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Playing with Texts: Classroom Practices for Enriching Young Readers' Engagement with Texts

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Abstract
This paper explores ways in which teachers may build bridges across children’s home, community and school texts. It does so by looking at how children’s texts form networks of relationships inside and beyond the text. These relationships significantly shape ways in which a reader interacts with the text in hand, other texts that the text-in-hand calls up, and other texts that the reader brings to bear. Further, these relationships provide teachers with valuable means for bridging children’s home, school and community texts and literacy experiences. In exploring these relationships, implications for young readers and for classroom practices are described.

Introduction
A class of seven and eight year-olds were engaged in a lively debate on the fate of shoelaces once they are discarded. A whole class debate may seem rather routine. However, what was exceptional in this classroom was the shift from their more usual interaction patterns that were dominated by teacher-led questions and evaluations of children’s answers. This shift allowed for free flow of ideas and thought associations, as children volunteered their ideas and supported or refuted one another through connections they made to what they had seen, read, heard and lived. After the debate, one child commented, “Ideas just kept popping into my head”. Other children made similar comments – one recounting it as “an explosion of ideas”, while another emphatically stated “It was an adventure I’ll never forget”.

Pleasure, passion and provocation were all evident in this interaction and children’s comments that followed. Time and again, when children engage in any kind of “adventure” where they are given scope to contribute their ideas and make connections, we see unbridled enthusiasm. Children exult in play with language and ideas (Kristeva, 1984), and revel in situations that allow such play to occur. In engaging in such play, we see children making key connections.

During this process we see children actively engaged in the Vygotskian concept of ‘leading activity’ that nurtures and extends their development (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p.50). Our purpose in this paper is to consider how teachers might marshal this playful disposition in children to build connections as they engage as readers and talk about the texts they share.
Playing with Texts

In children's play with texts, we see their enjoyment as they make connections to what they know and are provoked into thinking about texts in novel ways and at deeper levels.

As children play with texts, there can be a relative absence of constraint. For example, one six-year-old came upon the label 'Nephew' on a generic family tree in a class reader and immediately said 'Duckville' (Harris & Trezise, 1999). In this response, the child stretched the literal meaning of 'nephew' to Donald Duck comic books and TV cartoons that he loved to watch at home. A five-year-old child heard her teacher read aloud a witch's spell from a picture book narrative, and stretched its boundaries to associate it with 'rock-a-byes' – that is, lullabies and nursery rhymes that she heard every night before going to sleep (Harris & Trezise, 1997b). In a third example, a group of seven-year-olds huddled around a verb chart in their classroom, enthusiastically noting common patterns across word structures. The more patterns they spotted, the more they sought out, as their excitement mounted. Thus these children had made an impromptu game of how many patterns they could discover (Harris & Trezise, 1997a).

Examples like these illustrate for us time and again that just about anything is possible in the texts that young children read, hear and view – because of what text offers the child and what the child offers the text.

When we think of what the child offers the text, we may think about their semantic, world or 'prior' knowledge. We also think of other resources such as knowledge about how written language works, how words sound and look, and how grammar systems function. Indeed, these are all key resources for the reader (Luke & Freebody, 1999). To these resources, however, we add another – that is, a reader's approach to text. In the above examples, we see children taking playful approaches with text in which they seek patterns and build connections.

This play with texts is not idle activity. Children's play is serious business – play, after all, is children's work, an important means for learning, seeking out patterns and connections, and making sense of their world (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Young children's playfulness is an important part of how they interact with texts, construct meaning and develop as readers. In this context, we define 'playfulness' as willingness to see possibilities in texts, build connections, stretch boundaries, without fear or constraint.

Willingness and a keen eye for viewing a text in an unconstrained way allow readers move beyond the ability to get the 'right' or 'best' meaning, to further access various possibilities
that a text might carry. Many possibilities lurk inside texts. In this context, a helpful image is to think of texts as elastic – they can be stretched in new and different ways by different readers as they redraw boundaries that are not fixed (Kristeva, 1984). Our previous examples of ‘Duckville’ and ‘rock-a-bye’ illustrate young readers redrawing text boundaries and stretching the text in hand to connect with other texts and experiences.

