Creating Space: Making Room for Identity Politics in English Language Arts Class.
Lessons from a Community Theatre Project

Connie Morrison, *Memorial University*

Author's Note

Connie Morrison https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6138-2741

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Connie Morrison at conniem@mun.ca.

Abstract

In the context of this work, autoethnography is used as a pedagogical space and a cultural text. Reflexive practice situates personal narrative within the broader cultural, political, and institutional context that shapes English language arts education in Canada. Using a cultural studies frame, autoethnography is used to consider how the discipline of English Language Arts, especially in middle and high schools, can create space for community-based, queer, neurodivergent voices by considering expanded notions of literacy and identity. Structures of power are examined from the position of an ally and teacher educator, revealing how past attempts at creating space for students may have fallen short and how a project like *Blackout* offers hope and possibility for future educators. 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 English language arts teacher education by tracing how meaning and identity might be contested and reimagined. This article contributes to an understanding of pedagogy as a critical and transformative practice where such projects can push back against and resist normative discourse.

Keywords: autoethnography, cultural studies, critical literacy, identity, arts-based pedagogy, English language arts

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Introduction: Encountering *Blackout* after the Fact

Being invited to join the ECHO Lab's *Blackout* theatre project after it had been staged felt akin to getting on a westward transcontinental train ride midway through the prairies, where much of the Canadian landscape had passed before the other passengers. The invitation was to jump on board and not only collect the experiences of those closest to this project but also contribute to its forward trajectory. The opportunity was exciting, but also riddled with questions: what did I have to contribute? What could I learn from a community-based theatre project about an act of student resistance? What lessons could I pass on to my own students in their preservice education as I attempt to prepare them for classrooms where neurodivergent and queer students might not embrace the world's gestures and well-intended discourses of inclusion? This sense of arriving late, after the applause, after the story had been told, provoked a sense of humility and curiosity in me. It invited me to listen differently, to attend closely to the traces of dialogue, emotion, and transformation as I wonder what might come next.

Blackout was a community-based theatre project in Eastern Canada that explored youth stories of queer pride and resistance. Drawing from experiences of the youth participating in the musical production, the project portrayed how some youth chose to wear black armbands during Pride events in their community as a compelling act of resistance against increasingly commodified and normative displays of rainbow and trans flags that fly during community Pride events. The project illuminates complex and nuanced relationships with identity, expectation, bias and acceptance in ways that were funny, heart-wrenching and poignant all at once.

Adding to the complexity of this project was that its actors and contributors were also neurodivergent individuals, each navigating their own ways of being and knowing. Seminal work by Edmund O'Sullivan (2004) reminds us that transformative learning often requires a 'structural shift' in the way thoughts, feelings, and actions are conceptualized. This shift is at once conscious, dramatic, and lasting. Such a transformation offers an opportunity to change the very way we are in the world. Yet, as O'Sullivan has noted, movement toward transformation rarely occurs without struggle. As Berlak (2004) notes, transformative learning demands a negotiation between "confrontation and reflection" that results from such discomforts. And it is here, in the space between confrontation and reflection, that the opportunity for change resides. Sadly, despite movements to create safer, more inclusive democratic spaces, our world is still a place where racist and sexist comments continue to cause violence (McGough & Dunkley, 2025).

Before systemic change can occur, O'Sullivan advises that we attend to our self-locations and our relationships with others as a form of critical discourse. Autoethnography becomes my vehicle for self-reflection and reflective judgement (Mezirow, 2003) in order to gain perspective on the sources and structures that frame my knowing. As part of attending to my relationships with others, especially my students, I draw from Hagood (2002), who calls educators to both recognize and honour the dual relationship between identity and (critical) literacy. Hagood explains that students enter classrooms carrying rich 'funds of knowledge' from their familial culture, their peer influence, life experiences, and formal schooling. And as educators, we must "consider both students' perceptions of their own identities and the subjective perceptions of others … in relation to reading the world when examining critical literacy" (as cited in Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes, 2022, p. 63). In this way, *Blackout* can be understood as both performance

and pedagogy; a collaborative act of storytelling through which youth reimagined how pride, identity, and resistance might coexist within communities that often struggle to accommodate difference.

