

CARVED INTO MY PALM:

A REFLECTION ON THE INEFFECTABLE MARKS OF
ADOPTION ON SELF AND STUDENT

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Abstract

Reflection, experience, practice and research converge in this lived experience paper. Adoptees are marked with an invisible difference, a virtually unrecognizable otherness that they bring with them into the classroom. Adoptees often spend a lifetime feeling the absence of their severed biological ties, awareness of the void created in their sense of self, and masking the ineffaceable marks that adoption has marred them with. This reflection was written to raise awareness and to highlight some of the challenges that adoptees can face when they take a seat in your classroom.

Keywords: adoption, education, abandonment, auto-ethnographic, genealogical bewilderment

“The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned” (Angelou, 2010, p. 332).

RELINQUISHMENT, REASONING AND RESOLVE

Being adopted can make finding a safe place, as Angelou (2010) states, “where we can go as we are and not be questioned” (p. 332) difficult, especially when one’s sense of identity is limited to a few facts printed on forms. An adoptee’s ache for home often goes beyond the desire for four familiar walls to an ache for an authentic self. In my adult life, as a Master of Education student, I was tasked to write a “lived experience” paper that evaluated education through a personal lens and strengthened my understanding of my experiences as a student, and now a teacher, through research. Through the research and corresponding reflection for this assignment, I gained much clarity about my own social and educational journey. While reviewing literature on adoptees in the educational system, and the effects of adoption on identity formation, much of the writing resonated with me as both an adoptee and an educator. This was especially true of the writings of Verrier (2003, 2005) about the primal wound that adoption can cause and the lifetime ramifications on self-identity, social and scholastic development.

Previous to my Master’s Degree work, while obtaining my Bachelor of Education and throughout a decade of professional development obtained in association with my teaching position, a great deal of focus was placed on being conscious and inclusive of otherness in my classroom. Employing the concepts of critical pedagogy to our own practice and our own professional development we, as educators, have been repeatedly asked to evaluate our own practice, the power structures of our classroom, our inclusivity of all students, and to ensure our practice is not oppressive to any one race, gender, sexual orientation or class. However, dealing with the unique sensitivities of adoptees was never part of the dialogue. It was not until the graduate level that I had the opportunity to understand the effects of adoption on some students, including my younger self. It has become apparent to me, through my educational journey on both sides of the desk, that school-aged children are largely unfamiliar with

adoption as there is little education on adoption for children who are not adopted. The following is a reflection written in the first person as it is my experience and, like Eisner (1998b), I want you to know that it is a human being, with reason, passion and personal investment, who is writing this. This is my personal story; I do not claim that all adoptees share my feelings. However, through the research that I conducted for my lived experience paper, it does seem that many adoptees share similar difficulties socially and within educational settings. The references to researchers throughout this paper are meant to strengthen the importance of evaluating our pedagogy with regard to being inclusive to adoptees and their unique struggles. In many cases, the researchers quoted in this paper led me to what I call in my Drama classes “Ahh moments,” moments offering great clarity to me, as both an adoptee and an educator. Through this reflection, I struggle with my experiences and corresponding emotions “for the purpose of putting them on view for ‘the world beyond the self’ to see and in turn raise needed awareness” (Beattie, 1995, p. 3).

I was adopted shortly after birth by a couple that both loved and wanted me. Even surrounded by their love, I ached for an unknown home. There has always been a persistent void in my understanding of self and an unfulfilled yearning for a place and a people that I have never known.

On November 22, 1978, under the Child Welfare Act, by way of an adoption order, Jocelyn Dawn #030807, born only six months prior, ceased to exist and Amy Lynn

Ross was created, hereby adopted as the child of a United Church Minister and his wife. As stipulated on the official record of adoption, the biological mother was 16, in Grade 11 at the time of abandonment; her specialty was accounting and worst subject was language. The biological father was 23 and did not like school, as the pressure bothered him. A paragraph describes their relationship, but it can be summed up in two words: not ready. It is hard to gain a sense of identity from a few yellowed pieces of typed documentation. It is hard to define self from checked boxes and medical descriptions that anonymously outline lives I would be detached from.