An author or illustrator cannot know with any certainty how their readers might be provoked into stretching what they create in particular ways. Authors and illustrators might provide hints and signposts in their texts. ‘The Jolly Postman’ (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1986) is quite a well known example of how texts may provide very explicit signposts that stretch the book’s boundaries to include other fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Sometimes, authors and illustrators deliberately create spaces to encourage their readers to play with their work. For example, Anthony Browne’s ‘Piggybook’ (1986), ‘Gorilla’(2002) and ‘Voices in the Park’ (1999) call on other texts in cryptic and ambiguous ways that invite the reader to reach beyond the text-in-hand. The reader is called on to use other texts that Browne brings into view so as to interpret and reflect deeply on the text-in-hand.

Of course, some texts are more open than other texts to readers being playful, or being an agent or a ‘teller’ in making meaning (Barthes, 1988). For example, texts that are designed with the beginning reader in mind can often present rather tightly bound texts that are more closed to possible meanings. Even so, our previous ‘Duckville’ text shows that a child might recast a tight literal text as much as one that is designed to be more open.

Texts are open to interpretation and engage the playfulness of their readers by virtue of their permeability – that is, their connections with other texts through which ideas and experiences filter across time and place. We briefly explore the nature of these connections below. Following this exploration, we consider how knowledge about these connections provide tools for children to engage as active, playful meaning-makers – and signposts for how teachers might mediate children’s acquisition of such tools in their classrooms.

The Elastic Nature of Texts

Texts draw readers into their permeable spaces through the connections they build within and beyond themselves (Barthes, 1988; Kristeva, 1984). These connections are illustrated in
Figure 1, with categories coming from the work of Genette (1992, 1997, 1998) and Stam et al (1992).

**Figure 1**

**Connections Within and Among Texts**

These connections provide spaces in texts in which readers can play and know the pleasures of discovering old meanings and new perspectives, and be provoked into questioning and reflecting on texts. It is hoped that, in so doing, children might sustain a passion for reading —
for returning to old texts to find something new, picking up new texts and finding something old, and continuing to grow as readers active and playful in the construction of meaning.

**Connections between texts**

One way that connections are woven into texts is through the construction of relationships between the text in hand and texts that lie beyond it. This construction of relationships between texts is not solely in the hands of author/illustrator – it also rests with the reader to recognise connections and bring their own connections to the text that may not have been intended or anticipated by the text’s creator.

**Connections between the text in hand and its immediate surrounds**

A second way that texts weave connections is through the creation of relationships between the text in hand and its immediate surrounds. A text’s surrounds include covers, dust jackets, titles and title pages, dedications, contents tables and indexes, text previews, blurbs, promotional blurbs, media, font, style, layout and format. Not a part of the main text, these elements help set the stage and mediate a reader’s interaction with the text. Again, this construction of relationships between the text and its surrounds lies with writer and reader alike.

**Connections inside a text among its elements**

Once inside the text, links between its elements is a third way that texts build connections. These internal relationships within a text among its elements include links between words of the main text and accompanying pictures; between pictures and their captions; between different stages of a text, such as a text’s orientation and what then unfolds; and so on. These internal connections, especially those between words and pictures in children’s picture books, provide a ‘third space’ (Winch *et al*, 2003) in which further possible meanings are located.

**Connections between the text-in-hand and broader bodies of texts and themes**

A more abstract kind of connection that texts build is the connection between a single text and broad bodies of texts and archetypes in which the text takes part. These relationships between text and broad bodies of texts and themes include connections to text genres (such as ‘narrative’ and ‘information’ texts and their associated purposes, conventions and structures); to text series
(eg., the Harry Potter series); to discourses (such as traditional family discourses or scientific discourses); and to archetypal themes (such as themes of death and loss), plots (such as the hero’s journey) and characters (such as the villain).

