

From System Budgets to Lived Bonds

*Reimagining Nonprofit Education Through an Autoethnographic
Journey in Three Acts of Care*

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Abstract

This autoethnography examines the child welfare system, nonprofit leadership, and nonprofit education through a three-act narrative of foster care. Drawing on the author's roles as a public sector budget analyst, foster and adoptive parent, and scholar of nonprofit management, the manuscript explores how systems intended to protect children often reproduce harm through administrative burdens, fragmented accountability, and inequitable policy and service structures. Act One reflects on equity-oriented public budgeting and the central role of nonprofit organizations in preventive child welfare services. Act Two brings the system home, interrogating foster care, disability, and transracial adoption through an intersectional lens. Act Three situates these experiences within the evolution of nonprofit education, emphasizing critical pedagogy, reflexivity, and experiential knowledge. Together, the acts argue for reimagining nonprofit education and leadership as ethical praxis rooted in care, social equity, and lived experience, offering guidance for preparing future public and nonprofit leaders and educators to confront and transform systems of care.

Keywords: *Budgets, foster care and adoption, nonprofit education, ethics*

Introduction

I came to my co-editorship of this special issue as both an administrator in the child welfare system in New York and as a foster and adoptive mom. Many decades have passed since then, giving me time to reflect on my experiences and what I have

learned. Understanding the foster care and adoption system requires an examination of the discordant goals of various stakeholders and its harmful impact on families and children. My perspective on the system is deeply informed by my lived experience. Hence the importance of this special issue focused on confronting systems of care and advancing nonprofit education, leadership, and praxis in child welfare systems (Irizarry et al., 2025) published as the journal completed its 15th year of circulation focused on meaningfully “bridg[ing] research and practice, elevat[ing] pedagogy, and strengthen[ing] leadership development across diverse organizational and cultural contexts” (Mirabella & Jeong, 2025, p. vii). In this autoethnography editorial, I use my story—presented as Acts of my lived experience—to self-reflect and explore the topic of foster care and adoption—with emphasis on the critical role of the nonprofit sector for this special issue of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership (JNEL)*. My goal is to offer multiple and unique insider (and at times potentially outsider) perspectives, social critiques, and practical insights to help guide and inform the next generation of public service and nonprofit educators and leaders in the child welfare space.

Act 1: Budgets, Philosophy, and the Birth of a Public Service Career

After graduating from New York University with a master’s degree in public administration, I applied and was hired for a position in the New York City’s Office of Management and Budget as a Senior Budget Analyst in the Health and Welfare Task Force, responsible for the foster care and adoption budget, an issue area I knew virtually nothing about. Although the unit head who hired me was certain I would make significant contributions to the Task Force, she was concerned after a few months when all I was doing was reading and studying everything about the system I could get my hands on, while also gaining first-hand knowledge through meetings with various city, state, and nonprofit managers involved in the system. There was SO much to learn. (Later she told me she thought she had hired a dud!).

What my unit head came to understand is that the weeks I spent immersed in written material, reviewing previous foster care and adoption budgets, and perhaps most importantly, the long conversations I had with foster care administrators, nonprofit administrators—especially those affiliated with Council of Family and Child Care Agencies (COFCCA)—and advocates for families and children, formed the philosophical foundation for many budgets I would propose. Having become completely absorbed in the myriad policy issues related to foster care and adoption—including budgetary issues—I began crunching the numbers, which in those days meant creating hundreds of punch cards for all the foster care agencies under contract to determine current budget expenses and project future costs. At this time, New York City was still recovering from the financial crises that had almost sent it into bankruptcy. As a requirement of its bailout, the federal government mandated that NYC balance its budget through what we referred to as the PEG program, or the Program to Eliminate the Gap. Our task as budget analysts was to provide savings to Mayor Ed Koch that he could use to close the gap.

