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Framing young children's humour and practitioner responses to it using a Bakhtinian carnivalesque lens

Abstract

This article presents findings from a pilot study offering an alternative framing of children's humour and laughter in an early childhood education setting. It employs a Bakhtinian carnivalesque lens to explore the nature of children's humour in an urban nursery, and investigate the framing of children's humour and laughter outside the popular paradigm of developmental psychology. In addition, it addresses the challenge that children's humour can present for early childhood practitioners, turning to Bakhtin's analysis of carnival to frame children's humour as carnivalesque. This conception is then offered as a part of a potential explanation for practitioners' occasional resistance to children's humour, proposing that dominating, authoritative discourses within early childhood education play a significant role in this. The article draws on a number of theorists, including Bakhtin more widely, to address reasons why humour is not valued pedagogically within the UK early childhood field, and suggests that further research in the area is imperative, in order that we gain a better understanding of the place and significance of children's humour within early childhood practice.

Keywords: Bakhtin, humour, early childhood education, carnivalesque, pedagogy, practitioner

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude pilote présentant un autre cadrage de l'humour et du rire des enfants dans un milieu d'éducation de la petite enfance. Il emploie une lentille carnivalesque bakhtinienne pour explorer la nature de l'humour des enfants dans une garderie de milieu urbain, et analyse le cadre de l'humour et du rire des enfants en dehors du paradigme populaire de la psychologie du développement. En outre, il aborde le défi que l'humour des enfants peut représenter pour les praticiens de la petite enfance, en se tournant vers l'analyse de Bakhtine du carnaval pour placer l'humour des enfants dans un cadre carnivalesque. Cette conception est alors présentée comme partie d'une explication possible de la

résistance occasionnelle des praticiens à l'humour des enfants, en proposant que le discours d'autorité dominant en éducation de la petite enfance y joue un rôle important. L'article s'appuie sur un certain nombre de théoriciens, y compris Bakhtine plus largement, pour regarder les raisons pour lesquelles l'humour n'est pas pédagogiquement valorisé dans le domaine de la petite enfance au Royaume-Uni, et suggère qu'il est impératif de mener des recherches plus poussées dans le domaine, afin d'avoir une meilleure compréhension de la place et de l'importance de l'humour des enfants dans la pratique de la petite enfance.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio piloto que ofrece un encuadre alternativo del humor y la risa de los niños en un ambiente de educación de la primera infancia. Se emplea un lente carnavalesco bakhtiniano, para explorar la naturaleza del humor de los niños en una guardería urbana, e investigar el encuadre del humor y la risa de los niños fuera del paradigma popular de la psicología del desarrollo. Además, aborda el desafío que el humor de los niños puede presentar para los profesionales de la primera infancia, dirigiéndose hacia el análisis de carnaval de Bajtín para enmarcar el humor de los niños como carnavalesco. Ésta concepción, es entonces ofrecida como parte de una posible explicación para la resistencia ocasional de los educadores al humor de los niños, proponiendo que dominándolo, los discursos de autoridad dentro de la educación de la primera infancia desempeñan un papel fundamental en esto. El artículo se basa en una serie de teóricos, incluyendo Bajtín de forma amplia, para abordar las razones de por qué el humor no se valora pedagógicamente dentro del campo de la primera infancia en el Reino Unido, y sugiere que una mayor investigación en el área es imprescindible para que podamos obtener una mejor comprensión del lugar y la importancia del humor de los niños dentro de la práctica de la primera infancia.

Introduction

Despite a considerable volume of insightful psychology-based research proposing the pedagogical prominence of children's humour (Davies and Apter 1980; Klein 2003;

Loizou, 2007; Raskin, 2008; Hoicka and Akhtar, 2011), it has not enjoyed the attention it warrants within educational research. Of the wide range of studies of humour in education over the last four decades (Raskin, 2008), few have explored humour within early childhood education, focusing instead on school-aged children (Banas et al, 2011). Of those that have taken early childhood education as their focus (for example Bergen 1992; Reddy 2001; Loizou 2007; Hoicka and Akhtar 2011), many adopt a cognitive approach. This dominance of developmental approaches to children's humour reflects the hegemony of developmental discourses across the early years sector (Dahlberg 2000); an emphasis that sits comfortably alongside constructions of children and childhood that characterise children in two ways: firstly, as developing in phases - influenced by the overwhelming weight of Piagetian theory identifying children's capabilities as restricted due to cognitive limitations (Piaget 1953); and secondly, as having an affinity with nature and personifying innocence as (Taylor, 2013).

