

**Title:** “*That’s nothing if we never let you say how it feels to be already drenched:*” Identifying key themes for supporting youth in foster care through poetic inquiry

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### **Background/Purpose:**

Systematic review of outcomes of children in foster care show negative outcomes in education, employment, income, housing, and more (Gypen et al., 2017). Despite these challenges, studies rarely seek input from youth and other stakeholders on how the system could facilitate healing, be supportive, and build resiliencies among youth. In the context of a federal demonstration project to strengthen child welfare systems, this study sought to center the voices of youth and professionals working with them day-to-day. The central research question was developed with a youth advisory council as: How can child welfare and related professionals support young people in foster care toward positive experiences and outcomes?

### **Method:**

This study was conducted as poetic inquiry, which involved collecting data through poetic responses (Faulkner, 2017). Within a statewide project that involved public and private agencies across a Midwestern state, 7 focus groups were held with 41 participants, including youth with foster care experiences (n=13), parents (n=2), and child welfare professionals (n=28). Participants wrote poems in response to prompts related to envisioning a child welfare system that would support youth. Due to COVID-19, data collection, preparation, and analysis were conducted virtually. Thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) was used to identify codes, categories and themes across the poems in Dedoose. To address rigor and trustworthiness, researchers read poems multiple times, co-coded poems, used consensus process to finalize themes, kept a detailed audit trail, and conducted peer debriefing with one another.

### **Results:**

Four main themes were identified. (1) Relationship-building was seen as central to supporting youth in foster care. Excerpt: *I need reassurance that I’m good enough for you not to give up.* (2) Experiences with foster care system elicited emotional responses from youth and professionals. Excerpt: *Disrupts, another way of saying I’m not wanted, I’m not good enough, they can’t handle me, they give up on me.* Excerpt: *We can give you an umbrella if it’s raining/That’s nothing if we/Never/Let you say how it feels to be/Already drenched.* (3) Actions to support youth were identified frequently, varied greatly, and were prescriptive. Excerpt: *Lead with open mindedness.* Excerpt: *Listen. Ask. And listen again.* Excerpt: *Ask Me/Me, the one with the problem.* (4) Views on purpose of child welfare systems were complex, fragmented and in flux. Excerpt: *It’s not all about paperwork/Or checking boxes.* Excerpt: *Rage against the injustices.* Excerpt: *We hope to change the world.*

### **Conclusion/Implications:**

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating an art-based, creative approach to inquiry that centers real-world experiences of child welfare. Scarce is research that positions youth with lived experiences and professionals who work with them daily to identify what will most support them. Despite studies that document poor outcomes, youth hold expertise on their experiences and can build strengths within multiple adversities. This study suggests that child welfare systems should be restructured to emphasize relationship-building and maximize

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youth self-determination and practices that build resilience among youth and professionals. It also suggests that systems could be transformed to activating accountability and actions steps toward a family-centered, well-being system.