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## **“Beyond the ‘ordinariness’”: Arts-based pedagogies reframing teacher education**

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*This article documents work with pre/in service teachers who are university students across three universities in three regions of the US, across multiple courses. Given our shared concern about the narrowing of space for imaginative literacy practices in schools, we focus on our collective use of open-ended, arts-based pedagogies as a way to challenge how we, as instructors, and our students conceive of literacy practices. A collection of Shaun Tan texts (including picturebooks, wordless graphic novels, and other multimodal/media texts for young people) served as focus texts across our three classroom contexts. We found surprise, a problematizing of narrow literacy definitions, and flexibility were all common ways of responding to this open-ended, arts-based literacy work. It resulted in tensions around and challenges of conventional or ordinary classroom literacy practices and pedagogical choices.*

I would hope that beyond its immediate subject, any illustrated narrative might encourage its readers take a moment to look beyond the ‘ordinariness’ of their own circumstances, and consider it from a slightly different perspective.

-Shaun Tan (2006, para 20)

### **Introduction**

We have strong concerns about the state of education, particularly the narrowing of space for imaginative literacy practices. Working outside of an art education context, we noticed a clear lack of creative, arts-based pedagogies in our teacher preparation classes, as content or implemented in practice. As three university educators working with pre- and inservice teachers at different universities in three regions of the US, across multiple education courses, we teach with a commitment for the arts. Our work is inspired by Dewey’s (1899/1976) beliefs that education should prepare students to be literate, informed, and actively engaged citizens capable of navigating and influencing society, texts, and discourses. He believed this would be fueled by our dedication to including the arts in schools. Therein, we approach our teaching as action researchers, posing questions and “trying something out” in the service of students learning as artful and engaged citizens (Pine, 2009, p. 239). We found using open-ended, arts-based pedagogies in our pre-service/in-service teacher education classes cultivates powerful learning interactions with texts, ideologies, and each other. While this work is in constant tension with conventional and Common Core mandated practices, we challenged ourselves to embrace the tension and messiness it creates in our own pre-service/in-service teacher education classes. Higher education, in drawing on the arts, has the potential to support challenges and changes to current practices. With these interests in mind, we address the question: How does the use of open-ended, arts-based, literacy practices impact teaching and learning in a range of teacher-education courses?

Individually, one of us is rooted in a literacy framework and a second within a literature framework. We both worked to invite arts-based methodologies into our practices. The third author comes from an art education foundation, using arts-based methodologies to frame her approach to literacy. Significantly, working across three different frames and spaces presents a variety of ways teachers and teacher-educators can take up this work themselves.

Collectively, we draw on sociocultural and new literacies perspectives to position literacy as social practice (Street, 2003) and highlight the process of “doing literacy” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 248). For us, engaging in such literacy practices relies on the arts. Our understanding of arts and arts-based pedagogies adopts Gude’s (2007) 21<sup>st</sup> century art and culture orientation that includes all kinds of art/media (visual, virtual, written, audio, performance); focuses on concepts, process, and materials; and critically interrogates the values, privileges, and hierarchies in multimedia production, distribution, consumption, interpretation, analysis ((Duncum, 2004; Freedman, 2003; Eisner, 2002; Tavin, 2003; Walker, 2003, 2004, 2006; see also Gude 2004, 2010). In defining the term “critical,” we turn to art educators Kraehe and Acuff’s (2013) focus on reflection and self-reflection that involves identifying, examining, and challenging sociocultural norms. Critical dialog involves attending to and asking questions about representation in texts and discourse.

We value the risk, surprise, and flexibility that working within the arts supports (Eisner, 2002). Our arts-based pedagogical practices include an open-ended consideration of time and course assignments, collaboration, and imagination. We found using texts like Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2006) in our university classrooms challenged us to embrace the imagination and

possibilities of these texts. As Tan (2006, para 20) notes (epigraph), these texts, taught in an arts-focused environment, have the potential to shift perspectives and disrupt “ordinary” practices and ideologies.

Tensions arise with using such hybrid, non-traditional, primarily visual, wordless works, -- a pushing and pulling between older, more traditional understandings, texts and practices of literacy teaching with newer, more expansive ones. In our own research, this expansive approach resulted in three themes emerging through data from our work: *surprise*, *narrow literacy definitions*, and *flexibility*. By wrestling with, and confronting the aforementioned tensions, we argue that integrating an arts-based approach to teaching and learning can support teachers and schools in encouraging practices that are more open to new possibilities and surprises.

## **Theoretical Framing**

**(Rereading) A multiliteracies pedagogy and teacher education.** In 1996, the New London Group detailed a multiliteracies approach to pedagogy, calling for changes in texts we incorporate into classrooms, including how they are framed, designed, and redesigned. However, there are limits to what is possible when only working within this frame. Leander and Boldt (2012) acknowledge the individual, unscripted, embodied, and emerging literacy practices that occur in the real world, practices that don’t get recognized by the New London Group. They suggest a more fluid approach to considering literacy practices. As researchers and university instructors, we invest in literacy practices that invite such “fluidity and indeterminacy,” that are in-the-moment, creative, or unorganized (Leander and Boldt, 2012, p. 44). In turn, we are interested in how unfixed ways of operating in classrooms impact and challenge how we think about literacy alongside our pre-service and inservice teachers.

Many resources, such as time, space, and multimodal resources (images or art supplies) are actively controlled/limited in classroom spaces. There is an overarching focus on product, rather than process, with students often working towards projects, papers, and tests. Leander and Boldt (2012) note that these constraints often prevent a more holistic way of engaging literacy practices in classrooms. Jacobs (2013) observes, “Schooling, as currently conceptualized, lacks playfulness and exploration, and movement is discouraged as children are taught to remain at their desks and on task” (p. 272). For a multiliteracies pedagogy to be effectively enacted in a school, shifts in *what school is* are necessary (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Rowsell et al., 2008). For us, this shift begins with teacher education.