To help with her own mourning, my birth mother wrote a letter of explanation and apology, which I received as a child. In the letter she states, “Believe me it is a very difficult thing to do – to relinquish someone that is very, very dear to me. To give you up hurts me very much but, under the circumstances, it is best for both of us” . . . “Please don’t condemn me for giving you up” (personal communication, 1978). However, as Verrier (2005) succinctly and accurately states, “The baby doesn’t care why she did it, the baby just feels abandoned, and that abandoned baby lives inside each and every adoptee all his or her life” (p. 11). My own inner abandoned baby questions my biological mother’s ability at sixteen to be so sure of the appropriateness of her choices and resents that she was able to express so simplistically her loss in a few words, a loss that has haunted me through a lifetime.

THE TIES THAT BIND

“I will not forget you. You are carved in the palm of my hand” (Thompson, 1999, p. 3).

Much of my life has been spent trying to forget, omit or abort the girl who gave me up for adoption. Yet, I was unable to ever fully let go, as if she were carved into the palm of my hand. As Verrier (2005) explained, the 40 weeks spent in utero bonds mother and child biologically, genetically, historically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. So, no matter the lengths one goes to detach, the biological mother is still very much a part of the child’s being. No matter how I have tried to fully detach from this woman I never knew outside of utero, even now, as an adult, I still feel tethered to her often imagining what she is like, curious as to how similar or different we may be. The nine months spent in the womb forms a bond that when broken causes a “primal or narcissistic wound which often manifests in a sense of loss (depression), basic mistrust (anxiety), emotional and/or behavioral problems and difficulties in relationships with significant others” (Verrier, 2005, p. 3).

These manifestations have been common occurrences throughout my life. I can pinpoint moments where this depression, anxiety, and difficulty in maintaining relationships has restrained or controlled me.

As a student, if I answered aloud in class and was wrong, or garnered negative attention due to a small wrongdoing, I felt humiliated and would hold on to that humiliation for weeks or months, socially disconnect, retreating into myself as I rationed the teacher and classmates would just reject me anyway. Even at thirty-eight years old, I am haunted by this sense of loss. So much so that when my adoptive mother decided to sell her home and travel for months at a time, the rational adult in me encouraged her adventure, while the rejected child in me sulked in the corner, the abandonment wound opened again. While she travelled, I struggled with harnessing my feelings of isolation and disconnection, reason be darned. There is an impaired sense of self that comes from not knowing one's birthparents. As those who remain part of their biological family can fairly easily answer the question "who am I" by looking around them. I don't look like my adopted parents, I am tall and dark, and they are short and fair. We don't share the same cultural background, although we are all Caucasian. We don't have similar inclinations or interests, quirks or personalities. When I look at my own biological children, although we are of course different, I catch glimpses of myself. When doctors ask me the standard, "is there any family history of..." I have to answer with a shrug and an explanation. I feel like I have no roots and the personal history acquired through my adoptive parents feels like an ill-fitting borrowed sense of self.

GENEALOGICAL BEWILDERMENT INFORMS BEHAVIOUR

In 1964, Sants in his paper "Genealogical Bewilderment in Children With Substitute Parents," surmised that not knowing one's origins can have a bewildering effect on children, induce confusion, have a negative effect on personal growth and cause stress from their adopted status. Sants goes on to say that the resulting confusion and uncertainty affects the adoptee's mental health causing them to be maladjusted. According to the research, after the relinquishment, there are two behavioural models that adopted children tend to follow; the first is a tendency toward acquiescence, compliance and withdrawal, with an aim to please the adopted family so that they are not rejected again. The second tendency is to act out, exhibiting behaviour that

tests and retests love and commitment (Verrier, 2005). The second path is often laced with hostility and anger, where the adoptee becomes strong-willed and dramatic showing a desire to be in complete control of every situation (Verrier, 2005).

