Humor in the Classroom:

Changing the Face of Middle School Education

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Undergraduate Thesis
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I would also like to thank my friends and family for supporting me and motivating me throughout this entire process. Also, special thanks to Dr. Doug Andrews whose expertise in statistics was truly helpful. Last, and certainly not least, I applaud my Wittenberg University faculty committee. I cannot thank Dr. Jeannine Fox of the Education Department and Dr. Nancy McHugh of the Philosophy Department enough for their willingness to serve on my committee and their guidance throughout my project. I cannot say thank you enough to my faculty chairperson, Dr. Lora Lawson of the Education Department, for all the time and energy she gave in order for this project to be a success. Similarly, I appreciate her critique of my work because “pretty good” was not good enough.
Introduction

During my undergraduate study of middle childhood education, I have participated in many field experiences. The field experiences varied in duration, school location, subject, and grade level. One thing remained the same however. When I shared humorous experiences with the classes I was placed in, things changed. It is really hard for me to describe what those “things” actually were. The “things” that I believed were huge included higher levels of student engagement, creativity, and interest. Students asked more questions that were thought provoking and examined how these ideas relate to their own lives. Little “things” started happening, too, such as more students turning in and completing their homework, connections made between concepts, and retention and application levels skyrocketing. These little “things” are by no means insignificant.

These amazing changes did not take place the moment I stepped in front of the classroom, but it was only after the class and I shared a humorous experience that “things” changed. Because of the impact this had on the quality of the changes I saw, I wanted to explore how appropriate humor affects groups of students and their classroom environments. I wanted to know why students became more engaged and why classroom community became stronger when humor was part of the classroom experience.
In order to effectively understand the role of humor in the classroom, I had to better understand humor itself. Understanding how and why humor works was crucial to understanding the effects of using humor in the classroom. Furthermore, I had to look into the students’ and teachers’ roles regarding the use of appropriate humor in the classroom. I wanted to find out if the burden of effectively using appropriate humor lay solely on the shoulders or the teacher or not. Finally, I wanted to determine if the use of appropriate humor positively impacts students’ cognitive abilities as opposed to simply making class more fun.

The goal of my thesis is to better understand how the use of appropriate humor affects student perceptions of classroom community and learning. I envision a classroom learning community as a place where a group of students and a teacher, through positive relationships, are able to 1) celebrate individuality, acknowledging what each person brings to the group, and 2) celebrate a group identity, understanding that as a class they have learning goals (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985).

The learning community grows together in order to develop socially, intellectually, and morally as individuals and as a group. Education provides more than “book learning,” it provides a holistic approach to help children develop into integral
members of society. A teacher must address social and moral
goals in the classroom, and my personal experience lends me to
believe that appropriate humor in the classroom is a tool for
addressing social, intellectual, and moral goals. I must
emphasize that appropriate humor is simply a tool and is not the
solution to furthering the holistic development of students.

During my undergraduate student teaching, I had the
pleasure of working with a very special seventh grade science
class. This class was different than the other two science
classes I taught because humorous experiences we shared gave us
common ground. We drew back on these experiences during my
student teaching to remember the humorous experiences we shared.
The experiences were not anything extraordinarily humorous, but
brought the class and me closer together as a learning
community. Furthermore, the rapport I developed with this
amazing group of students allowed me to better manage the
classroom and structure lessons.

I conducted a literature review, field research, and
observations to gain more insight into the positive effects of
using appropriate humor in the classroom. I cannot convey how
much I learned as a result of this research process. I will be a
better teacher because of it.
Literature Review

Developmental Stages of Humor

The type of humor that a teacher can effectively use in a classroom depends greatly on the students’ age. The chart below displays a continuum of humor characteristics found in typically developing children.

Table 1

Developmental Sequence of Humor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Characteristics Displayed by Typically Developing Children – Children are able to…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 week</td>
<td>é Smile during sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 months</td>
<td>é Laugh when tickled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>é Laugh at peek-a-boo games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 years</td>
<td>é Respond to distortions of objects and words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>é Find rhyming and nonsense words funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>é Find humor in bodily functions and noises, taboo words, clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, chanting, and misnaming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Have little capacity for sympathetic humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Laugh at exaggerations or any form of surprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Enjoy word play with names and “pre” riddles such as, “What did the daddy firecracker say to the baby firecracker? You’re too little to pop.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-8 years</td>
<td>è Realize words are not always literal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Find practical jokes and others’ discomfort to be funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-12 years</td>
<td>è Enjoy concrete puns, conventional jokes, word plays, moron, and knock-knock jokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Gradually develop sympathetic humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Delight in deviations from the norm and taboo subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Begin laughing at self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Use and understand verbal humor more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>è Use humor for personal ends, such as channeling negative feelings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13+ years

- Deprecate laughter that is unfeeling
- Appreciate original, good-natured humor including sarcasm and self-ridicule
- Prefer tongue-in-cheek humor, social satire, and irony
- Kid around, make joking insults, and loud laughter in public
- Avoid laughing at forbidden topics in mixed company
- Appreciate verbal wit over visual humor
- Use humor more often to save face


The preceding chart that Cornett (2001) constructed shows that as a typically developing child grows older, certain types of humor generally start to be appreciated while other types of humor begin to lose their appeal. Within the literature review, I will share research connecting cognitive development to humor appreciation. Similarly, I will provide background information on humor beginning with the four main classifications of humor presented by Shade (1996) which are widely recognized: figural, verbal, visual, and auditory.

**Classifications of Humor**

Figural humor consists of tangible, “moment-in-time” pieces of humor, generically referred to as cartoons. The word “figural” refers to pictorial compositions often containing people or animals. The humor lies in an artifact that can be preserved for future enjoyment. Comic strips, comic books,
political cartoons, and caricatures are prime examples of figural humor. Pieces of figural humor are often accompanied by captions. According to Figure 1, children aged thirteen years and older would most likely enjoy and understand figural humor because they prefer social satire and irony, frequent categories of cartoons and comics.

Verbal humor comes in many forms and as its name implies, the humor is derived from something involving language. Verbal humor requires the reader/listener to understand incongruities in language (Shade, 1996). Examples of this type of humor are riddles, puns, jokes, satire, parody, anecdotes, irony, sarcasm, and farce. According to Figure 1, Cornett (2001) shows that appreciation of this type of humor begins as early as two to four years old when a child can appreciate simple riddles. The enjoyment of more sophisticated forms of verbal humor comes with age and cognitive development which I will explore in this review of the literature.

Visual humor is synonymous with physical humor because this type of humor is most effective when an individual watches for incongruities in behavior. Figure 1 shows that the appreciation of visual humor starts when a child is seven or eight years old, a time when practical jokes, a form of visual humor, are found to be amusing. Practical jokes often occur when a person is surprised by the unexpected, or incongruity, in everyday life.
Other examples of visual humor are slapstick, impersonations, facial gestures, and pantomime.

Auditory humor is a small category of humor associated with sounds. Although auditory humor is closely associated with sounds, the sounds are not always words. Bodily functions such as farting and belching fall under this category. Figure 1 shows that auditory humor is most appreciated by children ages four to six. The appreciation of this type of humor is likely due to the level of cognitive development displayed by children that young. I will explore the relationship between cognitive development and humor next.

_Humor Comprehension_

Shade’s (1996) theory regarding an individual’s sense of humor is comprised of five elements: humor identification, humor appreciation, humor mirth response, humor comprehension, and humor production. For the purposes of my study, I want to closely examine humor appreciation and its connection to humor comprehension. Because the appreciation of a joke requires the person to understand it, the elements of humor appreciation and comprehension are linked. Humor appreciation begins with the presence of a cognitive challenge, which means an individual must think about the joke that is presented. According to Shade (1996) if a person does not appreciate humor, it was either below or beyond the person’s understanding. The concept of humor
appreciation and its connection to cognitive challenge are crucial for use of humor in the classroom because students will derive more enjoyment from figuring out jokes. If a teacher wishing to effectively use positive humor in the classroom uses humor too advanced or too novice for the students, then the humor will be ineffective and useless because the cognitive challenge is missing and the students are not required to think.

