The influence of postmodern picturebooks on three boys' narrative competence

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This article examines the written and visual texts of three elementary male students and discusses how the boys' experiences with a collection of postmodern picturebooks influenced their narrative competence. The boys were participants in a multifaceted study that explored Grades 3 and 4 students' understandings of and responses to postmodern picturebooks. The research also examined how the children used their knowledge of the literary and illustrative interactive devices in the picturebooks to create their own print texts. Analysis of the boys' texts revealed that they were able to identify, understand and create narratives that were sophisticated, complex and metafictive in nature.

Narrative or storying is a way of making sense of human experience. It has been suggested that narrative structures our perception and construction of the world, that it is a way of thinking, and according to Hardy (1975), a 'primary act of mind' (p. 4). Researchers who have examined children's oral narrative forms have found significant differences in how these children construct their stories. McCabe's (1997) findings revealed that European North American children 'tend to talk about one important thing at a time' (p. 456), 'Japanese children living in America tend to tell concise stories that are cohesive collections of several experiences they have had' (p. 457), and 'African-American children usually plot numerous sequences of events within the context of the individual experiences combined' (p. 460). Further, according to McCabe, variation in storytelling 'within a culture is as remarkable as variation between cultures' (p. 455).

Heath's (1983) seminal ethnographic work revealed many distinctions among three communities' storytelling traditions and the narrative structures of their stories. She documented how these varying narrative experiences affected both the children's achievements and interactions at school. Indeed, Heath's study demonstrated how children draw upon their oral narrative experiences when they encounter written stories at school. Although McCabe's (1997) research revealed that many European North American children are 'equipped for the kind of stories they hear in school,' the kind that have a 'clear beginning, middle and end' (p. 456), not all children are familiar

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with linear and sequential narratives. There is more than one way to tell a story and differences in storytelling and narrative structures should be recognised, appreciated, valued and discussed in classrooms. Through multiple experiences with stories, oral and written, readers construct schemata or cognitive representations of story structures, elements and genres. The longitudinal research conducted by Wells (1986) in Britain revealed that not only did listening to stories read aloud contribute significantly to young children's literacy development but also that participants' lack of experience with narrative negatively affected their academic success in school. Thus, various cultural, social, linguistic and individual factors affect students' narrative competence, their 'ability to produce and understand narratives' (Prince, 2003, p. 61).

This article examines the written and visual texts of Anthony (age 9), Hunter (age 8) and Alonzo (age 9) (all names are pseudonyms) and discusses how the boys' texts reflect an understanding of narrative that was developed as a result of their experiences with a collection of postmodern picturebooks. A caveat: although the boys' texts reveal much about their understanding of and abilities to produce narratives, it would be necessary to collect and consider other data to make definitive statements about their overall narrative competence.

The discussion of the students' texts is framed within a sociocultural theory of writing that focuses on the connections between the reading and the writing completed by the boys, and on their membership in a particular classroom community. The purposes of and expectations associated with 'a kind of textual practice' (Dyson, 2001, p. 381) within the two classroom communities influenced how the boys assumed and morphed tools and resources when composing and creating their work. A sociocultural theory of writing considers how an 'individual's writing practices and identities [are] shaped by the social, cultural, and ideological contexts he or she inhabits' and how 'his or her writing, in turn, shape these contexts' (Schultz, 2006, p. 365). Before presenting a description of the research context that shaped the students' work, a brief discussion of narrative theories and postmodern picturebooks follows as these two topics provide pertinent background for understanding the boys' texts.

Narrative theories and postmodern picturebooks

Narratology 'studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative (regardless of medium of representation) and tries to characterise narrative competence' (Prince, 2003, p. 66). Our understanding about narrative competence has developed from Chomsky's (1965) notions about linguistic competence. 'Competence is defined as underlying, unconscious knowledge of the rule systems for generating linguistic behavior, and it puts language as a system into the mind of each individual language user' (Fox, 1993, p. 25). If narrative,

like language, is 'a universal structuring device,' then narrative competence can be considered knowledge of the systems of rules, of the codes or sets of principles, governing the understanding and generating of a narrative (p. 25), recognising that, as noted earlier, narratives vary within and among communities, societies, and cultures.

Some researchers have used a structural approach to analyse narratives. For example, Propp (1958) studied the narrative structures of Russian folktales and identified 31 functions that accounted for the structural base of these stories. Lévis-Strauss (1955) developed a structural theory about myths, and Barthes (1970) described how texts are constituted through five codes or signs. Story grammarians seek to identify the underlying structures of stories by specifying the relations among episodes/events in stories. However, as noted by Sipe (2008), story grammars or maps or models have several limitations, including the fact that 'most of the models are based on very simple, short stories that were written by the researchers for the express purpose of developing and explaining the models' (p. 42).

