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### Laughing Out Loud: Humor Usage in Young Childhood Classrooms

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# HUMOR USAGE IN YOUNG CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

Laughing Out Loud: Humor Usage in Young Childhood Classrooms

Mary F. Rossi

University of New Hampshire

Senior Honors Thesis

Human Development and Family Studies

Dr. Corinna Tucker

April 24, 2015

# HUMOR USAGE IN YOUNG CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS

## *Abstract*

The purpose of this honors thesis is to document the types of humorous occurrences among 2-3-yearold children and then to describe the relationship between children's humor during circle time and teacher-child interactions, noting how teachers respond to these humorous occurrences. I conducted my observations at the Child Study Development Center in the Nursery II classroom, which included one head teacher and 19 children. I audiotaped and photographed my observations and took notes on two tables. One table included recording linguistic humor and non-linguistic humor occurrences, or humor involving words and humor involving movement, and the other table included teacher responses to humorous occurrences (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008). My findings show that the majority of humorous occurrences stem from children's incongruent body movements and group discussion during story time. Furthermore, when the teacher extends or scaffolds a humorous occurrence, there is whole-group discussion with attentive listening from children. When a teacher rejects or ignores humor, the humor either stops or the behavior is labeled as inappropriate by the teacher and the children are redirected to what is expected of them. I discuss why humor in the classroom is important for educators to use to enhance young children's learning.

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### ***Why Study Humor?***

Humor can be defined as “a thin intelligence and ingenious (witty) way to interpret reality underlining its unusual, bazaar and funny aspects” (Farneti & Tschiesner, 2012, pg. 138). Laughter is both an element of human behavior and a method of communication for humans (Farneti & Tschiesner, 2012, pg. 133). Laughing about humorous occurrences happen in everyone’s lives and research shows that laughing increases serotonin in a human’s brain which increases the regulation of stress and ability to process and learn new information” (Poole, et al, 2005, pg. 60).

Humor has been shown to be a catalyst for children’s classroom learning. Classrooms are shifting away from the traditional teaching styles that include a serious, teacher-led curriculum. Teachers now use humor as a method to keep children’s attention while making their classroom “an index for the development of one’s cognition, morals, creativity, personality, social-emotional skills, peer relations, language skills, and literacy skills” (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008, pg. 23). When teachers use humor as a teaching tool, it can produce a wide variety of positive results in a classroom such as greater creativity, interest in literature, and better peer relations and emotional adjustment (Littleton, 1998, pg. 1).

### ***Relationship Between Cognitive Development and Humor Development***

As young children (2-3 year-olds) shift from concrete to abstract thinking and start to comprehend incongruities in reality, their humor begins to blossom. Theorist Jean Piaget developed stages of cognitive development that divided these cognitive milestones into age groups. The level of a toddler’s cognitive and language development reflects their humor development. Researcher Paul McGhee (1989) developed four stages of

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humor development based upon Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development. McGhee believes that 2-3 year-olds are between the first and second stages. The first stage is the ability to pretend to joke with objects and the second stage where children begin to replace these actions with words (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010, 1250). This study intends to describe the occurrences and categories of humor that occur in a classroom of 2-3 year-olds.

As children age, their humor is triggered less from motor stimuli, or incongruences in movement and more from verbal stimuli, or humor through words (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010, pg. 1251). One study suggests that when humor development increases in complexity, the child's linguistic and social skills do as well (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerlad, 2008, pg. 23). This is an essential indicator that humor can be productively used in a classroom to help learning and promote a pleasurable atmosphere.

### *Types of Humor*

Numerous studies have analyzed how humor contributes to a child's learning but there is not a lot research on types of children's humor. Lisa Colker identifies humor as the 12<sup>th</sup> characteristic of effective early childhood teachers (2008). A more nuanced examination of humor could be used to improve child and teacher experience in the classroom. Researcher John Littleton shares that humor, "allows us to release stress, to laugh at the absurdities, to open creative channels, and to savor that most soothing and nourishing of sensations" (1998, pg. 2). Educators who have to teach students who are shy or reserved can use humor to appease their nerves.

