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What Do Teachers Know about Adoptive Families, and How Do They Use It to Serve Adopted Children?

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ABSTRACT
Little is known about how teachers learn about the adoptive status or background of their students, or how they use this information. This mixed-methods study examined U.S. teachers' experiences with obtaining and using information about children's adoptive status and background. Data were gathered via an online survey. Respondents were 207 K-12 teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school professionals. Teachers most often learned a child was adopted from the child themselves, followed by the parents. Sometimes they learned the information in the context of a child's emotional/behavioral difficulties or their specialized education plan. Almost half had wanted to know more about a child's adoptive status or history but were unsure of how or who to ask. Findings have implications for teachers, school support staff, and adoptive families.

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Strong school-family partnerships optimize parent involvement and child developmental, academic, and socioemotional outcomes (Azad et al., 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Jeynes, 2005). Forging such partnerships depends on school personnel having the information they need to be able to meet their students' needs and families having the trust they need in order to share that information with schools. This paper addresses the case of adopted children, a group whose family structure and prior experiences may be important to consider in framing educational plans that will optimize their development, yet one that may be poorly understood and/or overlooked by school systems, such as with regard to curricula, assignments, and classroom practices. Our exploratory study addresses teachers' experiences with obtaining and using information about children's adoptive status and background, with the goal of enhancing schools' inclusion of and sensitivity to adoptive families, facilitating more effective collaboration across professionals who support adoptive families, and fostering strong, mutually-supportive teacher-parent relationships.

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Our study draws from Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems model of human development, which emphasizes the role of various systems—from proximal microsystems, such as families and neighborhoods, to the larger societal macrosystem—in shaping individuals' development and well-being. For adopted students, the microsystem encompasses social and physical proximal forces, such as the family and the school. The school itself encompasses multiple domains, including students, teachers, administrators, and policies, as well as curricula, assignments, and classroom practices that communicate institutional norms and values (Drakenberg & Malmgren, 2013). The mesosystem represents interactions between these microsystems, such as the interrelationships between families and schools. The exosystem consists of those systems affecting the individual's development in which the individual does not participate (e.g., state- and national-level educational policies and laws). Finally, the macrosystem represents the broader cultural context, including societal norms and ideologies. To have an impact on individual well-being, it is often necessary to intervene within these varied contexts. For example, both families and schools play a key role in enhancing or undermining academic, social, and emotional well-being among adopted youth (Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Tan et al., 2017).

According to Meyers et al. (2012), "to serve children optimally from an ecological perspective, professionals such as counselors, psychologists, social workers…educators, and administrators must provide effective services to the educational systems in which children are embedded" (p. 107). It is up to professionals who seek to support adopted students and their families to consider the ways that educational practices (curricula, policies, resources) are implemented within, and reflect the biases of, their broader social and cultural context, and to recognize how marginalized students and families are impacted by practices that fail to account for, or inappropriately address, their experiences (Shriberg & Fenning, 2009). Professionals (e.g., teachers, therapists) who are educated and informed about adoptive families, and/or who seek meaningful input and collaboration from adoptive families as well as from other professionals about adopted students, have the potential to facilitate inclusive educational practices and enhance adopted students' outcomes (Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Shriberg & Fenning, 2009).

Adopted children and school

Adopted children are a diverse group, with varying levels of emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. The degree and types of challenges experienced by children in school depend on their pre-adoption

experiences and post-adoption environments. For example, children adopted as healthy infants may show few problems during the school years, whereas children adopted post-infancy via foster care or internationally show elevated levels of speech/language delays, learning disabilities, and ADHD (Beverly et al., 2008), all of which are linked to poorer school performance (Harwood et al., 2013; Jacobs et al., 2010). Children adopted at an older age, or with greater pre-adoption adversity, generally show poorer academic performance (Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). In turn, adopted youth are especially likely to receive special education services (Beverly et al., 2008), with at least two times as many referrals among adopted youth than nonadopted youth (van IJzendoorn et al., 2005). They may also show higher rates of behavioral problems and attachment issues, which can pose challenges to social relationships and academic functioning (Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Keyes et al., 2008). Some children have experienced trauma prior to adoption, such as abuse or neglect by caregivers or living in depriving institutional settings. They may be especially likely to struggle socially and emotionally, which may manifest at school in various ways (e.g., acting out, inattentiveness, developmental delays; Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Gore Langton & Boy, 2017). It is important for those working with adoptive families to recognize that such differences are typically the result of pre-adoption experiences (e.g., maltreatment) or post-adoption adversities (e.g., encountering stigma or stereotypes related to adoption) rather than adoption itself, which for most youth is a positive intervention.

It may benefit schools to have information about children's backgrounds in order to help both children and families, which may involve addressing underlying or complex issues such as loss and grief; and, in turn, it may be ideal for schools to coordinate strategies with outside services (e.g., therapy, medication consultation) that the child might be receiving (Wrobel et al., 2006). Notably, adoptive parents tend to have more educational and financial resources than non-adoptive parents (Hamilton et al., 2007), which may benefit children in a variety of ways (e.g., emphasis on and willingness to seek out therapeutic and educational resources; school involvement, such as volunteering and attending parent-teacher meetings).

Adoptive families and teachers/schools

Little research has explored adoptive parents' experiences with schools, and existing work has mainly focused on parents of young children (e.g., preschool age; Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg & Smith, 2014, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2017a; Nowak-Fabrykowski et al., 2009), with studies exploring adopted children's lived experiences in the school context also being

relatively scarce (Crowley, 2019; Soares et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2020). Almost no research has examined the experiences of teachers in relation to adoptive families (Novara et al., 2017; Rijk et al., 2008; Taymans et al., 2008). In the practice realm, however, there are a variety of peer-reviewed articles and documents that provide general guidance to teachers working with adoptive families (Baker, 2013; Barratt, 2012; Gore Langton, 2017). Several key child-centered organizations (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP]), too, provide resources to adoptive parents about working with schools as well as to schools about working with adoptive families (AAP, 2021; CWIG, 2020).