Connections between the text-in-hand and other texts, genres and conventions that it disrupts

We now reach the final connection that this paper explores. This connection concerns relationships between the text in hand and other texts, genres and conventions that it disrupts. A text may disrupt established conventions, genres and themes in various ways. For example, the ‘Shrek2 Movie Storybook’ (Mason, Danko & Koelsch Studios, 2004) parodies traditional fairy tale characters. ‘The Jolly Postman’ (Ahlbergs, 1986) integrates fairy tale and nursery rhyme characters into a new story, thus creating a pastiche. Some texts transform pre-existing texts by extending them as sequels or prequels. Other texts innovate on textual boundaries that conventionally define genres – such as Base does when he incorporates story, counting book, geographic text, travel text and puzzle text into ‘The Waterhole’ (2000).

By virtue of all these various and multi-faceted connections, texts provide spaces and structures for children to explore, play and interpret meaning and stretch themselves as readers. That being said, we now go on to identify tools that knowledge about these connections give teachers to assist children in stretching themselves as readers in ways that bring pleasure and provocation, and over time, may help to sustain children’s passion in engaging with texts.

Enriching Children’s Engagement with Texts in Shared Reading

So far, we have explored the playful way in which children often engage with texts, and how texts draw their readers into their spaces to play with connections inside and beyond the text-in-hand. These connections give rise to possible rather than definite meanings in text. Meaning is ultimately in the hands of readers as they interact with the text. Knowledge about these connections, we believe, gives teachers tools for stretching children as readers and engaging them in pleasurable and provocative encounters with texts.

To the three conference themes of pleasure, passion and provocation that we have highlighted in our paper, we have added ‘possibility’. This fourth theme comes from the way in
which texts are viewed as intersecting spaces where other texts and experiences converge and are rewritten by readers against the backdrop of their own texts and experiences.

This idea of possibility leads us to a fifth theme – power. Here, we are writing about power of the reader to stretch a text's boundaries and draw on sources they deem relevant for interpreting and appreciating the text in hand. This power is not just a matter for teachers and the questions they deem appropriate to ask and interpretations they choose to seek and validate. Power, critically, is a matter for readers – for children in their classrooms exploring, articulating and validating their own perspectives on texts, and not just approximating their teacher’s point of view (Dillon, 1994; Hickman, 2002). To empower children to engage in such discussion requires classroom interactions shifting from teacher-initiated questions that lead to teacher-evaluated children’s responses. And so we come to a sixth and final theme – perspective, critical in interpreting text in all the possibilities a text might present to different readers.

With these six themes in mind – pleasure, passion, provocation, possibility, power, perspective – we now explore ways of enriching children’s engagement with texts. We do so through the Vygotskian notions of tools as means for attaining higher levels of development as readers, and mediators that teachers might create to assist children in acquiring these tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Leontyev, 1981). In so doing, we are advocating teachers’ use of ways to move children from assisted or shared performance such as occurs in shared or guided reading, towards the gaining of independence and responsibility (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p.68).

As we proceed with this exploration, we apply theoretical ideas to examples of classroom practice with reference to ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999). This picturebook tells of a visit to a park by a young girl called Smudge and her unemployed father, and a young boy called Charles and his upper class, oppressive mother. Each character gives his or her own version of events. Characters’ versions are represented in different fonts that reflect the characters behind the voice. In the pictures, the characters are shown as human-like gorillas. The images are typical of Browne’s surreal artwork in picturebooks, and make many references to other texts, movies, art and popular culture.

The activities that are included around this book are intended as leading activities in the Vygotskian sense – that is, activities that provide opportunities for children and teacher alike to play in the many spaces that a picture book provides so as to enrich children’s development as readers. These activities are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive.
Tools associated with knowing that texts connect with other texts

All texts, whether implicitly or explicitly, intentionally or unintentionally, interact with other texts – including written texts, spoken texts, aural texts, visual texts, digital texts, film, video, DVD, television, as well as lived experiences.

