

Do schools promote social inclusion? The experiences of intercountry adoptees in Australia

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Abstract

Intercountry adoption programs have brought children from racially and culturally diverse backgrounds to live as Australians, including 30 children from Rangsit Children's Home who arrived in South Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As part of a project which explored the life experiences of 12 adults who had arrived as children aged between 4 and 9 from Rangsit, this paper explores the role of schools in facilitating their inclusion into life in Australia. The school experience was often critical in learning English and was a pre-requisite for acceptance in the school yard but also a place in which most of these Thai-born intercountry adoptees experienced racism. More than half of the participants did not complete secondary school but all had employment. However, many of these jobs were low-paying and this precluded them from participating in opportunities to return to Thailand to learn more about their Thai origins or participating as adoptive parents in intercountry adoption programs. Hence, while schools can play an important role in facilitating social inclusion, the school system alone may be unable to address the multiple

dimensions of exclusion experienced by intercountry adoptees.

Key words: School, social inclusion, intercountry adoption, Thailand, racism, educational attainment

Introduction

Over the past century, thousands of children have come to live in Australia without their birth parents. These include up to 10,000 child migrants from Britain who migrated to Australia between the 1920s and 1960s through schemes such as those run by The Barnardo's Homes in New South Wales, the Fairbridge Society and the Christian Brothers in Western Australia (Murray, 2008; Kleanthi, 2004). In contrast to the British children who were recruited as part of campaigns to reinforce the White Australia policy, in recent decades children arriving in Australia without their birth parents, either as unaccompanied refugees (Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010) or through intercountry adoption programs (Williams, 2003), have been racially diverse. However, irrespective of how they arrived in Australia, it has often been claimed that settlement in a new country can offer children many possibilities not available to them in their country of birth (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Murphy, Pinto, & Cuthbert, 2010).

Arriving in a new country, is often a period of confusion and upheaval, of expectations which are not necessarily realised, and experiences which were not foreseen (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). The process of settlement often involves having to deal with the demands of life in a new country and at the same time dealing with losses from the people and culture from their country of origin (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006). For intercountry adoptees, arrival in Australia also results in experiencing the loss of persons who may have long played the role of carer (Gair & Moloney, 2013).

It is not surprising that services to new arrivals tends to focus on the most apparent immediate needs (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012), with language programs long having been part of the process of induction to Australian life for those arrivals with limited English-language. Not having the language skills to express themselves leaves immigrants feeling powerless and disadvantaged (Shakespeare-Finch &

Wickham, 2010) but also affects job prospects and full inclusion into Australian life (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007).

Ever since the South Australian Government first instituted a Social Inclusion Unit in 2002 and identified school retention as one of three priority areas for tackling social exclusion (Bletsas, 2007), education has been regarded as a key strategy in promoting social inclusion for all Australians (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011; Taket, Crisp, Graham, Hanna, & Goldingay, 2014). In particular, the social inclusion agenda has focused on the link between educational attainment and being able to find employment. Recent research examining the relationship between educational attainment and labour force participation, has concluded that for Australian adults aged under 65, not completing year 12 placed one at significant risk of unemployment and poverty, and hence a reduced likelihood of full participation in society (Callander, Schofield, Shrestha, & Kelly, 2012).

Over the last decade, the social inclusion agenda for schools has advanced from being primarily concerned with retention to the development of policy and practice guidelines which seek to foster inclusive school communities (Catholic Education Office, 2011). The school environment is not necessarily benign (Le Bon & Boddy, 2010) and it is not uncommon for children who stand out as different because of ethnicity to be bullied or discriminated against by other students (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Racism in the school environment may affect a child's capacity to develop a sense of belonging (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westby, 2003). For example, a Vietnamese adoptee, whose research targeted Vietnamese war orphaned adoptees from all over the world, found many of her participants experienced ridicule, exclusion, and negative cultural stereotypes by white peers at school. Consequently, being Asian became a negative part of their identity. Those who were most distressed by challenges to their identity had not been provided with positive knowledge and support relating to racial diversity from their adoptive parents (Williams, 2003). Similarly, Analee, a Vietnamese war orphan was adopted to Australia in the mid-1970s, attended a country primary school during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As the only Asian pupil, she suffered from negative comments relating to her Asianess which led her to believe that "being Asian was bad. Being Asian meant being a lesser person" (Armstrong & Slaytor, 2001, p. 18).

