Lore and Language in the Australian School Playground

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The schoolyard is a place where children can create a world of their own, a place where they can construct and continue an abundance of lore. Rhymes, songs and games, which are not intended for adult ears, are easily passed down to the next generation of children. There is a difference, however, between the lore created by adults for the pleasure of children, and the lore created by the children themselves. This essay will explain the difference between the folklore *of* children and folklore *for* children, and will examine some of the reasons why schoolchildren in Australia create and perpetuate folklore for specific use in the playground.

A useful tool when investigating language and rhyming in the Australian children's playground is understanding how the folklore *of* schoolchildren differs from folklore *for* children. The folklore *of* children refers to lore created by the children themselves, lore which is passed down from one generation of primary school children to the next by means of 'observation, imitation, trial and error and sometimes direct instruction.'[1] In the Australian school playground, folklore of children can include such diverse offerings as games, songs, taunts, rhymes and clapping or counting rituals. Although the lore of the playground can alter slightly with changing times, much playground lore has been found to be relatively unchanged throughout the generations. An example of the unchanging nature of children's lore is the game of marbles. Commonly played by today's primary school children, the game of marbles has been remembered by Sir Joseph Verco, who in his recollections of 'School Games, 1860-67' remarks that the boys of the time were addicted to the game and that they used marbles as a form of commerce[2] —a practice which still resides in Australian primary schools today. However, even though the lore of children runs in a strongly traditional vein, with many games, songs and rhymes remaining largely unchanged, it is at the same time 'continually adapting, borrowing and

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[1]   *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey, and Graham Seal (Melbourne, Vic: Oxford University Press Australia, 1993), p. 62.
[2]   *Ibid*., p. 63.

parodying contemporary information and experience.'[3] Schoolchildren continue to both pass down traditional lore and to create additional lore or to slightly rework existing lore according to the times, and may borrow from such experiences as news stories, television shows, popular music or the internet.

In contrast, folklore *for* children refers to stories, songs and games created for children, namely by adults. This folklore is 'devised and transmitted by adults for children's amusement and instruction.'[4] Whilst the lore of children is learned by imitation and example, folklore for children is conveyed by the adult world. Nursery rhymes, which children learn at a very young age, are taught to children by adults, and games such as 'This Little Pig Went to Market' serve to amuse the child through touch and tickling. Children are thrilled by the prospect of a visit from Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, and telling a grimacing child that the wind will change and they'll stay that way is a common form of jocular reprimand.[5] To differentiate between folklore of and folklore for children, a good example is that of the common schoolchildren's' game of hopscotch. In painting a hopscotch grid in the playground, the teachers or other adults are attempting to step into the world of the children, they are providing a game for them to play, but are setting the boundaries. In contrast, children drawing their own hopscotch grid are likely to create their own version of the game. They may change the size of the squares to accommodate different age groups or change the way the game is played, and in this manner, create and pass down their own folklore.[6]

It is interesting to explore some of the reasons behind the need of children for the preservation and handing down of different folkloric practices. Children are 'adept at verbal play of all kinds', the practice of which further leads children to verbal capability as adults.[7] Some oral rhymes recited by schoolchildren are necessary for the regulation of games.[8] A popular skipping game amongst children of primary school age, 'Teddybear', can be recited as follows:

> Teddybear, teddybear, touch the ground,
> Teddybear, teddybear, turn right around,
> Teddybear, teddybear, show your shoe,
> Teddybear, teddybear, that will do,

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[3]   Seal, Graham, *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society* (Melbourne, Vic: Oxford University Press Australia, 1989), p. 95.

[4]   *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey, and Graham Seal (Melbourne, Vic: Oxford University Press Australia, 1993), p. 62.

[5]   *Ibid.*

[6]   Beed Davey, Gwenda, and Graham Seal, *A Guide to Australian Folklore* (Sydney, Simon & Schuster Australia, 2003), p. 60.

[7]   Seal, Graham, *The Hidden Culture*, p. 98.

[8]   Opie, Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 17.

> Teddybear, teddybear, run up stairs,
> Teddybear, teddybear, say your prayers,
> Teddybear, teddybear, blow out the light,
> Teddybear, teddybear, say good-night.[9]

Variations of this rhyme can be "Teddybear, teddybear, turn around" or "Teddybear, teddybear, turn out the light", however the actions which accompany the rhyme are essential to the rhyme itself, and the actions are performed whilst jumping using a skipping rope. Some rhymes are a 'mere expressions of exuberance', and are recited because they sound funny, even naughty, or children may simply enjoy the rhythm.[10] These rhymes, or variations of them, survive because they appeal to children. They hear someone else say it, and they enjoy the way it sounds, so it is repeated. Many such rhymes are remembered 'for amusement only', lacking a directly functional play purpose.[11] There are games and rhymes, however, which evoke a physical response. 'A pinch and a punch for the first day of the month!' would be accompanied by an actual pinch and a punch to the recipient of the rhyme. 'Want a Hertz Donut?' would be followed by a punch, pinch or stomping on the recipient's foot with the punchline, 'Hurts, don't it?' Common in the Australian schoolyard is the following:

> How's your back, Jack?
>   (thump on back)
> Haven't seen you for 'ears and 'ears
>   (pull ear lobe)
> But I still nose ya
>   (pull nose)[12]

It is intriguing to ponder why children would allow others to encourage rhymes with such a physical response. The answer seems to lie in the fact that, once the child had been the recipient of such actions, they are now in on the joke, and can perform it on others. It seems that the act of passing down such a trick allows the child to accept being fooled, because they now have the trick, and can fool their peers. It seems to be this fact that 'endlessly prolongs the life of these jokes.'[13] Vulgar lore may be a means of expressing curiosity about sexual issues. Apart from some vulgar lore being popular because it is 'naughty', it can be a way of expressing interest in matters reserved for the adult world. Far from being a mere 'delinquent phenomenon', vulgar lore is very

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9   *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey, and Graham Seal, p. 63.
10   Opie, Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren,* p. 17.
11   Factor, June, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children's Folklore in Australia* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1988), p. 167.
12   Factor, June, *Ladles and Jellyspoons* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1989), p. 48.
13   Opie, Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren,* p. 58.

much universal, and immensely popular in the Australian schoolyard.[14] The fact that so many Australian schoolchildren continue to be amused at vulgarity suggests a 'determination to explore topics regarded as taboo'. That jokes about underpants, toilets and genitals prevail suggests that children are always interested in topics prohibited by adults.[15] This theme is carried on into adolescence, where teenagers in their first few years of high school continue vulgar lore. However, it changes from that of the primary schoolchildren, with adolescent vulgar lore moving from 'naughty' to more 'bawdy' jokes dealing increasingly with bodily functions, sex and the use of swear words. As they leave behind 'observation, replication and parody', adolescents take on more adult concerns, and they themselves move into adulthood.[16]

The folklore of children reflects an 'unselfconscious culture' in which many songs, games and rhymes go 'largely unnoticed by the sophisticated world.'[17] Children are just as happy to embrace folklore for children, however, with rituals and rhymes being happily transferred from adult to child. As 'one of the oldest continuous folk traditions in human society', children's folklore is an essential part of growing up in Australian culture.[18] It gives enjoyment, allows free communication between children and allows them to construct their own world, which is integral to childhood.[19]

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14   Factor, June, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook*, p. 160.
15   *Ibid.*
16   Seal, Graham, *The Hidden Culture*, p. 102.
17   Opie, Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren,* p. 2.
18   Beed Davey, Gwenda, and Graham Seal, *A Guide to Australian Folklore*, p. 60.
19   Factor, June, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook*, p. 191.

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