



Peer-reviewed paper

Nonsense and Early Childhood

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Nonsense as a genre of writing is well established in the English literature tradition. Young children's interest in playing with the aesthetic properties and meaning potentials of language as they master it for everyday use, is also well recognised by parents, teachers, and even by *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (1996). However, these two playful language traditions, and two groups of language practitioners, have not been sufficiently considered in relation to each other. In this article, I attempt to bring them together to demonstrate the strong links between them. Ultimately, I wish to highlight both the sophistication of nonsense language play and the learning value it has for young children. I provide, first, a brief background to nonsense as a genre and a literary tradition. This tradition is then linked to children's humorous language play. Finally, teachers' responses to children's spontaneous play with nonsense language are explored. It is important to point out, however, that this is not a study about how children learn language. My focus is on how children play with the language they are learning.

The Literary Background to Nonsense

Nonsense is a genre of writing, however, one that is associated with very few authors and texts. By far the most well-known practitioners are Lewis Carroll (*Alice's adventures in Wonderland* (1865); *Through the looking glass, and what Alice found there* (1871)) and Edward Lear (hundreds of limericks and other poems, for example, "The Owl and the Pussycat"). Both Carroll and Lear wrote in the middle – end of the nineteenth century, originally for specific children with whom they were friends and later, through publication, generally for children. It is largely thanks to their influence that nonsense is now mostly considered a children's genre, although one that continues to have a significant adult and critical/academic following.

However, according to Malcolm (1997) and McGillis (2002), nonsense was not originally or exclusively a children's genre. Malcolm (1997) traces the origins of English nonsense poetry to specific individuals and social sets from the inns and clubs of London in the 17th century. McGillis (2002) further reveals the mainstream credibility that nonsense had in the Victorian era for adults and children, when it was a legitimate means for poking fun at all sorts of pretensions. The readiness with which the word "nonsense" springs to our lips in response to political doublespeak or bureaucratic shenanigans is, therefore, in keeping with the original purpose of the genre.



Defining Nonsense in Literature

A definition of what constitutes “nonsense” in literature has not been agreed upon by the critics. Thomas (1985) has claimed that very little of what is called nonsense makes no sense at all, and therefore cannot be strictly termed nonsense: “Pure nonsense rejects sense. As much as is possible in this ultimately impossible enterprise, it nullifies sense.” (Thomas, 1985, p.119). However, critics do make a clear distinction between “nonsense” and “gibberish” by noting that nonsense breaks rules of sense making, while gibberish utterly abandons any attempt at sense making (Malcolm, 1997; Rieke, 1992). One vital distinction, according to Malcolm, is that nonsense language “presents the form of meaning while denying us the substance” (1997, p. 14). This distinction acknowledges the formality of nonsense literature, which most frequently follows a strict rigmarole, both in terms of the formal poetic language features of rhyme, metre and stanza; and the internal economy of sense it develops.

Seeking a working definition for the different sorts of nonsense in children’s literature, X. J. Kennedy (1991), a well-known American children’s poet, created the useful categories of “strict” and “loose” nonsense. Strict nonsense is “a highly specialised game” (p. 11) that occurs in a universe that is both strictly logical and insane – for example Wonderland in the *Alice* books. In contrast, loose nonsense tends to focus on a single unlikely event, such as a body part behaving oddly, rather than the whole world being unlikely and behaving badly. In Kennedy’s words, loose nonsense “doesn’t play such an elaborate, strictly rule bound game” (p. 111). Loose nonsense is much more common in writing for children.

What critics do appear to agree upon is that, for all its appearance of lightness and frivolity, nonsense is difficult to write. Not making sense while telling stories is very difficult; consistently not making sense while maintaining a strict formal language pattern is even more difficult and, according to Thomas (1985), indicative of a rare mastery with language. However, when children use language in non-serious ways that are deliberately designed to not make sense, it is often thought of as “being silly”, rather than an indication of language mastery.