At the outset, this concept provides tools for taking an open stance to texts – to exploring connections that particular texts have with other texts and experiences. Teachers may mediate this exploration by tuning into children’s perspectives and giving them opportunities to talk about the connections that they see in the text, as well as those they bring to the text. Given the open nature of texts – the text in hand as well as texts experienced by its readers/viewers – there can be no single, right or even best way to interpret a given text. Hence these explorations ideally establish and explore children’s perspectives, thereby achieving the Vygotskian notion of ‘shared understandings’ of those perspectives (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Teachers ideally use children’s perspectives as a basis for provoking children into more in-depth explorations of their own interpretations. At the same time, children ideally are encouraged to listen to and reflect on alternative points of view such as those expressed by their peers.

Exploring connections among texts this way moves teachers away from seeking preconceived answers and using the text in hand as the only authoritative source for validating children’s interpretations. Exploring these connections takes teachers into the realm of opening texts to scrutiny and open-ended discussion to mediate children’s higher-order thinking and meaning-making. This discussion may examine how the connections that children construct shape the interpretations they make. When children interpret a text, they are often asked to give evidence from the text itself to support their interpretations. However, exploring connections among texts clearly takes teachers and children alike into directions beyond the text – for evidence does not just lie in the text-in-hand but also in texts that children have read, seen, heard and lived.

How such connections may be brought to the fore can be illustrated with Browne’s ‘Voices in the Park’ (1999). An Attributes List activity seeks to build bridges to children’s worlds, to reflect on them and how they shape their expectations and interpretations of the text at hand. Children are given or are modelled a format that shows four columns, each column headed by ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘young girl’ and ‘young boy’. Children are asked to write or illustrate
attributes they associate with each one. They are asked to read aloud and dramatise some of their attributes, and start exploring similarities and differences among children’s ideas and why they have identified the attributes they have. In this discussion, children are encouraged to identify possible influences on their perceptions. As they then share ‘Voices in the Park’, children relate the representations of a mother, father, girl and boy to their own experiences.

Similarly, a Hot Seat activity can be used to engage children in the space between text and other texts and experiences, as well as the space between the text and broader themes and character types. Children are asked to think and talk about questions they might like to ask Charlie, his mother, Smudge and her father. Children are encouraged to think about why their questions are of interest to them; and to speculate on what the characters might say in return and why. This exploration might lead to a drawing out of character types with which each of these characters might be associated. This character typing might be linked to other texts (written, visual, film, TV, video, etc) that children have encountered, and lead to further exploration through visual and drama activities.

Connections among texts may make some interpretations more likely than others. This understanding provides impetus for teachers to find out, explore and acknowledge children’s experiences and how children connect the text in hand to other texts and experiences. This understanding provides tools for bridging children’s many and varied experiences’ lived and vicariously experienced through print, film, television, song, talk, music, art, information technology... and so on. Focusing children on these connections may encourage them to reflect on the texts and experiences that they have encountered; how these encounters shape their preferred interpretations; and how the text in hand evokes such connections.

Such explorations ideally are pleasurable rather than onerous – they validate children and their accumulating wealth of knowledge and experiences. At the same time, these explorations need to provoke children into being open to different ways of interpreting text, by being given opportunity and encouragement not just to articulate their own perspective but to listen to their peers’ points of view too. There needs also to be pleasure and provocation in these class interactions to encourage children to take on new perspectives and build bridges to new knowledge and skills that they need to acquire as they progress through school and beyond. Exploring connections among texts would seem an ideal way of mediating the construction of
bridges between what is and is not understood about texts and working with texts as literacy learners.

**Tools associated with knowing that texts connect with their immediate surrounds**

Many constructions surround a text. Consider a children’s picture book narrative. The story inside the book is surrounded by an assortment of constructions such as book covers, dust jackets, endpapers, title pages, dedications, bibliographic details, publisher details, promotional blurbs, trademark logos, author and illustrator blurbs, story synopses, information about texts and merchandise. What immediately surrounds a text has been likened to a ‘threshold’ (Genette, 1997).

