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in education **Volume 31, Number 1, 2026 Winter (Special Issue)**

Editorial

Kathleen Nolan and Valerie Triggs, *University of Regina*

Welcome to the first issue of *in education* for 2026, and a most unique Special Issue of the journal. In this issue, we are pleased to present **The Story of Blackout: Neuroqueer Identities and Arts-Based Pedagogy in Education**, guest edited by Connie Morrison from Memorial University. When we distributed a call for special issue proposals some months ago, we never expected to now be introducing this richly diverse and creative collection of research articles and essays, all stemming from the *Blackout* youth theatre project and from the Equity Collective for Hope and Opportunity (ECHO) Lab Collective's scholarship and partnership work in support of the project in St. John's, NL.

As Editors-in-Chief of *in education*, we have learned so much through working with Connie Morrison and the other highly dedicated and creative scholars in this issue. The essays and articles in this issue bring to life for the reader how a group of neurodiverse LGBTQ2SIA+ students were brought together to create a musical. As Connie shares in her editorial, by including contributions from both community educators and university academics, the issue offers a powerful account of the theatre project and its impact on the community.

As always, we wish to thank *in education*'s managing editor, Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, for being readily available throughout, from copyediting and formatting the manuscripts to publishing this special issue. We extend our deepest appreciation to Connie, as well as all essay and article authors in this issue, for providing *in education* with this wonderful opportunity to publish their story.

***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 LGBQTSIA+ 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 Inhospitality 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.

Foreword

Pamela Osmond-Johnson*, Memorial University*

Chronicling the experiences of academics, community partners, and youth in co-creating *Blackout*, a musical theatre production that explores the complex dynamics of safety and survival for neuroqueer youth, this special issue arrives at a critical juncture in the academy. On the one hand, there is increasing recognition of the possibilities that arts-based methodologies offer as a space for social and political transformation (Triggs et al., 2008/2024). On the other hand, institutional structures within universities continue to be restrained by traditional, exclusionary, and marginalizing research paradigms (Smith, 2021).

Consequently, one of the many things that makes *Blackout*—and this issue—so powerful is its refusal to be contained by traditional academic boundaries. Through essays grounded in poetry, narrative, and collaborative autoethnography, the contributing authors illuminate the critical potential of co-created community-based research while simultaneously broadening frameworks to challenge normative approaches to educational research and public engagement. In this manner, the issue not only offers a model for research as art and art as activism, but it also lays bare the formidable institutional barriers that such work must confront, and the burdens placed on those who make it possible.

Institutional Inhospitality and the Myth of Inclusion

While universities often espouse values of diversity, inclusion, and community engagement, the administrative and policy frameworks that govern research funding, ethics review, and scholarly dissemination are not neutral. Rather, they reflect—and often reproduce—assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge, who counts as a legitimate researcher, and how impact is defined and measured. Ahmed (2012) and Phipps (2022), for instance, have documented how institutions profess to perform inclusivity while maintaining deeply exclusionary norms in practice. For queer researchers and researchers working with queer and neurodivergent youth, these exclusions are often compounded by intersecting forms of marginalization and systemic gatekeeping where performance-based inquiry, poetic and narrative methodologies, and arts-informed approaches often remain peripheral to what counts as 'real' research (Denton & Cain, 2023; Ellis et al., 2019). As a result, researchers who engage in community-based or arts-informed work must constantly navigate systems that were not designed to support, recognize, or reward the academic contributions of their shared labour. Indeed, as Smith (2021) notes, "the academy is still profoundly shaped by colonial logics that define knowledge production as a detached, technical, and elite endeavor" (p. 22).

Subsequently, as Cahill (2007) and Fine (2018) have argued, participatory and critical youth-engaged research must challenge institutional norms that render community collaborators invisible or 'non-academic.' These include policies that do not recognize youth and community collaborators as legitimate co-researchers, that limit expenditures on collaborator travel, or that restrict capacity-building ventures that are essential for trust-based partnership development. These approaches also reflect the ongoing corporatization of the academy amidst the continued influence of neoliberalism on funding structures for post-secondary institutions, narrowing possible futures under the guise of objectivity, accountability, and compliance.

The Leadership Challenge: Moving Beyond Rhetoric

Academic leaders, including Deans, are uniquely positioned to resist norms and practices that discourage and devalue projects like *Blackout.* This means pushing institutions to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward systemic change, including revising ethical review protocols to better respect community-based co-authorship, reallocating funding to performance-based research dissemination, and reconsidering tenure and promotion frameworks to recognize non-traditional forms of research and research engagement. More importantly, leaders must create protective architectures within faculties and departments that affirm and sustain researchers undertaking high-risk, high-impact scholarship with equity-deserving communities. Leadership, in this context, must be understood as advocacy; grounded in a political and ethical commitment to transform the conditions under which knowledge is created and shared. In essence, we must be willing to embrace what Ryan (2015) describes as social justice leadership, harnessing the power of one's position to enable the voices of those who do not share in that power to be seen, respected, and heard. This kind of leadership, however, is not without its own complex tensions, and in the absence of astute political acumen, leaders may find their efforts stymied and their influence. Understanding the delicate nature of this work is therefore imperative to moving the needle, without breaking the dial.

The Promise of *Blackout*: Toward a New Vision for Educational Research

We need more projects like *Blackout.* But more than that, we need university systems that render such projects easier to initiate, sustain, and scale. The academy continues to define legitimate knowledge production in narrowly bounded ways. Despite this, *Blackout* has emerged as a transformative site of learning, performance, and resistance; a testament to what becomes possible when we rethink how we define research impact and excellence and how we make space for affect, community, and art in scholarly ecosystems.

To the youth of *Blackout*: thank you for your courage and creativity. You have created something that will have ripple effects far beyond that which you may ever see, shaping hearts and changing minds.

To the researchers, community educators, and artists who made this issue possible: thank you for your refusal to settle for what is, and your willingness to imagine what could be.

To the readers of this issue: may you be challenged and inspired to see the possibility of an academy that celebrates and supports projects like *Blackout* as a vital component of its research mission.

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Where Science Meets Stage: Embracing Art in the Practice of Research

Sydney Wells, *Memorial University*

Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sydney Wells at sw8737@mun.ca.

Abstract

This reflective paper explores my experience participating in the *Blackout* project and how it brought together two parts of myself that I had long understood as separate: my creative identity and my scientific training. Drawing on personal reflection, research literature, and my role within the project, I share three interconnected learnings that emerged: how expressive art can help process emotions and experiences, how art can function as a meaningful tool for communication and learning, and how creating together can cultivate a sense of community. Grounded in my research interests in ADHD and neuroqueer youth, I reflect on how research-informed theatre can translate lived experiences into emotional and embodied understanding. Being part of *Blackout* has influenced how I see scholarship, therapy, and community work, reinforcing the power of art, listening, and youth storytelling.

Keywords: research-based theatre, neurodiversity, community engagement, therapeutic practice

Where Science Meets Stage: Embracing Art in the Practice of Research

I was incredibly eager to begin writing this piece, reflecting on how artistic expression has influenced my life, the convergence of my scientific and creative domains, and the wonderful project that *Blackout* is. Once I began, I quickly realized it would be a much more difficult task than I had thought. I couldn't understand why; it was amusing how something as fundamental to my own identity and life as artistic expression was stumping me. I believe this is because creative expression is something I hold close to my heart. How do I describe my relationship to something so integral to my being, and encompass this in words? How do I bring to life the way the *Blackout* project has solidified the connection between my two worlds of art and research? I wanted to give these feelings justice, as the coming together of art and research has been happening for me for a while; *Blackout* has significantly impacted that fusion.

I broke down what I have learned through this experience into three main parts:

1. Processing emotions and experiences through expressive art.
2. Expressive art as a tool for communicating, expression and learning.
3. How creating together cultivates community.

I begin by situating my research focus on Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and how ADHD is expressed in both art and science. Art has a way of bringing together a community and changing the way people think. Art can convey an emotional experience from one person to others, allowing them to empathize with what is being expressed. Artist Nora Nord (2024) challenges the stereotypes surrounding ADHD and features the underrepresented faces of neurodivergence, providing a spotlight and raising the voices of members of the neuroqueer community. Nord uses the art of photography to amplify people's voices and help others gain a deeper understanding through their experiences, much like what the *Blackout* project aims to achieve. Nord's perspective provides a lens through which we can zoom in on people's experiences and learn personally, promoting empathy and understanding.

We utilize scientific research to explore and communicate new findings that can help us better understand people's experiences and inform policies and practices. Nord amplifies the voices of the people she interviews, in a similar way to Attoe and Climie (2023), who highlight the voices of researchers and women with ADHD. Both Nord's art and the research work of Attoe and Climie communicate information in different forms. When art and science can come together, then something extraordinary happens. While some people are more connected to art, others resonate more with science. But what happens when we combine both?

I find physics to be a fascinating science despite my lack of deep knowledge in the field. It's a science I have rarely encountered outside of a few documentaries and books that barely scratch the surface. Recently, I came across a video of a community engagement research initiative called *Break-in' Point*, which featured a physicist and a dancer collaborating on a highly impactful and insightful performance (Webster et al., 2022). When I watched this performance, I was struck by how the body movements, the art of dance, the personal stories, coupled with the explanations of physics concepts that are usually confusing (to me at least), made those concepts seem less convoluted. The performance demonstrated how, when scientific information is combined with art, emotion, narrative, and somatic movement, we may connect with it more deeply and process it more effectively. Personally, I was able to connect with the material on both an emotional and somatic level, which allowed me to understand and retain it more fully because it was grounded in

more than just numbers, data, and citations. All of these elements are incredibly important for validating information as being scientifically accurate; however, when such academic content is connected to emotion, it creates a particularly powerful combination.

I believe *Blackout* is a special project that has done, and will continue to do, the same. It involves creating art to translate the experiences of a highly talented youth group and to help inform people in our community. It is one thing to read about research on queer youth that presents crucial statistics, such as those reported by "The Trevor Project." According to its website, the 2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People amplifies the experiences of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people ages 13 to 24 across the United States (The Trevor Project, 2023). The survey found that transgender and nonbinary young people whose pronouns were respected by those they live with reported lower rates of suicide attempts, and that fewer than 40% of LGBTQ young people found their home to be LGBTQ-affirming. Communicating these statistics publicly has the potential to save lives. Similarly, Statistics Canada reported that compared to their cisgender, heterosexual peers, youth aged 15 to 24 years who are two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer and those who use other terms related to gender or sexual diversity (2SLGBTQ+) were found to be at higher risk for mental health disorders and suicidal ideation in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2024). However, not everyone responds to statistics, percentages, PowerPoint and research articles. When art is combined with and informed by scientific research, it can make these learnings more accessible, helping broader audiences gain perspectives and promoting empathy.

Why is art such an effective form of communication for humans? One reason may be the somatic connection that occurs when information is portrayed through artistic expression. According to Nummenmaa and Riitta, (2023), research using bodily sensation mapping demonstrates that viewing visual art can elicit measurable physical sensations in our body, particularly in the chest and upper limbs. Artwork depicting human figures produced the most significant responses, leading the authors to conclude that the presence and salience of human forms may heighten attention and interest, therefore mediating art-elicited emotions.

Along with a somatic connection, there is also an emotional one. A field study, Rathje et al. (2021), randomly assigned audience members to complete surveys before or after attending theatre performances. The surveys measured empathy, attitudes, and prosocial behaviour, with the results indicating that participants reported greater empathy toward groups depicted after viewing the plays. Art, therefore, functions as a communicative medium in which both creating and experiencing art constitute a distinct kind of communication (Tyler & Likova, 2012). Cook et al. (2024) similarly describe their research-based theatre project, *Unload*, developed through collaboration among veterans, artists, researchers, and counsellors. The play follows a veteran's journey to navigate challenges in and out of uniform, while guiding a civilian friend through longstanding, unspoken grief. Analysis of audience responses (Belliveau & Nichols, 2017) highlights the role of empathy within research-based theatre while cautioning against assumptions of sameness. The authors caution that when audiences presume they fully understand the character's experience, the complexity of marginalized identities can be missed. Rather than rejecting empathy, the authors encourage audience members to move beyond emotional resonance into critical reflection, including an awareness of privilege and difference.

In this context, research-based theatre (such as *Blackout*) can cultivate a deeper form of empathy and engagement (Cook et al., 2024). Like *Unload,* it draws directly on participants' lived experiences, centring their voices and inviting audiences not only to relate and/or confront

privilege, but also to witness. Watching *Blackout* for the first time, I was struck by its honest portrayal of characters' lives and its invitation to the audience to listen more deeply to experiences many viewers have not personally encountered. Those of us who have been outside school environments for many years may assume we understand contemporary youth experiences, yet many would likely be surprised by how much has changed. *Blackout* offers a nuanced portrayal of young people's lives directly drawn from their own writing. Reflecting on my role as a graduate student in this project and contributing to this special issue has encouraged me to engage with art not only through empathy but also through critical awareness of my own privilege, an orientation I will carry forward into my future work as a therapist.

Participating in the *Blackout* project has brought art and science together for me in ways that I had not personally anticipated. I always saw my science research self and creative art self as entirely separate parts of my identity, and I did not expect these aspects to converge towards the end of my education, just before the beginning of my career as a therapist.

Brian Stokes, a Tony Award-winning actor and singer, described this transformative potential in an interview with Craig Byrd for *LA Magazine* stating, "That's the magic of art and the magic of theatre: it has the power to transform an audience… and give them an epiphanal experience that changes their life, opens their hearts and their minds and the way they think" (Byrd, 2016). This perspective resonates with my own experience of the project. While I had long understood art as cathartic and capable of conveying meaning, working with the *Blackout* project has allowed me to see firsthand how art can not only instill but also contribute to social change through both performance and narrative.

