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Adoption awareness in the elementary classroom

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Abstract

Adoption is a complex and delicate issue, and too often, outdated and biased attitudes toward adoption influence people's perceptions of adoption and adoptees. Adopted children are particularly vulnerable to negativity toward the adoptive family structure, and adoptees have special emotional needs that must be addressed in the elementary school classroom. Research demonstrates a variety of ways teachers can bring awareness to adoption issues, de-stigmatize adoption in the classroom, and in turn, create a safe and nurturing classroom environment. The researcher designed an anonymous survey to distribute to a sampling of elementary school teachers; the survey results generally supported the researcher's hypothesis that adoption issues are not properly addressed in elementary education. The results established that elementary school teachers were not adequately prepared to support adopted children in class because they do not have the necessary training, resources, or support at the school and district levels.

Adoption Awareness in the Elementary School Classroom

Imagine that your 6-year-old son is in his first grade classroom, and it is his turn to be Student of the Week. He is presenting information to the class about his family, but he in fact has *two* families to talk about because he is adopted. He is bravely exploring the issue and excitedly sharing the information when another student asks, "But which ones are your *real* parents?" A second student chimes in, "So Shaun isn't *really* your older brother?" The teacher has no response for either classmate's comment. Your son finds himself confused, ashamed and unable to answer the question, and he no longer wants to talk about his family.

Unfortunately, scenarios like this occur frequently when elementary school assignments require children to reveal information to others about their adoptive status. A fundamental misunderstanding of adoption often results in people asking uninformed and ignorant questions regardless of whether or not they intended to be insensitive to the issue. In this situation, the teacher's reply to the students' questions could have been instrumental in providing valuable information, dispelling adoption myths, and preserving your son's self-confidence, but a lack of proper education and training prevented an important positive intervention.

Connection to Adoption Awareness in Elementary Education

I am an adoptee, and my interest in this particular topic stems from a lifetime of experiences in different educational and social settings. At a very young age, I often found myself having to reconcile privacy concerns concerning what information I wanted to reveal about my adoption and what information I preferred to keep private. Additionally, I have had to navigate around insensitive language and biased attitudes in the classroom toward adoption from both peers and teachers.

My birth mother was very young when she chose adoption, and I did not always want to reveal the nature of my adoption to every person who asked because the conversation often turned to, "How old was she when you were born?" There was always a risk that were I to reveal my birth mother's age, the questioner's uninformed response and barrage of further questions would leave me reeling, feeling embarrassed, uncomfortable, and outraged. When such negative conversations arose, I was also in an uncomfortable position because I felt the need to defend my birth mother from people who could not possibly understand the complexity of her story and the loving choice she made.

Furthermore, as an adopted student, I found certain class projects difficult to complete because they focused on family structure and biological heritage. For example, when my teacher assigned a Family Tree project, I had to determine how to represent my unique family structure with the limited tree handout the class received; there was no way to accommodate extra family member names that would represent both of my families. In addition, ethnic heritage projects presented a similar issue as I was required to determine my ethnic background and create a family crest based on my findings. I was confused and frustrated because I had to designate which ethnic background represented my own: my adoptive family's or my birth family's. A deeply troubling question arose from these experiences—how does an adoptee choose which family to use in these class assignments? More importantly, why is an adoptee even in a position where they *have* to choose? At no time during the span of my elementary education did these or other family-oriented assignments give me an option to include information about my adoptive status.

Background Information

Too often, outdated beliefs and attitudes toward adoption influence people's perceptions of adoption and adoptees. When adoptions became legally regulated by states in the 1850s with the development of a formal adoption system, legislators sealed adoption records and reissued new birth certificates to protect adoptive families; by 1950, most states legally required birth certificates and court records to be permanently sealed, thereby commencing an era of secrecy and its correlate shame (Silber, 1997). Accordingly, the majority of adoptions were handled by public agencies and considered "closed"—that is, all information remains confidential and inaccessible to all involved in the adoption (adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth parents), and the biological and adoptive families have no contact (Hilborn, 2005).

However, a movement toward openness developed in the 1960s and proponents for openness in adoption fought to unseal birth certificates and records for adoptees (Silber, 1997). A changing attitude toward unmarried mothers had emerged and people no longer accepted the perceived need to keep adoption secret. In the early 1980s, the first "open adoptions", in which adoptive parents and birth parents agreed to ongoing contact between their families and the freedom of access to information, were legalized, reflecting a new awareness of the importance of shared information in alleviating the stigma associated with adoption (Hilborn, 2005). "Semi-private adoptions" were made available as well, in which birth parents and adoptive parents exchange non-identifying information for the welfare of the adoptee, but there is little to no contact between their families (Hilborn, 2005).

Private adoption agencies and attorneys sprang up and became the key movers in the adoption process, both introducing the concept of charging for adoption services (Hilborn, 2005). Open adoptions were designed to be inclusive of all parties in the adoption triangle: the adoptee,

the birth parents, and the adoptive parents, thereby establishing mutual respect and preserving the dignity of those involved in the process. Public adoption agencies gradually focused on children involved with Child Protective Services, continuing to process predominantly closed adoptions.

Adoption Issues in the Classroom

Adoption is a complex and sensitive issue not well understood by the general public. Myth and misconception about adoption lead to societal stigmatization of all parties involved in the adoption. Although families are created in innumerable ways, the majority of Americans tend to define a "real family" as a married "heterosexual couple and their biological children" (Wegar, 2000, p. 363). This definition, with its emphasis on biological connection, leaves no room for the acceptance of alternate family structures—most importantly adoptive families. Accordingly, "an unfortunate consequence of this dominant family ideology is that all non-genetic family forms tend to be rendered abnormal, pathogenic, and unworkable" (Hilborn, 2005, p. 363). In general, society has learned to recognize the dangers of racial, gender, or class-based bias, but has yet to recognize that bias in favor of a genetic family structure is just as damaging to adoptive families (Dudley, 2004, p. 24). In order to establish a healthy class environment for all and support the needs of adopted children, negativity and bias against the adoptive family structure must be eliminated from the classroom. Teachers must make necessary changes to facilitate adoption awareness in the classroom.

Privacy issues in adoption. One of the primary issues in adoption is control over privacy, or a lack thereof. Adoptees may be interested in sharing their stories, but it is up to the individual to determine what information they are ready and willing to share. Often, parents of adopted children are faced with a dilemma of whether or not to share their child's adoptive status

with others, including teachers. If they disclose information, they run the risk of their child being treated differently based on the simple fact that he or she was adopted. If they maintain their child's privacy, they run the risk of their child experiencing a flood of complicated questions, situations, and information should the child reveal information as they explore what it means to be adopted. Once information is revealed, it cannot be taken back if others' reactions are less than satisfactory, and this can be heartbreaking for adoptees who do not want to be treated differently.

Furthermore, with family-oriented class assignments, an adopted child's right to privacy is compromised because he or she is required to provide information about him or herself that likely reveals his or her adoptive status. In other words, the adoptee loses control over confidentiality because he or she no longer has a choice of what to reveal about his or her life. Loss of control may be frustrating, bewildering, and even scary for the adopted child because he or she can no longer approach the concept of an adoptive identity at his or her own pace; as personal information becomes public knowledge, the adoptee may be subjected to a potentially relentless inquisition by others about the details of his or her adoption.

Myths concerning adoption and adoptees. Overwhelmingly inaccurate, biased, and false information exists about adoption and adoptees, which is perpetuated in the classroom. People often believe that the circumstances in which an adopted child was born were traumatic, abusive, and even dangerous, and that the birth parents did not want to keep the child (Carp, 1998, p. 209). Others assume that an adoption took place because the birth parents were thoughtless, dysfunctional, and selfish people who could not care for themselves and a child, and although this *can* be the case, it is presumptuous at best to assume so. However, according to one source, "birth parents, in realizing that the best they can do may not be what is best for their

child, have met the strictest definition of what it means to be a parent" (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). What these limited perceptions fail to consider are the innumerable adoptions that occur because of the great love a birth mother has for her child.

Many believe that maintaining secrecy in adoption is less problematic and confusing for the adoptee and promotes a stronger bond with the adoptive parents, but just the opposite is true; secrecy is damaging to all parties in the adoption and openness in fact leads to healthier relationships among all parties in the adoption (Carp, 1998, p. 210). According to Carp:

> With the information gained about birth parents, adoptive parents abandoned negative stereotypes, empathized with the dilemma of relinquishment, and consequently were better able to perform their role as adoptive parents. Birth parents lost their sense of guilt and shame and felt better about themselves, secure in the knowledge that their children were safe and secure. Adult adoptees no longer wasted psychic energy on genealogical questions because they were all easily and accurately answered. (Carp, 1998, p. 210-211)

Openness and the normalization of adoption topics in the classroom will support the healthy emotional development of adopted students.

Perhaps the most tragic of all misconceptions is when misinformed individuals lump all adoptees together as emotionally troubled or damaged individuals, and unfortunately, many people are unable to overlook these preconceived notions when dealing with adopted children (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). While adoptees do have special emotional needs and often experience lifelong issues related to their adoption, "the vast majority of adoptees are well-adjusted individuals who grow up to become healthy, productive citizens" (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). Generalizations about an adoptee's emotional well-being may inhibit the development of a healthy relationship between a teacher and an adopted student and may also

hinder the student's relationship with his or her peers if he or she is viewed negatively by the teacher in the classroom.

Special needs of adoptees and related psychological consequences. Emotional needs are quite possibly the most important consideration to make when determining the needs of adoptees in the classroom. Adopted children are particularly vulnerable to stereotype, stigma, and negative attitudes toward adoption. While adoptees may try to convince themselves otherwise, they experience a wide spectrum of emotions ranging from feelings of profound loss, rage, depression, grief, confusion, guilt and shame, and they also often grapple with a fear of rejection (Eldridge, 1999, p. 38). Although not all adoptees experience each of these emotions, they are likely to encounter one or more as they discover what it means to be adopted. Adopted students need to feel supported and be treated with sensitivity and consideration in all aspects of their lives—especially in the classroom.

Adopted children need to be taught that "adoption is both wonderful and painful" (Eldridge, 1999, p. 39), and that their emotions are natural, acceptable, and understandable, and valid. The most important notion to convey to an adopted child is that he or she possesses great value as a human being—just like any other child. With positive encouragement and unrelenting support, the special needs of adopted children "will become deep wells of personal strength and empathy within [the adoptee] as he [or she] grows older: (Eldridge, 1999, p. 41).

Given that approximately "1 in 25 households with children has at least one adopted child" (Concerned Persons for Adoption, 2009, p. 2), it is relevant and important for the general public to be knowledgeable about and accepting of adoption as a common societal practice. Unfortunately this is not the case, and the longstanding history associating secrecy and shame with adoption has not improved in the last thirty years since the introduction of open adoption.

Children, both biological and adopted, are dramatically influenced in their early years by teachers and peers and it is therefore *essential* that children learn and grow in an environment with people who support and accept all different diverse family backgrounds. Adoptees' special needs can be met if teachers incorporate adoption awareness into their curriculum and are sensitive to adoption issues in the classroom.

Research Question

Primary Question

Is there a need to create adoption awareness in the elementary school classroom to address the special needs of adopted children?

Secondary Questions

1. What are the special needs of adopted students that must be addressed in the classroom?
2. How can adoption awareness be included in classroom curricula?
3. In what ways are teachers prepared to teach adopted students?
4. In what ways are teachers unprepared to teach adopted students?
5. How should teachers modify elementary school curricula to address the special needs of adopted students?
6. What training do teachers receive regarding adoption issues and the special needs of adopted students?
7. What training should teachers receive regarding adoption issues and the special needs of adopted students?
8. What resources are generally available to teachers about adoption?
9. What resources are available to teachers about adoption at the district level?

Hypothesis

Despite large numbers of adopted students in the public school system, teachers do not receive training or information from school districts that would prepare them for teaching adopted students; insensitive class projects are frequently assigned without modification and adoption-themed literature is rarely available in class libraries.

Null Hypothesis

Given the large numbers of adopted students in the public school system, teachers do receive training and information from school districts that prepare them for teaching adopted students; insensitive class projects are not often assigned, and if they are, teachers provide appropriate modifications, and adoption-themed literature is readily available in class libraries.

Terms

Adoption: Parental rights and obligations are transferred from birth parents to adoptive parents—a permanent, legally-binding arrangement (Hilborn, 2005)

Birth mother: A biological mother who gives birth to a child and places that child for adoption (Hilborn, 2005)

Adoptive parent: "A person who legally assumes the rights and obligations of parenting an adopted child…[becoming] the permanent parent through adoption, with all the social and legal rights and responsibilities of any parent" (Hilborn, 2005)

Adoptee/adopted child: A child with a set of biological parents and adoptive parents (Hilborn, 2005)

Closed adoption: Birth parents and adoptive parents do not share information and their families have no contact; all information remains confidential and records are sealed from the adoptee (Hilborn, 2005)

Open adoption: An agreement between birth parents and adoptive parents to allow ongoing contact between their families, in which there is open access to information (Hilborn, 2005)

Semi-open adoption: Birth parents and adoptive parents exchange non-identifying information, but little to no contact is made between their families (Hilborn, 2005)

Private adoption: "An adoption arranged by a privately-funded, licensed agency or licensee. Private agencies charge fees for their services" (Hilborn, 2005)

Public adoption: "An adoption arranged through…an agency funded by the government….Public agencies usually provide services at no cost…" (Hilborn, 2005)

Literature Review

Historical Information

The practices of adoption have changed over time, evolving from adoption based primarily on kinship ties to adoption based on economic profit, and more recently, to adoption based on the desire to create a loving family relationship.

