

## **Lights, Camera, iPads, Action! How a Fourth Grade Class Learned 21st Century Literacies Through Various Arts Projects**

Stacy Delacruz and Sohyun An  
*Kennesaw State University*

### **Abstract**

This study sought to explore the possibilities of interdisciplinary teaching to connect the arts to other academic subjects in a classroom with a high number of English Language Learners. The research questions included: (1) What projects does a class create using traditional and digital art forms within language arts instruction? and (2) What impacts do integrated arts projects have on students' literacy learning? Data sources were student artifacts, reflections, and teacher interviews. Results indicate students visualized the content and recalled facts when 21st century literacy skills were employed.

### **Introduction**

The 21st century world is media saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected. The multimedia age requires new skills for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages within a digital, global, and democratic society. The acquisition and application of critical analysis and media production skills are part of what constitutes media literacy (NCSS, 2009; Rheingold, 2008). If we hope to make learning relevant and meaningful for students in the 21st century, classrooms need to reflect this digital world so as to better provide young people with the awareness and abilities to critically question and create new media and technology, and the digital, democratic experiences, necessary to become active participants in the shaping of democracy (Jenkins, 2006). A strong democracy depends on the ability of the citizen to

critically read the word and the world (Friere & Macedo, 1987; O'Quinn, 2006). In order to read the world in today's society, students need to encounter new forms of text and learn in a world influenced by technology and new literacies. Based on the development of Web 2.0 tools, new literacies integrate information and communication technologies (for example, Twitter, Facebook Wikis, Second Life, Instagram). New literacies enable students to read and produce digital texts in which computer screens substitute the pages of a book.

While texts have changed, traditional print literacy remains ever as important as the new literacies. Early literacy programs should still maintain traditional print literacy as the primary focus of instruction (Hassett, 2006). Traditional print literacy is composed of book and print media. The International Reading Association contends that students should be able to comprehend and construct information using print and non-print materials (Donovan, 2013). This idea of using print and non-print materials also correlates with the K-5 Common Core standards.

Integrating the arts into classroom instruction can merge traditional and new literacies. The arts "allow language and thought to be expressed through a variety of representations" (Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009, p. 22). These representations can take place in traditional print form or through new literacies. While arts integration has great potential in the elementary classroom, it becomes problematic when "the arts are not sufficiently connected to student learning or treated less seriously than other

subjects” (LaJevic, 2013, p. 3).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to understand the possibilities of interdisciplinary teaching/learning to connect the arts to other academic subjects in an elementary classroom with a high number of English Language Learners (ELLs). In the U.S., 20% of students in K-12 classrooms come from homes where English is not the native language (Crawford, 2000; Kelly-Jackson & Delacruz, 2014; Thomas & Collier, 2002). By the year 2030, this number will double (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Faltis (2013) highlighted the importance of a balanced interdisciplinary approach to arts integrated instruction, particularly with emergent bilingual youth. Not only does art integration support literacy instruction but it also helps students become culturally and linguistically responsive.

The two research questions that guided the study were: (1) What types of projects does a fourth grade create using traditional art forms and digital art forms within language arts instruction? and (2) What impacts do arts integrated projects have on students’ literacy learning?

### **Conceptual Frameworks: Role of Arts Integration in Learning**

Integrating the arts into instruction has long been advocated as an effective way to help students find relevance and provide a real context. Arts integration is generally defined as the linking of a content area and an art form for the purposes of reaching a deeper level of engagement, learning, and reflection than without the art form (Burnaford et al., 2007). Howard Gardner’s (1983, 1993, 1999a, 1999b) multiple intelligences theory has underscored the importance of the arts in teaching and learning. According to Gardner (1999b), all human beings have a multiplicity of

intelligences including; logical-mathematical, linguistic, kinesthetic, musical, visual-spatial, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalist intelligences; and people possess strengths in combinations of multiple intelligences. Gardner (1983, 1993, 1999a, 1999b) considers it critical to recognize that the arts build upon and integrate many of these intelligences, and supports teaching the arts themselves as well as using the arts to teach other disciplines to reach many students who are not succeeding in school and to reach all students more deeply. A growing body of empirical research supports his theory with compelling evidence of the benefits of art integration in student learning. Studies show arts integration associates with academic achievement, engagement, and important 21st century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and more strongly associates with marginalized student groups (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Deasy & Fulbright, 1999; Hetland & Winner, 2001; Offleifson, 1995; Upitis, 2011; Walker, McFadden, Tabone, & Finkelstein, 2011).

