

# LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

## EDUCATION IS KEY (BUT THE DOORS ARE HEAVY)

by Nicole Wong, JD, MST

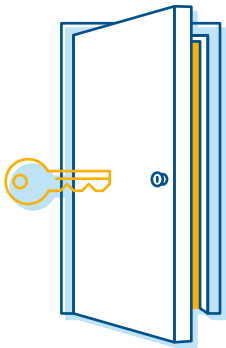
I sat in the back of the classroom and nervously kicked at the half-hanging heel on my boot. The constant motion finally caused one of my peers to look down at my feet and ask, “Do you know your boot is broken?” I knew. But now, it was embarrassing that they knew, too. In the very next moment, as my third-grade teacher called out my name, I had to choose to either sulk about being the new, poor kid or say “yes” when she asked if I felt up to participating in the spelling bee. I looked up, smiled at her slowly, and said, “Yes.”

**The first school day always felt like the worst part of changing foster homes.** The process started with all our belongings being packed into large garbage bags and my older brother and I waiting alone in an agency hallway until the social worker was able to drive us to the next family (sometimes, we were left alone for hours). We had a different social worker every few months, so we stopped learning their names just like they stopped referring to us by ours. To the professionals responsible for our wellbeing, we were “wards”, “foster youth”, or “the Asian siblings.” We learned that, at least initially, the families were going to be nice, as the various mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuses did not usually occur for a few weeks. In each new home, we always had a little time to breathe. But, at school, rejection and cruelty were our best friends, as the other children were brutally and immediately honest in their assessment of the new kids: We were dirty, our clothes were tattered, and we were too weird or too quiet to become their friends.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



**NICOLE WONG, JD, MST** grew up in the NYC foster care system. She holds a BA in Political Science from CUNY – Queens College, a Master of Science in Teaching from Fordham University, and a Juris Doctorate from the Maurice A. Deane School of Law at Hofstra University. Nicole currently works full-time at Paul Hastings, L.L.P. as a Corporate Tax Associate and uses her personal experience in foster care to provide guidance on child welfare policies part-time as a Lived Experience Expert on the National Association of Counsel for Children’s National Advisory Council on Children’s Legal Representation and as a Lived Experience Ambassador to the federal Administration for Children & Families in partnership with Think of Us.

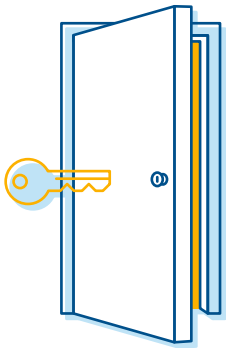


Although my brother and I faced similar judgments in each new, pedagogical environment, these repeated experiences impacted us in different ways. **I escaped into books.** My brother escaped into video games. I won poetry competitions. My brother fought with other students. I did extra homework. My brother failed classes and was forced to go to summer school. Most of the youth who experience the child welfare system experience outcomes like my brother did. Many go on to believe that school is not for them, that they can never excel academically, and that they need to pursue success outside of obtaining higher education. Yet, in my experience working with hundreds of current and former youth in foster care on their academic pursuits, none of these sentiments has rung true. In fact, there is only one conclusion I have reached: the potential of someone who faces the trauma associated with foster care is boundless; the barriers are limiting.

**The child welfare system is traumatizing from the start.** Whether it is removal from the only home one has known, or placement following the untimely passing of beloved parents and/or guardians, entering care is an emotional burden. The adults around you start off trying to help but tend to grow frustrated with you instead. The teachers hold you to the same standards as your classmates while not understanding that you have a gap in your education because it took you weeks to change schools and you have not been able to focus on studying. The foster parents demand respect and appreciation but do not show any compassion for your heartbreak (and the worst ones take advantage of your vulnerability and lack of protection). The social workers are always too tired or too busy to care. It is not long before you, as a mere child, eventually become too tired and too confused to care as well. Is it any wonder foster youth have poorer educational outcomes than their peers?

Change is needed, and it starts from the root of the problem, which is not that all youth in foster care are aggressive or incapable, but that **there are unseen obstacles preventing youth from saying “yes” to every opportunity.** We need to show more understanding and work towards removing barriers, rather than building on top of them. In order to do this, we have to refine care to mean continual empowerment, encouragement, and edification.

**Empowerment means we must allow children to make meaningful choices and present those choices in a way that removes judgment.** For example, when I participated in that third-grade spelling bee, it was because the teacher did not force me to participate, but rather asked me if I was up for it, acknowledging that it was understandable if I was not eager to spell in front of strangers on my first day in a new school. It was empowering to say “yes” because I knew that the teacher allowed all my peers to understand it was more than okay if I said, “no.” The choice was mine. No matter what I said in response to her question, I was safe. It would work wonders if more adults



realized that many children are just scared of doing the wrong thing and the punishments that follow. It makes all the difference in the world when we can decide from a place of safety rather than fear.

Encouragement means, in addition to offering affirming words, we demonstrate affirming actions and **provide children the tools they need to compete and partake before expecting positive results.** This could look like one's support system (e.g., foster parents and teachers) working to identify what gaps might be in a child's education due to moving homes (i.e., did the child miss out on some multiplication lessons in their former school and are now expected to do division at the new one?). Once those gaps are identified, support systems should work to address them; those solutions can be as creative as they are supportive (and should not cease upon one becoming an adult, since the traumas and challenges associated with being in the child welfare system do not suddenly cease as well). I will never forget that one of my law school professors, upon hearing I could not afford one of the very costly textbooks, let me borrow his personal copy since he did not need it 24/7. It cost him nothing but kindness and allowed me to study without the strain of poverty keeping me behind.

**Edification means supporting one's growth through compassionate challenging that is free from assumptions.** If you are blessed with skills and knowledge, be a blessing to others by recognizing your place of privilege and using that platform to help others rise up as well. I am currently a barred attorney working at a corporate law firm where coworkers edify me daily. They are aware that I did not grow up studying finance like they did, so they take time to help me "catch up" without ever assuming I do not know. They first ask me whether I am familiar with concepts and then go above and beyond, providing resources to study, making time to answer any of my questions, and expecting (which is different from demanding) great things from me as much as they do my peers. Day by day, I learn more. Their patience and sacrifices make me want to do my best, and I want to help others achieve as well.

Successful outcomes cannot and will not be the portion of a child who believes that they, rather than a system, have failed. Children are capable of learning and excelling if we will take time to empower, encourage, and edify them to do so. Let us all be receptive to what the education experience should teach us. Let us shift and help each other open the doors towards progress. **I would not be where I am today (a professional with three degrees: Bachelor of Arts, Master of Science, and a Juris Doctorate) without care.** I am grateful to the teachers, colleagues, family, and friends who exuded it. ■