

# THE LAUGHTER OF INCLUSION

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## ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with school-children's communication, behavioural, and emotional development, in which the first concern has been to focus on their laughter. Although commonly thought of as an integral component of childhood, children's laughter seldom receives the attention it deserves. The significance of laughter's correlation with children's social connectivity remains largely undiscovered. Existing literature seems preoccupied either with examples of its use as a barometer of pupil contentment or the exploits of self-styled classroom clowns. Little account has been taken of laughter's exclusive orientation, and the strain this may create in schools with an avowedly inclusive ethos.

Teachers and pupils who agreed to take part in this study were recruited from two primary schools. The units under focus were manageably small, although between them the combined participant population numbered in their hundreds. Together, they formed the substantive part of a pair of ethnographic case-studies. Data obtained from a series of playground/classroom observations and informal interviews were framed around Robert Putnam's theory of social capital, and its own inclusive-exclusive (bridging and bonding) dynamic.

Findings indicate that our diminishing stocks of social capital may be directly correlated with our decline in laughter production. They also confirm the view that it is unhelpful to consider inclusive and exclusive entities in isolation. Exclusive laughter appears to be a fundamental condition of inclusive schooling, with pupils and their teachers apparently natural exponents of a form of behaviour that may be described as inclusive-exclusive.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	22
Methodology.....	99
Methods/Findings .....	130
Playground Findings .....	147
Classroom Findings .....	174
Discussion.....	203
Conclusion .....	237
References.....	265
Appendix: A (Feedback Report presented to The Cross School).....	282
Appendix: B (Feedback Report presented to The Crescent School) .....	297
Appendix: C (Communications to and from The Cross School).....	313
Appendix: D (Communications to and from The Crescent School).....	318
Addenda .....	323



## INTRODUCTION

In 1999 I began (and subsequently failed to complete) a PhD in Art History. My thesis focused on the iconography of Judas Iscariot (1300 – 1600). It examined the signs and symbols used by artists of the period that helped audiences decipher the Apostle's depiction. As the study developed, I became particularly interested in the way Judas was presented both as a central and as a peripheral figure. Although he had a pivotal role in the Passion narrative, and despite holding an important position within the Apostleship (being the group's treasurer), certain painters and sculptors seemed wary about depicting the arch-sinner. In many cases his presence had to be reconfigured for reasons of propriety. Some artists responded by putting their knowledge of spatial settings, group dynamics, and the rendering of perspective to innovative use, deploying a range of pioneering visual effects and schemas. It was common, for example, for painters to portray Judas only in profile. Treating him strictly in two dimensions created an impression that while he was in the picture he was not of it: he was seen and unseen, included yet excluded. All manner of illusionary techniques were employed to ensure that spectators' moral and aesthetic sensibilities were not offended by his compelling and disconcerting presence. For, among the pious at least, Judas's image was capable of being experienced as an imaginatively real figure, and capable of provoking a profoundly visceral response.

I never got so far into my research that I managed anything other than just a brief survey of the range of emotions that renderings of Judas could provoke in the late Medieval/early Renaissance viewer. That his image was capable of instilling fear and awe is beyond dispute, but it could just as easily trigger the discriminating laughter of mockery and ridicule. His emblematic Jewish-ness, his dark skin, saturnine looks, his distinguishing black beard, and his Semitic hooked nose, would clearly have been intended to elicit derision and risibility

among prejudicial Christian beholders. It is quite possible therefore that an unconscious but lingering desire to find out much more about such themes may have nurtured a growing interest in laughter, and may have also inspired me to approach it from a slightly different perspective. For although iconography and ethnography are qualitatively distinct methodologies, both make use of symbols and signs, be they social or cultural, as vehicles to mediate meaning (Panofsky, 1972; Geertz, 1973).

It may have also renewed my interest in examining people's viewing habits, noting in particular how little they have changed over the centuries. People continue to regard society's outliers, strangers, and those who just happen to be 'different' in a manner indistinguishable from their early predecessors. Bigotry and discrimination, stereotyping and categorising, inclusion and exclusion, remain active and pressing issues of concern. The attempt by artists to have Judas *in* the picture - but not *of* it - could in effect describe some of the modern attitudes shown towards children of all abilities. Their right to be included in today's broad social and educational picture still requires it seems widespread approval. Despite the very best efforts of concerned bodies like the movement for educational inclusion, this goal remains some distance from being realised.

#### *Inclusion and Exclusion: Terms and Conditions*

If it was ever necessary to produce a condition report on the movement for educational inclusion, a sort of 'heads-up' on its past actions and its current standing, then something like 'a bright start followed by a gradual loss of momentum' might be telling it plainly. Taking its successes and failures into account, it could be said that among its broad coalition of activists and sympathisers many have become complacent, fatigued or simply resigned to the fact that the inclusion project has nowhere else to go. Hopes of achieving its primary objective

continue to prove elusive. Confusion and in-fighting have a tendency to unsettle the ranks, with much of the disagreements on elementary matters, principally the unsuccessful attempts to reach an agreed understanding of what inclusion actually is and how it can be recognised (Allan, 2010). But such a gloomy and discouraging assessment may not be entirely deserved. Insinuations about inclusion's continued viability and suggestions of diminishing group morale only encourages a largely inaccurate view of a project that has shown an uncommon ability to react and adapt in order to meet new conditions and challenges.

As is often the way with even the most estimable causes and movements, creative and vibrant phases are invariably punctuated by dull, inactive interludes. But these lean spells can sometimes prove to be expedient. They have, for example, enabled the inclusion project to pass through further historical moments, achieving ever more turning-points in its strategic and creative evolution. Far from having reached an impasse, it may instead be cautiously exploring all possible pathways, while simultaneously re-defining its internal structure and external outlook. For example, the movement appears to place considerable virtue in reconfiguring its default vocabulary. In the past, this has been the prelude to heralding a significant change in focus and direction. If the first 'moment' was notable for initiating a lexical shift from 'integration' to 'inclusion', the second moment occurred when focus was once again re-aligned, this time from 'inclusion' to 'inclusivity' (Berlach & Chambers, 2011). The degree of difference here appears to be slight but may in time prove to have major consequences. Greater concentration on the cognate term 'inclusivity' acknowledges the diverse range of pupils that currently fall within the movement's remit. Enlarging the human agenda means extending it well beyond - but not disregarding - those with physical and/or learning disabilities (Hall *et al*, 2004).



When using the term 'inclusive' it is often customary to reference it in relation to its polar opposite. Binary discrimination and classification is an important feature of our cognitive system (Crane, 2004). Braced in this way, inclusive and exclusive appear as antagonistic orientations. Thus, of the two, inclusive is presumed to be the more natural and preferred state, with inclusive communities, practices, behaviours and philosophies seen usually as having greater merit and being more socially and morally desirable. As Clough notes, however, such presumptions should be treated with caution (1999). In society generally, and within the system of education in particular, exclusive principles and inclusive intentions enjoy far more interaction, both in physical space and in individual consciousness (1999). At times, their level of interaction is so well established, so densely enmeshed, it is not always easy to distinguish between them. Corbett, for example, likens their arrangement to the cross-hatched weave in a piece of fabric (1997).

But in any school setting there will also be expectations and institutional pressures for that distinction to be made clearer. A dualistic way of thinking remains the norm; particular activities are conceived only as competing alternatives (e.g. good and bad behaviour) so that only one of them, typically the prosocial one, is championed and defended as correct. Indeed, "good" and "bad" are among the first words and concepts learned by children' (Baumeister *et al*, 2001, p.323) and their distinction, even in the earliest years, tends to be treated as absolute. Pupils' manifestations of prejudice, for example, warrant early identification, and will typically provoke immediate classification as an example of exclusive, unacceptable behaviour. Peremptorily, this will set in train a school's specific disciplinary procedures. Prompt and systematic action, too, will minimise incidents of exclusive practices, as when a child's full participation in the social and curricular aspects of their schooling is subject to some form of restriction. Teachers have a responsibility to

identify children who may find it difficult to interact with their peers and/or with adults.

Again, an ability to make some decisive analyses will be expected to ensure that the requisite inclusive mechanisms can be engaged. A school's organisational reputation depends to a great extent on the speed and efficiency of its responses to these and similar scenarios.

### Laughter

That laughter can be the cause of - and the solution to - many of these situations is one of the defining features of this paradoxical phenomenon. Laughter can be inclusive and exclusive at the same time (Dupréel, 1928). It can work to bring people together and also to set them apart. Events which occurred at a primary school in Bolton, Lancashire, illustrate how laughter's contradictory feature can operate. The sound of the pupils' laughter at play-time was interpreted by their headteacher as a particularly good indication of their well-being and level of contentment, although for the occupants of residential properties located nearby the noise was disagreeably excessive, prompting them to take legal action against the school for perpetrating a noise nuisance (Daily Telegraph, 2009). While laughter presents a range of problems for school authorities, it provides a useful reference point to show how simple binary thinking about education's inclusive-exclusive dichotomy is not always helpful. How, for example, is it possible to promote only cohesive and inclusive forms of laughter in school when some aspects of teasing, for instance, blur the inclusive-exclusive boundary? For the child-teaser, their sometimes hurtful and offensive remarks and actions are evidence of untapped skill and ingenuity, according to Willis (1976). More usually, teasing is taken as exclusive behaviour and therefore as potentially harmful, having a close association with bullying. And yet for the child-victim, 'being teased is part of learning the rules of belonging' (Partington, 2006, p.145). Ways of responding to name-calling, mockery, ridicule, taunts, etc, constitute an important part of a child's process of socialisation (Keltner, *et al*, 1998).

### The Research Question

For the task of the ethnographer, over and above exploring and investigating, describing people's lives, and maintaining field relations, is to 'reduce the puzzlement' (Geertz, 1973, p.16). Paying heed to this directive should ensure that sensible, insightful answers can be provided to the following question:

What can children's laughter tell us about inclusive schooling?

Previous research conducted (for a Masters degree) at a 'fully inclusive' primary school concluded that a range of anti-inclusive practices and behaviours were embedded within its inclusive framework (Nugent, 2008). The findings, however, which amounted to a declaration that no school has the right to describe itself as 'fully inclusive' if there is evidence of exclusive practices and behaviour, failed to appreciate the delicate interplay between the inclusive-exclusive pairing, seeing only the differences instead. Being altogether too deferential to the view that their alignment is distinct and fixed, with one category tending to preclude its supposed opposite, was a significant contribution to the misinterpretation of the research data. In hindsight, it was of no surprise that the outcomes were strongly disputed by the school's headteacher. But this experience, chastening though it proved, was proof enough that it was vital to achieve a more expansive understanding of their dynamic relationship. If the two points were not merely independent, isolated phenomena but mutually constituted, it would necessitate a more critically-minded approach of not only the concept of inclusive-exclusive but of existing literature, and to challenge rather than simply condone the oppositional way of thinking that much of it has hitherto encouraged.

Although dichotomies of many descriptions have been the subject of analysis from the time of Antiquity, and despite the enduring usefulness of Wright Mills' oppositional approach in

helping to stimulate the social scientist's research imagination (1967/2000), the inclusive-exclusive form has not on the whole received much attention. Certainly, nothing that has passed before has ever attempted to triangulate them using laughter. Within the field of education, Allan (2010) makes a critical note of the exclusive nature of much inclusive research, and Nind *et al* (2004) recognise that inclusive and exclusive processes are an everyday occurrence in schools, perhaps even amounting to a fact of life. Elsewhere, a selection of different disciplinary perspectives helps to stimulate the inclusive-exclusive issue. Although some feel that attempts at binary deconstruction can at times be over-applied (e.g. Searle, 1983) for the most part there seems to be a general/broad appreciation of its value, and evidently some agreement that differences between inclusive and exclusive are not always clear cut, despite not all of the parties using familiar terminology. For example, Bauman (1995) argues that phagic (inclusivist) and emic (exclusivist) practices or 'strategies' are characteristic of all societies, and both conditions are necessary for a society's successful upkeep (p.180). These are 'indispensable mechanisms of social spacing' and are not intended to function individually, but in tandem. More than that, he wonders if an 'inclusive community' might actually be a 'contradiction in terms' (2000, p.172).

### Gestalt/Frame Analysis

In extending the way our thought processes, our perceptions, are put into order, Gregory Bateson (2000), whose work was a major influence on Goffman's analysis of organisational frames, also considers the inclusive-exclusive theme, but from a psychological viewpoint. He claims that in order to simplify the way we make sense of events, the way information is categorised and subsequently interpreted, a type of mind-set that corresponds closely to the organisational boundary of a picture frame is constructed. The frame is highly selective, for it demarcates what information or material should be contained inside its boundaries,

distinguishing between what should remain inside (enhanced) from what remains outside (inhibited). Such a process, he argues, manages to be both inclusive and exclusive (2000).

### *Social Capital*

The preceding range of impressions and interpretations secure more shape and substance when organised around Robert Putnam's body of work on social capital and in particular his theory of bonding (exclusive) and bridging (inclusive) network connections (2000). Social capital places great stress on the importance of relationships, in either their strong or weak forms, and how social profit can accrue from the reciprocities and levels of trust generated through them. Putnam maintains that establishing bridging (inclusive) relations, which extend outward beyond our zones of familiarity, are a greater social priority than adding to the superfluity of bonding ties, which tend to be strong but are often rigidly homogeneous and inward looking (2000). Putnam's notion, however, needs to be examined and applied very carefully. A healthy and effective community requires a blend of different types of social capital (Halpern, 2005). It may be inferred therefore that too much inclusive (bridging) social capital can be as bad as having too little. Putnam's bias towards bridging social capital can be questioned on at least two levels. Since our experience of social capital begins with bonding forms (bridging social capital is only produced once bonding is established), and since it is this form we are most familiar with, and have the greatest experience of, generating bonding (exclusive) social capital is our natural, instinctive inclination. Furthermore, since the distinction between bonding and bridging is 'almost entirely context dependent' (Schuller, 2007, p.15) it is almost impossible to tell them apart; moreover 'the relationship between these two forms...may be complementary or conflictual, or both' (2007, p.16). It is therefore relevant to ask, at what point is it decided that bonding becomes too exclusionary? (Schuller, 2007).

A similar predicament has been ongoing in laughter studies. The superiority model of laughter, which accounts for all exclusive forms of the phenomenon, prescribes that we laugh out of ‘some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others’ (Hobbes, 1650/1994, p.54). It declares an explicit message of triumph, and has been the most influential account of why we are moved to laughter since the time of Plato (Morreall, 1983). But despite its prominence amongst the laughter theories, and despite claims that it is the *only* reason why we laugh (Gruner, 2000), this has not prevented some head-teachers from attempting to limit the superiority model’s influence by restricting school-based humour and laughter to just its affiliative, pro-social types. While such actions appear well-intentioned, they may in fact prove to be badly judged. For if we have any sympathy with the notion that a typical community needs to have interpersonal relationships that express shared and contested values, positive as well as negative social effects (Schuller, 2007), we might wonder at the wisdom and feasibility in encouraging inclusive-only practices and behaviour. For that matter, we might wonder whether developing inclusive-only philosophies, or even building inclusive-only educational movements, have any merit at all. The reductive thinking of head-teachers often rests on the assumption that people only laugh because they find something amusing. It is also assumed that when children laugh at racist or sexist humour, for example, they are in effect endorsing those discriminatory attitudes.

### *Exclusivity Reconsidered*

Actually, there may be any number of different attitudes directing a child’s laughter. There may be a longing to remain part of a group, or a wish not to show ignorance in the presence of one’s peers, or indeed a desire simply to copy others. If laughter ever succeeds in graduating from its marginal position located within the affective domain of teaching and learning (regarded mainly as an efficient instrument with which to improve pupils’

motivation and concentration), and is allowed to adopt a more expansive, influential role, perhaps even qualifying as a performativity benchmark (Johnson, 2005), school authorities must realise that exclusive laughter is a *sine qua non* of inclusive schooling. Although there is a tendency for the terms inclusive and exclusive to be used with evaluative force, implying that the former is somehow better than the latter, it will be argued at this juncture that each orientation is of fundamental importance. In fact, if the patterns of our interpersonal associations – our bridging and bonding capabilities – indicate anything at all, it is that the exclusive concept merits far greater distinction, inasmuch that without exclusive forms of social capital there can be no fertile ground upon which inclusive social capital can possibly develop.

When searching for evidence of inclusive schooling there is little doubt that a range of both inclusive and exclusive examples will be met. This is how it should be. The presence of exclusive practices and behaviour need not diminish the inclusive philosophy that a school may have been at great pains to build and promote. It merely identifies it as a fit and proper, fully functioning institution, one whose fitness might be deserved all the more by it openly declaring tenure of both dimensions. ‘Inclusive’, like the term ‘democracy’, bears a weighty, almost canonical significance. And yet the great democracies of the modern era seldom ever lose their democratic status even though they may routinely demonstrate a tyrannical capacity when effecting actions more usually associated with dictatorships. Plato claimed that variety and disorder were characteristics proper to any democracy (2003). We should not, therefore, be fooled into believing that every group, or member of a group, operating within a democracy functions solely for the common good. As Putnam says, ‘democracy does not require that citizens be selfless saints’ (2000, p.349).

Perhaps such a moderate view now obtains because ‘democracy’, up until the 19c, was an overwhelmingly unfavourable term, routinely associated with radicalism and revolt (Williams, 1976). Even today, the core components of the purest, most envied democratic system include ‘innumerable... distortions’, producing reduced concepts of constitutional protocols such as ‘election’, ‘representation’, and ‘mandate’ (1976, p.97). Few people would readily accept the idea that democracy today really does involve all categories of people and does indeed meet the needs of all groups in society. But perhaps it is unreasonable to expect that democracy should be more inclusive, and that inclusive should be more democratic. These contradictory themes are a fundamental aspect of social life, and a prominent feature within the education system. Although inclusive remains an important social and cultural aspiration, and inclusive teaching and learning remains the best hope for preserving our children’s educational future, such assertions will only come to fruition once the interactive relationship with its definitional opposite is held up to scrutiny. A basic limitation in existing research is its theoretical one-sidedness which all too often neglects the interactive nature of this twin-membered system.

### *The Educational Context*

This study not only makes a new case for the inclusive-exclusive relationship, thereby providing a new perspective on inclusive education, it also helps establish the case for laughter, still a peripheral topic within educational research (Vlieghe, *et al*, 2009). That it has troubled some of the greatest minds of past ages, from Cicero and Aristotle to Freud and Bergson, is an indication that laughter actually does matter, and an argument against the tendency to see it as a fleeting affectation with only superficial value. There remains, however, a lingering doubt as to its worthiness as a serious topic of study (Billig, 2005), not to mention its application in school settings, where its suitability has long been questioned



despite efforts to highlight its pedagogic significance (Vlieghe *et al*, 2009). Many of these misgivings are the result of laughter's contribution to the strain in relations between the polarities of playful and serious. Even though there have been some tentative associations with curricula issues (usually in pre-school settings), play has long been regarded as incompatible with formal learning. It seems that the common conjunction of laughter and play precludes either condition from being taken seriously. And it is precisely the seriousness with which we confront education in this country that renders it bordering on a national obsession (Conroy & Davis, 2002). Just how teaching and learning can be made more accessible, more meaningful to an ever-growing population of disinterested and disconnected learners, remains an ongoing cause for concern. But as more and more schools are electing to relinquish pupils' break-time there is evidence this has created more opportunities for playful classroom instruction.

Teachers have been encouraged to make more creative and novel engagements with their learners (Craft, 2000). Indeed, a feature of my fieldwork has been the number of classroom activities encountered that may have originated in the playground. In most cases it proved to be a productive if unusual union. Clearly there are limits to what can be taught during a particular lesson's 'play' phase. Humour might be one of many useful applications a teacher may deploy when helping children remember their times-tables, for example. It might not, however, be an appropriate method to use when instructing a child how to swim.

Nonetheless, among the primary school classrooms observed many had cultivated a noticeably informal atmosphere, where the serious and non-serious educational domains functioned co-operatively in a concerted interchanging process.

### *The Dialectic of Opposites*

This to-ing and fro-ing between dimensions shows, as with the inclusive-exclusive distinction, that the serious-play opposition is highly fugitive. These are not fixed categories. Moreover, the status of these categories may be subject to challenge (Mulkay, 1988). While the serious mode remains the dominant discourse system by which social acts are coordinated, Mulkay wonders how the subordinate humorous mode would function if the positions were reversed. Wickberg (1998) goes further, believing we may have reached that point already. 'There seems to be very little left to support the notion of 'the serious' as an objective entity', he claims (p.217). This, he argues, is due to the level of humour's penetration into that hitherto impenetrable realm of the serious, to the extent that we cannot take anything seriously anymore. The jokes that appeared so soon after the death of Lady Diana and after the attacks on 9/11 seem to confirm this view (Conroy, 2004). But however close or distant these oppositions are perceived to be, we still need to become better acquainted with the main features of dichotomous thinking since in many peoples' perceptual systems it remains the path of least resistance. Billig advises, for example, that in order to explain funniness we need to make sense of seriousness (2005). Guided by his wise counsel, and applying it more generally, makes it possible to examine these oppositions more evenly, without favour. If, in so doing, examples are uncovered where the various polarities are held in check, or show a tendency to converge, become integrated or are transposed, we may, despite the significance of the findings, have reached an important methodological juncture. By avoiding the single-lens perspective that has characterised a great deal of previous discussions on inclusion, a route opens up affording a two-dimensional approach, one that incorporates 'exclusive' while also examining its 'inclusive' counterpart. It thereby makes their relationship available for scrutiny in order to determine not only what it means for inclusive education, but to determine what inclusive education actually means.

### Categories Eschewed

At the heart of this new thinking on inclusive education lies a concern with the profusion of schemes in which objects, institutions, but mainly people, are routinely arranged in specific units, groups, and classes, since it is believed they have certain properties and characteristics in common. Aristotle's doctrine of categories, a treatise designed to organise fragmentary 'things' into families and types might not have been the first - but may have been the most influential - attempt to construct an index of classification (Ryle, 1937/8). Durkheim & Mauss explained that it was due to society's embrace of human classes and groupings that humans developed a corresponding urge to group and class other things (1903/1963). The need to arrange the world around us, rendering it more manageable, bringing social reality into comprehensible form, is at times an unconscious activity. Nonetheless, the way we classify objects and people usually determines who or what gets included and excluded. In schools no less than in society, programmes of separation are employed for a range of largely administrative reasons.

But the hallmark of categorisation, in education at least, is concerned with the perception of relative standing. When sorting, ordering, and classifying, we can engage in some very subjective, but also some highly sophisticated, forms of comparison. The practice of comparing pupils, for example, is the abiding feature of our contemporary and highly competitive education system which, perhaps inadvertently, is responsible for creating a wide range of homogeneous pupil-networks and communities. Much of this endeavour is focused on a child's ability, which can activate such codifying processes as setting and streaming, which has been regarded as an educational boon for certain pupils. Festinger (1954) has argued that humans possess psychical drives that actually demand their abilities be compared and evaluated. Children need to know, in effect, their own capacities and limitations. But

equally there is the risk that it can sometimes lead to performance measuring, to personalised labelling and to disreputable stereo-typing. At one time, the practice of categorising within education was heavily criticised (e.g. Tomlinson, 1982). More recently, however, there are indications that moods and policies have softened (Alexander, 2010).

A familiar technique, widely engaged in order to try and discover laughter's distinctive nature, has been to allot it a formal berth in some form of classification schema. It has, for example, been customary to categorise intellectual theories of laughter into three major types (Billig, 2005). From the late 18c, the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the theory of relief/release, have formed the spearhead of such explanatory systems. Aristotle (2009), preferring distinctions of a more personal kind, employed a taxonomy which approximated to an early continuum of social types. His laughter classification amounted to a list of those people whose mirth was excessive (the vulgar buffoon), those of a ready wit (the well-bred gentleman), and those who were indifferent to humour (the cynic, the melancholic). But what remained constant across these different epochs - and remains popular today - is the view that until an item, person or entity has been accorded a categorical status they or it could not be objectified, recognised, or understood.

An interest in the way that tribal societies were structured, how 'primitive' people classified their everyday worlds, from belief systems to kinship systems, was the point at which their particular schemes of life could be compared and contrasted to the reigning European/American paradigm. 'In the 19c...the imposition of a preconceived Western developmental framework made the job of the ethnographer much simpler; the task became in effect that of a classifier of cultural traits' (Vidich & Lyman, 2003, p.65). This enthusiasm for classifying has continued undimmed. The anthropologist George Murdock (1949) began constructing a

cross-cultural trait index in the 1930s. His work, of considerable size even then, was taken on by Yale University a decade later. Today, under the auspices of the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), it produces a handbook of categories based on all existing ethnographic literature. Many researchers are keen to access its immense database since it contains all manner of cultural, social, religious, and political details about local populations the world over. But despite its apparent usefulness, there are claims it encourages ‘disembodied’ ethnography (Vidich & Lyman, 2003, p.65). Social scientists are thus encouraged to access information about contemporary tribes and societies without having to leave their home or office, without having to conduct any observations or interviews. Unsurprisingly, the database has proved to be of considerable interest to the American military. Indeed, there are claims that Pentagon-led incursions in far off lands are rarely ever attempted before studying in careful detail the relevant sections in this monstrous document (Price, 2012).

The slowly evolving body of laughter categories, being decidedly modest in number, are unlikely to provoke the kind of controversy or debates found in other fields of enquiry. But in the absence of an all-encompassing laughter theory, they are very likely to remain the cause of continuing confusion and uncertainty. The human capacity to categorise may be said to breed two singular types of categorical thinking. Individuals whose view of social reality tends to divide human and physical worlds into fixed categories may be behaving consistently within societal expectations, doing precisely what is expected in an effort to organise their everyday experiences. But those who over-indulge in the habit of separating the world into distinct chunks can encourage thinking practices that risk obscuring the boundary at which conventional cognitive analysis meets unyielding dogmatism. Categorical thinking is a way of preserving the very insular and inflexible nature of our perceptions and understandings of the world around us. It is a way of organising reality that has very little

tolerance for - or allowance of - categories that overlap. In fact, the justification for bearing a pronouncedly rigid, categorical mind-set has been explained by another single-minded devotee of laughter's superiority theory. Buckley (2005) was moved to admit that in his case it was borne out of a desire to avoid trendy perspectives that tend to be constructed around the notion of 'modern fuzziness' (p.xiv).

### *Fuzziness Embraced*

But the fuzzy approach, eschewed by Buckley and by others, is the strategy that is adopted without reservation here. There are some distinct advantages in being fuzzy-minded. A child's view of the world, for instance, is not compartmentalised as is the world of grown-ups; children remain to a large degree oblivious to the distinctions we make and do not always find it easy fitting their experiences into our complex range of categories and compartments (Zerubavel, 1993). To process reality within such hazy, child-like boundaries can help develop a greater appreciation of a child's take on the world. Showing any level of sensitivity to, or empathy with, one's research participants can make for a more discerning interpretation of their behaviours and interactions. In certain respects, a child's school environment provides the ideal setting where a fluent, less rigid, sense of reality is most likely to operate.

Compared at least to their counterparts in the secondary sector, primary schools are not overly fussed, for example, about time-tabling. During the period of data collection, it was noted that some English classes merged seamlessly with maths lessons, and vice versa, with little to indicate where one began and the other ended, apart - occasionally - from the clap of a teacher's hands. Concerns about compartmentalising the primary curriculum has become an important issue, and is a theme highlighted in the Cambridge Primary Review which

proposes an altogether more flexible point of access to infant and junior education (Alexander, 2010). Not only does it recommend ending the core/non-core curriculum distinction, but the instrumental Key Stage framework is highlighted as a particular barrier to sustaining the momentum, the continuity, of children's learning. As one concerned and frustrated correspondent to the Review declared (regarding his objection to the practice of classifying children), 'there is now an argument in favour of blurring the edges and seeing the primary phase as one continuum...' (quoted in Alexander, 2010, p.369).

Talk of 'blurred edges' and 'fuzziness' can be understood, on one level, as outward expressions of uncertainty and mystification. Or they may be considered as highly perceptive views of reality, views that are necessarily cautious given that many entities and phenomena are anomalous, nuanced, or riven with ambiguity. This applies to laughter just as much as it does to certain features of teaching and learning. Laughter's specification details do not lend themselves so easily to the organising principles of classes and categories. There is, for instance, little agreement as to its physiological, social, and psychological status. Part of the difficulty in finding laughter's essence is that it is not at all clear how it should be categorised, even among the corpus of human passions, feelings and sentiments (Morreall, 1983). Daring to presume that laughter has any connection with these affective constituents is a considerable risk. Some will confidently classify it as an emotion (e.g. Stengel, 2012), while others insist that laughter and emotion are incompatible (Bergson, 1911/2005). Disagreements at such a fundamental level may be frustrating and confusing, but are the inevitable product of a continuous fascination with taxonomies, with information systems that are assumed to offer complete descriptions and explanations of all the elements and happenings in the universe.

Since philosophical ontology has sought the definitive and exhaustive classification of all entities in all dimensions, laughter's categorical standing remains heavily contested. This is so simply because there is no agreement as to what laughter actually is. It is possible, as Lefcourt (2001) has suggested, that humour and laughter, although immemorial components of what it is to be human, are still in their infancy, at least in terms of our phenomenological understandings (of it). Despite the steady accumulation of insights and analyses from classical philosophers to post-modern investigators, 'there is much to be added' (Lefcourt, 2001, p.165). And, it might be argued, a great deal to be taken away. The repeated attempts to consign laughter a specific category or a range of competing categories reflects the dominating procedures of the science of pure being and the system of pure segregation. The deeply-rooted relationship between the field of ontology and the practice of categorisation may have been the standard means by which knowledge-bases were constructed, but they have encouraged an indulgent habit of thinking in discrete and clearly defined ways (Lovejoy, 1961). While one can accept that classification is a fundamental part of everyday life, one must also realise that creating categories is an entirely artificial process (Zerubavel, 1993). Accordingly, and in keeping with a generally cautious approach to categorising and labelling, in this project laughter's existing categories of superiority, incongruity, and relief/release will not be ignored completely, but neither will they be allowed to dominate proceedings.

Category formation may constitute a necessary evil. The ease and frequency with which we employ categories throughout our daily lives is an indication of their usefulness, or perhaps the size of our reliance upon them. They are elemental mechanisms in many communities' infrastructure, a feature of the well-ordered society and of efficient human organisation. As a way of rendering the world manageable, some categories are more useful than others. But



instead of making life easier there are those that can become a barrier to the way society functions, disturbing the way individuals co-ordinate their behaviour, and threatening the very nature and foundation of cooperative interaction. When we encounter categories of an invidious nature they can be exposed and held up to ridicule, as featured in the work of Thorstein Veblen (e.g. 2001). Or we can adopt something like Aristotle's approach who, when attempting to separate qualities from relations and separate substances from kinds, he perhaps intentionally created a collection of types that were altogether rough and imprecise (Ryle, 1937/8). There is, arguably, much to commend such a system. A system of classification that, counter-intuitively, is expansive rather than restrictive, that instead of seeing types and classes such as inclusive and exclusive or seriousness and play as dichotomous, and perfunctorily organising them into single categories, to consider them rather as part of a broader, inter-related grouping, a sort of 'mixed family'. In a primary school environment it just might be the one thing to ensure that categories as we currently understand them do not become inscribed and reified, and that the psychopathology of stereotyping and pigeon-holing no longer remains a burden for certain pupils.

### *The Schools Presented*

Using two schools, The Cross and The Crescent, for the focus of enquiry raised the possibility (only briefly entertained) of developing a corpus of mainly comparative data. Despite ethnography being inherently a comparative practice (Wolcott, 1995), such an approach risks emphasising only differences. But apart from some largely superficial variance in terms of pupils' ethnicity, the design and age of their respective school buildings, the type and dimensions of each play area, and the overall environmental settings, the two schools were notable chiefly for their significant similarities. In real terms, the teaching and learning and the organisational structures in place (Ofsted notwithstanding) saw only minor

distinctions. Importantly, both schools shared an inclusive culture and outlook. More than anything, however, the goodwill generated by pupils and staff, along with their mutual enthusiasm for this project, placed them in perfect alignment. In fact, of all the schools that were contacted with a view to taking part in and supporting this research (n=50), The Cross and The Crescent were the only ones to show any interest. Demonstrating, therefore, how one school's laughter output measured up against the other's seemed a pretty poor way to repay such kindness and hospitality. Casting the research net as wide as possible so that parallel naturalistic data can be gathered and examined in a manner that treats the two schools as fairly representative examples within primary education may be the biggest help yet in unravelling some of the complexities that continue to beset the mainstream sector.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review has been organised around a series of time-frames. Five foundational decades in the history of inclusive and exclusive education cover the period from 1970 to the present day. The inclusive-exclusive relationship has been examined using the prism of social capital as a way to comprehend and to explain school children's laughter. The sequential arrangement of the review is only significant in that it highlights some of the important vertical lines of progression. The main emphasis has been to show the horizontal range of trends and tendencies, the shifts and continuities, from across a broad spectrum of discourses, domains, and disciplines. In attempting to establish the roots, and indeed locate some of the routes, of education that both includes and excludes, the conceptual umbrella of inclusive-exclusive has been stretched very carefully in order to accommodate as many actual, potential, as well as tangential themes and ideas that might provide new insights and new meanings into the inclusive-exclusive pairing. New evidence has been located among a range of cognate terms employed down the years, which have included public-private, altruistic-egoistic, outsider-insider, consensual-conflictual, subject-object, bridging-bonding, and concealing-revealing. These pairings, for so long considered as major oppositions, as isolates, will be treated here as mutually enriching.

### 1970s

In 1973 Margaret Thatcher and Mark Granovetter set in place two new initiatives that would help to redefine the way we think about, and potentially construct, heterogeneous societies. Granovetter's influential paper, 'The Strength of Weak Ties' (1973), proposed that the flow of information and ideas linking people together was at its most productive when occurring between loose, socially distant acquaintances and not, as intuition would have it, among

close friends or family members. His idea proved to be a major influence on social capital theories that were to flourish nearly a generation later.

Mrs. Thatcher, in her capacity as Secretary of State for Education, appointed Mary Warnock as the independent Chair of a committee to review educational provision for children with disabilities. It was the government's response to concerns that had preoccupied policy makers and members of the public keen to ensure that out-of-reach individuals and dislocated social groups could be reconnected to society's mainstream. What became known as the Warnock Report (DfES, 1978) led eventually to widespread use of the term, practice of, and belief in, educational inclusion.

Appearing between these two pioneering moments Paul Willis (1976) focused on a group of male secondary school pupils for whom laughter was a fundamental and forthright declaration of their anti-school philosophy. Documenting their transition from the education system to the economic system, Willis showed how the antagonistic behaviour of one group in the counter-culture of the school, known as 'the lads', amounted to a form of training, an apprenticeship for a working life-time spent in the all-male culture of the industrial shop-floor.

### *Integration and Segregation*

The Warnock Report (1978) was a unique document inasmuch that it was the first committee of inquiry in the modern era that had as its focus the education of children with disabilities. In keeping with progressive pedagogic trends in Scandinavian countries and North America, and responding to home-based campaigning by a variety of professional, voluntary, and pressure groups, the idea of integrated provision was offered as a positive alternative to the policies

and practices of segregation. It marked a move away from the conventionally rigid categories of 'handicap' and other inappropriate labels towards encouraging a new discourse of disability, one with the introduction of terms such as 'special needs' and 'learning difficulties'. The report declared that children of all abilities should be educated in a common setting, 'so far as possible' (p.100 section.7.3). It also introduced the practice of statementing for children with complex needs. Importantly, the report distinguished between three main forms of integration, which were not discrete but overlapping categories. Firstly, locational integration is practiced where special units/classes are set up in ordinary schools. Social integration involves children attending a special class/unit 'where they can eat, play and consort with other children' (p.101 s.7.8). Finally, functional integration is achieved where the locational and social association of children with special needs with their typical peers leads to joint participation in classroom activities and programmes (1978).

The ambiguous interpretations of integration in the Warnock report was reflected in the many loopholes which the subsequent Education Act (DfES, 1981) provided. It enabled the policy and practice of segregation to continue unhindered (Jackson, 2005). At the outset, the report struggled to rationalise who or what was to be included and excluded. It chose not to take into consideration the social factors which may contribute to disability (DfES, 1978).

Furthermore, recommendations of the committee would not apply to children deemed to be 'highly gifted' (p.4) or those from ethnic minority backgrounds. The bulk of the evidence submitted to the committee 'clearly favoured the retention of special schools as part of a broader spectrum of provision' (Wilson cited by Barton & Landman, 1993, p.45).

Many years later, the role played by the secretariat of the DfES, in helping to shape the direction and content of the Warnock Report, was revealed. In 2005 a reflective Lady

Warnock stated that the secretariat took responsibility for writing the initial papers that formed the foundation of the committee's work. This office also decided what research needed to be done, chose the schools that the committee members would visit, and also provided the key questions that were to be asked. Jackson (2005) was not alone in wondering about the independence of this 'government financed committee' (p.2). Furthermore, the committee commissioned significantly less research than any previous committee appointed to examine the educational system. It is believed Mrs Thatcher's influence weighed heavily upon this particular section of the report. During her period as Education Secretary she had made known her disdain for academic research which she saw as costly, time-consuming and ineffectual (Jackson, 2005).

Despite the ambiguity and the arguments, the loopholes and caveats, it should be acknowledged that the Warnock Report (1978) laid the foundation for far-reaching reforms of school-based education. Not least, it provided opportunities for pupils of all abilities to interact with each other, formally and informally, socially and educationally. It also redefined their experiences of relating and connecting to adults in school settings. Educational policy was steadily transforming the traditional, common-sense view of the local school, from a largely homogenised institution filled with like-minded children to a place where a child could encounter everyday behaviour from a socially diverse range of people. In this respect, the Warnock Report can be considered an important part of a progressive trend in education that was first glimpsed in the policy focus on Primary education covered by the Plowden Report (DfES, 1967). This landmark review considered, among many other issues, the educational welfare of all children in society, including children of immigrants, children from socially deprived backgrounds, and those described as 'handicapped'. Aiming to develop more egalitarian structures within modern schooling, the Warnock Committee picked up and

then expanded on the very general offerings covered in Plowden, in particular recognising the importance of social interchange between children with disabilities and their typical peers.

The framework document indicated that such a degree of association in schools 'should begin at as early an age as possible' (p.101, s.7.8.). Encouraging the formation of relationships between children normally situated outside their social circle was deemed to be an effective stimulant to a child's social and cognitive development.

### *Strong and Weak Ties*

In his research on network connections, Granovetter (1973) distinguishes between two kinds of social ties. Strong (exclusive) ties, such as those between family and close friends, are time-intensive, emotional, intimate and reciprocal. Weak (inclusive) ties between casual acquaintances tend to be fleeting, instrumental and impersonal. Weak ties may not appear to contribute much to one's level of connectedness, but Granovetter argues that, counter-intuitively, these ties are of considerable value. They function as bridges between socially homogeneous groups whose members ordinarily do not interact with one another. In contrast, strong ties tend to produce groups that are inward looking and bond similar people to each other. When searching for job opportunities, for example, the weak ties of acquaintances can prove invaluable since they may provide more serendipitous connections within the broader jobs grapevine. But the strong tie, with its densely-knit social structure, is conceived as having little practical value. It is likely to provide only redundant information since it can be anticipated to circulate in similar, if not the same, social circles. Although the strong tie may encourage local cohesion, it lacks the expansive channels that weak ties can provide in order to encourage access to wider opportunities and to obtain a greater range of resources (Granovetter, 1973).

### Centre and Margin

From a macro assessment of the dimensions of strong and weak ties, Granovetter also offered a micro analysis. Believing that as children get older they develop stronger bonding ties, consolidating links to those who are similar to themselves (1973), he set about attempting to define the key properties and structures of peer group relations. This, he felt, could explain, for example, conferrals of power and status. He offers some idea of a group's internal structure by his understanding of 'transitivity' (1973, p.1376), a term used to describe a passing-into condition, a sort of inclusive-exclusive (integration-segregation) state that people frequently experience when interacting with firm friends and mere acquaintances. The principle behind the term is that the stronger the tie between two pupils, like Gita and Ayesha for example, the larger the overlap in their relationship circles. If Gita likes Ayesha, and Ayesha also likes Pria, there is a strong likelihood that Gita will also like Pria. This calculation is based on the notion that the pupils will intuitively endeavour to reduce any possible friction or uncertainty in their social and emotional domains. Naturally the girls' friendship-group contains strong and weak elements, but the degree of one's likeability is subsumed in order to preserve the equilibrium of the group's internal structure.

Granovetter argues that the kind of information an individual has access to, and the choices that they make within a group, are affected by the position they hold, i.e. their proximal and hierarchical placement. Typically, individuals will either be located at the centre, giving every appearance of being highly integrated or they will occupy positions on the margins. Yet it is the influence that those on the margins ('Pria' in the example above) who, ordinarily one would describe as the weak tie in the group (being a mere acquaintance of Gita) can, in real terms, provide the group with all-important bonding, integrative capacities. Against expectation, the weak ties afford the group and its internal/external network with a dedicated



sense of stability and balance. A group's relational structure needs, more than anything else, to be stable. Weak ties within a group not only exist but thrive since they bear, in many cases, responsibility for the group's prosperity. Due to their pivotal role they can act as bridges, connecting individuals to each other inside a group as well as connect individuals between groups.

Among the many highlights in 'Learning to Labour' (1976) Paul Willis's social explanation for school-based laughter often gets overlooked. Much of the praise for his highly original treatment of male working-class culture centres on his fascinating insight into the day-to-day administration of an informal group of pupils, self-styled as 'the lads'. His book more than holds its own against the weightier but no less important psychology-dominated humour and laughter research that prevailed during this period. Chapman & Foot's landmark edited collection of psychology papers (1976) and Ziv's early examination of humour and laughter's influence on the psychological climate of a school classroom (1979) remain stimulating examples. Despite Willis's study not having a specific laughter focus, its continued importance to inquiries concerned with aspects of communication and behaviour is that it brings to light how schools are often the places to develop and shape the particular ambience of children's humour (Willis, 1976). He shows also how the strength of the ties that bind the particular boy's group together is reinforced by laughter, a bonding agent, he notes, of formidable potency.

'The lads'' laughter is a signature of the group's resistance to school authority. Applied with ruthless efficiency and complete disregard for their targets, it disparages peers, teachers and fellow group members alike. Laughter herein is taken to be a product of its social context. It confirms the shift in laughter-thinking prompted by anthropologists like Mary Douglas,

whose hypothesis gave prominence to a relatively new structuralist perspective. She suggested that forms of laughter rarely lie in the utterances alone, but tend to be expressive of the social situations in which they occur (1999). This view is largely supported by Willis as he shows, for example, when ‘the lads’ leave school and enter the local factories to continue the class-patterning that makes up the industrial workforce. The masculine laughter remains something of a constant here, except that it is peremptorily adapted for the benefit of a now largely adult and therefore more discerning audience. Willis indicates that school life is pretty much a dress-rehearsal for a life spent beyond the educational frontier (1976). It was a theme addressed simultaneously in America where Bowles and Gintis employed the term ‘correspondence principle’ (1976, p.131).

### *Creative and Destructive*

In such unforgiving environments - be it the school or the factory - the ability to make others laugh confers a within-group status upon certain group members. Those considered ‘quick’ (Willis, 1976, p.32), meaning quick-witted, can earn for themselves a special position within the group’s hierarchy. Deftly managed displays of repartee or derisive remarking, intended to hurt and/or persecute, are evidence for Willis of a specific capacity - an underlying level of intelligence - that routinely eludes the attention of teachers. Since there was (and continues to be) no specific application for it in the national curriculum, classroom laughter of ‘the lads’ variety is commonly associated with bad behaviour or, at the very least, judged to be a sign of idleness or inattention. But the creative skills involved in mounting withering acts of disparagement, the way that a victim’s weaknesses can be targeted with such precision, earns for Willis his grudging admiration.

Today, it might be imagined that a change in educators' attitudes would be inclined to offer more hope for the quick-witted young minds described by Willis. Teachers with a commitment to developing a deeper understanding of what motivates and engages their pupils might see in their often aggressive, foul-mouthed outpourings some potential - an appreciation perhaps - of the range of unconventional faculties with which many children are endowed. Among the ever growing literature championing the cause of introducing greater creativity and innovation in education (e.g. Craft, 2000), laughter and humour are rarely ever considered. This oversight is because the focus is invariably trained on the ways teachers can bring greater creativity to their methods of instruction. Very little is ever said about developing the existing humour/laughter skills in pupils. Despite the creative act of the humorist sharing the same pattern of creative activity as the scientist (Fry & Allen, 1976), despite the Sage and the Jester representing spheres of creativity that effectively 'shade into each other' (Koestler, 1964, p.27), laughter has not been accorded the status in education some people believe it deserves (e.g. Vlieghe *et al*, 2009; Stengel, 2012). If there were more opportunities for creative humour in contemporary classrooms, and in pedagogic theory, a child's flair for manipulating language, remembering sequences, and bearing an instinct for judicious timing, may stand more of a chance of being identified and harnessed by teachers who themselves are better prepared and better positioned to help channel those singular talents towards more constructive and rewarding ends.

### *Insider and Outsider*

Having professed a measure of esteem for the behaviour of some of his research participants as they waylaid friend and foe alike with belittling derision, Willis may have committed an ethical indiscretion. It is claimed that the relationship he made with the main cohort of his study seriously undermined the validity of his qualitative findings (Walker, 1986). His

theoretical position led him into methodological errors, the most damaging of which being accusations of over-rapport with 'the lads' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Similar allegations have been directed at the Warnock committee, too. The committee could not, for example, justify any claim to be independent if it was instigated and financed by the government of the day (Jackson, 2005). By the same token, Granovetter has been accused of showing undue favouritism towards 'weak ties', virtually ignoring the effectiveness of their strong-tie counterparts (Gans, 1974). Routes into employment in this period, for example, typically followed family lines for many working-class pupils, a point highlighted at length by Willis (1976). Granovetter later conceded that there is undeniably a basic need for strong ties, admitting, for one thing, they are easier to access and can be obtained at little cost (1983). Strong ties constitute a basis of trust that provides emotional comfort, physical support and solidarity when needed. This was indeed the case for 'the lads', for whom it proved an overarching convenience both inside and outside school.

But the strong ties of the researcher, the academic and indeed the chairperson, can often hold them hostage to the methodological and political demands expected when there is a need to maintain diplomacy, a respectful distance, and a safe level of abstraction. The nature of this inclusive-exclusive orientation has continued to dog, in particular, the work of ethnographers. A growing concern about their physical and methodological positioning when conducting fieldwork reflects a general nervousness about the occupation of 'safe' spaces and thresholds. While Willis is accused of identifying too much with one shade of his research cohort, Warnock, too, faced a very similar dichotomy. How could she remain far enough away from her political sponsors in the ruling government to at least create the impression of impartiality, and yet remain close enough to them so that her committee would not be compromised by failing to access all the available resources and expertise the education

secretariat would be so keen to provide? Regarding such matters, the perceived wisdom for researchers (and perhaps also for the committee chairperson) is to be a ‘simultaneous insider-outsider’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.89).

It is not always easy to adopt such a scrupulously balanced position, however. Mary Warnock was an outsider to begin with, who eventually became an insider. This particular trajectory was to her advantage. She felt no need therefore to adopt a position mid-way between familiarity and strangeness. An ambiguous, liminal position would not only have weakened the tenor of her ideological standing but damaged the carefully cultivated arrangement of her public profile. At the time of her Chair appointment in 1974 Warnock described herself as an ‘ignoramus’ on education matters (2005, p.1). And yet, ever since that time, she has, in no small part, presented herself as a high-functioning autodidact. The suggestion that one has experienced some kind of intellectual awakening is a strategy frequently employed by the skilled rhetorician. Presenting oneself as an outsider who subsequently becomes a knowledgeable insider seeks to persuade audiences that their message carries greater conviction because of an assumed movement from darkness into light, rather like that of a sinner who suddenly treads the path of righteousness. It also effects a belief that theirs is an impartial message for having been, at the outset, the product of an open mind, uninformed and therefore uncontaminated by any preconceptions.

