lack of good private schools in their region, but decided it was a bad fit, as it could "reinforce the trauma" associated with the other institutional settings the children had experienced.

A poor perceived "fit" between their child and the school they selected caused eight families to look for a different school—sometimes more than once. Sara (LM, FC), shared that her daughter Ellie, who had ASD, had attended 10 elementary schools in 5 years. Ellie was "kicked out" because "she was perpetually disruptive ... arguing with teachers, running away." It became clear that Ellie required a more structured environment, and at the time of the study, she was in a school for children with special needs. Brandy (HM, FC)—whose son also had ASD—described several school changes, from a Catholic school (which was a poor fit) to a public school (which failed to follow his IEP) to an "out of district special needs school." Tia (LM, FC) tried Catholic school for her son because she thought the structure would be good for him—but it was a poor match: "Our kids have lots of trauma ... and they had no concept of trauma, how to handle it, accommodations ... they were like, he's a 'bad kid.' We were like, this poor kid is getting nothing but negative." This family switched their son to a public school, which, although in an underprivileged area, had teachers with special education backgrounds who "understand trauma and are more receptive to us working with them."

Most parents had adopted a child of color, introducing another potential consideration in school selection: namely, racial diversity. Yet these parents often asserted that they felt that they had to prioritize practical factors (e.g., cost, afterschool schedule)—and their child's unique needs—over racial diversity. In turn, their children's schools were not remarkably racially diverse. For example, Barb (LM, FC), a mother of two, was more focused on her children's basic adjustment than on diversity: "We didn't really think about composition... We were just thinking, can they make it through the day without going to the principal's office?"

Lesbian parents were consistent in emphasizing that structural factors (e.g., geography, finances) and their children's special needs constrained them in terms of the degree to which they could prioritize the gay

friendliness of schools. Although they would have liked their children to “be surrounded by other families like [their] own,” the severity of their challenges and associated needs for services took precedence and resulted in “compromises ... to things we value, like a progressive school that ‘gets’ queer families.” In turn, they sometimes ended up in schools where “gay people are just not on their radar.” In a few cases, their children’s special needs completely overshadowed the significance of a school’s gay friendliness in the selection process. Sara (FC) acknowledged that, beyond her daughter’s autism, “there’s ... the fact that she has two moms [which] adds a whole other set of challenges and frustrations. But while for some people those would be such a big deal, they become just things that we don’t even really think about.”

### ***Families’ Experiences in Schools***

#### **The initial adjustment: What hurts and what helps.**

Most parents who adopted their children via FC described their children as having had multiple prior placements and having “gotten behind” academically. Parents who adopted IL faced similar struggles in that their children’s academic functioning was often “unclear” from records and compromised further by language barriers. Children, particularly those adopted via FC, were often several grade levels behind in key subjects such as reading and math, which led some families to pursue outside tutoring to help their children catch up. Additionally, parents were often placed with their children quickly and thus had little time to plan for school and “figure everything out.”

Some parents noted negative experiences regarding their initial adjustment to the school. Some knew little about their children’s academic backgrounds and faced the challenge of getting them tested and placed in appropriate classes in a brief period of time. In a few cases, the initial cognitive or academic testing they received was inaccurate, leading to inappropriate placement and difficulties getting their children’s educational needs met. Don (heterosexual father [HF], FC) said, “The school said, he is only slightly worse in reading, C minus, and he’ll catch up. Then ... we paid to test him ... four times, and the scores were terrible, like F minus minus minus.” Don and his wife chose to move their son from public to private school, which was very expensive but had smaller class sizes and was better equipped to handle their son’s needs. A challenge faced by several IL adoptive parents was uncertainty about their children’s birthdates and ages, which led to initial placement in lower grades than appropriate, resulting in boredom and behavior problems.

A few parents noted positive experiences. Namely, they described schools as supportive, responsive, and helpful during the initial adjustment period, as they

scrambled to acclimate as a family and to help their children settle into a new school. Lee (LM, FC) noted how teachers, aware that they were adopting three children, offered them advice and asked for information about the children’s background, to “learn about the kids, and how they were coming to the school and everything.” Further, one of Lee’s son’s teachers saw that he was “really struggling” and began tutoring him before school, “really working with him ... to kind of fill in those missing spaces.”

