



# Reconciling realities, adapting expectations, and reframing “success”: Adoptive parents respond to their children’s academic interests, challenges, and achievement

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## ABSTRACT

Adoptive parents are often well-educated, and potentially highly involved in children’s schooling. At the same time, adopted youth tend to struggle more academically than non-adopted youth. Amidst this reality, of interest is how adoptive parents perceive and make sense of their children’s academic performance, and form expectations for the future. This study of 63 parents in 33 families (11 lesbian mother, 11 gay father, 11 heterosexual parent) with school-aged children (mean age = 10) adopted via private domestic, public domestic, and international adoption, explores parents’ ideas about (a) children’s academic functioning, (b) the relative role of “nature” versus “nurture” in their abilities and challenges, and (c) children’s educational and vocational futures. Findings indicated a typology of parents: “inspired,” “pragmatic,” and “concerned.” “Inspired” parents described their children as bright and high-performing and were generally optimistic about their educational futures. Parents often acknowledged the positive contributions of birth family to, and downplayed their own role in, their children’s talents. “Pragmatic” parents described their children as academically average but bright, and as possessing learning or behavioral challenges. They acknowledged the role of birth family and genetics when describing their children’s aptitude, and also emphasized their own role in shaping and hopefully improving their children’s academic performance. “Concerned” parents had significant worries about children’s self-esteem and emotional/behavioral challenges, and these often outweighed academic concerns. Concerned parents tried to provide adequate supports to their children, but, unlike pragmatic parents, perceived an upper limit to how much school interventions could optimize their children’s abilities. Across the sample, as parents’ concerns about their children’s challenges increased, parents were less focused on academic success (e.g., college) and more on them living a happy, independent life. Some parents—especially male parents—struggled to adapt to or accept the reality that their own academic interests, orientation, and/or achievement were fairly different from those of their children. Results have implications for teachers and therapists who may need to help adoptive parents reconcile their perspectives on and experiences with school with those of their children.

## 1. Introduction

Adoptive parents are often well-educated (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007), and adopted youth tend to struggle more academically than non-adopted youth (van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005). This, along with the reality that adoptive parents do not share genetics with their children, presents adoptive parents with a potential tension or challenge: They may value academic success and educational attainment, but be parenting a child whose abilities or interests diverge from a theoretical child who is “cut from the same cloth.” Broader cultural

values that emphasize academic attainment, and cultural scripts that value parental involvement in children’s academic success (Valle, 2018), may amplify the tension felt by adoptive parents. Sexual minority adoptive parents may experience additional pressure to “turn out” high-achieving children, given societal pressures for gay parents to produce “normal” children (Goldberg & Byard, 2020).

This study explores how a sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents with school-aged children manage this tension. That is: How do parents reconcile their internal valuing of education, and the broader cultural script that treats higher education as a necessary

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commodity, with children's school-related challenges and/or interests in and aptitude for non-academic domains (e.g., the trades)? Specifically: (1) (How) do parents describe, react to, and adjust to their children's apparent abilities and challenges? (2) How do their responses reflect beliefs about the impact of nature (what children were born with; what parents cannot control) and nurture (parents' impact; school resources), and, relatedly, children's own "educability" (educational potential; Rätty & Kasanen, 2010)? This study is oriented to address these questions, amidst a broader focus on how adoptive parents think about their school-aged children's educational potential and futures.

### 1.1. Cognitive and academic functioning among adopted children

A modest literature has focused on the cognitive and academic functioning of adopted children. Often, this research focuses on the intellectual abilities and educational achievement of adopted children relative to non-adopted children (Maughan, Collishaw, & Pickles, 1998; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005) or to their non-adopted siblings or peers in foster care or orphanages (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Christofferson, 2012; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005). Much of this work focuses on internationally adopted children, many of whom experienced at least part of their early lives in orphanages, who often show language-based delays and deficits (Helder, Mulder, & Gunnoe, 2016; Rygvold & Theie, 2016), learning disabilities (Raaska et al., 2012), and poorer academic functioning (Helder et al., 2016). Likewise, children adopted post-infancy (i.e., via foster care or internationally) in general show elevated levels of speech/language delays, learning disabilities, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Beverly, McGuinness, & Blanton, 2008), all of which, particularly ADHD, are linked to poorer school performance (Harwood, Feng, & Yu, 2013; Jacobs, Miller, & Tirella, 2010). Further, among internationally adopted children, those adopted at an older age, and those with greater pre-adoption adversity, show poorer academic performance (Tan, 2009). Correspondingly, adopted youth are especially likely to receive special education services at school (Beverly et al., 2008), with at least two times as many referrals among adopted youth than non-adopted youth (van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005).

Some work, however, has found that adopted children, while showing lower cognitive and academic functioning on average compared to non-adopted children, score within the average range compared to general population norms (Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984; Neiss & Rowe, 2000; Vorría, Ntouma, & Rutter, 2015). And, meta-analytic comparisons of adopted and nonadopted children have found that adopted youth show poorer school performance and language abilities, and higher rates of learning problems, compared to their peers—but have higher IQ scores and do better in school compared to siblings that remain in orphanages or with their birth families, highlighting the potentially positive impact of adoption (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2005; van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005). Finally, several studies found that internationally adopted youth did not show deficits in their educational performance compared to non-adopted youth (Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; Lindblad, Dalen, Rasmussen, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2009).

Thus, compared to non-adopted children, adopted children—particularly those adopted internationally—often show poorer academic achievement and higher levels of learning difficulties and language skill deficits. Comparatively less work has examined cognitive and academic functioning among children adopted domestically, via public or private adoption (Harwood et al., 2013; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Children adopted via public adoption (foster care) may also be at risk for cognitive or academic deficits for various reasons, including educational neglect before placement, educational instability in care (e.g., due to numerous caregiver transitions), and trauma and prenatal drug exposure, both of which may affect brain development (Berlin et al., 2011; USDHHS, 2017). Indeed, prenatal substance exposure has been linked to poorer cognitive functioning among children

adopted via foster care (Tung, Christian-Brandt, Langley, & Waterman, 2020). Data from the National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP) show that, compared to non-adopted youth, adopted youth show poorer school performance: Only 19% of parents rated their reading performance as "excellent" and 24% rated their math performance as "excellent" (Bramlett, 2011; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Yet it is children adopted from foster care who account for much of this difference: they are less likely to be rated as doing well in reading and math than children adopted via private domestic and international adoption, which appears to be mostly related to child and family factors that vary by adoption type including having special health care needs and being from a low-income adoptive family (Knapp, Woodworth, & Ranka, 2013; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010).

Thus, adopted children may show compromised academic functioning, especially when they are adopted at older ages or have endured pre-adoption adversity. However, adoption may very well confer a protective function, enhancing children's cognitive capabilities and academic functioning beyond what might be expected if they remained in their pre-adoptive environment, particularly if children are raised in resource-rich families. Vorría et al. (2015) found that teens whose adoptive mothers had high levels of education had higher cognitive scores than teens whose adoptive mothers had low education levels. A longitudinal study of high-risk children adopted from foster care in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families found that, on average, children in all household types showed significant gains in cognitive development (although they maintained similar levels of behavioral challenges over time), despite lesbian and gay parents raising children with higher levels of biological and environmental risk prior to placement (Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2012). Further, research with biological and adoptive families suggests that environment (i.e., socioeconomic status) does impact children's school grades—albeit to a modest extent (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2007; Tan, Kim, Baggerly, & Rice, 2017). Indeed, adoptive parents tend to have more educational and financial resources than non-adoptive parents (Hamilton et al., 2007; Natsuaki et al., 2019; Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010), which may offer environmental advantages to children, such as via their impact on parenting, parent expectations, and school involvement.

### 1.2. Parents' education level, access to resources, and parenting values

Although parents' education level has long been regarded as a key predictor of children's academic achievement, it should be considered as part of a larger constellation of psychological and sociological variables that shape school outcomes (Walker & Smrekar, 2020). Parents with higher education may have greater access to various resources—such as income, time, energy, and school connections—which facilitate their engagement in their children's education (Child Trends, 2013). In turn, the relationship between parent education and children's academic outcomes may be mediated by interactions among status (e.g., education level) and process variables (e.g., school engagement; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Walker & Smrekar, 2020).

As noted, adoptive parents tend to have greater educational and financial resources than non-adoptive parents (Hamilton et al., 2007; Natsuaki et al., 2019), with international adopters reporting the highest levels, followed by private and then public domestic adopters (Vandivere & McKlindon, 2010). Adoptive parents also appear to be highly invested in their children and may devote more school-related resources to their children (Hamilton et al., 2007). Amidst greater education and income, and perhaps heightened awareness of their children's greater risk for academic challenges, adoptive parents may be especially engaged in their schooling, advocating for them amidst evidence of difficulty. Using a small sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents of children adopted post-infancy, Goldberg, Frost, and Black (2017) documented high levels of school involvement, with many seeking out specialized services for their children in the context of high levels of academic challenges. Such findings are important amidst evidence that

early intervention can enhance positive academic outcomes (DuPaul, Kern, Caskie, & Volpe, 2015), even into high school (Barnard, 2004). Significantly, studies of lesbian and gay parents (which often use highly educated samples) suggest that, like adoptive parents, they tend to be very engaged in schools, in part to minimize the marginalization they fear their children may experience there (Goldberg & Byard, 2020).

