

Resonant Voices in the Borderland: The Teacher-Researcher Experience Amid Cultural and Political Turbulence in Music Education

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Abstract

Amid escalating “divisive-concept” legislation, this study examines how one U.S. elementary music teacher navigates ideological conflict, curricular censorship, and institutional neglect. Eight journals ($\approx 22k$ words) were compiled over ninety days and analyzed through a two-stage design: dual open coding of the first four journals, followed by single-analyst coding of the final four to limit confirmatory bias. Subsequent axial coding connected personal narrative to systemic context. Five interwoven themes emerged—burnout and learned helplessness, diminishing administrative support, escalating student misbehavior, erosion of academic standards, and cultural resistance to responsive repertoire—with late-stage sub-themes of policy-driven decline, teacher deprofessionalisation, and institutional alienation. Framed by collaborative autoethnography and focused through a lens of Borderland Theory, the findings portray music education as a contested borderland where educators must compose provisional harmonies between pedagogical mission and divisive mandates. The study calls for shared accountability structures that shield teacher agency and sustain culturally inclusive artistry.

Keywords

Collaborative autoethnography, music education, teacher agency, burnout, culturally responsive pedagogy, institutional alienation

Context: The Classroom as a Battleground

When a fourth-grade choir's request to sing Imagine Dragons' "Bones" is flagged by a parent as spiritually subversive, a seemingly routine repertoire decision suddenly becomes political. Across the United States, similar flashpoints now erupt whenever lyrics mention "reapers," when jazz charts reference protest, or when mariachi arrangements compete with state-mandated patriotic songs. These moments reveal the modern music classroom as an ideological fault line where curriculum, teacher authority, and student identity clash under divisive legislation and censorship campaigns (Bylica, Hawley, Lewis 2024; PEN America 2023). Far from a neutral space for artistic exploration, school music has become a barometer of cultural anxiety—its educators tasked with composing harmony amid intensifying sociopolitical dissonance.

This study employs a partially collaborative autoethnographic approach to examine the impact of divisive rhetoric on one music educator's professional and personal experiences. Autoethnography enables a deep exploration of how political discourse, administrative policies, and cultural shifts shape classroom interactions, teacher identity, and professional agency. Through reflective journaling spanning several months, the educator documented feelings of burnout, policy-driven constraints, and struggles for cultural responsiveness, offering an insight of systemic challenges faced by contemporary music educators. With this research, we seek to unpack the contemporary and future implications of divisive rhetoric in music education. Specifically, this study highlights tensions between institutional demands and pedagogical commitments, especially amid culturally responsive teaching and the increasing politicization of classroom content. The study also engages with future implications by reflecting on possible paths forward, including ways educators might navigate these challenges while maintaining their professional integrity and commitment to inclusive pedagogy.

To explore these dynamics, we turn to the teacher-researcher experience as both a reflective practice and a strategic response to this evolving landscape. By employing a collaborative autoethnographic methodology, this study not only documents personal experiences but also situates them within broader debates around culturally responsive teaching, teacher agency, and the politicization of education, examining how one educator navigates these complexities.

The data analyzed consists of two rounds of journaling, with coding and thematic analysis conducted to identify patterns of conflict, resilience, and institutional response. Early journal entries reflect an initial optimism and sense of purpose, followed by increasing frustration, isolation, and disenchantment as policy constraints and administrative responses compound the challenges of maintaining a responsive and engaging music curriculum. Later entries highlight moments of resistance, as well as the ongoing negotiation between institutional expectations and the educator's evolving pedagogical values.

By centering the educator's lived experience within a broader sociopolitical and policy framework, we aim to contribute to the critical discourse on music education's role in fostering inclusive, equitable, and politically conscious learning environments. The findings not only illuminate the personal toll of divisive rhetoric on educators but also offer critical insights into the structural conditions that shape pedagogical decision-making in contemporary music education.

Situating the Study in Scholarship

The rise of divisive rhetoric in education has significantly shaped the design, framing, and interpretive stance of this study. In developing the methodological approach and coding strategies, we drew on a body of scholarship that situates teachers within contested political and institutional terrains. This body of work provided both conceptual grounding and practical direction for our methodological approach and coding strategies.