Having become quite familiar with the major issues around child protective services and the foster care system, and philosophically coming down squarely on the side

of those who felt that children were better served when they were able to live with their families rather than being placed outside the home, I developed a program to provide preventive services to hundreds of families in the city as a way of preventing placement in foster care. While foster care was seen as a viable alternative to children remaining with their birth families in unhealthy environments (Dore & Kennedy, 1981), child welfare advocates during this time were beginning to question the potentially negative impact of removal from families on children (Bowly, 1988; Geiser, 1973; Littner, 1956). It was becoming evident that the child welfare system, although seemingly established to serve the best interests of the child, was in fact working to the detriment of everyone, parents, children, and families. In their now classic work, Goldstein et al. (1984) recommended substituting “least detrimental alternative” moving “beyond the best interests of the child”:

The law ... is incapable of supervising the fragile, complex interpersonal bonds between child and parent. As *parens patriae*, the state is too crude an instrument to become an adequate substitute for flesh and blood parents. The legal system has neither the resources nor the sensitivity to respond to a growing child's ever-changing needs and demands. (p. 16)

Drawing on this philosophical approach, I successfully argued that by spending \$10 million dollars in preventive services, the City would save over \$40 million dollars over the next few years in foster care dollars while providing families with counseling and support services to create safe environments in the home for the growth and flourishing of children and their families. Mayor Koch endorsed the proposal, and my PEG was included in the 1984 budget. Most of the preventive service contracts offered in the community went to nonprofit organizations; in NYC, the vast majority of foster care and adoption services were provided by nonprofit organizations thus their also dominating service delivery in the foster care prevention space.

Also included in the 1985 budget was an increase of \$7.5 million to hire 172 additional child-abuse social workers and additional instructional personnel for Special Services for Children (SSC), the division of the Human Resources Administration that oversaw the child welfare system. This proposal grew out of conversations I had with the administrators of SSC, who shared with me that the number of new cases being assigned to case workers was far more than the ideal number suggested by child welfare advocates. By listening, studying, and engagement, we were able to start creating programming and services for the children and families we serve that meet and focus on their wants, needs, and goals.

Interlude: Boarder Babies Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG)

During my initial months at the Office of Management and Budgeting (OMB), while struggling to understand the differences between Title IV-E and IV-A, and the distribution of foster care funding by the federal, state and city governments, my supervisor gave me a phone number and told me to call Mike P., the foster care analyst for New York State's Division of Family and Children's Services (NYSDFCS). Mike and I began to work together on our respective budgets, sharing information and figuring out expenditures in one area or another that would unexpectedly balloon. We noticed an increase in the foster care budget for payments to hospitals for “boarder babies,”

children living in hospitals for lack of foster home availability. Together we developed a PEG to move these children quickly out of hospitals and into homes, not only saving hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars, but more importantly providing those infants with safe loving homes as opposed to institutional care. Key to this PEG was increasing funds to nonprofit organizations to develop additional foster homes. The voluntary and charitable organizations in NYC and in many other states in the Northeast dominated the foster care, adoption, and preventive services spaces as they were providing these services BEFORE the creation of state central registries and child protective service programs (see Katz, 2023).

Intermission: Championing Preventive Services and Exiting OMB

In addition to my budget proposals, I used my budget position to advocate for preventive services for children in the judicial system. I was able to meet several judges to share the preventive service concept with them and explain the ways in which these services can be utilized to prevent out-of-home placement. After these conversations and upon our return to the courtroom, I was elated to hear the judges asking caseworkers, during hearings, if preventive services had been provided to the family!

While at OMB, I successfully convinced the organization to champion various budget proposals, several which resulted in being added to the Mayor's budget for the year. Upon leaving OMB after a two-year stint to take an academic position, the Deputy in charge of the unit commented on my unique ability to add staff and significant resources to the budget I oversaw, as it was in sharp contrast to the proposals of others in my unit all of whom had proposed cuts to their budgets.

While back then, such a strategy might have been unheard of or considered to be an idealistic academic exercise of idealism, in today's contemporary literature such budgeting strategies may be seen and studied in a growing body of work under the umbrella of social equity budgeting that emphasizes not just outcomes and quality, but also processes and access (see Afshan, 2026; Bartle & Rubin, 2024; Martínez Guzmán et al., 2025; McDonald et al., 2024; McDonald & McCandless, 2025; Rubin et al., 2024; Wei, 2025), including calls for cross-sector collaborations (Lee, 2024). A related advancement in the realm of public budgeting is growing interest in and use of participatory budgeting which is designed to foster fairness, access, quality, and just outcomes for marginalized communities through increased civic engagement where the voices of residents are sought, heard, and hopefully meaningfully considered and applied to budgetary and policy decision making (see Kuenneke & Scutelnicu, 2021; Taylor et al., 2025).

