THE USES AND EFFECTS OF HUMOR IN THE SCHOOL WORKPLACE

by

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The role of humor among teachers in schools has not received much research attention. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor in the naturalistic setting of an elementary school. A qualitative exploratory case study was conducted. Twenty participants from one school completed a survey on uses and effects of humor, and a focus group was conducted with five of the survey participants. Results were transcribed and coded using the constant comparative coding methods, and themes were developed and compared to the scant prior research findings on the topic.

Findings identified a group of teachers who used humor mostly to provide stress relief for themselves and each other and to alleviate some of the stresses associated with teaching young children. Participants also reported the use of humor in sharing stories and events that occurred in the school workplace. Findings also included consistent

perceived positive effects from the use of humor in building collegial relationships, in providing rejuvenation, and in preventing burn-out. Teachers reported using humor in positive and productive ways and enjoying positive and productive results. Overall, study participants were in strong agreement in regards to uses and effects of humor in their school workplace.

As this was an exploratory study, further research is needed in additional school settings to explore reliability in regards to uses and effects of humor in other schools and with other mixes of teachers. As the scant previous research has shown a correlation between positive collegial relationships and good school climate and improved student learning, it would also be beneficial to conduct additional studies on the role of humor among staff in regards to student achievement.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few
people are interested and the frog dies of it.*

E. B. White

What role does humor play for teachers in elementary schools? While humor is

used every day by adults, it is usually not a topic for research and, in fact, we pay

minimal attention to the uses and effects of humor. We take it for granted as part of

everyday life. Teacher education preparation programs do not usually teach about uses of

humor, except perhaps as a minor aspect of teaching itself. For example, it is common to

advise educators entering the field "not to smile until winter break," even though the use

of humor can be both an effective and appropriate means to deliver instruction

(Wallinger, 1997). Is the topic of humor one that should be addressed in teacher

education programs? Should pre-service teachers receive information on appropriate uses

of humor in their future prospective workplaces? Should in service teachers receive

professional development on the role humor plays amongst adults in their schools?

Any one who has worked in any complex work setting knows that appropriate

uses of humor can make the challenges of the work day lighter. With the pressures of

accountability growing, schools can be stressful places to work. All of the challenges of

society are reflected in today's classrooms: not only do teachers have to teach a broader range of students, they must do so in an atmosphere that may be marked by student apathy, unruliness, use of drugs, and overt violence. Schools are increasingly diverse, rendering even experienced teachers somewhat at a loss as to how to meet the needs of all learners. This changing climate presents differing expectations about what teachers should be doing every day in the classroom, which is becoming more complex with each passing decade.

The humor used by adults who work together in a school environment can create and sustain both positive working and learning environments. Yet little research has been done on what type of humor works, and how, as educators, we could do more to expand the positive uses of humor in the school work place. As Roland S. Barth, author and senior lecturer in education at Harvard University has written: Schools are funny places (1990). Humor can be the glue that binds an assorted group of individuals into a community. We should make an effort to elicit and cultivate it, rather than to ignore, thwart, or merely tolerate it.

In the culture of today's workplace, humor is not generally regarded as an important element of the work environment. We do know that humor exists and serves many purposes in the workplace. Norrick (1993) has written that, "Everyday conversation thrives on wordplay, sarcasm, anecdotes, and jokes. These forms of humor enliven conversation, and help break the ice, fill uncomfortable pauses, negotiate requests for favors, and build group solidarity" (p. 1). Humor can have positive or negative effects (Duncan, Smeltzer, & Leap, 1990). However, humor has been shown to have an overall

positive effect and to be an asset to the workplace, as it has the ability to improve the quality of life, job satisfaction, and performance (Consalvo, 1989).

What we don't know is how the uses of humor affect adults in school settings. In fact, research of workplace humor in naturalistic settings has enjoyed minimal study. While the business environment has begun to address the importance and uses of humor in the workplace, and there exist publications such as *Nursing Jocularity* and *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research,* this has not crossed over into research on humor in schools and other social service settings. How can we elicit and cultivate the positive uses of humor in the school work place if we don't have research that tells us what constitutes positive uses of humor in schools? How can we know what effects the uses of humor can have on the school workplace if we do not ask the people who are in the schools about how humor uses affect them? It is important to know about the types of humor that exist in schools, why and how humor is used, and what effect the use of humor has on the school as a workplace.

Schools have long recognized that they enjoy a particular culture within each setting. Researchers of organizational culture write about and discuss the need to understand the underpinnings of the humorous interplay in the culture of a particular organization (Duncan et al., 1990). Humor is intricately connected to the culture code and insights into a society's values (Berger, 1976) and is generally seen as an artifact of a particular culture within an organization (Ott, 1989; Sackman, 1991; Schein, 1992). Through the use of artifacts, which include messages received through sight, sound, and feelings, the values and norms of an organization, and the rules of behavior, function as a

means of social control (Ott; Schein). While there are ambiguous definitions of culture, it is generally agreed that culture is learned, that is both distinctive to a particular group and shared by that group, and that it is intrinsically tied to core beliefs and values which underlie rules of behavior.

It is necessary that teachers coordinate their core beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors. This coordination occurs through communication with the goal of developing some common understandings (Pepper, 1995). Taylor (1993) writes, "Organization is not merely mediated by communication; it is continually regenerated, and recreated, by communication…" (p. 227).

Having worked in a variety of schools, as an administrator, a teacher, and a supervisor, I have experienced first hand the roles of both culture and humor in school settings. As a professor of teacher education courses, I hear teachers report on the culture of their schools and the role humor plays among staff. It is apparent to me that appropriate uses of humor in schools are appreciated, valued, and desired.

What do teachers think and how do they feel about the role humor plays in their interactions with one another? *The purpose of my study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor in the naturalistic setting of an elementary school.*

Background

Schools are places that are fraught with routines. Bells ring, schedules must be followed, benchmarks must be reached. While lots of funny things happen in schools, the

academic achievement of students is no laughing matter. Teachers view their jobs as serious work, with the outcomes of effective educational practices essential to a healthy and productive society. Long hours in the classroom, coupled with extensive hours of planning, preparation, and review of student work, make teacher burnout a very real condition.

Societal attitudes about teachers and education also add stress to today's schools as workplaces. In general, teachers are perceived by society and by those who set national educational policy as being at least partly to blame for the failure of many students to achieve at even basic levels of competency. This is reflected in the prescriptive and punitive policies of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) programs and tests. In a survey conducted by the Teachers Network (2007), over 5600 public school teachers from all 50 states recently responded to an online survey regarding the effectiveness of NCLB and its impact on teaching. Seventy-five percent of the teachers surveyed reported experiencing a great deal of pressure from NCLB to improve students' test scores. Teachers Network expressed desire that policymakers look at the data in regard to teacher burnout, as 69% of survey respondents "strongly agreed" that NCLB and its requirement of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has contributed to teacher burnout. Kyriacou (1987) suggested both direct action in addressing teacher burnout, as well as palliative techniques, consisting of physical methods such as relaxation and exercise, and mental techniques such as positive perspective and humor.

Teachers are often seen as people who came to be teachers because they could not do anything else, and may be viewed as "glorified baby-sitters." This is especially true

for elementary school teachers. One of the most readily "at-hand" stress-relieving

mechanisms that teachers can use is humor shared with colleagues. Berkman (1985) and

Cohen and Wills (1985) suggest that one's social network can mediate the effects of life

demands on health and well-being. In summary, the stressors from both within and

outside of the classroom contribute to a complex and often unrewarding workplace for

teachers. Humor can help to mitigate these stresses and also serve to enhance the

individuals' perceptions and attitudes in regards to their jobs.

In the following chapters, I examine the issues around humor among adults in

elementary school settings. Chapter I begins with an exploration of the topic of humor in

the school workplace setting and provides background into the uses and importance of

humor in naturalistic settings. Chapter I also provides an outline of the dissertation and

concludes with definitions of terms. Chapter II is a review of the prior related research on

this topic. Specifically addressed are the related contexts of society and culture, the

nature of public school settings, and research related to the general roles of uses of humor

in the workplace.

In Chapter III, the research methods planned and the assumptions made through

this study are discussed. The design of the planned study is presented along with a review

of the limitations of the design. I discuss attempts to compensate for limitations of the

design and for potential issues of bias. Chapter IV reports the data collected from short

answer questionnaires, focus groups, and surveys. Finally, Chapter V presents an analysis

of the findings of this study in the context of prior research on this topic. Limitations of

the study are discussed, and conclusions drawn about contributions of this study to future

practice and to theory. I conclude with recommendations for changes in practice and for future research.

Definition of Terms

- Artifacts – the phenomena that an individual sees, hears, and feels including architecture, language, technology, products, artistic creations, style of clothing worn, manners of address, emotional displays, myths and stories told about the organization, published lists of values, and observable rituals and ceremonies (Schein, 1992).

- Basic assumptions – implicit, taken-for-granted, non-debatable assumptions that guide behavior and tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. These assumptions reflect deeper issues about the nature of truth, time, space, human nature, and human relationships (Schein, 1992).

- Climate – "the feeling that is conveyed in a group by the physical layout and the way in which members of the organization interact with each other, with customers, or with other outsiders…" (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

- Culture – the attitudes and customs that individuals hold by which they understand their own experience(s) and by which they guide their behavior(s).

- Espoused values – "the articulated, publicly announced principles and values that the group claims to be trying to achieve…" (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

- Focus group – "a qualitative method of gathering in-depth information on a specific topic through a discussion group atmosphere which allows an insight into

the behavior and thinking of the individual group members" (Bellenger et al., 1979, p. 15).

- Formal philosophy – "the broad policies and ideological principles that guide a group's actions…" (Schein, 1992, p. 8).