The existing work on adoptive parents suggests that parents may encounter challenges related to teachers' lack of awareness or insensitivity surrounding adoption, including making assumptions or drawing conclusions about children simply because they are adopted, as well as failing to account for children's adoption history in assignments or curricula (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017a). This research also suggests that adoptive parents may be especially likely to be involved in children's schooling, perhaps in part reflecting their higher levels of education/income—which tend to facilitate school involvement—but also reflecting their awareness of potential issues that their children may deal with at school, such as academic and behavioral challenges (Goldberg et al., 2017b; Goldberg & Smith, 2017), a pattern that is consistent with adoptive parents' tendency to readily seek out services for their children's mental health issues (Keyes et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2000). Yet some parents fear sharing children's adoptive status with school officials or teachers, out of concern that such information may invite negative stereotyping or labeling: for example, lacking nuanced knowledge of adoption, teachers may use children's adoptive status as a heuristic, anticipating or labeling behaviors in ways that may be stigmatizing or unproductive (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017b).

In a study of 266 adoptive parents of preschool-age children, Goldberg (2014) examined parents' level of disclosure regarding their adoptive family status at children's schools, and experiences advocating on behalf of their children and families. Most (>80%) had discussed or at least mentioned the fact that their child was adopted to teachers and schools. In some cases, these were "formal conversations" (e.g., initiated during the school application process), whereas others pursued a more casual approach of "mentioning it when it seemed relevant." Those parents who had not shared their adoptive family status typically explained that they did not see a need or the topic of their child's adoption had not come up. All but one of these parents had adopted inracially, suggesting that the absence of obvious racial distinction between parents and children led to the

invisibility of their child's adoptive status, which parents had not made an effort to correct. In contrast, several explained their non-disclosure by stating that their children's adoptive status was obvious (because they were a different race). Thus, both racial invisibility and visibility were deployed to account for non-disclosure, and, by extension, both apparent similarity to, and deviance from, the biologically-related family ideal, were constructed as eliminating the need to speak about adoption. Parents' resistance to broaching the topic of adoption may also stem from underlying anxiety about how teachers might react and the conversations that might ensue (Goldberg, 2014).

In this same study, parents sometimes reported biased treatment by teachers, who seemed to attribute all of their children's behavioral issues to their adoptive status (Goldberg, 2014). Yet in addition to inappropriately attributing their children's challenges to adoption, teachers were also described as demonstrating insensitivity to the potential role of adoption in children's development or behavioral presentation. Parents of children adopted via foster care or from abroad were especially likely to feel that teachers did not understand the role of pre-adoption adversity in children's behaviors. This raises the question of how teachers should approach children's adoptive status, given that parents may be sensitive to both under-appreciation of, and over-focusing on, the role of adoption in children's lives.

Thus, existing work drawing from parent reports suggests that teachers may not always know that children in their classes are adopted, particularly if parents had prior negative experiences sharing such information with teachers. In addition, parents may make different decisions about disclosure at different points in time—for example, as a function of developmental or school transitions (e.g., they may disclose when their children enter a new school, but not year to year within the same school, perhaps assuming that such information is "passed down", which it may not be), or, in response to children's developmental status (e.g., as children grow older, they may request, or parents may anticipate a need for, more privacy surrounding their origins).

Teachers and adoption

Parents' disclosure of their children's adoptive status would seem to be in the interest of providing teachers with relevant information that would enhance their ability to understand and benefit children. This assumes, however, that teachers possess basic awareness and skills regarding adopted children and their families. Equipped with the knowledge that children in their classes are adopted, teachers might modify curricula or assignments to be inclusive of adoptive families—such as allowing flexibility in

the construction of family trees; recognizing the need for sensitivity in constructing assignments that involve genetics, genealogy, culture, autobiographical details, baby/early childhood photos; and anticipating potential difficulties amidst birthdays, Mother's or Father's Day and other holidays, and developmental transitions (Goldberg et al., 2017a).

Yet the limited work on teachers suggests that they seem to receive little formal preparation or training related to adoption, may feel ill-prepared to handle adoption-related issues as they arise, and may rely on other professionals and adoptive parents for guidance on the needs and experiences of adopted children. Taymans et al. (2008) surveyed preservice teachers/counselors and found that most learned about adoption from mentors/supervisors—and, notably, most indicated a desire for more information and training on working with adopted children. Novara et al. (2017) documented limited awareness by teachers in Italy of their adopted students, such that they mostly leaned on students and parents for adoption-related education, and rarely translated any awareness they gained into meaningful shifts in teaching practices. In a study of teachers of internationally adopted children who had experienced institutional deprivation, almost all teachers reported needing the advice of colleagues or other experts about the children (Rijk et al., 2008). Although two-thirds described good relationships with parents, one-third noted differences of opinion with parents, such that, for example, they viewed parents as possessing unrealistic expectations about their children (e.g., in terms of their capabilities).

Research gaps

Several key challenges are apparent. First, in order to serve adopted children and their families effectively, teachers may benefit from knowing more about the relevant backgrounds of their students. Second, teachers may lack in-depth knowledge of adoptive families and adopted children, including the notable diversity within adoptive families (e.g., in terms of racial makeup, adoption route, and pre-adoptive history) and the complex and nuanced ways that adoption may manifest in children's and families' lives. Indeed, issues related to adoption—including types of adoption, issues of grief and loss that impact adopted children, the effects of abuse/neglect, how and when issues of adoptive identity may arise for children—are rarely integrated into the training that teachers receive—as well as the training that allied (e.g., mental health) professionals receive (Henry et al., 2006; Koh et al., 2017). In turn, teachers may be vulnerable to missteps, such as making inferences about adopted children based on limited data, not taking them into consideration when developing curricula, and relying

on colleagues' advice which may not be evidence-based. In the presence of information about adopted children that they teach, but in the absence of training or background knowledge about adoption, teachers are ill-positioned to skillfully collaborate with adoptive families and meet the needs of adopted children.