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Humor is seen in many ways in the young child classroom. With 2 and 3 year-olds, humor can be divided into two categories: nonlinguistic and linguistic (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008, 14). Nonlinguistic humor is sub-categorized into physical actions and pictures. Physical actions can range from using body parts to make silly movements or using props to make silly movements. A child putting her name tag over her eyes is an example of a physical action. Pictures can include cartoons, incongruent pictures that stray from reality and any sort of comical illustration, particularly occurring in literature.

Linguistic humor is further sub-categorized into vocal and verbal. Vocal humor includes voice adjustment, rhyming, alliterating, sing-song prosody, nonsense words or any sort of systematic distortions to one's voice. Verbal humor is seen in more cognitively developed 2 and 3 year-olds and includes misidentifying objects or events, word play, playful hyperbole, teasing, taboo words, telling tales or beginning jokes (also known as preriddles) (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008). This study will document the use of Colker's categories of humor as well as the nature of response each occurrence receives from the teacher.

### ***How Teachers Can Promote Humor in Early Childhood Settings***

A significant amount of research points to humor as a powerful way for teachers to nurture development. However, an issue in many classrooms is that teachers do not see humorous occurrences as opportunities for learning and community bonding but as a negative form of attention-seeking behavior. During circle time, when humor is used an atmosphere is created which "not only will children become more interested in...but they will be also using brain building skills" (Poole, 2005, pg. 60). Teachers also establish a

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warm rapport with students by using humor to make everyone feel more comfortable (Littleton, 2008). Teachers' use of humor has been shown to have beneficial effects on children and classroom atmosphere. This study aims to document teachers' responses to children's humor and how that response is linked to teacher-child interactions.

Teachers' responses to children's humor can guide and encourage children's use of humor including extending the humor by joining in. For instance, a teacher could dress-up and act like Clifford the Big Red Dog when reading the book to the class. Teachers can also scaffold the humor by modeling and encouraging discussion about why something is funny (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008). Humor is a tool that results in students becoming more apt to participate in upbeat, enjoyable lessons. Research on humor in the classroom can help teachers identify serious and funny times in order to maintain a good balance of giggles and attentiveness. This is important when considering classroom management.

This study will aim to observe and describe young children's humor during circle time. Circle time (sometimes referred to as *morning meeting*) is a particularly important part of a school day. It is time for children to become situated, maintain routine, and "serves as a valuable community-building tool" (Bornstein & Bradley, 2007, pg. 27). Circle time was observed because children are interacting in an academic setting while numerous social interactions occur between children and teachers. Because circle time can include song, dance, stories, and conversations, it "is a truly inspiring experience for both children and adults" (Bornstein & Bradley, 2007, pg. 27) and provides an opportunity for humor to be expressed. This study will collect data on how often humor is displayed and the types of humor children express during circle time. Furthermore, this

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study will examine the relationship between the use of humor with 2-3 year-old children during circle time and the nature of teacher and child interactions.

### METHODS

#### *Participants*

My research was conducted at the Child Study Development Center (CSDC) in Durham, New Hampshire. The CSDC's philosophy revolves around the Reggio Emilia, or constructivist, teaching model. This model promotes student-led, teacher-guided curriculum, with an emphasis on reflection and critical analysis on how a child learns. Families that make up the CSDC include local residents as well as a significant population of UNH faculty and staff children. This childcare center also serves as a research base, providing opportunities for many college students such as myself to explore questions and theories about child development.

The subjects for this study were 2-3 years old in the Nursery II classroom participating in circle time for approximately 25 minutes at the beginning of their three-hour school day. The Nursery II classroom totals to 19 children, 9 boys and 10 girls. There is one head teacher (referred throughout my paper as *Teacher*), one assistant teacher, and two student teachers. Out of the 19 children; 2 children were not included in the study due to lack of consent.

#### *Procedure*

Participation in this study was voluntary. Parents were given consent forms for their children to be observed during circle time and photographed and/or audio recorded. The form included a description of the study with intended aims and goals as well as



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options for parents to check to have their child observed, audiotaped, photographed, published in my University Research Conference presentation, or not included in the study at all. Neither parents nor children received compensation for participation.