- Group norms – "the implicit standards and values that evolve in working groups…" (Schein, 1992, p.8).

- Humor – good natured, laugh, or smile-provoking stimuli that is likely to be minimally offensive to the target of the laughter or smiling (Gruner, 1996) including pranks, wisecracks, teasing, bantering, riddles, puns, jokes, stories, songs, silly noises, funny faces, and gestures. Humor can also include ridicule and sarcasm, which may not always be viewed in a positive light (Duncan, 1982).

- Joke – "any structured communication, with a witty or funny intent, which the teller seemed to know in advance of telling it. It may be a story, riddle, pun, skeptical question, rhyme, hypothetical book title, proverb, slogan, or similar format" (Winick, 1976, p. 124).

- Organizational communication – "the collective and interactive process of generating and interpreting messages" (Stohl, 1995, p. 4).

- Organizational culture – "shared values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, norms, artifacts, and patterns of behavior. It is the unseen and unobservable force that is always behind organizational activities that can be seen and observed" (Ott, 1989, p. 1).

- Organizational subculture – a "subset of an organization's members who interact regularly with one another, identify themselves as a distinct group, share a set of problems, and routinely take action on the basis of collective understandings unique to the group" (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985, p. 38).

- Shared meanings – "the emergent understandings that are created by group members as they interact with each other…" (Schein, 1992, p. 9).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Humor, the ability to find amusing, witty or optimistic views in life, can be found in all societies and cultures (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995). Functions of humor include the development and management of social relationships, ways to deal with uncomfortable or stressful situations, ways to reduce boredom or deal with frustration, and as a means to illustrate or teach a message (Fry & Slavin, 1988; Morreall, 1991). Individual variances or antecedent conditions to the use of humor include conditions of gender, ethnicity, physical traits, as well as other conditions which may contribute to an individual being liked or disliked. The structure of humor includes the interplay of various attributes such as humor initiators, audiences, targets of humor, and the context and type of humor being used (Ziv, 1984).

Theories of Humor

There is no theoretical agreement on what constitutes humor. While over 100 types of humor have been identified (Schmidt & Williams, 1971), they are typically divided into three groupings. One group includes the biological, relief, and ambivalence models. Darwin's theory (1872) suggested humor being an adaptive disposition. The relief/release model, identified by Freud (1928) and by Spencer (1860), suggests humor

being experienced when people use it as a relief from stress or strain. These types of humor center around the function of humor, and its value to us as humans.

The second group includes incongruity, surprise, and configuration. These are models around the stimuli for humor. The incongruity theory was first named by Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, in 1790. Arthur Schopenhauer (1819) further explained this theory in his work, *The World as Will and Idea*, by saying that laughter is a means of acknowledging the humor that results when one idea or action "disconnects" with one's expectations. An example of this is the element of incongruity often built into theatre or comedy presentations. We laugh because of the incongruity of the sequence of actions, which may startle our expectations. In 1649, Descartes identified the surprise model of humor, which says that humor requires suddenness.

The last group includes the superiority model. This model is based on the concept of censorship, and revolves around the concept of one person or entity being superior over another. This conceptual model goes back as far as Plato in the 5th century B.C.E. It is within this grouping that we try to find out what makes something funny, as we consider our humorous responses.

Knowing the types of humor does not immediately transfer into application. Minimal work has been done extending these theories to actual studies of the uses of humor in the workplace. For example, we know little about the sometimes subtle differences in culture, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and socio-economic level that may play out in the use of humor in schools. Yet, we know that those sometimes subtle differences

make a big difference in whether a particular person finds a statement humorous, or humorous and appropriate to the time, place, and setting.

Obviously, not all things are humorous to all people. Duncan (1982) states, "Humor appreciation is as uniquely individual as is any other aspect of personality and attitudes." Therefore, any study that looks at humor in the workplace needs to be aware of and sensitive to the related characteristics of the individuals within the setting. In today's politically correct culture, it is necessary to be perceptive as to what is considered appropriate, and inappropriate, humor. Humor directed at minorities, ethnicities, or gender are considered by most people today as inappropriate in a work setting and carry the very real consideration of potential lawsuits. This consideration is essential in school settings, which have a unique and diverse culture and are also legal workplaces where law suits can be filed.

Despite cultural mixes that make individual responses often difficult to predict, and despite the possibility of humor being misinterpreted, positive humor among staff in school settings plays an important role. Barth (1990) found that the nature of adult relationships in a school have more to do with the success and accomplishments of its students than any other factor, and adversarial relationships within the school among the school staff can have negative effects.

The use of humor may have a positive effect on preventing teacher burnout. Worker burnout was first identified by Freudenburger in 1974 as a phenomenon resulting from workers in helping professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work. These professionals reported often being pressured to give more of themselves than they were

able to give, resulting in worker burnout, or disengagement in their jobs. Researchers Maslach and Jackson (1981) conducted much of the early research in regards to burnout among workers, such as educators, in the helping professions. They described three dimensions of the condition, which are widely accepted by researchers (Anderson & Iwanicki, 1984; Byrne, 1994; Farber, 1984a, 1984b; Fisher, 1984; Jackson et al., 1986; Russell et al., 1987; Sarros & Sarros, 1987, 1990; Schwab et al., 1986; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Stephenson 1990). These three dimensions are measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1986). The dimensions are:

1. Emotional exhaustion – the feeling that one has used up all of one's emotional resources;

2. Depersonalization – the development of negative and/or cynical attitudes towards the very individuals one is supposed to be helping;

3. Feelings of low personal accomplishment – the sense of one's loss of effectiveness during the performance of one's work related duties.

Teachers are at great risk for burnout due to isolation from peers throughout the work day. Most person-to-person contacts in elementary school settings are with children rather than with other adults, and finding the time and/or energy to connect before or after hours can be difficult, causing a feeling of disconnect (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990). Barth (1990) advises educators to look for opportunities for revitalization and recommitment to their chosen profession. Specifically, Barth suggests, "Who can do what to provide opportunities for periodic recommitment for those who work in schools so that

they will continue to view their work as a vital profession and not as a tedious job?" (p. 514). Humor affords just these opportunities.

Research Studies

Humor in the workplace has primarily been addressed in trade books, such as, *Leave a Mark, Not a Stain! What Every Manager Needs to Know About Using Humor in the Workplace*, by Patt Schwab (2005), and *Laughing Nine to Five: The Quest for Humor in the Workplace*, by Clyde Fahlman (1997). There is limited research on the effects of humor in workplaces in general and even less specifically about uses of humor among school staff. An initial Google Scholar search using the terms "humor in K-12 settings" yielded 2,280 citations. Most of them were "how to" non-research articles about how to use humor in teaching. A Google Scholar search using "humor in the elementary school workplace" yielded 6,580 citations. When "classroom uses," "library teaching uses," "humor between the principal and teachers," and "after-school humor with students" references were removed, only four research studies that focused on uses of humor among teachers remained. They are discussed below.

A related sub-set of research about the medical and physical aspects of the use of humor emerged during the search for studies of humor in the workplace. The importance of humor to reduce stress has been recognized by the medical profession. A hearty laugh cleanses the body of carbon dioxide, relaxes muscles, increases the flow of adrenaline, exercises the cardiovascular system, and cleanses the eyes with tears. Humor also releases endorphins, the brain chemical that relieves pain (Fry & Slavin, 1988). A good

laugh assists the body's immune system (Lefcourt, Davidson-Katz, & Kueneman, 1990). Perhaps the most important role of humor in the workplace is its function as a relaxant. Stress has been shown to affect worker absenteeism and productivity (Anderson, Miller, & Cowling, 2001). The effects of stress have been shown to affect both job satisfaction and commitment (James & Tetrick, 1986; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Common workplace techniques to reduce stress are relaxation, yoga, meditation, and biofeedback, as well as humor (Morreall, 1991). In the day-to-day setting of schools, humor may be the only viable on-site methodology.

The Gunning Study

A study on the role humor plays in shaping organizational culture was conducted by Barbara L. Gunning (2001). The study was conducted at a child welfare agency. In a qualitative study, using focus groups and participant observation, Gunning looked at how humor was created and experienced within a particular social service organizational culture. Her research was guided by studying how employees' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences, as related to humor, were different in regards to one's place in the organizational hierarchy. Also, she explored how employees at different levels within the hierarchy used humor to meet similar or different goals. Qualitative methodology was deemed the most appropriate procedure, due to the exploratory nature of her investigation. Gunning herself was a member of the organization she studied, and she cited research that endorsed such in-depth involvement. Schein (1992) discusses the value of a researcher being deep within a workforce site. This is a perspective shared by Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982). Consideration was also given that the

researcher should not become overly incorporated in the setting, thus resulting in a loss of

objectivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Gunning created focus groups as a means to gather information. Schein (1992)

contends that in a group situation it is easier to get at shared assumptions due to the

stimulus provided from interaction amongst the group members. Krueger (1994) and

Morgan (1997) also recommended focus groups if the goal of a study is to understand

individual perceptions, feelings, knowledge, attitudes, and practices. In a group interview

format different people bring different perspectives, some of which they may be unaware

of without interaction with others (Morgan). Additionally, focus groups provide an

environment that duplicates the actual workplace – where the influence of individuals

plays a role. Gunning used five focus groups to identify both trends and patterns in

perception. While the individual groups had some homogeneity in regards to the

hierarchical structure, there existed enough variation as to permit contrasting and

opposing opinions. Her goal was to form groups that were homogeneous in background

but not attitudes. Morgan (1997) found that such homogeneity allows for spontaneity in

conversation amongst the participants and also facilitates the analysis of varying

perspectives between groups.

