

Seen but not Seen: Supporting Transracial and Transnational Adoptees in the Classroom

Melanie M. McCormick and Alycia N. West

Imagine walking into a classroom on your first day of school. The floor tiles are waxed, their black and white pattern squeaking slightly as you walk. The wooden desks in the room are clean with your name laminated in block letters on one of them. You hang your coat up on a hook in the back along with your backpack that is the size of you and then go sit down, the chair groaning against the floor as you pull it back and slide in. You take a look around at your peers, taking note that they all look the same, and that you are different. You look at your teacher, and she looks like your peers. As you go through the day, all the pictures in your textbooks look like your peers and teachers. At the end of the day, as parents are coming in to pick up their children, they all look like their kids. You look at your parents, noticing that you do not look like them.

Now imagine having to live this first day of school year after year, noticing the same things over and over again. While you will know your peers and have friendships, your friends will always look different from you. Imagine how lonely that must feel—not feeling like part of the group. As you get older, teachers ask you about Korea just because they assume you must know the culture since you were born there, and then force you to share your adoption story with your peers to give them a cultural experience.

Because teachers have been positioning you as the “classroom show and tell,” now your classmates come up to you asking questions such as, “where are you from?” and then when you say your hometown they go, “no, where are you *really* from?” They ask about your “real” parents and say that the people you know and love at home are not your “real” parents and that your “real” parents do not love you and that is why you are adopted.

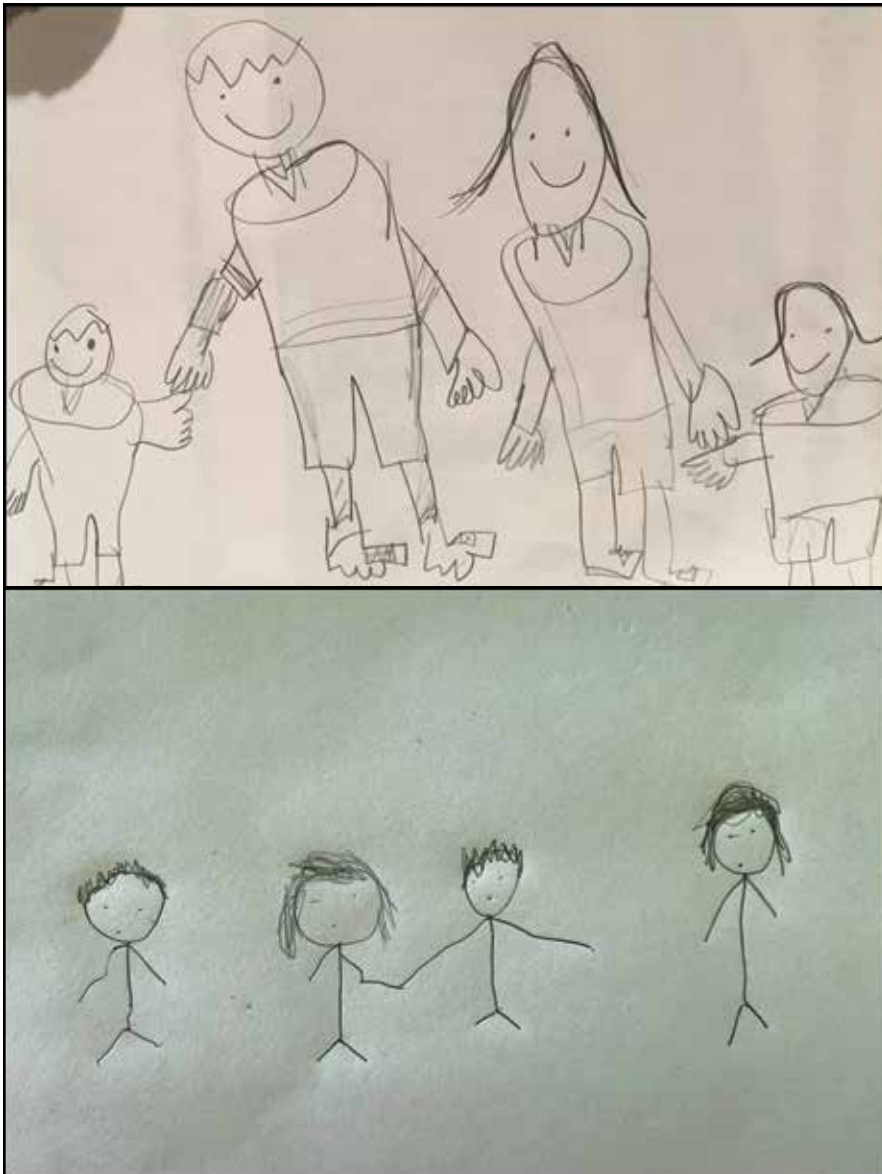
Imagine being a young child having to process through all these feelings and emotions at such a young age.