My study involved virtually no risk to participants. However, some children may have felt self-conscious when notes were taken or they were photographed and audiotaped, although this was usually a minor level of discomfort. Also, participants were reminded that they could decide not to participate in the study at any time, for any reason. Participants who did not wish to be photographed or audiotaped could express this desire and only written interview or field notes were taken. Generally children in lab schools are used to having people observe them and almost all the children were permitted to be audiotaped and photographed. Because the study was strictly observation, children did not have their daily routine hindered in any way.

In the entrance of each classroom, there is a name chart for each of the Nursery classrooms with children's pictures next to their names. I carefully viewed this to ensure the children whose parents did not consent were recognizable and not included in my observations. I also received a personal copy of the classroom chart with their names labeled next to their pictures. I highlighted the children whose parents did not consent in yellow and the children whose parents did not want pictures taken in green. All other children had a purple dot next to their name to illustrate their participation. Because of the small number of children permitted in the Nursery program, it was not difficult to avoid any recording of these children. Head Teacher has many years of experience at the CSDC and informed me she had full intention to work with me to make certain proper and diligent observations occurred.

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My research was qualitative. This study used qualitative methods of research for a variety of reasons. Qualitative research is the more common form of data collection when subjects are studied in their natural context, or in this study their natural learning environment. Readers can gain an understanding of how humor is portrayed in young childhood classrooms, directed by teachers, and established within the classroom's community through qualitative methods. It also is a more unique method that gives the respondents more of a voice in their research, giving their behaviors not a number but a unique description. My research questions were not focused on finding a tangible answer but more focused on exploring questions, thus qualitative was the most appropriate method for my study (Kuna, 2006).

I utilized field notes, photographs and audio recordings. No other persons other than me, the CSDC faculty and Professor Tucker had access to these data. Data were kept confidential in a locked file cabinet at the CSDC as well as on a password-protected computer. I did not include any actual names of research subjects. Photographs and audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study with the exception of selected photograph recordings that were saved and used in presentations if consent was given.

I conducted 3 pilot observations. During these pilot observations, I recorded circle time with my iPhone, which was placed in the classroom closest to the observation booth where I was observing the children and teacher. On the first day, I only observed the classroom setting and conversation visually with no note taking. This gave me time to carefully observe the dynamics of circle time and consider my initial research questions. Although I organized my categories of humor through Craig-Unkefer's findings (2008), my literature research did not include much about teacher response to humor. Therefore,

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during the other two pilot observations, I jotted down notes to discover how Head Teacher reacted to humorous occurrences and from there I made five columns for my teacher response column.

Once my pilot observations were complete, I consulted with my advisor to finalize my choice of data collection procedure. Every observation included audio recording and during the last two observations, I took photographs with my iPhone. The photographs I took captured the facial expressions and body language of both the children and Head Teacher in humorous occurrences. As I observed in the CSDC's designated observation booth, I maintained my notes through anecdotal records on significant humorous moments and also through two tables: one for humorous occurrences in the classroom and one for teacher responses to humor.

Inspired from my notes and the categories mentioned in Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald (2008), I determined the common forms of humor found in early childhood classrooms that I would document for my thesis. In each table, I broke down the themes of prospective humorous occurrences and responses into five categories each. The categories of humor include both nonlinguistic and linguistic humor. Physical with prop, physical with body movement, and cartoons/pictures are examples of nonlinguistic humor while vocal and verbal are examples of linguistic humor. The only exception for vocal being a nonlinguistic type of humor was if children used their voices to contribute to a humorous movement. All my notes clearly labeled the classroom name and date.