The Rise of Divisive Rhetoric in Education

As Lakoff (2014) described, divisive rhetoric constructs ideological battle lines that organize conflict through binaries at the expense of nuance. Within music education, such framing renders classrooms sited of ideological struggle. Scholarship by Bylica, Hawley, and Lewis (2024) and Salvador, Bohn, and Martin (2023) showed how "divisive concept" legislation works to constrain teacher agency and perpetuate climates of fear and avoidance, often manifesting as self-censorship. PEN America's (2023) report further contextualized the ways legislative discourse materializes in the form of curriculum bans and the public targeting of educators. Collectively, these works orient the music classroom as an ideological battleground

and guided our analysis in understanding censorship and compliance as structural phenomena rather than discrete events.

Administrative Responses: Performativity, Neglect, and Institutional Silencing

The "terrors of performativity" described by Ball (2003) illustrated how institutions privilege optics and compliance over authentic support for teachers. This has more recently been framed by Apple (2018) as a function of neoliberal reforms that reorient schooling toward market accountability regimes, while Sachs (2001) documented how teachers' critique is repackaged as obstruction. Giroux (1988) placed these dynamics within their historical context, tracing the remaking of teachers as implementers of policy, not intellectual agents. The foregoing perspectives informed our interpretive posture vis-à-vis administrative nonresponse, framing it as the system-level expression of performative governance rather than individual leadership failure.

Teacher Burnout and the Deprofessionalization of Educators

Teacher burnout, as Ingersoll (2001) and Finlay (2002) pointed out, is less a matter of personal weakness than of structural neglect. Accountability regimes reduce teachers to content deliverers, further eroding autonomy (Apple 2004; Ravitch 2010). It was through this literature that we interpreted teacher exhaustion as an institutional and political consequence of policy-driven decline and curricular constraints intensified by divisive-concept legislation. We coded shifts in tone across journal entries not solely as emotional fatigue but as one aspect of deprofessionalization, a process wherein educators internalize systemic disempowerment.

The Erosion of Educational Standards and the Impact on Student Outcomes

Policies enacted with performative metrics in mind often create the appearance of success at the expense of actual learning. As Ravitch (2010) and Ball (2003) indicated, reforms implemented amid the erosion of educational standards—and without the supports needed to uphold them—exacerbate inequities and destabilize classroom culture. Skiba and Losen (2016) provided evidence that accountability-driven and punitive school discipline policies not only fail to improve student out-

comes but also intensify inequities. Based on these insights, we read teacher reflections on curriculum and assessment as a sign of systemic erosion—where political optics displace substantive pedagogy.

Cultural Resistance in Curriculum and Pedagogical Autonomy

Finally, literature on curriculum politics and cultural resistance directly informed our focus on repertoire disputes and pedagogical autonomy. Cultural resistance and pedagogical autonomy efforts to diversify music curricula often prompt ideological backlash, as Schmidt (2017) and Benedict and Schmidt (2011) illustrated, revealing a “politics of not knowing” (Benedict and Schmidt 2011, 137) in which cultural avoidance serves as a means of power preservation. Regelski (2015) challenged this politics of not knowing by drawing on a praxial framework that frames music teaching as inherently ethical and socially situated. When curriculum becomes rigid and disconnected from student realities, it risks reproducing alienation (Benedict 2009). In response, Benedict (2020) called for a socially just praxis that affirms cultural identity and student agency. The literature above directly informed our approach to analyzing repertoire disputes as sites of both constraint and creative resistance—borderlands where educators negotiate the boundaries of policy, identity, and pedagogy.

Gaps in the Literature and Future Research Directions

While the existing scholarship framed the design and interpretation of this study, it also revealed areas that remain underexplored. For instance, although Ingersoll (2001) and Finlay (2002) detailed the immediate effects of burnout, they leave largely unexamined the long-term career trajectories of teachers navigating politically charged climates. Similarly, little research has foregrounded the role of student voice in curriculum disputes, despite indications that students themselves often seek greater cultural inclusivity. Finally, the literature has yet to fully address the intersectional dynamics of divisive rhetoric, particularly how it differentially impacts teachers across lines of race, class, gender, and professional status. These gaps informed our study’s emphasis on qualitative, first-person methodologies that capture the emotional, professional, and institutional dimensions of divisive rhetoric, and they suggest future directions for the field.