Parents' educational level is related not only to access to resources and school engagement, but to values and goals, which inform parenting practices—and thus child academic achievement. More educated parents may value and enact certain strategies and skills that facilitate children's educational success (e.g., they highly value learning; they are achievement-oriented), which they model and teach to their own children (Kohn, 1963; Rätty, 2003). They may also emphasize certain competencies over others. More educated parents may be more likely to focus on cognitive-verbal skills, whereas less educated parents may more strongly value practical or "hands on" skills (Rätty, 2003). More educated parents may also have higher academic expectations (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002), which they may communicate to children (Rowe & Casillas, 2011). Parents' high educational expectations may facilitate children's academic achievement by enhancing their sense of self-efficacy and self-perceived academic ability (Frome & Eccles, 1998; Knapp et al., 2013). Indeed, youth whose parents have high educational expectations are more likely to aspire to go to college (Sonuga-Barke, Stevenson, Thompson, Lamparelli, & Goldfoot, 1995; Tynkkynen, Tolvanen, & Salmela-Aro, 2012). Among adopted youth, parental interest in education (Maughan et al., 1998), parent involvement (Tan et al., 2017), and educational expectations (Tan et al., 2017) have all been linked to better academic outcomes. Of course, parents' education level is related to but does not dictate their educational expectations or interest in children's schooling (Watkins, 1997). Some less educated parents have high educational expectations for children and socialize them accordingly; and, not all highly educated parents engage in socialization practices that enhance children's academic self-confidence, competence, or goals. Ultimately, high expectations, regardless of parents' education, facilitate academic success when they translate into parent behaviors aimed at enhancing competence in a supportive context (Sonuga-Barke et al., 1995).

### 1.3. Adapting academic expectations: The role of children

Parents not only socialize their children, but children socialize their parents (Laible & Thompson, 2007). If children exhibit learning difficulties, parents may adjust their academic expectations or goals, and communicate these revised goals accordingly (Rätty & Kasanen, 2010). Maintaining and communicating high expectations for academic success may not be adaptive amidst evidence that a child is struggling academically. Unbridled educational "optimism" may not facilitate positive self-appraisals or academic outcomes, but contribute to frustration and family stress. Unrealistic or inflexible expectations may be especially likely to occur in adoptive families, if parents' expectations for children's academic interests and achievement hinge only on their own experiences and family history, and fail to take into account vulnerabilities that may impinge on their child's abilities, such as prenatal drug exposure, trauma, and educational neglect.

Research examining whether and how parents adapt their educational expectations amidst evidence of their children's academic and non-academic competencies is especially relevant here. Rätty and Kasanen (2010) explored the relationship between parental expectations and children's academic competence and found that parents crystallized anticipations of their children's further education as early as preschool; and, as children went through school, the relationship between parent expectations and child competence strengthened. That is, as children's academic abilities became more apparent, parent expectations were increasingly likely to "fall in line" (i.e., correlate) with children's emergent abilities. Similarly, research by Sonuga-Barke et al. (1995) suggests that the association between parents' educational expectations

and children's school performance may reflect parents' ability to identify whether their child will do well in school: i.e., parents may be drawing on pre-school indices of competence to make predictions about school performance. In this way, parents' educational expectations may represent a *response* to child characteristics rather than a cause, such that parents who observe their children to be impulsive, resistant to the type of structure typical of school, and disinterested or showing delays in cognitive-verbal skills (e.g., letters, numbers), may have lower expectations for children's school performance.

### 1.4. Theoretical framework

This study is framed by several assumptions. First, parents, including adoptive parents, are likely aware of societal beliefs and empirical evidence suggesting a genetic component to cognitive ability (Plomin & Petrill, 1997). It is also reasonable to assume that they may invoke not only nature (genetic processes; prenatal environment) but also nurture (parenting, school) in forming an understanding of children's academic abilities as well as an evolving set of expectations, goals, or hopes for their academic futures. People vary in their personal theories of intelligence, and whether they have a "growth" mindset (i.e., intelligence can be improved; nurture matters) or a "fixed" mindset (i.e., intelligence is set at birth), with most people falling in between these two extremes (Crosswaite & Asbury, 2019). Parents' ideas about the malleability of cognitive abilities in turn likely influence their parenting approach and educational expectations.

Notably, parents in general tend to demonstrate a "self-serving" attribution pattern when rating their children's academic competencies, whereby parents view their children's abilities to be relatively malleable and impacted by their own influence (Rätty, Komulainen, & Hirva, 2012). This tendency is especially strong among more educated parents, whose positive experiences within schools may lead them to internalize the notion of educability (Rätty et al., 2012). Gorman (1998) found that middle-class parents rarely acknowledged that their children might not attend college, whereas working-class parents, who generally had more negative histories of schooling, were minimally involved in children's schooling and less likely to have college aspirations for them. Significantly, relative to teachers, parents, especially middle-class, tend to be more "indulgent" in their assessments of children's academic competence, such that they overestimate what their children are capable of and/or how much they can improve in the future (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 1998).

Adoptive parents hold a unique vantage point with regard to considering the relative contributions of nature and nurture to their children's academic abilities and educational success. Amidst a societal preoccupation with genetics and genetic technologies (Lebner, 2000), they lack complete knowledge about their children's background (i.e., genetic, prenatal, and pre-adoptive), limiting their ability to forecast how these may impact their children's futures, and possibly leading them to look to birth parents and/or genetic testing for clues (Goldberg, 2019; Lebner, 2000). Unable to rely wholly on the theory of natural abilities or giftedness, and also unable to extrapolate from their own academic experience to their children, adoptive parents may be less likely to impose rigid educational expectations on their children, leading them to adapt a more dynamic conceptualization of their abilities. Educational optimism may be mitigated by awareness of the influence of early experiences, including known genetic or environmental risks, or simply the inevitability of (different) genetic influence. A mismatch in educational expectations or aspirations with children's abilities or performance may lead to stress on parents' part—but, parents may gradually adjust their expectations, and such mental flexibility may in turn facilitate greater ease and acceptance in relation to their child (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017). There is some evidence that adoptive parents may show distinct patterns in parenting style (e.g., more guiding parenting and less harsh parenting compared to non-adoptive parents; Natsuaki et al., 2019) which may encompass greater flexibility in general and

related to academic success in particular.

Yet certain types of parents may demonstrate more or less flexibility regarding their children's educational interests and outcomes. Heterosexual, middle-class biological fathers of children ranging from preschool (Richman & Rescorla, 1995) to adolescence (Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2017; Rimkute, Hirvonen, Tolvanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2012) have been found to endorse higher academic expectations of their children than mothers. Fathers are also less likely to readily acknowledge the possibility of their children not furthering their education or attending college (Rimkute et al., 2012), perhaps reflecting lower levels of involvement in their children's educational pursuits (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009) and in turn lesser attunement to their children's abilities (Bird & Berman, 1985) as compared to mothers. Unknown is how adoptive fathers may make sense of and respond to varying educational abilities or interests in their children. Also, research suggests that sexual minorities, particularly women, may be more open to adopting hard-to-place children, including children of a different race and/or with special needs (Goldberg, Tornello, Farr, Smith, & Miranda, 2020), and may ultimately be more likely to adopt children with such characteristics (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Lavner et al., 2012), perhaps reflecting—or at least prompting—earlier and/or greater acceptance of a variety of academic pathways. Research has generally documented similar academic outcomes among children in lesbian/gay-parent families and children in heterosexual-parent families (Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Potter, 2012). However, one study found more favorable academic outcomes for children of same-sex parents, which was attributed to high socioeconomic status and parental investment (Mazrekaj, De Witte, & Cabus, 2020). By contrast, another study found that in geographical areas with unfavorable attitudes toward same-sex parenting, children with lesbian and gay parents were more likely to be behind in school, especially adopted children (Boertien & Bernardi, 2019).

### 1.5. The current study

Parents who have high levels of education tend to expect their children to go to college and to have higher educational and career goals for their children. Yet parents who adopt do not share their children's genetic makeup and may also recognize that their children have experiences of prenatal or preadoption adversity that may interfere with academic progress or "success" as it has been traditionally defined. Our research questions were: (1) How do parents describe and respond to perceived child competence in academic and other domains, including their (a) beliefs about the role of nature versus nurture in their children's academic performance, and (b) educational expectations for their children going forward? and (2) If relevant, what are parents' experiences of adapting or reconciling their expectations for their children's educational outcomes if these do not align with children's emergent interests or academic achievement?