Having spent the better part of two decades teaching courses in diversity and inclusion to undergraduate and graduate students in a faculty of education, I am continuously reminded of Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes' (2022) call that "teachers must vigilantly counter hegemonic norms of schooling that may silence students and instead establish contexts that allow for students to be heard" (p. 64). However, attending to counter hegemonic norms is not relegated to only social justice education; this falls easily into the discipline of English language arts education (Houston, 2004). They argue that preservice and veteran teachers must seek "multivocal engagement with community issues grounded in power" (p. 64) and that critical literacies offer an avenue for such work. With this in mind, I also position this work within the context of the teaching I do with intermediate and secondary English language arts preservice teachers. Unlike others contributing to this special issue, I am not one of the creators of the *Blackout* project. Instead, I came after the curtain had fallen, the applause had faded, and the bodies had left the building. My engagement with *Blackout* is interpretive rather than participatory—an attempt to learn from the project's pedagogical resonances and to consider how its acts of creative resistance might inform teacher education more broadly. My role is to reflect on what this project, and others like it, offer to English language arts teachers and those in teacher education programs in a time when curriculum is being revised and reimagined. This inquiry is shaped by my own positionality as both practitioner and researcher, guided by questions of belonging, agency, and how educators might cultivate spaces where difference is not merely included but affirmed as generative. This is a time when the world urgently needs to create space for multiple intersectional identities of belonging. In this reflection, I draw upon my own experiences as a classroom teacher and as a teacher educator to navigate a way forward. I will begin by situating myself within this work.

In the context of *Blackout*, the youth's creative acts of resistance—refusing normative gestures of inclusion while asserting their own symbols of pride—embody this kind of productive struggle. The *Blackout* project, in this sense, extends an invitation to educators: to take part in a similar process of transformative reflection to interrogate how our own assumptions about inclusion, pride, and belonging shape the pedagogical spaces we create and inhabit. Such reflection also calls for a willingness to engage with discomfort, uncertainty, and contradiction, conditions that, as Boler (2004) and Berlak (2004) remind us, are essential to the practice of critical pedagogy. Within *Blackout*, the moments of tension and ambivalence become sites of possibility rather than obstacles to understanding.

Grounded in this framework, the article explores how arts-based and community-driven pedagogies can illuminate the tensions between resistance and inclusion in contemporary classrooms (Ellis et al., 2019; Fine, 2018). First, I situate myself within this work, reflecting on my own pedagogical assumptions and positionality. Then I situate this work within a framework of cultural studies, autoethnography and next, I consider *Blackout* as a site of transformative learning for both its youth participants and for educators encountering the project after its performance. Finally, I examine how discomfort, reflection, and the willingness to dwell between confrontation and reflection (Berlak, 2004) can move educators toward more ethical, responsive, and inclusive practices in English language arts classrooms. Through this exploration, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations about how arts-based inquiry, cultural studies, and critical

literacy can work together to reimagine teacher education as a site of transformation grounded in listening, relationality, and creative resistance.

Identity, Belonging and Standing Out

As a competitive figure skater in the 1980s, the opinions and approval of others shaped how I constructed my appearance and my self-perception. On the ice, originality and individuality were rewarded, but only within strict parameters. Off the ice, however, the commercial youth market was beginning to explode (Mazerella, 2005; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2008), and it was important to fit in with the crowd. I share this autobiographical fragment as a way of positioning my subjectivity as a narrator. In my youth, notions of appearance and attention affected my sense of belonging, and it also influenced my early understanding of what was valued in society and by my peers. These experiences were also situated within the dominant, patriarchal, humanist discourse that grounded my early education. I recall my experience as part of positioning my bias as a teacher and scholar, and ask how these insights reveal the way power has operated, and continues to operate, on the construction of subjectivity. As a white, middle-class, cisgender woman, I am an ally for my students and colleagues within the LGBTQ2SIA+ community. I don't remember a pivotal moment when this became my truth, but maybe it has to do with having family connections to this community. I have been teaching at a faculty of education at a university in Atlantic Canada for almost two decades. Preparing students to become teachers, I am acutely aware of the power structure that frames our classes. I regularly question if I am the right person to be teaching a course in social justice education when I reside comfortably in nearly all the dominant class categories. I am constantly reminded of how "society is structured in ways that make us all complicit in systems of inequality; there is no neutral ground" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 4). I recognize the privileges and the limits of my positionality, and I've even suggested that my role as instructor of this course might be perpetuating colonial and dominant discourses.