Russian Formalists, who were interested in the structure of literary texts, developed a theory of narrative that distinguished between story and plot. According to Formalists, fabula (the story) refers to the way in which an event unfolds, the 'brute chronology' (Holquist, 1990, p. 113) of the narrative, and syuzhet refers to the plot, 'the order and manner in which events are actually presented in the narrative' (Cuddon, 1999, p. 328). The mediated telling of events by an author is a construction, and the chronology of events might be varied in some way for a particular effect (Holquist, 1990).

Genette's (1980) 'systematic theory of narrative' identified 'basic constituents and techniques of narrative' (p. 7) and similar to Russian Formalists, he distinguished among several narrative elements including story, narrative and narrating. For Genette, *story* referred to narrative content; the narrated or story is 'the set of situations and events recounted in a narrative' (Prince, 2003, p. 57). *Narrative* was used to describe the 'narrative text itself' (Genette, p. 27), the oral or written discourse. Genette used the word *narrating* 'for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which the action takes place' (p. 27), that is the 'how' of the narrative' (Prince, p. 57). Genette's distinction among these three terms calls attention 'to the act and functions of narrating, to the complexities of the chronology of narrative time and story time and variations in focalisation and point of view' (Fox, 1993, p. 103).

Many of the contemporary picturebooks that I have used in my research self-consciously reveal multiple levels of narration, often blurring the world of the story and that of reality, and the time of the events narrated and the 'narrating of those events' (Fox, 1993, p. 102). The narrative discourse of these particular postmodern picturebooks exposes the fictional nature of the texts through multiple metafictive devices (McCallum 1996; Pantaleo, 2004a, 2004b,

2008a; Stephens & Watson, 1994; Watson, 2004). Although there is difficulty in identifying specific, compulsory characteristics in order for a picturebook to be classified as postmodern, a review of the literature reveals that one of the most prominent features of postmodern picturebooks is the extensive use of metafictive devices (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008). Lewis (2001) wrote that postmodern fiction is 'interested in the nature of fiction and the processes of storytelling, and it employs metafictive devices … for undermining expectations or for exposing the fictional nature of fictions' (p. 94). According to Waugh (1984), metafiction is 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (p. 2). Metafiction draws the attention of readers to how texts work and to how meaning is created through the use of a number of devices or techniques. Some metafictive devices include multiple narratives, intertextuality, indeterminacy, eclecticism, intrusive characters and/or narrators, playfulness, parody, and pastiche, as well as the breaking of genre boundaries, the abandonment of linear chronology, and the emphasis on the constructedness of texts. The literary and illustrative devices that the Grades 3 and 4 students learned about during the research projects are metafictive techniques but I referred to the latter as interactive devices to emphasise the participatory and co-constructing roles required of readers. In the next section I provide further information about the students' experiences with the postmodern picturebooks during the qualitative studies.

The research context

During 2007 and 2008 I conducted research in two Grade 3/4 classrooms. During each year of the classroom-based research, I was both the Language Arts teacher and the researcher. I recognise and acknowledge my influence on the research context. However, I engaged in daily conversations and participated in scheduled meetings with both classroom teachers to discuss the investigative procedures and the progress of the study throughout the duration of the research.

Each year I began my research in early January and I worked with the students for approximately 80 minutes each morning for nine weeks. Similar to my three-year study with Grade 5 students (Pantaleo, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007d, 2008b), I began the research with the children and their teachers by talking about the notion of 'response'. Through a range of activities, I discussed with the students how humans are constantly responding to multiple stimuli in their lives, and that there are various kinds of responses and ways to respond. Teacher and student modeling, as well as various instructional activities were used to develop the children's understanding of the qualities of a 'good aesthetic response' (i.e. articulating one's opinions, emotions, thoughts about the selection and supporting the latter with reasons/explanations). Time was also devoted to talking about small group discussions with the goal of

developing a communal understanding of the expectations, behaviours and protocol of 'successful' discussions.