Each focus group began with 13 open-ended questions in the manner suggested

by Krueger (1994). The intent of the first question was to establish comfort and general

rapport. The next two questions had the purpose of an introduction of the general topic

and an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own past person experiences. The

following four questions were included to assist participants in looking at the topic in a

broader manner, by asking participants where, with whom, and what they joke about at work. Four key questions covered topics such as the benefits of humor in the workplace, the appropriate use of asking where a participant may be prevented from using humor. Participants were then given a brief questionnaire to complete, followed by asking what goals an individual is trying to accomplish through the use of humor. At the conclusion of the focus group, participants were asked if they felt there was something that should have been discussed but was not.

The use of a focus group allows for gaining a deeper and richer understanding of the role of humor in complex, naturalistic settings such as schools. Focus groups are helpful when insights, perceptions, and explanations bear greater importance than numbers (Krueger, 1994).

Gunning concluded that her study helped answer the research question: How is humor created and experienced within (this) organizational culture? She felt that her research also helped answer questions in regards to employees' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences in relation to their position in the hierarchy of the organization, and how employees at varying hierarchical levels use humor to meet similar or different goals. Her findings suggest that humor is important across all hierarchical levels. Humor helps newcomers assimilate an existing work culture, and once assimilated humor helps to build and maintain relationships. Gunning found that humor may be an important antecedent to getting work done, and may help in relieving stress and frustration, particularly when dealing with child-related concerns. Humor helps people maintain

objectivity and rationality, and in a child protective agency may even be so essential that without humor one may not be able to be successful in the field.

Gunning also discussed the use of humor in creating an environment with high morale, teamwork, and an ability to be flexible and open to new ideas and concepts. Supportive humor was found to be pleasurable across hierarchical levels. Gunning discussed the benefits of humor to organizational leaders, as humor sheds light on the interpersonal relationships between workers and management. Through appropriate uses of humor, requests can be made, apologies offered, and praise bestowed. However there are also cautions. Workers may fear using humor with supervisors, resulting in less than ideal communication and, if the humor is only one-sided, strained relationships may result. Humor should not be used in place of open, forthright communication. The use of humor in the workplace is further complicated by the influence of culture and of individuality.

Gunning addressed some limitations to her study. As the focus group members were verbally self-reporting their attitudes and beliefs, perhaps people tended to share only what was comfortable for them to share. The analysis was based on fragments of information and she was aware that these fragments may not have told the whole story. Krueger (1994) reported that fragments may in fact not necessarily be relevant, as "there is a tendency to selectively see or hear only those comments that confirm a particular point of view and avoid dealing with information that causes us dissonance" (Krueger, 1994, p. 129). "Our training, our background, and our experiences influence what we notice and what we attend to" (Krueger, p. 129), leaving Gunning to feel that her study

would have been strengthened if, after her documentation, she could have obtained verification. It is challenging to know what particular role humor may play in the workplace, because functional theories of humor are, at best, educated guesses (Apte, 1985). In that sense, Gunning felt that her study was as much a study of perception as of observable phenomenon. Perhaps this is what Morgan (1986) was implying by the comment that one must "become skilled in the art of 'reading' the situations…" (p. 11) and that such a skill is developed as an intuitive process and "often occurs at an almost subconscious level" (p. 11). Observations were limited to settings in which Gunning could gain entry, and where there were humorous events to be observed. Gunning felt that her study could have been strengthened by delving deeper into an organization and by having access to more private settings in the workplace. She recommended that further studies explore the topic in other work environments.

The Susa Study

Anthony M. Susa conducted a study on organizational humor. His study, *Humor Type, Organizational Climate, and Outcomes: The Shortest Distance Between an Organization's Environment and the Bottom Line is Laughter* (2002), looked at the relationship between the three types of humor, (relief, incongruity, and superiority) in the workplace. Susa found little empirical research on the role of humor in organizational settings. He attributed this to the emerging role of the recognition of the importance of humor in the workplace. Susa also expressed concerns in regards to the lack of a consistent approach to the measurement of humor in the workplace, which led to the development of The Organizational Humor Scale (2002). Susa developed The

Organizational Humor Scale for use in examining how the three humor types affected 75 employees of a mid-sized financial service company. He looked at the areas of job satisfaction, commitment to the organization, organizational creativity, perceived organizational support, absenteeism, and job performance. The 31 questions, with responses gathered in a Likert Scale format, were analyzed into four generalized topic areas. The first topic question asked, *"What is the relationship between humor and organizational climate?"*, from which Susa drew three main conclusions: (a) a relationship between an individual's sense of humor is related to the climate of an organization, (b) perceptions of superiority humor were linked to negative organizational climates, and (c) perception of incongruity humor were associated with positive organizational climates. The second topic question examined, *"Will the three major humor types impact organizational outcomes differently?"* His study suggested that the type of humor used relates to job performance in varying ways. The use of incongruity and/or relief humor may be a means by which managers can increase employee performance, where the use of superiority humor is associated with lower ratings of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Results from Susa's third topic question, *"How will perceptions of the different humor types impact employee creative problem solving in a work environment?"*, indicated that managers who used humor effectively were seen by their supervisors as being better prepared to solve problems and address workplace challenges. The positive aspects of incongruity and relief humor were related to high scores on organizational creativity measures, with lower ratings linked to the negative aspects of superiority based humor. The fourth topic question, *"What is the*

relationship between the type of humor employed by management and commitment, satisfaction, and perceptions of managerial support?", found results indicating that where uses of relief or incongruity humor may not directly increase satisfaction or commitment, the use of superiority humor results in a decrease of these important organizational outcomes. Overall, Susa reported results that suggest that humor has an important role in the perception of a worker's organizational climate. The relation of humor to organizational outcome may be different, and whether it is a positive or negative relationship may be dependent on the very type of humor used. In general, Susa found superiority humor to be associated with low job satisfaction, low job commitment, low organizational creativity, as well as low overall job performance. Relief humor especially, and sometimes incongruity humor, showed a greater positive correlation with organizational outcomes (defined as job satisfaction, commitment, creativity, and overall job performance, including a record of good attendance). Susa felt his research validates the importance of additional studies of humor in the workplace, and in particular the connection between humor and organizational climate.

The Mawhinney Study

The most current study found was conducted by Mawhinney (2008). This study specifically addressed the value of humor in school settings and was published in *Ethnography and Education*. This ethnographic study focused on the informal interactions in one U.S. K-8 school, with a particular focus on the lunchtime break.

The paper addresses the issue of isolation for teachers, which creates a lack of community (Rogers & Babinski, 2002) and the resultant autonomous work style (Tickle,

2000). Several studies over the last quarter century have found that the isolation of teachers has the resultant factor of lessening long-term interest in both one's work and one's interest in his or her school (Forsyth & Hoy, 1978; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001; Zielinski and Hoy, 1983). Williams et al. (2001) also discovered that teachers place a higher value on *spontaneous collaboration* that develops as a result of informal conversations and encounters, as opposed to more structured collaboration. The discussion addresses emotionally taxing jobs, jobs such as teaching, which require *emotional labor*, a term developed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983). *Emotional labor* is defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (Hochschild, p. 7). Occupations with the following three characteristics are described by Hochschild as being emotional labor:

> First, they [the jobs] require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public.
> Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person –
> gratitude or fear for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training
> and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of
> employees. (p. 147)

While not all jobs with emotional labor contain all three elements, Mawhinney (2008) contends that teaching certainly does. Throughout their day teachers are required to present a positive or neutral emotional state. Teachers are expected to disguise any negative feelings or emotions in regards to their students, colleagues, or their job, and only reveal their true emotions in private spaces. The use of humor is an effective coping

mechanism and serves as a way many teachers support one another (Hochschild, 1983).

Woods' (1979) study in England, found the use of humor by teachers in the teachers'

lounge to be a means to develop solidarity and to cope with everyday stresses of the

profession.

Mawhinney's (2008) study had three evolving themes from a group of seventh

and eighth grade teachers: teachers laughing at themselves and one another, a way to deal

with irritations in regards to students, and a means to deal with the frustrations of the job.

Humorous interactions provided a social support for the teachers. Interviews with the

participating teachers showed the use of laughter to help reduce stress and as a means to

express some hidden emotions, as well as a means to cope with the hardships of being in

an emotional labor profession. Participants of the self-proclaimed "lunch bunch" sought

one another out for the purposes of humor and laughter release, and particularly sought

out individual teachers who had the reputation of being humorous or of telling humorous

stories and anecdotes. The staff of this particular school reported a long history of

practical jokes which also contributed to the relief of daily school-based stresses.

Mawhinney (2008) concluded that the social support provided through the use of

humor provided a means to deal with, discuss, and problem-solve the pressing concerns

of the job. The teachers that were observed and interviewed stated that laughter helped

them soothe their battle wounds. This study concentrated on the use of humor in the

congregational space of the teachers lounge. Data showed that informal humorous

interactions provided social and emotional support, released stress, and helped teachers

cope with everyday demands of the teaching profession. Mawhinney recommended

further exploration on this topic, and further study on teacher-to-teacher interactions, in order to fully understand the professional lives of teachers.

Other Studies

Vinton's (1989) study of humor in the workplace was done in a small family-owned business; however she had some interesting findings that assisted in framing part of my interview and survey protocol. She found that various types of humor helped maintain low status differentials, and that theory may be applied to schools as a work setting. Holmes' (2000) study of four New Zealand government departments also yielded a useful framework of how humor functions in professional organizations, like schools. Her subsequent 2005 study of collegial relations particularly identified gender and gendered humor sequences as an explicit focus of workplace humor.

Fine and DeSoucey (2005) contended that every interacting social group develops, over time, a joking culture, or a set of humorous references. These cultural attitudes are known to members of the group and members can refer to them that as the basis of further interaction. Their ethnographic research was on mushroom collectors and also professional meteorologists and is framed by small group and sociological theories of social regulation.

