Thematic Critique of *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*

Samuel Peck, Danielle Christensen, Jessica Forrester and Hong Shui

The University of Minnesota, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

ABSTRACT

In an effort to reach the ultimate goal of a reciprocal community strengthened by imagination, educational barriers must be both deconstructed and reconstructed. The history of ideas around breaking down an idea into its respective parts, we avail ourselves to examine its strengths and weaknesses better. These actions drive much of our work in how we think about curriculum, which is released through the imagination and may transform traditional notions of education. As Greene (1995) pulls from the existentialist philosophers of the mid to late 20th Century throughout the text, we felt a critique via modes of deconstruction and reconstruction would be thematically appropriate in how we analysed her work.

The content and discussions belonging to the doctoral course, Critical Examination of Curriculum in Context taught by Professor Nina Asher, directly led to the creation of this collaborative effort to discuss curriculum. As part of this course, we instructed and collected data from a one hour of class based on the content of our collaborative's selected text, Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change (1995) by Maxine Greene.

KEYWORDS

Imagination, Greene, education, arts, community.

ARTS-BASED INQUIRY WITH THE MINDS OF EDUCATION STUDENTS ON GREENE'S WORK

Educational theorist Greene (2000) argues, "social imagination is the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society" (p. 5) Yet what are the thoughts of current doctoral students in education on her philosophy of art and social change? As a collective, we opened a space with our peers to experience artmaking as a tool for creating and demonstrating knowledge while reflecting on the meaning and application of Greene's work within the current landscape of education. As arts-based scholars, Knowles and Cole (2007) state, "There is no better way to understand a particular aspect of creative practice than in this direct way". Therefore, what better way to discuss Greene's philosophy on art than by creating art in a synthesis of her work?

METHODOLOGY: DEFINING ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

Many authors have attempted to exemplify arts-based research, and much like art, itself, accurately describing such a methodology can be a daunting task. Leavy (2014) states "Arts-based research practices are a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation" (pp. 2-3). Whereas Knowles and Cole (2007) define arts-based research as:

> "Art-based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experiences by both researchers and the people involved in their studies."

To further expand the issue of defining this research, Gioia and Leavy (2014) created lexicology of terms for arts-based research, including a plethora of labels. However, the methodological name that stood out to us was an arts-based inquiry, given our desire to inquire with the minds of our participants and how they came to understand their artworks meaning.

Within Snowber's (2012) article there is a defense of embodied knowledge in the canon of western thought which has been concerned with accumulated knowledge as evidence of knowing "We dance the questions, we write the questions, and we go back and forth from our limbs and torsos to finding breath in our words on the page. Sensuous knowledge is our map for the journey. We know what we know, but I am curious about what it is we don't know. How can we be surprised and catapulted into fresh insight and ripe knowing?" Here the defense of embodied knowing gives space for what is not known. Through the embodied and accumulated actions of our fellow students we are given glimpses into what we know and don't. from this collected data we siphon insights into how the texts and embodied drawing practices could represent knowledge.

METHODS: FINDING FREEDOM AND KNOWLEDGE THROUGH DOODLING

The arts-based inquiry took form in the methods of participatory visual artmaking. Leavy (2014) discusses these methods by stating "participatory arts-based methods call on research participants to create art as data" (p. 263). As Knowles and Cole (2007) theorise "image-based research methods offer a powerful tool for realising children's ways of seeing the designed present and imagining the designed future" (p. 3). In this instance, the participants were our peer curriculum and instruction graduate students, and the focus was their art in response to Greene's book. In particular, the artmaking took form in visual concept mapping as a way to elicit our peers' understandings Knowles and Cole (2007) position that, "concept mapping can be used as a tool to articulate children's perceptions, promote reflection, and generate and communicate complex ideas on a range of topics [sic]" (p. 8).