Offering an alternative framing of children's humour and laughter in an early childhood education setting, this paper employs a Bakhtinian carnivalesque lens to explore the nature of children's humour in an urban nursery setting, and investigate the framing of children's humour and laughter outside the popular paradigm of developmental psychology. In addition, it addresses the challenge that children's humour can present for early childhood practitioners in the United Kingdom, turning to Bakhtin's analysis of carnival to frame children's humour as carnivalesque. This conception is then offered as a part of a potential explanation for practitioners' occasional resistance to children's humour. Also offered is the notion that rationality runs through the core of much educational practice (Duncam 2009) and that perhaps practitioners' need for rationality within early childhood practice hinders their ability to embrace children's carnivalesque humour. I also draw on Bakhtin and other literature more widely to address reasons why humour is not valued, pedagogically, within the early childhood field. The data presented is analysed in response to a central research question: What are young children's manifestations of, perceptions of and reactions to humour within an early years setting from a Bakhtinian perspective and what is the impact of this, pedagogically? An extensive response to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, however, responses to the data are offered throughout, via a dialogic analysis (Sullivan 2012) that serves to strengthen the

rationale for pursuing the study in greater depth as a doctoral project. The findings, although limited, demonstrate correlations between the children's humour captured and Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which will be presented and discussed in more detail later in the paper.

The Carnavalesque

There have been abundant attempts throughout history to create a universal theory of humour, a theory that remains elusive. Instead there exists a body of ideas that tend to fall into the three main categories: the incongruity theories, the relief theories and the superiority theories. One conceptualization, which places humour within a more general theory drawing on the folk culture of the middle-ages, and is noteworthy within the field yet defies simple categorisation, is Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque.

It derives, primarily, from his exploration of the works of 17th century author, Francois Rabelais. Bakhtin's theory analyses humour in an historical and literary context, and draws upon the prominence of carnivals and carnival imagery within Rabelais' writing, transforming the carnival from a single event into a semiotic cultural code. Bakhtin (1984b) classifies humour as the language of the carnival through which many of the ideas that make-up the carnivalesque are expressed: in addition to Bakhtin's work, a more detailed description of the nature of carnivalesque can be found in works by Taylor (1995) Vice (1997) and Mayerfeld Bell and Gardiner (1998).

Exploring a methodology

This study employed a dialogic methodology based on Bakhtinian dialogism or the idea that 'everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others' (Bakhtin 1981, p. 426). In large part, the aim of the pilot study was to test a selection of dialogic research methods, forms of which were operationalised by White in her doctoral study, based on her interpretation of Dostoevsky's polyphonic entreaty (White 2010).

Setting and Participants

The study took place in an urban nursery setting for children between birth and five

years old, and involved two key early childhood practitioners - both trained to NVQ level 3 - four children aged between 3 and 4 years old and who attended the nursery on a part-time basis, and me, as researcher. I spent time in the nursery before conducting the research in order that I may develop 'the trust of a range of adult gatekeepers; acquir[e] working knowledge of the social structure, nature of interpersonal relations, and daily routines in the setting; and gain...the acceptance of the teachers and children' (Corsaro and Molinari 2000, p. 182).

Procedures and Ethical Considerations

Once full ethical consent had been gained from the university ethics committee data were collected via video observations, two static cameras were set up to film the child and practitioner participants (Keyes 2006; Loizou 2007), and one head-mounted camera (similar to those worn in White's 2009 doctoral research) worn by one of the practitioner participants. Sensitivity to the children's attempts to communicate their consent to be filmed was foregrounded throughout, and informed consent for the children to be filmed was gained from the parents of all children in the nursery. Opt-out consent forms were provided to all of the staff in the nursery. 'Loosely structured' interviews were conducted and video-recorded (King and Horrocks 2010) with all participants. During the interviews, all participants were asked to view video clips of the child participants spontaneously displaying or responding to humour and to express a reaction. Once the initial interviews were transcribed, in keeping with the dialogic methodology, secondary interviews were conducted presenting all participants with an opportunity to watch their interview video and respond to it.