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HUMOROUS OCCURRENCE: *Date, Time*

| Physical w/ prop | Physical w/ body movement | Cartoon/Pic | Vocal | Verbal |
|------------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------|--------|
|                  |                           |             |       |        |

TEACHER RESPONSE: *Date, Time*

| Extend | Scaffold | Acknowledge | Reject | Ignore |
|--------|----------|-------------|--------|--------|
|        |          |             |        |        |

The five categories for humorous occurrences include physical with prop, physical with body movement, cartoon/picture, vocal, and verbal. A physical occurrence with a prop includes a child or teacher using a prop to intentionally or unintentionally initiate a humorous movement. A physical occurrence with body movement includes a child or teacher using their body intentionally or unintentionally that initiates a humorous movement. A cartoon or picture occurrence includes any illustration that intentionally or unintentionally triggers a humorous reaction. A vocal occurrence includes incongruence in one's voice or a sound from an object that intentionally or unintentionally triggers a humorous reaction. A verbal occurrence includes the use of language by a child or teacher that intentionally or unintentionally triggers a humorous reaction.

The five categories for teacher response include extend, scaffold, acknowledge, reject, and ignore. When a teacher extends humor, it means that she actively responds to the humor in a positive manner that continues the humorous occurrence. When a teacher scaffolds the humor, she uses the humor as a learning opportunity to reflect on the humorous occurrence. When a teacher acknowledges the humor, this means she makes a verbal or physical reaction to it but stays neutral, neither extending nor rejecting it. When

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a teacher rejects the humor, she dismisses and corrects the occurrence by treating it as a negative behavior. When the teacher ignores the humor, she gives no attention or reaction whatsoever.

After collecting data, I transcribed notes verbatim for each humorous occurrence. Many of these humorous exchanges were either small enough to completely capture in my anecdotal record or were a nonlinguistic occurrence. When I coded and discovered the categories for humor and response, they emerged into themes (for example which types of humor trigger which teacher responses). These themes illustrated patterns, differences, and similarities to other textual evidence I researched (Saldana, 2009). From these themes I was able to address my research questions with thoughtful and supportive answers.

### RESULTS

The results of my findings indicate there were between 8-12 humorous (8.67 average) occurrences per observation during the Nursery classroom's 25-minute circle time. Both themes of linguistic and non-linguistic humor were prevalent in the classroom and all instances received teacher response. Results were coded in exclusive columns and no instances overlapped in categories. The table below shows the number of humorous occurrences in each category per observation.

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*RQ1. How often do children at this age display humor during circle time?*

Human Occurrences Tally Chart

| Observation  | NON-LINGUISTIC          |                    |                 | LINGUISTIC |           | TOTAL     |
|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|------------|-----------|-----------|
|              | Physical with Face/Body | Physical with Prop | Picture/Cartoon | Vocal      | Verbal    |           |
| 1            | 4                       | 1                  | 0               | 1          | 3         | 9         |
| 2            | 0                       | 1                  | 3               | 3          | 2         | 9         |
| 3            | 5                       | 1                  | 0               | 2          | 4         | 12        |
| 4            | 1                       | 0                  | 0               | 1          | 3         | 5         |
| 5            | 3                       | 0                  | 1               | 0          | 5         | 9         |
| 6            | 2                       | 0                  | 2               | 0          | 4         | 8         |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>15</b>               | <b>3</b>           | <b>6</b>        | <b>7</b>   | <b>21</b> | <b>52</b> |

In total, I recorded 52 instances of humor during my six observations.

Furthermore, there were 28 occurrences of linguistic humor and 24 occurrences of non-linguistic humor, showing that linguistic humor was displayed only slightly more often. These numbers indicate that when humor occurred during circle time, Nursery children most often used verbal followed by body movement. Humorous occurrences involving physical gestures with props happened least often. All displays were able to be coded with the designated coding scheme.

*RQ2: What is the nature of children's humor in this context?*

I organized my results by describing linguistic humor instances followed by non-linguistic humor. I then categorized each type from most common to least common. Linguistic humor included verbal and vocal. Non-linguistic humor included physical gesture with body, cartoon or picture humor, and physical gesture with prop.

**Verbal:** The 21 verbal humorous occurrences resulted in the most humorous reactions that I observed. However, it is important to note that a lot of these verbal occurrences intertwined with not only other types of humorous occurrences but teacher

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responses, too. One of the most notable and characteristic of verbal humorous occurrences was an individual conversation between one boy and Teacher while she gathered everyone for circle time that resulted in group humor.

Boy A: Excuse me, [Teacher]?

Teacher: Yes, my dear!

Boy A: Why are you wearing a towel?

