

# ‘Youth are not something to check off your to do list’: Poetic inquiry into the symbols youth, parents and professionals use to reimagine supports for youth in foster care

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## Abstract

The child welfare system is characterized by fixed power structures, coercion and hierarchies that privilege the perspectives of a select few. These oppressive aspects of the system quench youth voice and others' voices, especially those with lived experience, frequently omitting them from case- and system-level decisions. Acknowledging the empowering potential of creative and arts-based research, this study used poetic inquiry with youth in or formerly in foster care, parent partners and professionals working in child welfare, inviting them to reimagine how the system could support youth in foster care towards thriving. Through seven poetry focus groups, 41 participants wrote individual and relational poems. Analyses focused on how symbols were used and their suggestions for revisioning child welfare. Seven themes identified the types of symbols used in poems: 1) Nature/Natural Phenomena, 2) Human Body/Senses, 3) Actions, 4) Physical Objects, 5) Paperwork, Cases, Bureaucracy, 6) Connectedness/Family and 7) Strong Emotions. Beyond demonstrating a novel arts-based method, findings offer a new, creative space for understanding the foster care system. Symbols were powerful and cut across life experiences and identities. A key implication pointed to using symbolic language to aid the work of revisioning child welfare towards humanistic and embodied approaches, social justice and well-being.

## KEYWORDS

child welfare, foster care, poetic inquiry, symbolism, systems change, youth voice

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Youth who experience foster care may encounter unique risks related to their health and well-being, such as behavioural health problems, low educational attainment, unemployment as an adult and homelessness (Gypen et al., 2017). Such negative outcomes are more likely for youth who age out of foster care without legal permanency, which underscores the importance of supporting older youth to prepare for and successfully transition into adulthood (Gypen et al., 2017). Yet, recent federal reviews showed that about one-third of older youth

did not experience foster care agencies making concerted efforts to assess their needs and provide appropriate services (Children's Bureau, 2019a). Indeed, youth with foster care experiences have described feeling overwhelmed, confused, voiceless, judged, ashamed, angry and sad (Children's Bureau, 2019b, p. 2), and the professionals working in or around the foster care system have affirmed that these feelings are typical (Children's Bureau, 2019a).

Recently, the US Children's Bureau called for engaging youth and parents in more active and empowering ways (Children's Bureau, 2019b). Recommendations comprised multiple levels, such as

involving family and youth in decision-making that affects their lives; hiring family members and youth with lived experience into leadership positions (example of organizational level); and investing in jurisdiction-wide workforce initiatives that embed family and youth voice (example of system level) (Children's Bureau, 2019a). In taking up this call to raise up youth voices, the present study acknowledged that youth who experience the foster care system acquire lived expertise in knowing how the system affects their lives and the lives of other young people. Though different than the expertise that youth have from foster care, many professionals working in foster care also gain unique perspectives on what works and does not work to support the healthy development of youth in foster care. This deep and experiential-based knowledge has the potential to be used to identify system shortfalls and gaps, revealing opportunities for change and system reform.

One approach to taking up the call to raise up youth voices is to promote youths' lived expertise via creative and arts-based research. Creative methods offer opportunities to empower youth and professionals to work together in co-constructing ideas for system change (Denzin, 2002). The present study used creative and arts-based research methods for this purpose. Specifically, this study utilized poetic inquiry with youth in or formerly in foster care, parent partners and professionals working in the child welfare system, inviting them to reimagine how the child welfare system could be constructed to support youth in foster care towards thriving.

As symbolism was markedly prevalent across poetic responses, this study was oriented to understanding the messages conveyed through symbolism in reimagining support for youth in foster care. Symbols are commonly used in literature, communication and the expressive arts as powerful tools for conveying themes and ideas. Likewise, symbols are a very common feature of poetry. Symbols expand peoples' ability to convey their own lived experiences as well as provide an entry point into more fully understanding others' lived experiences. Thus, this study's use of poetic inquiry and a focus on symbols aligns with the objectives to hear directly from youth who have experienced foster care as well as the professionals that work in this system, trying to support youth towards health and well-being.

### 1.1 | Creative and arts-based research and social work

Creative and arts-based research methods are ideal for centering the lived experiences and ideas of youth in foster care and promoting system change in a community-based manner. These methods, including poetic inquiry, support the development of knowledge that may be more difficult to generate when using traditional quantitative and qualitative methods (Gunaratnam, 2007; Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019). As one specific type of art-based research method, poetic research methods have been utilized to collect and represent data that center participants' voices (Clark & Jen, 2022; Corley, 2020; Jen & Pacey, 2020; Leavy, 2018). Additionally, traditional quantitative and

qualitative methods may inadvertently reproduce the stigma and systemic issues they aim to address (Jen & Pacey, 2020). In contrast, creative and arts-based research fits with approaches that aim to engage people who have been marginalized by our systems because they can radically center peoples' unique reality, allowing them to name that reality as valid and making space for audiences to hear and understand the lived experience from an affective stance (Jen & Pacey, 2020).