Each year *Willy the Dreamer* (Browne, 1997) was used to introduce the children to the semiotic notion of intertextuality and to underscore the importance of thoughtfully viewing the illustrations in picturebooks. I believe the sequence of the other picturebooks (see Appendix A) read during the studies reflected an increasing complexity of the use of literary and illustrative devices. For each picturebook, the students read it independently, completed at least one written response, and participated in discussions in small groups that were peer-led and mixed-gender. Following the audio-recorded small group discussions, the interactive devices were explicitly taught and/or reviewed during various whole class activities that involved the students discussing and examining the picturebooks. Throughout each study the children were encouraged to make connections between the interactive devices they were learning about in the literature and the existence of these devices in other print and digital texts. During individual interviews, the students were asked to identify their favourite picturebook(s) and to describe what they had learned about reading picturebooks by reading the picturebooks during the research. These interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

As is described in Appendix A the students read other specific picturebooks during the research projects but they neither wrote responses about nor discussed these books. Further, as well as the required texts, I brought other picturebooks with interactive devices into the classrooms for the children to peruse. Finally, as the culminating activity each year, the students created their own print texts with interactive devices. The children were instructed to include a minimum of eight interactive devices in their stories in 2007 and 10 interactive devices in 2008. Each year the students had approximately 11–12 Language Arts classes to work on their books.

At the end of the research projects the children completed a questionnaire that asked them to describe themselves as readers and writers, to identify the aspects of the research that they most enjoyed, and to explain the reasons for the latter. The questionnaire also included a list of the interactive devices that the students had learned about during the research; they were to circle the letters in front of the devices included in their books. During individual student interviews at the end of the studies, the students were asked to show and to explain to me the interactive devices in their books that they had indicated on the questionnaire. Again, the student interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

The students' writing

Elsewhere (Pantaleo, 2007e, 2007f, 2008b) I have discussed the writing of both boys and girls who have participated in my research projects over the past five years. I have also focused on the writing of a few girls who have been

participants in my studies (Pantaleo, 2006a, 2007c, 2009). The three boys' texts presented and analysed below were selected because their books contain many interactive features and levels of narration. Like picturebooks, the boys' books are multimodal because they contain both written and visual texts. The analysis of the boys' work below considered the multiple ways they used and combined the modes of image and writing (Kress, 2003).

Anthony

When asked to describe himself as a reader on the 2007 end-of-study questionnaire, nine-year-old Anthony wrote that he 'reads some challenging books and reads slowly to understand what is going on'. With respect to writing, Anthony explained that he likes 'to get ideas and then change [them] up a bit,' and that he likes to type his work so that he can 'change the fonts' and 'use spell check'. Anthony's favourite parts of the research project were 'reading the stories and then getting some ideas from responses and getting into discussion groups and talking about the picturebooks'.

'The Story That Never Got Finished'

The first sentence of Anthony's book signals that a particular type of story will follow: 'Once upon a time there were three pigs'. However, readers quickly discover a subverted tale as a cat, just entering on the right-hand side of the page, politely informs the narrator that, 'We're here to replace the three pigs. They were finally eaten by the big bad wolf'. The narrator complies and on the subsequent page changes the text to, 'Once upon a time there were three cats'. However, the illustration shows three cats and a partial profile of a fourth feline on the right-hand side. Again the narrator assents, revises the traditional quantity of characters in this tale, and resumes the narration, including events that seem appropriate considering the species of the main characters. 'O.k., then. There once were four cats and they were just walking home from the movie, 'The Three Blind Mice'. The feline representative once again interrupts the narrator and requests a car because the cats are tired from their journey. The illustration depicts a large human hand, with a car in its grasp, descending from the top left of the page. Subsequently, the cats express their preference for a mansion rather than the cottage described by the narrator. Once again, the narrator concedes and readers view a human hand delivering the requested dwelling. The narrator warns the cats to, 'STOP INTERRUPTING!' The felines apologise to the author but then proceed to further disrupt the story by introducing themselves to the narrator and/or the readers. On the next page the narrator informs the cats that the story is finished and explains to the incredulous felines, 'You just wasted the whole story. It's closing time and I need to clean up and go home for dinner'. The cats inquire innocently, 'Do we come back tomorrow?' and in large font the narrator replies, 'NO!'

