Learning to "Do Family" Differently: Towards More Complex Notions of Family, Culture, and Schooling

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Over the past eight years I have been thinking a lot about complexity science and education. Issues of complexity and curriculum have been the focus of much of my previous academic work (Laidlaw, 2001; Laidlaw, 2005). But, it has been within the past two years that I have experienced more life-altering learning experiences in relation to complexity. I became a parent. While more typically, perspectives informed by complexity would suggest the exploration of notions of parenting or families from biological, ecological, or evolutionary perspectives, and while some of the ideas I will address do come from such origins, my route to parenting came via social construction—a relationship formed via miles of paperwork and the approvals of a rather large cast of individuals, agencies, and governments—when I adopted a sixteen-month-old baby girl from China. This article will explore some ways of thinking about families differently, influenced by a weave of both personal experience and adoption research, and informed by complexity thinking (Davis & Sumara, 2006), as well as work that can be aligned with complexity research.

In many ways, an adoption that crosses boundaries of countries, cultures, ethnicities, race, and those of reproductive norms creates a

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perturbation from the expected ways of doing things. Specifically, from expected ways of "doing family." Rothman (2005) writes, "Take a kid from a Chinese orphanage and put it in a middle-class "Euro-descent" American home, and a lot of what parenthood is about in America is put into sharp relief" (p. 7). Rothman, an American sociologist who is also mother of a domestically adopted black daughter likens "doing family" in a transracial adoption to "the way that a transsexual does gender." She states, "We're just doing what "normal" people do, but we *know* we're doing it" (p. 4). Rothman describes some of the little tricks she uses, such as standing behind her daughter, with a hand on her shoulder, when they meet the new violin teacher: "Hello, I'm Barbara and this is my daughter Victoria," I say before the teacher can open her mouth. And put her foot in it." (p. 4)

Rothman's descriptions strike a familiar chord, reminding me of stories from my autoethnographic experiences and those of other adoptive parents I have surveyed. A Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) project that I have been undertaking asks Canadian parents to recount their experiences in relation to their family composition, and to share their stories and understandings of their child's experiences of schooling. Within the project, I have also engaged in contextual analyses, examining documents such as curriculum texts, government publications, and classroom instructional materials, as well as looking at perspectives on adoption within popular culture and the media. Throughout the project, I have attempted to examine family diversity in both micro- and macro-directions, from my particular personal experiences to collective experiences of other adoptive families, as well as looking at the ideological realm of discourse and cultural knowledge around family diversity and adoption. As Davis and Sumara (2006) suggest, gaining an understanding of social systems such as families or schools requires "considering all-at-once, the many layers of dynamic nested activity that are constantly at play" (p. 28), and the knowledge that such "organizational/organismic layers" may not be neatly separate. The stories shared by parents describe what it is like to "do family" differently, to disrupt normative social categories, and they tell us something about how notions of *family*, *culture*, *ethnicity*, and *race* are defined in North American societies, as well as how counternormative families are influenced by this conceptual and

ideological milieu. The contextual analyses, in subtle ways, and sometimes more explicitly, echo issues shared in the families' reflections on their experiences. Both data from the surveys and contextual analyses indicate that families formed by transcultural and transracial adoptions are not yet regarded as "mainstream". The weave of combined data also tells us something about how social systems and institutions may adapt, or resist adaptation, to sociocultural change. As I will explore later, the diversities presented by "new" families also offer some possibilities for inviting change, and thus "learning" (see Davis & Sumara, 2006) into aspects of schooling that have tended to remain somewhat stagnant.

"New" Families

As Jane Jacobs (2005) writes, "Unity, like many good things, is only good in moderation" (p. 19). She reflects on the "family fundamentalism" of the nuclear family:

> You probably know them personally, but in any case you've seen them in a thousand advertisements: the father, the mother, the little boy, and his older sister, alighting from their new car at the charming small town church (p. 22).

The dominant discourse around "family", often evident in social institutions such as schools, goes something like this: Families are biologically related, families include both a male and a female parent, families always have children, families live in one place, families share the same ethnic/cultural/religious background, extended family members live elsewhere, and so on. Given these limitations, the "normal" family would seem to be a category in a less than majority position for many contemporary families. Still, the "Dick and Jane" model pervades popular culture images and often dominates school portrayals of family structures, even though this model is a less than accurate representation of many families.