The dialogical approach to analysis adopted drew on Sullivan's (2012) work and utilised utterance, in the form of 'Key Moments' (Sullivan 2012), as the unit of analysis. More than a sentence or word, an utterance is always answerable and here, all Key Moments were utterances that responded to the research question. While the limitations of the pilot study meant I was unable to fully embrace the dialogic process, it did afford me the opportunity to carry out a partial dialogic analysis of the data. I drew on the concepts of 'genre and discourse', 'emotional register', 'chronotope' - or Bakhtin's notion that, 'different social genres (each with their own social memory, values and traditions) offer different sets of potential to experience and give value to time and space' (Sullivan 2012, p.89) - and 'context' (Sullivan 2012). The findings

are presented both within ‘summary tables’ and then in ‘direct quotations’, which enabled me to demonstrate my ‘engagement with different voices’ (Sullivan 2012, p. 89) in the data. The analysis and discussion elucidate only certain aspects of the above criteria in an attempt to illustrate possible methods for drawing out their significance.

Data analysis: adventures in the underworld

Through gaining an overview of my analysis (Sullivan 2012) I discovered that the most apparent features of carnivalesque within the data were concepts of hyperbole, grotesque and clowning, but other features were present also and will form part of the discussion. In this context exaggeration, excess and the moving of the particular to the realm of the universal personify hyperbole. The children’s appreciation of the grotesque focuses particularly on the scatological imagery associated with debasing and renewing properties of the lower bodily stratum (Bakhtin 1984b). The concept of clowning in the analysis revolves around Bakhtin’s suggestion that, ‘Clowns and fools...are characteristic of the medieval culture of humour. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season’ representing, ‘a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 8). It also bears more resemblance to the ‘teasing’ highlighted by Cameron et al (2008) and not their use of ‘clowning’ as here clowning is seen as ‘attempting to provoke a response from a communicative partner’ (Cameron et al 2008, p. 8) as opposed to attempting to repeat an act in order to ‘re-elicite (my emphasis) laughter from others’ (Cameron et al 2008, p. 8).

Many of the examples of humour within the data occurred at lunchtime. This chimes with several studies of the carnivalesque potential of mealtimes within ECE research (including those of Varga 2000; White 2014; Brennan in White 2014; Alcock 2007). Interestingly, Ødegaard’s study noted that the presence of an underworld was not apparent at mealtimes, suggesting that because adults engaged in humour with children on these occasions, any opportunity for children’s dissention was eliminated (Ødegaard 2007) suggesting that the role practitioners have at mealtimes is central to the occurrence (or not) of carnivalesque humour. In the example below, the practitioner is seemingly unaware of the children’s conversation. Table 1, (as with all of the subsequent summary tables) gives an overview of the Key Moment in relation to genre and discourse, emotional register of learning/truth, time-space elaboration of

genre (or chronotope), and context.

Table 1

Summary Table for Key Moment 1 (headings from Sullivan 2012)

Participants	Key Moment	Genres and Discourse	Emotional register of learning/truth	Time-space elaboration	Context
PRACTITIONER A, Jools, Henry, Imogen	1	Carnavalesque genre - clowning, mimicry, subversion Inside-out discourse (anti- authoritative, irreverent) Double-voiced discourse	Humour Joy Connectedness with peers	Time as full of potential and uncertainty	Lunch-time Interaction with peers and practitioner

Key Moment 1:

Practitioner: You haven't eaten much rice today? Weren't you hungry? Aren't you hungry for your yoghurt then? **James:** Yeah (*throws head back and laughs then looks at Oliver*). *Oliver throws his head back and laughs as well, then looks at James. The practitioner is engaged in a conversation with children on the other table. Oliver looks at the practitioner, turns around and says in a staged voice:* **Oliver:** I've got one toilet at home. **Imogen:** I've got a pink cup (her cup is green). *Still using the staged voice, Oliver points at Imogen's cup.* **Oliver:** Pink. **Imogen:** Green (*smiles*). **Oliver:** (*Still using a staged voice*) No, pink (*smiles*). I've got a yellow one (*his cup is blue*).