Ancient adoption practices. According to Moe (2007), "[a]doption of children, in one form or another, is as old as human history" (p. 1). The oldest written laws on adoption are located in the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, dating back as early as 2285 B.C. in Babylon—modern-day Southern Iraq (Moe, 2007, p. 1; Askeland, 2006, p. 7). In the earliest human societies, children were taken in and raised by other clan members if their biological parents died or were otherwise unable to provide care (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). Many countries practiced some form of adoption, but perhaps the most legendary adoption tale dates back to Ancient Egypt when the pharaoh's daughter rescued baby Moses from the Nile River (Moe, 2007, p. 1).

Early American adoption practices. The earliest forms of formal adoption in American society were based on an economic profit model. For nearly two hundred years during the early colonial period, culminating in the 1750s and early 1800s, orphaned or impoverished children in the American colonies became "indentured servants" who worked for "local farmers, householders, or heads of businesses" (Javier, Baden, Biafora & Camacho-Gingerich, 2007, p.18; Askeland, 2006, p. 8). Children were perceived to be a readily available source of labor, and the "adoptive" family structure was based on economic need rather than the desire for familial relationships (Javier et al., 2007, p. 18). Many of the children who experienced indentured servitude were severely mistreated and neglected by their masters, and their lives were fraught with difficulty. Numerous children died before the completion of their indentured servitude (Askeland, 2006, p. 8). However, by 1800, social perceptions began to change and a more enlightened view of childhood development emerged (Javier et al., 2007, p. 18). The practice of indentured servitude was no longer accepted as society considered childhood as a time of innocence, and the masses began to scorn the abuse of children (Javier et al., 2007, p. 18; Askeland, 2006, p. 9).

The emergence of "orphan trains". At the turn of the century, through informal adoption practices, children were brought into families as full-fledged family members. Given the profound number of children requiring special aid and intervention due to extreme poverty and with a new social norm emphasizing the well-being of children, children were soon moved into homes in the early-to-mid 1800s (Askeland, 2006, p. 18). For many years, the creation of families was not regulated by any formal procedures or laws; adults could simply ask for a child and their requests were approved with ease (Askeland, 2006, p. 19). Within this loose legal structure, adoptees' experiences ranged from incredibly positive to downright negative

(Askeland, 2006, p. 19). However, despite the recent social outcry that ended the practice of indentured servitude, a very similar practice of servitude emerged during this period of time. An estimated 200,000 children were taken off the streets of large cities and transported to rural areas in the Midwest on so-called "orphan trains" (Pertman, 2011, p. 22). Families would literally show up at the local train station and choose which child or children to take home as they were publicly displayed on a platform (Javier et al., 2007, p. 20). Although the founder of the controversial "orphan train" movement, Charles Brace, did use the process to place needy children in homes as cheap laborers, he emphasized to adoptive families the importance of nurturing and care to a child's development (Pertman, 2011, p. 22; Javier et al., 2007, p. 20).

Regulation of adoption. Eventually, between 1850 and the early 1900s, adoptions became more regulated and more formal as adoption agencies emerged and adoption statutes were written to govern the adoption process and make informal adoptions more secure (Askeland, 2006, p. 21; Javier et al., 2007, pp. 45-46). In 1851, the first adoption legislation in the United States was enacted in Massachusetts, and it established mandatory court approval for adoptions (Pertman, 2011, p. 21). Subsequent legislation required "state licensing of child-placing agencies and the maintenance of records on the children who were placed for adoption. State legislatures also began to enact laws that required formal home studies of prospective adoptive parents" (Javier et al., 2007, p. 48). Adoptive parents were now required to follow a basic legal agreement with an adoption agency or risk having the child removed from their care (Askeland, 2006, p. 21). Additionally, a new attitude toward adoption emerged in which adoption was based on the desire for "personal fulfillment through parenting" (Askeland, 2006, p. 35). In its new form, adoptive families primarily sought to raise newborn infants instead of older children (Askeland, 2006, p. 34).

Era of closed adoption. The concept of secrecy and sealed records in adoption arose in an era when little was understood about the psychological ramifications of adoption and the emotional and social needs of those involved in the adoption. Closed adoption records officially began with the passage of The Minnesota Act of 1917, the first state statute to seal adoption records (Pertman, 2011, p. 39; Moe, 2007, p. 46). According to Pertman (2011), "the conventional wisdom among behavioral specialists was that heredity played such a small role in human development that there was no need for anyone to know about, much less stay in touch with, the children's blood relatives" (pp. 39-40). Based on the irrational fear that birth parents would become overly involved in the adoptee's life, social workers believed that adoptive parents might reject an adopted child and return the child to the adoption institution if contact between birth parents and adoptive family occurred (Carp, 1998, p. 105). Similarly, adoption experts feared that biological parents or family members would attempt to blackmail the adoptive family or try to reclaim the adoptee after adoption (Carp, 1998, p. 104). Moreover, through closed adoption practices, states sought to protect adopted children from an "illegitimate" label and therefore, from social disgrace (Pertman, 2011, p. 40). Each of these concerns inspired the creation of legislation allegedly designed primarily to protect adoptive families; concern for the birth parents was practically nonexistent. Legislators sealed adoption records and reissued revised birth certificates, and by 1950, most states had mandated that adoptive parents and the adoptee could not access original birth certificates and court records (Silber, 1997).

Movement toward open adoption. As early as the 1960s, more radical proponents for openness in adoption fought to unseal birth certificates and records due to new social perceptions that rejected secrecy, sealed records, and the ostracism of unmarried mothers (Silber, 1997).

Advocacy groups and adult adoptees collectively lobbied the states to allow adoptees access to original birth certificates and genetic information (Silber, 1997; Pertman, 2011, p. 41). Advocates argued that since every state allows individuals who are *not* adopted unrestricted access to personal information including birth certificates and court records, state action sealing records would be a violation of an adoptee's civil and human rights (Dudley, 2004, p. 126; Moe, 2007, p. 47). In 1978, the book *The Adoption Triangle: The Effects of the Sealed Record on Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Adoptive Parents* was published, changing the adoption paradigm. The book was a catalyst of change in the adoption rights movement (Askeland, 2006, pp. 50-51). For the first time, all members of the "adoption triad"—the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptee—were identified and given respect (Askeland, 2006, pp. 50-51). The book described the adverse emotional and mental impact of sealed adoption records on the members of the adoption triad and in particular, on the adoptee (Askeland, 2006, pp. 50-51). The book's authors emphasized that "the shame and stigma of closed adoption left many children feeling that there was something terribly wrong with their own biological heritage" (Silber, 1997). Shortly thereafter, in the early 1980s, the first open adoption agencies were launched in the United States (Silber, 1997). Based on a counseling model, these open adoption agencies provided an opportunity for the formation of an open adoption plan between the birth parents and the adoptive parents (Silber, 1997).

In open adoption, the adoptive parents and birth parents make a formal agreement to allow ongoing contact between their families, and there is open access to information for all parties involved (Hilborn, 2005). Birth parents are allowed to participate in the adoption and may even choose who adopts their child (Silber, 1997). While the degree of contact between adoptee and birth parents varies from case to case, open adoption is a far cry from closed

adoption in which absolutely no information was available and no contact was permitted (Silber, 1997). The basic principle of open adoption was as follows: "caring contact between adopted children and birthparents is like any other normal, healthy relationship in our society, not something about which to be ashamed" (Silber, 1997).

Theoretical Information

As adoptees explore what it means to be adopted, confronting their adoptive status in the classroom can bring a flood of confusing, complicated questions and uncomfortable social situations. Adoptees are faced with special emotional challenges during the early elementary years with which other non-adopted peers cannot personally identify. It is important to examine the root causes of these challenges and understand why they are potentially detrimental to an adopted child's growth and development if not properly addressed in the classroom. It is, of course, the goal of every educational system to create a sensitive and nurturing classroom environment in which adoptees feel accepted, competent, and their adoptive status is normalized. This goal can be achieved with proper training, education and appropriate adjustments to standard elementary school curricula.

Seven core issues in adoption. In 1982, adoption experts Deborah N. Silverstein and Sharon Kaplan Roszia identified a series of lifelong implications for adoption, coining them the "seven core issues of adoption": loss, grief, rejection, guilt/shame, identity, intimacy/relationships, and mastery/control (Moe, 2007, p. 2; Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). According to these specialists, if each of these seven issues were not professionally addressed, they could prove to be a challenge throughout the course of an adoptee's life. The feelings associated with each issue may be intensified during certain milestones including but not limited to, experiencing the birth of a child within the family circle, realizing that different physical

characteristics may exist among family members, celebrating birthdays, entering school, learning about the adoption process, or completing certain school assignments (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). In order to provide adoptees with a safe, supportive and caring environment, it is critical that educators be sensitive to these unique emotional and psychological issues in the classroom and respond accordingly.

Loss. All adoptees experience loss regardless of whether they were adopted at birth or later in childhood (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). An adoptee's first experience with loss occurs at the initial separation from the birth family during the adoption process, and "even if the loss is beyond conscious awareness, recognition, or vocabulary, it affects the adoptee on a very profound level" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Other subsequent losses or the perceived threat of loss are traditionally more challenging to adoptees than to their non-adopted peers and will deeply affect the adoptee (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Loss may refer to many events within an adoption, including loss of "culture, religion, ethnic and racial connections, medical information, birth history, siblings,…country, language, family traditions,…pets, teachers, therapists, familiar smells and tastes…and on and on" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Loss becomes an overarching theme in adoption and is not perceived by adoptees as a singular event, because an adoptee's losses are a series of ongoing events to which there is no closure (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998).

Rejection. Directly related to the concept of loss is the notion of rejection. Adoptees' feelings of loss are intensified by deep feelings of rejection, and it is nearly impossible for adoptees to "view their adoptions as anything other than total rejection [by their birth parents]" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Rejection may also refer to the perception that the adoptee does not fit in with other non-adopted peers because, given the alternative family structure, he or she is "different" from others (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992, p. 61; Wegar, 2000, p. 364).

Unfortunately, such feelings of rejection diminish a child's sense of self-esteem. Young children are vulnerable to insensitive adoption language that reinforces the concept of rejection (ex. the use of the phrase "an unwanted pregnancy" to describe the reason for a child's adoption), and adopted children tend to conclude that the adoption took place because "they were unlovable, unwanted, unworthy, or defective" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998).

Guilt/shame. Guilt and shame emerge when adoptees' negative perceptions of adoption and of themselves lead them to feel as though they somehow deserve loss and rejection (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Often, the adopted child feels a sense of guilt because he or she feels responsible for the adoption, and the child feels shame because they believe that the birth parents chose adoption because there is something inherently wrong with him or her (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). These personal feelings of shame are reinforced by experiences of social stigmatization and negative societal messages that adoptive families are inferior and a "suspect family form" (Wegar, 2000, pp. 363-364).

Grief. As adoptees process their profound feelings of loss, they in turn grieve this loss. An adoptee's grief can manifest in many ways, including sadness, depression, anxiety, emptiness, or numbness, and children are often unable to verbalize what it is they feel and why (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Grief may cause adopted children to exhibit behaviors that could otherwise be misinterpreted, and since children tend to internalize their feelings, they "may have physical symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches, or frequent colds, may regress, may appear disorganized, fearful, or hyperactive, may have explosive or acting out behaviors or may isolate and withdraw" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Often, the adoptee does not know why he or she feels the range of emotions associated with grief because of the abstract nature of the

emotions (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 74). The adoptee then suffers due to his or her inability to successfully identify or even name these emotions (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 74).

Identity. Identity plays an important role in a developing child's sense of self and experts have determined that "adoptees have additional problems beyond the usual ones [experienced by other children]" (Lifton, 2009, p. 45). Although adoptees were born into one family, they were adopted into another family and assumed this new family's identity; adopted children are often confused by this process and wonder who they truly are, where they came from, and where they really belong (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Accordingly, adoptees must investigate identity in two stages: "[t]hey must discover not only who they are, but who they are in relation to adoption" (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 103). Adoptees often feel incomplete and as if they lack a fully developed identity (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998).

Intimacy/relationships. The development and quality of an adoptee's interpersonal relationships may be affected by his or her identity issues and "the multiple, ongoing losses in adoption, coupled with feelings of rejection, shame, and grief" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). Attachment issues and an inability to bond well with the adoptive family typically occur when an adopted child was older at placement, but research indicates that children adopted as infants may experience similar issues as well (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998).

Mastery/control. Some adoptees struggle with the experience of mastery and control in their lives. Since the adoptee was not responsible for the birth parents' decision to make an adoption plan, nor was he or she able to choose the adoptive family, the adoptee may view himself or herself as a "victim" and perpetuate this role (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). In adopted children, this belief may manifest an inability to control oneself, thereby resulting in a child's diminished sense of personal responsibility (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998). The "victim" title may

further impede the "development of the child's feelings of mastery, accomplishment, achievement, fulfillment, competence, or completion" (Silverstein & Roszia, 1998).