Then, fast forward to teaching in a school or being part of a larger educational system and still feeling like you oftentimes do not belong. Imagine appearing Asian (to your colleagues, students, and students’ families) but not feeling Asian American—a tension that others do not understand. You often get asked if you can speak Korean and feel ashamed that you cannot. Imagine all these confusing and conflicting feelings.

Personal Experiences

These are feelings that we felt, and continue to feel, as transracial and transnational adoptees from South Korea in the United States. Both our families are white,¹ and we grew up in predominantly white communities. Alycia grew up in a small town in Iowa. Alycia did not experience opportunities to learn about her culture growing up, and, when asked about it, would not want to learn more and would be embarrassed about it. Melanie grew up in a small town in Michigan. Melanie’s family offered her experiences to learn about her native culture throughout her life, but she always rejected them and would get visibly upset when they were offered. Both Alycia and Melanie never had a teacher who was not white throughout their entire preschool-twelfth grade schooling experiences and were some of the only students of Color.

These types of school and life experiences impact transracial and transnational² adoptees and their identity development. It is not enough to just have teachers, friends, or even family members who say “we love you for who you are.” It is vital that our Asian American



Images 1 and 2 show a mother, a father, and two children.

identities are embraced and acknowledged by those around us, including and especially by educators.

Richard Lee discusses what is known as the Transracial and Transnational Adoption Paradox.³ The paradox references how transnational adoptees experience their home life as what it would be as a white person, but when they go out into the world, they are treated like People of Color. The paradox shows how racial identity development could be challenging for a young transnational adoptee if they are used to being treated in specific ways and then enter school and are treated very differently. With transnational students entering a classroom, transnational adoptees will primarily draw their ethnic awareness from the families' ethnicity and not necessarily their own. Teachers need to acknowledge their transnational adoptee's identity and understand where they may be developmentally.

Before we dig into the purposes of this article, we want to be clear that our experiences are not representative of every single transnational adoptee's experiences. But we found our experiences to intersect in many ways, and we have developed many different connections through this experience together.

We also want to acknowledge that we both had many positive and uplifting experiences with teachers as transnational adoptees. But we also have faced our challenges. All these positive and challenging experiences have shaped who we are and our aims at creating more equitable, just, and inclusive spaces for children to learn. In this article, we hope to offer support for teaching about adoption in classrooms based on our personal experiences in education as well as in our lives. As transnational adoptees who were brought together to write this piece, we want to utilize our experiences to offer suggestions on (1) how to teach transnational adoptees in your classroom and (2) how to teach about transnational adoption in the classroom through children's literature and social studies education.

Content Analysis

Through Melanie's prior research in elementary social studies, she found that the "traditional" narrative of families is still often taught in classrooms and through social studies curriculum materials.⁴ She also found that children's literature still perpetuates the "traditional" narrative of families, which impacts children's preconceptions of families.⁵ For example, when she interviewed five children and asked them to draw a family, all five drew a family with a mother, father, and children together, even though four out of five participants did not follow the "traditional" narrative or structure of family (see Images 1 and 2). These findings suggest that "traditional" families are still dominant in children's understanding of what families are.

Children's Books About Adoption

Through our research together, we have analyzed various children's book on adoption. Through this analysis process, we have found some common trends with books on adoption.

We found that adoption was explained in different ways, some of which could be harmful to students, especially those who are adopted. For example, we found that many of the books framed adoption in a way where the child needed the family. This perspective can quickly turn into a “savior complex” where children feel their family saved them from a bad situation. This “savior complex”⁶ can range from bothersome to extremely harmful to hear as an adoptee. Many other texts used animals to represent adoption. Using animals as characters to explain adoption dehumanizes adoptees’ experiences. When animals are used in books about adoption, they are not the main characters. We suggest being mindful of these different perpetuations and representations of adoption in children’s literature. Additionally, most books about adoption are written from the perspective of the parent(s) rather than the adoptee, which is also problematic. It is important to amplify the voices of adoptees and give them space to tell their own stories. Currently, few texts present adoption effectively. Our hope is that there will be more in the future.