Frameworks and Methods of Inquiry

This study employs an autoethnographic approach, utilizing qualitative coding and thematic analysis to examine the lived experiences of a music educator navigating divisive rhetoric and systemic challenges within a public school setting. To enrich what might otherwise be a single-author narrative, we used a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) design—“a multivocal approach where two or more researchers share personal stories and collectively interpret the pooled data” (Lapadat 2017, 589). CAE preserves thick reflexivity while widening the analytic lens to include dialogic sense-making and negotiated meaning. The rationale for this approach stems from the understanding that individual narratives are inextricably linked to broader sociopolitical and educational structures. Autoethnography, in this sense, allows for the personal to become political, foregrounding how professional identity, policy constraints, and pedagogical decision-making intersect with broader ideological currents (Adams et al. 2015; Ellis et al. 2011).

The collaborative element of this project was not limited to bias mitigation but was central to the interpretive process. The two researchers engaged in iterative cycles of reading, coding, and reflection, during which dialogic exchange functioned as a primary mode of meaning-making. Wright, as the teacher-practitioner-researcher in the field, brought lived immediacy and experiential depth to the data. Coles acted as co-researcher and interlocutor, interrogating assumptions and highlighting alternative interpretations. This dialogic engagement often revealed differences in emphasis: for example, whether particular journal passages reflected personal burnout or broader systemic alienation. Such points of tension did not represent breakdowns but rather opportunities for epistemological plurality, as the process of negotiating meaning exposed layers of significance that may have been overlooked in a single-voice account.

At times, Coles challenged initial readings by reframing passages through the lens of institutional critique rather than individual vulnerability, shifting the analysis toward structural conditions. In turn, Wright emphasized the affective and embodied dimensions of the narrative, insisting on the centrality of lived experience. These interpretive negotiations created a productive dialectic in which individual and systemic perspectives were held in constant interplay. The resulting

analysis, therefore, reflects not only the voice of the teacher-practitioner-researcher but also the negotiated space between two epistemological positions—insider testimony and critical interlocution.

The practitioner-researcher paradigm offered an ideal foundation for this collaboration, acknowledging that educators are uniquely positioned to examine how policies and cultural shifts affect their own contexts (Zeichner 2003). Within this paradigm, the Wright's pedagogical philosophy was grounded in a culturally responsive, student-centered approach that sought to validate diverse identities and foster creative expression. The collaborative element sharpened this inquiry, ensuring that analysis moved beyond descriptive narrative into critical engagement with structural and political dynamics. To further contextualize these negotiations, we drew on Borderland Theory (Anzaldúa 1987) to conceptualize the teacher-researcher's experience of *Nepantla*—an in-between state where cultural, ideological, and institutional borders intersect. Here, the collaborative process became a form of *Nepantla*—a liminal space where differing interpretations converged, clashed, and were ultimately synthesized into an analysis that highlighted both lived experience and its broader political implications. Wright learned to navigate rather than resolve contradiction, creating a pedagogy that makes space for both institutional demands and cultural authenticity. This process situates the classroom as a borderland, not as just a site of conflict but rather a locus of creative possibility, where teaching becomes an act of reconciliation and resistance.

The research process unfolded in two distinct phases, spanning a total of ninety days. The first phase, conducted by Wright, consisted of four journal entries written over a sixty-day period, each triggered by moments of burnout, professional frustration, or systemic constraints that prompted deep reflection. The decision to journal at moments of emotional and professional tension was intentional—rather than prescribing fixed intervals for writing, the methodology embraced spontaneity and emotional immediacy, ensuring that the reflections remained raw and unfiltered. This approach aligns with critical autoethnographic practices, which prioritize authentic storytelling as a means of interrogating structures of power and oppression (Boylorn and Orbe 2016).

Following the completion of the first journaling phase, the first round of qualitative coding commenced. The research team approached this analysis through a constructivist grounded theory lens (Charmaz 2014), allowing themes to emerge

organically from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Each researcher independently coded the data using axial coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998), identifying key concepts and their interconnections. This process facilitated the recognition of recurring themes, including institutional neglect, pedagogical resistance, emotional exhaustion, and learned helplessness. To enhance reliability, the research team engaged in a collaborative discussion of codes, refining and converging findings to construct a more comprehensive thematic framework.

The second phase of data collection extended over an additional thirty days, during which the teacher-researcher, Wright, engaged in reflexive journaling. At this stage, a subtle but important methodological shift took place. Whereas the first phase of journaling was reactive—triggered by moments of stress or frustration—the second phase was shaped by conscious reflection on the themes that had emerged during coding. This shift was methodologically significant: it allowed for Wright to explore experiences not only as they happened but also considering newly identified patterns and theoretical implications. Entries were recorded when Wright felt compelled to write, often spurred by classroom incidents, administrative interactions, or broader reflections on the evolving sociopolitical landscape of education.