In teaching and learning literacy, arts integration becomes natural. Children’s language development from birth on, evidences the propensity to communicate through the arts as human nature. Without the arts, students are limited to reading, writing, speaking, and listening to process and communicate ideas. Such a literacy curriculum leaves many students mute—especially those who struggle. Empirical studies show arts integration into literacy education increase student engagement and achievement, particularly more so for English Language Learners’ learning (Brouillette, 2012; Goldberg, 2006; Ingram & Riedel, 2003; Wagner, 1998). ELLs face the multiple challenges of learning English, mastering academic content, bridging

distances between the home country and their new home, and negotiating new cultural and social contexts. Research demonstrates that integrating the arts into English language teaching and learning can help ELLs develop and deepen understanding of their own and others' human experience, and learn language and literacy skills (Cruz & Thornton, 2009).

### **Methods**

This study was a qualitative design using data collected from student video journals, student work samples, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. A general profile of the participants was formed from teacher interviews. Basic demographic information was compiled such as: race, ethnicity, gender, the number of ELLs, and free/reduced lunch rate of students from the fourth grade class involved in the study.

Next, student work samples and video journals were collected and reviewed with students using protocol from descriptive feedback (Rodgers, 2006). This reflective conversation enables students to describe their experiences as learners and gives them voice in subject matter (Rodgers, 2006). This type of reflection situates dialogue with students about their involvements in learning. Student interviews were not conducted due to the fact that the video journals yielded a deep understanding of the reaction of the students.

The classroom devoted about three hours each week to Fine Arts instruction. During this time, one researcher conducted participant observations. The researcher took careful, objective notes about what was seen and also recorded informal conversations that were held with the fourth grade students. Observing and participating were vital parts in understanding the breadth and complexities of integrating the arts into literacy instruction.

Finally, teacher interviews were conducted at the end of the study. Each interview lasted about twenty minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed. Member checks were conducted to establish the validity of the accounts. These also gave teachers the opportunity to correct errors or wrong interpretations.

### **Research Setting and Participants**

The two research questions that guided the study were: (1) What types of projects do elementary students create using traditional and digital art forms within language arts instruction? and (2) What impacts do arts integrated projects have on students' literacy learning? In order to answer these questions, the researchers used a purposeful convenience sampling method. Fourth grade achievement and assessment pressure is focused widely within reading in American schools (Allington & Johnston, 2001), therefore this grade level and subject area helped set the parameters of the study. Hilltop Elementary School was one of two schools in the district that were considered Fine Arts Academies. The school's mission was to integrate the arts within classroom content area instruction across kindergarten through sixth grade. The fourth grade teacher in this study, and her student teacher, shared a strong belief in the benefits of integrating arts into teaching literacy as well as other content areas, and had sought to find creative ways to integrate the arts into students' learning, particularly for their ELLs (Gallagher & Ntelioglou, 2011). They welcomed the researchers to conduct research on how arts are integrated into the teaching and learning of literacy in the 21st century. The teachers' fourth grade classroom consisted of 24 students, 65% of whom were Hispanic along with 30% White and 5% African American. Nine students were classified as English language learners. Each Thursday, the class spent about two

hours doing Fine Arts learning tasks.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The main data for this article drew from teaching observations of the unit on Colonial America, which the student teacher developed for the majority of her lesson plans during the first half of the year. The unit was eight weeks long and integrated almost every subject including literacy, social studies, science, math, music, and theater. The culminating project included three student-written plays, which were performed at the end of the unit. During this time, the fourth grade students engaged in extensive dialogue amongst themselves and with the teachers to help them think more critically about their unit of study, Colonial Times. They started with draft writing in writer's workshop, then moved to monologue crafting, and script writing. The teachers sought to have students create video journals of the project. The video journals were a running record of the students' accounts of the project and reflections on the project. These video journals were recorded on an iPad. Thus, the primary data collected included; student video journals, student work samples, classroom observations, and teacher interviews.

The following first describes the arts project integrated into teaching literacy with particular focus on the Colonial Times unit. Then, the impact of these projects on student literacy learning with specific focus on ELLs' learning, is discussed.