Children and Nonsense Language

Because of my long-term interest in nonsense poetry written for children, the few references to nonsense in *Te Whāriki* (there are three) have always appeared as tantalising hints, rather than fully expressed statements of the relationship between young children, language play and learning. In Part A, where the special characteristics of each age group are described, *Te Whāriki* states: “Young children [2.5 – 5 years] can recognise a wide range of patterns and regularities in the world around them. This encourages them to question when things are puzzling and different from what they expect and to respond to ‘nonsense’ and humour” (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996, p. 25). In part C of *Te Whāriki*, where the strands and goals are teased out, “nonsense” is mentioned in the learning goals of both the communication and exploration strands (1996, pp. 76, 90), where it is linked to playfulness and enjoyment, as well as to the development of language and patterning skills.



The “capacity to reflect on one’s language” as language is evidence of meta-linguistic ability, according to Schultz and Robillard (1980, p. 60). While there are a range of types of language play that can be included under the umbrella term “nonsense utterances”, all of them involve “dissolving the signifying practices of culture [and] the ways in which it establishes and fixes meaning” (Shires, 1988, p. 271). The English language, like any language, is based on a complex rule system; however, it is acquired through immersion in an on-going linguistic apprenticeship, and so the rules of language use may be mastered without an individual having explicit awareness of them. However, through the process of learning language children develop meta-linguistic awareness of some of the signifying conventions of language that may be accompanied by a desire to subvert them, explore them, or simply play with them.

Language is the most plastic material with which children interact on a daily basis (plastic in the sense of capable of being moulded). And, just as a child may use any toy according to its designed purpose or employ it for an entirely different purpose, so a child may choose to use the rich resources of language for purposes other than conventional sense-making. Drew and Rankin (2004) have written about the importance of open-ended materials as the basis for children’s exploration in the creative arts: “The more children use open-ended materials, the more they make them aesthetically pleasing by fiddling, sorting, and ordering, and the more they see the potential in the materials and in themselves.” (p. 42). In addition to being the ultimate open-ended material, language has its own aesthetic properties – as any of us who have heard a persuasive speech or have tried to write the perfect sentence can attest. It is a medium particularly amenable to patterning and ordering impulses – to destruction, recreation, translocation, dislocation, etc – and therefore to aesthetic manipulation. Meta-linguistic awareness of the open-ended and aesthetic properties of language leads to creative usages. Rieke (1992) points out that although nonsense is destructive of meaning, it is far from being destructive in spirit: it is the “creative negation” of sense that produces “creative energy” (Rieke, 1992, p. 20).

Four Types of Language and Word Play

This section describes four of the types of nonsense play that appear in children’s language, presented alongside snippets of published verse in an effort to put them into context with the nonsense literature. The selection is representative, rather than comprehensive.

Hyperbole

One of the staples of nonsense writing, hyperbole is the term used for statements of exaggerated incongruity. Hyperbole is used in many of Edward Lear’s Limericks and the poem below by Doug Macleod:

Brian

Brian is a baddie,
As nasty as they come.
He terrified his daddy,
And mortifies his mum.



One morning in December
They took him to the zoo,
But Brian lost his temper
And kicked a kangaroo.

And then he fought a lion
Escaping from its pit.
It tried to swallow Brian,
But Brian swallowed it!

Yes, Brian is a devil,
A horrid little curse –
Unlike his brother Neville
Who's infinitely worse! (Macleod, 2004, p. 241)

Like many types of nonsense, “[h]yperbole is humorous when one has the cognitive ability to understand figurative language, rather than attributing literal meanings to all verbal expressions” (Varga, 2000, p. 142). In a study of hyperbole and humour in children’s language play in an early childhood centre, Varga (2000) recorded a peer exchange among 4-5 year olds at snack time during which children playfully competed to make hyperbolic statement over who could eat the most—from an apartment through to the universe and God. Varga identified three different levels of contribution in the shared language play of the peer group of 4-5 year olds. Children with the highest level cognitive, language and social skills were able to initiate nonsense language play and extend it though more extreme hyperbolic contributions. At a second level of participation were the children who could understand and appreciate the language game being played, but could not generate nonsense extensions to the play; while at a third level of participation were the children who did not get the game being played and responded literally. Varga concluded that children in the middle category were being scaffolded by their more adept peers during the play, with the pleasure of the game providing the motivation to persevere with a meta-linguistic task of some difficulty. In addition to hyperbole, the exchange included jokes about eating stomachs, butts and teeth that have a punning aspect, another sort of language play (Varga, 2000).