Drawing from our content analysis, we want to share some ways that teachers can read against problematic texts and provide some examples of books they could focus on utilizing in the classroom. When teachers read books that use animal characters (e.g., *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, see Sidebar, p. 30), they must express through discussion that humans are also adopted, which could be an opportunity to share an adoptee’s story from their perspective. These types of stories can be found in news articles or blogs (e.g., Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network [KAAN]). Teachers can also ask students why it is important to use human characters when teaching about adoption, which can open inquiry-based learning for students to analyze problems with only using animal characters. Teachers can also have students inquire about the perspectives from which books are written. After reading a text, students can tell who they think wrote the book (e.g., parent or child) and how they think the story could be different if written from a different perspective. Example questions could include: Who wrote this text? Why do you think that? How do you think this text would be different if the adoptee wrote it? Why is it important for adoptees to also share their experiences? How can we share adoptee stories? This type of critical analysis can help students understand that adoptees also have their own stories and experiences that can vary from their parents.

Our overall recommendation is to be very deliberate about choosing books to teach about adoption. In the sidebar (p. 30), we have listed some texts that can be utilized to teach about adoption. Although none of these books are perfect, they can be supported with other

materials to engage learners. For example, informational texts can accompany the children’s book read to build background knowledge about adoption. Informational texts can include videos and information from websites that amplify adoptee voices. Teachers can also invite adoptees into the classroom for students to interview them or for them to tell stories about their adoption. Using other resources can provide students with opportunities to learn that there is not just one story that can encompass all adoption stories. Next, we will offer some suggestions on how to teach about transnational adoption in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on our personal experiences in education as educators and our findings from our content analysis, we created some recommendations for educators to follow when teaching about transnational adoption.

1. Do Background Research on Adoption

Teachers should start by first doing their own background research on adoption to learn more about the process, feelings, and experiences of adoptees. A range of adoptee perspectives and voices should be heard or read about before a teacher engages with teaching about adoption. There is a body of research on adoption that focuses on transnational adoption. This step is vital before any of the other recommendations can be followed successfully.

2. Think About Your Classroom Demographics & Ways to Engage Learning

Before engaging in a discussion about transnational adoption, teachers must understand the demographics of their classrooms. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Are there any students who are adoptees or transnational adoptees? If so, how can their cultural knowledge be utilized to teach about transnational adoption?
2. How can and should their families be involved in the conversations around transnational adoption?

We wish our teachers would have been more deliberate about how they assumed we wanted to discuss adoption growing up. Melanie remembers her school announcing that she became a United States citizen in first grade over the loudspeaker. This was an embarrassing and stressful moment because she thought that they were just going to announce her birthday, but instead, they announced her citizenship, which was confusing for a six-year-old to explain to curious peers.

If there is a child in the classroom who identifies as a transnational adoptee, it is vital to understand how they feel comfortable in discussing their adoption or identities. Some students may not feel comfortable speaking about their adoption yet. We recommend honoring their wishes and not pushing them to share if they are uncomfortable. Ask the student one-on-one if/how they feel most comfortable talking about adoption in the classroom and come up with ideas together to continue the larger conversation about transnational adoption for all students. Some students may want their families to share their experiences. For example, families could support discussions around adoption or read a book about adoption to the class. But be mindful that families can have different perspectives than the student on adoption. So, we recommend talking to the student first about whether they would like to have their family members support a conversation or discussion of sharing about their family experiences.

Also, be mindful of other texts that you read about race, not just adoption. For example, a beautiful text written by Joanna Ho and illustrated by Dung Ho, *Eyes That Kiss in the Corners* (HarperCollins, 2021), could be used to make an Asian child feel represented. But this text could also trigger a child who is adopted by a family of a different race because it relates the main character to looking like her grandmother, mother, and sister. This text could be critically read and provide opportunities for students to explore similarities with birth family members. But we feel that teachers should be mindful of adoptees not sharing racial or other physical genetic traits of their families and how this can make them feel.

As transnational adoptees, we experienced situations where we have been called on to discuss our adoptions by teachers without forewarning. For example, we remember being asked to present about South Korea without the cultural knowledge to do so, which made us feel embarrassed. The better teachers know their students and the funds of knowledge that they bring to the classroom, the more inclusive, equitable, and just they can be in their teaching.

3. Lead Social Studies Discussions about Identity

In many states, early elementary social studies standards call for teachers to teach about families.⁷ Justice-oriented social studies provides opportunities for students to honor “the voices and experiences of all members of our society, especially those who are historically silenced and marginalized”⁸ and should include learning about adoption.