The humour the children display in Key Moment 1 has a number of carnivalesque features, which helped me to identify its situation within the genre. The children embody the spirit of clowning, including: mimicry, when Oliver copies James in throwing back his head and laughing; playful performance and playing the fool, via James' use of a staged voice; and subversion (potentially, although this is somewhat speculative) when James looks at the practitioner, sees her attention is elsewhere, then turns to another child and engages in clowning behaviour (Bakhtin 1984). Support for this speculation comes from Da Silva Iddings and MacAfferty (2007) whose study

also reports young children's engagement with subversive behaviour. It might also be suggested that there is evidence of a 'double-voiced discourse' (Bakhtin 1984a) identifiable within this subversive behaviour. Oliver's comment 'I've got one toilet at home' may be a subversive response to a disapproving practitioner voice, particularly as his comment occurs in the context of lunchtime. Support for this comes from another excerpt from the data, seen later in Key Moment 3, in which a practitioner says:

'He'll (Simon) often...at the dinner table he'll always sit there and say things like that, and you're like, 'be sensible Simon' (laughs). Random things...It's just, usually in play it wouldn't normally matter but because they were at the dinner table, and then when he says something then they all start saying things and that sort of then gets a bit more than what he just started it as.'

This illustrates the practitioner's reluctance to embrace certain comments and behaviour in the context of a meal at 'the dinner table', for fear of the children's behaviour becoming uncontrollable, and supports the idea that Oliver may be responding to this reluctance given he may have experienced this response on other occasions.

The longest of the Key Moments and arguably the richest in terms of the identifiable carnivalesque associations did not occur at a mealtime suggesting that carnivalesque behaviour is not confined to these occasions. It involved two children, Sian and Simon aged 3 and 4, respectively, and me, as researcher. During a conversation with Simon and Sian whilst playing with porridge oats, the children, who had previously asked me for permissions as if I were a practitioner, appear to accept me as an equal in the humorous encounter. Our conversation began with a discussion about dinosaurs and their habitat. It was suggested that some lived in nests and the conversation moved on to who or what else can live in a nest. When it was proffered that I might live in a bird's nest, the conversation took on a carnivalesque spirit. Table 2 shows an overview of the analysis:

Table 2

Summary table of Key Moment 2 (headings from Sullivan 2012)

Key Moment 2:

Participants	Key Moment	Genres and Discourse	Emotional register of learning/truth	Time-space elaboration	Context
Simon, Sian and Laura (me)	2	Carnavalesque – grotesque body, anti-reality, degradation, clowning Inside-out discourse (anti-authoritative, irreverent)	Humour/the comic Joy Jouissance (Barthes, 1975) Displeasure Moral satisfaction Personal power	Time as full of potential and uncertainty Awareness of burgeoning sense of self in relation to the outside world	Free-play Getting to know an unfamiliar adult Moving between carnivalesque and ‘real world’ spaces

Key Moment 2:

‘**Simon:** (laughing)...you couldn’t go in there with that bird poo. But you could clean the bird poo up and put it in a bucket. **Laura:** Oh, and where would I put the bird poo then? **Sian:** (shouts) IN THE DINOSAUR’S MOUTH (laughs). **Laura:** (In an exaggerated tone) In the dinosaur’s mouth (laughs)? **Simon:** No, in the sink (laughs). **Laura:** In the sink (smiles). What would happen to the sink if I put all of that bird poo down there? **Simon:** (smiling) It would be smelly (laughs). You could put it in the bath (laughs). **Laura:** We could put it in the bath – hmmm (smiles). **Sian:** Just do it (smiles). **Laura:** A bath is for getting us clean. If we put bird poo in it, do you think a bath would get us clean? **Simon:** You can put soap in bird poo (smiles). **Laura:** Hmmm – or perhaps it should just stay outside? **Sian:** Yeah, I think so. **Laura:** Do you think so? **Simon:** Yeah, so the birds can eat it (laughs). *Sian laughs, too. The practitioners ask all of the children to tidy up because it is time for lunch.* **Simon:** (to me) Do I have to tidy up now? **Laura:** We all do because it’s lunch time.