### Findings

Arts integrated instruction played a critical role within the classroom. Believing in the benefits of integrating arts into teaching any and every subject, the two teachers introduced various ways of teaching literacy with and through the arts. Here, the arts project integrated into

teaching literacy with particular focus on the colonial times unit is highlighted.

The first project the class began with was creating string diddly bow instruments. This connected to the unit of Colonial Times because it was the teachers' hope that the students would play songs from Colonial Times with the instruments. Additionally, the instruments could be used in the plays. The fourth grade science curriculum incorporated the study of sound. The student teacher decided that if the students made string diddly bow instruments, they would better learn about sound, pitch, and vibration. She opened the lesson by sharing a video of people in Africa playing the instrument. The students quickly learned that music is in every culture. They also discussed the impact music has in various cultures.

The class divided up into various learning stations to create and extend upon this lesson on sound. One station focused on making the instruments. Another station focused on marking the notes on the side of the wood (see Figure 1). Students at the third station completed a sound lab on the computers, while the fourth station was devoted to students who were decorating their instruments and cans. Figure 2 displays the finished diddly bows with which the students played Hot Cross Buns and Yankee Doodle Dandy.



Figure 1. Making Notes on Wood



Figure 2. Diddly String Bows

Making the diddly bow instruments connected to the literacy curriculum as the students wrote and recorded the notes on the wood. They also used speaking and listening components as they discussed how to make and play the instruments. The teachers decided to take it a step further and incorporate additional expository writing.

Writing was an area of weakness within the classroom, and many times the students were uninterested in writing. The teachers aimed to make writing engaging for the students. Since every student shared in making string diddly bows, they asked students to write, *How-To Make a Diddly String Bow*. The teachers had been discussing expository elements in literacy and wanted to see if students could use precise language and vocabulary related to the lesson to inform the audience on how to make the instrument on their own. Figure 3 shows a student's finished *How-To* paper.

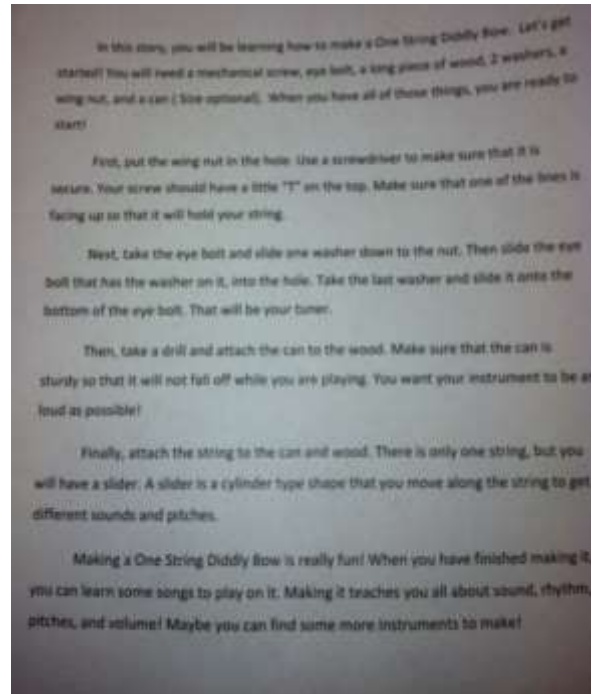


Figure 3. *How-To Make a Diddly String Bow*

Expository texts are highlighted in the fourth grade common core standards. Students are expected to examine a topic and convey ideas and information about that topic in a written product (CCS, Writing, Grade 4). It is clear from the writing sample that the student developed the topic with facts and details related to making the instrument. Domain-specific vocabulary was also used as the student referred to items such as the eye bolt and wing nut. Sentence Frames and word banks were used to guide ELLs through the task of writing the steps. These supports helped ELLs demonstrate the use of academic language such as rhythm, pitch, and volume.

The culminating project was the writing and performing of the plays students created based on the Colonial America unit. The plays integrated standards from the writing, speaking and listening, language, and reading informational texts common core standard strands. The student teacher kept a blog where she reflected on all aspects of the

project and kept practice videos and artifacts the students made along the way. She divided the class into three smaller groups so she could focus on their needs in literacy as they wrote their plays. The groups voted on their settings. One setting would be on a colonial Georgia southern plantation. The second setting took place when the Native Americans spotted settlers coming to Plymouth Rock for the first time. The third was a Native American water cycle play set on the land. After the settings were decided upon, the student teacher used a core character questions sheet (see Figure 4) for each student to decide which character they would like to be during this time period.

