

## Teaching as Meaning-Making: A Psychological Autoethnography of Blackout and Co-Created Art in Education

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### Abstract

Using autoethnographic and performance ethnographic methods, I trace my experiences as a public educator and as a member of the ECHO Lab, the research collective that is involved in the co-creation of *Blackout*. *Blackout* is a youth co-created musical theatre rooted in the personal experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students who protested Pride celebrations in their schools. Drawing on narrative, existential and critical psychological frameworks, I show how stories (my own and those represented in *Blackout*) are central to meaning-making in educational settings. Through personal vignettes, I illustrate how meaning emerges through relational experiences, authentic engagement, and values-driven action. I position *Blackout* as both a methodology and a psychological intervention that enables students and teachers to co-create meaningful expressions of identity and collective responses to shared problems. Ultimately, I argue that critical, co-created art expands the possibilities for collective affirmation among educators and neuroqueer students.

*Keywords:* 2SLGBTQIA+, neuroqueer, arts-based education, autoethnography

IN  
EDUCATION

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### Introduction: Why Stories Matter

I am a music teacher with degrees in classical music, musicology, and music education. I am also a doctoral student in clinical psychology. My work, and this paper, sit at the intersection of education, identity, and meaning-making. As a researcher, I have gained a rich, non-traditional perspective on student development and pedagogy in our schools. My professional and academic path has been nonlinear, but it has been guided by a common focus on meaning-making and on questioning the systems in which we live and work. *As educators, what gives our work meaning? How do we endure in systems that do not support us? Why do we stay?*

I draw on my experience as both a substitute and a full-time teacher in the Newfoundland and Labrador public school system, where I have worked at dozens of schools, and it is clear that the system requires change. In my experience, there is a fundamental absence of meaning-making and engagement in schools across Newfoundland, among both students and educators. As an early-career teacher, I am approached at every school by older educators—mentors, even. These are people who have spent 30+ years in the education system, who teach because they love it and their students, and who could not imagine doing anything else. Yet, they tell me to find another position. They tell me that this is not the same job they started, that the job is no longer worth the pension or the summers off. They tell me that they used to recommend the teaching profession to young people, but would never do so now, and they tell me that if I can think of one other thing to do, then I should do that. They say the job will break me down. They report that their job has become more classroom management and laptop monitoring than teaching. They say the students are not the same as they used to be. The parents are more combative, and the system is more broken. Moreover, they do not tell me these things because I ask. They tell me because they want to be heard, and heard by someone who can still leave. Overworked and underpaid, teachers have become frontline workers, witnessing their students attempt to prepare for a world that is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate.

These anecdotes are not in isolation. They are emotional, psychological, and institutional patterns that exist in many of our province's schools (Agyapong et al., 2022). As a teacher myself, I have witnessed the erosion of meaning in our classrooms. Teachers describe their days as 'in the trenches,' counting down to retirement. This profession has always been emotionally taxing, but it appears to be rapidly becoming spiritually and psychologically unsustainable. Our monolithic education system, which has barely changed since the 1980s, is not responsive to the ever-evolving realities of teaching children in the modern era, leaving many teachers experiencing stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression (Agyapong et al., 2022). *Blackout*, however, through co-created autoethnographic performance, offers an alternative to this way of teaching. What if schools supported students in sharing their own stories and in creating learning experiences that are meaningful and engaging for both students and educators? I argue that schools are not neutral spaces and explore their function as agents of identity formation, meaning-making, and social reproduction. Drawing on concepts from narrative, existential, and critical psychology, I write to examine how co-created performance narratives can restore meaning in contexts of isolation and indifference.

This article is structured into four sections. First, I introduce *Blackout*, a student-co-created and co-led musical initiative, as an arts-based method of inquiry into the lived experiences of

2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer students in schools. Next, I describe the methodological grounding for this article in autoethnography and performance ethnography through which I engage reflexively with the *Blackout project*. Following that, I draw from narrative psychology to share personal experiences of how meaning, visibility, and belonging are constructed and contested in educational contexts. Finally, I offer reflections and analytical insights that examine how youth-led arts-based engagement can serve as a meaningful intervention to foster affirmation and belonging for 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer students in schools.