My personal situation is unique as I tread both paths in my lifetime. Following my adoption in 1978, I grew into a withdrawn, well behaved, compliant, quiet child who, if not always heartfelt, played the role of doting daughter. Vastly independent from a young age, I would refuse so much as a hand-hold crossing the street voicing “hang off, mommy” when the attempt was made. The few times I did do wrong I self-punished, pulling my time-out chair into the corner before my mother had even realized I was up to mischief. I was as a child, and still remain, physically withdrawn sometimes bearing on awkward when involved in physical showings of affection. I would hug, but never wanted to be held. Withdrawn from most of the world, I was very much my adoptive father’s daughter, forging a deep bond and spending much time by his side.

When I was in grade six my adoptive father left and the fear of abandonment that I always harboured was made real. This marked a major shift in my behaviour, and I began down the second path that Verrier (2005) outlined, acting out and testing all relationships for love and commitment through bad behaviour. As Verrier (2005) reasons, when a child is rejected by parents it is not surprising that they test the commitment of the adopted parents, this increasing demand for acceptance by engaging in increasingly destructive behaviour is repeated, if left unchecked, until the adoptee brings about the very outcome which they feared in the first place, the child prematurely leaving home or being kicked out. I left home prematurely, in grade 11 for a period of time; during those years, I also struggled with delinquency, addictions and promiscuity as I searched for love and acceptance, or at least a way to lose myself. The maladjusted child grew into the maladjusted teenager.

THE MALADJUSTED CHILD

Through the research for my paper I learned that:

Although adoptees make up only 2 to 3 percent of the population, statistics consistently indicate that 30-40 percent of those children found in special schools, juvenile hall and residential treatment centers are adopted. Adopted children have a higher degree of juvenile delinquency, sexual promiscuity and running away from home than their non-adoptive peers. (Verrier, 2005, p. 3)

That statistic spoke volumes to me, not just as an adoptee, but also as a teacher. It made me realize that this burden of displacement is not mine alone to bear and many adoptees are struggling with a society and an educational system that is not giving them the support they require. As an adoptee growing up, I continually felt isolated, sometimes that was due to self-protective, self-imposed isolation and sometimes it was due to the isolation imposed on me by an uninformed society.

Langsam (2009), Singer (2010), Jaffé (2009), and Verrier (2005) all agree that adoptees question that they were abandoned because there was something wrong with them. My mother gave her age as her primary reason for abandonment; however, it still repeats in my head that if I were just a little better, cuter, smaller, then maybe she would have wanted me in spite of being young. Often adoptees bury their “vulnerable, defective self, the reason for her mother’s having given her up” (Verrier, 2005, p. 2). This reads like a checklist of my adolescent self: acting tough to cover my insecurities, promiscuity instead of real intimacy, rejecting others before they had the chance to hurt me, stubborn independence over showing any sort of need, anger over tears, and a never-ending drive for perfection instead of an acceptance of self. I wanted to bury myself so deeply that I took on characters, different versions of me that I could hide behind, which of course, lead me to theatre where I could be anyone I wanted, making up his or her histories as I made up my own.

As a young child, I lost myself to the musical *Annie*, feeling a kinship with the redheaded orphan. Just as in the plot-line of *Annie*, my letter of explanation from my biological mother came attached to

a locket. As a child, I wore a red dress fashioned like the one featured in the movie, carried around a stuffed dog I'd named Sandy, and even went so far as to perm my thick brown hair. I used to lose myself in my imagination, dreaming, like Annie did, about who the unknown could be such as in the lyrics to *Maybe* (1977):

Maybe far away/Or maybe real nearby/He may be pouring her coffee/She may be [straightning] this tie!/ Maybe in a house / All hidden by a hill/She's sitting playing piano,/He's sitting paying a bill!/Betcha they're young/Betcha they're smart/Bet they collect things/Like ashtrays, and art!/Betcha they're good -- /(Why shouldn't they be?)/Their one mistake/Was giving up me! (Charmin & Strouse)

I remember that there were times as a child that I actually convinced myself that Annie's story was my story. Imagination to a child is sometimes the best form of escapism from an otherwise difficult life. Using characters and imagination to escape my own emptiness followed me all through my early years, into high school where it further developed in drama class, motivated me to attend theatre school, and even now, informs my professional life as a Drama educator. My ability to become a character allowed me to escape from society's judgment and uninformed inquisitiveness.