**Multiliteracies through teacher education.** Jacobs (2013) suggests, “Perhaps insights from the world of art, in which creativity is a mix of the intended and the serendipitous, may provide an answer” to shifting school towards a multiliteracies framing (p. 272). A key component of arts-based pedagogies involves modeling it in our own teacher education classes, with our own students. In “authentic arts-based learning in teacher education,” Ogden et al. (2010) model their philosophy by mounting a student-teacher performance of Robert Fulghum’s musical *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (Zulia & Caldwell, 1999), in what one participant called “essentially a six-week, hands on learning experience” (p. 378). Their authentic arts-based experiences pushed teachers-in-training to consider opportunities for “individual and collective learning that encompasses both personal and professional growth” (p. 381). Like Ogden et al. (2010), we believe that in order to encourage teaching that goes beyond

the ordinary, we have to model it ourselves, creating classes where understanding comes from experiencing active, authentic engagement. This involves movement, music, color, and a focus on student-led topics, among other ideas we discuss later in this article.

This kind of transformation in teacher education also requires us to consider a broader, more social conception of literacy. Future educators need time and space to (re)consider what a *text* is and can be (Boche, 2014); this often requires teachers to relinquish their given curriculum, which is risky, especially for new teachers (Flores et al., 2019). Further, pre-service teachers admit concerns about authentically adopting a multiliteracies approach to teaching (Ajayi, 2010; Boche, 2014). Making this kind of change in teacher education aligns with enacting a multiliteracies pedagogy in schools (Ajayi, 2010; Cervetti et al., 2006; Rowsell et al., 2008). If multiliterate practices are the goal, teacher education must (re)address how literacy is positioned, defined, and framed (Ajayi, 2010; Cervetti et al., 2006).

**Multiliteracies through the arts.** Using Dewey (1976) as a common starting point, educational philosophers like Maxine Greene (1995) and Elliott Eisner (2002, 2009) champion the arts and their transdisciplinary value to education. Arts-based pedagogies emphasize artmaking as a process of dialogic meaning-making combining materials, ideas, processes, and discussions with collaborative learning community members (Greene, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Marshall (2010, 2014; 2015; Marshall & D’Adamo, 2018) emphasizes arts-based learning as an interdisciplinary approach that simultaneously teaches arts-based skills, techniques, and practices and academic content. Walker (2003, 2004, 2006) positions arts-based pedagogy as less focused on technical skill and more focused on play and the use of contemporary artists’ practices to explore materials and ideas concurrently.

Arts-based pedagogies can mobilize an open-ended, interactive, iterative, and cumulative process of co-constructing knowledge with students (Greene, 1995; Marshall, 2006; Walker, 2003, 2004, 2006). In teacher education spaces, there are opportunities for future teachers to engage and learn through the arts, while considering the possibilities for future students. Arts-based meaning-making demands attentive analysis and engagement; in return it provides multiple entry points and differentiated learning possibilities for *all* students (Rhoades et al., 2015).

**Multiliteracies through children’s literature.** Flores et al. (2019) propose “using children’s literature to support [pre-service teachers] as they (re)imagine literacy instruction and a just society - for all,” (p. 228). The use of children’s literature and other unconventional texts such as YA literature, digital composing, and film can support broadening conceptions of teaching reading and writing and contribute to more diverse and socially just educational spaces (Fowler-Amato et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2019). The inclusion of such texts also encourages preservice educators to “disrupt” their thinking about conventional and standardized classroom literacy practices (Flores et al. 2019; p. 226).

Yet, even when teacher educators are teaching with student-centered and socially-just motivations in ELA and literacy spaces, “The research shows the inherent complexity and tensions that come with this tremendous responsibility” (Fowler-Amato et al., 2019, p. 171). More research with pre/in-service teachers and in literacy teacher education spaces is needed (Boche, 2014). As researchers and educators, we are dedicated to the broadening of literacy, the

embracing of children's literature and other multimodal texts, and the inclusion of the arts within all aspects of education. We see opportunities to embrace emotions, surprise, and creativity with pre/in service teachers in our university courses.

### **Methods**

We want to address, and contest, the increasingly narrow, limited educational spaces in teacher education for multiliteracies learning, particularly the absence of creative and imaginative practices with open-ended, fluid, and even playful, teaching intentions. We meet these concerns with an integration of arts-based literacy practices into our university courses through an action research collective self-study. Working across three university contexts, we used Shaun Tan's texts as common exemplar mentor texts for our collective efforts. We asked: How does the use of open-ended, arts-based, literacy practices impact teaching and learning in a range of teacher-education courses?

### **Study Design**

This qualitative, multi-site study documents teaching and learning in university classrooms. As educators with vested interests in knowing and improving our own educational spaces, as well as the spaces of the pre/in-service teachers we work with, our methods draw from teacher action research (Anderson et al., 2003; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Pine, 2009; Sagoury & Power, 2012) and collective self-study (Samaras et al, 2006; Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2019). We took action in our teaching spaces, in collaboration with one another, investigating our use of open-ended, arts-based literacy practices. We served as critical friends, communicating while planning, teaching, collecting data, and analyzing our work (Anderson et al., 2003). And we worked to stay open "to exploring the surprises that pop up in our teaching lives" (Sagoury & Power, p. 20, 2012). While each author taught different courses (described below), we all worked with pre/in-service teachers using Shaun Tan's work to invite creative and imaginative literacy spaces.

While drawing from action research scholarship individually, our collaboration became a form of collective self-study. For Samaras et al (2006), in self-study, "Each team member brings ... personal perspectives, disciplines, and understandings to each task," and "These voices represent multiple perspectives on the processes of teacher and faculty development" (p. 44). Our collective critical dialogue pushed us to challenge our "own ideas as well as to challenge [one another's] assumptions about teaching," seeing such collaborative "peer scaffolding...[as] an important path to [our] professional development" (p. 44). We recognized tensions across our work as we connected literacy and the arts (Duncum, 2004; Zoss, 2009). In particular, Mindi teaches within an arts-based course, Ashley in a literature-based course, and Sara in a literacy-based course. Further, we see our self-study research aligned with what Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras (2019) call "polyvocal professional learning," working to notice, understand, and engage "diverse ways of seeing, knowing, and doing," considering how we "can deepen and extend" our own learning and that of our students (p. 4).