*Confused at first, Teacher looks at her dress (that slightly resembles a bath towel) and begins to laugh heavily. Two or three other children begin to laugh too, with Boy A laughing the loudest.*

Teacher: Would [Teacher] come to school in a towel?

Boy A: That would be super duper silly!

Teacher: It is so silly that (Boy A) thought my dress was a towel!

*Many of the students join Teacher laughing, Boy A is still laughing.*

Boy A: That would be super duper silly if you went to school in your towel!

This boy, still struck with this idea of Teacher wearing a bath towel to school, continues this towel conversation between breaths of air:

Boy A: What if you went to... *Continues laughing for a period of time, resulting in more students and Teacher laughing,* What if you went to school and wrapped a towel all covering your face and wrapped on your feet too?

Teacher: A towel wrapped around my head?

Boy B: What if you drove with a towel on your head?

This idea of driving with a towel strikes Boy A harder and he begins an even louder belly laugh, which triggers almost the whole class to be roaring with laughter.

Teacher: (Covering her eyes) I would say, 'Oh no! Where am I? Where am I?' Friends could you imagine if I was driving around with a towel on my head?

Boy A: You would be driving with a towel over your head.

*Laughter continues for a period of time.*

Teacher: Oh my goodness, what a wacky day!

Teacher's extension of this humorous observation made the entire class laugh as a group. Although a prop was involved, the conversation about the prop was more humorous to the children than the actual prop and accurately depicts a typical verbal instance that led to humor.

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Another typical occurrence was during the question of the day. Teacher asked the class if they had ever been fishing. One boy in particular began a silly conversation and asked, “Have you ever been fishing for toilet paper?” This became a whole group humorous occurrence when the class began to laugh and soon Teacher joined in, too. Two other children then proposed questions about fishing for balloons, bones, elephants, and dragons. The conversation led into Teacher calling on students to ask their silly fishing question.

**Vocal:** The seven vocal occurrences were during the morning song, question of the day, and when a child was expressing disinterest in what was happening during circle time. During their morning song, Teacher would ask a student to use a greeting book to pick out a language to use to sing “hello” to each other. The same three children laughed during a couple of observations when the Native American way to say hello, *Osiyo*, was used, particularly when Teacher was stretching out the word and demonstrating, “It’s pronounced, ‘oh see oh’, friends!” The children’s giggles were short and did not distract from singing the rest of the song.

When Teacher would write the question of the day on a piece of paper for the children to answer, she would sound out the letter while asking. While the children did not find it humorous to guess what the next word would be while she wrote, they did giggle a few times when she was sounding out her sentence. Two girls in particular giggled frequently during one observation when Teacher was sounding out and writing “Ha-have you e-vvvvver buh-been on a buh-bus?” with an increase in giggles during the “B” sounds.



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The same two boys who found physical gestures with props humorous were the ones who used their voices to make silly sounds when they were seeking attention. A common sound these children would make was a fart noise. However, this would only result in each other giggling for a short amount of time.

**Physical Gesture with Face/Body:** This was the second most common humor occurrence, with 15 instances recorded. These types of body movements mostly occurred during Nursery's movement song:

*“Have you ever seen a lassie, a lassie, a lassie  
Have you ever seen a lassie, go this way and that?  
Go this way and that way and this way and that way,  
Have you ever seen a lassie go this way and that?”*

The song demonstrates group humor and is interactive because Teacher would ask for a movement from a child and then everyone would sing the song while in the same motion. The repetitive movements the children chose included walking backwards, nodding their heads, doing a ballet pli , hopping on one foot while spinning around, swaying back and forth with their arms straight down, and flexing their biceps. Many of the children during this song would be smiling throughout the movement. The movement that resulted with the most laughter was when one boy had the entire class flap their arms up and down quickly as if they were birds.

Although the intention was to calm the children's bodies to prepare them for the question of the day, there were a couple of humorous occurrences while doing yoga, which followed the movement song. During my observations, the children were exploring the beach and ocean. Teacher asked children for yoga to make a mermaid pose. This resulted in a few children laughing. These results indicate that children enjoy pairing

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music with movement and, during many occurrences, can find something humorous about it.