Art and artwork, including arts-based research, are consistent with social work practice, values and research. Nearly two decades ago, Denzin (2002) called on critical social workers to 'take sides' and argued that arts-based research provides opportunities for social work researchers to help marginalized and oppressed populations 'find their own cultural homes within the shifting oppressive structures of global and local capitalism' (p. 33). Similarly, other scholars have identified creative and arts-based research methods as tools for social workers to improve their practice with diverse populations and people who experience marginalization and victimization (Corley, 2020). Indeed, art and artwork have been used in myriad ways, such as to promote healing, forge resistance, establish protest, build community, raise consciousness and evoke emotions (Moxley, 2013). Arts-based research can bring awareness to social problems and challenge societal inequity (Moxley, 2013).

There are many types of creative and arts-based research methods such as storytelling, poetic inquiry, photovoice and digital storytelling, among others (Leavy, 2018). Poetic inquiry allows the use of language in unique ways (Poindexter, 2002) to better understand the context and emotional aspects of participants' experiences (Furman et al., 2006). As with creative and arts-based methods more broadly, research poems can increase understanding of marginalized identities or experiences, as well as resist stigma by illustrating the complexity of a stigmatized experience (Jen & Pacey, 2020). Research poems may also have important utility for exploring complex relationships (Langer & Furman, 2004). Poetic inquiry and research poems have been used with social workers and related disciplines (Clark & Jen, 2022), Black high school students and their single mothers (Corley, 2020), researchers within a special education music class (Cousik, 2014), queer and trans youth and older adults (Jen & Pacey, 2020) and an individual's experiences with his father's cancer (Furman, 2004).

### 1.2 | Arts-based research studies in child welfare

Numerous qualitative studies have been conducted on child welfare, including studies that include youth participants. A recent systematic review identified 39 qualitative studies in English from 2001 to 2018, showing that interviews were the most common data collection method and that no methods were explicitly arts-based (Wilson et al., 2020). In their qualitative evidence synthesis, these researchers identified the need for more research on youth's emotional experiences of the child welfare system. To our knowledge, no prior research has used poetic inquiry within foster care settings. However,

our literature review found that arts-based research methods have recently expanded into this field.

We identified six studies that have examined experiences of the foster care or child welfare system using arts-based methods. Three of the studies used photovoice with older youth populations, including youth who had aged out of foster care and experienced transitional housing (Curry & Abrams, 2015), LGBTQ youth who were formerly in foster care (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019) and youth aging out of foster care (Doucet et al., 2021). Two studies used body mapping, one with young women who had been adopted from foster care (Ellem et al., 2020) and the other with mothers whose children had been placed in foster care (Collings et al., 2021). One study applied a narradrama approach with young women adopted from foster care, focusing on their developing personal public service announcements as a tool for supporting and developing self-identity (Savage, 2020).

Overall, these arts-based studies that involved people with lived experience of foster care demonstrated the usability of creative methods, describing several key features and benefits. While each study documented distinct research processes, they collectively identified that arts-based methods provided space for community building. This sense of community and belonging was particularly important for youth who were or have been in foster care because their identity associated with foster care was largely invisible, isolated, underrepresented and often stigmatized and marginalized (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019; Doucet et al., 2021; Savage, 2020). In addition to the power gained from realizing that they were not alone in their foster care experiences, these studies described how arts-based methods were pivotal in promoting a safe space for vulnerability, creativity and individual growth (Savage, 2020). By working anonymously and being focused on the art task, participants' worries about being artistically competent were relieved so they could more freely describe their experiences of foster care (Savage, 2020). Moreover, because the process relied on diverse and creative expression and not solely on building relationships through conversation, participants were able to build trust that was rooted in how people acted rather than in how they spoke (Doucet et al., 2021). These studies described arts-based methods as shifting the narrative from a deficit focus to a strengths orientation that was powerful, supportive and healing even with time-limited interactions (Collings et al., 2021; Doucet et al., 2021; Ellem et al., 2020; Savage, 2020).

In addition to portraying arts-based methods as beneficial for youth with foster care experiences, this set of studies demonstrated the use of symbols to provide potent representations of participants' affective experiences of foster care, both negative and positive. For instance, both body mapping studies described symbols for loss and grief, such as broken hearts, drowning and fetal positions (Collings et al., 2021; Ellem et al., 2020). Photo voice studies showed images that portrayed experiences and emotions around feelings of dehumanization and voicelessness within foster care (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019). They also found that participants creatively used ordinary images to represent positive emotions, change and growth. For example, one study reported that youth symbolized a fresh start with images of a room renovation and another youth denoted their coming

through a struggle with images of light breaking through storm clouds (Curry & Abrams, 2015). In sum, symbols were common across these studies and used as non-verbal means to effectively portray significant experiences, strong emotions and powerful messages.