Analysis

Analysis of Anthony's writing reveals the complexity of his story, of the narrating and of the narrative discourse. The diegetic, the fictional or story world in which the events and situations that are narrated occur (Prince, 2003), is constantly disrupted by the cats interacting with the narrator. As Anthony stated during his interview, 'like it's all got to do with the disruptions'. His narrative begins with traditional storybook language but ironically the story world is transgressed by the entrance of the main characters. Anthony's use of a different font for the cats and for the narrator further emphasises the separate narrative levels of the narrator and the cats. He explained his use of typographic experimentation, 'Well whenever the narrator's talking, well telling the story, it's like in a story type of font, and then whenever the cats talk, they have like thick writing'. The narrating includes the feline characters' requesting changes in their own story and the subsequent compliance of the narrator, which creates a metanarrative (i.e. a narrative within the narrative). The illustrations of the narrator 'hand-delivering' the car and the mansion further draw reader attention to the different levels of narration and to the self-referential nature of the story. Not only does the mediated narration remind readers of the fictional nature of the story, but the cats introduce themselves to the narrator and/or readers. 'I'm Mitchell Owens and I play left forward in soccer. I'm David Beakman and I play right midfield. I'm Steven James and my position is left midfield. I'm Paul Williams and I'm the goalie. We're brothers and we play for the Scratches'. As well as the narrator narrating the story world of the four cats, there is the diegetic level of the characters directly addressing the narrator and readers, and the narrator directly addressing the characters. Thus, 'The Story That Never Got Finished' contains several examples of 'metaleptic disruptions to the diegetic level of narration, which breach conventional relationships and hierarchies between characters, texts, authors, illustrators and readers' (McCallum, 2008, p. 181). The infringement of the boundary between narrative levels blurs the line between fiction and reality. Readers wonder who has control of the story and characters in this book.

Reader attention is also drawn to the different narrative levels at the end of Anthony's book when both the story time and the narrative time (Genette, 1980) are over because the narrator needs to 'clean up and go home for dinner'. The narrator directs the felines to not return the following day. The interaction between the cats and the narrator at the end of the narrative, as well as the indeterminate ending, draw attention to the processes being used in the narrative discourse as it is created in front of readers.

Finally, 'The Story That Never Got Finished' contains examples of parodic intertextuality. It includes parodic connections to events and characters from 'The Three Little Pigs' and a parodic reference to the 'Three Blind Mice'. These intertextual connections to other texts, to other diegetics, are further examples

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of metaleptic disruptions, of 'the mingling of two distinct diegetic levels' (Prince, 2003, p. 51). Further, during his interview about his book Anthony explained how he parodied the names of well-known soccer players (i.e. Michael Owen, David Beckham, Steven Gerrard and Paul Robinson) for his characters. Thus, this intertextual and transumptive act of taking names from the real world and using them in a fictive text represents another narrative level. Indeed, the intertextualities in Anthony's book make readers aware of 'the artifice of what they are reading' (Georgakopoulou, 1991, p. 6).

Hunter

On the 2008 end-of-study questionnaire eight-year-old Hunter described himself as 'a great reader'. He wrote that he likes to read mystery books and enjoys reading before he goes to sleep. With respect to writing, Hunter explained that he 'gets his ideas from other books and then starts typing'. When asked to identify the parts of the research project he most enjoyed, Hunter wrote, 'I liked writing our story because we got to write our own picturebook'.

'Garfield goes to Mexico'

The frontispiece of Hunter's book contains a pocket with Garfield's passport, a ticket, an Air Canada boarding pass, and money ('catbucks'). On the title page Garfield is depicted as looking directly at readers, arms wide open, seemingly welcoming them to the book. Hunter introduces himself as the narrator on the first page stating, 'Hi, I am the narrator, Hunter. You better be careful because Garfield can get really bossy!' The illustration of Hunter shows him looking directly at readers and pointing to Garfield. It seems that Garfield can hear Hunter addressing the readers as a thought bubble beside the feline depicts himself wearing a crown. On the subsequent page Garfield directly addresses readers and admonishes them for opening the book. 'Hey! You're not allowed to open this book. I am the king of the book. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I am Garfield. The famous Chester is my cousin. Yeah, pretty good, huh?' Garfield sings a few lyrics from 'Hound Dog' (Leiber & Stoller, 1953) and warns readers that they better get use to him singing and dozing off. Chester arrives for a visit but because he is wearing a tutu (see *Chester*, Watt, 2007), Garfield slams the door. When Garfield slams the door a second time (Chester is dressed in an evil outfit), Hunter appears in the story and states, 'Hey Garfield. Why don't you just let him in?'

Once Chester is let in the house, he and Garfield engage in a welcoming 'routine' that requires Hunter to return and comment, 'Readers, you had better be careful. This could go on forever!' Hunter yells, 'STOP!' and the two feline characters cease their irrelevant chatter. Garfield and Chester then proceed to watch the movie 'Frankenstein' (Shelley, 1931), drink Pepsi and burp loudly. The next morning Chester informs Garfield that they are traveling to Mexico

for a holiday. Two days later Garfield, Chester and Little Mouse (a character from *Chester*) rendezvous at the airport. The trio gobbles Subway sandwiches before they board their plane and five hours later they arrive in Mexico. The text reads: 'When they got off the plane, they took a taxi to a hotel called the Marriott. It was late so they went to bed. The next day Garfield, Little Mouse and Chester went for a swim at the beach'. Hunter, depicted in the background, declares, 'THE END'. The three characters protest, complaining that they have only just started their holiday. Hunter replies, 'Too bad. It's the end because you guys already took up the whole book just getting to Mexico and I am too tired! I need to go to bed. The end!'