Weiner (1988) found that in all definitions of organizational culture there is the implicit idea of shared values, attitudes, and expectations. Schneider (1990) conducted a study of climate research, which refers to the concept of a collection of individual perceptions that workers have in relation to their environment. Greenberg and Baron (1993) found the existence of group norms and socialization processes that influence, in

subtle or overt ways, individual workers to at least give the appearance that they are going along with the social norms of the group. I speculated that humor would be one value that would shape organizational culture. As organizational climate is based on a collection of the perceptions of the individuals, gathering information from individual teachers in regards to their attitudes and perceptions of the role humor plays in their school provides a means by which to view the school culture through a previously unstudied lens.

Amabile (1983) and Amabile et al. (1996) found that the creative process can be influenced by organizational climate factors. The potential benefits of working in a creative environment should have positive effects in the school's organizational setting. Teaching is a creative process, and information on the role humor plays may show a relationship to creativity in the organizational setting of a school.

Retallick and Butt (2002, 2004) conducted a study analyzing the workplace relationships of teachers and their peers. They reference the current educational climate of schools as learning communities where adult relationships are based on trust and collegiality, rather than on hierarchy. Teachers were asked to respond in writing on their feelings about their work lives, specify events that may have created those feelings, and reflect on why they had developed the attitudes they had. Three broad themes were found: *climate*, referring to the general context of the school workplace; *collegial communication*, defined as a generic sense of peer verbal interactions; and *facilitating workplace learning and teacher development*, which relates to experiences of particular events focused on both individual and collective professional learning. They concluded

that positive workplace relationships affect, to a large extent, satisfaction with their workplace. When communication among peers was viewed as being positive, with elements of positive support, encouragement, sharing, trust, and recognition, a positive workplace climate was experienced. Their study also addresses the aspect of social intimacy and the effects a supportive climate has on professional learning. While the value of humor per se was not discussed, it seems safe to say that positive uses of humor would contribute to the overall value of positive workplace environments.

The concept of schools as learning communities was explored by Mitchell and Sackney (2000). They discuss a way to construct a learning community that consists of three basic principles: personal capacity, interpersonal capacity, and organizational capacity.

Building personal capacity has been found to be somewhat dependent on the ties that are established within the community, and are developed through participation in emotional activities (Mitchell & Hyle, 1999; Smylie & Hart, 1999). The building of personal capacity serves to enhance and interconnect teaching and learning for the teachers and their students. According to Wineburg and Grossman (1998), "schools cannot become exciting places for children until they first become exciting places for adults" (p. 350). The emotion of excitement is at the very heart and essence of schools. Humor is perhaps one of the strongest emotional passions evident in humankind. As Mitchell and Sackney (2000) state, "Without passion, life and learning are routine and sterile; with passion, they are exciting and meaningful, and knowledge is not simply accumulated but also transformed" (p. 21).

The building of interpersonal capacity shifts the focus from the individual to the group. Stamps (1998) says, "Relationships, more than information, they determine how problems get solved or opportunities exploited" (p. 37). Teachers in any particular school come from a variety of backgrounds, knowledge bases, personal and professional histories, and bring with them individual emotions, desires, and needs. Due to these individual differences the workplace climate can be sensitive, and bears great influence on the norms and culture of a school. The building and maintenance of positive interpersonal relationships serves to enhance the overall climate of the school workplace.

The organizational capacity of a school has a strong effect on personal and interpersonal relationships within (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Schools are lonely places for many teachers, as contact with other educators is often at a minimum. The attitudes of individualism and privacy are often the norm (Firestone, 1996). Schools need to look for ways to break through what may be entrenched socio-cultural conditions. Humor can be one means by which to do this.

Beer and Beer (1992) and Hodge, Jupp and Taylor (1994) studied teachers and teacher burnout, and found that positive uses of humor in the workplace were essential to teachers' sense of self-esteem and reduced occupational burnout. However, they did not focus on defining specific uses and types of humor, and both studies were conducted in England.

In summary, we know that humor is a basic human emotion, and that the presence of appropriate humor may create a more enjoyable working environment. What we don't know are any specifics about the role humor plays in the U.S. school working

environment, the interplay and effects of humor in regards to adult relationships in elementary schools, or the frequency which humor is used amongst adults in school settings. My research is an attempt to delve into those questions and therefore provide some information where there is presently a gap.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes my research design, discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the model, and explains why the methods chosen were appropriate for my research purpose. I then provide information about the setting and about the study participants and discuss my reasons for choosing this particular site. Methods of gathering and analyzing data are explained. By addressing the potential limitations of this type of research design, I will discuss my attempts to reduce potential threats to validity. The chapter concludes with a discussion on limitations to generalizability for this study.

Again, *the purpose of my study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor in the K-12 workplace.* The generalized research question guiding this study was: How is humor created and experienced by elementary school teachers as related to their workplace? Ancillary questions that shaped and guided this study included:

1. How do teachers describe and define the uses and effects of humor in their school workplace?

2. How are the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor similar or different from those of other teachers?

3. How do teachers use humor to meet similar or different individual goals?

4. How do teachers use humor to meet similar or different school goals?

The reported results are grouped into three areas: (a) the reported structures of humor and its interplay in the daily work life of the school as workplace, (b) individual variances or antecedent conditions, and (c) the perceived functions of humor in the school workplace.

Research Design

"Few researchers have concerned themselves specifically with the task of describing the nature of humorous interchanges as these occur in naturalistic or quasinaturalistic group settings" (Scogin & Pollio, 1980, p. 832).

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methods were used along with elements of quantitative methodology, making this a mixed methods study. Qualitative research is known for its ability to provide in-depth information when there are a small number of cases being studied. Yin, Bateman, and Moore (1983) found that studies that used multiple sources of evidence had higher ratings of quality, as opposed to those that rely on single sources of information; therefore, I developed a design drawing on multiple sources of data. Previous researchers of workplace humor have favored qualitative methodology (Pepper, 1995; Schein, 1992; Scogin & Pollio, 1980). In order to understand how members of a particular community make sense of interactions with one another, access to the knowledge that these members have in regards to their interactions is advised (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). Once this information is obtained, "the interpretative researcher tries to discover the experience of organizational members

as they understand it without reference to a set of pre-established concepts" (Daniels & Spiker, 1987, p. 251). Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) also contend that, "Culture is amenable not to causal analysis but to interpretation. An account of organizational culture begs not for an assessment of its reliability and validity, but for an assessment of its plausibility and its insight" (p. 123).

Morgan (1986) and Pepper (1995) suggested that organizational communication studies be rooted in the everyday, ordinary, and extraordinary talk and behaviors of the site. An exploratory study can provide a detailed look at a particular setting, subject, or event (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003; Stake, 1994). Case studies are often the preferred research methodology when "how" or "why" questions are asked, when the researcher has minimal control over events, and when the focus of the research is on a "contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (Yin, 2003). The use of a single case study as an exploratory device was discussed by Yin (2003). A vulnerability of such a study may be that it may later turn out to be not the case it was thought to be. This study was revelatory in the respect that I was able to gain easy access to the teachers and the site.

According to Bogden and Biklen (2003), in site-specific research, the following foci are typical:

1. A particular place in the organization

2. A specific group of people

3. A specific activity

For this study I chose one particular elementary school (place), a group of certified teachers (people) and the role humor played in their interactions in the school (activity).

Design of the Study

The elementary school staff that was chosen for this study was one where I had reliable access. Teachers are busy people and they often eschew extraneous work that is not seen as having an immediate, positive affect on their students or their jobs. Having been a member of the staff at this school over 10 years ago, I was known to some of the teachers. I enjoyed a personal friendship with one of the teachers who was a tremendous asset in providing contacts within the school, with other teachers, in recruiting for the focus group, and in assisting in the distribution of the surveys. In other words, I chose this site because I had ready access to it, they were accustomed to me as occasionally present in their setting, and my presence for this project was likely to have a minimal affect on how they either responded to me or to my questions. The staff at this school remains fairly consistent, therefore presenting a good opportunity to collect reliable data.

The site is a medium-sized elementary school of approximately 450 students in grades K-5. The school rates "strong" in all areas of performance and attendance and has met all annual yearly progress (AYP) standards as defined by NCLB in recent years. The school is located in a mixed income neighborhood, with about two-thirds of students meeting federal poverty standards, establishing it as a school eligible for Federal Title 1 funding support. The student population consists of about 25% minority students of which the majority are Hispanic. The student mobility rate is approximately 38%. In

addition to the regular student enrollment, the school houses one district-wide special needs program and one county-based special needs program. All of the teachers meet the federal definition of "highly qualified" and possess an average of almost 18 years of teaching experience, with over 50% holding advanced degrees.

A questionnaire with Likert-style questions that I developed based on my review of prior research was given to the certified teaching staff at this school by me at the end of one school day, at a pre-arranged meeting. A Likert scale is a psychometric response scale that is used often in questionnaires. It is the most popular and widely used type of scale in survey research. Maurer and Pierce (1998) suggested use of a Likert-type measurement for measuring self-efficacy. I also added several open-ended questions. As recommended by Yin (2003), the survey instrument emphasized verbal information rather than actual behavior in both question formats. One hundred percent of teachers returned the survey questions.

Prior to distributing the survey, I tested the survey with 15 different teachers. There was good validity in their responses and they reported to me that the questions were straight-forward and easy for them to answer. Several of them asked if they had to fill out the open-ended questions on the survey; I didn't understand at that time that this was an indicator of reluctance to complete this part, which I would later find in the returned surveys from the study participants. Instead, I simply asked the field test participants to complete the open-ended questions with a brief answer. They did so, and the answers they gave were consistent and were on the topic I was attempting to analyze.