Act 2: Bringing the System Home: Mothering, Disability, and Transracial Adoption

As a dedicated public servant at OMB I, like many, worked tirelessly and met and got to work with so many amazing individuals. Notably, one friendship—with Mike at NYSDFCS—blossomed into a romance as we began dating after I left. We married shortly thereafter, and I moved to upstate New York with Mike and his two young children. At the time I dropped everything to focus on family, which led to a brief intermission from employment as I engaged in a journey of self-discovery with my family

and explored opportunities of interest consistent with my public service motivation to help others in meaningful ways. Shortly thereafter, while scanning the newspaper for a job, which is how we used to find employment in those days, I came across an article in the *Albany Times Union* titled, “Families Needed for ‘Boarder Babies’ Diocese to Help Neglected Infants” (Haddad, 1987). I immediately called Mike and told him that although my job search had not yet been successful, I had found a baby!

Shortly after reading the article in the *Albany Times Union*, Mike and I applied for approval as foster parents through a nonprofit organization, Community Maternity Services (CMS). Three months later, Lee joined our family after spending the first 14 months of her life as a boarder baby in a Brooklyn hospital. We adopted Lee shortly thereafter, though to be honest, the process was not really that short. Between all the required paperwork, psychiatric evaluations, and myriad obstacles presented by the system, she was six years old before the adoption was finalized. Such a short word count cannot completely convey the impact of such systems of care that impose administrative burdens on all involved from the child, to their biological parents and families, to those fostering and potentially adopting those children (but three manuscripts in this special issue expose and address some of the complexities and burdens involved, see DeMasters et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025; Nelson et al., 2025).

Upon receiving approval as foster parents, CMS presented us with a list of babies who were being brought to the Albany area for fostering. Long an advocate for placing foster children in their own communities to keep them in familiar environments (i.e., home, family, friends, schools, etc.), Mike and I struggled with the realization that we would be moving Lee far away from her relatives. However, two weeks before Lee was placed with us, she was sent to a foster group home. As a baby with Down syndrome, Lee was considered an “exceptional” or “special needs” foster care child who would be difficult to place in a foster home. This label reflected a broader reality in the child welfare system—that unfortunately persists today—where youth with disabilities are both overrepresented and at heightened risk for maltreatment, placement disruptions, and unmet needs compared to their nondisabled peers (Children’s Rights, 2006; Lightfoot et al., 2011; Platt & Gephart, 2022). For better or worse, I believe Lee’s placement with us offered more safety and stability—and loving environment—than a group facility would have provided when she was a toddler—especially given her unique needs. Research shows that children with intellectual and developmental disabilities often experience more severe maltreatment and longer stays in care when systems do not provide stable, well supported family placements (Dion et al., 2018; Shapiro, 2018).

Interlude: Intimate Acts of Care at Home Negotiating Race, Disability, and Motherhood

Through the years as Lee’s mom, there have been quite a few rationalizations about bringing home and adopting a child with an intellectual disability. Obviously the first one was “of course she would be better off with us than living her life in a group facility,” where she was headed before we became her foster parents. Other rationalizations pertained to bringing an African American child into a white family. As Lee grew, I became more aware that her race, disability, and status in foster care were not separate issues but intersecting identities that shaped how others saw and treated her.

Society can be unrelentingly cruel when it doesn't understand or lacks empathy rather than being supportive and attempting to understand. These ideas were not abstract to me; they showed up in our daily lives. Countless scowls, looks, stares, critiques, and much worse were directed at my child, at me, and at our family. Ultimately, Lee held multiple, intersecting identities. She was a newborn in foster care (a boarder baby—relinquished by her birth mother to the hospital) who had been voluntarily separated from her family of birth, a child with an intellectual disability (Down syndrome), and a Black girl being raised in an Italian/Irish/German white family. In those moments, I sensed the weight of her multiple identities and how others' reactions to her race, disability, and foster-care status converged, even if I did not yet have the words "intersectionality" or "multiple jeopardy" to name what we were living. I often felt that I was failing at being a good parent even as I was learning, growing, and loving as a parent to four children—one of whom was my wonderfully unique daughter with a disability. At the same time, I was trying to raise her in ways that were culturally sensitive and responsive so that she could know and embrace all her social and cultural identities as she desired. Over time, I came to understand that in the child welfare system—just like in society as a whole—these overlapping social identities and group memberships often stack the odds against children like Lee, creating "multiple jeopardy" in which negative outcomes are not merely additive but exponentially multiplied (Settles & Buchanan, 2014).