According to Zigler, Levine, and Gould (1967) when the comprehension of a joke taxes an individual’s cognitive structure, then the humor mirth response, or laughter, is greatest. Easy and complete comprehension of humor often results in a minimal mirth response. Shade (1996) states that humor is often created when the incongruities presented are a “violation of what is expected.” In order for students to comprehend such types of humor, they must possess a base knowledge of the concepts of words involved. Furthermore, children must have knowledge of relationships between the words included, giving them the ability to comprehend the possible alternatives that make the joke funny.

To comprehend a joke, a person employs any number of cognitive processes, including the capability to condense material, identify incongruities, and comprehend unusual verbal representations (Shade, 1996). Similar to solving brain teasers or mysteries, there is a certain level of intrinsic reward
associated with comprehending humor using these cognitive processes. Different types of humor require the use of different cognitive processes. For example, finding a cartoon to be humorous requires a person to understand the content of the cartoon in order to understand the joke, thus requiring a high level of cognition. On the other hand, the amusement that comes from the sound of a bodily function requires very little cognitive development, allowing children ages four to six to enjoy it as their primary humor (see Figure 1).

**Humor Theories**

After looking at the various types of humor that describe what we laugh at, I will next describe a few of the main theories about why we laugh. Theories on humor are described in both Cornett (2001) and Shade (1996). The incongruity theory and superiority theory are, to a degree, cognitively based while the relief/release theory explains the physical aspects of the sense of humor (Cornett, 2001).

**Incongruity Theory.** Shade (1996) details how this theory centers around the notion that humor is caused by incongruities that can take the form of understatements, exaggerations, surprises, contradiction, or the unreal. "The flip-flopping process of incongruity-based humor involves two conflicting sets of rules or frames and reference" (Cornett, 2001). An example of the flip-flopping process is found in the following student
response: “I got an F on my paper for bad spelling because the spell-checker blue it.” To find the humor in this response, a person must know that “blue” has a homophone and/or that computer spell-checkers would not find this mistake because it does not check for meaning. The cognitive piece of the incongruity theory exists because humor is often dependent on the ability to understand and manipulate language skills developed in early childhood. These skills include understanding the multiple meanings of words, metaphors, idioms, and appreciating a shift of perspective (Shade, 1996). The developmental sequence of humor (Table 1) shows that children begin to notice and appreciate incongruities as early as two years old. According to the incongruity theory, “humor exists because the listener perceives the incongruity then attempts to resolve it” (Shade, 1996).

Superiority Theory. The idea that humans attain pleasure when they perceive themselves as smarter than others is the premise of the superiority theory (Cornett, 2001). Everything is funny as long as it is happening to somebody else, is a quote often attributed to Will Rogers that effectively encapsulates the superiority theory. Situations where someone is being embarrassed, disparaged, or degraded are often the root of humor according to this theory. Furthermore, individuals often receive pleasure when they see themselves as better off than somebody
else. When people pick on individuals less fortunate than themselves, the result is a form of self-glorification (Shade, 1996). Children begin laughing at the expense of others as early as age seven (see Figure 1).

People customarily view this as an acceptable form of humor as long as no one appears to be getting hurt. Often times, the people laughing never know the true hurt or pain the victim is experiencing. This theory is often played out in society in the form of stereotyping groups and individuals based on their characteristics or attributes. Occupations, races, religions, institutions, and nationalities are often the subject of such jokes which exist to boost some people’s egos while deflating the egos of others (Shade, 1996). Because humor attributed to the superiority theory exists at the expense of others, a good lesson to teach young students is to place themselves in the position of the “jokee” and ask if it would be funny if it happened to them.

Relief/Release Theory. While the previous two theories were cognitively based, the relief/release theory explains the “uniquely human physical response of laughter” (Cornett, 2001). While humor explained by this theory often occurs after a cognitive event, the relief/release theory explores the effect of this humor on the human body. Shade (1996) believes the relief/release theory of humor challenges the restrictions that
affect our lives every day. Such restrictions include conventional constraints, the rigidity of logic, and human desires that are sexual or aggressive. The act of laughing is a means of releasing repressed energy produced by such constraints (Carlson & Peterson, 1995).

Humor in the Classroom

Benefits of Humor in the Classroom. Humor has a very important role in the classroom. The inclusion of humor in lectures helps make learning enjoyable for students. By making learning enjoyable, students begin to love the process of learning along with the end result. Using humor in the classroom often boosts morale which in turn has a positive effect on “the business of learning lessons” (Hill, 1988). Students are more likely to recall information when they can connect it to a memorable context. Use of humor is an ideal method for creating associations and forming schema. Furthermore, humor can be used as a prompt to help students recall prior knowledge and associate it to new information (Lundberg & Thurston, 1997). Joking that acts to reinforce material helps students retain subject matter by making associations between the joke and the material. These “explanatory anecdotes” need not be extremely funny to create schema (Hill, 1988).

Humor helps shape the learning environment by creating a place where students can feel comfortable making mistakes which
encourages risk-taking in the learning process (Hill, 1988). When students can relate to each other, the learning environment is enhanced. Sharing a humorous experience with someone else often creates a bond between two people. As humans, we have a desire to create such bonds because they are pleasurable. We enjoy laughing in large groups as well as recounting humorous experiences. When a group laughs together, there is a sense of security and self-confidence among the members (Cornett, 1986). The moments when a class laughs, students forget their differences, fears, and problems as they share a common experience that the humor has brought about (Hill, 1988). This comfortable group feeling is desired in the classroom setting because it promotes risk-taking and experimentation (Cornett, 1986). Experimentation can lead to more inquiry-based learning that is student initiated and foster a better understanding of concepts.

"Laughter can represent a certain amount of freedom from the constraints of the classroom" (Hill, 1988). Seeing school as a requirement and not an opportunity, perceptions of formality, and procedural-based learning are constraints that limit creativity. A humorous atmosphere increases creativity because students gain a new perspective which allows them to be flexible in their thinking. Because humor often focuses on the unexpected, students are able to open their minds and emotions,
paying less attention to proper procedures and correct answers and more attention to understanding and application (Lundberg & Thurston, 1997).

Roles of a Teacher. In order to effectively incorporate humor into the classroom, the teacher must lay a framework. One of the critical aspects in laying the groundwork for humor in the classroom is teaching the difference between positive and negative humor. Lundberg & Thurston (1997) define positive humor as “nurturing and kind; enhancing self-esteem” and negative humor as “cutting; hurts peoples’ feelings.” By instructing students on the differences between positive and negative humor along with the effects of each, the teacher establishes his expectations for how students use humor in the classroom. “The key is to use relevant, content-based humor that is neither demeaning or hostile” (James, 2001).

Lundberg & Thurston (1997) offer several guidelines teachers should follow for using humor in the classroom. Their list includes doing what fits your personality, making humor a regular part of class rather than something special, and tying humor to the subjects being taught. Similarly, the classroom set up and design should physically welcome humor by providing engaging visuals and open spaces for conversation. Because of the nature of humor, it is easy for students to become distracted or get out of hand when humor is used in the
classroom. Teachers should have the ability to redirect and refocus students if boundaries are crossed.

Cornett (1986) explains that humor can bring groups of people together as they share a common experience. She also points out that in the creation of an in-group feeling, there are those who become part of an out-group. If true classroom community is to develop, then a teacher must take steps to prevent the formation of an out-group. Sometimes children are on the outside because they do not know how to tell jokes or share humorous stories. Fortunately, joke telling can be taught and is a skill which gives students tools for making friends by giving pleasure to others. “Students who have poor self-concepts begin to view themselves differently if they use humor appropriately to bring pleasure to others. A class that has opportunities for sharing humor will have a more positive atmosphere” (Cornett, 1986).
Methodology

The field research I conducted as part of my thesis consisted of two main parts: 1) purposeful sampling of two classrooms and 2) a random survey of area teachers.