A focus group was conducted with five of the teaching staff who volunteered to participate. Focus groups use group interaction as a way to generate data through participant communication. Individuals are encouraged to talk with and interact with one another, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on one another's views and experiences. It is a particularly useful method for exploration of knowledge and experiences, as well as for identifying differing points of view (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999).

I tried to select volunteers who had 5 or more years of experience in this school setting together. Three out of five of the focus group participants had been teaching at the school for 12 or more years. One participant had been there for 6 years, after teaching elsewhere for 20 years. One participant had only taught at the school for 2 years, however, her mother had been a long-time staff member prior to her retirement and the group was familiar with her before she became a teacher at the school. She had also known the other members of the school staff for many years before joining them as a member of the teaching staff. All of the teachers said that they felt as if they had a good "handle" on the working environment of the school. In fact, they laughingly identified themselves as "the working environment of the school."

Constant Comparative Method

For my data analysis, I used the technique of the constant comparative coding techniques. The four stages of the full constant comparative method are (a) comparing incidents which are applicable to each category, (b) integrating each category and their

individual properties, (c) delimiting the theory, and (d) writing the theory. These theories were discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) outlined the constant comparative method data analysis process into three analysis steps: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding.

Open coding revolves around the discovery of concepts found in data. These concepts are then sorted into categories and sub-categories through similarities or differences. Each category or sub-category is present on a continuum. In order to complete the process of open coding, each transcript is analyzed line by line.

At the conclusion of the open coding process, Strauss and Corbin (1998) outlined the next step in the constant comparative method to be axial coding. They explained axial coding as "the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding" (p. 124). In this process, categories are related to their subcategories. Strauss and Corbin outlined four responsibilities of a researcher during the completion of the axial coding process. These responsibilities are: (a) identifying the specific properties and dimensions of a category; (b) delineating the conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences related to the phenomenon of interest; (c) relating categories and subcategories; and (d) and looking for clues in the data that indicate how primary categories may be related to each other (p. 126).

The final process Strauss and Corbin outlined in the constant comparative method is called selective coding, defined as "the process of integrating and refining categories" (p. 143). Through this process the researcher is able to correlate the analysis components

together for the purpose of writing an explanatory theory. This process is begun by first writing the theory that has been grounded from the data in order to select a "central category" (p. 146). This central category then "pulls together" the other categories which have been delineated and developed during the open and axial coding process and serves as a "main theme" of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 13).

While I used the coding techniques to make sure that I had a good understanding of my data, it was not my intent to develop theory from my data. Instead, it was my intent to relate my findings back to extant theory on the uses and effects of humor in the workplace. Since this was an exploratory study with a small sample size, I believe that this was a more appropriate use of the data and analysis generated in this study.

Generalizability and Validity

For this study, I looked at the role of humor in one elementary school workplace, looking to understand its uses and the applications for research to add to the sparse body of knowledge on the topic of the roles and effects of humor in the school workplace. There is the possibility of generalization from this study to other school sites and future studies.

Generalizability as a concept is applied somewhat differently in qualitative research and. quantitative research. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), qualitative researchers "concern themselves not with the question whether their findings are generalizable, but rather with the question of to which other settings and subjects they are generalizable" (p. 32). In this instance, I chose to do an exploratory study of a "typical"

school with an intact group of teachers who were well known to one another. My rationale was that these teachers knew one well enough to be comfortable with each other and to have developed mutual habits of expected humor exchange. Thus, they were the most likely of any group of teachers to be able to talk to me about their experiences with uses and effects of humor. In that way, I was more likely to get good data from them than I would from any random set of teachers who had not worked at the same school for a length of time or who were unfamiliar with each other. My objective was to see if there were commonalities between these teachers familiar with each other, and with the limited prior research on this topic, in order to generalize back to existing theory. This was instead of attempting to say that this group of teachers represented all teachers. My hope is that this data set would be "clean" enough to add to our understanding about how future research could be better framed and conducted on the uses and effects of humor in school settings. Future studies could focus on the necessary construction of a sample that could then be generalized appropriately to a larger population.

However, I have also attempted in this dissertation to describe my sample, methods, and data sufficiently so that an experienced educator could make his or her own decisions about whether this information might generalize to their particular setting. I have also given sufficient details of my methodology so that other researchers can replicate the study. Through replication and meta-analysis, findings from multiple studies can also sometimes be used to construct a framework for further generalizability to other populations.

Threats to validity are another concern of this type of research. Validity can also be strength of qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2003, p. 195). Validity can be defined as a means to understand the accuracy of a study and its findings. Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) discuss the usefulness and validity of qualitative research, by stating, "Despite the incongruence between quantitative epistemology and qualitative methodology, translated standards of validity have proven to be useful criteria for demonstrating rigor and legitimacy in qualitative research" (p. 523).

The suggestion is made by these authors for primary and secondary criteria, and for addressing openly threats to qualitative research validity. Primary threats may include authenticity, criticality, credibility, and integrity. Secondary threats may include failure to provide explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity in data presentation (Whittemore et al., 2001). These threats are discussed in my results, as well as the techniques I used to minimize such threats.

I used triangulation of two data sources, which is "a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2000, p. 443). In this study, I compared data from the focus group and the survey questions.

Limitations of the Design

Investigators are not able to control all extraneous variables, thereby making it difficult to determine absolute conclusions. However, attempts were made in several ways to control for possible intervening variables wherever possible. For example, the

sample consisted of a group of teachers were well known to one another in the context of a stable school environment. I felt that this was the group of people most likely to be able to talk to me about humor, and also that at least made their relative experiences and backgrounds similar and reduced the number of possible intervening variables from coming from different schools or different workgroups.

The study was conducted over a relatively brief period of time and in as few settings and meetings as possible, in order to hold possible maturation variables at a minimum. This type of research design, however, necessarily produces "snapshot" data that may not be the same if looked at over a longer period of time or over a different period of time. It reduces the possibility of error from primary or recency effects. Field tests were conducted to reduce the possibility of logical errors in the wording of my survey and interview questions.

I was the sole researcher. This introduces possible bias but it also makes the researcher-participant responses consistent throughout the study. My qualifications to conduct this study were based on my background as a teacher and my familiarity with this school in particular. However, that also potentially raises a question of bias in my view of the school and the teachers. Compensation for potential bias was attempted by detailing the data itself as much as possible without violating confidentiality for the participants so that future readers can make their own assessment of my interpretations of the meaning of the data.

The responses of the participants in this study, in both the survey group and the focus group, are obviously subjective; it is possible that any individual participant could

respond differently to some items at different times. The individual social skills of each participant may have played a role in their responses. These skills include, but are not limited to, social intelligence, self-perception, and the perception of others. Response bias is another concern, as participants may have desired to view themselves, or their school environment, in a particular fashion. The participants knew one another in the focus group and may have made responses based on their relationships with one another or based on the perception of themselves they wanted to present.

Survey respondents may have known which colleagues in their school participated; as elementary schools are difficult places in which to keep secrets. As the study was conducted with teachers at one particular school, the existing social mores and culture may have affected teacher responses. It is possible that the same study, conducted in another school, particularly in another part of the country, could elicit different data.

Attempts were made to compensate for these limitations. Participation in the focus group was voluntary. Participants met with me off-site after school hours; therefore they did not have to disclose their activities or account for their time to anyone at the school. The survey instrument was distributed to all the teachers in the school. A central drop-off point for the surveys was established, so teachers could complete and submit the survey without identifying themselves. The surveys were distributed and collected in the middle of the week, with the desire of catching teachers on a somewhat "average" day at school.

As a K-12 teacher and administrator, I had been previously exposed to a variety of school settings and had many opportunities to observe and participate in humorous

interplays with teachers. While I was not yet a researcher of humor in the schools, I was aware of the role humor played in my own job performance and satisfaction. My experiences as an educator for many years in elementary school settings provided me with an awareness of the possible role humor plays amongst teachers. As a former member of the selected school community, I had an "entrance" to the setting. However, many of the colleagues I was closest to have since retired. Regardless, the culture of any particular school enjoys a lengthy tenure; therefore, it is possible some of the mores I experienced at the school remain. My comfort in the physical setting and the fact that I enjoyed some introductory privileges with the staff could be viewed as having a positive effect. However, it may also have had a negative effect, in that my personal biases could have affected my objectivity.

In addition, teachers may have chosen to participate and/or respond in certain fashions due to my previous association with the school. My personal biases in regards to the topic of humor in the schools could also have an effect. Attempts to compensate for these possible sources of error were made through careful construction of the research design, through careful conduct of the study itself, through thorough and accepted data coding methods, through documented steps of analysis of the data related to prior research, or simply by naming what I could not control as possible sources of error in my findings.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of my study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor in one elementary school workplace. To do so, the use of a triangulated model was employed. This consisted of a survey distributed to all the teachers at one school, and a focus group with five of the school's teachers. There were 20 respondents to the survey, which comprised the total teaching staff of the school (100% return rate). Four of the survey questions directly addressed the uses of humor with the remaining 11 addressing the effects of humor. There were 5 participants in the focus group (one-fourth of the school teaching staff). The focus group was conducted off-site after school on a weekday afternoon. I had prepared some prompts and questions to guide the focus group discussion. Short answer questions provided opportunities for participants to discuss some uses and effects of humor. The analysis of these research techniques provided triangulation for my study.

To obtain the responses to the survey, I provided the teachers with the document so they could complete it at their leisure. When not all of the surveys had been returned by my original planned date, I visited the school one afternoon after students were excused, to collect the surveys. The host teacher at the school walked around the building

and reminded teachers I was there to collect the surveys, and informed them that chocolate cake was being served with the return of completed surveys.

When I looked over the returned surveys as I began coding, I saw that few had completed the three open-ended questions. Some who came in to complete the survey at the cake day said, "Oh I don't have time to do that," and others simply ignored them or drew a line through them.

