EAD 801 Exploration Project:

Laughter in the Elementary School Classroom

Molly Noyed

Michigan State University

Introduction

Laughter was the cornerstone to my year in kindergarten. This year was my first as a teacher, and my first as a college graduate in a full time position. I had very few expectations of what my experience as a Kindergarten Teaching Assistant would be like, but I would have never guessed that it would be filled with so many moments of laughter. At Greens Farms Academy in Westport, Connecticut, my mentor teacher and I called a converted carriage house our classroom (and home). At this picturesque, traditional New England independent day school, we shared giggles, chortles, and full-body howls. With our eleven uniform-clad five and six-year-olds, we shared moments of bonding and emotional contagion.

It is my belief that my mentor teacher, Erin Thorkilsen, and I had such a joyful class due to our own positive dispositions in leading them. Inspired by Daniel Goleman’s *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence*, I have researched the connections between laughter and learning in an elementary school setting. Through reading various scholarly articles and two dissertations, my understanding of laughter in the classroom is that of having a largely positive impact.

It is of note that the school at which I instruct is immensely affluent. A large majority of the children in my kindergarten class came from incredible wealth. Fairfield County, Connecticut is known as the “bedroom of New York,” and it really does seem that way. I have been extremely lucky to have this as my first teaching opportunity, and acknowledge that my understanding of how carefree our students are may be in part because most live very privileged lives. That being said, I believe that laughter in teaching and learning has positive impacts no matter who is a part of the group. Nonetheless, the social and economic context of Greens Farms Academy is important to note, as it has been my sole kindergarten teaching experience and the experience off of which I base my understanding of an elementary classroom setting.

A key term in this paper is that of laughter. Laughter, which is defined as the action of laughing, is also regarded as being separated into 15 distinct stages. They are as follows, listed in the order of intensity and progression: smirk, smile, grin, snicker, giggle, chuckle, chortle, laugh, cackle, guffaw, howl, shriek, roar, and convulse (Smidl, 2006, p.8). In this paper, the term humor will be defined as “the attempt to create positive feelings of amusement and/or laughter in another person” (Whisonant, 1998, p.3). This research will focus on laughter, predominantly, but humor as a catalyst of laughter was present in some pieces of literature.

My Exploration Project research question was as follows: Does laughter as an emotional contagion have a positive affect on learning in an elementary school setting? My experience in kindergarten this year, paired with Daniel Goleman’s insights into emotional contagion and the limbic open loop, made me curious about the connection of laughter in leadership and learning efficacy in young children (Goleman, 2011). This project has implications for my future as not only a kindergarten teacher, but also an educational leader.

Literature Review

A vast majority of the literature I utilized in my research denotes the positive implications of humor and laughter in the classroom. Through this literature review, I will articulate the key aspects of each scholarly work and illuminate its position in regards to my research question. Some of the following articles focused very much on humor; my research does not directly connect humor to learning, but instead, laughter. Nonetheless, I take the information about humor in stride and acknowledge its implicit connection to my core focus.

In Robert D. Whisonant’s dissertation, entitled, *The Effects of Humor on Cognitive Learning in a Computer-Based Environment*, he researched humor’s affect on divergent thinking and information acquisition. This dissertation was not tailored for elementary education, but much of the information he provided relates wonderfully to my theory of laughter’s impact in the classroom. To begin, Whisonant states that, “Some physiological evidence exists which suggests that humor utilizes the complete power of the brain” (Whisonant, 1998, p.3). This connection with the physiology piqued my interest, since Goleman touched on the physiological implications of laughter. Whisonant provides another layer to this, by presenting humor as fully engaging for the brain.

According to the relief theory, as introduced by Herbert Spencer, “humor is a socially acceptable way of releasing built-up tension and nervous energy” (Whisonant, 1998, p.7). This connects directly with kindergarten, and made me think of the first day of school. Each child, new to the institution and his or her peers, comes into the classroom very nervous. Through the use of humor and its ability to produce laughter, tensions are eased and the group feels united, welcoming the kindergarteners into a positive primary school learning experience.

Beyond humor as a uniting, relaxing tool, humor also has the ability to hook students in. As Whisonant states, “For children, humor should be used in small units and frequently to increase attention” (Whisonant, 1998, p.17). Humor has the ability to reconnect with children when they might be drifting. I have seen this firsthand in our classroom—via a redirecting comment by Erin or a silly modeling of how to walk in a straight line, humor as a teaching tool is indispensible.

Whisonant, in his dissertation, also includes an incredibly apropos quote. It is as follows:

“Boy, keep [your students] laughing. Make them laugh

so damn hard and so damn loud that

they don’t realize they are learning.”

*Bernie, from Pat Conroy’s The Water is Wide*

Through utilizing humor as a source of connection amongst classmates and a form of engagement from the instructors, laughter is due to ensue and result in a fun experience for the learners *and* leaders.

In Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee’s article, “Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance,” emotional contagion and its impact on a group is clearly articulated. It states, “If you’re an upbeat, inspirational leader, you cultivate positive employees who embrace and surmount even the toughest challenges,” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001). In the case of leading a group of small children through their kindergarten experience, I believe that the same idea applies. Cultivating positive and engaged students who are excited to learn is feasible through positive emotional contagion.

Referencing research performed by Alice Isen at Cornell in 1999, this article states: “An upbeat environment fosters mental efficacy, making people better at taking in and understanding information, at using decision rules in complex judgments, and at being flexible in their thinking” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001). This suggests that, perhaps, laughter (as a positive experience and an aspect of emotional contagion) could do all the things listed above. In a physiological sense, “our limbic system’s open-loop design lets other people change our very physiology and hence, our emotions” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001). This is an incredible asset to take advantage of as a leader, and most certainly as a role model for young children.

In Claudia Cornett’s 1986 writings, she lists 13 reasons why humor should be a part of the classroom. These reasons are as follows: attracts attention and provokes thought; liberates creative capacities; helps gain friends; improves communication; helps deal with difficult moments; can be an entry into the study of other cultures; for its health benefits; develops a positive attitude and self-image; motivates and energizes; solves problems; increases quality and quantity of students’ reading; reinforces desired behaviors; and is easy entertainment (Cornett, 1986). Her idea on developing a positive attitude and self-image is quite central to our work in kindergarten and elementary schools in general. So much of kindergarten is facilitating positive learning experiences and infusing our lessons with confidence and skill-boosting opportunities.

Ramit Ring’s paper, entitled, “Humor in Teaching,” presents similar ideas to that of the aforementioned resources. Ring states, “Using humor enhances lesson plans, compels students to pay closer attention, and gives many students a chance to display creative thinking skills” (Ring, 2008). This quote rings true with many articles and scholarly sources on the matter of laughter and humor in the classroom. Ring also presents a quote that I find particularly apropos for learning in the younger ages: “Reality is often incongruous, situationally absurd. It is never logical for long” (Ring, 2008). Although many things can be black and white for children, funny nuances in the day-to-day can result in sudden bursts of laughter, which leads me to agree wholeheartedly with this quote. Even when logic is present, situational absurdities can lead to a case of the giggles.

Said Shiyab, in the article, “Pedagogical Effect of Humor on Teaching,” speaks to the historical differences in the perception of humor. As stated at the beginning of my paper, the definition used for my research and understanding is, “the attempt to create positive feelings of amusement and/or laughter in another person.” Shiyab states that in the mid-18th century, however, humor was “perceived as a whimsical oddity, amusing and innocent” (Shiyab, 2009). Only recently did humor become a way to entertain people, or even engage people academically. Shiyab, like myself, acknowledges humor as simply “one of the causes” of laughter (Shiyab, 2009). This is due largely in part because laughter is both psychological and physiological in nature.

*Portraits of Laughter in “*Kid”*ergarten Children: The Giggles and Guffaws That Support Teaching, Learning, and Relationships*, a Doctor of Philosophy of Human Development dissertation by Sarah L. Smidl was perhaps the most apropos source I found. Sarah Smidl studied the connections between laughing and learning in kindergarten students. She shadowed one class for three days a week during a spring semester. Smidl states, “Commonly, the word humor is used to refer to cognitive and emotional processes, whereas laughter refers to the behavioral end product of a reflex-like physiological behavioral response” (Smidl, 2006). Smidl, in her dissertation, acknowledges a facet of laughter in children that no other resource did. She states, “Whether looking at children or adults, there can be no one true theory of laughter pertinent to everyone, and children can potentially laugh at everything” (Smidl, 2006). Seeing this exact idea come into play in my kindergarten classroom, and the entire Lower School at Greens Farms Academy, I can confirm her academically grounded idea.

In her research, Smidl also uses the term “group glee,” a phenomenon when one child’s laughter produces a domino effect. This phenomenon happened at Greens Farms’ Lower School Spring Concert: during their last song, one lone kindergartner got the case of the giggles. These giggles began to travel among the entire group, radiating through each child. The giggles turned into guffaws and kids started to move with their laughter, wiggling around while trying to get the words to “Doe, A Deer” out. “Group glee” is a term that not only sounds perfect for the circumstance, but also describes it quite aptly.