Before artmaking, we instructed our classmates to read three chapters of Greene's text (3, 7, and 12) and review a video detailing doodling, Doodlers Unite (Brown, 2011) before class to give the participants a platform to begin reflecting on the text concerning freeing themselves of inhibitions when drawing. Our instruction started with a short bio of Maxine, a review of the critical ideas addressed within the selected chapters, and a discussion of the sketch note process as a way to demonstrate the ease of drawing concept maps based on the techniques of Mike Rohde (2013).

The rest of the session involved our classmates creating art in the form of doodling and mind mapping their individual and collective insights to collaboratively and visually release their imagination concerning curriculum. Through our classmates' mind maps, corresponding discussions, and a close reading of *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change*, four themes emerged: awareness of constraints in education, small and big changes that transform conditions, freedom and liberation that result from a transformation, and the democracy of community. Those four themes are described in detail in the following sections.

"BURIED" WITH CONSTRAINTS

In order to begin to deconstruct and reconstruct the US schools, we must first become aware of educational constraints. During our class discussion on *Releasing the Imagination*, one group drew a child buried in the dirt by "the system", which inevitably limited their imaginative possibilities. The groups described children in the standard education system as a trail of ants that continued to travel down the "trail of oppression" that is filled with "measures, habit, scripts, repetition, compliance, and rules" (see Appendix A and B). Agency, imagination, and freedom are lost. When we replace "the system" with "the US education system", we must acknowledge the historical instances where constraints have limited children. To meet world-class standards by focusing on math and reading standards and annual testing, schools are training children to be resources for societal advancement instead of treating children as individuals. Greene (1995) powerfully states that "those of us concerned for the young and for the public schools today are more aware than ever before of the difficulty of reconciling the socioeconomic demands made of those schools with the needs of children who are striving to survive in and to make sense of a not always hospitable world" (p. 32). How do we expect children to release their imagination to be fully immersed in their educational experience when the demands of schools do not fulfil the imaginative needs of children? Maybe the simple answer to that question, in the eyes of those running the system, is that creativity and releasing the imagination are not important additions to the standard US curriculum. There is a significant need to break these systematic constraints to serve each and every child best.

In addition to the constraints on how subjects are taught, we must also investigate the restrictions on ways of thinking. Specifically, the limitations created by a teacher's implicit and explicit biases. So often are children described in binary ways: black versus white, male versus female, straight versus queer, rich versus poor, gifted versus at-risk. An educator's "inner eyes" "are constructed through several factors, some economic and social and some simply racist" (Greene, 1995, p. 37). Constraining our thinking to such limited categories is bound to have negative outcomes on student experiences. These adverse outcomes limit students not only during their present time in school but also as they enter the adult world. Imagination is not just beneficial for children; when educators begin to use imagination when they interact with children and decide what they include and omit from their teaching, constraints can start to dismantle and transform.