**Picture/Cartoon:** Humor resulting from pictures or cartoons was because of an uncertainty or incongruity in a book illustration. During one of the three humorous instances, Teacher read *Penguin on Vacation*, a story of a penguin that was tired of snow and wanted to live on the beach. A humorous reaction occurred from this teacher prompt when there were multiple pictures of winter activities that the penguin was incapable of doing on the beach. A few children began to giggle simultaneously when Teacher turned to the page showing how Penguin could not ski, sled, nor skate on sand. One boy called out, “He can’t do nothing!” and two girls sitting near him began to giggle.

While viewing the cover of *Penguin on Vacation*, one boy called out, “Why is there a lobster on the cover?” Another boy laughed, “That is not a lobster because it is a crab!” The two began to giggle together as Teacher described the cover. This humorous reaction from uncertainty also occurred while viewing the cover of the book, *The Circus Ship*. The cover displays various circle animals at the front of a ship. One boy cried out, “[Referring to the elephants’ red hats] Look! It looks like the elephants have pizzas on their head” resulting in the whole class, including Teacher, roaring with laughter. Another boy added, “With pepperonis on it!” which continued the laughter for about a solid minute.

**Physical Gesture with Prop:** All of the physical with prop occurrences were irrelevant to what was happening during circle time and occurred three times over the six observations. The first occurrence was two girls playing with magnets that were on top of a nearby table. The two girls were connected the magnets and giggling while Teacher

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was saying good morning to everyone in the circle. The second occurrence involved a boy who was hiding in his sweatshirt and peeking out to the girl next to him, who proceeded to giggle. This was happening while Teacher was discussing the question of the day to the class. Again, this occurrence was short-lived and also child-generated. The third occurrence involved a boy sitting next to Teacher during the question of the day discussion. He proceeded to grab a marker from her hand and belt out “HA-HA! I grabbed a marker from your hand.” Nobody else but him laughed at this occurrence and, again, it did not continue for long.

*RQ3: What is the relationship between the use of humor with children during circle time and teacher and child interactions?*

Teacher demonstrated all five categories of teacher responses in my table, which include extend, scaffold, acknowledge, reject, or ignore. The table below quantifies the instances of each category, which are categorized by positive, neutral, or negative reactions. In total there were 52 teacher reactions to humor occurrences. All teacher responses were able to be coded with the created coding scheme.

| Observation | P O S I T I V E |          | NEUTRAL     | N E G A T I V E |        | TOTAL     |
|-------------|-----------------|----------|-------------|-----------------|--------|-----------|
|             | Extend          | Scaffold | Acknowledge | Reject          | Ignore |           |
| 1           | 3               | 0        | 2           | 1               | 2      | 8         |
| 2           | 1               | 2        | 1           | 3               | 1      | 8         |
| 3           | 1               | 2        | 2           | 2               | 1      | 8         |
| 4           | 2               | 0        | 2           | 0               | 0      | 4         |
| 5           | 3               | 0        | 1           | 3               | 1      | 8         |
| 6           | 3               | 2        | 1           | 0               | 0      | 6         |
| TOTAL       | 16              | 7        | 14          | 10              | 5      | <b>52</b> |

My results indicate that out of the 52 teacher reactions, 47 received a reaction; 23 were positive, 14 were neutral, and 15 were negative. I organized my reaction descriptions by positive, extend and scaffold, neutral, acknowledge, followed by

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negative, reject and ignore. It is important to note that the terms *positive*, *neutral* and *negative* indicate whether the humorous actions were continued or discontinued. The terms do not represent how the child felt during or after the occurrence.

**Extend:** Extension was the most common reaction overall and the most common of each of the positive reactions, with 16 total occurrences. When Teacher extended humorous occurrences, children were more verbally involved in the conversations that were then further developed. There were no instances where she extended children's humor and children stopped listening or talking. During one observation, a boy began laughing. Teacher prompted dialogue when she turned to him and asked why. He responded, "Our hands bumped heads." He was referring to how he and the boy next to him touched hands accidentally while they were sitting in the circle. Teacher gave a typical extension result by asking, "Did they say 'Ouch!'" The boy, laughing even harder, replied, "They didn't know!" What is interesting about this scenario is the boy she was speaking with is usually more of a listener than a talker, unless it happened to be a silly scenario. This shows me that humor could be a way for children who are reserved to connect to other and express themselves.