### 1.3 | Study rationale

This study occurred as a part of a broader arts-based, participatory action study. The overarching study's impetus was to develop ideas for new visions of the child welfare system using authentic voices of young people who have lived expertise and professionals with work experiences in the system. Upon observing the frequent use of symbols, our research questions for this sub-study were sharpened to the following: How were symbols used in participants' poems, and what lessons do they communicate for revisioning the child welfare system? As supported by the above literature review, three primary rationales underly our study. First, voices are needed from people with direct knowledge of the foster care system. Necessary are the voices of youth who experience an array of challenging processes and outcomes in and after foster care. Likewise, many professionals encounter the foster care system as harsh, unsupportive and coercive (Haight et al., 2017), contributing to secondary traumatic stress, burnout and other negative consequences for their well-being (Braithwaite, 2021). While we acknowledge the clear power differential and authority that professionals have over the lives of youth and families, we also question whether the unstated binary of professionals versus youth/families is absolute and rigid. Child welfare professionals also experience powerlessness and are vulnerable to marginalization in the overall oppressive nature of the foster care system (Braithwaite, 2021; Haight et al., 2017), especially when their firsthand professional experiences are devalued or excluded from decision making and policy development. Thus, this study's approach to gathering the voices of both youth and professionals is warranted.

Second, by applying poetic inquiry, we propose that arts-based research provides an advantageous and well-fitting approach to elicit experientially grounded and creative ideas for rethinking the child welfare system. Given the need to more fully explore the emotional aspects of foster care lived experiences (Wilson et al., 2020), arts-based research opens new doors to building knowledge of emotions.

Our third rationale forms the basis for our analysis of symbols. A focus on symbols offers a distinct approach to examining people's ideas about the child welfare system. In the essay 'Poetry is not a luxury', Lorde (1984) describes poetry as vital to existence and resistance, a process that gives name to feelings and experiences, which then establish thoughts, from which potential for ideas, action and change emerge and expand. Symbolism and metaphors may be a form of language that connects and moves child welfare advocates through these junctures together to build shared meaning and co-construct supportive systems. Meaning making is a process in motion that constructs and reconstructs what we know (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013). In brief, meaning making becomes richer and more complex as we gain new experiences. Furthermore, the salience of symbols across all

poems in this study is noteworthy. In centering the knowledge of youth and professional participants, we drew from critical emancipatory research, an anti-oppressive methodology that rejects neutral analysis (Nkoane, 2012). Through critical lenses, we conducted close and responsive readings which included interrogating what we know and naming and following emerging cues that might inform shared meaning making (Nkoane, 2012). We could not dismiss the prevalence of symbols as poetic flourish nor make unexamined assumptions about meaning. Language is central to meaning making, and meaning making is at the mercy of social constructs and dominant discourses that privilege certain languages and ways of knowing and distort others (Nkoane, 2012).

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Project setting

As part of the Kansas Strong for Children and Families initiative, this study occurred as a sub-study of a statewide project aimed at improving child welfare court and agency practices in a Midwestern state. All study protocols for human subjects research were approved by the University of Kansas Institutional Review Board.

### 2.2 | Positionality statements

The study's research team comprised six members each with unique positionalities. Dr. Shelby Clark is a White, cisgender woman, who holds a PhD in social work. Dr. Clark is a faculty member and early-career scholar whose research focuses broadly on the use of multi-level interventions to improve well-being in human service settings, including child welfare. Dr. Clark has both work and lived experiences engaging with child welfare systems. These experiences shape her scholarly interests in understanding and addressing well-being and traumatic stress from a holistic and multi-level approach.

Dr. Becci Akin was the parent project's principal investigator. Dr. Akin is a White cisgender woman who also identifies as a first-generation college student and faculty member with a PhD in social work. Her research has largely focused on improving child welfare systems after starting as a practitioner, working in community settings and serving as a foster parent.

Sarah McCall is a South Asian and white biracial cisgender woman. She holds a master's degree in Library and Information Science and works on a social work research team focused on strengthening child welfare systems. Ms. McCall experiences in a multiply marginalized family and their struggles to navigate systems inform her interests in family well-being and in illuminating the knowledge and voices of impacted people as a means of achieving systemic changes.

Dr. Meg Paceley is a White, queer and gender queer woman with a PhD in social work. They joined the team during the analysis stages. Their work centers on system change for marginalized youth

and the use of creative methods to challenge stigma and promote equity.