### **The work of Shaun Tan**

We position a collection of works by Shaun Tan (including picturebooks, wordless graphic novels, and other multimodal/media texts) as resources for embedding arts in education in the hope of supporting and preparing future teachers. Because we teach different university

courses, we chose Shaun Tan's texts as our common thread. Knowing Tan sees arts and multimedia as key components of literacy, we wanted all of our students to model and learn from the sophisticated and accessible literacy practices evidenced in his texts. Additionally, in his home country of Australia, his texts are officially included in the Australian National Curriculum (<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu>). This reinforces the importance of his work in helping readers interact with arts-based texts, and, in the case of our students who are teachers or hope to become teachers, they are mentor texts in adopting arts-based practices. His broad body of work provides a range of multimodal texts, including a wordless graphic novel, picturebooks, computer apps, an Oscar-winning short film, and websites that include resources and supplemental reading materials for his stories. The works themselves are visually rich with complex plotlines that are ambiguous, open-ended, and full of visual tension. This variety makes Tan's work as a prime resource to encourage a wide range of creative and arts-based responses (Dallacqua et al., 2015; Rhoades et al., 2015). The use of Tan's work allowed us to notice common questions and issues emerging from our students in our data. *The Arrival*, in particular, was a text we all used in some capacity in this study. A wordless picturebook, *The Arrival* tells the story of a man leaving his family to immigrate to a brand-new country. Tan's illustrations stress the foreignness of the new environment and the difficulties the man encounters in trying to establish himself in a different world. His story is entwined with other stories of immigration as the characters work together to find familiarity and comfort in a strange place.

## Context

**Ashley's classroom.** Ashley was previously a fifth-grade teacher, before shifting into the university setting. Ashley collected data across two semesters of a Children's Literature course for undergraduate pre-service teachers, serving 28 and 23 students, respectively. All participants signed consent forms through a formal IRB protocol. As part of a minority-serving institution, the student make-up for these classes was racially and linguistically diverse; students also fell into different content area majors within the College of Education. This course is offered within a College of Education and Human Sciences at a large, public, minority-serving university in a major southwestern city. Students were required to read a range of children's literature and related scholarship and respond weekly to readings through writing, art-making, and research.

The lessons explored here used three narratives by Shaun Tan: *The Arrival*, *The Rules of Summer*, and *The Lost Thing*, because of the visual and media variety (picturebooks, short films, video of theater replications of his work) that existed. Ashley made texts available in class and invited students to sit and read these books and view the additional media during class time with little direction, other than to attend deeply and notice (Greene, 2014). Then, Ashley asked students to form groups and create responses to their selected Tan texts by collaboratively creating a multimodal text of their own. Ashley expected that students would enjoy the process of reading across such different multimodal texts and anticipated that these weekly responses would not pivot from the other literacy-based work and rhythms the course engaged in each week. Each student contributed to a collective multimodal response that considered their discussion of the text media and wrote reflections. For the purposes of this article, Ashley focused on the work of twelve students, six from each semester, who chose to respond to *The Arrival*.

**Sara's classroom.** Sara, a former second grade teacher, collected data from one semester of a K-3 Literacy methods course with 23 undergraduate preservice teachers at a large, public university in a mid-sized Western city. The class was a mix of students who wanted to work in early or middle childhood classrooms in the future. Over nine weeks of the semester, the university students tutored a student in first-, second-, or third- grade, with 30 minutes of one-on-one tutoring focusing on reading, writing, and word study with a print-based basal reader, and then 30 minutes of small-group lessons on needed literacy skills, culminating in participating in a Reader's Theater. IRB granted approval for this study as the assignments and activities were within the course's pre-established curricula. Furthermore, parental permission was given for the tutees to participate in both the class tutoring component and study.

During small-group time, one group of preservice teachers tutored four third-grade readers who scored over the third-grade level in the ARI, Analytical Reading Inventory, (Woods & Moe, 2014) reading assessment. Three of the four students identified as being the child of immigrant parents. The pre-service teachers expressed interest in using alternative methods while covering lesson requirements. Sara introduced the group to *The Arrival* and encouraged them to see the potential of such a text in their tutoring sessions; Sara expected the students would enjoy exploring a different text with their tutees, but anticipated some confusion and lack of understanding around creating artifacts and lessons with a wordless text. This group was the only group that used Tan's work in their small group sessions, and each pre-service teacher provided consent for their work to be part of this larger study. Before tutoring, the students read *The Arrival*, recorded their responses, then worked together to create weekly lesson plans, focused on the first section of the book, geared toward their small group of tutees. Each week of tutoring they collected observational notes of their tutee's reactions during the lessons, and wrote reflections afterwards. Near the end of tutoring, the students and their tutees created and presented a Reader's Theater script, an arts-based artifact (Eisner, 2009), based on what they read from *The Arrival*. Sara served as a resource and support, otherwise the pre-service teachers had the space and time to explore, experiment, and interact with the text and their tutees.

**Mindi's classroom.** Mindi taught high school English for six years before returning for a PhD in Art Education. As an Associate Professor, her scholarship, research, and teaching focus on non-art teachers and non-artists using arts-based pedagogies, multimodal literacies, and texts. Mindi collected data across two semesters of *Arts-Integrated Teaching* at a large public university in a major Midwestern city and analyzed data, with IRB approval, following the completion of her course. In 2017, the class served fourteen students; in 2018, seven. Each had a mixture of graduate/undergraduate students including pre/in-service teachers, international education students, a librarian, and a graduate student in poultry sciences. The course focused on using creative and arts-based meaning-making processes as tools for incorporating multimodal literacies learning for students of all ages and across all subjects. Unlike Ashley's and Sara's classes, Mindi's class starts with creativity and artmaking, then applies those principles to more traditional texts and subject matter to transform traditional literacy-based practices. Mindi anticipated some student resistance to accepting and appreciating the inclusion of arts-based texts and multimodal texts.



Mindi focused on intersections of creativity, artmaking, and meaning-making as tools for developing multimodal literacies. Data consisted of multiple creative activities and assignments, including a TASK Party (Herring, 2008), an obsessive photography assignment, a shaving cream and color sensory experience, and a soundscape lesson. These are described more fully in the data analysis sections. These activities and assignments were intentionally scaffolded into working with a collection of Tan texts.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The authors each collected data across three university courses. Data collected and analyzed for this manuscript included student work, instructor responses to student work and progress, and author reflections (in the form of memos and email exchanges with each other). Student work included students' lesson plans, in-class and anecdotal notes, reflections, responses, and final group work projects.

Initial reflective notes were completed independently by each of the authors, focusing on descriptions of events and central ideas discussed in class. Each author also compiled her own data sets and completed an independent initial review to develop preliminary conceptual categories and codes for continued analysis. We used a larger thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) incorporating Saldaña's (2014) descriptive strategy for coding. Saldaña encourages coding as a means to capture the essence and essential elements of the research story. We moved from individual immersion in the data, generating and applying initial themes that were common across our data. Initial themes included time, collaboration, joy, and imagination.