In the past, I've written about how my experiences of negotiating appearance and belonging allow me to understand, though never fully inhabit, the pressures faced by youth whose identities fall outside dominant norms. (Morrison, 2007, 2010, 2016). Though I have deliberately positioned myself as an ally, within the academy, in the community and with the students I teach, I recall Britzman's (2000) caution as I struggle with the perceived omnipotence that a position of authority affords. "I positioned myself behind their backs to point out what they could not see, would not do, and could not have said even as I struggled against such omnipotence" (p. 32). When attempting to consider my connection to youth who are (and have been) truly marginalized by hegemonic and homophobic acts, my attempted connection is frail at best.

Within the *Blackout* project -a student student-inspired theatre project that portrayed the struggle of queer youth who wore black as an act of resistance to mainstream pride events, my role as an ally is to create pedagogical spaces that amplify their voices while acknowledging how power circulates through culture, education, and performance. My reflexive stance, grounded in feminist poststructuralism, foregrounds the partiality of my perspective while affirming a commitment to allyship and critical pedagogy. Working as an ally within social institutions with the goal of social transformation requires deep reflection about the complex nature of power dynamics, not only in the classroom but also through the social and cultural experiences that inform identity—especially as they reproduce or disrupt dominant culture (Bishop, 2015; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Shelton, 2019; Yep, 2021).

I have been teaching students who are insiders and outsiders to recognize, consider and work against systems of oppression (DiStefano *et al.*, 2000). While allyship could easily have dominated my reflection as it relates to literacy practices, identity, and English Language Arts, I also acknowledge this thread has been taken up more eloquently in another article in this issue. Instead, I have chosen to use my allyship as a springboard to question identity, culture, power and belonging through the lens of a teacher educator+-

Through this lens, I examine what we have been doing in the discipline of English Language Arts and how our failure, even amid the best of attentions, can help turn us around to help create space for all student voices. How do we make space for texts (or projects like *Blackout*) that disrupt the discourses that those of us in the dominant groups assume want to be voiced by those in the marginalized groups? Allies have learned that it's politically and socially correct to support Pride events, so what do we do when queer youth resist that performative acceptance?

Before proceeding to a theoretical framing of this work, it is important to acknowledge how situating this work within the present social context is nearly impossible. Every single day brings another announcement, another crisis, another rupture of what felt like decades of progress toward inclusion and balancing the scales of equality. Next, I will highlight my theoretical framing for this paper.

Theoretical Framing

At my core, I'm an English teacher; as such, my theoretical position assumes pedagogy from within a cultural studies framework. It also requires a positioning of knowledge within social, historical and economic contexts (Hall, 1999). As far back as the 1930s and 1940s in Britain, Leavis and the Cambridge school suggested that social harmony could be achieved through literature in English, and in particular, through the establishment of a literary canon with a moral vision that could help the working class determine good from bad in art, literature and cinema (Ball et al., 1990). As a practical and educational project, Leavisite English remained through the moral panics of both World Wars, and some argue that it continued to thrive in places well into the 1990s (Morgan, 2000; Pirie, 1993). By the 1960s, Leavisite English was being critiqued for its instance that literature must reflect a high seriousness and serve a moral purpose and its refusal to budge from the literary canon, while for the learner, first-hand meaning and the daily life of the authentic child were becoming important as an educational project.