Smidl, specifically on the topic of laughter and education, suggests that if an adult can laugh at himself or herself, it shows the students that they can, too. In a sense, the adult can model mistake making and self-acceptance through laughter. This is an excellent learning lesson, as it shows students that if something goes awry, one can persevere and take it in stride (while also exuding some positive emotional contagions). Smidl’s idea blends well with a quote from the Kouzes & Posner text: “You have to go first because people who demonstrate trust in others are seen as more trustworthy themselves” (Kouzes & Posner, 2010). This goes hand in hand with tone setting. “A teacher who makes her students laugh is genuine and invites spontaneity, intuitiveness, and risk, all of which are essential in developing positive relationships” (Smidl, 2006). By introducing laughter into the realm of education, positivity abounds.

“Learning and laughter go hand in hand, and always have” (Lovorn, 2008). Lovorn, in his article, “Humor in the Home and in the Classroom: The Benefits of Laughing While We Learn,” posits that laughter can amplify the enjoyment of even the most mundane of tasks. “The explanation for this natural phenomenon is that kids bring unlimited playfulness and creativity to any task” (Lovorn, 2008). This idea of unlimited playfulness and creativity blends smoothly into the place of laughter in the classroom. Laughter, as Lovorn seems to imply, just makes sense.

Methodology

For this Exploration Project, I read two books, two dissertations, and five scholarly articles and papers. I took extensive notes and made connections between the readings and with my own experience in kindergarten and in an elementary setting. Through forging these connections, I synthesized the learning in this course with my interest in laughter as a positive emotional contagion. Although I conducted no interviews, I thought back on various moments throughout the school year during which Erin and I employed laughter as a means of communication, connection, and learning facilitator. Moments of joy and full-class laughter are keen in my memory, and I now I reflect on them with a different lens—that of self-awareness that what we were doing was natural and *great*.

Findings and Conclusion

Does laughter as an emotional contagion have a positive affect on learning in an elementary school setting? Based off of my research and personal experience, the answer is a definite yes. Laughter and humor, when employed in the elementary school classroom, are effective ways to channel creative thinking and high levels of cognition. Along with this, laughter unifies a class through actual physiological connection and raised levels of communication (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001). Laughter has countless positive affects, ranging from self-acceptance to undeniable bonds between classmates (Smidl, 2006).

To capitalize on the positive impact of laughter in an elementary school classroom setting, it is key that the teacher goes first. “As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same” (Kouzes & Posner, 2010). The energy we bring to the classroom is transmitted, so it benefits our students *and* ourselves to have positivity at the forefront. By allowing ourselves to bring authentic (and gladly contagious) joy to the classroom—by leading through laughter—we can facilitate myriad positive ripples in each student’s learning experience.

Summary

On the last Friday of this school year, glorious chaos ensued. A visiting prospective student came into our kindergarten classroom during Guided Discovery, a period at the end of the day where creative play stations are set up for interactive engagement. Erin and I were working with some students to rapidly finish an end-of-year art project. As Erin sat rapidly painting with a group at one table, and I sat writing with a group at another, it felt hectic and overwhelming… but the atmosphere of giggles and happy mistakes was undeniably joyful. The prospective student joined in at the play-doh table, and the first-grade-ready boys welcomed him proudly. As Erin and I greeted him from our posts in the room (children still mingling and creating, building and drawing), I overheard one of our boys tell this visitor, “You will love it here. Our teachers are *awesome*.”

After they cleared out that afternoon, Erin and I burst into a fit of giggles. However wild and chaotic that afternoon seemed to be—with the excitement of summer and bittersweet endings—the kids were filled with joy. Erin noticed that it was the happiest they have been in a long time, and it was likely because it was also the happiest we had been in a long time, too. We were emotionally contagious with our group glee and connection to our joyous, wonderful kindergarteners.

This Exploration Project has allowed me to put academic backing to what I experience on a daily basis as a primary school teacher. Through learning that laughter’s infectious nature proves positive for many aspects of learning, it has reinforced my desire to utilize its serendipitous existence in my classroom. Laughter, in its positive correlation with learning and cognition, is a joy to use… and quite possibly, the ultimate teaching tool.

Cornett, C. (1986). *Learning through Laughter: Humor in the Classroom.* Bloomington, IA: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. E. (2002). *Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance*. Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (2011). *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Northampton, MA: More Than Sound LLC.

Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2010). *The Truth About Leadership: The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Lovorn, M. (2008). Humor in the Home and in the Classroom: The Benefits of Laughing While We Learn. *Journal of Education and Human Development, Volume 2, Issue 1.*

Ring, R. (2008). *Humor in Teaching*. (Unpublished scholarly paper). West Point, NY.

Shiyab, S. (2009). *Pedagogical Effect of Humor on Teaching*. United Arab Emirates: Digital Stream Proceedings.

Smidl, S. L. (2006). *Portraits of Laughter in “*Kid”*ergarten Children: The Giggles and Guffaws That Support Teaching, Learning, and Relationships*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, VA.

Whisonant, R. D. (1998). *The Effects of Humor on Cognitive Learning in a Computer- Based Environment*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, VA.