Adoption in the classroom. Anti-bias education, as developed by author-educators Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, provides a framework for an inclusive style of education that encourages human empathy and social competence:

> Thinking critically about stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination takes away barriers to comfortable and respectful interactions with a wide range of people and gives children a tool to resist negative messages about their identities. Strong cognitive development is also enhanced when children develop curiosity, openness to multiple perspectives, and critical-thinking skills. (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 17)

Within the anti-bias framework, which primarily addresses issues concerning race, gender, economic class, different abilities, and religious practices, the authors briefly addressed the topic of adoption in a general chapter about family structures (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, pp. 117-118). They emphasized the need to build curricula around the myriad of family structures and to use classroom props and materials that reflected the children who came from these families in order to dispel notions of stereotype and bias. The authors stressed that it is essential for teachers to respond quickly to situations that arise in the classroom during which children express negativity toward human differences and address the issue outright, continually reinforcing that not all families are homogenous (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 34). Teachers are "ethically responsible to respect the dignity and preferences of each family and to make an effort to learn about the family's structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs—then to bring those understandings into [their] program" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 121), creating a classroom community in which children feel safe.

Proposed in-classroom solutions. Research indicates that there are several positive ways a teacher can help bring awareness to adoption issues and in turn, de-stigmatize adoption in the classroom. Teachers should familiarize themselves with the language of adoption, provide alternate assignments for adopted students, and supply literature related to adoption in the classroom library.

Positive adoption language. Experts have provided suggestions for appropriate and considerate adoption language when speaking about adoption in the classroom. According to one author "the language we use is important, since the way we speak of sensitive topics models confidence and courage on the one hand, or shame and fear on the other" (Hilborn, 2005). By familiarizing themselves with the language of adoption, teachers will be prepared to intervene and address inappropriate commentary or questions that may occur in the classroom or at school (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). Moreover, knowledge about adoption-appropriate language will also allow teachers to model alternative words and phrases to students that can be used to replace negative language. In general, teachers should refer to adoption as a loving choice and emphasize the beauty of adoption as it leads to the creation of a loving, healthy family. Recommended language is as follows (See Table 1, p. 24).

Table 1[1]		
Negative Language	Positive Language	Explanation
Real parents	Birth parents, biological parents	Adoptive parents are just as real as biological parents.
Natural parents	Birth parents, biological parents	Lack of genetic ties does not make an adoptive parent any less of a parent.
Natural child	Birth child, biological child	Lack of genetic ties does not make an adopted child any less of a child.
Unwed mother	Birth mother	"Unwed" denotes a moral judgment.
"Your own child"	Birth child, biological child	A person's children are all his or her own whether adopted or biological.
Illegitimate	No replacement—Do not use	Children should never be labeled or stigmatized based on their parents' marital status.
Keep, keep the baby	Parent, parent the baby	Children are not possessions and should not be labeled as such.
"Hard-to-place-child"	Child with special needs	Children should not be labeled—the alternative is less damaging to the child's self-esteem.
Give away, relinquish, surrender, adopt out, put up for adoption	Make an adoption plan, choose adoption	Negative words do not accurately describe the birth parent's responsible and loving choice.
Adoptive parent, adopted child	Parent, child	It is unnecessary to use adoptive or adopted to describe the parent or child in most contexts.
Is adopted	Was adopted	Adoption is a one-time event and does not define a person.
Blood relatives	Biological or genetic relatives	Indicates that a biological relation to the child is superior.
Taken away, given up	Termination of parental rights	Indicates that children are stolen or forgotten rather than adopted legally.
"Adopt-a-Highway", "Adopt-a-Park"	Sponsor-a-Highway, Sponsor-a-Park	Misuses the word "adopt" in a marketing scheme to make money and diminishes the true value of adoption.

[1] (Hilborn, 2005; North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2002; Institute for Adoption Information, 2007; Mitchell, 2010)

It is important to note that the use of positive adoption language is essential to overcoming outdated perceptions of adoption and to facilitating a safe and nurturing learning environment for all children. If teachers include adoption when discussing various family structures and use positive adoption language, the secrecy and shame associated with adoption will not emerge and adopted children will not feel different or be perceived as different by others (North American Council on Adoptable Children, 2002). As one author noted, "[o]pportunities in daily lessons arise when adoption can be discussed in a positive, matter-of-fact way, reinforcing the idea that adoption is just another way of forming a family" (Mitchell, 2010).

Unbiased class assignments. One solution that will help adoptees feel understood and accepted by their peers and teachers is the use of assignments that do not require publicly exposing an adoptee's personal history. Traditionally, teachers of elementary school-aged students assign certain personal projects designed to explore individual and family backgrounds. These projects may include, 'Bring a Baby Picture' or 'Bring Photos Taken Each Year Since Birth', family tree projects, autobiographies and family history projects, a study of genetic history, cultural and ethnic heritage projects, 'Create a Timeline of Your Life", and Very Important Person (VIP) or Student of the Week events. Each of these seven assignments represents curricula that may alienate adopted children who either lack information about themselves or who are unable to share details about their adoption. Assignments must be modified to take into account the sensitive issues adoptees and their families face so that they can fully participate and complete them (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006).

Baby pictures. Many adoptees possess very little information about their early lives and may not have access to baby pictures or even pictures from their first few years of life. Moreover, the adoptive identity of some students may stand out due to obvious physical

differences among family members (Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007). Instead, teachers can modify the assignment by asking a student to bring any picture of him or herself to share (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Concerned Persons for Adoption, 2009). A teacher may even ask the student to draw a self-portrait instead (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Concerned Persons for Adoption, 2009; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.).

Family trees. The family tree project is usually problematic for adoptees because it traditionally allows room for only one family—the biological nuclear family (Mitchell, 2010). Adoptees may be confused or upset that not enough spaces are built into the tree structure to include birth relatives (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.). Additionally, this project takes away an adoptee's choice to privacy because it asks students to display personal information that will be viewed by the entire class. Teachers have many options when adapting this project to broaden the scope of family that could be included. For example, the teacher could offer the choice of creating a "family orchard" or "family forest" in which multiple trees exist to hold the names of both families (Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). Or, a student could create a "rooted tree" that allows for members of the birth family to be the "roots" and the adoptive family to be the tree and branches (Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). Lastly, the tree concept may be changed entirely to a family wheel or circle in which the adoptee is in the middle and the other family members emanate from the child (Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006).

Autobiographies and family histories. Autobiographies and family history assignments are particularly difficult for adopted children who have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect, or who were adopted at an older age (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006; Mitchell, 2010). These projects also raise the issue of privacy concerns because students are required to disclose personal family information in order to complete the projects. There are many modifications of this type of project as well, and teachers may give students the option to write about a special event in his or her life, to write about a certain time period during his or her life, or to write a biography of a historical figure or of someone they know (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Mitchell, 2010).

Genetic history projects. Genetic information is not necessarily available to adoptees, and questions about physical characteristics or similar physical features among family members may distress an adoptee who lives in a family that does not share his or her genetic heritage (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.). A positive alternative to a genetic traits or history assignment may include giving the child the option of researching the genetic history of friends or family members, or studying the genetic information of plants or animals (Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007; Mitchell, 2010; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.).

Cultural and ethnic heritage exploration. Cultural and ethnic differences between a child and his or her adoptive family can be difficult for adoptees to accept. An assignment about family heritage may be confusing or upsetting, and once again, forces the adoptee to focus on either the adoptive family or the birth family—but not both (Mitchell, 2010; Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.). The adopted child is left wondering how to self-identify. Instead, teachers should give the students an opportunity to write about any country or culture of

interest (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007).

Timelines. The creation of a personal historical timeline may be difficult for adoptees to complete regardless of whether or not their birth and adoption histories are available (Mitchell, 2010). Those who do have information may wonder if they should include the history of their adoption in the timeline because it would reveal confidential information, and those who lack information may be devastated that they cannot complete the project in its entirety. To modify the project, teachers should either ask students to construct a timeline that does not begin at birth or allow the child to create a timeline for a historical or fictional person (Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007).

VIP/Student of the Week. The "Very Important Person" (VIP) and "Student of the Week" events are designed to honor each student for a day or a week and are considered to build students' self-esteem. However, both events traditionally involve a focus on the students' family histories which may be uncomfortable or painful for adopted children who have limited access to pictures and other information about their birth and adoption (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.). In addition, adoptees may not be comfortable responding to the intrusive questions that a VIP-style project usually elicits (Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007). As an alternative, teachers may suggest other information to be shared that does not revolve around a child's personal history, including the child's favorite sports or activities, pets, hobbies, or other interests (Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, n.d.; Adoptive Families Magazine, 2007).

Adoption-themed literature in the classroom library. Experts universally embrace the inclusion of adoption-based literature in classroom libraries (Mitchell, 2010; Adoptive Families

Magazine, 2002). Adoption-based literature is important to have available in the classroom because it helps promote positive attitudes toward adoption. Additionally, children need to see themselves and their lives reflected in books, because what children see in books speaks to what is "normal" and "acceptable" in life. While the number of adoption-themed children's books is somewhat limited, the selection that is currently available to teachers is informative, sensitive, and addresses a number of different issues in adoption. In fact, one independent online bookstore, Tapestry Books, specializes in adoption literature (Tapestry Books, n.d.).

Current Information

Statistics about adoption reveal important trends that are relevant to the American public educational system at large. The numbers that demonstrate the increasing rate of adoption in the United States confirm that it is imperative for all elementary school teachers to bring adoption awareness to the classroom. Reportedly, one-third of the nation is touched by adoption within their families; approximately one hundred million Americans have adoption within their immediate or extended families (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). An estimated six million people in the United States were adopted into their families, and 140,000 children are adopted to American families each year in domestic and international adoptions (Institute for Adoption Information, 2007). According to the 2010 census, of nearly sixty-five million children under the age of eighteen living at home, 1.5 million of them were adopted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In sum, these numbers indicate that one in twenty-five households with children has at least one adopted child, effectively demonstrating the likelihood that at some point during their teaching careers, teachers will have adopted children in their classrooms (Concerned Persons for Adoption, 2009).

The current movement toward openness in adoption means leaving behind the closed adoption paradigm involving outdated stereotype, myths, and misconceptions that have plagued members of the adoption triad for decades. "The shift for greater openness, from the start of an adoption and throughout its course, is altering the way millions of people think and live every day" (Pertman, 2011, p. 101). This paradigm shift must apply to the educational system through which adopted children learn, grow, and form personal identities. Despite the fact that professionals in the educational field work to promote the healthy growth and development of all children, "they typically have the same knowledge base and biases about adoption…as does the general public, which still harbors negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the adoption itself and about the people…that it encompasses" (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2006). As a result, even the most well-intentioned teachers may not be able to effectively respond to or compassionately address adoption issues in the classroom as they arise, simply due to a lack of information about and awareness of the sensitive nature of such adoption issues. One author even noted that some teachers and administrators have displayed reluctance to change as they believe there should not be a "fix" to something that is not a problem (Mitchell, 2010).

In order to promote acceptance of all different family structures and diverse family backgrounds, teachers must be leaders and leave behind the antiquated stigma and stereotype associated with closed adoption. This requires that teachers receive proper training and education about the benefits of openness in adoption and about the social, emotional, and psychological needs of adoptees through childhood and adolescence. However, despite the existence of numerous resources for teachers that provide realistic, comprehensive information about adoption awareness training and curriculum modification, there is little evidence that teachers currently receive any support for formal training at the school district or site level.

Methodology

Research Goals

The goals of the Adoption Awareness research project were threefold: 1) to ascertain the number of adopted children present in the classroom, 2) to determine if teachers receive any form of adoption awareness training, and 3) to examine if teachers modify classroom assignments that are biased against the adoptive family structure. After a critical review of the outcome of these three goals based on data retrieved from surveys, the researcher provided suggestions for how teachers might facilitate and include adoption awareness in elementary education.

Methods

The researcher surveyed a total of forty-nine teachers from three public elementary schools in the city of Santa Cruz, California.

Participants and participant selection. The researcher chose to conduct research in the city of Santa Cruz, California because she was raised in Santa Cruz, attended elementary school, junior high school, and high school in the Santa Cruz City School district, has worked in both private and public elementary schools in the school district, and has a general familiarity with the demographics of the student population within the Santa Cruz City School District. Santa Cruz is a coastal city that borders the Pacific Ocean. According to the 2010 Census, Santa Cruz County had approximately 262,000 residents, while the City of Santa Cruz had nearly 60,000 (Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, 2011). A breakdown of ethnic demographics revealed that 76.7% of the population in Santa Cruz County were White, 6% were Asian, 2.1% were Native American or Alaska Native, 1.8% were African-American, .5% were Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, and 18.1% were classified as “Other” (Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce,

2011). Of approximately 59,000 households in Santa Cruz County, 27,500 households had children under the age of eighteen (Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, 2011). Within the households with children, nearly 41,000 children were in the public school system attending kindergarten through twelfth grade (Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, 2011).

The researcher chose to access three public elementary schools in the Santa Cruz City School District for her research. The researcher chose School 1 because it was a school at which she had previously completed multiple Service Learning requirements. The second school, School 2, is a school at which the researcher is currently volunteering. Lastly, the researcher chose School 3 because she attended this school from kindergarten through sixth grade.