### ***Blackout as Lived Inquiry***

*Blackout* is a youth co-created and co-led musical theatre initiative. It began when several 2SLGBTQIA+ students in the public system protested their school's Pride celebrations by wearing black clothing. The protest was symbolic; it was a clear objection to perceived tokenization and performative allyship that these students felt when wearing a rainbow. ECHO Lab, a research collective of which I am a member, partnered with these students and their community music school to produce a musical to better understand how such artistic creation and performance could serve as an intervention for 2SLGBTQIA+ affirmation and meaning-making in school contexts. I focus on *Blackout* because, by wearing black during Pride celebrations, these students asserted their agency and co-authored a different narrative that posed impactful questions. What does visibility mean? Whose story gets told? What does it mean to author your own story? In this way, *Blackout* is not only performance art but also a collective inquiry into 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer lived experiences and allyship in schools.

Through collaborative songwriting, embodied rehearsal processes, and public performance, *Blackout* fostered a shared space where students' lived experiences could surface, be negotiated, and be interpreted collectively rather than extracted or spoken for. The process of *Blackout* unfolded over several weeks of collective writing, rehearsal and collaboration between students and with their music instructor to determine the themes and stories they wanted to centre. Songs and narratives emerged from shared experiences in schools, moments of affirmation and safety, moments of tension and erasure. What was particularly notable about this process of cocreation was that it never sought consensus. There was always room for difference, contradiction, and fluidity in the way *Blackout* wrote and portrayed experiences and 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer identities.

Students, perhaps more than anyone, are acutely aware of the changes happening in the world (Currie & Kelly, 2022). They are not disengaged; if anything, they demand deeper engagement and want to participate in conversations about the world and their role in it. *Blackout* was created in response to an absence of authentic conversation and participation. They were seeking to be part of the narrative, not merely a symbol of it. Well-intentioned visibility initiatives can often feel tokenizing and contribute to students' sense of being unheard. The *Blackout* project symbolizes an effort to bring students into these conversations, to be seen and heard, and ultimately to create their own narratives. For the creator-participants of *Blackout*, this work is both an effort of inquiry and expression and an act of activism and reclamation of meaning.

### **Theory: Using Critical Psychological Approaches as a Conceptual Lens**

In my writing, I draw on psychological theories to examine how meaning is constructed in schools. Narrative psychology provides a framework through which people understand themselves and the world by constructing life stories that give meaning and coherence to their experiences (Crossley, 2000). Stories shape how people both remember the past and, importantly, make sense of their

present circumstances. For example, for students who are 2SLGBTQIA+ or neuroqueer, often the only narratives that include them say that affirmation and validation can be achieved through a Pride flag on a door. Examining these messages through narrative psychology is an important step in advocating for meaningful change. This framework informs my analysis and understanding of *Blackout* by highlighting how meaning is produced through the stories that become possible when students are supported in authoring and sharing their own experiences of identity.

Existential psychology offers a way to conceptualize meaning as iterative and process based. Meaning is not passive; it is created and must continuously be recreated in relation to our experiences, environment and relationships (Frankl, 1985; Yalom, 1980). Without active and continuous engagement, meaning wanes and anxiety takes its place. As Yalom (1980) notes, “the existential dynamic conflict stems from the dilemma of a meaning-seeking creature who is thrown into a universe that has no meaning” (p. 9). Teachers are consistently engaged in meaning-making both with ourselves and our students. Using these existential ideals, and through critical reflexive analysis, I highlight *Blackout* as one example of meaning-making within a bigger, struggling system.

Additionally, critical psychology offers a way to question the systemic and societal forces that are contributing to the meaninglessness, or “existential anxiety,” that teachers and students can feel (Fox et al., 2009). Critical psychology concerns itself with society as much as psychology (Prilleltensky, 1999). It challenges mainstream clinical thought and individualizing tendencies to ask questions like: How are the systems, in which teachers and students are positioned, impacting the narratives of affirmation and safety in schools? How does *Blackout* challenge the common idea that visibility in schools equates to safety and affirmation? And, how does *Blackout* shine a light on the complexity of tokenism and inclusion?

