Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership 2025, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 58–72
https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2025-13298

Reimagining Nonprofit Praxis in Foster Care Through Lived Experience and Radical Hope

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Abstract

This autoethnography interrogates nonprofit praxis in U.S. child welfare systems through the author's lived experience of repeated placements and aging out. It contends that benevolent narratives obscure cumulative, state-produced harms that pathologize difference, sever relationships, and reduce youth to deliverables. Bridging scholarship on social equity, administrative burden, and psychological safety with storytelling, the analytical autoethnography reframes foster care as a system of power in which nonprofits function as paradoxical actors—at times reproducing bureaucratic harm, at others serving as lifelines that restore agency, access, and belonging. Advancing radical hope as praxis, the author calls for trauma-responsive practice; leadership by people directly impacted by the system; and funding, metrics, and pedagogy aligned with healing, family preservation, and flourishing. Reimagining nonprofit praxis in foster care requires rejecting case processing as a proxy for success and building organizations that help young people not merely survive, but thrive. This manuscript also curates accessible resources for readers working in contexts where equity content is restricted.

Keywords: *Social equity, trauma-responsive practice*

Carrying the Case File: Processed, Not Prepared

In many ways, I remain a foster kid 19 years after aging out. This identity has followed me from shelter placements to group homes, courtrooms, college campuses, and into professional spaces. I've carried this identity into my work as an educator, scholar, and advocate. For the third time in my life, at age 9, I entered the NYC foster care system and aged out at 21. Shuffled through more than 15 placements and three different foster care agencies, I was left to navigate adulthood without a real roadmap for what

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came next. My experience was emblematic of Goodsell's (2004) classical dilemma of bureaucracy—I was a case to be processed rather than a person to be cared for. At 18, the system attempted to declare its job done, having seen me through high school because college wasn't their responsibility. But through my own advocacy in family court, I fought to remain in care until age 21—when family court jurisdiction ended and I would have completed most, if not all, of my college education. While still underprepared for discharge, with a state-declared case completion, I was left to assemble a life the child welfare system had done little to prepare me for. This autoethnography shares part of my story, and throughout provides readers with additional resources to explore, especially for those in places and spaces where such content is under attack, banned, and otherwise inaccessible.

Diagnosed, Displaced, and Determined

This special issue on foster care and adoption in the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* is not merely a scholarly endeavor; it is, for me, a personal reckoning with systems that both failed and shaped me. Working on this special themed issue is a long-awaited goal of mine, and I am so happy to be reminded that it is never too late to do something. In my case, this means getting back into the realm of advocacy and change for youth in need.

This special themed issue also affirms the voices and acts of resistance of young people—especially those made vulnerable by systems that pathologize difference, whether racial, neurodivergent, sexual, or spiritual (for additional autoethnographic analyses in this special issue see Berry-James, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025). Youth in care are too often forced to navigate a system that fails to recognize their full humanity. For instance, the system diagnosed me as a problem that needed correction or a broken child who needed to be fixed. Upon entry into foster care at age 9, I was immediately identified as problematic or abnormal, with attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity disorder, and a host of other deficiencies. These diagnoses were used to identify what the system interpreted as "broken" and was working to "fix," rather than attempting to understand what a profound traumatic impact foster care has on a young child, especially when it was their third time in care—a reality I only learned about later in life which they should have known and been aware of the moment I reentered the child welfare system.

The initial nonprofit foster care service providers [NPFCSPs] overseeing my foster care services (both of which no longer exist in their previous forms) either failed to or were unable to honor my personal agency—the ability to define my own path and express my needs along the nonlinear journey through which I crafted my identity. When I was about 15 or 16 years old (if memory serves me right, and if I correctly retroactively understand and interpret the communications I still have on old emails), rather than support and assist me when they lacked placements, the first NPFCSP instead attempted to place me in a juvenile detention facility, because as a minor, I needed to be supervised. In my mind, this is supervision akin to that provided to a hospital patient or prison inmate. This system failure, to me felt like a personal attack, a punishment for the crime of being neurodivergent, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, a person driven by what the system considered to be an alternative faith with child welfare services contracted to a catholic affiliated NPFCSP, and/or because I was outspoken