**Purposeful Sampling of Two Classrooms**

In order to gain a better idea of how humor was currently being used in the field of middle school education, I purposefully selected two teachers whom I would observe. I selected these teachers based on personal experiences and recommendations of Wittenberg University faculty. I had spent time with each teacher for university field experiences and felt they would provide me with contrasting approaches to the use of appropriate humor in the classroom.

I used two methods to gather data about the two classrooms in order to make a holistic description of the two teachers’ uses of humor. I felt it appropriate to survey each student of the two purposefully selected teachers to confirm the students’ attitudes and responses toward the teachers based on my observations.

**Survey of Area Teachers**

In order to make generalizations about the use of appropriate humor in middle school classrooms, I decided to survey middle childhood teachers in one county of central Ohio. Fifty-nine teachers were surveyed as a result of a random
selection of one school from each of three categories: 1) private, urban schools, 2) public, rural schools, and 3) public, urban schools. I surveyed teachers in three different types of schools to make generalizations about humor in the classroom across middle schools based on the data I compiled.
Purposeful Sampling of Two Classrooms

Subjects. The subjects were two middle school teachers and their students. One was a sixth grade language arts teacher and the other was a seventh grade mathematics teacher. The sixth grade teacher taught in a public, urban school district and the seventh grade teacher taught in a public, rural school district, both in central Ohio. The students were all taught by these two teachers during the 2002-2003 school year.

Instruments. While observing the two middle school teachers, I used the Field Observation Checklist (Appendix A) as a guide for things I was looking for and a tool on which I could write and organize the things I saw. At no time did either teacher or any student see the information I wrote on these sheets.

The Student Humor Assessment Survey (Appendix B) was used to measure the students’ perceptions of the use of humor in their classroom, the ways humor helps them learn, and their attitudes toward learning. I used a legal size sheet of paper to give students ample room to write a response. A pilot survey was administered to a middle school classroom in a rural, public school. Student feedback on the pilot regarding a lack of room to write led me to use legal size paper. Based on student suggestions, I felt that the additional space at the bottom of the survey would encourage more students to respond to the last
question. Similarly, the script was adjusted to give more detailed instructions for the open-ended response question. Students who took the pilot survey informed me they did not understand the question and needed a better explanation.

Table 2

**Timeline for the Purposeful Sampling of Two Classrooms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| October, 2002 | • I completed the design for the teacher observation and student survey field research.  
                • I called Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Turner explaining my research and requesting permission to observe them. |
| November, 2002| • I administered the pilot survey to a rural, public middle school.  
                • One week prior to the observation week, Mr. Roberts was sent a letter with the observation schedule (Appendix C).  
                • I observed Mr. Roberts for one week. On Monday through Thursday, I observed the final class that Mr. Roberts taught each day. On Friday, I observed all of Mr. Robert’s classes and surveyed every student in each class. There were a total of 63 student responses. |
| December, 2002| • One week prior to the observation week, Mrs. Turner was sent a letter with the observation schedule (Appendix C).  
                • I observed Mrs. Turner for one week. On Monday through Thursday, I observed the final class that Mrs. Turner taught each day. On Friday I observed all of Mrs. Turner’s classes and surveyed every student in each class. There were a total of 113 student responses. |
Case Studies: Classroom Observations

As part of my field research, I spent time observing teachers in an effort to observe how humor was being used in the classroom. I observed two different teachers for a week each and took notes on appropriate uses of humor, inappropriate uses of humor, student use of humor, and student reaction to humor used by the teacher. These observations allowed me to obtain a better sense of appropriate classroom humor being practiced in a school setting.

To rule out as many confounding factors as possible, I observed both teachers for one week. I spent Monday through Thursday observing the last period of each teacher. On Friday, I observed the teacher for the entire day. I arranged the observation schedule so I could get a sense of how each teacher interacted with a single group of students. I used Friday to make observations on every class the teacher has in order to see if his or her use of humor was similar throughout the day.

My observation of Mr. Robert’s classroom took place the week of November 18, 2003 in a city middle school. I observed Mrs. Turner’s classroom the week of December 9, 2003 in a rural middle school. Furthermore, pseudonyms are used in the case studies to maintain student and teacher confidentiality.
Survey of Area Teachers

Subjects. The subjects involved in this study were three middle schools located in central Ohio. One middle school came from each of the following three categories: 1) private, urban school, 2) public, rural school, and 3) public, urban school. The schools were selected using randomization and none of these schools were used in the observation of teachers, the surveying of students, nor the pilot study of the survey.

Instruments. The Teacher Humor Assessment Survey (Appendix D) was used to measure the teachers’ use of humor in the classroom, beliefs about humor in the classroom, and familiarity with research on the use of humor in the classroom. The survey consisted of six statements for the teachers to respond to using a continuum that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” After the continuum portion of the survey, there was an open response question where teachers were asked to provide personal experiences and beliefs related to the use of humor in the classroom.
Table 3

*Timeline for Survey of Area Teachers*

| November, 2002 | • I randomly selected one school from each of the three categories: 1) private, urban school, 2) public, rural school, and 3) public, urban school.
|               | • I received permission from the principal of each school to survey all teachers who instructed students in grades six through eight in core subject areas (math, science, social studies, and language arts). I also requested and received a faculty roster from each school for the purpose of calculating survey return rates.
|               | • I personally delivered surveys to the three schools for dissemination. Each survey consisted of a cover letter explaining my research (Appendix E), a copy of the survey, and a tea bag as a token of appreciation.
|               | • Surveys were returned by the teachers within a week to the school secretaries.
|               | • I personally collected the surveys from the secretaries at all three schools.
|               | • In total, I sent out 59 surveys and received 41 responses resulting in a return rate of 69.5%.

| March, 2003   | • In an effort to get surveys from non-responders, I personally delivered 18 follow-up surveys to the two schools with return rates less than 100%. Each survey consisted of a new cover letter (Appendix F) and a copy of the survey.
|               | • Surveys were returned by the teachers within a week to the school secretary.
|               | • Surveys were collected from the secretaries at both schools.
|               | • In total, I sent out 18 follow-up surveys and received 13 responses giving a total return rate of 91.5%. |
Content Analysis: Survey Responses

In order to compile and analyze the responses to open-ended questions from the Student Humor Assessment Survey, Dr. Lawson and I mutually established a coding system for the comments. The categories emerged from the data and divided up the responses into meaningful groups based on the information each response provided. The categorization process was cyclical and required new categories to be generated, certain categories to be divided, and some to collapse into other categories. In the end, each category had its own distinct characteristics. For responses from the student survey, there were nine categories which categorized the responses into eight specific groups and one additional group for comments that were vague, unclear, or did not answer the question.

Responses from the final question of Teacher Humor Assessment Surveys underwent a similar process, but with very different categories. Similar to the student survey responses, the teacher responses were placed in one of five specific groups that emerged from the data. The “additional comments” group was designated for answers that were unclear or off-topic. By categorizing these responses I was able to clearly organize the opinions of students and teachers and look for trends or specific beliefs that appeared repeatedly.
**Statistical Analysis**

The quantitative statistics are derived from my field research based on the *Student Humor Assessment Survey* and the *Teacher Humor Assessment Survey*. Each of the surveys had several statements requiring the responder to use the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Unsure or Undecided</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to make quantitative calculations, each possible response on the scale was assigned a numerical value: Strongly Disagree = -3, Disagree = 1, Unsure or Undecided = 0, Agree = 1, and Strongly Agree = 3. The distance on the scale was extended one value in each direction for Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree because responders do not tend to select choices with extreme adverbs such as “strongly” unless they have extreme opinions. I wanted responders who did select the extreme responses to have their opinions taken into consideration when numerical calculations were made.

All surveys were included in the statistical calculations. In the event that a responder refrained from answering a particular question, their response (or case) was omitted from a calculation involving that particular question only. Some of the
 statistical results show a number of cases omitted which indicates the number of responders who did not answer a question involved in the specific calculation. I felt that invalidating surveys with unanswered questions compromised my data because many students may not have understood a particular question and providing any assistance not on the Student Survey Administration Protocol (Appendix G) was not permissible. Similarly, students who had no comment to a particular statement should not have their surveys discarded.