The current study aims to address these questions in an in-depth qualitative study of 63 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents who adopted via international, public, and private domestic adoption. It explores how parents view their children's academic and cognitive abilities and futures, and how they adjust to unexpected challenges.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Sample

The sample consists of data from 33 couples: 11 lesbian, 11 gay male, and 11 heterosexual. All parents had adopted their children, approximately eight years earlier. Both partners were interviewed in 10 of 11 lesbian mother (LM) families, in all 11 gay father (GF) families, and in nine of 11 heterosexual parent (HP) families (two men did not participate). Thus, data were gathered from 63 people in 33 couples. Effort was made to include data from families who had adopted non-infant children as well as infant children. In each group (LM, GF, HP), four families

adopted via private domestic, four via public domestic (foster care) and three via international adoption. Thus, a total of 12 families adopted privately and domestically, 12 via foster care, and nine internationally. Parents reported that it took an average of 12.5 months to adopt ( $SD = 12.65$ ), and an average of 39 months (3 years, 3 months) to become a parent ( $SD = 30.94$ ), highlighting their high motivation to become parents. Of the 33 families, 18 adopted infants and 15 adopted children over six months: nine toddlers (under three) and six school-aged children. Seventeen of the 33 families (51.5%) later adopted one or more children, who are not the focus of this study.

Most parents were white (85%); 15% were of color. Parents worked 32.26 h per week on average ( $Mdn = 40$ ;  $SD = 19.31$ ). Their mean educational level was 4.65,  $SD = 0.94$ , where 4 = college degree and 5 = master's degree (range of 2–6; 2 is high school and 6 is PhD/MD/JD). One (1.6%) had a high school degree, seven (11.1%) had some college/ an associate's, 15 (23.8%) had a college degree, 30 (47.6%) had a master's, and 10 (15.9%) had a PhD/MD/JD. Thus, 87.3% had at least a college degree, and 63.5% had a graduate degree. Mean family income was \$164,873 ( $Mdn = \$134,000$ ;  $SD = \$95,911$ ). Lesbian couples earned the least ( $M = \$115,727$ ;  $Mdn = \$100,100$ ;  $SD = \$52,391$ ), and gay couples the most ( $M = \$237,863$ ;  $Mdn = \$190,000$ ;  $SD = \$115,875$ ), with heterosexual couples in the middle ( $M = \$137,263$ ;  $Mdn = \$120,000$ ;  $SD = \$50,491$ ).

Twenty of the children (60.6%) were boys and 13 (39.4%) were girls. Most children were of color, including biracial/multiracial (24; 72.7%). Mean child age was 10.05 years ( $Mdn = 9.20$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ). Most children were in third or fourth grade (24; 72.7%). Three (9.1%) were in fifth or sixth, three (9.1%) were in seventh or eighth, and three were missing data.

Twenty children (60.6%) attended public school, 10 attended private school (independent, religious, or therapeutic; 30.3%) and three (9.1%) were homeschooled. Mean parent-reported grade point average (GPA) was 3.28 ( $Mdn = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ), with a range of 1.0 to 4.0. Parents rarely disagreed in reports of GPA; in the few instances this occurred, we took the average of their reports. While we used parent-reported GPAs as an approximation of children's academic performance, it should be noted that the use of GPAs is uncommon in elementary school; rather, math and reading are more commonly used to evaluate overall performance (Moser, West, & Hughes, 2012). In this sample, most parents said their children earned mostly A's (29, 47.5%) or B's (26, 42.6%) in English, with the remainder earning C's and D's. Similarly, most parents said their children earned mostly A's (33, 54.0%) or B's (23, 37.7%) in Math, with the rest earning C's and D's.

Regarding developmental, learning, and academic challenges, according to parents, 13 (39.4%) children had ADHD, eight (24.2%) had academic delays or learning disabilities, seven (21.2%) had speech challenges/delays, four (12.1%) had sensory integration challenges, four (12.1%) had visual/hearing problems, two (6.1%) had autism, and two (6.1%) had FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder). Regarding emotional and behavioral challenges, four (12.1%) had anxiety disorders, three (9.1%) had ODD (oppositional defiant disorder), and fewer than 5% had other issues (e.g., mood disorder, attachment disorder). Four (12.1%) had social challenges.

Regarding interventions, 13 (39.4%) had individualized educational plans (IEPs) at school (which provide individual special education and related services to meet a child's unique needs), three (9.1%) had a 504 plan (which provides services and changes to the learning environment to allow students to learn alongside their peers), and four (12.1%) were in a special needs classroom at least part of the day. Six (18.2%) received occupational therapy, four (12.1%) speech therapy, four (12.1%) tutoring, and one (3.0%) physical therapy. Over half (17; 51.5%) were in individual therapy; five (15.2%) were in group therapy. One-third (11; 33.3%) took at least one medication.

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants completed an in-depth interview about eight years after



becoming first-time parents via adoption, in the US, between 2015 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> Each parent was interviewed individually, separate from their partner, by the principal investigator and trained psychology doctoral students. The interview focused predominantly on school experiences of adoptive families. Interviews lasted 1–1.5 h on average and were transcribed and de-identified. Participants also completed an online survey that contained mostly closed-ended questions hosted by the platform *Qualtrics*. The study was approved by the Clark University internal human subjects review board.

In our analysis, we primarily drew on parents' responses to the following interview questions, which were often accompanied by spontaneous probes and clarifying questions: 1. How is parenting going? 2. What unexpected parenting challenges have you run into during the past few years? Are there aspects of your child that you were not expecting or were not prepared for? 3. Have you realized anything about yourself as a parent that you weren't aware of? 4. What do you see as your child's main strengths, at home or at school? 5. What do you see as your child's main challenges? What concerns you most about your child, at home or at school? 6. In what ways do you think being adopted impacts your child's development? 7. Tell me about the schools your child has attended. 8. Tell me about what kinds of things you considered in deciding where your child would attend school. 9. Tell me about your experiences with your child's teachers. 10. What is your relationship with [child's] birth family? How has this changed over time?

### 2.3. Sample selection

The current sample of 33 families (63 participants) was selected from a larger sample of 105 families who participated in interviews (33 LM families, 27 GF families, and 45 HP families). In the larger (full) sample, 59 children (56.2%) were adopted via private domestic adoption (16 LM, 19 GF, 24 HP), 26 (24.8%) via international adoption (7 LM, 3 GF, 16 HP), and 20 (19.0%) via public domestic adoption (10 LM, 5 GF, 5 HP). Most (69; 65.7%) children were of color (24 LM, 17 GF, 28 HP). Slightly more than half (55; 52.3%) adopted boys (15 LM, 19 GF, 21 HP); 45 families adopted girls (16 LM, 7 GF, 22 HP) and five adopted siblings (2 LM, 1 GF, 2 HP).

Given the time and resources involved in conducting an in-depth rigorous qualitative analysis, and because a larger sample size does not imply higher-quality data or lead to a richer understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015), a subsample of the 105 families was selected for analysis (33; about one-third; Roy et al., 2015). Effort was made to roughly approximate the racial and gender breakdown of children in each family type (LM, GF, HP) in the larger sample. Although it would be ideal to have equal numbers of families who adopted via private, public, and international adoption in the subsample for data analysis, only three gay couples in the larger sample adopted internationally; thus, our subsample of international adopters is smaller (nine total; three in each family type) than our subsamples of private domestic (12; four in each family type) and public domestic adopters (12; four in each family type). Beyond considerations related to child gender and race, and adoption type, the subsample of narratives chosen for analysis was selected based upon the richness of interview, including the length, detail, and level of complexity of responses on the topics of interest—common considerations for qualitative researchers seeking to reduce the number of participants from a large dataset to enable more focused attention and greater depth and complexity to data analysis

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the original transition to adoptive parenthood study, see [masked for review]. In that study, we explicitly recruited same-sex and heterosexual couples through adoption agencies, given the increasing diversity among adoptive families: Indeed, same-sex couples who are parents are six times more likely than heterosexual couples who are parents to have adopted their child(ren) (Goldberg & Conron, 2018).

(Burton, Cherlin, Winn, Estacion, & Holder-Taylor, 2009; Roy & Burton, 2007; Roy et al., 2015).

### 2.4. Data analysis

Parents' responses were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis, a rigorous and deliberate yet theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data involving exploration of recurrent patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Data analysis focused mainly on descriptions of children's academic abilities, performance, and futures.

The first author began by reading through all 63 of the interview transcripts multiple times, to gain an in-depth understanding of each family's story and each parent's perspective. She wrote memos to process her understanding of the data and develop preliminary ideas about emerging codes. In this early stage, she attended in particular to parents' descriptions of children's academic abilities and performance, attributions about their academic abilities, performance, and challenges; and values, expectations, goals, and efforts related to education. To develop themes, she engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories that stayed fairly close to the data (Patton, 2014). For example, initial codes included "excellent student," "bright, underperforming student," and "poor student"—a typology of parent descriptions of child academic functioning. These codes were refined and elaborated upon as she moved through the coding process. For example, cross-cutting themes emerged that described the severity of children's learning challenges and emotional/behavioral problems, parents' attributions for children's abilities (e.g., nature versus nurture), and their aspirations and goals for their children. These themes were mapped on to the initial typology that emerged—a typology which itself was further refined and nuanced to capture parents' emotions and perceptions surrounding their children's abilities and performance. At this stage, the first author also examined whether themes varied within and across the typology by family type, adoption type, and other dimensions. These focused codes, which are more conceptual and selective, became the basis for the "themes" developed in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2014). The first author also attended at this stage to how key concepts and themes varied across families and within each individual family.