**Beyond the initial adjustment.** As parents came to know their children, they often realized what they needed to thrive in a given school environment. Several parents described how their children had a high need for structure and experienced “a lot of emotional distress” if their environment or schedule was unpredictable or they were left to make many of their own choices. Maura (LM, IL) noted that her son “needs to be in control and succeeds when he feels like he knows what is expected of him and has a routine. He struggles a lot if there’s not assigned seating...he needs to know he’s going to have a place to sit every day and where it is.” Whereas his prior teacher “didn’t have that kind of mind-set,” his current teacher tried to minimize changes in his environment and routine. Maura understood her son’s need for routine and structure as related to his unstable early environment (e.g., being left at an orphanage and living there for several years) and felt that this context was important for schools to know, so that they could understand her son.

Erin (LM, FC) noted that her daughter, Serena, did not thrive when she was with teachers who were too “nice” (“Serena ran that classroom”) or didn’t care (“then Serena had nothing to lose”). Rather, in Erin’s eyes, Serena thrived best when she was presented with “structure. She needed that desperately.” Erin noted that “we’ve been in a public school system 5 years with Serena, and it’s taken until this year for them to ... appreciate the impact trauma has on development in all domains. I don’t think they took it seriously; I think they just thought she was a shitty kid.” Parents like Erin voiced frustration and helplessness when they felt that schools viewed their children as “bad” as opposed to exhibiting behaviors that, although disruptive, were expressions of trauma that reflected their exposure to preadoptive and prenatal adversity.

Many parents sought to educate schools about children’s backgrounds (e.g., FC history and gaps in their education), believing that this information was crucial to ensuring that their children’s abilities and behaviors were seen in the context of their early life circumstances and to guarding against the perception of their children as unintelligent or a “bad seed.” Brianna (HM, IL) felt it was important to “explain to the teachers where they came from, and ... about the cycle of need, and about

the result being a hyper-reactive or a hypo-reactive kid, and about how I have one of each." Teachers were described as responding positively: "[They're] amazing ... they all kind of know where the kids came from." Positive experiences were also noted by Brandy (FC), who felt that the teachers at her son's school were open and "want to understand why he would act this way, what triggered it, what can we do." She contrasted this experience with her son's prior school, where he was regarded as a "bad kid." In some cases, sharing details about children's background did not have the desired effect. Don (HF, FC) and his wife had disclosed their son's abuse history—which had caused neurological damage that manifested in short-term memory loss and difficulty following directions—with teachers, yet found that the teachers lacked sensitivity to the complex ways in which his trauma history contributed to his functioning and did not know how to manage his behaviors.

**Fighting for services.** For one third of parents, perceptions of their children's challenges and needs were not matched by the school district, resulting in frustration as they advocated for appropriate evaluations and supports. Some struggled to have their child properly assessed for services, while others indicated conflict over improper or inconsistent implementation of services.

Despite the fact that public schools are legally required to provide assessments for children suspected to have learning disabilities (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004), some parents shared that schools delayed the evaluations or seemed resistant to performing them at all. Ann (LM, FC) explained: "The tool that they have to kind of get rid of parents is a 504. They don't want to do an IEP because it requires extra funding and extra services.... So they do a 504, which is basically like, okay we'll put your son in the front [of the classroom] if he sees better from there." The sense that a school's decisions about assessment were related to funding was shared by a mother who was advocating for her child to be reassessed to reflect her gains. Cathy (LM, FC), whose daughter was originally assessed in FC and found to have severe socioemotional challenges, noted that the school resisted a reassessment, seemingly because it would qualify for less funding if she was found to have less need. This led Cathy to "hire our own psychologist to do an assessment ... the principal was ... not working with us to get this done." Indeed, several families elected to pay for testing privately rather than wait for the school—an expense that may be particularly burdensome for families who adopt via FC, who tend to have fewer financial resources than families who adopt privately (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007).

Several parents reported that, even when a school had promised supports, these were not always provided. De-

nise (LM, FC) stated: "I know for a fact [what] they're supposed to be doing with my daughter according to her IEP, [but] they're not implementing it. So, the school district says we're adversarial parents because, well, we're educated and informed and we know special education law ... we know what you can and can't do."

Thus, establishing and maintaining appropriate services was ongoing effort for some families. Such experiences are likely to be especially frustrating for parents who adopt noninfant children: Educational neglect by prior caregivers or delays in receiving services while in care may render these additional service delays particularly urgent and salient.