We shifted into reviewing and refining those themes together during an online Skype debriefing session, clarifying how we defined each of those themes and reviewing example data. Following this review we returned to our own data sets and recoded them. We found that our initial themes could be collapsed or reorganized into clearer categories that became our final organizational codes: *surprise*, *narrow literacy definitions*, and *flexibility*. For example, time and imagination led to our thinking about *flexibility*. Imagination also contributed to our investigation of the *narrow literacy definitions* with which we and our students were operating; time was also part of our *surprise*.

Using these themes, we returned to our data and coded a third time. Following this round, we again met and reviewed our process, categories, and concerns. We then combined, reorganized, and exchanged our data according to our chosen themes. Each researcher selected a theme and reviewed/recoded the associated data. Afterwards, researchers met again to review any concerns, contradictions, or gaps in the data. In this way, our collective self-study employed what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) call investigator triangulation, multiple researchers analyzing common data.

Because we were embracing open-ended, arts-based, literacy work in teacher education courses, we located tensions with the conventional practices embedded in the educational systems we inhabit, including structured timeframes for class and given, standardized curriculums for our courses. First, we focus on the surprise that surfaced in reaction to these tensions; surprise sparked bigger questions and moves in our spaces. By recognizing and building from surprise in all of our classes, we were able to confront how we do and do not think about teaching and teaching literacy. We found all of this work required flexibility in our practices and in students' learning. While *surprise*, *definitions of literacy*, and *flexibility* were codes we explore in individual sections below, it is important to acknowledge their

connectedness. Each theme led to the next or pointed back to previous ideas. To react to surprise, we needed flexibility. Flexibility made it possible to recognize tensions in literacy definitions. And we were ultimately left surprised by how we pushed and pulled at our literacy conceptions. All of this work left us noticing and challenging the educational perspectives we hold and pass on to (and with) our university students.

### **Surprise**

As educators, we strive to engage students, spark interest, and challenge thinking. Combining Tan's texts with arts-based meaning-making for reading and responding can inspire such work. Across our classrooms, students often initially expressed uncertainty, even dismay, when they encountered Tan's (2013) complex, ambiguous texts. We engaged with these texts purposely, using open-ended arts-based pedagogies, which included book responses relying on visual and spatial (rather than alphanumeric) engagement, physical movement, use of non-traditional materials, and highlighting literacy learning through image-based books. This translation of material from one form into another, such as reading an image-based text and creating a Readers Theater from it as in Sara's classroom, fits within creating meaning in arts-based pedagogies (Rhoades et al., 2015; Rhoades, 2020). Eisner (2009) asserts, "Education can learn from the arts that everything interacts; there is no content without form, and no form without content" (p 7). When we welcomed spaces of surprise into our classrooms we began to see ways "uncertainty create[s] opportunities for argumentation, for the pursuit of different lines of logic, for knowledge construction, and for the movement of ideas from tacit to explicit" (Jordan & McDaniel, 2014, p. 523). We position surprise, which embraces uncertainty, as beneficial to the learning process. Eisner (2009) insists surprise, "is not to be seen as an intruder in the process of inquiry but as a part of the rewards one reaps when working artistically...But surprise in the course of work is also the result of securing a new insight" (p 8). Allowing for such uncertainty in collaborative spaces helped redirect pre/in-service teachers' beliefs towards more encompassing and inclusive ideas around literacy.

### **Collaboratively addressing uncertainty**

Our collective approach to communally co-constructing knowledge initially generated student discomfort, which was evident by the students expressing hesitation on the class activity, uncertainty around the value of Tan's books, and/or skepticism on whether the books or activities would be met with success in classroom settings. But as students collaborated, they constructed open-ended contexts which allowed explicit expressions of confusion and surprise, offering students possibilities to reconsider and reshape both their independent and collaborative thoughts about literacy. The course assignments provided an artificial starting point of convenience for communicating these thoughts. Though our course activities were unusual, uncomfortable, and nontraditional, they surprised students with the complexity of learning and richness of experience they fostered. For example, students in Ashley's class requested more time to explore and consider what they were discovering in Tan's texts as they read and created multimodal responses. Instead of capturing brief responses to the text, students delivered more critical, contextually-relevant, creative responses to the text. Ashley noted "discomfort" and "confusion" from students as they approached the texts themselves; some students initially expressed active dislike for such texts because they were "just too much" to take in and make sense of (Ashley's field notes). Yet, they assigned themselves out-of-class work, and organized

ways to communicate through the week in preparation for the next class. Their uncertainty became a collaborative process requiring time to explore the surprise they were experiencing. This request for more time and extended engagement also surprised Ashley. Viewing the classroom as a collaborative and shared space, Ashley chose to adjust the schedule when requested. Confusion and uncertainty in this environment produced tensions in reading and literacy understandings while simultaneously pushing students to engage in those tensions together.

Encountering surprises allowed students to grow and reshape their understandings around how meaning is made, what that looks like, and how it is communicated. Mindi incorporated an embodied art-making experience early in the semester: a modified version of artist Oliver Herring's (2008) TASK Party.

During TASK, one student made an elaborate cardboard X-wing fighter. Two made a plastic bin aquarium filled with a glass bead and sequined bottom and paper fish. In class, students responded that these activities surprised them, challenging them to consider ways to include other arts-based pedagogies and meaning-making strategies in their own curriculum. In a subsequent music-making activity, one student noted, "As someone who likes to talk a LOT, I was surprised by how much silence my group wanted to use in our composition." Students noted the activities facilitate a playful approach to interpreting, developing, and completing class tasks. Ashley's and Mindi's classes became supportive spaces where any confusion about texts or tasks provoked dialogue where students could "generat[e] productive uncertainty" (Jordan & McDaniel, 2014, p. 494). This uncertainty became surprise; students were surprised by the speed with which they lost their feelings of discomfort and confusion, by their desire and willingness to play, and by the amount of fun they had during the activities, all of which helped them reconsider ideas around literacy and how classroom spaces (can) work.