I have been a graduate assistant with this project since I began my Master of Counselling Psychology. In this role, I have participated in research meetings within the ECHO Lab, contributed to presentations, and supported development. Once the project began, I had the opportunity to act out the student-written script alongside the youth creators. I also assisted with workshops and focus groups exploring audience responses to the performance of *Blackout*.

Art and performance have always been at the forefront of my life. I was born into a musical family with an immense appreciation for music of all genres and ages. My grandmother and her siblings regularly sang together and played the guitar when they were growing up. I can remember sitting in the back of her Cadillac as she perfectly harmonized with *River Blue* by A La Carte. My mother, who also has a beautiful voice, instilled in me a love of music, ensuring I was familiar with performances like Simon and Garfunkel's *Live in Central Park*, and by middle school, I had memorized the words of The Sound of Silence. As far back as I can remember, I have been privileged to participate in music lessons, acting, and musical theatre camps, where I learned and performed alongside friends. Performing musical theatre duets at music festivals required trust, vulnerability and collaboration, experiences that shaped my confidence and became a meaningful part of my childhood. Performing with my friends gave me courage.

Reflecting on my involvement in *Blackout* has highlighted how these lifelong artistic experiences now intersect with my academic and professional development. This integration of art, research and clinical training has encouraged me to approach both scholarship and creative work with greater openness to creative embodied and relational forms of understanding.

Another form of art that is dearly important to me is creative writing. It has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember, beginning with stories I created in primary school. One of my earliest memories is a Halloween writing prompt, where I felt immense joy adding vivid, visual

details about a holiday I loved. From that moment, I recognized the power of translating thoughts and emotions into narrative. In addition to writing, I also love film. Growing up in a small town, two hours away from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, I moved to the city after high school and quickly became involved in filmmaking, working on locally made films. I appreciated the cathartic experience of learning a character and expressing their emotions, even when uncomfortable. Playing roles whose values did not align with mine required me to understand the "why" behind their actions, an exercise in perspective-taking that has remained meaningful to me. Through the film community, I also met a mentor who helped me see research and writing as another artistic outlet. Since then, writing: poetry, reflections, or stories has remained central to my life. I don't think a day has passed that I haven't written. It's how I process each part of my life with every character or line expressing what I couldn't process without the art of writing.

At the same time, I was completing my honours degree in psychology, and my academic demands intensified during my final year. I have always dreamed of being a therapist and was completing my first thesis. Following that, I pursued a master's degree in experimental psychology, then came the onset of a global pandemic. Although research was challenging, I remained passionate about the field. My academic schedule limited my opportunities for filmmaking. Every time I passed a parking lot with trailers lined up and assistant directors walking around with headsets on, I felt a strong pull toward the creative work I was missing.

The opportunity to work at a shelter for individuals and their children fleeing abuse and intimate partner violence further focused my attention on professional and academic responsibilities. During the pandemic, I felt more distant from artistic expression than ever before. Volunteering helped to foster positive human connections and promote healing through collaborative songwriting and storytelling (Buley, 2020). During the meetings, participants gathered to talk, create crafts, and develop songs with support from facilitators and volunteers. I realized how long it had been since I had created anything with my hands other than plucking away at my laptop. It felt so good to create again with tangible materials.

Participants reflected on personal narratives while experimenting with lyrics, chord progressions, and harmonies that shaped their songs. Being part of a collective creative process again was powerful. Witnessing the participants be so open and honest with their songwriting reignited the flame for me, and I wrote and played the guitar again, much more. At the time, art functioned primarily as a means of personal processing alongside my academic work. I would work on my studies and then take a break to play my guitar or write. There had been a *vast* separation between my academic pursuits, professional life, and my art. However, this experience demonstrated that art could become integrated, enriching multiple aspects of my life.

Several years after I completed my second thesis, I began my Master of Counselling program, focusing on ADHD. It was during this time that I was introduced to the *Blackout* project through the ECHO Lab. When I first heard the story of *Blackout*, something clicked. The project offered a powerful way for individuals to explore identity while educating others. What better way to learn about yourself and help others learn than through writing, music and performance? As a therapist-in-training, this realization was particularly meaningful. Like impactful theatre or film, the project communicated important messages while fostering emotional connections that linger beyond the performance itself. The youth involved are provided with a safe space to express themselves, build empowerment, and reflect on their experiences through creative processes, while also informing the community around them.

How remarkable is this work? How *brave* is this? How lucky am I to be a part of this?

The intersection of being neurodiverse and queer is ebbed within the community but also deeply personal to the individual; it's an experience that cannot always be easily explained with words and words alone. Artistic expression offers a pathway for understanding.

Thankfully, There Is Art

Whenever a feeling is too large, too tangled, just too *much*, I have always turned to art. More than anything. It's such an unexplainable sensation to me. Still, personally, the emotion or experience feels less heavy and more digestible once it is turned into a poem, song, story, or clay. Emotion is no longer just anxiety; it can be externalized as a piece of art. Through the process of making, I find relief and solace. Afterward, I can look at it and learn more about myself. If someone else can witness someone else's creation, they may be able to say, "Ah, through this art, I can see that person's experience; I can feel empathy for what they are going through and maybe feel not so alone myself." Hopefully, they can learn something about themselves, or others, or both.

Participating in the *Blackout* project continued to deepen my understanding of how art, research and therapeutic practice can intersect. I recall the first ECHO Lab meeting I attended for the *Blackout* project, which felt warm and welcoming. As discussions unfolded, I began to see how these domains could converge rather than exist as separate parts of my identity. The lab brought together individuals with expertise in social policy, counselling psychology, music, and theatre pedagogy, united by a genuine commitment to supporting youth. I discovered that *Blackout* is a community-youth co-created musical theatre production that engages public conversations about neuroqueer youth who seek safety by concealing themselves or blending in with the crowd. Following anti-pride protests across Canada in June 2022, some junior high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador, including allies of the LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiversity communities, participated by wearing black during Pride events and avoided Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in schools. From this context, important questions emerged: Why are queer youth avoiding GSAs? How can educators improve the everyday experiences for marginalized youth? How can we as educators further support marginalized youth and ensure there are truly safer spaces in schools and homes? How can we affirm our youth? Are we truly including them by creating places for them to go, separate from their peers? How can we teach cis-heteronormative and neurotypical peers and those in authoritative positions the most affirming, accepting, empathetic ways to support them?

The first time I watched *Blackout*, I was struck by the honesty of the youth writing. Among the beautiful harmonies of the young voices, there were heart-wrenching, honest lyrics such as:

"Pick up my phone and scroll until I disappear."

This line captured a familiar impulse to escape, or doom scroll, to dissociate through technology.

Another lyric, "I make comedy out of catastrophe," reflects how humour can create distance from overwhelming emotions, a pattern I have observed clinically and in research on masking among neurodivergent individuals. I have worked with so many people who have told me something that has happened to them in their lives. Just as they were about to get too close to the experience, a joke or a funny anecdote came to the rescue, something we do to escape an emotion that is just too much to look straight in the eyes. Humour *can* be a great way to cope; have you ever heard the line "If I don't laugh, I'll cry?" Similarly, "I do everything to fit in, even though

it takes everything from who I am" conveys the exhaustion and shame involved in having to mask who you are to fit in and feel connected to your peers in order to gain acceptance.

As the story unfolded, it was evident that *Blackout* was an authentic, honest look into what young people experience. I think many people would be surprised to hear about the challenges that today's youth face, and that these challenges may not align with the assumptions they have. Within counselling psychology, we emphasize "within-groups differences" (Collins, 2018) where individuals within any identity group vary significantly in experience, values, and worldviews. Personal cultural identities are shaped by various factors, including personal, interpersonal, contextual, and systemic influences, leading to intragroup or intracultural diversity (McNair, 2017). Furthermore, while it's common to believe that specific traits are typical for all individuals in a cultural group or subgroup, there is frequently as much variation within the group as there is between that group and those outside of the group (Ratts et al., 2016). Assuming all individuals in a group are identical can result in stigmatization and stereotyping, obscuring critical differences in values and worldviews among individuals and their cultural affiliations (Pohlman et al., 2014).

Personally, I believe a way to reduce stigmatization and stereotyping is to openly and carefully listen to people's experiences and learn directly from them, to not just assume that we know the answers without hearing from many different perspectives within a group of people. When I watched *Blackout,* I thought back to these concepts and realized that it could be a way for people who may not be aware of "within-group differences" to learn more about individual experiences, open their minds, and challenge previously held stereotypes. *Blackout* provides the opportunity to hear directly from youth and their individual experiences in the education system today.

The inclusion of a teacher's perspective also resonated:

"We watch our kids break into pieces, knowing there is nothing we can do."

This sentiment is likely familiar to many educators, mental health professionals, parents, and others in the school community and offers insight into the emotional realities we are navigating. As a future therapist, my initial response was gratitude for the courage required to share these expressions openly so that others may learn. Hearing about the hard truths and "within-group differences" was crucial, and because of the writers' courage, we can help others challenge their biases.

Several moments remained particularly impactful and have stayed in my heart. In one, a character recalls their childhood experiences with compassion toward their younger self. It was a poignant moment to see them reflecting on what they had gone through as children and where they were now. It was as if they wanted to reach out and hug their inner child. It was very powerful. In another, a mother apologizes after reacting negatively to her child coming out as bisexual, explaining that she was scared and that her fear stemmed from wanting to protect her child from judgment. This moment highlights a tension common to many parents: attempts at protection may unintentionally cause harm, while acceptance and support are often the most powerful forms of protection they can offer.

Three main learnings emerged during my time with the ECHO lab that have remained particularly meaningful:

I. Processing Emotions and Experiences through Expressive Art

Through both community work and my involvement with the ECHO lab, I have seen how art can create spaces of safety, reflection, and expression. Living in Newfoundland and Labrador, where music, theatre and storytelling are deeply embedded in community life, reinforced how artistic engagement can support identity exploration. Newfoundland and Labrador is a province that nurtures their artistic community and provides experiences for everyone of all ages. A local Brazilian-born artist, Bruno Vinhas, described this act of self-exploration through art:

> It was through my practice that I actually allowed myself to be who I am. In every play, art piece or curatorial project, I learned to put down my walls and to listen to the artists I am working with. The silent moments of creation are the moments where I reflect on what I am, who I am, and why I am doing what I do. (B. Vinhas, personal communication, February 12, 2025)

Witnessing youth in *Blackout* engage in a similarly courageous act of self-expression through art was profoundly impactful. Their brave self-expression was something I will hold for my entire career. It has influenced how I intend to approach therapeutic practice going forward.

II. Expressive Art as a Tool for Communicating, Expression and Learning

When words are insufficient to capture internal experiences, art can provide an alternative language for expression and understanding. Art provides a universal language that transcends social barriers, allowing personal experiences to be shared in ways that resonate emotionally and relationally. Vinhas described this:

> Art has been the first way that I was able to communicate, to be myself and to develop a sense of being. Living with high-functioning depression, it is through my artwork and my art-related work that I am able to release the tensions and express feelings, emotions, and world views. (B. Vinhas, personal communication, February 12, 2025)

This reinforces the role of creative expression not only as communication, but also as a process of learning about oneself and others.

III. Creating Together Cultivates Community

There is a deep, collaborative bond that can occur when people connect over art. Sharing vulnerability through creative work allows individuals to witness one another more authentically, strengthening relational bonds. I think that this speaks to how we process our emotions and the vulnerable way we express ourselves. People get to see each other in such an honest way through working on art together, and I believe it creates such a beautiful form of community. *Blackout* emerged from this collective process, with youth wanting to create something together, grounded in honest storytelling and mutual understanding. Observing and being part of this collaboration highlighted how artistic engagement can build community while also giving voice to those who may not often be heard.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my involvement with Blackout, I am reminded of the performance that altered my understanding of how art and science can converge to deepen learning. Just as dance movement and narrative made complex physics concepts more accessible to me, this project demonstrates how artistic expression can illuminate the lived experiences of neuroqueer youth in ways that statistics or theory alone cannot. Knowledge is not just cognitive. It is also emotional and

embodied. I am still early in my graduate assistantship and look forward to continuing to learn while contributing to this important work. *Blackout* highlights the value of positioning youth as active participants in educating their communities, and it demonstrates how important it is to let our young people be active participants in telling their own stories. The more we listen to young people, understanding what they are experiencing and going through, the more effective support we can provide. They are the experts on themselves; we, as professionals, are their students learning what they have to share and how we can best support them. Cultivating and nurturing these safe spaces for young people to express their most honest stories not only allows us to learn priceless lessons but also gives them space to learn about themselves, each other and create community. As I move forward in my career as a therapist, I carry with me the recognition that art and the act of listening can be powerful tools for understanding, healing, and change.

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Seeking Refuge: A Community Educator's Reflections on Neurodivergent Teaching and Hope

Courtney Fowler, *Courtney Fowler Performance Academy*

Abstract

How does art help to engage youth, and how can educators help create spaces where art can be created in ways that are critical and that connect with everyday life? In this reflective narrative essay, Courtney Fowler, a community educator and performer, shares her approach to teaching and learning by exploring her experiences with the *Blackout* Project. The piece examines how shame-free spaces can help neuroqueer youth use art to affirm their identities and to frame complex issues through storytelling and artistic performance.

Keywords: neurodivergence, neuroqueer, community-based arts education, community-educator

Seeking Refuge: A Community Educator's Reflections on Neurodivergent Teaching and Hope

Searching for Hope and Connection

What do I do when I feel hopeless?

I search for hope, and connect with others in my search in the company of many who support and believe in the vision I see for education as a safe, shame-free space of acceptance, autonomy, and agency. I believe in them, and that provided me the hope I needed to continue.