Here, whilst playing with imaginary scenarios, we see children engaging in what Bakhtin refers to as their ‘right to emerge from the routine of life, the right to be free from all that is official and consecrated’, a state he suggests is ‘typically carnivalesque from beginning to end’ (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 257). Also illustrated is the children’s engagement with grotesque imagery. Cohen reminds us that, ‘carnival abuses and the term grotesque were not negative for Bakhtin, rather they connected to real life as a way to mock fear and generate renewal and rebirth’ (Cohen 2011, p. 192) and the presence of these ideas helps us to identify the genre as carnivalesque. Daniel (2006) suggests that the pleasure children experience from this grotesque imagery can be likened to Barthes’ (1975) concept of ‘jouissance’ as highlighted by Kenway and Bullen (2001) and that Grace and Tobin describe as ‘...an intense, heightened form of pleasure, involving a momentary loss of subjectivity. It knows no bounds’ (Tobin 1997, p. 177). More broadly, Bakhtin tells us that ‘[t]he comic, in general, is based upon the contrast between the feeling of pleasure and displeasure...’. We might argue that in one section of the Key Moment, ‘displeasure is caused by the impossible and improbable nature of the image...’ for example, bird poo in a dinosaur’s mouth. However, ‘...this feeling is overcome by two forms of pleasure: first...[the children] find some place for this exaggeration in reality’ (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 306). Perhaps the place found by the children for this exaggerated image in reality is in the idea that their comments challenge the pervasive cultural norms; those that are reinforced by adults and that direct the types of behaviour that are socially acceptable, and those that are not. ‘Second...’ Bakhtin tells us, ‘[the children may] feel a moral satisfaction’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 306) - moral satisfaction may be gleaned from having joked successfully with incongruous and grotesque images in the face of prevailing discourses that frame this kind of humour as ‘inappropriate’, as well as in the face of the adults who perpetuate and embody these discourses. Bakhtin also suggests that ‘[t]he essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity’ (Bakhtin 1984b, p. 20). The grotesque imagery we see in the example above, and others in the pilot have in common the children’s engagement with corporeality, and its role as an opportunity for children to enjoy the sense of expertise: we are all experts on our own bodies. It appears then, that engaging with grotesque realism presents children with the opportunity to feel empowered in an environment where they experience very little

power. They can degrade and debase adult authority by engaging with imagery that dominant cultural discourses claim as inappropriate, relishing the power they have over their own bodies. This may be a particularly enjoyable experience because as children of 3 and 4 they may have only recently become toilet-trained, and gained control over their bladders and bowels, contributing to them feeling empowered by their own corporeal awareness. This resonates with Loizou's argument that power is an integral feature of humour that children use to negotiate their social surroundings (Loizou 2007).

This example also demonstrates children's appreciation of nonsense, which is supported by Smeed (2011) and shows them engaging in what Kennedy terms, 'loose nonsense' (Kennedy 1991), through changing the laws of nature in an unsystematic way. For example, a seemingly logical conversation about people not wishing to live with bird poo becomes a conversation about putting bird poo into a dinosaur's mouth. Simon seems intent on bringing the conversation back to the realms of logic by attempting to problem-solve; he suggests that we might put the bird poo in the sink - a place he recognises as clean and therefore the opposite of bird poo. However, once again the nonsense element weaves its way back into the conversation via Simon's suggestion that bird poo in the sink would be smelly, and consequently suggesting we put it in the bath. The nonsense elements within the example are carnivalesque in a number of ways: firstly, carnival is the ultimate anti-reality - a nonsensical world; secondly, the presence of nonsense demonstrates a sense of turning the world upside down (Bakhtin 1984b). The playful toying with words and ideas shown here also reflects an engagement with clowning. Sian's comment that we could put the bird poo in the dinosaur's mouth appears as particularly playful and as an act of entertainment and playing the fool (Bakhtin 1984b).