### **Surprise making way for new practices**

In these collaborative, supportive spaces, students reconceptualized what engaging in literacy means, participating in critical dialogue and questioning instructional practices solely aligned in traditional print-based texts. Since it is "important to take into account both relational and content uncertainty when trying to understand how students engage in collaborative problem solving" (Jordan & McDaniel, 2014, p 493), we recognize collaborative spaces as places where beliefs about literacy and education can be acknowledged, upended, and ultimately, reshaped. Ashley documented shifts towards new ways of thinking as her students reflected, sharing comment such as, "I will not dismiss the value of a picturebook or graphic novel that has no words in the future" and "I liked that it made me think, slow down to interpret the story." Here they are noting changes in their own thinking and literacy practices, resulting from their own surprises from their literacy work.

In their tutoring group assignments for elementary children, one group of Sara's preservice teachers doubted that *The Arrival*, a wordless graphic novel, could be an effective mentor text for teaching comprehension and fluency as presented in their course text. After giving the tutees the text and providing the time, space, and activities for questioning, and ultimately creating meaning from the text, the university students realized these doubts were inaccurate. For example, they commented that their tutees would look ahead and state things from a personal perspective, implying insertion of themselves within the text—an imaginative arts-based process (Eisner, 2009) and a target skill. Additionally, when the tutees began writing a

Reader's Theater script (Figure 1), the preservice teachers noted their own surprise in their students' capabilities, the depth of their engagement, and the complexities of their discussions around the both texts—book and script. They realized students' questions were authentic, acknowledging their definition of literacy was expanding (explored more in the next section). This process was not “a matter of abandoning beliefs, but of gradually replacing them with more relevant beliefs developed from experiences in a supportive environment” (Vaino, Holbrook, & Rannikmäe, 2013, p. 74). Reading *The Arrival* surprised students with how much their tutees learned from a text without words, extending and applying knowledge from this book in meaningful ways.

Figure 1

*Readers Theater Script Excerpt*

*SCENE 3*

The dad gets off the boat.

**Dad:** This place looks so weird. There are flying boats everywhere. First, I have to find a new home. Then, after a few days, I'll ask around and see how I can find a job and learn the language.

**New characters:** (will say Hi in their own languages [Lithuanian, Spanish, and Urdu]) and then will say hi in English to show that the Dad is learning the language.

Mindi's students started the semester experiencing arts-based pedagogies as a precursor to using them to explore the use of these pedagogies with complex texts such as Tan's. The first instructional activity involved taking excessive digital photographs of a single object, exploring it thoroughly and spending an extended time intimately engaging with it. Mindi wanted this approach internalized as students encountered their class texts, as well as with their everyday *texts* (a mug, a pair of glasses).

Across the three studies, university students were surprised by the evolution of their approaches as they recalled shifting perspectives and a new focus on details. The pre-service teachers in the above-level third-grade tutoring group in Sara's class asked their tutees to discuss the emotions of the main character in *The Arrival*. One of the pre-service teachers wrote in her reflection, “These students really surprised me, their ability to interpret feeling and emotion in a wordless text was incredible.” Earlier, the pre-service teachers confided that they thought the third-grade students would use simple terminology to describe the main character: “He's sad, lonely, or confused.” However, in this activity, they gave their tutees time to look at the wordless book, and one tutee in particular related the characters to her own experience of moving to the United States from Pakistan. She said the character had to be sad, because he had left his family

behind to move to the new place, much like her leaving her sister behind to move to the U.S. When this tutee saw the picture of all the people on the ship, she commented that the people in the illustration were mostly men, which made her think that they all also had to leave their wives and children behind. She even began to speak for the character--narrating what she thought he would say in those pages--using her own personal experience to inform his dialog. A different pre-service teacher wrote in her reflection that when this student spoke for the character it “yielded some very interesting results,” including how this wordless book opened up the space for the children to insert their own dialog. This complexity and deepness of analysis and personal connection caused the students to shift their perspectives of the potential of this type of text to elicit deep connection and analysis.

In Mindi’s class, during an assignment designed to have students obsessively focus on an item, one student noted how this process made her re-see the red and gold glass she used daily for tea. Instead of absentmindedly filling and drinking it, this assignment made her slow down, give her time to remember her family, her home, the joy and gratitude of the ritual event of having tea. It was a reawakening for her to be more intentional and present. While activities like focusing on the glass seem removed from traditional learning activities in classrooms, using such pedagogies for collaborative arts-based integrated units provided university students with the opportunity to make connections between various forms of literacy visible and explicit—for themselves and their own students. Providing entry points into texts creates openings for all students to see themselves reflected and represented, creating possibilities for examining things in depth and critically reviewing and assessing the details for questioning and challenging the status quo.

Turning their focus from objects to texts by Tan, students recognized sophisticated storylines and concepts, which were expressed through densely-packed semiotic and heavily visual texts. These storylines and concepts stretch and blur the boundaries of children’s books, graphic novels, and fine art. In Tan’s works students discovered a bridge between arts and literacy, providing an array of possibilities for arts-based connection, extension, and representations. Open-ended and surprising pedagogical moves encouraged students to think about different ways of approaching and reading a text. For example, one group of students working with *The Rabbits* (Tan, 2010), a tale of the colonization of Australia, developed an activity that involved composing rich, dense soundscapes to “tell” multiple perspectives of stories about the arrival, occupation, and westward expansion of European colonists and settlers on the North American continent. They channeled their collaborative dialog and emerging surprise into reconceptualizing and expanding their views of literacy (to be explored in the next section). From uncertainty and surprise, we, as instructors, and our university students embraced alternative ways to read, teach, and engage.

### **Confronting (narrow) definitions of literacy**

Our university students struggled at times to make sense of the books they were reading. As one student noted, Tan’s texts seemed to revolve around a theme of “subverting expectations” (student notes). As discussed above, engaging with Tan’s work did not always go as expected, surprising us. We were interested in university students’ (subverted) expectations, not just around the texts we were reading and composing, but also their expectations around *what literacy is*. In thinking about the work across our classes as literacy events, we were in the act of

(re)defining literacy. We conceive of such events as socially, culturally, and politically situated (Larson and Marsh, 2005; Street, 2003) and multidimensional (Heath, 1983).

Conventionally, literacy events include occasions of writing, using, or discussing printed text (Heath, 1983), but we are also interested in literacy that uses other graphic signs, beyond alphanumeric-based literacies (Street, 2003). In this section, we explore what happens when we define and enact literacy events that do not rely primarily on words. Students experienced a great deal of tension around this question, wondering if what we were doing could even be considered *reading* or *literacy work*. Tan's work challenged our thinking around interpretation and complexity as components of literacy events.