I do not have a degree, nor did I thrive within the current education system. I am someone who traded my emotional regulation and safety for academic success until the burden became too heavy to bear in post-secondary education during my undergraduate music degree. Consequently, writing this paper felt like I was voluntarily retraumatizing myself. I am not afraid to fail, but I am afraid of misrepresenting myself. After experiencing failures within the education system, and as my love for the therapeutic and narrative power of the arts grew, I founded a performance academy that offered experiential, kinesthetic learning opportunities rooted in connection and acceptance. *Courtney Fowler Performance Academy* is a space where students have a choice over what they learn and how they participate.

I created the space that I needed, and I became the listener I craved. Here, in this essay, I call this space 'refuge,' a shame-free learning environment where students can regulate, belong *and* create, without hiding their neurodivergence. I begin with why I see refuge as important, name the practices that help build it, and finally describe how those practices shaped the development of *Blackout.*

Breaking Free from Enclosures

Where to escape, when there is no escape?

Imagine being a deer in an enclosure, thinking you are safe, yet wearing an orange vest that makes you easy to spot. You, a deer, are put in an enclosure with a hunter for hours upon hours a day, with no way out and no resources to help you succeed, with little vegetation to hide. This is how our neuroqueer children feel in our schools, celebrating their uniqueness without 'a place to hide' or 'escape.'

Worse yet, what if the deer's homes are full of hunters? What if their teachers are hunters? What if their sense of threat is heightened because their lived experience has taught them not to trust those in authority, or because they have experienced trauma from not having their voices heard, or their needs met (Ragan, 2020)?

Where do we go, as youth, when we have huge questions that seem incomprehensible to us? Where do we go, as youth, when the answers that we receive scare, frighten, and take on a life of their own? Where do we go, as youth, when the support given to you is perceived as a threat, when trusted adults set off your fight or flight responses, or when you have not been taught how to regulate in a way that works for you emotionally?

Where do we go, as youth, when we have no one living in the home that we trust? Where do we go when we are experiencing body dysmorphia, severe loneliness, yearning to belong, uncertainty about sense of self, a biological need to fit in?

Where do we go, as youth, when school is a place where we see posters celebrating our identity? In the same halls, we experience micro-aggressions, or hateful acts, or violence, or feelings of neglect, or feeling unsupported by watching exhausted adults in working jobs that have no authority to discipline and have not enough resources to support all of the students in their care. What happens when the identity with which we align is being targeted with acts of hatred and violence?

We listen to stories about brilliant humans who made it their mission to have their stories survive. They hid, they protected, they wrote, and their voices lived on. We tell stories to teach them the skills to rise above their 'hunters.' We share stories that answer questions, and we share stories of words of comfort and wisdom that were shared with us. We reach out to the communities of storytellers for support.

Safe space is rarely guaranteed for neurodivergent and neuroqueer students. Refuge begins before instruction; it is relational and begins as a shame-free space to exist where you are accepted as you are. There is no talking about accommodations; they are freely given, whatever you need. Bar none, everyone is accepted.

Then it is the power of stories. When neurodivergent and neuroqueer students share their stories, they carve out a space to exist and relate. Telling your story with others fosters community and belonging. I believe in narrative therapy.

From Rigid Enclosures to Shame-Free Circles

The rigidity, structure, and emphasis on the final product in Western classical music education left me feeling unsupported and isolated. After leaving formal opera studies, I studied at Kindermusik University, where participation is welcome, there is no final product, the journey is celebrated, and classes are centred on connection and regulation. Kindermusik, a research-based music and movement class, introduced me to shame-free learning and acceptance at a time I needed them most.

I learned early on the importance of setting the tone and space for learning. In Kindermusik, we sit in a circle to be on the same level, without any parent or child above or below the others. Every class begins and ends in this circle, to connect with every student as an equal. No one was singled out for needing something different; they were taught to notice objective actions and label them as observations without praise. I often had trouble reassuring parents that their children were behaving in the 'right' way, that, in fact, there was no 'right way,' only each child's autonomous, authentic curiosity, and sense of play (Lillemyr, 2009).

Intention matters for educators as they are the ones who walk in and bring their energy into the classroom. At Kindermusik University, we learn how to position ourselves, what questions to ask others, how and when to check in, and how to show genuine care. We are taught to pay attention to social cues and how to engage with people in a caring manner, especially helpful for those who do not understand social interactions easily. Some neurodivergent thinkers require different explanations, question things differently, and are motivated to learn differently. Understanding what motivates each person changes how we respond as educators.

The Kindermusik classroom usually starts as a blank room; if there isn't one, we minimize distractions. Our job is to hold the attention in the room, and if we let it drop, we have dropped the ribbon. With attention comes responsibility. One must be prepared to direct that attention because once it is given, it is special. We have the power to create magic in those moments. We also talk

about being present in our bodies and how building small, actionable steps creates trust within our bodies that we can do hard things. By keeping steps small enough so that they are achievable, we show people how to believe in themselves, rather than telling everyone they need to fit into the same box to be accepted.

Opening My Own Performance Academy

I enjoyed teaching this way so much that I wanted to transition my entire studio into a play-based (Pyle & Danniels, 2016), wide attention model where the student was the center of the experience. I transitioned to a home-based studio, and within a couple of years, the studio had blossomed into an *Academy for Performance Arts.*

Kindermusik set the framework for shame-free learning, encouraging students to enjoy the journey of being a forever student, to follow their curiosity, and to be the narrators of their own story. I immediately began integrating these methods into my classes with older students in music and theatre education, adapting them to suit the needs of each group. Every student was provided with a role to perform and grow into, regardless of skill level, and learned to support one another through an ensemble-focused approach. Sounds were not judged. Rather than labelling sounds as good or bad, I offered to help students achieve their tonal outcome goals. There was no way to fail. Everyone had an understudy, so there was no pressure to perform.

In my teaching approach, the most important piece of the puzzle was ensuring that every student felt seen, heard, accepted, safe, and able to regulate their emotions. Play and learning cannot happen when basic needs are not met. I had volunteer teaching assistants provide support to the younger students. These volunteers would participate in activities with focused attention, provide alternative solutions for activities that needed accommodations, and take students who could not focus on regulation breaks. This peer support increased student success by improving class conditions and helped assistants deepen their own learning by teaching younger students.

These methods fostered an environment where students were eager, imaginative, and had the agency to create and shape their own material. When they became interested in writing and recording, I opened studio time for them to start learning. When students asked questions I couldn't answer, I would find the necessary resources and often hire professionals to provide professional development and expand our shared knowledge.

My evolving teaching approach emphasized understanding the whole person. To teach or support young people well, I had to understand where they were developmentally since their brains, bodies and sense of self were still forming. Youth development reflects this understanding: young people are building a sense of self, becoming aware of where they are developmentally, and recognizing how their biology makes them vulnerable.

As instructors, we are taught to translate everything into benefits and outcomes: to tell parents the benefits of learning from the activities we do in class, and to communicate the academic research that underpins these courses. In practice, that often means speaking the language of people who are already in education and who possess time and money, because those are the families who can pay and who see education as an investment. However, many youths born into families or other circumstances beyond their control are still deserving of an education. Imagine a young person who is unable to escape their surroundings, their home, their circle, their school, their circle of influence, and who is constantly being told, directly or indirectly, that their needs are too much

or that their voice does not matter. For these students, a safe, creative space can be a refuge, their first experience of being addressed and accepted as a full, worthwhile person.

Developing Blackout in the Light: Finding Refuge

In the shame-free environment we created, students felt safe to be open and honest. In our Pre-Professional Broadway class, I challenged them to write a musical about some difficult experiences they were navigating in school, including trying to make sense of "inclusive" events that did not always feel safe or affirming in practice. Events like Pride Day or joining groups like the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) highlighted differences that aimed to celebrate their communities, yet had become a way to target individuals and students' experiences. This became one of the main plot points in *Blackout the Musical* during our script-writing classroom sessions. Students who aimed to bring harm to the participants of Pride celebrations or GSA meetings had a way to discover their identities by following GSA meetings, so they could be followed on walks home from school, or in other instances where students endured hateful acts due to participating in the meetings. As a result, students were more likely to hide wearing black clothing than celebrate by wearing rainbow clothing during Pride days to avoid being targeted and isolated from the community. Some went so far as to create a Pride Day Protest by wearing black as a group. As a class, we aimed to understand and connect the stories by questioning all students' world views, motivations, traumas, and how their beliefs were shaped to understand why someone would behave this way. We developed connections, compassion, and empathy for all of the characters in our stories and analyzed how each person would have benefited from different supports. All students wanted to connect and feel a sense of belonging within the group as a whole, as opposed to standing out and feeling separated from others. To come back to our neuroqueer students, those wearing black during Pride Day, they felt polarized within the student body they were trying to be a part of. It is also impossible to separate students from the social and political climate that they are witnessing in social settings that polarize their worldview politically and interfere with acceptance as a whole.

Students were presented with questions such as: "Why are queer students joining in Pride protests at school, when the goal of a Pride Day is to celebrate the identity they are hiding from? If these spirit days are not appreciated by queer students, who are they for? What kind of representation, event or public display achieves the goal of fostering safety, affirmation and acceptance?"

Answers to these questions led us to find that many of the students who were applying masking techniques in social settings were also neurodiverse. This intersectionality between the LGBTQAS2+ and neurodivergent communities, or the 'neuroqueer' community, became significant to the musical *Blackout*'s narrative. Students also explored well-intentioned but harmful allyship, and deconstructed the term "bully," including how actions that further isolate the 'bully' rather than rehabilitate or educate them compassionately can polarize both sides, resulting in an "us versus them" dynamic.

Students contributed to the project however they wanted. While we were discussing these topics, students contributed by writing an essay or monologue, submitting art connected to these themes, and writing music and lyrics. There was no wrong way to respond, and submissions and interactions were student-led. Different students excelled in different areas; there were no negative consequences for trying something new, no pass or fail, so this freedom led to exploration. Students developed skills in creative writing, music production, research, choreography, costume and set

design, directing, and stage management, ultimately culminating in the production of the musical before a live audience at LSPU Hall in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Being able to take credit for creating this work, bringing their own stories to life, and seeing and feeling that connection through audience feedback developed new confidence in all the students who participated, regardless of whether they were seen on stage in the final performance or not. The students were empowered by my decision as an educator to give them agency over how they participated and how they created the project, having gone through the whole process of creating, developing, and performing in an original musical. As an educator, my role was to collaborate with students, support their ideas, and provide the resources they needed to succeed, defined as specific, manageable, and achievable goals.

By researching and sharing the benefits of writing musicals with youth and sharing neuroqueer stories, we help legitimize a pedagogy grounded in fostering hope and encouraging others to share their stories. I believe this is meaningful work. Why do I keep bringing up safety concerns? The world is not safe. However, our classrooms must be safe to provide a conducive learning environment. To get to real, deep, passionate learning, we need permission to step away from our unsafe, terrifying world, and within these walls, we can be silly. Not dividing people is important here, but instead focusing on our commonalities and strengths makes all the difference.

Finding Questions and Framing Space

Youth-written theatre initiatives, with adult supervisors acting in good faith to support their learning journey, are student-led and driven by curiosity and kindness. They begin from a place of not knowing the answer to a question and needing to find one. At the same time, it places a responsibility on educators to avoid letting their biases shape how they perceive different student groups and their needs. Since students' behaviours are strongly influenced by their environment and experiences, it's unrealistic to expect children from diverse backgrounds to enter a room and behave the same way with the same level of support.

Theatre and arts-based education are often autoethnographic in nature. In my experience, to tell a story, young people first have to build it by reflecting on their own experiences and organizing into strengths-based groups to tackle the work that needs to be done. Keeping the work in-house gives the youth in the room permission to be creative, learn, ask questions, conduct research, and build the skills they need. This process fosters community, builds self-esteem, and demonstrates how empowering community partnerships can facilitate positive growth.

Intention matters. Don't drop the ribbon. In a world where youth attention is mined by algorithms and context is accessible and engaging, we have to match and meet that expectation. What need is the student expressing? How can the student lead me to understand what they want to experience or learn? Can we explore concepts and grow together? Can we scaffold together, build on those concepts, and receive an individualized learning plan so I can tailor it to your needs, your style, and your passions? Can I learn what excites and motivates you authentically as a human being, and can I use that to thread through our learning?

The point of *Blackout* was not to produce a perfect play with all the right answers. Its purpose was to give students an opportunity to ask questions and search for the answers on their own, in their own way. It invited them to direct their questions out into the world, propelling them on a quest for discovery and encouraging them to tackle hard questions that we do not yet have the answers to. It was about doing memory work the hard way: hands-on, in the flesh, being brave in

the face of failure, celebrating failures and turning them into learning opportunities. A failure is an opportunity to grow by living out these lessons the hard way as a community of learners and educators.

Learning to Trust the Process

Blackout was the result of a safe and creative learning environment. My team and I created a forgiving, affirming space to work in, and tried to become the person who believes in them when they do not believe in themselves. Loneliness stings, and we are biologically programmed to feel the pain of rejection. In neurodiverse people, this pain can be amplified into rejection sensitivity disorder, which can intensify emotional hurt, create mental fog, and overwhelming physical sensations (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). To fight a loneliness epidemic, we build communities that empower each other and provide the support and resources people need to succeed.

To build a community, we have to build its parts, starting with the self. We cultivate a self that is bold enough to question and brave enough to look for honest answers. We build a self that is forgiving, open to learning, and engaged with all types of people to improve and expand their knowledge. These self-building techniques are especially important for neurodivergent learners. As neurodiverse people, we need a space to safely practice new skills in activities in a forgiving environment, with the training and support required to succeed. We need safe opportunities to practice empathy in real-life settings, while making meaningful connections and learning how to put these skills into action.

Theatre, drama, art, and music give a community of people who find it hard to navigate social situations a safe way to practice how to move through complex situations and to connect meaningfully so they do not feel so isolated and alone. Students develop trust in themselves and their abilities. In *Blackout,* I saw what that kind of practice can do. The result was unmistakable, as I witnessed the growth and joy in the eyes of the students who participated. Students thanked me for restoring their agency in learning and for seeing what is possible when given the opportunity.