I personally entered the data into the Statistix for Windows program. The data was printed out and I double checked the statistics to ensure accurate results.
Results

This chapter presents the results of the various aspects of my research including a summary from my field observations, case studies for each teacher I observed, open-ended responses from the student and teacher surveys along with statistical analyses based on the two surveys.

Field Observation Summary

The following table is a compilations of data from my of Mr. Robert’s and Mrs. Turner’s classrooms. I used the Field Observation Checklist (Appendix A) as a guide for making notes and recording events I believed to be pertinent to my thesis. The third column in the chart represents the number of instances a particular event occurred. Examples of an “instance” include a teacher joke, a sarcastic comment by a teacher, a student laughing, etc.

I anticipated combining the student survey and observation data to compare and contrast the two teachers and groups of students, but students made written responses about teachers other than Mr. Roberts and Mrs. Turner. Therefore, I was unable to combine them and made Table 4 to display the observation data and based my case studies off this information.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of Appropriate Sarcasm by</td>
<td>• Teacher initiated event</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>• Mrs. Turner joked with a group of girls about how they were chattering like they were women at a tea party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Appropriate use and content of sarcasm</td>
<td></td>
<td>• When a student called Mr. Roberts by the wrong name, Mr. Roberts explained he was much better looking than the other teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Inappropriate Sarcasm by</td>
<td>• Teacher initiated event</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>• Mr. Roberts teased a student about finally getting something correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Inappropriate use or content of sarcasm</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mr. Roberts referred to a student response as &quot;stupid.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Appropriate Joke by</td>
<td>• Teacher initiated event</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>• Mr. Roberts joked around with a student who fell asleep asking if he enjoyed the nap.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Content of joke was appropriate</td>
<td></td>
<td>• A student told Mrs. Turner he could not do a math problem because he was only in the seventh grade. Mrs. Turner responded by saying, &quot;so is everyone else.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Inappropriate Joke by</td>
<td>• Teacher initiated event</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>• Mr. Roberts made a homosexual joke regarding a Thanksgiving family gathering with &quot;Aunt Sam.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>• Content of joke was inappropriate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers Laughing at Their Own Mistakes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teacher Made a Mistake</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teacher Laughed at Their Error and Encouraged Others to Do So</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Allowed Student Jokes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student(s) Made a Joke</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teacher Laughed Along with the Class</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appropriate Responses to Teacher Humor by Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Response to Teacher Humor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Showed a Positive Response Immediately</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Behavior Remained Positive During Class</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inappropriate Responses to Teacher Humor by Students</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Response to Teacher Humor</strong></td>
<td><strong>Showed a Negative Response Immediately</strong></td>
<td><strong>Student Behavior Remained Negative During Class</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>While giving instructions for an assignment, Mr. Roberts made an error and asked the whole class to say, “Der” with him.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mrs. Turner started asking a question about why 6 was a prime number then laughed with the class when she realized 6 isn’t prime.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mr. Roberts allowed a student to make a joke about his haircut.</strong></td>
<td><strong>One of Mrs. Turner’s students said, “It sounds like my vacuum,” while another student blew her nose.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Students Laughed when Mr. Roberts handed out a vocabulary list and informed them the test would be tomorrow.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Students in Mrs. Turner class laughed when she asked why six was a prime number.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When Mr. Roberts referred to a student’s answer as stupid, that student and several nearby became frustrated and remained off-task for the remainder of the period by talking with others or putting their heads on the desks not paying attention.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another aspect of the **Field Observation Checklist** form was recording notes on the physical environment, teacher rapport with students, and other pertinent events. The following is an excerpt from my notes on Mr. Roberts.

When two students began teasing each other, Mr. Roberts interrupted and reviewed with the class the differences between joking and crackin’. Mr. Roberts defined crackin’ as "something specifically done to hurt someone else’s feelings and/or make them mad in order to start a fight."
Case Study on Mr. Robert’s Class

Mr. Roberts teaches Seventh Grade Reading and Language Arts to approximately seventy-five students in a city school system. In Riverview School, a sixth through eighth grade middle school of 442 students, classes are forty minutes long. Mr. Roberts teaches three, eighty minute blocks each day. Within each block, forty minutes are devoted to Reading and another forty minutes to Language Arts with the same students.

During my week-long observation in Mr. Robert’s classroom, I observed several instances where he used humor in a positive way indicated by observed student response. For vocabulary tests, Mr. Roberts has a “100+ Club” in his classroom which rewards students who score 100% or higher on the previous week’s vocabulary test. On Monday, Mr. Roberts jokingly encouraged the boys in the classroom to improve because there were only females in the “100+ Club,” and he would have to tell everyone that girls were smarter that boys because of it. Several students of each gender laughed at this comment which I found appropriate because it was not aimed at any one specific person and it was an example of using humor to encourage improvement.

Mr. Roberts also worked to create a comfortable learning environment using simple, yet effective, techniques. Mr. Roberts allowed students to call him “Mr. R.” Although it can be argued
that this could diminish his authority because it might seem disrespectful, this practice actually makes Mr. Roberts more approachable as a teacher. By allowing students to address him in a more casual way, Mr. Roberts is breaking down barriers that prevent students from developing a friendship with him. Mr. Roberts also has several humorous posters on the walls of his classroom which encourage learning and being active. One poster states, "You know, you grow," with a silly animal picture shown on it. Finally, Mr. Roberts was able to laugh at his own mistakes on two occasions. On Tuesday, Mr. Roberts accidentally said "idear" instead of "idea" and was able to laugh with the class at his own blunder. Later in the week, he made a mistake in giving instructions and invited the class to join him in saying, "Duh!" Lundberg & Thurston (1997) encourage such practices that welcome humor into the classroom and allowing the teacher to set a friendly tone. Similarly, Hill (1988) states that such practices create a place where students can feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes in the learning process. The comfortable and safe learning community that Mr. Roberts has established is evidenced by the two occasions when students held their peers accountable to class rules.

Lundberg & Thurston (1997) and Hill (1988) both emphasize the importance of using meaningful, purposeful humor that exists to help students create associations to information being
instead of merely entertaining students. Mr. Roberts demonstrated this technique in an activity where students created a comical, run-on sentence by adding in more and more words. He did an excellent job of setting ground rules and following through on punishments when limits were crossed. Mr. Roberts explained the significance of the activity by discussing the parts of speech that the class had recently studied. When the activity was over, each student had added a word to the sentence, identified what part of speech his or her word was, and laughed as a group at the silly sentence they created. This single activity included many components required to effectively use positive humor in the classroom. This activity exemplifies the students in Mr. Robert’s class sharing a common experience centered around humor (Cornett, 1986).

Mr. Roberts had an effective rapport with his students. He was able to tease them safely and appropriately without hurting or offending the students. For example, during my observations on Wednesday, Mr. Roberts had to refocus Bradley who was too busy flirting with surrounding girls to concentrate on the lesson. In response, Mr. Roberts told Bradley that if he continued to flirt, he would be transferred to an all-boys school. Several students including Bradley laughed. I saw this as a very positive way to refocus a particular student in a way that did not embarrass or berate the student. Another example of
Mr. Roberts using humor to refocus a student occurred on Thursday when Seth fell asleep in class. After several of Seth’s classmates woke him up, Mr. Roberts asked him if it was a pleasant nap and whether or not he dreamed anything. Seth and several others laughed and then Mr. Roberts proceeded with the lesson.

