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## Where is the story?: Intertextual reflections on literary research and practices in the early school years

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## Where is the story?: Intertextual reflections on literary research and practices in the early school years

### Abstract

The authors gave the following talk at the 2003 NCTE Annual Convention in San Francisco upon receiving the Alan C. Purves Award, presented to the RTE article from the previous year's volume judged most likely to have an impact on classroom practice. Writing as lead author, Pauline Harris traces the history of her interest in children's intertextuality through her life as a classroom teacher, her doctoral studies in the Bay Area, and her recent work with colleagues Jillian Trezise and W. N. Winser in Australia. As they describe the impetus behind their award-winning article and suggest directions for future research, the authors challenge classroom teachers to understand children's intertextuality as a source of pleasure and complexity, and as a guide to appropriate and engaging instruction.

### Keywords

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## **Where Is the Story?: Intertextual Reflections on Literacy Research and Practices in the Early School Years**

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### **The Story So Far**

A child in one of the classrooms of our study was being rebuked by his teacher for not paying attention:

T: I don't really think you can see from there because you were reading and looking at me. Is the story on my face?

The child answered:

C: I was looking with one eye at you and one eye at the book.

And so we concluded the paper that is the recipient of the 2003 Alan C. Purves Award, for which we are deeply honored. There are many people we want to acknowledge and thank and, as we proceed, we will do so.

However, at the outset, we want to acknowledge and thank Peter Smagorinsky and Michael Smith for their editorial guidance of this work. Their recognition of

its value, and their careful and very constructive suggestions for revisions, contributed in no small way to the quality others perceived in the published piece. We thank them for their input and feedback and for their patience in working with authors at such a distance (with some ups and downs that life brings, along with some delays). It is thanks to enlightened editors such as Peter and Michael that researchers can find recognition and realize their potential.

### **The Story of the Journey Leading to “Is the Story on My Face?”**

It was Bakhtin (1981) who theorized that a text carries many voices that filter through the writer onto the page—an intertextual phenomenon he called heteroglossia. This paper, and the research that led to it, is no exception. Essentially it is an intertextual amalgam in which many voices find a place—not just our own voices, but also the voices of children, teachers, researchers, university students, journal editors, and reviewers, including those who have been particularly influential in shaping the lens through which we view classrooms. Chandler (2003, p. 5), writing on intertextuality, wrote that “the debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged.” In now chronicling the journey that led to the paper for which this award has been given, we are acknowledging many voices that have shaped our research along the way.

This journey has been—and continues to be—an intertextual one. It has continued to evolve over an extended period, and for every answer found, there have been more questions unearthed. Speaking as first author and project leader, it was many years ago that I first began exploring the children’s perceptions of their classroom literacy experiences and the connections they made between these experiences and their own acts of reading. In the undertaking of my undergraduate honors thesis at The University of Sydney, and under the guidance of my thesis supervisor, Geoff Williams, I sought to probe first grade children’s perceptions of reading in their classroom. Much had been documented about children’s perceptions (e.g. Johns, 1977; Johns & Ellis, 1976). However, less was known about how instructional practices shaped these perceptions—such as by conducting *in situ* observations in classrooms where researchers might triangulate observational and interview data. Observing these first graders in their reading groups and interviewing children about their perceptions of reading revealed important connections between reading instruction and what children came to believe reading actually was—evident, for example, in one child’s definition that “Reading is when you learn to read. You start at Kindergarten and the books get harder.”

I continued this line of inquiry into my doctoral studies at UC Berkeley, with Bob Ruddell as my adviser and Anne Dyson, John Ogbu and Martha Rapp Ruddell as members of my dissertation committee. These individuals all brought influential voices to my doctoral research—Ruddell’s voice in terms of the theorization of reading as involving interactions among constituents of the reading process as

well as with the contexts in which readers read; Dyson's voice in terms of taking up the child's perspective amidst the confluence of social and academic content of classroom learning; Ogbu's voice in terms of understanding the diverse agendas that teachers and children bring to their interactions; and Rapp Ruddell's voice in terms of the ways in which we understand the multifaceted tasks that children undertake in classrooms.