**Adoption, family structure, and race: Experiences in the school setting.** Some parents identified the ways in which their children's adoption had become salient within the school setting, often in the context of curricula. Some parents were unsettled about the way that schools handled family-related assignments and exercises, but also described efforts to advocate for their family and suggest adaptations to incorporate adoptive families. Brianna (HM, IL) noted that her son's teacher arranged a "heritage fair" where she asked children to bring in items "to show where [their] family came from." Brianna responded by calling the teacher to request a "heads up" in the future and to request some acknowledgment of adoptive families when discussing this topic. Several parents reported difficulties with schools asking for baby pictures and other early documentation that they did not have. Stacy (LM, FC) voiced discomfort related to family timeline exercises, which "always came up" and "create a lot of unhappiness" but felt that her son's school handled it fairly well: "[I talked to them] and overall I think they get it." Stacy noted that after addressing this issue in kindergarten, in subsequent years, they sent "a letter, a heads up, 'this is the exercise, if child wants to send a picture of the birthday [he spent] with you [instead of the day he was born].'"

Several LG parents complained that the books at school were not reflective of their family (multiracial, adoptive, two moms), which they sought to remedy by talking to teachers and donating books. Events specifically geared at moms or dads (e.g., "Breakfast with Mom, Donuts with Dad") were also experienced as a bit unsettling by several LG parents, although as Sharon (LM, FC) noted, "the school is good about saying anyone can come in." Several LG parents felt they had to be "vigilant" about explaining their family and educating school staff about the need for inclusive language—for example, on school forms and classroom dialogue, which often invoked terms like "moms and dads," which made their kids "feel like [they] didn't belong."

With regard to racialized challenges at school, several parents recounted incidents of racialized bullying—yet found that school staff handled the situations

well. Emma (HM, IL) described how, after an incident involving racial slurs, the principal spoke to the bully and his parents, and the bully wrote a letter of apology to Emma's son. Yet Emma's concerns went beyond these two incidents to the broader racial dynamics at the school: "At some point I already know in my head my son is going to get in trouble because of the color of his skin." Her job, as she saw it, was to teach him that they would fight for him in the best way possible.

## Discussion

This is the first study to explore how parents who have adopted noninfant children—who may be at risk for school-related challenges due to early instability in caregiving environments and other adverse experiences (Zeanah et al., 2011)—juggle practical constraints (e.g., finances) alongside their children's unique needs and characteristics (e.g., a trauma history; behavioral challenges; and adoptive, racial, and LG-parent statuses) in choosing schools. It is also one of the first to explore the challenges faced by parents of adopted noninfant children in terms of establishing and maintaining appropriate school-based services for their children (Hill & Koester, 2015). Although most children in the sample had special needs and/or needed accommodations, not all did. This highlights the diversity among adopted children and points to the need for practitioners to remain cognizant of the diversity among children adopted postinfancy (Zeanah et al., 2011).

Our findings indicate that parents balance a variety of complex factors in deciding where their children should attend school. Consistent with prior work (Davies & Aurini, 2011; Goldberg & Smith, 2014b), practical considerations—particularly finances—constrained parents' options, ultimately forcing a few parents to opt for public schools when private schools may have been better able to meet children's needs. Echoing work on parents whose children have special needs (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011, 2016), children's challenges and needs often took center stage in terms of determining school options and priorities. Yet these parents were unique in that they were often considering their children's psychological and developmental needs alongside various diversity-related factors that complicated decision making and led to hard decisions and trade-offs. Whereas practical factors and special needs were key priorities, racial diversity and LG inclusion tended to be downgraded and ultimately downplayed in the selection process—which typically resulted in children attending relatively racially homogeneous schools and schools with limited LG-parent representation. In turn, some parents found themselves advocating for more inclusive practices, highlighting the powerful role of parents as advocates—but also the need for professionals to develop greater competence related to family diversity

(Taymans et al., 2008), insomuch as engaging in multiple forms of advocacy (e.g., surrounding their children's special needs and family structure) is likely exhausting for parents.

Almost half of families ultimately switched schools—typically because of dissatisfaction with schools' awareness of and accommodations to children's unique needs and challenges, and frustration with schools' lack of sensitivity to the role of preadoption adversity in their children's academic or behavioral issues. Some parents articulated concerns that teachers misread their children as uninterested in school or labeled them as "bad kids"—which has the potential to create added stress for children and further impede their learning and adjustment (Baker, 2013). By contrast, parents appreciated teachers who sought information about children's backgrounds, were sensitive to children's needs, and worked with parents to provide support for children. Such experiences were salient in enabling parents to feel that their children were getting the help they needed. Ensuring that school staff have general competence in providing trauma-sensitive education could be particularly important for children adopted postinfancy, who may have adverse early life experiences (Blitz, Anderson, & Saastamoinen, 2016; Tan, 2009). Unfortunately, uncertainty about how to support adopted children—especially those with traumatic histories—is likely the norm, not the exception, among teachers. Both Taymans et al. (2008) and Rijk et al. (2008) found that teachers often rely on the advice of colleagues in attempting to help adopted children and their families, suggesting that they rarely feel that they possess sufficient adoption knowledge or awareness themselves.