Once this second set of journal entries was completed, a second round of qualitative coding was conducted, this time solely by one researcher, Coles. This phase served a dual purpose: to validate and refine the initial coding framework and to identify any new themes or evolving patterns. As the coding process progressed, we observed that early themes—such as administrative neglect and cultural resistance—were not merely persistent but intensifying, shaping Wright’s shifting perceptions of agency, resilience, and institutional constraint. The final step in the analytical process involved a narrative synthesis, weaving together coded themes to construct a cohesive, theoretically informed account of Wright’s experiences within the broader discourse of divisive rhetoric in education (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Throughout the study, several key methodological commitments guided the research process. First, the inquiry was deeply reflexive, recognizing Wright’s dual role as both subject and analyst. Reflexivity in autoethnography is essential, as it demands a continuous interrogation of one’s positionality, assumptions, and bi-

ases (Chang 2008). Second, the study emphasized credibility through transparency, aligning with naturalistic inquiry standards (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Rather than attempting to establish objectivity—an unrealistic goal in personal narrative research—we prioritized thick description, methodological rigor, and prolonged engagement with the data. Third, thematic analysis was iterative, allowing for an evolving understanding of Wright’s lived experience rather than a static categorization of findings (Braun and Clarke 2006).

As the study unfolded, the ethical dimensions of autoethnographic inquiry became increasingly salient. Given the deeply personal and potentially sensitive nature of the research, care was taken to ensure that all references to administrators, colleagues, students, and parents remained anonymized. Moreover, Wright was mindful of the delicate balance between self-disclosure and professional responsibility, an ethical tightrope often navigated in autoethnographic work (Tullis 2013). To mitigate potential risks, we adhered to ethical self-disclosure guidelines, foregrounding systemic critique over individual blame while preserving the integrity of Wright’s personal truth.

This research was methodologically inspired by critical autoethnographic frameworks, which view personal narrative as a powerful tool for resisting dominant discourses and exposing systemic inequalities (Boylorn and Orbe 2016). The study’s analytical lens was grounded in qualitative thematic analysis, informed by inductive coding, axial coding for relational insight, and narrative synthesis for theoretical integration (Saldaña 2021; Strauss and Corbin 1998). By adopting this multi-layered methodological structure, the study aimed not only to document Wright’s experience but to situate it within larger policy debates, ideological conflicts, and the contested landscape of contemporary music education.

Nevertheless, like all qualitative research, this study is bound by certain methodological limitations. Autoethnographic research, by its very nature, is highly subjective, and while this is an epistemological strength, it also limits generalizability. The findings of this study are not intended to represent all educators but rather to offer transferable insights into the systemic struggles many teachers face (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Additionally, as a study driven by emotional and cognitive self-exploration, the research is inherently emotionally invested, which could influence interpretive neutrality (Finlay 2002). This concern was addressed through rigorous reflexivity and methodological transparency, ensuring that analysis remained critical and balanced. Lastly, the study captures a specific moment

in time, offering a snap shot rather than a longitudinal trajectory. While the themes identified here are significant, further research is needed to examine long-term patterns of teacher agency, policy impact, and educator attrition.

Ultimately, this methodology is not just a research framework but a statement of intent: to foreground the lived realities of educators within a system that often silences their voices. By situating personal narrative within broader educational discourse, this study reveals the emotional, professional, and ideological struggles of a music educator navigating divisive rhetoric, policy constraints, and pedagogical resistance. The findings not only illuminate the personal toll of these struggles but also offer critical insights into the structural forces shaping contemporary music education.

Composing Dissonance: An Analysis of the Journals

Across the ninety-day study period the teacher-researcher produced eight reflective journals totaling roughly 22,000 words. Journals one through four were written during the first sixty days; journals five through eight followed over the next thirty. We adopted a deliberately sequenced analytic strategy. In the initial stage both authors conducted independent, line-by-line open coding of the first four journals, then met to reconcile labels and craft a shared codebook. This dialogic reading enabled constant-comparison checks that surfaced divergent interpretations rather than smoothing them away. Once the codebook was stable, the second stage began: the remaining four journals were coded only by the secondary researcher. Restricting Wright's hand in this phase was a conscious effort to curb confirmatory bias that might arise if the primary voice in the data also re-interpreted entries written after the first analytic conversations. When single-analyst coding was complete, both Wright and Coles reconvened to conduct axial coding, relating first-cycle codes to one another and tracing how personal narrative braided into institutional context.