Bakhtin describes carnival as being a time of equality and communication between all people. Before engaging with the children in their play, they treated me as another practitioner who had the power to sanction or disallow their behaviours. Once the conversation entered a carnivalesque space, however, the children appeared to effect a role change for me from 'authority figure' to 'equal'. When Simon asked me if he had to tidy up, a shift occurred from the carnivalesque space, back to that of 'real world' where the hierarchy was reinstated and, as a perceived practitioner (once again), I had

the knowledge and authority to answer his question. For Bakhtin, carnivals engender equality and free and familiar interaction between people and carnivalistic misalliances, meaning that although outside the carnivalesque space the children and I were separated by hierarchy, within the carnivalesque space we were equals (Bakhtin, 1984b). That the children seemed happy for my role as an authority figure to become blurred may indicate that children use adults within the 'safe haven' of the nursery as a 'practice ground' for communicating with others. For example, in varying contexts and dependent on the social skills the children are seeking to test, practitioners could present as an authority figure, a friend, an adversary and so on. The notion of children using adults to test, for example, the social acceptability of behaviours is supported by Sutton-Smith who argues that children engage in 'testing play' as, '...a form of self-validation' (Sutton Smith 1970, p. 9). It is possible, therefore, that children may project different identities onto practitioners depending on the nature of the testing. It also may depend on whether they perceive the environment as an all encompassing Rabelais-esque carnival that includes practitioners, or as an underground world that only children inhabit outside the official realm they are required to occupy alongside adults for the majority of the time (Bakhtin, 1984). Strengthening this is the idea that children may be doing this in an attempt to negotiate the presence of 'multiple voices within adults' (and all) utterances (Holquist 2002), and in reaction to the presence of 'hidden dialogicality': meaning that 'each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fiber to...[an]... invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person' (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 197).

Support for the idea that practitioners may not always be at ease with children's humour, perhaps both in relation to its timing and/or content, comes from Practitioner A and B's responses to Simon's comment about bird poo, an excerpt of which was shared earlier in the paper.

Table 3

Summary table for Key Moment 3 (headings from Sullivan 2012)

Key Moment 3

Participants	Key Moment	Genres and Discourse	Emotional register of learning/truth	Time-space elaboration	Context
Practitioner A, Practitioner B and Laura (me)	3	Epic genre Outside-in discourse (privileging a single truth) Double-voiced discourse (word with sideward glance)	Humour Need for control Responding to need for rationality ('be sensible Simon' and 'so then we have to say calm down and eat your dinner').	Hero as static	Establishing boundary between child and practitioner

Key Moment 3:

Practitioner B: That's just a typical Simon comment really... **Practitioner A:** Yeah, anything that come out of his mouth... **Practitioner B:** He'll often...at the dinner table he'll always sit there and say things like that, and you're like, 'be sensible Simon' (laughs). Random things...It's just, usually in play it wouldn't normally matter but because they were at the dinner table, and then when he says something then they all start saying things and that sort of then gets a bit more than what he just started it as. **Laura:** So it escalates and everyone else gets quite excited? **Practitioner B:** Yeah so then we have to say, 'ok, calm down and eat your dinner' (laughs).

Here, we see potential evidence through use of the terms 'be sensible' and 'calm down' of B's desire for rationality within the nursery space affecting her reaction to Simon's humour. Further, the mention of Simon's behaviour including 'random things' suggests conflict with the anticipation of order in the nursery context. Table 3 presents a perspective of Practitioner B's comments that demonstrates how this Key Moment differs significantly from the first two in a number of ways. The genre of this

Key Moment contrasts with that of the first two Key Moments in that it is monologic and finalising in nature, highlighting the practitioners wish to demonstrate how they 'know' Simon (for example, through the comment 'anything that come out of his mouth') and can label his behaviour as often going against the grain (for example when one practitioner says 'be sensible, Simon'). As a result of this the chronotope of this Key Moment appears to lack movement, which is in stark contrast to the chronotope of Key Moments 1 and 2 that seem more fluid. This contrast hints at a potential void between aspects of children's carnivalesque behaviour and practitioners' response to it, which arguably needs to be addressed in order to aid communication and understanding between the children and the practitioners. Also present in this Key Moment is Bakhtin's concept of a 'word with a sideward glance' or speech that indicates fear of other's judgements (Bakhtin 1984a). Practitioner B says 'random things' then hesitates; the gap in her speech suggesting she was responding to another voice, critical of her suggestion that this behaviour of Simon's was never accepted. In response to this voice Practitioner B explains that this behaviour would acceptable in play and attempts to justify her reaction by suggesting that it is context dependent, for example the behaviour is found to be inappropriate when sitting down for a meal.