Over-literality

Another sort of nonsense language play that children enjoy is over-literality, an example of which is provided in the poem by Spike Milligan below:

Pennies from heaven

I put 10p in my Piggy Bank
To save for a rainy day.
It rained the *very next morning!*
Three Cheers, Hip Hip Hooray! (Milligan, 2004, p. 179)

Milligan’s verse is an example over-literality that involves playing with a conversational postulate, or the rules of language use in social contexts; this comes under the category of language pragmatics (Schultz & Robillard, 1980). A child who responds to a request to “move please” by wriggling her body while staying in the same place is demonstrating a similar sort of over-literality



based on a conversational postulate. Such play is meta-linguistic because it demonstrates a player's understanding of the extent to which the English language is metaphorical, and that we are always saying things that we do not literally mean—like “get lost”, or “you just saved my life”. An alternative example of over-literality might be a child literally lying down when asked, “are you lying?” In this case, the child is demonstrating an understanding of the humorous potential in homophones.

Playing with Phonemes

According to Schultz and Robillard (1980), children's play with language rules also frequently occurs at the level of phonology. Phonemes are speech sounds that distinguish one word from another—for example the “p” and “b” sounds that make “pet” distinct from “bet”. As this example suggests, phoneme substitution is ripe ground for the creation of rhyming games, as is well illustrated in Ogden Nash's nonsense verse below:

Barnyard Cogitations

Behold the duck.
It does not cluck.
A cluck it lacks.
It quacks.
It is specially fond
Of a puddle or pond.
When it dines or sups,
It bottoms ups.

Let's think of eggs.
They have no legs.
Chickens come from eggs
But they have legs.
The plot thickens;
Eggs come from chickens,
But have no legs under 'em.
What a conundrum! (Nash, 1961, p.7).

In Alcock's (2007) study of children's play during mealtime at an early childhood centre, she witnessed group name play based upon the rules of phonemic substitution, in which a boy called Olaf was called Lollaf; Sammy was called Spammy and Wammy; Anna was called Panna, and so on. Eventually the children moved on to more hyperbolic names, such as Andewope, which was then rhymed with Gwanelope (p. 289). According to Schultz and Robillard (1980) phoneme substitution is part of language acquisition (for example, before children can articulate a particular phoneme they will substitute with one that is close to it, like ta for car) so it is perhaps not surprising that this type of word play is popular among children.

Play with Selection Restrictions

The fourth category of language play I will focus on occurs around the rules of selection restriction, or restrictions on how words can be combined. In the



classic nonsense poem *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, Carroll uses selection restriction for humorous effect in the opening stanza:

The sun was shining on the sea
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright -
And that was strange because it was
The middle of the night. (Carroll, 2008, p.22)

Schultz and Robillard (1980), point out that children's language is never meaningless. Even first words have a semantic context, which means that the rules of combination are being practiced from children's first two word utterances. For example "go away" (a favourite phrase of my niece at two years old) is a meaningful word combination, whereas "go stop" isn't. However, "go stop" is potentially funny if the incongruity between the two directive commands "go" and "stop" is playfully recognised, just as a cow jumping over a moon is funny on the basis of incongruity and selection restrictions.

Nonsense and Humour

As the poems and many of the examples above suggest, enjoyment of nonsense requires appreciation of "incongruity humour", which involves recognising that:

1. There are rules; but
2. The rules have been subverted in some way.

Any adult or child who has the ability to form expectations of what will occur next—in an interaction, a setting, or a sequence, for example—and then the will to respond with humour to a violation of those expectations understands incongruity humour. According to Pien and Rothbart (1980), research does not support Piaget's original proposal that children's participation in incongruity humour is dependent on the development of symbolic play capacities; rather it "involves only the recognition of incongruity and a playful interpretation of incongruity" (p.3), which they claim can occur from as early as four months. At that age a playful reaction to incongruity cannot be relied upon, however, and a fear reaction to the same violation of expectations can occur in a different context (Pien & Rothbart, 1980).