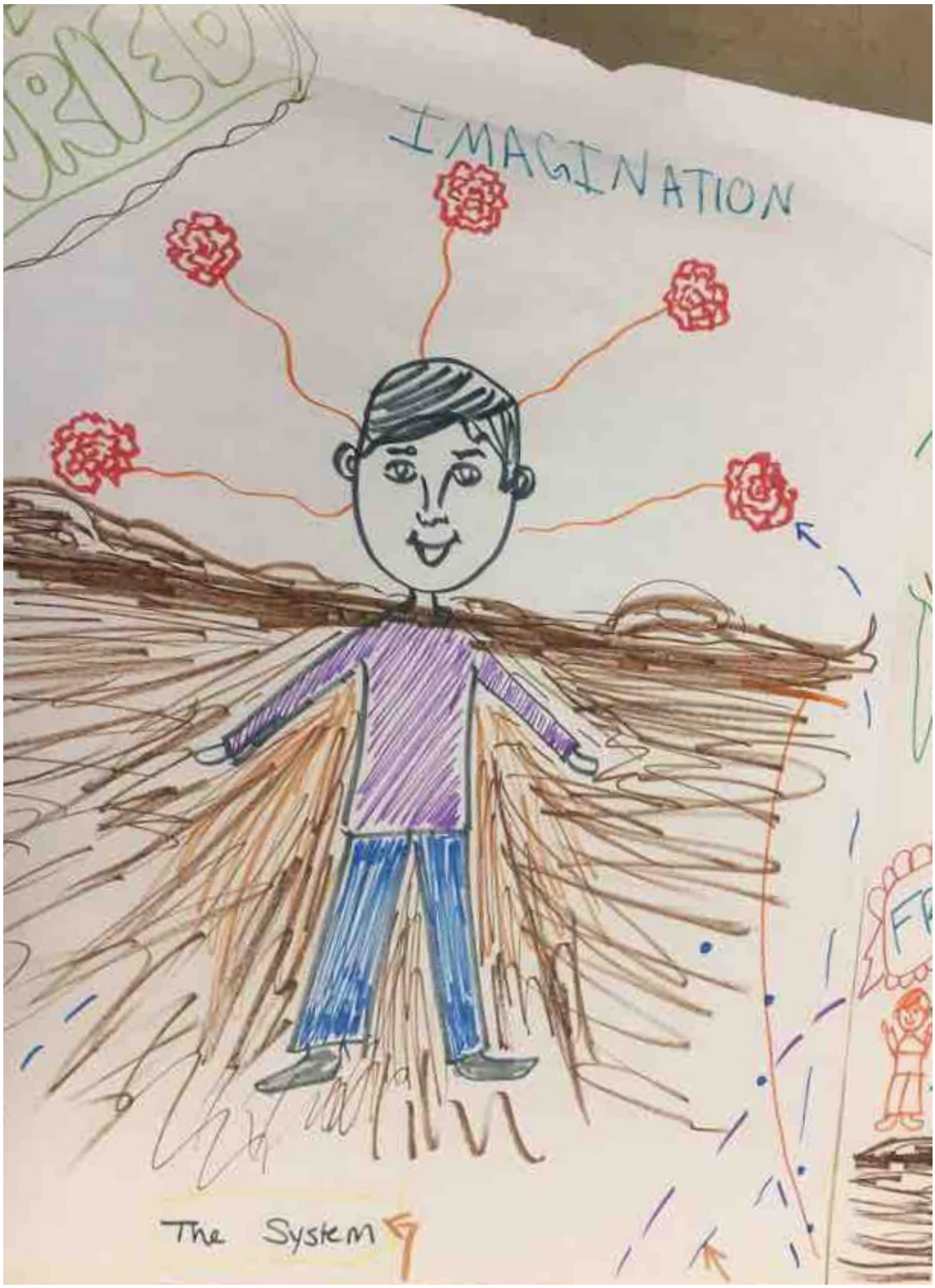

FIGURE 1 - Group Depiction of Student Buried by Constraints

TRANSFORMATION BY HELIUM AND HAMMERS

Awareness of educational constraints is the initial step to releasing the imagination. The following step lies in how deconstructed the condition could be, how borders become erased, and the brick of walls demolished. During the discussion session, peers congregated various inspiring ways educators can break the invisible frames embedded in the curriculum. Combining their ideas, Greene's strategies, and our reflections, we illustrate that curricular transformation could be made through the small cumulative practices of educators in schools on the one hand and external forces from society on the other.

The Helium, as one group depicted (Appendix C), is the emblem of small practices in classrooms implemented by instructors. The continuous pumping of helium into the flat balloon resembles the process of exposing students to something surprising, something uncomfortable, something beyond their ideological framework. During the "helium effect" process, the agency of educators plays a critical role in making adjustments in curriculum content. Educators could present different stories and utilise various formats to puff the air of imagination into the minds of students. It was what we experienced by reading the life of Khalil in *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), the unspeakable suffering of Dakota people in *What Does Justice Look Like?* (Waziyatawin, 2008), the interviews displayed in poems by Kumashiro's *Troubling Education* (2002), etc. Just as illustrated by Greene, art and literature enable us to "live" life in strange worlds, feeding us materials to build centres outside of the wall. It may not make an immediate difference in real life, but our inner minds are under gradual changes. We have the consciousness to extend our lens to see from above the wall, reflect on what has been taken for granted so long, and be prepared to participate in exerting the effect of Helium. "Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 87). In the interstices created by instructors, the imagination begins to brood.