Of note is that both the overall number of participants whose data were analyzed (63) as well as the number of participants in each family type and adoption type, was in part informed by theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation occurs when researchers are satisfied that "the properties and dimensions of the concepts and conceptual relationships selected to render the target event are fully described and that they have captured its complexity and variation" (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 875). Rich data, in combination with theoretical saturation (i.e., the continual recurrence of the same themes in the same relationship to one another within and/or across contexts), provides assurance of the integrity of the project and its associated conclusions. In turn, saturation, in combination with other factors, including each author's high level of familiarity with the data and participants, and our use of multiple coders—can be seen as a valuable index of the validity (or credibility) of our findings.

The second author examined a subset (one-fifth) of transcripts as a way to evaluate the emerging coding scheme, using the evaluative concepts of credibility (e.g., Are the data sufficient to merit the research claims?) and resonance (e.g., Do the analytic categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?; see Charmaz, 2014, p. 337). This author provided feedback which led the first author to make minor refinements to the scheme. At the final stage, all authors attended closely to the "storyline" of the findings, such that the data are organized in terms of the major typology that emerged ("inspired," "pragmatic," and "concerned"), and cross-cutting themes are discussed for each group (e.g., attributions for abilities/challenges; future goals for children). The findings section ends with a final section that details some parents' reconciling of their own educational pasts with their children's

**Table 1**  
Major codes and subcodes, by adoption type and family type.

Code	Total	By Adoption Type	By Family Type
<b>Inspired Parents</b>	12 (36.4%)	7 PD, 3 INT, 2 FC	6 LM, 3 GF, 3 HP
Nature vs. Nurture: Environmental supports facilitate natural abilities			
Investing in private school to provide “solid foundation”	4	4 PD	2 LM, 2 GF
Sacrificing school rigor for child well-being	3	1 PD, 1 INT, 1 FC	1 LM, 2 HP
Educational Expectations: Goal is to support their talents, dreams			
Communication of high expectations	3	2 PD, 1 INT	1 LM, 2 GF
Communication of flexible expectations	2	2 FC	1 LM, 1 GF
<b>Pragmatic Parents</b>	9 (27.2%)	3 PD, 3 INT, 3 FC	3 LM, 4 GF, 2 HP
Nature vs. Nurture: Environmental supports offset risk			
Seeking out support services for learning disabilities, ADHD	6	2 PD, 2 INT, 2 FC	2 LM, 2 GF, 2 HP
Educational Expectations: Goal is to keep all options open			
<b>Concerned Parents</b>	12 (36.4%)	2 PD, 3 INT, 7 FC	2 LM, 4 GF, 6 HP
Struggles with Academic Self Esteem	6	2 INT, 4 FC	1 GF, 5 HP
Nature vs. Nurture: Genetics limits positive effect of supports			
Educational Expectations: Goal is personal stability			
Goal is personal independence	7	1 PD, 2 INT, 4 FC	2 LM, 2 GF, 3 HP
Managing and Modifying Expectations	9	3 PD, 2 INT, 4 FC	5GF, 4 HP

Note: PD = private domestic, INT = international, FC = foster care, LM = lesbian mother family, GF = gay father family, HP = heterosexual parent family.

academic realities. See Table 1 for a display of all themes, for the full sample and by adoption type and family type.

Parents in each family tended to provide similar accounts, and few major discrepancies between partners were observed. In turn, we describe themes in terms of their frequency across families rather than individual parents.

### 3. Findings

Key patterns emerged in how parents described and responded to their children’s cognitive and academic aptitude. That is, a typology emerged, whereby some parents described their children as cognitively and academically advanced (“inspired parents”); others described their children as bright but underperforming, often because of ADHD or learning disabilities (“pragmatic parents”); and still others described their children as doing poorly in school and having a range of and/or significant emotional/behavioral issues (“concerned parents”). In turn, systematic patterns emerged in how parents discussed the role of nature and nurture in their children’s abilities and performance, as well as their educational aspirations for their children. The results are organized such that for each of the three types (“inspired,” “pragmatic,” “concerned”), we first explore parents’ descriptions of their children, followed by their sense of the roles of nature and nurture in children’s abilities or challenges, and finally, their educational expectations.

#### 3.1. “Inspired” parents: Impressed and hopeful (“He’s highly intelligent, and doing well”)

One-third of the families were characterized by very positive assessments of both their children’s cognitive abilities and their academic

achievements, and were termed “inspired” parents. Namely, 12 families (36.4%; 7 private adopters, 3 international, 2 public; 6 LM; 3 GF; 3 HP; all but one child adopted under a year) described their children as excelling, or even “gifted,” in elementary school, in some cases expressing awe in their child’s “natural” or “innate” talents and abilities. These parents generally reported high GPAs in their children (4.0, for the most part; a few had a 3.75). Stated Mariette, a white lesbian mother with some college, whose son, Orion (multiracial, adopted privately, public school) had a 4.0 GPA: “You never know how your child’s going to be and how your child’s going to take to learning and growing [academically], and Orion has just—there’s never been an expectation, but if there ever was one, he’s well exceeded it. I’m truly amazed.” For Mariette, the biggest academic challenge was Orion’s “enormous vocabulary” and high reading level, making it difficult to find age-appropriate, intellectually stimulating reading material for him. These parents, then, tended to share a sense of awe and gratitude when it came to their children’s intellectual abilities and growth, and a sense of excitement and optimism about their academic futures and possibilities.

#### 3.2. Inspired parents’ views on the roles of nature and nurture: Environmental supports as facilitating “natural” abilities

Parents of academically high performing children often freely attributed children’s intellectual abilities to genetics (nature), but also acknowledged the role of family and school environment (nurture) in the development of their “natural abilities.” Environmental factors included enrichment activities, type of school, and parenting choices. In some cases, parents deliberately chose less stressful school environments to take pressure off their high-achieving children and ensure their socioemotional well-being.

Families who emphasized the influence of genetics on their high-achieving children’s academic abilities can be seen as generously acknowledging or expressing gratitude for the gifts their children’s birth families had given them: “We can’t take credit for who our child is.” Erik, a white gay father with a master’s degree, marveled about his son (white, adopted privately, private school): “He’s a really sharp kid. So genetics does play a part in that. At the same time, investing in early education [plays] just as big a part as genetics, to be able to foster and develop his abilities.” Jen, Mariette’s wife (quoted above), said:

I feel like I’m allowed to boast a little bit because genetically I played no role in his amazingness...Orion is very bright—he was seen by a neuropsychologist [and was] absolutely confirmed gifted...We do know both his birth parents and we’re like “Hmm, wow, he probably wouldn’t have gotten that from us.”

Gillian, a white lesbian mother with a college degree, shared similar sentiments about her daughter Lily (white, adopted privately), who had previously attended a private school but was now in public school: “She’s a very, very smart kid and her birth parents are brilliant people, so I joke that I hope she did get that part [from them], so college will be easy...And Lily’s a smart kid. She just tested out reading as high as fifth grade...and Montessori [private school] was great with that; she came out of school at Montessori there with [lots of] good stuff.”

Parents like Gillian suggested that while they placed a high premium on genetics in understanding their children’s academic aptitude, they also believed that high-quality, supportive educational contexts had the potential to facilitate “natural” abilities. These parents tended to emphasize the role of both early education and their own parenting in cultivating, supporting, or encouraging children’s intellectual and creative development. Parents described how they impacted their children by selecting educational settings they hoped would nurture their skills and talents, and by exposing them to travel, museums, and books. Thus, parents acknowledged the role of the environment (school, parenting) but framed it as playing a secondary, supportive function in facilitating their children’s existing capabilities. Colleen, a white lesbian mother with a master’s degree, described her son Trevor (Latinx, adopted internationally, public school) as “curious about everything.” Colleen

said she had “encouraged him from a young age to take initiative. So I definitely think that has a lot to do with [it]. And Emily and I, we’re kind of dorks, and we love to learn; we take him to museums, we always have.” Ultimately, Colleen acknowledged the contribution of both nature and nurture: “I think that to a large extent...a lot of who Trevor is just who he is, but I also think a lot of him is because of how we parented him.”