I rarely see my own kind of family represented in popular culture: that of single parent to a transracially adopted child. Unless, of course, such representation presents a darker moral story, such as in the "Law and Order" episode where an adopted Chinese toddler of a working

professional single mother is shaken to death by her nanny, and where the lingering subtext is the indirect responsibility of the working mother to her daughter's demise. There are also representations intended as humour—the adoption of Chinese girls as fodder for cartoons or comedians, as in the *Mother Goose and Grim* cartoon (Peters, 2006) where one character states to another, "We adopted a baby girl from China. She's 3 now and works at a Nike plant in Beijing", or in the Simpsons episode entitled "Goo goo gai pan" (The Simpsons, 2005. For an episode description see Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goo_Goo_Gai_Pan). In February 2005, comedian Rick Mercer in a programme known as "Monday Report", made a joke about Chinese baby girls being a gift with purchase on EBay, provoking no small amount of response from Canadian adoptive parents.

Occasionally, adoptive families are portrayed in advertising. Not long ago, Walmart had a commercial featuring a Euro descent American mother and father who adopted a Chinese daughter and subsequently gave birth to a biological child. (Just think of all the shopping required!) Interestingly, this representation perpetuates the myth that adoption leads to pregnancy, or "cures" infertility, although statistically it is an infrequent occurrence. The child adopted "from afar" is the means to setting things right.

Such media representations of adoption, however, are relatively few. Positive representations remain a particularly small category. In children's television programming, *Sesame Street* seems to be one of few shows that consistently represents diverse families, portrays adoption in positive ways and features adoption in the lives of central characters (see *Susan and Gordon Adopt a Baby*, Freudberg, 1992). While representations of adoption within media and popular culture are relatively few, we do not need to search very far to find existing cultural metaphors, related to beliefs and discourses of "normality". As Davis (2004) notes:

> In popular rhetoric, the normal family consists of a middle-class married couple, usually White, with two to three of their own children—despite that this particular arrangement is a historic anomaly that is not at all representative of the current diversity of familial structures (p. 126).

While cartoons and fictional dramas may be somewhat excused for revealing ideological biases about notions of what is "normal" and not, however lacking in sensitivity such representations might be, in collecting news articles about adoption I often find statements like this one, "After learning they could not *conceive naturally*, [my emphasis] the couple began investigating the options available to them…." (Whitehorne, 2006). Biological offspring are regarded as "natural" (even if their birth is the result of "high tech" fertility treatments), making adopted children the "unnatural" and "foreign" runners up. I read about movie stars Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, having their "own" child, as if the two older adopted siblings belonged elsewhere. Genetics trump any prior claims to relation. One of the adoptive parents who responded to the survey wrote:

> We have been asked in the presence of our kids (both of whom have ears the last time I checked) if they are "real" siblings. My answer is simply *yes*. They may not be biological siblings, but they are without a doubt in my mind *real* brother and sister.

Such linguistic moves serve to underline the "normative narrative" at play. Carrington (2002) argues:

> [T]he nuclear family has, since the mid-twentieth century, been constructed as the natural social form in western epistemology and has informed much of the theorizing of the family in the West. It has become a normative narrative against which others, and ourselves, have been measured. (p. 17)

Rothman (2005) sees the very word *adoption* as being problematic:

> one adopts pets, highways, textbooks, political platforms, and yes, children…. But what all of the uses of this word, used in this broad way, imply is taking something foreign, other, and making it one's own. (p. 54)

As Rothman's statement suggests, language itself creates a kind of

condition of nonacceptance.

When child and parent visibly "do not match" such families tend to experience regular reminders of how they disrupt the usual categories:

> *I am gardening in my back yard while my daughter plays nearby. My neighbour's housesitter, back again this summer, starts up a conversation over the fence. "You can really tell that she's your child," she says. 'As opposed to what?' I wonder to myself. 'A small foreigner I've been minding?' But, I say nothing, for what is there to say? Our family experiences regular public scrutiny of how "real" or "fake" we might be compared to more "normal" families.*

One white adoptive mother of Chinese girls recounts this story of their experiences in a small town:

> Frequently if I am out in a mall, strangers will ask me if I am married to that guy that works at A & P. I explain that I know Chris, his wife and 2 children. But I am married to the guy that owns the shoe store. But my daughters are adopted from China, too.

The underlying message in such stories is that children who join families outside of birth, genetics, or race do not truly *belong* there. Language and thinking mutually reinforce one another, and reinforce action. And so it goes. "Ideas do, indeed, have consequences," as Rorty (1999, p. 19) suggests. But Rorty (1989) also articulates the possibility for change, "to change how we talk is to change what…we are" (p. 20). By changing the way we might talk (and think) about different sorts of families, we might loosen the grip on negative cultural messages around adoption and diversity.