Hammersley & Atkinson’s (2007) insider-outsider typology, as with weak-strong social ties, is depicted in such a way that attempts to keep the dominance of any one particular element in check. The hyphen between each pairing shows not their division, as is often assumed, but their relation. Today, for example, the strength of both types of social tie would be deemed, in many contexts, vitally important since each one has a significant influence on the operation

and structure of group and inter-group networks. This is a reflection, perhaps, of changing epistemological and methodological conditions. The current research climate, for example, appears to eschew universal truths in favour of multiple realities. Mixed-method approaches are now the vogue where once the single-model paradigms were regarded as incompatible. This is particularly noticeable in Willis's account. Societies were more polarised in the 1970's. Deepening social cleavage and greater awareness of class stratification ensured that competing 'either/or' options remained a constant motif. Willis was able to show how 'the lads' valorised and vigorously exploited their strong ties. They saw little situational advantage in going beyond their own exclusive, tightly-knit, high-density social circle. He could defend to a degree over-rapport as a way of gaining privileged access to, and achieving some credibility within, this close-knit community. It proved, for instance, to be a highly successful means by which to encourage trust and cooperation between the researcher and the research participants. However, in so doing, Willis risked becoming a spokesperson for 'the lads' rather than their critical analyst. The group's sexist and racist humour together with their threats of violence was never directly challenged by him, leaving some to conclude that their behaviour had been unduly romanticised (e.g. Walker, 1986).

The emergence of post-positivist sensibilities provided new ways of approaching some old social and educational problems. Established realities were being steadily transformed if not distorted. The alignment of pressing polity issues such as integration and segregation could just as easily be yoked together to show their affinity as pulled apart to emphasise their difference. It was an age when common-sense categories and boundaries could no longer be trusted. It was a time of interpenetrating, promiscuous fusion. Fuzziness and fluidity were gaining a cultural and scientific foothold (e.g. Labov, 1973; Lakoff, 1973). Amid all this upheaval, however, the concept of fuzziness could be applied judiciously. There were those

who felt it entitled them to adopt positions between certain policy programmes. For the Warnock Committee at least, a commitment to integration did not necessarily mean abandoning segregationist practices and principles. A form of conceptual integration may have been realised as a result of their intervention but, in the face of some fierce resistance from politicians, practitioners and parents, it fell well short of any ideological obligations to end separate schooling.

It was a time when qualitative research was entering its blurred genre phase (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). And when things weren't getting a little blurry, they were turning upside-down. Traditional frames of reference were subject to contrary and contradictory renderings. Granovetter (1973) managed to up-end traditional thinking on contrasting pairs with his reappraisal of the weak-strong continuum. 'The lads' in Willis's study effected a plane of behaviour more in keeping with an absurd counterworld than an expression of a counter-culture, with their grotesque and hilarious inversions of school norms (Bergson, incidentally, argued that the spirit of 'topsyturvydom' is an important attribute of laughter, and holds a central place in any society's understanding of the phenomenon (1911/2005, p.46). The suspicion that Willis may have crossed an ethical line when conducting his research could be conceived by some as a timely attempt to overturn some of ethnography's most hallowed methodological canons. Whether he had in effect achieved some sort of spontaneous integration with the group of lads or it amounted to no more than strategic ingratiation, he nonetheless wrestled with this methodological difficulty since the ethics of qualitative research were becoming a concern both generally and personally. In a moment of reflection and foresight Willis conceded there may indeed one day be a need 'to invert aspects of the PO [participant-observer] paradigm' (1976, p.194).

## 1980s

It was not until the 1980s that debates and practices surrounding integration and its newer 'inclusive' variant became more widespread. They gained in intensity when all but a handful of the recommendations detailed in the Warnock Report (1978) were incorporated into the Education (Special Education) Act, 1981. Sally Tomlinson's 'A Sociology of Special Education' was published in the following year. It provides an early assessment of the immediate post-Warnock period. Although integration had been granted its long-awaited legal status, Tomlinson was dismayed to find that the practice of segregation was given tacit allowance to continue. She also presents a forthright case for sociology to have a more influential role in special education matters.

Insofar as social networks were concerned, it looked as if the inclusive-exclusive trail had, for the time being, gone cold. It did, however, reappear, although in a different guise, in the field of ethical philosophy and social theory. Diego Gambetta's (1988) edited volume explores the phenomenon of trust as a precondition for and a product of cooperative relations. Gambetta presents a thought-provoking analysis of trust in closed, exclusive communities (e.g. the Mafia). But it is Bernard Williams's (1988) contribution, and in particular his social application of 'thick' trust, that is most relevant. Using game theory, he reveals how parties may be motivated towards cooperation depending on the level of intimacy that exists between them; whether, for example, the parties happen to be dense and exclusive.

Peter Woods (1984) provides an interesting glimpse into the hitherto unexplored and highly exclusive region of the school staffroom. He discovers that laughter operates pretty much for teachers in the same way as it does for learners. An inclusive-exclusive dynamic is much in



evidence here, complimenting many of the themes and issues covered in Willis's (1976) earlier pupil's eye-view of one school's counter-culture.

Surprisingly, Tomlinson's warrant for greater inclusion had no specific educational reference. Her bold, inclusive declaration was made only in the name of sociology. She presents a persuasive argument for her own discipline to take its rightful place alongside other interested disciplines so that the debate on special needs education becomes more inclusive. No matter how disappointed sociologists may have felt at being without representation on the Warnock Committee, she claims their omission may in fact have been an auspicious moment in that it delivered to them a timely wake-up call. She acknowledges the slow responses made by social scientists in developing an interest in special education. But even though the presence of psychology, in particular, had been deeply embedded within this sector of education, she maintains that, on its own, it is unable to provide all the answers to pressing disability and segregation issues. She insists sociology has a valuable role to play despite a belief that, as a discipline, it is a bit of a trouble maker, inclined to look critically, negatively, at social phenomena. More worrying is the view that ultimately it is deemed not to be relevant, i.e., that while it can offer interpretations it cannot provide tools for action (1982).

Discipline-related exclusion and isolation notwithstanding, Tomlinson believes the effects that integration has had thus far, particularly the debates it has generated, has allowed for a broader social, political and educational engagement than was possible before the 1981 Act was implemented. It will, however, result in there being more, not less, professional expertise around, and therefore an increase in the use of 'professional mystiques' (1982, p.181). The Warnock recommendations and government approaches do go some way, she says, towards accommodating egalitarian critics of segregation; what counts as 'special need', however, is

kept as vague as possible in order to accommodate segregation where and when it is deemed necessary. The state education system has perfected the use of the 'safety-valve' (1982, p.67), she argues, this being a means by which pressure on the 'normal' school can be relieved, thereby establishing the special needs school as a functioning but unofficial filtering system.

Having assumed the vanguard role for so long (and perhaps with some justification) psychology may have resented sociology's sudden show of interest in special education. The special needs system up to this point appeared to be perfectly integrated. The field of psychology had produced a workable system of classification or labelling, an arguably necessary evil, which did at least ensure that some of the meagre resources available for distribution were apportioned where needed. It had also introduced some of the more positive aspects of educational assessment. Not unexpectedly, the educational psychologist's work load was anticipated to increase as a result of the Warnock report (1978). Yet, these were the people that Tomlinson accused of having 'vested interests' (1982, p.11-12). Talk of this nature evokes Gambetta's work on organised crime. Indeed, Tomlinson detects a special needs conspiracy of sorts, not least from the 'hostility' shown towards sociology by rival and feuding disciplines (1982, p.1). She also notes the endemic 'secrecy' within the special needs sector (p.8) and the abiding 'power struggles' (p.25) between those vying to sustain their monopoly privileges. The way that children's views are 'almost totally unrecorded' (p.106), and that of their parents, many left without a voice and inadequately consulted, amounts to a form of '*omerta*', a system of silence. Tomlinson hints that if sociology did become an actively concerned partner and indeed ruffled a few educational feathers, it might not be such a bad thing. Cooperation is all well and good, but as Gambetta says, a 'dose of competition is notoriously beneficial in improving performance' (1988, p.214). It can, quite often, lead to an improvement in services and an increase in resources.

### Altruistic and Egotistic

In 'Formal Structures and Social Reality' (1988) Bernard Williams' intensely concentrated essay considers the general conditions under which trust becomes relevant for cooperation. All social interactions depend on elements of trust. It is conceived as 'the lubricant of society' (Elster, 2007, p.344). Without it our friendships would become affairs of fleeting convenience. Yet, trust remains a precious and fragile resource. Cooperating options, Williams says, will be informed largely according to altruistic or egoistic motives. Although these dispositions constitute the very bedrock of trust, it is not always easy to determine whether a party is entering into a venture for selfish or purely benevolent reasons. Essentially, some form of assurance is required. It is therefore recommended that a search for patterns of cooperative behaviour be conducted. This will help to ascertain if a person's or party's reputation is distinguished by long established routines of trust (1988). Ignoring such a commitment merely increases the level of relational risk. If a party is deemed trustworthy from having, in effect, a good trust history, it is likely that it obtains for them a 'macro-motivation' (1988, p.10). This is due, perhaps, to an inherent, embedded moral sensibility. Such intrinsic value, however, has to be shared, i.e. it must be communicated. But as Williams asks, how can we know for certain? We may never have complete and accurate knowledge of the motives of others (1988).

In considering the issue of motives for cooperating, Williams adjusts the extent of the altruistic-egoistic parameter. He states that parties are often motivated to cooperate once the costs involved have been taken into consideration. If they are too high then this will discourage motivation. But costs can refer not only to egoistic influences. A party may reject efforts to cooperate because of possible sufferance to third parties, such as harm to friends and family. But Williams calculates that cooperation is above all else a symmetrical

relationship (1988). Thus, an element of what he refers to as 'dependency' (p.7), whereby a non-symmetrical relationship obtains, amounts to coercion not cooperation. Coercion as a means to enforce cooperation is an inadequate alternative to trust since it promotes power and resentment. So, there are different kinds of motives to cooperate, but entering into successful cooperative relations depend entirely on one essential qualification, that they are restricted to persons whose disposition and character are individually known to one another. They must rely on what Williams refers to as 'thick trust' (1988, p.8). This form of trust is generated from intense, repeated interactions between those of localised familiarity, such as close friends and kinship groups. Here, communication is normally strong, i.e. face-to-face. Having intimate knowledge of each other's interests is more likely to foster a cooperative outcome. Williams, with a sense of regret, points this up as a damning verdict on the state of society and the general nature of human behaviour (1988).

However, Williams's pessimism may be premature. Axelrod (1984) was able to show how cooperation can emerge spontaneously, without the presence of trust, and even where communication has been reduced to a minimum. He used a famous example that occurred on the battlefield among troops facing each other in the trenches during the First World War. The 'live and let live' phenomenon which occurred at Christmas in 1914 demonstrated that affiliation is not always necessary for the development of cooperation (1984, p.21). As Gambetta says, it is not so much that trust is not involved here, as that it would not seem to be a precondition to achieve cooperation (1988). But it is Williams's reliance upon game theory that is more problematic. It can be argued that social life is not a game situation and its complexities cannot be adequately characterised according to a system based on rational choice. A logical, mathematical application to social interactions will not be able to describe the complexity and sometimes irrationality that lies behind human decision-making. In daily

social interactions the concept of cooperation has many conditional features and is constantly modified by experience and by learning. It is, therefore, a dynamically, ever-changing process. Williams actually appreciates its limitations. He acknowledges that conditions in 'real life' (1988, p.4) are unlikely to correspond to analytical 'games' predicated on actors' absolute rationality in their choices, or based on those always seeking to maximize their gains.

### Public and Private

Peter Woods (1984) takes a sociological look at the life of a school staffroom, using its most prominent feature, laughter, as his lens. Laughter constitutes a form of social 'lubricant' (Martineau, 1972, p.103). Whether this accolade is more deserving of trust than laughter, the point here is of a sense that the machinery of human interaction should be kept functioning smoothly, an indication perhaps that human society is a highly complicated and overly delicate instrument susceptible to friction and break down. The school staffroom, not unexpectedly, sees its fair share of both types of malfunction. Woods chooses to focus on the teacher's 'private sphere' (p.190) because it is here that his or her 'private self' (p.190), understood at that time to be severely under-researched, will offset the weight of evidence amassed elsewhere, of the heavily documented accounts of their 'public self' (p.190) displayed typically in the classroom or on the playground. Nonetheless, the two poles are contiguous and interconnected, and it is through laughter that teachers are able to synchronise them (1984). The staffroom is the key area in the school, the teachers' collective private area, and its privacy is well protected and respected (1984). It is off-limits to pupils, and even the headteacher must knock before entering. It is a haven with an exclusive status, being a concentration of ultra-tight affiliations. The stresses and strains that are a regular feature of

the teacher's workload engender a spirit of collegial support and cooperation. Here, 'laughter is an enormous aid to solidarity' (Woods, 1984, p.193).

At times the staffroom is characterised by its 'euphoric atmosphere' (1984, p.191). Woods describes it as 'the laughter arena' (p.191) although laughter does not always function as a Freudian tension release or safety valve. Sometimes laughter, like trust, occurs spontaneously, amounting to a 'natural growth event' (p.196). The impression of the teaching staff is that they are inclined to behave pretty much like their pupils. Many of them 'are as much on the lookout for laughs as the kids' (p.191). There is a fatalistic grin-and-bear-it outlook among some staff members, summed-up by a 'you have to make a laugh of it' attitude (p.191). It is a place of ruses and subterfuges every bit as irreverent as pupils' antics found in the classroom or on the playground. The common foe is the 'institutional framework of the school' (p.194) particularly those figures with senior authority. Some of the teasing is very precisely applied. The staffroom is illuminated by the main laughter-makers, two named teachers, whose virtuoso performances easily translates to the pupils, carried there by colleagues who, leaving the staffroom, proceed to their classrooms often in buoyant mood (1984).

Much of Woods' theoretical approach draws on Erving Goffman's ideas on 'region behaviour' (1969, p.109) and 'impression management' (p.203). These techniques and actions give shape to a dramaturgical perspective which presents social life as a series of performances played out on an imaginary stage. They provide guidance to Woods in his mission to consider if teachers are more likely to 'be themselves' when situated backstage in a staffroom. However, to distinguish between what passes for natural behaviour and what is a calculated enactment presents a fundamental interpretive challenge. It also presents one of the

main arguments against the dramaturgical method. The rational model of communicative action, in contrast, places the highest value on an open society, a society that guarantees access to all citizens (Habermas, 1986). The primary concepts of truth, validity and understanding, according to Habermas, can only emerge from a social system when and where communication is served by public, free and unconstrained dialogue (1986). The way we relate to our everyday world, the way we can achieve mutual understanding through language, must be constructed on a foundation of communicative rationality.

Cognitive-based processes such as beliefs and intentions, which are coherently objective states, generate spontaneously expressive behaviour (1986). In contrast, for the dramaturgical model, language is not so highly prized; appearance alone is valued and purely subjective experiences obtain (1986). Performances that are emotively-based and laden with internalised desires and feelings are fixed by manipulations of a 'latently strategic' nature (1986, p.93). Nonetheless, Woods indicates that a school staffroom fulfils many useful functions. Its exclusive setting allows teachers to act irrationally and to engage in what may appear to be non-purposeful behaviour, providing them with the opportunity to let off steam, to regress with relative impunity, to become child-like. Above all, it provides them with the opportunity to re-energise. Some of this emotional coping is achieved through the use of humour and laughter, these being forms of communication that might as it happens have little input or influence in the public realm of ideal speech and rational deliberation envisioned by Habermas.

Searching into the deep structures of our language, Habermas's goal is to try and find a communication model entirely free from social and ideological domination (1986).

Accordingly, he regards the public-private difference as a necessary condition if society is

ever to be understood and improved. Tomlinson notes how those with vested interests in special education deliberately sought to confuse the public and the private spheres (1982). By making special needs a specifically private issue helped maintain its relentlessly efficient programme of categorisation and assessment. For many families, a private trouble rarely ever became a public issue. What was understood to be 'their' problem duly became 'their' fault (the 'within-child' model of disability developed according to this kind of deterministic thinking). Keeping matters contained within the private sphere also meant less interference for the experts. With fewer distractions they could press ahead with their behaviour-related processes, even if it meant excluding children or their families from sharing information and proper consultations. Instead of dwelling on the distinction, however, Tomlinson focused on the close relationship between private and public. Her intention was to help connect those with personal/private troubles to the underlying wider social structures with the help of a broader range of agencies. This in turn informed her wider and often repeated appeal for greater openness within the sector (1982).

Discussing the public-private binary, Williams (1988) placed a party's decision to cooperate on any given matter at the heart of his argument. This rested largely on altruistic-egoistic parameters: making a preference essentially depended on motivations that were either inclusive and selfless or exclusive and selfish. However, this 'either-or' approach may, to some extent, over-simplify the issue. Williams concludes that outside of an intimate friendship, one likely to generate 'thick trust' (1988, p.8), no single type can do the trick of giving rational people a motive to become trustworthy in the way a trusted co-operator should. If anything is to be a solution to the problem of how society-wide trust-involving cooperation is to be motivated, it will, he considers, be a judicious mixture of both altruistic and egoistic processes (1988). However, resolving the public-private tension so neatly does



not hide the fact that the boundaries between public and private are always liable to shift. Nowhere is this better highlighted than when considering the possible fate of the school staffroom. Woods, for example, may never have imagined there would come a time when the building of a new school did not include a separate space specially dedicated to teachers.

But the dawn of the staff/pupil lounge (Hastings, 2004) does exactly that, and seems to obscure further the public-private distinction. Due, for the most part, to the research efforts of ethnographers like Woods, the exclusive world of the staffroom has, to use Tomlinson's term, been 'demystified' (1982, p.7). Woods may not have predicted the onset of the communal lounge area, but he and other researchers must share some of the responsibility for their inception, having between them provided a particularly rich and at times graphically unflattering account of teachers' lives back stage. Given the possible demise of the so-called 'laughter arena' (Woods, 1984, p.191) we are entitled to ask: what will happen to the laughter of the staffroom? Will it continue unabated in the new mixed-facility suite? Perhaps it will be directed instead towards the classroom where pupils will become the main beneficiaries. Or will teachers be inclined to hold it in check? The fundamental worry is that it will become internalised, suppressed, and therefore remain unused and lost forever.

The possible consequences for school children, for their opportunities to develop meaningful relationships and to interact in both formal and informal settings, may rest to a large degree on their teachers' mood management while in the staffroom. Woods (1984) gave an indication as to the level and the range of influence held by teachers over their pupils. From his position, he was able to ascertain that teachers' risible staffroom behaviour, the daily performances and interactions with their colleagues, stood every chance of being taken into the classroom and passed on to their pupils. This could help to create the kind of environment

conducive to encouraging not only reciprocal laughter from children. The relationship between teachers and pupils can be very strong, made stronger still by the suggestion that teachers are no different in many respects to their pupils when it comes to laughing matters. They employ similar laughter tactics; they laugh at similar things. The philosophy underpinning this reflected amiability inspired Williams (1988) to undertake his analysis of the strategies and preferences used by parties in everyday interactions. In seeking to determine what motivates people to cooperate, he asserts that the element of trust is a crucial feature among the social norms. Here, perhaps, unwittingly, he offers the optimum conditions for which affiliative laughter can serve as a trust-building device. Among the comic norms shared laughter can successfully create a valuable social bond, be it a transitory or a more durable attachment. But Williams also provides the first sighting of the specifically 'exclusive' dimensions regarding his formulation of 'thick trust' (1988, p.8), opening the door to a term that would much later help trigger a foundational change in the way we think about personal relationships and social connectivity.

Tomlinson, meanwhile, was fighting valiantly to find a way that would allow children of all abilities to learn together. Attempts to effect her interactionist position proved something of a challenge in an era notable for provoking a culture of individualism, revitalised on account of the long, uninterrupted streak of Conservative government dominion which opened and closed the turbulent decade. Its ministerial leader, in questioning the very existence of 'society' (Keay, 1987), appeared to valorise the cult of individuality over collectivity, although failing to appreciate that in a strict sociological sense neither dimension was in effect oppositional. Research traditions, too, were experiencing realignment. Many of the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methods were beginning to break down (Bryman, 1988). Not unrelatedly, the so-called 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln,

2003, p.3) ruptured the landscape of qualitative research during this period. Researchers were finding new ways to reconstruct and represent the voices and experiences of their 'subjects'. The burgeoning popularity of a pronouncedly inclusive scholarship, participatory and collaborative, was based around egalitarian principles of reciprocity and trust, and operated within a non-hierarchical relationship according to a spirit of shared governance.

### 1990s

The issue of integration had already been placed high on the social and political agenda by the time of Julia Kristeva's philosophical and psychoanalytical contribution. In 'Strangers to Ourselves' (1991) much of her discussion traces the condition of the modern outsider, commencing with an analysis of the outsider's historical origins. She notes change and continuance in the ways those populations that lay outside the mainstream have been treated and valued by various European societies. Her account focuses on the experiences and fate of refugees and economic migrants, but there is a great deal which is relevant to not only 'foreign' but to indigenous outsiders. Of additional interest is the publicity she gives to what may turn out to be the earliest known instance of social capital: this being the world of connectivity according to the Antique circles of affiliation concept, the 'concentric spheres' which bind us to mankind (1991, p.57).

Daniel Wickberg's 'The Senses of Humor' (1998) compliments Kristeva's central theme, noting that people deemed to be lacking a sense of humour can find themselves excluded from certain in-groups and removed from their attendant social benefits. Charting its very brief history from 1840 to the mid-twentieth century, Wickberg takes a keen interest in the sense of humour's transition in early Antiquity from an objective, physical phenomenon to a modern subjective, mental attribute. He examines further how this change, this narrowing of

the distance between subject and object, was the point at which the distinction between 'laughing at' and 'laughing with' behaviour became more pronounced. He concludes with a brief appreciation of the impact that the concept had – and continues to have – on the education process.

Community building and its relationship to community development form the substance of Gittell's and Vidal's (1998) evaluative study. Their appraisal of a development programme, to ascertain whether linking local residents to the local corporate sector could lead to the creation of community-based coalitions, provides the first reference to social capital's twin dimensions of 'bonding' and 'bridging'. The authors' theoretical framework suggests that bonding and bridging networks established within three sample underdeveloped and under-invested communities, may be measurable, thus signalling their potential relevance in creating cross-sector relationships capable of nourishing social capital.

### Separation and Union

The purpose of Kristeva's intervention is to enlighten those yet to be persuaded by the arguments presented in favour of social integration. Tracing the historical development of the strange and unfamiliar, her account moves through the great ages of Western culture, culminating in her provocative yet highly original thesis that these two exclusionary tendencies are located within each of us. Among her natural sympathies a cosmopolitan consciousness emerges. Of the philosophers engaged, she is heartened by Kant's 'internationalist spirit' (1991, p.170) and finds in his principle of 'unsocial sociability' (1991, p. 170) a pertinent description of the constant, interconnecting tensions that form the heartbeat of many contemporary societies. These seemingly competitive elements which describe the 'notion of *separation* combined with *union*', (original italics, 1991, p.171) are a

fundamental requirement for the preservation of society's well-being. The argument, essentially, is that we should be careful about effacing exclusionary elements or eliminating antagonisms, for these seemingly negative conditions are critically situated so as to ensure we do not slip into zones of comfort, of complacency, and thus assume an imagined invulnerability.

From the early philosophers, too, Kristeva draws some inspiration, and it is these classical sages who are employed to make most sense of the inclusive-exclusive orientation. The dual formulation becomes fully synchronised when the exclusive outsider is understood to be at all times part of our own inclusive circle. An interesting and useful example is provided. The notion of social *oikeiosis* or 'conciliation' (Kristeva, 1991, p.57) explains how these disjunctions are re-framed and made equivalent. According to ancient Stoic doctrine, each person is surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The circle nearest to us is occupied by our loved ones and family members. The basic principle relies on each person extending the way they are disposed towards people who are closest to them to everyone, including those situated at the outermost circle. Our task, as citizens of the world, is to draw the circles towards the centre so that in tightening them 'we succeed in absorbing all men...into ourselves' (Kristeva, 1991, p.57).

Kristeva could be accused of preaching a naïve and overly utopian ethic of 'brotherly love'. While it is commendable that she should believe in man's natural goodness, one of her biggest intellectual influences, ironically, took the opposing view. Freud's attitude to expressions of cosmopolitanism was uncompromising. The command to love thy neighbour, he says, goes against human nature (2002). Human beings are not gentle creatures in need of love. On the contrary, 'they can count a powerful share of aggression among their instinctive

credentials' (2002, p.48). It is the existence of this tendency to aggression, which is detected in ourselves and presumed to occur in others, that will always place a limit on the level of affiliation with our neighbours (2002). The stranger/outsider, upon closer inspection, is not someone that can ever be truly loved – not in the way we would love our closest family members. In fact, if anything, they deserve our hatred (2002).

Freud's intuition here is that within Kant's idea of 'unsocial sociability' resides his own id-ego theory of personality. These competing, disparate forces within the psychological structure are of decisive importance for the functioning of the social system (2002). Social cohesion depends on an individual's ability to temper inclinations toward discord by the intervention of their inner regulatory system. Freud is prepared to concede that a given community can indeed be successfully bound together by brotherly love, but only if there are significant subjects within that community, a common foe, who can become targets for that pent-up aggression (2002). This follows the principle that one's aggressive drives must obtain an outlet so that the urge to hostility maintains a correspondence with the drive to maintain group solidarity. But aggression, as Freud is aware, can take many forms. As societies became more sophisticated, disagreeable behaviour that was once publicly tolerated gradually became subject to greater forms of control due to the implementation of social codes and prohibitions. There remain, however, alternative methods by which hostility and aggression can be demonstrated. The appliance of humour, a disparaging aside or satirical remark, may prove to be a relatively low-cost but high-yielding means by which the enemy/outsider can be made inferior, obnoxious, or risible (Freud, 1905/2001).

### Subjective and Objective

The events that encouraged the first appearance of the term ‘sense of humour’ were convened in the nineteenth century, but conceived in the preceding century. The term was unknown before 1840, but Wickberg relates how, after a series of cultural changes which took effect during the time of the Enlightenment, the concept slowly began to take hold in the national consciousness (1998). In the first place, humour and laughter grew closer in association. The meaning of the word ‘humour’ changed from its designation in medical pathology as one of the 4 essential bodily fluids that make up one’s temperament, to being a designation for the odd and quirky temperament itself. As Wickberg points out, the social acceptability of humour was facilitated in large part by the development of several new perspectives on laughter. Both humour and laughter moved gradually from an objective to a subjective meaning. The prevailing view held that laughter was triggered by the object laughed at, conforming to classic superiority theory, i.e. that we laugh in order to ridicule.

But by the eighteenth century, the relating of an object’s risibility to the subjective evaluation of the individual person laughing became the norm, and gradually evolved as a subjective and largely sympathetic passion, encouraging a ‘laughing with’ not ‘laughing at’ attitude. It was during this period that the incongruity theory (laughter results from experiencing the unexpected) began to prosper. It was a time when matters of morality, sensibility, and aesthetics directly affected speculations about laughter. In short, laughter had become more conservative. The transition from objective to subjective was repeated in the proliferation of intuitive faculties of judgement that gave rise to the middle-class ‘culture of sensibility’, with the flourishing of discriminatory internal senses, e.g. sense of beauty, sense of morality, etc. Originally, the word ‘sense’ described a benign and generalised level of ‘awareness’ and ‘perception’, but then evolved into a far more discerning ability. The sense of humour which

developed from this became another way by which people were subject to codification and appraisal. It provided a new means of estimating how ‘the self’ compared to ‘the other’. Women were among the first to experience its discriminating nature. A view popularised during the late-nineteenth century was that of all the sections of Victorian society it was females who had an unnatural disposition to humorlessness.

100 years after its inception, Wickberg records that the sense of humour concept had become an essential part of the cultural mainstream (1998). It has permeated all aspects of human society, bearing a stake in just about every key domain, from religion and politics to education. Education policy, hitherto, had subscribed largely to following traditional and regimented pedagogic values. The strict disciplining classroom and stern-faced teachers operated according to highly functional models of rote learning and didactic teaching methods. Laughter had no place in such a formal, teacher-centred environment; nothing was allowed to impede order in the classroom or to jeopardise teacher control and discipline. But educational reformers of the 1930s and 1940s thought that by juxtaposing the old style education with a new brighter, innovative, and happier form of teaching and learning, laughter could be accommodated, if not rehabilitated, in the classroom. In America, where most of Wickberg’s later focus is trained, the progressive educational movement which sought to take laughter to the classroom had two ambitions: to utilise humour as a pedagogical tool that would contribute to achieving educational goals, and to educate and develop the pupils’ sense of humour, seen now as a desirable human characteristic. The senses of humour of both teachers and pupils were brought into play in educational processes, and this was seen as indicative of the personal growth that progressive educators desired. As a conclusion, Wickberg suggests that even though the serious and the humorous remain specific features in the language and thought of modern America, ‘...American culture has



discovered that the serious is not a fixed category. At any moment it can be transformed into the humorous' (p.217).

Much of Wickberg's analysis hinges on his treatment of prevailing dualisms. There are, notably, the serious-humorous and the physical-psychical, but the organising motif of his study resides in the dynamic and somewhat confusing object-subject relationship. The narrowing of the distance between object and subject (accredited to the c.17 dramatist Ben Jonson with the arrival of comedy as a literary form) gave rise to a new and sympathetic notion of laughing 'with' rather than laughing 'at' (p.34). But it is difficult to tell the extent to which this new notion was practically employed. Given that superiority and incongruity forms of laughter continue to confuse and be mistaken for either one (as a glance at any contemporary school playground will testify), it is hard to appreciate how much of an up-take there was for this new laughing expression, especially when there is little or no evidence of resulting ambiguity.

Wickberg views objectivity and subjectivity as a contrasting pair. 'We speak of people as being objective or subjective', he says matter-of-factly (p.5). In terms of laughter, this manifests itself as subjective = superiority laughter (it makes me feel superior), while objective = laughing at a mistake or some deformity in others. But this opposition is not altogether convincing. It has been adjudged an 'imaginary opposition' (Wilden, 1987, p.125). From a communication studies perspective, Wilden argues that subjectivity, for example, is not strictly that. It is not strictly relative to the individual since our supposedly unique personal opinions are derived from non-original, third-party sources, such as the media, our family, and our friends. Genuine subjectivity, he argues, is a 'self-and-other relationship', (p.125). Much of what we understand to be 'subjective' or 'objective' is, ontologically,

*collective* (italics added), i.e. derived from those subjects and objects with whom we communicate on a daily basis, whether we are aware of it or not (1987). Castoriadis (1997) makes a similar point. Following Wilden's notion of the collective nature of the subjective-objective relationship, he likens it to a form of 'solidarity', and describes both dimensions in terms of their 'perpetual intertwining' (p.343).

This can be a most useful way to think about the inclusive-exclusive dimensions that connect children's laughter to mainstream education and to social capital. Not so much 'either/or' distinctions but 'both/and' relations. Wickberg seems to have little patience with those periods where the practices of 'laughing at' and 'laughing with', for example, 'appear fuzzy and indistinct' (p.34). Understandably, he is keen to show the moments when tastes in humour began to change, the progression from superiority laughter, which dominated in the medieval period, to the emergence in the eighteenth century of incongruity as the second major source of laughter. While it is clear that the growing popularity of comic drama and the rise of literary criticism helped incongruity humour/laughter become a growing communicative currency in the popular imagination, superiority forms of laughter, however, did not quietly slip away and decompose. The essential elements in laughter, on and off stage, among cultivated speakers and among the masses, were an appetite for the unexpected as well as an enthusiasm for malicious pleasure. In everyday usage, superiority and incongruity operated in tandem, functioning more like nuanced, overlapping essences. Even today, it can be difficult to tell which meaning of laughter is in operation. This notion of over-spill, in fact, tallies with certain laughter philosophers whose work continues to defy straightforward classification. Henri Bergson, for example, is sometimes described as a superiority theorist and sometimes as an incongruity theorist (La Fave *et al*, 1976).

It is even more difficult to find any agreement as to the extent of the sense of humour's psychological, cultural, and social influence. Despite Wickberg's claim that it has been successfully absorbed by all sectors of society, including education, there remains the possibility that children of primary school age do not possess anything as sophisticated as a sense of humour at all. We may, in fact, be confusing this term with more general humour abilities, like clowning. Most schools, we are told, will have the proverbial 'class clown' (McLaren, 1993, p.160). Indeed, children with Down syndrome are reported to be perhaps too willing rather too often to adopt this role (Reddy *et al*, 2001), and yet at least one study has show that children with Autism rarely ever assume such a position (St. James & Tager-Flusberg, 1994). A. S. Neill eschews this notion of a prevailing 'sense of humour' by suggesting that children only have the more innocent-sounding and presumably less developed, 'sense of fun' (1915/1986, p.26). Expressing this view at a time when the sense of humour concept was still quite young, but long before he established his pedagogic innovations at Summerhill, Neill unknowingly highlights a methodological tension in Wickberg's study. Save for a brief mention in the section dealing with a sense of humour and education, children do not feature in this work. In writing the history of an idea, a sensibility, Wickberg has effaced any reference to 'individuals, or particular figures or groups of people' (1998, p.222). This raises the question whether Wickberg assumes that children have the same sense of humour as adults, and that differences in age, sex, and those with higher/lower ranges of abilities will have no influence on one's sense of humour development. Or, as Neill was perhaps alluding to, children may be too young to develop anything as cognitively technical and so discriminating as a sense of humour. A 'sense of fun' has a slightly purer ring to it.

### Consensus and Conflicting

Gittell & Vidal (1998) monitored a community-based project aimed at bringing people together which followed a 'consensus organising' model (p.2). At the time, this was a new and ambitious approach to community development practice in America. The authors wished to see if indigenous leadership and forms of self-managing from within low-income neighbourhoods could be encouraged through the development of mutually beneficial relationships between community-based groups and locally-based private investors (1998). The principle behind the study was to examine the efficiency of Community Development Corporations (CDCs) in helping to transform neglected real estate into affordable housing. Bonding capital was employed to develop strong ties of trust and cooperation among the neighbourhood residents. A much stronger emphasis was placed on instigating bridging capital in order to create weak ties and working relationships to those with resources, power and influence in the private sector. Three pilot sites, high in populations of colour, were the focus of Gittell & Vidal's 5-year action research evaluation project.

The inclusive 'consensus' approach to community-wide organising contrasts with the exclusive and more traditional 'conflictual' model. This type tends to operate around overtly political initiatives of more radicalised voices, of community activists and pressure groups whose intention principally, although not exclusively, is to overcome structured inequality and oppression (1998). Historically, many of these organisations were synonymous with the popular social movements that grew out of the civil rights era. While Gittell & Vidal felt that the conflictual school of community organising could accrue some short-term community benefits, it would in the long-term be more likely to damage investment opportunities, limit access to outside resources, and jeopardise the opportunity for cross-sector groups to work in future collaborations (1998). However, as the authors ruefully admit, the consensus model

was itself beset by shortcomings, and they acknowledged that the task of bridging across class and racial cleavages proved, ultimately, to be a bridge too far. At the project's conclusion no new properties or coalitions had been constructed. Despite an overly optimistic and perhaps face-saving summary of the project, the merits of a consensus model in helping to form partnership initiatives capable of creating social capital in low-income communities was not, in this particular example, proved.

Conflictual organising models place no value on the weak ties of bridging social capital. Advocates of this approach have described these ties that were so persuasively advocated by Granovetter (1973) as a way of selling out to corporate interests (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Community organising in America has a long and distinguished history in using confrontational methods to highlight, for example, racial and socio-economic discrimination, much of which continues to be associated with ongoing struggles for social and political power. The specific focus of traditional, conflictual, organising has been on galvanising stocks of bonding capital. Strengthening internal ties among people and organisations who share similar values and interests has long been considered the most effective means by which the powerless and exploited members of society can help to effect change (1998). Much of this exclusively-minded thinking has been determined by years of bitter experience. Many people, quite naturally, are mistrustful of those they do not know. They tend to suspect that any well-meaning intentions from outsiders serve only as a cloak for the vested interests of charitable do-gooders and/or opportunists eager to take financial advantage of any bridging networks. Those who favour the conflictual method believe not so much in working the system but in changing it. They believe equally that projects and programmes must be carried out not *for* the community but rather *by* the community. Their resentment of initiatives deemed to have been 'parachuted in' (1998, p.157) is well placed since the creation of many

Community Development Corporations were not the product of grassroots action at community level, but were instead created by well-meaning humanitarians from without. Their defensive rationale and positioning, then, is to some extent understandable.

It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to simply dismiss bridging capital altogether. Much, however, depends on the reasons behind parties' decisions to become part of any bridging system. From Gittel & Vidal's study it is clear that some well-placed bridging activity from the consensus organisers towards those conflictual-minded community groups and organisations firmly established in the 3 sample sites would have been a propitious and courteous first step. The failures of those who attempted to implement the consensus model were not only centred on their unrealistic expectations, but on their swaggering, rather self-righteous attitude. One of the people actively involved in a conflictual organising project, and deeply affected by the consensus groups' intervention, was Garland Yates. He produced a withering denunciation of the consensus method, and also of Gittel and Vidal's study. His verdict on the latter was unflinching (and arguably more accurate than the authors'), dismissing the results from their evaluation as 'dismal' (1998, p.31). He highlights the fact that grassroots organising networks that were in place long before the consensus people arrived had achieved, in their own way and in their own time, good cross-community sector networks. Local people already had in place links to the private sector, he claims, this despite many of them being burned through bad experiences on previous occasions. Yates claims that Gittel & Vidal's message about consensus organising is potentially dangerous. He warns that it is likely to find a receptive audience among funders who, despite pronouncements about wanting to improve conditions for the poor, are really motivated by institutional self-interest. Investors, he argues, must allow communities to choose their own issues and their own organising approach. Anything else is simply manipulative (1998). In fact, anything else is

simply condescending. For those social movements bearing an exclusive focus, who rely on disruptive tactics and forceful, concentrated lobbying, actually increase their chances of achieving their goals (Giugni, 1998). In some instances contention can, it seems, advance a community's agenda further forward, and far quicker, than consensus.

### *Thick and Thin Trust*

The principle of trust is noticeable by its presence - and also by its absence - in those relationships joining the native to the stranger, the teacher to the pupil, and the consensus organisers to their conflictual counterparts. The influence of this degree of reasoning when engaged as a value, deployed as a resource, or even when unrepresented, dominates the social system. The community residents who expressed little trust towards potential investors in the private sector were matched by the consensus group's ideological misgivings over their community-based rivals, regarding them as 'scary' and 'uncontrollable' (Yates, 1998, p.31). They pledged to avoid working alongside them before descending unceremoniously *en mass* on their turf. The effort to become fully engaged citizens says a great deal about the levels of belief we hold in others and the means by which such efforts are applied. It had much to do with competition in the latter example, as predicted by Williams (1988), who claimed it can at times be particularly useful, although in the American example it proved confusing. In the former, however, it was suspicion and not competition that proved to be the fundamental motive for community members' unwillingness to build bridging relationships. Achieving an acceptable level of trustworthiness became difficult within those communities.

Getting to this level of cooperation presents few problems for those with sufficient stocks of bonding capital. But for many members of grassroots communities the bonding stage is where it begins and ends (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). They simply have no incentives to take

advantage of bridging capital. Self-contentment, cynicism or bad prior experiences may account for such reluctance. But whatever the reasons, their reliance upon ‘thick trust’ (Williams, 1988, p.8) defies the best efforts to champion the potentialities of weak, bridging ties (e.g. Granovetter, 1978). People are, quite understandably, easily drawn to ‘thick trust’. In unorganised and under-invested communities across the United States they have, historically and often successfully, bonded together around issues of social and political injustice (Yates, 1998). Freud, therefore, would be expected to appreciate the motives behind the conflictual community organiser’s martial manifesto. ‘Contention is indispensable’, he declares (2002, p.49). Furthermore, contention can actually work, as Yates has pointed out. Years of aggressive campaigning and agitating against city hall and the banking giants has not lessened either institution’s eagerness to get involved in community initiatives, particularly when both are threatened with negative publicity and public boycotts (1998).

Ultimately, it may seem like an impossible task to change people’s social capital priorities. But if the illustration of Stoic *oikeiosis*, the circles of affiliation, achieves only one thing, it is in providing a particularly useful mental picture to see why, of the two forms of social capital, bonding capital is so routinely favoured. The distance from the outer circle to the inner circle is so daunting it seems unlikely and impractical that people so far removed can ever be in a position to help one another. Freud, rather graphically, describes its scope as ‘oceanic’ (2002, p.4). Drawing the circles of affiliation together so that the circle’s inhabitants merge into one, as Kristeva described (1991), certainly resolves this problem, for the inner and outer boundaries no longer exist. Except that this amounts only to conceptual integration, and not the kind of integration to be of any immediate, practical benefit to society. The solution, then, must be that if we want to create more trust in communities so



that members are capable and desirous of cutting across lines of social and racial cleavage, we need, figuratively speaking, to start laughing with people we don't already know.

Admittedly, such a plan of action is fraught with difficulties. Even laughing with people we already know is not without its problems. Sometimes pupils' trust in their peers can be entirely misplaced. Trust in their teachers, too, can be based on flimsy, often irrelevant values. The intuitively appealing equation, so marvellously Maslovian, that a teacher + a good sense of humour = a good teacher, will invariably be the sum and solution for many pupils. Maslow (1970) believed that a person with a good sense of humour was invariably a good person. Those conferred with such strength of mind, of self-control, that they do not laugh at superior or disparaging humour are clearly to be admired. Although Maslow's equation has a certain appeal to it - it contains much that many schools would find morally instructive - it presents complications in other respects. For one thing, it invites the prospect that those who laugh at superior or disparaging humour are necessarily bad people.

Children, in fact, may laugh at discriminatory humour that may be racist or sexist for any number of different reasons. It may, for example, be prudent and practical for them to do so. Issues regarding a need to maintain positions within a school's in-group, or to ensure they are not teased or suffer physical abuse by not laughing, may be the principle motivation into laughing tactically. The key point here is that if children feel it necessary to express their laughter in a contrived manner (whether they do this all the time or just occasionally) it could affect any claim made that they have or lack a humorous personality. If the definition of a sense of humour is the capacity to find certain things amusing, does it mean genuinely amusing or strategically so? It can be very difficult to determine whether a pupil or a colleague is laughing spontaneously or voluntarily. Wickberg's (1998) literature is not

particularly helpful on this matter. We may be justified, therefore, in arguing for what amounts to an inclusive-exclusive sense of humour, one that is not a fixed personality trait since many children may be moved to laughter simply because it is expected of them or because it is convenient.

The crisis of representation, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), was coupled with the crisis of legitimation. These crises threatened qualitative researchers' ability to extract meaning from their data, thereby jeopardising the significance of any findings. It forced a re-appraisal of key concepts such as validity, reliability and objectivity. A concern with the validity and dignity of 'the other' proved a distinctive feature of postmodern thought in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The view that certain groups and populations had been overlooked by the grand narratives of Marxism and Freudianism, for example, was a source of irritation to those who felt that important themes affecting issues of difference and alterity had not been adequately addressed. Some researchers determinedly set about producing radical, democratic transformations in the public/social sphere. Emancipatory agendas aimed at interrogating differences, such as those affecting race and ethnicity, emerged.

Gittell & Vidal (1998) showed how these two issues coalesce around their study of social capital creation within community-based organisations. However, despite a commitment to activist-oriented principles and a genuine desire to help disadvantaged black communities, it was no guarantee that their anticipated outcomes would be realised. New modalities of otherness also conferred greater freedom of expression upon participant's voices, like those of children and of women. Kristeva's experiences as an outsider, for instance, were the source of power behind her reasoning that in order to overcome exclusion of 'the other' we must learn to live with others without erasing their sense of difference or ostracising them.

We do this, she claims, by recognising the foreigner, 'the other', within ourselves. Of considerable interest is the way that the foreigner can be equated to Granovetter's notion of a 'mere acquaintance', the 'weak tie' in his bridging relational theory (1973). Herein, the economic migrant, who is characteristically industrious and entrepreneurial, is the kind of person worth knowing, according to Kristeva (1991), even if it is only in passing. Conversely, it has been difficult to assess Wickberg's workings on personhood or any social actors, since the human element in his sense of humour study has been 'subordinated to the current of historical ideas' (1998, p.4). We are then no nearer to finding out if children with or without linguistic, communicative, and cognitive competencies actually have a sense of humour, share the same sense of humour, or have different senses of humour.

## 2000

The beginning of the new millennium was marked by the publication of three noteworthy documents, each one unveiled as though it was a manifesto for a coming golden age. The 'Index for Inclusion' by Booth & Ainscow (2000), a practical, hands-on resource, was designed to give guidance to schools as they made the transition from an integrated educational framework to an inclusive one. It addresses the challenges of developing not only more inclusive practices, but the need to support schools' self-evaluation. Its business-like spring-bound folder-format anticipates much use in collaborative action-planning and in staff development programmes. Its four sections provide guidance on how the materials are to be used. Descriptions of the processes involved in how to employ the content are provided, so too is advice on creating inclusive cultures, policies and practices. The final part includes an array of questionnaires and summary sheets.

Robert Provine's (2000) 'Laughter: A Scientific Investigation', the fruit of a 10-year project to effect an understanding of laughter, aims to bring some order and discipline to the field of communication/laughter studies. His book is a riposte to the speculation of philosophers who, with their appeals to reason and logic, together with the shoddy methodologies of social scientists, he claims, have persistently brought the topic into disrepute (2000). As a biologically oriented researcher and an advocate of solid scholarship, he takes for his study a scientific-led ethological and neuroscience approach, based on strict observation and controlled experimentation. Intriguingly, he claims to have cracked the laughter code, a suggestion that he has identified laughter's elusive acoustic signature. Of more significance, perhaps, Provine's book is one of the few to include a 'pathological' (p.154) survey of disabilities, impairments, and syndromes in which laughter is a conspicuous attribute.

In his pioneering 'Bowling Alone' (2000) Robert Putnam charts the shifting dimensions of social capital and its fluctuating fortunes across modern America, from a high point of community engagement at the beginning of the last century to large-scale civic disconnectedness by the century's close. Putnam begins by describing the level of corruption among social relationships, and then considers the cause of this atrophy together with its social, economic and political consequences. In conclusion, he looks back longingly in search of a time of highest happiness and well-being in the hope of finding some signs from history that may inform and help replenish stocks of social capital for America's future.

### *Bridging and Bonding*

Social capital amounts to the 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000, p.19). These connections can be put to use in different ways and for different purposes. According to

Putnam (2000), the two most important network types are those that bridge (inclusive) and those that bond (exclusive). What is new and so interesting in 'Bowling Alone' is the way that bridging and bonding forms have been reconfigured. They are treated here far differently to the way they operated in Gittel & Vidal's (1998) community organising account. Putnam has refined them. He points out that they should not be considered as distinct entities, not as 'either-or' categories into which social networks can be neatly divided (2000, p.23). The suggestion now is that inclusive-exclusive relationships can overlap; they are in effect a network of fluid links. This may come as some relief to those who did not find it so easy to tell them apart in the first place. For, what may appear as 'bridging' capital to some may be viewed as 'bonding' to others. Much depends on the particular context in which they are expected to function. Despite the notion that the two dimensions are capable of some 'spill over', Putnam enthuses over the prospect of connecting with people unlike ourselves, the connections that establish networks which take us beyond our familiar social circles. Of the two orientations outlined, he clearly favours bridging social capital. When Putnam distinguishes between them by suggesting that the bonding form is useful only for 'getting by' whereas the bridging version is crucial for 'getting ahead' (2000, p.23), it is clear that in order for America to start rebuilding its fragmented communities bridging social capital offers the best hope. In fact, so pronounced is Putnam's passion for the inclusive form he has been accused of fermenting a 'bridging bias' (Patulny & Svendsen, 2007, p.37).

A propensity for the bridging model is most apparent when he considers the topic of education. The links between social capital and education have both a strong and a relatively long history. Putnam is careful to remind his readers that the term 'social capital' first came to public attention thanks to a paper written by a reforming rural American educator at the beginning of the last century. Thereafter, he sets about trying to establish a link between

education and just about every possible type of civic and social engagement. Education is usually one of the most important predictors of many forms of social participation. Given that schools encourage regular face-to-face interaction and instil a cooperative and collaborative ethos, they present the right kind of environment for the development of social capital. A good academic record and good rates of attainment determine how connected to society a child will be when they later move forward into adulthood. In this respect, Putnam emphasises the importance of specifically bridging family-school relations. He applies particular focus on the role of parents and the amount of influence they can have on their children's academic well-being. By introducing two further related strands of social capital, of formal and informal (2000), Putnam believes that the authority of the latter, being parents'/adults' casual associations with friends on a regular basis, within any community, is deemed to be a stronger predictor of pupil achievement than in the level of formal social capital, such as when a pupil's parents attend official school-related meetings, etc. Consequently, when adults/parents are moved to make regular connections with one another this perfunctory interaction is likely to have only a positive effect on the education performance of their children (2000).