The increasing skills at forming patterns; manipulating language; understanding the world; and enacting social behaviours that children develop around the age of three (Sutton-Smith, 1970) add much to the pleasures of incongruity humour. For example, there is the pleasure of mastery—knowing what is right and recognising it has gone wrong. When the pleasure of mastery is added to the pleasure of recognition, the appeal of the incongruous rises significantly (Pien & Rothbart, 1980). For young children, language is already associated with mastery—both in the sense that learning to master the rules of language is a large part of their learning; and in the sense that language is used by adults and children as a tool for asserting and maintaining mastery. To over-master language is, therefore, potentially a very pleasurable and liberating experience.



Producing nonsense also indicates an ability to think anarchically while behaving in a highly disciplined manner. Nonsense may break the rules of language and sense making, but it creatively replaces them with different rules that can be very complex. For example, children's nonsense utterances contain many of the complex, formal poetic features that, according to Kennedy (1991), characterise literary nonsense, such as repetition, sequences, rigmaroles, metre and rhyme, all of which announce that an unreal game is being played.

Teachers Responding to Early Childhood Nonsense

According to the literature, the learning potential in nonsensical verbal play extends beyond developing skills in language manipulation. Varga (2000) highlights the more sophisticated communications skills and heightened levels of responsiveness that were required of children in the hyperbolic language play she witnessed. For example, children altered their intonation and speech patterns (she termed it "implicit communication") rather than leave the "play frame" to explain their intentions or their joking stance (Varga, 2000, p. 149). Both Varga (2000) and Alcock (2007; 2009) stress the degree of interconnection and cohesion required in the peer group for this sort of play to occur, with Alcock claiming that the play with names she witnessed, "mediated children's individual and group awareness, agency, and consciousness" (2009, p. 26).

Given its spontaneous nature and the opportunities for peer learning and mutual pleasure available in children's nonsensical language play, it might seem that it is best left for children to get on with. However, I want to address teachers' responses to children's nonsense language play, because I believe that within a centre context the teacher will always be taking a position in relation to this play, whether consciously or not. Therefore, I have created five categories of teacher response to child-initiated verbal playfulness, informed by the literature; the research of Alcock (2007; 2009; 2010) and Varga (2010); and my own observations and beliefs.

First, it is possible that teachers may mistake children's nonsense play for errors of expression or understanding that need to be corrected, which is what occurred during Varga's (2000) observations. To some extent, this is unavoidable because it is impossible for teachers to keep up with every interchange, and mistakes occur in dialogue all the time. Indeed, they are normal. However, maintaining an awareness of specific children's interest in playing with language could perhaps make teachers pause before making a correction. Alternatively, the awareness that mistakes are often very funny for children, particularly those of adults, could enable teachers to turn errors into subsequent playful and humorous exchanges.

A second teacher response to nonsense, and the one most commonly observed in Alcock's research (2007; 2009), is teachers tolerating children's nonsense play by non-intervention, or providing implicit sanction with non-verbal signs (such as smiling), but not actively participating. Tolerating silliness will allow for the development of a children's culture of such play, which could provide both rich peer language-learning opportunities (Varga, 2000), and heightened opportunities for children to experience pleasurable connectedness (Alcock 2010; Alcock, Cullen & St George, 2008). However, it may also cement a "hidden curriculum" (Carpenter, 2001) in the classroom, that adults only use



language seriously, thus firmly establishing it as a child's toy. It also leaves the resourcing of children's language play at the level of the most competent player.