Lundberg & Thurston (1997) define positive humor as nurturing and constructive to self-esteem and negative humor as the type that hurts feelings and is cutting. The previous examples of humor were positive because they nurtured self-esteem and made associations to the information being taught. Mr. Roberts utilized humor several times that fit Lundberg & Thurston’s (1997) definition of negative humor. During an activity on Wednesday, Mr. Roberts asked a question for students to answer aloud. When Julie raised her hand and gave an answer, Mr. Roberts said that the answer was stupid and several students in the classroom laughed at her. I determined this to be a negative use of humor because of Julie’s response. Instead of laughing with other students, Julie responded by putting her head on her desk and started to get off task, likely because she felt she was not able to contribute to the activity without ridicule. Another example when Mr. Roberts used negative humor occurred on Thursday when he commented to Mark that it was about time he finally got something right in class. Mark did not laugh
or respond to the comment as if it were funny, but looked around at his peers who were laughing at the comment. Mark most likely took offense to Mr. Robert’s comment and was hurt by it. The students’ responses to Mr. Robert’s negative humor often ended in the student appearing to be frustrated with class.

Another crucial element for a teacher to effectively use positive humor in the classroom requires the teacher to establish the boundaries for acceptable humor in the classroom so that all students understand what is expected of them (Lundberg & Thurston, 1997). Mr. Roberts did an excellent job establishing boundaries because he revisited the classroom rules twice during my observation. On Tuesday, students were giving suggestions of what topics they wanted to be included in a sample story web. One student teased Lisa about her answer and several students laughed at her. Mr. Roberts promptly stopped class and explained that it is all right when the class laughs with each other but laughing at other people is not acceptable. On Friday, Mr. Roberts again stopped class after a group of students began teasing each other. He took the time to explain the difference between joking and “crackin’” on one another. Mr. Roberts explained to the class that “crackin’” was not acceptable. After the class was dismissed, I asked Mr. Roberts to define “crackin’” and he said, “Crackin’ is something
specifically said/done to hurt someone else's feelings and/or make them mad in order to start a fight."
Case Study on Mrs. Turner’s Class

Mrs. Turner teaches seventh grade mathematics to approximately 110 students in a county school system. She also teaches one section of eighth grade algebra to a class of approximately 27 students. In Goodridge Middle School, a fifth through ninth grade middle school of 612 students, classes are forty-eight minutes long. Mrs. Turner teaches five, forty-eight minute periods each day.

In a discussion with Mrs. Turner, she informed me that her use of humor in the classroom is purposeful and she is cautious when she uses it because she does not want to offend or hurt any of her students. Mrs. Turner enjoys using humor with middle school students because, “they are old enough to understand sarcasm is a type of humor that is not designed to pick on them, but to simply make light of a situation.” Mrs. Turner also believes that students in the middle grades enjoy being a part of a joke and do not see themselves as “an object of ridicule.”

The level of classroom community in Mrs. Turner’s room is due to the comfort level that exists there. On multiple occasions during my observation week, students displayed their classroom comfort and acceptance of others. Students were comfortable enough with Mrs. Turner and their classmates to openly admit when they did not understand an idea or concept.
Students felt comfortable asking such questions because they did not evoke a teasing response from their peers.

During my weeklong observation, I was able to observe how effectively Mrs. Turner used sarcasm with her students. Mrs. Turner was able to tease students without making them feel ostracized or hurting their self-esteem. On Tuesday, a group of girls were talking among themselves when Mrs. Turner referred to them as a bunch of old women after a tea party. After being teased, several students in the class and every girl in the group Mrs. Turner was referring to laughed at the comment. On Thursday, students were struggling to remember the relationships between common fractions and decimals. Mrs. Turner asked if they studied these relationships yesterday when school was cancelled due to snow. The entire class had a good laugh at the idea of studying math on a snow day. Finally, another example of how Mrs. Turner was able to effectively use sarcasm came on Friday when she told Jill that her jeans were too low or her shirt was too short and that it was probably both. Jill did laugh at this comment and did not take offense. It was an effective way of pointing out a dress code violation without embarrassing Jill publicly. I purposefully watched for any change in Jill’s behavior in class to see if she was hurt, and no such change came about. Along with positive survey responses, I concluded that Mrs. Turner’s students are not hurt by her use of sarcasm.
When a teacher can laugh at his or her own mistakes, he or she encourages students to take risks and make mistakes in the classroom (Hill, 1988). Over the course of the observation week, I recorded several different instances when Mrs. Turner was able to laugh at her own mistakes. For example, one instance involved Mrs. Turner making a mathematical mistake when she explained to her class that six was a prime number. Students were able to laugh along with Mrs. Turner at this error. Poor English was the cause of another mistake when Mrs. Turner became caught up in her words and became tongue-tied. Several students laughed along with Mrs. Turner as a result of the blunder. Mrs. Turner also encouraged student risk taking by never teasing or ostracizing students who give incorrect answers.

Mrs. Turner was able to effectively use sarcasm in her classes because of the rapport with her students. Her sarcastic comments were found to be amusing by students rather than hurtful or mean. When Zachary was explaining aloud how he solved a problem, he mispronounced “common denominator” and when Mrs. Turner teased Zachary, he was able to laugh at his blunder without becoming humiliated. Another good example is when Mrs. Turner was reviewing the relationship between fractions and decimals and Shellie used a chart on the wall to get all her answers. Mrs. Turner called Shellie a cheater with a smile on her face and the entire class laughed and admitted they were all
using the chart. This is an example of appropriate sarcasm and the entire class sharing a common experience centered around humor (Cornett, 1986).

Mrs. Turner does a wonderful job of allowing student jokes in the classroom. During the observation week, there were four different instances where students were able to make jokes. Before a lesson on terminating and repeating decimals, Mrs. Turner asked the class what they thought "terminating" meant. Students made references to the movie, Terminator, the killing of bugs, and dying numbers. The students and Mrs. Turner all laughed at these definitions. Another example involved Angie joking around with Mrs. Turner on how her problem was correct when it was obvious to everyone, including Angie, that it was incorrect. Each time a student made a joke, the entire class enjoyed the experience evidenced by their laughter and attentiveness once instruction resumed.

Lundberg & Thurston (1997) emphasize the use of appropriate, nurturing classroom humor. Mrs. Turner uses this type of appropriate humor even when student behavior is inappropriate. On Thursday, Michael repeatedly acted out and disrupted class and Mrs. Turner was forced to openly discipline him in front of the class. She was able to incorporate humor into her discipline without ridiculing the student in public. Mrs. Turner teased Michael’s behavior but not Michael as a
person, evidenced by her sarcastic tone-of-voice and a smile. Michael was able to laugh with his classmates when Mrs. Turner teased his behavior. This was very effective because Michael’s disruptive behavior ceased and all students were reminded of classroom expectations in a humorous way, making this humorous event nurturing.
Table 5  
Responses to Open-Ended Question From Student Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Sample Student Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Examples of Humor That are       | Type of humor used by teacher                                              | 32 | • "When he picks on me, I think it’s funny.”  
• "He makes jokes for us to remember things at times."  
• "One time my teacher, who is a guy wore a pink shirt to school. I asked him why he was wearing a pink shirt, and he asked me why I was wearing a green shirt we joked around all class period. It was funny.” |
| Appropriate                      | Result of humor                                                            |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                  | Humor’s positive value is reported                                         |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
| Examples of Humor That are       | Type of humor used by teacher                                              |  3 | • "He intends to pick on kids and sometimes they don’t think it’s funny.”  
• "I have experenced humor in the class when somebody made a stupid question she made fun of it.” |
| Inappropriate                    | Result of humor                                                            |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                  | Humor’s negative value is reported                                         |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
| Examples of Humor Without        | Type of humor used by teacher                                              |  6 | • "I go to sleep in class and my teacher wake me up and said wake up your late for school!”  
• "A teacher dressed up funny for an activity.”  
• "Last year my teacher acted out a skits to help us learn the material.” |
| Value Ascribed                   | Result of humor and value is not ascribed                                  |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
| Positive General Comments About  | General comment                                                            | 47 | • "Sometime I even laugh when he dose crack on us.”  
• "I like it when Mr. Roberts uses humor in the classroom because it makes us all laugh and to be able to like this class.  
• "A positive makes me feel like hey that’s cool, funny or like ‘whatever with a giggle’.”  
• "Humor in the classroom makes me feel comfortable.” |
| Humor and Self                   | Positive effect                                                            |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                  | Speaks only for the individual                                             |    |                                                                                                                                                      |
| Negative General Comments About Humor and Self | • General comment  
• Negative effect  
• Speaks only for the individual | 4 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Positive General Comments About Humor and All Students | • General comment  
• Positive effect  
• Speaks for all students | 7 |
| Negative General Comments About Humor and All Students | • General comment  
• Negative effect  
• Speaks for all students | 2 |
| Positive Comments & Examples On Student-Teacher Relationship | • Comment is about relationship with the teacher  
• Positive value | 7 |