### **Method: The Evocative Power of Narrative**

This article is structured around narrative vignettes and reflexive analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In particular, I use autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to explore and share narratives of my experience as an early-career teacher in Newfoundland and Labrador. It begins with narrative vignettes drawn from my personal and professional life, including encounters with staff, students, and my grandmother, who taught in St. John’s for over four decades. These narratives precede and contextualize the discussion of *Blackout*, serving as an embodied account of how teaching and learning have shifted over time. The vignettes capture moments of resistance, harm, and care and collectively interrogate what makes educational work meaningful and sustainable. In addition, this article employs direct quotations to frame each section. These quotations, collected during my work as a substitute and replacement teacher in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, reflect the voices of teachers, staff and students of all grade levels and subject areas, and highlight both the diversity and breadth of experience within our school system as well as the common emotions that span it.

As an educator and researcher embedded in this work, I draw on my own experiences, thoughts, and affective responses to critically examine my engagement with this project. Autoethnography enables me to articulate what matters to me personally, situating my reflections within educational contexts. This methodological approach mirrors the work of the creators of *Blackout* in that, through my situated and embodied writing, it seeks to move closer to the lived process of meaning-making in education. My approach is further informed by performance autoethnography, which invites both educators and learners to use embodied storytelling, personal

narrative and expression to question the dynamic interactions of systems and institutions around them, as a means of meaningful interventions (Hamera et al., 2011). Performance ethnography centres the body, emotion, and storytelling as valid and necessary forms of knowledge production (Bacon, 2013; Denzin, 2003). This article stems from these methodological commitments, functioning both as a reflective process in my own teaching and learning, and an analytical account shaped by my experiences working with *Blackout*.

Next, I draw from three autoethnographic narratives situated within the methodological tradition of narrative inquiry to examine the nature of a teacher's work and how teachers work with students and the relational processes of meaning-making. Narrative inquiry positions experience as both phenomenon and method by attending to the ways that lives are storied, interpreted and made meaningful within social, cultural and institutional contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Consistent with autoethnographic approaches, these narratives use personal experience as a site of critical analysis, linking the individual to broader structures of power, identity, and pedagogy (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The first narrative reflects on an interaction I had with my grandmother to illustrate how teachers construct meaning through relational engagement with students and ethical alignment with our values. The second narrative examines my earliest teaching experiences, highlighting the precarity that exists for 2SLGBTQIA+ people in school contexts and highlighting the pedagogical and ethical importance of allyship and affirmation. The final narrative shares my experience working with *Blackout* to offer an alternative pedagogical orientation for educators and students to affirm the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer youth. Taken together, these narratives function as analytic texts. I hope that sharing my narratives will lend some insight into the affective, political and relational dimensions of teaching by challenging realities of today's classrooms and offering alternative pedagogy, which may help transform the way we think and experience education.

### Autoethnographic Vignettes

#### Lessons from Home

I open with a narrative about my grandmother, Doot. Since childhood, her stories have shaped my understanding of what it means to be a teacher and a person for others. Reflecting on them continues to inform my teaching practice today. Revisiting this memory reconnects me to teaching and to meaning-making. Doot's career represents a deeply relational teaching practice and positions meaning-making as an ethical endeavour. Doot's teaching career is deliberately grounded in connection to students and her values lived in practice. This story is also cautionary, pointing to what is at stake and what might be lost in our schools.

It was a warm spring day in 2019, the first warm weather St. John's had that year, and I was walking down Water Street with my grandmother, Rosemarie (affectionately called 'Doot' by our family). As usual, Doot looked effortlessly chic, her shoulder-length blonde hair in place and her mischievous spirit transforming an ordinary errand into an adventure. As we exited a shop, we passed a man on the sidewalk. He wore an old knit beanie, a tattered flannel, and well-worn brown boots. He was thin, with tattoos covering his forearms, neck and face, and he smoked a cigarette held loosely between a few missing teeth. At first, we walked past, not thinking anything of the encounter. There were lots of people out walking, enjoying the first sunny day in months. Moments later, however, we hear him calling out to us.

“Mrs. James! Mrs. James!”