Analysis

Hunter crafted a story with several narrative levels and narrating devices. In Hunter's book, the author (him) is the narrator. However, the narrator also becomes one of the characters in the narrative. Hunter includes a metalepsis by beginning his story with an intrusive narrator (himself) who 'introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative' (Genette, 1988, p. 88) by greeting and warning readers. He immediately oversteps the boundary between 'the world *in* which one tells, [and] the world *of* which one tells (italics added)' (Genette, 1980, p. 236). Further, on the first page it seems that Garfield can hear the narrator address the readers as the lasagna-loving feline imagines himself in the role that readers have been warned about (i.e. a king). Again the boundary between narrative levels has been deliberately breached creating an illusion of reality.

Hunter's book contains numerous instances of metalepsis and these narrative transgressions further 'fold narrative levels back onto the present situation of the narrating act, uprooting the boundary between the world of telling and that of the told' (Pier, 2005, p. 303). For example, Garfield directly addresses readers on the second page, reprimanding them for opening the book and introducing himself. Hunter, who is both the narrator and author, not only directly addresses readers, but he speaks directly to his characters in front of readers on several occasions during the narrating, effacing the boundaries between characters and narrators and between narrators and readers. The intrusive narrator, Hunter, comments on narrative situations and events in the book that he, himself, is narrating and this mediated narration draws attention to the fictional nature of the story. Thus, the diegetic is disrupted in different ways in Hunter's book.

As well as the examples above, the 'process of textualisation' (Pier, 2005, p. 304) is further emphasised in the narrating of 'Garfield goes to Mexico' through Hunter's use of five different fonts – one for Hunter, one for the narrative, one for Garfield, one for Chester, and one for Little Mouse. The distinct fonts contribute to emphasising the distinct narrative levels. Further, the ending heightens the fictionality of the story because the characters

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complain to Hunter when he states, in his own font (not the narrative font) 'THE END'. Garfield, Chester and Little Mouse attempt to negotiate with Hunter, who is depicted in the background of the illustration, for additional time in Mexico. However, the 'demarcation between fiction and reality' (p. 303) is further contravened by Hunter's statement that the characters 'took up the whole book just getting to Mexico' and that he is tired and needs to go to bed.

Finally, some of Hunter's intertextual connections are further examples of metaleptic disruptions. He entangles several diegetic levels through his intertextual connections to the movie Frankenstein, the character Garfield, and the picturebook, *Chester* (Watt, 2007). Hunter identified three intertextual connections to *Chester*: 'I got Chester because he's in my book. I got Little Mouse, and I got the 'Hasta la vista, baby'. That's on my ticket in the book'. In *Chester*, Chester prints the words 'Hasta la vista, Mousie!' when he changes Melanie Watt's story and sends the mouse character to Mexico. Although some students, including Hunter, knew that Arnold Schwarzenegger had articulated the lines 'Hasta la vista, baby!' in the movie *The Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991), all of the children in the 2008 research project became aware of this fact after our whole class discussion of *Chester*.

Other intertextual connections in Hunter's book that draw attention to the fictional nature of the narrative discourse include a song ('Hound Dog') and references to corporate businesses and products (Marriott, Pepsi, Subway and Air Canada). During his interview about his book, Hunter explained his parodic transformation of other specific 'texts' (i.e. American currency, an airline ticket, a passport, and a boarding pass).

H: Well I got a passport and on the front it says, 'Go Around The World. You'll like it'. That's what it's called, but I just thought up that idea. I didn't get it from anything. And then I put a picture of Garfield in it and it says, 'This is me Garfield'. And it's got a picture – most of the passports have your picture in it. And then I got the Mexico ticket to Mexico, and then there's the Air Canada [boarding] pass. I got that from traveling and then I got row 9, seat 3, and then I got the zip code at the bottom. And then I got the narrator's one and it says Air Canada, row 9, seat 4, and it's got the zip code on the bottom. [He means the code on a boarding pass that is scanned before boarding.] And then I got the money. It says one hundred catbucks, and then … in Garfield's world it's called catbucks and the guy on the dollar bill is supposed to be Abraham Lincoln, but in his world it's Catbraham Lincoln. And I got two hundred bucks, two one hundred dollars bills because you need money to spend, to buy stuff in Mexico.