The current study and research questions

Since strong school-family partnerships optimize parent involvement and child development (Jeynes, 2005), it is important to understand more about teacher-adoptive family relationships, especially in the context of teachers' general knowledge of and approach to adoption and adopted students. Adoptive parents report that they typically share information about their children's adoptive status with teachers, yet also encounter teacher stereotypes and assumptions amidst this knowledge (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017b). From teachers' perspectives, it is important to know more about the type of information they typically possess about adopted children, what they do with it, other data they wish they had (e.g., to help them to interpret and best use that information), and barriers to and facilitators of effective communication with adoptive families. Understanding of teachers' knowledge, communication, and consultation regarding adoptive families can inform (a) efforts to enhance the training that teachers receive vis a vis adoption, (b) assessment of and revisions to policies, curriculum, and school practices that harm or marginalize adopted students, and (c) development of positive family-school collaborations, all of which may enhance adoptive families' school experiences.

Thus, our key research questions are: a) What kinds of personal and professional experiences with adoption do teachers report? b) How is adoption disclosed to teachers? c) What are teachers' attitudes about parent involvement and advocacy in discussions about adoption? d) How and why do teachers consult with other professionals about adoption?

Method

Procedure

We collected data from 207 K-12 teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school professionals via a survey aimed to understand teachers' experiences and knowledge related to adopted children and families. Prospective participants were told that the survey "examines teachers' experiences with and perspectives on teaching adopted students and working with adoptive families," and that they could complete the survey if they were "currently a teacher in K-12, including teacher aides, student teachers,

paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and substitute teachers." Participants were recruited nationally across the United States, using personal and professional contacts, professional associations related to educators and teaching, and social media groups and listservs related to teachers and teaching.

Data were collected in April-May of 2021. The survey was hosted on the online platform Qualtrics and took about 25 minutes to complete (*Mdn* duration = 27 minutes). It contained a variety of closed and open-ended questions that addressed experiences with, educational training about, and knowledge of adoptive families. Participants had the option of being entered into a raffle to win one of 20 $50 gift cards. The survey was approved by the Internal Review Boards (IRBs) of Clark University and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

The development of the survey instrument was in part informed by focus groups with teachers (7) and adoptive parents (6). Teacher focus group participants included classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and special education teachers, across a variety of grades and in public and private school settings. Teacher focus groups focused on personal knowledge and experience of adopted youth and families, integration or consideration of adoption within school practices and materials, and communication and collaboration with parents and other professionals regarding adopted students. Parent focus group participants had children who ranged widely in age and had been adopted via a variety of routes (public domestic, private domestic, international). Parent focus groups focused on perceptions of and experiences with schools, teachers, and other professionals related to adoption in general and their children specifically. The survey instrument was also informed by research and practice documents aimed at teachers (CWIG, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021a). In addition, the survey was reviewed by individuals with expertise in areas complementary to the researchers, and by individuals who provide training and support to teachers and adoptive parents.

Participants

We report findings only from participants who completed most of the survey items ($n = 207$). Namely, 193 completed 96-100%, and 13 completed 64-95%. We excluded partial responses (i.e., < 64%, or two-thirds, of the survey) from 64 participants.[1] Most (>80%) of the sample was teachers, and thus we refer to participants in this way (i.e., as teachers).

Most participants were cisgender women (176, 85%), with 24 (11.6%) identifying as cisgender men, 6 (2.9%) as nonbinary, and 1 (.5%) as a

trans man. Most were heterosexual (167, 80.7%), with smaller numbers of bisexual (13, 6.3%), queer (11, 5.3%), lesbian (6, 2.9%), and gay (5, 2.4%) participants. A total of 181 (87.4%) were white only and 26 (12.6%) were of color. Participants could identify with multiple racial categories. A total of 185 (89.4%) identified as white (with four identifying as at least one other race), 8 (3.9%) as Asian, 5 (2.4%) as Hispanic, 4 (1.9%) as Latino/a/x, 5 (2.4%) as Black/African American, and three as something else (Cambodian, Jewish, Multiracial; 1.5%). Just 12 (5.8%) were 21-25 years old; 54 (26.1%) were 26-35, 64 (30.9%) were 36-45, 46 (22.2%) were 46-55, and 31 (15.0%) were 55 or older. These characteristics of teachers (mostly white women, in their 30 s-40s) echo national statistics on elementary and secondary school teachers (NCES, 2021b).

Participants taught in 26 different states, with 7 (3.3%) teaching outside the U.S. The largest number taught in Massachusetts (40, 19.3%), where the researchers reside, followed by California (18), Connecticut (10), Pennsylvania (9), New York (7), Maryland (7), Tennessee (6), Ohio (6), Texas (5), Washington DC (5), Washington State (4), Kentucky (3), Illinois (3), New Jersey (3), Virginia (3), Wisconsin (3), and between 1-2 in Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Vermont.

The sample consisted of 63 elementary school teachers (30.4%), 74 secondary school teachers (35.7%), 46 special education teachers (22.3%), and 39 (19%) programming/support staff (e.g., afterschool teacher; librarian). At least 40 teachers were represented at every grade level (preschool/kindergarten through 12th), and broadly represented across subject areas: general elementary (54, 26.1%), special education (60, 29.0%), English/Language Arts (39, 18.8%), Math (24, 11.6%), Science (23, 11.1%), Social Studies (21, 10.1%), ESL/bilingual education (14, 6.8%), early childhood (13, 6.3%), foreign languages (12, 5.8%), music/art (11, 5.3%), and <5% for career/technical education, physical education/health, and computer science, with 33 (15.9%) saying "something else."