### **Subverting and supporting conventional literacy events**

Regardless of whether we were working within an art, literature, or literacy-focused university course, we all found ourselves engaged in questioning ideas of reading and text. We believe teachers can design lessons addressing standardized objectives while incorporating student driven, multimedia/modal learning. In this case, we were all addressing literacy practices that were standardized within our universities, with the goal to broaden and challenge them through inductive and creative methods.

Sara's university students, as described above, expressed surprise and even dismay upon reading *The Arrival*, not seeing how a wordless graphic novel could be an effective mentor reading text. This activity was not only asking them to question their own conceptions of literacy, but to question their textbooks and previous professors' lessons. It asked them to consider the arts-based principle that "The limits of language are not the limits of cognition" (Eisner, 2009, p. 8). Through extended work with their tutees and their own literacy learning and developing vocabulary, Sara's university students did shift their thinking about recognizing and describing literacy events. As the pre-service teachers' vocabulary and knowledge about theory and methods of literacy practices grew, they applied and extended these in their group tutoring sessions.

As Ashley's children's literature students reflected on their experience with Tan's work, they described their interest and openness to "reading" more books like *The Arrival*. Several students, in their reflections, wrote *reading* in quotation marks, sharing comments like, "I would like to 'read' more books without words." In a sense, the quotation marks might illustrate tension around how students were defining reading and the potential for the definition to shift and evolve. "Mere literacy" is often associated with decoding alphanumeric texts, as Sara's students thought (Cope & Kalantzis, p. 5, 2000). *The Arrival*, a wordless text, offered a broader way to think about literacy, reading and writing, considering the reading of images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Yet, those quotation marks may also signal a different tension around students' not considering what they were doing as reading, but in a literature course, were not sure what other terms to access to describe their work.

### **Interpretation**

Students across our research sites noted there was a wide range of options when interpreting the Tan texts. Working with a text that privileges images challenged students' expectations of understanding and meaning-making. While their instinct was to arrive at a single conclusion of this text, students found there were many ways to make meaning. One of Ashley's

students reflected, “Since there are no words, I think that everybody interprets it differently” (student reflection).

Interpreting this text became the work of making multiple connections. This resulted in turning away from single, correct answers, towards many ways of reading and knowing. Sara’s university students recognized the ways their tutees were making personal connections between the immigrant experience in the text and their own immigration experiences. In the post-reflections, one student commented on the tutees’ engagement with the text. Noting the connections her tutees were making between the books and their lives in contrast to her difficulties forging with what she later identified as a text-to-self connection. One student wrote,

There was a page in particular where [the tutee] really related this book to her life because she remembered coming to the US and having to go through customs and immigration. There was a page where the father has stickers all over him and he handed the guy a piece of paper and she explained that the piece of paper was probably his ticket and the thing that allowed him to come into the country.

She noticed how personal the interpretations of the text were, something not initially aligned with the goals of the lesson.

Mindi engaged in another example of initially questionable literacy activities and events. She led the university students through a dramatic inquiry process of using the movement of their bodies (clapping, slapping, smacking, snapping, clicking) and personal materials (their own pens, pencils, keys, change) to create ad-hoc “instruments” for a symphony of sounds, summarizing sections of narrative. Students selected the multi-page spread of *The Arrival* where the protagonist experiences the bureaucratic process of immigrating to a foreign country without speaking its language. There is lots of activity on these pages—many people scurrying around and much noise and excitement about arriving is suggested by the images. The students’ symphony began with a cacophony of indistinct shouts and conversation. Then, it transitioned to staccato rapid-fire questions with answers coming, slower and softly, that faded to murmurs, then silence, then to slow shuffles into silence again. As one student reflected, “one of my favorite things about dramatic inquiry is the fact that it truly immerses you in the world of the characters.” Interpretation of sounds led to understandings of characters and worlds.

Students were able to combine their basic aural/musical literacies with an open-ended arts-based approach (Eisner, 2009) to a wordless graphic novel, translating and interpreting it into a soundscape expressing empathetic, emotional understandings of the process of immigration. As one student noted, “Even with no words you could tell the man got sadder and more beat down as he kept getting what he knew were questions, but he didn’t understand and his responses didn’t really matter.” Another commented, “I didn’t expect how much sadness the silence would hold,” acknowledging the power of a sound-based activity to surface emotions from the text. Just as sound had added emotion and meaning to the text, silence had as well.

Across our university classes, students worked to connect with and interpret images, connect with characters and their situations, and connect with each other as they read and discussed. They also conceptually began to connect with future students who might be challenged to engage or interpret this text in the same ways. Tan’s texts have been taken up with young people across age-levels and content areas, supporting an arts-based approach to meaning-making. (See Dallacqua et al., 2015 & Rhoades et al., 2015 for examples of young people responding to Tan’s texts). As these future teachers experienced arts-based literacies as students, they recognized the power those pedagogies and practices would hold for their own students.



## Text complexity

The layers of meaning in Tan's illustrated texts take time and effort to appreciate. We invited our students to engage in close reading and looking. Mindi prepared her students for close reading with an art activity involving mixing food coloring into shaving cream (Figure 2 & 3) using pipettes to drip bright colors onto the white, cloudlike surfaces, then swirling these puddled droplets, creating a constant stream of continually shifting colors, with students intensely focused on observing, feeling, enjoying the process as an aesthetic and academic experience. One student noted:

I observed that I was learning with my whole senses at the same time. The sound of spraying the shaving cream, the act of choosing and spraying the different colors of the ink, the smell of the chemical reaction and the intermittent colors that came up at intervals was an amazing experience. (Student A)

Although the experience did not look like *ordinary* literacy on the surface, it encouraged students to embrace the arts-based approach of slowing down, observing subtle aspects of a visual text – the slight changes in color, the texture of a surface, the layering. This activity prepared students to engage more fully with visual texts, closely studying the artful choices, and challenging what it means to read and compose a text full of life and meaning (Eisner, 2009).