Dr. Kaela Byers was the parent project's co-investigator. Dr. Byers is a White, cisgender woman and a faculty member with a PhD in social work. Dr. Byer's scholarship, centered on systems change to support families and communities, is informed by both professional and lived experiences engaging with child welfare and other systems.

Mariana Gomez is a Latinx, cisgender woman. She is an undergraduate student studying psychology and social welfare and is a former foster youth herself. Her lived experience as a foster child inspires her work and enables her to provide unique perspectives on child welfare and the foster care system while advocating as a voice for change.

### 2.3 | Design

In this study, poetic inquiry was selected as a key design feature for four purposes. First, when designing this study, two team members met with youth with lived foster care experience. During these meetings, youth expressed a desire to use their voices through creative expression. Second, the nature of the overarching research question called for the study to be designed and conducted in a manner that supported creative thinking. Third, collecting poetry data ensured findings would be disseminated with participant voices. Fourth, research poetry invites listening and learning (Neilsen, 2004). While this study responded to the Children's Bureau's call to include youth voice, the research team felt that the design required inviting more than inclusion. The aim was for the study to also encourage connection, empathy and action.

More specifically, this study utilized relational poetry (Witkin, 2007). Relational poems utilize collaboration and co-creation of poems to explore the interactions of different and related realities (Witkin, 2007). First, individuals write their own poems. Second, lines from different writers' poems are woven together in order to create '...a new poem that is more than either poem alone' (Witkin, 2007, p. 478). The research team selected to utilize relational poetry in order to normalize the creative process and to support participants in creating meaning together. The research team recognized that asking youth and professionals to write poems to imagine an improved child welfare system may be uncomfortable. The team felt encouraging both individual and collective writing may normalize discomfort in the creative process. Additionally, collaborating through relational poetry gave participants opportunities to refine the meaning, purpose and voice within their poems.

### 2.4 | Participants

Purposive sampling was used within a statewide project in a Midwestern state. The sample included 41 participants, including youth with foster care experiences ( $n = 13$ ), parents ( $n = 2$ ) and child welfare

professionals ( $n = 28$ ). Participants who were parents and professionals were recruited from the overall project's steering committee. Several strategies were used to recruit youth participants. First, researchers partnered with a statewide coalition of youth with lived foster care experience to recruit youth using flyers and word of mouth. Second, researchers met with foster care workers who were working directly with youth ages 14 and older. Foster care workers served as liaisons between research staff and youth participants. Parents and professionals were not compensated for participation as their participation was a part of their regular work duties. Youth participants received \$25 as compensation for participating in poetry focus groups.

## 2.5 | Data collection

Data were collected through poetry focus groups from October 2020 to March 2021. Due to data collection restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, all poetry focus groups were held virtually by Zoom. In total, seven focus groups were held. Three with parents and professionals and four with youth. With the intent of limiting barriers to participation, focus groups were scheduled with input from study collaborators including professionals and youth. Focus groups included 2–14 participants. Group size varied due to differences in attendance patterns.

Dr. Clark and Ms. McCall facilitated the poetry focus groups. Focus groups began by orienting participants to poetic inquiry and relational poetry as research methods. Participants were provided with instructions about the process of generating research data through poems and information regarding the aim of the overarching study to develop practice and policy recommendations to improve the experiences of youth in foster care. Participants first responded to open-ended prompts about improving the experiences of youth in foster care by writing poems individually. Participants then copied their individual poems into a shared document. Co-created relational poems were developed by participants by weaving together lines from individual poems. The focus groups generated 41 individual data poems and 15 relational poems.

## 2.6 | Data analysis

Individual and relational poems were imported into Dedoose for coding and analysis. Four study team members conducted analyses collaboratively. Each team member read poems individually. Upon initial reading, the team noted the widespread use of symbolism and subsequently coded all symbols in poems. Coding occurred in a collaborative format as team members met by Zoom, took turns reading poems aloud line by line and determined coding through discussion and consensus. The second author reviewed coded symbols to identify seven preliminary categories of symbols. For example, one category was identified as 'weather, nature, natural phenomena' and included phrases like 'the calm in the storm' and 'the skies are ever

changing'. The team discussed initial categories and any areas of disagreement. For example, in the nature category, the team discussed whether 'light' and 'shining' were captured within nature or were outside of it. Subsequent rounds of discussion led to a final set of seven categories. Next, categories were compared across different participant groups to identify whether some were more prevalent among youth or adult participants. Rigour and trustworthiness were enhanced by using consultation with people with lived foster care expertise, multiple reads, team co-coding, team consensus, detailed audit trail of coding and analysis and peer debriefing among researchers. Member checking occurred through presenting findings to professional, parent and youth participants and receiving their feedback regarding the alignment of the study's findings with their experiences. Additionally, member checking occurred through co-presenting findings from the study with youth participants at state and national conferences.