School 1. School 1 was a coed public elementary school, and grade levels ranged from kindergarten through fifth (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013b). Of 395 enrolled students, 68% were Hispanic, 29% were White, 1% was Asian, 1% was African-American, and 1% was multiracial (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013b). There were twenty fully credentialed teachers; this number did not include substitute teachers or other teacher assistants (Gault Elementary School, n.d.; GreatSchools, Inc., 2013b). There were three kindergarten classes, two kindergarten/first grade combination classes, three first grade classes, three second grade classes, one second/third grade combination class, three third grade classes, two fourth grade classes, one fourth/fifth grade combination class, and two fifth grade classes (Gault Elementary School, n.d.).

School 2. School 2 was a coed public elementary school, and grade levels ranged from kindergarten to fifth (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013a). Of 513 enrolled students, 51% were Hispanic, 43% were White, 4% were multiracial, 2% were Asian, 2% were African-American, and 1% was American Indian/Alaska Native (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013a). There were twenty-four fully credentialed teachers (Bay View Elementary School, 2012; GreatSchools, Inc., 2013b); this

number did not include substitute teachers or other teacher assistants. There are five kindergarten classes, four first grade classes, four second grade classes, four third grade classes, three fourth grade classes, and three fifth grade classes (Bay View Elementary School, 2012).

School 3. School 3 was a coed public elementary school, and grade levels ranged from kindergarten to fifth (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013c). Of 578 enrolled students, 74% were White, 14% were Hispanic, 8% were Asian, 2% were multiracial, 1% was American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1% was African-American (GreatSchools, Inc., 2013c). Of the 33 teachers, 97% were fully credentialed (Westlake Elementary School, n.d.; GreatSchools, Inc., 2013c); this number did not include substitute teachers or other teacher assistants. There were six kindergarten classes, four first grade classes, six second grade classes, six third grade classes, five fourth grade classes, and four fifth grade classes (Westlake Elementary School, n.d.).

In total, the researcher distributed forty-nine surveys to elementary school teachers at Schools 1, 2 and 3. Twelve surveys were distributed at School 1, eighteen surveys were distributed at School 2, and nineteen surveys were distributed to School 3. Based on the researcher's knowledge of the ages at which issues in adoption emerge during childhood, the researcher initially planned to survey only first through third grade teachers. Thus, teachers surveyed from Schools 1 and 3 taught first through third grade. However, teachers surveyed from School 2 taught first through fifth grade; the school principal recommended the researcher modify her survey sample from School 2 to include fourth and fifth grade teachers given that some of the class projects listed on the survey were assigned to fourth and fifth grade students as well.

Materials.

Surveys. The researcher created an anonymous, universal survey to be distributed among the sample of teachers. The survey did not ask teachers to indicate any identifying information including teacher names or school of employment. The survey was printed on both sides of one full sheet of paper, and it included a total of six questions. Of the six questions, three questions required respondents to check a box marked 'Yes', 'No', or 'I'm Not Sure'; one question required respondents to check a box marked 'Yes' or 'No' and two questions required respondents to check as many boxes as needed to accurately answer the question. Four of six questions required respondents to further describe, explain, or list information if they answered 'Yes'.

The survey was intentionally short because the researcher believed the respondents would be more likely to answer than if the survey required extensive time and effort to complete. In addition, the researcher provided smaller text boxes to allow respondents to expand upon certain answers because shorter answers would be more succinct and easier to tabulate when compiling data. Lastly, the researcher decided to make the surveys completely anonymous (neither school nor teacher identified) because she believed anonymity would potentially increase response rate and elicit more truthful responses. See Appendix I.

Cover letter. The researcher constructed a cover letter and attached the letter to the surveys. The cover letter was included to provide information to respondents as it introduced the researcher, thanked the respondents for their participation, reassured respondents of their anonymity, described the foundation of the project and explained its importance, and clarified what the researcher intended to do with the data collected from the survey. The cover letter also

indicated a preferred date by which the researcher wished to have the surveys returned. See Appendix J.

Procedures.

Communications. In order to gain access to distribute surveys to teachers, the researcher initially attempted to initiate contact with the school principals on Friday, November 1, 2013. Hereinafter, the principals will be referred to as Principals 1, 2 and 3, respective to Schools 1, 2 and 3. The researcher called the school secretaries at Schools 1 and 3 to be transferred to the Principals 1 and 3; the researcher called Principal 2 directly. However, immediate transfer was not possible as Principals 1 and 3 were unavailable, and Principal 2 did not answer the telephone call.

The researcher was not contacted by Principals 1, 2 or 3 on Friday, November 1 but the secretary from School 1 immediately scheduled an appointment to meet with Principal 1 the following Monday morning, November 4. After meeting with Principal 1 on Monday, the researcher still had not been contacted by Principals 2 or 3 so the researcher drove to School 2 determined to meet with Principal 2. Although Principal 2 was not available to meet Monday, the secretary made an appointment for the researcher to meet with Principal 2 the next day, Tuesday, November 5. The researcher then drove to School 3 and attempted to contact Principal 3 but he was unavailable; the secretary advised the researcher to use email to request a meeting with Principal 3. After arriving home, the researcher emailed Principal 3 in an attempt to arrange a meeting. See Appendix A.

However, the principal's secretary from School 3 emailed the researcher in the late afternoon on Monday and indicated that the researcher needed permission from the school district in order to distribute the surveys at School 3; the secretary provided the name and contact

information for the Administrative Assistant of the Santa Cruz City School district. The researcher agreed to contact her. See Appendix B.

On the morning of Tuesday, November 5, the researcher called the Administrative Assistant of Santa Cruz City Schools. The phone call was successful and the researcher spoke directly to the Administrative Assistant; the Administrative Assistant asked the researcher to email a copy of the survey for review to help determine whether or not it would be possible for the researcher to distribute the survey. The researcher sent the requested email with Survey and Survey Cover Letter attachments. See Appendix C.

The same day, the researcher received an email from Principal 3 that responded to the researcher's initial email from the day before. Principal 3 confirmed that the researcher likely needed to receive authorization from the school district in order to distribute surveys. Principal 3 also indicated that he would forward the researcher's initial email to both the Assistant Superintendent of the Santa Cruz City School district and the Superintendent's secretary in order to understand what the process of approval involved. The Assistant Superintendent responded quickly and allowed the distribution of surveys without further intervention because the respondents were adults and the surveys were voluntary (throughout this paper, the terms respondent and teacher will be used interchangeably). See Appendix D. The researcher thanked both the Assistant Superintendent and Principal 3 in separate emails for their cooperation. See Appendix E.

Principal 3 responded to the researcher's email and gave the researcher permission to distribute surveys without needing to meet with the researcher in person. Principal 3 also offered to present the researcher's project in the school's weekly bulletin and asked for the researcher to provide an appropriate statement to be included. See Appendix F. The researcher accepted the

offer to include the project in the school bulletin, and created a statement for Principal 3 to use in the bulletin. See Appendix G.

On Wednesday, November 20, the researcher emailed Principals 1, 2 and 3 and asked that each contact teachers at their respective schools once more, reminding them to complete and return the surveys to the researcher as soon as possible. See Appendix H.

Distribution. Along with the surveys, the researcher provided pre-stamped and self-addressed envelopes to distribute to teachers, and she went to each school individually and physically placing the surveys in the designated teacher's boxes in the school staff rooms. The researcher also provided sample surveys for the three school principals to review to ensure their comfort in allowing the researcher to distribute surveys to the schools.

Limitations. Research limitations included a small sample size and a limited number of teacher responses—approximately a 40% response rate. Another limitation involved the survey's failure to ask respondents who had received training to indicate where they had received training on classroom-related adoption issues. A further limitation was the survey's failure to allow respondents an opportunity to explain why they chose not to modify class assignments; thus, the researcher was unable to determine if teachers who did not modify assignments failed to do so because of insensitivity or because they had already considered the needs of adopted students. The final limitation was the receipt of inaccurate or incomplete responses from specific respondents because of an incorrect interpretation of a question or a misunderstanding of the given directions.

Emergent Themes

Survey results generally reinforced the researcher's belief that adoption awareness was not included in elementary education despite significant numbers of adopted students in the

public educational system. While analyzing the results of the twenty returned surveys, the researcher established the emergence of several apparent themes based on answers received in the survey.

More adopted students in class than anticipated. Survey results revealed a high number of adopted students in the average public elementary school classroom. According to the results, 85% of teachers reported that they had taught at least one adopted student during the course of their teaching careers.

Need for teacher training. Survey results revealed a need for teacher training to address adoption issues that arise in the classroom. Based on the results, 85% of respondents had never received any form of training to address adoption issues in the classroom.

No resources on adoption available at district level. Survey results indicated that information about adoption issues in the classroom was not provided to teachers by the school district. Not one single respondent reported to have received information on adoption from the school district. The majority of respondents revealed that they had received information on issues pertaining to adoption through direct personal contact: knowing an adoptee (65%), having contact with adoptive parents (75%), or teaching adopted children (60%—should be 85%, but several respondents did not read the options closely).

Use of insensitive class assignments. Survey results confirmed that teachers used most of the class projects listed in the survey that have a potential to be insensitive to the adopted child if not appropriately adapted. These projects fail to protect the privacy of adopted students as they take away the adoptee's choice to determine how much and what personal information to reveal. According to the results, 90% of teachers included at least one of the assignments listed in survey Question 4 in their curriculum. Surprisingly, however, 70% of respondents confirmed

that they did modify these assignments to take into account the adoptive family structures; these findings contrasted the researcher's hypothesis.

Lack of adoption-themed literature in classroom libraries. Lastly, survey results revealed a shortage of adoption-based literature in classroom libraries. According to the results, 45% of teachers reported that they were not sure if they had adoption-themed children's literature in their class libraries, and 15% of teachers indicated that they did not have any adoption-oriented children's literature in the classroom. These two percentages reveal that 60% of respondents do not utilize adoption-themed children's literature in their classrooms.

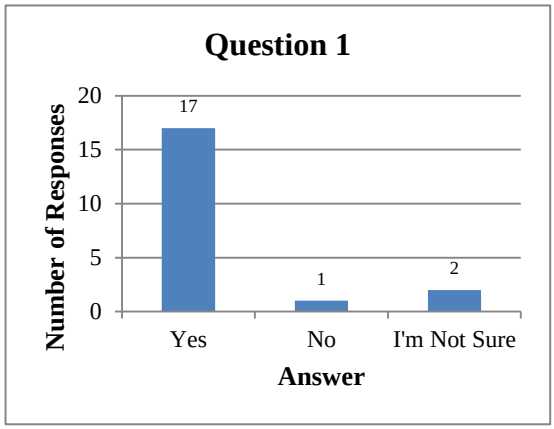
Results

Survey results indicate that elementary school teachers were not adequately prepared to support adopted children in class because these teachers do not have the necessary training, knowledge or resources to create an adoption-friendly classroom environment. The researcher dissected the raw data collected from the survey results, and from this data, the researcher drew specific conclusions about the corresponding themes that emerged.

Raw Data

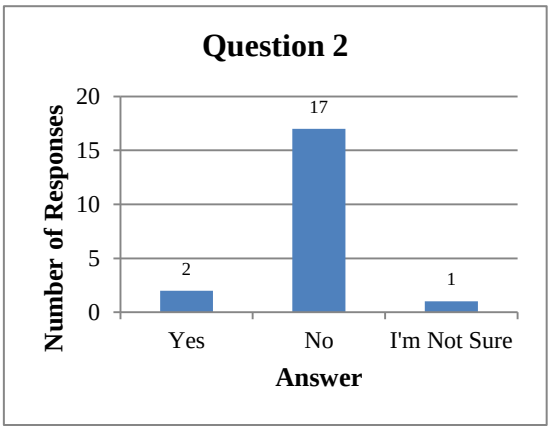
The researcher dissected the raw data collected from the survey results. Each survey question is broken down in terms of answers, the number of responses, and respective respondent commentary.

Question 1: Have you ever had adopted students in your class? If 'Yes', please indicate the approximate number of adopted students who have been in your class during our teaching career. Of twenty respondents, seventeen indicated that they had taught adopted students, one indicated that he or she had not taught adopted students, and two indicated that they were not sure if they had taught adopted students. Of the seventeen teachers who answered



'Yes', sixteen teachers reported the approximate numbers of adopted students, and these approximated numbers were compiled as follows: 1, 1, 1, 2, 2, 3-5, 4, 5, 5-10, 6, 7, 7, 8-10, 8-10, 10, 20-40. Based on these numbers, the average number of adopted students in class per teacher is approximately 8. Considering that one respondent marked an outlier number of 20-40 students, the average becomes approximately 5 students in class per teacher upon removal of this large outlier.