Embarking on my doctoral research, I stepped foot into a California inner-urban first grade classroom, where more children's voices entered my line of inquiry into literacy in the early school years. On my first day, six-year-old Charlie greeted me and immediately detected from my accent that I was an Australian. As Charlie very hospitably showed me around his classroom, he discoursed learnedly about Australia: "You have a lot of desert down there. Yeah, a real lot! Of course, it's *not* all desert or else there wouldn't be any rivers for the platypus to swim." Impressed that a six-year-old living in another country would know these details about Australia, I asked Charlie how he knew so much. He told me from reading books, watching television documentaries, and seeing the Australian film "Crocodile Dundee."

In this one spontaneous conversation, Charlie made a myriad of connections among his funds of knowledge (after Moll & Gonzalez, 1994). These intertextual connections cut across his home, school, and community settings, and called on various experiences with books, TV programs, and movies that provided intertextual resources for learning and participating in the world.

Classroom participation was a complex venture for Charlie. While school reading assessment protocols suggested that Charlie had high reading potential, this promise was largely unrealized at school, where he was assessed as performing below his potential and attended a special reading class. Observing Charlie go about his day-to-day classroom literacy experiences, it became apparent that he was more favorably predisposed towards factual texts than narratives. To use his own words heard time and again, he "hated" narratives by Pat Hutchins—and these narratives were the focus of a literacy unit at the time. When it came time for his group to work with these objects of his disdain, Charlie quickly set about packing up all the work materials before his group began—saying to his peers, who were loudly protesting, that this would "save time" and "earn a point" for a clean and tidy table.

Yet, in self-directed activity, Charlie took on a different role—he became a very intent and analytical learner, who on his own would skim and scan complex factual texts about dinosaurs and animal life, take note of what he had learned, and spend a half-hour meticulously sketching a three-dimensional model of a Stegosaurus. Charlie had said that he wanted to be a palaeontologist when he grew up, and at times like this, his aspirations certainly came to light.

In these self-directed "free choice" situations, the intertextual connections

between Charlie's out-of-school life and his official classroom life could be actively realized and sustained. These situations, however, were not the primary focus of the class literacy program and so did not carry the same kind of significance, or cultural capital (after Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), as participation in teacher-planned and teacher-assessed narrative tasks.

While classroom literacy situations were connected to one another by virtue of their location in the social classroom context and any similar instructional foci they might share, situations were also connected to one another by their essential situational and pedagogic differences. These differences between situations highlighted a notion comparable to that coined by Martin (1985) in relation to differences among written texts—the notion of *contratextuality*. In the contratextual space between classroom situations significant influences on children's participation resided—as we saw previously with Charlie. As Ruddell and Unrau (1994) modelled, children read much more than the text at hand—they also read the authority structures and power relations inherent in a reading situation.

Carrying back home to Australia the voices of my dissertation committee, the children, and the researchers and theorists whom I had read or been taught by, I took up an academic appointment at the University of Wollongong. There I continued my line of inquiry into how children make sense of classroom literacy and the impact of classroom context on children's perspectives. I ventured into another first grade classroom, and observed teacher and children engrossed in making explicit connections across texts and experiences in their various home, school and community settings as they made sense of texts and tasks. These connections evoked texts and experiences that teacher and children had encountered in and beyond their classroom. These connections encompassed videos, television programs, shopping expeditions, environmental print, classroom displays, class excursions, children's popular culture, neighborhood settings, and community activities . . . and the list goes on.