Too often, educators forget the struggles they encountered in their own learning journeys. Was their education perfect? Would it have been improved with more agency, kindness, a shame-free space, and someone willing to go at their own pace? Was it led by curiosity, joy, and a love of learning? I am grateful for the time I've spent reflecting on my needs and creating space where hope for the future of education can thrive. Having a framework where students can access and apply research to an active project and see results in real time can create hope for the future, where we have our next generation of students empowered, connected, confident, supported and full of dreams, knowing they have the formula for success: to fail, learn, edit, grow, repeat, and then succeed.

We can let today's youth be shaped by the many influencers around them, or we can be involved in their development. We can enrich their lives with knowledge delivered in ways they can understand emotionally, in environments that clearly explain the benefits, and through techniques that allow scaffolding to work. Tiered information helps. So too do tools for thinking critically and looking up trustworthy sources on topics that engage them.

Successful inventors often have a method that involves failing and correcting over and over, much like how an AI learns. We can apply the same principle in education by providing soft,

safe places for failure. I spend a lot of time teaching students that it is okay, and even encouraged, to fail.

When students fail, as educators, it is an opportunity to offer them a skill they can use next time or a tool to add to their toolkit for assessing that problem again. Student-led education means supporting students in pursuing what they are most passionate about and helping them reach their goals (Blum, 2020). For many adults, it is ingrained that they have to do it perfectly, and they are missing one of the most significant learning opportunities by not allowing their bodies the chance to be free, be bold, be silly, be loose; truly engaging with life rather than simply trying to produce it synthetically, plastically, in an artificial way. Whether we are the target of our own violence or the violence of others, the arts have proven to be a medium for self-expression, community, and healing for students I have supported in this process.

What is an escape into the self?

Look to the darkness. Investigate it curiously. The best academics are passionate, or driven, driven mad by a question, a desire.

Where to escape, when there is no escape?

We start by finding those who are hiding in the dark.

Listen to their stories. Let their pain live somewhere else. Let them know their human experience matters, and that their voice can be used meaningfully to communicate (Ragan, 2020).

I had the question: What do I do when I feel helpless?

I hide and write.

The best advocates are full of passion.

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

Stefan James, *Fielding Graduate University*

Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stefan James at stefanjames@fielding.edu.

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

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

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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Up-staging Ourselves: Performing Community as Critical Change in the Blackout Project

Sarah Pickett, *Memorial University*

John Hoben, *Memorial University*

Authors' Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Sarah Pickett at spickett@mun.ca.

Abstract

How do we know when we are just going through the motions? Moreover, how do we close the gap between our stated commitments and our everyday practices in our community-facing academic work? This article is an autoethnographic study that uses found poems derived from interview transcripts and personal reflections to describe and explore our work in the *Blackout* Project. This arts-based and community-oriented project aims to celebrate and explore neuroqueer identity by staging tensions around visibility, agency and belonging and inviting persuasion through performance. Here, we describe the origins of *Blackout*, our positioning as critical scholars at a crucial juncture in our careers, and the project's inception as a response to shifting historical and cultural conditions. We also discuss the challenges associated with partnerships among academics, community educators, and community members, as well as how we envision the future trajectory of work that pushes representational and institutional boundaries during a time of realignment and challenge within today's universities.

Keywords: anti-oppressive education, neuroqueer identity, arts-based education

Up-staging Ourselves: Performing Community as Critical Change in the Blackout Project

Taking Stock: *Blackout*, Shifting Identities and Perspectives

What do we do when our critical work begins to feel misaligned with the world it is meant to address? "Perhaps it goes without saying," says Carmen Shields (2005), "that we are born into a story already in progress, but the implications […] are profound in terms of examining the roots of our beliefs about the world, and the way our thinking and actions are enacted in our lives" (p. 180). This autoethnographic piece represents our desire to express and explore our collaboration on a community-focused arts-based project centred on neuroqueer experience. It discusses the project within the context of our careers, our changing views on critical education, and our increasing anxieties about shifting cultural and historical conditions in Canada and globally.

Although we are proud of our work in critical circles, we also wonder whether it is time to adjust our approach to critical work, given the increasing polarization and conflict in our society and the sense that familiar strategies may be losing traction. In exploring our views, we are not asserting that this is the only approach or the best practice; instead, we are engaging in a broader discussion from a moment of vulnerability that, for us, reflects where we are honestly situated at this time. Rather than ignoring feelings of apprehension, uncertainty and frustration, it may be time to reassess and take stock of what meaningful, achievable praxis looks like in today's age, what we have done right, what we feel needs to shift, and how *Blackout* and projects like it, represent a new, more effective, way of doing critical research, and creating effective partnerships that proudly refuse to conform to the conventional academic mould.

This is the space from which our collaboration emerged, as two mid-career, nonconventional academics admitted their discomfort with the direction of our culture and our fears about what might be. Emerging from this shared unease, our collaboration was guided by a recognition that "hope is the acknowledgement of more openness in a situation than the situation easily reveals" (Simon, 1992, p. 3). In what follows, we draw on our shared reflections and conversations about *Blackout,* and explore themes connected to the challenges of forging community-based partnerships in today's academy and how we see our work as a response to a more careful and 'slow' form of praxis (Berg & Seeber, 2016), ideally one that is more far-reaching and impactful in the long run. Collectively, our piece is intended as both an autoethnographic reflection and a call to spark a broader conversation about how we perceive intellectuals and how our preconceptions about what and who count in the academic world filter some important voices out of the frame.

Beyond Pathology: Neuroqueer Identity and the Creative Turn

To interpret what *Blackout* stages, it is vital to explore the arts-informed neuroqueer framing through which we encounter the project, and that resists a fixing logic by keeping youth agency central. For scholars and activists, understanding neurodiversity as a complex, situated, and intersectional aspect of human identity is crucial to grasping how people relate with one another and to the contexts in which they live. Reductive or exclusionary conceptions of exceptionality are not benign; they can actively harm or exclude others. This is especially evident in rigid, non-fluid discourses on gender and sexuality that leave little room for voices outside dominant norms, even within frameworks that present themselves as critical or progressive (Egner, 2019; Johnson, 2021).

Fortunately, new perspectives are emerging. Researchers increasingly caution against adopting what Walker and Raymaker (2021) have termed a "pathology paradigm" (p. ?) regarding

exceptionality, identity, and difference. Although many attempts to 'help' or 'fix' neurodivergent people are well-intentioned, this framing still treats neurodiversity as a deficiency. In contrast, critical work stresses that people think, feel, and perceive the world differently, and that these differences are not simply to be weighed against an absolute measure of what is good and bad or 'normal' (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Scholars working with the notion of 'neurodiversity' (Singer, 2017) foreground intersectional human identity and embodied subjectivity, placing these at the core of efforts to move beyond simplistic binaries of normal and dysfunctional.

One way this shift materializes is through art and arts-informed inquiry, which is increasingly used to create sites where neurodivergent and neuroqueer individuals can share their experiences in more affirmative and, ideally, authentic ways. Performance offers a powerful means of showcasing the creativity, talent, and wisdom (Grandi, 2022) associated with neurodiversity. It fosters community and belonging while providing neurodivergent youth with opportunities to exercise agency. At the same time, performance enables artists, creators, and performers to engage with the public beyond simplistic platitudes, allowing community members to speak in their own words. In doing so, it underscores the diversity and intersectionality within the neurodiverse and neuroqueer communities, as well as among individuals, differences that are often overlooked.

By situating neurodiversity within broader conversations about embodiment, gender, and desire, scholars and activists seek to affirm neurodiverse ways of being through approaches that are both transformative and grounded in practice (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Community-crafted scripts can be deeply fulfilling for artistic creators and performers, who give voice to previously unheard 'truths' of their experiences, while also offering audiences up-close and personal encounters with stories that move beyond clichéd depictions of neurodiverse or neuroqueer life. Art's capacity to generate productive tension allows performance to be both disruptive and connective, challenging reductive narratives while inviting empathy and understanding (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011; Piantanida et al., 2003). Nevertheless, change remains hard-won and often requires performance and pedagogical practices rooted in genuine empathy and listening, rather than top-down solutions, especially as artists and educators respond to a growing heteronormative and cisnormative backlash against LGBTQ2SIA+ communities.

Situating *Blackout*: Performance Pedagogy in a Local Moment

Blackout emerged from a local sequence of events that made the aforementioned 'academic' concerns highly tangible. In June 2022, anti-Pride protests occurred across Canada, including junior high schools in Newfoundland and Labrador where students, including allies of LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiverse communities, participated by wearing black during Pride events and avoiding Gender & Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). As a musical grounded in real-life events, *Blackout* seeks to ask how we might imagine the world otherwise, using the creative power and impact of the performing arts. This is why we agreed to collaborate with community partners on the *Blackout* Project. This effort represented a shift in our existing work toward more action-based, community-oriented practice, in which our roles are more supportive and less directive.

Blackout is a co-constructed musical theatre production developed with and for youth to engage and inform public discourse about neuroqueer youth who seek safety by blending into the crowd. The performance aims to disrupt harmful narratives and affirm LGBTQ2SIA+ and neurodiverse identities, speaking directly to educators, parents, community leaders, and policymakers to inspire meaningful change. We observe that K-12 schools in Newfoundland and

Labrador (NL) have primarily focused on increasing the visibility of LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals and families, recognizing the life-saving impact of such efforts. With this in mind, *Blackout* represents a different form of public pedagogy, in which youth and community educators can engage with real-life events and present them as a living text that celebrates neuroqueer identity with nuance and complexity. *Blackout* resists easy categorization because it offers an ironic, satirical take on surface-level engagements with LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. Its sharp social critique is tempered by humour and an upbeat, almost 'campy' musical score. Though it addresses violence and anti-LGBTQ2SIA+ protests, the narrative and tone remain consistently hopeful amid the many strains and conflicts driving these events. This remarkable balance mirrored our desire for academic work that embraces subtlety and tension within a non-didactic yet pedagogical orientation.

What We Did: Crafting an Autoethnography through Found Poetry

To understand *Blackout*, we adopt a methodology that keeps us experience-near and conveys our distinct experiences and voices. Consequently, we use autoethnographic writing and, as we elaborate below, found poetry to examine our experiences and perceptions of everyday life as academics, citizens, and teachers (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). We view the self as a partial, intersectional, constructed, and contested site that can teach us much about broader culture, while also recognizing the significance and poignancy of individual subjective experience (Richardson, 2000). Our paper explores Sarah's role as the faculty lead on the project, John's position as an ally, and our collaboration with community educators, all within the context of the expectations and realities of contemporary academic settings. At the core of our investigation was our hope that we could somehow harness and capture "education's belief in the ability of both art and language to represent the real and the anxiety associated with a move away from what has become commonsense" (Triggs, 2009, p. 85).

We reflected on the reasons for our decision to collaborate on *Blackout* and how our participation in the project impacted our perceptions of belonging and academic identity. At the centre of our broad-based inquiry was the question of how community-based, arts-informed collaborations like the *Blackout* project help us reimagine what it means to engage critically in a changing world. This question prompted us to write individual reflections and then to engage in an hour-long conversation about the project, which was subsequently transcribed. We met to discuss these reflections and to select passages that highlighted key issues and themes.

Some of these passages, which we felt were most representative, were then selected and, in keeping with the arts-inspired theme of our special issue, edited to create found poems, a genre that, according to Prendergast (2006), "has an established history and practice in literature" (p. 372) and educational research. Found poetry from research data or texts (Sullivan, 2000), also known as "poetic transcription," or, more commonly, "research poetry" (Patrick, 2016), enables the exploration of experimental research forms where, as Glesne (1997) notes, "horizons are broadened" (p. 219). Autoethnographic reflections on these found poems, together with our own narratives, serve as points of departure for discussing and analyzing the meaning and nature of our arts-based collaboration. In this sense, our method is not simply a way of reporting on *Blackout*; it is itself an act of creative and critical reflection that keeps us close to our lived experience as we examine what the project makes possible.

Reframing through Performance: Transformative, Anxiety-Inducing Spaces

With this framing in place, we turn from methodology to practice, using found poems and key scenes from the musical itself to explore how performance functions in *Blackout* as a non-conventional mode of inquiry. Many of our reflections intersected with songs and themes from *Blackout* and, often, represented a creative interplay with the musical. *Blackout* itself invited audiences to grapple with tensions surrounding the simultaneous need for LGBTQ2SIA+ visibility, anonymity, agency, as well as the ongoing fluidity/evolution of sexuality, gender, and other social constructions (Butler, 1999; Warner, 1993). We want to reassure ourselves and others that it is acceptable to exist in these hybrid spaces, that we value beginning where we are, and that we encourage others to do the same.

All too often, formal education has forgotten that we are all "beings in the process of becoming [and exist] as unfinished, uncompleted beings, in, and with, a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). A recurring theme in our reflections was the limitations of a one-size-fits-all institutional response that youth have resisted, a phenomenon explored in *Blackout*. This often means listening to the people in front of us, rather than being prescriptive and didactic. It also requires careful consideration of the complexity of existing institutional responses to neuroqueer identity and how, in many respects, they fail to recognize its ambivalence. *Blackout's* performance pedagogy, we argue, renders this ambivalence visible and invites audiences to dwell in it, rather than resolving it too quickly. In this spirit, the found poem *Shift* reflects on the need for GSAs alongside other conventional approaches to supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ youth, but also on how to move beyond those approaches to find ways of celebrating and supporting LGBTQ2SIA+ identity that offer greater nuance and depth.

Shift

We needed GSAs… and we still do…
In some spaces, we still do.

We need champion teachers…
Rainbows. All the colours, all the care…
But sometimes,
It is a thin response, isn't it?