THE MALADJUSTED ADULT

This maladjusted child eventually grew into adulthood and became a secondary school Drama teacher. As an educator, and as an adoptee who has been through the education system, I realize that many adoptees are struggling with a society and an educational system that is not giving them the support they require. As a teacher, it is my job to create safe and inclusive learning environments for all of my students. I ensure that my literature, exemplars, music, questions and tasks are open and adaptable for everyone, which is part of our mandate as educators. Adoption is an invisible otherness, and therefore is often overlooked when creating inclusive learning environments. My awareness stems from own my experience, not from my teacher training or my professional development over the past decade.

In my classroom, I never hush my adoption. Although it does not hang on the wall as a neon sign that blinks and flashes and advertises my own otherness, it is there waiting for appropriate moments to appear. Every day in my Drama classes, in order to build community and give each student a voice, we begin with a focusing question that asks students to put a tiny piece of themselves out to the rest of the class. Usually, in the early days of a semester, I ask a question about their childhood. I, too, respond to the question and it gives me a venue to expose my adoptee status. Over the years, this has, at times, been met by a student, face washed over with a relieved smile, saying, “I’m adopted too!” This is not a fishing expedition on my part. Whether an adopted student responds, or not, matters little. The act of voicing that I am adopted removes the stigma that it is a hushed topic. For a student who may be adopted, it shows that they are not alone and that their otherness does not have to be secreted away. Drama is a subject matter that demands great vulnerability from its students, so I, as an educator, am especially cognizant of creating a safe, inclusive environment for their artistic and scholastic development. I want all students in my classes to feel valued, worthy and recognized for who they are and I am hopeful that my pedagogy, shaped by my own experiences, achieves that.

SOCIETAL AWARENESS

In a society where “adoption is still considered ‘second’ best to building a family by birth,” (Singer, 2010, p. 210) average outings are never simple for an adopted child. Questions posed by others, innocently, can actually be very invasive, intruding on private information. Most people who pose the questions are unaware that they are violating a child’s privacy, that their questioning causes pain, embarrassment, awkwardness, hurt, anger, confusion, and self-doubt (Singer, 2010). Even as an adult, going to a medical practitioner for the first time can be difficult when they question why the family medical history section on their information form is left blank. It’s hard when people question where my height or hair colour comes from as neither parent shares those traits. As an adult, when addressing new acquaintances and the topic of my adoption arises, I have an arsenal of practiced responses to the standard line of questioning: do you

know anything about your real parents? Have you found or tried to find your birth parents? Don't you want to know about them? There is often an assumption that you have a strong desire to find them. You become numb to the experience of being asked why they gave you up responding with what is easiest over what is accurate. You attempt humorous responses to awkward questions such as, "you're cute/great/lovely, how could anyone give you away?" Answering such questions with a light-hearted or funny response when, in reality, you would also like to know the answer to that question. The exchange that still strikes me hardest is when, for whatever reason, you have told someone that you're adopted and they look at you pityingly and say, "I'm sorry," not apologizing for their intrusiveness, but in condolence.

It is hard enough dealing with merely acquaintances; however, I grew up in a very small town where everyone knew who I was and that I was adopted. My sudden arrival stirred up a hum of whispers in the village. I was always introduced, or referred to in polite conversation, by way of "and that is Amy, their *adopted* daughter" the emphasis on adopted and the tone to imply its significance. Therefore, anyone newly arrived in the village was quickly caught up and made aware of my otherness.

These awkward introductions and lines of questioning are difficult enough to navigate in adulthood, and were nearly impossible to dodge as a child. Often, those behind the questions were caring individuals who meant no harm, and over the years, many of these inquisitive adults were my teachers. School had its own set of challenges for me as an adoptee. On the playground at recess, I often heard taunts of "at least I am not adopted" and "my parents *love* me," adding to the stress of the school environment. I often found myself at the mercy of bullies.

Adopted children can often be emotionally vulnerable to these questions from the "outside" because these questions and comments often mirror the exact questions adopted children are asking themselves "inside" as they struggle to make sense of what being adopted means about them and to them. (Singer, 2010, p. 211)

Inside, we are already asking ourselves why we were not good enough to keep and struggling with the reality that we were someone's mistake.