Figure 2 & 3  
*Shaving Cream Activity*



Ashley's children's literature students also came to acknowledge the complexity a wordless book offers. Students concluded these books were "more complicated than we give them credit," acknowledging prior notions of easily reading a book of pictures. By challenging such narrow notions of reading and children's literature, these future teachers were (re)considering educational literacy practices, goals, and measurements. That these books are written and marketed for young readers also challenges narrow views of young readers' capabilities. These future teachers came to value the impact of such texts and their challenges. It is our hope challenging and changing notions of *reading* and cultivating an openness for the kinds of books we advocate will translate into how literacy practices operate in future classroom spaces.

## Flexibility



Flexibility was also a core theme across data sets. For Barak and Levenberg (2016), flexibility involves creative thinking, generating new ideas, open-mindedness, the ability to compromise, being open to new experiences, and being able to “successfully adapt to fluid and shifting environments, tasks, and duties” (p. 49). We realized evidence of flexibility took multiple guises across our data, but it was key in our approach to teaching multimodal literacies through Tan’s texts in relation to expectations and interpretation of texts; class time and pacing; and activities, assignments, and assessments.

### **Modeling flexibility**

As instructors, we found it key to model flexibility for several reasons. One, it “prompt[ed] individuals to think independently, challenge commonly held assumptions, and view problems from different perspectives” (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012, p. 580). Two, university education programs bear responsibility for “provid[ing] preservice teachers with exposure to theory in practice” (Faulkner & Cook, 2006, p. 11). Three, if we want teachers to implement flexible pedagogy, they need to see and experience it in practice, followed by critical reflection. In addition to using Tan’s texts to disrupt traditional conceptions of literacy and reading, we tried to model flexible pedagogical strategies and teacher responses whenever possible. Mindi noted, “It takes a lot of time to do in-depth learning – to engage deeply with ideas and materials and processes and ways of knowing beyond traditional literacies” (Reflective Memo). We modeled and respected flexibility of time. Responding to her students’ request for more time to read and make sense of *The Arrival*, Ashley reflected:

As an instructor working with pre-service teachers, I felt a responsibility to model flexibility, as it is a recurring theme around teaching and learning. So when students asked for more time, we all rearranged other course plans to make that time. (Reflective Memo)

In doing this, Ashley’s students participated in the experience of negotiating with a teacher: requesting more time, explaining their intentions, collaboratively modifying the class schedule, and proposing short group presentations on their response projects. Perhaps this flexibility led to flexibility in students’ reading experiences as well. One of Ashley’s students reflected that “this work made me more open-minded to other types of ‘nontraditional’ or ‘odd’ books.” Education can learn from the arts that open-ended tasks permit the exercise of imagination, one of the most important of human aptitudes. Eisner (2009) asserts, “It is imagination, not necessity, that is the mother of invention” (p. 9). In both of Ashley’s classes, providing the students with more time resulted in their devoting much more attention to the text, allowing a rich process of extended intellectual and personal engagement, of imagination, and of building connections between the text and their lives.

In Mindi’s classes, flexibility is also infused throughout the semester planning and teaching. While customizing the course syllabus, Mindi notes:

I know it makes it more complicated but it is also more rewarding, for me and the students.... It isn’t easy to make a class be focused on the specific students you have and their personalized contexts and needs, but it is too hard for me to ignore this part. I want my classes to be meaningful to *my* students, not generically. (Reflective Memo)

This flexibility of planning and individualizing pedagogy initially surprised or even frustrated students, “It’s definitely challenging for some ... but they usually all come around.” Then they like it:

[Spring 2018 students] seemed less concerned about adhering to expectations and norms and standards...[and] willing to be much more loosely structured in terms of assignments and grading and participation ... They didn't require much convincing or much reassuring; they just went with it. (Reflective Memo)

While there is obviously a power differential between instructors and students, Mindi is a proponent of un-grading (Blum, 2020) and guarantees all students an “A” to minimize its importance and promote risk-taking, creativity, and process. A flexible approach to teaching and learning can produce a sense of disequilibrium, which can train teachers and students “to develop the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and frustration” in the learning process (Collard & Looney, 2014, p. 350). Ambiguity and the ability to forestall conclusion—arts-based approaches (Gude, 2007, 2010)—assist students in cultivating more sophisticated and nuanced critical thinking.

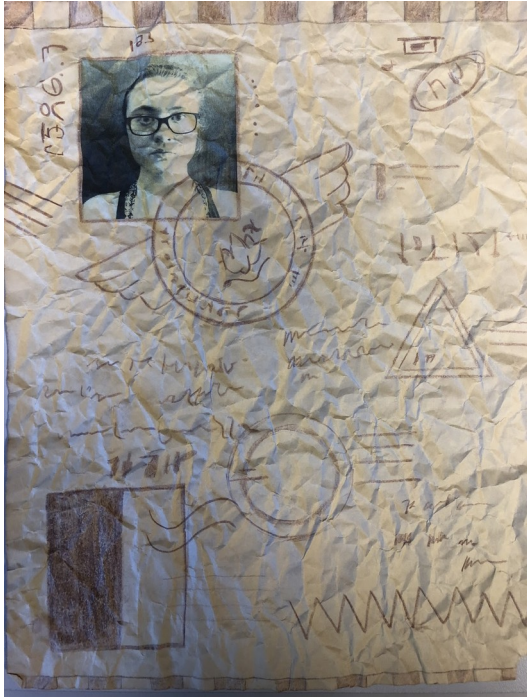
### **Activities/Assignments/Assessments**

Another important aspect of flexibility and multimodal literacies involves the overlap of activities, assignments, and assessments --how we present assignments and activities and how university students take them up. Most education courses may still enact traditional models of teacher-centered classrooms and structured time, while we challenge this through the arts-based use of non-traditional texts and flexible assignments that encourage multimodal responses (Eisner, 2009). With *The Arrival*, Ashley's open-ended response assignment and willingness to negotiate time allowed students to develop meaningful connections with the text. One group response began with a presentation inviting students to write their name on a projected map for countries where their families had originated. Because the class was so culturally diverse, the covered map revealed many connections to familial immigrant identities, a major theme in *The Arrival*.

This map activity was a prelude to sharing self-assigned handmade passports students constructed outside of class during the negotiated extended time (Figure 4). The group noted “characters’ passports were bonding opportunities” (student reflection) and wanted to bring the same emotional investment to sharing theirs with classmates. They also wanted to create items that would “represent their lives and backgrounds” (student reflection) yet reflect the confusion the characters felt in a new country. For this reason, the passports’ language, as in *The Arrival*, was “gibberish” (student reflection). Yet, given time to process and discuss their ideas, in response to the openness and ambiguity--or flexibility--of Tan's text, students found points of connection, places where they could insert themselves and their stories into the text and into a larger human story. They could make sense of the “gibberish.” Their attention to the practical and aesthetic details of the passport reflect a close attention to detail and deep conceptual understanding of the artifact as a symbol.