Some teachers, well-intentioned,
Say, "I know the right pronoun…
I've done this… I've done that…"

But the kid in their classroom,
Maybe they're trans… Maybe they don't want the GSA.
And the teacher thinks, "We made this for you… We helped you…"

But maybe…
Maybe they want to be stealth, fly under the radar…

Disappear a little… like the neurodiverse student,
Who would rather get a "C" than stand out for an "A"
Who wants… just to move through quietly…

And us?
Sometimes we don't know, I don't know…
How to wrestle with that agency…
How to honour the world the way they live it… it shifts so fast…

But *Blackout*?
Oh, *Blackout*. It's different.
It's messy. It's alive.

Youth brought their stories.
Educators wrestled.
No neat endings. No tidy bows.

Just real. Complicated. Authentic.

And I love that. I've always loved messy spaces.
Music that doesn't resolve. Things that aren't wrapped up.

They feel real. They feel alive.

Shift exemplifies the kind of arts-informed, critical practice we value; it honours the desire for safety and vulnerability alongside calls for visibility and affirmation, without forcing a single solution. Being alive means that our experiences unfold unpredictably, sometimes chaotically, despite our best efforts to slow them down or to rationalize them. For academics, at first glance, this can be unnerving: the open texturedness of life seems much more familiar than the linear predictability of arguments. Feeling and experiencing knowledge means making room for intuition and imagination, even as we trust the creative process to form our ideas, hoping they will be different and fresh.

Blackout challenges us to consider the pull between form and open-endedness, the comfort of what we know, and the thrill of what is in the process of becoming, driven by passion. It also captures the uncertainty that often accompanies transformation and growth in the interval between the old and new, especially when we feel at risk of being on the 'outside.' Indeed, a key narrative thread in *Blackout* centres on the GSA, which provides a sense of community for some but remains more fraught for others, including Chris, a transgender character. The song, *Join the GSA!*, captures the GSA champions' well-meaning enthusiasm, drawing on *Blackout*'*s* characteristic campy, self-deprecating humour. Staged as an upbeat, cheery invitation to join the school's Gender

and Sexuality Alliance, the number's bright, confident tone satirizes the notion that belonging is simply a matter of adopting the right language or entering the right room. The character's exaggerated earnestness is funny, but it also captures a familiar institutional reflex: when faced with complexity, reaching for an easily replicable and visible sign of care.

What gives the number its edge is the friction it stages around youth response. The invitation is not received as liberating by everyone. For some students, the offer of visibility feels like safety, while for others, it feels like exposure, or a misreading of what they need in that moment. The juxtaposition is a reminder of how, in art and life, "different modes of perception are asked of us" (Greene, 1995, p. 131) if we genuinely want to effect change. From the live performance, we were struck by how the comedy did not soften the critique but rather signalled its referentiality and complexity. Read alongside *Shift*, the scene clarifies that the question is not about whether GSAs matter, but whether schools and the community can also honour quieter, more nuanced, and deeply personal expressions of identity that are not easily reducible to an institutional checklist. Taken together, *Shift* and *Join the GSA!* model a persuasive, non-didactic performance pedagogy; they keep institutional logic and youth agency in productive friction, asking audiences to linger with complexity rather than resolving it.

This is what art and writing do; they make it possible to let go of old identities and to try on new ones. As Carl Leggo (2023) observes: "I am a writer because I have created myself, written myself as a writer, and in the creating and writing, I have come to know myself" (p. 11). His insight resonates with our own ongoing negotiation of academic work and identity, and with the students who animate *Blackout* and the events it stages. Read this way, *Blackout* functions as a mode of self-authorship, inviting both performers and audiences to experiment with new ways of being.

Performing Discomfort: Finding Ourselves Through Uncomfortable Roles

If *Shift* and *Join the GSA* stage the limits of institutional logic and the complexities of youth agency, we also need to turn the lens inward to examine how performance implicates us as academics and allies. Consequently, we interrogate the tensions among masking, complicity and vulnerability, in both the musical and our own narrative and poetic responses, attending to how these dynamics are made visible within performance practice. People are also much less predictable than we assume, meaning that, as art like *Blackout* allows us to depict, they are never only one thing at once. This tension between the roles we play and the lives we lead is elusive yet central to the power of artistic expression. Identity involves nuance, tension, emotion, and depth, themes that also operate in our own search for new conceptions of academic identity and cultural spaces. This theme of masking and unmasking, of assuming different identities to be recognized across different settings, runs throughout the musical. *Blackout's* staging thus exposes not only institutional contradictions, but our own investments in particular social roles.

Conventionally, we look at indecisiveness as a form of weakness, a failure to commit, especially in the academic world. However, why is this so? Can vulnerability be heroic? In the song *Batman*, from the musical, the straight, well-intentioned ally Josh describes living 'two lives' in different contexts, hiding his love of theatre and performing a version of masculinity he believes will be accepted. However, this insight is also accompanied by an implicit awareness that life could unfold differently, capturing both caution and a sense of transformative possibility. The song uses humour to keep the scene accessible, but also functions as a form of cover. It tells the truth without fully exposing it. However, what stands out is the contrast between the superhero metaphor and

the ordinariness of masking for this character. Masking is not a rare phenomenon, but a routine strategy learned under social pressure to conform.

As audience members, we recognized how the number functioned as a subtle hinge between lightness and discomfort. The performance invites us to recognize how quickly people are trained to manage impressions, and how closely that training is tied to gendered norms of masculinity and belonging. The song is complex, however, because it integrates these social and personal dynamics with a performance that renders this tension visible and thus available for shared reflection and, potentially, change. In the words of Roger Simon (1992), the number is an act of engaging in "the production of images of that which is not yet that provoke people to consider, and inform them in considering, what would have to be done for things to be otherwise" (p. 9). In *Blackout*, performance becomes a praxis of self-implication; it does not simply describe masking but asks us to inhabit the discomfort of living 'two lives' and to imagine alternatives, if we can.

Identity's relational and performative aspects are explored across multiple levels throughout the musical, sometimes in humorous, light-hearted terms and sometimes in darker, satirical ones. But this anxiety moves in many different directions. The capacity to change sometimes begins with the realization that there may not be a single 'right' answer, a position that requires a willingness to listen and learn. Persuasion often has an uneasy alliance with the truth because we fear that telling others how we really feel will be rejected. But our experiences and emotions are never as linear and unambiguous as we pretend. This found poem was taken from John's written reflection as he reflected on the sense of inadequacy he felt as a novice ally:

Scared Straight Man

Speaking as a straight man…
But also… neurodiverse.

Not knowing…
Yet wanting to work here—
It's scary. It takes guts.

In the university—
Especially the neoliberal one—
We're told: brand yourself. Be an expert.

But this project? It's different.
Admit we don't know.
Start the conversation. Use art.
Show what it feels like… from the inside.

After tenure, I asked myself—
More publications? Pages no one reads?
It didn't matter. It didn't change a thing.

I wanted…
Meaning. Connection. Impact.

And maybe…
Admitting we don't know
Is the first step.

John found reading the found poem as Sarah crafted it was surprising, because he felt it cast him in a different light, one that gave him more agency than he would typically allow himself, given how uncertain he often felt in the ally role. He recalled that Sarah and other project members had made him feel safe and welcome, and that it is acceptable to make mistakes as he learned. "Admitting we don't know/Is the first step." Perhaps it is also a condition of authentic presence. In this way, performance and poetic transcription together create a critical space in which uncertainty is not a deficit to be hidden, but a starting point for genuine engagement. As Bayles and Orland (2001) remind us, "the only voice you need is the voice you already have" (p. 117). Their broader point is that creative work becomes possible when we stop waiting for permission and begin where we are, accepting that fear accompanies the creative act of self-expression.

Performance is relational and participatory, and the most powerful texts are those that create space for readers to (re)imagine themselves through others' eyes, to draw on memory and imagination, and to lend life to other worlds in which people can be otherwise. Such an immediate, visceral, and intimate response reminds us that "participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed" (Greene, 1995, p. 123). This is especially true for themes as complex and fraught as identity, since *Blackout* celebrates identity while refusing to reduce individuals to a single group label. We understand these uncomfortable roles, then, as central to *Blackout's* reflexive, intersectional frame, since they hold us accountable to our own complexity while still making space for change.

Embodied Emotion: Stitching Together Lived Moments

The experience-near moments traced above, including our own discomfort, invite us to consider how emotion and embodiment function as forms of knowledge within *Blackout,* connecting musical performance to personal history and public memory. Critical, arts-based approaches are uniquely positioned to capture the tension between educational culture and the complexity of everyday life, particularly when they decentre power and create space for multiple voices. In contrast to formal educational settings, where knowledge is presented as settled and authoritative, art invites participants to dwell in the lived moment, in which past and present are mutually constitutive and together shape how we see and experience the world. Embodied performance pedagogy can seamlessly combine affective engagement and critical insight in ways that mirror the intensity and passion of actual life. *Blackout's* use of musical performance to capture a particular cultural moment reminded Sarah of her own engagement with the musicals of her youth, and her found poem explores similar themes:

Hard Return

You know…
I'm from a generation…
That *watched musicals break the rules*.

The one that hit us?

Rent.

It captured a moment in history…
The turn of the century…
The AIDS crisis…
Policies that ignored lives…
Artists figuring themselves out…
Neurodiverse voices…
Queer love… Trans love…
All of it—on stage.

You can't read this in a book.
No textbook… No paper…
Could ever hold that.

When the US government…
Refused to fund HIV or AIDS research—
Because it was a "gay disease"…
That silence… that erasure…
You *felt* it in the music.
In the rebellion.
In the living, breathing story.

You don't watch it…you *participate in it*!
Move with it. Sing with it.
Feel it. *Live it.*

The music!
Rebellious. Raw. Visceral.
Not like anything we'd ever heard before.

> It hit you. It shook you.
> It pulled you into the story.
>
> It isn't just a show…
> It's history.
> It's anger.
> It's joy.
> It's pain.
> It's love.
> And you *feel* every bit of it.

In *Hard Return*, musical theatre appears as a living archive of a cultural moment, a mode of critical public engagement through which audiences come to know history not only intellectually, but intimately. 'Freedom,' says Timothy Snyder (2024), "is about knowing what we value and bringing it to life" (p. xv). This version of freedom is the creative impetus that gave life to *Blackout* and animates other artistic works, as it is the capacity to transform what is given into something that speaks through the artistic act of reclamation. In this framing, personal stories are stitched to broader histories in ways that invite audiences to remember, connect, and hope together. As Sarah noted, just as *Rent* (Larson, 1996) offered a mirror to a generation grappling with loss, desire, and social neglect, *Blackout* provides a space for young people to author their own unique cultural narrative:

> Sarah: What I am saying feels bold, because I am not saying that *Blackout* is like *Rent*, but there is something about the youth-driven closeness… it is staying very experience-near, even if that experience is not the same as someone else's in another part of the world. I think the visceral nature of it offers a glimpse of what it could be like and helps contextualize what is happening in the larger world, even though, like *Rent*, it does not name everything that is happening. In some respects, *Blackout* shares the same tenets. It is an experience close to us, visceral, and collective. Whether or not you are part of the community or are aware of this happening, it uses youth language, which is also what is happening in our larger world. The audience is centred on how systems are functioning. However, it is subtle in a way that is accessible to the audience and not confrontational or overwhelming. I think it is powerful, which helps me feel less afraid of continuing this work.

Anxiety, we recognized, was a recurrent theme in our reflections and in *Blackout* itself. Fear arises from visibility when communities of difference are under threat, but it is also linked to the moral responsibility of advocacy and allyship. We fear misrepresenting others or centring our experiences in reductive ways. To us, working in a public-facing arts-based collaboration is less well-mapped out and less familiar than conventional academic work. Although this is often positive, it also means that our work is not often recognized or supported by the university, and acknowledging this reality can bring a real sense of trepidation. Positioning *Blackout* alongside *Rent* in this way underscores our claim that performance can serve as a form of public pedagogy; it allows youth to feel their way into complex social realities and rehearse new forms of belonging.

The messiness of using an experience-near lens can lead to anxiety, just as relinquishing control through a collaborative process can. In many ways, much of the groundwork for such projects involves creating the conditions for creative collaboration and fostering a climate of trust. This emphasis on relationships and connection also stands in stark contrast to the often formal and formulaic academic world. Collaborative art-making can serve as both a response to the possibility of discovery and as a reminder that knowing, like art, is a living process that connects us to one another and to a collective past. The shared act of creation enables us to forge new subjectivities and transformative spaces, even amid the most challenging circumstances. In *Blackout*, this shared creation brings emotion, risk, and relationship to the centre of our critical work, rather than treating them as peripheral to 'real' scholarship.

The Praxis of Persuasion: How Do We Create Lasting Change?

Having considered performance as a site of institutional critique, counter-narrative, and embodied knowledge, we now turn explicitly to questions of persuasion as a mode of praxis. *Blackout* has prompted us to consider how performance can function pragmatically as a mode of critical engagement in ways that institutional or academic scripts often cannot. One way it does this is by giving voice to lived experience in a powerful, engaging manner. More broadly, our experiences have also prompted us to view changes in people as more about persuasion than overt moralizing. *Blackout* is primarily concerned with attending to the intersubjective and intersectional aspects of identity, because our identities manifest differently across relationships, often in unexpected ways. This fundamental insight includes reconsidering how we can more effectively problematize masculinity in ways that do not alienate or push away young men.

At the academic level, we aim to undertake work that extends the growing body of scholarship on how neurodiversity intersects with other dimensions of identity, including gender and sexuality within LGBTQ2SIA+ communities (Rosqvist et al., 2020; Walker & Raymaker, 2021). On a more human level, this project made us think a lot about how we can convince others to commit to change. Art can help persuade others by offering intimate glimpses into subjective and situated experiences. Moreover, it can help people imagine how the world might be otherwise, even as we examine its imperfections and blemishes. Performance art, rooted in real-life experience, can do these things in a way that didactic moralizing, however earnestly communicated, often cannot.