Beyond early education, inspired parents sometimes indicated that they viewed their choice of primary and secondary schooling, past or present, as a key way that they influenced their children’s academic aptitude and performance. Four families, all of whom adopted via private domestic adoption, described having sent their children to private school for kindergarten or part of elementary school, which they viewed as an “investment” in that it provided them with “a solid foundation.” Yet parents’ schooling choices were also informed by their children, and parents’ sense of what they needed to thrive not only academically but socioemotionally. Three families of high-achieving children said they had guided their children towards less competitive school choices because of concern about how they might respond to major academic pressures, and a corresponding desire to facilitate their children’s academic self-confidence. These parents noted that their children struggled with perfectionism, anxiety, or self-esteem related to academics; in turn, when choosing among various charter, magnet, and public school options, they opted for what seemed like the least competitive or “pressured” option. Damian, a white heterosexual father with a college degree, shared how his daughter Sophie (Asian, adopted internationally) had tested into a school for the gifted—but he and his wife had decided to send her to the local public school. Given Sophie’s history of test anxiety, and her adoptive status—which Damian expected might intensify issues of identity and belonging that were bound to arise in middle school—Damian felt that public school was the best choice: “There’s a lot of parents who are like, ‘Oh, I want my kid to excel academically.’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, I want her to as well.’ But we were very cognizant of the fact that she has these other factors that might come into play that are going to erupt in middle school, and want to give her room for that.”

### 3.3. Inspired parents’ educational expectations: “Our goal is to support their talents and dreams”

When describing their children’s futures, these parents, all of whom had at least a bachelor’s degree, were enthusiastic and ambitious. Some spoke of strongly valuing higher education, with several noting that they had communicated their educational expectations to their children throughout their life (“I think he’s absorbed the fact that we expect college since probably first grade” [GF]). Chris, a biracial (Latinx/white) gay father with a master’s degree, whose daughter Veronica was biracial (Black/white), adopted privately, and attending public school in a “top school district,” said, “We talk about college a lot actually...and she does talk about college [and] talks about what she wants to do for a career—she wants to be a neurologist, she wants to be a chef—all sorts of things!” Lindsey, a white lesbian mother with a master’s degree, exclaimed, about her daughter Carly (Asian, adopted privately, private school):

I’m so curious to see, like, academically, where Carly ultimately goes, because she’s really into math and she reads 10 books a week and she just is a sponge—she loves to learn, so I’m totally excited to just see, like, where does her kind of her focus ultimately end up...What’s she going to major in in college, and...what’s her first job going to be as a teenager, and...her first, like, professional job.

These parents, then, tended to have high levels of educational optimism that were matched by their children’s academic competence. They generally “expected” that their children would attend college, but also showed flexibility, recognizing a range of future paths for their high-achieving children (e.g., neurology, chef), which they sought to support. This flexibility was especially apparent in two families who had

adopted via foster care, who described how their educational expectations, and how they communicated them, were informed by their children’s early adversities, wherein parents sought to create space for them to develop their own interests and abilities rather than pushing them in any direction. Barb was a white lesbian mother with a college degree, whose daughter Rory, who was Black, had entered the family at age five via foster care with developmental delays. About Rory, who attended private school, Barb said:

She has such a love of music. A love of drama. A love of reading. She just always has things she’s interested in...We had high expectations within what we thought she was capable of at the time, but...we weren’t like, “If you don’t come home with anything less than an A...If you don’t play this flute perfectly...” So, all of that pressure I think we were able to let go of, so she was just able to develop in her time.

Thus, although they hoped their children would attend college—which seemed viable given that they enjoyed and did well in school—these parents sought to communicate openness regarding their academic futures.

### 3.4. “Pragmatic parents”: Realistic and flexible (“She’s got some challenges, but is very bright”)

Another group of parents were termed “pragmatic parents” ( $n = 9$ : 3 LM, 4 GF, 2 HP). These parents represented a mix of all adoption types (3 private domestic, 3 public domestic, 3 international) and described their children as academically “average” (GPAs for children in this group ranged from 2.75 to 3.25) and as having mild to moderate school and/or learning challenges, while also noting that they were bright, gifted, and/or talented in at least one domain (e.g., music, art). These parents often described a disconnect between their children’s abilities (high) and grades (okay to good). They also noted that they had expended a great deal of resources—i.e., in energy, time, and money—to support their children’s academic development, such as by retaining tutors to help their children in difficult subjects.

A typical narrative came from Laura, a white lesbian mother with a master’s degree, who described her son Andrew (white, private adoption, public school) as “super smart...He’s always putting things together in his head...he’s a creative mind...he is really good at Lego building and construction. I think his mind works in unique and mysterious ways that will be put to use that way.” Yet despite his abilities, Andrew was “not a great student”; in turn, Laura tried to support him as best she could: “[He does not] excel academically at this point. He is super smart but it doesn’t come out in testing, and he’s slow, not fast...So I don’t think [he is going to be] the Type A, getting A’s student. [My goal] is just to provide support for him in the process of getting his education.” A similar narrative was provided by Iris, a white lesbian mother with an associate’s degree, about her daughter Trish (Latinx, public adoption, public school). Iris lauded Trish’s strengths (“She has a really great voice and likes to write poetry...and she ended her year with good grades in classwork and homework”) but also described academic challenges (“She can’t pass a test to save her life because she doesn’t study”). Iris’s hope was that Trish would improve in her study habits, especially since she had recently been diagnosed with ADHD and was now receiving additional school supports and medication aimed to help her in the classroom.

### 3.5. Pragmatic parents’ views on the roles of nature and nurture: Environmental supports as offsetting risk, enhancing success

Parents in this group rarely directly invoked genetics or birth family to make sense of their children’s academic strengths or challenges. Rather, they emphasized the power of nurture, underscoring their pursuit of educational and therapeutic resources (assessments, tutors, therapists), the explicit function of which was to enhance their children’s academic and psychological well-being, with perhaps the implicit function of mitigating early environmental and/or genetic influences.

Dean, a white heterosexual father with a master's degree, who adopted his son—who was white, and had learning disabilities, ADHD, and social skills deficits—via foster care, said: “I believe education is the key. It's not a nature versus nurture thing; it's services and experiences [that make the difference]...So we try.” To Dean, trying meant activating a range of resources, including a special education plan, reading therapy, and a social skills group.

Two-thirds of these families ( $n = 6$ ) described how diagnoses of learning disabilities or emotional/behavioral challenges, such as ADHD, had led them to seek out specialized supports and resources they hoped would facilitate their children's academic success. Val, a white heterosexual mother with a Ph.D., shared that her son Joshua (white, public adoption, public school), whom she viewed as “very bright; he has a great IQ,” was recently diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. Val expected that Joshua's impulsivity would continue to be a struggle for him, but hoped that with support, he could be successful academically: “He's an impulsive kid...it's going to be an ongoing challenge. . [but] there are more opportunities, more services available for students with ADHD and dyslexia than [in the past].” Jason, a white gay father with a master's, said his son Toby (white, private adoption, public school) was “super smart; he will remember anything someone has told him, or a movie he watched. Yet Toby also had a sensory processing disorder and dyslexia, and thus had a special education plan, a tutor, and reading therapy. Jason said, “We are investing a lot. We are supporting him in the most strategic ways that are going to leverage the most.” Jason was optimistic that such supports would facilitate Toby's success: “I feel like when he gets to middle school he is going to [improve]. I hope that is true.”

Three of these families shared their belief that their status as adoptive parents may have encouraged their attentiveness and responsiveness to potential learning and behavior challenges. Adam, a Latinx heterosexual father with a Ph.D., whose son Max (Latinx, private adoption, public school) had academic and behavioral challenges, reflected: “We've been handling it immediately with therapy and medication...Because he's adopted, because we couldn't have a kid the standard way, we did not go into being parents expecting things to be 'normal.' So I think we've reacted more quickly, with less denial, when we've been confronted with problems.”

### 3.6. Pragmatic parents' educational expectations: “Our goal is to keep all options open”

Parents in this group often intimated an awareness that their child might not pursue a traditional academic trajectory—i.e., attending “regular” school through high school and then going on to college—and expressed openness to other possibilities, such as vocational or trade school. In this way, parents calibrated their educational expectations to reflect their children's school performance, as well as their interests and talents. Val noted that her son Joshua was interested in cooking and computers and “would like to go to a vocational-technical high school... so that [route] is a possibility.” Some parents, in turn, sought to communicate acceptance of a range of professional options. Tamara, a white lesbian mother with some college, noted that her daughter, Allie (Latinx, international adoption, public school) had challenges with organization and studying, which Tamara hoped would improve as Allie learned to manage her ADHD. Yet Tamara held a flexible orientation with regard to Allie's future, which she tried to convey:

We've talked a lot about different things she can do. She has a full list of, “I'm gonna be a dispatcher at 911” or “I'm gonna be a cop.” And she knows she can go to college if she chooses, so it's very open. I've never said to her, “Oh, you're going to go to college no matter what.” That's just not the way I talk to her, and neither does Sheila.

Parents such as Tamara, then, sometimes outlined how their children had expressed career goals that were less academic and more trade oriented (e.g., the military; working at a nail salon). Parents generally expressed acceptance of these goals—although several emphasized that they wanted their children to keep their options open (e.g., vocational

school, college, community college), and in turn had discussed a variety of future paths with them.