and adept at self-advocacy. Like so many in care, it was through struggle and survival that I came to name myself: in faith or doubt, in gender or fluidity, in love and desire. Accordingly, while recognizing that I was a child in need, I refused the ascribed labels such as criminal, deviant, or queer/abnormal, and worked with attorneys from a local nonprofit as well as other community nonprofits to reject the "care" and the future the system wanted to impose on me for a more self-determined future because the reality at the time communicated anything but care. These actions resulted in my being homeless for some time—having to fend for myself in the streets while checking in daily with my attorneys until they could get my case moved to another foster care agency more able to accommodate my needs.

Naming Myself, Reclaiming Power

Shortly before and initially during my transitions between NPFCSPs (when I was around 15-16 and again between 17-18), my performance in school plummeted and my connections with those closest to me suffered. Not only did I perhaps feel the most alone in my personal life, I worried about the threat of the issuance of a bench warrant for my arrest because my foster care agency wanted to report me as a runaway. As documented most recently by Roberts (2022), runaways tended to be arrested as if they had committed crimes, regardless of the legitimate maltreatment, neglect, abuse, and harm they may have suffered in their current placements. Looking back, I am uncertain if such a threat was real—or worse, actually sought and or obtained—but this was no way for a child—or a young adult—to live. Irrespective of whether it was an actual threat, realized event, or a misunderstanding as a result of the limited sensemaking capabilities of a youth in care, what remains true is that as an adult—an accomplished practitioner and scholar—my understanding of the situation remains unchanged, and the scars and trauma perpetually linger. I remain thankful to those at Lawyers for Children [LFC] and the Hetrick Martin Institute [HMI] (and so many others outside of the child welfare system) for being there for me and helping me navigate one of the most difficult times in my life. Such nonprofit organizations and their extended communities provided a lot of hope in dark times.

Ultimately, I went from one religious NPFCSP to another, and later to a third NPFCSP that offered agency-operated boarding homes (AOBHs), group homes, and supervised independent living programs (SILPs) for LGBTQ youth and young adults. This last NPFSCP was in many ways a blessing, because as I got older, it became harder for the child welfare system to accommodate a young person with my needs. My journey, like that of so many others, was one of piecing together, resisting, and reimagining. I questioned imposed labels, experimented with various expressions, and slowly arrived at identities I could name, inhabit, and claim as my own. These acts of naming and becoming were rooted in self-discovery, self-determination, and empowerment—each forged in defiance of systems that too often deny such autonomy and agency.

Narratives that Erase and Systems that Harm

The dominant narrative of foster care is often told through the lens of well-meaning intervention: saving children, managing risk, ensuring safety. But from inside the system, those stories feel hollow—not only for those children, but also for their families

and care providers who endure psychological distress and face other costs imposed by administrative burdens and compliance requirements, as documented in this special themed issue (DeMasters et al., 2025).

These narratives also fail to acknowledge that identity is not something merely discovered or inherited. For many of us who experience foster care, identity is shaped through resilience, reflection, and relationships—formed not in isolation, but in response to trauma, survival, and connection. While not specific to identity construction and development, DeMasters et al. (2025) illustrate how the negative emotions, psychological toll, and stigma impact parents and families before, during, and after family separation, as well as long after family reunification. Their findings imply that the child welfare system distorts perceptions of identity and worth—from those outside the system looking in, by administrators looking down, and by those within the system struggling to make sense of their place in the system and in civil society more broadly. This understanding of identity as consciously constructed, rather than passively received, continues to inform my professional practice and perspective (see Davis et al., 2026; Evans et al., 2023; Irizarry, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d, 2026f; Irizarry et al., 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2026f).

While the literature documents the harms inflicted by the child welfare system on parents, families, and communities, my own lived experience, along with my professional work, shows how these dominant narratives tend to erase the trauma of being torn away from your home, your family, and the only world you've known (see Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry et al., 2025a; Ruiz, 2025). They obscure the pain of advocating for your own rights, especially when those tasked with representing you fail to listen or show up. They silence the indignity of being told that your needs and desires (as you feel and understand them), education, and emotional and mental health aren't priorities, that you're too difficult, or that reunification isn't possible—because you are uninformed, ill-informed, or unworthy, and not because your family is incapable of love, but because the system is incapable of care.