Most respondents were teaching in public schools (156, 75.4%), with 32 (15.5%) teaching in private schools and 19 (9.2%) indicating something else (e.g., religious, charter, early childhood). Most had more than 5 years of experience as teachers (169, 81.6%): indeed, almost two-thirds had at least 11 years of teaching experience (129, 62.3%), with 40 (19.3%) reporting 6-10 years, 30 (14.5%) reporting 1-5, and 7 (3.4%) reporting under 1 year (1 missing).

Most had a master's degree (145, 70%); 33 (15.9%) had an educational specialist or professional diploma (at least 1 year beyond a master's level). Eight (3.9%) had a doctorate. Participants' educational level was generally higher than national statistics (58% of public elementary/

secondary school teachers had a graduate degree in 2017–2018; NCES, 2021a).

Teachers were surveyed during April–May 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about the 2020–2021 school year, 153 (73.9%) said that all or some of the classes normally taught in person moved to a distance learning format using online resources, 11 (5.3%) said that there was no change in how classes were taught, and 21 (10.1%) said something else (e.g., in-person with COVID safety protocols). Twenty-two (10.6%) did not respond to this question.

Measures

Participants completed closed- and open-ended questions that addressed whether and how they learned that children in their classes were adopted, as well as questions about their teaching experience and exposure to adoption. Demographic details were also obtained (e.g., gender, race, years, employment setting, position type, grades taught/served). Participants were also asked about whether they consult with other staff about adoption or adopted children in their classes as well as their views about adopted children and adoptive families in general. Questions also addressed what types of modifications participants may have made to their teaching practices in order to be inclusive of adopted children and their families, resources in their school that might assist adopted children, and their views about gaps needing to be filled in teacher education with regard to adoption. The survey is available from the first author upon request.

Data analysis

The current exploratory study can best be described as mixed-methods, in that our analysis of survey data involved ongoing interplay between qualitative (i.e., open-ended) and quantitative (closed-ended) components in developing conclusions (Johnson et al., 2007). For example, a series of questions asked whether the participant made adoption-sensitive modifications to assignments, books and materials, curriculum, and disciplinary practices; following each yes/no question, an open ended text box was provided so that the participant could provide details.

Quantitative

Responses to many items were on Likert-style scales (e.g., strongly disagree to strongly agree), or had yes/no response options or options that asked how frequently something occurred. For these items, descriptive statistics, cross tabulations, and difference tests were computed using SPSS v. 25.

Qualitative

We used content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to examine the open-ended data. Content analysis is a standard method for examining open-ended responses to survey questions, generating new insights through a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing primary patterns or themes in the data. Through this process of exploring and classifying qualitative data, we condensed words to text into a smaller number of content categories to develop a coding system to organize the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Our analysis focused on teachers' descriptions of experiences and perspectives related to their adopted students and was informed by prior literature and an ecological lens that emphasizes the interplay between family and school systems (Albright & Weissberg, 2010). The first author first read all open-ended responses to gain familiarity with the data, including overarching themes in responses. Then, responses were annotated: via line-by-line coding, she labeled phrases relevant to the primary domains of interest (e.g., knowledge of adoption). These codes were abstracted under larger categories and subcategories, which were positioned in relation to each other, such that connective links were established in an effort to meaningfully describe teachers' perspectives with adopted children and their families. A tentative coding scheme was produced and re-applied to the data. The scheme was examined against a selection of the open-ended data by the second author, leading to minor modifications in the coding scheme. This process ensured consideration of multiple interpretations, strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Results

Personal and professional experiences with adoption

Teachers indicated that they taught a median of 40 students a day (*Mn* = 55.8, SD = 56; *range* 0-400). They believed that they were teaching a median of 2 adopted children during the current school year (2020–2021; *Mn* = 2.5, *SD* = 3.49; *range* 0–25). Thirty percent of teachers estimated that they had taught between 0-5 adopted children in their career, with 40% estimating that they had taught 6-15 adopted children in their career, and about 15% estimating that they had taught 16-30 adopted children in their career.

An important and distinct feature of the sample was their personal experiences with adoption. Forty-eight (23.2%) said that they had adopted children, with smaller percentages saying that they were themselves adopted (13, 6.3%), members of their immediate family were adopted (17, 8.2%) or their partner was adopted (7, 3.4%). Over half of the sample reported having friends or acquaintances who adopted their

children (54.1%) or friends or acquaintances who were adopted themselves (52.2%).

When asked how well they felt that they were prepared by their education/training to work with adopted students and their families, 46 (22.2%) said not at all prepared, 61 (29.5%) said not very prepared, 26 (12.6%) said neutral, 50 (24.2%) said somewhat prepared, and just 5 (2.4%) said very prepared, with 19 (9.2%) missing. A chi square analysis revealed that special education teachers were somewhat more likely to report feeling somewhat or very prepared (where preparation level was dichotomized), X^2 (1, 188) = 3.01, p = .060. Participants were able to elaborate on their responses and most of those who did described disappointment with their lack of preparation ("I never learned about [adoption] while getting my degree and certification to become a teacher"; "I feel really ignorant about issues related to adoption; it hasn't been addressed in all the years of diversity work I have done"). Some commented on the role of personal experiences in offsetting their lack of explicit training: "Because I grew up with adopted family members and took college courses on adoption, I feel that I knew a lot of this information coming into teaching. However… our teachers don't get enough explicit training."

