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THE WEB OF STORIES: UNPACKING INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract. *As educators, we have all witnessed the magic moment when a student's eyes light up with recognition. It might be when they hear a familiar phrase in a new story, spot a character from a classic tale in a modern picture book, or notice that a plot feels strangely similar to another they've read. This spark of connection is not a coincidence; it is a fundamental principle of how literature works. It is called **intertextuality**, and understanding it is one of the most powerful tools we can bring to our teaching of reading and writing.*

Key words: *Intertextuality, literature, students, conversation, readers.*

What is Intertextuality?

Coined by literary theorist Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, intertextuality is the idea that no text is an island. Every story, poem, or play is in conversation with the texts that came before it. As Kristeva (1980) argued, any text is constructed as a "mosaic of quotations" and is an "absorption and transformation of another" (p. 66). In simpler terms, authors are also readers. They draw upon the vast library of stories, myths, fairy tales, and cultural narratives they have absorbed throughout their lives. They might do this consciously through direct reference or homage, or unconsciously by using familiar structures and archetypes.

For children, who are constantly building their own internal library of stories, this concept is not an abstract theory but a lived reality. Their excitement at seeing the Big Bad Wolf pop up in a different story, or a character who looks just like them, is a direct experience of intertextuality. It is the pleasure of being "in the know."

Why Does Intertextuality Matter in the Classroom?

Recognizing and teaching intertextuality is not just an academic exercise; it has profound implications for our students' literacy development.

Builds Comprehension: When students can connect a new text to a familiar one, they activate prior knowledge. This schema acts as a scaffold, making it easier to understand new characters, predict plot developments, and grasp complex themes. A child who knows the story of "Cinderella" will have a rich framework for understanding any "rags-to-riches" narrative.

Fosters Critical Thinking: Intertextuality invites students to move beyond simple comprehension to analysis. They begin to ask: *Why* did the author choose to reference this other story? *How* does this new version change the original's meaning? Is the author celebrating, questioning, or making fun of the original text? This comparative thinking is the heart of critical literacy.

Cultivates a Love for Reading: The "aha!" moment of recognizing an intertextual link is deeply satisfying. It makes reading an active, puzzle-solving endeavor. It transforms



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reading from a solitary act into a conversation with other books and authors, creating a community of readers who share a common set of references.

Empowers Young Writers: When children understand that stories are in dialogue with one another, the daunting task of writing becomes more accessible. They realize they don't have to invent everything from scratch. They can write a fractured fairy tale, a prequel to a beloved book, or a story that puts a new spin on an old myth. Intertextuality gives them a toolbox of familiar structures and characters to build upon.

Forms of Intertextuality in Children's Literature

Intertextual connections appear in many forms, from the obvious to the subtle. Here are some of the most common types you can explore with your students:

Direct References and Allusions: This is the most straightforward form, where a text explicitly mentions another. For example, in *The Jolly Postman* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, the postman delivers letters to characters from classic fairy tales like Goldilocks and Cinderella. The book assumes the reader's familiarity with these stories for its humor and narrative to work.

Parody and Pastiche: Parody imitates a style or genre for comic effect, while pastiche is a more respectful imitation. Jon Scieszka's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* is a classic parody, retelling the familiar tale from the wolf's perspective, forcing readers to question the original's version of events. *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* also by Scieszka is a masterclass in parodic intertextuality.

Fractured Fairy Tales: This popular subgenre takes a traditional tale and twists it. These stories are inherently intertextual because they rely on the reader's knowledge of the "original" to create their new meaning. *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch, for instance, subverts the traditional princess-rescued-by-prince narrative, creating a new, empowered heroine by inverting the tropes of the classic damsel-in-distress story.

Genre and Archetypal Intertextuality: This is a more subtle form where texts share common structures, character types (archetypes), or themes. The "hero's journey," the "wise mentor," or the "trickster" figure are all archetypes that appear across cultures and centuries. When a student reads a fantasy novel about a young person discovering a hidden power, they are engaging with the same archetypal story as *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, or *Star Wars*, which in turn draw from ancient myths.

Visual Intertextuality: In picture books, intertextuality is not just textual. Illustrators often embed visual references to other works of art, other picture books, or cultural icons. For example, an illustrator might place a small, recognizable painting on a character's wall or have a character read a famous book. These visual "Easter eggs" add layers of meaning for the observant reader.

Practical Strategies for the Classroom. So, how do we translate this theory into practice? Here are some engaging activities to bring intertextuality to life in your classroom:

Create a "Text Set": When planning a unit, group a core text with several related texts. For example, if you're reading a traditional version of *Cinderella*, create a text set that



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includes: *Yeh-Shen: A Cinderella Story from China* by Ai-Ling Louie (multicultural variant)

The Rough-Face Girl by Rafe Martin (Native American variant)

Cinder Edna by Barbara McClintock (a fractured version)

Ella Enchanted by Gail Carson Levine (a novel-length adaptation)

After reading, use a Venn diagram or a comparison chart to discuss the similarities and differences in plot, character, and cultural values.

Author Studies: Focus on an author who uses intertextuality heavily. Jon Scieszka, Roald Dahl, and Anthony Browne are excellent choices. Have students track the references and parodies in their work. How does knowing the original story change their experience of the author's version?

"Write Your Own Fractured Tale": After exploring several fractured fairy tales, have students choose a traditional story and write their own version. They can change the setting, the point of view, the ending, or mix it with another genre (e.g., "Cinderella in Space" or "The Three Little Pigs as a detective story"). This is a powerful way to assess their understanding of narrative structure and intertextual play.

Intertextual Journals: Ask students to keep a "connection journal" where they record any time a new story reminds them of another book, movie, or song. Encourage them to note the specific connection and how it made them feel or think differently about the story.

Visual Scavenger Hunts: For picture books, give students a "scavenger hunt" list of possible visual intertextual references to find (e.g., "a character reading a famous book," "a picture on the wall that looks like a famous painting," "an object from another story"). This sharpens their observational skills and reinforces the idea that meaning is made in multiple ways.

CONCLUSION

Children's literature is not a collection of isolated tales but a rich, interconnected web of stories. By embracing the intertextual nature of the texts we share, we move beyond teaching students *how* to read and empower them to become critical, analytical, and joyful readers. We give them the tools to see the conversation between books, to understand the cultural echoes that resonate through stories, and to one day add their own unique voices to that grand, ongoing narrative. When we teach intertextuality, we are not just teaching literature; we are teaching a way of seeing the world as a place of endless connections.

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