From within the child welfare system, the harm inflicted wasn't theoretical. It was delivered in the name of help, but experienced as deliberate harm—daily and unrelenting. And it wasn't additive; it was cumulative. Each trauma intensified the next, compounding isolation and accelerating harm (see Berry-James, 2025; Ruiz, 2025).

This trauma extends to the experience of adoptees and their families, as well (see also Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025). As Nelson et al. (2025) note, psychological safety is significantly linked to the degree of communicative openness adoptees experience. Those who felt seen, accepted, and loved reported greater trust and emotional security within their familial arrangements. Consider the life-altering impact of such safety and support—how youth in the child welfare system might actually have a fighting chance to survive and thrive in every aspect of life and civil society if they were given this kind of foundation.

Nonprofits as Lifelines and Bridges to Transformation

The role of nonprofits in our child welfare system extends far beyond their roles as NPFCSPs to their roles in civil society more broadly, where they may serve as lifelines and bridges to transformation (see Evans, 2026; Evans & Irizarry, 2022). For instance, I have told students and other audiences in various venues that the nonprofit sector

saved my life—literally and figuratively. I recognize that what helped me survive—and eventually thrive—was not the child welfare system itself, but the community organizations, mentors, and advocates who stepped in where the state had fallen short such as LFC's LGBTQ Rights Project, the Urban Justice Center, HMI, Living Beyond Belief, John Jay's SEEK program, and the Harvey Milk School founded by HMI (at the time a program of the Career Education Center, and since 2003 a public High School administered by the NYC Department of Education). I am intentionally not naming individuals here, because most certainly any list I construct now would be incomplete—but those people know who they are! That said, it is no surprise that the majority of these organizations were nonprofits, as it was in the nonprofit sector and through public educational institutions where I learned firsthand what was meant by public service motivation (Irizarry, 2024; Perry, 2020; Perry et al., 2010; Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015; Word & Carpenter, 2013). These institutions were not just safety nets; they were bridges to transformation.

Involvement with these nonprofits helped me challenge policy decisions that stripped me of basic support, pushed me to remain in school when dropping out seemed easier, and connected me to opportunities that allowed me to dream beyond mere subsistence. Their interventions turned me from a child welfare statistic into a scholar, educator, activist, and advocate who champions social equity for all in every aspect of life, especially in relation to democracy, civic engagement, and public and nonprofit pedagogy and praxis (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; ASPA DSJ, 2020; Evans & Irizarry, 2022; Evans et al., 2023; FIU Maurice A Ferré Institute for Civic Leadership, 2022; Irizarry, 2024, 2026e; Irizarry & Evans, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2023, 2026; Lopez-Littleton, 2022; Meyer et al., 2025; Rummell, 2004). For instance, as a youngster in a Catholic foster care agency, I distributed safer sex kits as an HIV/AIDS peer educator, advocate, and activist (Meenan, 2003). I later worked within the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) on developing the revised ASPA Code of Ethics (ASPA, 2013) and helped to establish the LGBT Advocacy Alliance as an ASPA section (Mostel, 2012, 2024), where I currently serve as a board member and was awarded a service to the section award in 2025.

As bridges to representation, self-discovery, and transformation, a variety of nonprofit organizations helped change the trajectory from the life imposed on me to one I could direct and more fully control. In many ways, their influence might even lead some to consider me a hood academic in the public service education arena. I wholeheartedly would accept the hood academic label as an identity of a person who "does not see [my] socioeconomic and marginalized background as a weakness" but rather as "lived experiences and 'street knowledge' that is applied in "reshaping pedagogy and instruction in the classroom" by contributing "resilience and experience that is not shared by [my] more privileged colleagues" (Philips, 2025, p. 176) in public administration and nonprofit education.