- "I think Mr. R. needs to be more serious sometimes instead of playing a lot."
- "And sometimes he doesn’t know it but embarrasses people."
- "A negative input by the teachers make me feel like 'that's really wrong'."
- "My teacher will say something about himself or someone else. All of us laugh even the person he talks about."
- "When a teacher can have fun and teach, the students have fun and learn."
- "When a teacher uses humor, it gets the students' attention and we listen better and remember things more easily."
- "Sometimes it’s ok to use humor but other people will just start goofing off and everything will be a mess. Usually it’s really fun though."
- "I think humor is good to an extent but if you (teachers) use too much than you don’t really teach us what they need to."
- "I sometimes crack on him when he cracks on me."
- "I sometimes stay after class and talk to him."
- "Sometime when I am doing my work I wish he sometimes wish he was my Dad. That’s how bad I like him."
### Additional Comments

- Ambiguous answer
- Did not answer the question
- Not enough information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>62</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|       | "I tripped on my pant leg but I didn’t fall."
|       | "Yes I would like to hear more about you."
|       | "When I told a bad joke."
|       | "She has a monotone."

Note. N=176. These are direct quotations from students. Spelling and grammatical errors have not been corrected. This data represents responses from 176 middle school students from Mr. Robert’s and Mrs. Turner’s classes. Each student present on the date of the survey filled one out. Field Observation Checklist (Appendix A) was the guide for these observations.
Table 6

Responses to Open-Ended Questions From Survey of Area Teachers

n=54

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>Sample Teacher Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Appropriate Examples of Classroom Humor Initiated by the Teacher | • Describes humorous event  
• The event was initiated by the teacher  
• Value of the event included | 6 | • “The teacher takes on the voice or character of a person she wants to mimic so as to provide humor and understanding.”  
• “Probably the one area this has worked the best for me would be vocabulary development. If funny stories are shared using the word—the students really catch on fast.”  
• “I laugh with them when I trip and fall over their books.” |
| Appropriate Examples of Classroom Humor Initiated by Student(s) | • Describes humorous event  
• The event was initiated by a student  
• Value of the event is included | 2 | • “I also laugh when the students tell appropriate jokes or share fun stories.”  
• “Today someone told me his shoes smelled like beer! Everyone just cracked up!” |
| Beliefs About Classroom Humor That are Positive | • Personal belief on humor in the classroom  
• Positive value associated with the belief is included | 15 | • “It is part of being human that helps you relate to students, and the students to relate to you.”  
• “It keeps the students on their toes when the teacher slops in comments that are humorous.”  
• “Humor allows a discipline situation to be win-win.”  
• “Humor can help loosen the class up and let them realize that you can relate to them.” |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs About Classroom Humor Without Value Ascribed</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Personal belief on humor in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No value of the belief is ascribed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Humor allows students to see I don’t take myself too seriously.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Funny moments are not usually planned—just spontaneously funny.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidelines for Classroom Humor</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Boundary or limitation on the use of humor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Foundation needed for humor in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I don’t make constant jokes because everything we do isn’t humor appropriate.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Cannot distract from lesson or promote inappropriate behavior.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Comments</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Did not answer the question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Commented on the assessment survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provided suggestions for research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “My suggestion for your study would be to survey the students. Ask them what they feel they learn the most from.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “I suppose the first thing I thought about when I read over this survey was my experience in church this morning.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N=54. These responses are a from the teachers from three area schools that were surveyed. Fifty-nine surveys were sent out and forty-one teachers responded giving an initial response rate of 69.5%. I sent eighteen non-responder surveys out and received thirteen back giving a total return rate of 91.5%.
Statistical Analysis

Data From Survey of Area Teachers

Mean values of the teacher survey data indicate teacher beliefs regarding humor in the classroom. The mean response value for teachers using appropriate humor in the classroom is 1.7407 on a scale of \{-3,3\} with a standard deviation of 0.9749 indicating that the average teacher does use appropriate humor in the classroom. Using the same scale, the mean response value for teachers who believe humor has a place in today’s classrooms is 1.9259 with a standard deviation of 1.0614.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Use appropriate humor in class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use humor with purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.4912</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Make jokes during class</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2368</td>
<td>0.3187</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Humor has a place in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2729</td>
<td>0.2984</td>
<td>0.4590</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Any teacher can use humor</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.1921</td>
<td>0.1670</td>
<td>0.2359</td>
<td>0.3033</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Aware of Humor Research</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0082</td>
<td>0.0601</td>
<td>-0.0940</td>
<td>0.0847</td>
<td>0.1806</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because the design of this survey allowed me to survey teachers from three different types of middle schools, I can make generalizations about relationships across all middle schools in Clark County. Using the data from the Teacher Humor Assessment Surveys (Appendix D), I was able to find a positive
correlation (0.4912) between teachers who use humor with a purpose and teachers who use appropriate humor in the classroom (found in Table 7). Having surveyed teachers from three different categories of schools, I can make a generalization that teachers who use appropriate humor often do so with a purpose.

Another correlation (0.4590) drawn from this data shows a positive relationship between teachers who make jokes during class and teachers who believe appropriate humor has a place in today’s classrooms (found in Table 7). I can make a generalization that teachers who make jokes during class tend to believe that humor has a place in today’s classrooms.
Data From Purposeful Sampling of Two Classrooms

The mean response value for students remembering things better when teachers or peers use humor is 3.3678 on a scale of (-6,6) with a standard deviation of 3.7188. This scale has a larger range because it is a transformation of two values (see Table 8). Mean response value for students who enjoy the use of humor by the teacher is 1.7829 on a scale of (-3,3) with a standard deviation of 1.3766. Finally, the mean response value for students who wish their teacher would use more humor is 0.9886 on a scale of (-3,3) with a standard deviation of 1.3766. Each of these mean response values indicate that students agree with the corresponding statements found on the Student Humor Assessment Survey (Appendix B).

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Remember better</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Wish teacher would use more humor</td>
<td>0.5278</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I feel accepted by my classmates</td>
<td>0.1509</td>
<td>-0.0441</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I feel accepted by my teacher</td>
<td>0.2012</td>
<td>0.1260</td>
<td>0.2468</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I enjoy it when my teacher uses humor</td>
<td>0.7217</td>
<td>0.3904</td>
<td>0.1743</td>
<td>0.2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I feel I can be myself in class</td>
<td>0.0090</td>
<td>-0.0117</td>
<td>0.2589</td>
<td>0.2533</td>
<td>0.1425</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The remember better statistic is a transformation of questions five and seven on the Student Humor Assessment Survey (Appendix B). I titled this new value "remember" because it refers to student memory based on teacher and student use of humor. Six cases were omitted from these calculations due to non-responses by students.
Based on this data, there exists a strong, positive relationship (0.7217) between students who enjoy the use of humor by teachers and those who remember material better when humor is used (found in Table 8). One possible explanation for such a strong linear relationship could be that students enjoy humor in the classroom because they know it helps them to remember things.

In addition to a correlation regarding improved student memory and student enjoyment of humor, there was a positive correlation (0.5278) between improved student memory and students wishing their teachers used more humor (found in Table 8). This relationship is evidence to me that students are not only aware of how humor helps them, but desire the continued and more frequent use of humor in the classroom.
Discussion

Based upon a review of related literature, it was expected that the implementation of appropriate humor in a middle childhood classroom would have a positive effect on students’ and teachers’ perceptions of classroom community and learning. Appropriate humor in the classroom is beneficial in many ways. Student survey responses from my study support Hill’s (1988) belief that humor in a classroom boosts morale, in turn having a positive effect on “the business of learning lessons.” One student responded to the open-ended question on the survey writing, “If there is humor in the classroom, I think I pay more attention because it is more interesting, and I don’t want to miss anything funny.” Another student commented that, “Humor is a very important part of school because it relaxes me and gets me ‘pumped up’ to learn.” These comments show that students are aware of how humor positively affects their learning.