When asked how prepared they felt now (as an experienced teacher) to work with adopted students and their families, only 2 (1.0%) felt very unprepared, 8 (3.9%) felt somewhat unprepared, 16 (7.7%) said neutral, 89 (43.0%) felt somewhat prepared, and 74 (35.7%) felt very prepared, with 18 (8.7%) missing. Teachers who were the parents of adopted children were marginally more likely to feel somewhat or very prepared currently, X^2 (1, 189) = 2.50, p = .086. Thus, on-the-job experience and exposure to different types of families, as well as personal experiences with adoption, appeared to enhance teachers' sense of confidence and competence vis a vis adoption.

Adoption disclosure to teachers

When asked, "how have you typically found out a child was adopted?" and asked to check "all that apply," more than two-thirds (134, 64.7%) indicated that they learned this from the child (i.e., the child said they were adopted). Almost two-thirds (123, 59.4%) learned it from parents in person/verbally, 44 (21.3%) from parents via email, and 39 (18.8%) from parents in discussions prompted by children's emotional/behavioral challenges. In addition, 90 (43.5%) found out from other teachers (e.g., via informal discussion), 72 (34.8%) learned it from support staff (e.g., guidance/adjustment counselors), and 59 (28.%) learned about it in the context of children's individualized learning plan or needs (e.g., IEP/504). One

third (71, 34.3%) learned it via paperwork/the student's records. Eleven noted other ways they learned about a child's adoptive status: it was obvious due to racial differences, they taught in a small community where they "knew everyone," and they learned it from other students. Four (1.9%) said that they did not tend to know if children were adopted as privacy rules prevented the sharing of such information.

When asked if their school/teachers sent out a form asking for general child background information (where, theoretically, this information might be shared), 83 (40.1%) said yes, 46 (22.2%) said no, 77 (37.2%) were not sure, and one person did not respond. Teachers were then asked to elaborate on how information about children's adoptive status/background was typically shared with teachers/support staff. They often responded that teachers send their own forms and thus have access to it that way. Some said that it was shared by the school with teachers at the beginning of the year, or, on an "as needed basis" (e.g., in the context of a child's IEP). Many noted the lack of a formal system or structure for gathering and disseminating such information. One teacher said:

> The school does not, but I have an open-ended question on both my parent contact sheet (Anything else that would help me to know about teaching your student?) as well as a similar question on my student information form (Anything else that you would like me to know?).

Another teacher shared: "Typically it's sent out by homeroom teachers rather than the school. Homeroom teachers will share with relevant service providers (ESL, SpEd) and sometimes with specialists…but there is no formal information sharing system for it."

When asked if they ever wanted to know if a child was adopted or more about their adoptive history, but were not sure how or who to ask, almost half of the sample (93, 44.9%) said yes. When asked to elaborate on their response regarding whether or not they had ever desired more information about a child's adoptive background, and what prevented them from obtaining this, many noted that they wished for more information so that they could relate to children more effectively. Some noted that they personally were adopted or had adopted children and felt that knowing a child's adoptive status would allow them to form a more solid, meaningful connection ("because I am an adoptive parent, this is a way to connect with such a student"). Others noted the impact of trauma or negative early experiences on behavior and learning and indicated that knowledge of this would help them to better serve students ("Understanding how/when someone was adopted can help a trauma-informed approach when needed"). A few felt that it would be useful to know a child's adoptive status and adoptive background because it would enable them to

anticipate potential issues (e.g., "whether birthdays are loaded/hard for the child").

Many expressed concerns, however, about being seen as nosy or intrusive (e.g., they did not want to "pry" or violate boundaries), or voiced uncertainty about how to appropriately ask students, families, or colleagues to share such information. Some emphasized that they expected that if families wanted to share this information, they would ("I believe that if children/their parents want me to know more, they'll initiate that conversation"); in turn, they generally followed families' and students' lead. Ultimately, many voiced a tension between wanting to know whether a child was adopted and/or more about their adoptive background and wanting to respect boundaries and privacy and not alienate families and students. They sometimes expressed feeling that more information would enable them to "better anticipate and meet adopted children's needs," but held back from inquiring because they did not want to seem "pushy."

Attitudes about parent involvement

In response to the open-ended question about whether they had ever desired more information about a child's adoptive background, several teachers noted that adoptive families were generally very communicative and transparent ("Parents have been very open about sharing adoption history and family information, often without being asked"), with a few noting that adoptive parents seemed especially likely to advocate for their children. When asked a general question about how they typically viewed parents advocating on behalf of their adopted children, 157 (75.8%) said that they very much welcomed it, 45 (21.7%) said that they welcomed it, three (1.4%) indicated a neutral response, and no teachers said that they did not welcome it; two were missing. When asked to elaborate, they often emphasized a strong valuing of parent-teacher collaborations, noting that parents "know their child best," and that parent engagement and communication were key components in successful family-school partnerships. As one teacher said: "I am really appreciative of the information/feedback that I get from adoptive parents because it helps me to be a better and more supportive teacher. Another teacher shared:

> It is helpful to me as an educator when adoptive parents come to me and let me know what their child's needs are. I want to be as accommodating and inclusive as possible in my classroom and can't do that if I'm not aware of what is expected of me as an educator and advocate for the adopted child.

Notably, a few teachers shared their view that many of the adoptive parents they interacted with "don't have a lot of trauma training," and their lack of sensitivity to certain issues and dynamics (e.g., not

understanding why children might feel angry, or struggle with abandonment) impeded their ability to be effective advocates for their children. Said one teacher:

> I have had adoptive parents that clearly don't recognize, validate, or understand the effects of adoption trauma on a child. Those parents are always welcome to give input and be involved, but sometimes it is difficult because they are not [doing things] in the best manner for the child.

Adoption consultation with other professionals

In possession of knowledge that a child was adopted, teachers may consult with other school professionals about how to best support or serve them. Of note is that when asked about the presence of adoption-knowledgeable professionals at their school, 82 (39.6%) said their school had an adoption-knowledgeable guidance counselor, social worker, or psychologist.