One particular struggle involved learning to care for someone with needs different from mine or their siblings, like maintaining and managing their hair. With little community support at the time for culturally diverse families, part of the struggle revolved around, perhaps a self-imposed critique of not feeling that I wasn't able to always be a good parent or not being able to get—what at the time I might have felt like an easy thing—hair care, maintenance, and styling—right. It felt like sometimes it didn't matter what else was going right, how happy and healthy my daughter was, how happy and healthy we all were as part of a loving family, or what we did as parents to support the growth and development of our children. Consequently, at some point, I rationalized that all the demanding work my family and I were doing to provide Lee with strong educational programs to help her thrive mattered more than conforming to others' expectations of how her hair or appearance 'should' look. I told myself that if she were loved, learning, included, and happy, then maybe it was acceptable if I could not always get her hair care, maintenance, and styling right.

When we moved to New Jersey in the early 1990s, I researched all the school districts in the state providing the best programs in inclusive education for children with disabilities. When we settled on and moved into the Somerset Hills School District in the suburbs of New Jersey, where only 1% of the population was African American, I rationalized that Lee's being included in a regular classroom was more important than her being in a racially diverse classroom. Looking back, I see how I framed these choices as either-or: academic inclusion versus racial and cultural belonging, hair care versus access to services. I did the best I knew how at the time, yet I now recognize that these rationalizations also reflected the limits of my own understanding and the pressures of parenting in systems that rarely made space for both disability-affirming supports and racial/cultural affirmation.

In making these choices, I was also navigating a child welfare landscape in which children from racially and ethnically minoritized communities are perpetually over-represented in care and too often placed in homes that do not reflect their cultural or racial backgrounds—a pattern documented not only in the United States but in other countries such as Canada (Daniel, 2011; Francis et al., 2023). These broader histories of racism, colonialism, and ongoing debates over laws like the Indian Child Welfare Act—and recent rulings such as *Haaland v. Brackeen* affirming that Native children should not be unjustly separated from their families or communities—underscore how transcultural and transracial placements can both offer safety and introduce additional layers of trauma and identity complexity that require intentional, sustained ethical reflection (Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2023). And these rationalizations have continued as Lee has become an adult requiring different types of care. In short, in this season of our lives, the everyday decisions about hair, schools, and neighborhoods became sites where Lee’s race, disability, and foster-care history—and our family’s holistic identity and status—collided, forcing me to confront how often I was asked—implicitly and explicitly—to prioritize one part of Lee’s identity (and by extension our family’s identity) over another.

At the same time, Lee’s story is only one example within a much larger system that still struggles to provide culturally grounded, disability-affirming support for transcultural, transracial, and blended families. Additional analytical-interpretive reflections addressing similar and related topics are provided in this special issue from the lived experience perspective of authors. For instance, informed by their involvement with the child welfare system, Allen and Irizarry (2025) present a book review of Robert’s (2022) book, *Torn Apart*; Irizarry (2025d) elucidates how his identities as a Latino, neurodivergent, and LGBT+ community member significantly shaped his experiences in care; Ruiz (2025) details his experience as a Latino foster child, guardian of a sibling in care, and professional experience as a social worker shape his experience; while Berry-James’ (2025) shares her experience as a youth kidnapped and taken out of her home country only to return and find that while there was no place like home, the system determines what “home” actually means in practice irrespective of the voices and perspectives of those impacted. Kurtz’s (2025) manuscript highlights how privilege and status prevent those who are capable, knowledgeable, and willing to care for those in need are barred from doing so because of their status as being single or divorced, while Meyer (2026) highlights how the status of being married may be overshadowed and restricted by other identities such as heteronormative affirming standards and norms.

Nevertheless, some promising developments—including greater attention to ethics in adoption, more intentional preparation of foster and adoptive parents for multicultural family life, and emerging practices that center children’s voices and identities—offer models for how agencies and nonprofit partners can better honor family diversity and promote belonging (see DeMasters et al., 2025; Meyer, 2025; Nelson et al., 2025). The manuscripts in this special issue, including Meyer’s (2025) work on the ethics of adoption and Nelson and colleagues’ (2025) analysis of adoption practices, further illuminate several remaining gaps and the possibilities for more just and culturally responsive systems of care.