## 3 | RESULTS

Our analyses identified seven major themes that capture the types of symbols used by participants in individual and relational poems: 1) Nature/Natural Phenomena, 2) Human Body and Senses, 3) Actions, 4) Physical Objects, 5) Paperwork, Cases, Bureaucracy, 6) Connectedness and Family and 7) Metaphors for Strong Emotions. Each category is described as distinct; however, the results reveal that they also overlap and connect with one another.

As poetry, the symbols within the seven themes sometimes appeared in a short line or stanza, with symbolic meanings that could not be separated into mutually exclusive categories. We describe each theme separately to illustrate how they appeared within and across poems and invite readers to engage with the symbols and excerpts as both art and data, allowing their own interpretations and ideas to surface.

### 3.1 | Nature/natural phenomena

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

Symbols related to nature and natural phenomena included words like wind, storm, rain, shine, stars, sky, universe and forcefield and spoke to a need for hope and aspiration within the child welfare system. This symbol was primarily used by adult participants (i.e., parents and professionals) to send messages of hope to youth in foster care and recommend that foster care staff instill hope and hold high aspirations for youth in their care. While much of the symbolism in this category embraced hope for youth in foster care, poems also recognized the importance of understanding how hope and trauma can both be

present. For example, the poignant verse at the start of this section is part of a co-created poem by adults, using the symbols of rain and being drenched to describe the trauma and emotional toll experienced by youth and the umbrella as a temporary or inadequate fix.

Participants used symbolism to name the importance of providing space for youth to share their truth and reality. Another poem grappling with the duality of holding both hope and space for the reality of trauma included the excerpt 'Be the calm in the storm' as a directive to professionals to remain steady in their challenging work with families and children, however, ended by including permission to challenge injustices and fight for system change. Messages to youth were focused on moving forward, being strong and authentic and finding hope in their future. In one poem, an adult used the symbolism of wind: 'I hope you find purpose and passion, and the wind at your back'. In an adult co-created poem directed towards youth, a poem starts with a single word: 'Shine' as a directive or wish to youth. Later in the poem, the poets revisit this wish: 'Thrive in what makes you shine in your own unique way', sending a message of authenticity and future.

### 3.2 | Human body and senses

A voice is a powerful thing, but what do you do when you feel you can no longer speak?

...

So I do not speak, or at least not the truth, because the truth is too much to bear.

I speak with my eyes.

Look into my soul when you ask me questions in case my words are a lie.

Parts of the human body, both physical and metaphysical, as well as bodily senses, included words such as heart, toes, face, scars, listening, bruises, soul, mind and voice. Included in poems by both youth and adults, these symbols were illustrated a need for a holistic and embodied understanding of youths' experiences of foster care. The two excerpts above are from one poem written by a youth; the beginning of their poem used words like voice and speak to symbolize a loss of power. Later in their poem, they revisit speaking, pleading with workers to see beyond the actual words they use to look within their soul, crying out 'I speak with my eyes'.

Interestingly, some adult participants took on the perspective of being a youth when writing their poems. This was a unique phenomenon that occurred when adult professionals working within the system wrote poems imagining experiences of youth and writing in the first person. Youth participants did not take on perspectives other than their own. One professional imagined a youth experiencing fear and isolation. They wrote, 'I'm 18 but my heart is 8, I'm not ready, I'm scared, I'm alone'. Adult participants also used symbols of the human body and senses more broadly than youth participants. Adult participants often utilized symbols to depict ways in which they hoped workers would show up in their work with youth. One included this

excerpt in their poem, asking workers to be fully present and with youth: 'Listen with your heart. Listen from your toes'. Another adult sent a message to youth in foster care, reminding them they are more than their trauma: 'I hope that the challenges you face, give way to wisdom and grace, more so than scars and bruises'.

### 3.3 | Actions

We trip and learn which bumps in the road to avoid.

Keep traveling the path.

So others know which direction to go.

Action symbols included words like stand, trip, travel, listen and care. These symbols captured key concepts for relationship building such as self-determination, respect, empathy, compassion/care, hope and humanity/humanness. In the excerpt above, a professional uses the symbol of tripping to describe the mistakes professionals make—as they are human—and the need to learn from them. The professional then uses the phrase 'traveling the path' to encourage professionals to persevere and make things better. Numerous professionals emphasized the need to listen and defer to the expertise of youth, by using a variety of action symbols. One professional wrote: 'Listen to learn not just to respond. They are the experts of their lives. We are simply guests'. Other professionals' poems read: 'Stand beside them as they walk this terrifying journey and let them know they have support' and 'Don't pretend to know what it feels like to walk in their shoes, but instead just walk beside them'. One youth called on professionals to not give up on them: 'I need you to care enough to hold on'.