Question 2: Did you receive any training during your credential program or after your employment as a teacher concerning how to address adoption issues in the classroom? If 'Yes', please describe. Two of twenty teachers indicated that they had received some type of formal adoption awareness training, seventeen of twenty teachers indicated that they had not received any type of training, and one of twenty teacher indicated uncertainty about having received formal training. Of the two respondents who answered 'Yes', both commented in the description section; one respondent wrote "During [my] credential program, a class focused on adoption and challenges these kids can face", and the second respondent wrote, "[I received] [b]asic information on ways to approach or handle



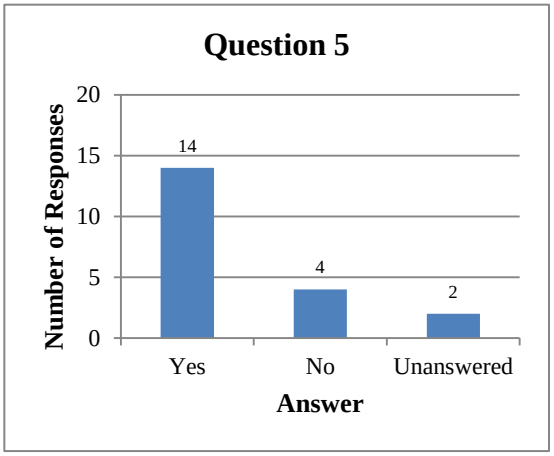
situations". One teacher indicated that he or she had not received formal training but commented, "Other than training on being aware of familial, cultural or societal differences, but not specifically adoption".

Question 3: What other sources have provided you information about issues pertaining to adoption? Please check all that apply. Of twenty respondents, three indicated that they have not received any external information about adoption issues. Thirteen of twenty respondents received information from knowing someone who is adopted, fifteen of twenty respondents received information from adoptive parents, and twelve respondents received information because they had taught adopted students; this number, however, is not reflective of the fact that seventeen teachers indicated they had taught adopted students. These seventeen teachers should have acknowledged they received information from having adopted students in class. One teacher indicated an alternate source had provided information, and remarked: "In a general way, coming across pieces people have written on the subject—magazines, online, etc." No respondents were adopted themselves; none were parents of adopted children, nor had any conducted independent research on adoption. Lastly, no respondents had received information about adoption through the school district. See Appendix L.

Question 4: Are any of the following assignments included in your curriculum? Please check all that apply. Of twenty teachers, fourteen indicated that they used the VIP/Student of the Week project. Nine of twenty teachers used Family Tree projects in their classes, eight of twenty teachers used cultural or ethnic heritage projects, and seven of twenty teachers used 'Create a Timeline of Your Life' projects. Three of twenty teachers used 'Bring a Baby Picture'/'Bring Photos Taken Each Year Since Birth' projects. Two of twenty teachers

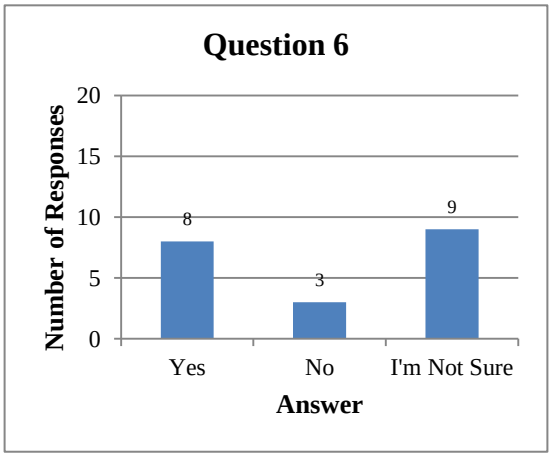
used autobiographies and family history projects, and two teachers indicated that they did not use any of these assignments. No respondent used genetic history projects. See Appendix M.

Question 5: If you have used any of the previously mentioned assignments, have you adapted these projects to take into account the adoptive family structure? If 'Yes', please explain how the assignment was modified. Of twenty respondents, fourteen indicated that they modified assignments to take into account the adoptive family structure. Twelve of these fourteen respondents expanded upon their answer and described how assignments were modified, but two of the fourteen respondents did not expand upon their answer as they were asked to do in the survey. Four of twenty teachers reported that they did not adapt these assignments, and three of these four teachers expanded upon their answers although they were not asked to do so in the survey. Two of the four respondents who did not adapt assignments commented that they did not believe the assignments needed to be modified; one such respondent wrote, "In the 2 cases I've had [of adopted students], [the adoptive parents] had gotten child as a baby, so there was no problem." The second respondent commented, "It is not necessary to adapt my student of the week for a particular family type." One teacher who indicated that he or she did not use any assignments from Question 4 reported that he or she *did* modify assignments, signifying that this respondent did not follow survey instructions or incorrectly answered the initial question; this teacher wrote, "Consulted with parents to modify or excuse student from that assignment. Alternative assignment was created." Two teachers left Question 5 blank; one of these two respondents followed directions and did not comment



because he or she had answered 'No' to Question 4, but the other respondent did not choose an answer despite the fact that he or she had answered 'Yes' to Question 4. Instead, this respondent wrote "NA", as in 'Not Applicable' on the survey next to Question 5, but this was nonresponsive as the answer to the question was simply 'Yes' or 'No'.

Question 6: Do you have books in your classroom and/or school library that address adoption? If 'Yes', please list the titles of any books you can recall that were particularly engaging and informational. Of twenty teachers, three indicated that they do not have adoption-themed literature in their classroom and school libraries. Nine respondents indicated that they did not know if there was adoption-themed literature in their libraries, and eight respondents indicated that they did have adoption-themed literature available. Three teachers listed book titles as required by the researcher, and the titles listed were as follows: "Families are Different," "Happy Adoption Day," and "Brothers and Sisters." Four respondents who indicated that they did have access to adoption literature did not write any book titles.



Discussion

Emergent themes and respective conclusions. The researcher examined the survey results and discussed the specific themes that emerged from the raw data relative to the researcher's initial hypothesis.

More adopted students in class. The first theme corroborated the researcher's hypothesis that large numbers of adopted students attend public schools. Results demonstrated high

numbers of adopted students in the average public elementary school classroom. Accordingly, responsible school districts must include adoption awareness in elementary education by designing effective programs and implementing adoption-sensitive teacher training. While it is important to note that the survey numbers reflect results taken from a small sample size, these numbers indicate the high incidence of adopted students in the public elementary educational system. These students are particularly sensitive to issues involving family heritage and history, so appropriate teacher training to address these issues must be implemented by school districts.

Insensitive class assignments. The second theme both verified and refuted the researcher's hypothesis. Consistent with the hypothesis, most teachers relied on the class projects that have the potential to be insensitive to the adopted child if not appropriately adapted; however, in contradiction to the hypothesis, many teachers did modify the assignments to take into account the adoptive family structure. However, while the majority of respondents reported that they modified class assignments, it is important to note that the true sensitivity of these adaptations cannot be determined. Teachers may modify assignments, but it is unknown if the modifications were made based on the teachers' knowledge of alternate assignments specifically designed to address adoption issues or if they reflected different family structures overall.

Two respondents indicated that they did not believe the assignments needed modification, but the researcher did not include a space for these teachers to further explain their reasoning. The researcher could not determine the teachers' reasoning based on the survey. Did the respondents believe the projects did not need adaptation due to their lack of sensitivity to adoption issues, or did the projects they had assigned already take into account the needs of adopted students? As a result, the researcher was unable to conclude that the respondents who did not adapt their assignments failed to do so because of insensitivity. Nonetheless, it is

imperative that school districts provide teachers with adoption-appropriate assignment modifications supported by evidence-based recommendations of adoption experts.

Adoption-themed literature. This third theme maintained the researcher's hypothesis that adoption-based literature is rarely available in classroom and school libraries. The reported shortage of adoption-based literature in classroom libraries demonstrated the necessity for teachers to incorporate more adoption-themed literature in their class libraries. Classroom materials must reflect each child's life, and adopted children are no exception; if adopted students see themselves in the literature used in the classroom, they and others will perceive their adoptive family structure to be normal and acceptable. School districts must provide teachers and schools with a variety of adoption-themed literature to ensure that adopted children are supported in the classroom.

Resources unavailable at district level. The fourth theme further supported the researcher's hypothesis that information about adoption is not provided to teachers at the district level. Resources on adoption for teachers are limited to personal relationships, and this does not adequately prepare teachers for adoption issues that may arise in class. Teachers must be supplied information based on academically-reviewed adoption literature and not forced to rely on anecdotal information for answers. School districts must provide teachers with teaching tools and information related to adoption issues so they will be better prepared to teach adopted students.

Teacher training. All of the preceding themes direct readers to a fifth and final theme that overarches the scope of the researcher's project. The final theme strongly reinforced the researcher's hypothesis that teachers lack formal training regarding adoption issues that arise in the classroom. There is great need for formal teacher training to address adoption issues that

arise in the classroom. It is the responsibility of school districts to provide teachers with training to help address adoption issues so teachers are not left to their own devices to learn about adoption and to understand how to teach adopted students. Teachers must come into the profession prepared and knowledgeable about issues in adoption, and teacher training should provide invaluable information about sensitivity to adoption issues in the classroom.

Action Documentation

For her action, the researcher chose to design a pamphlet titled "Adoption Awareness in the Elementary School Classroom" to distribute to the three elementary schools at which she distributed surveys. The researcher constructed the pamphlet such that it would provide a short, concise informational piece on adoption in the classroom. This action will hopefully highlight the need for increased teacher training on adoption issues.

The front panel included the pamphlet title and the researcher's name. The researcher introduced the topic and provided brief statistical information on adoption numbers to engage the reader's attention on the first inside panel. The second and third inside panels included the ways in which teachers could modify certain assignments and provided examples of adoption language to be used in class that would promote healthy perceptions of adoption. The first back panel listed book titles for adoption-themed children's literature. The second back panel provided multiple resources on adoption for teachers to access, and offered background information on the researcher. See Appendix K.

Conclusion

The researcher chose to focus on adoption awareness in elementary education because of her personal experiences as an adopted student in the classroom. Starting early in childhood, the researcher found herself having to deal with the consequences of unpleasant encounters with

uninformed individuals who used insensitive language and demonstrated biased attitudes against adoption. As an adopted student, the researcher found certain class projects difficult to complete because they focused on family structure and biological and ethnic heritage; the complexity of the relationship between the researcher's birth family and adoptive family was not considered by the researcher's teachers, and the researcher was not given the option to modify these assignments to include the adoptive family structure.

In an effort to provide a well-rounded, thorough examination of adoption in elementary education, the researcher presented information on the history of adoption, proposed solutions for sensitivity to adoption issues in the classroom, and discussed current adoption information as it pertains to elementary education. In addition, the researcher examined the results of a survey distributed to public elementary school teachers and examined themes that emerged relative to survey answers.

Based on these themes, the researcher provided several recommendations intended to promote a brighter future for adoption awareness in the elementary school classroom. The researcher suggested that school districts create a budget specifically designated to provide adoption-themed literature for the classroom, alternative materials for class projects, and teacher training on sensitivity toward adoption issues in the classroom.

Appendix A

More

Senior Capstone Project, Survey Distribution Inbox x

Claire LaBerge <calaberge@gmail.com> Nov 4

to [redacted]

Dear Principal [redacted]

My name is Claire LaBerge, and I stopped by the school office this morning--hopefully you have received my note and sample survey. I'm currently a student at CSU Monterey Bay, and I came to see about speaking with you to discuss the possibility of handing out anonymous surveys to 1st-3rd grade teachers for my Senior Project. My project topic is Adoption Awareness in the classroom; I myself am an adoptee, and I chose the topic based on my experiences growing up and an interest in learning about how to create an awareness of and sensitivity to adoption issues. I would like to distribute these surveys at [redacted] because I attended [redacted] from Kindergarten through 6th grade (I graduated in the class of 1999, I believe).

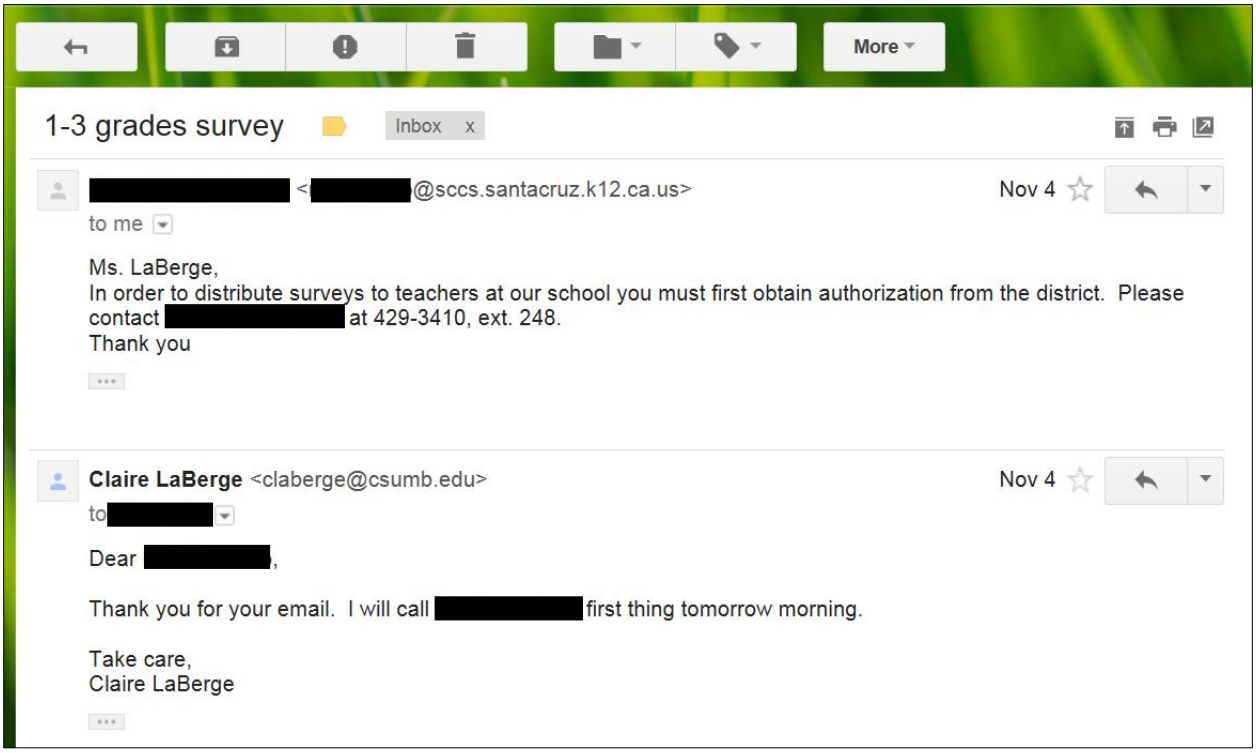
It would be incredibly helpful if I could meet with you sometime this week as the project is time-sensitive and I must compile the data I receive from the surveys by the last week in November. Ideally, I would appreciate the surveys mailed back by November 20. Our meeting doesn't have to take long--maybe 5-10 minutes--if you're crunched for time. The most important thing is that I'm able to explain the project to you, and if you approve, then we can make a plan for how to distribute the surveys most effectively.