SCHOOL IMPACT

As previously stated, school-aged children are largely unfamiliar with adoption as there is little education on adoption for children who are not adopted. In my experience as both a student and educator, the majority of school literature does not feature adopted subjects or characters. School-aged children fear adoption, the idea that you can simply lose parents is the basis for many stories and fairytales we hear as children. In these stories, often the mother replacement is evil, just think of Cinderella (Singer, 2010). Children who fear the "other" distance themselves from the adoptee, just as they do with children who are disabled, by asking distancing questions and making inappropriate comments to highlight how different the adoptee is (Singer, 2010). The taunts at recess mentioned previously, that my parents did not love me, were likely bred from childhood fear and ignorance; but, as a child, that was beyond my comprehension.

Langsam (2009) states an obvious, but often overlooked fact, adopted children become part of the school system at some point and bring along with them their behaviour problems, insecurities and issues. Elementary school was especially awkward and stressful for me. I had difficulties paying attention in class, low self-esteem, negative peer interactions, and lack of control over my emotions, mainly that of fear and loss. I was gifted, but struggled due to the social pressures of school. In a classroom, negative behaviours exhibited may include acting out, tantrums, regression, inattention, disconnection and aggressiveness; all of which are often used by the adoptee to protect themselves, but can be disruptive or misinterpreted as an inability to learn (Langsam, 2009). My negative behaviours were inattention and disconnection, I spent the majority of my time gazing out the window or doodling completely unaware of what was happening around me – like I was a ghost.

Often adoptees do not deal well with failure, feeling that they have pressure to excel in order to please their adoptive parents. When they

do succeed, their need for positive reinforcement is greater than other, more attachment-secure students. “The struggle between the delay of gratification and an inability to regulate behaviors when gratification is not immediate triggers feelings of rejection leading to increased anxiety in an attachment disordered child” (Langsam, 2009, p.15). This has been a mark of my entire academic life. Even as a graduate student, with a 4.0 GPA, I can’t help but focus on the one A- that blemishes my transcript and take it as a personal insult. An adoptee is often in need of a multitude of positive reinforcement, even if they, like me, tend to shrug it off as unnecessary when it is given.

EDUCATING EDUCATION

Feeling excluded makes us feel devalued as human beings, making us question “why aren’t I good enough to be part of...?” I felt excluded from my education in many ways. Of course, the school system cannot be fully blamed for my alienation as a child within it. However, it did little to make me feel valued, worthy, and recognized as an adoptee. I believe that any parent wants their child to feel valued, worthy and recognized when they send them down the educational stream. Over the last decade, I have experienced a great deal of professional development that focuses on creating inclusive curriculum and safe spaces for all students. Rightfully, there has been a focus on reevaluating old lesson plans for inclusivity, ensuring vocabulary, word problems, course literature, visuals and tasks represent a variety of cultures, races, faces, body types, abilities, genders, family structures including same-sex parents, and so on. Yet, I have yet to witness adoption on the list of inclusive focus areas within that professional education scope, I still feel as if it is largely overlooked.

As a student, I know that my self-esteem and sense of personal value would have been bolstered if I’d have just seen a positive representation of myself somewhere, at some point, in my school curriculum. Just once, if we had been assigned a book with an adopted protagonist, portrayed positively and discussed openly in the class, I would have felt validated. But, in all of my years of schooling, an adopted child never came to life on the pages of my book and adoption was never a discussion point in any of my classes. Instead, adoption

was treated as a hushed topic that was awkward and better to be tiptoed around. Hushing it made it seem like a dirty secret, or stain on who I was. The simple act of discussing it when we talked about family dynamics in family studies class would have made me feel, as a student in the class, worthy of inclusion.