A third teacher response to children's nonsense play would be to label it "silliness" in a negative sense, and seek to quash it by emphasising a return to sensible communication. While I have only anecdotal evidence for this sort of teacher response, I have witnessed it often enough to feel confident that it constitutes a category of response. It might be automatic; made in defence of a planned learning task; or based on a fear that the "silliness" will get out of control and undermine order in the learning environment. Research by Davis and Apter (1980) reveals that the benefits of humour in the learning environment have been established in some contexts; although there is the possibility that humour "may help to raise arousal beyond its optimal level, especially in cases where the learning task is a difficult one" (p. 239). In terms of the centre experience, however, there can be no doubt that humour will make a learning environment happier and more pleasant; and there is some evidence that it will make learning events more memorable, and could therefore reinforce them. Egan and Judson (2009) class jokes and humour as imaginative tools that have both motivational and pedagogical benefits for teaching curriculum studies to school level students. Some early childhood teachers may have to develop a degree of toleration for the discomfort they feel when children become excitable and escalate their silly inventions; or perhaps allow time and space for such events within the routines of the day. It is worth noting the following: first, that Varga's (2000) research revealed children self-policing their language play when it veered towards illicit words—she hypothesises this was done to pre-empt adult intervention that would spoil the game. Second, the literature clearly emphasises that the nonsense genre is as conservative as it is radical, and that play with categories is often about re-establishing their fixity, not fostering misunderstanding.

An alternative approach (my fourth category of teacher response) is for the teacher to consider her/himself as a rich resource for language play. Adults have greater vocabularies; longer histories of experiences (real and imagined); greater understanding of a range of types of humour; and greater facility with linguistic complexity. All of these are rich resources for verbal games based on patterning and sequencing, incongruous connections, exaggerations (hyperbole) and over-literal uses of language. Children's imaginations can get stuck and require resourcing, even in games of their own devising. In particular, contributions from adults can kick start and extend children's emerging skills at verbal patterning and making connections.

Lastly, and fifthly, having traced the connections between the literary nonsense tradition and children's nonsense utterances, I have to advocate for exposing children to nonsense literature. Evidence from Varga (2000), and Schultz and Robillard (1980) reveals that children's appreciation of nonsense humour is in advance of their expression of it; therefore, exposure to nonsense literature will be both pleasurable and potentially instructive.

Conclusion

The concept of *ako* recognises that, no matter what our educational roles, we are all teaching and learning from one another (Tamati, 2005). Teachers play a



significant role in the development of literacy skills in early childhood; while children can teach us a great deal about spontaneity, creativity, adaptability, pleasure seeking and risk taking. I have found that engaging in nonsense exchanges with children has developed my abilities with impromptu recall; extemporising with language; and abstract and associative thinking. I have also experienced and understood firsthand the sense of *frisson* that comes with being involved in a scenario or exchange where I do not know what I or anyone else will do next. Cullen (2008) has expressed concern that the emphasis on embedding early childhood literacy education within meaningful, holistic contexts has meant that “skills such as phonemic awareness and phonological processing have been deemphasised” (p.11). The evidence that informs this article suggests that even if teachers have deemphasised these skills, children have not—they are playing with them all the time and, therefore, at any time, we can join in the game.

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For children experiencing toxic stress, specialized early interventions are needed to target the cause of the stress and protect the child from its consequences. Suggested citation: Center on the Developing Child (2007). The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu. Subscribe to our mailing list Request permission to republish this resource. Early Childhood Education Commons, Open Access. Powered by Scholars. Published by Universities. Search Early Childhood Education. 2,083 Full-Text Articles 2,616 Authors 253,057 Downloads 214 Institutions. Popular Articles. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the effects of a play-based early childhood curriculum on the academic and social development of pre-kindergarten children. The findings in this literature review examine the relationships between free play, social skills, and academic outcomes in the early years of school. The reviewed research suggested a positive correlation between free play in early childhood and future school success in literacy and social development. Early childhood education is basically for children between the ages of three and five. It is more commonly referred to as preschool, pre-kindergarten, daycare, nursery school or simply early education. Despite the different names, they all have the same purpose "to prepare children for elementary school. Giving your children special attention before elementary school helps in giving them a head start for their future. What is the Purpose of Early Childhood Education? Early childhood education is similar to a training program given to young children. During class, children will gain the social skills necessary for success in school. Early childhood is a stage in human development. It generally includes toddlerhood and some time afterwards. Play age is an unspecific designation approximately within the scope of early childhood. In psychology the term early childhood is usually defined as the time period from birth until the age of six years, therefore covering infancy, kindergarten and first grade. There are three simultaneous development stages