Journeying to the underworld: a step too far for adults?

The data provide evidence to suggest that elements of children's humour, as seen in an early childhood setting, can be explained by Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque and that this illumination is potentially important for young children. Questions are raised, however, about practitioners' conscious and subconscious willingness and ability to accept and facilitate children's engagement with this kind of humour. If young children are to have the opportunity to engage in carnivalesque humour and explore their world enveloped by its renewing and liberating potential (White 2014), it seems imperative for early childhood practitioners, and the field as a whole, to embrace children's carnivalesque humour. Nevertheless, there appear to be a number of potential barriers, some of which are highlighted within the data, to its recognition as pedagogically valuable.

Current theoretical rhetoric within the early childhood education field depicts children as having agency and as being competent (Taylor 2013). Perhaps it is not enough for

these conceptions of children to be highlighted and advocated, however, due to a kind of cultural and societal hegemony which represses discourses that are not well established. Central current and historical discourses will prevail if practitioners are not encouraged to analyse how such monologic discourses (Bakhtin 1984b) affect their practice (Sorin 2005). Instead, practitioners may be left to lay new discourses across existing ones, creating a layer-cake approach to early years practice. In the role of co-creator and co-learner, practitioners would be perfectly set to understand, accept and embrace children's relationship with the carnivalesque. However, the lowest section of the layer-cake, or the most ingrained of their held discourses, can act as a barrier to change, by filtering through and determining their approach to practice. If practitioners are guided by prevailing ideas of children as innocent and pure (Taylor 2013) it could affect their expectations of children. Equally, Key Moment 3 supports the notion that early childhood practice may be founded partly upon rationality, as Duncam (2009) suggests schools are, and this too could create conflict for practitioners in embracing children's potentially subversive and transgressive carnivalesque humour. Bakhtin suggests that practitioner expectations of children are responsive, stating that, 'all real and integral understanding is actively responsive...and the speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding' (Bakhtin 1986, p. 69). Thus, when early childhood practitioners anticipate children's responses, due to what Bakhtin terms the 'centripetal' or homogenising and hierarchising forces (Bakhtin 1981) inherent within the authoritative discourse, this may deliver conflict between what the children, as heroes, are communicating and the way adults author their attempts to communicate.

White suggests that in engaging with children's carnivalesque humour '[t]he teacher plays an important role...since her task is not only to recognize this disposition, but also to respond appropriately' (White 2014, p. 905). She suggests a possible obstacle to this is that the teachers' accountability may prevent them from recognising and responding to this form of humour. Tobin argues that this accountability, and the boundaries it establishes, means that many early childhood teachers have an aversion to popular culture infiltrating the nursery environment and may experience its presence as a possible 'threat...to teacher supremacy' (Tobin 1997, p. 165) which prompts a 'fear of dissolution of boundaries' (Tobin 1997, p. 165) between teacher and child (Lambirth 2003). It could be that humour, and in particular carnivalesque

humour, is suffering the same fate as popular culture, for similar reasons. Gartrell (2006) suggests that practitioner engagement with humour in a classroom context is a 'high level' skill: another potential reason for their concern. A preoccupation with the 'serious' and contained nature of ECE, the skill involved and the accountability it presents is reflected in the idea that, '[l]aughter and play do not allow themselves to be controlled and may therefore not be understood by reason that aims to find causes and seek defined goals' (Øksnes 2008, p. 162). These ideas warrant further empirical investigation within my main doctoral study.