Statistical analysis of student surveys support student’s desire for humor in the classroom. A very strong, positive correlation (0.7217) exists between students who enjoy the use of humor in the classroom and students who remember better when teachers make jokes and their classmates act out funny skits. This statistic supports the idea that humor can be used as a prompt to help students recall prior knowledge and associate it to new information (Lundberg & Thurston, 1997).
Furthermore, statistical analysis confirms that a positive relationship exists (0.5278) between students who remember better when humor is used wish their teachers would use more humor in the classroom. Students want humor in the classroom not simply for entertainment purposes, but for academic reasons as well. One student remarked, “When a teacher can have fun and teach, the students have fun and learn.” Middle school students are aware how humor makes learning enjoyable and benefits them academically.

Student comments also indicate that humor in the classroom positively affects the learning environment. “Humor in the classroom makes me feel comfortable,” is one student comment that speaks for a positive learning environment related to humor. Similar comments support the idea that humor shapes the learning environment by creating a place where students feel comfortable (Hill, 1988). The environment that surrounds the learning community affects interactions among students and teacher. Responses indicate that humor strengthens these relationships and the learning environment by promoting risk-taking and experimentation (Cornett, 1986). The student comment quoted above speaks volumes about how humor affects students by allowing them to feel comfortable in the classroom (Hill, 1988).

Teacher responses to the survey are aligned with student beliefs regarding humor in the classrooms. There is a positive
correlation (0.4590) between teachers who make jokes in the classroom and teachers who believe that humor does have a place in the classroom. One teacher wrote, “It is a part of being human that helps you relate to students, and the students relate to you.” This indicates that teachers are aware of the place using humor has in the classroom.

Another positive correlation (0.4912) exists between teachers who use appropriate humor in the classroom and teachers who use humor for a purpose. This indicates that teachers, as well as students, see the place for purposeful, classroom humor. James (2001) supports this type of humor that is “relevant, neither demeaning or hostile.” One student commented that when teachers use too much humor, then they “don’t really teach us what they need to.” Teachers must use their humor for a purpose. This often requires planning and thought if it is to be effective.

Although I believe the content of a joke or humorous event plays a role in determining appropriateness and effectiveness, it is not the most crucial element to consider. Whether the humor used by teachers is positive and effective or not depends largely on individual students. I have concluded that there are three key elements that dictate whether humor is appropriate and effective or not: 1) the teacher-student relationship,
2) students’ responses to humor, and 3) students’ previous experiences.

Rapport between students and teachers is the most crucial element when it comes to effectively using appropriate humor in the classroom. The teacher-student relationship is the most important of the three elements because predicting student responses to humor and knowledge of students’ prior experiences develop as a result of this relationship forming. "At Goodridge our teachers are very close to their students and I feel that helps us," is a student comment expressing the importance of the teacher-student relationship. Students benefit from a relationship with their teachers because what the teachers do not know about their students prevents them from effectively using humor.

Cornett (1986) stressed the importance of group laughter because it builds relationships and provides a group with a humorous experience they can recall in the future. One of Mrs. Turner’s students commented on the student survey, “When a teacher can have fun and teach, the students have fun and learn.” Cornett (1986) emphasized the significance of group laughter providing a sense of security and comfort. I believe that the primary benefit of group laugher is the rapport developed among group members. In the context of my thesis, the “group” is a learning community consisting of students and a
teacher. Through the use of group laughter, a teacher can effectively use humor in the classroom not only to promote learning and build community, but to develop the teacher-student relationship crucial to forming classroom community.

A classroom community is a place where two key ideals are emphasized: 1) students can celebrate individuality acknowledging what each person brings to the group, and 2) students celebrate a group identity, understanding that as a class they have learning goals. The teacher-student relationship key to using humor effectively also strengthens classroom community by enabling students to meet these ideals. Because of a link between teacher-student relationships and classroom community, teachers are able to use humor in the continual development of their relationships with students and classroom community.

During my observations, I was able to note how the relationship between the teacher and a student or group of students developed during a humorous event. Many teacher jokes or uses of appropriate sarcasm came as a result of knowing about the student(s). An example of this took place during my observation of Mr. Robert’s classroom when Bradley was flirting with a few nearby girls and not paying attention to the lesson. Mr. Roberts told Bradley that if he continued to flirt he would be transferred to an all-boys school. Bradley was able to laugh
at the comment, refocus himself, and remain attentive for the
duration of the class. Being scolded in front of the entire
class had the potential to negatively impact Bradley. Mr.
Roberts appeared to have an understanding of Bradley’s sense of
humor and how he would respond to such a comment. The
relationship between Mr. Roberts and Bradley allowed the joke to
serve as a reminder about appropriate behavior and not a public
insult.

The second key element that must be present in order for
humor to be appropriate and effective is to know about the
students’ responses to humor. As I mentioned before, this
element comes as a result of the teacher-student relationship.
When teachers have a good relationship with a student or group
of students, they can often predict how a student will react to
a joke or sarcastic comment. Teachers must use these predictions
to determine whether students will perceive the humor as
positive and nurturing or negative and cutting (Lundberg &
Thurston, 1997). Because of this, a teacher must give
significant thought to how students will respond to humor. If a
teacher fails to consider how humor will be perceived, it is
possible that students will take offense. One student wrote,
“Mr. Roberts intends to pick on kids and sometimes they don’t
think it’s funny.” The result of students taking offense
dramatically affects the teacher-student relationship and perceptions about learning.

Based on my observations and experiences, an adverse response to humor is more damaging than a positive response is beneficial. The student surveys also provided me with insight on how negative experiences with humor affected student perceptions. One student wrote, “There was a time when a teacher called a student stupid after asking a question.” Another student wrote how teachers can sometimes be “too sarcastic and mean.” In each of these cases, students expressed how the particular use of humor had a negative impact on them causing dislike of a particular class or teacher. Because of the impact that negative humor has on students, I find this type of humor undermines teacher-student relationships and damages classroom community.

The third key element to effectively use positive humor in the classroom are the students’ previous experiences. Teachers must have a grasp on the previous experience of their students if they desire to use humor effectively. Shade (1996) and Zigler, Levine, and Gould (1967) illustrate how the appreciation of a joke requires the person to understand it. When a teacher makes a joke related to a concept being taught, the student must have knowledge of the concept in order to understand, appreciate, and find humor in the joke. When teachers make jokes
that do not cognitively challenge students, the humor is lost and does not benefit the students’ social, intellectual, and moral development.

As middle school educators, we must listen to the information that students have provided in my research expressing a desire for an increase in appropriate humor in the classroom. Statistics and student comments all lead to the conclusion that students do enjoy humor in the classroom and understand the benefits that come from using it. Similarly, teachers must continue to use purposeful humor in the classroom that works to aid in student learning and retention of material as well as build classroom community. It should be our desire that middle school classrooms are comfortable places for students to learn and humor is one tool that can develop comfortable learning environments.

Humor used by middle school teachers must be used to build community and improve perceptions about learning, rather than simply entertaining. Because of this, teachers must give significant thought to how students will respond to humor. When a teacher fails to consider how humor will be perceived by students, it is possible that students will take offense jeopardizing the teacher-student relationship. Without the teacher-student relationship, we cannot use effective humor with
the classroom because the students we have offended will no longer accept appropriate humor.