Despite the rhetoric of its importance as a predictor of social capital, the issue of education in Putnam's book accounts for one of the very shortest chapters. This is probably due to his reliance on mainly quantitative data. Life-style surveys and a glut of other statistical indices make up the bulk of his evidence (it was not until the publication of 'Better Together' in 2004 that he managed to incorporate any qualitative data into his research). It would explain why, for example, he has very little to say about the origins and the influence of pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil relationships. They are not mentioned because affective interactions of this nature rarely show up on any of the measuring tools Putnam put to use. It is a process that

calls to mind Wickberg's (1998) aseptic approach to the sense of humour trait, one devoid of instrumentality and bereft of any human stakes. Putnam's methodological approach allows a focus on school-community links to take preference over within-school issues. He seems absorbed with the condition and influence of pupils' parents, noting how their social capital 'confers benefits on their off-spring' (2000, p.299). Much of this is achieved through community engagement. Communities whose adults trust one another, who join organisations and socialise with friends, will find that their children tend to flourish academically. Communities with healthy civic attitudes provide healthy, well-adjusted children (Putnam, 2000). However, he virtually ignores the idea that schools themselves have huge potential as sites for the production of social capital among learners, and neglects the active role they play in generating their own connections and networks (Smyth & MacBride *et al*, 2012).

Social capital is routinely engaged, for instance, every time children help each other with their homework, or whenever a teacher chooses to organise a group learning task. Bonding forms, it may be argued, proliferate in typical school conditions. But what of Putnam's much vaunted bridging forms? What chances are there for any child to connect with pupils unlike themselves? From his all too brief focus on and encounter with education, it is difficult to tell if the trends show a tendency for schools to favour homogeneity, where individual pupils' identities are flattened out, or there is a flourishing of heterogeneous school communities where diversity is the standard (Allan *et al*, 2012). There are many positive signs that schools will eagerly foster a strong sense of intra-community links, but this bonding/exclusive social capital need not come at the expense of attempts to commit community members to a bridging/inclusive outlook (Campbell, 2006).

Many mainstream schools will very likely provide its learners with every opportunity to bridge *and* to bond. A school that might have a homogenised complement of pupils assembled around a single faith, for example, and outwardly present itself as a strongly bonded institution, will nonetheless provide ample bridging features and opportunities within the composition of the pupil cohort. Many of them will perforce differ according to traditional variables such as age, sex, and social class, but also along dimensions such as ethnicity and learning disability. But even though education remains an important source of social capital, and despite Putnam's estimation of it as a vital predictor of social capital, what precisely happens to children during their school tenure is neither clearly explained, understood, or given the attention it deserves, since he fails to place those important causal mechanisms under full, inclusive scrutiny.

There is no reference to 'integration' in the 'Index for Inclusion' (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). The document that was designed with the purpose of creating more inclusive cultures, that itself owed much to the influential Salamanca Statement (Unesco, 1994), makes no mention of its educational predecessor. It's as though the beginning of a new century was deemed an auspicious moment to close the door on one old, out-dated system and open a new one to allow a more radical all-embracing opportunity to make education more democratic. Ever since it was championed by the Warnock Committee (1987) many of those with a professional and emotional stake in children's education found integration both an unsettling term and a troubling practice. In common classroom parlance it was often assumed to mean that children with disabilities would find it difficult to maintain their unique social identities, having little or no opportunity to celebrate their individual selves (Smyth & MacBride, 2012). Furthermore, children with some experience of being integrated were made to feel as though they should be grateful for a school's benevolence instead of simply expecting that their



fully-rounded education should be provided as a matter of right. Similarly, the Index treats the concept of 'special educational needs' with the same disdain shown to 'integration'. Since the term amounts to labelling people, it becomes just another way of segregating and excluding them (Tomlinson, 1982). It was replaced by the non-specific 'barriers to learning and participation' (2000, p.13.).

The process of replacing old terms with new ones is not simply just another way of stating or describing an issue, but is part of the new reforming spirit aimed at initiating a whole new approach to school-based education. 'Inclusion', at this point, has a much broader compass than its forerunner; it attempts to meet the increasing diversity of school populations. Not only is it concerned with children who had been previously categorised as requiring special education, but it applies to all pupils and adults vulnerable to exclusionary measures and sensibilities. It deals with improving school conditions for members of staff (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). It is also about maintaining links between schools and their local communities, such as embracing, demonstrating and encouraging multicultural attitudes. The underlying principle behind inclusive education is that it is but one, albeit important, aspect of the drive to construct a more inclusive society (2000). A social model of learning disability informs this dedication. Shifting the focus of attention onto the environmental, structural and attitudinal barriers within institutions and society is seen as a move away from medical, and ostensibly deficit, thinking. It is society rather than the individual which has to be changed (Allan, 2010).

The Index for Inclusion may have been influenced by the inclusive momentum brought about by the statement issued at Salamanca (1994), but the processes, beliefs and values inscribed within it owe substantially more to the key ideas associated with one of its contemporary

publications, Robert Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (2000). Both texts can be utilised as resources for reflection. Each one encourages a process of self-questioning, providing a heterogeneous purview. They offer a diagnostic facility, and an opportunity for users to aim for and realise a mixture of prescribed group/individual targets. Putnam (2000), for example, considers a large-scale approach to community renewal; Booth & Ainscow (2000) have less grandiose ambitions, although their aim is to see how small-scale school communities can contribute to and be included into the larger community network. For example, one of the main goals of the Index was to initiate a programme that would transform schools from self-managing inward-looking institutions into educational centres that provide support to and receive support from the wider community. Perhaps the authors of the Index were unaware that what they were attempting to achieve depended to a great extent on establishing supplies of social capital (a term that lacked the currency it does today, although they may have been familiar with the basic principle of social connectivity). In their attempt to help school leaders, pupils, teachers, and parents to work together to create more democratic school environments, the Index authors were aiming to increase the scope and quality of schools' relational networks (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Achieving this feat entailed encouraging schools to look outwards and play a more central role in the development of the local community.

### *Stranger and Friend*

Of the personnel described in the Index whose involvement in securing greater community ties is encouraged and valued, the effort of the 'critical friend' (Booth & Ainscow, 2000, p.19) is the most interesting. This 'friend' is something of a shadowy figure. He/she has an inclusive-exclusive portfolio, functioning at once as a member of the school's self-evaluation team, a person known to the institution concerned, yet a figure who, importantly, also

remains an outsider, someone identified by the school's stakeholders as possessing a neutral agenda. To use Kristeva's (1991) circles of affiliation as a guide, the critical friend occupies a position somewhere in the middle of the map of concentric contours, close enough to be an acquaintance but far enough away so as not to compromise their objectivity. The rationale here approximates closely to Granovetter's (1973) theory on strong and weak ties, inasmuch that a weak tie is more likely to be the provider of new hitherto unseen information, whereas a strong tie may feel obliged, out of politeness and a sense of loyalty, to provide only the information one wishes to see or hear. However, it is argued that impartiality is an unrealistic condition in such a relationship since the critical friend (whoever they may be and whatever their background) will bring to any school their own particular remit and focus (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). Nonetheless, the critical friend is still expected to provide a service that functions even in non-ideal situations as a vital link between the school and the wider community. Education psychologists, teachers from other schools, parents and school inspectors are felt to be among the most able candidates to assume this role. They offer an opportunity to view the school through a different lens, to provoke and also to challenge interactions between the various stakeholders wherever and whenever necessary.

All of the value held by this figure lies in the creative potential that sits at the threshold of strangeness and familiarity. Being a mixture of ally and alien, the critical friend is the very model of social connectivity. Bestriding two separate domains, they are well placed to simultaneously bridge and bond between school and community in their capacity as a linking-consolidating point of reference. The influence of the liminal figure has been firmly established in other disciplines. An attitude of intimate detachment is commonly associated with anthropological investigations. Ethnographers have been recommended to assume a position intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness (Powdermaker, 1966). Not

unrelatedly, a rule that goes back at least to Bergson (1911/2005) states that a comic effect is achieved only when the natural expression of an idea is transposed into another key. For Bergson, laughter is obtained when the familiar is confronted with the unfamiliar; the meeting of these two opposing currents triggers a creative laughable charge. A similar type of stimulus activates the critical friend to open up new ways of construing the myriad pedagogies and practices, dispositions and attitudes, from their interstitial position. By encouraging the widest scrutiny of everything that makes up the lifeworld of the school, the Index expects to include not only critical outsiders but traditional outsiders such as parents and carers, those members of the community with a history of having only a token involvement in their children's education. Collaborations between school and local families constitute a potentially strong and important source of social capital, and carry every prospect of becoming a positive factor for educational improvement and reform (Carrington & Robinson, 2006).

Some have claimed that the comprehensiveness of the Index is overwhelming (Vaughan, 2002). While its thoroughness, on one level, is to be commended, and clearly it is a document brimming with good ideas and intentions, there are those who remain puzzled by the need for a root and branch examination at all. Some might argue that the adoption of new, inclusive ways of working should be an easy, natural, straightforward undertaking, given that to be inclusive is morally, instinctively, and ideologically the right course to follow. At an international education conference, for example, one that had become bogged down with British policy on inclusive schooling, an unnamed African delegate/teacher wondered why (in the West) the process had become so complicated when the only thing required was for community members to value and respect one another (in Carrington & Robinson, 2006). Although there will be inevitable concerns about the inclusion issue, and a suspicion that

some are indeed guilty of ‘over-thinking’ it, what lies at the heart of the Index is a recognition that the desire to effect institutional change offers no easy solutions. When it is felt necessary to re-educate mind-sets and habits away from the damaging practice of integrating children and to embrace instead a newer, more democratic system, the process will take time and effort before re-culturing can be achieved. Accordingly, the creation of more inclusive cultures begins with a long-term commitment to staff development (Booth & Ainscow, 2000).

### *Internal and External*

Conventional professional development had previously revolved around the familiar triad of workshops, conferences and courses. Teachers and support staff relied almost exclusively on external ‘experts’ who, while often possessing good knowledge of school systems in general, usually lacked any specific knowledge of the site where those personnel were actually employed. The Index for Inclusion made it clear that teachers should be allowed to develop their professionalism with external support but within the confines of their own schools. School reform was more likely to result when a professional community was supported in both sectors, from inside and outside the institution. It was not unreasonable to assume that schools could be made more effective once a more considered and nuanced view of the inside-outside relationship was taken. Indeed, among the many good things contained in the Index is a determination to move beyond the kind of canonical definitions that indicate a binary logic has taken root. When considering inclusion, for example, one must also take exclusion into account. Some of the team members responsible for organising the Index made this point very clear in an earlier document: ‘We link the notion of inclusion and exclusion together because the process of increasing the participation of students entails the reduction of pressures to exclusion’ (Booth & Ainscow, 1998, p.2). They highlighted situations

common in some schools where students, previously excluded and receiving special education, 'are welcomed in through the front door while others are ushered out at the back' (p.2). It amounted to the production of a strange gyratory system. Children were being worked in inclusive-exclusive rotation, circumstances the authors describe in their frustration, but with considerable restraint, as a 'comedy' (1998, p.2).

Such a description allows the thought to surface that the dividing line between comedy and tragedy is not always clearly defined. Many instances of the comical are not properly dignified by that name, as is clear from Booth and Ainscow's ironic use of the term. Despite a long tradition sanctifying a distinction between comedy and tragedy, in the lifeworld of a primary school, as in life generally, this pair of contraries may be just as likely to overlap or fuse together as be treated as separate entities. Exactly how these two poles often become entwined can be seen in Robert Provine's 'Laughter: A Scientific Investigation' (2000). His text is the result of a 10-year enquiry to explain why laughter is an 'unconscious response to social and linguistic cues' (p.2) Initially, Provine began observing subjects in his laboratory, but found laughter too fragile, illusive and too varied a commodity to be considered under direct scientific analysis. He then embarked on a range of different approaches, which included eavesdropping on people's conversations in public, scouring the personal columns of newspapers noting the quantity of adverts placed by women seeking men who could make them laugh, encouraging students to record their own laughter in a personal logbook (its time of occurrence and its circumstances in order to determine the sociality of laughing), observing an acting class (the members of which attempted - and failed - to produce 'genuine' laughter on demand), a 52-item questionnaire on tickling, and a gadget called a 'laugh box' which produces, at the push of a button, a burst of pre-recorded laughter which

tested whether in the listener the canned laughter in itself was enough to produce a contagious laughter response (2000).

### *Genuine and Counterfeit*

With a background in developmental psychology, and a specialism in animal behaviour, Provine's early studies were notable for his attempts to develop an understanding of the vocal facility in birds, working to the idea that the song-like nature of human laughter could have its counterpart in bird-song (2000). Although he does not embrace a wholly empiricist epistemological position, Provine does show unalloyed animosity towards the social sciences and philosophy, two disciplines he maintains that have clouded our understanding of the laughter phenomenon. For instance, Provine takes issue with Aristotle's (1968) often repeated claim that risibility is the sole preserve of humans. Drawing many of his hypotheses about human laughter from comparisons with some of the vocal expressions produced by apes and chimpanzees, Provine points to studies conducted on these and other primates as proof of a misperception that laughter is exclusive to human beings. However, he qualifies the laughter of these animals by referring to them only as "*laughlike*" (p.75, italics added). Nonetheless, there are references to laughter's social aspect, to its 'social bonding function' (p.47), for he notes that 'solitary chimps, like solitary people, seldom laugh' (p.92). Moreover, Provine's book is one of the very few texts that make time to consider the laughter of people with a range of learning disabilities, including references to autism and Angelman's syndrome (2000). That said, however, he seems to be on far safer ground when revealing some of the more humorous, anecdotal aspects to illuminate the world of laughter. Among the miscellany of entertaining and fascinating titbits, all of which appear to be garnered from secondary sources, is the tale of the epidemic which swept through a Tanzanian girl's school

in 1962, rendering half of the pupil population incapacitated with laughter, and forcing education authorities to close the institution concerned for a period of two months (2000).

Declaring that laughter can serve as a bond to bring people together or it can work as a weapon to ostracise (2000), Provine introduces the first of many themes that echo those featured in Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' (2000). Referencing laughter's 'darker side', as when it excludes outsiders (p.47), reproduces Putnam's familiar quote about the 'dark side' of social capital (2000, p.350). It is because of these anti-social elements that two seemingly contrary dimensions of laughter and social capital eventually developed, laughing *with* (inclusive) and laughing *at* (exclusive), which approximate closely to Putnam's notions of bridging and bonding. Provine devotes the final section of his book to identifying ways in which diminishing laughter levels can be restored. Obliging, he offers '10 tips' (p.209) to increase our laughing habit, which resembles the concluding chapter in 'Bowling Alone', where Putnam lays down six challenges to his readers that he hopes will help to kick-start the process of renewing their depleted stocks of social capital (2000).

Whether our laughter is programmed or we simply choose when to laugh, it remains an important yet neglected question, one that has a bearing on everyday communication and behaviour. According to Provine, it is the question upon which 'the validity of over two millennia of thinking about laughter hangs in the balance' (2000, p.49). His consistent claim is that laughter is an unconscious, spontaneous impulse, and he rejects as a myth the view put forward by mainly philosophers and social scientists that laughter bears the tacit assumption of intentionality and conscious control (2000). Provine's view feeds into specific opinions about spontaneity and laughter, but also an opinion about spontaneity in broader, general terms. There is, for example, a tendency for society to valorise the spontaneity of laughter,



the assumption being that because it is natural it 'is the real McCoy' (Smith, 2008, p.3). Moreover, whatever the type of laughter it may be, 'it must always *appear to be* natural and spontaneous' (cited in Mulkey, 1988, p.118, emphasis in the original), as if there is a social expectation for it to be so. Genuine, spontaneous laughter remains one of the cornerstones of our social and cultural system (Mulkey, 1988), and a reflexive means of expression continues to be the most popular view of the phenomenon.

If they exercise the same discretion as their elders, children will show a stronger preference for spontaneous humour and humorous stories from real life than for material that has been deliberately manufactured (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2007). Almost anyone can tell an amusing story or joke, but a child who can produce a funny comment, pull a face, or 'burp' on the spur of the moment is a much rarer individual, and one more likely to be admired by their peers (Morreall, 2009). Spontaneity has long been regarded as among the defining markers of one's sense of identity. It is associated with liberty in works by Ovid and Virgil. Lenin was allegedly fearful of it (Lih, 2008), while Maslow placed spontaneity at the apex of his well-known 'hierarchy of needs' (1970). It points to a profoundly important theme in our culture, and constitutes an influential element in a child's creative, emotional and learning development since it describes estimable qualities like speed, instinct, and mental energy (Moreno & Moreno, 1944). Spontaneous laughter, similarly, has gained much of its social and cultural prestige from its authentic, unpremeditated expression. But it has also gained considerably from its association with legitimising values such as 'genuine', as 'civilised' (Koestler, 1964) and as 'true' (Screech, 1999). These positively-loaded terms have helped to aggrandise its status, whereas controlled or voluntary laughter is known largely through its negative synonyms, such as 'counterfeit', 'contrived' and 'fake'. Importantly, such sharply

defined categories presuppose that these laughter reference points always stand in isolation, that there is no correspondence between them. This, however, does not always follow.

Those persuaded by a composite view of laughter argue that it does not lend itself so easily to rigid classification, as either a voluntary or an involuntary response. Instead, it falls between these two extremes (Portmann, 1998). Even though Provine's scientific position convinces him that all laughter is involuntary, some sociologists, for example, maintain that involuntary laughter 'occurs much less frequently than any other forms' (Mulkay, 1988, p.118). Indeed, Provine appears to have overlooked or deliberately discounted the possibility of instances arising where people - and in particular young children - deliberately contrive their laughter in order to create the impression that it is an involuntary reaction. Strategic practices of this kind are covered by the description 'controlled spontaneity' (Mulkay, 1988, p.118), a conciliation which avoids the dangers of thinking according to pernicious dualisms, and admits that each dimension will necessarily overlap with its opposite, forming what Koestler refers to as a 'marriage of incompatibles' (1964, p.95). For all that, Provine's cursory review of the philosophical literature on laughter leads him to conclude that this discipline's analysis of it has been vitiated by the 'rational person' hypothesis (2000, p.18), a common sense but incorrect premise that the decision to laugh is motivated by a rational choice. Both research and common sense support the claim that laughter is not solely the product of a conscious choice. But equally they contradict the notion that laughter is only ever non-voluntary and irrational. To be fair to Provine, he never explicitly makes this second claim; it is enough that he rests satisfied with the first. Even so, for one whose primary expertise is in avian evolution, it might be said that a great deal of his work on laughter has been left up in the air.

Describing the tension between two of the main competing theories, of those who favour spontaneity against those championing contrivance, Provine presents a case for laughter as an instinctive, spontaneous reaction. The laughing instinct is programmed, not by exposure to social/cultural systems, but by our genes (2000). A genetic-environment rapprochement is not possible or wanted in Provine's view. Accordingly, we somehow always manage to laugh at just the right times - even though we are not always aware of what we are doing (2000). The example of contagious laughter provides the strongest challenge to what he considers to be the shaky hypothesis that we are rational creatures in full control of our behaviour (2000). Provine's adherence to the idea of laughter's involuntary expression is justified and maintained from having observed a number of acting classes where aspiring thespians were invited by their drama teacher to laugh on cue. Unfortunately, their efforts merely 'sounded forced and artificial' (2000, p.49). With slightly more methodological rigour, he highlights some previous studies which note examples of laughter's strategic use, as in the self-effacing forms by people of low social rank, exemplified by the caste system in India, and women in communities all over the world who, he claims, are habitual users of 'self-humbling' laughter (2000, p.49). But he chooses not to use these two very good examples as a way to explore the broader significance of tactical laughter. Had Provine taken the trouble to visit a school during the 'urban safari' phase of his fieldwork (2000, p.25), he would surely have noted, as did Willis (1976) and Woods (1984) before him, that many pupils and teachers have good cause to cultivate the habit of laughing instrumentally, either as an appeasement strategy or for purposes of ingratiation.

If Provine's scientific investigation ever manages to escape being labelled a 'tragedy', it is only because the term 'tragicomedy' might be a more suitable description. His book combines humorous and pathetic elements. Much that is pathetic is represented by the variety

of colourful research methods, namely his hit-and-miss attempts at gathering data (Martin, 2003). Again, to be fair to him, Provine concedes that it is a 'catch-as-catch-can interdisciplinary work in progress' (2000, p.9), meaning that he had to make do with whatever methods were available to him. It is entirely reasonable, therefore, that during his 10-year exploration Provine should have felt it necessary to employ a profusion of different research approaches. Going against his strictly scientific instincts, he nonetheless bridges the qualitative-quantitative divide with randomised frequency. Instead of depending on highly decontextualised laboratory research, Provine felt compelled to assume an anthropological spirit. In order to find examples of genuine, spontaneous laughter, he had to first defy the parochialism of inward-looking academic disciplines, including his own, and, as he readily admits, take to the sidewalk (2000).

For all of its methodological shortcomings, Provine's book remains a text of particular interest in that it reveals how important it can be to break free from the restrictive mental cages in which researchers often lock themselves. His unusual if not haphazard mixing of methods resonates, perhaps unconsciously, with the ways that children use, encounter, and think about laughter. Although he does not write specifically with children's laughter in mind, there is something disarmingly childlike in Provine's approach to his subject. From his use of toy props like the 'laughter-box', to his examination of playful tickling, and not forgetting all of the zoological-related monkey business, it's as though he feels compelled to take a child's perspective on laughter in order to try and understand laughter's many complexities. Scientific and philosophical literature is filled with elementary and puerile accounts that frequently reduce laughter to an intrusion befitting young children, a vestige, for example, of crying in infancy (Morris, 1967). In ancient Greece the association between laughter and childhood was part of a life-affirming nexus of classical values (Halliwell,

2008). Laughter, claims Darwin, is primarily the expression of joy or happiness – as demonstrated by the incessant laughter of children at play (1872/1998). And laughter's infantile roots were explored and expounded by both Bergson (1911/2005) and Freud (1905/2001). In their fluid social worlds, children are often oblivious to the outlines of categories and borders, having a disposition to take everything literally. They routinely experience such difficulties as appreciating tongue-in-cheek humour or irony (Zerubavel, 1993), and a failure to think analytically sometimes prevents them from actually getting the joke (Provine, 2000). But lapses in analytical thinking are not the sole preserve of children. Despite enthusiastically reinforcing the outdated nature-nurture debate with his highly partial coverage of the unconscious-involuntary laughter opposition (which in itself is an outlying aspect of the intrinsic, biological origins of laughter versus the extrinsic social/environmental factors) Provine repeats – but makes no effort to reconcile – any of these inclusive-exclusive diminutives.

## 2010

If Provine truly believed that future writers on laughter would heed his call and abandon attempts to philosophise about it, and instead get out of their armchairs and start observing it, he was in for disappointment. Barbara Stengel's contemplative essay 'After the Laughter' (2012) raises a series of imaginary proposals using accounts of laughter that are mainly a series (sequence) of fictional school-based scenarios, but with some of the author's personal education-related recollections included for good measure.

In 2010 'The Cambridge Primary Review', a volume edited by Robin Alexander, which included a host of contributing authors, published an in-depth assessment of the state of primary education in England. So that the document should be treated with the importance

the Review team believed it deserved, they stipulated that one of its subsidiary aims was to try and circumscribe the ‘discourse of derision’ (2010, p.22), this being a reference to the crude way that public opinion had often been manipulated, largely - but not exclusively - by the popular media (Ball, 1990). In recent times this practice has reached an unacceptable level in its mocking hostility, constructing a range of dichotomous polarities that perpetuate putative divisions between powers of volition, such as gravity and ridicule, sarcasm and sanctimony.

In his ‘Theories of Social Capital’ (2010) Ben Fine has two distinct but related ambitions. In attempting to deliver a deconstruction of social capital he hopes to try and make some sense of its popularity among the social sciences. He tries to show why, in his view, social capital is a nonsensical concept. Furthermore, by virtue of the book’s sub-title ‘Researchers Behaving Badly’ he delivers what amounts to be a route-map of the various steps and skills needed to carry out a piece of research. He shows how good research should be conducted and offers, among other things, useful information on how to assemble an effective literature review. This intelligence is aimed squarely at the burgeoning researcher who is intending to use social capital as a means to explore some concept or other, a formula he describes as ‘social capital plus X’ (2010, p.5), with ‘X’ being a construct, condition, or phenomenon tagged randomly on to it - something like laughter, one imagines.

### Concealing and Revealing

Stengel reminds us, among other things, that we laugh at what is comical and what is unfunny. She refers obliquely to the latter as the ‘difficult’ (2012, p.5), meaning conditions like fear, nervousness, shame, confusion, etc. These are the kinds of emotions which can give rise to laughter, and the kinds of emotions which sustain her principle interest. Aside from

wanting to know what it is that prompts this ‘difficult’ laughter, Stengel aims to explain ‘what happens *after* the laughter’ has gone (p.2. original italics). In other words, how can the vacuum, the potentially positive space left in laughter’s wake, be exploited? She indicates that there are opportunities for teachers here, just as long as they are in a position to recognise and take advantage of that liminal region. In everyday circumstances laughter will be easily recognised by teachers, although the laughter’s meaning may at times be unclear (p.5). Superficially, it appears that laughter’s double nature is once again being referenced in the time-honoured sense of it being either laughing *with* or laughing *at* behaviour. But Stengel’s project offers something new. It is suggested there is a laughter form that simultaneously ‘reveals and conceals’ (2012, p.3), providing teachers with an opportunity for some ‘teachable moments’ (p.4). This type of laughter represents a pedagogic ‘opening’ (p.4) - just as long as the laughter signal is heeded and therefore revealed, and not ignored and thus concealed (2012). Herein, laughter becomes a novel, but crucial, first step in the process of helping teachers to respond to and diagnose their pupils’ needs.

Drawing on the work of John Dewey as a way to explore laughter’s profound role in education, Stengel addresses a range of affective-related issues, not seeming to care very much that despite writing copiously on human emotions Dewey had comparatively little to say about laughter. Nonetheless, what he did say was worth saying, for he was one of the first to recognise that laughter can occur without any humour stimulus (1894). But it is in the broader realm of human emotions that Stengel makes use of one of Dewey’s important - but least known - concepts. Referred to by her as ‘blind discharge’ (2012, p.2) and by him as ‘emotional seizure’ (1895, p.17), either term connotes a laughing action that is neither spontaneous nor voluntary, but one that announces a pupil’s breakdown, rupture or some form of interruption in their learning experience. Simply put, laughter can be expressed when

an individual experiences a cognitive and/or affective malfunction. Either way, the laughter produced operates as a behavioural marker, one that teachers are urged to recognise, to interpret correctly, for it could lead, according to her argument, to a breakthrough in learning (2012). On the face of it, the Stengel-Dewey coalition offers a startling new perspective on laughter's long-standing inclusive-exclusive relationship. Behaviour that reveals as it conceals appears to be further evidence of laughter's inclusive-exclusive patterning, a flexible juxtaposition that accommodates two habitually incompatible frames of reference.

In order to try and make sense of this apparent inconsistency, it may be useful to follow Stengel's lead and invoke an imaginary scenario whereby this new type of thinking could be applied. At a particular school, for example, the laughter of a particular child is out of kilter with the prevailing classroom mood. It may signal to the attentive teacher that it is the laughter of discontentment and unhappiness. It may suggest that the pupil concerned is encountering difficulties, either academically or emotionally. The teacher may be inclined to make a mental note of this distress signal, and then, at a time convenient to both parties, approach the pupil with a gentle but pointed question as to the status of their well-being. This is the kind of response Stengel would expect and appreciate any caring, on-the-ball teacher to make. Given laughter's inherent duality (that we laugh because we are either happy or unhappy) the teacher has only a chance level of discovering some discrepancy that may be affecting the pupil's classroom performance. Assuming there is indeed an issue, the laughter has done its job, and so too has (in the short term) the teacher. As for the pupil, the laughter has temporarily diverted their attention away from the difficulty in hand. In Stengel's terms it has been *concealed*, and yet it has also been *revealed* if - and only if - the teacher is attuned to the laughter signal, who may be then prompted to uncover the source of the pupil's discontent.



On a very basic level, Stengel's speculation makes good sense. If some of our laughter behaviours are responses to some kind of difficulty, then laughter can indeed become a valuable signal - to those who are capable of interpreting it. But the central weakness in her hypothesis concerns this task of interpretation. It tends to take for granted the veracity of these signals; it assumes that the produced laughter is spontaneous and therefore genuine. But if Michael Mulkay is to be believed, most of the laughter people express is premeditated. He argues that in our social, conversational interactions at least, laughter is systematically and deliberately applied (1988). Despite this apparent shortcoming, there are other aspects to her theory that remain attractive and potentially useful. As Stengel makes clear, laughter can at times approximate to a cry for help. It is here that she leans heavily on Dewey's analysis of emotionality. She points out, for example, that Dewey makes no distinction between laughter and crying (2012). For him, both emotions are closely situated physiologically and closely aligned theoretically. Laughter's relief/release model, popularised during the late nineteenth-century, stipulates that we may be moved to laughter and/or crying 'because it marks the ending of a period of suspense or expectation' (Dewey, 1894, p.558). It functions, in this sense, much like a syntactical full stop. In other words, due to its declarative, climactic essence, it is teleological, and should, all things considered, be behaviour difficult to miss. Nonetheless, Stengel urges teachers to be vigilant, cautioning that they 'are well advised to pay close attention to laughter in all educational circumstances' (2012, p.3). This might not seem to be an unreasonable expectation of teachers. Some, however, would argue that, practically speaking, yet more responsibilities places further burdens on their always demanding workload.

Perhaps Stengel is slightly insensitive in wishing to assign hard-pressed teachers yet more classroom duties. Gathering information by having to scrutinise the sound of pupils' laughter, so that they can distinguish between the good natured form and its 'difficult' variant, requires a set of skills that has thus far eluded many behaviour and communication experts. In some ways it presents the same kind of problem encountered by playground supervisors when attempting to interpret pupils' facial signals in order to determine whether a child's grimace indicates aggressive behaviour or merely rough-and-tumble play. Within the first years of life children have already mastered the ability to manage many of their emotional states, with some showing proficiency in controlling a wide range of facial expressions (Ekman, 2009). Being naturally accomplished performers, with a flair for the arts of legerdemain and contrivance, children will have served, by the time of their Key-Stage education, an extensive apprenticeship in the form of their daily repertoire of pretend play. Their dedication to the world of make-believe and fantasy may be due in part to being exposed across the social and cultural media to an almost constant adult-oriented desire to excite their imagination. It is small wonder then that children have been described as 'communication delinquents' (Goffman, 1966, p.165), a suggestion that many of them have but a giddy idea about adult understandings of social interaction. Stengel's failure both to appreciate that children spend a significant amount of their daily time engaged in pretence, and to even consider the possibility that children are not above fabricating their laughter, may not be the kind of attitude liberal-leaning educationalists had in mind when advocating in pupils more flexible, imaginative, and expressive thinking habits by constructing a more 'democratic definition of creativity' (Alexander, 2010, p.267).

But being the principal figure behind 'The Cambridge Primary Review' (2010), Robin Alexander's declared aim is to promote some serious and rational arguments on the condition

of, and future for, our children's schooling. Not since the Plowden Report was published 40 years earlier has there been such a comprehensive review of primary education. The document is aimed at a broad audience of stakeholders, from parents, pupils, and teachers to politicians and policy makers. It is voluminous in size; its scope (is) impressively vast. Educational arguments are firmly set in their historical and political contexts. But unlike official, government-backed inquiries the Review is careful to make conspicuous its non-partisan credentials. Somewhat self-consciously, it is at pains to point out that its findings were made possible thanks to the support and benevolence of a charitable trust. However, because of this, there is always the chance that the impact of its findings may be limited, making little real impact outside the world of education. Nonetheless, among its mix of visionary outlook and an adherence to tried and tested values and procedures, the most notable recommendations are that core and non-core curriculum subjects should be united. The Review also pledges a firm commitment to curricular flexibility, it challenges the ideology behind SATs - 'it is not testing which raises standards but good teaching' (2010, p.325) - and relatedly, but unsurprisingly, maintains an unreserved dedication to upholding the highest quality of teaching and learning (2010).

These recommendations are based on empirical evidence underpinned by a rich and exhaustive methodology, blending a copious array of primary and secondary source material. The Review team invited opinions in the form of written submissions from a cross-section of society. Home-based and international academics, national and international organisations, as well as views from ordinary members of the public, formally and informally, were garnered whether their interests were from inside or outside education. They took community soundings, both regional and national. Travelling around the country they spent thousands of hours engaged with those involved in the day-to-day running of primary schools, as well as

those situated beyond the school gates, such as local and national employers, community and religious leaders, the police, etc. They commissioned surveys and sent out questionnaires to a wide range of interested agencies and individuals. Official data were engaged, with the very latest and also archive material from government sources like the DfES and Ofsted.

### *Reverence and Ridicule*

As part of the Review team's dissemination strategy, a series of interim reports were published, commencing in 2007, which highlighted some of the Report's earliest findings. This was done primarily to stimulate public discussions and debate. Although the teaching community were generally supportive of these intervening accounts and early conclusions, the same could not be said for the national media. The press, in particular, penned a series of largely scornful and sensationalist headlines which were matched only in levels of hostility by rejoinders from those individuals occupying government/ministerial positions. Derision by their critics, however, was not answered in kind. By way of a more measured response, the Review team chose to incorporate some of this critique into the body of the final report, devoting to it an entire chapter. The significant part of this particular chapter was concerned with the citing of three patterns of discourse which, in recent years, they felt had frustrated the progress of educational thinking, policy and practice. Two of these features - the discourses of dichotomy and derision (2010) - prove not only to be highly topical but fundamentally important. There was a feeling that an affectation of dichotomies has engulfed the debate on education. The Review team considered the trend to reduce often complex debates on education matters to risible bipolar slogans as a deliberate attempt to stifle healthy discussion. While the Review accepts that there will inevitably be competing discourses, for example, from the evidence submitted by such a wide range of public opinion, it is set firmly against any involvement in corrosively adversarial formats. Yet the vein of dichotomous

discourse runs deep, and it continues to exert a powerful grip on the professional debates centred on primary education (2010). It encourages polarised positioning, seen often in the exclusive ‘versus’ preposition (i.e. formal *versus* informal, subjective *versus* objective, etc) a term that with some profit, it is argued, could be replaced by using the more inclusive ‘and’ (2010).

The ‘discourse of derision’ (2010, p.22) describes the kind of disdainful, belittling communication associated with mainly right-wing elements in the media. It is typified by widespread scoffing and boorish rejoinders to just about any progressive agenda mooted for discussion concerning education generally and teachers in particular. But this distortion of the communication process is not restricted to the media alone. Politicians and commentators of every stripe often make use of it when they encounter opinions that clash with their own, choosing to impugn the credibility of a specific person, party or profession. Nor indeed are such registers ever far away from the school classroom or playground. The discourse of derision’s disciplinary function, together with its rebellious spirit (Billig, 2005), remain key features to which school children are routinely exposed and regularly gravitate. Mockery and ridicule are at times easier forms of discipline to meet out than many traditional types of school punishment. Carefully done (applied), they can be performed in an ‘ambivalent’ inclusive-exclusive manner (Bakhtin, 1984, p.13). A teacher’s mocking of a pupil, for example, may be enacted with a genuine display of warmth and concern (in the manner of many caring parent-children interactions) to ensure that the pupil’s error or misdemeanour is not overlooked, yet done in a way that does not exclude them from joining in with the laughter (Billig, 2005). Children’s use of derision can also admit to containing a streak of rebellion. Disobedience of this nature calls to mind Bakhtin’s (1984) idea that comic laughter

is at its most effective when established hierarchies are turned upside-down, when the pompous, the mighty, and the pretentious are disparaged.

However, it is not always necessary to be part of the right-wing media militia or affiliated to the Westminster Establishment to find items in The Cambridge Primary Review worthy of derision. The issue of categorising children, for example, which was critiqued and itself subjected to some spirited contumely from Sally Tomlinson (1982), continues to trouble educational thinkers and practitioners. The policy of streaming and setting is, according to the Review, very likely to be a grouping method that accentuates children's differences. Even the alternative, and arguably more sensitive, 'mixed-ability teaching' (Alexander, 2010, p.377) is thought to produce similar harmful effects. But despite such negative projections, the Review's best recommendation is only that teachers should 'categorise with caution' (2010, p.378). The circumspection here signals that teachers remain attentive to the inherent dangers in this practice although, mysteriously, the Review is unwilling to campaign for its dissolution. Categorising, much like the reliance on dichotomies, is a way of organising reality that amounts to a form of segregation. In this instance, it functions, quite simply, by separating children from other children. If, as they claim, the Review team are set against the perpetuation of dichotomous thinking, it seems strange that they should be so ambiguous about the existing methods of classroom organisation, of classifying pupils, which many would argue is manifestly unequal.

The Review team greeted their critic's derision with sombre, straight-faced disapproval. Aside from including extracts of such negativity into the final report they advise their eventual readers that whatever they may think of its conclusions, 'its findings are to be discussed, its arguments treated with due seriousness, its evidence given the careful study it

deserves' (2010, p.1). Holding dear the values of sobriety and sanctimony the Review authors invited their readers to emulate such *gravitas* - on the understanding that anything less than a straight-faced response would show a lack of respect to such a serious topic. One predominant characteristic of modern scientific discourse is its generally serious and sedate tone. But, it can be argued, humour need not be inconsistent with academic writing. Some of the most revered texts in literary history have successfully blended seriousness with laughter and humour. The opening paragraph of 'The German Ideology', for example, contains 'more biting wit' than most philosophers produce in a lifetime, although Marx's raillery did not undermine the rhetoric of his trenchant political message (Billig, 2005, p.242). Norbert Elias notes that Erasmus's short treatise '*De civilitate morum puerilium*' (On Civility in Boys) - a hugely popular educational text when it appeared in the early sixteenth-century - was delivered with great seriousness, yet at the same time with much mockery and irony (2000, p.47-48). And, according to Michael Screech (1999), the revered and sacred writings of the Bible are shot through from Genesis to Revelation with countless accounts of scornful, mocking laughter.

It might be said that the Review team's earnestness only serves to heighten the level of ridicule that might entice the mischievous tabloid copy-writer or politician. With the reader receiving instructions on how to respond to the Review's final report, some might argue that it practically invites a scornful, derisory reaction. There is no denying that education is a vitally important system and process which affects millions of people and, if the government are to be believed, the fate of the nation depends on its efficient and skilful administration. But derision is not incompatible with constructive criticism - far from it. Admittedly, it can often have destructive consequences, yet it can also be shrewdly illuminating. In the hands of an accomplished and dedicated writer, ridicule may help to elaborate a text so that it may be

more easily consumed or possibly just provide it with a fresh perspective. Those who are so high-minded to valorise the weighty over the light-hearted may be in danger of constructing a dichotomy of the very type the report's authors actively seek to circumscribe. But this should come as no surprise, for seriousness and risibility are not wholly incompatible conditions. Wickberg (1998) suggests that the modern opposition between the serious and the humorous originated in the nineteenth-century, at a time of growing contrasts that proliferated in industrial society, which included sharp divisions between sacred and profane (popular) culture, and between the world of work and leisure. But like the work/leisure distinction the humorous/serious opposition was highly unstable. As Wickberg points out, the worlds of politics, religion, and education have all tried and failed to maintain the humorous/serious distinction, for each of these traditionally 'serious' spheres are subject to regular incursions by humour and laughter (1998).

Billig (2005) goes further and argues that ridicule lies at the 'heart of social life' (p.8) and at the 'heart of humour' (p.196). Parents routinely use derision as a way to educate their children, taking great delight in laughing at their faults and follies. It is considered a cost-effective means of social discipline, and as the child gets older it can become a useful method in helping to maintain social order (2005). Education has, historically, been built on a language of derision. It remains a salient ingredient within most primary school settings, and for centuries has been treated as an important pedagogic device. Ever since Plato (*contra* Socrates) suggested that mocking laughter ought to be encouraged, teachers have been the declared object of their pupils' diminishment. But teachers who are often the butt of unkind humour, who are often derided, can also deride. They can deliberately self-disparage, for example, make knowingly comical errors in order to reduce the teacher-pupil power differential. They habitually laugh at derogatory jokes and remarks made at the expense of



head teachers, the school system, pupils, and parents of pupils, while in the relative safety of the staffroom (Woods, 1984). The teacher in class who rolls her eyes each time a child provides her with an incorrect answer carefully enacts a performance strategy that relies on ridicule rather than harsh words or splenetic criticism. There are daily instances in the school playground where children – because they happen to be different in some form or aspect – may be subjected to the ridicule and scorn of their peers. Children can be praised, lauded, and envied as well as reviled and rebuked for their quick wit and insulting asides (Willis, 1976). In fact, each Year group will invariably contain at least one class clown who can, with equal degree, make a fool out of the teacher and add something of vital importance to the lesson (McLaren, 1993). And not forgetting the derisory laughter contained in just about every school library that holds copies of popular reading material by authors from Hans Christian Anderson to Jacqueline Wilson. Ridicule is a significant element in children’s education, being much more common than many people would care to acknowledge.

There is ridicule a-plenty in Ben Fine’s ‘Theories of Social Capital’ (2010). His passionately and highly opinionated assessment of social capital leads him to make a forthright rejection of the concept as envisioned by Robert Putnam. In what amounts to a detailed compilation of social capital’s many and varied limitations, Fine’s work represents a compendium of the first 10 years’ critique that followed the publication of ‘Bowling Alone’. Having previously examined the role of social capital in use by the World Bank (2003), Fine uses his background in economics to consider why key systems and features like capitalism are routinely ignored, relegated, or glossed over, concluding in his view that among the growing social capital literature ‘social capital is more interesting for what it excludes than for what it includes’ (2010, p.11).

‘It is the degradation of social science’, Fine proclaims (2010, p.2). No-one knows with any certainty what it is, he states. Its meaning is amorphous and ambiguous which, he argues, results in definitional chaos. Almost any form of social interaction has the capacity to be understood as social capital. ‘In short, social capital can be anything you like’ (2010, p.21). It is little wonder, he continues, that social capital has been embraced with such enthusiasm by governments the world over, hardly believing their luck that insufficient or non-existent investment in inner-city neighbourhoods could, for example, be blamed on the local population’s lack of community minded-ness. He believes the fascination with social capital simply got out of control. Much like laughter and its contagious effect, the social capital phenomenon spread like wildfire, infecting many people on an almost epidemic scale. Its applications have been ‘astonishingly diverse’ (p.2), its movement across disciplines ‘extraordinarily impressive’ (p.2). It has been used as an explanatory factor in just about everything from domestic pets as a source of community-building networks to its ability to prevent deforestation (2010). ‘The point here is not to mock the notions that such subjects of study should be taken seriously’, he says (2010, p.23)... but he mocks them anyway. Fine notes all of these examples with a growing sense of incredulity, but also with a measure of malicious gloating. As with ‘The Cambridge Primary Review’ (2010) Fine makes a direct appeal to his readers, but here it is only to ask that his stamina for and commitment to his subject be passed on to them ‘through the medium of good humour’ (2010, p.10), as if to underline once again how laughter and seriousness can comfortably co-exist, without either condition dominating the other.

Robert Putnam emerges as the cardinal target in Fine’s crusade against social capital. Following his analysis of American civic virtue in ‘Bowling Alone’ (2000), he is held to account for many intellectual and methodological transgressions. He is the party responsible

for re-awakening an interest in social capital - according to Fine, an undeserved popularity (2010). His contribution in helping to distinguish between social capital's negative face and its more appealing and well-publicised good side is, however, both original and significant. He introduced the twin dimensions of 'bridging' and 'bonding' (inclusive and exclusive), but as with social capital itself, claims Fine, it is riddled with ambiguity since there are no clear lines as to what precisely constitutes these two opposing forms.

For example, there tends to be some stereotyping that bridging social capital is positive, and that bonding social capital is mainly negative. This typecasting is based on the argument that the former allows for a more general, broader form of reciprocity and trust development. But as Fine makes clear, the complex of tensions and conflicts within society 'cannot be wished away by aggregating social divisions' such as race, class, gender, and disability into bland and universal categories like bridging and bonding (2010, p.29). This is a clumsy, heavy-handed routine; it would be akin to fitting square pegs into round holes. Putnam's simplistic belief that 'more bridging and less bonding is a recipe for curing all ills' (2010, p.123), that bridging social capital is conceived as some kind of 'magic bullet' and that bonding social capital is the wrong kind, simply misses the point. It can be argued that in real terms both forms are important. The bridging and bonding distinction does not seem to be a very natural dichotomy (Durlauf, 2002). 'One would expect various forms of social networks to simultaneously do both' (2002, p.261).

Although Putnam is singled out as the man at the wheel of the social capital bandwagon, it is those who have enthusiastically jumped on board that earn for themselves a special measure of Fine's odium. Putnam's contributions notwithstanding, a proportion of the blame for allowing social capital to get wildly out of control can be attributed to low-grade scholarship.

Fashion-conscious universities have allowed themselves to get caught up in all the hype and excitement, be it through a mixture of opportunism or plain gullibility. Either way, a long succession of worthless research projects have been bankrolled with generous research grants on the back of the social capital hysteria. In a voice reminiscent of Alexander (2010) Fine complains that it has led to the impoverishment of intellectual integrity. Accordingly, a supplementary concern to the main theme of Fine's book provides him with an opportunity to offer some much needed guidance to future enquirers in the social sciences, so that they can avoid the errors that have befallen previous researchers who wittingly or unwittingly got drawn into the circus Fine refers to as 'hack academia' (2010, p.32). But as if a research topic investigating whether pet ownership scores highly on civic engagement scales did not have a built-in amusement factor to it already, Fine feels it necessary to remind his readers that although it can be hard work, research can be fun (2010).

It could be argued that Putnam's theory of social capital may have simply been the object of a deliberate and dedicated re-branding scheme, designed with the intention of making the idea of civic engagement more pressing on and palatable to a newer, wider audience. But Fine doesn't think there was much wrong with social capital's earliest incarnation. Despite misgivings about the concept in general, and the fact that in his view it has contributed to the degradation of social theory, the frequently overlooked interpretation of social capital offered by Bourdieu (1986), who at least placed an emphasis on its class dimensions and related concerns with social hierarchies and power elites, had much to commend it. Offering a deeper, narrower understanding of social capital should have ensured that similar variables such as race, gender and disability would not have been so easily passed over. This may help to explain Fine's antipathy not only toward Putnam but also to so much spurious, self-indulgent, hastily-assembled social capital-inspired research (2010). His critique of what he

claims are the many unworthy research projects which have proliferated in the wake of social capital's popularity echoes the noises of reproof made by a one-time Secretary of State for Education who claimed, in a speech to an ESRC meeting, that the social science community was guilty of producing a surplus of irrelevant investigations (Blunkett, 2000). Like David Blunkett before him, Fine seems to care very little for the esoteric, naïve, or marginal research items conducted perhaps as part of a statutory research training programme, by virgin researchers unintentionally ambiguous and hesitant. Even though their work may stand little chance of informing social policy, such a derisive view of their efforts may well restrict or close down the possibility of surprising, novel and radical critique emerging in the future (Ball, 2001).

#### *Laughing with and Laughing at*

Mention of his 'good humour' (2010, p.10), which has clearly been self-enhancing, helping him through the stresses and strains in completing his critical social capital study, allows Fine to cast a nod toward humour's long-established coping properties. But this humour reference itself is not without its problems. It, too, is ambiguous. For instance, does Fine mean 'good'-natured humour, that is, just a bit of banter, a substantive part of the give-and-take of academic life, which amounts to a form of professional repartee? Or does he mean 'good' as in good quality humour, a type with popular appeal? Or 'good' as in humour that is non-harmful, non-tendentious, wholesome and clean? Or 'good' meaning clever and artful, the elitist wit of an intellectual who uses it to attack an opponent without resorting to physical violence? Whatever Fine meant by this very loose term does not hide the fact that acts of derision summon up behaviours that blur the distinction between adulthood and childhood. When, for example, he refers to Putnam as a 'benchkin' (2010, p.159), a term of his own coinage, it being an unflattering description of 'an academic who attracts attention in spite of

the poverty of analysis and lack of validity' (2010, p.159), he doesn't end it there. He quickly follows up by caricaturing him as the 'Ronald McDonald of social theory' (2010, p.161), as though Putnam was a figurehead for the research community's gluttonous appetite for attractively packaged refection that is deeply satisfying but ultimately bad for one's health. Fine claims that this 'scurrilous mocking is hard to avoid' (p.159). And in a show of grotesque modesty he even takes some comfort from the fact that there are other critics who direct even more caustic humour at Putnam than he does (2010).