Within the shift toward English within a cultural studies frame, texts are chosen not for their cultural value or worth, but more importantly for how they contribute to individual and collective identity and meaning-making within the culture. By contrast, traditionally, texts from popular culture have been ignored, marginalized or even shunned from the classroom for their association with a low culture (Coiro et al., 2008; Currie & Kelly, 2022; Hall, 1996; Fine, 2018; Furman et al., 2019; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, 2006). Even when marginalized voices began to gain acceptance in English language arts curricula, they were legitimized voices—recognized and validated as important enough to be included. But as traditional pedagogy around literacy practices in the classroom often ignores everyday literacy practices and popular texts, it does even less to value texts that are produced in the community outside of regulated institutions. If traditional pedagogy around literacy practices in the classroom often ignores everyday literacy practices and popular texts, it also attempts to view the terms 'text' and 'reading' through a progressive lens, as demonstrated in the expansive definition of 'text' within the *Foundation for the Atlantic Canada English Language Arts Curriculum* (APEF) document (1996), where it is defined as:

any language event, whether written, oral, or visual. In this sense, a conversation, a poem, a novel, a poster, a music video, a television program, and a multimedia production, for example, are all texts. The term is an economical way of suggesting the similarity among many of the skills involved in 'reading' a film, interpreting a speech, or responding to an advertisement or a piece of journalism. The expanded concept of text takes into account the diverse range of texts with which we interact and from which we construct meaning. (p. 11)

It is this expanded and diverse range of 'text' that requires challenging. In Newfoundland and Labrador, despite repeated improvements and updates to the English Language Arts curriculum, targets and indicators remain tied to this foundational document, which acknowledges multimodal forms of text. It stops short of engaging with the understanding that literacy is inseparable from culture, identity, and subjectivity.

In Eastern Canada, the *APEF* document remains, to this day, the definitive guiding text for selecting supplementary reading as it provides the guidelines for selecting books in the Annotated Bibliographies for junior and senior high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador. Where this selection process becomes problematic is in its lack of inclusivity. A search for books with a description of a character who is part of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community reveals only one book in the junior high list. *King and the Dragonflies* (Callender, 2020) is a realistic fiction about a tween boy, King, who is convinced that his dead brother has come back as a dragonfly. The annotated bibliography describes a gay character in the novel, who is King's friend, who goes missing, prompting him to question his own sexual identity. Similarly, there is only one title to be found in the senior high school annotated bibliography with a keyword search (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, queer, sexuality). *Absolutely, Positively Not* **(**Larochelle, 2009) is a realistic fiction recommended for students in lower secondary school. A sixteen-year-old tries several tactics to convince himself and those around him that he isn't gay. Together, these texts come nowhere close to offering representational voice to students who identify (openly or not) as LGBTQ2SIA+. This lack of representation limits visibility and inclusion for all students.

By relegating popular and performative literacies to the margins, such curricula risk overlooking the pedagogical force of cultural practices like youth theatre. This omission sustains humanist and patriarchal traditions that disconnect text from power, bypassing opportunities to examine how culture, identity, and desire intersect in lived experience. Within this framework, literacy ought to be understood as more than alphabetic decoding; it is a social practice deeply embedded in cultural, historical, and political contexts (Luke, 2007; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Street, 2003, 2005). The *Blackout* project exemplifies how student-led drama serves as a literacy practice that mobilizes performance, collaboration, and storytelling as modes of meaning-making, which also highlight the instability and multiplicity of subjectivity and foreground the shifting, relational nature of knowledge production.

A critical literacy perspective (Currie & Kelly, 2022; Hsieh, 2022; Kachani et al., 2020; Luke, 2007) provides a framework for interrogating the cultural and institutional power structures that sustain hegemonic practices in Western discourse. Building on Freire's (1970) conception of reading both the word and the world, critical literacy emphasizes the politics of representation and the ways cultural texts construct subjectivity. Popular literacy practices, such as those embedded in the *Blackout* performance, are inherently pedagogical, shaping how truth claims and identities are represented and contested.