Please let me know if and when we might be able to meet. I'll be available to meet any time on Wednesday, until 11am on Thursday, and any time on Friday of this week.

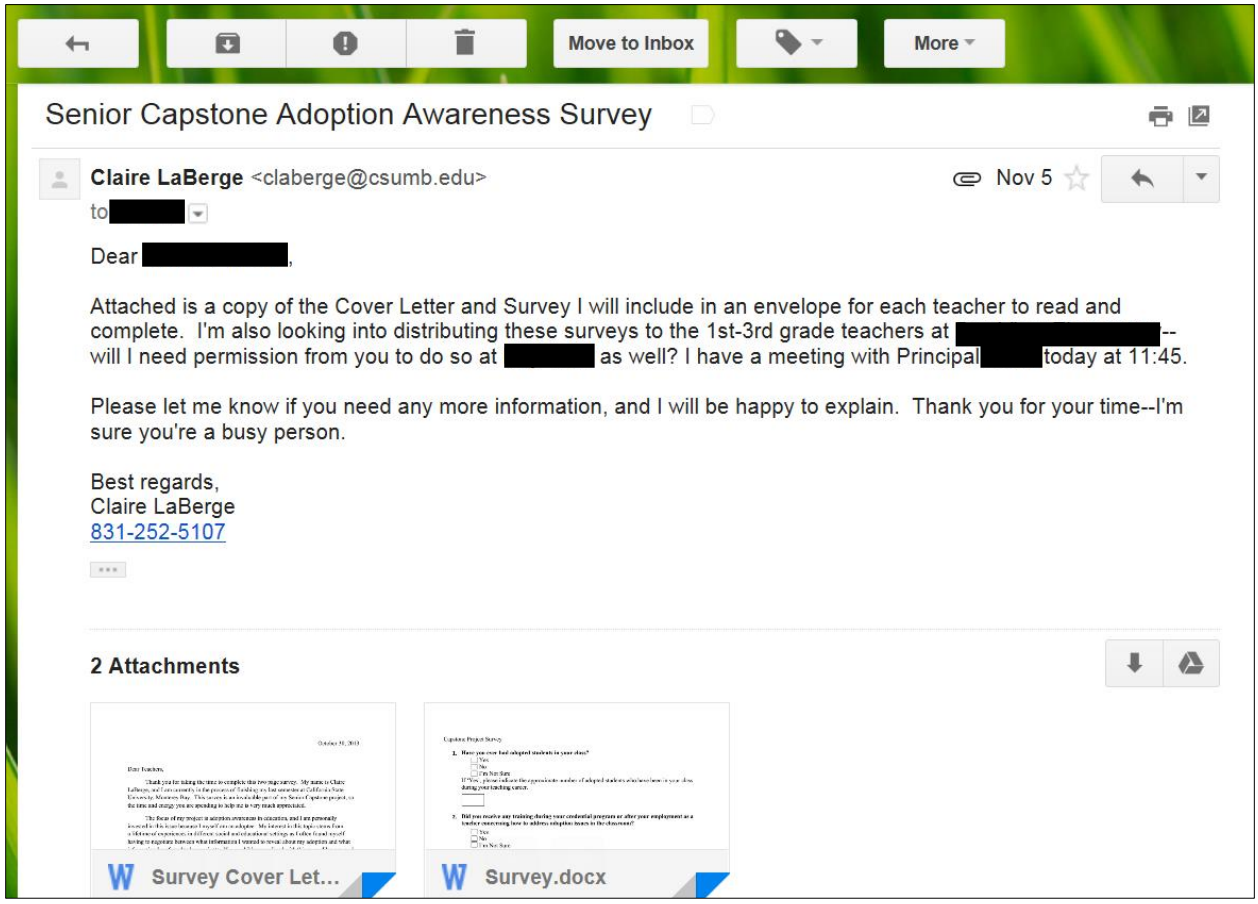
Thank you for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Best regards,
Claire LaBerge
831-252-5107

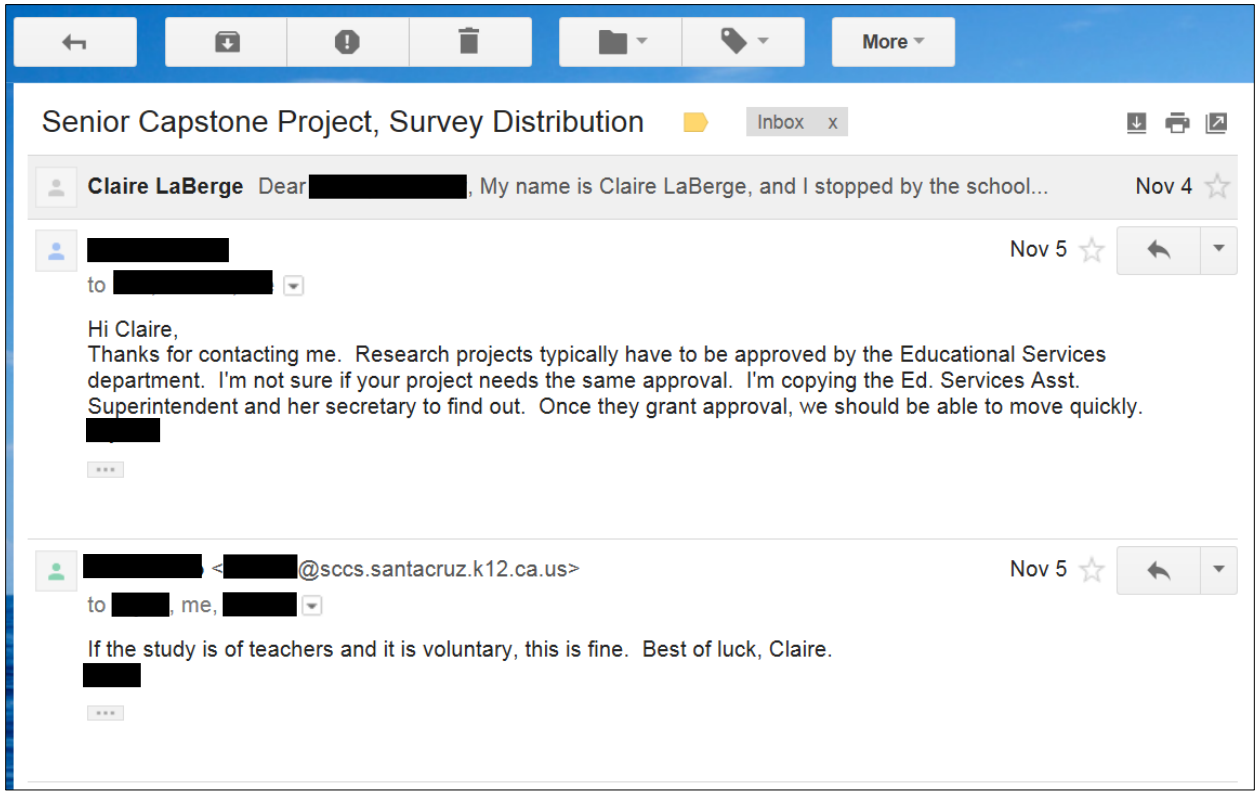
Appendix B


More
1-3 grades survey
Inbox x
[redacted] <[redacted]@sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us>
Nov 4
to me
Ms. LaBerge,
In order to distribute surveys to teachers at our school you must first obtain authorization from the district. Please contact [redacted] at 429-3410, ext. 248.
Thank you
Claire LaBerge <claberge@csumb.edu>
Nov 4
to [redacted]
Dear [redacted],
Thank you for your email. I will call [redacted] first thing tomorrow morning.
Take care,
Claire LaBerge

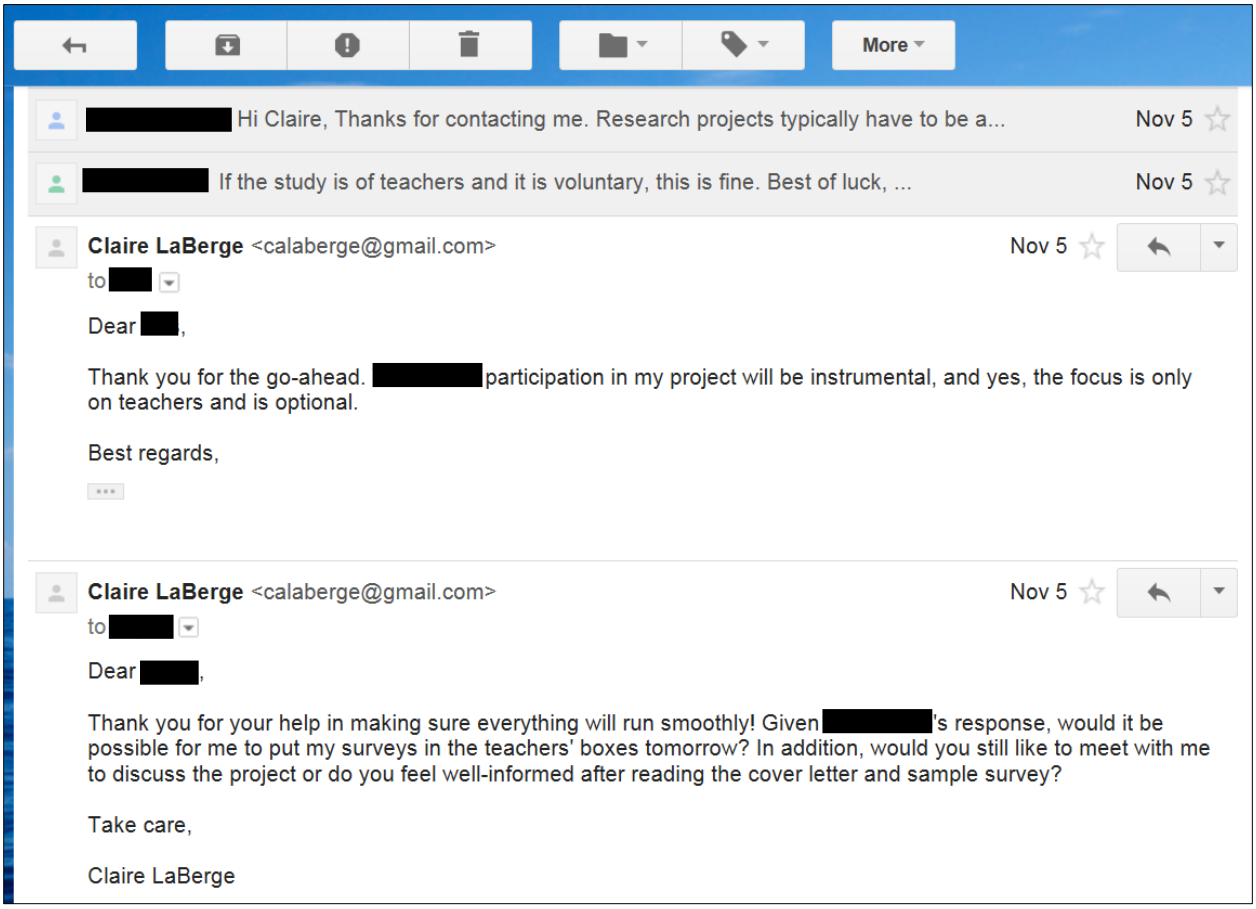
Appendix C


Move to Inbox
More
Senior Capstone Adoption Awareness Survey
Claire LaBerge <claberge@csumb.edu>
Nov 5
to [redacted]
Dear [redacted],
Attached is a copy of the Cover Letter and Survey I will include in an envelope for each teacher to read and complete. I'm also looking into distributing these surveys to the 1st-3rd grade teachers at [redacted]-- will I need permission from you to do so at [redacted] as well? I have a meeting with Principal [redacted] today at 11:45.
Please let me know if you need any more information, and I will be happy to explain. Thank you for your time--I'm sure you're a busy person.
Best regards,
Claire LaBerge
831-252-5107
2 Attachments
Survey Cover Let...
Survey.docx