It is no coincidence that Fine's conduct here should resemble the kind of activity one would normally expect to find on the school playground. Puerile name-calling and other acts of derision amount to the most common form of laughter behaviour. They feature among the main components of laughter's superiority theory, which is basically a theory of mockery (Billig, 2005), a theory which, for many people, provides the only credible explanation as to why we are moved to laughter at all (e.g. Gruner, 2000; Buckley, 2005). This classic laughing *at* attitude is not only an innate, spontaneous response to some humorous stimulus. Although it still comes suddenly, this laughter is deliberate (Wickberg, 1998). On the printed page it seems even more calculated and contrived, as if watching some risible interaction in slow motion. In fact, this slowing down analogy is particularly helpful for it can improve our understanding of these laughter interactions. Under closer analysis it becomes clearer to see that the concept of derision does as much to define laughter in terms of the person instigating the derisive act as it does in terms of the object being derided (Wickberg, 1998). Ridicule can, with equal force, be person-centred just as it can be object-centred. This laughter which can fire backwards, as it were, has been identified in a recent study where evidence indicated that some school children were ridiculing themselves for purposes of affiliation, to make others (school bullies) like them or to prevent them from being oppressed. In short, they were

using adaptive, tactical forms of humour for self-protection (Jones *et al*, 2012). Thus, when parents begin laughing at their children's mishaps, foibles, and general naïveté, we may be witnessing the beginning of a circular laughter process that commences with children picking up laughter cues from adults, and then continues with adults reverting to laughter behaviour usually associated with their children.

Signs of circularity, of repetition, were not apparent in the preceding review of literature.

There was synthesis but no evidence of cycles. While the sweep and curve of the inclusive-exclusive profile was followed and charted in the hope of finding 'grey areas' at the interface of these two extremities - areas where laughter can be perceived as one *and* the other - the conception and emphasis has been essentially ordered and sequential. Perhaps it is too soon to begin looking for repeatable trends and tendencies. The relatively short time perspective failed to notice any resurgence in special education's psychological model, for example, or a re-emerging interest in the methods of logical positivism. For the time being at least, the distinguishing feature of the phenomena analysed has been their relentlessly progressive unfolding. Implementing a chronological review of the literature has helped to appreciate the evolutionary development of the inclusive-exclusive configuration. It showed how, in sixty years, its methodological treatment has been affected by the change in cultural patterns, in social policies, and innovations in scholarship. To that end, the rise and the demise of various intellectual traditions, of disciplinary models has, with each undulation, helped to re-arrange and bring improvements in our thinking and our practical habits about laughter, about inclusion and exclusion, and about teaching and learning.

## METHODOLOGY

The main difficulty faced by laughter investigators is knowing how, where, and when to locate data commonly regarded as ubiquitous. Try to grasp it, we are told, and it will disappear (Berger, 1997). It is, with equal effect, ordinary and conventional, mysterious and elusive. But in order to unravel its mystery an ethnographic approach has much going for it. Observations and interviews are very useful research tools from/upon which valid inferences can be made. On the face of it, however, these particular methods seem entirely unsuited since laughter is such a slippery phenomenon to scrutinise. It is not easy, for example, to distinguish laughter from crying, or to differentiate exclusive from inclusive laughter. A quantitative-based design may have helped here, and clearly has its attractions, but before one can begin to count or measure instances of laughter one must be able to discern those sometimes subtle differences in laughter behaviour. In fact our first perceptual instinct is to hear laughter, not to see it. Moreover, people generally find it a difficult topic to discuss since many are unable to remember why it was they laughed in the first place (Berger, 1997). Nonetheless, there is something about the ethnographic method that makes it a good fit with laughter. Re-tracing some of ethnography's anthropological roots will help render this conjunction much clearer.

Applying a research focus on two primary schools owes much to the widely held view that laughter is a key constituent of childhood. In the popular imagination, at least, they collect strong associations and together have a long history. When children attempt to build up their stocks of social capital in order to make those vital family, neighbourhood, and community connections, laughter will invariably help facilitate that process. Its value as a social lubricant cannot be underestimated. But because of laughter's fugitive and fragile nature approaches to it must be cautious (Berger, 1997). All endeavours must be the product of careful planning.



Designs and strategies must therefore incorporate searches among school settings that will not only highlight the places *where* laughter's presence is most frequent, but also *when* its manifestations are most likely to occur.

### *Ethnography and Anthropology*

Of all the available research methodologies to choose from, ethnography is the one that seems to have an unexpected fit with subjects focused on humour and laughter. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly distinctive about the ethnographic outlook or its structure that should so obviously commend itself as an approach whose credentials have any sympathy with mirth or amusement. But, here and there and from time to time, there emerge instances of note that suggest ethnography and anthropology have made strenuous efforts to cement an association of sorts. These instances may be rather deep and profound, or somewhat speculative, fanciful or fleeting. Malinowski, for example, had hoped, facetiously perhaps, that anthropology would be able to not only inform us on tribal rites and customs, but 'supply us with a finer sense of humour' (1992, p.145). Some academics have gone out on a limb and dared to compare the world of comedy to the development of modern ethnography (e.g. Chambers, 1989). Others seem content to avail themselves of the ethnographic method in order to, in the aid of rhetoric, turn their field-notes into witty, sarcastic documents, distinguished by their use of parody (e.g. Goffman). And there are even those who profess to have an expertise in both anthropology and laughter (Piddington, 1933; 1950). Each example and instance has proved to be an influence, to some degree. Moreover, there is something reassuring that in this particular branch of interpretive inquiry there is a methodology that not only can provide a solid foundation to the research enterprise, it also has some natural sympathies with its subject matter.

Anthropology's first contact with laughter and humour is likely to have occurred with the exploration of 'primitive' joking rituals. Investigations pertaining to ritualistic behaviour affecting codes of honour and social status in non-Western cultures proved popular in the middle years of the last century, and featured prominently in the work of British functionalists like Radcliffe-Brown and Mary Douglas. In order to try and understand the different systems of family life and kinship and their effect on the social structure, Radcliffe-Brown gave serious thought to the issue of 'function', how the various interlinking parts within the system operated, developed together, and helped maintain society's healthy condition (1952). For instance, anthropologists have seen in joking relationships distinct modes of behaviour that perform the vital function of easing the strains of problematic relations, of releasing tension (Apte in Billig, 2005). But humour and laughter have many different functions in this respect, although promoting group cohesion, creating inter-group conflict, and providing social control through the mere threat of ridicule and disparagement, seem to be among its most common applications (Billig, 2005).

Of interest to Radcliffe-Brown was the relational networks prevalent in 'native' cultures, and in particular relationships 'involving both attachment and separation' (1952, p.91). He noted, for example, that certain marriage customs in tribal societies can provoke tension for the bride and groom insofar as their new in-laws are concerned. Although they are clearly taken into the family, and enjoy a special relationship with that family, the bride/groom remain to a large degree as outsiders. This inclusive-exclusive relation is described as involving 'both social conjunction and social disjunction' (1952, p.91). The question Radcliffe-Brown attempted to answer was how can a relation which combines two potentially antagonistic positions be given a stable, ordered form? One way, he noted, was through the deployment of the 'joking relationship' (p.90) – the joke which is set aside for specific ritual occasions. He

observed that hostility can be circumvented by playful disparagement and teasing, and this in its regular repetition is a constant expression or reminder of that social disjunction. Radcliffe-Brown understood this as being one of the permitted, essential, components of the relationship. Concomitantly, the social conjunction - the inclusive condition - is maintained by the expected friendliness of the disparaged person, the butt, who is required to take no offence at the pretended tease or insult. More generally, the joking relationship is part of customary banter that extends in varying degrees across a range of different cultures. In many circumstances it is considered to be a social balm that is deliberately applied at times of tension for the purposes of appeasement and putting people at their ease.

Mary Douglas chose to examine the part joking plays in West African kinship traditions. Like Radcliffe-Brown before her she believed that ritualised joking 'connects and disorganises' (1999, p.156), a routine assumption to make given humour and laughter's propensity to include and exclude. But she was critical of some of her colleagues and predecessors who felt that joking-based fieldwork was just a question of classifying joking rituals (1999). Failure to consider the jokes themselves, the significance of the witty repost or scatological laughter, without making any attempt to determine a joke's origin (on the understanding that all jokes have a social reference), does not make, she argued, for comprehensive analysis (1999). Much of anthropology's interest in classification schemes can be attributed to Durkheim and Mauss's 'Primitive Classification', published in 1903 (Ellen, 2006). Since then, interest in the organisation of human experiences and perceptions, and the related processes of differentiation and distinctions, groupings and social hierarchies in advanced and rudimentary cultures, has become obsessive. Douglas is drawn in particular toward anomalies, examples of objects and concepts that defy easy classification, and where strict taxonomies have been flouted. Some items will invariably be adjudged difficult to label. It is Douglas's belief that

the way a society manages its aberrant and ambiguous forms will parallel its relationship with outsiders (1999). Furthermore, she notes the flexible ways in which some categories are arranged, a flexibility borne out of the fact that most rudimentary cultures of interest to early anthropologists were not able to rely on systemised storage and arranging techniques due, essentially, to the absence of written records.

Douglas notes, too, the subversive potential in all joking relationships. Laughter and jokes 'attack classification and hierarchy', she says (1999, p.156). Ritual joking provides a relief from social classifications, suspending the codes, observances, and stipulations that operate within the structural system. Although jokes can do this, their effects, however, are only short-term. They have no intention of actually overthrowing the controlling social system (Berger, 1997). A joke can cause but a temporary suspension of it, creating only a minor disturbance (Douglas, 1999). It could, on the other hand, do more damage, be more destabilising, if there was greater consensus on a joke's recognition. But the thorny question remains: how does anyone know when a joke has actually occurred? What is the difference, she asks, between an insult and a joke (1999)?

Douglas may be alluding to those nuanced joke-forms like sarcasm and irony, tropes which often confuse readers or recipients, who may, for whatever reason, be unable to appreciate their essential double meaning. An ironic tone, in particular, one that says the opposite of what one means, has a strong association with humour (Partington, 2006), and is an approach popular among those ethnographers who seek to challenge received wisdom and contradict officialdom (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Used deliberately by a writer it can become a 'device for excluding as well as including' (Booth, 1961, p.304). Stylistically, irony has been branded elitist (Bakhtin, 1984), bringing a new meaning to laughter's superiority model, one

that does not simply equate it with eminent triumphalism. Bakhtin's formula suggests that this laughing habit bonds an author to certain readers in a very partial and privileged way. These high-brow forms of humour only appeal to a select audience, he argues, a community of insiders who collusively share the same values and the same knowledge. Although a type of kinship is created it is of a type which means that, almost inevitably, some people will fall outside of its rarefied circle. Since they depend on the reader or listener having the ability to unravel their two-fold structure, sarcasm and irony can effectively marginalise the uninitiated. Non-native speakers and people with communication difficulties, for example, are among those at most risk of failing to distinguish joking material from what may seem like a much harsher, more deleterious use of language and literature.

The problem for 'primitive' participants as much for their modern counterparts or for individual fieldworkers lies in the interpretation of human actions. But, following fellow anthropologist Victor Turner, Douglas calculates that while the concept of 'structure' is firmly associated with authority, laughter and joking are potent and appropriate symbols of 'community' (1999, p.156). 'Structure' connotes the mundane apparatus of orderly ranks and positions arranged in an essentially hierarchical and non-egalitarian formation. 'Community' is the counter principle, ready to momentarily overturn the structure's rigidly defined world. Contrary to Bakhtin's (1984) thesis, ritual joking and laughter creates generally positive values which cohere around a form of anti-structure. Based on the sharing of common experiences, good natured relations and interactions, the concept of 'community', as distinct from 'structure', provides a better, richer means of interpreting ritualistic patterns of behaviour (Douglas, 1999, p.157).

Of frequent relevance to anthropological studies on humour and laughter is the presence of some contradiction or incongruity built into the structure of a local society. According to Douglas, this is where jokes originate; they are born into a system with all of the necessary joking material, as it were, pre-installed (1999). Her formula for identifying jokes rests largely on the belief that a joke will only stand a chance of being amusing if it expresses the social situation in which it occurs (1999). 'Joking takes place because the organised patterns of social life themselves involve disturbances, oppositions, and incongruities' (Mulkay, 1988, p.153). Jokes can challenge and disrupt that structure, that system of neat categories, those carefully designed sets of standardised and institutionalised acts that prescribe people to behave in predictable ways, by giving voice to its inherent inconsistencies and irrationalities (Douglas, 1999). Herein, ethnography can provide a unique and disquieting view of this precise system's underlying fragility.

Focus should be placed on situations, circumstances, and settings where humorous-provoking discrepancies and incongruities are likely to occur. Some are most likely in systems where behaviour is habitually guided by strong normative conditions. As humour and laughter involves the temporary infraction of both formal and informal norms, they successfully draw attention to them. By attending to these infractions, we can discover not only the norms themselves, but how such codes, rules, and prohibitions thrive or decay depending on the extent to which they are embedded within the social, cultural, or institutional infrastructure. Children's humour and laughter may be singularly important in this respect. Apte has suggested that the prevalence and range of humour among children indicates and reflects a society's or culture's attitude toward humour (1985). 'That adults encourage children to participate in humour and to appreciate it suggests a society's positive attitude toward it. On the other hand, the relative paucity of children's humour reflects a society's negative attitudes

toward it' (1985, pp.83-4). Studying children's humour and laughter in a school setting, for example, may help in discerning institutional norms and values by highlighting those practices and processes that either encourage or inhibit pupils' freedom of expression.

When ethnography began to flourish as a discipline in its own right, among its most edifying and practical ideas was that data should be obtained directly from a community or culture *in situ*, away from artificial or experimental settings. As Bergson said, 'to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one' (1911/2005, p.4). Some of the very best fieldwork that has examined laughter in school-based cultures, either placing it as its primary focus (e.g. Woods, 1984) or as a topic in passing (e.g. Willis, 1976), have relied on ethnographic observations and interviews. Shining examples like these stand out chiefly because of the humorous content, the risible comments made by the research participants, comments faithfully reported by the researchers concerned in the culture being investigated. In many texts, recorded speech can appear as a refreshing interlude that punctuates often tedious stretches of narrative or dense theoretical explanations. It brings the reader not only some light relief but much closer to the events and to the action described, humanising the participants involved, bringing them to life, ensuring they don't 'exist only as the muted objects of the ethnographer's scrutiny' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.203).

The inclusion of humour in ethnographic writing is not without its problems, however. As Apte indicates, humour may well prove to be a rhetorical device of some importance (1985), yet some readers may see its inclusion as evidence of researcher-participant over-familiarity. Such an accusation has been levelled at Paul Willis (1976). His school study was memorable not least because of the amount of time he spent with one of two pupil-groups under his

examination, a group who expressed an unusual devotion to humour and laughter. It encouraged not only a strong bond between the group members but, it might be argued, between them and Willis, too, to the point where his data may have been compromised as a consequence. Willis's proximity to laughter, his transcription of it, his asking questions about it, his seeking explanations for it, may have been enough for some people (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) to have misinterpreted this level of familiarity, the amount and detail of textual analysis, and effectively assumed that it was evidence of the kind of damaging affiliation that can reduce the safe ethical distance expected between researcher and researched.

'One predominant characteristic of ethnography...is its serious and sedate mien' (Fine & Martin, 1990, p.89). It might be argued that one of the reasons for the continuance of this description is that when researchers step outside the sphere of serious discourse they leave themselves open to critical scrutiny for their imagined lack of respect and unprofessional attitude. There is a general belief that the world of humour is 'where the strictures of the serious no longer obtain' (Wickberg, 1998, p.170), as if there was no equilibrium between these two opposing modes. Although writing and researching *about* laughter has grown in popularity over the years, ethnographers are disinclined to incorporate humorous techniques into their work either as a significant or as a supplementary textual feature. One searches in vain through the pages of scholarly journals for any evidence of wit (Buckley, 2005). One of the difficulties faced by researchers is that humour draws a crowd, and very likely draws a critical crowd, eager it seems to treat with hostility any deviation from sober academic conventions and standards. Humour, therefore, demands great skill in its handling since it seems to invite so much extra attention. And yet the prevalence of ethnography's serious side is surprising given claims of its association with literary comedy (Chambers, 1989). It is



suggested that they share a range of structural similarities. Unlikely as it sounds, they regularly use specific literary modes of ‘exaggeration...and reversal’ (1989, p.589), not to mention the ‘literariness’, the expressive power, of much ethnographic presentation (1989). Some of the parallels, however, are even more tenuous. Much is made, for example, of the growing awareness among writers of comedy in the 18c that ‘satire derived less from their imaginations than from careful observations of human behaviour’ (1989, p.591).

Erving Goffman is looked upon as one of the few social scientists to take the serious and sedate ethnographic approach and successfully shake it into a state of mild effervescence. Introducing highly diverse sources and an array of humorous elements into his work did not limit the number of admirers who marvelled at this centrally important theorist’s creative genius. And yet, despite the plaudits, he remains a figure who stands accused of taking an all too casual methodological approach to his investigations. The strongest objections allege that his data-gathering was unreliable (Fine & Martin, 1990). Being the recipient of such reproach recalls the responses made to Paul Willis’s most famous work (1976). One is inclined to wonder, therefore, whether humour and laughter will always provoke this level of criticism, and that either phenomenon will perhaps long be regarded as a disruptive and damaging influence on the integrity of the social sciences, forever viewed as a sign of either flippancy or over-affinity.

But one of the reasons for Goffman’s popularity as a writer, why he is read with so much pleasure, can be attributed to his witty tone of voice, his dry humour which manages to be both entertaining and informative. This also extends to his deliberate violation of rules governing the use of language, his habit of what some describe as ‘atom cracking’ (Burke, 1984, p.308). This term refers to the practice of introducing a word that by custom belongs to

a specific category, but is wrenched free from its taxonomic straitjacket and applied liberally into unexpected textual settings. This dramatic use of vocabulary is routinely employed by children who, in the process of language acquisition, much like Goffman, appear to have great fun exploring and manipulating its morphological and semantic structure, bending it out of shape, in what amounts to a form of linguistic play (Apte, 1985).

Anthropology and ethnography's strong association with laughter and humour is all the more remarkable because their principle methods of enquiry – observations and interviews – are not particularly suited to the task of gathering laughter data. Naturalistic studies have been hit particularly hard by the recent ethical restrictions on recording equipment, once a mainstay of school-based fieldwork. Apart from that, laughter is a form of expression that is, first and foremost, detectable chiefly by the ear. To rely on visual perception alone or on the interpretation of purely facial cues, for example, is likely to lead to confusion. Equally, asking people questions about their laughter behaviour is unlikely to yield much important information. Berger (1997) offers a cautious note to those about to conduct research on laughter: 'one must be very, very careful, or the thing [laughter] will break before our very eyes' (p.xv). His advice is not to approach it directly, but to go around it with calculated circumspection (1997). 'The experience of the comic is fragile and fugitive', he warns (p.xv). It may be difficult for a person to recall - let alone rationalise - why something was able to provoke in them a humorous response (1997). Despite these doubts and caveats, ethnography comprises many of the credentials necessary to lead an investigation with a focus on school children's laughter. Its historical concern with behavioural patterns and issues of communication in small-scale societies make it, in many ways, the ideal approach to be used in micro-cultures such as a school or a school classroom.

In any mainstream classroom laughter plays a dual role. It functions as an affiliative, cooperative force and as a divisive, anti-social one, simultaneously supporting and undermining a school's inclusive ethos. Given its duplicitous nature it would appear to present primary school education with something of a dilemma. Should laughter be managed so that only its positive 'inclusive' side prevails? Or might its negative 'exclusive' side be positively valued on the understanding that, counter-intuitively, exclusive laughter may be an important constituent of inclusive schooling? Perhaps its negative 'exclusive' side should simply be tolerated on the understanding that it is an imperishable polar opposite. It is all-too convenient to judge between the dimensions of inclusive-exclusive as one might be tempted to distinguish, for example, between 'good' and 'bad' laughter or 'genuine' and 'contrived' laughter. But these boundaries are not always easy to define. Each dimension, in fact, can be mutually influential.

Arguably the most widespread explanation of why we laugh, the anti-inclusive superiority theory, is said to account for all genuine, spontaneous laughter (Buckley, 2005). Furthermore, even where it can be argued that laughter may be characterised by disparagement, discrimination and malice, 'this does not negate its status as a creative act' (Conroy, 2004, p.91). Such thoughts have provided some educators and educational commentators (e.g. Willis, 1976; Keltner *et al*, 2001) with cause to re-assess commonsense understandings that set about constructing notions of exclusivity, and in particular those that almost unthinkingly identify 'exclusive' with 'negative'. Inclusive and exclusive *are* distinct entities. However, it may be helpful in this context to think of their relationship functioning like patterns of breathing. Inhaling and exhaling, for example, are quite different respiratory actions, but both are vital for the well-being of the human body.

In many ways, laughter's double-life reflects the many binary themes that feature in this particular investigation. The decision, for example, to use the theoretical framework of Robert Putnam's paired bridging and bonding forms of social capital can be justified on two counts. Education's relationship with social capital is long and distinguished. The term's emergence at the beginning of the last century has been attributed to a former teacher (Putnam, 2000). Education has also been at the heart of some influential idea-systems and conceptual analyses. Monographs by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) have paved the way for contemporary researchers to examine educational achievement, attainment, and development from a range of different perspectives, including key social themes such as family and class structure. In addition, the inherent strengths and indeed the principal weaknesses of the concepts of bridging (inclusive) and bonding (exclusive) will best explain the conjugated nature of the inclusive-exclusive school environment. For example, a taken-for-granted view maintains that bonding forms of social capital are bad, for they can lead to closed, homogeneous communities, whereas bridging types are considered to be good since they are more outward-looking. On that basis, not unreasonably, Putnam enthuses about the importance of creating more bridging social capital so that we can 'connect with people unlike ourselves' (2000, p.411).

And yet Putnam concedes that it is not always easy to distinguish between these two particular forms (2000). Under many circumstances both bridging and bonding social capital can have positive social effects (2000). The problem, as Fine (2010) indicates, is that bridging and bonding tend to cut across variables such as class, gender, race, disability, etc, and, as a result, 'overlook the fact that one person's bond is another person's bridge' (p.29). Only by understanding the contexts within which social capital is generated and applied can it become possible to differentiate between each type. Moreover, one can have bonding social

capital without bridging - but not vice versa (Schuller, 2007). The exclusive bonding form is therefore hugely important and, arguably, the most powerful – if not exactly the most socially desirable – of the two types. ‘A social unit with no bonding social capital is hard to imagine’, Schuller explains (2007, p.15), indicating that in certain contexts exclusivity is the more natural orientation. It therefore becomes possible to sense in the opposing tensions present in bonding and bridging social capital echoes of contradictory themes common to studies in laughter. The task, then, is to examine if they have any affinity with inclusive-exclusive issues in education, and to assess whether the former continues to merit its preferred status, and if the latter is still deserving of its largely unfavourable reputation.

### Quality not Quantity

Choosing the most appropriate methods to capture and analyse school-based laughter will usually mean deliberating on the ‘best fit’ between research questions and research paradigms. But it has also become necessary to take into consideration the type of ‘fit’ involved, e.g. the type deemed to be the most useful, the type likely to provide the most impact, that makes the biggest contribution to the community, and is the most attractive to parties of potential interest and influence. A single-minded qualitative researcher concerned about the condition of their research because it lacks, for example, a quantitative component, and is therefore considered to be lacking in validity (Gorard, 2001), may find the pressure to quantify – be it warranted or not – difficult to resist. Quantification could make any amount of meaningful contributions to a study hoping to gain insights into the social exchanges that shape attitudes, dispositions and meanings among the population of a primary school. Counting and measuring laughter has a long and significant history in the behavioural sciences. But the pressure to find at least a complimentary role for some quantitative methods derives less from methodological expediency than from political and economic expectation.

Many politicians and research funders who share a dislike for non-replicable, interpretive studies do so on the understanding that they are too parochial to be of any general benefit (Gorard, 2001)

The decision therefore not to include any quantitative methods in the chosen design frame is based on a point of principle rather than on any lack of confidence in using numbers (Gorard, 2001). An exclusively qualitative approach can be justified on the grounds there is simply too much quantitative authority in the current educational system, a system already clogged and encumbered with numbers, tables and targets. Attempts to account for this abundance follow a circular logic, in that '[n]umber drives the economy and children's education is driven by number because their education serves the economy' (Conroy, 2004, p.6). But an educational setting seems singularly unsuited to increased degrees of quantification, given its history of reducing complex educational practices to simple, supposedly objective measures, and its habit of creating statistical profiles based on league tables, SAT scores and Ofsted ratings.

In matters of social research, too, the researched community have often been treated by quantifiers as though they were nothing more than enumerable units (Oakley, 1999).

Nonetheless, numerical indices can bring a sense of order to what Stephen Ball describes as the chaotic organisation of school life (1998). Evidently they retain a measure of influence among some parents of pupils, seemingly impressed by their presentment of certainty and rectitude. However, it is not so much that figures can or cannot always be trusted. The point at issue is that the most important figures in the school equation (pupils and their teachers) can easily get overlooked amid the welter of performativity-related arithmetic. Ironically, it is those innocent sounding 'everyday numbers' (Gorard, 2006) that are routinely employed to evaluate schools, its teachers, and their pupils, putting them under an extra burden of

scrutiny, and measuring them against exclusively quantitative benchmarks. Johnson (2005) pointedly contests this kind of behaviour, arguing that school performance measures are incompatible with quantitative standards. Her alternative, highly original, thesis favours the use of laughter as the sole reference point for school performativity.

But Johnson's proposal, worthy in so many respects, suffers from the same weakness in construction commonly found whenever inclusive-exclusive criteria are based solely on better or worse, good or bad, binary values. It has been said that whatever people wish to purge, relegate, isolate, marginalise or ignore is invariably concentrated deeply within the very condition they choose to retain, favour, or prioritise (Castoriadis, 1997; Kristeva, 1991). Johnson's otherwise commendable recipe for a qualitative laughter-based rating system actually contains most of the quantitative ingredients she is so keen to replace. Introducing numeric categories and publishable league tables to sit alongside SAT scores, for example, seems to defeat the whole purpose of her exercise. That said, however, to design a qualitative performance indicator without recourse to some quantativity would prove to be a difficult - if not impossible - enterprise. To illustrate the degree of difficulty involved it has been noted that even purely qualitative-minded researchers are unable to resist employing quasi-quantitative terms like 'many', 'frequently', and 'some' (Bryman, 1988, p.127). Fastidious though this type of argument might be, it nonetheless illustrates the challenges to be faced when attempting to eradicate conditions many would argue to be ineradicable. If this is indeed the case, and that the poles at either end of a continuum are much closer than previously imagined, could the current state of the quantitative-qualitative orientation be applied to bridging-bonding and, by extension, inclusive-exclusive? By pursuing the putative distinction between them is it possible we might find more equivalences than differences?

Today, the integration of quantitative and qualitative perspectives enjoys widespread support among the academic community and within scholarly literature. The big metaphysical issues thought to be behind much of the acrimony between the two traditions have either been conveniently side-stepped or temporarily deferred. The early claim that research craft and practice should take precedence over the application of philosophical ideas (Bryman, 1988) has now assumed much greater authority, although down-grading the influence of the metaphysical is still viewed with alarm in some quarters (e.g. Peim, 2009). But even in the wake of this embracement of the 'Third Way', the metaphysical underpinnings of social research have not been entirely abandoned. With little fuss or fanfare the movers for 'methodological inclusivity' have been quietly but conscientiously going about their business. Despite the name, it does not appear to be a full-blown methodological system as such. Research handbooks seldom mention it. Researchers rarely make exclusive use of it. It may, in fact, be understood more as an inner (personal) self-guidance system, functioning according to largely extemporised standards and operating principles. All the same, some broad-based ideals are frequently championed. Among them include a dedication to ensuring that a diversity of methods should have greater representation in social research. Also, in an effort to make the research experience more democratic, all participants - particularly children - should be made to feel like valued partners and not just passive subjects. But what raises it above the level of similar-minded systems is that it links to a single facet of social reality. According to Davison and Martinsons, to be methodologically inclusive is equivalent to being socially inclusive; it amounts to a complete identity of opinion (2011). Bearing such an outlook suggests that inclusivity is operational whether one is actively engaged in research endeavours or not. Inculcating such an attitude may be a way of transcending the overtly selfish 'means-to-an-end' view of social research held by some aspiring members of the research community. Its neat one-piece formula resembles a type of prescription that gives



shape to current and future practices that are assembled throughout everyday life. Its essence is overtly cosmopolitan and caring. It seems to be more than just having that largely passive, almost hackneyed 'view of social reality'. Instead, it is about being actively motivated so that one can achieve a suitable position to effect some real change to that reality, should it be required.

### *An Inclusive-Exclusive Methodology*

And yet, if it was ever necessary - or even possible - to measure the inclusiveness of an inclusive methodology, its estimates are liable to fall far short of many people's expectations. In terms of the values and principles that inclusively-minded researchers profess to uphold, a commitment to collaborative processes and practices are among the most well-known. But despite reconfiguring the power difference, could there be any reason to believe that a methodology described as 'inclusive' has, in fact, rather more in common with its polar opposite? Its elusive - not to say exclusive - character may call into question its dedication to egalitarianism. Inclusive research, it is argued, seems only capable of focusing on single issues, its adherents not seeming to care or understand, for example, that educational concerns relating to ethnicity and learning disability do in fact evolve from similar discriminatory social factors (Allan, 2010). There is deep frustration felt by junior researchers not knowing where, when and how an inclusive methodology can be applied, i.e. whether it is actually intended to be used as a supplement to conventional methodologies or as an alternative. Fundamentally, there is a suspicion that while an inclusive methodology should indeed be a positive way forward in democratising the research process and delivering significant outcomes, its principle achievement is in raising a flag to its own good intentions.

Of perhaps greater interest is the claim that research with an inclusive bias has, unwittingly, contributed to a rise in exclusive practices and procedures (Allan, 2010). This indicates that at least for some researchers their understanding of the term 'inclusive' remains incomplete or confused. To some extent this is understandable, for even among experienced professionals and practitioners the specialised discourse surrounding the concept remains highly contested. 'Labelling', for example, a term with critical significance in mainstream education, can either be deemed inclusive or exclusive, depending on whether the practice is viewed from a 'rights-based' or a 'needs-based' perspective (Ravet, 2011, p.670). But one of the hallmarks of inclusive research remains its near obsession with process. A fundamental objection to inclusive methodologies is that their desire to meaningfully include those traditionally marginalised from the research experience threatens to engulf the very real need to produce findings and outcomes which can ultimately guide policy (Walmsley, 2004). As a human disposition, self-consciousness generally denotes a sign of uncertainty; people require assurances from others, in the form of positive feedback, about the kind of impressions they are making (Buss, 1980). Something similar may be said to occur with those who use inclusive methodologies, that is, in the way they appear to divide their focus explicitly between concerns for the welfare of research subjects and the maintenance of their self-regarding image, over-mindful perhaps of the undoubted goodness of their own actions.

But this need to focus both ways demonstrates that social research (and ethnographic research in particular) is, like laughter, two-faced. Modern-day ethnographers are advised to be simultaneous insiders/outsideers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), a description which recalls Powdermaker's (1966) Janus-like stranger/friend combination. As for the postmodern position, ethnography is envisioned as a study of the self/other, the researcher and the researched (Vidich & Lyman, 2003). These apparently countervailing orientations feed into

the notion that, like the binary nature of other paired distinctions (bonding-bridging, qualitative-quantitative, exclusive-inclusive), though they may be a useful way of classifying and understanding human interactions, there is a risk they may lead to static either/or positioning. Perhaps the manner in which social capital's bridging-bonding relationship is considered should be the way to begin thinking about other binaries, i.e. that they are, in effect, 'two qualities in the same network' (Portes in Patulny & Svendsen, 2007, p.36). This idea corresponds to some early-modern thoughts on laughter. Its inclusive-exclusive alignment is not always in contention. It can be a perfectly complimentary relationship, their arrangement resembling two atoms (Dupréel, 1928), their assured mutuality obviating the need for artificial efforts to synthesise or to reconcile them dialectically. Although 'exclusive' is often positioned as antithetical to 'inclusive', arguably its most persuasive explanation lies in Dupréel's molecular metaphor, as one half of a whole. As he first explained, not only are laughter's two forms interconnected, they can be inclusive and exclusive at the same time (1928).

Failing to appreciate that exclusivity has a significant value, and that the inclusive-exclusive pairing is best considered on a relational level that stresses their interdependence, was the principal inspiration behind this present study and gave shape and structure to its subsequent design. After conducting a small piece of laughter-based research in a primary school in 2008, a copy of the finished dissertation was presented to the school's head teacher. Upon reading it she promptly returned it, her indignation so profound it rendered her temporarily speechless. It was left to the deputy head, speaking on her behalf, to explain that among the document's findings evidence of exclusive practices flourishing within the school should not have been judged so harshly and did not in fact compromise the school's proud claim to be

‘fully inclusive’. I was then politely advised that for the purposes of any future research I should try and access an institution elsewhere.

When participants in ethnographic inquiries are moved to challenge research findings and dare to ‘talk back’ (Brettell, 1993, p.20), ethnographers can often react assertively, emphasising the rightness of their interpretations and the wrongness of the participant’s responses. Denied an opportunity to speak directly to the headteacher meant that I was not in a position to defend my fieldwork. The alternative course was to try and make some reflective sense of how I had found myself traduced and excluded after collecting, analysing and presenting data as objectively and conscientiously as I could. For some time afterwards the head’s high dudgeon was a reminder of the dimension of damage caused to an otherwise cordial relationship; the threat posed by this break in relations to a burgeoning and mutually valuable school-university partnership was more worrying still. At all events, I considered the headteacher’s response to be an overreaction, and that her evaluation of my research performance, perceived as some kind of betrayal, to be in very poor judgement. It was only much later that I began to have second thoughts. Gradually, I came to the conclusion that her grounds for grievance may in fact have been entirely justified. It has been said that researchers who have gone in search of the inclusive school have often come away disappointed, finding little evidence of inclusivity (Allan, 2010). This is because exclusive pupil behaviour and/or exclusive pedagogy might not actually militate against inclusive schooling, but be necessary components of it. It is entirely possible that inclusive and exclusive elements do occur simultaneously (Allan, 2010), and that their presence is not necessarily evidence of any contention.

### *Ethnography and Race*

Of the many different traditions that count collectively as qualitative research, ethnography remains one of the most inspiring and popular, despite it also being among the most contentious and excluding (Vidich & Lyman, 2003). Its long established partnership with anthropology has earned for it an unwelcome reputation. Perhaps this has been more deserving in former times when it was put into service by colonial governments the world over to carefully document the social systems in their overseas possessions. Many of these 'studies' were conducted by bureaucrats and administrators investigating indigenous populations and their customs 'in order to provide the dominant white minority with information prejudicial to native interests' (Turner in Asad, 1973, p.15). But, despite having divested itself of virtually all of its colonies, Britain is still coming to terms with the various aspects of its imperial past. Today, those who migrate from the old dominions in the East to the so-called 'motherland' do so in spite of how their ancestors and distant relatives were affected by Britain's past actions and omissions. Even though there is much to condemn regarding Britain's Asian exploits, the two peoples in fact share an intimate history and also a growing cultural affinity. Indeed, it is at the old Empire's epicentre where today many migrant families choose to cash-in their stocks of social capital. Being in possession of an impressive network of kinship connections improves their access to potential social openings, which may ultimately provide them with stronger economic security, improved welfare provision and, for the children of industrious parents, a greater range of educational opportunities. The motility of successive generations from the subcontinent has, among other things, helped make it possible for the modern ethnographer to continue studying unfamiliar social groups, but from a more ideologically respectable and methodologically reliable vantage-point. No longer the unequal power encounters of old; the emphasis now is on

respectful dialogue, with the only condition likely to be exploited being the mutual desire among people from different traditions with different identities to get to know each other.

Heeding the advice that ethnographers should be simultaneous insiders-outsiders may prove to be empathically valuable when coming to study a school society whose pupil population is of mainly Pakistani heritage. It has been noted that within this particular ethnic grouping many youngsters in the UK live a divided insider-outsider existence (Bhatti, 2011). The Crescent Primary School has borne the brunt of similar divisions in its recent turbulent history, with internal difficulties necessitating some harsh external remedies. The introduction of special measures on the back of perceived weaknesses in school leadership and below-average SAT scores (in maths and English) has produced an enforced union with a high-achieving school in an outlying neighbourhood. The most recent Ofsted report indicates that as a result of federation some improvements have been noted in both areas. Despite such efforts, however, the school remains severely under-resourced and is constrained by a substantial budget deficit, a burden inherited from the previous school administration. Its larger than average number of pupils on roll (450) has a correspondingly larger than average population of pupils on the SEN register. Its situation in an inner-city area of significant socio-economic disadvantage is perhaps the single most important element in a cumulation of debilitating social and economic factors. Into this inauspicious environment one might be tempted to find that a complex like laughter is viewed with having very little significance in the course of routine school business. Nonetheless, if and when laughter is eventually presented, the immediate task will be in knowing how to recognise it.

### Participant Observation and Specific Listening

Peter Berger (1997) asks, how can you tell if someone is laughing or in pain? The suggestion being that it is not enough to rely on outward appearances alone. Physiological knowledge of the ‘co-ordinated contraction of fifteen facial muscles...accompanied by altered breathing’, (Koestler, 1964, p.29) could in fact describe any number of human emotions. Attentiveness to those who are able to describe their own laughter experiences, however, may be of slightly more value. Taken together, the two methods of observing and interviewing should make the task of identifying laughter more rigorous. And yet, situated somewhere between these techniques, one of the most important instruments available for the detection and analysis of laughter goes largely unrecognised. In our culture and in this context the priority given to the visual over the auditory is difficult to justify. Normally its unique acoustic signature is the first indication that laughter has transpired. Yet even respected anthropologists who have written extensively on laughter insist it is essentially a facial expression (e.g. Douglas, 1999). In a school setting, however, it is the *sound* of laughter that is deemed to have most significance. From it, for example, we can determine whether it is the product of healthy or harmful interactions (Johnson, 2005). But whichever way it is utilised, listening remains a skill that is rarely thought important enough to be justified as a research tool in its own right. Usually it is subsumed as a configuration in the questioning techniques that are fundamental to the art of interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Sometimes it is included as a component of the many approaches that can be applied to observational studies (Robson, 2011). But listening to, and for, laughter, demands that researchers develop not only a discriminating ear, it requires the development of a broad range of auditory skills - skills which approximate more to predictive listening, that is, listening in anticipation both for the laugh stimulus as well as for the laugh response.

The importance of specific listening has been demonstrated in the work of Gail Jefferson (1985). It was through careful machine analysis of laughter that she was able to show how, in the course of everyday conversations, its expression is rarely spontaneous but more often applied deliberately, strategically. That laughter can be controlled and carefully managed for either interactional effect or because of social constraints may have important in-school consequences. Concerns raised over ‘the voice of the child’ have typically focused on its absence in research projects involving children (e.g. Allan, 2010). Taken literally, however, this term can also apply to the act of vigilant listening, not only to or for the vocalised laughter of children, but also their unvoiced laughter. Unvoiced nasal forms may be a growing phenomenon in schools, and could indicate, in their arrested expressiveness, a bodily response to an institution’s over-reliance on rules, norms, and other behavioural and communication constraints. Nasal laughter tends to be heard but rarely ever seen since it occasions few discernible facial signals, except for a very short, sharp movement of the head and a sudden flexing of the diaphragm. The sound emitted is from the force of air pushed down through the nose. Researchers will be expected to get close enough to participants in order to hear these, at times, discreet articulations. Searching for these two forms of laughter in particular will justify the design and implementation of a laughter ‘map’. More properly, it might be referred to as a ‘schedule’, which details in sequence the everyday risible events that may be subject to some degree of prediction.

To be receptive to laughter means being favourably placed to those situations most likely to elicit it. It is tempting to believe that in a primary school setting a researcher on the alert for laughter will be spoiled for positional choice. It is a mistake, however, to assume that such outbursts occur so frequently that laughter can be considered ubiquitous. Previous experience (Nugent, 2008) has indicated that looking and listening for laughter requires something more



than just sitting, waiting patiently for it to happen. If a researcher's positioning and timing could be organised to coincide with outbreaks of laughter it would circumvent any need to depend on good fortune, and would mean that sampling was not only more systematic (Woods, 1986) but that it would likely produce better quality data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This may be crucial given the inevitable time constraints placed upon fieldwork by the sometimes small windows of opportunity provided by the always busy host sites. Here, the familiar school timetable could prove to be a research tool of fundamental significance. Functioning akin to a laughter map, it could be used, in conjunction with some personal intuition and prior knowledge, to help inform the whereabouts - and the time division - of possible laughter 'hotspots'.

### *A Time for Laughter*

This is not as fantastic as it sounds. Two teachers have independently mentioned that, for the duration of SATs week at their respective primary schools, laughter would be made temporarily 'unavailable', and therefore my presence (as a laughter researcher) would not be required during this particularly testing period of national testing. Contingencies like this merely confirm the widely assumed notion that the serious and the humorous are conditions which are mutually excluding (Berger, 1997). But instances that give rise to cases of 'laughter withheld' do not sound particularly healthy, although it probably and hopefully was only intended as an indication of the strength of the pupils' academic focus. Even so, it may confirm in the minds of some the suspicion that schools can find it too easy to close down, draw in, and quickly engage their exclusionary procedures. Nonetheless, a laughter map may succeed in producing two things. Firstly, it has the ability to provide an indication of 'people's time-bound experiences of laughing and responding to laughter' (Glenn, 2003,

p.39). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, mapping laughter might make findings from an ethnographic-based case inquiry more generalisable.

Up until quite recently, it has been regarded as a golden rule within social science research that it is not possible to generalise on the basis of a single case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). That the substance of this notion has remained valid for so long has meant that case methodology has managed to stand out, not just as ‘an exclusive method of inquiry’ (Anthony & Jack, 2009, p.1177), but in a way that its assumed limitations are made more conspicuous. Being amenable to the intense examination of the particular, case study proves attractive to investigators where there is an intensity about the research site in question and an equal intensity about the methods used to locate and collect data. The primary focus should be fixed on understanding all intrinsic particulars of the case. This, and not making generalisations, is the real business of case study (Stake, 1995). There are some, however, who maintain that the general-particular relationship is a misleading dichotomy (e.g. Fay, 1996). Generations of students and researchers, for example, committed to the interpretative understanding of human experience, have been brought up to believe that the general and the particular enjoy a much closer association (Berger, 1966). The true bearing of their alignment is best appreciated if it is accepted that mainstream schools function according to the same, or a very similar, set of codes and conditions. The central idea being that the rule-based nature of classroom instruction, which presumes a certain amount of coordination in order to proceed (Evers & Echo, 2006) encourages, through largely regular and repetitious staff and pupil behaviour, patterns of expectation.

On this basis, it may then be possible to anticipate instances of laughter across a school setting. Laughter influences and is influenced by patterned human behaviour (Buckley,

2005), behaviour which occurs in mainly informal zones and, it may be argued, at specific school times. If this is indeed the case, then it corresponds with the interpretivist view of the phenomenon, that laughter is a largely deliberate, controlled action (e.g. Mulkey, 1998; Jefferson, 1985), and not, as the positivist model entertains, an involuntary, spontaneous reaction. On the understanding that 'classrooms are [so] similar the world over' (Evers & Echo, 2006, p.518), the level or amount of predictability required to have any investigative significance would need to be substantial, something more profound (and precise) than, say, the popular conception that pupils and teachers are more inclined to laugh at 3pm on Friday afternoon than they are at 9am on Monday morning. If it could be predicted that not only is there no laughter during SATs week, but that pupils also refrain from laughing during break-time (because playground activity is now subject to strict regimes of supervision) this might have some relevance to much broader educational concerns. It may indicate, for example, that mainstream schools, in their desire to become more inclusive, have become more controlling. It may be the case that including greater numbers of children with special educational needs has made them more sensitive, perhaps over-sensitive, to health and safety issues. If laughter can indeed be predicted, it may suggest that schools are so keenly organised, that behaviour is so strictly managed, that children's laughter displays are subject to such careful governance, that teaching and learning now approximates to a strict stimulus-response formula, much like a mechanical conditioning process, or as one would find during a poorly conducted interview.

### *Conversations not Interviews*

As a researcher who privileges the ethnographic approach Woods (1986) questions the suitability of the term 'interview'. It implies a formality that most fieldworkers seek to avoid. The best method to transfer information, to discover others' perspectives, he suggests, is by cultivating 'conversations or discussions' (p.67). Conversations, especially, are a more

democratic, two-way, free-flowing process, marked by flexibility and friendliness, wherein participants can be 'themselves' and are not restricted by an obligation to adopt designated roles. Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) use the terms 'conversation' and 'interview' interchangeably, describing the interview, for example, as a 'professional conversation' (p.2). Among the various types available, the 'true conversation' (Gadamer, 1979, p.347) is characterised by a state of openness between parties promoting a reciprocal to-and-fro. Related to it is the 'casual' or 'everyday conversation' (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p.6), which is the kind of talk in which we feel most relaxed and most spontaneous. Conducting interviews in conversational mode attempts to change the relationship between researcher and researched. At its most basic it allows the former to engender trust, thereby encouraging the latter freedom of expression. However, even these forms of talk, informal and colloquial though they might be, are highly structured and functionally motivated. The exercise of power is always present in each verbal transaction (Nunokoosing, 2005). Even casual conversation is talk that involves the element of 'complimentarity', where one interactant or party 'demands' and the other 'gives' (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p.20).

Challenging this type of interchange will mean constructing an alternative method, one more in keeping with the collaborative principles of interpretative research. This, however, does not necessarily exclude the possibility of employing techniques that, while not ethically questionable, may blur the distinction between sincerity and cynicism, decency and deception. When conducting interviews, for example, it is claimed that the interviewer and the interviewee behave like actors engaged in a theatrical performance (Nunokoosing, 2005). Goffman used the term 'dramaturgical' (1969, p.246) to refer to the way individuals wish to present a certain aspect of self in order to influence an audience. A researcher's profile, for instance, their 'best side', can be favourably lit. Their complete image can become highly

polished through regular rehearsals, or piloting. Props such as pens and note-books can be made noticeable by their absence. Every effort will be made to show interviewees that there is nothing up one's sleeve, that is, their words will not be recorded or so obviously transcribed. Of course their words *will* be recorded, although this takes place in post-production, out of sight, where it will be transcribed from memory in preparation for later analysis and interpretation. This 'illusion', if it can be so described, is not intended to dissemble. In everyday conversation verbal exchanges are not normally committed to print, it being one of the types of talk a participant may feel reasonably free from any threat of surveillance or accountability (Eggins & Slade, 1997).

In rejecting the idea that face-to-face communications are stage-managed, Jurgen Habermas's main objection to the dramaturgical approach focuses on the way it appears to privilege an inclusive-exclusive relationship between speakers. As outlined in his work on communicative action (1986), speakers and listeners operate within a system of distinct yet interrelated worlds: the subjective, objective and the social world. Those who seek to achieve mutual understanding must meet with each of these landmarks in what amounts to a validity-check, a form of ontological triangulation. The performance approach to interviews and conversations is deemed to be only a two-world model, with participants connecting successfully with the subjective (exclusive) and the objective (inclusive) world, but failing to establish any meaningful correspondence with their social world. This is considered a serious oversight, for social reality is the key mediating influence between the subjective and objective domains. When operating together all three reference points help to further the goal of 'reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1986, p.286), i.e. coming to an understanding *with* others rather than by exerting influence *upon* them. Crucially, the rational, intelligible values in everyday communication are, thanks to Goffman, at risk of surrendering to insincerity and artifice,

bringing into question the validity of what people say to each other by improving the prospects for distortion and misunderstanding. Goffman seems to admit as much when he says, 'we spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows' (1974, p.566). The point at issue here is that when conversational behaviour is restricted to self-conscious posturing it produces a highly stylised 'presentation of self' - a depiction incapable of encouraging spontaneous expressive behaviour (Habermas, 1986).

## METHODS AND FINDINGS

As a way to highlight some of the issues affecting the practices employed to obtain field data, and the conclusions arising from examining that data, this chapter divides the conventional thesis headings dedicated to 'Methodology' and 'Findings'. Introducing a combined Methods/Findings section will bring to the fore some of the basic questions that continue to trouble qualitative fieldworkers. It will underline the participant/non-participant tension in unstructured observations, the formal/informal aspect to conducting interviews, and how the inclusive-exclusive nature of these research methods impact on the laughter data. It is a way also of introducing the primary schools that form the two research sites from which data were collected over two terms in 2012. It is also an opportunity to make a brief authorial introduction by way of some selective vignettes, a series of singular encounters that occurred early on in the field. These have been chosen to some extent for selfish reasons, to act as a means for some reflective analysis, but are included primarily to provide some background details, revealing some personal characteristics, some trait impressions, personal strengths and weaknesses, to all intents and purposes those discovered 'surprises and undoings' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.579). 'It is the requirement for methodological rigour that every ethnography should be accompanied by a research biography' (Ball, 1990, p.170). From it, an audience might get a better sense of a laughter researcher's feelings, fears, attitudes, and interactions, all of which subsequently gave significant shape to the generated findings.