### 3.7. “Concerned parents”: Thinking beyond academics (“He's not so great in school”)

Some families ( $n = 12$ ; 2 LM, 4 GF, 6 HP) described considerable concerns about their children's well-being associated with their significant struggles with “traditional” academic subjects in elementary school. These parents, most ( $n = 7$ ) of whom adopted via foster care (three international, two private), described their children as poor to average students (less than a B average), with severe or numerous emotional, behavioral, and/or learning problems that impacted them at home and school. In turn, most children received school services, such as IEPs, and many also took medication and were in therapy to provide additional support. Corey, a white heterosexual father with a bachelor's degree, shared that his son Nathan (white, public adoption) had learning and speech delays, ADHD, and had maintained only a 2.0 GPA before he and his wife pulled him out of public school: “The further we got into school the more issues came up...We pulled him out because he was really just had kind of shut down...Even with the IEP and advocacy, his teacher and the special ed folks were just not able to get him to engage in school.”

Half of the children in this group ( $n = 6$ )—four of whom were adopted via foster care and two internationally—were described as struggling with academic self-esteem. According to their parents, they were “down” on themselves academically, in part due to learning disabilities or poor school performance. Parents wanted more than anything for their children to realize their own self-worth (“I want him to like himself a little bit more; he's very hard on himself,” [HM]). Diana, a white heterosexual mother with some college, said, about her son Leo (Latinx, adopted internationally, public school): “He's got his IEP in progress. But he's going through another bout of being really insecure with things so we're seeing a therapist.” Nicole, a white heterosexual mother with a master's, whose daughter Amelia (multiracial, private adoption, public school) had ADHD, felt that Amelia's academic and social challenges impacted her sense of self:

With her distractedness, I think she misses a lot and then gets confused...then the whole conversation, whatever, has moved on and she's lost...and I think she gets baffled in social situations. The sum total of those two things is that it starts to really affect her sense of self, which is why we're monitoring it so carefully, and trying as many resources as we can. I'm frankly less worried about her grades, and more worried about her sense of self.

### 3.8. Concerned parents' views on the roles of nature and nurture: Genetics limit the positive effect of environmental supports

Parents in this group tended to invoke birth family and genetics to make sense of their children's challenges. Thus, in contrast to referencing birth family's talents or skills as a context for understanding their children's abilities, like “inspired” parents, they drew on knowledge of birth family's developmental, academic, or mental health challenges to make sense of children's difficulties. In this way, parents focused on genetic processes and early environmental factors largely as liabilities that might help to explain children's challenging characteristics. Rosie, a white lesbian mother with a master's degree, explained that her daughter Layla (Latinx/white, public adoption, public school) “has fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. She has Generalized Anxiety Disorder and she has a mood disorder...Layla's experience in utero, and also what she inherited from her birth family, does have a significant impact.” Michael, a white heterosexual father with a master's—and Nicole's husband—viewed Amelia's difficulties via the lens of what he knew of Amelia's birth mother, Lisa:

I think the biological factors have shown themselves—I mean, Lisa herself has said that she really struggled with math...Having the genetic



background that Amelia came from, and knowing Lisa and knowing how Lisa has not been able to launch herself as an adult—I mean, there was a lot of environmental reasons for that, but also seeing how she interacts and navigates the world, her birth mom, I feel like it's hard for me not to see some of those same characteristics in Amelia, and some of the same challenges.

Parents who adopted via foster care not only invoked genetic factors but also early adverse experiences in discussing their children's academic and behavioral challenges and potential trajectories. Ernest, a white gay father with a high school education, shared that his son Rick (white, public school), who had less than a 2.0 GPA, had missed “so much school” due to being in foster care for much of his early life. This, coupled with his birth parents' drug addiction, made Rick vulnerable to getting off track academically and in life. Ernest saw his role as helping to “break that cycle” via academic and therapeutic interventions so that Rick was able to graduate, get a job, stay off drugs, and live on his own. Thus, Ernest and other concerned parents signified a commitment to doing what they could to mitigate vulnerabilities on their children's part.

Yet significantly, unlike “pragmatic parents”, who often underscored the power of nurture (e.g., school supports and services) to enhance children's outcomes, these concerned parents perceived an upper limit to what school interventions could achieve. Most noted that they had had incomplete success with such services. Even with therapy, medication, and an IEP, Diane's son Leo “can't stay focused, and he can't get his work done, and he's constantly getting distracted.” Likewise, two families noted that their lack of success with traditional interventions at school (e.g., IEPs, special education services) had led them to homeschool their children.

### 3.9. Concerned parents' education expectations: “Our goal is personal stability”

In contrast to “pragmatic parents,” whose children showed moderate learning, emotional, and/or academic challenge amidst average academic performance, concerned parents grappled with the reality of their children's severe emotional, behavioral, and/or developmental challenges and generally poor academic performance. In turn, in speaking about children's futures, they tended to deemphasize academic goals amidst their primary goal of personal stability. For many, educational achievement was secondary to their goal of raising a child who, as an adult, engaged in healthy relationships, was not substance addicted, and had the skills to “get a job, work outside the home.” Seven of these 12 parents explicitly stated that their primary goal for their children was personal independence (3 LM, 2 GF, 2 HP; four public domestic, two international, one private domestic). Rosie acknowledged her daughter Layla's mood, anxiety, and FASD diagnoses while also emphasizing her strengths and positive qualities, including her creativity and musical talent, such that Rosie hoped that Layla would “stay in music, dance, and theater.” Yet in thinking about the future, Rosie said, with a sigh,

We'll keep learning who she is and what she needs every day to support her...We worry most about drugs and alcohol. If we can keep her in enough structured activities [with] enough good people supporting her then hopefully we will get her to [adulthood] where she can actually make good decisions on her own—but with her brain injury, we don't know...We want to have faith in her and her capacity to use the stuff we've given her over these years to make good decisions, but...we worry. We want her to be a successful adult.

In imagining their children's vocational futures, concerned parents considered their children's interests, talents, and positive qualities alongside their psychological and academic challenges. Rosie, for example, considered Layla's love of animals alongside her poor science and math grades, prompting the conclusion that Layla would probably not be a veterinarian (“I don't think she's going to be able to get all the way through school”), but might be a vet tech or dog trainer. A similar process was articulated by Kathleen, a white heterosexual mother with a

master's degree, who was grappling with her daughter Chloe's (white, private adoption, private school) recent autism diagnosis, and what it meant for Chloe's future. Unlike Rosie, who did not expect or hope that Layla would be a vet (this was Layla's stated wish, which Rosie saw as unrealistic), Kathleen had initially envisioned Chloe, who loved science, becoming a doctor, or at least achieving “a degree of some kind.” Conceding that school was “so hard for Chloe,” Kathleen had modified her expectations. While her husband “would really like Chloe to go to a four-year, I don't have that expectation of her just because of how much she struggles and how much she hates it. She does have a lot of interest in medicine so we've talked to her about different tech things she can do, like [be a medical assistant].”

In three cases, children had severe developmental and/or emotional disabilities, and, thus independent living was framed as the ultimate goal—but one that was not necessarily easily within reach. Tori, a white lesbian mother with some college, described how her daughter Sydney, also white, and adopted via foster care, had made great progress at home and at her therapeutic day school. But Sydney's behavioral outbursts were a continual challenge, leading Tori to gradually revise her expectations (e.g., for college; for independent living) to incorporate growing evidence that Sydney might be unable to achieve such milestones:

We know where she's headed if these behaviors don't change. She's not going to live independently, and she's not going to go to college. She'd probably end up...at a group home...I think that's she's come as high as she has...because we've set the expectations really high. Last summer we took her down to visit the college she wants to go to...Part of the point was to help her take a far-reaching goal and make it more immediate and more achievable and identifiable, and to help her see how far she still needs to go.

### 3.10. How pragmatic and concerned parents manage and modify expectations: “We're not cut from the same cloth”

Some of the pragmatic and concerned families (5 GF, 4 HP) noted that it was an “adjustment” to modify their educational expectations amidst their own love of learning and educational success, but they were “working on it.” The disconnect between their high education levels and success at school, and their children's lesser interest in or poorer performance at school, was difficult to accept. These parents implicitly or explicitly acknowledged differences in “DNA” or “genetics” in trying to make sense of and come to terms with the differences they observed between their own and their children's scholastic orientations and aspirations. Dominick, a Latinx gay father with a master's degree, whose son Brandon (Latinx, adopted internationally, public school) struggled mightily in reading, said: “David and I were both very strong academically, and so that's where not being our DNA is a little challenging...The reading [especially] has been torturous, which is heartbreaking for me, because I am a voracious reader.” Adam, a Latinx heterosexual father with a Ph.D., whose son Max had academic and behavioral challenges, sought to reconcile his love of reading and school with Max's difficulty in these domains:

Both my wife and I...were both very precocious and bookish kids; we never had any problems with reading, and we didn't have all that much trouble with impulse control...so this is new for us...[With adoptive parenthood], there is the complete realization that the child is very much another entity that you're taking care of. Not an extension of you, not a reflection of you, not “You Version 2.0.”