In Mariana Souto-Manning and Christina Hanson Mitchell’s work, we learn that children can begin to discuss their identities in elementary school, even early elementary school. There is a misconception that teachers cannot engage in critical forms of pedagogical practice in classrooms.⁹ Children in early childhood education can share their identities and think about how their perspectives and identities impact their lives and choices.¹⁰ Identity impacts how children view the world around them. It is vital that students are provided opportunities to discuss their identities. In the article, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop explains that students can learn about their own identities as well as identities different from theirs.¹¹ We grew up in a time when it did not feel that schools did much identity work.

Social Studies Standards

Below is a list of potential C3 Framework social studies standards from Dimension 1 (Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries) that could be addressed by teaching about adoption in elementary classrooms. Compelling and supporting questions would need to be developed for students to go through an inquiry-based project on adoption. For example, teachers could pose a compelling question such as, “what are different types of family experiences?” Then a supporting question that is more focused on adoption could include, “what is adoption?” Addressing student’s questions about adoption can provide opportunities to dismantle any harmful preconceptions that students may hold about adoption.

C3 Framework (K–2)

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

D1.1.K-2 Explain why the compelling question is important to the student.

D1.3.K-2 Identify facts and concepts associated with a supporting question.

D1.4.K-2 Make connections between supporting questions and compelling questions.

C3 Framework (3–5)

Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries

D1.1.3-5 Explain why compelling questions are important to others (e.g., peers, adults).

D1.2.3-5 Identify disciplinary concepts and ideas associated with a compelling question that are open to different interpretations.

D1.4.3-5 Explain how supporting questions help answer compelling questions in an inquiry.

Even if you do not have students who identify as transnational adoptees, this topic is still of utmost importance to teach because there are still hundreds of thousands of transnational adoptions in the United States. Teaching about transnational adoption can help students understand how people can transverse different identities. This inclusive teaching can support students in developing an understanding of the different challenges and joys that adoptees may experience and can support students in talking to adoptees about adoption in ways that are not harmful. Teaching about adoption can also teach students to act against injustice that occurs to adoptees.

4. Intervene When You Hear Misconceptions about Adoption

Lastly, we suggest that when teachers hear student misconceptions about adoption, they intervene and use it as a teachable moment. For example, if a child is heard saying that adoption occurs when a parent does not love the child, there must be intervention to teach the child that there are different circumstances that lead people to adoption. Or if students are committing microaggressions about race or families, then there must be intervention to teach the students what is respectful and kind. Rather

than allowing students to ask questions like, “where are you really from?” teach them ways to be curious without being harmful. For example, have students reframe how they ask that question. They could ask, “can you share with me about where you were born?” It is especially important to be mindful of the discussions that students have around the Asian American communities because there has been so much harm to this community historically and in the wake of 2020 (e.g., anti-Asian violence, Atlanta mass shooting).

Address any misconceptions that can come from the children’s literature as well. If a teacher finds a text is perpetuating a savior complex or only using the voice of the parent rather than the adoptee, address this with students. This can help students understand the many perspectives of adoption.

Conclusion

Transracial and transnational adoption is something that helps expand and build upon the understanding of diverse families. It is an experience that is unique and special for all those involved. It is important to remember, however, that an adopted child will be navigating life differently than many of their peers. The recommended steps are a starting

Teaching Resources

Children’s Books

- Friedman, Darlene. *Star of the Week: A Story of Love, Adoption, and Brownies with Sprinkles*. Illustrated by Roger Roth. HarperCollins, 2009.
- Katz, Karen. *Over the Moon: An Adoption Tale*. Square Fish, 2001.
- Kitze, Carrie A. *I Don’t Have Your Eyes*. Illustrated by Rob Williams. EMK Press, 2003.
- Nazario, Tiarra. *And That’s Why She’s My Mama*. Tiarra Nazario, 2018.
- Parr, Todd. *We Belong Together: A Book about Adoption and Families*. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2007.
- Richardson, Justin, and Peter Parnell. *And Tango Makes Three*. Illustrated by Henry Cole. Little Simon, 2015.

Books for Adult Learning

- Chung, Nicole. *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*. Catapult, 2018.
- Kim, Eleana J. *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*. Duke University Press Books, 2010.
- Oh, Arissa H. *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption*. Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Park Nelson, Kim. *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*. Rutgers University Press, 2016.

- Walton, Jessica. *Korean Adoptees and Transnational Adoption*. Routledge, 2019.

Documentaries

- Borshay Liem, Deann, dir. *First Person Plural*. Sundance, 2000.
- Maxwell, Jon, dir. *Aka DAN: Korean Adoption Documentary Series*. YouTube, 2015.
- Aka SEOUL: A Korean Adoptee Story*. 2016.
- Myung, Alex, dir. *Arrival*. 2016.