The business of making these connections generated much excitement among teacher and children alike. This excitement was akin to the "jouissance" (ecstasy or bliss) of which Barthes (1976) wrote when describing the pleasures readers experience when they find connections and interpretations on their own terms. In this classroom, a teacher named Maureen modelled herself as an active and enthusiastic explorer of these connections. In her interactions with the class, Maureen allowed children to insert ideas as they popped into their heads. In so doing, she relaxed participation protocols, which allowed scope for enthusiastic sharing, corroboration and challenging of ideas.

Away from these interactions, children continued to verbalize their intertextual connections with considerable enthusiasm, even in what might seem mundane situations. For example, one morning during writing time, some children gathered around a verb chart on the class wall that highlighted tense suffixes. With the

same level of enthusiasm with which earlier that day they had drawn connections between a class text and their own favorite videos, these children identified and validated connections among word structures, patting each other on the back and praising one another as they did so:

M: [looking for the word “calling”] Let’s see. [looking at chart] “Calling.” [moves his pencil down the chart] Calling. Calling. Calling.

J: I know it’s “c” - “a” - “l.” [moves pencil down the chart and stops at “fall”] Hey, here’s “fall”! [continues to move pencil down chart. stops at “yell”] “Yell”!! Look, double “l.” [sounding the double “l”] //l/. Two “l”s.

M: OK. “Fall . Call .” [points to “call”] “C” - “a” - “l” - “l.” I want “calling.”

J: [Moving to next verb chart] Look, there’s two “fall”s. Here, and here [pointing].

M: Look, over here [pointing to verb chart from “Crocodile Beat” sequence. Runs pencil underneath “eat” - “ate” - “eating”] That’s [pointing to “ing” of “eating”] “ing.”

J: If you add that to “call,” that makes “calling!”

M: *Yeah!!!*

This scene was one of many in this classroom that provided a vivid image of what Eco (1988) meant when he wrote that making connections that others also recognize in a text is like belonging to a clique—everybody is “in the know.” Mutually recognizing connections, be it among word structures or whole texts, can bring personal satisfaction and social significance. In this classroom, intertextuality clearly had a bonding effect between teacher and children and among children themselves in their various groupings and networks. In having this effect, and in allowing children to seek and find connections to their in- and out-of-school experiences, fostering intertextuality contributed in no small way to empowering children’s learning.

Maureen made the marshalling of children’s intertextual resources seem almost easy. Behind this apparent ease was a carefully orchestrated plan. This plan consisted of strategies that included contextualizing teacher-class interactions around texts in a supportive teaching/learning cycle that moved through phases of modelling reading and writing, jointly engaging with the children in reading or writing a text, and engaging children in independent construction of texts as readers and writers. These phases were interconnected as one phase paved the way for the next, with recursive re-visits of phases along the way.

In interactions around texts, Maureen explicitly invited and explored children’s divergent perspectives. Questions such as “We’ve heard about one idea. Who has another?” were frequent and genuine in this classroom. Children’s perspectives were invited and validated. There was scope for children’s spontaneous input as long as they listened to one another and no one spoke over another child.

Providing and then making intertextual connections to shared experiences in and out of the classroom was another key strategy. The fact that these experiences were shared meant all participants were familiar with the point of reference. How else could six-year-old Lindsay's connection have been understood when he said in a teacher-led discussion, "He came with his crocodile and it had scales, only they weren't like those, they were a little bit different . . . they were a bit greyish, and they're green"? Here Lindsay made a link between a picture book narrative called *Crocodile Beat* (Jorgensen & Mullins, 1988), which was the focus of the lesson at hand, and a shared classroom event where a guest speaker had brought his crocodile to show the class. To quote a cliché, "You had to be there."

The complexity of intertextuality became vividly clear in a conversation that I had with Lenny in Maureen's classroom. As he finished reading a story aloud from the class reader, I watched him turn to a double-page spread of a family tree. Drawn as an actual tree, it bore labels like "mother," "uncle," and "nephew." Reading these labels and stopping at "nephew," Lenny asked "What does that say?" I replied "nephew." Lenny immediately responded "Duckville." We went to and fro, with me repeating "nephew," and Lenny saying "Duckville." Finally, Lenny said "Yeah, I know, but that's like Louie and Dewey. I've got a book about it." And before I had a chance to speak again, he emphatically added, "I'll bring it in tomorrow to show you."