In addition to reading, there is one critical practice mentioned by Greene that expands our perspectives: writing to learn. For the shocking moments that could not be explained by what is inside the wall, "it is by writing that we often manage to name alternatives and to open ourselves to possibilities. This is what we think learning ought to be." (Greene, 1995, p. 107) More than outlining possibilities and alternatives, writing reifies the imagination in our heads. When we discussed Anzaldua's *Borderlands* in class, a borderless world was only a blurring image to us. Nevertheless, now while we are writing, we see the demolishing of walls and the connection of people walking out of those walls. We deconstruct the borders, and what we should reconstruct are not new borders but relationships. This is a borderless world where we like to be so much not only "...because it has no opinion about us" (Nietzsche, 1878/1910, p. 360) because it bonds us with understanding and love.

While the teachers deliver the small changes in schools, the heavy blow of social movements smashes like a hammer to break the wall. In the discussion of *The Hate That You Give,* peers talked about the young African American deaths (Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, etc.), the protests under Black Lives Matter movement, and how this social context influenced the wide acceptance of the novel in classrooms across the country and the inclusion of it into the curriculum. For the voices that are oppressed, neglected, and twisted, they would find their way to press the curriculum transformation. In the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement pushed forward the creation of programs and departments of African American Studies: "A Conceptual Proposal for Black Studies" by Nathan Hare at San Francisco State University in 1968, the

instituting of Black Studies Department and the introducing of five Black Studies courses (The Black Experience from the Civil War to the Early Twentieth Century, Art of Black Africa, The Black Family, Black Literature, A Colloquium of Black Studies) in the University of California, Berkeley (Taylor, 2010, p.257), etc. At the same time, American Indian/Native American studies (AI/NAS) programs started to emerge, critiquing " the inability of the traditional academic disciplines to represent the truth about marginalised and oppressed American Indians" (Kidwell, 2011, p. 28). The programs urged the correction of misinterpretation and the countering of stereotypes. With the second wave of women's movement, the first accredited course of women studies was initiated at Cornell University in 1969 (Kahn, 2006, p. 388). The effect of the hammer blows exerted not only on the surface of curriculum transformation (e.g., having subject changes) but on "a massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness" (Anzaldua, p. 87). Instead of "or", it is "and" that releases our imagination, erases the borderlands, and connects us all.

FIGURE 2: Group Depictions of Constraints, Imagination, and Liberation

INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AND LIBERATION

In several instances, the collaborative efforts in mind mapping focused on the result of the transformation, which was argued to be freedom and liberation. For example, Appendix C includes an illustration of balloons lifting the bricks of oppression, Appendix D represents liberation as an uprooted human, and the third collaborative discussed the results of ants riding the Ferris wheel of play is in a land of liberation as seen in Appendix B. Nevertheless, this freedom implies oppression, where hooks (1994) argues that education can be a form of domination that can take the form of educators who are not excited about teaching and do not understand the philosophy of education as a practice of freedom. Adding to this conversation, Greene (1995) proposes that people can become free through choice and action and by "belonging to the world" (p. 142). Both Greene (1995) and hooks (1994) propose that the next step is to envision a different world. hooks (1994) argues that for liberation to take place one must "know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable so that we can think and rethink so that we can create new visions" through teaching that enables transgressions (p. 12). Similarly, Greene (1994) argues that imagination includes working "for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 3). Furthermore, Greene (1995) supplies that imagination is the ability to "reconceive and re-visualize better states of affairs" (p. 5).