Core Character Questions

Name: Elie

Age: 10

Appearance: short black hair, big eyes

Unique Features: clay for mud, apples

Clothing worn during this time: sweat shirt, shorts

Defining gestures/expressions: Does your character curl their lip when speaking, do they look at the ground when speaking or look at the person they are speaking to?

Yes, will not curl lips or they look at the ground

Speaking style: (fast, talking, monotone) slow

Skill: seamstress

Temperament: (easy going, angry, happy, sad) happy

Things your character cares about: other people

Does your character have a family? yes

Figure 4. Core Character Questions

The scripts included a seamstress, blacksmith, silversmith, a shop owner, a baker, and a teacher. Other characters included; Wampanoag women, Chief Metacomet, Little Precipitation, and Chief

Run Off. The characters were all selected by the students.

The next step was to draft their play scripts. When groups got stuck during the writing portion, the student teacher would video record them acting out what they already had, on an iPad. The students would watch the video and revise their script based on what they had seen in the video. This proved to be a useful strategy when helping them edit and revise the scripts because they realized things that were missing as they watched themselves act it out.

Towards the end of the year when the students had painted the sets and finished the scripts and costumes, they created play invitations that they sent home (see Figure 5). These invitations connected to the Common Core standards as students produced and organized writing with a given audience in mind. Students also had to use appropriate language and conventions skills.

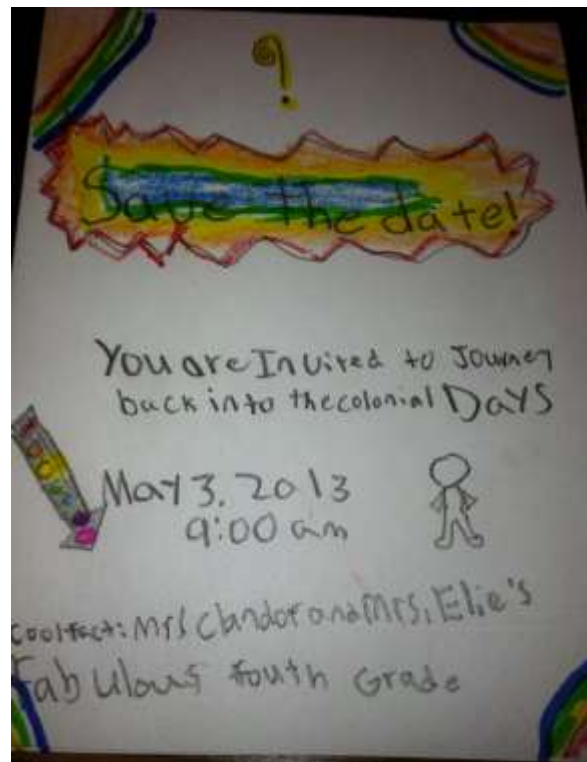


Figure 5. An Invitation to the Play

The students also created songs about their unit of study in a written format. The teachers reproduced the songs on the Smartboard for students to practice and eventually perform. A song about British Taxes was created after learning about the Boston Tea Party and how the colonists were treated. They decided they would write a song and incorporate this in the end of year play they have been working on (see Figure 6). The students also created “Thanksgiving Feast” (see Figure 7) which they elected to sing to close the play. The student teacher video recorded the students as they sang each song. The songs were then played back to the students and revised their future performances on what they had seen in the videos.

“British Taxes Song”

Taxes are coming to town,  
The king has taxed our sugar and tea,  
Tax collectors are everywhere,  
They are following us here and there.  
Back in England they are holding the vote,  
We don’t have a voice in Parliament.  
We need to FIGHT!  
We need to SCREAM!  
We need to get our cup of tea!

Figure 6. “British Taxes Song”

“Thanksgiving Feast”  
*Sung to This Old Man*

This new land, this new land,  
Pilgrims sailed in 1629  
On the Mayflower to find a better home  
This new land is home sweet home.  
Thanksgiving feast  
We thank the Lord  
for all we’ve got, the food that’s stored,  
On a warm fall night we all sit down,  
Please bless this world,  
Please bless this town!