This was a clarifying moment for me with regard to how children make meaning—the connections they make among texts; the many complex insights into texts that children's utterances may reveal; the cryptic ways in which children may express such connections; and the fact that what children say is often susceptible to being overlooked in the busy interactions of reading lessons, or misunderstood in light of a teacher's own preconceptions.

It was at the end of this project that I began to talk about these findings with my recently arrived colleague, Jillian Trezise. She, too, had a strong interest in intertextuality, particularly from a psychoanalytic perspective. Together we delved into Kristeva's theory of intertextuality (1984) and how it came to bear upon our understanding of intertextuality and on children's intertextual and often cryptic and laconic utterances like "Duckville." This exploration proved to be very revealing: It led us to more closely examine how children make and express meanings, and how children's ways are different from adults' ways of making and expressing meanings (Harris & Trezise, 1999).

We also spoke with Bill Winsler, who joined our collaboration and brought a functional linguistic perspective (after Halliday & Hasan, 1985). From this perspective, every text is seen as an intertext—every lesson is itself one unfolding intertext of all that has gone before, all that is to follow, and all that is occurring in other texts, experiences and situations. This perspective was critical to understanding the interconnectedness not just of texts but of lessons. Bill brought the work



of Jay Lemke to our attention—specifically, his documentation of intertextual connections in science lessons (Lemke, 1990). This work expanded our intertextual horizons and the way in which we viewed intertextuality in classrooms. It contributed to operationalizing our framework for investigating intertextuality in classrooms. We initially drew on Lemke's categories, expanding them in response to what our classroom data suggested in terms of connections and the "intertextual challenges" they presented.

Carrying multiple voices of intertextuality, we planned a longitudinal study of reading and intertextuality in the first three years of school. We sought and received funding from the Australian Research Council to undertake a longitudinal inquiry into intertextuality in the early school years. And so we come to the study that revealed intertextual challenges and conflicts reported in the paper, "Is the Story on My Face?" (Harris, Trezise, & Winsler, 2002).

### **Is the Story on the Teacher's Face?**

Although in Maureen's classroom intertextuality emerged as a resource for teaching and learning, this study found that it could pose challenges and bring to the surface clashes in intertextual frames of reference between teachers and children. These challenges warrant educators' attention for at least three reasons: One, they impact how children function as readers in shared reading; two, if not carefully negotiated, they may frustrate and thwart instructional goals and plans; and three, intertextuality is an intrinsic part of literacy—resolving intertextual challenges during teacher-class interactions around texts can provide key lessons about growing as readers for adults and children alike.

Intertextuality takes on many guises in classrooms, where it can be an invited guest, an unexpected visitor, and an unwelcome intruder. Intertextuality is not confined to connections among written texts. To fully explore intertextuality, we need to broaden our definition of "text"—to encompass written texts, spoken utterances and interactions, visual images, and lived experiences. Broadening "text" in this way means a parallel broadening of what we define as "reading" and "writing" and "literacy."

In exploring intertextuality, we peeled back some layers to reveal tensions that lie beneath the surface. And what did we find there? We found that every instance of an intertextual conflict is significant for a researcher to contemplate—even just one occurrence across the span of a longitudinal study provides an opportunity to elucidate this complex phenomenon. We found that intertextuality carries many nuances that can and do create challenges for teachers and children alike. The teachers in our study planned literacy instruction around the idea of making connections, to build bridges and scaffold children's learning. This planning was systematic and backed up with questioning strategies, protocols for participating in teacher-led interactions, and authority structures whereby teachers acknowledged

and prioritized children's responses in ways that sought to further their instructional plans.

