



LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

WHEN YOUTH VOICES RISE AND SYSTEMS RESIST: THE VITRIOL OF PERFORMATIVE LIVED EXPERIENCE INCLUSION

By Ivory Bennett, M.Ed.

There is a myth that child welfare centers children and youth. The reality is that there is an intense and intentional disconnect between what is written in policy and procedure and what happens in practice. Cashmore (2011) notes, “Children’s participation is not simply about being heard, but about having their views taken seriously in decision-making.” Systems claim to center children while prioritizing arbitrary timelines, haphazard compliance practices, and professional hierarchies above the lived experience testimonies of the youth subjected to it — a stark contrast to the warnings of scholars over the last several decades that simply listening to children is not equitable in comparison to actually sharing power with them (Shier, 2001; Cashmore, 2011).

Legally, youth’s disclosures are documented — rarely is this information grounds for meaningful investigation or proactive measures (Shier, 2001). Performative youth voice inclusion — particularly in court, case planning, and permanency hearings — is one example of many where practitioners unintentionally protect and engage in the harmful oppression inevitably engrained in the United States family court systems. Important to note, under Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth’s views must be

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given “due weight” — still, research reveals a persistent gap between obligatory listening and intentional inclusion (Cashmore, 2011; United Nations, 1989).

Unfortunately, identity shapes credibility. And in an ecosystem such as the child welfare landscape, many youth have marginalized identities that are disproportionately represented. Identity, something that is far too often predetermined and projected onto not only youth, but their families, cultures, and communities, is an essential component to their “listen-ability.” Roberts (2002) wrote, “The child welfare system is not a benign force in the lives of Black families;” a stark reminder that not all identities garner the same attentiveness, seriousness, or value.

Black families are often victims to a child welfare system that perpetuates more harm than restoration. Research has long shown that child welfare systems disproportionately surveil Black children (Roberts, 2002), who are often perceived as more adult and less deserving of protection (Morris, 2016), and who may present trauma-affected narratives that professionals misinterpret as inconsistency rather than injury (De Bellis et al., 2013).

I, once a young, black girl with a more mature body and an adultified and parentified awareness of myself and the world, living in an incredibly racist city and culture, often experienced feeling dismissed by individuals who were meant to serve and protect me. Morris (2016) documents how adultification bias leads Black youth — particularly girls — to be viewed as “more culpable and less deserving of protection.” Too often, my experiences only mattered when my story could be plastered as trauma-porn that guilted wealthy patrons into donating more money or resources into whatever entity felt entitled to exploit my lived experiences for their profit.

Zora Neale Hurston once proclaimed, “If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.” It is only when children and youth inconveniently buck against injustices that are seemingly unimportant to the powers that be — misuse of clothing allotments, undignified subjugations, dismissal of cultural practices, and blatant abuse and neglect, just to name a few — that their stories gain traction, to be used against them!

And it is important to note that these stories are typically only heard when being shouted with aggression or coupled with undesired behaviors, because the system often dismisses, ignores, or undervalues calm, rational communication. Moreover, credibility is further compromised when children are ignored; De Bellis et al. (2013) explains that trauma can disrupt memory encoding and retrieval, meaning inconsistencies in children’s accounts may reflect neurobiological stress rather than deception.

It is crucial to explicitly uplift a particular marginalized group the child welfare system often dismisses as unreliable narrators — lived experts with chronic illnesses. Due to the stressful nature of child welfare involvement, those with lived experiences tend to have higher ACE scores, thus higher instances of disease — “Adverse childhood experiences are a leading determinant of the health and well-being of the nation (Burke Harris et al., 2018).”

In other words, systems-involved children and youth are not adequately protected while in the child welfare system and must also deal with those ramifications throughout the entirety of their lives in the forms of health disparities. When identity shapes credibility, the intersections of race, trauma, disability, and professional bias interfere with equitable legal assessments and proceedings that last well beyond childhood.



Far too often, harm disclosures are meticulously documented but insufficiently interrupted. As someone who lived the experiences of foster homes, kinship homes, and even one shelter across the span of 17 years and about a dozen placements, I know what it means for the record to be accurate while the response remains inadequate. I know what Audre Lorde meant when she wrote, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*.

System responses do not always escalate in meaningful ways that reduce harm, according to research on child protection decision-making, even when the risks are clearly identified (Font & Berger, 2015). In practice, this can create a discouraging gap between legal acknowledgement and legal accountability — a case note may accurately reflect what a child communicated; it does not ensure that anyone acted with urgency regarding that shared information.

Institutional reviews of maltreatment disclosures similarly find that systems frequently struggle to translate knowledge into protection, particularly in complex or high-volume environments (Whittaker et al., 2017). Nowhere is this more painfully visible than in fatality review findings, where children are repeatedly described as “known to the system” prior to serious injury or death. These patterns reveal a structural truth: information alone does not save children — timely, decisive intervention does. When case files hold the truth but outcomes remain unchanged, the issue is not documentation capacity but accountability discipline.

My daily work through Youth Voices Rising and InnerViews has reinforced what the research increasingly affirms: lived experience is not anecdotal; it is diagnostic. Scholars of co-production note that integrating lived expertise into system design improves both responsiveness and also legitimacy because it surfaces risks professionals may overlook (Jones et al., 2020). In child welfare, lived experts often function as an early warning system, identifying patterns of harm long before they appear in aggregate data.

Beyond early detection, lived experience operates as an interpretive lens that helps legal and policy actors correctly read what is already in front of them. Beresford (2016) argues that user involvement produces a distinct form of knowledge capable of challenging institutional blind spots. When paired with trauma-informed advocacy approaches that emphasize partnership and power-sharing (Saulnier & Swigonski, 2015), lived expertise becomes a moral accountability mechanism — not just a storytelling exercise. The question, then, is no longer whether to include lived experts, but whether systems are prepared to change because of what lived experts consistently reveal.

Here are some practical steps for attorneys, judges, and advocates to take when shifting from performative listening to meaningful inclusion of youth voice:

- Slow down when harm is disclosed (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges [NCJFCJ], 2017; SAMHSA, 2014):
 - Have resources for your client readily available
 - Have a plan for yourself to allow for healthy processing, offloading, and recovery
- Approach inconsistency as a trauma indicator, not as a moral deception (SAMHSA, 2014)
- Build and protect feedback loops with lived experts that extend beyond courtroom testimony (NCJFCJ, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014)
- Ask: What would accountability require here for restorative justice — beyond procedure? (Piquero et al., 2017)

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Beliefs, values, and morals can and must translate as legal actions. Centering youth voices — honoring the brave stories of their lived experiences — must be an unavoidable and structural foundation of any child welfare-related practices. Child welfare attorneys, judges, and advocates must move beyond performative lived experience inclusion towards centering real, true accountability. Youth voice cannot exist merely as a symbolic performance, but as a sacred, integral, and protected facet of the institution that is the child welfare system. Belief must be centered as an ethical and legal responsibility, not just as an anecdote. Just imagine the possibilities for change if children's words were treated as evidence, not inconvenience! ■

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