Respondents were asked whether they had consulted with various school professionals about adopted students (e.g., regarding learning issues, trauma, identity issues, etc.). More than two-thirds (140, 67.6%) had consulted with guidance professionals, including social workers and school psychologists, and more than one-third (80, 38.6%) had consulted with special education teachers/aides. Almost half (100, 48.3%) had consulted with other teachers, and more than one-third (75, 36.2%) had consulted with school administrators (e.g., principal). Twelve indicated "something else", which included outside professionals (e.g., outside therapists or community agencies; $n = 4$), and parents/teachers with knowledge of adoption ($n = 4$).

Teachers were asked to elaborate about the nature of the consultation (i.e., what led to or prompted them to consult). Twenty respondents specified issues related to trauma, sometimes noting that it was related to early adverse experiences. One teacher, for example, said that they consulted about "trauma and learning issues including ongoing barriers that might be affecting the student." Behavioral issues and changes (e.g., acting out) (17) were noted as the prompt for some consultations, as were socioemotional issues, including depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (15), and attachment issues (5). Some highlighted learning issues and disabilities (16) and grades/academics (10) as the impetus for some consultations ("usually [it's behavioral issues, or lack of motivation on grades and assignments and to see how else I can assist the student in my classroom"). Some (13) noted issues surrounding racial/cultural identity and/or transracial adoption ("We discuss adoption particularly when a students is clearly exploring the 'who am I'? questions which are common in middle school. Especially true with transracial adoptees"). Some (9) noted a desire

for more information about family medical history, including early background information. More rarely, adoptive family dynamics (4), birth family issues (4), acculturation issues (e.g., language) (4), trust/abandonment issues (4), and exclusion/lack of belonging (4) prompted the consultation. Many respondents identified multiple potential issues that had led them to seek consultation ("Looking for help to understand triggers for students, or family dynamics…Figuring out what [a] student knows about their history, or helping [a] child deal with learning about their adoption"). Said one participant:

> I have consulted about early trauma, the impact of early attachment, the complexities of trans racial adoption, particularly in our predominantly white school, and how to support students around birthdays and framing/supporting adoptive kids with assumptions about parents (i.e. reading a book about melanin and skin tone and how it describes one's skin tone being a result of one's parents' skin tones).

Some of these teachers framed the consultations in terms of their efforts to gather more information about the root or nature of children's concerning behaviors (i.e., information-seeking: "Asking about possible trauma history, asking if the birth parent was still in the picture, asking if adoption was finalized"; "Was this student adopted? Is there a history of trauma? Is the student aware they were adopted?"). More often, though, they underscored a desire to develop skills and competencies in best supporting children (e.g., help them to express their emotions in a healthier way; show more empathy to children who were struggling; understand and manage children's behavioral issues) ("[I usually consult] to make sure that students are getting the best support possible, to get strategies to support the child and family, to understand other teaching methods or approaches I might use"). As one teacher said:

> A student had mentioned to me during class that they were in the process of being adopted and were having a lot of feelings about it. I noticed some behavior changes in them as well. I touched base with the school social worker to see if there was something more I could do to help the student.

Another teacher said that their consultation was prompted by a student's "dealing with trauma and processing grief," leading them to talk to the student's "previous year's teacher about observations and things that might be helpful for support." Still another teacher wanted to support their student who "was struggling with [their] transition to [their] adoptive family after getting adopted at an older age." In a few cases, too, consultations centered on how to make curricula more inclusive of adopted children.

Those who had not consulted provided a range of reasons for the lack of consultation. These included concerns about the skillfulness and

competencies of other teachers/guidance professionals ("I have never felt comfortable consulting with other staff because of negative personal encounters I have had with colleagues involving stereotypes about adoptive children") and concerns or ambiguity related to student privacy ("I am always conscious of respecting their privacy"; "We also want to make sure not to discuss anything the students themselves are not open about with the other kids").

Discussion

Amidst a lack of knowledge about how teachers learn about the adoptive status or background of their students, and/or how they use this information, the current mixed-methods study examined teachers' experiences with gathering, obtaining, and using information about children's adoptive status and background. Our findings have implications for school administrators, support staff, and teachers who wish to engage the possibility of systems-level change to better support adoptive families, as well as for therapists and other professionals who work with and may be asked to consult about adoptive families.

Notably, a quarter of respondents were adoptive parents themselves, and many had other personal connections to adoption. In turn, adoptive parents reported feeling somewhat more prepared currently as professionals working with adopted students and their families than other respondents. While these findings might seem to indicate a higher level of skillfulness by these professionals (e.g., as individuals intimately familiar with adoption, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that they have a deeper knowledge of adopted students and families), it is important to remember that their reports are subjective. It is also possible that their personal experience is with a limited range of adoption arrangements, and that they might overgeneralize from their own unique experience to adopted children and adoptive families more broadly (who vary considerably in terms of age at placement, needs, racial/cultural background, etc.; Farr & Grotevant, 2019). Coupled with what several teachers spoke to (e.g., they encountered adoptive parents whom they regarded as not trauma-sensitive), it is likely that all professionals, including adoptive parents, are in need of more in-depth professional training on adoption. Indeed, both teachers and parents may have a particular idea or "template" for what trauma looks like, and may have a difficult time relating to one another as well as the broad range of adopted students in their care if they do not have a nuanced understanding of adoption, as well as trauma.