Gee's (2001) concept of Discourses underscores how language practices are tied to identity, belonging, and power relations, and how they are acquired through social participation rather than formal instruction. Applied to the *Blackout* theatre project, this suggests that students are not only performing scripts but negotiating discourses of queerness and gender as they construct and contest identities. Critical pedagogy, therefore, requires educators to recognize how literacy practices in such settings both reproduce and resist dominant ideologies, and to create spaces where diverse voices are valued (Davis & Francis, 2022; Davis et al., 2015). Teachers, as the final arbiters of curriculum, play a crucial role in either sanctioning or silencing the discourses that circulate through cultural texts. If we know how and why the game is played, then we can build strategies to protect ourselves from its harmful effects and take advantage of its useful effects (Kashani et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the *Blackout* project illustrates the transformative potential of expanded notions of literacy. It positions community theatre as a site where students read, write, and perform cultural texts while simultaneously interrogating the power relations those texts encode. In line with Luke's (2007) vision of literacy as intrinsic to social justice, such projects provide young people with the agency to resist and reimagine dominant discourses. For English language arts teacher education, this signals the necessity of reframing literacy to include multimodal, performative, and critical practices that acknowledge the cultural politics of representation and open possibilities for more equitable pedagogy. Next, I turn to a brief discussion of the methodology that grounds this autoethnography as I consider how the production of *Blackout* became an opportunity for transformative learning for both its youth participants and for educators encountering the project after its performance.

Methodological Grounding

Methodologically, this work is situated broadly within the paradigm of cultural studies and incorporates autoethnography as both a mode of inquiry and a stance of self-reflexivity. Together, these approaches enable an understanding of *Blackout* that is attentive to context, relationality, and ways that meaning is constructed through narrative and performance. An analysis of my attempts to offer critical perspectives on existing pedagogies and conventions within teacher education. As a field of study, cultural studies has a history of qualitative and empirical research that has focused on the social, historical and economic context of lived experience, texts or discourses (During, 1996; Saukko, 2003). Cultural studies has historically resisted positivist "objectivism" in favour of approaches that recognize the situated, relational, and contested character of meaning (Foucault, 1999; Hall, 1999; McRobbie, 2005). Emerging from adult literacy movements and working-class education in mid-20th-century Britain, the tradition developed as a critical pedagogy committed to examining how cultural constructs both constrain and enable possibilities for identity, agency, and social transformation (Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1958, 1983). Research in cultural studies attends to the relationship between lived experience, discourse, and the broader social, historical, and political context. Seminal works, including Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977), Hall and Jefferson's *Resistance through Rituals* (1976), and McRobbie and Garbner's (1976) analysis of girlhood subcultures, modelled how cultural studies sites such as schools, media and leisure spaces function as locations of both resistance and regulation.

These studies positioned culture as ordinary, negotiated, and polysemous, while also highlighting the way it is bound up in structures of power and inequality (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1981). In a kind of stitching together of research intentions, cultural studies created a location that joins together divergent philosophical perspectives in order to (Saukko, 2003):

articulate a mediating space between right wing optimism and left wing pessimism that allowed the paradigm to examine how people's everyday life was strife with creative and critical potential, while their lives and imagination were also constrained by problematic cultural ideologies as well as structures of social inequity. (p. 13)

Methodologically, cultural studies embraces Freebody et al.'s (1991) term, 'disciplined multiplicity,' and insists that inquiry remains reflexive, partial, and open to contradictory truths. This stance resists essentialist claims to stable meaning while recognizing the generative tensions between humanist, structuralist, and poststructuralist traditions. Within this frame, questions are conjectural rather than definitive, foregrounding process and interpretation over claims of empirical certainty. This orientation provides a fitting methodological frame for analyzing *Blackout* as a cultural text, one that emerges from community and youth resistance while inviting educators to reimagine their own pedagogical and ethical frameworks. In doing so, it positions *Blackout* not simply as a performance but as a living archive of transformative possibility.