This paper explores the role of schools in promoting social inclusion for a cohort of Thai-born adults who arrived in South Australia as intercountry adoptees in

the late 1980s and early 1990s. These findings form part of a study which explored the lived experiences of this group from leaving a children's home in Thailand to living in Australia first as children and now as adults (Scarvelis, 2013).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, thirty children from the Rangsit Children's Home in Thailand were adopted to South Australian families. At the time of their arrival in Australia they were aged between 4 and 10 years. Many of the children were abandoned at birth in Thai hospitals and lived in children's homes until their adoption. There were approximately two hundred children living in the Rangsit Children's Home, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, with thirty to forty children sharing a dormitory. These children had almost no contact with the world outside the orphanage and never ventured beyond the orphanage gates. Even the rudimentary schooling received by the older children occurred within the confines of the institution. Many of those who came to Australia from Rangsit Children's Home would have been considered to be 'special needs' adoptions on the basis of having a medical condition, a physical or intellectual disability, or emotional and behavioural difficulties, associated with their life experiences prior to adoption (Post Adoption Support Services [PASS], 2008). Many of them had obvious physical abnormalities requiring medical attention and special dispensation was granted by the Australian Immigration Department, to allow entry into Australia. The first author's son was one of these children, and while he was not one of the participants in this research project, she has not only visited Rangsit Children's Home during the period when children from there were coming to South Australia, but over the years had contact with a number of families who had adopted children from Rangsit. Consequently, she has some awareness of the unique characteristics of this group of intercountry adoptees and that no scholarly research has been undertaken which focused on this group.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through World Families Australia organisation (previously known as Australian Society for Intercountry Aid Children SA Inc. or ASIAC SA, which has been a key parent group organisation supporting intercountry adoptions in South Australia. World Families Australia distributed information about the research

project through online announcements and via an informational flyer that was distributed to a monthly support group of adoptive parents which is run by World Families Australia. The flyer invited the Thai adoptees from Rangsit Children's Home to contact the first author by telephone or email if they were interested in participating in the research. On making contact, further information was provided about the project including aims of the project, length of interviews, confidentiality, and withdrawal of consent procedures. Prior to interview, more detailed information was provided in the form of a Plain Language Statement which accompanied the Informed Consent forms for participants.

Twelve adults who had come to South Australia as intercountry adoptees from Rangsit Children's Home in the late 1980s and early 1990s contacted the first author and all were subsequently interviewed in the latter months of 2011. Four were previously known to the first author. Although their actual age at interview was not ascertained, at the time of their arrival in Australia, six participants were in the 4-6 years age bracket and six were aged 7-9. Therefore participants were aged between their early 20s and early 30s at time of interview. Nine were male and three were female. The age at arrival and gender distribution of research participants is not dissimilar to that of all 30 children who arrived in South Australia from Rangsit Children's Home. Although the interviews did not ask about medical conditions or disabilities, five participants discussed the impact of these at one or more life stages. Similarly participants were not asked about how they came to be at Rangsit, but one indicated that they had been "abandoned" and another commented on how their birth family had been unable to keep them.

Interview procedure

Life history interviews were conducted as these provide research participants with the opportunity to recapture the subtle differences, the people, meanings, events and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped their present lived experience (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Watson, 1976). Furthermore, life histories enable the voices of those who allow the researcher to give voice to those who have been "muted, excised from history, invisible in the official records of their culture" (Long, 1987, p. 5), as reflects the experience of this cohort of Thai adoptees not recorded in the official adoption records in South Australia. The interview process was also underpinned by critical theory which identifies how individual experiences

may be related to oppressive social structures (Baines, 2007; Thompson, 2006) which silence and marginalise some and privilege others (Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2005).

Open-ended questions explored the participants' lives in Australia in three chronological periods. The first stage of the interview focussed on when the adoptee first arrived in Australia when interactions were confined to adapting to a new way of life, living in a family, learning a new language, attending primary school and the introduction of social events. The second stage was directed to the adolescent period when secondary school was attended, peer interaction became important and activities took place outside of the home. What assisted them during this stage and what had negatively impacted on them was also covered. The final stage addressed adulthood, which included the participants' current situation living with or away from their families, encompassed by their experiences and challenges along the way.

The initial question was designed to be non-challenging and the participants were invited to talk about their lives when they first arrived in South Australia. The focus was placed on the adoptive family dynamics such as family members, number of children, other intercountry adoptive siblings and personal questions relating to age at adoption. This process enabled the participants to feel at ease as they drew on easily recalled facts relating to their family environments and adoption history, thus setting the participants' memory in the early chronological period (Williams, 2003).