S: Laughs. Definitely! Great explanations. What's on the back of your passport?

H: It says for help visit www.gatw.com. [gatw stands for Go Around The World]

S: Okay, and where did you get that idea from?

H: I just got the idea from my mom. I looked on the back of her passport and my passport and I saw that it says for help visit www and then something like that [a website URL].

Thus, Hunter demonstrated his ability to draw on and transform existing texts, and to make them meaningful for his own narrative. The intertextualities that link 'Garfield goes to Mexico' with other texts represent another level of narration in Hunter's metafictional work.

Alonzo

On the 2008 end-of-study questionnaire nine-year-old Alonzo wrote that he is 'a great reader when it comes to understanding it,' and that he likes humourous books and to read when it is quiet. Alonzo described himself as an 'o.k. writer' because he has 'troubles starting' but noted that he is 'fine the rest of the way'. He explained that he does not like to brainstorm ideas for writing but rather just wants to get started. When asked to identify the parts of the research project that he most enjoyed, Alonzo wrote, 'I like how we recorded our discussions because we got to use the recorders'.

'My Version of Tokyo Drift Featuring the Pigeon'

A parodied version of Mo Willems's Pigeon (2003, 2004, 2006) is the main character in Alonzo's book. A centered, black vertical line divides the pages; on the left-hand side the Pigeon comments on his story, converses with the narrator and overall, interferes with the narrating and the narrative. The right-hand side of the page is essentially the narrator's 'space' to tell the story. On the first page of the book the Pigeon trespasses the centre line and pokes his head into the story on the right-hand side of the page.

The story has intertextual connections to a movie about streetcar racing titled *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Morgan, 2006). However this story's setting is Canada and the Pigeon, complete with a Mohawk hairstyle, a pierced nose and a dollar sign tattoo on his neck, is the main character. The Pigeon objects to the vehicles the narrator provides for him and asks for a Camaro and then a Nissan 350Z. When the Pigeon approves of the Nissan 350Z, the narrator parodies Elvis Presley with, 'Why, thank you. Thank you very much'. The race features the Pigeon against well-known characters from Nintendo video games: Yoshi, Luigi, Toadstool and D. K. (Donkey Kong). One page shows the cars at the start line and rain falling from the sky. However, when readers turn the page the text on the left-hand side reads, 'Sorry, your free trial has expired'. A final page turns reveals Homer Simpson, donned in only his underwear, sitting in a chair in front of a television on the left-hand side of the page. The word 'D'oh!' is in a speech bubble above Homer's head and on the television screen are the words, 'Sorry, your free trial has expired'. The right-hand side of the page features the other members of the Simpson family

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(Marge, Lisa, Snowball II (cat), Bart, Santa's Little Helper (dog), and Maggie) looking directly at readers.

Analysis

Similar to Anthony and Hunter, Alonzo's book includes various types of interruptions to the multiple diegetic levels in his book. The first three words of the text, 'Once upon a …' are typed in a font Alonzo described as 'like fairy tale writing'. Another narrator interrupts this momentary fictional world with 'Hold up. Hold up. This is not a fairy tale. This is an even more extreme version of Tokyo Drift. Ahem! Oh yeah, featuring the Pigeon'. The metaleptic disruptions create a metanarrative as the narrative refers 'to itself and to those elements by which it is constituted and communicated' (Prince, 2003, p. 51). The first narrator is interrupted by a second narrator, and the second narrator is interrupted by the Pigeon, both verbally (Ahem!) and visually (the Pigeon encroaches the centre line that separates him from the story). Further metanarrative comment occurs when the narrator states, 'Now we begin the story. One day there was a totally awesome pigeon. Wow, that sounded weird'. The narrator not only announces to readers that the story is beginning, but he also comments on the telling of his own story, further blurring the boundaries between the narrating time and the story time.

On the second page the Pigeon comments on the narrative, expressing his disapproval of the mini van described by the narrator. The Pigeon looks directly at readers and this 'demand' image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118) further flouts the transgression of boundaries among author, character and reader. The Pigeon, while tapping the centre line with his wing, pointing at the mini van, states, 'Please! You expect me to drive that! Give me a Camaro or something!' The Pigeon makes additional remarks about the narrative and he and the narrator engage in a textual conversation in front of readers. Thus, the interactions between the narrator and the Pigeon, which constitute part of the narrating, draw reader attention to the fictional nature of the book. When Alonzo was explaining how his book had stories within stories he stated, 'Well there's the narrator trying to tell the story and then there's the Pigeon interrupting and trying to make him [the narrator] tell his own story'.