Autoethnography offers a particularly appropriate methodology within this frame. Like ethnography, it examines lived experience as both a site of meaning-making and a text for interpretation, but it does so by centring the researcher's own subjectivity and situated knowledge. By challenging conventions, autoethnography expands conventional academic methods to contest theory and lived experience. Informed by poststructuralist critiques, autoethnography acknowledges that experience is always mediated by discourse, representation, and power (Bochner, 2012, 2020; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Britzman, 2000; Pickering, 2008). It involves writing about and with the self in order to glean insight and knowledge, yet it does not present experiences as transparent or singular but as fractured, partial, and constitutive of broader cultural logics. Bringing a poststructuralist sensibility to bear on ethnographic questions, modernist expectations of such holistic representations and "reads the absent against the present" (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). It puts representation in crisis and makes knowledge constitutive of power.

Positioning myself as a researcher and subject requires that I draw from personal experience, uncovering layers of discomfort in order to arrive at a location framed by critical hope. As Britzman (2000) does, I struggle with the authority I possess as a narrator, and with my inability to represent a community of youth as they would represent themselves. So, I must be clear that my intent is not to capture a truth that is already out there—that would be impossible. I will recall my cultural studies frame in order to question the power structures behind how meanings and knowledge get naturalized in these everyday cultural texts. My position is interpretative, and as such it is political. My interpretations cannot be removed completely from my values or subjectivities. While ethnographic research attempts to open a space where "experience could not speak for itself" (Britzman, 2000, p. 32), I also confront politics present in recounting, just as there is a politics present in the desire to be accountable. We may be constituted by discourse, but I confront the poststructural reality that although representations of identity/subjectivity may be constituted by discourse, language fails to capture these representations fully. In fact, there is no way to completely represent the real within the limits of language. Instead, there are several layers of interpretative loss to acknowledge in this work.

I consider *Blackout* as a site of transformative learning for both its youth participants and for educators encountering the project after its performance. The project itself invited audiences to reimagine what inclusion and resistance might look like when the expected symbols of pride were replaced by gestures that unsettled the norm. For the youth involved, this was a creative

reclamation of narrative power and a refusal to be spoken for, even by those who would claim to be allies. For educators like myself, it also posed an ethical challenge: what happens when our own inclusive intentions reproduce the very hierarchies we seek to dismantle?

Recently, we have become increasingly familiar with rising nationalist and anti-DEI agendas that seek to silence conversations about equity and justice, while liberal and democratic voices answer back with renewed commitments to inclusion. Yet these counter-movements often risk reinstating old hierarchies in new forms. The *Blackout* project reminds us that even gestures of inclusion can be complicit in the silencing of difference. The act of wearing black armbands during Pride events was not a rejection of visibility, but a demand for more honest representation and an insistence that inclusion without complexity can easily slide into tokenism. This form of artistic resistance called me to question how well-intended, ally educators, myself included, participate in similar dynamics within our own classrooms and curricula.

A decade and a half ago, when I taught a graduate course in teaching and learning, one of the assignments invited students to explore the trope of the 'teacher as saviour' in popular culture. I often used films such as *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) and *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995) to critique how popular culture positions teachers from dominant groups as rescuers of marginalized students. Over time, I grew uneasy with perpetuating this binary and stopped using such examples. Yet, a few years ago, a student from Turkey asked if I had seen *Freedom Writers*, insisting it was a deeply inspiring film about teachers who help immigrant youth succeed. When I explained that I had stopped using it to avoid reinforcing the white saviour trope, she looked genuinely puzzled, explaining that communities like hers *needed* the advocacy and mentorship of teachers from the dominant culture. Her comment caught me off guard. It was a moment of productive discomfort or what Mezirow (2003) might call a disorienting dilemma. The moment deeply unsettled my confidence in what I thought I knew about representation, privilege, and pedagogy. Working against a white saviour trope seemed to align with an allied stance. I had genuinely wanted to create safe and welcoming spaces for my students. *Where had I gone wrong? What had I missed?*

While the conditions of race and gender representation are not the same, that exchange stayed with me because it echoed the same questions that *Blackout* raises: Who gets to speak, and on whose behalf? What responsibilities do we bear when we take up stories that are not our own? As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) remind us, allies within dominant groups must engage in the ongoing work of critical self-reflection, risk-taking, and accountability. This involves letting go of control, listening differently, and being willing to make and take responsibility for mistakes. Sensoy and DiAngelo also share a narrative about suffragist women who succeeded because they had members of the dominant class on their side to promote their cause. This added layer of consideration, when applied to my Turkish student's film recommendation and the Blackout project's theme of resisting well-intended discourses, all collide. In the context of teacher education, these practices are not simply acts of personal humility; they are pedagogical commitments that shape how we select texts, frame classroom dialogue, and respond to the discomforts that emerge when equity and power collide.