Sometimes in classrooms during shared reading sessions, teachers focus on a book’s front cover to direct children’s attention on the book and lesson at hand. Once focused, children are often asked about what they see on the cover and what they predict about the text between the covers. These strategies are valuable for focusing attention and eliciting children’s prior knowledge. However, such strategies can go further.

Thinking about constructions like book covers as a book’s threshold opens our minds to the idea that these constructions are a space to be explored in its own right; a space to be connected with the text inside in more reflective ways that go beyond cursory predictions and ‘This text reminds me of...’

For instance, exploring a book’s threshold might involve stopping a while to contemplate, even appreciate, the way in which that threshold is constructed. Reflections might focus on what is presented; how it is presented; what is included and what is not, and why. Reflections might also take stock of how the cover relates to other parts of the text’s threshold – is how a reader/viewer interprets the cover corroborated, challenged, extended or disrupted by what is seen on its title pages and blurbs?

Take, for example, ways in which children might be engaged to explore the covers and title pages of ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999). Ideally, children are given time and space to contemplate and play with the book’s front and back covers and title page. They are encouraged to ask whatever questions and make whatever comments pop into their heads, which this material provokes. The teacher, tuning into the children’s questions and comments, might then ask leading questions to explore children’s ideas and wonderings. This might involve exploring and
interrogating not the children but what is shown on the book’s surrounds. What are the images and why are they shown? What does that make me think about? How I am being set-up? Do I feel certain about anything about this book? Do I feel uncertain or unsettled or intrigued? If so, what makes me feel that way? How does this feeling affect my desire to read on?

Teachers may mediate the development of these reflections by strategies such as: modelling how they explore and use a text’s threshold to frame their expectations and interpretations; asking leading questions (rather than known questions with preconceived answers in mind); and allowing children time and space to contemplate and explore these aspects of the text in hand.

Exploring the threshold of a text also provides tools for nurturing children’s self-reflection as readers – for example, how does this text’s threshold impact on my desire to read on and how does it shape what I anticipate from this point? How am I, the reader, being set up? Why am I being framed this way? What resources do I/might I bring to this text?

Understanding the impact of a text’s threshold on readers means we critically explore features such as book covers and title pages as spaces, for readers to explore, move around in, and contemplate. Making such explorations means we move beyond using book covers and the like as a means for focusing attention and predicting text, to deeper and more meaningful engagements that may enhance pleasure and provocation. While usually considered as a means for predicting a text before it is read, revisiting these same elements after the text is read opens up further possibilities for interpretation and appreciation of the text. Such revisits provide avenues by which children can interrogate and reflect on the text - and, as importantly, become aware of their agency as meaning-makers who confirm and re-think their interpretations.

How a text’s threshold is constructed varies across texts but follow certain conventions. Exploring these conventions may see teachers engage children in comparisons across different media – for example, what does the threshold of a website text consist of and how does that frame the reader/viewer and structure the reading process? What about the thresholds of movies? Television programs?

How a text presents itself to its readers and viewers goes beyond its covers and title pages. Once inside the main text, that text is presented through particular font styles, formats, layouts, art styles and media, and so on. These aspects of a text interact with its potential meanings, and can resource classroom talk that goes beyond noting and describing how text is
presented, to the impact of that presentation to its readers/viewers and to interpretations that might arise. For example, children can be engaged in talking about the use of different fonts to express different voices, and the use of gorillas for people in ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999) Questions arising might include, Is there anything children find interesting, puzzling or surprising about these aspects of the book’s presentation? How are they made to feel by the use of gorillas? How do the fonts help to give character to the people behind the voices? Who’s telling the story and how do we know?

Such a discussion might flow into a Readers Theatre that explores voice and how the choice of fonts and gorillas mediate a reader’s interpretations of the characters behind the voices. Readers Theatre may be focused in a specific way to critically reflect on the text – for example, by exploring, how is each voice expressed? What experiences does each voice construct? What worldview do they represent? How do I know? How are the characters’ experiences in the park the same yet different? What character interests me the most? What character/s do I identify with? How does the text shape what I think about these characters?