Confronting Complicity, Reimagining Care

In at least one way, my journey through foster care idiosyncratically. The majority of the youth I knew in care rarely graduated high school, let alone attended college or graduate school. They were rarely able to avoid being caught up in the carceral web of the foster-industrial complex (brilliantly elucidated by Roberts, 2022); and were

rarely able to avoid coping mechanisms, leading many to engage in high-risk behaviors and/or substance abuse. Accordingly, by comparison, my foster care experience ended uniquely as I avoided these perils and was able to age out just around the time when I submitted my last final exam for my Bachelor of Science in Legal Studies and with admission into the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Since then I have earned my MPA, Master of Arts in Criminal Justice, and PhD in Public Administration. Now with degrees in hand and students of my own, I remain troubled by the knowledge that my story is still far too rare. The systems that failed me continue to fail too many others. Nonprofit agencies—so often lauded as compassionate intermediaries—sometimes replicate the very harm they are meant to ameliorate. Too many youth age out of the child welfare system without permanent housing, without access to training or education, without safety, without family ties, and without hope. Too often, success is narrowly defined as completion of high school (or back in my day, completion of a GED) and a low-wage job, while holistic well-being, family preservation, or long-term empowerment remain afterthoughts.

This special themed issue of *JNEL* invites us to confront that complicity, gathering scholars, practitioners, and individuals with lived experience to interrogate the systems that claim to protect while often punishing and that claim to uplift while too often destabilizing. As public administration and nonprofit scholars and practitioners, we must ask ourselves: What does it mean to lead within a system that packages young people for discharge rather than prepares them for life? What would it take to truly center the needs and dignity of youth in our policy and programmatic responses? Together, the contributions in this issue urge us to reframe how we understand the child welfare system—not simply as a service, but as a structure of state power that intersects with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, and citizenship. In doing so, these contributions echo what many of us have long known: the system is not broken, it functions exactly as it was designed (see Roberts, 2022).

Radical Hope and the Work Ahead

There is an urgent need for the nonprofit sector, educators, social workers, and public administrators to reckon with the following truth: while the child welfare system claims to be a benevolent service, and while it can and may sometimes result in positive outcomes, the reality for many involved in the system, such as those of us in foster care is that the injuries inflicted by the system may outweigh such proclaimed benefits and have long lasting negative impacts. Such harms cannot be understood as merely sequential or discrete; rather, they are compounding, recursive, and structurally embedded with each experience of harm reinforcing and accelerating the next. Accordingly, confronting this reality includes interrogating how funding priorities, risk assessments, and service models reproduce cycles of dispossession, as well as recognizing the deep reservoirs of resilience and wisdom that exist among system-impacted youth. It also means making room for new leadership—by those who have lived these realities, not just those who studied them. Contemporary examples of such work include Alvarez-Hernandez, 2024; Berry-James et al., 2021; Chordiya & Protonentis, 2024; Chordiya et al., 2023; Colvin & Meyer, 2024; Foxworth, 2022; Gullums, 2024; Meyer et al., 2024a, 2024b; Page, 2023; Sweeting et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2022; Zavatarro et al., 2024).

Additional examples are contained within the edited volume, *Public Administration, Civic Engagement, and Spanish-Speaking Communities* (Irizarry, 2026f)—a volume that grew out of the National Academy of Public Administration's first ever bilingual (Spanish-English) panel on language and social equity (see Appendix D)—addressing multiple topics and arenas including health and human services (Alvarez-Hernandez et al., 2026), local government engagement (Camarena et al., 2026), immigration (Caraballo et al., 2026), social media (Evans, 2026), equitable access to crisis information (Haupt et al., 2026), homelessness (Moore & Knepper, 2026), news (Piscia, 2026), an equity model for inclusion in research (Rios et al., 2026), interactions with policing agencies in the United States (Topel & Colvin, 2026) and civic engagement and social equity (Vera, 2026).