In my undergraduate course on diversity and social justice education, we use Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) definition of an ally as "a member of the dominant group who acts to end oppression in all aspects of social life by consistently seeking to advocate alongside the group who is oppressed in relation to them" (p. 211). This definition reframes allyship not as benevolent advocacy but as a continuous practice of self-interrogation. To act *alongside* rather than *for* others

demands humility, vigilance, and a willingness to work collaboratively with other educators to challenge the structural inequities that shape our schools. It means validating and supporting those who are institutionally marginalized, engaging in perpetual self-reflection to expose our socialized privileges, and taking responsibility for the harm we may cause—even when our intentions are good.

These imperatives extend into the curricular decisions we make. As educators, we are constantly navigating the ethics of representation: which stories we bring into the classroom, which discourses rise to the top, and which are left out. The question of inclusion is never neutral. Even as we strive to "diversify" reading lists or highlight counter-narratives, we risk constructing new moral hierarchies, or what I have elsewhere referred to as a "neo-Leavisite" impulse, where texts are deemed "good for" students in ways that reproduce another form of paternalism. As noted above, the claim of inclusion is not born out in book choices when sanctioned annotated bibliographies only reference two LGBTQSIA+ titles. Rather, a site of representation exists by going outside the school walls to a community theatre project like *Blackout* that invites us to resist this impulse. Its refusal to conform to institutional expectations of what pride or inclusion should look like reminds us that truly transformative texts must hold multiplicity and tension rather than offering closure or comfort.

This struggle to make space for stories that disrupt rather than soothe sits at the heart of critical literacy and transformative pedagogy. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) point out, even institutions that claim to be safe and caring often reproduce inequity by design. For those of us who teach, safety cannot mean insulation from discomfort; it must mean cultivating the conditions under which discomfort leads to insight. In this sense, the *Blackout* youth's black armbands become a metaphor for what education at its best might do: draw attention to what is missing, to what inclusion has failed to include.

Kashani et al.'s (2020) work on counter-conduct adds urgency to this reflection. Drawing on Foucault, he argues that "forces of counter-conduct must have a bias toward social justice and cannot sit on both sides of the fence" (p. 13). The call is not only to reflect but to act—to take ethical stances that risk discomfort and dissent. Citing Hedges (2013), Kashani reminds us that "objectivity banishes empathy, passion, and a quest for justice" (as cited in Kashani, 2020, p. 13). For educators, this means that transformation cannot remain theoretical or abstract. To practice counter-conduct is to speak and teach from a place of engaged ethics, where neutrality is replaced by responsibility, and where education becomes a living, moral project.

Blackout models this stance. It refuses the comfort of easy narratives and insists on the necessity of tension as a condition for growth. In doing so, it extends an invitation to educators—to reimagine allyship not as mastery over difference but as a willingness to be changed by it. Finally, I examine how discomfort, reflection, and the willingness to dwell between confrontation and reflection (Berlak, 2004) can move educators toward more ethical, responsive, and inclusive practices in English language arts classrooms.

Dwelling Between Confrontation and Reflection

As Boler (1999) reminds us, emotions are not peripheral to learning but integral to how we come to know and unlearn. They mark the friction between what we believe and what we are being called to reconsider. *Blackout* offered precisely this kind of emotional and intellectual provocation. Its refusal of easy inclusion unsettled audiences, especially educators, by revealing how well-intentioned gestures of equity can still reinscribe hierarchy. To dwell between confrontation and

reflection is to sit with that discomfort, to resist closure, and to allow uncertainty to do its transformative work.