Podcasts

- Noyes Saini, Anne. “Your Mom’s Food pt. 1: What Dumplings Can’t Fix.” Produced by Dan Pashman. *The Sporkful*. 31 July 2017. Podcast audio.

Organizations

- The Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture (2017)
- The Adoption Museum Project (2022)
- Adoptee Rights Campaign (2021)
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice (2022)
- Adoptees for Justice
- Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN, 2021)

point to foster inclusive environments for students. We hope this article will help teachers think critically about how they structure their classroom and be aware of how little things, such as books offered, can make a huge impact on the students who are entering the classroom. ■

Acknowledgments

A special thank you to Dr. Noreen Naseem Rodriguez and Dr. Sohyun An for supporting us in this work about transnational and transracial adoption. We appreciate their commitment to creating more inclusive educational spaces for all children, including adoptees.

Notes

1. The authors have decided to lowercase *white* as an act of defiance against white supremacy and to legitimize the experiences of Transnational Asian Americans.
2. The authors emphasize the importance of transracial and transnational adoption types, but for the purpose of this article, in any reference hereafter to “transnational” adoption/adoptees, we mean both transracial and transnational adoption/adoptees.
3. Richard M. Lee, “The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization,” *Counseling Psychology* 31, no. 6 (2003): 711–744.
4. Melanie McCormick, “What Do Children Actually Learn About Diverse Families?: Understanding How Family Composition is Taught,” Presentation accepted at American Educational Research Association (Virtual) Conference (2021, April).

5. Christina M. Tschida, and Lisa Brown Buchanan, “What Makes a Family? Sharing Multiple Perspectives through an Inclusive Text Set,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 2 (2017): 3–7.
6. Teju Cole, “The White Savior Industrial Complex,” *The Atlantic*, last modified March 21, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>.
7. Tschida and Buchanan, “What Makes a Family?”
8. Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath, *Social Studies, Literacy, and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom: A Guide for Teachers* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 13.
9. Mariana Souto-Manning and Christina Hanson Mitchell, “The Role of Action Research in Fostering Culturally-Responsive Practices in a Preschool Classroom,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 37 (2010): 269–277.
10. Terry J. Husband, “He’s Too Young to Learn About That Stuff: Anti-racist Pedagogy and Early Childhood Social Studies,” *Social Studies Research and Practice* 5 no. 2 (2010): 61–75.
11. Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 9–11.

Melanie M. McCormick is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She can be reached at mccor158@msu.edu.

Alycia N. West is a doctoral student in Higher Education at Iowa State University. She can be reached at alycia@iastate.edu.



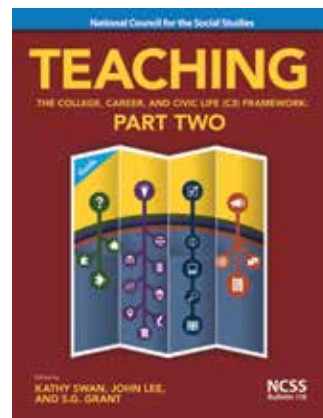
Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, Part Two

Edited by Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant

The powerful social studies inquiries in this book bring the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework to life. They are based on the Inquiry Design Model (IDM), a curricular approach that animates social studies standards and integrates the four dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc.

The editors of this book invited outstanding social studies curricular organizations to take the IDM challenge and contribute units based on IDM blueprints about topics that are central to K-12 social studies. The resulting inquiries cover an impressive range of subjects: teaching students about the concept of money and how to understand maps; engaging students in historical investigations of Indian Removal, slavery and the failure of Reconstruction, and the Holocaust; exploring social changes such as the historical impact of bicycles and the present-day effects of the use of robots in manufacturing; and dealing with current issues such as gun control, media literacy, the minimum wage, and the controversy over school bathrooms.

This book is a companion volume to the popular NCSS publication, *Teaching the C3 Framework*. The editors of the book are the lead authors of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards.



Member/List Price: \$19.95 / \$29.95 | Item: #180116

Purchase 10 or more copies and save 20% off the non-member price.

Order online at www.socialstudies.org/store.

To order by phone, call 1-800-683-0812. To order by purchase order, please email as attachments to bookstore@ncss.org; fax to 301-779-8596, or mail to NCSS Publications, 3570 Bladensburg Rd., Brentwood, MD 20722.

Any order including a check as payment should be sent to: NCSS, P.O. Box 79078, Baltimore, MD 21279-0078.