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at locations in Australia negotiated with the first author who was conducting the interviews. The time frame of each interview was approximately one hour duration, although this was not an intended set period. Each participant was interviewed once. The participants were encouraged to discuss their lives for as long as they thought was necessary to complete their answers. All interviews were audio-taped with the consent of participants. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Health Ethics Committee at Deakin University.

Data analysis

Transcripts of the interviews were sent to participants who were able to make changes to the transcription prior to analysis. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify key themes and issues for this cohort of Thai adoptees (Rubin & Rubin,

1995). The first author read all the transcripts and noted the prominent ideas which emerged in each interview in her own words. Examples of these included 'felt comfortable in Australian family' or 'recognised lack of early language development'. The full list of ideas were then use to interrogate and code each transcript. Once all interviews had been coded, the data relating to each of these initial ideas was collated and further interrogated to identify themes emerging from these interviews. These themes were then discussed with the second and third authors, who had not been involved in the interview process and were able to provide feedback as to the consistency of the themes with their own independent readings of the transcripts. This process recognised the methodological dilemmas associated with adoptive parents researching intercountry adoption, particularly around the need to ensure personal experience does not lead to reporting bias:

We live daily with these ambivalences and ambiguities and have struggled with how to position our research and writing: how to cast an eye that is both critical and sympathetic, attuned to our own profoundly personal connections to these questions and to an analysis of the cultural and political contexts within which adoption must be situated. (Volkman, 2003, p. 4)

Hence there was much debate over a number of months between all three authors as to what themes were actually emerging from the interview data.

Due to the small population of adoptees who came from the Rangsit Children's Home to South Australia, some of whom are known to each other, to preserve anonymity of individual participants a decision was made not to attribute quotes or ideas to specific individuals.

Results

Analysis of the interviews identified four dimensions regarding the role of schools in promoting social inclusion for the Thai adoptees. These were concerned with learning English, belonging, experiencing discrimination, and educational attainment. Each will be discussed in turn.

Learning English

None of the adoptees spoke English when they arrived and the families had little or no Thai language. Most of the adoptees had difficulty communicating with their families and the struggle continued for a couple of years. A typical comment was:

At first it was real hard for me to speak my language, like English to them, to communicate. But, then again, we got by, they kind of understood me but I couldn't understand them.

Depending on their age on arrival to Australia, children were enrolled at school whereas; those who arrived at pre-school age had the advantage of learning at least some English prior to commencing school. Attending school and learning English were intrinsically bound together for school-aged arrivals. Attending special 'English as a Second Language' (ESL) programs at a language school was available to those who lived in the vicinity of Adelaide. Others had ESL support arranged for them at the schools they attended or 'private tutors to update me or fast track me a little quicker'. Arriving at an older age often meant the adoptees were placed in age appropriate classes with no knowledge of the English language, which was recognised as a difficulty for individuals, "I was in year three or four at the start, even though I didn't know English. It was just like kindy; you start from scratch, which was hard". Even though extra tuition was provided many had difficulties learning the language, with three participants reporting issues with hearing which contributed to further learning difficulties within the class room settings.

Specialist support was less likely for children in rural South Australia. School was a positive experience for those attending culturally diverse schools, as it provided a connection to children with similar backgrounds. "I felt really comfortable because there were different countries like myself. So I felt like I wasn't the only person that was here". A positive experience was also gained where schools were able to meet the child's needs and this was recognised. "The school was pretty much set up for me and I made friends pretty much straight away. They had programs especially for people like me".

In addition to needing to learn English, some of the adoptees did not speak Thai either. Whereas children typically know around 13,000 words when they commence school, the Thai children who came to South Australia from Rangsit

Children's Home had very limited language skills on arrival in Australia. As one commented, "all I remember is that I probably never spoke because I don't actually remember speaking Thai", resulting in language skills *per se*, being far below what might be usually expected of a child of a given age.

Belonging

For some children newly arrived in Australia, attending school was a positive experience due to the school structure being similar to the orphanage structure, routine and predictable, and being surrounded by many children. It was an environment they were used to and gave a sense of continuity for some adoptees:

I think I was used to having many kids and I think it reminded me of the orphanage. Just that environment of so many kids, you'd sit in a classroom like we would do in the orphanage. I actually quite liked it and I was very welcomed.