The use of authority to direct children's responses is understandable in terms of implementing a teacher's instructional plan. However, the potential of intertextual questioning to tap into children's experiences remained limited—as did the teachers' ability to capitalize on children's experiences as resources for new learning that is mandated by the syllabus and central to school success (see also Delpit, 1995; Moll, 2002).

Making connections to what children know and live invokes intertextuality that is not always systematic—it can be highly idiosyncratic, quite elusive, and can occur when either speaker or listener least expects it (Kristeva, 1984). The moment teachers try to evoke particular connections and invite children to make their own connections, a Pandora's Box is opened—as one of the teachers in our study found when he asked the question, "What's a report?" While he looked for responses about information reports (factual texts) as identified in the state syllabus, children instead volunteered a myriad of ideas that included school reports ("You get one every end of the year"), scientific reports ("When you've invented something"), newspaper reports ("There's been, um, a lot of bus crashes"), television news reports ("Like, um, there was a fire"), police reports ("When you report that means that something happened and you have to report to somebody like to a police station"), and reports to the principal ("Just say, um, T. was not behaving on the bus and I was sitting in the seat opposite and reported him to the principal").

Thus it becomes apparent that when posing questions and trying to invoke intertextual powers in children, teachers need to be able to recognize, acknowledge, and be prepared to explore the associations that they might awaken. Every question, regardless of its intentions or desired responses, has many possible answers—just as every text has many possible interpretations and associations. Preparedness to do so in our study, however, was clearly constrained by mandated syllabus outcomes, extant instructional agendas and perceived time pressures. In this finding we see that the enactment of power in classrooms (Delpit, 1988) in relation to intertextuality was not just between teacher and children but also between teachers and higher authorities. While teachers at times did pursue children's ideas, they often—and understandably—redirected children's thinking to the instructional agenda at hand.

### **Does the Story Need to Be on the Teacher's Face?**

It was a reality that all the teachers in our study were constrained by curriculum requirements and outcomes. They invariably felt the pressure of time to get the curriculum covered. When children's contributions digressed from their teachers' planned agendas, tensions emerged. In the face of these conflicts, teachers used the

underlying social content of their lessons—that is, classroom protocols and power relations—to prioritize desired links and marginalize all others.

This sense of pressure and its consequence provided a strong counterpoint to Barthes' notion (1976) of "jouissance" that texts can bring their readers. We had witnessed the delight that children expressed when making connections in another classroom. We also see the enthusiasm of our preservice children's literature students who, in their university classes, explore intertextuality and frequently make comments such as "You're making me see books in ways I'd never done before," and "If we feel like this, imagine how *children* would feel." Indeed, such delights are worthy of children and teachers in classrooms—and they are worthy of research that shows how we can explore the pleasures and learning benefits that intertextuality can bring, without feeling pressured by the need to "move on." Such benefits are also worthy of policies and syllabus documents that provide scope and resources for teachers and children as they together explore these challenges.

### **Where Is the Story for the Reader?**

Intertextuality and the research referred to in this paper have important implications for how we theorize and therefore think about teaching reading. Intertextuality points to the highly interactive nature of the reading process, such as has been explicated in Ruddell's many years of research, encapsulated in an interactive reading model (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). In this model, prior knowledge and experiences are, in essence, resources derived from the reader's intertextual history which embrace texts and experiences across various media and settings. What connections readers make to their resources are shaped by what Ruddell has termed the "reader environment." In classrooms, this environment is made up of complex social as well as pedagogic factors that shape the choices readers make therein—as we saw with Charlie and Jimmy, and as we saw in the class interactions of our most recent study. In this view, reading may be characterized as a process of shuttling "back and forth between the language of the work and a network of contexts that are not in the work but are essential for its realization" (Scholes, 1975, p. 147).