Figure 7. “Thanksgiving Feast”

The writing of the songs connected to the language arts curriculum as the students used knowledge of language (conventions, grammar, and usage) when they wrote. They also used research to build and present their knowledge in the form of the songs.

The impact of teaching and learning literacy through the arts was evident in this fourth grade classroom. Gardener’s multiple intelligences emerged as the teachers asked students to carry out various arts integrated tasks. “Tying the activities to inviting pursuits enables students to discover and develop abilities that in turn increase their chances of experiencing a sense of engagement and of achieving success (Gardner & Hatch, 1999, p. 7). When the students wrote the scripts, expository texts, and songs they used linguistic, musical, and interpersonal intelligences. As the class practiced acting out the scripts and songs, they demonstrated visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and linguistic intelligences. According to Gardner and Hatch (1999), if teachers can determine student’s strengths and interests through multiple intelligences then, “using them as a basis for engagement and learning may prove to be worthwhile” (p. 9).

Teachers’ efforts to cater to students’ multiple intelligences through integrating arts into literacy teaching were successful which resulted in heightened motivation from the students. The fourth graders in this classroom did not sit passively and listen to their teachers talk about people and events in the Colonial America; they made costumes and instruments and became the people living in the historical time period. Every student had freedom to choose a character of the Colonial America, and write the script for the plays based on their intelligence and interests. Having this kind of voice and ownership in learning motivated the students and made them

excited to learn about Colonial times, which otherwise, many of them would not find relevant. This was more for the ELLs who had been struggling with engaging in a whole group, lecture based learning. One ELL student commented in the video journal saying,

“The most exciting part of writing the script for the play is that we get to draw backgrounds and wear costumes. What we write has to match our costumes. I am a farmer so I could wear a straw hat and overalls. I would draw crops like wheat and barley in the background.” (Evan, 2013).

It is evident from Evan’s comments that he was motivated to make sure that what was written in the scripts matched the costumes, set designs, and props. This video journal also illustrated Evan’s understanding of content when he referred to having crops such as barley and wheat.

Other data from the video journals concluded that students were more engaged by being able to write a play rather than reading from a prescribed one. McKenzie commented below on the reasons she thought writing a play was much more engaging than reading from a pre-made one.

“Reading a play is boring and does not require much imagination. When you write a play, you use your imagination and have fun by thinking of ideas and details. I’m looking forward to writing the class script because I will have the opportunity to do something different that we have not done in the classroom.” (McKenzie, 2013)

Various arts projects throughout the year motivated them to become better readers of literature and informational text as they discovered facts about Colonial America. Students became more exposed to writing expository texts and also became better writers by using correct conventions and

grammar. The student teacher reflects on how the students’ speaking skills improved as they built on others’ ideas and expressed their own ideas clearly through the songs and plays.

“The students were actively engaged with language throughout the project. One thing I noticed was that the students revised their scripts after watching themselves perform. I would record them acting out a scene on the iPad video camera, and they would watch the clip back. A couple of my students went back and reread their scripts, changing the language so it made more sense. Students also coached each other on how to change certain language.” (Mrs. Danza, 2013)

Students had to think critically as they presented their knowledge and ideas via the plays. The English language of Colonial Times used vocabulary from that given time period. Students had to revise their plays accordingly, to add in language from the past. For example, kids in Colonial America played the game rounders. Today, most children call the same game baseball. People in Colonial America may also greet each other by saying, “how do you fare?,” instead of saying, “What’s up?.” This type of past vocabulary was intertwined throughout the scripts of the plays. Students had not originally drafted the plays with such vocabulary, however, once the initial scripts were written, it allowed the teachers to give mini-lessons on how to incorporate such vocabulary into the scripts.

## Discussion

Integrating the arts into classroom teaching provides a quality unifying teaching and learning experience, and this study explored the integration into language arts. A number of themes emerged in this study. The first theme focused on the types of projects the class created using traditional



and digital art forms in literacy instruction. The class created instruments and wrote “How-To” papers based on the creation of those instruments. They also wrote play scripts and songs related to the curriculum. Academic language was embedded into the language arts components. “With the increase of rigor due to the Common Core State Standards, every student needs to learn academic English” (Barrow, 2014, p. 36). The teachers employed thoughtful strategies for ELLs since the academic language was more of a complex challenge for them. Viewing the clips of the play practice assisted ELLs in revising the writing and language so it made better sense. Barrow (2014) suggested vocabulary strategies to use on a regular basis with ELLs. Talking, movement, and journaling were among her recommended strategies. The ELLs practiced using the unit language in their speech as they acted and recorded their scripts. Movement and gestures helped them associate the meaning of new words. Vocabulary acquisition occurred as a result of these activities. These tasks also involved comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). The input occurred as learners received messages that they could understand when verbal and nonverbal cues were used.