However, one of the consequences of poor language skills was an initial difficulty making friends, particularly at primary school. Several participants stated that they did not have any close friends for a considerable time until their English improved and they were then able to communicate. High school brought about a change of schools and this meant integrating into to a new school community and making new friends. Being good at a particular subject at school assisted the adoptees with confidence building, it helped with socialisation, and it promoted a greater acceptance within the school community. Many demonstrated a natural ability in art and sport, including athletics, so they found they were readily accepted into their school communities.

High school was another big step for me again, and I found it much easier because I'd picked up my language. My English was getting better, my communication was getting better and I was getting along with more friends because of my speech, and I wasn't left out of the group. I loved playing sport of course; I played most sports in high school that involved, football which is Aussie rules, soccer, basketball, and then tennis. It helped me mix.

Approximately one-third of the participants reported having difficulties making and maintaining friends during their adolescence. In particular, it was not uncommon for participants to have been placed in classes with students who were much younger. However, neither did they mix with peers of their own age at events such as school sports when competing events were organised in age level and not year level. For example, being in year eight competing against years eleven and twelve meant for one participant that “I didn’t know the sports very well and I got laughed at, but I didn’t mind that so much”. Despite these challenges several stated that high school was the best years of their lives and a place where they felt they belonged:

I would say high school was the best years of my life because I have so many memories of friends, and activities that I have done. We always had fun and there was always things happening.

Experiencing discrimination

Despite some positive memories, school was also a place where participants had experienced discrimination, particularly in the form of racism. Racial ‘difference’ was insignificant to most individuals during the primary school years although it was not unheard of. It was less likely in culturally diverse schools. Living in a rural location with a culturally diverse population was an advantage. Racial taunts were most likely to be experienced where the community lacked cultural diversity and participants were vulnerable at the beginning. Regular comments were “kids used to look at me weird, teasing me, like nerd, just pointing and things like that”, and “when young kids are that age they don’t think and they just tease you, until your grow up a little older when in high school and you start to realise okay this is a little bit different”.

At high school, racism was experienced by most and they were teased and bullied about being Asian. A minority secretly wished they could be similar to the mainstream school population and were envious of them. Others were confused by the names they were called when referring to the Thai features, which were not understood and confidence levels dropped. While some learnt to ignore racial bullying, others found that learning to have self-confidence assisted in preventing racial attacks. As one participant commented:

You always get harassed by other students. It's all about someone being better than you. There is still racism out there, always will be. It

depends on who you hang around with. It's all about the group. You will get some people who still have a bad attitude towards other races. It's all about confidence I reckon; if you are confident with them they will leave you alone. That's what I see, that's what I think. If you're not confident the guys will stir you up and that is when it gets messy.

In addition to racism, some participants also experienced negative attention due to having obvious physical issues with missing or damaged body parts, or disabilities such as hearing loss. While some were able to ameliorate these, others were teased about their abnormalities, especially in the school settings.

Educational attainment

High school provided a career pathway for some of the participants but brought challenges for others. Many adoptees had difficulties learning English and for some, English continues to be a struggle. In addition, their physical disabilities and hearing loss have, at times, impacted on their learning. Consequently, only one-third completed high school and one reported attending university. Most of the participants struggled at high school and more than half did not complete the final year of secondary schooling, although a number had since completed vocational qualifications, particularly related to the hospitality industry, through TAFE SA. Senior colleges for mature age people have also provided an age appropriate venue for a couple of the older adoptees who since leaving school have subsequently returned to study and completed their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE).

The majority had been in regular employment since leaving school, and in what was for them meaningful employment despite their earlier life experiences and lack of education. All adoptees had each worked in a variety of positions including factory work, labouring jobs, supermarkets, fast-food outlets, restaurants and as shop assistants. Most were now employed in the hospitality, leisure or health industries.

Discussion

As the experiences of a group of Thai-born intercountry adoptees demonstrates, the relationship between education and social inclusion involves multiple dimensions,

and hence, is not necessarily straightforward. While it is acknowledged that social inclusion *per se* entered the policy environment in Australia after the intercountry adoptees from Rangsit Children's Home had completed their schooling or were in the last years of attending school, the four themes associated with social inclusion would nevertheless have been of concern during their schooling, i.e. learning English, belonging, experiencing discrimination and educational attainment. Each will be discussed in turn.