Karin, a white heterosexual mother, who was now homeschooling her son Nathan (white, public adoption) because he “hated school,” reflected on both the past (i.e., the prior year at public school) and Nathan's future, against the backdrop of her own positive schooling experience:

It was just really stressful...like, “Oh my God, if my kid can't hack it in second grade, what does our future look like?” And then all the baggage about my fears about his future and what the possibilities are and all the sort of adoption baggage would kind of come raining down

on me and I'd be like "Oh God." None of his birth family have graduated from high school, for example, so [I]...just had a lot of just expectations that were just, it affected everything...I loved school. I went to grad school. I would still be in school if I could afford it! Stepping off of that track with homeschooling has put us in a box where we have to look at things differently...I still panic daily about his future, but I'm getting better at envisioning a path that's different than the path that my husband and I went on.

Karin, like some other parents, voiced disappointment that her child did not thrive in school as she had, and her fears that he might experience negative consequences as a result. Yet she also sought to imagine an alternative yet successful path that did not require strong academic performance.

#### 4. Discussion

This study is among the first to examine adoptive parents' assessments of their children's academic functioning, beliefs about the contributions of nature versus nurture, and ideas about their children's educational and occupational futures. We used an in-depth, qualitative analytic approach to explore these domains in a diverse set of 63 adoptive parents of school-aged children, the majority of whom were very highly educated: almost the entire sample had at least a college degree, and about two-thirds had a graduate degree. Our sample included same-sex and heterosexual parent families, and families that adopted via private domestic, public domestic, and international adoption. While some families depicted their children as struggling academically, many described them as average or above average in school. But a large percentage of children had diagnoses of ADHD and learning disabilities/developmental delays: near 40% and 25%, respectively, similar to national estimates for adopted youth (36% and 23%; Zill, 2018), and consistent with prior work showing high levels of health care needs in children adopted via foster care, which in turn affect academic performance (Harwood et al., 2013).

##### 4.1. Parent typologies

Through our analysis, a typology emerged that characterized adoptive parents' perceptions of their children's academic functioning, the perceived role of genetics and environmental resources in their children's abilities and challenges, and their educational expectations for their children. The first group, "inspired" parents, was characterized by parents who described their adopted children as bright and high-performing academically, were delighted by their abilities and talents, and were generally optimistic about their educational futures. It is difficult to say whether these parents' generally high expectations encouraged or were responses to children's strong academic performance—but their narratives suggest at least some evidence for the latter (Räty & Kasanen, 2010). Parents not only demonstrated responsiveness to their children's strengths, but seemed to adapt to their needs and challenges. Some parents, for example, described how they sought out schooling options that were less pressured and rigorous in the hopes of securing a more supportive setting for their anxious children. This is especially notable in the context of a study by Coon, Carey, Fulker, and DeFries (1993) which found that school difficulty was negatively related to academic achievement among adopted children, leading the authors to suggest that an overly challenging school environment may engender feelings of futility that results in poorer academic performance. Other parents described a flexible orientation to children's learning and educational futures when their background included early adversity and/or educational neglect—a reality of many children adopted via foster care and internationally (Berlin et al., 2011; Lavner et al., 2012).

Inspired parents often invoked the notion of "natural giftedness," a construct commonly endorsed or believed among highly educated individuals, particularly when children's performance is good (Räty & Kasanen, 2010). In contrast to biological parents, adoptive parents who

invoke natural giftedness can be seen as overtly acknowledging, often with gratitude, the (positive) contributions of genetics and birth family, thus downplaying their own contribution to their children's abilities and talents. Such generous attributions are easier when children's academic and socioemotional functioning is high. Notably, all but one of these families adopted children as infants, which has been associated with fewer academic challenges (Harwood et al., 2013; Tan, 2009). As we saw with other parents, especially those whose children were adopted at an older age via foster care or internationally, attributing "cause" is more complex amidst difficulties that are highly heritable or shaped by early adversity.

The second group, "pragmatic" parents, was characterized by parents who described their children as academically average but bright, and as possessing learning, developmental, and/or emotional/behavioral challenges that parents were often early in the process of addressing. These parents were hopeful that, with supports and services, their children's challenges could be managed and they would show improved grades and study skills. Thus, parents implicitly acknowledged the role of "nature" by highlighting children's aptitudes and talents, while also appearing to believe in their "educability" (Räty & Kasanen, 2010), as indicated by their emphasis on the potential for supports to mitigate genetic or early environmental risk. Parents also showed a high level of investment and involvement in their children's schooling and resource needs.

Parents in the third group, "concerned" parents, had more significant concerns about their children—involving their self-esteem, emotional/behavioral challenges, and the like—and these concerns often outweighed concerns about academic performance per se. Parents often alluded to significant stress associated with their children's educational struggles. As Knapp et al. (2013) suggests, poor academic performance can increase stress within the family (e.g., parental worry over a child's career prospects), possibly contributing to negative outcomes, especially in adoptive families. A number of parents—particularly those who adopted via foster care—highlighted challenges with academic self-esteem, which was intertwined with social self-esteem in some cases, echoing work by Mihalec-Adkins and Cooley (2020) indicating that youth in foster care showed associations between self-esteem, social skills, and school engagement.

##### 4.2. Nature and nurture

Parents most clearly invoked genetics in the context of stand-out talents (e.g., art or music) that they felt that they could not "take credit" for (as was typical in "inspired" parents), as well as in the context of severe developmental, behavioral, and academic problems (as was most prominently characterized in "concerned" parents). For example, when met with a talented violinist or a child with autism, parents tended to invoke what was beyond their control and/or in the past: namely, genes or early environment.

Parents saw themselves as impacting their children's abilities and outcomes as well, such as via school selection and involvement, whereby their influence served to support and enhance their "natural gifts" or to actively ameliorate the disadvantages that parents saw genetics having bestowed on their children. To this point, parents in all three groups alluded to high levels of involvement and engagement in their children's schools—particularly the "pragmatic" and "concerned" parents, who described seeking out services to provide extra support for their children. That our adoptive parent sample felt empowered to impact their children's learning environment through advocacy is a notable strength (Goldberg et al., 2017), since research has shown that early intervention for learning disabilities and ADHD enhances positive academic outcomes (DuPaul et al., 2015). Yet there is inevitably an upper limit to what these supports can achieve, as parents in the "concerned" group in particular alluded to.

Some participants observed that their status as adoptive parents prompted them to seek assessment, consultation, and services for their

children sooner than they would have had they been parenting biological children. This echoes prior work suggesting that one reason for adoptive families' overrepresentation in the mental health care and special education systems—beyond a higher rate of child difficulties in adopted children—is that adoptive parents themselves are more likely to seek help for their children (Keyes, Sharma, Elkins, Iacono, & McGue, 2008). They may have a heightened awareness of children's potential adjustment issues, thus seeking help even for typical developmental problems because of what they know about adoption. Indeed, adoptive parents (Goldberg et al., 2017), as well as sexual minority parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2014) and middle-class parents (Gorman, 1998) all may be predisposed to engage in school-based advocacy—which bears out in our sample of mostly middle-class, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents. Such advocacy may have been facilitated by class-based comfort with schools and schooling (Nixon, 2011) or a desire to proactively ameliorate the unique stigmas and challenges that their children might face due to their adoptive and/or lesbian/gay-parent status (Goldberg & Smith, 2014).

#### 4.3. Educational expectations

“Inspired” parents tended to speak with optimism and excitement about children's futures—which seemed to at least in part reflect and represent a response to their children's scholastic interests and performance (Sonuga-Barke et al., 1995). They did exhibit flexibility in their educational expectations for their high-achieving children, however—as evidenced by their careful selection of schools that they believed would preserve children's emotional well-being even if they were not the “best schools.” Especially notable flexibility and responsiveness to their children's abilities, challenges, and interests was exhibited by “pragmatic” and “concerned” parents, who appeared to be open to vocational skills training for their children—even those parents who had very high levels of education. Realistic and adaptable, many seemed to center their children's interests while being mindful of their academic challenges, sometimes talking to their children about possible career paths that required less schooling (e.g., vet tech versus vet).

These findings are significant in the context of prior work suggesting that middle-class parents rarely consider or acknowledge the possibility that their children may not attend college (Gorman, 1998) and view vocational school as a “last resort” (Rätty & Kasanen, 2010).

