

in education Volume 31, Number 1, 2026 Winter (Special Issue)**The Story of *Blackout*: Neuroqueer Identities and Arts-Based Pedagogy in Education****Editorial by Guest Editor**Connie Morrison, *Memorial University*

Growing up, I recall seeing a poster with a cartoon image of an elephant surrounded by blind figures, each describing what they could feel. “It’s a fan.” “It’s a rope.” “It’s a tree.” “It’s a spear.” “It’s a snake.” “It’s a wall,” each character exclaimed. Later on, I learned the profound insights from the parable of “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” which likely came from Indian or Buddhist roots. Each of the characters in the image describes what they feel by relating their experience to what they know and to the immediate evidence in front of them. None of them is wrong, but none of them is entirely correct either. Instead, perspectives are subjective and limited. Seeing the entire elephant also requires distance, an ability to zoom out, measured both physically and emotionally. While this analogy is imperfect, it serves as an introduction to the intentions of this special issue. The *Blackout* youth theatre project is our elephant. This timely and ambitious project by the ECHO (Equity Collective for Hope and Opportunity) Lab Collective cannot be ignored. In 2024, a group of neurodiverse LGBTQTSIA+ students were brought together to create a musical that reflected their lived experiences around Pride events. Each contributor to this issue reflects on a distinct aspect of the project--before, during, and after its staging. In a departure from other academic journals, we deliberately invited community educators to join us in sharing their insights into and out of this project as a way to provide a fuller, more nuanced description of the project and its impact on the community.

This special issue opens by situating *Blackout* within the broader institutional, methodological, and ethical conditions that shape arts-based, community-engaged research in education today. The issue’s foreword acknowledges the political and institutional stakes, the methodological commitments (arts-based, youth-engaged, co-created), and the leadership challenge that animates the issue. The sequencing of the articles begins with institutional critique, then deliberately foregrounds community educators’ perspectives before turning toward academic research contributions, including theoretical and reflexive methods, such as autoethnography, found poetry, personal narrative, and critical literacy, to closely examine how identity and self are implicated in pedagogical systems and structures that create academic and community knowledge. The structure of this special issue purposefully and progressively decenters academic authority to trouble taken-for-granted discourses of institutional authority *and* to help educators, regardless of their backgrounds, reimagine what might be possible in the name of inclusive practice.

Pamela Osmond-Johnson’s Foreword, *Institutional Inhospitability and the Myth of Inclusion*, provides an observer’s introduction to this transformative project, situating *Blackout* as both a collaborative arts-based research project and a critical intervention into the contemporary academy. From her position as Dean of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University, Osmond Johnson notes how the co-creation of a musical theatre production with neuroqueer youth, community partners, and academic researchers culminated in research that is at once relational, performative, and grounded in affective practice that exceeds conventional methodological boundaries. Through her administrative lens, she interrogates the disjuncture between universities’ rhetorical commitments to inclusion and the administrative, ethical, and evaluative regimes that can marginalize non-traditional research practices and render community collaborators invisible.

Her introduction concludes with a call for social justice-oriented academic leadership, arguing that meaningful institutional change requires leaders to move beyond symbolic support toward advocacy that protects, sustains, and legitimizes high-risk, high-impact scholarship conducted with equity-deserving communities.

While the journal's Foreword maps the institutional terrain within which projects like *Blackout* must operate, the next contributions shift attention toward the lived pedagogical and relational spaces where this work unfolds by centring the perspectives of community educators.

The essay, *Where Science Meets Stage: Embracing Art in the Practice of Research* by **Sydney Wells**, serves as the first of these community-based reflections, offering an epistemological exploration of art, learning, and neurodivergence grounded in lived experience. The incorporation of community voices in a traditionally academic journal is a calculated and deliberate gesture that aligns with this issue's broader commitment to co-creation, affect, and community knowledge production. This contribution brings a community educator's reflective voice into dialogue with the issue's broader explorations of arts-based research, neurodivergence, and collaborative knowledge-making. Writing from the intersection of artistic practice and scientific inquiry, the author reflects on her participation in *Blackout* as a formative space where creative expression, research, and identity converge. Organized around three interrelated insights: expressive art as a means of processing emotion and experience, as a tool for communication and learning, and as a practice that cultivates community, the essay foregrounds art as a vital epistemic resource rather than a supplementary pedagogical strategy. Drawing on her engagement with research related to ADHD, the author illuminates how neurodivergent ways of knowing are expressed, shared, and affirmed through collective art-making. By centring lived experience and community-based pedagogy, this contribution deepens the issue's commitment to inclusive scholarship by demonstrating how meaning, empathy, and learning emerge through creative, relational practice beyond conventional academic frames.

Building on this pedagogical focus, the second community-authored essay brings forward another perspective grounded in relational practice and experiential knowledge. This second submission from a community educator is **Courtney Fowler's** *Seeking Refuge: A Community Educator's Reflections on Neurodivergent Teaching and Hope*. Fowler's reflective narrative contribution illuminates the experience of a community educator and performer whose work has been formally recognized through the Faculty of Education's Dean's Award for Excellence in Community Teaching at Memorial University. Writing from outside the conventional boundaries of academic authorship, Fowler offers a grounded and rich account of her engagement with *Blackout*, exploring how art-making can function as a site of refuge, affirmation, and possibility for neuroqueer youth. Through storytelling and reflection, the essay examines the pedagogical significance of shame-free, relational spaces in which young people can engage in artistic practice to make sense of their lives and articulate complex social realities. This contribution extends the issue's commitment to shared authorship and inclusive knowledge production, underscoring the vital role that community expertise plays in reimagining education, research, and care beyond the academy.