### *Thick Participation*

Although not as old as some of the binary oppositions common to early Greek pathological and cosmological doctrines, the distinction between observing as a participant and as a non-participant has only been active since the birth of the modern disciplines of sociology and anthropology. Although it rarely provokes the kind of spirited debate familiar to other

methodological issues, it continues to cause some uncertainty among novice researchers as they try to decide which of the different types of observer role to adopt. The number of options now available has increased to the extent that school-based observers, for example, must choose between an assortment arranged across a dimension that has inclusive (complete participant) at one end and exclusive (pure observer) at the other. Participant observation is the role most often associated with researcher-practitioners, such as teachers and teaching assistants, who already enjoy a level of integration in the community being studied. Non-participant observation, on the other hand, leads to the collection of data without any deliberate contact with participants (Fine & Glasser, 1979). Here, a *laissez faire* approach is intended to uphold a researcher's dedication to detachment and unobtrusiveness, operating as a 'fly on the wall' for fear their presence will have a reactive influence on participants' behaviour.

The act or process of observing is the cornerstone of the ethnographic method (Delamont, 2002). 'You do not ask people about their views, feelings or attitudes; you watch what they do and listen to what they say' (Robson, 2011, p.316). At one time, non-participation was the field technique of choice for British ethnographers (Woods, 1986). Its popularity was due in part to its defensive strength, preventing observers from getting too close to their participants, thus reducing the chances of allowing over-rapport to develop with any particular element within the research setting (Woods, 1986). However, the decision to be made as to the type of observer to become can be motivated by our feelings about people generally, about the kind of relations we habitually make, and the type of interactions we experience or prefer. Putnam (2000) stresses the importance of building and maintaining social connections – 'doing with' as opposed to the altruistically-inspired 'doing for' (p.117). This is particularly relevant to researchers who may be so minded as to select a detached, non-participating strategy as the



purest, most purposive way to collect data. While it may leave some participants in awe of - and grateful for - the researcher's singular expertise, it may also mean that social connections become strained, since the research undertaking might assume the tenor of a one-sided act of kindness. It makes a mockery therefore of the view that qualitative research is best practised as a 'two-way street' (Lankshear & Knoble, 2004, p.112). Moreover, the term 'non-participant observation' fails to obey its own logic. All explicit forms of observation in the human milieu are to a great extent participatory. The level of interaction, according to Dewey (1916), may only be between sense organ and subject, but if we are given to observing people then we can also expect to be observed by them. This is the reciprocal nature of vision (Berger, 1972); on that understanding alone, the observer and the observed have a distinct commitment to one another.

At The Cross Primary School everyone seemed fully committed. After a business-like tour of the premises the headteacher introduced me to Ms Jones, head of Year 6. She was in her classroom making last-minute preparations before the influx of pupils at the sound of the school bell. It gave me an opportunity to move around the room, noting its shape and dimensions. Despite its resemblance to a large carton, even when empty it had a nest-like snugness, its walls over-laden not with leaves, moss, and lichen, but drawings, paintings, and pictures, each layer fattening out the flat square lines making the entire space appear cosy, friendly, and warm. This must be what Dewey meant when he described education as a process of 'rearing and raising' (1916, p.12). On my short saunter I found a promising spot from which to observe. Positioned at the back of the classroom, set adrift from the main arrangement of tables and chairs, was a solitary child's seat topped with a red cushion. From here a broad prospect of the interior was offered, affording views of all the key stations and personnel. I was pleased. I saw no value in remaining conspicuous although, unlike other

non-participant observers, I had no desire to become invisible (e.g. King, 1978). When the children came in and the register taken it was from this back-of-the-room vantage-point that I stood up and introduced myself to those present.

There was no timetable as such, certainly not of the kind used in secondary schools, but the opening ninety-minutes on Monday morning were always devoted to English. The lesson began with the teacher reviewing the previous session, which apparently was the first in a sequence of studies concerned with what the curriculum describes as ‘myths, legends and traditional stories’ (DfEE, 1999). On offer this morning was a continuation of the tale of King Midas. After the brief period of revision, in which the importance of the tale’s moral element was underlined (greed and its harmful consequences), the children were directed by the teacher to take their chairs and form them into a circle by placing them around the inner perimeter of the classroom. This manoeuvre was performed precisely and efficiently as if it was a familiar routine. To my surprise I found that I’d been joined at my remote outpost by two small neighbours, a boy and girl, who had moved into positions on my right and left side. Before very long all thirty seats in the large circle were occupied. Ms Jones took control of its centre and waited patiently for quiet.

I had assumed that the seating was arranged in this way because it was a convenient method of grouping the children. For the teacher went on to explain to the class that each child in the circle would be asked in turn what they would wish for if they were granted just one wish. But before making their choice public, Ms Jones urged everyone to remember the cautionary story of King Midas whose wish for the golden touch very nearly proved fatal. (Alas)/But as the class activity got under way it was clear that the first few children questioned had paid little heed to the teacher’s advice. One after another they declared in favour of such examples

as wishing ‘to own Manchester United Football Club’ or ‘to live in Disneyland’. As each new wish was revealed Ms Jones, with growing frustration, was at pains to point out either the moral flaw or impractical weakness in each offering. As the teacher slowly worked her way around the room I began to sense with mounting unease that I too might be invited to make a contribution. As if to make such an event less likely, I kept my head down and began writing phantom field-notes in exaggerated scribbles. This was my ‘do not disturb’ sign. Now, whether Ms Jones simply did not recognise or chose not to respect my abstention strategy, all the same after what seemed like an eternity I heard her call my name questioningly, and, with an impish rising pitch, ask me if I had anything to declare. Given the meagre amount of time available to think of something appropriate, assuming that a wish for world peace and an end to poverty might sound slightly self-righteous, and desperately trying to locate the child within me, all I could muster, under the circumstances, and at such short notice, was that I’d like to live in a house made of chocolate.

In the time it took before order was restored to the classroom and the children had finally stopped laughing, I was able to reflect on how pleased I was with my answer, and in particular the effect it had made. Not only did most of the children find it amusing, it also chimed with the general literacy/fairy-tale theme under discussion, connecting particularly with the confectionary gingerbread house made famous in the story of ‘Hansel and Gretel’. Ms Jones, however, was doing her best to defy the prevailing high mood. Her pique may have been due to my disregard for her advice, since I had simply repeated the same errors made by the children in asking for a wish that was rashly intemperate. Much like Midas’s, mine was predicated on a form of greed, in this case gluttony. Even before Ms Jones moved on to the next child in the circle I knew that I fully deserved - but was politely spared - at least a modicum of her reproach. On reflection it would have been useful had the children

been made aware of the impracticality of living in a house where every bite of it would destroy its capacity to provide shelter and safety (not to mention the problems a hot summer would bring). Earning her displeasure so soon was disappointing and embarrassing. The teacher was probably expecting that I would provide an answer that showed at least some evidence of having understood the rubric. Impelled, therefore, to demonstrate how it should be done, she proceeded to explain in careful detail and in a considered tone how, from the time of her early childhood, she had always wanted to be able to fly.

As I tried to get the image of Ms Jones soaring on motionless wings out of my mind, I felt that all was not lost. By dint of unintentionally reducing the pupils in Year 6 to giddy laughter I gained some comfort from assuming that I had succeeded in becoming a member of their circle. Those who did not actually laugh at my chocolate house reference made ‘*hmmm*’ and ‘*aaah*’ sounds, as though the mental picture I created was deemed approvingly delicious. Woods (1986) calls attention to the divisive nature of participatory research. Although it ‘could aid one’s relationship with fellow teachers, it could [also] negatively affect rapport with pupils’ (p.37). Somehow, I had managed to turn this hypothesis on its head.

Nevertheless, it proved to be a propitious moment inasmuch that I had every reason to expect that follow-up interviews, intended to complement the observation schedule, would be made so much easier after my morning’s performance. The success of the interviews depended on there being a certain amount of correspondence between interviewer and interviewees. Even interviews that are conducted informally, casually, will generally benefit from an ice-breaking effort to stimulate conversation. The sociability thesis proclaims that laughter has a unique ability to do this. Furthermore, laughter is a signal of trustworthiness since it serves as a bonding device between wit and listener (Buckley, 2005). Pupils who know so little about the person with whom they will be interviewed may feel that an ability to make others laugh

can make the stranger appear less strange. This may be important. Trends reported a decade ago indicated a worrying decline in social citizenship among youngsters, many of whom felt that, in their experience, people who did not count as their personal friends were, in the main, not to be trusted (Putnam, 2000).

Although it was not appreciated at the time, Ms Jones's decision to include me in the classroom interaction made a lasting and favourable impression. Perhaps her rearrangement of the chairs was a furniture version of the sociability thesis. After all, the sweeping line of a circle's geometry reveals a space of both intimacy and unity. Whether she knew her Euclid or was aware of Kristeva's (1991) meditations on the circles that bind people together, it was for all that a most worthy and appreciated intervention. If it was the sight of my preferred observer's position that may have offended her inclusive sensibilities and prompted her to take remedial action, it might have been because it stood out for her as a glaring example of social dislocation, and instinctively provoked in her the kind of response more usually in evidence whenever she notices, for example, a child at break-time wandering aimlessly around the playground on their own. Detachment and disconnection can of course represent valid and legitimate individual choices. When a person is reluctant to participate, is showing signs of withdrawal, it may be for genuine, personal reasons, some of which can be health related. Social barriers, too, can hinder participation. But, generally speaking, the quality of society and the basic foundations of social solidarity are thought to be compromised by non-participation (Putnam, 2000).

The decision to practise as a non-participant observer is considered by some to be a form of protection against 'going native' (e.g. Woods, 1986, p.38), although more accurately it is to guard against going *completely* native. Problems with this questionable term notwithstanding,

most teacher-researchers, for example, will have achieved 'native' status at the outset. The issue of over-rapport may have some relevance where there is a strong feature of cultural dissimilarity, but it becomes less relevant when there is a pre-existing identification with and affiliation to a particular culture, such as the culture of schooling and pedagogy. It matters little that the teacher-researcher may never have practised at the chosen school setting. But it may explain why those who enthusiastically embrace the role of 'pure' observer can often approach their fieldwork with a highly disciplined single-mindedness, as if to create the outward appearance of utter impartiality despite knowing that this is not – nor can ever be – the case.

King's (1978) focus on the task of obtaining data proved so unflinchingly clinical that he would not allow anyone to stand in his way, even if it meant being rudely uncommunicative to his infant-school participants. But then what he was attempting to achieve was something approaching the impossible, that is, to collect observational data while simultaneously maintaining an inclusive and an exclusive position. Taking such a strikingly objective approach could be argued as making very good sense given his specific research goals. Sustaining an engagement in a learning environment whereby the interactions between teachers and pupils are of sufficiently important value, yet having to initiate a detachment from those same participants so that their actions appear sufficiently natural, is an imposition that would confound Harry Houdini. To effect a complete 'social separation of the researcher from the subjects' (Hayhoe, 2000, p.231) may be a genuine attempt to try and minimise the researcher's presence, neither wanting to be an unwarranted attraction or a disturbance. It does, however, leave them open to accusations of unethical and anti-social practice.

Researchers of the future who might be inclined to make that social separation absolute can take heart from the knowledge that wearable technology, in the form of clothing that renders a person invisible, is the type of hi-tech attire that may soon be widely available, and not limited to the fantasy world of Harry Potter (Pendry, 2011). But until that day arrives, observers who aspire to be ‘a fly on the wall’ may find they must continue pretty much as the elephant in the room. A not uncommon tactic deployed while conducting fieldwork is to remain *incommunicado*. Declining to correspond with participants, even when they are small school children, and even when they make sincere requests for help with their spelling or reading, ensures that nothing can get in the way of a researcher’s determination to ‘observe clearly and research effectively’ (King, 1984, p.123). Using silence as a means to disengage from potentially distracting interactions with participants is, however, a risky procedure, not least because silence has an inherently ambiguous value. Proverbially, at least, it is said to speak louder than words. More interesting, perhaps, is the way in which silence is understood as a dynamic entity. Not so much a popular metaphor of absence, omission, or inaction as presumed by some, but, in fact, ‘a pronouncedly active performance’ (Zerubavel, 2008, p.8). As a crucial component of our communication system, linguists, for example, take a particular interest and place a significant value in those pauses and spaces placed in-between pieces of speech.

Averting one’s gaze to discourage interactions is a more familiar avoidance technique. The principle here is that ‘if you do not look you will not be seen’ (King, 1978, p.4). It proved to be so successful for King he was moved to declare that the teachers he had been observing ‘had forgotten I was there’ (1978, p.4). Yet his reluctance to speak to any of the pupils in his infant school study means we will never know if, like their teachers, they felt that the non-participating observer had become invisible or in fact remained highly conspicuous. That it

was a child who first saw through the illusion that lay at the heart of the tale of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ is deeply significant. Whereas adults will often unwittingly collude in perpetuating a delusion, as Hans Christian Andersen memorably demonstrated, children will be more inclined to speak out - such is the extent of their naturally active inclination towards spontaneity and curiosity (Dewey, 1916).

The research community had been alerted many years previously to the dangers in persisting with this fiction that research participants, particularly children, will over time get accustomed to a non-participating observer’s presence. Polansky *et al* (1949) were part of a team who, at a summer camp for children, systematically observed, over a 4-week period, a cohort of youngsters described as ‘disturbed children’ (p.282). Employing tactics and techniques familiar to those often favoured by modern-day non-participating researchers, observers in the team adopted a completely passive, neutral role, diligently following their remit to ‘maintain a bland exterior composure, [and] engage in a minimum of social interactions with the children’ (p.284). In an important - but almost fatal - act of reasoning, they assumed that the participants would simply become inured to the group of silent, expressionless, and emotionless scientists watching them. The first week passed off without incident. But by the second week it was reported that tensions between the observers and the observed had resulted in a series of ‘blow-ups’ (p.285), with the research team facing a genuine prospect of open hostilities should the observations be allowed to continue. It appears that the children found the process of being observed by people who were physically and emotionally removed from them, who made no attempt to engage or communicate with them, to be unnerving, threatening, and the cause of their deepest distress. The study team were forced to react smartly to try and rescue the situation. Practices and procedures aimed at ‘humanizing the observer’ (p.286) were quickly introduced, beginning with a dedicated move



toward warmer, friendlier associations with the children, which included more meaningful participation with them during formal and informal occasions.

Back at The Cross School, in the first session after lunch, Year 6 were treated to a classroom screening of Ray Harryhausen's splendid 1953 stop-frame animated film, 'The Story of King Midas'. Harryhausen intended that his series of *Fairy Tales* (there were 5 in total) should be used in schools, for he had an idea they might one day have an educative value (Harryhausen & Dalton, 2009). Despite the film's age, its 10-minute duration, and in spite of an audience made up mainly of youngsters raised on high-definition computer graphics and hot electronic technology, they were enthralled with the jerky (by modern standards) celluloid curio. They expressed genuine shock and surprise, some even jumped back in their seats, at the moment the hapless king inadvertently turned his little daughter into a solid ingot, a scene not included in either Ovid's original version of the tale or in the pupils' modern class-book adaptation. Such was the impact of witnessing the princess's transmutation that had we seen it - and the film - before the morning's class activity, it would assuredly have improved the quality of our revealed wishes to Ms Jones.

Stop-frame methods of cinematography have more than just a single application in school settings. Not only do they provide an extra dimension to children's text-based literature, they have also been put into service as an effective means of collecting data. This was the motive behind Rob Walker & Clem Adelman's decision to combine photographic and sound recordings, a union that became a signature of much of their early observational work, which reached fruition in their famous paper published in 1976. 'Strawberries' has achieved a kind of cult status in laughter studies. In the methodological literature, too, it remains something of a hidden gem. The technical innovation that went into observing classrooms longitudinally

with cameras and tape recorders, which may seem primitive (and inappropriate) today, was aimed chiefly at helping teachers to reflect on and develop their own practice. More significantly, in providing the technical know-how and popularising the specialised means, Walker and Adelman may have been partially responsible for encouraging school-based practitioners to get actively involved in investigating and ultimately understanding the interactions occurring in their own classrooms. It is quite possible they were prompted by Stenhouse's earnest appeal for more teacher-researchers made the previous year (1975).

The stop-frame process used in the classroom by Walker and Adelman was similar to the system used by Harryhausen in his studio. Photographs were taken at intervals of 2 or 3 seconds and then synchronised with a sound recording. With this technique they were able to record teaching and learning sessions over days, weeks, and even years (1976). Importantly, it showed that even with sophisticated (for the time) technology, pupil-teacher interactions have little significance unless they can be set within a contextual structure. Thus, the well-known reply given by the under-productive schoolboy, 'strawberries, strawberries' to his teacher's query 'is that all you have done?' (Walker & Adelman, 1976, p.134), although causing laughter among the other pupils, completely mystified the two observers. The cryptic reference, however, could have been unravelled had they known that in repeating the word 'strawberries' the pupil was alluding to the teacher's enduring catch-phrase. Implementing an extensive longitudinally-recorded research programme may be one way of establishing the context, with a view to decoding the content, of classroom interactions. But ethical sensitivities today generally preclude the use of such methods, meaning that traditional observational instruments will by necessity maintain.

It might mean, for example, employing a very large research team or launching a very long research investigation. Alternatively, in order to stand any chance of getting at those important background situational conditions, it should be possible to encourage much greater engagement on the part of the observer, to raise their level of participation. This would entail reconsidering issues of positionality: to think again about one's placement at the margins, on the outskirts, to re-arrange those viewing-points habitually situated *in extremis*, at 'the back of the classroom...' and at 'the back of the hall...' (Woods, 1986, p.36). It's as though in bestriding these remote regions, maintaining an insider-outsider existence, researchers express not only a lack of genuine belonging but also a distinct lack of commitment. 'It's better together', (Putnam *et al*, 2004) may sound like a mawkish platitude, but as Polansky and associates (1949) discovered, participants under observation can become critically aware of the ways in which observer-researchers unwittingly acquit themselves, and the ways in which their conduct and bearing is laid open for public scrutiny. It is, after, all, at the edge where inhabitants are generally configured differently from those who occupy the centre (Conroy, 2004). The concept of what might be termed 'thick participation' can become a key ingredient, a unique type of bonding agent, that helps draws the observer away from the periphery towards the very heart of pupil-teacher operations. Here, researchers can partake, where necessary, of classroom activities, be they on a minor or more substantial scale. It should be possible for an observer to make these kinds of relations without having a professional portfolio, without having any established school credentials, connections or qualifications; 'participation' in this sense should not be the preserve of practitioner-researchers. Making such a commitment therefore may be the only way in which to get a hold on those elusive sequences, those essential background circumstances behind classroom actions, behaviours, and communications, which are vital in order to help determine their meaning.

During that first day at The Cross School I was repaid in kind for having the impertinence to situate myself beyond its collectivist boundary. It felt as though my non-participatory status was challenged at every turn, with staff and pupils working earnestly to prevent me from operating outside the school's inclusive orbit. Putnam likens this effect to an irresistible tide at sea (2000). Either way, it seemed that during the course of my school inquiry I was constantly reminded of the social – not the solitary – nature of the research enterprise. Whether this was manifested in a courteous 'hello' in the corridor, 'high-fives' in the playground, being asked to adjudicate in classroom disputes, helping pupils with their spellings, reading their written work, being invited to accompany Year 5 on a field trip, all these and similar instances that occurred on that particular day served to underline how non-participation is not only incompatible with a school so blatantly oriented towards a system of sociability and affiliation, it just doesn't make any practical sense. Non-participating observers who take to social research with a cold calculating eye can be admired for not permitting the pupils' or teachers' natural inclination for association to impede their view or to impair their findings. But cold detachment, it can be argued, is no match for a warm heart. When the task is not just to observe, but to put observations into some kind of temporal framework, to set interactions within a historical context, their success will depend on how much of a physical and emotional commitment has been made. While signs of 'thick' participation might indicate, for some, a lack of professionalism or evidence of a researcher having gone dangerously native, confessing to a passionate involvement in the research process is a reminder, rather, that no matter how thorough and systematic our observations are advised to be, they remain, above all else, a distinctly human experience.

The decision to increase one's level of engagement in and around a school classroom may be justified and validated by the dimensions of the inquiry. For example, getting close to

participants and their interactions can be justified lest those small but significant laughter behaviours go unnoticed. The task is not just to look but to listen, to be so well positioned to hear the variety of laughter sounds - from the raucous to the gentler more discreet forms. But that dedication, that level of commitment, will at times be severely tested. To a large degree, the amount an observer's profile can be raised depends on how 'thick' the school will allow participation to be; to this extent, much will depend on the teachers' and pupils' goodwill. When negotiating entry into a classroom it is often a good idea to become acquainted with the various codes and regulations in operation, knowing the correct procedures to follow, for example, in the event of encountering disorderly behaviour.

At The Crescent School, towards the end of the summer term, Year 3 pupils were enjoying an assortment of classroom games and fun activities as the formal teaching and learning programme was slowly winding down. As I was observing a particularly lively game of 'pass the parcel', in which half of the pupils were involved, sitting cross-legged in two lines on the floor facing each other, with the remainder standing and watching, one of the spectators produced a toy gun from his pocket. Holding it sideways (in the modern manner), he applied its muzzle to the head of a classmate, and with each click of the plastic trigger the gunman uttered a small exploding sound. The boy on the receiving end regarded the event with complete indifference, being so absorbed with the 'parcel' game to take much notice. Of the three adults present in the classroom, only the teaching assistant failed to see the incident. I saw it, as did the class teacher. But his first response was to do nothing, except to shake his head in astonishment, his face registering an incredulous expression, which he may have felt was sufficient or all that he could manage given that he was supervising the class game. At all events, he continued his supervisory role without any interruption.

It was one of those occasions when it is hoped that other people who saw what happened would make the necessary intervention in order to save anyone else from having to do so. Knowing that the only other witness was the teacher, who may to his credit have been waiting patiently for a more opportune moment to find out more details of the incident, determined perhaps *in camera*, was enough to prevent me from approaching the boy, making clear my disapproval, before tactfully disarming him. As Horton (2001) discovered, being party to pupils' misbehaviour presents researchers with a dilemma, not least in knowing when or how to make their presence felt - to intervene or not to intervene. Even though one may be dedicated to the principle that participation should be 'thick', intervening is a very precise form of engagement that can often be misconstrued as interference. Indeed, my own reticence was because I weighed up that, on balance, it was more important to maintain relationships in the field (Delamont, 2002) than risk upsetting the class teacher. He may have viewed any intervention on my part as an attempt to undermine his authority, especially when he might have the situation already covered. Even though researchers have adult-world responsibilities in situations where classroom rules are being violated (Polansky *et al*, 1949) there remains nonetheless something very comforting about the non-participant observer's status, that feeling of protection and privilege one has in maintaining such an ambiguous position, inhabiting that borderland between the inclusive and the exclusive, having, in effect, so much freedom to be far less responsible.

And yet, as King Midas was to discover, having a concern solely with one's own advantage, wanting to have the best of both possible worlds, amounts to selfishness, plain and simple. Be it in the castle or in the classroom, the pursuit of individual self-interest runs counter to the very basis of community participation. Unlike the all-round hospitality shown by Ms Jones and her Year 6 group, the non-participating observer occupies an exclusive circle of one. It is

easy to forget sometimes that with much of the focus trained on large social entities' efforts to stimulate participation, e.g. in the political, civil, and religious sectors (Putnam, 2000), social capital is, fundamentally, about how people interact with each other. While the macro factors tend to make all the headlines, those day-to-day performances that occur at the micro-level can often get overlooked. But it is here that qualitative researchers can help to re-align the somewhat skewed nature of existing observational fieldwork. The range of observer categories that currently abound are misleading and unhelpful. There is need only for one type of observer. The category of 'participating observer' would accommodate those researchers committed to teaching or teaching support, as well as the researcher without such a pedagogic background or remit but with a desire to improve their level of engagement, to become more thickly involved in their fieldwork. For me, then, the default position is always to participate. For even an observer sitting silently at the back of a classroom with their collar up and their head down is, for all that, making an engagement. They are still taking part.

## PLAYGROUND FINDINGS

The idea and practice of children's play covers many manifestations. Its most favourable aspect implies an activity that is affectively bonding and non-serious. But within the confines of a typical school playground, play can have both moderate and abrasive connotations. Football, for example, which remains one of the most popular forms of playtime interaction, can be engaged by some pupils with almost ruthless determination, as this chapter will verify. It may be better served therefore by a description that more accurately reflects its competitive, aggressively physical and contentious-arousing elements. Football *is* play, but rarely is it ever *playful*.

Findings suggest that the absence of laughter during formal and informal (football) matches echo much broader social and behavioural concerns. Two such instances occurred at about the same time (as) results of a nationwide survey revealed that our levels of laughter (much like our levels of social capital) were in sharp decline. Given the extent of our diminishing degrees of social connectedness the results were unsurprising. They remain, nonetheless, of interest despite being - or because they were - commissioned by an online gambling website (Jackpotjoy.com, 2012). Indeed, their appearance here may constitute a form of 'ludic post-modernism' (Ebert, 1991, p.115), that is, a playful intrusion upon the decidedly dull criteria threatening to overrun our understanding of what counts as research quality (Ball, 2001).

The inclusion of two pupil-specific case-studies brings a semblance of rigour and re-alignment to the playful-serious dichotomy. Each study provides an insight into the vast dimensions that aggregate as play behaviour. These children were engaged in robust play behaviour, but perhaps it would be more correct to say they were actually *playing* the game. For children, once they get a little older, learn to play in another sense of that word. As the



findings significantly demonstrate, they learn not only to mimic and pretend (Morreall, 1983), but to apply a very skilful form of playfulness built around strategies and tactics.

### *The Play Space: Design Features*

If the school is the principal venue where children are likely to form friendships and learn about their consequences, if it is the key arena where they are able to take those vital first steps (outside of their immediate families) towards procuring - with a view to exploiting - friendship networks, then it is on the playground substantially where those friendships will be put through their paces. It might be said that playgrounds can make a significant difference to the quality of pupils' interactions and associations. That they can either encourage or restrict pupils' free play depends on the quality of their design, the amount of play space available, the quantity and variety of play equipment, the intensity of adult supervision, and the sheer number of playground interdictions in force. But in spite of the range of school-level variables, there are in effect just two types of playground. The functioning survivors of the school building enthusiasm that spread throughout the second half of the nineteenth century might be distinguished as the no-frills model. Soon after the passing of the 1870 Education Act, The Crescent School, distinguished by its pitched roofs and its large dormer windows, surrounded by densely set terraces of Victorian housing, was founded. It has provided four generations of children with a dedicated space in which to play. Although a modern, artificial slope has been introduced to deter standing water, the playground retains much of its original shape which, in the form of an elongated dog-leg, remains enclosed on all sides by walls and metal fencing. The walls have been decorated with colourful and distracting murals. At some recent point in its history a small number of birch trees have been introduced. This seemed no more than a modest attempt at landscaping, but the saplings nonetheless provide a welcome contrast to the acre and-a-half of featureless tarmacadam.

The school rebuilding programme, which reached its peak during the middle period of the twentieth century, was the inspiration for a new type of play (space)/ground. In response to a sharp increase in the birth-rate immediately after the Second World War, new schools were built on the peripheries of towns and cities where more space was available. The Cross School materialised from one such suburban settlement, benefiting from both the revolution in modern design materials and progressive ideas in education. Gothic angularity gave way to flat roofs and strong horizontal lines. Hard, asphalt play systems yielded ground to those advocating softer surfaces amid a growing awareness of ecological and safety concerns. Attempts to link break-time to the national curriculum were done in the belief that playgrounds could bring cognitive and social shape to a child's school experiences, as well as the traditional emphasis on physical skills development. Thanks to the ample site that was available at The Cross School, a substantial playground could comfortably accommodate pupils from the upper and lower school, without any need for playtime to be staggered. Plenty of additional space which lay around it had been carefully cultivated into facilities of undisguised charm, like the adventure play area complete with climbing frames, rope swings, and slides, all dressed in a soft wood mulch to minimise injuries. There was also a dedicated nature trail with maze-like low hedging, natural pathways, boxes for nesting birds, and logs formed into small piles to replicate the natural habitat of a variety of small creatures and insects. Both sites were adjacent to, and overlooking, a great swathe of green-belt land where, in the summer term, the school was able to hold its annual 'sports day', and where for recreation or for play children were at liberty to pick flowers or safely perform handstands.

But the ideal playground conditions of a child's joyful, spontaneous, physical activity cannot be taken for granted. Even though their conjunction is routinely emphasised, the expressive forms of laughter and play remain ambiguous. Social and psychological concepts of school-

based play are founded on and organised around a functional contradiction. Common notions of 'play' must be given a more expansive ambit to include, for example, a child's strategic, artful playground performance. Given this degree of circumspection, bystanders and trained observers will naturally struggle to maintain the distinctions between serious and non-serious (formal and informal) interactions. Nor for that matter is it even clear what that special phase of the school day should be called. 'Playtime' is in fact 'break-time' for older pupils, who see the former as a term more appropriate for use by - and to describe the activities of - children at Key Stage 1 than Key Stage 2. This was explained to me by two Year 6 girls at lunchtime as they strolled around the playground hand in hand as though they were taking a digestive promenade. These girls may indeed have been enjoying the designated play period, but they were not 'playing' as would fit any typical understanding of the term. Some younger boys nearby were similarly engaged, wrapped up physically, exclusively in one another, their arms extended across and around each other's shoulders in a mutual embrace that was splendidly matey and distinctly old-fashioned. There they were, these boys and girls, amply content it seemed to be in enjoyable company, moving around the playground with little obvious purpose, no doubt affirming their friendship, their camaraderie, but not really playing, and not yet laughing.

At The Cross and The Crescent schools the mid-morning and lunchtime break periods continue to be occasions in which high levels of laughter and play are anticipated. Even though some children choose to engage in more earnest, less frivolous playground pursuits, and despite reports that Britain's laughter levels are in terminal decline (Jackpotjoy.com, 2012), a popular view maintains (a remnant perhaps lingering on from the Victorian era) that because both actions involve muscular excitement they both provide natural outlets by which children's pent-up energy and aggression can be released (Spencer, 1890/1970). It is, for

example, the main reason why the boys in Year 6 at The Crescent School are watched closest of all. They cause the most trouble, according to one playground supervisor. As a result they receive extra supervision, although some maintain that this level of attention amounts to an undeserved privilege. Football is played each break-time. It is played vigorously, although the children's vigour can on occasion be construed as a problem. A community coach has been employed to come in several days per week to supervise playtime matches, because 'if you don't', he said, 'they end up arguing'.

### *The 'Beautiful' Game*

Football is taken very seriously. A game played between Year 6 pupils can take on the organisational significance of a Moon landing. The overseeing coach was stringently efficient. With one hand he was able to set out in intermittent sequence some plastic cones to define the boundary of one of the touchlines, and with the other distribute distinguishing yellow training bibs to each player on one team. Spectators standing too close to the action, mainly younger children, were cautioned by him to move away for 'health and safety' reasons. For the duration of the game the coach's voice was the only one to be heard, constantly motivating, urging, exhorting, encouraging and praising the players from both teams. There is a view that in receiving such personalised attention the boys are being rewarded for their sometimes querulous behaviour. It might be said, however, that their 'play' period is not really play at all. When adults intervene on the playground like this they reinscribe the meaning of play; football becomes less of a break-time game and more like any another organised lesson. It is an example of how adults risk 'overrunning pupils' freedoms' at playtime (Blatchford, 1998, p. 172). It could be argued, indeed, that given the degree of concern within the school about the behaviour of the boys in Year 6, the coach's goal was simply to tire them out. His task may well have been to ensure that the pupils became so

exhausted that their troublesome urges would be purged before the commencement and the possible disruption of their post break-time classes.

There was another football match played that day. In an area dedicated to ball games for younger children, separated from the main playground by a small picket fence, two teams of pupils from the lower school faced each other at the kick-off. As one of the teams was short of a goalkeeper I was only too happy to make myself available. Where the earlier game was disciplined, efficient, and the rules were strictly enforced, this one was notable chiefly for its decidedly casual approach to all known sporting regulations and procedures. In fact, it was an event more notable for an assortment of surreal comedic moments. The reduction in scale, for one thing, proved so disorienting it had a deleterious effect on my ability to keep goal. It was as though I had entered the kingdom of Lilliput. Somehow the miniature goals - only 2m wide and 1m high - were proving most difficult to protect. It did not help that their hollow plastic tubing construction were prone to breaking apart at the slightest touch from ball or player. Although the diminutive ball-players ran around like terriers showing terrific energy, many of them were randomly leaving and then re-joining the game as a visit to the dining room was necessary so they could obtain their lunch. Moreover, as all the players were wearing the same blue school jumpers it was impossible to distinguish a team mate from an opponent. As it happened, it didn't make much difference since the game soon degenerated into a free-for-all. Every pupil who was playing – even those on my side – wanted, more than anything else, to score a goal past me. Of all the outfield players playing the game none were defenders – everyone was an attacker. Like Gulliver before me I was assaulted by shots and volleys that came thick and fast and from every angle. The match only ended when the ball was inadvertently booted into the garden of a neighbouring property. Despite that, it seemed clear the children had been absorbed in their game, even if there were few visible signs that

they had found it fun and entertaining. I made a mental note that laughter output here was very low. It was a theme, in fact, common to both games. The two matches, the formal and informal, seemed to agree with Huizinga's claim that children's games, and in particular games of football '...are all played in profound seriousness – the players have not the slightest inclination to laugh' (1970, p.24).

It was frustrating and surprising to find so few children cast with a laughing attitude. Our mini-game may have been less structured than the other fixture, but that did not diminish the players' determination to score a goal, nor did it guarantee they would find my goal-keeping abilities any more amusing. Even when goals were scored there was little or no laughter, no celebrations, just a moment's satisfaction, a look of accomplishment from the scorer, and then a determination to try and do it all over again. It was reasonable to assume that a school's informal sphere, evinced in the second game, would lend itself to a lighter overall mood and thus be a secure motive for a measure of risibility. But it was a mistake to believe that football would lend itself so easily to that end. Somehow the boys had contrived to take the 'association' out of association football, turning it from a team sport into a competition for individuals. Even though those who had taken part were mainly from the lower school, they were well aware that their reputations were being show-cased, and could be handsomely enhanced on the strength of their footballing prowess. It was not just a chance for them to impress a visiting adult with their fancy footwork, but an opportunity to instigate or consolidate their all-round standing among their peers and within the culture of the school. Two general forms of status, academic and social, operated at the school. Social status being informed, to a large extent, by a pupil's general level of popularity, enables footballing 'stars' (Skelton, 2000, p.13) to earn for themselves a measure of high regard within the school. Although it had the appearance and feel of a slackly managed kick-about, our football match

nonetheless was held in high regard by those pupils involved. The playground, of course, can provide a useful platform for the staging of individual performances, providing opportunities for pupils to shine in a host of non-academic ways. Given such a seriously interactional context, where individual flair had a chance to stand out, and also the high reputational rewards that were at stake, laughter on the playground would have been an entirely inappropriate intrusion.

‘It is difficult to over-stress the role that football can play in the playground activities and indeed the lives of many English boys’ (Blatchford *et al*, 2003, p.502). In its most idealised apparition football is said to promote the successful interaction between peers, and for pupils to engage in games requires a fair degree of social and cognitive sophistication (2003). But in those two primary school playgrounds, I saw conditions that were not so encouraging. Only in the supervised game was there any indication of team-work, and even then it had to be insisted upon by the coach, since the intuition of the Year 6 players was to charge around with their heads down oblivious to the existence of their team mates. Despite football being played so often, The Crescent was one of the few inner-city institutions that did not have its own designated school team. Although football was played by pupils of all ages, it was not their preferred playground game. Here, the boys would be far happier playing cricket. Their attitude to both games could be gleaned from the large sporting murals that decorated the walls bordering the playground. Among the colourful depictions of various global sporting activities which included an American surfer, a Canadian ice-hockey player and an Australian swimmer, were representatives from the world of football and cricket. The footballer was an anonymous goalkeeper shown diving through the air in a manner recalling Marc Chagall’s free-floating figures from his series of famous circus paintings. Next to it, presented in full face, was a steely-eyed portrait of Pakistan’s 2009 Twenty20 World Cup

winning captain, Younis Khan, stepping out onto the Lord's pitch, resplendent in his national team's verdant jersey, with the famous white Pavilion situated behind him.

If educators feel that pupils should have access to a game that combines a competitive spirit with the principles of fair play, there is much to commend the game of cricket. In many ways it is the quintessential team game, a game arguably demanding greater social and cognitive sophistication than football, it being a mixture of the cerebral and physical, reliant upon individual skill and strength, and collective strategies and responsibilities. Despite it having all the qualities necessary for a more rounded and egalitarian playground ball-game, pupils at The Crescent School spoke painfully when explaining that their headteacher took the decision very recently to ban playground cricket due to concerns about the aggressive ways in which the bat was being swung and the ball (albeit a tennis ball) was being struck. It was only after the ban on cricket came into force that the boys started playing football, a game they played not so much grudgingly, but without the enthusiasm and affection evidently shown by those English boys (Blatchford *et al*, 2003), although they still played it one feels more so with an eye on its social possibilities, its way of affording a measure of personal prestige if not for personal pleasure. Perhaps the fact that these school boys were 'playing the game', inasmuch they were playing a game they didn't much care for, and not part of their culture, was the fundamental reason it was played at all, and why the cricket-mad footballers at The Crescent School were, in so doing, able to keep such a straight face.

### Unlaughter

Where it was assumed to be found in abundance, laughter would prove uncommonly elusive. On a busy playground, its unique acoustic signature often struggled to make itself heard. It had become closely embroiled with other sounds, of pupils' shouts and screams or it had, for



some reason, been held in check. By a most singular coincidence, right in the middle of data collation, the results of a survey were published which declared that our national laughter levels were dropping at an alarming rate, leading to what has been described as a 'laughter recession' (Jackpotjoy.com, 2012). Troubling though this information was, the language and tone of the report's findings proved to be of more interest. Interpreted by a consultant psychologist, they broadly echoed those made by Robert Putnam in 2000 when he warned of the consequences for communities across America should their stocks of social capital continue to fall. Identifying generational differences as a possible cause and contributing factor, he concluded that contemporary Americans were not as civic-minded as their parents or their grandparents. As with Putnam's data, the sponsors of the laughter study relied on a range of quantitative commercial life-style surveys (Jackpotjoy.com, 2012). Their findings also pointed to generational concerns. They specifically expressed unease that previous generations had laughed a lot more - 18 minutes per day, to be exact - compared to today's sulks and cynics who can only muster a measly 6 minutes each (Jackpotjoy.com).

A corresponding decline in levels of laughter and social capital may be a matter of some significance. The association between these phenomena extends far beyond the sharing of inclusive-exclusive dimensions. As an interactional tool, laughter helps in the lubrication of everyday communion, facilitating introductions and easing through all manner of social negotiations. It is one of the most economical means by which bonding and bridging networks - ties within groups and between groups - can develop. Therefore if Putnam is right and social capital levels are decreasing across Western societies (2004), it is reasonable to assume there will be a parallel reduction in levels of laughter. The tendency to cite generational differences in order to establish causation is a feature common to both structures. But creating sentiments of lost laughter and social capital, drawing on the past to

explain difficulties experienced in the present, only serves, it is argued, to constrain and devalue the vibrant, creative, communication spirit in contemporary society (Murphy, 2009). To suggest that some aspects of the social and cultural past, in effect, offer the best way forward remains a disquieting paradigm, however, not least because it can present an idealised depiction of bygone times, a lost - and largely fictionalised - world of happy, laughing, close-knit communities.

When lamenting the demise of popular, festive, carnival laughter, for example, Mikhael Bakhtin (1984) claimed that the laughter spirit of the late middle-ages had slowly been extinguished by official (church and state) prohibitions. It left little in its wake, he claimed, except for bookish and superior laughter forms such as irony and sarcasm (1984). Laughter became devalued, he felt. It lost its universal, democratic character, where everyone who laughed was also laughed at. Since Bakhtin's day, there has been a persistent suspicion that the laughter of previous ages should be the standard against which to measure the vanishing laughter of the present. Some have even expressed concerns that genuine laughter would go the way of the dodo (Grossvogel, 1959). Stephen Potter (1964) bemoaned the loss of a specifically English form of laughter. Writing on the condition of laughter in the 1970s Richard Boston found the abiding theme could be summed as 'things are not as funny as they used to be' (1974, p.11), a sentiment, he notes, which remained popular in the early 20c, and in the 19c, too (1974).

It might be safer to admit, however, that it's not so much that we are laughing any less - it's just that our attitudes to what we find funny have become more varied and better educated. As Boston (1974) says, we no longer go to the local asylum to laugh at inmates. A sense of propriety and a concern with other, newer forms of amusement, suggests that our laughing

habits are dynamically oriented and subject to frequent adjustment. To that extent, it might be said that our attitudes to civic participation changes over time, too. It's not so much that we have become more anti-social, but that our means of participating are being applied in different and exciting new ways. Formal and fixed membership structures are being replaced by more informal interactionist repertoires (Stolle & Hooghe, 2005). Use of the Internet, and the popularity of online social networking, means that people - particularly young people - are more connected than ever before, using faster, innovative forms of engagement. That said, however, Putnam's misgivings about the technological revolution can on occasion touch a raw nerve, especially with those who also feel that the virtual community is no substitute for the tangible contacts to be had with kith, kin and one's immediate neighbourhood community (2000).

Data collected from the two school sites has helped to identify some of the enduring as well as the fleeting dynamics that lie behind the management of pupils' playground behaviour. Taking laughter and play as the key reference points has made it possible to consider the quality of their interactions in order to test the rhetoric that 'every child matters' (DfES, 2004). The playground affords a much clearer view of how physically and socially included children feel within their school community, which may go some way to predicting how they will be disposed to view the prospect of making future ties to, and within, the wider adult community. The principle has been to fix extra attention on pupils who were, for whatever reason, unable to show any evidence of interacting with their peers, those offering few if any of the typical signs of showing interest in acquaintanceships, such as those playing on their own, those who, in effect, may be at greatest risk from being left behind. Laughter, herein, becomes an important behavioural marker and social signal through its recognisable presence and its disquieting absence. It is frequently claimed that children are less inclined to laugh

when engaged in solitary play (e.g. Smoski & Bacharowski, 2003). As Provine succinctly puts it, 'laughter is about relationships' (2000, p.44).

Putnam has noted the problems associated with 'loners' (2000, p.289), those children isolated from their peers and their school community, and the related dangers posed by them in some extreme (specifically American) scenarios. But wherever they may be, pupils who find themselves disconnected at school are more conspicuous on the playground than in the classroom (Foot *et al*, 1980). A very small number of children will spend much of their playtime alone, walking around in circles, with their head down, unperturbed or even stimulated by the act's repetitiveness. The vast majority, however, associate freely, with some of them interacting carefully and considerately, while others are more vocal and vigorous. And then there are some like Peter, a pupil at The Cross School, whose preference was for a sort of half-way position, not fully inclusive or exclusive, hoping perhaps instead for the best that both dimensions could provide.

### *Loners 1: Peter*

Having newly arrived from Poland, Peter joined his Year 5 cohort at the most awkward of times, right in the middle of term. His command of English was such that in most of his classes he was accompanied by an interpreter who translated some of the more technical and vernacular strains of teacher-talk that was apt periodically to confuse him. At playtime, however, he was very much on his own, an indication perhaps that 'play' is still conceived in some quarters as a universal language, one that requires no translation (although it could be argued it was on the playground where Peter was in fact in most need of additional support). But what he may have lacked in English language skills he more than made up for in ambition, creativity, and sheer guile. For Peter practiced a very different kind of play, a type

that although relationship-driven was problematic nonetheless. In an effort to make some form of contact with his unfamiliar peers, most of whom were busily engaged in paired or group play, Peter pioneered a form of play-acting worthy of the tangentially valid ruses and schemes cited and studied by the likes of Erving Goffman (1970) and Stephen Potter (2008).

To many new pupils the teeming theatre of the school playground can either make them ache to be a part of it or leave them frustrated that they are not. Peter's game plan may have been hatched with both of these thoughts in mind. His plan involved throwing a tennis ball high into the air expecting, hoping, knowing, that on its fall to earth it had a better than average chance of striking somebody who happened to be situated on the playground. He did not seem particularly choosy as to who got hit, but his aim was generally concentrated over an area where large numbers of his Year group played. His early attempts followed a set routine. Upon scoring a 'hit', he would rush over to the disconcerted 'victim' and, being careful not to admit or show liability, simulate some concern for their well-being. Then, using a combination of suitably 'concerned' facial expressions and animated gestures, he would begin speculating as to what might have happened. With a choreographed performance straight out of Huckleberry Finn, he'd look around bemusedly, scratch his head theatrically, and then shrug his shoulders before pointing up at the sky as if to invite the possibility of *force majeure*.

Originally, it was assumed that his performance was enacted in order to make contact with one of his new peers in the hope that the consequences of any ball-pupil percussion might be enough to open communication channels and, perhaps, eventually result in Peter receiving an outright invitation to play. Anthropologists and psychologists have studied the effects of this behavioural phenomenon (e.g. Fox, 2004; Crusco & Wetzell, 1984), although Peter's efforts

to manipulate social encounters by means of provocative contact is a version yet to be explored or explained in any significant detail. But having observed many of his later efforts with the ball, a time perhaps when he was beginning to grow weary of repeated failures, it became clear that his laughter had changed. Previous to this, his sheepish laughter-chuckles were always as a consequence of the ball having found a human target. But for many of his later attempts Peter was laughing before a ball had even left his hand. There were occasions when, standing with his back to the playground, preparing for a speculative launch high over one shoulder, he'd already be in a state of mild delirium. Peter's laughter seemed out of sync; he was laughing before anything had actually happened. After the ball was released, however, and in the fragment of time it took to complete its curving airborne journey, it was as though his whole motor system had locked down or had frozen over. In that tense, suspenseful wait for impact, the ecstatic agony of expectation being so powerfully drawn, Peter was left gripping tightly at his clothing, unable to speak, unable to breathe, momentarily petrified by the most intense fear and the most thrilling anticipation.

Seized by this rapture, Peter's emotional condition seemed not only inappropriate but disproportionate to any serious effort at breaking the relational ice. What may have begun as a genuine if unconventional attempt to engage pro-socially with his new peers, had taken a decidedly anti-social turn. If it was doubtful that Peter's priority was to try and bond with his peers, it raised the possibility that his objective in fact was to succeed only in hitting someone. Or perhaps his intention, as a matter of convenience, was to do both. The way we tend to think about laughter and play is in terms of their affinity. There is a sense of expectation that they should be framed together, but it is a taken-for-granted combination that reflects a popular but largely ill-informed viewpoint. While we shouldn't necessarily discount the existence of playful laughter, we should as a matter of good judgement be at least

suspicious of it. Theorists have argued strongly that the only reason we are moved to laughter is because of some innate competitive and aggressive element. Although this does not account for all the reasons why we laugh, it is a view that was and remains influential (e.g. Hobbes, 1650/1994; Freud, 1905/2001; Gruner, 2000; Buckley, 2008). Peter was capably demonstrating as much, and demonstrating further that playful and aggressive laughter are susceptible to a flat and static form of classification, as either an inclusive or an exclusive category. But Peter also managed to draw attention to the way in which good natured laughter transmutes easily into laughter perceived as aggressive, thereby signalling the presence of a grey area - a transition point situated at the interface of these contrasting poles where laughter is capable of being perceived either way (Platter, 2010).

### *Loners 2: Tahir*

Peter's behaviour may not have been consistent or indeed laudable, but it was arguably an authentic display of his frustration with events on the playground. It showed how important it can be for some pupils to have a sense of belonging and the extremes some will go - and believe they must go - to achieve affiliation with others. Another pupil, Tahir, was an exponent of a particularly audacious method of fostering some association. Despite exhibiting coordination difficulties, most noticeable whenever he ran, Tahir's overall playground movement was only slightly inhibited by his developmental delay. But he did like to run. And he liked to laugh, too. In fact, whenever Tahir was observed on the playground he was engaged in what looked like spontaneous running and laughing activity, evidence perhaps of some form of hyper-mobility. Any casual observer would be forgiven for thinking that he was indulging in dynamic interactive free play. But Tahir's play, for the most part, was a solitary pursuit. His unaccompanied performances were carefully crafted, for they were managed in such a way as to give the appearance that they included the active involvement of

others. In this case, the ‘others’, a group of four classmates, were the unwitting targets of Tahir’s legerdemain. This quartet of friends regularly indulged together in playground ‘tig’. It was one of their favourite games, and demanded lots of running and produced lots of laughter, due largely to the exhilarating experience of chasing and being chased. But even though he was not a member of their group, Tahir made it very clear that he was determined to play with them regardless. Taking it upon himself to instigate proceedings, his routine was to run up to any member of the group, touch them, cry ‘tig’, before running away excitedly at speed, expecting, but usually failing, to provoke any kind of response. Occasionally members of the group would protest, express annoyance that he was not in their game, and try to ‘shoo’ him away every time he ran past or through the group. But Tahir would invariably become animated by this response, inclined to believe that their ‘shooing’ was in fact a feature of the game, which only spurred him on to run even harder and laugh even more excitedly.