This layered process yielded a coherent but troubling portrait. Throughout all eight journals burnout and a creeping sense of learned helplessness shadowed the Wright's reflections, with language that grew markedly sharper in the later entries. Descriptions of administrative support shifted from frustration to outright indictment as requests for resources or classroom assistance were repeatedly dismissed. Student behavioral incidents likewise escalated—from isolated disruptions in the

early journals to sustained challenges that eroded the educator's classroom authority. Alongside these interpersonal stresses was a perceived policy-driven weakening of academic standards—grade inflation, removal of homework from assessment, and other reforms that the teacher felt undermined meaningful learning. Finally, threaded through every journal was cultural resistance—pushback against efforts to introduce more diverse or socially resonant repertoire—even as students themselves signaled a growing appetite for precisely that material. Notably, several sub-themes emerged only in Journals five through eight: a deepening critique of system-wide policy decline, a felt deprofessionalization of teaching, and an acute sense of institutional alienation. The late appearance of these themes suggests that the single-analyst phase captured layers of critical reflection that earlier collaborative coding had not yet foregrounded. Taken together, the journals depict a profession pressed at every seam, and a music educator composing provisional harmonies in an environment of mounting ideological and structural dissonance.

Burnout and Learned Helplessness

Throughout both phases of journaling, expressions of emotional exhaustion, professional frustration, and feelings of powerlessness appeared repeatedly. The first phase of journaling (journal one) initially presented a trajectory from optimism to exhaustion, with early entries reflecting enthusiasm for teaching, engagement with students, and commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy. However, later entries indicated a growing sense of burnout, particularly as external pressures—such as increasing student enrollment, lack of support staff, and administrative dismissiveness—escalated. Wright describes this shift poignantly:

The first couple of months felt incredible. I felt like I was really connecting with my students, and the relationships I had worked so hard to build were paying off. Parents and colleagues were finally recognizing my efforts, and I was feeling validated in a way I hadn't before. It felt like things were starting to click.

But now, I feel like I'm drowning. I'm teaching 730 students every week, and about a quarter of them have IEPs, which means I'm trying to juggle not just the sheer number of students but their varied needs, too. The behaviors are becoming more difficult to manage, especially as my class sizes keep growing. One week, everything seems okay—just barely manageable with the help of my instructional assistant. But then, weeks later, I find myself with six classes of over forty students, doing my best just to keep things under control. My assistant is pulled away to cover other classrooms, and I'm left with no support.

Journal two reinforced this trajectory, with stronger and more explicit language indicating a deepening sense of despair and disillusionment. Entries in this set introduced language of breaking points, as Wright's described moments of emotional distress, including questioning whether to continue in the profession. The intensity of the language in journal two suggests that burnout had not only persisted but intensified, with Wright articulating a shift from struggling to cope to considering leaving the profession altogether.

Lack of Administrative Support

The perception of institutional neglect and administrative apathy remained one of the most consistent themes across both phases of journaling. In journal one, Wright frequently described administrative dismissiveness toward requests for additional classroom support, with one notable entry documenting a meeting in which Wright, in tears, was told, "We're all in the same boat." This lack of intervention from school leadership contributed directly to the Wright's growing sense of isolation and helplessness.

In journal two, this theme persisted but evolved into a more overt critique of administrative priorities. Wright's interactions with school leadership became more contentious, particularly regarding large class sizes, behavioral incidents, and the refusal to allocate additional resources to the music program. One entry captures this escalation clearly: "The current lack of support is unacceptable and significantly hampers my ability to deliver effective instruction. I will insist to my administration that they address the need for adequate classroom assistance. They need to recognize the critical impact of insufficient support on both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes."

Additionally, journal two revealed a new sub-theme of dismissive administrative communication, as exemplified by Wright receiving a curt, dismissive email rejecting a request for instructional assistance. The administrative response that followed further deepened frustration and hopelessness, indicating not collaboration but resistance: "That is a lot to pull [IA] for. You are asking for a lot right now. She has thirteen teachers to cover, and we would rather not pull her for that long." This reinforced the perception that administrative figures were not only failing to provide support but actively disregarding the challenges faced by educators.

