

# OFF AND RUNNING

An American Coming of Age Story



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## ***Off and Running***

### **Teacher Resource Package**

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#### **Synopsis**

Country of Origin: United States

Release Year: 2009

Director: Nicole Opper

Runtime: 72 minutes

Themes: Identity, Transracial Adoption, Gay Marriage

Avery, a young African-American girl, is living with two white Jewish lesbians for parents and two adopted brothers of mixed race. She has grown up in this unique and loving household, but when her curiosity about her roots starts bothering her, she decides to contact her birth mother. As she questions her own race and identity, she begins staying away from home, skipping school and risks losing her shot at a college athletic scholarship. This documentary follows Avery through the most difficult period of her life and the choices she makes, exploring the strength of family bonds and the lengths people must go to find themselves.

#### **Curriculum Links**

*Off and Running* can be used to meet the curriculum requirement of the Media Studies component of ENG3C/U. It can also be used to meet the requirements of the Family Studies courses HPC30 (Parenting), HHS4M (Individuals and Families in a Diverse Society), HHG4M (Issues in Human Growth and Development), HPD4E (Parenting and Human Development) and the Social Science Courses HSP3M (Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology) and HSB4M (Challenge and Change in Society).

Related Websites:

<http://offandrunningthefilm.com/index.html>

**Context: Transracial Adoption**  
**(Source: Position Statement by the Canadian Paediatric Society, Paediatric Child Health, Vol 11, No 7, September, 2006, pp 443-447)**

Early in the film, Avery jokes that her family nickname is the United Nations; with one African-American daughter, one son of mixed black and white parentage and one Korean-born son, the Klein-Clouds present teachers with a complex case study of transracial adoption and the challenges it brings for both the parents and the children involved. In order to understand how the issues facing the members of the Klein-Cloud family relate to the larger context of transracial adoptions, students should first do some research into the topic. Below is a brief overview including some of the research findings conducted in the field.

Data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada indicates that, in 2004, there were close to 2000 international adoptions, most of which were crosscultural and frequently transracial. There have also been many domestic transracial adoptions in the last few years. The practice of white people adopting a child of a different race is not without controversy; in 1972, the National Association of Black Social Workers published a paper strongly opposing such adoptions (their position statement can be found at <http://www.uoregon.edu/~adoption/archive/NabswTRA.htm>). Although they have since revised their wholehearted condemnation of the practice, they still advocate family preservation, with transracial adoption as the final alternative. Similarly, after several First Nation children were adopted by white Canadians in the 1950s and '60s with disastrous consequences for the children, several provinces introduced explicit adoption legislation reflecting the importance of preserving their cultural identity and unique status. Since 1971, Canadian immigration policy has supported international adoptions as an important part of maintaining the multicultural character of Canada. In 2004, the vast majority of international adoptions were from China, but there were also many from Haiti, South Korea, India and the Philippines.

In its position statement on transracial adoptions, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC), a group representing more than 400 Canadian and American child advocacy organizations, contends that it is important that adoptive parents be of the same race as the child in order to best provide him/her with the skills and strength to combat racism. However, while they recognise the importance of race and ethnicity in placing a child, they also believe that transracial adoption is a better alternative to long-term foster care and should be considered if an appropriate family of the same race cannot be found (<http://www.nacac.org/policy/race.html>).

### **Development of Racial Identity**

Racial identity has been defined as "one's self-perception and sense of belonging to a particular group including not only how one describes oneself, but also how one distinguishes one's self from other ethnic groups" (Hollingsworth). Racial identity in children develops in two stages: firstly, the child distinguishes race at a conceptual level and secondly, they begin to assess his/her own membership in a racial group (McRoy). This second stage usually occurs between the ages of three to seven. Children's attitudes towards their own race are greatly influenced by their interactions with and observations of the attitudes of their significant others. On the one hand, in families where the issue of race is not addressed, children get the message that it is inappropriate to express their own feelings. On the other hand, in homes where parents dwell on the issue of the race extensively, children may overestimate its significance, causing anxiety (McRoy).

As adolescents, all children begin to establish their identities as separate from their parents. In the case where the child is of a different race than his/her adopted parents, the reality of the physical differences between them becomes magnified which may exacerbate their feelings of isolation, especially compared with their nonadopted peers.

## **Adjustment Outcomes of Transracial Adoptions**

Numerous studies have been conducted in the area of transracial adoptions. A 12-year longitudinal study of 204 families and 366 children whose families included transracially adopted children, adopted white children and white birth children, found that the transracial adoptees were as integrated into the family as the biological children. No significant difference in self-esteem was evident. After twelve years, with approximately half of the families still in the study, 18 adoptees had serious problems. However, in only one case was race a significant factor. Otherwise, all of the problems could be traced to the children having been adopted at an older age (over four), learning disabilities, developmental delays or previous abuse (Aboud). Another review study found that the majority of transracially adopted children (75% to 80%) functioned well and demonstrated no more behavioural or educational problems at home or school than nonadopted children (Tizard).

A Canadian study tracking families from Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec who had adopted internationally found that the self-esteem of inter-country adoptees when they reached adolescence was higher than that of the general population but lower than that of their siblings. A large majority of the adoptees reported being comfortable with their ethnic background, although 10% identified themselves as white despite coming from Korea, Bangladesh and Haiti. More than 80% of internationally adopted children experienced racism or discrimination but only 26.5% of the parents felt that their children had not experienced racism (Westhues).