Rothman (2005) points out one pervasive thread in the construction of ideas about adoption, something she refers to as genetic ideology. She notes current modernist perspectives on the child:

> Contemporary, highly individualized American society has encouraged us to see the child as a unique, almost disconnected person, not belonging to anyone. (p. 58)

The development of medical technology such as ultrasound imagery can encourage this view, by showing fetuses as if removed from their maternal environment. Rothman adds that while the idea of the "free floating fetus" might seem to make adoption a less strange concept, in fact, viewing the fetus as "genetic material ... developing makes adoption a more difficult concept" (p. 60). Genetic *ideology* presents genes as the key determinants of a child's future potential, and ignores information from genetic science that tells us genes are entangled in a process of complex unfolding:

> Genes interact with other genes and with the environment, and complex processes cannot be reduced to simple discussion of genes for diseases, characteristics, types. (Rothman, 2005, p. 61)

Ironically, the use of new reproductive technologies is often hinged on a belief system of genetic ideology, which understands "only the child of one's own genes as one's own child, the child of unknown genes will be the foreign and unknown/unknowable child" (p. 62).

Genetic ideology frames genes as a kind of homunculus, the miniature fully formed human of early biological preformation theory, and ignores the fact that biological offspring may be phenotypically very different from either or both parents. New understandings in genetic science are also ignored. Recent genetic studies suggest that many conditions previously understood as "caused" by a defective gene may in fact be far more complex, and rely on interactions with other genes and other environmental details.

Both this underlying genetic ideology and a "normalist" perspective seem to also influence some of the existing research on adoptees. Much empirical research linked to education centres focuses on how internationally adopted children "measure up" to their non adopted peers (socially, behaviourally, academically, linguistically), or on examining particular problem areas for adoptees. Although information gathered in these studies can have practical use (for example, if used to provide support or resources for children or families), an unintended effect of such research is that adopted children can be portrayed in terms of how normal or "defective" they are, more or less as a commodity—who need to have their value "proven in comparison to biological

children.

"Old" Schools

Given existing societal assumptions about adoption, it should not be entirely surprising that adoptive families and their children may also encounter biases in school, where the "normative narrative" (Carrington, 2002) often pervades curriculum. The modern nuclear, or "traditional" biological family has been the normative standard against which all other family models have been measured, and where, in contrast, alternative family structures may be represented as deficient or illegitimate (Carrington, 2002; Carrington & Luke, 2003; Patton, 2000). Consequently, both pedagogical practices and discursive frames used in schooling tend to remain aligned with portrayals of the traditional biological family, leaving other family compositions ignored, or misrepresented. Even where curriculum is aiming for better inclusivity, as in Canadian primary grade social studies where "family" is typically addressed, "normative narratives" about how families are formed pervade such documents.

One assignment often dreaded by adoptive families and seemingly an almost compulsory educational exercise is the "family tree", usually first encountered in primary grade social studies. Typically, students are asked to include family members in the "tree", branched to represent biological maternal and paternal lines. While, at least superficially, the tree image appears to represent a complex form, in practice, the activity often presents linear and narrow assumptions about family composition and family history. Sometimes the child is required to fill out a copied form that leaves no room for alternative family structures. (See, for example, Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 2000, p. 152, for a description of one experience with this activity—when the child of a same-sex families encounters difficulty with teacher assumptions.) As Wood and Ng (2001) explain:

> Today's real families are wonderfully diverse and include multiracial families, gay and lesbian parents, foster families, children being raised by grandparents and other kin, non-related households, step and blended families, children being parented by mothers or fathers who have placed a child for adoption, as well as families formed or

> expanded by open or closed adoption. All children learn when all families are respected. (p. 76)

Ng (2001) elaborates ways that the family tree activity can be expanded to include a wider range of families: creating a tree of people who love or care for children (preschool/primary), "important people trees" (preschool/kindergarten), family orchards or forests (elementary), and genograms that address a wide variety of structures and relationships (middle or high school). Such adaptations allow adopted children to participate equally and encourage all children to consider ideas of "family" in more diverse and complex ways. Many assignments that can be difficult or impossible for adopted children to accurately complete can be made more inclusive, and often more interesting, with minor shifts or a slight change in focus.

In surveying parents of children who have been adopted internationally, many cite occasions when their visibly different family experienced rather surprising responses from others, both in general public contexts and those of schooling. Such reactions, usually comments or questions experienced as insensitive, invasive, or simply ignorant (e.g. asking if a kindergarten child adopted as an infant speaks English or has head lice, questions about "real" relationships, or cost of a child), demonstrate a sort of perceptual "blindness" in relation to diverse families, not unlike how modernist influences have tended to frame educational experiences (see Laidlaw, 2005). Adoptive families present small scale examples that bring together multiple considerations: family composition, race, ethnicity, culture, and variations in family history. As well, international adoption tends to intersect with global, economic, and social conditions both in countries where children are relinquished and in countries where children are received (Dorow, 2006). In times where classrooms are changing, often reflecting a far more complex mix of demographics than the fictional realm of Dick and Jane, using the conceptual frame of adoption to disrupt existing biases about "what is a family" can provide a useful perceptual tool for teachers and also for learners.