Act 3: From Practitioner to Professor: Mapping Nonprofit Education

While raising Lee and the rest of our children together with my husband, I embarked on my second act as a professor of public administration and nonprofit management. I am currently an associate professor of Public Administration at Kean University, involved in research on philanthropy, nonprofit education, and critical perspectives on nonprofit organizing. I have edited and co-edited multiple volumes including the *Handbook of Critical Perspectives on Nonprofit Organizing and Voluntary Action* (Mirabella et al., 2024) serving as one of the first of its kind in the field to survey discipline specific critical scholarship and *Reframing Nonprofit Organizations: Democracy, Inclusion and Social Change* (Eikenberry et al., 2019, 2025), that substantively provided the discipline's first critical perspective on nonprofit administration.

In addition to working on edited volumes, some of my key scholarship in the field involved initiating efforts to map out the inception, growth, development, and impact of university-based educational programs of undergraduate and graduate nonprofit management and philanthropic studies (Brunt et al., 2020; Dolch et al., 2007; Mirabella, n.d.; Mirabella et al., 2019a, 2019b; Mirabella et al., 2021; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella et al., 2007; Mirabella & Balkun, 2011; Mirabella & Eikenberry, 2017a, 2017b; Mirabella & Hofer, 2023; Mirabella & Hoffman, 2023; Mirabella & McDonald, 2012; Mirabella & Nguyen, 2019; Mirabella & Wish, 1999, 2000, 2001; Mirabella & Young, 2012) and as many of our readers may be aware this scholarship subsequently led to the development of a companion nongovernmental organization database for global education programs.

With more than 1,700 citations to my works in Google Scholar (to date), my work has had a significant impact in multiple disciplines including nonprofits, social work, public administration, and public service. For example, my works (i.e., Mirabella et al., 2023; Sandberg et al., 2019) have recently been utilized in Appendix A: Implicit Bias and Implications for Social Equity: A Reflexive Written Activity (Irizarry, 2026a) and Appendix C: Reflexive, Mindfulness-Based, Social Equity Learning Activity: Multimedia Expression and Communication Connecting Historical, Political, and Societal Topics with Art, Music, and Public Service (Irizarry, 2026b) in the edited volume, *Public Administration, Civic Engagement, and Spanish-Speaking Communities* (Irizarry, 2026c), to supplement their engagement with implicit association tests and mindfully reflect on their results with an eye toward public service leadership development and public and nonprofit education.

Finally, it is impossible to articulate the roles, involvement, and impacts of my scholarship over time, nor to recognize all whom have cited my works directly or been indirectly influenced by it, but it is important to note that with this autoethnographic manuscript, and those contained in this special issue, readers should know that they can use their voice in all spaces and places—and that includes legitimately in research that is meaningful to them and may at times even use, rely on, and/or comment on their lived experiences. Accordingly, I see the works discussed in this act as reconnecting me to my “first act” as a public and nonprofit administrator, helping build the nonprofit field in the process. While not specifically focused on nonprofit foster care and adoption organizations, I believe my work in this regard helped to lead the way for nonprofit studies, including child welfare organizations, to flourish.

The Current Act: Looking Back, Acting Forward in Child Welfare and Nonprofit Education

When José and Seth approached me about this special themed issue, I was quite excited to re-engage in the policy issues concerning families and children, foster care, and adoption. Collaborating on this issue with them has clearly provided me with an opportunity to bring together the varied roles I have played in my life, particularly now as I have begun my third act at Kean University. My previous roles as nonprofit worker, child welfare budget and policy analyst, foster parent, adoptive parent, and professor, together with my scholarship in nonprofits, pedagogy, social equity and critical perspectives can now be employed to advocate for children and families negatively impacted by the child welfare system and work together with the scholarly, policy and advocacy community to create the system anew. In doing so, I join my co-editors in using our lived experience and positionality as a form of “street knowledge” that can inform the theory, practice, and teaching of child welfare and public service (Philips, 2025). By situating personal lived experience within nonprofit education and leadership development (Blessett, 2018; Evans et al., 2023; Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2024; McDonald et al., 2024; Mirabella et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2025), my autoethnography aims to help prepare current and future practitioners to pursue more equitable and just approaches to foster care and adoption. I am grateful to José, Seth, and all other contributors to this issue for giving me this opportunity.

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