Taken together these community-based perspectives set the stage for the research contributions that follow, which examine how meaning, identity, and pedagogy are negotiated within educational and scholarly contexts connected to the *Blackout* project.

The next article moves from a critique of the researcher-self to educational meaning-making in schools. **Stefan James'** *Teaching as Meaning-Making: A Psychological Autoethnography of Blackout and Co-created Art in Education* offers an intimate and theoretically grounded exploration of meaning-making in education through narrative, queer identity, and critical psychological frameworks. Drawing on autoethnographic and performance ethnographic methods, the author traces their experiences as an educator in Newfoundland and Labrador and as a member of the ECHO Lab research collective, positioning *Blackout* as the connective thread between personal narrative, pedagogical practice, and collaborative art-making. This article conceptualizes *Blackout* not only as a youth co-led, co-created performance emerging from 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer students' resistance during Pride week, but also as a methodological and psychological intervention that enables educators and students to collectively construct meaning, engagement, and affirmation within schooling contexts. By foregrounding shared authorship, relationality, and values-driven action, the author argues that co-created art holds significant potential for collective healing and for disrupting deficit-based narratives that continue to shape the experiences of queer and neurodivergent youth in schools.

Continuing to build on this reflexive orientation, the next article shifts from individual positionality to collective pedagogy, examining tensions within community-academic relationships. *Up-Staging Ourselves: Using Arts-Based Community Pedagogy to Create Spaces for Community-Based Praxis*, by **Sarah Pickett** and **John Hoben**, deepens the methodological conversation by naming tensions inside community-academic partnerships. As two of the project's faculty collaborators, this article offers a methodologically explicit and reflexive examination of *Blackout* as an arts-based, community-oriented pedagogical praxis. Employing autoethnography and found poetry constructed from interview transcripts and personal reflections, the authors foreground arts-based inquiry as a mode of analysis that surfaces affect, contradiction, and ethical tension often obscured by conventional qualitative methods. Situating the project within shifting historical, cultural, and institutional conditions, they reflect on their positioning as critical scholars at pivotal moments in their academic careers and on the methodological complexities of sustaining partnerships among academics, community educators, and community members. The article advances arts-based community pedagogy as a rigorous methodological approach grounded in self-implication, relational accountability, and responsiveness to institutional realignment within contemporary universities.

Extending this reflexive orientation, the next article shifts the focus from collective pedagogy to individual positionality, interrogating how power, privilege, and identity operate within arts-based participatory research. In *Understanding How I'm the Problem: Autoethnographic Reflections on Falling into Straight Allyship*, **John Hoben's** autoethnographic contribution offers a deliberately self-critical interrogation of straight, cisgender allyship within arts-based, community-engaged research. By zooming in on individuality and power structures, this piece acts as a hinge, treating the author's reflexivity as a challenge that carefully destabilizes academic authority, thereby preparing readers for community voices. Writing as an ally within the *Blackout* project, the author employs critical autoethnography and thematic analysis to examine how this position, when lacking sufficient reflexivity, can reinscribe heteronormative authority, recenter privileged identities, and reproduce the very exclusions it seeks to undo. By attending to experiences of anxiety, belonging, and relational discomfort, the author foregrounds humility, accountability, and relinquished control as methodological imperatives within creative arts-based participatory action research. Rather than positioning allyship as a stable identity or moral achievement, the piece frames it as an ongoing, ethically fraught practice that demands sustained

self-implication, attentiveness to power, and openness to being unsettled in collective work with neuroqueer communities.

Whereas the previous contribution examines allyship as a methodological and ethical challenge, the final article turns attention to how meaning itself is constructed within educational spaces, particularly for queer and neurodivergent youth. Here, insights from the *Blackout* project are considered within the domain of English language arts, illustrating how arts-based, inclusive pedagogies can be mobilized within curricular and classroom contexts.

In *Creating Space: Making Room for Identity Politics in English Language Arts Class. Lessons from a Community Theatre Project*, **Connie Morrison** uses autoethnography as a pedagogical space and a cultural text. Employing reflexive practice, this article situates personal narrative within the broader cultural, political, and institutional contexts that shape English language arts (ELA) education in Canada, particularly in middle and high schools. It considers how ELA creates space for community-based, queer, neurodivergent voices by expanding notions of literacy and identity. When youth theatre is positioned as more than an extracurricular activity, it becomes a site of cultural production where power, representation, and subjectivity are actively negotiated. This perspective not only illuminates the transformative potential of youth theatre for participants but also underscores its relevance for ELA teacher education by tracing how meaning and identity might be contested and reimagined.

Bringing academic and community voices together to explore the impact of a youth-led theatre project was an elephant-sized task. I owe a great deal of gratitude to the authors of this special issue for generously sharing their insights, and to the Editors-in-Chief of *in education*, Dr. Valerie Triggs and Dr. Kathleen Nolan, for their patience, guidance, and support throughout this project. The parable of “The Blind Men and the Elephant” reminds us that it takes humility to listen to the perspectives of others, time and distance to see how individual perspectives can be connected parts of a larger reality, and the wisdom to acknowledge the limits of our individual experiences.