In taking such a bold step, it may have looked as though Tahir was attempting to force his way into the boys’ clique because he was too impatient to wait for an invitation. Equally, he could have been attempting to disrupt the group’s ongoing activities since, like Peter, he felt aggrieved by their exclusive nature. But Tahir did not seem the type of lad to wilfully upset others, to deliberately flout playground codes or peer-group protocols. It makes far better sense to recognise in the shape of his behaviour a determined means by which to convey information about his play-competencies so that their merits could be subjected to peer-group appraisal. Tahir was hoping to pass what was, in effect, an audition. His behaviour amounted to a demonstration, a practical display of his skills, abilities, and virtues that might give potentially interested parties an indication of his character, his background and personality, and whether it would make him an attractive candidate, one with the right group-member



potential. He may simply have felt that in having all the credentials necessary to play 'tig' it would go some way towards impressing the group's gatekeepers. Tahir's expressive playing ability was, for one thing, fully coordinated with theirs; in his quest for acceptance he was demonstrating that he could run and laugh just like them. Incorporating echoes of current members' behaviour in the hope of impressing them is a traditional access tactic for aspiring group members (Cromdal, 2001). In this context, his earlier tendency to run and laugh while playing on his own could be constituted not so much as random play behaviour but more likely as a form of dress rehearsal.

Attempting to establish relationships with individuals or groups can be a difficult proposition for any child. For outsiders like Tahir and Peter it can present significant challenges - although it can provide opportunities, too. Encouraging, in this regard, is that both boys proved to be highly enterprising and creative agents. Their attitude towards playtime was to make use of its recreational frame so that they could take seriously the need to make contact with the wider pupil community. Peter's outlook soon changed, however, once he realised that his original well-intentioned efforts at finding a friend had largely gone unrequited. His subsequent actions grew more reckless and vindictive. Indeed, one of the consequences of social exclusion is that frustrations can metamorphose into aggressive behaviour (Baumeister *et al*, 2001).

Tahir's investment in a combined running and laughing routine may have been organised according to the belief that a prerequisite for peer group entry was all about making a good first impression. Although he might have taken this idea rather too literally, homogenous groups often have a tendency to stress the similarities between members (Putnam, 2000). Demonstrating an ability to imitate existing members' behaviour may, in his mind, have

improved his chances of gaining group access. It risked, however, diminishing his appreciation of not just the diverse make-up of a small school community, but the diversity which is commonplace in wider society. Tahir was not properly laughing at anything, but was making the responses he imagined others expected of him given his specific circumstances (Grossvogel, 1959). In this respect, both his play and his laughter were premeditated. Peter's laughter illustrated the dynamic quality of the phenomenon, it being in perpetual inclusive-exclusive tension. Between these two pupils they managed to show the ambiguity of play and the ambivalence of laughter. Such an achievement is impressive, although it remains unclear where Peter and Tahir learned to behave in such ways. Was it merely instinctual or can their sleights and skills be attributed to any specific pedagogic influence?

Robert Putnam's work on social capital may prove to be important here. He has acknowledged the influence of education, that it is '*the* most important predictor... of many forms of social participation' (2000, p.186). Since New Labour's decision in 1998 to introduce citizenship education into the national curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2, Putnam has been adjudged - or accused - as the programme's principle influence (Kisby, 2009). Among the guidelines listed in the curriculum's framework document, are those which encourage pupils to develop good relationships and to respect difference (DfEE, 1999). In the primary school sector, the citizenship programme offers only guidelines since it is not a statutory component of the curriculum. By rights, this should allow or encourage teachers to exercise a degree of creativity in the programme's development, providing innovative and imaginative approaches to their citizenship studies in the classroom. But the effects of pupils' attempts to appreciate the value of togetherness, membership and solidarity, as outlined in their PSHE-related studies, are more likely to be seen on the playground than in the classroom. It might not be the case that children like Peter and Tahir require a great deal of

coaching in social skills, more a case that teachers need to be aware of how their skills are being practically deployed. If teachers are the single means by which citizenship education will be delivered, they should be better situated to see for themselves how those relationships are being negotiated and constructed. As it happens, they may not be getting such a good view of children's social behaviour from the confines of the classroom. A far better position can be obtained on the playground.

### Play Supervision

If the playground continues to be thought of as an additional classroom (Santa, 2007), as an essential venue where, during free play, children are able to learn about themselves, about forms of communication, and develop the social skills necessary to interact with their peers, it seems strange that most playground supervision is now under the control of non-teaching adults. Mostly it is the task of well-meaning volunteers, often mums and dads who live in the schools' immediate vicinity, to monitor pupils' behaviour at playtime. Their remit is to identify and discourage all forms of impropriety, from bullying to the use of bad language. One of the reasons why there are so few teachers supervising at playtime is the feeling that children deserve or need to have specific periods in the school day where they are free from excessive official adult scrutiny. With an increased parental presence, the playground bears the look of a less institutional, more homely environment. It conforms to Putnam's (2004) view that many schools should encourage more direct links to parents and to other community members. On the playground, then, adult supervision becomes more family oriented, operating according to a seemingly straight-forward combination of instruction and care, represented most conspicuously in that venerable adult intervention which regularly cautions children to 'play nicely'. The implication here is that parents (and not teachers who

may happen to be parents) have the greater ability from years' domestic experience to distinguish between non-consequential and deleterious play.

Making sense of Peter's gleeful or possibly malicious laughter, as with Tahir's derivative or possibly spontaneous offering, was always going to be difficult and contentious, whether one happened to be a parent or not. Despite persuasive arguments detailing its ambiguity (Billig, 2005) and its inherent slipperiness (Platter, 2010), laughter remains in the minds of many an immediately recognisable and therefore a distinctly reliable behavioural marker. From playground supervisors (Boulton, 1996) and psychologists (Smith, 2005) to educationalists (Johnson, 2005), there is a will to believe in laughter's assumed goodness. Laughter and its cognate, smiling, together carry a force of considerable social weight permitting others to make reliable inferences about one's behaviour. On the playground, the presence or absence of laughter is often the key signal that alerts one's senses to help pupils and adults distinguish, for example, playful from non-playful interaction. Many playground supervisors are expected to read and then encode facial signals. They have suggested that, along with other contextual factors, a child's facial expression which is brightened by laughter and smiling, indicates to them that, for example, 'fighting' is just boisterous horse-play and therefore undeserving of censure (Boulton, 1996; Smith, 2005). Duchenne du Bologne, the French anatomist, was thought to have found a reliable way of distinguishing between genuine and contrived smiles. The so-called 'Duchenne smile', which has an instrumental role in the production of laughter (Ruch & Ekman, 2001, p.436) has been deemed difficult, if not impossible, to control voluntarily. But recent evidence has brought this long-established view into question (Krumhuber & Manstead, 2009). It is now thought that facial expressions are in fact easily manipulated. A child, for example, can produce a 'genuine' laugh, or the smile of enjoyment, be they happy or sad, whether they happen to have good intentions or not.

The task of interpreting children's behaviour can be put into some perspective if it is appreciated that playgrounds constitute school spaces where the nature of children's interactions are unlikely to make much sense to adult observers. They are one of those educational settings where fact and fantasy, where the genuine and the contrived, operate, temporarily at least, with equal legitimacy. I spoke to two Year 3 girls from The Cross School who were sitting outside one morning playtime quietly snacking on some food items from their lunchboxes. I asked them if they were going to play. They shrugged their shoulders and continued eating. 'There's nothing to do', one of them said after a few seconds. 'There's nothing for *girls*', her companion corrected. Looking out on the busy play areas most of the boys were actively engaged. They were either chasing footballs or chasing other boys in vigorous but good natured forms of pursuit. Most of the girls were arranged in small groups chatting and laughing, but not being so obviously active. 'Netball?', I said hopefully, pointing at the redundant pair of free-standing pole/hoop combinations, one positioned at either short end of the playground. The girls looked at me askance, clearly wounded by my thoughtlessness. 'They're for basketball', they said authoritatively, 'they're for boys'.

Perhaps it was the sheer variety of play-related equipment on offer at The Cross that had prompted the girls' inertia. Indeed, it might be said that what The Cross's modern school facilities gained in its diversity it managed to lose in the paucity of peer-peer interactions. Most of the resources on the ultra-functional playground were human ones, that is, they consisted solely of pupils and their imagination. Although it could never be accused of fostering solitary forms of play, or even instances of non-play, sedentary social encounters were more noticeable at The Cross than at The Crescent School. It was as though the array of children's play opportunities had succeeded only in causing confusion, leading some pupils

to experience difficulties when attempting to manage their playtime motivations and choices. In a small number of cases encountered they became not just choosy but exacting.

At an institution with much of its High Gothic anatomy on constant display, it seemed appropriate that the venerable game of playground 'tig' still enjoyed huge popularity at The Crescent School. For one thing, it's a terrific game to play if play-related apparatus is in short supply. It comes into its own if ball games are difficult to manage because of the steep playground gradient, or if there is a ban on all forms of cricket. And if temporary accommodation, in the form of prefabricated classrooms, continues to encroach upon playground space, there may be a point when 'tig' will constitute the diversionary residuum. Being a derivative of the ancient form of 'tick' meaning 'to touch' (OED, 2013), 'tig' is an excellent way for children to stay connected, to remain in physical contact with one another, to exert some old-fashioned forms of association during playtime. When Robert Putnam bemoaned the 'anticivic contagion' that swept across America (2000, p.247) and many Western societies (2004), his use of the term 'contagion' may have been partly intended for dramatic purposes, as if to suggest that diminishing civic-mindedness can spread untrammelled like a virus. But he might also have been signalling that the lack of physical contact between people, between communities, the basic abandonment of 'first order' sensual communication, lies at the very heart of this anti-social malaise. It could be one of the reasons why he is not entirely convinced of the electronic mass media's contribution to civic society (2000). As if anticipating the unprecedented popularity of online social networking he wonders whether 'virtual social capital' might in fact be a contradiction in terms (p.170). Digital technology's speed and efficiency appear to be valorised at the expense of intimate, face-to-face interactions, of the kind Putnam lauds as examples of 'genuine community' (2000, p.172).

Talk of 'contagion' need not be wholly negative, despite its pathological tendency to provoke alarm. A contagion of goodness is a much rarer item, but one that is not impossible to come across. Given its fast-acting transmission, laughter could prove to be a very useful and effective predictor of a community's well-being. It is not a matter of disputing Putnam's data, or even suspicioning the somewhat gloomy forecast of the overall condition of the nation's laughter capacity (Jackpotjoy.com). But the evidence at community level - from the school playground - suggests that the outlook for social connectivity is far brighter, and a cause for exciting more hope, than many commentators and pundits have predicted. One of laughter's more remarkable features is its ability to produce a highly contagious effect (Billig, 2005; Bergson, 1911/2005). Its infectious quality can provoke laughter in others, a case of laughter begetting laughter (Glenn, 2003), causing a chain reaction capable of quickly touching individuals and entire communities, arousing feelings of closeness, inspiring a sense of togetherness, and proving almost impossible to resist.

### *The Girls in the Gazebo*

One memorable outbreak occurred during mid-morning playtime at The Cross School. I found myself drawn towards a polygonal gazebo which occupied one corner of the playground. At first sight it seemed empty, but after slowly walking around it I happened upon the small opening and found four girls lying face down on the wooden floor, one on top of the other. It looked as if they were re-enacting the story of The Princess and the Pea, or attempting to build a column of bodies as one would find in a circus. But what attracted the attention was the sound of the girls' laughter. Each child had been reduced to a state of collapsible hilarity. The sound that rang out soon encouraged a crowd of adult and pupil onlookers who, curious as to the source and nature of the exhilaration, were soon laughing among themselves having been happily and helplessly contaminated. If the tower of bodies

was not the most elegant sight ever seen, it certainly produced the most attractively natural sound one could ever wish to hear. Their fabulous laughter continued for some minutes, more so perhaps out of sheer delight that despite their high humour the girls had managed to preserve the integrity of their vertical shape - that somehow none of the upper bodies in the human construction had toppled over. In its sheer simplicity the girls' column embodied the noblest properties of physical solidarity, each human course providing mutual support and held together by laughter, the bond of union. Such an innocuous, trivial occurrence almost went unnoticed yet was responsible for holding a small playground audience spellbound, and encouraged a spread-ability factor for which laughter's infectiousness - its ability to touch others - could and indeed should be of fundamental social importance.

Although laughter may be apt at times to spread like a contagion, quite often it develops from the least consequential detail, sometimes having little or no purpose at all (Zijderveld, 1983). The cascade of giggles issuing from inside the gazebo had no obvious stimulus beyond the incongruity of the girls' precarious physical position. Their laughter may have simply been a natural accumulation, with the sole reference point being the girls' immediate and exclusive company, the sheer delight and pleasure of peer group association (Woods, 1984). And yet it also successfully managed to affect a thoroughly inclusive outcome. The girls' laughter was not only located in - or even between - themselves, but concentrated in the relationship between them and the small party of onlookers, reverberating around all those concerned who were, momentarily at least, indelibly connected. The group of people who shared in this playground experience may have gone away slightly richer, more warmly disposed towards their fellow beings, and possibly set to gain one day on the strength of their having been touched by laughter's awesome sociality (Provine, 2000). As Putnam says, all it takes is an



episodic nod or a wink for rudimentary informal connections to develop. From such seemingly tiny investments real social profit can sometimes accrue (2000).

*Burning Questions (of our Movement)*

In the final section of 'Bowling Alone' Robert Putnam asks the cardinal question, 'What is to be Done?' (2000, p.365). In providing his own answer he focuses on six key areas or 'spheres' which he believes will bring radical change to community fortunes. Education, unsurprisingly, features prominently. It is the key agent in cultivating attitudes which will encourage civic and social engagement. Interestingly, it is education's end product - attainment levels and qualifications - that receive most attention, underlining the view that those in receipt of a good education are more likely to make good citizens of the future. But this neat and simple equation 'conceals much, probably most, of what is important about the educational process' (Campbell, 2006, p.34). With many of the discussions centred on secondary or post-secondary education (2006) we may be forgiven for thinking that social capital has no real value, prospect, or significance at any of the early learning phases that occur before Key Stage 3. Had Putnam taken a more considered view of primary/elementary schooling, he might well have added an extra sphere. In it he could have expressed an interest in understanding just how and why some children of this age group place such value on social participation, and why others are not motivated enough or are reluctant to show any desire to form interpersonal relationships. Given the abiding importance of this issue, it seems strange that Putnam has made no attempt to discover whether schools at this level should be directly or only partially credited with instilling either a pro-social or anti-social frame of mind.

This ethnographic study has discovered three kinds of laughter used in three different types of play situations. Together they provide an indication of the current state and effectiveness of

connective trends. Football, as one example of common play, encouraged a singular form of laughter, a case of laughter deferred or unbegotten. Children's urge to laugh – even in an informal playground encounter – was effectively put to one side, as they set about the serious business of fashioning for themselves a positive individual image and status. There is a belief among certain pupils that academic weakness in the classroom can, to some extent, be mitigated by a strong showing on the playground, given the kudos in school that goes with being designated a 'good player'. Peter and Tahir proved to be very good players, but not in any sporting sense. Their play-related abilities only caught the eye as a result of their tactical practices, that is, when both pupils felt compelled to employ the art of gamesmanship. Two small case-studies helped to illustrate how their strategic use of both laughter and play perhaps entitles us to view their personal futures with a degree of hope and encouragement, taking into account their innovative, single-minded approach to obtaining a stake in a friendship network. It is hoped that determination of this nature may mean that in adulthood Tahir and Peter become instilled with what might amount to an associational 'habit'. Finally, there were the girls in the gazebo. Their laughter just seemed to happen, although its spontaneity was not the most salient aspect of its occurrence. That particular honour went to the way in which laughter rapidly engulfed a small community with a great choral effect, creating a social network that brought people together, connecting us, as Putnam (2000) so keenly approves, to people we didn't already know, and in a way that we still do not truly understand.

## CLASSROOM FINDINGS

Although largely absent from discussions in the previous chapter, teachers will assume now a much higher profile by way of this dedicated section. In respect of their executive and interactive classroom duties it will be useful to assess how their day-to-day operations and performances impact on their pupils. Despite many of their pupils' best efforts, teachers remain, by design or by default, the primary suppliers of laughter-generating behaviour.

The way that informal classroom events and conditions develop depends to some degree on a practitioner's proficiency in laughter management. How it is dealt with, administered, and governed can be considered from a range of different perspectives, not only from that of the teacher's. Children, for example, will routinely attempt to suppress their laughter. Instances of stifling and inhibiting will often indicate a child's awareness of normative classroom rules and restrictions. They are widely believed to be spontaneous expressions, although evidence which follows suggests that so-called acts of restraint can be very deliberately applied.

Laughter management also refers to those actions performed by senior school figures, most notably the individuals responsible for planning my fieldwork (schedule), who took charge of my laughter quest and led me to areas in each setting where they thought likely examples would flourish.

A teacher's sense of humour is also placed under scrutiny. Arguments about its importance in establishing rapport, in creating a happy and friendly learning environment, are discussed.

Among many educators there is a presumption that it is vital to have a sense of humour.

Findings here, however, indicate that perhaps it is not nearly as important as teachers having a good sense of what might be called comic timing. Knowing when to apply some informal,

light-hearted respite in the face of pupil lethargy, stress, or restlessness may be of more practical value than simply being the bearer of a humorous disposition.

For that reason, being sensitive to not only temporal dimensions but capacities relating to the effects of touching and listening, and their relationship with laughter, are calculated. This will herald a momentary modification to the main method of inquiry. The privileging, hitherto, of an observational approach can be questioned when one's gaze becomes too narrowly focused, either as a result of incessant over-use or simply due to field-fatigue. When this happens it may be an appropriate time to broaden the phenomenological scope of the investigation. An ability to capture impressions of the classroom can vary according to ever-changing conditional and temporal dynamics. A coldly formal regime of silence, for example, unexpectedly realised copious amounts of data, which called for some specific listening techniques since it was important to distinguish nasal laughter from its more usual vocal form(s). Equally, a noisy but warmly informal lesson gave pupils an opportunity to communicate through playful physical contact. They engaged in a singularly digital (touch-related) process of interaction, executed at a precise time of the school day when laughter, serving in its capacity as a means of comic relief, is thought to function at its very best (Stebbins, 1980).

### *Laughing on the Inside*

Unlike the pupil-pupil interactions that dominate break-times on the playground, most of the important interchanges that take place in the classroom are teacher-pupil oriented. But just like on the playground, there are some significant relationship issues that affect their arrangement, from the motives for their establishment to the means by which those relationships are maintained. Some have argued that the classroom and the playground are

qualitatively different places producing different types of affiliations (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). Fundamentally, however, the dynamics are much the same, with each milieu encouraging a mixture of emotionally and tactically inspired connectedness. As a feature of their professionalism and humanitarian outlook some teachers make a genuine, personal commitment to the creation of qualitative, person-centred friendships. Other teachers may feel pressurised into assuming a suitable persona, one recommended by policy-makers and outside bodies as a purely functional undertaking. Either way, the identity they present is done in the interest of establishing a mutually stimulating classroom environment.

Experienced teachers and their newly qualified colleagues may have different methods for effecting structured objectives and outcomes, but both will be mindful of the value placed on unstructured, informal teaching and learning processes. Their sense of humour, in this respect, will prove to be important depending on how it is engaged and whether it is viewed as a specifically individual aspect of one's personality or as an objective, outward projection. Of the many different aspects of management in operation, which includes a teacher's (self) impression management and the way they manage their pupils (classroom management), there are also the many different dimensions to laughter management. Suggestions that laughter is a slippery, unstable construct raises questions as to whether any amount of administration can ever render it subject to personal and/or public governance.

The way laughter is managed in schools is usually in terms of its coping potential. Often it is deployed on an individual basis as a means to reduce stress, for example, in the staffroom, or when teachers use it as a way to ease through a difficult topic or mollify a challenging Year group. In addition, there are those occasions when children utilise it to construct and/or deconstruct friendships (on the playground), etc. But a phenomenon like laughter which is

felt to be slippery and intangible, is not something one would ordinarily consider being subject or responsive to any form of administration, personal or otherwise. And yet, across the two schools its practice was widespread. A school's code of conduct will often place a threshold on many forms of vocal and bodily expressions. Those like laughter can, in some circumstances, be conceived as a disturbance to adjacent classmates, to pupils and teachers elsewhere in the school building, and even to those communities residing beyond the school gates. In an effort to deal with such eruptions, teachers and pupils have developed many ruses and strategies. Out of necessity they have become accomplished exponents in the art of laughter management.

Children need to manage and take control of their affective states as part of the socialisation process. Aspects of personality are often judged according to the amount and type of laughter an individual produces. Some traits of personality have to be negotiated tactically while others are made on impulse. Thus a child's cognitive and communicative development should accompany an increased ability to produce laughter, not only as a direct expression of pleasure or amusement, but also for social reasons (Glenn, 2003). During this period, the child becomes aware of social norms and develops a measure of sensitivity to civic-minded attitudes and behaviours, and the accompanying expectations to conform to them, as well as the likely penalties for their contravention. With this sense of development comes the ability to modify, exaggerate, hide, and control their laughter. Key Stages 1 and 2 can be viewed, therefore, as developmental milestones. By the time children enter primary school they will already have attained a level of competency in laughter management. They laugh when reporting a misdemeanour in the hope that their mirth becomes contagious and pacifies any adult reproof. Depending on the strength of peer group norms some boys, for instance, may be discouraged from showing they are scared or easily frightened. When nervous they

conceal their fear by feigning a laugh in order to 'put on a brave face'. Teachers' interventions are often modelled along similar lines and attempt to heighten positive arousal through the use of humour. They will encourage a child to laugh at times of negative affect, for example, after sustaining a playground injury or when experiencing some form of distress. It is almost customary for teachers to make light of such moments by inducing the tearful to laughter.

### Laughter Management

In order to create and maintain interpersonal relationships children will find it an advantage to become acquainted with what is described as the 'art of suppression' (Conroy, 2004, p.78). Rarely are any efforts made to suppress laughter when on their own. But in the company of others, children have been observed trying to smuggle unbecoming laughter into their hands or/and attempting to contain it by pinching their lips shut with their fingers. At other times, they are often seen biting their lower lip as their tummies buckle and strain under a laughter attack. All attempts, however, are usually in vain for the laughter almost always breaks through. But these small units of behaviour, these apparently reflexive gestures, are often deliberately executed for they show a heightened awareness of classroom norms and codes, the rules that regulate their conduct. It helps to think of the child's body in this respect as a communicative medium in its own right, distinct from the sound of laughter articulated from the mouth (Douglas, 1999). Normally, the physical, bodily channel supports and agrees with the vocal one. But sometimes they contradict each other, so that the momentary loss of control (the spontaneous laugh) will need to be redressed. Masking, hand gestures, and lip biting communicate to others a conspicuous but pardonable 'I *am* laughing...but against my better judgement'. As Aristotle pointed out, 'we don't blame someone for laughing if she's

tried hard not to' (in de Sousa, 1987, p.279). In the context of the school classroom, pupils and teachers know that this can be very important.

Laughter management practices also include those that approximate to an occupational function, as those conducted by school leaders. At The Cross and at The Crescent School two managers, the headteacher at the former and the school business manager (SBM) at the latter, were responsible for directing me to the likely places where laughter at their respective sites could be found. There were no requests on my part to observe specific classes or interview particular children or teachers. I was content to be guided by their good administration and was happy to be placed in what appeared to be their capable hands. As a result, very nearly all of the classroom observations which took place occurred in the afternoons. This was due principally to a core/non-core curriculum distinction. The post-lunch period was the part in the school day when the non-core curriculum subjects took place, and when both managers felt laughter conditions were most likely to flourish. It was made clear at both schools that in the mornings KS2 pupils would be so focused on their core curriculum subjects that laughter incidents would be negligible. Furthermore, I was never invited to attend either school during SATs week, or even in the weeks preceding it, because the pupils, I was informed, would be purposefully and seriously disposed. In management's view there was clearly a proper time for laughter.

Indeed, temporal dimensions proved to be highly significant. It wasn't just that more informal teaching and learning took place after the lunch-break. The transition from the formal part of the school day to the more informal learning stage was also evident in the extended school periods, i.e. those phases denoted by breakfast clubs and after school clubs. It was also evident that teachers knew instinctively when their pupils needed a change, a bit of light



relief. For example, at the end of a particularly dreary and painfully dull ICT class the reward for the pupils' perseverance and endurance was an impromptu classroom game.

But being at the mercy of the school managers' judgement meant that it rather upset my one and only research desire: to test the common sense theory concerning behaviours that are likely to occur at the beginning of the week compared to the end of the week, i.e. that children (and adults) are in a more playful mood on Friday than on Monday (morning). Efforts here were in determining, especially, whether there was any evidence of cultural variation. Managerial guidance notwithstanding, as far as could be told, there was no significant difference between the two schools, except that at The Crescent School on a Friday, among the pupil population at least, it is always a cause for high moods and good spirits since it is the most important day of the week for young Muslims. This is manifested in a more easygoing atmosphere throughout the school. School uniforms were temporarily suspended in favour of a smart, splendidly dressed-sense for boys and girls. Pupils were decked out in their finery: sharp shirts and ties for boys, with splendid waistcoats beneath smart jackets over long white shalwars. Many of the younger girls wore princess-like multi-layered tulle dresses, of the brightest lacey fabrics that would not have looked out of place at a party. At The Cross School, Friday was sometimes designated a casual day, an opportunity for all school personnel to 'dress down'. At The Crescent School, Friday, by way of a contrast, was always an occasion for pupils to dress up.

Certain features of the management models in operation at both schools came close to expressing cadences of exclusivity. They presupposed, for example, a particularly rigid perception of formal and informal learning domains. Although, no doubt, managers were guided to a great extent by a national curriculum divided into discrete halves - its two tiers

encouraging ‘an invitation to treat the second tier with far less seriousness than the first’ (Alexander, 2010, p.261) - there were however clear concerns in their approach to school organisational activity being too business-like. While it would be inappropriate to conceive of laughter as some kind of intrinsic element in the curriculum (Conroy, 2004), it does not mean that laughter deserves to be lumped in with ‘the rest’ in curriculum terms, kept separate from the protected and highly valorised core-curriculum components (Alexander, 2010). The headteacher and the school business manager naturally wanted their schools to be perceived as orderly and efficient institutions and, as agents in those institutions, as orderly and efficient representatives. It was not unreasonable to assume therefore that a school manager at work in a setting that was well-managed knew or would be expected to know where everything was, including something insubstantial like laughter. It could be imagined that with their ability to think and operate in a focused and rational manner distinguishing relevant from irrelevant material would be easy. For example, when they were told that my research objective was to find evidence of laughter neither individual turned a hair. I could have made any search-related request - no matter how outlandish - but it would have been met with the same unflappable can-do attitude befitting a pair of administrators ever keen to demonstrate their efficiency and organisational prowess.

The world view on which much school management planning is predicated follows the Newtonian paradigm that presents the school environment as a place of order. Here, everything operates according to specific, knowable and predetermined rules (Bell, 2002). But any type of manager operating in an educational setting should recognise that today’s schools are ‘...complex, contradictory, sometimes incoherent organisations’ (Ball, 2006, p.96). It can be argued that in their striving for order and rationality some managers, at whatever level, fail to take this into account, and fail to appreciate that contradiction and

incoherence are antagonisms not necessarily to be avoided or eradicated. These are in fact necessary features of any organisation or institution since they can function as catalysts for change and improvement. But the manner, for example, in which the school managers' search for laughter was conducted, the way in which it was steered away from formal curriculum areas of learning to the informal areas, suggests that this separation forms part of a dichotomous discourse which continues to exert a powerful grip on the professional practices and commentaries surrounding primary education (Alexander, 2010). In many ways it is unsurprising given that the act of dividing and separating are habitual ways in which our culture organises meaning, and recalls the attempt to preserve a 'humour-free zone' in Britain at the turn of the last century (Wickberg, 1998, p.172). Constructed as part of a wider scheme of social taxonomy by which the middle class and the working classes, high culture and popular culture, work and leisure, and humorous and serious, could be distinguished, they were, as Wickberg (1998) reports, modes of distinction that proved ultimately to be unstable and unsuccessful.

School managers, of course, would not be expected to have much of an appreciation of laughter's social mechanisms, at least not beyond its basic social cohesive utility. But failing to appreciate that informal and formal are not exclusive spheres in a primary school is a serious misperception. It may also have some serious consequences if the recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review are accepted, and that in the primary curriculum of the future every subject, be it P.E. or Mathematics, English or Art, will be treated with equal seriousness (Alexander, 2010). One wonders where, then, if these prescriptions ever come into effect, school-based laughter researchers of the future are likely to find their subject matter? Where would they be encouraged to search for it if there were no recognisably informal areas within a typical primary school, apart from the playground? Laughter remains

a difficult phenomenon to regulate. It grows and it unfolds. It becomes uncontrollably contagious, and is capable of crashing thresholds and storming all types of boundaries and borders. However, where attempts are made to constrain it, where patterns of classification continue to be developed, and whether they succeed or fail, those patterns and those attempts will continue to provide evidence of significant value.

### *The Silent Reading Class*

While waiting for a local repertory company to set-up in The Crescent School's main hall (they were performing a Christmas pantomime for each Year group, and running slightly behind schedule), rather than remain in the corridor for 20 minutes and rather than waste some impromptu observation/interview time, I was ushered by the SBM towards Mr Khan's Year 5 class, who obligingly took me in since they had already seen the troupe's performance. The room was full, and all of the children seemed dutifully studious. At first sight, it looked more like a liturgical than an educational setting, for most of the pupils attending to their books were producing soundless but significant lip and chin movements, as if in meditation. Mr Khan pointed to the large collection of books that were available at the back of the class which were spread across three bookcases with more books piled high in colourful, plastic storage boxes beneath, and quietly explained that the children were engaged in some silent reading. With this news my heart sank, for the laughter prospects at this juncture looked decidedly slim. The lack of classroom interaction would surely limit any moments of expression let alone occasions for mirth. I imagined that my unexpected gift of an extra twenty minutes observation time would promise little more than tedious agony. But, against all expectations, the interactive vacuum proved to be a highly profitable laughter resource. The axiom that 'one cannot not communicate' (Watzlawick *et al* 1967, p.51) was to prove not only comforting but propitious. It was particularly encouraging to see and hear that

only a few minutes after I had sat down the children were doing their level best (without really doing very much at all) to break the silence. It was just as Zerubavel said: as silence becomes more pronounced so do the pressures and opportunities to end it (2008).

The merest sound would be enough to send the children into tummy-buckling chuckles, into creases of half-smothered giggles, titters, and compressed grunts. A squeaky chair, footsteps in the corridor, or the siren from an emergency vehicle somewhere in the distance, these and other noises both natural and manufactured suddenly assumed the intensity and amplification of gun fire, with each volley registering squarely on the pupils' funny bones. If Mr Khan ever imagined he was going to have an easy lesson he was very much mistaken. For the duration of my short stay he was kept busy trying to maintain discipline, having to make repeated interventions in response to unsolicited sniggers. It brought a whole new meaning to the practice of reading for pleasure. But despite the children giving every appearance of being dutifully engaged with the assorted literature spread out on their desks before them, it was clear that very few were actually reading. It was just another demonstration of what one pupil has described as a 'silent lets-pretend-we're-reading lesson' (in Barton, 2011).

Events took a distinctly unexpected turn with regard to one particular pupil, a girl whose form of autism ordinarily predisposed her to intermittent and involuntary vocal outbursts. Under everyday ambient classroom conditions they would probably have merited little significance, her classmates being well-used to the sound of these articulations. But now they had become so conspicuous in volume, largely on account of the imposing silence, that every spontaneous emission she produced ricocheted sharply around the classroom. The noises were considered such a distraction to other pupils, since they were encouraging yet more laughter, that at Mr Khan's bidding, and perhaps due to his mounting exasperation, the 'noisy' pupil was escorted

by a support assistant to another part of the classroom, and safely tucked away behind an adjoining door which led to a small ante-room. Here she remained out of sight and, more importantly, out of earshot. The child's removal did in fact succeed in achieving two related outcomes. Firstly, noise levels in the class decreased appreciably. Secondly, the remaining pupils in all probability presumed that the girl had been punished for *her* actions, hence the chastening effect her dismissal had on the rest of her classmates' activities.

Many of the pupils clearly struggled to cope with the classroom conditions. Understandably, they found it difficult to uphold the artificially benign atmosphere. Perhaps they had good reason to consider silence in a negative light. There is an institutional tendency to associate it with normative restrictions, such as classroom rules and school strictures. The historic conditioning of silence in education, and schooling in particular, has been linked not only with codes and norms but also with examinations, and, not least, as a form of punishment. What was impressive, though, was the way in which many of the children, through their collective laughter responses, attempted to defeat it, attempted to break the silence. It was akin to an organised rebellion. What may have so exasperated Mr Khan was that despite the wide range of reading material available to the children, much of it humorous with stories by authors like Roald Dahl, Jacqueline Wilson and the Goosebumps series, it was the mundane common-day sounds that were carried and that prompted the children to laughter. But then the silent reading exercise raises a variety of different teaching and learning questions, not least its suitability as a form of instruction. More importantly, and from an inclusive-exclusive perspective, if the children had indeed been reading diligently and studiously would their laughter (at the humorous content in their reading material) have constituted a breach of the silent reading rule? Or were the children expected to laugh silently, to stifle their mirthful responses on pain of being rebuked by the teacher for laughing out loud?

Attempts at interpreting the amusing silence offered up a range of different theoretical perspectives. The relief/release theories of Spencer (1890/1970) and, later, those of Freud (1905/2001), had clear application. But some others proved equally relevant, specifically Bergson's view that 'our laughter is always the laughter of the group' (1911/2005, p.3). The children's collaborative and contagious laughter was evidence of that, or that it certainly seemed to be as a result of a cooperative effort. But Bergson's better-known use of the incongruity theory could be pertinently applied here, too. This view supports the idea that the laughable element consists of a certain 'mechanical inelasticity', of oppressively rigid behaviour, and is provoked in circumstances 'where one would expect to find the wide awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being' (1911/2005, p.5). Bergson's foresight seems to be particularly well-aimed, here, and perhaps no better description of a school classroom and its pupils currently exists, and certainly comes very close to summing-up the behaviour of all parties in Mr Khan's class.

Bakhtin's ideas on laughter also contribute usefully to the ongoing issue. For him, laughter is a way to challenge, to disturb and disrupt oppressive social orders (1984). This position only makes sense in light of the Year 5 class if the seriousness and solemnity accredited to the task of silent reading is regarded as an unnatural practice, created in an artificial environment, and therefore as repressive, which may then justifiably warrant a measure of subversive behaviour in response. What occurred were a series of small acts of defiance, some relatively minor flouting of official classroom norms. Perhaps the pupils' laughter was a way of mocking the whole idea of reading silently. Perhaps they were confronting their fear and frustration of silence with nervous laughter, as would a child's fear of the dark. It's conceivable the children were deliberately attempting to upstage or overturn the teacher's position, and just as likely they were trying to show him the idiocy of that particular

classroom exercise. Alternatively, it is quite possible that they were simply laughing in spite of themselves, i.e. they had no possible sense of self-control, since that when a noise was heard they had basically given themselves up to laughter, completely surrendered to it: noise - any noise - became an irresistible laughter trigger. This, however, seems unlikely given that when the school bursar and I made our unannounced (and noisy) entrance to the Year 5 classroom in the first place it prompted no laughter from the children. Sound was not the issue; it was the regime of silence. The meanings of certain sounds change according to the context in which they are heard. It is not the sound that provokes laughter so much as the social, the actual listening, conditions.

### *A Sacred Silence*

Similar restrictive behavioural conditions can produce quite different results, however. A service of commemoration was the reason why Year 5 from The Cross School paid a visit to their parish church. It was situated just beyond the school's main precinct but remained well within its local and spiritual jurisdiction. It was interesting to note that before and during the service, although there was a good deal of ambient noise inside the sacred building, there was very little laughter from the mainly pupil congregation. The occasional snicker/titter could be heard, but there was nothing like the amount of laughter activity I was expecting. If the children were showing their relief at being away from the classroom, their laughter did not approach the quantity that was produced when engaged in silent reading. Here, instead, all emotions appeared to have been carefully controlled. There were few, if any, profane outbursts. The small number of pupils who so much as dared to transgress in any capacity were typically fixed with the cold stare of disbelieving outrage by highly affronted members of staff. It was enough. No words were necessary.



On the whole, the pupil church-goers seemed to have little interest in wanting to break this particular silence, either through laughter or through any other means. This may have been due to there being a greater sense of respect for the premises they were in, since it was an environment where silence was naturally to be expected, it being a fundamental part of organised religion's 'plausibility structure' (Berger, 1967, p.11). It's what helps to make religion so revered, lending atmospheric weight to its grave and awesome, if not ominous, sense of ecumenical mystery. Although the children may not have felt entirely comfortable with this silence, they at least understood its solemn significance. Whether they happened to be believers or not, they recognised - if not appreciated - the rationale behind it; they could see the point in being carefully respectful and reflectively contemplative.

In a school setting, on the other hand, silence has a tendency to do the opposite. It can, for example, mean painful associations for some children who may have first-hand experience of the 'silent treatment', a form of ostracism routinely instigated by their peers, which involves deliberately avoiding eye contact and verbal communication, effectively excluding the concerned party from their usual peer group association. Historically, silence formed a dominant part of the school curriculum. Indeed, the teaching and learning experience was founded on an appreciation for and respect to its maintenance. Until very recently its application remained widespread, and was used officially as a form of chastisement, a formidable feature of Monday morning assembly, and a fundamental part of the behavioural code that enjoined children to stop talking when the teacher was teaching. However, with a growing interest in and concern for the concept of 'pupil voice' (Lundy, 2007, p.927), silence has become something of an anachronism in modern school education. Children are now privileged, to some extent, to speak openly, to have their say, to let nothing stand in the way of their right to self-expression. Whether many teachers would care to confirm this is, of

course, a debatable point. But the principle, if not its actual practice, is the key thing, and it's fair to say that generally speaking silence is no longer such a prominent feature of children's education. Today, apart from the obligatory period of national testing when talk is necessarily suspended, silence in a primary school setting is pretty much unheard of.

It is all too easy for schools to become saturated with codes of conduct. While there is a solid argument supporting the notion that rules and boundaries are necessary, such a strict system runs the risk of having a negative influence on pupil's physical behaviour, their gestures and other expressive flourishes. Half-concealed forms of classroom laughter such as 'sniggering' and 'tittering' may in fact have flourished as a result of the abundance of school interdictions. One can see why certain practices such as silent reading could have actually encouraged if not forced children to cultivate forms of voiced and, in particular, unvoiced laughter, both in response to the literature they engage with daily and also to the classroom environment around them. In response to these classroom conditions, a type of laughter, described as nasal 'snort-like' and 'grunt-like' disturbances, may have developed (Bachorowski *et al*, 2001, p.1583). These forms articulate a more subdued laughter signal, as if pupils are keen, or are required, to keep sonorities to themselves, for their laughter appears to be only grudgingly released. It is commonly assumed that laughter is mainly 'song-like' and articulated vocally, just like the sounds produced by the girls in the gazebo. Analysis indicates, however, that in experimental conditions at least unvoiced laughter proves to be the most prevalent type, particularly among male student participants in education (Bachorowski *et al*, 2001). Bergson may have had this behaviour in mind when he made clear his unease at the possibility that the person laughing 'retires within himself...and we discern...something less spontaneous' and, perhaps, worryingly, something 'more bitter' (1911/2005, p.97).

Mr Khan's decision to deport his autistic pupil notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged that he did reasonably well to distinguish between the different modes of communication that were kicking up such a dust at that time in his classroom. The mix of unvoiced laughter 'snorts' and the voiced, non-laughing 'grunts' produced by his Year 5 pupils were not, I found, so easy to separate. The acoustic patterns of these atonalities are closely related. It was only possible to tell them apart due to the 'grunts', which are a feature of some forms of behaviour on the autistic spectrum, being marginally more frequent and repetitive, but tending not to be continuous, bursts of sound. Presumably, being attuned to his pupil's autism-related outbursts made it much easier for the teacher to note the distinction between each register. It is important to have some understanding about how teachers respond to laughter, how they cope with it, how they employ it, their appreciation of its inclusive-exclusive dimensions, for to do so will affect the ways in which children apply it in their everyday behaviour and day-to-day communications. It is teachers who, in the classroom at least, will bear much of the responsibility for either providing or restricting children's opportunities to express themselves.

Teachers' perceptions and appraisals of laughter can vary. Consciousness levels only become heightened whenever they know that laughter and humour are being placed under scrutiny within their precinct. Thus, it is possible that Mr Khan's decision to remove one of his pupils from the classroom was influenced as much as anything by my presence. Even allowing for some expected reactive behaviour from those being observed, a recurring feature of my fieldwork was the support – and at times the overbearing favouritism – it received. Laughter is a phenomenon that many people, and particularly many adults, feel certain they know enough about since they practice it and produce it as a matter of routine. There is, then, an assumption they can make some meaningful input to its inquisition. When they were not

demonstrating a well-meaning desire to help the investigation along, attempting to induce it, to force it whenever laughter was proving reluctant to appear (rather than letting it appear naturally), they were reacting to it rashly if not bumptiously. Mr Khan, for example, may have felt that my observations were being hampered by the behaviour of his pupils. He may have assumed that I would be left disappointed and unfulfilled, clearly not realising that as I sat and watched the events unfold in his Year 5 class I was obtaining data of the very highest value.

There were teachers, however, who during fieldwork seemed to carry on as normal. They paid no heed to the observations, electing to change very little of their behaviour, presentation, or style of delivery. Either by force of habit or through sheer professionalism their personalities seemed to undergo no significant modifications. Two key dimensions of people's personality traits are considered to be competence and likeability (Fiske, 2004). In the continuing effort to find ways for children to make more meaningful engagements with their school-based learning, a teacher's personality has long been considered an important influence. In particular, a quality much prized and widely advocated among the profession is 'a sense of humour' (Nevo *et al*, 2007, p.385). Among the pupil community, too, a teacher's sense of humour is held in high esteem, it being the main criterion by which their teaching ability and general popularity is often measured (Ziv, 1979). Aspiring teachers continue to be advised about the importance of teacher collegiality and pupil-teacher affiliations, and how conveying a sense of humour 'can play a useful part in helping to establish good rapport and a positive teaching climate' (Kyriacou, 2007, p.76).

### A Sense of Humour?

Even though people laugh for many non-humorous reasons, the link between humour and laughter remains strong. A sense of humour may generally mean the capacity to perceive something as comical or funny. In this respect, it functions as an outward awareness or judgement, but it can also signify a person's inner attribute. In a school setting, for example, it may be expressed as a willingness to laugh at oneself in order to appear pleasantly easy-going (but not so much as to diminish one's essential dignity). It also implies a requirement to be culturally attuned to one's colleagues and pupils; a teacher with a sense of humour is one who laughs at the things they typically find amusing. But this is not always so easy to fulfil. Differences in humour appreciation, between what a teacher and a pupil might find amusing can account for erroneous claims that either party actually lacks a sense of humour. A teacher who has, for example, a passion for the uncompromising humour of Frankie Boyle or the acerbic stand-up of Sarah Silverman may appear to have very little comedy in common with a child stimulated by the visual slapstick of TV's 'Dick 'N' Dom'. But there is another meaning of the term 'sense' pertaining to sense of humour. It is closely related to 'awareness', an ability to make a judgement. It has a very special application to teachers who, it may be said, are considered, personally speaking, to have the wit or *common* sense.

Among the classrooms and along the corridors at The Cross School, Mrs Bradford cut a remarkable figure. She was considered by some of her pupils to be 'too strict'. Severe codes of conduct in her classroom were maintained with very few exceptions. Away from the classroom, Mrs Bradford was surprisingly engaging and easy to talk to. I remember noting that despite her gruff exterior she was one of the few teachers I had encountered who so plainly cared for the future well-being of her pupils. The possibility that her young charges might leave her care under-equipped to deal with life beyond the school gates seemed to

trouble her greatly. Her rather serious demeanour therefore was perhaps appropriately drawn. To that extent, any evidence that she had a sense of humour was not immediately apparent. It is possible that privately at least she may have had a very competent degree of humour appreciation, and that during her public duties she was simply choosing to be more discriminating in terms of her humour performance and level of humour awareness. All the same, she didn't seem too troubled by it; indeed, there were periods when it looked as though she may have even revelled in her notoriety.

Except that Mrs Bradford was capable of delivering some sublime pedagogic moments. Every so often, without any warning, she would dramatically change tack and alter the entire mood-structure of the classroom. During one particularly stressful Maths lesson, at a time when many in her Year 5 class had been left truly befuddled by the rules pertaining to fractions that no amount of depictive pizza portions or imagined slices of chocolate cake could make palatable, she introduced the children to a fabulous and memorable routine aimed at helping them to remember their multiplication tables. Pupils were made to stand to attention, face each other in pairs, and then at her command begin beating-out the time-honoured times-table rhythm according to the format of a traditional hand-clapping game. "Three 7s are 21, four 7s are 28...", they chanted to a cross-handed tempo, that all too frequently collapsed as the children collapsed with laughter as they tried and usually failed to remember the sequence of each numeric table's string, as well as perform the clapping moves in unison. The meeting of words and hand actions proved too difficult for many of the pupils.

It could, however, be said of Mrs Bradford that, much like the very best comedy performers (and the very best teachers), she had impeccable timing. She did the minimum of things necessary to alleviate the oppressive atmosphere which, although of her own making, were

just enough to rejuvenate the pupils' interest, executed at a precise time when she anticipated signs of pupil fatigue, waning interest or just sensed a general restlessness brought on by lengthy periods of seatwork. She knew very well, for example, that pupils respond not only to the context of what they are taught but to the ways in which it is taught. She knew what it meant to the children to experience these adjustments or pieces of relief, however mechanically and passionlessly they were applied. They showed nonetheless that Mrs Bradford had the wit and the wisdom to recognise what was needed and when it should be applied in order to affect a small mixture of both formal and informal activities. Perhaps having a sense of humour is not nearly as important to teachers as having the gumption or good judgement to know when to introduce a change, to bring some light relief to pupils' learning. It could be said that Mrs Bradford had the wit, without ever once being witty. Her achievement was based not on having an aptitude for humour, or possessing a creative flair for it, nor even an ability to appreciate it, but rather on having a wonderful appreciation of what sort of thing humour actually is (Wickberg, 1998).

Previous appeals for teachers to have at least some understanding of the role played by humour in education have been made (Stebbins, 1980). It was suggested that those who use or plan on using it in their classrooms really ought to know about some of the humour processes involved. When applied inappropriately, we are cautioned, humour can damage any prospects for building teacher-pupil rapport. But when used thoughtfully, status differences can be momentarily forgotten and a form of 'social cohesion is produced through the pleasant experience of laughing together' (Stebbins, 1980, p.91). Given the range of identities and behaviours that comprise and enliven today's mainstream classrooms, it is a sign of good practice to try and broaden a teacher's humour knowledge-base. This would allow them the opportunity to absorb and connect with the diversity of classroom influences, taking into

account, for example, cultural and gender differences, and being altogether mindful of related sensitivities associated with laughter production.

The figure of a single adult instructor pitted against a communal gathering of largely passive but developing classroom subjects, is not uncommon. In order to avoid this distinction teachers have been enjoined to try and identify with their learners. They have been encouraged to see the world from their perspective, to become familiar with not only their preferred learning styles and behavioural patterns, but also their affective and emotional traits, their likes and dislikes, and their laughter habits. Relationship-building, as Putnam *et al* (2004) maintain, 'is a way of looking at the world' (p.18), it is an action-oriented belief system and not a short-term strategy artfully applied. Achieving a deeper, more meaningful level of connectedness can, for example, enable both parties to operate cooperatively to determine the means by which the curriculum can be most effectively engaged.

Traditional approaches tend towards encouraging a blend of classroom interactions. Periods of intense seriousness, for instance, will benefit from punctuated bouts of informality. Typically, this method is employed in order to ease through difficult or uninspiring phases of work. Occasions arise, however, when it is neither possible nor appropriate to implement this plan of alternation. Instead of introducing an informal segment at specific points during a classroom task, it may have to be introduced once the task has been concluded. On the face of it, there seems little point in it occurring subsequent to the main learning activity. But teachers who know their pupils know also how important it is that they should take something positive and memorably enjoyable from their classroom experiences, even if it bears no obvious relation to a specific learning task. Often a topic proves to be so uninspiring and inflexible it will resist all efforts to give way to humour or any other creative and



innovative mediation. It leaves the teacher little choice but to see it through to its onerous conclusion. In such circumstances, a popular option is to provide the pupils with some form of restorative, uplifting activity.