The data below is presented in order of the core topics of the survey, which were derived in turn from my review of the literature on humor in the workplace. The following questions/topics guided my research activities:

1. What role does humor play for teachers in elementary schools?

2. What do teachers think and how do they feel about the role humor plays in their interactions with one another?

In order to effectively answer these questions it was necessary to look at the uses and effects that humor played in the school workplace.

Uses of Humor

There were four survey questions related to the uses of humor. A table illustrating the results follows this narrative report.

Survey Question 1 asked how often school staff witnessed the use of humor with one another. Seventeen of the teachers responded that they witnessed school staff using humor with one another often or very often, with the remaining three teachers responding

"sometimes." These responses show a strong response to the evidence of the use of humor among staff in this school workplace.

Survey Question 7 asked how often staff witnessed the use of humor with one another when planning or preparing lessons. Four responded "very often" or "often," 10 responded "sometimes," and 6 responded "rarely" or "very rarely." The reported use of humor to plan or prepare lessons was not as strong as overall evidence of the use of humor.

Survey Question 9 inquired about the use of humor across hierarchical roles. Two teachers responded "very often/often" with 11 responding "sometimes" and 7 responding "rarely." The use of humor across hierarchal roles appears to be an uncommon event at this school.

The frequency that a responder used humor with other staff was the context of Survey Question 15. Sixteen teachers responded "very often/often" with 3 responding "sometimes" and 1 respondent responding "rarely." With 80% of respondents saying humor was used "very often/often" it appears that humor is used on a frequent basis.

Due to the wording of the questions, when responses were coded as "sometimes," an interpretation was made that the response was of a positive, rather than of a negative nature. The results are shown in Table 1.

Teachers were asked to respond to short answer questions aimed at describing the use of humor, in what context humor was used, and the reasons behind the use of humor. Half of the respondents wrote that humor was used to share events that occurred during the day, specifically stories about students and events around students. To quote one

Table 1

Uses of Humor

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
I witness school staff using humor with one another	9	8	3			
I witness school staff using humor with one another when planning or preparing lessons	1	3	10	4	2	
I witness school staff using humor across hierarchal roles	1	1	11	7		
At school, I use humor with other school staff	2	14	3	1		

teacher, "I frequently tell funny and cute stories about the students. I use this to entertain other teachers." Another said, "At the end of a particularly stressful day it is often helpful to 'debrief' with a colleague, using humor, to see the funny side of situations that, at the time, were feeling frustrating or hopeless."

A third of the respondents discussed using humor to laugh at and with one another and to share work related jokes. In the short answer questions someone wrote, "I was joking with other colleagues about the 'wild animal behavior' of my first graders. I mentioned this to my husband and he called them 'non-domesticated children' and we all got a chuckle out of the comment."

Three teachers wrote about humorous events that occurred during regular staff meetings. Two people reported that the principal of the school purposely initiated humorous events. These comments related to the incongruity model of humor. The custodian found a toddler wandering around the school grounds in the dark. The child

had wandered away from home. It all turned out okay and the child was returned home, however to alleviate the seriousness of the situation the principal reported that when the custodian first encountered the child all he could think was….an alien! The incongruity in the story provided relief.

Five members of the staff met off site for a focus group discussion. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon and I hosted the teachers at a local riverside dining establishment. The actual focus group discussion lasted approximately one hour, however folks visited a bit before and after. The discussion was audio-taped and later transcribed onto paper, coded, and responses organized by themes. I took minimal written notes throughout the actual focus group discussion, as I wanted to concentrate on the discussion and the participants. Participants were asked to discuss circumstances where humor was used and who the initiator of the humor was. One teacher shared a story about a shared laugh with a colleague in regards to a computer incident. This was around an incident of one teacher asking for assistance from another with some computer work. There were self-deprecating comments such as, "I must be too dumb to do this," as well as gentle jibbing from the teacher providing the assistance, "Yeah, we all know how much smarter I am."

<center>Effects of Humor</center>

Eleven survey questions pertained to the effects of humor. Results are showed in the table following this discussion.

Survey Question 2 asked how often a respondent witnessed the effect of humor to develop friendships and build rapport. Sixteen reported "very often" or "often," with the remaining 4 reporting "sometimes." This shows a strong effect of humor in building friendships and relationships.

Survey Question 3 asked how often humor was witnessed to provide an example or to prove a point. Eleven teachers reported "very often/often," 8 reported "sometimes," and 1 reported "rarely." The "sometimes" responses, added to the "very often/often," responses point to solid evidence of the effect of humor to provide examples or prove points. Survey Question 4 asked how often humor was witnessed as a means to express approval. Seven teachers marked "very often/often," 10 marked "sometimes," and 3 marked "rarely/very rarely." It appears that humor has an effect in expressing approval.

In Question 5, teachers were asked how often they witnessed humor being used to express disapproval. One teacher said "often," 6 said "sometimes," 10 said "rarely," 2 said "very rarely" and 1 said "never." In this question the response ratings were reversed, in that the "often" response could be viewed as a negative, rather than a positive effect.

Next, in Survey Question 6, participants were asked about the frequency they witnessed humor being used to initiate conversation. Six reported "very often/often," 11 reported "sometimes," and 3 reported "rarely." Most respondents reported humor to initiate conversation being used on a frequent basis.

The role humor plays in stimulating conversation and creativity was the context of Survey Question 8. Two participants responded "very often/often," 11 responded

"sometimes," and 7 said "rarely." This response was interesting, as it was the only response that showed rather infrequent effects of humor.

The use of humor as a means to exert power or influence was the context of Survey Question 10. One person reported "often," 2 reported "sometimes," 8 reported "rarely," 4 reported "very rarely," and another 4 said "never." One person did not respond to this question, causing speculation as to whether this may have been a personal issue.

Survey Question 11 asked about the frequency humor is witnessed as a means to gain the attention of others. Three reported "often," 11 said "sometimes," and 6 said "rarely/very rarely." A limitation of this question is the lack of clarification as to the definition, uses, and effects of "gaining attention."

In Survey Question 12, the use of humor being used as a means to relieve tension, stress, or anxiety related to school situations was asked. Fourteen teachers said they witnessed humor being used in this manner "very often/often" and 6 said "sometimes." This is consistent with the focus group comments on the positive effects of humor in this school workplace.

The topic of Survey Question 13 was the effects of humor to disarm aggression with others. One person reported "often," 8 reported "sometimes," 7 reported "rarely," and 4 reported "very rarely/never." This response indicates that the perception of the effects of humor in this way are mixed among the staff.

Finally, in Survey Question 14, the use of humor to insult, attack, or demean others was asked. Three people reported "rarely," 6 reported "very rarely," and 11

reported "never." Again, because of the wording of the questions, responses coded as "rarely" were more of a positive, rather than of a negative nature. The results are shown in Table 2.

Results showed participants feeling positive about the uses and effects of humor in their school workplace.

In short answer questions, participants were asked their "feelings" in regards to the appropriateness of humor that was used; whether they felt that everyone involved in the incident found the scenario humorous, and if they had any second thoughts about the way humor had been used. In all cases, respondents reported that they felt the humor used was appropriate. No one had a negative feeling in regards to the use of humor or reported feeling that others found the humor objectionable or inappropriate. There were no reported "second thoughts" in regards to the use of humor. Six respondents felt humor was used in appropriate ways with positive effects. Six people commented on the stress relief humor provided.

Table 2

Effects of Humor

	Very Often	Often	Some-times	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never	No response
I witness school staff using humor to develop friendships and build rapport	3	13	4				
I witness school staff using humor to provide an example or prove a point	1	10	8	1			
I witness school staff using humor to express approval	1	6	10	2	1		
I witness school staff using humor to express disapproval		1	6	10	2	1	
I witness school staff using humor to initiate conversation	3	3	11	3			
I witness school staff using humor to stimulate imagination and creativity	1	1	11	7			
I witness school staff using humor as a means to exert power or influence		1	2	8	4	4	1
I witness school staff using humor gain the attention of others		3	11	3	3		
I witness school staff using humor to relieve tension, stress or anxiety related to school situations	9	5	6				
I witness school staff using humor to disarm aggression with others		1	8	7	2	2	
I witness school staff using humor to insult, attack, or demean others				3	6	11	

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The goal of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor in the naturalistic setting of an elementary school.

As discussed earlier, minimal research has been conducted on the role humor plays among staff in a school setting. Research has been emerging as to the role of humor in the workplace in general. In this chapter, I will analyze my findings and then compare them to prior research findings.

Types of Humor

The biological, relief, and ambivalence models were the types of humor found most often in this study. In analyzing the uses of humor, where 75% of the school staff reported witnessing the use of humor among staff as "often" or "very often," results showed humor being used to reduce tension and provide relief. Having a workplace environment that feels safe and trusting was addressed in the theme of using humor to build trust and develop friendships, and speaks to the biological use of humor. In some manner, the incongruity, surprise, and configuration models are also woven into these responses, as teachers told stories of incongruity and surprises (identified as pranks) that they played on one another.

One story in particular stands out from the focus group discussions. Several teachers in the focus group chimed in to tell the story, "When Carol's Dog Died." Teacher Carol learned of her dog's death during a school day. Fellow teachers knew how much she loved her dog and how devastated Carol would be at the death. For several days afterwards, her team members were afraid to ask her how she was doing because "she was close to tears all the time about the dog." Finally, one day, Carol called team members into her room and told a joke about a little boy whose dog died and was told that God wanted his dog in heaven. The little boy responded, "What does God want with a dead dog?" When Carol told this story everyone laughed and then felt they could talk about her dog. After that incident, whenever the team felt someone needed a laugh, they would show up in their classroom after school and say, "We need a dead dog meeting." This would happen after someone had a hard day and it was, to quote a focus group participant, "all about that we need to laugh." Teachers then commented on how these types of interchanges help in building trust and deepening friendships. This is an example of humor used as a biological relief from tension.