**Tools associated with knowing that texts build connections inside themselves**

Children’s texts are usually comprised of a variety of written and visual components that interact with one another. In picture book narratives, connections are constructed between words and pictures. In children’s factual texts, these connections may bring together words of the main text with visual text and accompanying captions, as well as embedded texts and insets.

Knowledge about how these connections work provide tools for confirming what words say from the pictures; predicting the next part of a text; and inferring additional information from the pictures (e.g., characters’ feelings and motivations). Moving beyond these considerations, children also can be encouraged to critically reflect on how and why the text is presented in such a way; and how these internal links may help anchor or unsettle their interpretations.

The relationship between words and pictures in a picture book narrative, for example, may underline preferred interpretations. Alternatively this relationship may create ambiguity and tension (Graham, 1990; Meek, 1988). Pictures, for example, may contradict the words, as seen in ‘Rosie’s Walk’ (Hutchins, 1968). Pictures may extend and elaborate on the words, as seen in the portrayal of Hannah’s isolation and alienation from her father in ‘Gorilla’ (Browne, 2002). Pictures also may introduce theses that are too difficult to put into words, as we see in the visual
depiction of themes of loneliness and loss in ‘John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat’ (Wagner & Brooks, 1977). Demonstrating, sharing and discussing specific picture books that embody different kinds of internal relationships provide opportunities for mediating children’s appreciation of how texts are constructed and how they may use internal spaces in a text to create and question meaning (Meek, 1988; Williams, 1991).

The impact of these internal connections in children’s texts goes beyond supporting and guiding predictions. Depending on how these internal connections are constructed in more literal or more open ways, spaces are created within the text for readers to play (Williams, 1991). Readers may find themselves being provoked to exert themselves so as to resolve ambiguities in what they read and view – for example, why is there a fox in the pictures but the words describe an uneventful walk in ‘Rosie’s Walk’? Why is the story of ‘Memorial’ (Crew & Tan, 1999) presented as a collection of images and textures that resemble a scrapbook or photo album? How do I make sense of the repeated appearance of hats and other images in ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999)?

Continuing with ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 19990, children might be engaged in a ‘Treasure Hunt’ to help them explore the assorted array of images that occur and recur throughout ‘Voices’. For example, children might be asked to locate and count the number of times a hat appears. They might look for visitors that they recognise form other books, paintings, movies or popular culture – for example, Mary Poppins, Santa Claus, Mona Lisa and King Kong. However, this hunt is not a trite end unto itself. It is meant to provide a basis for children to identify and tease out the many complex and perplexing images that are included, to talk about what they might recognise and discuss their potential significance for the story; and talk about what they might not recognise, or what puzzles them. This activity allows children to pool their observations and interpretations and so develop a community of meaning-makers in classrooms. Beyond this activity, children might be guided in tracking sources and thinking more on their significance to the story-in-hand.

**Tools associated with knowing that texts connect with broader bodies of texts**
Texts reach a long arm out to genres and archetypes that frame readers’ sense of purpose and build their pathways for pursuing and finding meaning. This understanding provides a basis for working with text genres – the purposes they serve, the conventions they follow, the structures they provide.Explicitly exploring such understandings helps to shape children’s interpretations of what they read through anticipating structures, conventions and purposes of the text in hand. For example, if a narrative, then readers might expect a chronological text in which the scene is set, characters are described, and events arise that might present certain complications that need to be resolved. On the other hand, an information text sets up different structures and purposes that see readers approach the text a different way – perhaps skimming and scanning, sampling text, and locating relevant or interesting information.

Knowledge that texts interact with broader sets of thematic, character and plot types has the potential to heighten understanding of recurring patterns across texts that contribute to the semblance of truthfulness of those types. Likewise with discourses and their associated ideologies – their recurrence corroborate their so-called truthfulness. Conversely, encounters with alternative discourses presents readers with other options and ways of viewing the world. Amidst these options, readers may be provoked into critically thinking about where their own views and standpoints lie. Engaging with texts in this way involves interrogating text and interrogating self (as opposed to the teacher interrogating the child).