Student Behavioral Challenges and Classroom Management Struggles

In both journal sets, student behavioral issues were a dominant concern, appearing in multiple entries across different time periods. Journal one detailed episodes of student disrespect, defiance, and even physical aggression, with one instance involving a student throwing a chair at Wright. These incidents were met with little to no administrative action, exacerbating Wright's sense of vulnerability in the classroom.

Journal two reflected a deepening frustration with student behavior, with Wright noting that even basic classroom management strategies were becoming ineffective. This phase of journaling introduced new dimensions to the theme, including a perceived erosion of teacher authority. Wright described moments where student misbehavior was not only tolerated but, in some cases, excused by parents or administrators, reinforcing a broader sense of powerlessness.

The Erosion of Educational Standards

A significant new theme that emerged in journal two was a strong critique of the declining quality of education due to policy changes and systemic neglect. Wright articulated concerns about overcrowded classrooms, lowered grading standards, and shifts in policy that de-emphasized student accountability. One journal entry specifically critiqued a district-wide policy that removed homework from grading calculations, arguing that this shift had led to decreased student engagement and a lack of reinforcement of critical learning concepts.

Additionally, Wright highlighted disparities between publicly celebrated district statistics and classroom reality, particularly regarding graduation rates that are artificially inflated by lowered academic expectations. This theme represents a shift from personal frustration to systemic critique, as Wright increasingly attributed classroom challenges to deliberate policy decisions rather than just local administrative failures.

Cultural Resistance in Curriculum Design

The theme of curricular control and cultural responsiveness persisted across both journals but evolved significantly in journal two. In journal one, Wright detailed efforts to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy, such as introducing non-tradi-

tional concert themes that reflected a broader range of cultural perspectives. However, these efforts were often met with resistance from administrators and colleagues, with pushback favoring traditional, holiday-centered performances over more inclusive programming.

Journal two documented a shift in student attitudes toward cultural content, revealing a contradiction between administrative resistance and student interest. One entry noted that students independently expressed a desire to learn more about Black musical traditions, suggesting that the demand for a culturally diverse curriculum was coming from the student body rather than being imposed by the educator. This finding underscores a systemic tension between educational leadership's reluctance to embrace change and students' evolving interests and identities.

Perceived Deprofessionalization of Teachers

An emergent theme in journal two was the devaluation of teaching as a profession, particularly in Wright's reflections on their treatment by administrators, parents, and policymakers. Wright articulated a sense that teacher expertise was being increasingly undermined, with administrative policies favoring student appeasement over pedagogical integrity.

One key journal entry highlighted a moment of public recognition from an assistant principal, in which the administrator acknowledged Wright's dedication to music education in front of students. While this provided a rare instance of validation, it also reinforced the broader theme of invisibility—Wright noted that such moments of acknowledgment were exceptional rather than the norm. Additionally, journal two introduced a critique of political influences on education policy, with Wright expressing concern that state-level shifts in governance were likely to exacerbate existing structural issues. This marked a broadening of thematic focus, as Wright connected personal frustrations with wider political and ideological movements shaping educational policy.

Institutional Alienation and Consideration of Career Change

While journal one documented mounting frustrations and challenges, journal two introduced a more explicit contemplation of leaving the profession altogether. Wright repeatedly questioned whether staying in the field of public education was

sustainable, referencing considering relocation to another state as a potential means of professional survival.

This theme reflects a growing sense of institutional alienation, as Wright described feeling increasingly disconnected from the values and priorities of the school system. Unlike earlier entries, which focused on working within existing structures to improve conditions, later journal reflections suggested that Wright was beginning to view systemic change as unlikely, leading to a reconsideration of their professional trajectory.

Discussion

The findings of this autoethnographic study reveal a complex intersection between teacher burnout, administrative neglect, educational policy shifts, and the intensifying role of divisive rhetoric in public education. Wright's experiences illustrate not only individual struggles within the classroom, but also larger systemic fractures exacerbated by ideological tensions, cultural resistance, and policy-driven constraints. These findings align with broader literature on the erosion of teacher autonomy, the politicization of curriculum design, and the impact of divisive rhetoric on pedagogical environments (Bylica, Hawley, and Lewis 2024; PEN America 2023; Salvador et al. 2023).