I glanced at Doot, who gave me a knowing smirk and turned around to face him.

“Mrs. James! I knew it was you the second I saw you. Remember me?” he asked, as he caught up with us.

Doot paused for a moment, considering. “Well, that can’t be young Bobby Prescott, is it?”

“It is me! Mrs. James, you were always my favourite teacher. I knew you’d recognize me. You don’t look different.” He grinned ear to ear as though my grandmother had just awarded him full points on a test.

“It’s nice to see you, Bobby. How are you? Staying out of trouble?” Doot asked.

“Well, Mrs. James, you know me. It’s been tough, but it’s good to see you.” He looked at me in the eyes, “You take good care of her now, she did a lot of good for me when I didn’t deserve it.” He hugged Doot and walked on, looking like a little boy again, with not a worry in the world.

Later, over a cup of tea, I asked Doot about the encounter. She told me she taught ‘Bobby’ in the early 1980s, when she was a teacher at a denominational school in St. John’s. Like many of the children there, Bobby came from a family in the downtown area that struggled financially. Despite raising five children of her own, Doot always showed up for those boys, bringing them food and supplies, and keeping them out of trouble. She told me that Bobby was a particularly ‘hard-ticket’ and often found himself in trouble with the Christian Brothers who ran the (then denominational) school district. On one occasion, Bobby got in trouble for throwing snowballs at passing cars and Doot was brought into the office by one of the Brothers to discipline Bobby with a leather strap. She refused and allowed Bobby to leave, believing the severity of the punishment was disproportionate to the behaviour, and instead offered to supervise detentions or another punishment. Her refusal was described as ‘insubordination’ at the time, and it got Doot into a bit of hot water with the school district. Ultimately, however, her judgment was upheld, and she was able to determine the appropriate response. As the teacher, Doot knew what was best for her students. Bobby never threw another snowball. In fact, she told me he never gave her any more trouble during his time in her class.

Nearly fifty years later, Doot immediately knew this was the event that Bobby was recalling. For her, it had been relatively insignificant, just one of many instances of putting her values and her students first. Doot loved her students. And she loved being a teacher. Even after working for over thirty-five years in St. John’s, she never wanted to retire and continued to substitute long after she was eligible to leave the profession.

I come from a legacy of educators: Doot, her sister, and some of their children and grandchildren. Yet, I often feel as though I am breaking new ground. I’ve talked with my grandmother over the last few years about what it was like to be a teacher then, and she has asked me about what it is like now. After one such conversation, her answer shocked me. She said that, if given the opportunity, she doesn’t know that she would do it again today.

“It’s not the same job. It’s harder to make a difference now. And the parents are different.”

I was shocked to hear my grandmother, someone who loved teaching, and who loved being a teacher, express any negative feelings toward teaching. She elaborated that the job is the same, but the times have changed: there is less respect for teachers today than there was thirty years ago, especially from parents, and less support. She said that education systems are failing to keep up with the world and are leaving it to teachers to make up the difference.

My experiences with my grandmother led me to reflect on how much and how little things have changed in our schools. They also reminded me of a memorable experience for altogether different reasons, in which teachers, as hurt people, can hurt others, contributing to a cycle of pain and misrecognition rather than compassion and growth. Schools are environments conducive to social reproduction, as much for teachers as for students. They are inherently not neutral spaces.

As I reflect on my grandmother's perspective, I've come to recognize a fundamental shift in schooling when compared to thirty years ago. While tensions between teachers and the educational systems in which they work have long existed, there appears to be far less tolerance for professional disagreement today. In the 1980s, teachers felt they could stand up for what they believed was right for their students. By contrast, today, educators often operate under heightened conditions of fear, especially around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. Recent legislation restricts teachers from using students' chosen names without parental permission (CBC, 2023). There are calls to ban books and curricular materials out of concern that the presence of 2SLGBTQIA+ characters may harm or 'pervert' students' minds (CBC, 2024). As social conditions beyond schools continue to shift, it becomes increasingly difficult for students to find answers, affirmation, and coherence within an educational system that struggles to keep pace. These conditions raise pressing questions: What can be done inside schools to foster personal and collective meaning? How can teachers reduce our reliance on districts and unions to find the answer? What is missing in our interactions, despite more effort than ever from educators, to create and maintain meaningful engagement from students?