Irrespective of the recent political shift in the United States calling for a blindness or outright eradication of difference, diversity, and identities other than white and English speaking (see Irizarry et al., 2026; Thomas, 2024), the literature in public and nonprofit administration is clear and demands retrospective and forward-looking reflexivity to address the scholarship of teaching and learning in public service education. Emphasis has been on what it is that we teach our students and how we train them (Azevedo & Shi, 2024; Evans et al., 2023; Irizarry, 2022; McCandless & Gooden, 2024; McDonald et al., 2024), whether or not public administration has failed (Guy 2025a), the future of nonprofit education (Stewart et al., 2025), and embracing and fostering a multi- and interdisciplinary practice for social change (Mason et al. 2020; Mirabella et al., 2025). What we do next must address and train public service leaders for the reality that there are ongoing and intensifying efforts to destroy rather than build public service—and for that matter democracy—and as Guy (2025b) notes, "a thriving democracy requires principled public servants whose concern is about performance and reliability" (p. 241). This requires us going beyond research and beyond the classroom (see Meyer et al., 2022; Ressler et al., 2023; Wright, 2023).

Accordingly, for me, contributing to this special themed issue as a co-editor was more than editorial work; it was a narrative act of resistance, a public scholarship of survival. It is a reminder that I am not just a foster kid or former foster youth. I am a public service scholar, an institutional insider, and a committed advocate for social equity and social justice. I carry within me the archives of my own struggle—emails, memos, scars, and memories—and I now offer them not as evidence of trauma alone, but as testimony to endurance, transformation, and radical hope. I know from experience that nonprofit programs can save lives and/or enable harm. My experience is that nonprofits weren't just institutions, they were lifelines or liabilities, depending on whose mission took precedence: contracts or care. When we reduce youth to case numbers, success metrics, or grant deliverables, we lose sight of their humanity—and of our own. The bureaucratic structure and personality that Merton (1957/2005) discussed is real, and we must avoid the traps of trained incapacity and occupational psychosis he mentioned, as that will not help us achieve major aspects of our code of ethics such as advancing the public interest, strengthening social equity, demonstrating personal integrity, and promoting ethical organizations (ASPA, n.d.). That's why I believe nonprofit education and leadership must be rooted in justice, not charity. In dignity, not compliance. In abolitionist imagination, not administrative ease. My words from long ago in the context of my work as an HIV/AIDS peer educator apply in this case and

still ring true: youth need to be educated, but that is not enough, because "If they don't believe they matter and don't protect themselves, we've failed" (Rummel, 2004).

My hope is that readers of this special issue hear the urgency that pulses through every article, autoethnography, and review (see also Irizarry et al., 2025b). That those involved and impacted by the system who read this special themed issue recognize that their voices and experiences have value and can be used in academic, scholarly, and professional works. This is consistent with the interpretive research tradition, where they would be "the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018, p. 43) and they get to determine what qualifies as data, information, and knowledge. The contributors of this special themed issue challenge us to move beyond reformist tinkering and into transformational action. They remind us that foster care is not a neutral good—it is a mechanism often weaponized against Black, Brown, Indigenous, disabled, and LGBTQ+ youth and their families. They show how nonprofit organizations—working as part of and external to existing child welfare systems—can either uphold or dismantle these systems of control, depending on the values we embed in our leadership, our funding models, our partnerships, and our pedagogies.

Our children deserve more than survival; they deserve justice, love, and a system that sees their brilliance—not just their needs.

To Those Still in the System: You Matter. You Always Did and Do

To the young people still in care, still waiting for a home, still being moved from placement to placement: you are not invisible, and you are more than a case to be processed and closed. You matter. Your voice matters. Your story matters. It bears repeating an adapted section of the acknowledgements of my dissertation:

> This [autoethnography—and for that matter my contributions to this special themed issue on foster care and adoption in the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*] is for those who need to be reminded that the future is YOURS to define and not determined by "the system" or anyone else. I did not let "obstacles" stop me from obtaining my higher education. I am a proud gay Puerto Rican former foster youth from NYC, first in my known family to graduate college, grad school and earn a PhD. I did this while managing my ADHD and working off campus to provide for myself. I believe that anyone who remains dedicated and resilient can do the same! (Irizarry, 2020, p. iv)

Know that we are more than what the system made of us. We are the future it didn't plan for—but desperately needs.

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