Courage to Risk 2023 Session: Working with Children Adopted Internationally with Disabilities – Research Overview

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Children Adopted Internationally (CAI) are unique:

- second first language learners
- trauma experience of spending critical developmental years in an institutional setting without a primary caregiver
- vast majority have developmental delays

Challenges & Gaps

- Many CAI are currently school-age and have special needs related to disabilities
- This diverse group is largely understudied or ignored in the special education research and professional literature for teachers
- CAI are more at risk for language impairments and later reading disabilities than their environmental non-adopted peers
- Gaps in language skills take years to overcome and can effect later literacy skills

Research Questions

1. How do parents perceive the language and literacy development and related educational needs of their children with disabilities who were adopted internationally?

2. How do parents provide literacy experiences and opportunities for their children with disabilities who were adopted internationally?

3. How do parents perceive language and literacy special education services and school supports for their children with disabilities who were adopted internationally?

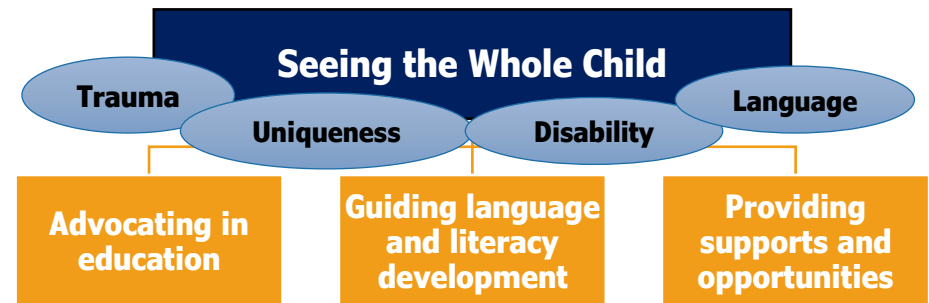| Characteristics of Children		Number
Gender	Male	7
	Female	8
Age when adopted	< 2 years	5
	2-3 years	7
	4-5 years	3
Grade completed in 2021	Pre-K	2
	K - 2	8
	3-4	5

Grounded Theory Research

Focus Groups
Individual Interviews
Participants: 12 mothers from 12 different states in the USA.
Disabilities of children included Speech and Language Impairments, Learning Disabilities, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairments, and Visual Impairments

Mothers' perceptions on navigating trauma, disability, and unique language needs to provide educational and developmental opportunities for their children adopted from China.

Seeing the Whole Child

Trauma · Uniqueness · Disability · Language

Advocating in education · **Guiding language and literacy development** · **Providing supports and opportunities**

Implications for Practice

For Teachers:
- Training and professional development focused on understanding effects of trauma, adoption-related issues, and language learning
- Frequent, respectful collaboration and communication with parents of CAI

For Parents:
- Post-adoption support related to navigating special education and disability information
- Resources to build language and literacy at home
- Attachment and shared reading experiences

Tips for Teachers & Schools

Key Idea: Collaboration and communication with families is essential.

- Intervention and monitoring in school should be combined with consistent communication and collaboration with parents.

- It may be helpful for multi-disciplinary teams and teachers to develop an action plan for collaboration with families of children who were adopted internationally (CAI), such as the one described by Rossetti et al. (2017):

- **Three guiding questions:**
  - (a) How culturally responsive am I?
  - (b) Who is this family? and,
  - (c) Have we developed a collaborative partnership?

- In working through these questions, educators self-reflect on their own cultural beliefs and experiences related to the family/child's ethnicity and adoption. The second question is critical for adoptive families – teachers need to convey to parents that they want to understand their unique child and gain knowledge about the family, including their concerns, expectations, and experiences.

Second First Language Learners vs. English Language Learners

- **Language development:** As second first-language learners, CAI are neither bilingual nor monolingual because of the abrupt switch in language rendering their first language unavailable or unusable; moreover, many CAI are not fluent or are delayed in their birth language due to lack of language input from a consistent caregiver (Hwa-Froelich, 2009; Rakhlin et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2011). Most CAI may not have developed their first language enough to use (Rygvold & Theie, 2016) which represents a major difference from other English Language Learners who are exposed to a first language from birth.
- **Vocabulary:** Research suggests that, while CAI may initially demonstrate rapid vocabulary growth and score within the average range on some standardized assessments, as a group, they continue to lag behind their environmental peers in areas of language that impact academic performance, such as such as expressive vocabulary, word definitions, verbal short-term memory, and explicit memory (Delcenserie et al., 2013; Eigsti et al., 2011).