The vast majority of participants reported that they were unprepared by their professional training to work with adoptive families, echoing other

work on teachers (Rijk et al., 2008; Taymans et al., 2008) and medical practitioners (Henry et al., 2006). Notably, however, special education teachers were somewhat more likely to report feeling prepared than other types of teachers, perhaps because their coursework and supervised classroom experiences were more likely to be inclusive of the kinds of issues that adopted students might disproportionately experience (e.g., trauma, learning disabilities; O'Neill et al., 2010). Teacher education programs in general need to incorporate adoption-specific education throughout their program experiences and training (e.g., in the context of learning about trauma-sensitive education, multicultural approaches to education, classroom management, etc.; McClain, 2021). Schools should carefully consider whether specialized consultation and/or in-service trainings may be necessary to supplement the training and exposure that their teachers and staff typically receive regarding adoption. The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), for example, offers trainings and workshops, including online resources (e.g., webinars) to schools and educators on adoption-competent educational and system-wide practices (see adoption-support.org).

Teachers reported that they most often learned a child was adopted from the child themselves, followed by parents. Sometimes they learned it in the context of a child's emotional or behavioral difficulties or their specialized education plan. Less than 50% of respondents said that their school sent out a form asking for child background information (where a parent, if they wanted, could indicate information about their children's adoptive status or history), and more than one-third were unsure if such a form was sent. Notably, almost half had wanted to know more about a child's adoptive status or history (e.g., because they felt it would enable them to support and teach adopted students) but were unsure of how or who to ask, sometimes hesitating too because they did not want to overstep boundaries and risk offending families. Teachers walk a tightrope between wanting to ask for information and not wanting to pry, echoing the tension that some adoptive parents experience between wanting to share information and fearing that teachers may use it in ways that are ineffective or even harmful (Goldberg, 2014). Indeed, lacking preparation or training vis a vis adoptive families, teachers—as well-meaning as they may be—may, in possession of information about children's adoptive status or background, draw inappropriate or inaccurate conclusions about children or the causes of their behavior, or spotlight their adoptive status (e.g., singling them out to speak about their adoption or asking questions of them that they would not ask non-adopted students).

Given the importance of parent-teacher relationships and collaboration to student success and well-being, it is essential that efforts to improve

teacher-parent communication about child difficulties and needs in general encompass the specific case of adopted students (Azad et al., 2021; Goldberg, 2014). School personnel can educate parents about the types of information that might be useful to them in planning for individual children and the rationale for using the information; in so doing, parents may be more trusting that information they disclose will be used appropriately on behalf of their children. Parents should have the opportunity to share information about their children's adoptive status (e.g., via forms), as well as elements of their children's adoptive history that may be relevant (e.g., trauma, special needs, cultural factors). In this way, question(s) about adoptive status can serve as "door opening" questions, enabling parents to share as little or as much as they wish (but also guiding parents away from a stance of avoidance), and may help improve parent-teacher collaboration and communication. Teachers, likewise, should be encouraged to consider children's adoptive history as possibly relevant, but should be encouraged to "check out" their hypotheses and ideas with parents themselves, thus building mutual trust in the context of engaging personal humility.

Significantly, teachers were generally very enthusiastic about parent involvement and advocacy, and some even noted that adoptive parents tend to be strong advocates for their children, echoing prior work finding this to be the case (Goldberg et al., 2017b; Goldberg & Smith, 2017) and the benefits of such involvement for adopted children (Tan et al., 2017). Given that adoptive parents tend to be strong advocates for their children and highly involved in their education, it would seem that increasing teachers' knowledge and sense of competence surrounding adoption would enable them to work even more effectively with such parents (e.g., to feel confident to ask appropriate questions of parents): indeed, sensitive teachers and highly motivated parents would appear to be a powerful combination, and one that can significantly serve, and advance positive outcomes among, adopted children. School administrators and consultation professionals should consider both the high regard that teachers have for adoptive parents, and adoptive parents' generally high level of involvement, and look for strategies to simultaneously enhance teachers' knowledge and support of adoptive families and engage parents as valuable and knowledgeable stakeholders in their children's success (Azad et al., 2021; Meyers et al., 2012). Consultants can also introduce and facilitate ways to promote improved teacher-parent collaboration and communication, capitalizing on adoptive parents' tendency to be highly involved advocates for their children.

When asked about consultation surrounding adopted students, more than two-thirds had consulted with school guidance professionals, almost

half had consulted with teachers, and more than one third each had consulted with special education professionals and administrators. Trauma, behavioral and/or emotional issues, learning and academic issues, and identity issues (e.g., related to race) were the most frequently described reasons or concerns driving the consultation. The purpose of such consultation was often described as obtaining information, resources, and strategies to help them to better understand, respond to, and teach their adopted students. Those who had not consulted voiced concerns about staff members' sensitivity or skill level as well as concerns about privacy issues (e.g., whether it was appropriate to consult about a given student). These findings build on prior work suggesting that teachers often rely on the counsel and input of others (e.g., colleagues) related to adoption and adopted students (Novara et al., 2017; Rijk et al., 2008; Taymans et al., 2008), but go further in that they also highlight the specific content that teachers often seek consultation for, as well as their very valid concerns about the inadequate knowledge base of other staff members and how this may be a barrier to effective consultation.

Given the encouraging tendency for teachers to seek out consultation regarding their adopted students, but also the reality that such consultation may not be as effective or evidence-based as it could be, school consultation professionals might recommend the development of—and help implement—internal consultation teams. Consultants can encourage, and look for ways to foster, collaboration among teachers and other school support staff and specialists (special education teachers, school psychologists) as well as set up mechanisms for ongoing consultation among these different stakeholders as they seek to support adoptive families (Shriberg & Fenning, 2009). Additionally, such findings point to the need for school psychologists, counselors, and other helping and guidance professionals in schools to be exposed to adoption as part of their education and training. Notably, professionals in social work and counseling do appear to be more likely than professionals in education and/or medicine to receive such exposure—yet such content is inconsistent across graduate programs and even when present may not be substantial or sufficient (Koh et al., 2017). Both teachers and support staff need robust and nuanced training in adoption to ensure that they do not rely on stereotypes about adopted children, overinterpret adoption-related information, and/or underappreciate the diversity among adopted children.