Humans need meaning, and teaching is fundamentally a profession of meaning-making. Meaning, however, is not simply passed down or unproblematically transmitted. As the preceding narrative suggests, students and teachers both need to be valued and respected participants in educational relationships. Psychological scholarship has long established that individuals actively construct their own reality (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1971). In educational contexts, meaning-making refers to how individuals gather information and make sense of themselves, others and experiences (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Crucially, meaning is not a static outcome or event; it is a product of an experience and an individual's reaction to it (Ignelzi, 2000).

Teachers, therefore, do not simply provide meaning to students. They build it collaboratively. Irvin Yalom, a prolific existential psychologist, describes meaning as articulated in Kegan's theory of meaning-making, which posits that meaning-making is an overarching developmental process encompassing the multiple changes one undergoes in life and one's relationships with experiences, knowledge, others, and the self (Ignelzi, 2000). While ambitious, this conceptualization of meaning-making as an internal structure that changes in predictable ways provides a valuable framework for understanding the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer students in our schools today. Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory posits that each student represents a different type of meaning-maker, each constructing their own reality. Because each student creates meaning individually, Ignelzi (2000) suggests that self-authorship is a central goal of an effective education system. Yet, self-authorship in our schools today is relatively rare. One potential site for cultivating it lies in performance autoethnography. This is one reason why *Blackout* functions as such a powerful pedagogical resource. It is an example of self-authorship in action. Through engaging with complex life experiences, students constructed their own meaning on their own terms rather than having it imposed upon them.

## **Dangerous Conversations: Something Old and Something New**

Sharing a story about my grandmother was an effort to highlight what endures in education. The next narrative highlights what is breaking. Doot's story offered an ethic of care grounded in relationality and mutual respect. This moment reveals how institutional cultures can suppress morality, punish vulnerability, and isolate those who resist. This story takes place later, in the staff room of a junior high school, and marks a pivotal moment in both my professional and personal development. It constituted a rupture in my relationship with teaching and fundamentally altered how I understood my place within the system. I include this narrative because it encapsulates the systemic nature of schooling and illustrates how institutional structure transmits values of exclusion, both implicitly and explicitly.

In the same month I completed my degree in education, I accepted a substitute teaching contract at a local junior high school. After years of university coursework and an unpaid internship, I was eager to finally begin teaching. It was a great job teaching instrumental music and science at what was widely regarded as 'one of the good schools' in town. I remained at this school for about half of the school year, working primarily with grade 7 students and band students. Because instrumental music was optional, the students who attended were enthusiastic and engaged. It was, in many ways, a gentle introduction to the profession. However, during that time, I lost the rose-tinted glasses with which I had graduated.

Shortly after arriving, I had a serious incident in the staff room. While I sat at the table eating my lunch, two middle-aged, white, male teachers were on the couch by the door. Both were in the late stages of their careers, had permanent positions, and had worked at this school for several years. They were engaged in a loud, expressive conversation that could be heard everywhere in the room and (I was later informed) could be heard in the hallway outside. They were discussing a particular transgender social media personality who had recently gotten an advertisement campaign with a major beer company. However, they were not just talking about her brand. Nor were they talking about her personality, online presence, or even her recent success in mainstream media. They were talking about her body. They were talking about how her breasts were not big enough to be considered a woman. They were talking about her body fat percentage. They were referring to her, intentionally, as a man. They framed her inclusion in a national campaign as 'a slap in the face to women.'

They also knew I was in the room. At the time, I was one of only two openly queer staff members at the school. I was involved in the Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at school, and several of my students had already expressed concerns about these teachers' conservative ideologies. Regrettably, I left the staff room without confronting them. As a new hire, I prioritized my job security over my values in the moment.