Divisive Rhetoric and the Politicization of Music Education

At its core, divisive rhetoric thrives on the construction of opposition, framing debates in binaries that obscure nuance and stifle productive discourse (Lakoff 2014). In contemporary music education, this rhetoric manifests in disputes over curriculum content, administrative responses to teacher agency, and broader public discourse surrounding "appropriate" educational material (Bylica, Hawley, and Lewis 2024). Wright's experience demonstrates how divisive rhetoric influences classroom realities, particularly in culturally responsive curriculum design and the perceived deprofessionalization of teachers.

One clear instance of this is Wright's attempt to modify the traditional holiday concert to include a broader range of cultural perspectives. The resistance from administrators and faculty—framing the shift as a deviation from tradition—reflects a common rhetorical strategy in divisive educational debates: the weapon-

ization of tradition as a tool of exclusion (Schmidt 2017). When cultural responsiveness is framed as an affront to established norms, it becomes an ideological battleground rather than an opportunity for curricular growth. Wright's efforts to implement inclusive pedagogy while maintaining institutional approval show how teachers are often caught between their educational values and restrictive political and administrative frameworks. Moreover, Wright's observation that students themselves demonstrated a desire to engage with culturally diverse material contradicts the administration's resistance, raising critical questions about whose voices are prioritized in curricular decision-making. When students pursue knowledge suppressed by institutions, divisive rhetoric in educational leadership may reinforce ideological barriers that preserve the status quo rather than shield students from discomfort (Apple 2004).

Administrative Responses: Appeasement and the Silencing of Educators

The Wright's lack of administrative support, especially regarding student behavior and resources, reflects broader systemic patterns where teachers face growing responsibilities while losing authority. Literature on teacher deprofessionalization indicates that administrative non-intervention often acts as passive control, pushing educators to self-regulate and self-censor to avoid conflicts with institutional authority (Giroux 1988).

Wright's interactions with administration reveal an avoidance-based leadership model in which issues are neither acknowledged nor addressed in meaningful ways. When the Wright raised concerns about overcrowded classrooms and behavioral issues, the response—"We're all in the same boat."—illustrates a rhetorical strategy of diffused responsibility, where individual teachers are expected to endure structural failures as collective burdens rather than addressable problems (Ball 2003). This aligns with literature on neoliberal education reform, which has shifted accountability from policymakers and administrators onto teachers, reinforcing an unsustainable workload under the guise of institutional resilience (Apple 2018).

Furthermore, Wright's escalating frustration in journal two, particularly in reference to unresponsive and dismissive communication from administrators, signals a critical shift from professional advocacy to disillusionment. The absence of institutional recognition of teacher concerns is central to workplace alienation,

worsened by divisive rhetoric that frames dissatisfaction as personal failure rather than systemic dysfunction (Sachs 2001).

Behavioral Challenges, Policy-Driven Educational Decline, and the Role of Political Rhetoric

Wright's documentation of increasing student behavioral challenges—from verbal disrespect to physical aggression—raises urgent concerns about shifting power dynamics in classroom environments. While student empowerment is key to progressive education, Wright's experiences reveal a structural failure to balance student rights with teacher authority, undermining classroom management and pedagogy.

This aligns with ongoing debates about “student-centered” versus “teacher-centered” disciplinary models, where progressive disciplinary reforms, if not accompanied by adequate teacher support, can result in the undermining of classroom authority (Skiba and Losen 2016). Wright's frustration with administrative inaction over severe behavior highlights how divisive discipline rhetoric casts educators as either authoritarian or permissive, ignoring the structural conditions that require intervention.

Wright's critique of falling academic standards—such as eliminating homework grades and inflating graduation rates—frames this study within broader concerns about performative educational success. The discrepancy between publicly celebrated district data and the classroom realities of disengaged students reflects a pattern in which educational policy becomes a tool of political optics rather than genuine learning improvement (Ravitch 2010). Wright's frustration that academic rigor is being systematically eroded suggests that educational policy may be increasingly shaped by political expediency rather than pedagogical efficacy.

The Path Toward Institutional Alienation and Career Exit

One of the most concerning trajectories in Wright's journals is the progression from burnout to potential career exit. Wright's initial resilience—characterized by advocacy and problem-solving—transforms into professional disengagement, culminating in contemplations of leaving the profession or relocating to a different educational system. This follows a documented pattern in education research

where unaddressed burnout leads not only to teacher attrition but also to a depletion of collective pedagogical expertise within school communities (Ingersoll 2001).