The ending of Alonzo's story reveals that the fictional world readers have observed being created in front of them is in fact another diegesis – a television show being watched by a prominent, popular culture fictitious character: Homer Simpson. Alonzo explained to me during his interview that, 'Homer is just watching TV because he was watching this movie that he got for free, and then, but it was only part of the movie. And so it was kind of like a free trial thing. So yeah, Homer was watching the whole book'. The inclusion of the Simpson family, characters from an animated television show, which is itself another fictional world, represents an additional metalepsis (Prince, 2003). Further, the Pigeon, a character from picturebooks, is to compete in

a car race with characters from the Mario Brothers video game, another diegetic. The layers of diegetics in Alonzo's book not only draw attention to the metafictional nature of the text, but also to the distinctions among the story, the act and purposes of narrating, and to the spatio-temporal contexts and chronology of both story and narrative time.

Alonzo's use of different fonts for the narrator, the Pigeon and Homer also draws reader awareness to the act of narrating and to the distinct narrative levels. The intertextual connections to other fictional worlds, which were parodic in nature, are additional examples of metaleptic disruptions (i.e. combining narrative elements from different diegetic levels). Finally, another level of narration in Alonzo's book is the intertextual connection to a well-known phrase by Elvis Presley.

Discussion

As stated in the beginning of this article, the boys' texts are an artifact that can be examined to reveal their understanding of and abilities to produce narratives. Anthony, Hunter and Alonzo use many interactive devices in their books and manipulate several elements of narrative and narrating. Their texts include discontinuous narratives; the chronological narrating of each boy's story is interrupted both verbally and visually by intrusive characters and/or narrators. The different levels of narration result in distinctions between story time and narrative time (Genette, 1980). Each boy's book includes explicit metaleptic disruptions, some of which are 'signaled by the overtly self-reflexive references to storytelling' within the narratives (McCallum, 2008, p. 184). Indeed, readers are reminded that they are 'dealing with a constructed plot' (Ryan, 2001, p. 194) through numerous metafictive devices, including examples of intertextuality and parody.

During the research studies many of the picturebooks read by the students include narrating strategies that blur the boundaries among author, narrator, characters and reader, and explicitly invite reader participation in the fictional world. As is evident by the descriptions of the boys' texts, they also subvert several traditional narrative conventions and expectations, and these playful transgressions enhance the humourous nature of the narrating and of the stories. Drawing upon the work of Barthes (1975, 1977), who wrote about the role of the expected and the unexpected in texts and distinguished between texts of plaisir and texts of jouissance, the boys' books, like most of the picturebooks they read during the studies, can be considered texts of jouissance. To Barthes 1975), a text of plaisir/pleasure is one that 'comes from culture and does not break with it, [and] is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading' (p. 14). Although English lacks equivalent words for expressing the range of meaning of jouissance as Barthes used the term, jouissance is associated with texts that disrupt readers' assumptions. These texts, according to Barthes, provide the pleasure of non-conformity as they create discomfort,

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impose 'a state of loss' and fragmentation (p. 14). The boys' books can be described as texts that provide jouissance as a result of their self-referential nature and their playful and nonconforming approach to conventions.

Not surprisingly, the books created by Anthony, Hunter and Alonzo (as well as their peers) reveal that they were influenced by the picturebooks and other literature that they read, responded to and discussed throughout the research projects. The students' writing was embedded in a specific context of social interaction and activity that was generated due to their engagements with particular kinds of texts. Anthony, Hunter and Alonzo drew upon their reservoirs of literary and life experiences and adopted and adapted signs from other texts that they had read, viewed and/or discussed both inside and outside of the classroom context. The boys' application of the knowledge they developed as a result of their experiences during the research demonstrated how they were able to participate in and make meaning within existing literacy forms, as well as actively transform and produce those forms (Lankshear & Knobel 2003). Further, in both research classrooms the children shared their work with one another during the composing process and some students 'borrowed' characters from their peers' books to include in their own work. Resonating with other research (e.g., Cairney, 1990, 1992; Lancia, 1997), the boys' written and visual texts demonstrate how their work was affected by their membership in a particular 'social/textual community' (Kress, 2003, p. 159).