Returning to the train ride analogy from my opening, I am reminded that entering a project already in motion requires more than observation. It demands a willingness to feel unmoored, to listen rather than lead, to notice what has already passed outside the window. *Blackout* became that kind of journey: both destination and vehicle. It invited those of us who teach to question our assumptions about direction, speed, and who is invited aboard. Pushing boundaries and crossing borders**,** on both conceptual and practical levels, has become essential to my understanding of transformative pedagogy. Within classroom practice, there are abundant opportunities to justify the inclusion of alternative or community-based texts, even when sanctioned lists are limited in scope. Drawing from Riley & Crawford-Garrett (2015) Hsieh & Cridland-Hughes (2022) encourage teacher educators, like myself, to implore preservice teachers to "consider texts, the culture of schooling, and assessments through critical frameworks and supporting candidates to relate these experiences to their own literacies and learning, as spaces from which to challenge dominant practices" (p. 62). Their call includes a moral imperative—one that moves beyond grounding critical literacy theory intellectually, to one that includes moving "beyond our own classrooms and candidates to look for openings and partnerships within broader teacher education contexts" (p. 68). By moving our critical literacy practices "toward collective enactment" (p. 68) and seeking extended partnerships and teacher learning opportunities that reside beyond the halls of the academy, we can fill the gaps in current teacher education programs. If we are meant to prepare students for the future in the real world, then this begins by empowering teacher candidates to include texts such as the real-world, community-based *Blackout* project into our teacher education programs.

This is not a call to abandon the official curriculum but to read it differently and to use its existing language of inclusion as a platform for deeper, more critical engagement. For example, the newly revised curriculum documents in Newfoundland and Labrador articulate key competencies for all students that closely align with the goals of transformative literacy. These include respecting diversity of perspectives, networking with communities and groups, navigating disagreements constructively, and practicing social wellbeing, inclusivity, and belonging for themselves and others (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2025). More specifically, within the English Language Arts curriculum, the essential speaking and listening strand identifies 'interacting with sensitivity and respect' as a core target. Taken further, a transformative intention would challenge students and, by extension, educators to reflect critically on the normative discourses embedded in sanctioned texts, to consider how identities are positioned by others, and to ask what such positioning means for how we represent ourselves in the world (Hall, 1996; Pomerantz, 2006).

Transformative literacy must therefore be understood as both *always in progress* and *deeply relational.* In earlier work (Morrison, 2010, 2016), I found that performances of identity rely on the discourses made available to them. The youth of *Blackout* enacted precisely this awareness. By choosing to wear black armbands rather than donning pride pins or other conventional symbols, they refused the stability of sanctioned narratives. Whether their actions are read as social resistance or youthful rebellion matters less than their insistence on multiplicity and complexity. A project of transforming schooled literacies is both broad and specific as it calls for structural shifts in educational discourse and, simultaneously, for micro-level acts of pedagogical

courage. When educators limit what counts as 'text,' community-based arts projects like *Blackout* fill the voids, making the lived intersections of identity, language, and power visible.

To engage such work, educators must be willing to embrace what Britzman (2000) calls "a more complicated reading process," one that moves "beyond the myth of literal representations and the deceptive promise that 'the real' is transparent [and] stable" (p. 39). *Blackout* stands as evidence of what happens when learning itself becomes performance when emotion, resistance, and inquiry coexist in the same space. By creating room for texts and performances that exist outside traditional and sanctioned lists, English language arts education might be reimagined "not so much as helping people know that they don't know, but noticing what they haven't noticed" (Davis et al., 2015, p. 35).

Like boarding a train already in motion, transformative teaching asks us to surrender mastery, to be startled by new vistas, and to listen to the rhythms of stories not our own and to be open to critically reading the power structures that reside within. The *Blackout* project reminds us that such journeys are not linear; they loop, pause, and diverge. Yet it is in these moments of uncertainty that learning and ethical transformation take root. The work of teaching, then, is not to chart a fixed route toward inclusion, but to remain attuned to the landscapes of discomfort and possibility that pass before us, inviting us to look again, and differently, each time.

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