I left to find another teacher to walk into the room so I could have a witness. I knew I would not prevail in a situation where it was my word against theirs. Then, I did what I believed was appropriate for a new teacher and employee: I spoke with the administration. During the conversation, I initially felt taken seriously, and I understood my concerns to be framed around student safety, especially given that many of those students were standing outside the staff room at the time. However, I was mistaken. Instead, I was informed that no action would be taken by the administration (or anyone) because the ethics code requires that I confront the teachers myself to reach a resolution. The disappointment I felt in that moment was immense, but it was accompanied by fear. Both men were senior to me in age, rank, and institutional power, and both

were openly homophobic and transphobic. It was unclear why, under these conditions, my employer would require such a confrontation. The literature shows that lack of administrative action contributes to unsafe school environments, and that 2SLGBTQIA+ teachers already feel constrained by institutional power dynamics (Payne & Smith, 2011).

After a day of reflection, I did confront those teachers for the sake of the students. As educators, we have a legal responsibility for keeping our students safe. One teacher responded with visible embarrassment and acknowledged the inappropriateness of having these sorts of dangerous conversations at work, in front of many openly queer and vulnerable students. However, the other teacher did not react constructively. He doubled down, insisting on his right to express his beliefs, and sent me Fox News articles ‘disproving’ the existence of transgender people, to ‘educate’ me about basic human anatomy. Ultimately, he concluded that I was at fault for not being open to differing opinions. This claim was ironic given the increasing ideological polarization of American media. Networks such as Fox News and MSNBC do not simply present alternative perspectives; they construct entirely bifurcated epistemologies by contextually framing identical topics with minimal linguistic overlap to reinforce partisan divisions (Ding et al., 2023). In evoking such media content as support for a disagreement, the teacher transformed the conversation from a difference of opinion and perspective into an argument over competing truths. Once that happened, productive dialogue was virtually impossible. Ideally, my concern had never been about his ideological beliefs; it was about how brazenly sharing those beliefs can affect (and harm) our students. There was no meaningful resolution. That teacher is still working in the same position today. Since this confrontation, I learned that this teacher had even previously held a district-wide job as an itinerant teacher responsible for safety and inclusion in school communities.

Throughout the remainder of that semester, I heard stories regarding the other openly queer teacher at the school. Students harassed them with slurs, ripping down the Pride flag hanging on their door, punching holes in the walls behind the desk where they sat, and carving vulgar and discriminatory rumours about them into the walls of the bathrooms and into trees behind the school. Every day, they returned to the workplace where they were targeted and abused for who they are and for how they presented themselves to the world. I had many conversations with this teacher about how this work environment was affecting them, both professionally and personally. They received no meaningful support at work. Repeated appeals to the administration and the employer were stonewalled with the same line I had received when I sought support: “There is nothing more we can do about that.” Eventually, the abuse reached the point that the teachers’ union forcibly transferred them to another school as a human rights intervention (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982).

Unfortunately, none of these situations is novel or unique. Grace and Benson (2000) collected similar autobiographical narratives of queer teachers more than two decades ago, highlighting persistent difficulties with queer erasure, lack of institutional support, institutional inaction, and the personal burden of self-advocacy in the school environment.

I share these experiences not to demonstrate the existence of conservative ideologies in Canada, but to highlight and underscore the ethical responsibility educators hold for our 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and to make visible what our schools look like for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. I often return to that moment in the staff room when I failed to speak up. In existential psychology, silence often signals a boundary space where freedom and authenticity are in tension (May, 2009). From a narrative psychology frame, these moments accumulate, adding to the story of how we see ourselves in the world. McAdams (1993) says that these stories give meaning and coherence to

our lived experiences. This moment was meaningful in my story because choosing self-preservation over confrontation contributed to reinforcing the very system that had produced the harm to begin with. *Blackout* demonstrated to me that the opposite situation is also possible, contexts in which students are invited to claim their authenticity and freedom rather than uphold the tension.

### ***Blackout as a New Way Forward for Teachers and Students***

Working on the *Blackout* project has offered a solution to facilitate meaning-making for both students and educators. When students first had the idea to create *Blackout*, it was an act of resistance to what felt like unsafe visibility. As the project developed, however, it became clear to me, as both a facilitator and an audience member, that it was also an act of meaning-making in a time of uncertainty. Within schools and communities, leaders frequently promote visibility, often through slogans like ‘visibility saves lives,’ which are plastered on school walls across Newfoundland and Labrador. In many cases, visibility does save lives. But so can being invisible.