The superiority method of humor was represented in responses related to the use of humor across hierarchical roles and in the use of sarcasm. This type of humor is often viewed as being negative, and although the respondents were given ample opportunities to comment on or discuss negative uses of humor in the school workplace, there was only one reported instance of humor being used in this manner. One teacher told a story of teasing another teacher and being told that the teasing was not appreciated. This resulted in a heightened awareness of her own use of sarcasm, and increased her understanding

that one needs to be very careful about how and to whom sarcasm is used. One reported use of humor across hierarchical roles had the goal of reducing tension, and the other reported uses of sarcasm were aimed at self-deprecation, defined as humor at the expense of oneself.

There were several comments made, both in the short answer questions and in the focus group, in regards to one particular example of sarcasm and its occurrence across hierarchal roles. Reportedly, the school principal, a person staff like and admire, has a habit teachers find humorous. When giving morning announcements the principal is prone to make extraneous comments such as, "I'm standing here in the office" or "I'm looking at this announcement." One teacher reported using this terminology in humorous communications and interactions with another teacher (for example, saying "I am standing here with my hand in my pocket") for the purpose of light sarcasm. Another teacher reported being on a field trip and talking into the microphone saying, "I'm standing here in the front of the bus." While these instances did not occur within earshot of the principal, focus group members felt that, if he heard, he too would consider them humorous.

During the focus group one teacher discussed an incident of using sarcasm with an educational assistant. This use of sarcasm was across hierarchical roles. An alteration in the day's schedule resulted in a bit of "orneriness" on the part of the assistant. The teacher kept reinforcing the assistant with comments such as, "Oh, you are being really good about this" and "You really saved the day." At the end of the day, the teacher thanked the assistant for her flexibility and the assistant said, "Yeah, I'm sorry. I guess I

was a bit crabby about it." The teacher replied, "Well that's the only time you can be crabby this week." The reported intent of this sarcasm was, "to lighten things up" with the goal being to avoid a rift between one another.

The Use of Humor to Prevent Burnout

As previously discussed, humor can be an effective means to reduce and prevent worker burnout. The three dimensions of burnout identified by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1986) were represented in my study.

The dimension of emotional exhaustion, described as the feeling that one has used up all of one's emotional resources, relates to the rejuvenation teachers reported from relief humor, as well as to biological uses of humor. In the focus group discussions, teachers reported "feeling energized" or "experiencing the lifting of spirits that happens after a good laugh." The most prominent theme was that of stories about children. In 14 different comments, teachers reported on humorous incidents with other staff that involved recounting incidents that occurred with students. The use of this humor was to release tension as well as to share with one another. In each incidence report, the teachers remarked the effect of sharing these "kid stories" to be building comradeship (four reports), feeling better about themselves (six reports), or using humor to help others feel better (four reports). This relates directly to Maslach's depersonalization dimension, defined as the development of negative and/or cynical attitudes towards the very individuals one is supposed to be helping. Teachers in the focus group reported a sense of

understanding from their colleagues in regards to the challenges of working with students.

One of my favorite focus group stories was the recounting of what they termed "hallway incidents." In these scenarios, a teacher would have had a student in the hallway for a serious one-on-one discussion relating to the student's classroom performance or behaviors. The focus group participants told how, when conducting such a lecture, another teacher would be walking down the hallway, out of sight of the targeted student. The observing teacher would do things such as make silly faces or gestures that were seen only by the lecturing teacher. Teachers reported on the levity such behaviors gave to an incident, thus reducing their feelings of negativity or cynicism towards the offending child.

Maslach's third dimension of low personal accomplishment, which includes the sense of one's loss of effectiveness in regards to one's work-related duties, was also evident. The peer isolation that occurs in an elementary school setting is imbedded in the very nature of the workplace, as there are minimal opportunities throughout the day to interact with other adults. During the focus group discussion teachers reported several incidents where a quick encounter with another teacher energized them. In one story, a teacher told about seeing a fellow teacher who had been absent from school. She commented, "Oh I haven't seen you for awhile," and the other teacher looked up from her computer and said, "Oh, it's a Mary Ann sighting." Both teachers then laughed and went back to work. This simple exchange was reported to energize both participants.

Later on in the morning, the first teacher told another, "I had a Mary Ann sighting,"
sharing yet another chuckle.

The Uses of Humor

The overarching results from my study show a group of teachers who employ the
regular use of humor in their workplace. Humor was used to reduce stress and tension
and provide relief. Humor was used to build comradeship and enhance trust.

There were generous reports of stories of the amusing things children say and
how sharing it with one another lightened up the day. During the focus group, for
example, a teacher told the story of meeting one of the teacher's daughters. The child
looked at her teacher and then at her daughter and obviously noticed the family
resemblance. She then looked at her teacher and said, "Wow, you must have been pretty
once." The teacher said she shares these types of stories with other staff because it makes
them laugh and then they often share their own humorous story. Sharing a story of this
type is an example of the use of self-deprecating humor. It also may serve to build and
maintain relationships.

Participants of the focus group commented on how a lot of school humor is only
understood by school people. When they go home and tell their families the stories, non-
educators sometimes don't see them as being funny. One focus group teacher told the
story of how she was "laughing her head off" at school just the other day, but could not
recall what was so funny. Another teacher said, "Maybe you were just laughing at

yourself" and the first teacher said, "Maybe it was just the voices in my head." This is another example of the use of self deprecating humor.

There were other examples of humor being used to poke fun at oneself, One teacher, who used to teach kindergarten and is now responsible for the Title 1 reading program, commented on how she doesn't laugh as much at school anymore, as she views her job as more "high stakes" than kindergarten. She said, "I used to be funny 3 years ago," and reported that when someone asked her earlier in the day if she was going to attend the focus group she said, "Yeah, because I need to learn how to be funny again."

Although results from the survey questions showed teachers sometimes using humor with one another to prepare student lessons or to stimulate creativity, this did not emerge as a theme in either the short answer questions or in the focus group. Reported incidences and uses of humor centered mostly on the themes of sharing stories, building comradeship, and stress relief.

Overall, this research study indicated that teachers in this particular workplace used humor to relieve stress, share job related stories, and build camaraderie.

The Effects of Humor

In five separate responses to short answer questions, teachers commented on the positive effect humor has on their workday and on the overall school environment. There were 11 comments made in the focus group that followed these themes of reducing stress and enhancing the workplace environment. As earlier reported, the responses to the

survey instrument also followed these themes, with questions pertaining to the effects of

humor in regards to building positive interpersonal relationships.

Study results showed that the effect of humor across hierarchal roles occurred

rarely and usually in non-negative instances. The same was true of the effects of sarcasm,

with the one exception as was previously discussed.

The effects of humor in the study setting were found to be positive, with only one

reported instance that had negative connotations. Teachers in this setting seemed to feel

that humor had positive effects in their workplace.

Interpretation of Findings

The previously cited research discussing the categories of humor was present in

this study. By far, the most common was the relief method. Working with young children

provides many opportunities for comic relief, with humorous stories and events

throughout the work day. It then logically follows that sharing these stories and events

with colleagues would provide tension relief with the additional benefit of building

friendships and establishing trust with coworkers.

It was interesting that the reported uses and effects of humor were so

overwhelmingly of a positive nature, with only minimal reports of humor used in a

negative manner. There were few references or responses associated with the use of

humor in negatively sarcastic ways or using humor to exert power, control, or influence.

Also interesting is that while previous research tells us that "not all things are humorous

to all people" (Duncan, 1982) there was, in fact, strong agreement among the teachers

themselves on what was deemed funny and why. However, they did report that what they thought was funny was not always viewed that way by people outside of their immediate work setting.

Earlier research pointed strongly to the risk of teacher burnout due in part to peer isolation. Gunning (2001) found humor to be of value in building and maintaining relationships as well as in the overall work culture, particularly when dealing with child-related concerns. This finding was validated by the participants of this study, as reported that relating with one another in humorous ways provided levity to the stresses and demands of their work day.

Susa (2002) spoke to the importance of humor in organizational climate. He found relief humor to enjoy a positive correlation with organizational outcomes. Results of my study agree.

Mawhinney's (2008) study was in close alignment with my findings. Teachers do feel that humor is an effective means to lighten their emotional workload, and also that the positive social interaction that occurs with the use of humor reduces stress and builds relationships. Her recommendation for further study on teacher-to-teacher interactions is just what my study was about.

Fine and DeSoucey (2005) reported on the joking culture that develops over time in an interacting social group. This was also linked to my study, with the "dead dog stories" as an example.

My speculation that humor would be a value that would shape organizational culture appears to be valid. Throughout the focus group meeting, for example,

participants shared a comfortable and joking banter with one another. It was apparent they enjoyed the culture of their school workplace. To quote one participant, "Our school is a good place, people are definitely good to be around here, and share a sense of humor." This comment was followed by another person saying, "I too think [our school] is probably the most positive environment I've worked at. It is the humor, and also the respect that's shown to one another in a caring way."

Amabile (1983a, 1983b) and Amabile et al.'s (1996) discussion of the role humor plays in creativity did not emerge as an overall theme of my study. When asked in Survey Question 8 if one witnessed school staff using humor to stimulate imagination and creativity, there were only two responses of "very often/often" with the remainder of responses being "sometimes" or "rarely." Perhaps this is due to the isolation of teachers, and the limited time they have to plan and create with one another. Perhaps it is due to the fact that, when teachers do come together, it is often after hectic work days and to address some particular agenda that does not include or support creative acts.