Writing and performing the plays helped students understand and remember the content. Using theater helped the time period come alive. As Chappell and Faltis (2013) assert, “teachers can use theatre and theatre techniques throughout the curriculum to give children multiple opportunities to expand their creativity and to bring their experiences into the classroom through story and performance.” (p. 87).

The Common Core State Standards also calls for readers to have a host of experiences with rich informational texts and writing nonfiction pieces. The students in this study became better readers of informational text as they discovered facts

about Colonial America. They were engaged and felt like their learning was done for an authentic purpose since the information would be shared with a larger audience. Their writing improved as they edited for correct spelling and grammar.

### **Limitations**

This study had a small number of participants and a specific instructional context (fine arts focus) which prevents the generalizability of findings beyond this context for arts integrated instruction. However, the study does provide a framework for examining arts integration within elementary classroom that could be explored in various types of studies of instructional practice, including action research projects by teachers themselves.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study provides further evidence that literacy learning can occur through arts integrated classroom projects. The students in this study were able to demonstrate editing and revising skills throughout their study of writing within the projects. The writing included academic language from the unit of study the class was involved with. Students learned this academic language as they became engaged in the informational texts they read. As Brouillette (2012) noted, “theater arts lessons have the potential to provide all students with access to specialized vocabulary and complex, low frequency words” (p. 69).

Within this study there were some unfavorable conditions of the teachers’ efforts to bring arts a vital part of students’ learning of literacy. The teachers remarked, “I wish we had more time to prepare,” “It would have been nice to have more time to help individual students to work on the script” at formal and informal conversations after the project. Despite having supportive administration, and even having a fellow

teacher with a shared vision, the teachers' workloads were just too full. In addition, the teachers expressed the desire to participate in professional development on arts integration. Further research may need to be conducted to determine what types of professional development opportunities teachers need in order to add theater-based (or arts based) activities that focus on the development of enhanced oral language skills.

When teachers employ learning tasks that require dance, visual arts, or music in the elementary grades, it builds a foundation for students for arts learning in later years. Art activities promote growth in students' social skills and boost student achievement (The Arts Education Partnership, 2005). The arts can also be a gateway to learning. For example, a student who doesn't like history, but learns more about art, might realize how arts and history are interconnected, therefore causing the student to enjoy and do well in history.

The current generation of students was born into a ubiquitous digital media environment. Traditional print literacy should still be the basis of instruction, however these digital natives crave digital literacy. Within the context of this study, students learned key literacy skills as they used the Smartboard for their songs and the iPad to video record their play practice. When students are able to hear themselves or view themselves after practicing language, they can pick up on errors that were made.

### **Conclusion**

Indeed, integrating arts into literacy teaching benefited the students in

innumerable ways. These projects demonstrated that arts can engender vital and comprehensive learning experiences for all students. There were several reasons for the successful integration of arts into literacy teaching and learning in the teachers' classroom. First of all, the two teachers had a strong belief in the benefit of using various arts into teaching, always searching for a creative way to teach literacy in a meaningful and relevant ways for their diverse classroom. Additionally, both teachers were willing to take risks for the better learning of their students. As they witnessed their students' enjoyment of literacy learning through the arts, they shifted the focus of student experience from that of passive observer to active explorer of the meaning of text by actualizing it or performing its meaning (Iser, 1989; Schneider et al., 2006). Although it took more time and added preparation, they worked diligently to provide many opportunities for students' learning through arts projects. Last but not least, teaching and learning at a school whose mission was to integrate arts across the curriculum was a great support for the teachers and students. The teachers didn't have to justify teaching with and through arts; instead, they were encouraged and supported to do so by the school administration.

We want to conclude by noting that incorporating arts should not be viewed as extra-curricular or "icing on the cake" activities but as essential methods in the practice of literacy teaching. Even with the demands of balancing 21st century literacy with traditional literacy, teachers can strike a balance and make learning student-centered and engaging by integrating the arts.

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