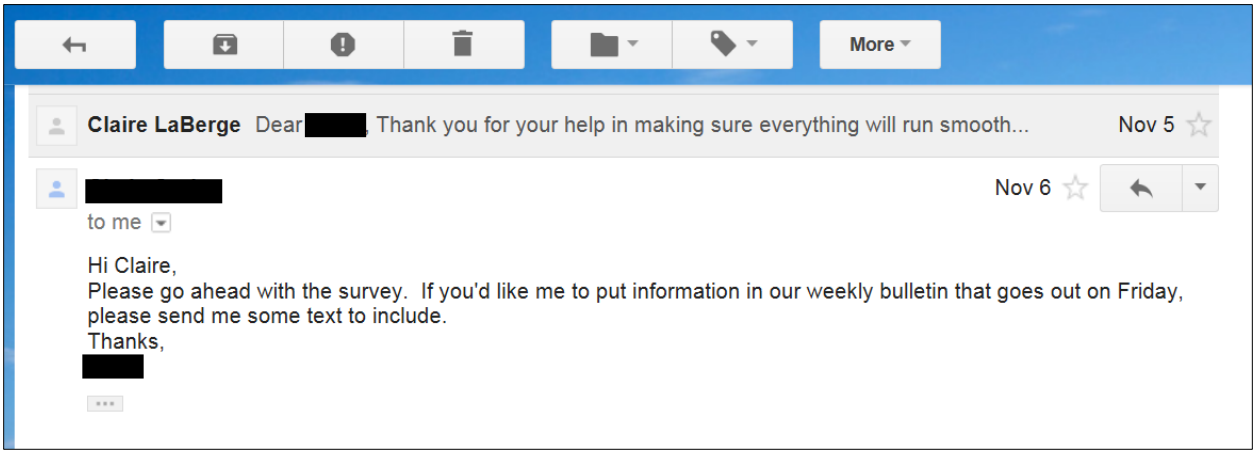
Appendix D


More
Senior Capstone Project, Survey Distribution
Inbox x
Claire LaBerge Dear [redacted], My name is Claire LaBerge, and I stopped by the school...
Nov 4
[redacted]
Nov 5
to [redacted]
Hi Claire,
Thanks for contacting me. Research projects typically have to be approved by the Educational Services department. I'm not sure if your project needs the same approval. I'm copying the Ed. Services Asst. Superintendent and her secretary to find out. Once they grant approval, we should be able to move quickly.
[redacted]
[redacted] <[redacted]@sccs.santacruz.k12.ca.us>
Nov 5
to [redacted], me, [redacted]
If the study is of teachers and it is voluntary, this is fine. Best of luck, Claire.
[redacted]

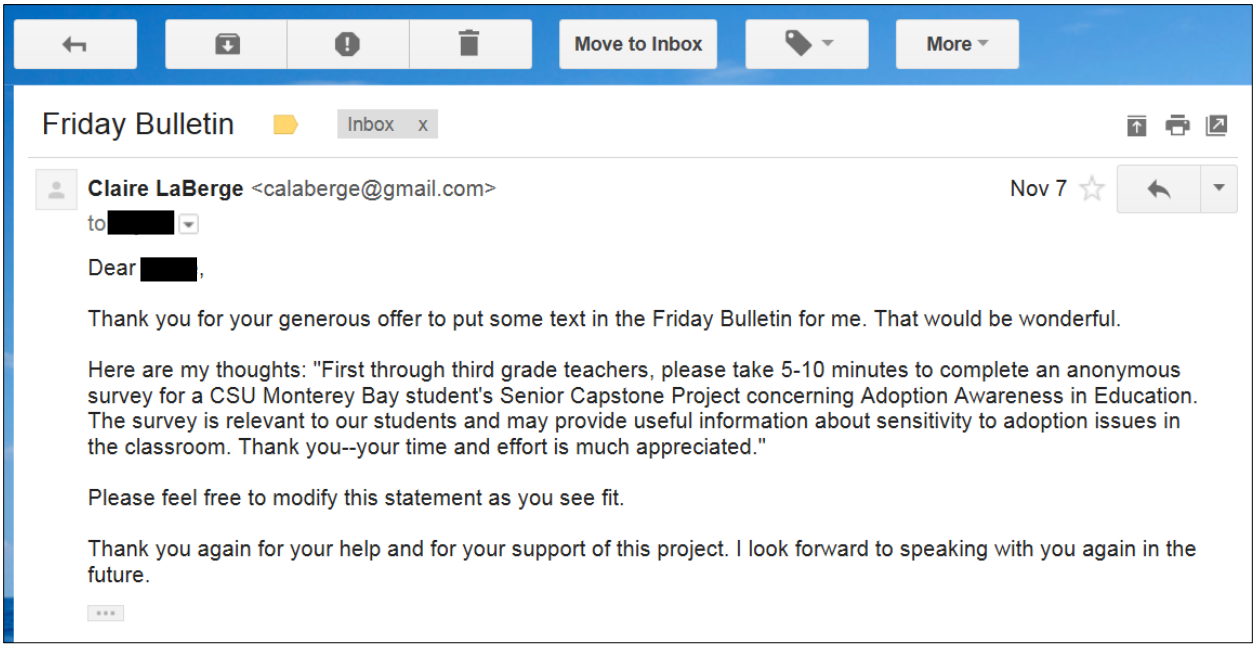
Appendix E


More
[redacted] Hi Claire, Thanks for contacting me. Research projects typically have to be a... Nov 5
[redacted] If the study is of teachers and it is voluntary, this is fine. Best of luck, ... Nov 5
Claire LaBerge <calaberge@gmail.com> Nov 5
to [redacted]
Dear [redacted],
Thank you for the go-ahead. [redacted] participation in my project will be instrumental, and yes, the focus is only on teachers and is optional.
Best regards,
Claire LaBerge <calaberge@gmail.com> Nov 5
to [redacted]
Dear [redacted],
Thank you for your help in making sure everything will run smoothly! Given [redacted]'s response, would it be possible for me to put my surveys in the teachers' boxes tomorrow? In addition, would you still like to meet with me to discuss the project or do you feel well-informed after reading the cover letter and sample survey?
Take care,
Claire LaBerge

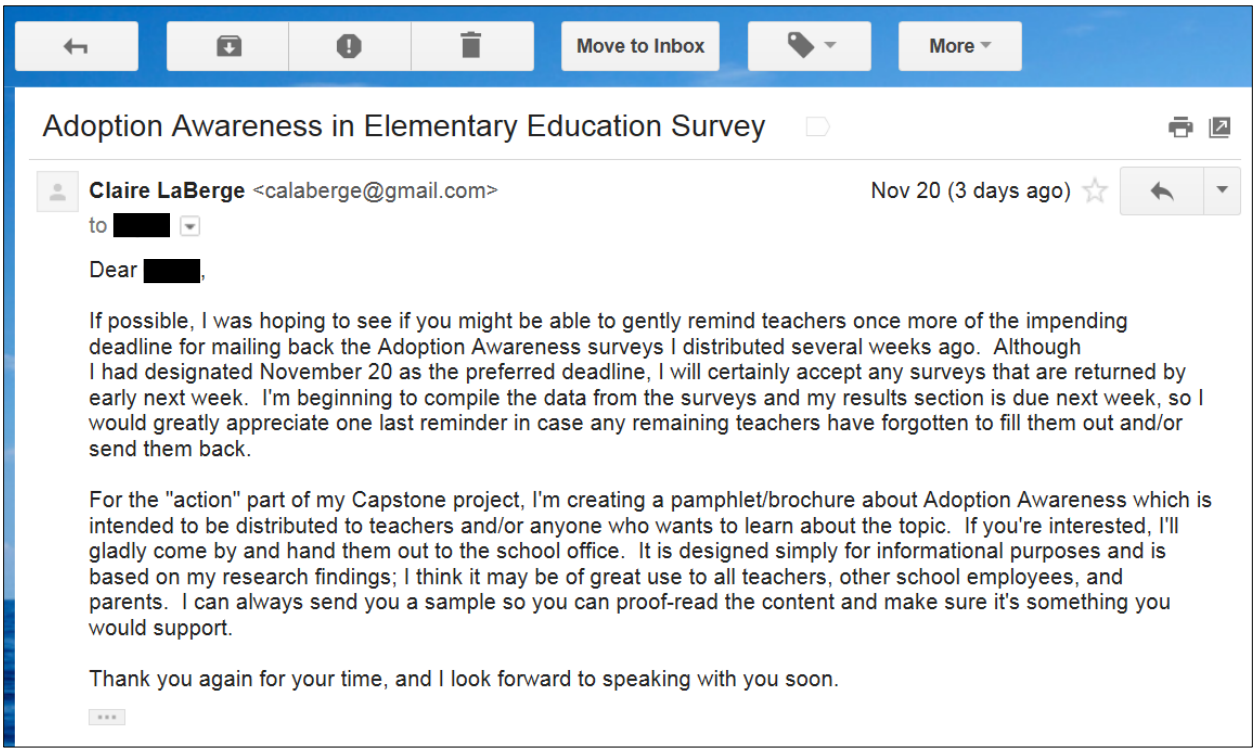
Appendix F


More
Claire LaBerge Dear [redacted] Thank you for your help in making sure everything will run smooth... Nov 5
[redacted] Nov 6
to me
Hi Claire,
Please go ahead with the survey. If you'd like me to put information in our weekly bulletin that goes out on Friday, please send me some text to include.
Thanks,
[redacted]

Appendix G


Move to Inbox
More
Friday Bulletin
Inbox x
Claire LaBerge <calaberge@gmail.com>
Nov 7
to [redacted]
Dear [redacted],
Thank you for your generous offer to put some text in the Friday Bulletin for me. That would be wonderful.
Here are my thoughts: "First through third grade teachers, please take 5-10 minutes to complete an anonymous survey for a CSU Monterey Bay student's Senior Capstone Project concerning Adoption Awareness in Education. The survey is relevant to our students and may provide useful information about sensitivity to adoption issues in the classroom. Thank you--your time and effort is much appreciated."
Please feel free to modify this statement as you see fit.
Thank you again for your help and for your support of this project. I look forward to speaking with you again in the future.

Appendix H



Move to Inbox

More

Adoption Awareness in Elementary Education Survey

Claire LaBerge <calaberge@gmail.com> Nov 20 (3 days ago)

to [redacted]

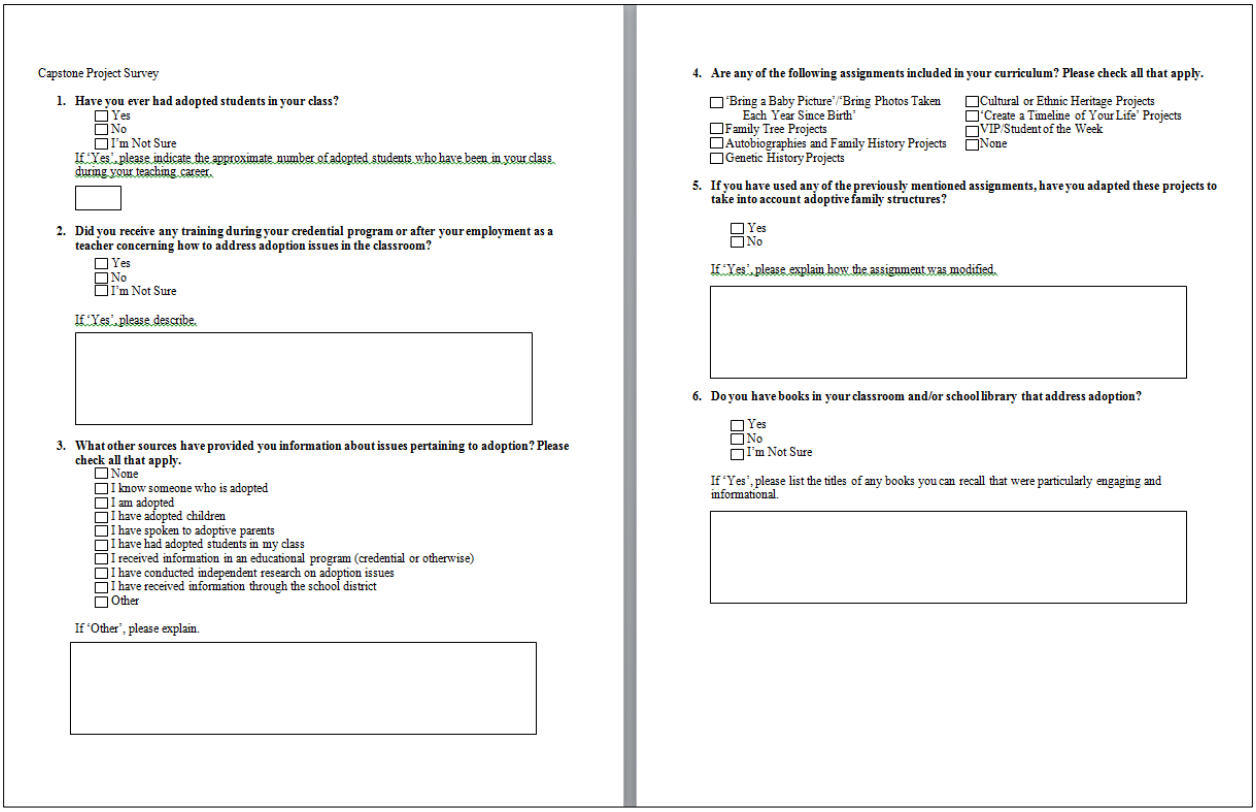
Dear [redacted],

If possible, I was hoping to see if you might be able to gently remind teachers once more of the impending deadline for mailing back the Adoption Awareness surveys I distributed several weeks ago. Although I had designated November 20 as the preferred deadline, I will certainly accept any surveys that are returned by early next week. I'm beginning to compile the data from the surveys and my results section is due next week, so I would greatly appreciate one last reminder in case any remaining teachers have forgotten to fill them out and/or send them back.