Changing Possibilities

> Adoptive families come in all kinds. Single-parent, gay and lesbian, multi-ethnic, blended. In fact, there's only one kind of family that adoptive families are not: the so-called typical family with their two parents and their two offspring. (Pertman in Hunt, 2003, p. 2)

Adoptive families play a sort of counterpoint to the "normative narrative". Perhaps one of the reasons that those of us in "visible" adoptive relationships find our families to be sites of public interrogation is that we provoke a shift in perception and disrupt existing assumptions around notions of family relations. The parents I have surveyed frequently mention feeling as though they are in the constant role of educator, although they do not always enjoy or appreciate this responsibility. As Davis (2005) writes, on the etymology of the word "teach":

> To teach was to perturb; a teaching was, to borrow from Gregory Bateson…any difference that made a difference. (p. 85)

The adoptive families who find themselves to be a site of "perturbation" may often be the "frontline" educators, discovering that they must be proactive "teachers" within their child's classroom and school. This can happen in response to difficult assignments mentioned previously, as well as being called upon to talk about adoption in school.

But educators might also address the increasing diversities and complexities in their classrooms, and, if the surveys provide a valid indicator, thus far they suggest that a good number of individual teachers are doing this rather well. Davis (2005) suggests that teaching might be framed as "the consciousness of the (classroom) collective," and it is important not to ignore the aspects of the collective that do not fit normalized assumptions; in fact, the "messy" diversity such children and their families bring can create new openings and strengths within classroom collectives, as well as offering learning opportunities that would be less likely in homogeneous groupings. While educators might broaden the ways in which they represent "family", we can also ask children themselves to consider ideas of family and relation in more

complex ways.

As well, learners (both teachers and students) might consider issues of cultural and ethnic diversity in ways that move "beyond shallow and static presentation of culture reduced to ethnic food, dress and quaint customs" (Strategic Workshop on Immigrant Women Making Place in Canadian Cities, 2002). Culture and cultural identity are complex, and for adoptees, even more so. I can no more teach my child authentic Chinese culture than I can be a good model for spoken Mandarin. My experiences and understandings are as a cultural "outsider", tourist, interested observer. While my daughter regards herself as both Chinese and Canadian, her Chinese-ness, of course, involves a different weave of identification, cultural knowledge and experience, as compared to a Chinese child living in China, a Canadian born child of recent Chinese immigrants, a third generation Chinese Canadian, or a child born of a mixed race Chinese and Euro-descent Canadian family.

Comments made by one parent interviewed in the project trouble some typical assumptions about notions of culture present in schools. She noted that several incidents that were intended as positive moves in validating her child became somewhat troubling to their family. Her child had been asked to represent her culture of origin during special school celebrations in what her mother interpreted as a cultural "mascot" role, and she feared that her daughter (and their family) did not have adequate knowledge of their child's culture of origin to be able to perform this role beyond sharing very superficial details. For internationally adopted children, the issues of cultural knowledge and identity are complex. As Register (2005) suggests, for international adoptees, "Inside and outside don't match up" (p. 79), and so, any cultural displays adopted children may be asked to perform can be a kind of fakery, representing Western perceptions of the child's original culture, rather than tapping into the "actual, living, evolving" culture that is enmeshed with a "value system, beliefs, interpersonal behavior, or outlook on life" (p. 97). Cultures are living, adaptive systems, but often, instruction about culture presents static, historical models, focusing on objects, historical facts, and the traces of what has passed rather than the vibrant cultural "organisms" of the present.

However, even young children can be astute observers of aspects of what adults label "race", "culture", and ethnicity, and discussions and

explorations for the very young are often open to more fluid perspectives and wider possibilities, without predetermined assumptions. Davis (2005) argues that "teaching seems to be more about expanding the space of the possible and creating conditions for the emergence of the as-yet-imagined" (p. 87).

In my undergraduate elementary education classes, I often ask my students to consider each assignment they might plan in terms of who it might unintentionally exclude, and how it might be adapted to become inviting to all children. I also ask them to consider creating a classroom environment that represents all students through books, images, and play materials. Initially, for the preservice teachers I work with, doing "close readings" of activities, events and contexts can reveal many potential stumbling points, but the changes that would make them more inclusive are often very subtle ones.

In my survey, I end with a question asking what parent participants think schools might do differently to be more inclusive of transracial and adoptive families. Rarely do parents respond with requests that address the specifics of their own families. Rather, more often respondents acknowledge the need to recognize multiple possibilities for family composition, racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversities, and the complex nature of identity for many children, not only those who have been adopted.

Embracing, supporting, and exploring the diversities that exist in classrooms can enlarge the space of the possible, and create opportunities for the emergence of new thinking and new ways of acting in the world. Thinking about difference, differently, and using difference to make a difference.

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