

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

Volume Two - Number Three - April 2002

Research recommends transracial adoptions continue under certain conditions

A study carried out in Durban has recommended that children continue to be placed with families of another race group when it is not possible to place them with a family of their own race when certain conditions are met. **Fran Ledderboge** writes that the study was taken to facilitate a policy decision as to whether transracial placements should be continued or not and to identify possible provisos should the practice continue.

Changes made to the Child Care Act of 1983 in 1991 coincided with a steady increase of child abandonment in the Durban metropolitan area. The Durban Child Welfare societies struggled to find primary caregivers for these children as places in institutions had become scarce. Moreover, 10 to 15% of the abandoned children - usually infants - were in such a precarious state of health that a primary caregiver was essential. These were the circumstances in which the then Durban Child Welfare Society experimented with placing abandoned children transracially if no inracial caregiver was available.

Since this new practice was considered an experiment, it was accompanied by an ongoing research study. The first stage was completed in 1996. It showed that the children had greatly benefited by being placed into a family. However, the young age of the children excluded any inference regarding their self-identity or ethnic identity. It also revealed that the parents experienced the behaviour of the public as generally benevolent but also problematic at times. In the meantime, the political structures and climate have changed and the families reported that support was available more easily in their neighbourhood, schools and circle of acquaintances. Predictably, the respondents in the 1996 study had requested specific services and they identified the education of the public as a need.

The argument against transracial placements usually reasons that such practice alienates the children from their roots. However, all the children studied as part of recent research have reportedly had contact with other persons of their own ethnic background. From observing the children and interacting with them directly, the researcher deduced that the children are acquiring bicultural competence although at a younger age some of them had revealed insecurity such as not wanting to speak isiZulu. However, the average age of the total sample of children at the time of the research was 6,5 years, with the age range starting at one year and going up to 17. This means that the majority of the children were too young to have established either cultural competence or an ethnic identity.

The parents generally have been doing a sterling task in building up the child's sound and positive self-image, in spite of the child's difficult personal history, poor health and at times, an insensitive

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

environment. They have not shrunk from extra financial sacrifices to afford the child good physical and psychological care and extra curricular activities. However, it is of concern that one out of ten interviewees did not acknowledge the differences, and one out of five played down the importance of an ethnic identity.

An unexpected outcome of this research was the parents' candid acknowledgement of their own developmental needs. They reported that the transracially placed child posed new challenges to them in respect of the child's unique identity needs and history. Out of anxiety, ignorance and insecurity, some parents had been postponing "telling the story of abandonment" to the child. Furthermore, the once white or Indian family had become a 'rainbow' family with new friends and acquaintances and activities. They needed to integrate their own journey. Only one family had fully mastered this task and had begun to reach out to the community as animators and was inducing changes towards greater and more effective integration of the larger residential locality into a multi-cultural community.

The parents identified their need to meet the birthmothers or the child's relatives if these were available, or with established 'rainbow' families before the child was placed with them. They were adamant that thorough preparation prior to receiving the child was essential. Single parents mentioned that they needed input on normal child development, as they had been unsure how to interpret behaviour in view of the child's unique and often unknown past. Particularly, single parents reported having benefited from a support group. They felt it was a positive tool for coping with initial insecurity, ignorance and anxieties and for establishing or broadening a personal support system. Support group members thought that the time gap between initial placement and finalisation of the adoption was sufficient, and the single parents specified that two years, generally, was an adequate period of time.

In view of the changed socio-political structures in South Africa, a support group for parents may no longer be needed. However, the parents identified the need for help regarding the formation of the child's ethnic identity in order to obviate the child's rejection by his or her own ethnic group. In this respect, the parents thought that a support group for transracially placed children or occasional camps or workshops would most probably be a positive investment. The researcher noted that the family camps helped the children to normalise their situation and that they were looking forward to the next camp.

The social work staff made an interesting point when they identified specific areas to be addressed at professional supervision or consultation levels. The priority related to the social workers' own developmental needs of self-acceptance and awareness of their own values and bias and how these impinge on relationships, perception and intervention.

Of the transracially placed children considered as part of this study 73% were abandoned children. In addition, 10% had been left with the employer or a neighbour by a relative. In the last four years only mixed parentage and black children were placed transracially.

One half of the alternative parents (51%) had natural children, and 43% raised a second family. One third had two transracially placed children. The vast majority of the parents were white (85%) and married (64%). In a 1996 study, 78% had been white and 74% had been married. The number of divorcees was higher in the recent research.

Love of children was still the main characteristic of the parents, as well as a natural openness to people and surprises, and the ability to adapt rather easily. This was reflected in the number of children these families were raising and in the group's mobility: One out of four children had been placed by another agency and one out of five had moved away from Durban to Gauteng, inland, or

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was published by Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc in 2001 and 2002. All rights reserved. No editorial material published in Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from, and acknowledgement to, Cheryl Goodenough.

Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal was proofread by Donna Hornby from Absolute Proof.

Copyright Profile KwaZulu-Natal cc, 2001, 2002

the Cape.

In view of the changed socio-political structures, a support group for the parents no longer seems necessary, but the parents identified the children's need for contact with families similar to their own in form of workshops, groups or camps. The parents identified their own need for educational preparatory workshops prior to receiving the child and periodic workshops geared towards the child's and the parents' developmental tasks.

Several features that emerged in this study suggested the need for a modified policy of continuing to place children transracially. This included the less prominent need by parents for ongoing mutual support due to the political changes in South Africa, ongoing assistance requested by both children and parents to assist through developmental phases and the addressing of the needs of social workers who rendered statutory services to multi-racial families.