Year 4 at The Crescent School were using the forthcoming 2012 Olympics as the frame of reference for an ICT lesson concerned with exploring some of London's famous landmarks. The teacher explained that the exercise was to be conducted collaboratively, in pairs, with each duo designated a well known building or monument to form the basis of a small-scale case study. The children were then required to transfer across the corridor to the computer suite from where a specified website could be accessed in order to find an image of their designated landmark, download it along with a paragraph of information, print it out and then return to the classroom for a presentation. The lesson was delivered with formidable efficiency by a NQT whose skill and confidence belied her lack of experience. A support worker was on hand to provide help, for most of the pupils needed continuous prompting and assistance. The whole event was heavily teacher-led, but then the subject matter was hardly the most stimulating or relevant. After speaking to one pupil-pairing in the computer suite it became clear that the Olympics, thus far, had failed to ignite much excitement or enthusiasm around the school. Moreover, London did not seem to hold a special place of significance in either child's heart.

This particular pair's specified edifice was the tall glass-panelled office block known as 'The Gherkin'. Neither pupil had much of an opinion about it, although when quizzed on its comestible variant they both recognised it as an item used occasionally at home in the kitchen. Nonetheless, they easily realised their task-oriented objectives. But despite instigated as a joint enterprise, the project evinced few signs of cooperative working. That each pupil

sat in front of a computer screen was all the excuse they needed to focus on the array of palaces and statuary before them while largely ignoring their partner sitting beside them. As will be noted in the playground findings, when children are busy interacting with specific resources they often ignore the attention of their peers. Putnam (2000) and others have expressed concerns about the prospect of ‘real conversations giving way to...easier screen dialogues’ (Baroness Greenfield in Alexander, 2010, p.270). Upon returning to the classroom for the plenary stage, it felt as though the presentations were somewhat hastily executed, rushed through by a teacher who, to be fair, had been rushed off her feet, constantly explaining, guiding, directing and correcting.

As if to acknowledge how difficult the preceding 75 minutes had been for her pupils, the teacher, quite unexpectedly, announced that once all of the learning materials had been safely stowed away the children would be allowed to play a game before home-time. The change was as sudden and dramatic as the mood that immediately engulfed all who heard the news, and was greeted with a mixture of wild enthusiasm and blessed relief. Initially, it was supposed that the timings on the teacher’s lesson plan had gone awry and the session had simply finished ahead of schedule, leaving her with an empty time-slot to fill. Cynics might argue that such a strategy was only implemented in order to save the teacher’s face. A feel-good end-game that brings teaching and learning proceedings to a close will tend to reflect well on the teacher since it is very likely pupils will rush out of their classrooms into the arms of awaiting parents bearing excitedly happy dispositions. A more plausible explanation, however, is that the ICT phase was brought to an early conclusion in order to accommodate some much needed interpersonal interaction.

Approximately 15 minutes remained in which to get a game up and running. Of the many amusements at her disposal the teacher picked an old school favourite called 'Heads Down, Thumbs Up'. On the strength of having produced good work (or having shown the most resilience) in the ICT lesson, seven children were invited to stand out at the front of the class. The rest remained in their seats. At a signal from the teacher the seated pupils followed precisely a well-rehearsed procedure. Placing their heads down on the tables, and with eyes closed, holding their hands above their heads, they kept each thumb upraised on open display. The seven children of merit then moved quietly among their seated peers. Once a suitable target had been identified they each touched by squeezing one of their thumbs before returning carefully to their position at the front of the class. When the seated children were asked to raise their heads, their task was to try and identify which of their seven classmates had made physical contact. The entire performance took place to a musical accompaniment, broadcast via the interactive white-board, of the stop-start sound of a piano arranged in comical staccato.

It was, quite possibly, the worst game I had ever seen. Even though the children appeared to have enjoyed every minute of it, it was difficult at first to identify any of its redeeming educative or recreational virtues. And yet it succeeded in producing some inspirational moments. Hussain, a boy who had been anonymous for the previous hour and a quarter, making no discernible contribution to the lesson during the ICT phase (being one of the 'quiet ones') was nominated by the teacher as one of the seven 'squeezers'. I had met Hussain before on the playground. Whenever I saw him he was intent upon helping me with my research. He introduced me to his mother who came into school at lunchtime, a measure perhaps of her parental solicitude since her son was quite capable of missing dinner completely, disposed as he was to periods of forgetfulness. She would accompany him on the

short trip to the dining room just to make sure he received his midday meal. Although Hussain was bigger than most of the boys his age, his size was no reflection of his executive-functioning abilities. Generally, he struggled with routine cognitive tasks, but took to his official role as 'squeezer' in the class game as though he was Harlequin in the commedia dell'arte. The transformation in this gentle giant was striking. When called upon to put the squeeze on his peers he played his small part with all the expressive energy of a seasoned exponent. His movement, gestures, and bodily attitude all managed to convey the comicality of the ludicrous background music. His furtive tip-toeing to the plink-plonk piano was gloriously improvised and proved a real hit with the watching ensemble. Even the teacher laughed, perhaps enjoying herself and her work for the first time that afternoon.

The classroom game may have been an attempt to divert attention away from the ITC lesson's pedagogic and collaborative shortcomings. Nonetheless, it succeeded in bringing to the surface some of the concerns that have been raised about the ways in which recent technological advances have impoverished the quality and quantity of interpersonal communion in both large-scale and small-scale communities. If the habit of watching a television screen is considered anathema to social capital development, it being 'lethal to community involvement' (Putnam, 2000, p.192), the attention children lavish on their individual computer screens may have similar social consequences. Anecdotal evidence from Year 4 indicates that computer technology may indeed have had a detrimental effect on the performance of a cooperative learning assignment. Despite the positive contributions made by computer-mediated communication, Putnam remains suspicious and sceptical of their long-term benefits to social cohesion and face-to-face communion (2000). The difficulty faced by schools is in achieving a balance between the digital and the physical dimension, embracing the massive educative potential of media technology, but mindful also of it being a

powerfully self-absorbing resource. The ICT teacher may have had this notion of equilibrium uppermost in her mind when having to decide on the most appropriate restorative follow-up action to implement.

Appending various games or periods of light relief onto long and wearisome classroom lessons is a common strategy practiced across the primary sector. But it was precisely the *choice* of game that proved, in this instance, to be significant and particularly opportune. Its introduction was in direct response to the pupil grouping arrangements made for the ICT lesson, but not implemented simply as an attempt to act as compensation for it. The teacher employed it more to remind the children that they in fact enjoy access to two distinct types of digital technology. One type asks of children ordinarily to ‘log on’ using a unique password in order to avail themselves of the various on-line and off-line resources necessary for the completion of class-based coursework. The other opens up a distinctly human channel of communication, one that encourages an interactive and sensuous form of contact. This amounted to no more than the application of pressure to the inner digit on another person’s hand, but its realisation in the ‘Heads Down, Thumbs Up’ game was deemed to be instructive enough to help realign a learning situation that had shifted too far away, for the teacher’s liking, from the physical, from the personal. Her motive in so doing was to help pupils in Year 4 appreciate that people can keep in touch with one another in ways that are vital and unmediated, ways that were largely absent from the learning task conducted in the computer suite. Using a fairly ordinary game like this she was able to juxtapose the physical and digital, the personal and impersonal, and make it seem that while neither binary was privileged both remained fundamental.

In an attempt to gain some insights into school-children's laughter techniques, and the ends that they serve, it was anticipated that the role of the school teacher would be a significant influence. Instances whereby games and other ludic activities were used in deliberate counterpoint to the serious, formal business of classroom learning, showed the amount of flexibility demanded of teachers as they respond to the wide array of children's educative needs. It showed, furthermore, the importance of being aware of and attentive to the propriety of timing. Most noticeably, teachers are often called upon to judge correctly when it is appropriate to break up the solid structure of the learning environment by, for example, introducing informal elements and features. 'Break up' is a useful and important term here, since it can be applied to the act of laughing in two distinct ways. Firstly, it is a way of temporarily disrupting the mundane and the inflexible, such as an intensely serious curriculum or scheme of work, making way for some small diversions, a little bit of risibility. Secondly, the act of laughing is a force that also 'breaks *us* up' (Davis, 2000, p.3, italics added) causing us to burst out from our typical selves in ways that seem to defy all forms of agency, of self control. To use Hussain as an example, it could be understood as a moment of social flourishing. The informal episode attached to the end of the formal ICT lesson provided him with an opportunity to break out, open himself up to the world, and in so doing help in the process of changing the classroom atmosphere and, perhaps most of all, the view that others had of him. The(se) eruptive moment of laughter, Conroy reminds us, allows the hidden self to emerge (2004).

A recurring theme to emerge from the data is that laughter cannot be subject to any simple system of classification. It is neither spontaneous nor contrived, but falls at a point between these two extremes. It is neither inclusive nor exclusive, for the evidence suggests that laughter, in many circumstances, assumes an intermediate position. For example, there

remains some doubt as to whether the children in Mr Khan's silent reading lesson were indulging in laughing *at* or laughing *with* behaviour when responding to a classmate's involuntary utterances. Conversely, there were indications that the laughter which was a feature at the end of the ICT class was less ambiguous. In an environment that had suddenly become dominated by playfulness, the 'Heads Down Thumbs Up' game bore all the hallmarks of an inclusive group activity, one deliberately orchestrated to promote some underdeveloped bonding and affiliation. And yet it was possible to detect traces of self-deprecation in the teacher's willingness to lampoon her ICT class and, in particular, her own role in it. The issue then was not so much how the digital and analogue (physical) forms of communication were set in comic contrast, but whether an ability to laugh at oneself constitutes exclusive, disaffiliative behaviour. The philosopher Thomas Hobbes was convinced that self-directed laughter amounted to the same as laughing at others (in Billig, 2005, p.52), i.e. it remains a form of ridicule. Meanwhile, the state of management's laughter-knowledge, so efficiently traditional given that managerialism in the education sector has a reputation for being deeply conservative (Waite, 1998), naturally invited speculation as to whether the presentment of a distinctly conservative vision and sensibility would have any effect on the search for laughter's whereabouts. Pleasingly, despite both school managers' best efforts, it was duly noted that laughter was found on occasion in places where it was least expected.

## DISCUSSION

The process of gathering data presented few real problems. Making sense of that data, however, raised a number of significant methodological issues. Attempts to distinguish laughing *at* and laughing *with* behaviour, even when it was situated in conditional, social, or temporal contexts, proved such a challenge that questioning the suitability of the tools and techniques by which data were obtained became a daily routine. When not blaming one's tools, it was just as easy to lay the blame on laughter, it being - as many have said - inherently fugitive: difficult to grasp and impossible to comprehend. Matters were complicated further by having to decide whether the captured laughter was articulated spontaneously or deliberately.

Aside from taking into account the culture and the conditions, and the institutional norms, fieldworkers are advised to try and get inside the heads of their participants. Interpretivists are enjoined to empathise, to see things from their point of view. Thus the intentions and motives behind their actions and interactions will become clearer and help in generating a degree of understanding. But the effort to get inside their heads may turn out to be a fruitless exercise. While this approach may be suitable for some types of inquiry, it can have only a very limited application if, as Freud claimed (1905/2001), people simply do not know what they are laughing at.

If an individual's laughter is indeed the product of such uncertain causes, it may help us to appreciate why just about every example of laughter that was encountered at The Cross and at The Crescent schools could be construed as encouraging inclusive *and* exclusive interpretations. Consequently if, as some theorists have suggested, inclusive and exclusive social capital (bridging and bonding) should not be thought of as discrete entities, should we



consider the relationship between inclusive schooling and its putatively troublesome, exclusive 'other' more intimately? The prospects as to how such an institution might function, and what it might be called, are discussed.

### *A Question Worth Asking*

The question at issue has focused on some of the different reasons why children are moved to laughter while at school and what this information might tell us about the inclusive institutions they attend. It is a question that generates a number of broader points of enquiry. It highlights, for example, issues which affect our appreciation of what is meant by 'inclusive' and in particular 'fully inclusive' school settings. It posits, further, the value in constructing a more suitable alternative term. It also attempts to uncover some of the different laughter dispositions of children at KS1 and KS2, and to establish what it is specifically about inclusive contexts that move pupils to express their laughter in spontaneous or in premeditated ways. According to the evidence, laughter represents many things in an inclusive school setting. It can just as equally be a positive signal of well-being, a measure of children's contentedness with the whole mainstream experience, as it can be a disquieting sign of their dissatisfaction, discomfort, and distress.

Laughter is closely identified with an opposing inclusive-exclusive dimension. It usually breaks down into rather neat categories of laughing *with* or laughing *at* behaviour. But this simplistic and all too rigid construction is not always so easy to maintain if it can be demonstrated that inclusive and exclusive laughter, as with other inclusive-exclusive forms, do not always exist in isolation. Quite often they are subject to a considerable degree of overlap. That which is deemed to be exclusive can operate as inclusive's moving principle. To appreciate this viewpoint is to go some way towards adopting a new and more rounded

understanding of the inclusive concept. This is relevant to a whole range of studies and applications, not only those concerned with laughter and humour. A similar relationship exists in areas concerned with civic participation and community relations. In the guise of social capital, an inclusive and exclusive model (bridging and bonding) is frequently conceptualised as competing values locked in opposition. Although Putnam (2000) made it clear that bridging and bonding capital should not be considered in such stark terms, he has nevertheless thrown his weight behind moves to encourage more bridging social networks and connections.

Scholarship indicates that both forms of social capital have merit, and can be mutually interrelated. As Portes (1998) argues, they can be two qualities in the same network. The popular image of the inclusive-exclusive relationship stands to be altered and much improved therefore once a fresh approach and perspective is adopted. Schools are a powerful source of laughter and social capital. Taken together they may help expose children to ideas about the functions and values of interpersonal connections, and offer institutions the additional means of promoting children's self-esteem and sense of belonging. Inevitably this will create exclusive laughter inspired by competition, ambiguity, and tension, yet it will feed off inclusive laughter that is cooperative, congruous and comforting. The two types commingle and energise each other. Each one has the capacity to fulfil important social roles and both, it has been argued, have enormous relevance to mainstream schooling.

The task has been to find a way to reconsider some of the common assumptions that have been allowed and encouraged to prosper around the inclusive-exclusive pairing in education. This has been achieved by noting this pairing's nature, aspect, and condition within the primary school sector, as well as its near relations active in other disciplines and domains.

For the most part they are shown to work in tandem, not in tension. This spirit of cooperation, however, raises some interesting epistemological issues. Distinguishing between exclusive laughing *at* and inclusive laughing *with* behaviour, for example, has proved to be a considerable challenge. An inability to distinguish ridicule from playful teasing has not only confounded playground supervisors at The Cross and at The Crescent schools. It has on several occasions threatened to jeopardise the integrity of this project as it became a challenge to place them satisfactorily within an intelligible interpretive framework. Laughter cues can be frustratingly ambiguous. In addition to being categorised as inclusive and/or exclusive, laughter can be spontaneous or contrived. It can, in other words, be expressed as a result of a physiological reflex or applied as a conscious, deliberate act. The spontaneous-contrived dimension is in itself a noteworthy dualistic phenomenon, but of more importance is the way in which these two forms are regarded in wider society. For the most part, they function according to an inclusive-exclusive agenda where spontaneity is invariably valorised whereas contrivance is inevitably viewed with suspicion.

Be it inclusive or exclusive, spontaneous or contrived, one of the fundamental tenets upon which most laughter scholarship depends is that people tend to laugh together. As Provine observed, laughter has no meaning or existence outside of a group context (2000). This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a suitable means of linking a triad of connected subjects - a way of linking laughter to social capital and to children's education. Thinking of each construct as a component in a triangular relationship is particularly helpful, for as long as the integrity of this formation is maintained it will discourage thinking in linear and in strict oppositional terms. Secondly, it means that when children's laughter is not in fact group-related, it can be presumed to be an activity of some consequence. Accordingly, the search for solitary laughers among the pupil population of the two schools amounted to a

quest of near Grail-like determination. To be driven by such a single-minded purpose made it easier, at least initially, for the behaviour of children like Peter and Tahir to stand out, to catch the eye.

The difficulty, however, has been in trying to decipher the common but more complex phenomenon of group laughter. The task of interpreting the fine details of fast-moving exchanges and interactions was at times overwhelming. Conversational laughs, for example, were so pervasive that it was difficult on occasion to even notice them (Glenn, 2003), let alone decide who laughed when and why. Sometimes, however, group laughter was produced and presented in such a way that it hardly warranted any need to untangle its meaning. In some admittedly rare cases, such as the incident involving the girls in the gazebo, it was much easier to see and hear what was occurring because the produced laughter was a uniformly choral display. In that instance a group of pupils were rendered helpless by laughter of a type that had no particular butt or target, and perhaps because of that encouraged between them a remarkable feel-good factor which managed to deliver, in a most delicious but perhaps unwitting way, an opportunity to make contact, to connect with other people. It was not physical or visible contact, but a sonorous connection brought into being by the special, rich musical quality of the girls' laughter, laughter that seemed so genuine, so sincere that it was enough to make anyone think (who heard it) that a soul capable of producing such a sound must also be a sincere, genuine human being.

Laughing at the girls' laughter enacted an unusual form of reciprocity, but even so it satisfied one of the two conditions necessary for the creation of social capital, according to Putnam's thesis (2000). Along with the concept of trust, these two attitudinal norms figure prominently as predictors of civic mindedness. But while laughter is an expression that is

easily shared and frequently reciprocated, its ability to evince trustworthiness seems to sit less comfortably within the social capital paradigm. Recalling Putnam's economic approach to the issue of trusting other people, which he does in terms of 'transaction costs' (2000, p.135), Buckley (2005) considers laughter's unique ability to create trust by first invoking some of the big cannons of economic theory. Referencing iconic names like Adam Smith and David Hume (2005) he indicates that 'with trust comes a greater ability to exploit profitable opportunities for joint gain' (p.178). The benefit offered by laughter, he argues, is that it establishes a bond between people, permitting them to promote their trust in each other (2005). Much of this information may be self-evident, but the point is that laughter does not usually appear so high up on the list of factors that we habitually use when attempting to make sense of other people, when we have to decide upon their dependability and good faith. And yet a trusting orientation based on laughter may be just as useful as other more established human motives. In a culture, for example, where clean-shaven men are deemed to be more reliable in certain occupational roles (Barber, 2001), such a notion easily extends to trusting someone simply because their laughter is openly celebrated, while not trusting those, for instance, whose laughter is concealed behind their hands.

If gradations of laughter could be defined along a risibility continuum, partially concealed laughter would occur at a point midway between the openly celebrated and the unbegotten. Unbegotten or absent laughter is a disquieting kind of silence that can give school playgrounds a haunted ambience, and makes certain playtime activities troubling and difficult to watch. The consequences of finding laughter in places where it was not expected have been discussed, but a more worrying outcome was not finding any laughter where normally it would be expected. That laughter was seldom produced during games of playground football, in either a formal, organised match or a more relaxed, casual contest, was a surprise. Football

was never like this. The very earliest versions, those Shrovetide set-pieces played with a minimum of rules during the seventeenth-century, were done so in fun and with good humour (Kitching, 2011). Even today's high-earning professionals are urged to play 'with a smile on their face' (Jackson, 2012). Although there may have been good reason for laughter's absence in the highly structured and heavily supervised match at The Crescent School, it was difficult to account for the laughter vacuum that was noticeable during the informal game. It may, however, have been due to the fact that football played at this level rarely contains the all-important social ingredient – the 'association' – for which the game was largely intended.

From the number of games observed it was clear that playground football functioned primarily to provide opportunities for individual children to show-off their eye-catching skills. Despite the best efforts of an outside coach who was keen to encourage a more communitarian-based passing game, some bold as well as some rather clumsy solo displays won the day. Many of the pupils simply followed the ball around, not caring about positions or systems or tactics, but followed it and chased it as would a pack of hounds pursue a hare. When one of them eventually managed to get the ball under control their only thought was to keep it, and only ever succeeded in distributing it when they were told to do so. To have any chance of making a name for themselves players first had to stand out, and that could only be achieved when the ball was at their feet and not at someone else's. Such selfishness was understandable considering what was at stake. Around the school, the rewards for having good football credentials were comparatively lavish. Localised stardom beckoned for players of note. It could confer upon them a range of significant benefits, which included almost guaranteed popularity with girls, undoubted respect from their peers, and even admiring glances from some teachers.

Putnam has noted the rise in soccer's popularity among American youngsters (2000). He is clearly heartened by the small number of team games that continue to retain their popularity despite a trend indicating widespread decline in sporting involvement across the States. The problem with Putnam's reliance on sporting-related data, however, is that they are focused mostly on participation rates. Popularity is determined according to club and society membership, and also by calculating the amount of sporting accessories, such as boots, balls, and jerseys, that are sold (2000). Statistical measurements alone are seldom ever capable of providing satisfactory accounts to explain the popularity, or otherwise, of playground activities and experiences. For instance, not enough attention has been given to the *quality* of football played. Putnam fails to examine what children actually do with the ball each time they take part in a game, how they make use of it relative to their team-mates. In some cases team-mates are treated much like members of the opposition, as people to beat, to get past, rather than colleagues to avail upon. Football is, fundamentally, a team game. Its associational nature was one of the factors that helped it to flourish and helped it to make that decisive leap across the class divide in the nineteenth-century. From its lofty and semi-organised origins in London's elite public schools, its popularity grew in part out of a burgeoning spirit of 'associationsim...the sheer act of cooperation' (Sennett, 2013, p.42) which flourished in mid-Victorian popular culture, particularly within working class communities. And yet if the kids in America play school-yard soccer anything like the two observed games played by their British counterparts, there may be good cause to question the accuracy and value of continuing to refer to the beautiful game as a 'team sport' (Putnam, 2000, p.109).

At about the time the two ball games were kicking off, results from a national survey were published which indicated that Britons were laughing far less than their forebears did 50

years ago (Jackpotjoy.com, 2012). These findings correlate with those presented by Putnam (2000) showing that social capital levels across America and Western Europe have been in steady decline since their high point in the 1950s and 1960s. One can speculate about the possibility of a causal connection here. More than that, we might wonder whether a reciprocal causal relationship is indicated, for laughter is both a cause and a consequence of social capital, *and* vice versa. If we are laughing much less today it may indeed be because our stocks of social capital are in short supply. Therefore, once our stocks of social capital begin to fall it is reasonable to assume there will be fewer social occasions in which we can laugh interactively. But despite sharing a key inclusive-exclusive ingredient, the connection between laughter and social capital has rarely, if ever, been recognised. Perhaps theirs is a taken-for-granted relationship which, because it is so obvious it has, up until now, remained unstated and unstudied. What else could explain Putnam and his associates' failure to document such a conspicuous coupling?

Well, a closer look at the state of school education may have helped. This would have allowed Putnam the opportunity to put to one side for the moment his compulsion 'to count things' (2000, p.26), a method, he maintains, that delivers the best empirical evidence possible (2000). Schools are at their most enlightening when studied at close range. It's only when the fine details are examined that they may reveal what it is about these small-scale communities which, in turn, may have much to reveal about behaviours, attitudes and practices that occur in wider society. To be fair to Putnam, he did in fact manage one visit to an elementary school, but only after his initial and most influential American-based phase of social capital research had been completed (Putnam *et al*, 2004). If an American elementary school is organised along the same lines as a British primary, it is possible he would have seen that education can, at times, undo all the good work in raising people's awareness of the



merits and benefits of civic engagement and community mindedness. He would have seen, for instance, that schooling is slowly taking the fun out of pupils' playtime with its over-officious supervision in respect of pressing health and safety concerns. In some extreme cases this has led to the complete loss of allotted playtime breaks, and has almost certainly contributed to severe restrictions in the choice of games in those schools where children are still allowed to play. And even when a range of games are made available the competitive impulse continues to drive pupils' performances, so much so that the collective team ethic seems to have little real application within a system intent on only rewarding individual feats of excellence.

Even though the inclusive-exclusive profile has been deliberately enlarged here to make for a more expansive examination and analysis, the task of trying to estimate what qualifies as inclusive and exclusive shows a corresponding increase in difficulty. A principal feature of this enigmatic, intangible pairing is their capacity, either individually or taken together, to somehow dissemble our senses, to render each element's appearance deliberately equivocal so that it becomes difficult if not impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy its form and content. Therefore, while making the area of inquiry as comprehensive as possible it was necessary to impose certain limitations for fear of getting encumbered with a distracting array of peripheral issues. A line, for example, was drawn at the different *types* of laughter encountered during fieldwork. At the outset, giggles and guffaws, although important expressions that helped to determine laughter's whereabouts (e.g. with the girls in the gazebo), did not make a big enough contribution to the thematic economy of the project. That said, however, Peter's rare example of antecedent laughter, which was at once provocative and novel, deserved - for those very reasons - further attention. In the main,

however, it was the *techniques* children employed as they conducted themselves in the classroom and on the playground that were of central interest.

By 'techniques' is meant the various methods of performance, and also the means by which some children choose to express their premeditated laughter. It describes the different approaches taken by pupils who show some commitment to forms of behaviour entertained in their minds ahead of any bodily articulation. Peter's advanced laughter functioned like this, but Tahir's imitation of the boys' laughter in the exclusive playground group provides a better example. His was a tactical, carefully crafted (and crafty) form of laughter, hatched and delivered, it may be reasoned, out of hardship and necessity, at a time when all other means of affiliation open to him had failed. Playtime is an occasion when friendships and peer interactions assume great significance. It is also a significant phase of the school day in which to assess children's interactive behaviour to see if it corresponds to the inclusive sentiments declared in their school's mission statement. As for the two playground communities that occasioned Peter and Tahir' singular laughter actions, '[t]he notion of separation combined with union' (Kristeva, 1991, p.171) amounts to a pretty fair summation. As a venue for childish exuberance, of committed peer togetherness and association, the school playground can, to some pupils, be a cold and lonely place. Kristeva's borrowing of Kant's notion of 'unsocial sociability' (in Kristeva, 1991, p.170) accurately captures many of the frustrations felt by pupils who may consider they have little choice other than to use their creative skills and inventiveness, to take matters into their own hands, to be, if necessary, aggressively proactive and to force the relational issue. Although we begin to get a less flattering account of the inclusive-exclusive primary school, a far more detailed, and perhaps more telling picture emerges of its character and its internal workings.

Reconciling these two warring factions - drawing them together in the form of the inclusive-exclusive school - produces something more significant than just an ungainly, seemingly contradictory, appellation. It is indeed a label, a form of reference, but one that convincingly accounts for most, if not all, of the behaviours and practices that described the daily events that took place inside two mainstream primary schools. The problem with the much heralded and over-subscribed 'fully inclusive' school lies, to a great extent, in its nomenclature; it only tells half of the story. It tells a traditional tale whereby the seemingly contrary disposition, the insignificant 'exclusive' other, is effectively imagined away, relegated and seldom mentioned for reasons of prudence, since it is deemed to be the inappropriate and immoral member of the pairing. But any inclusive community depends to some extent on a variety of exclusive ingredients, from principles and structures to habits of thinking, behaviour, and practice (Clough, 1999).

Whether any primary school would ever choose to make public such a compilation of negatives depends on whether they view such a degree of disclosure as potentially unflattering and harmful or refreshingly candid and authentic. Schools like The Cross and The Crescent have little choice but to over-describe, to aggrandise themselves in respect of the fully inclusive paradigm. Conditions in the market-led education system make it more or less a necessity since the very notion of education's embrace of the business model is based on stakes of betterment, of surpassing competition, of the pressures placed upon them to out-perform rival institutions. To that extent, 'fully inclusive' can become a very useful item to have listed among a school's mission statement. Despite the charge that they (mission statements) appeal only to the 'fan of badly written platitudes' (Hobsbawm, 2013, p.2), it soon became apparent, however, that neither school fully deserved this designation. Their

inclusive goals, values, and practices scored highly in some areas but missed the mark in others.

From the range of behaviours observed those that could be described as missing-the-mark originated mainly with pupils. Even so, there were occasions when anti-inclusive behaviour on their part was unwittingly solicited by their teachers – either because they were not paying attention, they were unaware, or simply not on message. For example, it was at times felt that there was no facility (perhaps due to a lack of skills, motivation, desire, time or resources) among staff to find in pupils' exclusive behaviour a germ, a trace of something useful and promising, something potentially creative and innovative that could, for the benefit of the pupil, the school and the wider community, be worth nurturing. Willis (1976) hinted at this in his study of working class schoolboys. One can sense his frustration that pupils with undoubted but untapped skills and talent, those who show their abilities in unconventional ways (principally through their destructive wit) had little hope or opportunity of having their admittedly abrasive humour harnessed and channelled towards more constructive ends. This may have been because such skills and ingenuity as those ably demonstrated by Peter and Tahir are simply not recognised or accredited in the current system of education. The tendency today it seems - as it was in Willis's day - is to ignore them, unless they have some obvious academic relevance or value.

'Creativity' has assumed the status of buzzword or cliché in education circles of late, with schools urged to provide opportunities for children to express themselves in imaginative and creative ways. Most of these opportunities tend, however, to only be available in formal learning situations, occurring within the confines of the national curriculum. But as with laughter creativity is ambiguous, being equivocal on several levels. Whether it is concerned

with valuing and stimulating children's inventiveness, their divergent thinking, or related to innovative teaching/imaginative learning, or is a process confined specifically to arts-related subjects, the actual educational significance of creativity remains unclear (Alexander, 2010). It could be argued, however, that children's flair for creative and flexible thinking that occurs outside of the curriculum, and outside of the classroom, should be encouraged and be given just as much respect and attention.

To ensure that this happens teachers will need to be in a good position to recognise their pupils' creative potential. Schools will be failing those children if they are unable to provide suitably experienced staff with a suitable context in which to place the range of behaviours typically found in a mainstream setting, everything from the disparaging humour of Willis's 'lads' (1976) to Peter and Tahir's playground theatrics. This is not to say that teachers and support staff are incapable of recognising a potentially gifted pupil when they see one, even one whose exceptional talent is presented in an unconventional guise. It's more a case that in the inclusive-exclusive school this kind of behaviour would not only be expected, but it would be expected to be dealt with in a more constructive and sympathetic manner.

Given the appropriate conditions it may even be actively encouraged if it was done so under the careful guidance and tutelage, let's say, of one of those quick-witted teachers that frequented Woods's school staffrooms (1984). Those 'major laughter makers' (1984, p.197) could be persuaded to put their own singular senses of humour to good use. They above all people may be best suited to recognise and appreciate (in a technical capacity) the biting wit and abusive humour in others if they themselves have shown a flair for delivering an expert put-down, a withering insult, or a mocking aside. They, perhaps, would be able to make some sense of Peter's singular laughter display, and be able to see in Tahir's relentless laughing

marathon a troubled child who seems prepared to go to exhaustive lengths in order to make some new friends. As Stengel pointed out, if teachers can learn to recognise the laughter produced by their pupils, to distinguish signs of contentment from those of discomfort, it will create opportunities for children to open up, to reflect and, as she suggests, make good use of this new discursive space (2012). Sadly, such opportunities at The Cross and at The Crescent schools were only partially exploited. One of the consequences of teachers at both schools ceding playground supervision to local parents is that they were no longer in a position to see the range of creative talents pupils displayed each playtime. In playgrounds of 'unstructured, loosely supervised play' (Alexander, 2010, p.65-66) Peter and Tahir's inventiveness and tenacity went unnoticed by those staff members who matter most. They were too preoccupied elsewhere to notice that 'something interesting was percolating', something of genuine pedagogic value (Stengel, 2012, p.11).

It is easy, however, to get carried away with the benefits and stability implied by the imaginary inclusive-exclusive school model. Gittell & Vidal's (1998) two-model approach to community organising provides a salutary reminder of how the macrocosm of wider society can have an ominous correspondence with the microcosm of primary schooling. Their study has shown that the experiences of a research team's participants come very close to the events and happenings lived through on a daily basis by pupils at school. Their study provides an indication of the importance and esteem with which exclusive behaviour and consciousness is held, and the powerful hold and elemental position it retains within a community of any size. It is a model that assumes within any community the existence of aggrieved parties. There will be those, for example who may feel impelled to take direct action in order to overcome or highlight their grievances, perhaps something commonplace such as those concerned with some form of discrimination (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). This is the

conflictual approach. Its sole focus and goal is to create exclusive bonding social capital among community members on the presumption that solidarity equals strength; the objective being to 'change the system' (1998, p.52).

At variance to it is the consensual version. It stresses non-confrontational methods and advocates deliberate avoidance of organisations that are based on the conflict organising style, preferring instead to construct communities built around bonding and bridging social capital. It is an approach wrapped-up in the warm, safe, rational glow and healthy principles of mutual trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). It is indicative of a community that is constantly encouraged to pull together in order to effect a shared vision based on common interests and agreed goals. Despite these fine sentiments, however, the consensual model detailed in Gittell & Vidal's study returned only modest gains during its 3-year period of activity. On the very big prize, that of encouraging involvement from a diverse segment of the community, it failed absolutely. The conflictual approach was simply too well embedded, too deeply entrenched, for the consensual method to make any significant impact.

Even within the idealised construction of the seemingly more democratic and correctly proportioned inclusive-exclusive school, some may take the view that each irreconcilable force will inevitably be competing and jostling for hierarchical position. It will be tempting, therefore, to equalise these relations, to try and maintain a sense of balance for fear that exclusive forces will remain a powerful if not over-powering entity in the relationship. As Clough notes, it is only when we begin to understand that 'mind and society are intrinsically exclusive' (1999, p.70) that we begin to realise our inclination towards proposing inclusive philosophies and adopting inclusive attitudes is not actually based on any credible foundation. But this is not the best way to consider the inclusive-exclusive conjunction. The

inclusive-exclusive school should not be thought of as an institution in possession of evenly matched orientations, in a state of perfect equilibrium, ultimately churning out perfectly balanced children. Thinking about the ways in which two theorists, Bergson and Koestler, fashioned their ideas about laughter's functioning and capabilities, can provide us with a much clearer conception of the inclusive-exclusive relationship.

Bergson was of the opinion that society viewed rigidity with suspicion (1911/2005). It is the main reason why, he claims, we are moved to laughter. We laugh because of someone's or something's lack of flexibility; there is a 'certain mechanical elasticity' where ordinarily 'one would expect to find the living pliability of a human being' (1911/2005, p.5). A rigid and ossified view of the inclusive-exclusive school would invite scornful laughter, according to Bergson. But, as he was at pains to point out, it is important to have the threat of corrective, mocking laughter hanging over those people, constructs, or situations that are prone to inflexibility. Laughter is endowed with admonishing capabilities; we laugh when a person, construct, or situation strikes us as ludicrous. It is therefore more appropriate to think of the inclusive-exclusive relationship not just as an overlapping binary, or a pairing in a state of constant upheaval, wildly antagonistic, grating and colliding, but one that is always full of energy and dynamism, consistent with Ball's (2006) view of schools as conflicting and confusing places. If teachers and education ministers are genuinely concerned that schools should encourage creative and flexible thinking in their pupils, there can be no better environment than one that will habitually bring into contact two hitherto incompatible frames of reference to create a bisociative fusion, an act of creative energy of the very kind that Koestler believed gave rise to laughter (1964).



Bergson's theory that laughter functions as a social sanction can be applied to the incidents that occurred during Mr Khan's silent reading class. That laughter played a central role in those classroom events comes as no surprise. This is what laughter does. It is inherently ambiguous, cloaking itself in clever camouflage, bringing mischief and mayhem to all manner of social occasions, troubling our emotions and taking liberties with our perceptual senses. It was difficult to tell, of course, whether the ejected pupil's peers were laughing at her, with her, or doing a bit of both. Importantly, however, had any of the adults present in that classroom been aware of Stengel's (2012) formulation, and had anything more than a passing knowledge of Bergson's theoretical views, they would have realised that Year 5's laughter could have approximated to a cry for help, a signal that all was not well in the rigidly oppressive classroom, that the children were unimpressed with and probably disturbed by the artificial ambience of a decidedly uncomfortable silence.

The children's half-compressed laughter, at once concealing and revealing (Stengel, 2012), puts pressure on children particularly, but also on adults, in how to deal with this volatile behavioural marker, an indicator capable of doing two things - being inclusive and exclusive - at the same time. Again, it was difficult to tell whether the children had simply failed to suppress their laughter in class, that somehow their laughter management systems had broken down, or in fact the sniggers, titters, giggles and snorts were deliberately half-released - the intention being to ensure they were heard, that they should carry in their semi-compressions an overt criticism of the particular learning environment. Stengel's recommendation that teachers should set about recognising laughter's inclusive-exclusive signals would be given, under different (more specifically inclusive-exclusive) conditions, some serious consideration. Moreover, if teachers and their pupils stand to benefit from having such insight, as Stengel has argued, not only would it render silent reading sessions redundant (in

2009 Ofsted described this practice as counterproductive) it would remove the need for Mr Khan to have ever considered removing a child from his classroom.

It is not clear from Stengel's (2012) paper how teachers are expected to acquire those necessary recognition skills. Ideally, it would form part of their professional development portfolio. Ideally, it would include far more than an ability to recognise laughter and to decipher its many contextual signals. It would also cover an appreciation of laughter's control mechanisms, i.e. the means by which it can be suppressed, or planned aforethought, or whether it should only be considered as an uncontrollable reflex, etc. Furthermore, it would include an ability to recognise that in certain school contexts children's and adult's attempts at laughter management can differ in some very important respects. At Mr Khan's school, for example, the person responsible for laughter management duties was the school business manager (SBM). At The Cross School those undertakings fell to the headteacher.

### Mapping Laughter

Both managers attempted to facilitate my laughter quest by organising a comprehensive observation/ interview schedule. Befitting their organisational skills they were able to identify not only where but when laughter was most likely to be found. This intelligence specified not only the days of its occurrence, but the very times of day. Periods and phases deemed favourable for its appearance were plotted and forecast with sibylline confidence. Their outstanding capacity for administrative efficiency was such that it seemed as though they believed (which was enough to make others believe) that laughter was just another predictable and measurable commodity waiting to be arranged and classified. Clearly they knew their respective schools well enough to know which lessons, which teachers, and which pupils were more likely to produce the requisite data. But at the same time they were obliged

to show the most positive side of their respective schools, being careful to protect those on the inside as well as to accommodate outsiders, fearing perhaps that instances giving rise to pupils' exclusive laughter, and thus encouraging unflattering accounts of their schools in subsequent documentation, would be detrimental to both of their good names. It was noticeable, for example, that for the duration of fieldwork that came in the wake of the playground football match, the 'troublesome' boys in Year 6 at The Crescent School were quite deliberately kept out of my way.

Even allowing for the fact that my basic laughter requirements were known in advance, the head teacher and the SBM radiated a cool rationality with their business-like approach to the task in hand. In meetings arranged before fieldwork began they showed not the slightest doubt that this fugitive and ambiguous phenomenon could be identified and located. For instance, both were reluctant to let me loose among their respective lower schools. It was felt that children of tender years might find my presence too much of a disturbance; the upper school seemed to be the preferred fit. Generally, their thinking processes seemed to follow a similar alignment. It was reasonable to assume they were based on a shared professional commitment to efficiency, order, and control. It was as though both were endowed with the same intuitive instincts and thinking patterns that could equally set dynamic strategies in place and then swiftly develop viable alternatives. Much of this mental endeavour proceeded according to an arrangement of unseen borders and frameworks, looking for windows of opportunity amid unyielding institutional bureaucracies, serving both inclusive and exclusive purposes, identifying and bracketing what or who belongs inside or outside of them, all the time the two individuals, without any need for consultation, were dedicatedly checking and matching scenarios in their heads against empty pages in their diaries: 'Mrs Jones's class might be better than Mrs Lewis's... Mr Shah hasn't been with us very long, so he might not

be amenable... Year 4 will be rehearsing ahead of a visit by the Lord Mayor that day... Miss Clarke is away on sick leave... afternoons will be better than mornings... there can be no observations directly before or during SATs week... can you come on the week commencing Monday 15<sup>th</sup>? ...the school pantomime this year is on a Wednesday... Friday assemblies are always lively....,' and so forth.

But for all of their calculations and considerations, their logical planning and intuitive thinking, their sense of comprehensible order and pragmatic rationality, for all the best strategic insights and skills they could marshal, the headteacher and the school business manager could not reveal the whereabouts of all the laughter behaviour at their schools. Nor indeed was this ever a realistic expectation. Nevertheless, it was a feat they came very close to accomplishing. The single exception to what would have been a perfect display of clinical administration came in the shape of The Crescent School's Year 5 class and its (not so) silent reading group. But this in itself is significant. As a last-minute venue, a spur-of-the-moment opening, it provided, quite unexpectedly, some of the most interesting and memorable data collected during the inquiry. That it was accumulated on account of an unscheduled stop on my itinerary suggests it to be a sign, perhaps, of laughter's recalcitrance, its considerable resistance to being managed in any capacity. In a way it was reassuring and a relief to realise that, despite the two leaders' best efforts, and despite a near-flawless display of laughter management expertise, schools remain irrevocably complex, contradictory, and incoherent (Ball, 2006).

It may seem unforgivably churlish to criticise the two school leaders who, during the entire period of fieldwork, gave of their time freely and showed only kindness and unequivocal support. But had they invited contributions from other stakeholders involved in the project,

other colleagues perhaps, or even a few pupils, it would have made my laughter quest more of a collective experience rather than an individual challenge. The effect could have been to shift the epistemological focus sufficiently to have allowed more, if not more informative, laughter data to emerge. It is a moot point, of course, whether collaboration of any kind would have been a steer in the direction of any better or worse research material. But the principle of building human networks which has been encouraged at both institutional and individual level (Putnam, 2000) continues in two fully inclusive school communities and in one fundamental aspect, to rely on a pronouncedly top-down model. It is one that, insofar as their management practices are concerned, is exclusive and excluding. The intellectual capital possessed in abundance and demonstrated most capably by the headteacher and the school business manager risks eroding what stocks of social capital both schools appear to have spent considerable time and effort in accumulating. Effective school leadership is impossible without the full inclusion and cooperation of all available and committed colleagues and learners. To ignore this is to undermine a school's declared visions and values, and to risk reducing their fully inclusive statements to mere platitudes. It would be a travesty if the continuing difference between 'complacent rhetoric and actual practice' (Tomlinson, 1982, p.24) becomes a theme in education destined to haunt future school children for generations.

### *It's Better Together*

Willis (1976) believed that the school environment provoked, developed, and gave shape to pupil's laughter. Woods (1984) claimed that it was through laughter that teachers could synchronise their public and private spheres. Stengel (2012) entertained the idea that pupils and teachers should laugh in mutually helpful ways. The common denominator here is a degree of congruence, a correlation between the institutional setting, its main protagonists, and their laughter. Plainly, this should come as no surprise since it is a principle that

constitutes laughter's first rule of expression, that of the rarity - if not impossibility - of producing solitary laughter. It was conceptualised in Putnam's declaration that 'mirth is enhanced by companionship' (2000, p.217), and if there happened to be no available companion there should ideally at least be something capable of providing a social cue or echo. Juxtaposed, and in contrast, to this correspondence is the discourse of dichotomy, a chronically debilitating condition within the primary school sector (Alexander, 2010), constantly disrupting and frustrating the progress of policy and practice. These two antagonisms proclaim compatibility and cooperation, difference and discord in a to-and-fro arrangement that closely describes the institutional dynamics in operation at The Cross and at The Crescent schools. Pupil's laughter behaviour at both sites, on the whole, reflected this oscillation. Some like Peter's, the outlier from Year 5, appeared to be 'out of sync', although his largely improvised display was probably just an attempt to keep in step with the singular rhythm, or arrhythmia, at The Cross School. There was rather more harmony in evidence at The Crescent in the figure of Tahir and his running/laughing performance. In a concerted attempt to tap into some friendship networks, he resorted to a cleverly disguised routine choreographed around a theme of mimicry, a form of conscious imitation in order to be 'in tune' with the boy's group he was so eager to join.

But the structures that govern the rhythm and routine of school life, as Peter and Tahir discovered, can sometimes lead to dissonant and discrepant behaviour. The unnatural atmosphere in the silent reading class may have been enough to trigger a series of laughter actions that busily and mischievously issued throughout the room, spreading quickly like a winter virus. In many ways it was like the outbreak that began with the girls in the gazebo, which only ended when their fast-acting risibility had been passed on to all onlookers, possessing them in a contagion of perfectly repeated and coordinated laughing contractions.

The compunction to synchronise with someone, something, to find that social echo (Bergson, 1911/2005) was seen, too, in Hussain's musical theatrics, which involved the artful and graceful matching of his movements to the background piano accompaniment during a game at the end of a forgettable ICT class. And seen, too, in Mrs Bradford's lesson with those unforgettable children learning their times-tables to a rhapsody of hand-clapping and rhythmical rote.

In these playground and classroom examples, some of the children's laughter behaviour simply reflected the features underlying their school's organisational structure. Other examples were highly purposive, deliberate, calculated attempts to reconfigure them, finding gaps in the institutional framework such as their need to find alternative cues. Some children, it is reasoned, may have suspected these features to be out of alignment and took it upon themselves to implement change, attempting in effect to rearrange them at will for their own convenience. That laughter should occur at all inside inclusive school settings is because they are effectively places of contradiction and incongruity. Children's laughter, therefore, can be seen to derive in part from, and as a response to, the messy structures and conditions, the organised and the disorganised patterns intrinsic to inclusive school life. If laughter is as important to education as many of the arguments presented here suggest, then both of these conditions and patterns should, at the very least, be acknowledged. When primary schools are routinely described as 'inclusive' or 'fully inclusive' they are at risk of placing themselves out of kilter with prevailing behavioural and communication tendencies. Failing to declare or factor-in the often absented 'exclusive' school ingredient is, in itself, an act of segregation that makes a mockery of the principle that 'it's better together' (Putnam *et al*, 2004), a precept that applies as much to the operation of institutions as it does to the activity of individuals.

## Ethics

It might be argued that ethics, as a crucial regulatory system, places itself beyond the parameters of any form of scrutiny or discussion, it being a sacrosanct, non-negotiable part of the research process. But it is included in this section because throughout the conduct of my research a variety of ethical issues have been raised which may merit some elaboration and debate. I shall, therefore, outline and review the conduct of my research project, which specifically concerns my dealings with staff and students in the role of participant observer. In doing this, I shall focus especially on the ways in which ethical concerns came to the fore in qualitative, and, particularly, ethnographic enquiries. In ethnographic work, the meaning and application of research ethics continues to provoke intense debates. Some claim it to be an inviolable part of the empirical process, and that its regulation should be increased as newer and ever-more innovative research designs come into being. Others argue that it has become an unnecessarily bureaucratic procedure, dominating and distorting the research process, and that the institutional industry which has come to direct it needs to be restructured if research studies of the future are to flourish.

It is perhaps helpful to note here that it took several attempts before my application for ethical review was ratified. Each failed submission was returned by the university's ethical review committee having adjudicated that it did not include enough detail. All aspects of my fieldwork were expected to be precisely itemised, right down to the duration of each interview and the whereabouts of every observation point. Although many of these details only become apparent once an investigation gets under way (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), there remains a fundamental need in institutional ethics approval systems for protocols governing how researchers acquit themselves when conducting inquiries involving children and adults.



This degree of specificity seemed to me to be overly prescriptive since I felt, in the context of qualitative research and the notion of 'emergent design', that I needed manoeuvring room to respond spontaneously to those unplanned moments in the field, of which plenty were expected given laughter's inherent unpredictability (Morreall, 1983) and fieldwork's inveterate messiness (Marcus, 1994). The disjunction between the practical requirements of my research and the demands of ethical regulation appeared, however, to create some difficult-to-negotiate obstacles.

And yet, as I am keen to argue in this and in other related contexts, rifts that seem contentious can, by and large, meet eventually with some degree of conciliation. As with the inclusive-exclusive relationship, there may be some justification in seeking out an ethical-unethical rapprochement, or at least being sensitive to instances whereby the two opposing constructs overlap or intersect. Identifying these cross-over points may help one to examine and appreciate the difficult - if not impossible - undertaking faced by ethical committee members who must decide what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate research behaviour. It has been suggested, for example, that ethical review committees continue to operate under the influence of a largely positivistic biomedical paradigm (Israel & Hay, 2006). Such a model might not readily take into account the fact that, as a rule, qualitative research occurs in naturalistic conditions, settings often marked by disorder and ambiguity, where ethnographers have little or no control, and where one's research design is not fixed but in a state of continual development (Hammersley, 2009). Any resolve on a researcher's part to behave within agreed ethical guidelines can often be undone by the everyday practicalities of working on impulse and ad hoc in an indefinable and sometimes incomprehensible research environment.