Some children in the sample came to their families with inaccurate assessments of their academic abilities, possibly having endured poor record keeping and lack of consistent advocacy on their behalf (Hill & Koester, 2015). Parents of children adopted IL sometimes lacked definitive information about children's ages, which had the potential to inhibit proper assessment and placement (Baker, 2013). Schools should be flexible with parents who are new to their children's lives and willing to reassess for services after a period of adjustment, even if it requires revisions of IEPs outside of required assessment windows (Cavanaugh, 2016). Indeed, school flexibility—the degree to which schools were willing to work with and accommodate families with diverse needs—was important to adoptive and, specifically, LG-parent families. Teachers who acknowledged and incorporated diverse families into the curricula helped families to feel more comfortable and accepted (Goldberg et al., 2017). Schools should seek to adopt an open and flexible approach to their work with adoptive families, both with respect to curricula and with how they respond to parents who disclose information about their children's backgrounds.



### Limitations

The current study is limited by the fact that our parent sample was small and relatively homogeneous: largely White, middle-class, and well-educated. Future work should explore the school selection processes and experiences of lower-income adoptive parents, who inevitably face greater practical constraints on their choices and may have no choice at all (e.g., private school is often simply not an option). This may result in a different set of challenges, particularly when requesting accommodations and providing input to schools. Another limitation is that we did not include the voices of children themselves, nor did we include those of school staff or administration. Future work should include adopted children in particular to explore their challenges and successes in school.

### Implications for Practice and Research

**Practice.** Our findings have implications for teachers, school social workers, and administrators who seek to optimize the success of adopted children in schools. School staff who are sensitive to the myriad factors that affect adopted children's ability to thrive in school, and who are willing to work collaboratively with adoptive parents, can make a difference in children's school adjustment, including cognitive and social outcomes (Baker, 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). When parents in this sample saw school professionals as showing basic interest in and awareness of their children's adoptive and trauma backgrounds, this meant the world to them; rather than feeling left alone to advocate for their child amid an unfamiliar and challenging set of circumstances, they felt that they were part of a team who cared. Such findings underscore the significant payoffs that even basic adoption competence may have for engendering parents' engagement in their children's schools. Recognizing the key role of parents' school involvement for their children, school social workers should embolden adoptive parents to assert themselves to staff when children are not getting the support they need (Blitz et al., 2016). Such advocacy may be essential to children's success—particularly adopted children with difficult early life histories.

Further, as our study indicates, noninfant adoptive families may possess multiple intersecting minority statuses involving racial composition, parent sexual orientation, child trauma history, and special education needs. Prior work suggests that LG adoptive families, especially those with children of color, often seek schools that will be welcoming or representative of at least one of their minority statuses (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a). Yet, parents in this study who had children with special needs consistently felt they had to prioritize children's special needs over other factors. By extension, some described school practices that were insensitive to their family's adoptive, LG, and/or multiracial statuses,

echoing the limited work on this topic (Goldberg et al., 2017). Notably, these parents sometimes sought to advocate for greater inclusion. In that parents' engagement in children's schools is related to children's school success (Hornby & Lafaele 2011), school social workers should help these families to find support in school communities that may not have been selected for their tolerance or diversity.

Beyond family support, school social workers have other potential roles in the schooling of noninfant adopted youth. This study highlights the importance of trauma- and adoption-sensitive schools, and social workers are uniquely situated within schools to provide education and advocacy surrounding such sensitivity. Social workers should advocate for sensitivity in scheduling IEP testing around adoptive placements and possibly recommend reassessments after a period of adjustment, rather than waiting for the next required reassessment date.

**Research.** Future work should examine the school selection processes and experiences of parents who adopt children older than 2 years, as children with extensive institutional stays as well as numerous FC placements are at risk for more serious cognitive and academic difficulties (Zeanah et al., 2011). Future research should also examine parents' decision making over time, to evaluate how both children's and parents' perspectives intersect to shape school-related choices and transitions. For example, as children's racial identity becomes more salient (e.g., in adolescence; Samuels, 2009), parents' attunement to racial diversity may change, potentially complicating the process of school decision making.

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**Abbie E. Goldberg**, PhD, associate professor, **Reihonna L. Frost**, PhD student, and **Kaitlin A. Black**, PhD student, Department of Psychology, Clark University. Correspondence: [AGoldberg@clarku.edu](mailto:AGoldberg@clarku.edu), Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main St., Worcester, MA 01610.

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