Schools often play a crucial role in teaching English to people arriving in Australia from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Arriving in Australia with little or no English most of the Thai adoptees were enrolled in school immediately on arrival in Australia. Although some attended intensive English classes on arrival or had tutors providing additional assistance, for others learning English was a more haphazard affair dependent upon an individual's experiences of being immersed in an English-speaking school and family. Not surprisingly, several of the participants reported having difficulties learning English and most continued to have limited English language proficiency as adults. As they advanced through school, their English language skills improved but tended to lag behind those of their peers who were not intercountry adoptees (Meese, 2005).

Schools can also provide opportunities for developing a sense of connectedness and belonging to local communities (Crisp, 2010). It is not surprising that a group of Thai-born children, some of whom were further singled out as differing from the mainstream due to apparent disabilities or having bodies which were differently configured, found the school yard to be a site of exclusion. Such experiences not only result in being unhappy at school but can result in obstacles to learning and reaching one's potential (Juvonen, Nishina & Graham, 2000; Rigby, 1998).

Schools are a key setting for experiencing race-based discrimination and in recent years there have been a number of interventions aimed at reducing racism in Australian schools. However, for the most part, these have occurred in the years since the participants in this study were attending school, and the effects of these programs on reducing racism has often been limited at best (Greco, Priest, & Paradies, 2010).

In terms of educational attainment, certainly fewer of the research participants completed their final year of school than might be expected for all Australians of a

comparable age (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013), which limits their access to more highly paid employment. Whether or not it was realistic to expect this group of Thai adoptees to achieve levels of educational attainment in accordance with the norms for Australian-born children of the same age must be considered. Other studies have found that institutionalised children who were adopted at an older age had lower IQ scores compared to those who were adopted as infants and/ or had not been institutionalised (Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2005). For the Thai adoptees, schooling in Thailand had been very limited and cognitive stimulation had been lacking. The older participants stated that they only spent a couple of hours a day in school and much of that time was spent colouring pictures. Hence most commenced school in Australia at a considerable disadvantage compared to their Australian-born peers.

Educational attainment should not just be considered in respect of the highest level reached but whether individuals have been provided with the basis to reach their potential with respect to pursuing further education or employment which not only provides an income but which is part of a fulfilling life. To the extent that participants were employed, it can be argued that school attendance facilitated social inclusion for this cohort. However, for some participants, a consequence of their low educational attainment was having incomes insufficient to enable them to do things which were of importance to them. Several of the participants stated that they would like to adopt a child from overseas to give the child an opportunity similar to what they had been given, but the cost of adoption is beyond the earning capacity of most of the participants. Lack of income also precluded some participants from being able to return to Thailand and learn more about their country of birth.

It is quite possible that the schools attended by this group of intercountry adoptees made whatever efforts possible to facilitate their social and economic inclusion into Australian life (Lynch, 2011), but the research methodology, relying on the recollections of adults about their childhood does not enable such matters to be determined. It is also unknown as to the extent that the 12 participants contacted through an intercountry adoption agency were similar or different from the 18 children from Rangsit Children's Home who did not volunteer to participate in this project. Many of the participants have identified on-going problems which affect their ability to fully participate in Australian society. It may be that such issues result in

families being more likely to maintain contact with an adoption agency than families where such issues are less prevalent.

As the first author is well connected to the intercountry adoption network in South Australia, it was not surprising that four of the research participants were previously known to her. In such circumstances we had considered it might be possible that participants already known to the first author might be more reticent in divulging sensitive information, but the resultant interview transcripts suggested no difference between these and other participants as to what they said in the formal interview. However, two known participants did at points in the interview request the tape recorder be turned off before they provided additional information which did not form part of the interview transcripts which were analysed.

Achieving social inclusion is challenging, particularly for individuals such as the children from Rangsit Children's Home, who have experienced multiple dimensions of exclusion including educational disadvantage, communication difficulties, racism and disabilities. School communities can make an important contribution to fostering social inclusion. However, schools will be most effective in this role when they are prepared to examine the assumptions on which they operate and explicitly adopt ways of working which address the multiple dimensions of social exclusion which their students experience. This may involve reviewing and making changes to school policies and curriculum to be responsive to the learning needs of individual students and taking steps to ensure that the school environment facilitates a sense of belonging by modelling respectful relationships, celebrating diversity and taking a strong stance on racism and discrimination (Stagnitti, Frawley, Lynch & Fahey, 2014).

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