Both Greene (1995) and hooks (1994) discuss how the key to liberation is the idea of community and voice. Greene argues that "being of the world" and refusing automatism is the key to transcending (1995). Speaking of the classroom and liberation, hooks (1994) states that "we can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education" (p. 44). Additionally, Greene (1995) looks to Dewey's concept of democratic community by calling for imagining "a community accessible to the young" (p. 33). Furthermore, Greene (1995) argues that for students to re-visualize a better future, they must "acknowledge the harshness of situations as they are" (p. 5). hooks (1994) proposes that educational freedom includes students not only sharing but should be able to confess and that there should be a respect for student voices within the classroom community.

Speaking to the idea of community, liberation, and voice, Waziyatawin (2008) calls for a wide-scale truth-telling of the Dakota people about the oppression and their experiences, such as testimonials, the healing measures that this truth-telling will call for, and the inclusion of these stories in public education. An example of how denying oppressions of the past and the present has occurred, Waziyatawin (2008) reviews how "White South Africans and even many black South Africans denied the horrors perpetrated during apartheid, turning a blind eye toward the brutality, violence, dehumanisation, and severe oppression" (p. 82)

Greene (2011) also discusses the power of imagination and the arts by citing Emily Dickinson, who outlines how imagination lights the 'slow fuse' of the possible. Greene goes on to argue that "without imagination- the ability to enter alternative realities, to bring an 'as if' into being, to look at things as if they could be otherwise- we would be sentenced to perpetual literalness, to be confined in a 'square room'" (2011, p. 2). Pulling together the concept of voice, activist education, and anti-oppressive education, the pedagogical philosophy of the Theatre of the is an example of how arts education attempts bringing social change and freedom to the classroom. Creating safe spaces for student voices to be heard must be taken seriously as Friere (1997) argues for education to be liberating, students must be involved in examining oppressive social realities (as cited in Schroeter, 2013). Theatre of the Oppressed was created by Augusto Boal in Brazil and Peru in the 1960s in association with the economically and culturally oppressed (Shawyer, 2011).

Boal (1997) looked to Friere's idea that freedom comes from when people learn to "perceive the social, political and economic contradictions and take action against the oppressive elements of their reality" (as cited in Schroetr, 2013, p. 397). Boal (1985) in Theatre of the Oppressed that this pedagogy is "a rehearsal of the revolution" and chance to practice options and actions (as cited in Shawyer, 2011, p. 15). Boal outlines how the "Joker" plays the role of the intermediary between the audience and the play to find solutions to the issues raised (Schroeter, 2013). Theatre is used as a platform for social justice because theatre "was intended to bring out raw emotion and personal feelings, provoke free and frank discussion and remove inhibitions that could restrict constructive thought and change in personal feelings on the issues with" (Sunil, 2016, p. 52). As Greene (1995) argues "Imagination is the one (cognitive capacity) that permits us to give credence to alternative realities" (p. 3). "it can play out in a mode of Earth Community, as a cooperative effort to rebuild community; to learn the arts of sufficiency, sharing, peaceful conflict resolution; and to marshal our human creativity to grow the potential of the whole" (as cited in Waziyatawin, 2008, p. 14). hooks discusses the risk of taking action by arguing "the choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences.

Moreover, that is part of what makes that choice one that is not politically neutral" (1994, p. 203). Though this reality of consequences exists, Greene discusses the need for imagination and change despite this by arguing, "The responsibility is great. So is the felt vulnerability. The choosing is intense. However, each one of us, somehow, can break with purposeless and airless confinement in square rooms. It is up to us to light the fuse" (2011, p. 9).

DEMOCRACY AND COMMUNITY

The responsibility for change lays not within any individual but in the advocacy and activism that is capable through the collaboration of a community. Speaking to this, Greene advocates for the construction of organisations as an instrument for social justice, which releases through the imagination, while also fighting against the invisibility of any individual. Similarly, within appendix B, we notice the colony of ants overcoming fear with play as a community seeking liberation with Libby the crow. Love and freedom grow out of curiosity, allowing a bloom to arise within the hearts of all involved. In a written reflection of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (p. 94), she speaks of being shocked into new awareness,

