



LEARNING CORNER

Adoption and schooling

Nayantara Mallya

"I have two mummies; can I add them to the family tree?"... "I can't bring my baby photo; I was adopted when I was four years old."... "I can't trace my blood group inheritance; I don't know my birth parents' blood group."

Teachers in schools today may be surprised by answers to some assignments! As the concept of what defines a family changes across society, there are more students in schools from single-parent, grandparent-only, step-parent and adoptive families. Principals, teachers, special educators and counsellors need to increase their awareness of a child's family background, so they can provide the extra emotional support a child may need.

"Why are parents labelling their child as adopted? And how can you ask us to give special attention to an adopted child?" was a question posed to Sheela Ramakrishnan, educator and adoptive parent herself. She was addressing educators at a workshop "Adoption and Education" organised by SuDatta Adoptive Families' Support Group in Bangalore.

Sheela stressed that educators need to be aware and prepared because of the emerging openness about family composition in today's differently built families. She emphasised the need for a partnership between parents and teachers; and categorised adoptive families as four types, based on their comfort level with the topic of adoption.

- The child knows she was adopted, and everybody around (including school) knows too.
- The child knows but others do not know.
- The child does not know but everyone else knows.
- The child does not know and others are also in the dark, while the parents bear the burden of the "secret". There have been several cases where this secret unravelled in school.

One repeated question was that once the child has been adopted into a family, why talk about adoption, why not forget about it?

RESOURCE BOOK FOR EDUCATORS

Sudatta, the adoptive families' support group in Bangalore, has brought out a booklet "Talking about Adoption with Educators", based on the experiences of schools and families. The book looks at how children understand adoption at different ages. It suggests some classroom strategies for differently composed families. It offers suggestions on positive adoption language, and ends with some useful web and book resources. Visit www.sudatta.org to know more or order through Sutradhar.



Visit www.sudatta.org to learn more about adoption

Sheela replied that it is what happened *before* adoption that is the issue. The child takes time to process and understand this. It can be traumatic for a child to not know his genetic lineage, and certain class assignments can result in his feeling isolated or different because of this. Worse, there may be awkward perceptions of the child's birth and background that can sometimes be used to belittle the child by his peers. The child's sensitivity to rejection can also lower his self-esteem. He needs extra support to build it up.

"Yes, but why tell the child so early in life and go on talking about it?" Sheela's simple answer was: "Because a successful relationship is built on honesty and transparent communication." Children's curiosity about themselves must never be swept under the carpet. Neither must family secrets be kept; it can be a ticking time bomb that **will** explode sometime.

Children often bring up their adoption-related questions in school. A teacher who is aware, informed *and* comfortable with the topic can address these sensitively. Children can pick up a tone and body language that tells them, "My teacher is uncomfortable talking about this...it must be something to be ashamed about", a thought a child must never have.

The primary school years for a child who knows her life story do not usually present difficulties. But towards the end of the primary years, the child realises that since she grew in one woman's womb and is now being brought up by another, there is a painful element of loss: of knowledge of her lineage and family history. The middle school years bring up deeper issues, and the child may become sensitive to her feeling different from her peers. She may express a desire to find her birth parents. Educators will need more skills and empathetic understanding at this stage. Parents need to have reasonable academic expectations as their child copes with these emotions. The high school years bring up issues of self esteem and peer group acceptance. Teenagers are building the social, sexual and familial aspects of their identity, and are under intense academic pressure. For teachers, these years are the most challenging.

Sheela ended with three guidelines while planning classroom transactions: Check for stereotypes, add more gray to black and white areas, and avoid judgments, especially moral ones!



TEACHER TALK

Education for peace

Arvind Gupta

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, and the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953

It's a dog-eat-dog world. We have been repeatedly told by socio-biologists, 'Only the fittest survive'. Hitler not only consigned six million innocent Jews to the gas chamber but also eliminated all the people with any 'disability'. The 'disabled' were considered a hurdle in his march for progress. But shouldn't a society's humaneness be judged by what it does for its most vulnerable citizens?

Thinkers and educationists have long pondered over this. A. S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill – one of the freest schools in the world, was seized with the issue of peace. He had seen the devastation wrought by both world wars and wanted education to contribute significantly to world peace. He blamed the 'unfree' family for societal sickness. Children were deadened by anti-life: forces of reaction and hate, deadened from their cradle days. Don't make noise, don't masturbate, don't lie, don't steal. They were also taught to say 'yes' to all the negatives in life. Respect the old, respect religion, respect your teachers, and respect the law. Don't question things, just obey. Neill was influenced by the psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich – a rebel student of Sigmund Freud.

Peace education should be about understanding the dialectic between competition and cooperation. Ant colonies compete with each other, but inside the colony the ants have achieved an astonishing level of cooperation. Empires compete with each other, but the soldiers of each army have to cooperate. Companies compete with each other, but the workers of a company have to cooperate. You experience competition and cooperation as soon as you become part of a group. This happens in the playground, even in pre-school. Most games have both elements. In a game of football two teams compete with each other and cooperate among themselves. But children must understand that to have a good game of football teams must cooperate not only among themselves but also with each other: They must agree on the rules of the game, or they will not be playing football but having a brawl.

Children educate themselves. Values like love, tolerance, goodwill, compassion and peace should not merely be preached. Children should experience them in real life. Losers are not to be laughed at. Differences need be respected. In India we are fortunate to experience pluralism in all its glory – a multiplicity of religions, languages, music, food etc. This helps in breaking the monocultures of the mind.

Our best bet for lasting peace is to send our children not to 'ghetto' schools (exclusive one-community, elite, unisex schools, schools for 'gifted' etc) but to ordinary good schools where children can soak in the best ethos of Indian tolerance.

Ten years ago every school around the world was invited to submit two lines of poetry about peace to the United Nations. These lines were later collated together into one long Peace Poem.

The poems came from 38 countries across the world. Says Kofi Annan in his preface, "In their wisdom, the children whose intermingled voices gave birth to the Peace Poem know that peace is far more than the absence of war. Children know that peace comes from the heart; it lives in the way we see others; it survives in the respect we show our neighbours every day." Sample some of these heart wrenching poems:

We don't like it that our fathers must be soldiers and shoot other children's fathers.

We must not use weapons but fight with words. There shouldn't be war but our voices should be heard.

We must learn to give and take. Practice love, forget the hate.

In today's world as we struggle collectively to bring an end to violence and suffering, the understanding of peace is as crucial as ever. It will be wonderful if each school can take the Peace Poem forward.



WHAT'S NEW

The Toymakers: voices from the margins

Scharada Bail's fascination with itinerant toy makers led her across India, meeting a community of people whose precarious existence is ironically spent fashioning objects of joy and recreation for others. Folk toys are fragile, and run the risk of being easily discarded. Her journey took her from the Durga puja in Calcutta to the Kumbh mela in Allahabad, to everyday parks and corners in Hyderabad. She found toymakers to be experimenters, people who observed something, tried developing it, and came up with their own version. Although there were often elders who had taught them some skills, making toys seems to have been their own choice, and the skills for it self-taught. She found toymakers to be whimsical characters who abhorred structure, timetables, and the galling accountability that accompanies regular employment!

To read more about this journey, her book "The Toymakers" can be ordered from Sutradhar. (Rs 135)