### 3.4 | Physical objects

Don't give up on me

Keep the door open for when I'm ready

Ready to forgive the system, my family, myself

It's never too late

Physical objects included words like book, poem, umbrella, blender and door. These objects symbolized hope, respect and opportunity and were utilized by youth and adult participants. In an excerpt by a youth engaged in foster care, the youth uses the door as a symbol of hope and opportunity, asking workers to continue to make space for them as they work through their trauma. Another youth used a blender to symbolize the chaos they felt inside when they moved from foster home to foster home: 'Thoughts are thrown around my mind \*back and forth\* like a blender'.

Adults also used physical objects as symbols in their poems. One spoke of hope, the future and optimism in a message to youth: 'Keep a poem in your pocket and a picture in your head and you'll never feel lonely'. Another adult described the challenging nature of their job using a book as a symbol: 'We are all doing our best, without a book of answers'.

### 3.5 | Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy

They want to know all of my secrets.

...

But they already know more than they should.

Boxes of binders and papers meant to help, but only making me feel like a lab rat.

...

I am more than some words written down on a paper.

Symbols in this section referenced paperwork, youth as cases and the ever-present bureaucracy of the child welfare system. These symbols were utilized by youth and adults to reference dehumanizing elements of the child welfare system. The above excerpt from a youth in foster care uses the phrases 'boxes of binders and papers' and 'words written down on a paper' to symbolize the lack of humanity they felt in the system, as well as the vulnerability of having all their experiences and trauma in a binder for all to see. Another youth shared a similar feeling about their life being contained in a file while also expressing a desire for self-determination and autonomy: 'Let me see my life. It's my file'. Adults used the symbol of a checkbox regularly, alluding to the compliance nature of foster care and encouraging professionals to humanize youth in their care: 'Youth are not something to check off your to do list', 'They are more than a checkbox. More than a task' and 'Truly take an interest in the youth as a person as they are not just a case'.

### 3.6 | Connectedness and family

Remember this

We are all bound together by this complex thing called humanity

Remember this and eventually they becomes

We...

Connectedness and family symbolized family/relationship-oriented goals of the system. Interestingly, these symbols were used predominantly by adult participants. In the excerpt at the start of this section, the poet reminds us of the interconnectedness of humanity and the need to maintain this awareness in working with youth in foster care. Several adults spoke of family, sending wishes to youth that they would 'experience the shelter of family' or noting that 'family is the heart'. Adult poets also spoke to the need to help youth build a community of support, such as one professional who said 'Help them find their tribe. Build the tribe up'.

Youth poems included a sense of common humanity with professionals in the system and described the positive impact of meaningful relationships with them. One youth described the impact of their case manager: 'I carry all your wisdom that you passed onto me today'. Additionally, youth demonstrated a desire to stay connected to their family members. One youth explained: 'What I needed was structure... A place I could reside to have a relationship with my sister and

brothers'. Another wrote that they needed 'a TRIBE of people that understand that sometimes life isn't fair'.

### 3.7 | Metaphors for strong emotions

Trauma ripples out and touches everything.

...

Rage against the injustices.

Shout it from the rooftops.

Strong emotions were present throughout most participants' poems; however, some poets used metaphors for strong emotions in symbolic and powerful ways. These metaphors represented a range of concepts from empowering to challenging. In one poem an adult describes the trauma youth experience as 'rippling out and touching everything', speaking to the invasive and complex nature of system and individual trauma. They speak of anger and rage in their directive to others to 'rage against injustice' on behalf of youth in foster care. Youth describe feeling in chaos, fearful, confused and angry: 'I stand here numb/I can't believe my eyes/One second I had been twiddling my thumbs/And the next, I want to die'. One professional writing from the perspective of a youth wrote a reminder that 'When I flip my lid, it may not be about you'. Another professional writing from the perspective of a youth imagined, 'I'm not ready, I'm scared, I'm alone'.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study used poetic inquiry to seek the input of youth and parents with lived experience of foster care and professionals working in foster care to build an understanding of foster care and how it could be reshaped to support youth towards thriving. Our analysis centered on symbolism in participants' poems as a relevant approach to identifying the ways in which individuals used imagery, metaphors and other symbolic languages as one tool for meaning making in their responses to the overarching study's invitation to re-imagine foster care. Overall, we identified seven categories of symbols used across the study's poems, including 1) Nature/Natural Phenomena, 2) Human Body and Senses, 3) Actions, 4) Physical Objects, 5) Paperwork, Cases, Bureaucracy, 6) Connectedness and Family and 7) Metaphors for Strong Emotions. To our knowledge, this study represents the first poetic inquiry into child welfare. Besides demonstrating the application of a novel arts-based method, our findings also offer one new space for understanding the foster care system from a unique and creative vantage point, potentially providing insights for developing the next steps to reimagine and strengthen foster care in support of the health and well-being of youth. Below is a discussion of the key themes, how they relate to existing literature and ideas on potential implications for practice and future research. Table 1 outlines the central recommendations for child welfare practice and scholarship that were developed as a result of the findings from this study.