Of the 28 OECD countries in UNICEF's Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries report (2013) 18 have national guidance for early childhood education. Arguably significant in considering humour as pedagogically meaningful is that of those 18, only 3 contain a reference to humour: the UK, Norway and Ireland. None of the references are detailed; the most attention to humour appearing in the Norwegian 'Barnhage' guidelines (World Education Services 2014), where it is mentioned in relation to play, creativity and environment. Likewise, the Irish ECE Guidance, 'Aistear' (World Education Services 2014), links humour with play, also avoiding references to the development of humour. The UK Early Years Foundation Stage Non Statutory Guidance (World Education Services 2014) includes the word 'humour' once in the Communication and Language Development section, stipulating it is desirable that a child between 40 and 60 months, 'understands humour, e.g. nonsense rhymes and jokes'. The presence of humour within these early childhood education documents is positive, however, that only three countries specifically reference humour and only two in a non-developmental context suggests that humour is generally not seen as important pedagogically. There are a number of potential reasons for this. Bergen (1992) suggests we may not see humour in nursery play scenarios because teachers encourage earnest pretend play but discourage humorous pretend play due to concern regarding its 'out of bounds nature' (Bergen 2006). Another explanation for practitioners not 'seeing' humorous play may be that children exercise an element of control over their underground world by intentionally finding opportunities to engage in carnivalesque humour outside of the gaze of adults, because it allows them to experiment and explore power boundaries and relations within their environment, another suggestion which requires further empirical scrutiny.

The data inspires the thought of children projecting identities or roles onto practitioners that they need to be aware of and negotiate depending on the context in which the carnival is playing out. For example, if children are engaging in humour together away from adult gaze, the practitioner's role may be as authority figure. Consequently, practitioners could deliberately employ 'positive disregard', or make the pedagogical decision to 'turn a blind eye', gifting children the freedom to communicate in their underground world. Da Silva Iddings and McAfferty's (2007) findings suggest it is not necessary for children to be unaware of this disregard, and that it could be positive for them to note an adult's subtle communication of compliance (via eye contact or a smile), as this may even enrich their carnivalesque experience. I offer the term 'positive disregard' as an alternative to 'skilful neglect' (Labbett 1988). The distinction is that Labbett's term describes how teachers/practitioners understand and act on the idea they are not always responsible for what children should know and therefore, in particular situations ought to resist the urge to intervene in children's learning. Positive disregard requires practitioners to recognise their limited responsibility for what children should do, or the way they should act, given the multidisciplinary nature of early childhood education. This resonates particularly with the discourse-generated ideal of children engaging in play that reflects their innocence and connection with nature (Taylor 2013). In essence, 'to join the carnival, or not to join the carnival?' that is the pedagogical question; and practitioners may need to engage with it and recognise the presence of carnivalesque behaviour and carnivalesque humour in early childhood practice, generally, in order that children are supported meaningfully and effectively in the nursery environment. It is important to recognise that, '[s]eriousness of purpose can lead to...fear of failing in an important endeavour...' and if we continue to ignore children's carnivalesque humour '...we risk undermining the sort of joyful, playful relation to the world and each other that would actually allow us to look fearlessly at the world and tell the truth about it' (Lensmire 2011).

Conclusion

Whilst my pilot study data do not show children engaging in an intentional and authentic Rabelaisian carnival, their actions and behaviours can be classified as embodying the spirit of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and this offers us potentially

valuable insights into the nature of their humour (White 2014). Shortcomings in my data collection methods will necessitate changes, from attempting to acquire the Bakhtinian notion of ‘point of view’ in opposition to truth (White 2009) more effectively via the use of head cameras for all participants, including the children; to examining the effects of my involvement in the study and how this may affect the way children behave. However, this does not detract from the discovery that the children produced and enjoyed humour that embodied a carnivalesque spirit. From the exploratory yet thought-provoking beginnings provided by my pilot study it will be intriguing to delve into the phenomenon in more depth. Debatably, if nothing else, these findings present ideas that necessitate further research. It seems important for the field of early childhood education to acquire a more comprehensive and meaningful sense of the pedagogical implications of children’s carnivalesque humour. Perhaps a conscious move away from early childhood education as preparatory and focused on what children will become, towards Bakhtinian-inspired dialogic pedagogy (Matusov 2009) that encourages practitioners to notice and value the contributions of children, might expedite a different and progressive way of framing children’s humour. Further research for my doctoral study should help to unravel this conundrum and present a fresh, but not finalising, perspective. In the interim, facilitating practitioners recognition of their practice as potentially underpinned by multiple and conflicting discourses that could lead to the misunderstanding and neglect of children’s motivations, warrants serious consideration.

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