**Tools associated with knowing that texts may disrupt established texts, genres, themes and conventions**

Texts like ‘Shrek2’ (Mason et al, 2004) are both pleasurable and provocative for many people because they call on presumably familiar texts and cast them in a new context, often bringing humour and disruption to preconceived interpretations. Such texts make explicit how all texts indeed function – that no text is complete unto itself – all texts call on other texts for meaning, their boundaries open to being redrawn by individual readers. Texts like ‘Shrek2’ (Mason et al, 2004) provide valuable resources for making abstract ideas about the connectedness of texts and disruption of text conventions concrete and accessible in the early grade classroom. If familiar with the original texts or genres that are being played with, readers may reflect on what has been changed, and interrogate how and why it has been changed, and to what effect.
Such reflection in classroom interactions moves children beyond ‘spot the difference’ to deeper levels of text interpretation and critical literacy.

For example, children might be encouraged to explore the antecedent to ‘Voices in the Park’ (Browne, 1999). This activity aims to engage children in the space between the text in hand and other texts that it transforms. Most obviously, this activity would involve Browne’s actual antecedent text, ‘A Walk in the Park’, which tells of a visit to a park in a more conventional way than ‘Voices’. However, this book is out-of-print and may be difficult to obtain. Alternatively, other texts may be chosen for focus, that tell stories about families or encounters in parks, in more conventional ways that ‘Voices’ innovates on.

After ample opportunity to become familiar with all texts concerned with ‘Voices in the Park’, children are invited to discuss commonalities and differences. Teacher and children might use a schematic means such as a Venn diagram to document commonalities and differences, and use this as a springboard for more critical interrogation: What has changed? Why might this change have been made? How has the change been made? What does the change make me think about? What do I think of the change?

Previously we highlighted ways that texts call on genres. Many children’s texts, however, bend the rules of genre and blur the boundaries between genres. Base’s ‘The Waterhole’ (2001) is a case in point. This picture book focuses on animals that gather around an ever-shrinking waterhole, and highlights seasonal variations in rainfall and the need for environmental care and water conservation. Base has constructed a complex amalgam of genres associated with counting books, narratives, art books, travel books, atlases, animal books, riddle books and visual puzzles. Thus the reader is drawn into this very complex and intriguing amalgam that is non-linear and blurs generic boundaries.

In texts like ‘The Waterhole’, the challenge for young readers is to find unfamiliar pathways for constructing meaning. Yet this is a challenge each time readers confront an unknown genre, however conventional or innovative it might be. At the same time that young readers face this challenge in a text like ‘The Waterhole’, they enter into the book’s game – recognising patterns, confirming interpretations, flipping pages back to check earlier patterns and looking ahead to anticipate what’s coming up next. In engaging with the ‘unusual’ text like this, it might be said that the more conventional forms of text may be better understood. It often is in seeing how rules are broken that the rules themselves crystallise.
Discussion

This paper has explored tools that equip young readers to engage with texts in rich and complex ways. These tools take stock of both children's experience and inexperience – the texts and experiences they have encountered, and new understandings about texts and experiences they are yet to develop as readers. Identifying these tools has been made possible by looking at how children's texts form networks of relationships inside and beyond the text. These relationships significantly shape ways in which a reader interacts with the text in hand, other texts that the text-in-hand calls up, and other texts that the reader brings to bear. Further, these relationships provide teachers with valuable means for bridging children's home, school and community texts and literacy experiences. In exploring these relationships, implications for young readers and for classroom practices arise.

Classroom applications that we have included do not introduce new classroom activities per se. Nor are they meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. Rather, examples of classroom practices provide possible ways of stretching established classroom practices to exploit the interconnectedness of texts in ways that integrate the six key themes of our paper – pleasure, passion, provocation, possibility, power and perspective. In so doing, it is hoped that these activities are couched in the spirit of children's play – with a daring to reach beyond children's own capabilities and explore new ideas and possibilities in texts, build connections, stretch boundaries, without fear or constraint.
References