**TABLE 1** Summary of recommendations for transforming child welfare practice, policy and scholarship

Recommendation	Applicable analytic categories
Name and create space for complex and multi-faceted emotions experienced by youth and professionals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metaphors for strong emotions</li> <li>• Nature/natural phenomena</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>
Facilitate hope and aspirations for youth in foster care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Metaphors for strong emotions</li> </ul>
Support youth in healthy growth and development through life transitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> </ul>
Create a healing system that prioritizes holistic and embodied well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human body and senses</li> <li>• Nature/natural phenomenon</li> </ul>
Honour youth and professionals as whole people with multi-faceted identities and experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connectedness and family</li> <li>• Human body and senses</li> </ul>
Prioritize authentic and caring relationships over tasks and bureaucracy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connectedness and family</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>
Rethink and revise system policies and procedures to minimize the impact of the bureaucratic and dehumanizing aspects of the child welfare system, including eliminating dehumanizing language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Physical objects</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>
Center youth self-determination, voice and expertise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Nature/natural phenomenon</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>
Create and nurture a child welfare workforce that shows up authentically and is emotionally and relationally intelligent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human body and senses</li> <li>• Connectedness and family</li> </ul>
Challenge injustices and fight for system change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>
Facilitate action and accountability mechanisms to ensure progress and change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actions</li> <li>• Paperwork, cases and bureaucracy</li> </ul>

Across the identified categories of symbols, these findings demonstrated that the use of poetic inquiry to explore ideas for revisioning the child welfare system elicited strong emotions from both youth and adult participants. More specifically, the emotions of trauma, grief and loss were frequently portrayed via symbols, showing up most noticeably in the categories of nature/natural phenomena and physical objects. Conversely, symbols of difficult and challenging emotions sat alongside pleasant emotions, such as tenacity, resilience and hope.

Observing these two countering types of emotion suggests that youth and adults' cognitive and affective responses to foster care may represent a 'both/and' phenomenon that comprises pain and sorrow as well as strengths and optimism. As multiple types of emotions were present and in tension with one another, one implication for child welfare practitioners to better support youth may be that they name, give space and accept contrasting emotions and experiences even within the same individual and themselves. Moreover, the onus to provide emotionally healthy and responsive interactions and environments with youth moves beyond workers alone. Child welfare systems and organizations aimed at better supporting youth must also acknowledge, name and allow for emotions to be present in work that inherently invokes affective responses.

Additionally, the common use of weather-related symbols may underscore humans' connectedness with the natural world and reveal a space for reflection and healing. This study's findings are consistent with prior studies that also found symbols, including nature and weather-oriented images, communicating trauma, loss and hope (Collings et al., 2021; Curry & Abrams, 2015) as well as other strong emotions (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019; Doucet et al., 2021; Ellem et al., 2020; Savage, 2020). Our findings about hope and resilience are similar to a prior photo voice study with youth aging out of foster care, which described arts-based participatory approaches as helping youth to 'flip the narrative' away from a focus on deficits and pathology and towards a foster care system that can be nurturing and build upon youths' strengths and aspirations (Doucet et al., 2021, p. 9). The prominence of hope and resilience may speak to a future orientation that acknowledges the life transitions that lay before youth, including the usual transitions of adolescent development as well as the unique transition of leaving foster care. The present study's poets seem to acknowledge that foster care intersects with youth development and can facilitate or thwart developmental trajectories. Overall, their symbols relayed individual and collective yearning for a transformed child welfare system that would support youth in healthy growth, development and a thriving future. This finding aligns with the movement for promoting normalcy for all children and youth in foster care (Jacobson, 2016; Perlmutter, 2017; Pokempner et al., 2015).

While our analysis of symbols revealed themes on how the system dehumanizes youth and families, it also spotlighted glimpses of empathy, compassion and humanity. In line with prior studies (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019; Collings et al., 2021; Ellem et al., 2020), youths' symbols that referred to the human body and senses exclaimed their desire to be recognized as a whole person; treated with kindness, care and humanity; and acknowledged and respected as the primary decision maker about their own lives. Both youth and adults used symbolic language about paperwork and bureaucracy to emphasize the oppressive nature of the system, again calling it out for dehumanizing youth and leaving them voiceless. Adults' poems expressed empathy, especially those that took on a youth's persona and recognized that youths' experiences of foster care were holistic and all-encompassing. Importantly, both youth and adults used symbols to explicate foster care as an experience that supersedes