**Scaffold:** Scaffolding occurred less often than extension and acknowledgment, but was a positive response, occurring 7 times in total. When Teacher would scaffold a humorous lesson, she would either rephrase the occurrence again so all the children could appreciate the humor, or initiate the humor by giving a little background information. Typically a humorous occurrence resulting in scaffolding would be teacher prompted. During one yoga movement, she asked all the children to get on their hands and knees. She then asked, "Friends, can you make a lion roar?" Many of the children began to roar

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and giggle. Teacher then acknowledged their roars and said, “Wow those are some mighty lion roars.” Some children then began to lick their hands as if they were paws and one girl said, “I have a mane!” This is a great example of how Teacher had a conversation about lion characteristics while implementing humor to maintain the children’s attention.

**Acknowledge:** Acknowledge was the only neutral response to humor and, with 14 occurrences total, was the second most common reaction from Teacher. Because Teacher is experienced with incorporating humor into the classroom, a lot of the humorous occurrences involved her. However, she acknowledged a range of categories of humor and it mostly correlated with whether or not it contributed to the conversation. If the Nursery class was discussing something a child added a humorous but relevant comment, Teacher would smile at the child. If there was a humorous occurrence and a few children were still laughing or responding to the occurrence, Teacher would again smile but verbally redirect the conversation. This smile ended up being an indicator to the child whether or not to continue or stop the humor. This plays along with Teacher’s own strategy of promoting self-regulation in her classroom.

If a child was creating a humorous occurrence that was irrelevant or distracting from circle time, Teacher would symbolize “Sh” by putting her finger to his mouth and making quick eye contact with the child. She was showing that she heard the comment but was focusing on something else. Again, this was a way for the teacher to acknowledge behavior as well and continue listening.

**Reject:** Teacher would typically reject humor if it disrupted circle time at a socially inappropriate time. Rejection occurred more than ignoring, with 10 instances

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total. This included mostly the physical gestures with props and vocal humorous occurrences. In one observation, a child was covering his head with the sweatshirt of his hood while repetitively making a “naa-naa-naa-naa” sound. He did this independently and it was not related to anything occurring during circle time. Teacher then gently put her hand on his back and whispered, “This is not what I am asking of friends to be doing.” The boy then took his hood off and sat quietly. Teacher only rejected one verbal humorous occurrence. The class was telling a story as a group and during the story Teacher asked, “What would we do if we caught a mermaid?” Although none of the other children found it humorous, one girl giggled and said, “I would kill it.” Teacher responded, “This isn’t a kind of story that would include that.” The girl then continued to focus but did not say anything about killing again.

**Ignore:** Ignoring humor was the least used and I think that the few times that Teacher did ignore was because it was during a song or it was during a situation where multiple people were talking. I believe Teacher would not intentionally ignore a child because she tends to use socialization as a learning tool. She practices self-awareness with her children, promoting observational dialogue and peer communication. This way every behavior can be reflected on and directed in a productive way.

## DISCUSSION

This thesis paper sought to discover humor in young childhood classrooms during circle time. My research questions included studying how often 2-3 year-olds use humor, the types of humor used, and the types of teacher reactions resulting from humorous

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occurrences. Linguistic and non-linguistic humor was observed in circle time creating opportunities for Teacher to use during her lessons.

### *Benefits of Humor Usage in the Classroom*

Humor indeed is prevalent in young child classrooms and I found evidence of both linguistic and non-linguistic humor in young childhood classrooms. My results indicate that 2-3 year-old children most often use linguistic humor involving conversation and physical humor involving body movements. Linguistic humor can serve as a tool for children to learn and interact with others and a way for teachers to support language development, social competence, and increase verbal participation with 2-3 year-old children. The typical instances when Teacher extended humor, there was a continuation in the conversation that resulted in group participation. Verbal humor demonstrates that children are acquiring developmentally appropriate language and social skills when they effectively communicate their humor to the whole group.