When the students involved with *Blackout* felt that participating visibly in Pride celebrations would make them a target for bullying and harassment, their decision to wear black was more than a knee-jerk response. Rather, it was a deliberate and embodied response to a situation for which no one had prepared them. These students are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, allies, and family members. They support Pride, yet their experience raised an important question: should students be expected to shoulder the risks and consequences of visibility in order to demonstrate that support? Creating art from this uncertainty was a way to process these tensions collectively and to construct a shared meaning at a moment when teachers did not have the answers (Pauly et al., 2019).

For me, as both a teacher and researcher, *Blackout* is a way to understand the changing landscape of meaning-making in education. It prompts a central pedagogical question: how can we take the outcome of this project, a collective, shared meaning for students and educators, and work backward to foster such experiences in the classroom? Participating in *Blackout* has led me toward performance ethnography as a viable pedagogical and research approach, one that is well-documented in academic literature but less frequently seen in school settings. In her essay “Embodied and Direct Experience in Performance Studies,” Bacon (2013) describes the performance as “giving primacy to the experience, and to things of and from the body” (p. 114). In contexts shaped by exclusion, queer and neuroqueer students need experiences and opportunities for internal validation grounded in embodied experience. Performance autoethnography is both a research method and an educational approach. It not only teaches students how to find their voices but also how to use them productively. *Blackout*, in particular, represents not only artistic or pedagogical intervention, but it is also an effort of activism, one that models how power can be claimed and exercised productively.

### **Conclusion: Assessing the Road Ahead**

In this article, I have presented personal narratives tracing my experiences working as an educator in the public school system of Newfoundland and Labrador and as a researcher with ECHO Lab during the creation of *Blackout*, a youth co-created musical theatre initiative. Through narrative, autoethnographic and performance-based approaches, I examined how meaning is constructed, constrained, and reclaimed in school contexts, particularly for 2SLGBTQIA+ and neuroqueer students and the educators who work alongside them. As educators, we need to consider the types

of communities we are building for young people, or the types of communities that are imagined but not yet realized.

Meaning in education, however, is never neutral and always also contested, as classrooms are personal, contextual, and political (Grace & Benson, 2000). Recently, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador proposed changes to the junior high school curriculum that would have removed mandatory art and music classes from the junior high curriculum and replaced them with three semesters of a single subject area over three years of schooling. The public backlash against this proposal was intense and ultimately led the government to pull back the initiative altogether. However, the proposal revealed a broader disconnection between educational policy and the lived realities of our classrooms and communities. Such a move implicitly frames expression as expendable, reinforcing the marginalization of arts-based learning. It was effectively the government saying that artistic experiences in education are not valuable and can be discarded. The resulting lack of clarity and direction from the government and the school district contributes to uncertainty and confusion for educators and affects students' understanding of what and who is important in their education.

One of the cornerstones of *Blackout* is that it is co-created, co-written, and co-constructed. Participation in the project was initiated and sustained by the students. Scholarship in arts education suggests that project co-creation can foster inclusive ways of knowing and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Pauly et al., 2019). Student-led curriculum is a powerful piece of agency in an institutional environment that famously delivers education through a top-down learning model. Traditionally, teachers are the experts who deliver curriculum, assign work and evaluate learning, while students are expected to receive and reproduce knowledge with limited opportunity to interpret it for themselves. *Blackout* fundamentally disrupts this pedagogical arrangement by offering an alternative that upholds student voices, fosters their individual identities, and respects students' capacity to advocate for themselves and articulate what they need, particularly from their education.

The music, theatre, and art classes in our schools are a lifeline, not only for our future artists but also for our 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and advocates who are still finding their voices (Kelly et al., 2025). Engaging in arts-based activities in educational and group settings can mobilize 2SLGBTQIA+ students' talents, interests, and strengths toward common goals while fostering the benefits of community participation (Kelly et al., 2025). Ultimately, these students look to one another and to us, their teachers, to construct meaning. Projects such as *Blackout* suggest that when educators create space for collective authorship, embodied expression, and relational care, schools can become sites where meaning is not only taught, but lived.

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