cognition and affect, using a wide range of symbols and metaphors that imply experiences as truly embodied. Collectively, this study described child welfare work as more than just a job, underscoring that the system impacts whole people but that, at present, it may not be set up to nurture whole people. To support youth towards thriving, these findings suggest that the foster care system could better acknowledge and respond to the full and complete experiences of youth by expanding the use of embodied practices and interventions, such as those discussed by other scholars (Huss & Sela-Amit, 2019; Tangenberg & Kemp, 2002; van Rhyn et al., 2021). Given the prevalence of trauma among youth and professionals in the child welfare system, necessary are responses that go beyond telling people to use self-care; rather, resources and strategies are needed at re-visioned organizational and systems level to embrace and care for whole people. Likewise, foster care research has an opportunity to broaden and deepen its use of creative and arts-based methods that more fully honour the whole person.

In contrast to metaphors that signalled bureaucratic and compliance-driven aspects of foster care, youth and adult participants' re-visioned system was oriented to relationship-centered practice. These ideas emerged most clearly from poems that used symbols for bureaucracy, actions and connectedness/family. In all, this study's poets were pleading with the system to acknowledge the connection between interpersonal connections and well-being and make relationships—whether personal, familial or professional—central to work with youth and families. These themes echo those found by Doucet et al. (2021) and Ellem et al. (2020), which also indicated a focus on relationships and connections. Our study extends these earlier findings by also revealing a research process where poems became a forum in which youth and professionals communicated with one another, as though they were in conversation, listening to one another and co-creating ideas for reform and action. While relationship-centered practice and research are not novel ideas, more work is needed to build new structures, policies and funding mechanisms that will allow relationships to be central to the foster care system.

Symbols surfaced ideas for action and often relayed instructions for professionals in and around the child welfare system. These instructions originated from both adult and youth participants. While instructions connected to other prominent themes described above (e.g., resilience, hope, empathy, self-determination and relationally centered), they were noticeable in their nearly exclusive micro-level focus on seeking to improve the interactions between professionals and youth. These instructive aspects of our findings resemble prior studies that showed youths' emphasis on identifying specific needs for the system to address, such as learning new skills and requiring financial support for their transition out of foster care (Curry & Abrams, 2015). While lacking an emphasis on macro or structural forces that influence the child welfare system (e.g., courts), this study's poems often called for action and accountability, especially in the justice and advocacy-focused ideas that were observed in the nature/natural phenomena and strong emotions symbols.

## 4.1 | Limitations

This study's findings should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, although recruiting participants through purposive sampling was an appropriate approach for the study design, we also acknowledge this study's sample included more professional voices than youth or parent voices. Future research should expand participants to include more parents and youth. Although considerable resources were given to recruiting youth, accessing this population was challenging. Future research should also plan and account for potential difficulties in accessing and recruiting youth and parents into such studies in order to maximize their participation. Additionally, other constituents of the child welfare system, such as court/legal professionals may have different perspectives that would enrich future scholarship. Second, this study was conducted in a U.S. Midwestern state with a privatized child welfare system. Other studies should examine whether similar findings are identified in different regions of the United States and the globe. Third, relational poems were collected at a single point in time and cannot speak to how perspectives may fluctuate at different time points. Longitudinal investigations may be valuable to understand how perspectives and use of symbols change according to external time-specific factors as well as how individuals' views vary over time. Fourth, future research could also examine the use of symbols and their corresponding themes among adults who were formerly in foster care by inviting their input multiple years after leaving the foster care system. Finally, this study used only poetic inquiry as its arts-based method; future work with other arts-based methods may reveal additional themes and should be investigated. For example, methods that rely on visual images might differ from those identified in language-based metaphors.

## 4.2 | Conclusion

This study contributes to the foster care literature by centering youth, professional and parent voices, using creative expressions and co-constructed knowledge for system change in child welfare. Attending to the symbols that study participants used in their poems to represent complex and multi-faceted experiences of foster care may be helpful for a fuller, more holistic portrayal of child welfare and developing new visions of supporting youth towards thriving. As has been acknowledged by prior scholarship, social work researchers can be a conduit for youth storytelling and advocacy (Perlmutter, 2017). By understanding and leveraging the power of metaphor, child welfare scholarship can ask about existing symbols within the system and whether they have their intended impact. Symbols are powerful teachers and provide ways to communicate that cut across life experiences and identities. Given the coercive and oppressive aspects of the child welfare system, symbols may be used—especially by people with less power in a hierarchical system who may be cautious in choosing their words—to convey critical information and create new opportunities for system change efforts.

Through newly co-constructed language and meaning making, youth, parents and professionals can design new ways of working in child welfare. Symbolic language can aid our work to revisioning child welfare towards humanistic and embodied approaches, social justice and well-being.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

All authors report no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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