In an era marked by polarization and performative outrage, this kind of slow, embodied persuasion, rooted in vulnerability and invitation, offers a vital alternative to more didactic or purely abstract models of critical education. We wish people would change when we tell them that their actions are hurtful or their words tend to wound. However, in an age of algorithms, people's views have become increasingly entrenched, with little middle ground from which to seek reconciliation (Neiman, 2024). We acknowledged that mainstream critical approaches had failed to engage certain groups, particularly young males. Sarah, as we see in the following found poem, voiced her concern about the need to find new ways to engage this group while still addressing the harmful dimensions of traditional masculinity:

The Men in My Life

Some narrow expressions of masculinity…
They can feel threatened.

The belief that I have to be tough…
All the time.
That I can't show emotions…
That I can't be tearful.

That I can't like musicals.
That I *have* to like sports.

(She pauses, looks out at the audience, almost whispering.)
This dichotomy—
This box—
It doesn't come from nowhere.

It comes from what we've heard.
From society.
From our families.
From our cultural context.

(Her voice rises, more passionate now.)
But is that all masculinity is?
Toughness? Silence? Denial?

Or can it be something else?
Something wider…
Fuller…
Human.

(Music swells. She steps closer to the audience, almost confessing.)
Because I believe…
Masculinity can hold tears.
Masculinity can sing.
Masculinity can be soft…
And still be strong.

Sarah's found poem opens up masculinity as a question rather than a verdict. It offers a pedagogy of invitation in which young men are addressed as capable of tenderness and change, rather than positioned solely as embodying patriarchal harm. Read through a neuroqueer and intersectional lens, the poem loosens the grip of narrowly scripted gender norms and suggests that masculinities, too, can be re-authored in more expansive and life-affirming ways. In this sense, the poem

exemplifies the type of persuasive, experience-near praxis we see in *Blackout*: it names the harms of dominant gender norms while simultaneously extending an open invitation to transformation. Making this change requires us to mindfully balance the tension between critique and care, as we make room for a more proactive, humane and attentive form of critical activism, themes that Sarah reflected on at length during our interview:

> Sarah: Those folks, especially those who are going to be teachers and working with youth, are part of the audience where *Blackout* is disruptive. It challenges what we think we know about gender, about neurodiversity, about queerness, and how we come to learn about these things. And here is my little soapbox moment: I think we have done a disservice to our men and boys, particularly our Cisgendered, heterosexual, and I would even go so far as to say, white, men and boys, because we have kept them out of the conversation. We have often done that by shaming them and telling them that everything they do is wrong…The challenge is how to address that truth, culturally, and with youth, in a way that helps them feel heard, valued, and given a voice? How can we create space where they can let their guard down enough to say, "Oh, I see how I can walk into a room in a way that you cannot. I see how you have to shut down a part of yourself to be in this space. Did you know that I have to shut down a part of myself to enter this other space?" Furthermore, from there, can we work toward not having anyone shut down any part of themselves to belong and to enter a space?

When voiced in and around a performance like *Blackout*, such reflections become more than individual insights; they form part of a reflexive practice that invites audiences, particularly future teachers, to reconsider their own roles in sustaining or disrupting gendered norms. 'Teaching,' writes bell hooks (1994), "is a performative act" (p. 11). However, how this performative aspect of teaching becomes operational is often complex. As hooks explains, teachers perform, but, more importantly, they invite active participation from students, their audience (hooks, 1994). Collectively, we find ourselves breaking ground between the conventional academic culture we have known and new creative spaces that are both invigorating and anxiety-inducing. We resist the idea that these two realms can be neatly divided, or that doing so would deepen our sense of worth, either as individuals or academics. *Blackout*, we realize, models a performance-based pedagogy that keeps contradictions in view long enough for something to move, in audiences, institutions, and in ourselves.

Coda: Performing Community Beyond the Printed Page

Our paper has traced how *Blackout* resists the temptation of easy solutions by bringing dramatic power to a local moment and staging the complex dynamics of intersectional identity in an engaging, memorable way. Performance art can serve as both method and message, embodying critical principles while telling the stories of academics working with community educators. By reflecting on *Blackout* and our own "poetic transcriptions" (Glesne, 1997), we have explored how creative arts-based approaches can work to make critical education tangible and transformative (Cohen et al., 2018). In doing so, we seek to contribute to the growing body of work that connects creativity, community, and education (Arnold & Norton, 2021; Lowe et al., 2021; Smith, 2021). This convergence of approaches offers hope, but also introduces new challenges and forms of vulnerability.

Blackout grew from a desire to move our work in a new direction, one that would be more impactful and foster boundary crossing through a partnership with community-based educators.

Our aim in this project was to use arts-based research to identify new ways of seeing ourselves and our contributions to the world. We saw performance art as a valuable means of encouraging audiences to explore the multi-textured nature of human experience and social reality (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011).

As Leavy (2020) emphasizes, "arts-based practices can get at multiple meanings, opening up multiplicity in meaning making instead of pushing authoritative claims" (p. 27). This desire to persuade rather than to tell felt like a much-needed way forward in an increasingly fractured and angry world. Performance art, especially art created by youth working in concert within a particular cultural and historical moment, is a means of capturing multiple truths, intersecting identities, and gripping tensions. We saw our aim not as bottling up a message to be administered wholesale to an unthinking audience, but as creating cultural moments in which stories could be told, and people could encounter perhaps unfamiliar perspectives (Grandi, 2022). These were spaces charged and animated by emotion, with feelings that spilled out over the page and across the stage, resisting any easy answers, much like lived experience itself.

These performative spaces also allow us to explore art as a form of bearing witness to the historical and cultural world in which we hope, dream, fear, cry, and love. They stand in welcome contrast to the much more sanitized habits of academic life, where we are encouraged to keep our feelings in check and to file away the more imaginative and passionate parts of ourselves. Instead of focusing on who is right, they instead gesture towards an intellectual and artistic project where we explore how we became this particular way in this particular moment, how that experience feels, how we carry it in our senses, how it unfolds in time, and how mysterious it is to exist together in the ever-elusive, bittersweet now. Performance art, like *Blackout*, stages that ever-encroaching darkness, not to leave us there, but to let in a little, much-needed light, so that we can finally see each other more fully, and perhaps begin, at last, to understand.

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Understanding How I'm the Problem: Autoethnographic Reflections on Falling into Straight Allyship

John Hoben, *Memorial University*

Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. John Hoben at jlhoben@mun.ca.

Abstract

What does it feel like to be a novice ally navigating the inevitable tensions between privilege and solidarity? This self-study reflects on allyship from the perspective of a straight cisgender academic who participated in a collaborative arts-based musical drama project celebrating neuroqueer identity. It explores the challenges of belonging and anxiety, the role of a supportive, welcoming community, and the moral complexities of 'standing with' rather than 'standing for' marginalized groups. A thematic analysis highlights the importance of humility, relationship-building and agency as these emerge within the context of participatory action research (PAR). The paper closes with suggestions for further critical reflection and ongoing challenges. Rather than presenting 'good allyship' as a static achievement, the essay maps how an ally's agency is co-constructed in relation and continuously under development.

Keywords: creative arts-based methods (CAE), straight allyship, critical autoethnography, positionality, critical agency

Understanding How I'm the Problem: Autoethnographic Reflections on Falling into Straight Allyship

Standing With, Not Standing For: An Ally's Point of Departure

If we are being sincere, allyship is hard. This difficulty may explain why allyship has become a critical area of inquiry in social justice research, especially within LGBTQ2SIA+ scholarship (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). Allies are members of the dominant class who work against systemic and localized forms of oppression alongside members of the 'insider group' (DiStefano et al., 2000; Jackson & Hardiman, 1988; Washington & Evans, 1991). Allyship can be a powerful means of social transformation, but it also entails complex power dynamics and thus calls for reflexivity and humility among allies who may unintentionally reproduce dominant cultural norms (Shelton, 2019; Yep, 2021). Straight allyship remains a growing research area, yet few autoethnographic accounts by straight allies reflect on their motivations and experiences (Grzanka et al., 2015; Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021).

My road to allyship started with a personal crisis of meaning. After attaining tenure, I felt surprisingly stuck and unsure about the future of my scholarship, amid significant change at the university. Despite achieving this significant milestone, I felt tired and disconnected from the academic community. Once I had secured a permanent position in the university that I had so long coveted, how would I know if it mattered? As a white, straight, cisgendered, neurodiverse professor, I had long been drawn to critical adult education and arts-based research. However, my academic work no longer felt as if it mattered to me or to the world at large, really.

Around this time, a friend and colleague approached me to collaborate on the *Blackout* project. This arts-based, community-focused, student-led musical drama explores and celebrates neuro-queer identity. The musical emerged in response to anti-Pride protests in local high schools during 2022, which saw an unlikely alliance of opponents to pro-LGBTQ2SIA+ voices, creating a hostile climate for members of the trans and queer communities. My participation in *Blackout* introduced me to the complex dynamics of allyship, challenged my own conceptions of identity, and helped me to understand how a cisgendered straight ally might 'stand with' rather than merely 'stand for' non-hegemonic communities.

Accordingly, what follows is an autoethnographic account of the challenges arising from my complex positioning as an ally and how I came to understand my own limitations and develop agency. My intended audience comprises other potential allies, including those in the early stages of allyship who may be trying to make sense of the role. I draw on relational ethics and the work of the French Existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1948, 1949) to conceptualize the moral tensions inherent in allyship. I also aim to show how the 'good ally' narrative can serve as a subtle form of self-protection, and how relational accountability can redirect that impulse toward shared work. Towards this end, I discuss themes of anxiety, disillusionment, and hope, culminating in an exploration of how community-based artistic collaborations can foster more impactful and meaningful academic work. In short, I aim to explore the question: What does responsible critical agency look like for an ally?

Theoretical Framework: Reflexivity, Care, and the Problem/Mystery Distinction

There is a long tradition of scholarship examining the nature of allyship within the broader ambit of social justice education (Broido, 2000; Jackson & Hardiman, 1988; Washington & Evans, 1991), and LGBTQ2SIA+ scholarship in particular (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Clark, 2010;

Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Fingerhut, 2011; Yep, 2021). This scholarship recognizes the importance of creating strategic alliances and forming communities that move beyond superficial inclusivity (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). Allyship has been promoted as a powerful means of transforming institutional spaces and cultivating positive social change by supporting advocacy efforts for greater rights, participating in public expressions of solidarity, and spreading awareness. Indeed, more broadly, research indicates that creating accepting spaces where LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals can feel safe and belong is an important part of reshaping attitudes within the broader community (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). Unfortunately, to date, within education, the experiences of straight allies remain a relatively under-researched area (Clark, 2010; Grzanka et al., 2015; Ji, 2007; Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021).

Research has focused on the limitations of allyship and the need to avoid surface-level formulations. It also recognizes the importance of intra-group differences within both allies and LGBTQ2SIA+ populations (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). More importantly, scholar-activists aim to foster deeper engagement rather than a transactional approach that fails to produce meaningful transformation (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Edwards, 2006; Yep, 2021). The academic literature also highlights the importance of a relational sense of identity, which understands identities as in process and part of a greater effort at progressive 'worldmaking' (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Allies are rightly urged to be careful that their efforts do not unintentionally reproduce heteronormative norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Yep, 2021). Others have noted that allyship is highly complex and contextual, and that allies may often experience doubt, underscoring the need for more nuanced views of ally identity and development (Russell & Curtin, 2016; Shelton, 2019).

Intersectionality, while adding to our understanding, can also increase the likelihood of misunderstanding and misrecognition when allies assume that they 'get it' solely based on partial overlap in experiences with a disenfranchised group (Forbes & Ueno, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020). Issues related to allyship and representation become even more fraught within the broader ambit of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which explores neuroqueer identity (Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Research on neuroqueer issues is a relatively new yet growing field, and it is imperative to examine the complex interplay among marginalized identities (Egner, 2019; Rutkowski & Cepeda, 2021).

Allyship is also closely related to an ethics of care discourse (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984) and, more broadly, to relational ethics (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). This way of thinking about right action emphasizes the importance of context, interdependence, empathy, and understanding how these ideals play out in relation to power dynamics (Bishop, 2015). In such a framework, other human beings should not simply be reduced to a stand-in for an ideal or merely serve a transactional role; instead, they should be encountered through mutual dialogue and respect (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Seen more broadly, allyship becomes an intimate gesture, the act of standing with another while recognizing the relational exchange of care through presence, words, and action. In the context of allyship, the risk is not simply 'ignorance' but a mode of engagement that reduces identity to a solvable object rather than an encounter with communities whose testimonies exceed the ally's capacity to understand.

Two concepts from the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1948, 1949) help me frame the moral complexities I encountered as a novice ally. The first is his distinction between problems and mysteries. Problems invite instrumental rationality and control, while mysteries require presence and commitment. The second is Marcel's distinction between observation and testimony: observation can remain detached, whereas testimony requires the commitment of the

self and makes the speaker accountable in relation (Marcel, 1948, 1949). For novice allies, the task is not to become an expert witness who speaks over others, but to become a reliable participant who can listen and remain present without attempting to control or impose a single story.

Methodology: Autoethnography and Thematic Analysis

Autoethnography refers to writing about the self (Ellis, 2004). As a critical research methodology, it uses writing to examine narrative experience as a means of understanding individual experience and to explore those insights, constructing knowledge about the self and the world (Bochner, 2012). Critical autoethnography does not view the self as a source of possible bias or as an objective standpoint from which to view the world; rather, researchers who use this methodology believe that the self is multifaceted and relational. Writing serves as both method and analysis, allowing researchers to critically construct meaning from lived experience as it unfolds. Autoethnography allows us to use writing to examine our experiences and the complex, sometimes counterintuitive ways in which humans construct ideas that inform how we engage with one another and with culture (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Leavy, 2020).