Figure 4

*Student Handmade Passport*



Sara's course, as the first of three in a sequence of required literacy courses at her university, has a standardized, structured curriculum to prepare students for the two courses that follow, focused on foundational concepts, theories, and pedagogies for primary grades related to emergent literacy. For her course, flexibility was often difficult. Still Sara found opportunities for flexibility between her university students and their tutees. Recognizing that the tutees in one group were all above-grade readers needing more challenge, Sara recommended reading *The Arrival* with them to "explore what happens." Consequently, the university students demonstrated flexibility by responding to specific students' needs, working with an unfamiliar text, and exploring possibilities instead of completing predetermined outcomes. In creating a Reader's Theater script on *The Arrival*, the preservice teachers were amazed when their elementary students wanted to include a section in the script where they spoke the other languages they knew in order to show the confusion of being in a new world that speaks an unfamiliar language.

Sara's pre-service teachers realized given time and space to discuss, explore, and question, elementary students employed traditional literacy skills, such as personal self-to-text connections to construct sophisticated meaning within the boundaries of their class requirements.

Specifically, one pre-service teacher had to reconsider her interpretation of *The Arrival* and plans for using it after her third-grade tutees began creating angry dialog for the protagonist. The university students all assumed the character was sad, but because of the wordlessness of the text, an elementary student's personal experiences as the son of immigrants informed his interpretation of anger. Thus, the flexibility of the text also required flexibility in the various ways readers make meaning. Working with traditional print-based texts often curtails these connections and varied interpretations, while working with open-ended texts invited individual students' perspectives and interpretations. As a result, tutees engaged deeply with *The Arrival*, incorporating personal immigration experiences, teaching the university students about the

power of wordless texts to facilitate comprehension, and developing their own Readers' Theater performance based on excerpts from Tan's text.

Flexibility around time and class activities—allowing time to do and savor, discuss and reflect—is crucial to student learning; students relished it. Without sufficient time and openness to creative pedagogical practices, students struggle to achieve significant learning. Instead of understanding, students get superficial content coverage. –

### **Implications**

Our experiences as researchers and teacher-educators in this research re-emphasize our criticism of current schooling in the United States as a static, individualized, and competitive process and echo calls that literacy education needs to become more multimodal. Enacting multiliteracies pedagogies requires shifts in how teachers teach and how they expect students to learn (Jacobs, 2013; Leander & Boldt, 2012). Specifically, our research shows that arts-based multiliteracies practices and texts can make space for the kinds of inquiry and surprise leading to rich, authentic, personally-significant learning for pre-service teachers. This is significant for several reasons. We were all working in different university spaces that held different framings and expectations around literacy (due to differing standards mandated by state boards of education that impact curricula and licensing); yet, we were able to approach our courses with similar practices and collective texts. There are possibilities for arts-based multiliterate practices being enacted in all spaces. This also speaks to the flexibility of Tan's texts and the ways in which they support arts-based literacy practice in so many different environments. These books' adaptability invited us, as literacy educators, to see our own curriculum "from a slightly different perspective" (see epigraph, Tan, 2006, para 20). In particular, we believe the wordlessness of *The Arrival*, and the ways in which the images were both incredibly specific, yet without time or location, made them more available to all kinds of learners and practices.

As educators ourselves, we acknowledge the risk involved in engaging in work that is so open-ended. Students often reacted to this work with frustration and tension. Such flexibility with our teaching structure, student expectations, and assignments could be construed as apathetic or careless. But we challenged ourselves to be comfortable in this tension, and--as we discuss above--modeled that for our students. Flexibility does not mean only stepping back and letting things happen. We found the next steps are watching, listening, and then stepping back in to support students with their questions and creations. For all three of us, flexibility with arts-based literacy work was a constant negotiation, with our students, our schedules, our syllabi, and ourselves. This negotiation generated productive tension that pushed us to consider literacy, the arts, and teaching in new ways.

Our students were invited to jump right into our arts-based activities and be surprised by them, whether making music, creating passports, or writing a Readers' Theater production. Then, we examined and discussed our work, rather than lecturing about how to engage with the arts first. This inductive, dialogic way of teaching and learning is a central impetus for the surprise that was experienced across our university courses.

Classrooms in the 21st century are filled with more and more diverse learners, with incoming students encountering an unprecedented number of multimodal texts than ever before. Instead of hindering or dismissing the visually saturated experiences these learners have, teachers embracing diverse literacy practices not only meet students where they are, but help them exceed expectations for what literacy is/can be in test-driven school environments.

## Conclusion

One of the most important things we can do as educators and researchers is make note of events that surprise us. In the case of this study, surprise fueled bigger questions and encouraged us to dig deeper. Our surprise demanded we challenge conventions of school and literacy. It required space for us to model and teach how literacy can be a growing, living thing. While the world of education often lauds such flexibility in teaching, there is little room for it in public classrooms today (Collard & Looney, 2014). We all grappled with conventional, standardized classroom practices through arts-based literacy inquiry. Leaning into surprise and flexibility while challenging literacy norms created fruitful tensions around classroom practices. Using Tan's work, which thrives on visual and verbal paradox, stoked those tensions.

As we noted above, surprise, flexibility, and confrontation of narrow definitions of literacy are interwoven. To take note of, and act on surprises, requires flexibility. We needed to be flexible with our time, with our thinking, and especially with our expectations of literacy events and practices. Performing, experimenting with shaving cream, "reading" images are all literacy practices. Expressing surprise, learning flexibility are also literacy practices.

As university-level educators, we acknowledge that the classroom environments our students will enter may be confined by testing, standards, and possibly other rigid expectations. Yet, we embrace the challenge of breaching any walls erected around education that prevent multiple ways of doing literacy. Collectively, we saw students taking the first steps to challenge such conventional constraints as well. This is only a starting point in working to use art and arts-based practices to transform teaching practices across disciplines. We invite you, and the teachers you teach, to examine the myriad ways literacy can look, to turn the ordinary into the extra-ordinary.

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