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization, published an extensive examination of adult adoptive identity based on input from 468 adults who were adopted as children. The 112-page report is entitled "Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Positive Identity Formation in Adoption" ([http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2009\\_11\\_culture\\_camp.php](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2009_11_culture_camp.php)). Central findings include:

- A large majority of transracially adopted children experienced race-based discrimination rather than (or in addition to) adoption-related teasing or bias.
- A significant majority of transracially adopted adults reported considering themselves to be or wanting to be white as children. Only a minority had not reconciled their racial identity by adulthood.
- The most effective strategies for achieving positive identity formation are "lived experiences", in particular, attending racially diverse schools for transracial adoptees.

## **Resources Relating to Adoption**

Family Helper: Adoption Resource Central  
<http://www.familyhelper.net/arc/trans.html>

Adoption Council of Canada  
<http://www.adoption.ca/NewsAndEvents.html>

Dolls like Me  
<http://www.dollslikeme.com/html/adoption.html>

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute  
<http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/index.php>

The Transracial Adoption Paradox  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2366972/>

Canada Adopts  
[http://www.canadaadopts.com/canada/resources\\_links.shtml](http://www.canadaadopts.com/canada/resources_links.shtml)

The Adoption History Project  
<http://www.uoregon.edu/~adoption/index.html>

North American Council on Adoptable Children  
<http://www.nacac.org/>

**Related Classroom Activity: Charting Identity**  
**(Adapted from Charting Identity: Building Community in the Classroom**  
**<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/lessons/charting-identity-building-commu>)**

The subtitle of *Off and Running* is *An American Coming of Age Story*. Indeed, while the film focuses specifically on Avery's identity crisis as an African-American adopted by two gay white women, her struggle can be seen within the universal context of adolescent identity formation. As such, Avery's quest to establish her own unique identity is not that much different than that of any other North American teenager. Teachers can explore the issue of identity with their students through a range of classroom activities such as the one outlined below.

**Step One:**

Introduce the theme of identity using one of the following prompts:

- Have students compile a list of between 5 and 10 phrases including both nouns and adjectives (e.g., Chinese, sister, Christian, hockey player, etc.). Highlight the two words or phrases that best describe how they feel about themselves.
- Have students bring an artefact (e.g., photo, baseball, crucifix, etc.) that they feel illustrates something about their identity.
- Have students write for five minutes about their names and what they signify to them. How do their names relate to how they feel about themselves? Are they named after anyone? If so, whom? How do they feel about being named after someone? What does their name say about their cultural, religious or racial identity?

**Step Two:**

Have students break into pairs and share their responses with one another. What (if any) thoughts or experiences did they have in common?

**Step Three**

Reconvene as a larger group and construct an identity chart that includes all of the categories that they had identified about themselves as individuals and answer the following questions:

1. How does how we define ourselves affect how others see us?
2. How do other peoples' perceptions of us influence the way we define ourselves?
3. How do these perceptions shape our relationships with others?
4. Is identity fixed or can it change over time?

**Step Four:**

Have students expand on their notions of personal identity by having them discuss the idea of national identity. What does it mean to be a Canadian? How do we define ourselves as a society? How do we differ from other countries in terms of how we see ourselves?

**Other Identity-Related Lesson Plans**

I Am What I Am

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2000/07/17/i-am-what-i-am/?pagemode=print>

Colour-Blind

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2004/07/23/color-blind/?pagemode=print>

How I Became Me

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/how-i-became-me/>

Identity Charts

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/identity-charts>

### **Other Suggested Classroom Activities**

1. Write a film review of *Off and Running*.
2. Compare the documentary *Off and Running* with a feature film about interracial adoption such as the *Blind Side*. Which film do you think is more effective in making the audience understand the challenges involved for both the parents and children of interracial adoptions? Provide evidence from each film to support your opinion.
3. Research the issue of gay adoption. What countries allow LGBT adoption? In what countries is it illegal? What are the arguments for and against it?
4. Explore theories of development psychology such as Eric Erickson's eight developmental stages. How are these theories reflected in the characters of Avery and Rafi? How are they reflected in your own life?
5. Research the cultural, ethnic and religious background of your family and create a collage that reflects your individual, ethnic, religious, national and racial identity.

### ***Off and Running*: General Discussion Questions**

1. Why do you think that the director begins the film with Avery's decision to write to her birth mother?
2. Why do you think that the director includes shots of Avery running while we hear her writing the letter to her birth mother?
3. What are the factors that lead to Avery's decision to contact her mother?
4. Why do you think that Kay (Avery's mother) stops writing to Avery? How much of Avery's identity crisis do you think can be attributed to her feeling of being rejected a second time? Do you think that her questions of identity would all have been resolved had she stayed in touch with her mother? Why? Why not?
5. What do Avery's friends mean when they refer to her as an Oreo? Do you think that this is an apt description? Why/why not? Provide evidence from the film to support your response.
6. Why do you think that Avery uses the name Avery Klein-Cloud in real life and Mycole Antwonisha online?
7. At one point in the film, Rafi states, "a big difference between me and my sister is that I feel my identity is amorphous. She feels like she was born into something and I feel like I can create what I want to be." Do you think that identity is predetermined by factors such as race, religion and genetics or do you think that a person is capable of shaping his/her own identity independently of these factors? What do you think accounts Avery's and Rafi's differing viewpoints?
8. As Avery starts to behave in a self-destructive manner, Travis wonders whether she's "maybe attracted to that direction." Do you think our behaviour is biologically determined? Is there any evidence to support this theory?
9. Do you think that Avery's adopted mothers understand her? Why? Why not? Provide evidence from the film. How might they have handled her situation differently?
10. Tovah wonders whether Avery is testing her and Travis to see if she would be rejected again. Do you think this is the case? Why? Why not?
11. Do you think that Avery will continue to struggle with questions of identity later in life? Why? Why not?

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- <http://www.familyhelper.net/arc/trans.html>
- <http://www.adoption.ca/NewsAndEvents.html>
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- <http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/identity-charts>
- <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/artsed/visart102030/vamod21.html>