An intertextual view of reading was made manifest, for example, in Lenny's "Duckville" encounter. Here, meanings that Lenny made from his class reader were shaped by particular intertextual influences that Lenny selected and prioritized over other possibilities. For, as Scholes (1975, p. 144) also wrote, "there is no single 'right' reading for any complex literary work. . . . In approaching a text of any complexity, then, readers must choose to emphasize certain aspects that seem crucial to them. This is a matter of personal judgment." The complexity of this process for any reader cannot be underestimated. Readers have a crucial role to play in choosing and constructing meanings from texts, drawing on their experi-

ences of other texts—such as those texts previously read, those lived, and those explicitly recollected.

Likewise, Barthes (1988, p. 157) inadvertently placed quite an awesome if appropriate responsibility on the shoulders of young readers when he asserted that while texts carry a myriad of possible meanings, it is for the reader to achieve unity of meaning. It is readers who must find their own paths through texts—paths shaped by both the texts themselves and the store of experiences and predispositions readers bring to their readings, as particular meanings are evoked for particular readers.

### **Where Might the Story Go from Here?**

Our research into intertextuality was born of the desire to understand children's perspectives in classrooms—the complexities and challenges that children saw they had to contend with. Over the years, as this exploration revealed the complex social and pedagogic aspects of classroom life, the phenomenon of intertextuality came more and more clearly into our view and took conceptual shape in our research. And so we turned to documenting its manifestation in classrooms and its relationship to reading there. As tensions unexpectedly surfaced, we have endeavored to unravel these tensions so that we might contribute to understandings about the nature and quality of literacy instruction in the early school years.

It would seem that interactions around texts provide important contexts for nurturing children's abilities to carve out pathways of meaning. Consequently, further intertextuality research may be well directed to questions such as:

- What is it in interactions around texts that might help children develop competence in making judgments about meaning? What is it in such lessons that may hinder the development of this competence?
- How might teachers strike an effective balance between working toward mandatory outcomes while taking time to explore and nurture children's connections that are part of their intertextual agendas and meaning-making processes?
- What other kinds of situations in classrooms provide enabling contexts for children to engage intertextually with texts and one another's meaning?
- What constraints do syllabus policies impose on intertextuality in classrooms, and how might these constraints be effectively redressed by teachers and by policy makers?
- What intertextual learning do children take up during and away from teacher-class interactions around texts?

Making connections may be thought of in terms of teaching with vision. By this we mean the ability of teachers to see the bigger picture of what they are doing

as teachers, in terms not only of their class programs, but in terms of children's worlds, at school and beyond. In a current study now being undertaken, Sandra, a kindergarten teacher, is grappling with the multiple and very diverse realities of children's backgrounds, parental expectations, school resources and agendas, systemic requirements and mandated outcomes, as well as her own philosophy and preferred *modus operandi*. The word "grapple" is used here advisedly, for there are many tensions produced by the presence of many and often conflicting demands and expectations of teacher, children, parents, school executives, and statutory authorities.

Amidst these multiple realities, Sandra is seeking to make connections and allow children to see the interconnectedness of what they are learning. In this learning, and amidst the realities that she is orchestrating, she is a strong advocate of integrating visual arts and drama with literacy learning. Her approach resonates with the work of Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) and allows children to explore and express intertextuality in ways that go beyond verbalizing answers to teacher's questions—including re-enactments and visual experiences that are embedded in Sandra's class interactions around texts, as well as in small group, "hands-on" situations.

As Sandra talked about the benefits of integration and the challenges of multiple demands and expectations, her words encapsulated the intertextual complexity of classrooms: "Everything is just so much a part of everything else."

And that's where we leave this story—for now.

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## DEDICATION

The first author wishes to dedicate the 2003 Alan C. Purves award and research on which the paper was based to her husband, John Daley, who has been a constant source of encouragement and inspiration throughout all the years of "intertextual" talk that's seen the unravelling of many a connection in what we read, hear, and view. His voice resides always in my work.

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