Limitations

The current exploratory study was limited in a number of ways. First, because of the survey nature of the research, we could not probe (as we

would in in-depth interviews) for elaboration or clarification of participants' responses beyond what they wrote in open-ended text boxes. Second, although the characteristics of our sample (mostly White women) echoes those of most teachers in the United States, our findings are certainly circumscribed to a particular set of perspectives and experiences. Third, we did not differentiate among different types of adoption (e.g., public domestic, private domestic, international) in assessing respondents' ideas about and inclusion of adopted individuals and families; in turn, our tendency to refer to adoption in the general sense necessarily curtailed the nuance and specificity of our findings. Fourth, many of our participants had a personal connection with adoption, and our findings are likely not representative of teachers and professionals generally who interface with adopted individuals. Individuals in general may simply feel more compelled to participate in research if they have a personal connection to the topic under investigation. Despite these limitations, our study makes a key contribution in that it builds on a very small body of literature on teachers' knowledge of and perspectives on adoption, and adoptive family-school relationships, and offers a number of implications for practice.

Implications for research and practice

The current study points to a number of potential areas for future research. First, more research is needed into the training and educational experiences of teachers and other professionals vis a vis adoption. For example, what informal and formal educational and professional experiences are most useful in terms of enhancing competence regarding adopted students and families? Second, much more research is needed into how both parents and teachers experience their communications and consultations surrounding adopted children, and what strategies and behaviors are experienced by either or both parties as enabling them to work effectively in the best interests of children. Finally, research seeking insights from adolescent young adult adoptees about their own school experiences would be very helpful, as their perspectives may be different from those of both their teachers and their parents.

Teachers and other school professionals should seek to avoid inadvertent marginalization and stigmatization of adopted children. They should be careful to recognize their own biases or stereotypes regarding adoption (including LGBTQ adoption and transracial adoption), and seek to correct such assumptions through education (e.g., reading the research on adoption; attending adoption webinars or conferences). In addition, they should work to meaningfully address and overturn their students' stereotypes and/

or assumptions about adoption, which may be rooted in dramatic media portrayals combined with limited personal experience with adopted people and families; adoption awareness by students, in turn, will impact the social and peer experiences of adopted youth. Of course, teachers should not have to do such work on their own: School administrators should ensure that adoption-related topics are offered as part of regular professional development so that all teachers are reached, thus enhancing the likelihood of systemic (as opposed to just classroom- or student-specific) shifts in adoption competency.

Teachers should seek to approach adoptive families with an attitude of nonjudgmental empathy. In turn, parents will likely be more open to disclosing adoption information, and less concerned about the implications of doing so (i.e., they will be less concerned that details about their child's history will be used against them or their child; Goldberg, 2014). At the same time that teachers should guard against assumptions about adoption and its effects on children, they should recognize that in some cases children may exhibit temporary stress reactions related to their adoptive experience, which may manifest as behavioral problems (Taymans et al., 2008). Further, they should not overlook the potential significance of early or multiple transitions in caregiving environments, or abuse/neglect, in children's development (AAP, 2021).

In addition to having incomplete knowledge about adoption, the findings suggest that teachers often lack comprehensive information about children's family histories (including adoption/foster care experience) which they need in order to plan effectively for their success. This information needs to be gathered from families in a more systematic matter, and shared with appropriate personnel, and passed down from year to year, while also protecting family privacy. Systems-level consultation may help to identify problems related to information gathering and sharing, and to implement more successful and streamlined approaches.

Schools need to discuss how to balance families' rights to privacy with schools' needs to know information about children so that they can effectively meet their educational needs. One possibility is having all teachers seek input or feedback from parents at the beginning of each school year, via paperwork wherein parents are offered the opportunity to share details of their children's adoptive background if they wish (e.g., in response to a query such as: "Is there anything else about your child's background or history that you wish to share with us? E.g., adoption history; foster care experiences; family separations, divorces, or remarriages; etc."). Teachers can be clear about why they are seeking such information, and invite parents to share their purposes and wishes in disclosing the information they ultimately share with the school (e.g., how do they hope the information will be used; Gore Langton & Boy, 2017).

At the same time, obtaining information about adopted children's background is not sufficient. Without training and education geared to help teachers to effectively interpret the information that they obtain about children/families, as well as what follow up questions to ask or additional information to solicit, teachers are at risk of drawing inappropriate conclusions and/or responding in ways that might be counterproductive to children and families.

Ultimately, these findings offer important guideposts for school professionals and others who seek to support and advocate on behalf of adoptive families. Such professionals should seek to advocate for greater inclusion of adoptees in curricula, pursue training and education to enhance their knowledge of adoptees and adoptive families, and engage parents as key stakeholders in their children's success. Additionally, professionals should look for ways to improve teacher-parent communication about child difficulties in the context of their adoptive history, which may or may not be relevant. We understand that teachers and school administrators are under great pressure to be responsive to many characteristics and needs of the children and families they serve. Special training with regard to a small population may feel difficult to justify. Nevertheless, strengthening family-school partnerships and sensitizing teachers to the needs and experiences of all learners is an important goal—and one that will benefit adopted children and their families in particular.

Note

1. These 64 valid partial responses do not include those we eliminated based on evidence that they were fraudulent or "fake" responders (or possibly bots): namely, responses wherein only the "agree to participate" box was checked, but no valid responses were given; or, responses were given but in an illogical pattern and/or in impossibly short time frame (e.g., a duration of under 60 seconds). We assume that most of these fake respondents were people trying to gain eligibility for the random drawings for $50 Amazon gift cards.

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