In this case, my research question about the nature and meaning of allyship prompted narrative reflections and vignettes. The goal was not to 'prove' allyship, but to trace recurring tensions as I entered the work and tried to find my footing. How do I make sense of my experience as a white cisgender male academic trying to come to terms with the meaning of allyship in a neuroqueer community-based project? I wrote these narratives as situated accounts of embodied moments of uncertainty and my attempts to find belonging, and then returned to the texts to try to identify recurring patterns. These narratives were analyzed to generate broad categories, which were then synthesized into core themes through comparative analysis. These themes, detailed below, are offered as my interpretation of my experiences, rather than as generalized findings that make definitive statements about the nature and meaning of straight allyship.

The *Blackout* Project: Learning through Discomfort

Vignette 1: First Encounters

Never underestimate serendipity. I came to the *Blackout* project through a longtime friend and colleague, Sarah. During one of our many conversations on campus, she asked whether I would be interested in meeting some people at her house to discuss a potential collaboration with community partners on neurodiversity and LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. She thought I would be a good fit since the project was arts-based and focused on critical approaches to neurodiversity.

I was immediately intrigued, but expressed some concerns. *What could I possibly contribute?* Sarah assured me that they wanted the perspective of a straight, cisgender person on the project, especially one who was neurodiverse. I trusted Sarah's judgment, but I still could not shake my unease. As we spoke, I peered awkwardly down an empty hallway. I imagined a garish sign at the end, flashing in large neon letters: "Allies wanted. Apply within."

"Just come and see," she said. And so, I reluctantly agreed.

Our first meeting was at Sarah's home, which was warm and inviting with plants that created a laid-back atmosphere. I felt like I had entered a cozy, chic bungalow in Northern California, except for the unseasonally cool temperatures and grey skies. Two dogs immediately greeted me at the door, in a scurry of tails and fur. There was also a cat, 'Shadow,' who soon was purring, stretched out across my lap. "O.k., so far so good," I thought as I petted the cat.

Although I knew Sarah and everyone seemed relaxed, I felt nervous. Could they tell? I wondered. I noticed one of my black socks was darker than the other and hoped no one else did. I scouted out the most inconspicuous chair, plopping down as if I had just found the one solid piece of ice in the middle of a thawing river. What if I said the wrong thing or got my acronyms mixed up? What if I seemed too staid or old or straight? I worried about my ADHD taking over, causing me to interrupt people with off-topic ideas. "Pull yourself together!" I told myself. I was regressing, the knot in my back tightening. I had a flashback to another time, when I was putting the finishing touches on the liner notes for a mix tape before handing it over to a high school crush. What would they think?

It helped that they already knew each other, except for me, of course. I tried to listen and resist interrupting. I was also acutely aware that I was the only cisgender person with a predominantly heteronormative frame of reference. Even though everyone knew Sarah, I worried I might be perceived as an outsider, the literal "odd man out," or that they might wonder why I was there. As I listened to each person introduce themselves, I was struck by their warmth, humour, and positivity, which were so different from those of many of my academic colleagues, who often seemed less genuinely happy to be in a collaborative space.

When it was my turn to say a little about myself, I shared about my ADHD and struggles with depression, and I acknowledged feeling uncertain about my role as a straight person in the project. I felt a little like the new kid at summer camp, squeezing my hands together gingerly, hoping I would not be the last one left when it came time to pick teams. I looked eagerly at the assembled smiling faces, trying not to make a gaffe that would have everyone make a collective gasp of horror, before I was politely asked to return the cat and leave.

Despite my awkward internal monologue, none of this happened. I saw some affirming nods, the odd laugh, and, most importantly, there were fabulous cookies. Shadow so far had proven to be a model companion. Gradually, the group put me at ease.

I connected with one of the community educators, and we talked about art, drama, and the writing process. She was like a screenwriter-turned-Broadway performer who had known me since fifth grade. She was the community lead for the musical drama. She ran her own performing arts school, creating a welcoming space for kids who felt out of place in more conventional educational settings. Another teacher at the school, who had been with the group since she had been a student there, was passionate about planning the production. Witnessing their collegiality was inspiring, and I was equally impressed by how concerned they were about working with kids to co-create a play that faithfully reflected real-life dynamics.

Another member of the group, a teacher with a background in both music and psychology, was especially mindful about resisting the temptation to sloganize or oversimplify LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. He seemed to glide effortlessly between the worlds of academia and performance art like a champion goalie sliding deftly from side to side. In true ADHD fashion, I also noticed he had great hair, perhaps not a surprising observation, given my own advancing male-pattern baldness. In my head, I wryly imagined an infomercial in which I played the untreated control, and he was the final cutaway for the stand-alone miracle cure.

As a teacher, he was keenly aware that educational institutions often implement well-intentioned interventions that fall short. However, this was not theoretical; he lived it every day. It was apparent why Sarah was drawn to this group. They were all willing to tackle difficult problems and had confidence in their ability to effect change. I cupped my hands more tightly

around my warm cup of coffee, feeling happy and hopeful. These were cool, interesting people. Eventually, maybe some of that would rub off on me like glitter backstage at an elementary school concert.

Despite my internal insecurities, I knew that, deep down, I had connected and been recognized in turn, despite our differences. I left that day excited about not only the project but also, for the first time in a long time, about my work. I did not have to spend the rest of my life in an *institution*; the very word made me feel as if my tongue were coated in dry sand. Our encounter broadened our view of education. We did not have to spend our time branding ourselves, nor did we have to pretend that we knew everything. Instead, we could leverage our positions to empower others to grow and lay claim to a space for the critical imagination. I began to see this project as a break from the university, where differences did not shut people out but opened up new forms of connection. I left Sarah's house that day, surprised and, more importantly, a little more hopeful.

Vignette 2: Stage Pedagogy

The first showing of the musical at the LSPU Hall, a historic downtown St. John's theatre, was a turning point for me because it made the project's stakes publicly visible. There was a professional-looking playbill, and the Dean and Associate Dean of our Faculty came to watch. People were smiling and making small talk with the drama coaches and the artistic director. The place was filled with a bustling energy. I was anxious, even though I knew the script and the music were good, *really good*. It was the thrill of anticipation.

As the lights came up and the audience's attention fell on the silhouetted figures onstage, I felt the rush of being so close to something so public-facing. Along with the rest of the crowd, I laughed and felt my eyes brim with emotion. Although there was distance, I felt close to the actor's eager, upturned faces, filled with intensity. It was my initiation into a new form of cultural work, and it was exhilarating. The play featured many great songs, peppered with pop-culture references, witty and full of verve. The script evoked the fundamental need for love and recognition, even as the search for those things leaves us vulnerable to the rawness of human emotion. There were betrayals and unexpected alliances, as a trans-kid sided with bullies, and there was always an underlying threat of violence. Yet, throughout, the protagonists displayed a stubborn, stumbling, utterly brilliant courage.

After the show and the applause, as the noisy crowd slowly filtered out of the hall, I overheard a young couple discussing the play's ending. In this final scene, the principal enters and delivers a preachy, staid message about everyone just needing to get along. A stock figure offering tired old platitudes. The couple seemed invested in the scene, and it reminded me of our own animated conversations about the motivations of different characters. Suddenly, I was struck by how wide a net a work of art could cast. I had never experienced anything like this in the academic world. The whole endeavour had opened up a moral space, without being didactic, where people could feel the hurts of others, where someone else's wrong became translated into the language of their own love and pain. This was exactly what the project aimed to do: highlight the complex richness of our inner lives and the importance of resisting the temptation of easy solutions.

In the weeks that followed, much happened. Another outstanding, bright, and sensitive graduate student joined our team. I had some unused grant funds that I allocated to the project, and we soon secured two additional community partnership grants. This led us to create a lab for participatory action-based research on neuroqueer issues, which we called the ECHO lab (Equity Collective for Hope and Opportunity). More recently, another exceptional teacher with academic

expertise in gender and digital critical literacy joined our team, raising exciting avenues for future work. Over time, I began to reimagine my academic work through the lens of participatory, arts-based action research. Working with Sarah and the community educators introduced a new dimension to my academic work, one rooted in humility and solidarity. I had gotten over myself, but also into myself, and what I found was not all bad, though there were a lot of corners that needed to be swept clean.

Reflection and Themes

My narrative vignettes trace how I entered the work through a relationship and shared neurodiversity, and how, in my case, action often preceded understanding of my new role. Through my critical autoethnography, I identified recurring tensions that resurfaced as I sought to find my footing, which I explore in the following thematic reflections.

I. Entry points: The Desire for Belonging and Legitimacy

I did not seek out this role; instead, it found me through a relationship (Broido, 2000; Shelton, 2019). In my case, allyship was enabled by the support, kindness, and understanding of LGBTQ2SIA+ community members who welcomed me. Nevertheless, I experienced myself simultaneously as an insider and an outsider in these new spaces. Being neurodivergent, I experienced a growing sense of belonging and excitement about the possibility of meaningful contribution. Yet, I remained acutely aware of my positioning within the dominant straight male culture. Although I understood the concept of straight privilege, that "members of dominant social groups […] benefit from *unearned privileges* given in the form of *unearned entitlements*" (Edwards, 2006, p. 40, emphasis in original), I still did not fully grasp how these entitlements function from the vantage point of those who are excluded. Only after joining the *Blackout* project did I begin to appreciate these harms more concretely.

My engagement with *Blackout* marked a shift in how I understand allyship, from an abstract commitment to a practice enacted with others. Communities don't just provide context for solidarity; they define and enact its very meaning, even though "allyship remains a process with little to no consensus, and sometimes with conflicting goals," whether those are political or more intensely personal (Forbes & Ueno, 2020, p. 173). Although, as a critical scholar, I had implicitly understood this, my new role helped me to appreciate the importance of communities as sites of struggle more viscerally. Reflecting on these experiences, Patricia Leavy's (2020) work on arts-based research resonated strongly with me. As she observes, "Arts-based researchers are not 'discovering' new research tools, they are carving them. With the tools they sculpt, so too a space opens within the research community" (p. 3).

It was important to me, as an ally, to recognize how my positioning as a straight male simultaneously confers unearned advantages and closes off certain forms of understanding. However, my LGBTQ2SIA+ friends helped me understand that my privilege was not all that I was, nor all that I could be. While privilege entails social responsibility (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995), it need not define the totality of one's identity or potential contribution. Oppressive dominant norms exact real, concrete costs on all members of society, including oppressors, whose humanity is diminished by their moral complicity (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Ji, 2007).

In today's troubled world, establishing communities in which the ideas and experiences of historically marginalized groups can be shared through dramatic storytelling constitutes a vital form of praxis. In the words of one scholar, "LGBTQ worldmaking is an aspirational project—

one that is in ongoing contestation, transgression, change, and transformation of heteronormative culture and its institutions" (Yep, 2021, p. 76).

In my case, the entry point also posed a risk: because the group felt meaningful and welcoming, I could conflate my sense of belonging with ethical legitimacy. The warmth I experienced could become a form of reassurance that I was "doing it right", potentially obscuring the ongoing work allyship required. Instead, I realized, the work itself, not the feeling of acceptance, had to be my measure of accountability.

II. When the Stakes Become Real: Proximity and Responsibility

What makes an ideal like solidarity real? How can we see what is ubiquitous and taken for granted as "normal"? Unfortunately, the cruelty and hatred of straight culture are often invisible to those who share heteronormative identities (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Yet, as friendships developed with my collaborators, I came to care more about their personal experiences than about abstract political commitments. As Bochner (2012) notes, "there may be no better way to come to terms with how we want to live and what we can understand and say about how others live than to listen and converse with their stories" (p. 162). Bishop (2015) frames this well within the allyship context:

> When learning to see yourself as an oppressor, the experience is by definition hidden from you, because part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed. It is this lack of empathy, this denial that anyone is hurt, that makes oppression possible. (pp. 156-157)

This is why *Blackout* is meaningful. It is art that examines social issues at the local and individual scales. It uses the imagination to help people see issues on an intimate level. Written and performed by community members, it also seeks to give voice to the tensions and contradictions within the community. It underscores that communities are not monolithic and that it is equally important not to view the experiences of individuals from underrepresented groups as merely a series of problems. Although these problems are real, there are also positives, including optimism and lives lived with courage and authenticity. Like the young adults in Vicars and Van Toledo's (2021) study, whose actions were "grounded in and affected by the participants' relational interactions" (p. 8), or as found by others (DiStefano et al., 2000; Knepp, 2022), friendship can be an important motivator for engaging in solidarity work.

Adopting a relational lens also changes the meaning of action. Here, collaborative action entails standing with and co-creating, rather than operating within a framework of dominance and possession. It also requires humility, especially as allies become immersed in relationships where the human reality of struggle unfolds and allyship becomes integrated into the fabric of their lives (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995). Here, the ally is aware of the separateness of the other's identity and experience, yet remains committed to being fully present and to deep listening. This capacity to recognize both connection and difference, and to be in a relationship without collapsing the other's experience into one's own, is at the heart of ethical engagement. Mutual trust develops when both sides recognize the need to avoid reducing people to types or group members, but rather to recognize them as real human beings with distinct identities and histories (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). In our case, our shared interest in a single project, *Blackout,* gave rise to a "collective-action group identity" (2011, p. 390). The theme of 'proximity and responsibility' helps describe what made my invitation consequential, as abstract ideals become real-life responsibilities. This is where the stakes of 'showing up' become real.

III. Embracing Vulnerability: Moving Beyond the "Good Ally" Role

If we problematize our desire for belonging and our default mode of operating in the world, where does that leave us as developing allies, even ones who recognize the importance of proximity and responsibility? Acknowledging one's privilege is only the beginning. The more difficult work involves moving beyond the desire to be seen as a 'good ally,' sitting with discomfort and accepting one's position as a perpetual novice. This entails seeing yourself as someone who will inevitably make mistakes and must depend on the patience and grace of the very communities you hope to support. While I sometimes experienced trepidation, that doubt could be 'generative' (Shelton, 2019), pushing me to experiment with new ways of thinking about myself and my role in spaces where I lacked control. Although, as a novice ally, it is all too easy to focus on problems, I am gradually moving away from a spectator role toward standing alongside community members.