Children at this age are cognitively illuminating the transition from concrete to abstract thinking when they voice a humorous scenario that skews reality to create an incongruent scenario. Humor usage can demonstrate children's cognitive skills because when they laugh from comprehending an occurrence, [it] shows that it "falls within the parameters of [their] intellectual development" (Littleton, 1998). My findings also support McGhee and his stages of humor development (1989). Most of the humorous occurrences I observed were verbal and support his notion that 2-3 year olds are transitioning from the first stage characterized by physical gestures with props into the second stage of humor development in which they will find words more humorous than actions (Semrud-Clikeman & Glass, 2010, 1250).

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My observations also revealed that children at this age often display non-linguistic humor. Non-linguistic humor can be useful when teaching young children. Picture and cartoon humor show how 2-3 year-old children find equivocal and ironic illustrations not only funny but also a way to socialize with one another. During humorous occurrences I observed, the children noticed each other laughing. They added onto each other's humor and interacted with Teacher when they shared a humorous encounter. Humor usage in the classroom can result in an increase of socialization and community building among children. Children have "an innate desire to laugh" and teachers who appreciate and properly arrange their classroom to incorporate it will see positive results (Craig-Unkefer & Fitzgerald, 2008, pg. 23).

My observations also revealed relationships between children's humor displays and teacher reactions. When the teacher would extend and scaffold humor, there was related class participation and continued conversation. The teacher in this study's reactions served as an effective behavioral management tool because she rewarded their thoughts with further humor and fun. However, Teacher was mindful of when she chooses her reactions to humor occurrences. For instance, vocal occurrences, although humorous to the child, were a sign of distraction and expression of boredom. Physical gestures with props were acts either seeking attention or a result of distraction. None of these opportunities led to a teacher response that contributed to any cognitive or social-skill building. Therefore, Teacher would redirect the children's behavior to regain their focus during circle time. My findings suggest that particular humorous occurrences with positive teacher reactions can create a learning environment that is both productive and silly (Poole, et al, 2005, pg. 61).



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### *Limitations and Next Steps*

Although Teacher in this study strove to maintain a classroom that uses as much silliness, song, and movement as appropriate, not all teachers instruct like her. Some believe that a teacher-led classroom is more of a calm, serious atmosphere. This would probably lead to different humorous occurrences and different child and teacher reactions than what I observed at the CSDC. The majority of time Teacher did, in fact, engage in the humor. But there could have been days that she was not in the mood to continue humor or felt that the humor was not appropriate for the lesson. During a pilot observation, I observed a substitute teacher when Teacher was ill. This teacher was not humorous and rejected and ignored every humorous occurrence. This shows how a teacher's sense of humor can be reflected in her classroom atmosphere and learning opportunities. Further limitations of this study include the numerous snow days that hindered my observation time. Because I was limited to six observations, I could have missed other humorous occurrences not labeled in the tables or reactions.

It is important to note the culture of the CSDC when discussing the generalizability of this study's findings. Teachers at the CSDC are encouraged to explore various teaching methods including the use of humor. Also, the children are mainly university faculty members' children and are used to a more liberal climate than other children in typical young child education. Finally, the children that make up Nursery II are all white and live in the same New Hampshire community. Their humor interpretations may be influenced by their culture, which would be different for other children. Because of this limitation, I think that my findings may not be applicable to other school settings and research samples. I would like to explore cross-cultural humor

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in young childhood classrooms. I believe that different learning environments will produce different humorous occurrences. Future studies could include exploration of *why* a child found something humorous instead of *what* a child found humorous. The variety of teachers in education also contributes to how humor is managed. I wonder if humor could be used as a behavioral management tool regardless of culture or if these tools are only effective with certain types of cultures.

### ***Conclusion***

Overall, humor can trigger a positive atmosphere in young childhood classrooms. Teachers can take the types of humor I studied and incorporate them into their lessons to increase certain child language and cognitive skills as well as enjoyment. When a teacher finds the right balance of respect and silliness, her classroom can evolve into an affectionate, fun environment.

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