Indeed, the current sample of middle-class parents is much like non-adoptive samples of middle-class parents in that they were highly involved in their children's education (Gorman, 1998)—but appeared more relaxed around the possibility that their child might not have the same educational or career aspirations, interests, and/or “success,” narrowly defined, as them. While all children ultimately socialize their parents (Laible & Thompson, 2007), perhaps adopted children can more readily socialize their parents to alter their educational demands given their parents' understanding from early in their parenthood journeys that their children may indeed be quite different from them. This flexible orientation likely in part relates to their experiences with unmet expectations during the family building process and the adoption process specifically. Adoptive parents are often placed with children who differ from either their stated or unstated preferences regarding various child characteristics, such as gender, race, and age (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017). Thus, adoptive parents' experiences navigating the unexpected (which may cause minimal to severe stress) may render them more adaptable to emerging differences or challenges that arise over the course of children's lives. In turn, when adoptive parents adjust (lower) their expectations, this may enhance their well-being. Notably, research on non-adoptive families has found that greater flexibility and acceptance and lower self-blame regarding a child's unexpected diagnosis (e.g., of autism) promotes greater well-being in parents over time (Da Paz, Siegel, Coccia, & Epel, 2018).

Importantly, as parents' concerns about their children's challenges increased, parents appeared to become less centered on academic

success (e.g., college, careers) and more focused on them living a happy, independent life. Similar to prior samples of parents of children with serious developmental disabilities (Todd & Jones, 2005), concerned parents voiced concerns about their children's futures, and described their sense that their children would need to rely on various services and supports throughout their lives. In this way, parents' goals for their children shifted to match the reality of their children's current emotional, behavioral, developmental, and academic functioning, consistent with prior work showing that the linkage between parents' educational expectations and children's academic competence is at least in part a reflection of parents adapting their expectations to reflect children's performance—versus parent expectations predicting child performance (Rätty & Kasanen, 2010; Sonuga-Barke et al., 1995).

#### 4.4. Managing and modifying educational expectations

Some parents—specifically heterosexual and gay male parents—acknowledged struggling to adapt to or accept the reality that their academic interests, orientation, and/or achievement were different from those of their children. These parents, like other samples of adoptive parents (Hamilton et al., 2007; Natsuaki et al., 2019; Vandivere & McKlinton, 2010), were generally very well-educated. Some seemed wistful that they could not or would not share certain hobbies (e.g., reading) with their children, while others were more focused on the future, musing that their children's academic path would likely not look like their own (e.g., college, graduate school). Gorman (1998) suggests that middle-class parents hope to pass on to their children the same “lifestyle” that they themselves experienced vis-a-vis the classroom—good grades, high academic aspirations, and a college education, having internalized the notion that these achievements would help to guarantee a successful future for children. In some cases parents expressed more than a sense of disappointment—rather, they voiced a sense of loss surrounding their unmet expectations. These feelings echo Moyer and Goldberg (2017) findings that adoptive parents who were met with unexpected special needs in their children often experienced stress and disappointment—feelings that were especially intense when parents felt that they were unable to have as much of an impact on their children's development as they had hoped.

Gay fathers were the most likely, followed by heterosexual parents, to describe a difficult adjustment to the reality that their children's academic interests might not be in line with their own. Men in general tend to place more emphasis on academic achievement (Ciciolla et al., 2017) and to have higher achievement expectations of their children than women (Richman & Rescorla, 1995; Rinkute et al., 2012). Perhaps male couples—especially those with high socioeconomic status—experience a “double dose” of heightened expectations surrounding academics. This, combined with awareness of societal scrutiny of their parenting capacities as gay men and associated pressures to produce well-adjusted children, may make it challenging for them to fully embrace their children's non-academic interests and aspirations (Diaz-Serrano & Meix-Llop, 2016; Goldberg & Byard, 2020). That female-partnered women did not show the same tendency may in part reflect the fact that (a) women in general have lower and perhaps more realistic academic expectations of their children (Bird & Berman, 1985; Rinkute et al., 2012) and (b) sexual minority women are especially open to adopting children who have special needs—even more so than sexual minority men (Goldberg et al., 2020), which may speak to a greater openness to the possibility of educational challenges and diverse academic trajectories. Interestingly, a study by Sellers, Battalen, Fiorenzo, McRoy, and Grotevant (2018) found that adoptive parent-child incompatibility (as evidenced by lack of coordination in parent-child behaviors and hindered communication) was linked to psychological distress among heterosexual fathers but not among their wives. Collectively, our findings along with Sellers et al. (2018), suggest that fathers may have particular difficulty reconciling differences, whether they be academic or in communication style, between themselves and their adopted children, a

trend that might therefore be amplified in the context of two male parents. Future work can explore this possibility in greater depth.

#### 4.5. Implications

High educational expectations are linked to better academic outcomes (Maughan et al., 1998), including among adopted youth (Tan et al., 2017), yet some youth may not be able to perform at a high level in school. In turn, our findings have implications for how parents communicate educational expectations to children: for example, they can show confidence in and support for children's abilities while also promoting acceptance of a range of educational and occupational outcomes. Wu, Hou, and Wang (2018) found that parents' educational aspirations for their children and children's own educational aspirations were positively associated, but only when youth reported high parental warmth, highlighting the importance of the familial context in shaping the meaning and impact of messaging surrounding academic competence. Indeed, firm-but-responsive parenting (i.e., establishing reasonable rules, setting attainable standards, being responsive to child needs) is often linked to fewer behavioral challenges and greater academic success (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Narayan, & Masten, 2014). Research showing that adoptive parents may be especially likely to engage in guiding (vs. harsh) parenting (Natsuaki et al., 2019) provides encouraging evidence that adoptive parents may be well situated to communicate high, but flexible, educational expectations in a supportive context.

It is also important for both parents and teachers to offer their children role models of, and teach about, a variety of successful individuals with diverse careers paths and academic histories (e.g., athletes, artists, computer programmers, etc.). Teachers in particular have a role to play in providing information about vocational school and other non-college pathways, and challenging the notion that college is necessary for or synonymous with success (Rosenbaum, Stephan, & Rosenbaum, 2010).

Social workers, including those that counsel individuals and couples in the pre-adoption stage as well as those who provide post-adoption support, can prepare parents for possible mismatches between their own educational histories, goals, and aspirations for their children, and their children's own interests, abilities, and challenges. Academic and behavioral challenges may co-occur, and become increasingly problematic during the elementary and middle school years for some adoptive families, warranting increased post-adoption services during this time (Waid & Alewine, 2018). In addition, individual, couple, and family therapists who counsel adoptive parents can support them in coping with the anxiety, stress, and potential embarrassment associated with their children's challenges, as well as feelings of loss they may be experiencing surrounding a real or imagined child that would follow in their footsteps (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017). Therapists can also support parents and their children to build a flexible/growth mindset whereby they perceive many possible paths to success and seek out opportunities for their children to develop diverse skills. This can help children build and maintain healthy self-esteem and self-worth, which has been shown to positively affect life satisfaction (Marcionetti & Rossier, 2019).

#### 4.6. Limitations, future directions, and conclusions

This study is not longitudinal, and captures adoptive parents' perceptions only. Of interest is whether and how parents' perspectives change over time, and the degree to which they dovetail with teacher and child perceptions. It is important to consider how perspectives evolve as children gain more experience in the classroom and their academic strengths and challenges emerge. Relatedly, it is important to establish whether parents who adjusted their expectations had more flexible mindsets from the beginning, as opposed to being shaped by their children. Thus, future work should follow adoptive parents and children over time, to examine the evolution of children's academic performance and parents' corresponding reactions, behaviors, and

goals.

We documented few thematic differences by parent gender or sexual orientation, despite evidence that certain groups (e.g., well-educated women; lesbian/gay parents) may feel particular pressure surrounding parenting and children's success (Goldberg & Byard, 2020; Valle, 2018) and be more likely to advocate for their children in schools (Dotterer et al., 2009; Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017). Future work can more fully explore how parent characteristics shape their perceptions and expectations related to children's academic potential and success.

Adoptive parents' perceptions of their children's school performance, beliefs about the sources of their children's abilities, and hopes and aspirations for their children's futures are important, given that all of these will likely impact children in various ways, thus undermining or promoting their academic self-esteem and competence. Indeed, Tan et al. (2017) and others have established the potentially positive role that parents' educational expectations can have on both adopted and non-adopted children's educational success. Furthermore, although genetic endowment, early traumatic stress, and attachment difficulties all may potentially impact adopted children, both in general and with regard to academic competence specifically, what parents do and think matters. Adopted youth perform better than non-adopted children from similar birth circumstances at school, with adoptive family socioeconomic status and parent interest in education emerging as key factors in this advantage (Maughan et al., 1998). Likewise, parent involvement and higher educational expectations are associated with better reading and math performance across adopted and non-adopted children (Tan et al., 2017). Thus, it appears that a flexible and supportive stance on the part of adoptive parents, coupled with a commitment to and ability to devote resources (e.g., time, energy, school supports), will benefit all children, including those who excel in school, and those who face challenges in the academic sphere.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Abbie E. Goldberg:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft, Funding acquisition, Investigation. **Nora McCormick:** Investigation, Validation, Writing - review & editing. **Reihonna Frost:** Validation, Writing - review & editing. **April Moyer:** Validation, Writing - review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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