Allies often have feelings of doubt and failure. However, these emotions can reshape ally identity and move beyond a dichotomous conception of allyship, where "one either was or was not an effective ally" (Shelton, 2019, p. 602). One crucial realization emerged. My fixation on a simple insider-outsider framework kept me from being authentically present. While I recognized my straight privilege, I also feared that my positioning as an ally was not active or strong enough, or that I was an imposter. I worried that as a straight white man, I could never be entirely accepted. In this sense, my experience echoed the aspirational identity work described in Edwards' (2006) or Suyemoto & Hochman's (2021) models, as I began to see allyship as an ongoing, iterative process.

Instead of feeling terrible about my positioning, I began to listen to my LGBTQ2SIA+ friends and colleagues and to see my role in a new light. Like the participants in Grzanka et al.'s (2015) study, I began to realize that "being an ally is less a pre-scripted role to be taken on and more of a nascent identity formation crosscut by [many]…intersecting dimensions" (p. 176). Yet I also recognized a troubling pattern. My constant self-reflection could become a form of avoidance. I talked about agency and humility, but remained at some level reluctant to move forward, perhaps because doing so meant accepting my ongoing discomfort. While being reflexive was important, what value did reflexivity have if it led to disengagement and paralysis? As some scholars have noted, allyship requires a complex and tenuous form of 'identity choreography,' an ongoing effort to navigate the demands of authentic activism while safeguarding against inadvertently reproducing heteronormativity (Grzanka et al., 2015). In practice, the question becomes less about achieving the right stance and more about whether I am willing to stay in the work when it is awkward and uncertain.

My self-assessment revealed that I am a novice, predominantly passive ally (Edwards, 2006). While this admission concerns me, I recognize the importance of resisting two temptations. Either seeing my novice status as a failure and withdrawing, or, conversely, using it to assuage guilt by presenting myself as an unproblematic 'good example' (Clark, 2010). Instead, I came to see that my agency as an ally arose from my willingness to try to unlearn dominant conceptions of heteronormativity. In other words, there was power in being in process. I also recognized that my unease would not go away, and that there was no easy solution except to work through my anxiety with the help of those who welcomed my allyship. Following Knepp (2022), I realized that "it may be conceptually important to consider allyhood as a development process instead of a static state" (p. 135).

Synthesis: Co-Constructed Agency and the Shift towards the Enigma of Identity

Although I recognized myself as a novice ally and the importance of viewing learning as a form of agency, I still felt that my positioning as a straight ally was fraught with tension.

These three themes: *entry points*, *proximity and responsibility*, and *vulnerable learning*, helped me understand my experience. However, they did not resolve a deeper moral question: *What does it mean to act responsibly when one's very position carries the risk of harm?*

As one scholar points out, even "the very decision to 'move over' or retreat can occur only from a position of privilege" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 24). Even if I do acknowledge my privilege, this does not absolve me of the ongoing responsibility to interrogate my motives and my participation in oppressive structures (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Russell, 2011).

Some concepts that help me make sense of my role can be found in the work of the French existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1949), namely his distinction between a problem and a mystery. Marcel argued that problems are issues the subject can observe from a distance and solve through instrumental rationality. In contrast, a mystery is something in which the subject is implicated and must be encountered; it requires commitment and engagement, whereas relying solely on instrumental logic reduces and objectifies a complex, enigmatic reality. As Marcel (1949) noted, "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved" (p. 117). The subject cannot stand outside a mystery; they must encounter it through commitment and by being present to others' experience. Identity and the nature of human subjective experience are such mysteries; for an ally to treat identity as a problem risks objectifying and trivializing a deeper human reality.

Marcel (1949) made another important distinction relevant to the present topic related to observation and testimony. Observation, Marcel (1949) notes, is impersonal and factual. A subject may carry it out, but it is detached and functional. The observing 'I' is interchangeable, and it makes no difference who performs the act, apart from any quality or characteristic that would impair the quality of the observation. Witnessing, in contrast, is a relational practice that requires commitment. When we speak of what we witness, it matters profoundly who the witness is since testimony is intimately tied to the subject's identity and positionality. As Marcel (1948) writes, "the witness always conceives of himself (sic) as standing in the presence of someone" (p. 102). "My testimony…commits my entire being as a person who is answerable for my assertions and for myself" (p. 103).

Reading Marcel, an ally stands in a peculiar position, caught in a third space between observing and witnessing, continually at risk of conflating social problems with the fundamental enigma of human identity. An ally must retain a respectful attitude towards the space of testimony. And yet, they may nonetheless be invited into that space by those invested, or they may otherwise have some relational connection to a particular community, especially given the intersectional nature of identity (Bishop, 2015). In a sense, entering the space requires reverence and humility, which are prerequisites for genuine engagement. However, this willingness to be open to the unknown and the uncertain can be an important impetus for gaining knowledge (Shelton, 2019).

Marcel's work provided the conceptual framing that helped me understand a shift in my thinking. I stopped seeing the project as something I could stand outside and assess, and instead came to see it as something I had to encounter through specific relationships and what people

entrusted to me. As Linda Alcoff (1991) wrote, there are moments when I still cannot help but ask myself, "Is my greatest contribution to move over and get out of the way?" (p. 8). Over time, though, I have come to see the difference between knowing some*thing* propositionally and understanding some*one* through deep listening and perspective-taking. It was one thing to know trans and queer people experience bigotry and hatred, and quite another to hear a young teacher share how he endures offhand remarks from students nearly every day he substitutes. That seemed so profoundly wrong and hurtful. I also marvelled at his dignity and strength, especially since he was more concerned about the students who had to hear homophobic comments from another teacher than about his own harmful experience.

Equally remarkable was a young community educator who battled depression yet turned her struggles into a play about mental health that she shared with students, becoming a force for positive change. Hearing these experiences made me realize that, as a straight male, I never have to declare my sexual identity or even think about it because the world is structured around my norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998). I listened to people who could not get married because of the laws in their home country, who could not hold hands in certain neighbourhoods for fear of assault, developing a background awareness of these types of threats because of past experiences of bigotry or hatred. It struck me how deeply wrong this is, yet it also showed me how music and drama can bring these realities to life by creating moments of insight and empathy.

Over time, I came to understand allyship as a form of relational witnessing. Belonging and personal connection are important factors that contribute to the emergence of an ally identity (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). However, this relationality must be grounded in authentic presence and taking responsibility (Bishop, 2015). Allies "bear witness" by committing to relationships within real-life communities. The challenge, and the ongoing tension, is that allies constantly face the temptation to reduce lived human experience into a simple problem to be solved, rather than a relationship requiring authentic commitment. These moments of connection helped me understand that engagement and relationship-building are core to the process of becoming and learning as a novice ally.

Backstage Praxis and the Limits of the Good Ally Story

Where does this leave me? As I complete this autoethnographic reflection, I am acutely aware of the risk that my reflective narrative might inadvertently center my experience in ways that reproduce the very dynamics I seek to resist. Clark (2010) warns against allies who end up "centring whiteness and straightness" to become "position[ed] as 'good' examples of white, straight people" (p. 707), and I recognize that my essay flirts with this danger. Ultimately, I have come to realize that allyship involves co-constructed agency. An ally cannot take sole credit for success, as if it were simply the product of their own merit or hard work, especially given that the success of allyship depends heavily on the interaction between the ally and the insider group (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022).

It is well known that LGBTQ2SIA+ people are at increased risk of verbal and physical abuse and violence (Shelton, 2019), and since *Blackout* began, violence against LGBTQ2SIA+ people has intensified in many places (Chang, 2025; Flowers & Trotta, 2025). This authoritarian backlash is built upon cruelty, especially toward members of the queer and trans communities (Pengelly, 2023). Historically, education has been central to this struggle, and it remains so today (Clark, 2010; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). Collectively, these developments have raised the stakes

for allies. The question becomes uncomfortably concrete: Will we show up when visibility entails costs to do work that is not glamorous or self-exonerating?

Fortunately, public-facing projects like *Blackout* offer a vital space for reimagining social reality and cultivating shared empathy. I find myself turning towards imagination, feeling, and intuition, recalling Cixous's (2005) interminable question, "Of what secret lights are we made?/Of what densities?" (p. 7). The question exemplifies the refusal of easy answers, instead relying on encounters with mystery to guide us away from hatred and towards discovery and possibility.

More fundamentally, I have learned that an ally's identity is not a "static identity experience or achievement" (Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021, p. 114). Growth is always the primary aim of allyship, but this also implies that the process of becoming an effective ally is never complete (McDonald et al., 2023; Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021). Allies will inevitably make mistakes and will need to constantly revisit their preconceptions, even as they try to remain mindful of the risk of self-congratulation or settling for token displays of commitment (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995).

While this account traces my development through key insights, these realizations nonetheless remain, despite my efforts, partial and aspirational. I have revisited them many times and in many different ways, making progress in some areas, but losing momentum in others (Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021). The three themes I have identified: belonging and legitimacy, when the stakes become real, and embracing vulnerability, are not completed stages but ongoing challenges that I endeavour to navigate. As I have described, my self-reflection has marked a shift from treating allyship as an implementable solution to encountering it as a moral relation that implicates me fully as a human being.

Ultimately, this account offers no easy resolution, only an acknowledgement of the ongoing demands of allyship and the necessity of commitment. I remain a novice ally, aware of both my privilege and my desire for solidarity. I realize that responsible allyship is not about achieving a final state of being a 'good ally' but showing up consistently for the unglamorous, uncertain work of standing with communities of difference. It means accepting that I am part of the problem since I am structurally positioned within systems of oppression, while also recognizing that this positioning can be leveraged to support change. The question of what responsible critical agency looks like for an ally is never fully resolved. But perhaps the question itself, revisited continually, will help keep me accountable to the relationships and communities that make the work meaningful. In many ways, we do not feel the pain we cause, which is why, all too often, it goes on unchecked. My entry into allyship made me feel less like a spokesperson and more like a learner with daunting new responsibilities. From here, perhaps, I can engage in my backstage praxis, one eye on the unfinished action, the other on my fraught positioning, trusting that what we notice, we can slowly begin to change.

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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

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

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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Author Biographies

Courtney Fowler (she/they) is a professional artist, community educator, and owner/operator of Courtney Fowler Performance Academy, a neurodivergent, inclusive, adaptive performance arts school. With an unwavering dedication to the transformative power of the arts, she is driven by a profound passion for empowering individuals through creative expression. Courtney received funding to compose and perform her original autobiographical musical, *Not My Self Today*, exploring themes of neurodivergence with high school youth. At the core of her mission is nurturing environments where students of every age can explore and embrace their authenticity, while she remains a lifelong student, continuously expanding her knowledge and expertise.

John Hoben (he/him) is an associate professor in Memorial University's Faculty of Education. His work examines teaching and learning, education law, democratic education and poetic inquiry, drawing on arts-based and autoethnographic approaches. Trained in education and law (L.L.B.), he was called to the Bar of Ontario (2002) and the Bar of Newfoundland and Labrador (2004). His work examines the integration of critical approaches into teaching and everyday life through creative writing and community-engaged projects that support reflective practice and participatory forms of education.

Stefan James (he/him) is a PhD student in Clinical Psychology at Fielding Graduate University, specializing in qualitative and human science research methodologies. His scholarship emphasizes arts-based and community-engaged approaches, with contributions to research on LGBTQIA+ belonging, performance ethnography, ecological imagination in education, and the intersections of narrative, identity, and technology. His dissertation examines relational and contextual processes in ketamine-assisted psychotherapy. Clinically, he has trained in addiction recovery and geropsychology settings, providing psychotherapy, assessment, and group interventions with culturally diverse adult and older-adult populations. He also has experience in school-based counselling, crisis intervention, and 2SLGBTQIA+-affirming mental health services, and has presented at national and international conferences.

Connie Morrison (she/her) is an assistant professor in Memorial University's Faculty of Education. She has designed and taught a wide range of undergraduate and graduate courses informed by critical literacies and social justice pedagogy. Her current scholarship is framed by critical media literacy theory, which explores the truthfulness of online representation, the influence of AI on teacher education and how arts initiatives can help create inclusive spaces within a broader educational context. In 2024, she was awarded the Dean's Award for Teaching Excellence from the Faculty of Education at MUN.

Pamela Osmond-Johnson (she/her) is Professor of Educational Leadership and the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. As a former school administrator, Pamela's scholarship has heavily focused on the important role teacher organizations play as educational advocates. In 2017, she was the recipient of the Pat Clifford Award for Emerging Scholar in Canadian Education.

Sarah Pickett (she/her) is a registered psychologist and associate professor in the Faculty of Education, Counselling Psychology program, at Memorial University. Her research interests focus on LGBTQ2SIA+ issues in teacher education and school culture/climate. More broadly, she is interested in narrative and autoethnographic research, how researchers may use these methods to engage in evocative conversations about LGBTQ2SIA+ people's experiences, and the impact these stories may have on shaping the discourse surrounding LGBTQ2SIA+ people, family, and communities in education and society.

Sydney Wells (she/her) is currently completing her Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Counselling Psychology at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she previously earned a Master of Science (M.Sc.) in Experimental Psychology. Her research focuses on Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), including its relationship with sleep health and smartphone use. Across her honours, graduate, and current thesis work, she has explored different aspects of ADHD with an interest in improving understanding and recognition. Sydney's work as a Transition House Counsellor at Iris Kirby House and as a Family and Natural Support Worker with Choices for Youth has informed her interest in trauma-informed, accessible mental health support.