Progress Monitoring & Intervention

- Learning disabilities, ADHD, and emotional behavioral disorders are often impossible to diagnose at young ages and parents may not have knowledge of these needs at the time of adoption.
- Consistent monitoring of CAI, especially those already labeled with delays or disabilities, will help identify language and literacy challenges as they arise, rather than waiting until a child is frustrated and loses motivation in school (Dalen et al., 2020).
- Language and vocabulary gaps, difficulty with grammar, and low comprehension may become more evident as students progress academically. While oral language skills may catch up, written language and literacy difficulties may become more visible as children progress through elementary school (Rygvold & Theie, 2016).
- CAI with delays or disabilities should be regularly monitored for speech and language needs as they progress through elementary school as CAI may qualify for services at older ages (Scott et al., 2011).
- If a CAI does not qualify for special education services to receive intervention, the child may benefit from elective speech-language services or other support services such as English as a second language instruction or tutoring that may facilitate continued development of communication skills (Hwa-Froelich & Matsuo, 2019).

Advocacy

- Be prepared to educate professionals about your child's unique needs and address misperceptions or lack of awareness about adoption, trauma, and racial differences.
- Pre-advocate! Contact your child's teacher(s) prior to the school year. Ask to meet with them to discuss your child's unique history, strengths, and needs.
- Communicate and collaborate with teachers frequently.
- Learn about the special education process in your school district. Seek advice from other parents and join parent support groups!
- Research your local school options to choose the right fit for your child.

Developing Language & Literacy

- Use purposeful conversations.
- Model literacy in the home.
- Encourage the child's interests through books.
- Provide access to literature through library visits, audio books, home libraries, and regular story time.
- Encourage conversation and questions about daily routines and events.
- Explain vocabulary words used in daily conversation.
- Play word games.
- Sing songs.
- Cite rhymes and poems.
- Involve the whole family!

Integrating Reading & Writing Skills into Daily Life

- Read together every day!
- Take turns reading aloud to develop fluency and word reading skills.
- Reinforce letter and word learning at home through learning apps, flashcards, magnet letters, white boards for writing practice, and interactive games.
- Question your child to check comprehension while reading. For example, ask what happened, why characters may have done something, or other questions relevant to understanding the story.
- Encourage daily journal writing and/or drawing.
- Involve your child in writing activities like creating shopping lists, sending text messages, and writing thank you notes.

Tips for Parents

Key Idea: Literacy activities can help promote attachment and social emotional development.

- Reading aloud with your child is a great way to connect literacy with emotional attachment and the feeling of being loved. Set aside a special time each day to read aloud with your child. Give your child opportunities to choose the book and ask them questions throughout the story to check their comprehension.

- Create family books to help children develop literacy knowledge, reading, and meet social-emotional needs related to understanding their own stories. Photo books about the child's adoption story are a great place to start!

- Read books about adoption and/or the child's birth country (and, if possible, in the child's birth language). Let your child ask questions and share their feelings honestly.

- Provide your child with a journal to write or draw their thoughts. Encourage them to document family activities and to be creative!

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Additional Resources for Parents & Teachers

Disability & Literacy Resources

- **www.understood.org**: This website has a wealth of information about disabilities, perspectives on learning, accommodations, and literacy! Here is an example of resources to help understand reading comprehension and how to help your child develop comprehension skills.
    - https://www.understood.org/en/articles/6-essential-skills-needed-for-reading-comprehension
- **www.readingrockets.org**: This website has a variety of resources for teachers and parents. There are a number of book lists organized by grade level, topic, and genre to help teachers and parents find books related to culture, disability, age, and several other categories.
- ***A Child Becomes a Reader: Proven Ideas from Research for Parents:*** These free publications provide research-based information on how to support literacy development at home and what to look for in schools.
    - Birth through Preschool - https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/reading_pre.pdf
    - Kindergarten through Grade 3 - https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/documents/readingk-3.pdf

Adoption Resources for Teachers

These websites provide resources and information about how to make your classroom a safe, welcoming place for students who have been adopted. These sites also provide background and research-based information about adoption and why it should be presented in a positive light in schools.

- **Supporting Families** : https://consideringadoption.com/7-ways-teachers-can-support-adoptive-families-and-their-children/
- **Understanding Adoption**:
    - https://www.colorincolorado.org/adoption-and-school-resources-parents-and-educators
    - https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-99/
    - https://adoption.org/adoption-friendly-language
- **Elementary School Lesson Plan on Diverse Families**: https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/lessons/what-is-a-family
- **Explaining Adoption at School**: https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/parenting/explaining-adoption-at-school/
- **Teaching Academic English Language**: https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/what-difference-between-social-and-academic-english