Retallick and Butt's (2002, 2004) studies analyzing peer workplace relationships of teachers found that positive workplace relationships influenced overall satisfaction with a workplace. My study also found this to be evident, as illustrated by the previous comments of teachers.

Teaching in an elementary school can be a lonely occupation as there may be minimal opportunities to interact with colleagues throughout the school day. Having a culture of humor within the school may aide in promoting teacher satisfaction, as even brief exchanges may serve to "lighten" the days work.

When I began my study, I wanted to explore teachers' perceptions of the uses and effects of humor on the K-12 workplace. Enjoying humor myself, I was interested to learn what others thought in regards to both the relief method as well as the methods of superiority and incongruity, and how humor adds or detracts from the school environment. Through analysis of the theory and findings of previous research, I found the role of humor to have some importance in the workplace, and specifically in social service settings. I wanted to look at the correlation of previous research findings to my findings in one elementary school. Having been a teacher at this particular school 10 years previous, I had found the workplace environment and the interpersonal relationships to be some of the best I had ever experienced. I had not, however, looked at the environment through the lens of humor, and I was interested to see if current staff members did.

My ancillary questions were explored through the research methodologies of survey questions, short answer questions, and a focus group. For the first question, how teachers describe and define the uses and effects of humor in their school workplace, I found a group of teachers who found humor in their workplace a common occurrence and who shared similar definitions of humor. The second question, pertaining to similarities or differences between teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to humor, was upheld when I found strong similarities, as staff reported similar experiences, attitudes, and values around humor. The questions of how teachers used humor to meet similar or different individual or school goals were not directly answered. In retrospect, none of the questions developed for any of the methodologies directly used an example or

elicited an example from the participants with which I could answer this question. This was a flaw in my design of my instruments.

Application of Findings

While it is good to know that teachers can enjoy their work and find support with one another through the use of humor, the underlying issue could be said to be: What does this mean for student achievement? Comer (1984) and Eccles et al. (1993) found a positive school climate to have a powerful effect on students' motivation to learn. A white paper prepared in 2008 by the National School Climate Center (NSCC), the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE), the National Center for Learning and Citizenship (NCLC) and the Education Commission of the States (ECS) reported research showing a relationship between school climate and student self-concept (Cairns, 1987; Heal, 1978). School connectedness has also been shown to be a predictor of student health and academic outcomes (Shochet, Dads, Ham, & Montague, 2006).

A positive school climate is characterized by healthy and collaborative learning communities. Research indicates that positive school climate can be a contributor to student risk prevention as well as student learning (Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2002). When students feel safe and cared about, academic achievement increases (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1977). Additional research shows that a positive school climate enhances students' self esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990), reduces alcohol use and psychiatric problems (Kasen, Johnson, & Cohen, 1990),

as well as reduces student absenteeism and disciplinary problems (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

School climate has a profound effect on teacher retention – it is common sense that when teachers enjoy their jobs and find pleasure in their workplace they create a positive school climate and an effective learning community. The use of humor among colleagues in a school environment might just be "the tie that binds," in promoting teacher workplace satisfaction which then has a positive effect on student achievement and on students' lives. While I am speculating on the potential of this assertion, based on my research findings, I believe that the findings clearly point in this direction.

The Answer to My Study Questions

I wanted to study what teachers thought and felt about the uses and effects of humor in their school workplace. While responses to all of my ancillary questions were not obtained, I did obtain insights into others. In both of the research tools used in this study, responses showed positive uses and effects of humor as well as similar perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. Participants reported using humor in positive and productive ways and enjoying positive and productive results.

Limitations of This Study

What did not emerge from my study was information on how humor was used to meet specific to individual or school goals. Perhaps this was due to limitations of my research questions. At the conclusion of the survey and short answer questions, as well as

at the conclusion of the focus group, respondents were asked to comment on the value of the questions and for any additional suggestions of questions that could have been asked. Only three teachers responded and their responses were inconclusive.

As this study was conducted in one elementary school, its results are limited to that individual setting. It would be interesting to discover if the common themes that emerged appear in other elementary school settings.

The survey and short answer questions were made available to the teachers for several days prior to collection. Some teachers chose to respond the day of collection. It is possible that any individual teachers' responses could vary, depending on the time and day of their responses, affected by experiences immediately preceding their responses. Although none reported to have done so, it is possible that some teachers discussed their responses with one another, which could have affected individual responses.

In replicating this study, consideration should be given to the wording of "sometimes" in the Likert-scale questions. A more descriptive term could be assigned to the median response, thereby reducing ambiguity.

The focus group was limited to the teachers that had the time and flexibility in their personal schedules to show up, off-site, after school hours. As it was viewed as somewhat of a social event, it is possible that the teachers who attended are the ones most likely to enjoy interpersonal relationships and open communication.

While the short answer and survey questions were anonymous, the focus group was not. Participants may have offered only what they felt comfortable offering. Finally,

because I was known to some of the staff, it is possible that their impressions and/or previous experiences with me affected their responses.

Recommendations for Further Research

This was exploratory research into the role of interpersonal humor in a school setting. As this research was conducted at one particular school site, more studies are needed, at a variety of school sites across the country, to expand the information on the uses and effects of humor among teachers in other schools. In this study, the relief method was the type of humor most commonly reported. Is the very nature of elementary schools the causation of the predominance of the method? The effects of humor in this setting were viewed as quite positive and respondents reported their satisfaction with the effects of humor used. Would this be true in other settings? Further exploration would discover the effects of humor in other settings, and what the effects of collegial humor are in other schools.

It would be interesting for further research to explore any connection between the use of humor and the retention of teachers. The average tenure for teachers is now approximately seven years, where it used to be common for people to spend their entire working lives in the teaching profession. Perhaps humor may be an aspect of collegiality and the school work environment that can compensate for increased teacher accountability as well as an increasingly stressful work environment.

The link to overall organizational culture needs further exploration. It would be interesting to find out how the school environment compares and contrasts to other social

service settings, as well as to non-social service environments. Perhaps most importantly, the link between a positive school workplace environment and the learning and achievement of students needs to be explored.

Changes in Practice

Teacher education programs do not address the psychological needs of educators. There is a significant gap between research aimed at school climate and the education of teachers. Beginning teachers do not have a guide or blueprint for developing the types of healthy relationships with other teachers that may increase their retention as well as affect the success of their students. There is a need to educate veteran teachers about the role of school climate, the uses and effects of humor in enhancing school climate, and the broad implications of teachers working in a joyful environment. School leaders need to be educated regarding the role humor plays in their schools and be aware of and nurture the positive uses and their effects (relief and incongruity), as well as work towards the elimination of negative uses and effects (superiority and hierarchal). Currently there is only one professional group that provides humorous trainings and in-services to teachers nationwide, with most topics geared towards teacher-student interactions. Their presentations are relatively costly and, therefore, out of reach of most schools. While there are university courses on the research of the effects of humor on general learning and retention, and even around the use of humor in teaching university level students, I teach the only known university level course on the use of humor in the K-12 classroom, again aimed at teacher-student interchanges.

In summary, it is important to recruit and retain highly qualified and inspired educators to effectively teach the next generation. Then, it is important to make sure they work in a satisfactorily supportive workplace. It is recommended that pre- and in-service educational trainings be developed and expanded in order to promote the practice of humor in the school workplace. K-12 education is in urgent need of revitalization. Humor might be just the ticket to this passage.

APPENDIX A

DRAFT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Please respond to these questions by circling one of the replies.

1)   I witness school staff using humor with one another
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

2)   I witness school staff using humor to develop friendships and build rapport
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

3)   I witness school staff using humor to provide an example or prove a point
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

4)   I witness school staff using humor to express approval
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

5)   I witness school staff using humor to express disapproval
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

6)   I witness school staff using humor to initiate conversation
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

7)   I witness school staff using humor with one another when planning or preparing
        lessons
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

8)   I witness school staff using humor to stimulate imagination and creativity
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

9)   I witness school staff using humor across hierarchal roles
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

10)   I witness school staff using humor as a means to exert power or influence
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

11)   I witness school staff using humor gain the attention of others
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

12) I witness school staff using humor to relieve tension, stress or anxiety related to school situations
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

13) I witness school staff using humor to disarm aggression with others
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

14) I witness school staff using humor to insult, attack, or demean others
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

15) At school, I use humor with other school staff
Very often   Often   Sometimes   Rarely   Very Rarely   Never

Please write a short reply to the following questions.

Tell about a time you used humor with other school staff. What was your reason for using humor in the given situation? Do you think using humor in the situation was appropriate and helpful, or do you perhaps have second thoughts about your use of humor in the situation?

Tell about a time when you had a good laugh with other school staff. What were the circumstances? Who was the initiator of the humor? Do you think everyone involved (if the incident involved more than just you and one other person) found the scenario funny?

Now that you have answered the questions, please go back and respond to the *value* of each question. Was it a worthwhile question? Can you think of better wording for the question? Can you suggest other or additional questions?

APPENDIX B

DRAFT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Opening Questions:
      How many years have you been teaching?
      How long have you been a teacher at this school?
      Tell us about one humorous event – no matter how slight – that you witnessed
      between school staff recently (within the last week).

Think about the last time you experienced a good laugh at school. Can you share this with the group?

How funny do you think your teaching colleagues are? What types of behaviors make some people funnier than others?

There are three main types of humor: relief, incongruity, and superiority. (I will briefly explain each type and provide a visual support for reference.) Can you provide an example, either actual or hypothetical, where you have observed, instigated, or participated in each type of humor? What were some of the effects of the type of humor displayed – on the individual that was instigating it and/or the participant? Were these positive or negative effects?

Lastly, what is your opinion of how teachers use humor in the school workplace? Do you feel humor has a positive, negative, or neutral effect on the school as a workplace?

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