For the "action" part of my Capstone project, I'm creating a pamphlet/brochure about Adoption Awareness which is intended to be distributed to teachers and/or anyone who wants to learn about the topic. If you're interested, I'll gladly come by and hand them out to the school office. It is designed simply for informational purposes and is based on my research findings; I think it may be of great use to all teachers, other school employees, and parents. I can always send you a sample so you can proof-read the content and make sure it's something you would support.

Thank you again for your time, and I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Appendix I



Capstone Project Survey

1. **Have you ever had adopted students in your class?**
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ I'm Not Sure

   If 'Yes', please indicate the approximate number of adopted students who have been in your class during your teaching career.

2. **Did you receive any training during your credential program or after your employment as a teacher concerning how to address adoption issues in the classroom?**
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ I'm Not Sure

   If 'Yes', please describe.

3. **What other sources have provided you information about issues pertaining to adoption? Please check all that apply.**
   - ☐ None
   - ☐ I know someone who is adopted
   - ☐ I am adopted
   - ☐ I have adopted children
   - ☐ I have spoken to adoptive parents
   - ☐ I have had adopted students in my class
   - ☐ I received information in an educational program (credential or otherwise)
   - ☐ I have conducted independent research on adoption issues
   - ☐ I have received information through the school district
   - ☐ Other

   If 'Other', please explain.

4. **Are any of the following assignments included in your curriculum? Please check all that apply.**
   - ☐ 'Bring a Baby Picture'/'Bring Photos Taken Each Year Since Birth'
   - ☐ Family Tree Projects
   - ☐ Autobiographies and Family History Projects
   - ☐ Genetic History Projects
   - ☐ Cultural or Ethnic Heritage Projects
   - ☐ 'Create a Timeline of Your Life' Projects
   - ☐ VIP/Student of the Week
   - ☐ None

5. **If you have used any of the previously mentioned assignments, have you adapted these projects to take into account adoptive family structures?**
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

   If 'Yes', please explain how the assignment was modified.

6. **Do you have books in your classroom and/or school library that address adoption?**
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ I'm Not Sure

   If 'Yes', please list the titles of any books you can recall that were particularly engaging and informational.

Appendix J

October 30, 2013

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for taking the time to complete this two page survey. My name is Claire LaBerge, and I am currently in the process of finishing my last semester at California State University, Monterey Bay. This survey is an invaluable part of my Senior Capstone project, so the time and energy you are spending to help me is very much appreciated.

The focus of my project is adoption awareness in education, and I am personally invested in this issue because I myself am an adoptee. My interest in this topic stems from a lifetime of experiences in different social and educational settings as I often found myself having to negotiate between what information I wanted to reveal about my adoption and what information I preferred to keep private. Young children are faced with this same dilemma, and as they explore what it means to be adopted, the flood of complicated questions, situations, and information can be overwhelming and altogether confusing. Sensitivity to these issues in the classroom and adaptation of materials may help de-stigmatize the concept of adoption, preserve privacy, and address the complexity of issues experienced by adopted children as they find their way through life.

This capstone project will examine what training teachers receive regarding adoption issues and whether or not adoption awareness is included in classroom curricula. I hope to investigate what resources are available for teachers to access in the event that more information is desired about adoption issues.

I would greatly appreciate receiving your completed survey as soon as possible, but no later than November 20, 2013 as I will need to compile this data and complete the remaining sections of my project before the final deadline. This survey will remain anonymous and will only be used for this project.

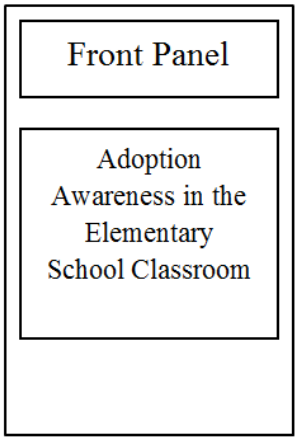
Thank you very much,

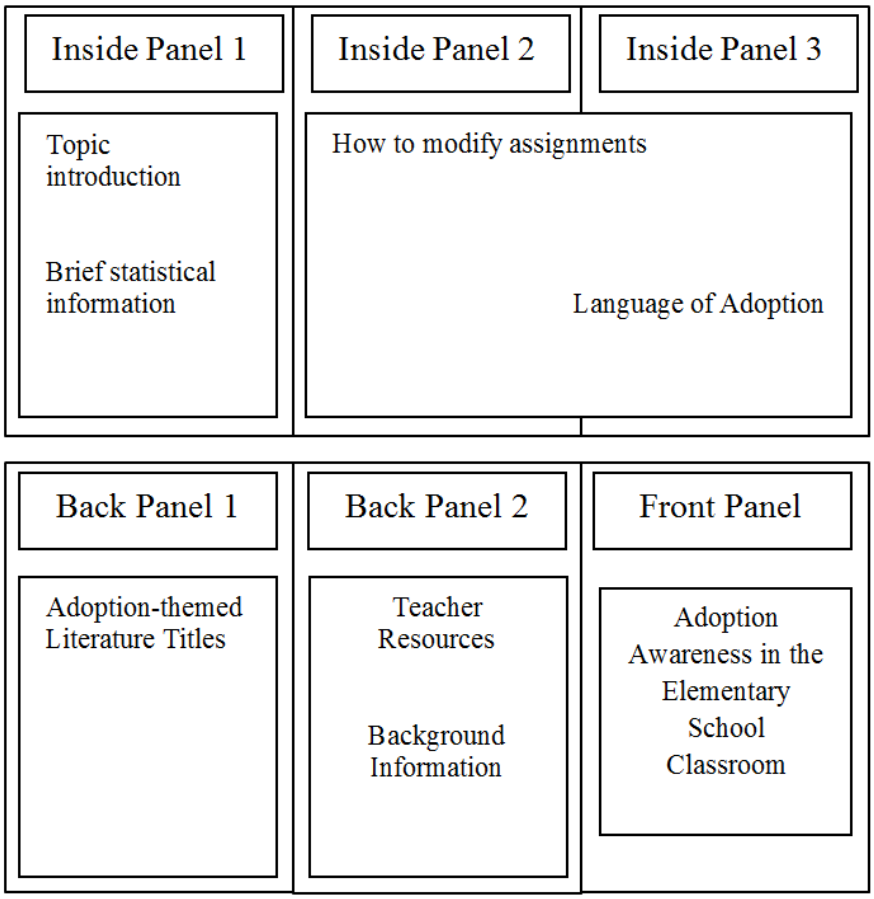
_____

Claire LaBerge
3431 Loma Alta Ln.
Santa Cruz, CA 95065
(831) 252-5107
claberge@csumb.edu

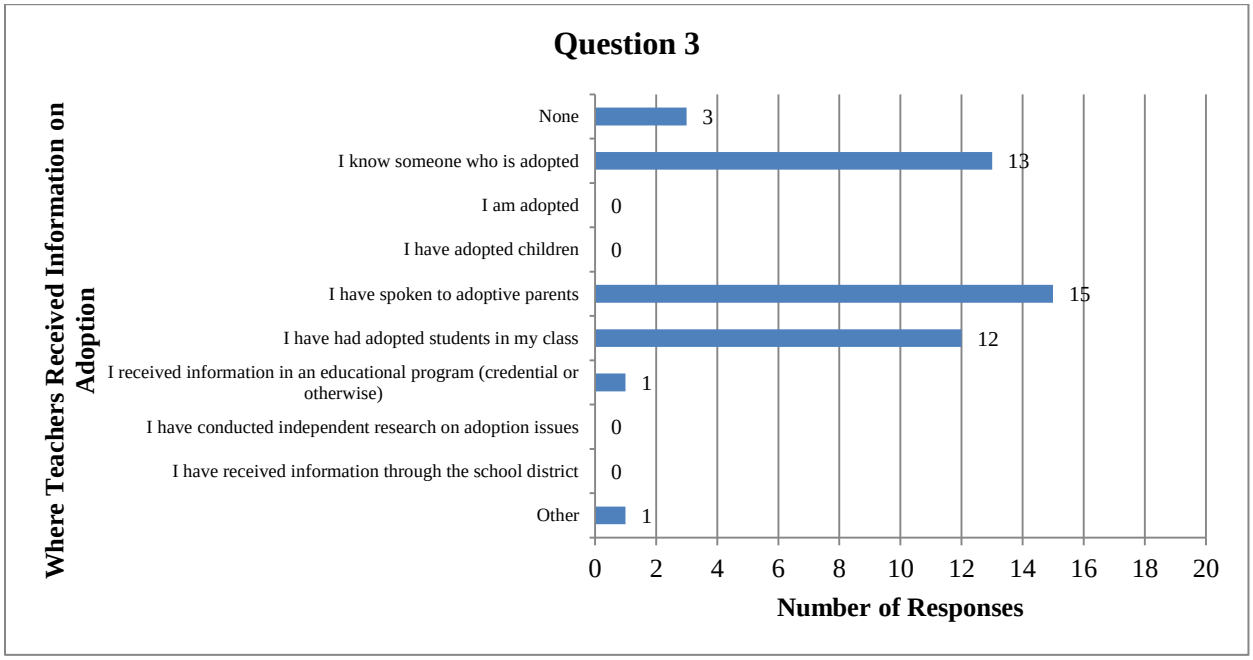
Appendix K

Pamphlet Panel Arrangements

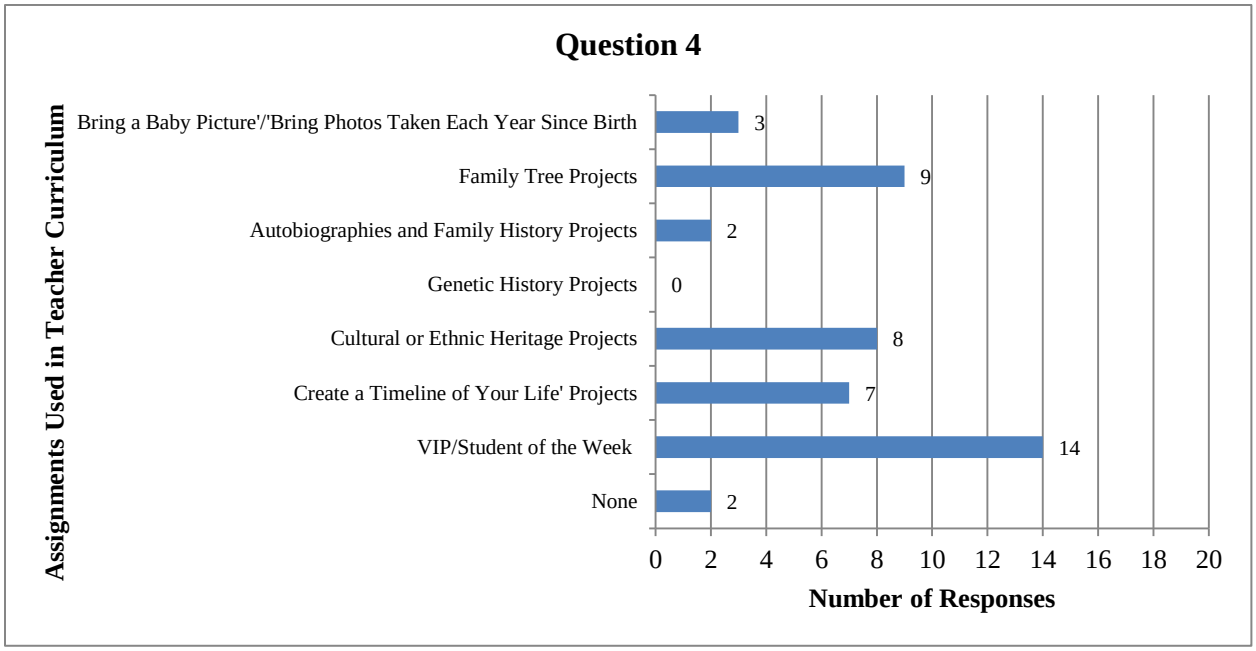




Appendix L


Question 3
Where Teachers Received Information on Adoption
None
I know someone who is adopted
I am adopted
I have adopted children
I have spoken to adoptive parents
I have had adopted students in my class
I received information in an educational program (credential or otherwise)
I have conducted independent research on adoption issues
I have received information through the school district
Other
3
13
0
0
15
12
1
0
0
1
0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20
Number of Responses

Appendix M


Question 4
Assignments Used in Teacher Curriculum
Bring a Baby Picture'/'Bring Photos Taken Each Year Since Birth
3
Family Tree Projects
9
Autobiographies and Family History Projects
2
Genetic History Projects
0
Cultural or Ethnic Heritage Projects
8
Create a Timeline of Your Life' Projects
7
VIP/Student of the Week
14
None
2
0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16 18 20
Number of Responses

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