EXPECTATIONS

“You can’t just carry everyone else’s hopes and fears around in your backpack and expect to stand up straight” (Chadband, 2011). One of the resources that my parent’s used to educate me on my being adopted was a children’s book entitled, *Why was I Adopted? The Facts of Adoption with Love and Illustrations*, written by Carole Livingston (1978). To begin, the book ensures me that I am indeed a human being and not a puppy dog or gorilla; addresses the overwhelming question of who I am, by simply saying I have the same physical features as most people; and outlines the various reasons why someone may have given me up for adoption. Livingston (1978), explains the adoption process as this:

What all of this means is that if you are an adopted child, you became part of your family in a different way than by just being born into it. You were wanted by somebody very, very much. They wanted you! (Not a bad choice! They must be pretty smart!) ... The most important thing about them is that an adoptive parent really loves children and wants a child very much. That’s how your parents came your way. They wanted to care for you and love you and help you grow up. Pretty nice of them isn’t it?

In my experience, it seems that most adoptive parents desire a biological baby of their own and are unable to conceive therefore, when they adopt they are already settling for their second choice. They approach adoption wanting *a baby*, not, as Livingston (1978) states, specifically me.

In another children’s book, *Did My First Mother Love Me?*, the author Miller (1994) writes, “My dearest child to your parents I have given the precious gift of you” (no p. #). The act of giving turns the adoptee into a commodity being passed from biological owner to adopted owner, yet there is no return policy on this product. If the

child-commodity is defective or somehow not meeting expectations, there is nothing to be done except feel disappointed. My biological mother concluded her letter to me by saying, “I know that you will grow up to be a fine young woman and will make your parents very proud of their adopted daughter” (personal communication, 1978). An adoptee is often left feeling that they must go above and beyond in order to earn the right to remain in their newly acquired family. The adoptee often will feel that they need to be perfect in order for the adopted parents to love and accept them. This can lead to unattainable perceived expectations that, when unfulfilled, leave the child feeling inadequate or worthless, further reinforcing the perception that one failed their birth mother (Verrier, 2005). Livingston’s (1978) statement, “Pretty nice of them isn’t it?” comes loaded with expectation and pressure, insinuating that they were nice enough to take a child in, so that child must not let them down. Thus, beginning at a young age I began a life struggle to be that awesome human being; to be the best student; then, the best teacher; test my athletic capabilities by completing an Ironman; keep a beautiful home; be an artist; look and act the right way; be a good daughter; go far in education; be an amazing mom; and so on. Keeping all of those juggling balls in the air is, at times, exhausting. When I fail to meet my own set of intensely high standards, it leads to anxiety, depression and lowers my feeling of self-worth. How is someone, especially a child, expected to walk straight, as Kirk (Chadband, 2011) illustrated, with a backpack full of expectation, made heavier by their own fears and insecurities, strapped to their back? As an adult I can recognize this imbalance in myself and work to keep it in check; however, twenty-five years ago, as a student sitting in your class, I felt trapped under the weight of it, often feeling like a failure who was unworthy of love.

RECLAMATION AND REFLECTION

I was once a bewildered and maladjusted child who sat in a classroom with the heavy weight of expectations on my shoulders. As an educator, I am acutely aware of how my words and actions can reinforce or negate adoptees’ feelings of insecurity, belonging and normalcy. My awareness stems from my own experience. My pedagogy reflects my awareness; I make public my adoption when the

lesson warrants it and I include it in my Drama curriculum in the form of scenario and script. I never hush my adoption, as it was hushed when I was a student. Adoption is as much a part of my inclusive classroom as race, sexual orientation, and gender. Adoption marks students with an invisible difference, one that is often unrecognized in our society and certainly in our schools due to its invisibility. It is very hard to overcome the low valuation placed on a child through the act of abandonment. Being wanted never quite compares to being unwanted. Adoptees do not just experience loss once; instead throughout their lives, they experience a series of ongoing losses, on anniversaries or birthdays for example (Langsam, 2009). Loss follows adoptees through childhood; filling them with self-doubt and insecurities, haunting them at recess, challenging them in the classroom, and marking conversations and human interaction with awkwardness. Adoptees often spend a lifetime feeling the absence of their severed biological ties, awareness of the void created in their sense of self, and masking the ineffaceable marks that adoption has marred them with. This reflection was written to raise awareness and to highlight some of the challenges that adoptees can face when they take a seat in your classroom.

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