> "I saw before long that the 'construction of [people's] *inner eyes*' that rendered the narrator invisible was a function of and response to a racist society and that education of reflectiveness might play a part in altering such 'a peculiar disposition of the eyes' (as cited in Greene, p. 94 - 95)"

Greene recognised the ease in which we could slip into a 'Manichean allegory' (p. 95) similarly as Kumashiro recognised "the desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand-in-hand with resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements toward social justice [sic]" (Kumashiro, 2002 p.4). Greene proposes imagination not only to be an instrument for envisioning new answers for the problems we encounter but also argues that imagination is incorporated in how we approach our community and each other. "[a] way to imagine imagining:", Greene (p.38) states, "it is becoming a friend of someone else's mind, with the wonderful power to return that person a sense of wholeness." As Karl Marx reifies in his early writing, "Only in Community [with others has each] individual the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible" (Tucker, 1978). Similar to Marx, Greene urges us to build community in a release of

our imagination as we cooperate in ways that uphold the interests of those around us as they are treated as visible and not reified society driven machine components.

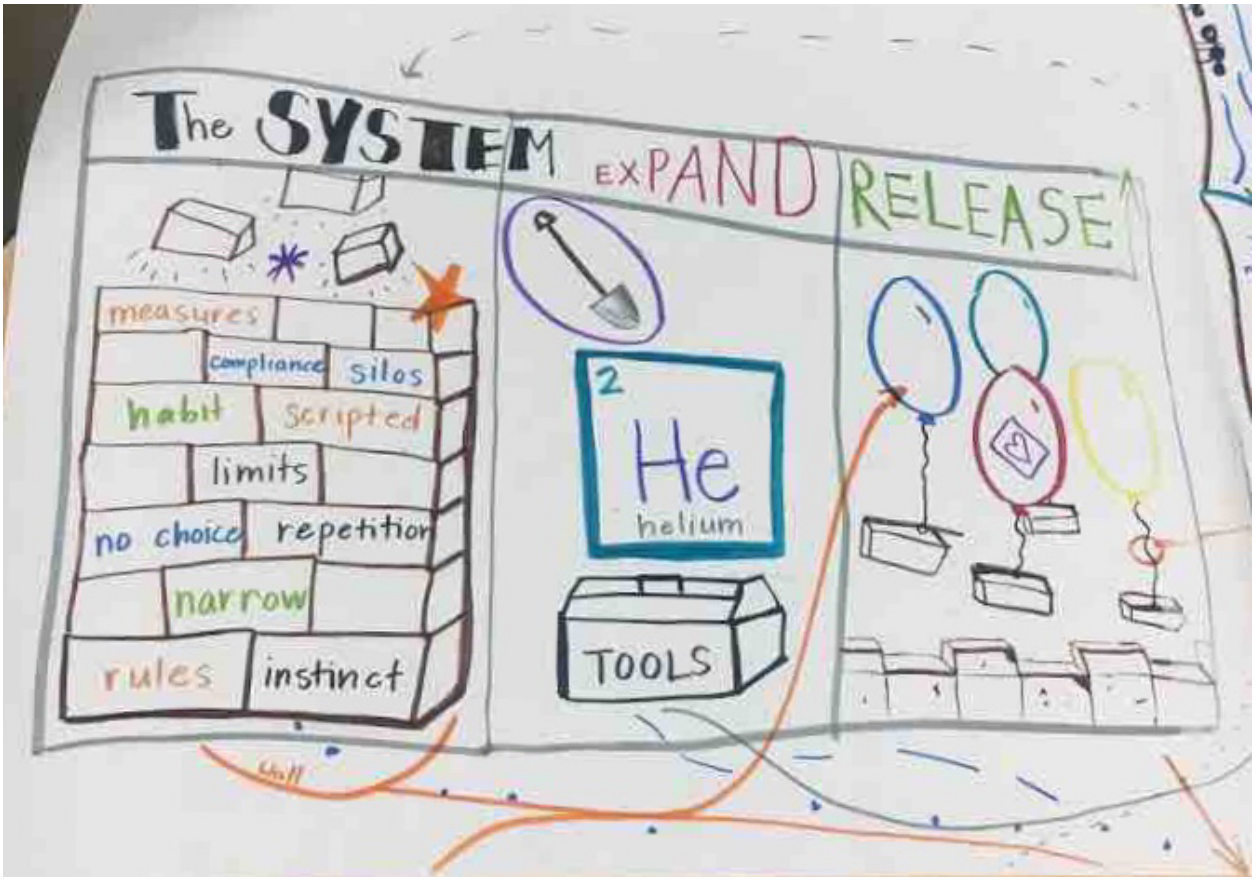

FIGURE 3: Group Depictions of Constraints and Liberation

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Greene wrote *Releasing the Imagination* close to 25 years ago, and the ideas contained within about education and the arts and are still relevant and open up insights about the current state of the U.S. school system. There is an immediate need for changes in the curriculum to deconstruct educational constraints and cause individual transformations. We recognise the chasm between us graduate students and Greene's facile use of the field including fiction, philosophy, poetry, literature, song and how these forms beautifully weave a tapestry to defend her ideas and expose otherwise hidden ideas within the curriculum. We hope to honour her legacy with this article as we argue for a reexamination of her work for its relevance today. The author's agreed that Greene's writing opened our eyes to problems within the U.S. curriculum and ways to imagine speculative futures that intersected with the critical learning we were doing across our coursework and into our future careers.

FIGURE 4: Group Depiction of Freedom and Democracy Caused by Imagination

REFERENCES

Anzaldua, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza.* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company.