The written and visual texts created by Anthony, Hunter and Alonzo emphasise the need for curriculum documents to recognise and encourage the 'symbolic and discourse flexibility' (Dyson, 2001, p. 382) evident in the boys' work. In British Columbia, the Writing Performance Standards document, which many teachers use to guide their assessment of student writing, focuses on four aspects of writing: meaning, style, form ('attention to the 'rules' of the particular form of writing'), and conventions (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002b, p. 11). In both Grades 3 and 4 the 'rating scales' for form for writing stories emphasise a linear, chronological story with a logical sequence that resolves the problem (pp. 119 & 165). Further, no criterion addresses the possibility of multimodal compositions. The Reading Performance Standards (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002a) that describe literature suitable for Grades 3 and 4 students also privilege a narrative trajectory that is linear in nature with closure (e.g., 'there is no ambiguity at the end' p. 104). Although overall these provincial publications are creditable and instructive for teachers, both documents need revision with respect to the criteria that describe the structure of 'a good story' (McCabe, 1997, p. 470).

Students are disadvantaged if they read and write texts that include only the narrative structures described in the British Columbia Grades 3 and 4 Reading and Writing Performance Standards. As discussed at the beginning of this article, many children's experiences with and understanding of story

differs from the 'kind of stories they hear [and read] in school,' the kind with a 'clear temporal sequence of events' (McCabe, 1997, p. 456). Students need to develop a polysemous understanding of the nature of stories and the multiple ways that they can be written, represented and told. In developing cognitive flexibility it is imperative that students experience complexities and irregularities, encounter multiple representations, learn to tolerate ambiguity, and develop interconnected and flexible knowledge structures (Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich & Anderson, 2004).

According to Meek (1988), the most important single lesson that children learn from texts is *the nature and variety of written discourse*' (p. 21). The narrative heterogeneity of the picturebooks that the students read and discussed during the research contributed to their schemata of and strategies for reading print texts. The children developed an understanding of the structures, conventions and literary and illustrative devices in the literature, as well as the implications of these aspects for them as readers and writers. The students were able to identify, understand, interpret, and create narratives that were ambiguous, complex and metafictive in nature. Although they had little, if any previous experience in creating print texts with such diverse semiotic systems, the children confidently approached and completed their assignment.

Students should have opportunities to read, view, discuss and create print and digital texts in school that reflect changing ways of communicating and representing in their world. In his study of the effects of popular culture, Johnson (2005) described how the increased narrative complexity of television shows and films requires viewers to hold multiple threads in their consciousness like a 'kind of mental calisthenics' (p. 129). He wrote about the cognitive demands of this increased 'narrative complexity' (p. 69), and stated that contemporary audiences embrace the latter because they have experienced two decades of this structural feature (p. 71). Students are immersed in a plurality of texts and educators need to acknowledge and use students' out-of-school experiences with texts that have multiple reading, writing and viewing pathways (Kress, 2003). In our classrooms we need to talk about popular culture texts, the structures of such texts and the relationship of these texts to sociocultural contexts.

Educators need to develop their own knowledge and understanding of the broadening range of contemporary multimodal texts, such as the picturebooks used in the research with the Grades 3 and 4 students. In order to develop students' narrative competence, they need to be provided with diverse and complex narratives that demand particular cognitive skills for engagement, such as keeping track of numerous possibilities, and understanding that it isn't always 'necessary to think in a straight line to make sense' (Macaulay 1991, p. 419). Students also need opportunities to engage in various kinds of writing activities that are both challenging and motivating.

Appendix A
Sequence of picturebooks read and discussed during the research projects

2007	**2008**
Willy the Dreamer (Browne, 1997)	*Willy the Dreamer*
Re-zoom (Banyai, 1995)	*Re-zoom*
Shortcut (Macaulay, 1995)	*Shortcut*
Voices in the Park (Browne, 1998)	*Voices in the Park*
The Three Pigs (Wiesner, 2001)	*The Three Pigs*
Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book? (Child, 2002)	*Chester* (Watt, 2007)
Wolves (Gravett, 2005)	*The Getaway*
The Getaway (Vere, 2006)	*An Undone Fairy Tale*
An Undone Fairy Tale (Lendler & Martin, 2005)	*Wolves*
The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales (Scieszka, 1992)	*Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?*
Black and White (Macaulay, 1990)	*The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*
	Black and White

The students in both studies also read *Zoom* (Banyai, 1995) (after reading and discussing *Re-Zoom*); *Tuesday* (Wiesner, 1991) (before reading *The Three Pigs*); *Beware of the Storybook Wolves* (Child, 2000) (before reading *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Book?*); and *Why the Chicken Crossed the Road* (Macaulay, 1987) (before reading *Black and White*).

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