Divisive rhetoric exacerbates this process by framing teacher dissatisfaction as ideological non-conformity rather than institutional failure. When educators raise concerns about policy flaws or systemic shortcomings, they are often cast as dissenters rather than reformers, leading to a culture of professional silencing (Apple 2018). Wright's increasing alienation from administration and policy mirrors a national trend where experienced educators leave not from lack of passion, but because of unsustainable working conditions.

Imaginative Reframing: Toward a Liberated Music Education

Our study documents the constraints of a music education practiced in the borderlands, but it also implicitly asks: What lies beyond this contested territory? Imagining a music education unbound by ideological censorship is not an exercise in utopian fantasy but a necessary act of radical hope.

A liberated music education would redefine the classroom not as a space for the transmission of approved culture, but as a studio for critical inquiry and democratic world-building. Repertoire choices would cease to be points of contention and instead become invitations for students to explore the complex, sometimes contradictory, sonic tapestries of human experience. A choir's request to sing any topic would be met with curiosity, sparking dialogue about metaphor, resilience, and how music helps us explore the human experience.

In this envisioned future, teacher autonomy would be understood as a prerequisite for pedagogical excellence, and administrative support would shift from risk management to the active cultivation of intellectual and creative courage. Student voice, particularly the desire for culturally diverse and relevant material, would not be a challenge to authority but the very catalyst for a dynamic, evolving curriculum. This reframing moves beyond pragmatic fixes, rethinking music education's purpose: not to create harmony by avoiding dissonance, but to empower students to navigate and compose within the complex realities of their—and our—world.

Conclusion

Our findings in this study illustrate how divisive rhetoric, administrative neglect, and policy-driven constraints converge to produce an unsustainable professional environment for educators. Wright's experiences provide a microcosm of larger systemic issues facing music education, including cultural resistance in curriculum design, the undermining of teacher authority, and the politicization of educational policy. The findings from both phases of journaling reveal a narrative progression from initial optimism to deepening burnout and institutional disillusionment. Key themes from journal one—including burnout, lack of administrative support, student behavioral challenges, and resistance to culturally responsive pedagogy—were reaffirmed and intensified in journal two. Additionally, new themes emerged, particularly critiques of systemic educational decline, the deprofessionalization of teachers, and a growing sense of institutional alienation.

While Wright's initial frustrations were largely situational and school-specific, later entries demonstrated a broader critique of educational policies, political influences, and structural inequities. The intensification of these themes suggests that the challenges faced by Wright were not isolated incidents but reflective of larger systemic patterns within public education. These results indicate a clear trajectory toward professional exhaustion and potential career exit, underscoring the cumulative effects of administrative neglect, policy-driven constraints, and pedagogical disempowerment.

Future research should explore how divisive rhetoric shapes administrative decision-making and whether policy interventions can mitigate teacher attrition in politically charged educational climates. Additionally, longitudinal studies on the career trajectories of educators who navigate these tensions may offer further insight into the long-term impact of ideological conflict on pedagogical practice and institutional stability.

These classroom vignettes show that so-called divisive rhetoric is not just controversial—it is designed to divide, separating teachers from their expertise, students from their cultural reflections, and communities from the challenging conversations art can spark. Each lyric contested, each repertoire list redacted, and each moment of self-censorship mapped in the teacher-researcher's journals testifies to this engineered partitioning of educational space. The data call not for lone-wolf courage but for rebuilding the fractured whole: administrators supporting

pedagogical judgment, families embracing productive discomfort, and policymakers weighing the civic cost of enforced estrangement. Until such connective tissue is deliberately rebuilt, music educators will remain in *Nepantla*—that borderland where they live in provisional harmony between mandate and mission. Exposing this liminal labor is the paper’s final cadence; whether those tones resolve into consonance or fracture into silence now depends on how the field confronts rhetoric designed to keep us apart.

About the Authors

Drew X. Coles is the Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Educational Opportunity Programs at Bard College, where he leads equity-focused initiatives to support historically underserved students through academic empowerment, inclusive programming, and student success pathways. His work emphasizes change leadership, institutional transformation, and mentorship across diverse learning communities. Previously, Dr. Coles served as Director of the Hybrid M.A. Program in Music & Music Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and held executive roles at the Crane School of Music. He is a prolific author with interdisciplinary scholarship published in *Issues in Teacher Education*, *Music Educators Journal*, and *Journal of Educational Thought*. In addition to his research and leadership, Dr. Coles is active in national service through editorial and organizational board memberships. His approach to higher education is grounded in equity, creativity, and innovation—bridging policy and practice to support both student flourishing and institutional growth.

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