Brown, S. (2011, March). *Doodlers, unite!* Retrieved December 8, 2019 https://www.ted.com/talks/sunni_brown_doodlers_unite?language=en.

Chilton, G. & Leavy, P. (2014). Arts-Based Research Practice. In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1st ed., Oxford Library of Psychology, pp. The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2014-07-01). Oxford University Press.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Haraway, D. (2015). Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene: Making Kin. *Environmental Humanities*, *6*(1), 159–165. doi: 10.1215/22011919-3615934

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Kahn, A. P. (2006). *The encyclopedia of stress and stress-related diseases* (2nd ed.). New York: Facts on File Inc.

Kidwell, C. S. (2011). American Indian studies as an academic discipline. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal, 35*(1), 27-31.

Knowles, J . Gary, & Cole, Ardra L. (2007). *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2002). *Troubling education: queer activism and antioppressive pedagogy*. New York: Routledge Falmer.

Leavy, P. (2014). *Method Meets Art*. Guilford Publications.

Nietzsche, F. (1910). *Human, all-too-human: A book for free spirits* (J. M. Kennedy, Trans.). Edinburgh: Morrison & Gibb Limited. (Original work published in 1878)

Rohde, M. (2013). *The sketchnote handbook: the illustrated guide to visual note taking*. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.

Snowber, C. (2012). Dancing a curriculum of hope: Cultivating passion as an embodied inquiry. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, *28*(2), 118–125

Schroeter, Sara. (2013). "The way it works" doesn't: Theatre of the oppressed as critical pedagogy and counternarrative. *Canadian Journal of Education, 36*(4), 394.

Shawyer, S. (2011). Activist Awareness in the Theatre of the Oppressed Classroom. *Canadian Theatre Review,* (147), 12.

Sunil, P. (2016). A personal experience of Theatre of the Oppressed. *Research and Humanities in Medical Education, 3*, 48-52.

Taylor, U. (2010). Origins of African American studies at UC-Berkeley. *The Western Journal of Black Studies, 34*(2), 256-265.

Thomas, A. (2017). *The hate you give*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Tucker, R. C. (Ed.). (1978). The Marx-Engels Reader.

Waziyatawin. (2008). *What does justice look like? : The struggle for liberation in Dakota homeland* (1st ed.). St. Paul, Minn.: Living Justice Press.

Wilson, A. C. (2008). *What does justice look like? the struggle for liberation in Dakota Homeland*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press.