On the survey, one student captured my belief on classroom humor, writing, “[humor] makes me feel like hey that’s cool, funny, or whatever with a giggle.” It is the job of middle school educators to use appropriate humor for this student and many others to help students learn and become part of a learning community. My attitudes toward humor in the classroom have only been reinforced by this thesis. As teachers who strive to meet the needs of our students, we must respond to their desires and learning styles and use appropriate humor as an educating tool.
References


Appendix A

Field Observation Checklist
Field Observation Checklist

**TEACHER BEHAVIOR:**

Use of Sarcasm: tick marks and topics
  Appropriate

  Inappropriate

Use of Jokes: tick marks and topics
  Appropriate

  Inappropriate

Making Mistakes:
  Laughing at themselves

  Dismissing mistake another way

Allowing Student Jokes:

**STUDENT BEHAVIOR:**

Response to teacher humor:
  Appropriate Instances

  Inappropriate Instances
OTHER NOTES:

Other key observations regarding classroom environment, teacher rapport with students, and other events pertinent to my research.
Appendix B

Student Humor Assessment Survey
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
Gender: Male   Female
Date:_______
Grade in this class:_______

Student Humor Assessment Survey
Directions: Read each statement and circle the choice that best corresponds with the statement. Use the scale below in choosing your responses.

SCALE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Unsure or Undecided</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. My teacher uses humor during class.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

2. I feel I can be myself in my classroom.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

3. I feel accepted by my classmates.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

4. I feel accepted by my teacher.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

5. I remember better when my teacher uses humor in the classroom.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

6. I enjoy it when my teacher uses humor during class.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

7. When students act out funny skits, it helps me to remember important information.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

8. I wish my teacher would use more humor in class.
   - SD
   - D
   - U
   - A
   - SA

I am interested in hearing more from you. Please share your thoughts and/or experiences with humor in the classroom.
Appendix C

Letter Sent to Teachers One Week Before Observations
Dear [Name],

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the field research component of my senior honors thesis. This piece of my research is invaluable as it allows me to get an accurate picture of what is going on in schools in regards to humor. Your time, commitment, and flexibility are truly appreciated.

My thesis explores the use of appropriate humor in the middle childhood classroom and its effects on students’ perceptions of community and learning. My observations will examine the physical aspects of the classroom environment, teaching style, and rapport between students and teachers.

Observation Schedule: WEEK OF DECEMBER 9, 2002.

Mon: Observe class period from 2:45 – 3:33 PM
Tu: Observe class period from 2:45 – 3:33 PM
Wed: Observe class period from 2:45 – 3:33 PM
Th: Observe class period from 2:45 – 3:33 PM
Fri: Observe entire school day and administer survey to students in every class.

During the first four days of my observation, I will simply be an observer in the room. You may introduce me, but please do not tell the class what I am observing because that information may alter students’ responses and behavior. My final observation will run the entire day. I will observe all your classes and administer a survey to all your students in each class.

I thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study. If you have any other questions, please contact me at (937) 505-2001 or at s03.bkuhn@wittenberg.edu If you would like a copy of my thesis, please contact me using the above information between April 1, 2003 & May 1, 2003.

Sincerely,

Brian Kuhn
Wittenberg University
Class of 2003
Appendix D

Teacher Humor Assessment Survey
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Name: ______________________
Gender: Male   Female
Date:________
Avg. Number of Students per Class: ____

**Teacher Humor Assessment Survey**

Directions: Read each statement and circle the response that best corresponds with the statement. Use the scale below in choosing your responses.

**SCALE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Unsure or Undecided</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I use appropriate humor during class.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

2. The humor that I use during class is done with a purpose.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

3. I often make jokes during class.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

4. Appropriate humor has a place in today’s classrooms.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

5. Any teacher can effectively use appropriate humor.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

6. I am aware of research involving the use of humor in the classroom.
   - [ ] SD
   - [ ] D
   - [ ] U
   - [ ] A
   - [ ] SA

I’m interested in hearing more from you. Please share your thoughts and/or experiences with humor in the classroom. I greatly appreciate your completion of this survey. Again, any experiences I choose to include in my thesis will be done anonymously and no real names will be used. All information will be kept confidential.
Appendix E

Teacher Survey Cover Letter
May 14, 2003

Dear Educator,

My name is Brian Kuhn and I am a senior at Wittenberg University majoring in Middle Childhood Education. For the past few months I have been conducting research under the guidance of Dr. Lora Lawson and creating a literature review for my honors thesis.

My research focuses on the implementation of appropriate humor and laughter in middle childhood classrooms to have a positive effect on students’ and teachers’ perceptions of classroom community and learning. Field research for my thesis includes the case study of two middle childhood classrooms. These case studies involve classroom observations, student surveys, and teacher interviews.

Another crucial piece of my field research is a survey of middle childhood educators regarding humor in the classroom. Your school has been randomly chosen to represent Clark County in my study. Attached is a very short survey about humor in the classroom. Your response is extremely important because your opinions and experiences will be used to represent Clark County. I would greatly appreciate your taking time to complete this survey and return it to the school secretary by Monday, November 25th.

» Please be sure to complete the demographic data at the top of the survey.

» Circle one choice for each response. Please do not select areas in between two choices.

» Please provide any positive or negative experiences you have had with classroom humor for the last question. Write your responses on the back of the survey. Experiences that you provide may be included in my thesis anonymously and all data will be presented in a compiled fashion.

I again thank you for your time and sharing your experiences with me. I look forward to compiling this data which is crucial to my field research. If you are interested in the results of this survey or my thesis, please contact me at s03.bkuhn@wittenberg.edu.

Sincerely,

Brian Kuhn
Wittenberg University
Class of 2003

Lora Lawson, Ph.D.
Wittenberg University
Department of Education
Appendix F

Non-Responder Teacher Survey Cover Letter
May 14, 2003

Dear Educator,

My name is Brian Kuhn and I am a senior at Wittenberg University majoring in Middle Childhood Education. Just before Christmas break I surveyed the entire faculty at Middle School regarding the use of humor in the classroom.

I am sending out this follow up letter with another questionnaire attached because I know things were very busy before Christmas break and you may not have had time to fill out the survey. In order for my research to be statistically valid, I need a response rate as close to 100% as possible. Currently, Middle School is at %, and I would truly appreciate your time in helping your school reach the 100% mark. Your opinions and experiences are very important because they will represent County in my study.

If you already completed this survey and turned it in, please consider this a thank you for your time. This survey was likely sent to you again because you chose to respond anonymously.

» Please be sure to complete the demographic data at the top of the survey.

» Circle one choice for each response. Please do not select areas in between two choices.

» Please provide any positive or negative experiences you have had with classroom humor for the last question. Write your responses on the back of the survey. Experiences that you provide may be included in my thesis anonymously and all data will be presented in a compiled fashion.

PLEASE RETURN TO THE SCHOOL OFFICE BY WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12.

I again thank you for your time and sharing your experiences with me because your opinions are crucial to my field research. If you are interested in the results of this survey or my thesis, please contact me at s03.bkuhn@wittenberg.edu.

Sincerely,

Brian Kuhn
Wittenberg University
Class of 2003
Appendix G

Student Humor Assessment Survey Administration Protocol
Humor Assessment Survey
Administration Protocol

1. The survey you are about to receive will help me complete my research project about the use of humor in the classroom.

2. Please be honest with all of your answers. Your teacher will not see anything you write and your grade in this class will not be affected by this survey.

3. This survey is anonymous and I will not know which paper belongs to you.

4. Once the survey is passed out, please do not begin working on it until you have been instructed to do so.

[PASS OUT SURVEY]

5. In the upper left-hand corner you will see a section marked "Demographic Information."
   » Please circle your gender.
   » On the next line, please enter today’s date. “Today is [insert the date].”
   » On the next line, please write what grade you had in this class on your most recent report card. Remember to be honest and that your name is not on this survey.

6. Read each statement and circle the choice that best corresponds with the statement. Use the scale at the top of your paper to choose your responses.

7. Please remember that you should circle one choice and there are no “half” answers. [DRAW EXAMPLE ON BOARD]

8. When you have completed the statements, take time to look over the final question. This question asks you to write about your personal experience with humor in the classroom. Your personal experiences are very important to me and may be included in my research paper. This part is anonymous, so feel free to include any positive or negative experiences you may have had. Examples of these experiences could include times when your teacher used jokes in a positive way or teased a student in a negative way.

9. You may now begin the survey.