At the end of one particular day given over to classroom observations, I was approached by a teacher who asked about my availability to help with the supervision of a group of pupils who were invited to attend a sports event (after school hours) at a stadium on the other side of town. It was made at very short notice, but her request carried the insinuation that implementing the visit depended entirely on my willingness to accept the offer. She was, it transpires, struggling to find the necessary quorum of adults prepared or available to act as supervisors. Not wishing to be the person held responsible for killing everyone's joy, nor wanting to pass up the chance of getting what was anticipated to be a good amount of good data, I readily agreed to offer my services. It was only much later I realised that no allowance for such an eventuality had been specified on my AER (application for ethical review) form. The document only declared that for the duration of my fieldwork all data would be obtained from within the schools' grounds, specifically their classrooms, corridors, and play areas.

After careful deliberation, I decided against incorporating any of the sports-day material into my project. On the occasions when the university's ethical review committee rejected my application it was on account of my reluctance to supply root-and-branch details of data collection procedures. Being expected to provide details of the situational conditions in my two case-studies before I had even seen them was asking for a prodigious feat of projection (Monaghan *et al*, 2013). Less than a week later, at the same school, and again at very short notice, I was asked to accompany a Year 5 class to their parish church. My task was to escort them on the short walk across the school car-park, and from there to supervise them as they entered the chapel and then attended the service. In this instance, however, there was no need for reflection and there was no sense of apprehension. I didn't hesitate in using the data

collected there even though the church, by approximately 50 metres, lay beyond the school's physical boundary.

It's fair to say that since then my peace of mind has been troubled more than once by this decision. In the end, I chose to use the observational data from the church visit simply because of the dimensions involved. It all boiled down to where the church and the stadium were positioned in relation to the school. The sports arena was situated miles from it. The church, on the other hand, was close by, although not actually on its property. To forestall suspicion just in case there were any recriminations, I'd rehearsed an exonerating formula borrowed from Gestalt theory which declared, 'the closer things are to one another, the more we tend to perceive them as a single entity' (Zerubavel, 1993, p.16). In all probability such a prescription wouldn't get me off the hook, but to even think of having to make contingencies like this demonstrates the lengths some researchers may feel compelled to go in order to try and extinguish their own guilt and to cover their own tracks should questions be asked at a later date. Indeed, an artful and circumventing mind-set seems to have flourished in respect of this issue. Some doctoral researchers, it is suggested, are compelled to adopt a range of tactics (McAreavey & Muir, 2011), to take strategic approaches (Hammersley, 2009), in order to satisfy the strictures of university scrutineers. It indicates that even before fieldwork has begun they have already, in their imagination at least, grown suspicious of any putative distinction between ethical and unethical behaviour.

The basic principle behind consent being informed is that participants are kept informed about the nature of an investigation. But Hammersley & Traianou (2012) make the point that it is precisely the speed at which events can overtake all known scheduling and planning that renders the one-off informed consent form unfit for purpose. Participants can become so well

informed that their new-found knowledge poses a viable threat to the integrity of an investigation. When children, for example, know what kind of material the researcher is seeking to obtain it can encourage in them a desire to produce voluntary (reactive) responses. It was for this reason that teachers and support staff who formed the adult cohort of my pilot study knew at the outset the precise nature of my investigation, and why the pupil participants were told only that my brief was to examine 'aspects of communication'. Many educational ethnographers consider that opted-in consent is an excessively contractual instrument, weighed down by its implied legal orientation (Fujii, 2012; Crabtree, 2012). Implied consent, on the other hand, offers them a far more flexible option (Homan, 2001). Here, a head-teacher will often act as the pupils' guardian, ethically granting consent on their behalf.

Getting acquainted with members of the study population is a high-risk strategy since it can create the kind of behaviour that ultimately compromises analyses and findings. Well-intended rapport can move seamlessly into a relational stage that goes beyond what is necessary for a project's completion. But it is not always easy to adopt the stranger-friend persona recommended by some ethnographers (e.g. Powdermaker, 1966). Slipping in and out of these fragmented roles, being at once socially connected and then disconnected, is difficult to achieve, particularly when participants in many school settings tend to be wholly supportive of projects, committing to them a genuine benevolence and an unguarded camaraderie.

Whenever it becomes possible to maintain one's emotional distance it becomes easier to make some necessary, but potentially hurtful, decisions. When criticisms of individual participants appear among one's findings it will very likely put a strain on existing friendships. But just how should researchers respond when a fellow teacher, for example,

behaves unprofessionally? Even when adverse interpretations of behaviour or practice are justified, it can seem like an act of betrayal to those individuals disparaged. As Dingwall (2008) suggests, the production of yet more anodyne research with types of inquiry that reinscribe the status quo instead of disrupting and challenging it, is not the kind of prospect many people in the research community would wish to envisage or endorse. Therefore instances of unprofessional conduct on the part of school teachers should not be ignored. Overlooking such behaviour not only weakens the principles underlying the ethnographic method, it fails every pupil taught in circumstances most would eschew. Nor should it be ignored simply because it may, at the later feedback stage, present an awkwardly uncomfortable moment when an individual's questionable behaviour is brought to light. What is often intended to protect the criticised and also the critic in such situations is the principle of anonymity.

One way to maintain the integrity of the ethnographic method, of respecting research settings and subjects, is to ensure that the identity of each school and every individual is protected from both public and critical exposure. Anonymity has become the default position for most university-based ethical review committees. Along with the application of confidentiality, they form a bridgehead at which an institution's and an individual's right to privacy is preserved. And yet, researchers who are determined to uphold that right are expected to operate within a regulatory framework where that right is undermined at almost every turn. Even when identities are thought to have been cloaked and thoroughly coloured, it is relatively easy for certain individuals to be identified from among small populations such as a primary school. It can be argued that in our well-meaning efforts to become exponents of egalitarian research, we are at continuous risk of collecting data in settings bounded by ethical impossibilities.

The precise moment when feedback should be provided to participants raises some interesting administrative and methodological questions. Of the two schools that formed my study cohort only one requested that my findings should be made known to them. And, in respect of this, no time limit was set. I took this to mean that I could declare my findings when the entire project had been concluded, i.e. once my thesis had been checked for fitness and appropriately certified post-submission. Furthermore, we may take for granted the idea that host sites will always be enthusiastic about the follow-up services researchers provide. But there is always the possibility that for whatever reason, be it the constraints of time, the passage of time, or questions of relevancy, a host site may feel it is no longer appropriate to receive feedback.

Both of my host sites eventually responded to the offer that my findings should be presented to them, although they didn't exactly snap my hand off. Clearly, this was not a priority issue for either school. Their apparent indifference contrasted sharply with my eagerness to get this stage in the PhD process completed before a looming deadline expired. However, those representing The Crescent School proved in the end to be not only charming hosts but generous, too. Once they had an opportunity to read my feedback report my overall efforts were commended, and thereafter a much keener interest was shown in the details of what my analysed data had contained. But at The Cross School it seemed that the installation of a new headteacher effectively severed a well-developed connection that had previously been established with the school. The current incumbent certainly did not have the same regard for my project as did her predecessor, despite attempts to inform her of its relevance and importance. And, I suspect, that her enthusiasm would not have improved by much even had I an opportunity to acquaint her with the scope of the venture undertaken, or the many

protocols that were passed at the outset, or that my conduct throughout and subsequent to the collection and analysis of data showed due consideration to all stakeholders.

### Feedback

The inclusive and exclusive dynamic that has maintained such a high profile in this project was evident even at the project's end stage. Among the final duties I had to perform was presenting the research findings to the research participants. This was more than just a common courtesy - it was also an important way to obtain respondent validation. And yet, when I eventually asked the headteacher at The Cross School for her permission to feed back my findings, it was Bergson's famous phrase, an 'absence of feeling', that most accurately summed-up her response. Two years had passed from the time I began collecting data at the school. Since then, some significant changes within the staff team had occurred. The change with the biggest implication concerned the headteacher. Shortly after completing my fieldwork, which she had been so active in supporting, and unbeknown to me, she elected to leave her position and pursue a career elsewhere. Her replacement turned out to be not so accommodating, failing to show any enthusiasm for any part of the research, including its findings.

Establishing lines of communication between us proved to be difficult and initially came to nothing. But unexpectedly, after 3 months, she managed a reply to one of my letters. Somewhat reluctantly she asked me to phone the school in order to arrange a meeting. However, when we spoke she changed her mind and suggested instead that I forward to her as an e-mail attachment a copy of my report (Appendix: A). This was duly despatched, complete with an invitation to comment on all parts of the document, and in particular to check that it did not contain any inaccuracies or points of contention. I am still waiting for her reply.

There was, however, far more encouraging news from The Crescent School. Here, the headteacher and the school's business manager seemed reasonably keen to receive my report and keen also to give their responses to it. Prior to our meeting, I had the presence of mind to send on ahead to each party a copy of my written document (Appendix: B). I reasoned that they could read it before my arrival and therefore our meeting would be more likely to generate a group discussion rather than be fixed around a monologue followed by Q & A. And so it proved. Time constraints limited to three the number of people attending, but this did not detract from the depth and quality of the debate. Of the many issues highlighted in my report it seemed that some chimed precisely with concerns the school was currently addressing or about to address. General comments I had made, for example, about the state of the playground and the performance of playground stewards were met with promising visions of re-designed play areas and programmes dedicated to the training of break-time stewards and supervisors.

To my surprise and delight the head let it be known that she wished to be included in the academic circle devoted to school-based studies on laughter. She made a request for copies of articles and any relevant literature. Moreover, she proposed the idea of having designed and then displaying a series of posters around the school, informing pupils, staff, and visitors, of the different types of laughter and humour behaviour (the inclusive and exclusive forms). It was felt that this activity could be linked most effectively to the national curriculum, featuring perhaps as a future topic on responsible citizenship as part of PHSE lessons.

The main problem I found with the dissemination stage of my research was the size of gap that appeared between the time when fieldwork commenced and when findings were



concluded. It meant that the initial interest shown towards the project by those at both host sites noticeably waned. This was not unexpected, and a process of continuous feedback may have ensured such an event was less likely to happen. It would have been better to have maintained regular contact with each school and kept them informed on how my research - and how the task of collating data - was progressing. But that said, the really positive aspect of feeding back information to participants is that it provided an opportunity to re-connect with them. Those who read my report seemed genuinely fascinated to receive an outsider's view of their school. Happily, there was no awkwardness or recriminations, only promises to remain involved (in at least some capacity) with those who were good enough to be so supportive and cooperative, and to be a continuing part of the school's evolving future.

## CONCLUSION

A new way of thinking about mainstream schooling is proposed. Its inclusive-exclusive alignment is inspired by one of our oldest and most important information-processing faculties. Based on an elementary Gestalt approach to perception - the figure and ground experience envisaged by Bateson (2000) - it makes such an appealing prospect for the education sector one might imagine that only an ungainly appellation prevents it from becoming the mainline strategy for mainstream teaching and learning. How such schools of the future might function, and by what name they might be known, are discussed.

Laughter has proved to be a surprisingly useful tool in assessing the viability of this approach. Its ubiquity and ordinariness, its elusiveness and equivocation, reproduces the disorderly and contradictory personal and institutional structures and conditions found typically within the K1 and K2 Stages. Yet among laughter's ever-changing practices and habits abides an undervalued and underused performativity function. The way it is articulated in mainstream schooling, it is suggested, marks a moment when both the well-being of individual pupils and their school settings can be realised.

We are, nonetheless, urged to approach laughter with caution (Boston, 1974). It may indeed provide some new and unusual insights into the daily happenings of primary school life, but it is equally capable of presenting a varied succession of impediments and challenges. Its inherent ambiguity ensures misunderstandings will commonly arise. But as will become clear, far from judging them as failures or mistakes that might invalidate data, misunderstandings can become ethnographically significant. The false antithesis between *verstehen* and *missverstehen*, to some extent, mirrors the positive and negative points of reference often associated with the inclusive-exclusive relationship. The concept of

reflexivity can help to reconcile these two opposing binaries, ensuring that to misinterpret or misconstrue an event or interaction in the field can in some instances lead to an epistemological breakthrough.

### Full Inclusion?

Schools that describe themselves as ‘fully inclusive’ should be expected to defend making such a peremptory declaration. Whether it is an expedient claim or one based on good faith, the term will usually have some reference to a school’s policy of accommodating pupils regardless of their background or ability. But a fully inclusive environment can mean many things. It may include a position which instigates a zero tolerance of bullying and its related behaviours (e.g. teasing, ridicule, and intimidation). It may also include the implementation of equitable management structures and systems, more effective and fairer staff relations, the cultivation of a broad ‘team spirit’ ethic, or forging stronger links with the local community (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). To be fully inclusive can cover a wide range of personal, organisational, and societal dimensions. At all events, it should leave a school open to detailed scrutiny to ensure that it indeed fully deserves its meritorious description. And yet, instead of opening up, it can in fact effectively close the door on debate, inquiry, and analysis. This is because ‘fully inclusive’ is a term many people are reluctant to argue against. It is somewhat blindly presumed to be the definitive article, the conclusive educational ideal. Arguing against it amounts to a form of heresy, akin to questioning the idea of democracy or society. Ultimately, however, it is a troublesome term in two respects. It places all of its focus on one specifically inclusive element, virtually ignoring the more complex but arguably more dynamically charged exclusive features and structures. In addition, it can create in the minds of some inclusionists the belief that a goal has been reached, a journey completed, and a job already done. It might inadvertently ensure that a sort

of end-state comfort-effect obtains, encouraging campaigners and activists, teachers and pupils, to relax and become complacent.

The findings presented here suggest that this should not be the case. No one can afford to rest easy, especially when only half of the inclusive-exclusive equation has been estimated. But laughter has proved to be a very useful estimation tool. It successfully brings into view the often elided and less desirable 'exclusive' school elements that some institutions would prefer to go unnoticed. Laughter can also operate as an effective 'performance indicator' (Johnson, 2005, p.81), allowing checks to be made on the status and condition of a full range of behaviours and practices operating across mainstream settings. Yet, despite these and other undoubted abilities, laughter is still capable of presenting the researcher with an array of impediments and challenges. In fact, all of the methodological, theoretical, and personal resources that were used to lead this investigation managed, at various stages of the enterprise, to furnish one's temperament with suspicion and to shake hitherto unshakable beliefs. Entirely befitting an exploration of the inclusive-exclusive model, not only did it open one's eyes to new horizons, it cast doubt upon one's capacity to see clearly.

### *Figure and Ground*

All the same, there is nothing new, remarkable, or even radical about proposing an inclusive-exclusive system of education. We habitually employ an inclusive-exclusive framework to help direct and evaluate our ways of thinking. It is the most natural means we have of processing and bringing order to our myriad daily experiences. Our perceptual and cognitive systems are involved in a continual shift between inclusive and exclusive positions, at once enhancing and then inhibiting information (Bateson, 2000). The term used to describe this process, 'figure and ground' (2000, p.187), concerns the way we privilege certain concepts or

inklings by bringing them to the forefront of consciousness (the 'figure'), if they are deemed important enough. Alternatively, they can remain in the distance (the 'ground') if they are considered to be of less value or relevance. An observer does not perceive some situation at once, in all of its detail. Some entities become salient only as a 'figure' that stands before a more or less diffuse 'ground'. The key point is that the functions of enhancement and inhibition are in a state of constant flux; each element (the figure or ground) receives different emphasis of attention at different times depending on an individual's level of knowledge, their personal mood, and the extent that ideology shapes their behaviour. What we may include one minute can be excluded the next. It changes moment by moment.

Bateson is only stating that we are natural practitioners of inclusive-exclusive behaviour (2000). It is a facet of every bias and instinct within us, part of the human tendency to judge and to discriminate, a fundamental part of our deep structure to be, not simply one or the other, but by necessity a bit of both. So adept have we become in maintaining a near-obsessive commitment to insulating mental entities, to organising a rigid perception of the borders separating ourselves from others, we are inclined to miss the intricate physical, spatial, and temporal relationships that exist between assumed polarities. It is small wonder that children find it difficult to appreciate the kind of distinctions adults routinely make. They find it difficult fitting their experiences into our conventional categories, which may be one of the reasons why so many pupils have difficulty 'fitting in' at school.

The figure-ground phenomenon has its origins in psychology. Outside of the discipline its influence was felt most keenly where the principles of Gestalt theory could be applied to aspects of composition. Music, unsurprisingly, benefited greatly from this. But the most significant transition was to the field of art. It challenged some of the fundamental

assumptions about how static objects and forms (shapes and colours) could relate to one another and create harmonious or discordant effects. It helped bring about a greater understanding of the way our visual and cognitive processes operate. Its application to scenarios whereby the key elements happen to be human and therefore more dynamic seemed, however, less convincing. And yet, the basic grouping principles of Gestalt doctrine, the organisation of parts such as proximity, uniformity, connectedness, and segregation, bespeak a language common in and applicable to a range of disciplines, not only within the arts but in the social sciences. It certainly applies to some aspects of ethnographic fieldwork. The starting-point for this study's informal observations, for example, was largely an unorganised affair, with no particular system or structure set in place beyond an expectation to accumulate as much laughter data as possible. But once the project began to develop, the social dynamics of the 'group' emerged as the core unit of focus.

Precedence was given to the grouping arrangements of pupils, i.e. those laughing outside of a typical group structure as well as those whose laughter originated within a recognisable peer ensemble. These types of actions and interactions did indeed return a steady stream of relevant data. But the gestalt approach also had its uses in respect to abstract relations. It could be applied where the grouping of not only people but events and situations were believed to have some sort of influence on children's laughter production. The distribution of repeated elements of the school day, for example, were noted, such as the way core curriculum subjects were separated from non-core topics according to a morning-afternoon, formal-informal divide. Decisions implemented by school managers and administrators affected the day-to-day running of each school, but they also had a significant 'figure-ground' impact on the execution of fieldwork. Opening-up their respective schools to any outsider was an occasion for the headteacher and the school business manager to present each

institution in the best possible light, while at the same time carefully concealing or circumventing the less favourable parts. Not unexpectedly they were keen to steer me to observe and interview a particularly 'good Year', or a particularly competent teacher with an engaging or entertaining pedagogic delivery.

Even though the fieldwork schedule was drawn up largely for the convenience of the two schools, I was not overly concerned about the dangers of being manoeuvred into or away from certain people or areas. I had no specific research requests or stipulations to make because I still wasn't entirely certain what kind of things I was looking for - apart from a conviction that KS1 and KS2 would make the best cohorts to study. I was quite happy therefore to be guided by those who, to outward appearances at least, gave the impression that their knowledge of each research site was professionally thorough. The upshot of being party to such businesslike displays of stewardship, however, was that it became difficult to establish any kind of rapport with the main participants of the inquiry since my 'key informants' during fieldwork (Ball, 1990, p.164) were mainly adults and not pupils.

Perhaps the reason why Peter and Tahir attracted my attention in the first place, and why subsequently so much time was spent writing about them, was because to some degree their situation out in the playground was not unlike my own. Generally, there were few opportunities to make any informal connections with the children. Moments of banter and bonhomie did emerge, but most of the exchanges were self-consciously polite and formal since they were subject to constant supervision. This was disappointing not least because it meant there was no natural means by which the children could act as potential sources of useful, perhaps even unofficial, information. On the other hand, this 'failure' could in fact be construed as a success. For one thing, it provided an opening to see at close quarters the logic

and culture of school management practices. Although, at the outset, this was an unanticipated aspect for consideration relative to children's laughter habits, ultimately it helped to apply an important extra perspective to the investigation. For instance, it offered an opportunity to assess how well these educational leaders knew their respective schools, and whether the directions I was given actually lead to the material I was looking for, or just to the material they were hoping I would find. But over and above these issues, it ensured that after spending many hours engaged in fieldwork, many more hours converting raw data into coherent pieces of information, and even more hours poring over relevant accounts of playtime experiences and interpretations in books and journals, I came away from the two research sites having a much clearer physical and emotional understanding of what it must feel like to be a school user struggling to fit in.

When access to a class or a school event had been successfully negotiated there remained the problem of adopting a suitable position, one that provided some advantage to the process of finding suitable data. It meant maintaining an acceptable distance so as not to get too close during observations and interviews for fear of unduly influencing the participant's behaviour and responses, but not being so far away that I might miss something important – either an item of behaviour or a whispered reply. It meant there was a continual shifting in and out, as if repeatedly switching figure and ground lenses in response to an ever-changing field of attention. In certain classrooms it was more comfortable and strategically useful to reduce my profile, to remain in the background in order to gain a broader conspectus of events.

However, some teachers like Ms Jones at The Cross School seemed reluctant to leave me isolated and detached, preferring instead to have me adopt a more inclusive position in her classroom community.



This inclusive-exclusive alternation was also evident when attempting to analyse and organise data. The findings that eventually followed were a carefully selected sample. Following Mary Douglas (1999), a considered decision was made to foreground the novel, the curious, eccentric, and singular laughter episodes, conferring upon them pride of place, while relegating the common, mundane, everyday examples. This was based largely on a fear that details of the ordinary, typical laughter habits of school children would not be viewed with much enthusiasm among a research community ever alert to instances of ‘originality’. There is a pressing need for ethnographers to fight familiarity (Delamont & Atkinson, 1995). It takes, as Howard Becker (1971) says, ‘a tremendous effort of will and imagination to stop seeing the things that are conventionally ‘there’ to be seen’ (in Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.82). What in effect was finally brought to the fore was a very small number of exceptional cases of laughter behaviour that could not, in all honesty, be described as representative of pupil behaviour at either school.

Nonetheless, the figure-ground experience became a recurring feature during fieldwork, and grew steadily in influence. But this should not have come as any surprise given that it has proved to be a concept some researchers ordinarily associate with an ethnographic perspective (Belmonte, 1979). Anthropology’s concern with the ‘other’, with the identities and behaviours of so-called ‘primitive’ non-Western subjects, was all but reversed when Western ethnographers began to place their own societies and, much later, their own personae under the research spotlight. A commitment to an understanding of the reflective-self brought the background of the ethnographer into parallel with the lives of their foregrounded participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Postmodern developments in qualitative inquiry saw the positionality of the researcher and their participants defined according to a partnership principle. Managing this reciprocal relationship, however, demands some skilful

manoeuvring on the researcher's part. It is a process that constantly fluctuates, with each juxtaposition an involvement but also a detachment, a continual shift in disposition which, if not smartly judged, risks leaving the identity of who or what is the actual 'figure' (in the figure-ground scenario) in doubt. Excessive intrusions into ethnographic texts inevitably lead to accusations that researchers lack objectivity.

Figure and ground describes the contrapuntal arrangement that lies at the very heart of ethnographic inquiry. It is very much expected of observers to attend to the vigorous, explicit behaviour and interactions of participants, but not to overlook the latent, seemingly insignificant – sometimes richer – smaller details. Paying heed to those subtle 'twitches' and 'winks' (Geertz, 1973, p.7) encourages a continuous process of focusing and re-focusing within the visual frame, and become a regular feature of field activity. It had its widest application on the school playground, although here it produced only mixed results. The two big set-pieces – the pair of formal and informal football matches that all but dominated play-time at The Crescent School – returned disappointingly little in the way of laughter behaviour. Those large and swiftly moving sporting scenes full of energy and movement from a mass of pupil-players returned less rewarding evidence because there were too many deeds and actions vying for visual attention. In trying to make observations all-inclusive it can leave one's perceptual faculties with simply too much to do. But the small and arguably more valuable portrait of Tahir and his laughing-running routine was only delivered when it became possible to see beyond the prominent games of football, having developed an ability to perform, in gestalt terms, a figure-ground reversal.

Figure and ground is also a way to describe the relationship between the behaviour and interactions observed and their contextual frames. The perceived ethnographic wisdom is to

ensure that ‘context information is recorded *before* the thick description *per se* is begun’ (Carspecken, 1996, p.47, first italics added). Details like time and location are carefully sketched-in *a priori* to provide a feel for the setting’s atmosphere, for the environmental or physical conditions. Quite often, however, contextual factors remain in the background and stay there only until they are summoned by the researcher as an explanatory tool or a corrective resource. Ordinarily, context provides a fix on the nature of the activity at hand, it being the situational setting that frames a behavioural event. Its clarifying power can help to bolster data analysis and bring light onto interpretation. But Alexander (2010) sounds a warning to those who might downplay the significance of contextual information, suggesting they should not be treated as concepts that provide mere circumstantial evidence, simply occupying space behind the all-important figure. It was, for example, when children’s behaviour seemed out of tune or out of sync with the broader social circumstances that the hitherto dutiful background details grew massively in importance.

Paying careful attention to contextual matters made it possible to draw out some plausible interpretations of Peter’s unusual laughter display and the nervous giggling of the children ill-at-ease during Mr Khan’s silent reading class. These were assumed to be examples of discrepant behaviour of the kind that typically warrant methodical examination, that call for a degree of critical focus. It was only by analysing the formative events which led to those noteworthy actions taking place that it became possible to speculate as to their likely causes. But there will always be certain activities that seem deceptively plain and simple to make sense of, and that demand the very minimum of information or background details. There were no appeals to context, for instance, when it came to providing a relevant and fruitful explanation for the laughter produced by the group of girls happily occupied in the playground gazebo. Beyond the fact that it was playtime and the girls seemed to be in high

spirits there appeared no need to spend time trying to determine likely motives for their heart-warming behaviour.

Laughter like this can stir the emotions, but it does not always incite the kind of investigative spirit necessary to determine its cause or antecedence. The inclination was, in fact, quite the opposite. The urge, rather, was to luxuriate in its very pleasing affects, to accept it as an instance of happy, inclusive laughter, and remain gladdened by the pupils' uplifting sound, a sound inspired by unbridled contentment. Under these blissful conditions it was easy to lose one's sense of focus, to get distracted, even become slightly mesmerised by laughter's palatableness. Its bewitching effect was such that it induced in me a curious form of inertia, temporarily paralysing all attempts to engage any of my rigorous information-processing strategies.

Events which can be described as producing negative (exclusive) laughter will tend to affect our motivational systems more actively than positive ones. Insofar as fieldwork was concerned, intuition dictated that exclusive laughter needed to be addressed, confronted, and dealt with. Taylor (1991) proposes the view that aversive events produce complex cognitive and affective reactions that good, wholesome, desirable behaviour does not. This is because bad events will usually demand a pressing need for prompt settlement or solution; they inspire a largely pro-active response (1991). 'One can thus ignore something good more easily than something bad' (in Baumeister *et al*, 2001, p.360). This may be the reason why the seasonal pantomime at The Crescent School, which provoked unceasing laughter from pupils for an hour and-a-quarter, prompted only the occasional entry in my field journal. The children's laughter was, in this particular case, simply too good.

Despite a tendency to give greater weight to exclusive laughter events, the final tally of laughter episodes that were encountered and examined throughout the period of fieldwork proved to be approximately in equal inclusive-exclusive proportion. The overriding concern was that a concentration of exclusive laughter material would have invited understandable criticism from the host schools. Additionally, such a concentration would have affected any viable conclusions drawn out in respect of the research question. Children's laughter might be able to tell us a great many things about inclusive schooling, but it would be a stain upon the nature of objectivity if all it could tell was my propensity for a particular type of laughter behaviour. But none of this can disguise the fact that exclusive laughter has a singularly significant value. It is more informative insofar as it can provide useful information about the kind of behaviour and activity that departs from what is understood to be the primary school norm. For example, children are expected to be respectful of behavioural codes during their time at school. Evidence where this might not be the case, where exclusive or bad laughter is seen to occur, can show that school-based norms and rules are being defied, which may reveal something about the inner dispositions of the rule-breaking pupils concerned, but can also prove insightful on the behaviour of those with responsibility for enforcing those school rules and practices.

But of the many examples of inclusive laughter that were witnessed in classrooms and across playgrounds, even they could contribute to the potential flaw and distortion of research data. Inclusive laughter can lead one to forget about determining the unseen cause of children's vibrant laughter, and to concentrate instead on the highly visible consequences of it. At The Cross School the gazebo girls' risible symphony was spreading so quickly and infecting everyone who heard it, it approximated to a playground epidemic. But reciprocal effects of this nature can make researchers forget the supposed impartiality of their researcher's

position, especially when they unwittingly get caught up in events, becoming so involved that in effect they are no longer merely observing the event, but contributing to it. When incidents of this kind occur, one's level of participation becomes so deep that an inexorable link is established to those who are producing the laughter. Like it or not a social bond of sorts is formed, of a type Tahhan (2013) describes as a 'touching at depth' (p.45). Whether or not I was deeply or unduly influenced by this incident, there were subsequent observations when I paid perhaps rather too much attention to some of the gazebo girls while in the classroom and on the playground - expecting, hoping, they would articulate more of the same, although, as it happens, they never did. Perhaps King (1978) was right all along. Researchers should make more of a commitment to ensuring their emotions do not betray them or distract them. They should maintain a straight face during observational duties, and remain expressionless, passionless.

It can make very good sense to effect an 'anaesthesia of the heart', as Bergson recommends (1911/2005, p.3). Where a human emotion is the subject of inquiry there should indeed be, on the researcher's part, 'an absence of feeling' (p.2), particularly if they are keen to project for themselves an image of authority and an air of committed efficiency. In such circumstances, laughter's appeal should be 'to intelligence, pure and simple' (p.3). This advice might ensure that even where a researcher is getting more involved in the research inquiry than they anticipated, their involvement is never so deep that its risks becoming dangerously over-familiar. The advice to ethnographers while in the research setting is to avoid 'feeling at home' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.90). If that sense of being a stranger is ever lost, according to their argument, we may also lose our critical and analytical sensibilities (2007). Alternatively, we could always ensure that both laughter's cause and its consequence are carefully taken into account. What matters at all times is to acknowledge laughter's inclusive-

exclusive capacity. This should allow us to appreciate its twin dimensions. It will make inquirers more attentive to the possibility of getting caught off guard, perhaps beguiled, for example, by the sound of beautiful, inclusive laughter, or even incapacitated, rendered awe-struck, as when confronted by instances of bad, exclusive laughter.

### *Verstehen and Missverstehen*

My attempt to make some sense of the decision by the head at The Cross School to avoid involving herself in my study, in particular the feedback stage, was as accurate as the available information would allow. But attempts to understand social experiences and behaviour will invariably lead to instances of error, of misunderstanding. In the world of qualitative inquiry where validity and reliability remain fundamentally important conditions, the expectation is to ensure assertions and interpretations produce a fulsome but trustworthy research document. Working within the qualitative tradition researchers will appeal to contextual information for a more accurate understanding of social events and institutions. Failing, for example, to appreciate the broader social and emotional sensitivities of the two girls at The Cross School who faced potential derision for playing netball with equipment they believed was intended for the game of basketball, impresses on the mind just how easy errors of judgement can occur when engaged in a school-based inquiry. Schools are situated in a world where a child's laughter and a child's distress are intimately related, where a shriek of delight can turn into a scream of terror, where a smile is never far away from being a grimace. A regular hazard of so much observational work in schools is the development of 'observational strain', a condition where fatigue brought on by repetitious inspection obstructs the visual senses normal functioning.

Errors can also arise because of our world-weary habits in processing information. The way that we separate entities from their surroundings is what allows us to see them in the first place; they have to be set apart so that they can stand out. We categorise and we classify. We obey the urge to pigeon-hole a behaviour, a person, or an activity, so that it stands out and we can make better sense of it. Without an ability or tendency to erect organisational frames or establish categories we would not be able to see very much at all. Our perceptual and cognitive faculties function according to a constantly shifting and sifting classificatory system, be it objects, events, or people. It is at once a highly sophisticated operation, neurologically and biologically speaking, yet at the same time it is operationally primitive and naïve. From the observer's perspective, those things that appear to belong together are usually grouped into a single mental category. When we cast items into homogeneous lots it is often done for convenience sake, and quite often with little regard for an item's unseen or unknown uniqueness.

One of the consequences of falling slave to this processing schema may have resulted in a case of mistaken identity concerning the pupil who, up until now, has been referred to as 'Tahir'. This boy's background was presumed to be Pakistani, a heritage it was believed he shared with most of the pupils at his school. According to field-notes they document only that a small Asian boy was running and laughing about the playground in a manner that was intriguing enough to warrant further scrutiny. There was no reason to question his ethnicity at the time, for it seemed to be beyond dispute. But months after fieldwork had been completed, and just when the writing-up stage had begun, doubts as to 'Tahir's' initial identification began to emerge which meant that it was no longer possible to uphold with any degree of confidence. It is entirely possible that this pupil at The Crescent School was in fact a white boy - one of the (very) few remaining indigenous British pupils still in attendance at the



school. It was simply taken for granted that 'Tahir' was Asian - even though his complexion was noticeably pale. The error is difficult to justify, especially as it has been well known to me that among the inhabitants of the Indus Valley there are populations with complexions lighter than Caucasians. The Kalasha, for example, a tribal people who have lived in northern Pakistan for a thousand years, are so fair (in skin colour) they are routinely mistaken for Europeans.

Unlike Geertz, whose experiential moments occurred during his detailed account of the cockfights in Bali (1973), my moment of revelation occurred well away from the research site and many months after observations had been completed. Whether it was an example of post-field reflection or it came about as a result of some conscious-subconscious orientation in the figure-ground manner, Marcus suggests that it can be the 'diffuse efforts to come to terms with the lacks and failures of fieldwork *afterwards* that provide the richest and the 'thickest' materials' (2006, p.115, italics added). Not that there were an excess of difficulties or frustrations encountered during my research role, although there were constant periods of doubt and uncertainty. Okely (1992), in agreeing with Marcus, makes the point that 'field-notes may be no more than a trigger for...hitherto subconscious memories' (p.16). It is therefore quite possible that this period of 'post-fieldwork fieldwork' (Cohen, 1992, p.339) could have provided me with a different angle of vision, an opportunity to reconstruct my ethnographic account from the notes that continued to develop long after observations and interviews finished, but not notes culled from the field, rather those 'from that mental notebook which is never closed' (1992, p.339).

In an effort to try and reduce laughter's negativity bias, countless attempts were made to neutralise the greater potency of exclusive laughter by re-engaging with the mass of head-

notes that had been mentally stowed away. The hope was they would help to establish why I felt there was such a need to record mainly exclusive laughter data, and determine what it was that made me finally decide instead to equalise them, to ensure that inclusive and exclusive laughter episodes should be evenly represented throughout the study. It was during one of many equalising moments like this that the first doubts about Tahir began to emerge, doubts that grew suddenly into a major perturbation. Constantly replaying his playground routine in my head, together with the unusually harsh judgement of him by the group members he seemed so interested in joining, may have succeeded in suspending my initial analysis. With the benefit of this hindsight, assumptions about Tahir's identity were now considered a low-risk, non-contentious strategy, a way of dealing with a potentially difficult and sensitive issue that would certainly have conferred upon my findings some much needed impact, had it been carried through, but may have caused nothing but trouble for the staff and pupils at The Crescent School. It therefore may not have been just a simple observational error on my part. More likely, it was a subconscious wish for neatness, a desire not to leave any messy, awkward ends, but, rather like a meta-analysis in research that achieves a skilful synthesis or, in the world of humour and laughter, a successful joke/funny story that delivers a conclusive punch-line or satisfying dénouement, there was an irresistible impulse to find an orderly means of resolution.

If 'Tahir' was truly a white pupil, the playground incident would have raised a problem that was unlikely to be confined to the school setting alone. It was an issue bearing much wider social and political significance, one that could have been easily exploited by certain parties or groups in the broader community intent on using confrontational methods in a manner Gittell & Vidal (1998) have previously described. Even though the general public have a right to be informed about such matters, this privilege must be weighed carefully against the

sensitivity that must (also) be shown to local community relations in an area where they achieve, at best, a delicate balance. Putnam has described in general terms the phenomenon whereby white families abandon their communities in the face of increased patterns of immigration as ‘white flight’ (2000, p.209). Over time, these new settlers can become the majority population. The commonsense view is that social capital either gets lost in the transition or it is simply replaced, like for like. Putnam, however, sees immigration as a national asset, arguing that diversity fosters creativity, economic growth, and inter-ethnic tolerance and social solidarity. And if black and white children attend the same schools race relations will improve, he says somewhat hopefully (2007). At all events, the emphatic decline in white pupil enrolment at The Crescent School remains a sensitive issue.

In my capacity as a teacher I am inclined to be far less forgiving when confronted by exclusive behaviour in the playground, particularly if it is thought to contain a racial motive. But in my role as a researcher it was an act that I deliberately chose not to acknowledge. Out of some sense of loyalty to the school concerned, I feared that by highlighting the transgression some form of community backlash would ensue. That said, however, I had no such qualms about bringing to light the details of what occurred in the same school during a silent reading class. There was no circumspection, no corresponding anxiety on that occasion, no fears about upsetting anyone inside or outside the school. This inconsistency is difficult to justify, except to say there were nagging doubts (that remain to this day) about ‘Tahir’s’ identity, whereas Mr Khan’s actions were beyond all possible doubt. It was inconsistent, too, to suggest that Mr Khan had acted rashly when I had committed a very similar act, or at least performed an inverted version of it.

Whereas he had taken a child from a group to which she naturally belonged, I had placed a child into a group where he almost certainly did not belong. Even though 'Tahir' made a valiant attempt to become a member of a group which at the time was keenly resisting his every effort, I managed with very little thought or effort to assign him a less problematic categorical identity, one based on a highly selective system of perception and classification. But then adults are quite accomplished at employing tactics of control when it comes to children (Jenks, 2005). This is so even when intentions are well meant. Children are certainly subject to fierce forms of regulation. The whole premise of adult interaction with the child is based on a combination of precept and control. It operates through, among other factors, a process of 'hierarchical observation', says Sheridan (in Jenks, p.82). It operates according to a depth of gaze in the child-adult relationship that had it been slightly more democratic, trusting, and slightly more reciprocal, it may have led to a decrease in authorial control and an increase in authorial humility (Stoller, 1989).

### Post-fieldwork Fieldwork

One of the ways to assuage any feelings of guilt at having been so careless, and also to retain a measure of face-saving credibility, is to have the perceived error declared instead a 'discovery'. This is how the ethnographic film-maker, Jean Rouch, was able to deal with and make sense of an epistemological oversight that had troubled him for many years. After a prolonged period of post-fieldwork fieldwork he realised that his initial interpretations had been founded on a series of misidentifications. Findings from observations that focused on symbolism used by the Songhay people in Niger were gleaned and scrutinised using an inappropriate Eurocentric perspective (Stoller, 1989). Essentially, while studying different aspects of their world view, he saw in the Songhay's geographical/transport network a series of road systems which intersect, whereas his native informants saw roads which end in forks -

an inconsequential matter on the face of it, but one of foundational importance in Songhay cosmology. And so, 30 years after he made his initial error, he was impelled to reassess, to reconsider, and only then, after all that time, did he begin to see the delusion of his original thesis (Stoller, 1989).

I would like to think that there was something deeply virtuous in not being able to distinguish between most of the inclusive and exclusive laughter forms/examples I encountered.

And, further, to posit whether my inability in these cases can be correlated to my failure to distinguish between a white pupil and Tahir, an Asian one. At one level it might look like a basic ethnographic oversight. But on another level, there may be something positive and ennobling to be said about a failure not to see such differences. It may reveal something more profound/substantial about an individual's innate urge not to habitually separate or feel impelled to categorise. To see people as indivisible is surely among the most important steps that need to be taken when building an inclusive society. Indeed, perhaps we should be finding it more difficult to classify entities, be they social or abstract. If it can become possible to genuinely overlook distinctions, to take greater heed of our first order responses, regarding them as more accurate accounts of things seen and said, it may help us to understand the moderating influence that the process of reflection has on our essentially pure, raw, fieldwork experiences.

My own experience of post-fieldwork fieldwork may have prompted a comparably slow disclosure, a gradual dawning and realisation concerning the question of Tahir's identity. I managed to convince myself that resistance to accepting what I thought to be his true ethnic status was because I did not want to foist problems of a racial nature on to a school already feeling the strain across so many different educational, social, and political fronts. Besides,

previous experience of dealing with irate sections of a school's community over disputed research findings had left me exceptionally wary about antagonising managers and teachers. Small comfort could be had from the knowledge that suppressing the truth for ethical reasons retains an instrumental value in naturalistic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Moreover, it is claimed that doubts and uncertainties lie at the heart of ethnographic and educational inquiry (Frankham & Smears, 2012). Viewing these negatives as positives proved not only consoling but seemed an expedient way of invoking and defining my personal inclusive-exclusive agenda, the explanatory principle of which is one that simultaneously delimits and enhances information, be it habits of thinking or ways of seeing.

Aspects of a researcher's value orientation or personal agenda can be revealed in fruitful and illuminating ways when individual assets such as their 'identity capital' are engaged (Côte & Levine, 2002, p.141). Not unlike its more famous social variant, identity capital amounts to a person's psychosocial skills and attributes, those personality mechanisms that can be cashed-in to facilitate acceptance and entry into desirable social groups and settings (2002). Wary of being perceived as an outsider or an authority figure, fieldworkers will know that an ability to smile and appear pleasant, or being possessed of a flair for making others laugh, will go some way towards building that all-important rapport with a group under scrutiny. Substantially, then, one's identity capital covers the range of resources an individual is able to deploy in order to define themselves and to be defined by others (2002). The stress placed on this reciprocal essence, on interactions and relationships, lies at the concept's heart and serves to remind us that researcher positionality can only be considered with respect to the population to be researched. When adopting a hermeneutic position, for instance, one that infers or interprets meanings from participants' actions or articulations, an ethnographer is enjoined to

try and assume a performative attitude, to 'take the position' of those participants, and to see things from their point of view (Carspecken, 1996, p.99).

But it is also important for fieldworkers to appreciate that positionality can be flexible and subject to frequent change. Watching Tahir's attempts on the school playground to gain entry among his preferred peer group grouping brought this particular point powerfully home. Not only is it liable to change, but the positionality of the researcher is not so far removed from that of the participants. Both will at times use artful means to try and describe 'who they are' or, if necessary, 'who they are not'. Tactics researchers employ when in the field in order to ingratiate themselves, to heighten their respectability, to make them appear sympathetic and concerned for participants, may mean that the art of getting pupils, for example, to 'open up' may be achieved by manufacturing a relaxed and natural ambience, and will depend to some extent on performing a variety of ruses and feints, by sometimes subtly masking one's true character or motivation. Outwardly at least, it may look as if the power differential between researcher and participant is being maintained if not actually extended. The wily and skilful researcher could be conceived as attempting to outwit unsuspecting and gullible youngsters by coercing them to perhaps unwittingly reveal details about themselves, and artfully extracting reasons to account for their various school-based actions and articulations. But children are not above doing this kind of thing themselves. Those like Tahir and Peter have shown they possess a great aptitude for such forms of cunning and contrivance. Tahir's performance, in particular, was so skilfully wrought that not only was I taken in by it, but it might have contributed indirectly to my fateful attempt at identifying him. His exhibition proved so absorbing it may have caused a momentary lapse in my concentration. This led to a failure to observe data correctly, which ultimately led to a failure to uphold my own inclusive-exclusive anti-discriminatory position.

To speak of an ‘inclusive-exclusive’ society or constitution is unlikely to fashion it as a particularly appealing prospect. It lacks the emphatic exactness suggested by the neatly totalising, confidently declarative, ‘inclusive’ society or ‘fully inclusive’ school. Thus, it is not perhaps the kind of social system or ideology many people would voluntarily wish to inhabit or espouse, despite it being one that realistically describes a society and disposition that manages to accurately reflect its vigorous mix of positive and negative mechanisms. Such an achievement, it is argued, should be openly and proudly acknowledged. And it is with regard to this mixture of mechanisms that ‘Tahir’s’ questionable identity, or my understanding of it, resonates with particular effect. For the duration of playground fieldwork these two aspects stood in close proximity to one another. I assumed Tahir was Asian, but deep down I suspected he was white. The pretence was maintained, I suggest, to deflect any possible criticism that could be directed at the school. But just like Saleem Sinai, the mistrustful narrator in *Midnight’s Children*, I was taking liberties with a known error (Rushdie, 2008). And just like any author of a textual incongruity my narrative account, perhaps with all due aptness, had left myself open to ridicule.

Nonetheless, this error offered a useful way to reflect on a much larger picture. It provided some insight as to how pupils like Tahir are viewed, and perhaps view themselves, as fractured individuals, as children embodying a double sense of self. Many like him, for example, carry dual nationalities. They maintain strong links with their ancestral homelands but enthusiastically embrace selective aspects of British culture. Many boys like Tahir regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as outsiders and insiders (Bhatti, 2011). In this sense, Tahir approximates to a typical figure among his peers who may feel at any one moment inclusive and exclusive, engaged and disengaged. In some respects he is much like ‘Tahir’s’



significant other, the little white boy, whose prejudicial treatment in the school playground occurred against a backdrop of the dissolution of white, mainly working-class, communities. A large number of families deliberately abandoned their homes on a racial impulse. They left behind a scattering of white friends and relations, some of whom were defiantly hanging on; others simply didn't have the financial means to resettle. They also left behind a reduced community of children many of whom were suddenly left vulnerable and exposed. In an example of history's eternal recurrence, those children, both on the street and on the playground, soon fell prey to the kind of racially motivated behaviour and experiences that their modern-day tormentors, and their ancestors, endured and indeed continue to endure.

### *Laughter's History and Future*

A common view of human history is to see it as a series of turning-points, a succession of ruptures and shifts which singly and collectively help define the growing sophistication and advancement of civilised societies. Each discovery and break-through, each juncture and watershed, forms the central motor that can highlight the historical significance of select intellectual atmospheres and cultural periods. Each distinctive stage or epoch becomes a definable and recognisable category into which information and knowledge can be easily inserted and just as easily extracted. Their schematic character, however, the way material, facts, and information is accumulated and condensed, means 'there is a risk of neglecting continuities' (Castoriadis, 1997, p.36). Complexes and phenomena which are largely static, constant, and reliable rarely catch the historian's eye. They are apt to settle in the background such is the demand and desire to find and highlight distinctive periods of interest, dynamic moments of change, upheaval, and creation.

Wickberg, for example, states that as a descriptive term the 'sense of humour' made its first appearance in the 1840s. Before that time, he suggests, there was no 'sense' to speak of – there was 'only humour' (1998, p.16). 'Humour' heretofore effectively described a person's physiological condition. Any attempt to relate it to a person's psychological temperament would, at this relatively early understanding of mind and behaviour, amount to an anachronism. We are told that the way to understand the sense of humour concept, and specifically the important change in the meaning of the term 'humour', is to see the past as 'a foreign country' (Wickberg, 1998, p.18). This is based on a presumption that people having individual personalities is a comparatively recent idea. Our early ancestors, for example, lacked the 'enduring characteristics of individuality' (Billig, 2005, p.12). This sense of segregation, of seeking to separate the past, is a familiar strategy used by those who employ periodisation as a way to illustrate the progress and rapid change of mankind's physical, social, and psychological evolution.

The categorisation of time is often deployed in order to help accentuate the presumed difference between past and present. Charles Jencks, the renowned architect and designer, does this. With remarkable precision he identifies 1972 (the 15<sup>th</sup> of July, to be exact) as the day which saw the symbolic death of modernism and the birth of post-modernism (in Harvey, 1990, p.39). With only slightly less exactness, but with equal conviction, the historian Eric Hobsbawm calculated that a seismic change occurred in Western art and culture during the 1950's and 1960's. Again, drawing on the language of segregation/separation, he claims these to be fractured times (2013). In a similar vein, the criminologist Jock Young (1999) has charted the industrial world's transition from what he describes as an inclusive society prior to the 1960s to an exclusive society during the last third of the 20c. Once again, the 1960's are conceived as being a pivotal period. The era preceding it is pictured as endowed with a

strong sense of community, booming economies, falling mortality, a growing standard of living, etc. It is a period he clearly laments, and brings to mind the equally mournful Putnam (2000) who, like Virgil in his fourth eclogue (Arnold, 1994), pined for a return to the so-called golden age.

But it is not always helpful to reduce history to neatly partitioned contexts and decisively distinguished eras. For many people, historical and contemporary events are regarded collaterally. The past will invariably inscribe the present. For example, historical events are actuated by the same kinds of contemporary pressures, prejudices and passions. Judging by Young's analysis, the period just before the 1960's, the one marked by two world wars, was somehow more inclusive than the era that came in its wake (1999). He seems to be referring to that 'inclusive period of high modernity which saw the relentless segregation of people with learning disabilities in large psychiatric hospitals, of children with physical disabilities in large 'special' residential institutions...' (Yar & Penna, 2004, p.545). But, as Yar and Penna make clear, it is doubtful whether there ever was such a thing as an inclusive society (2004). The suspicion is that Young's thesis is predicated upon a common fallacy, one that sets up a historical dualism between inclusive and exclusive (2004). Whether a society of either orientation could ever be capable of giving way to its antithesis, could ever be capable of producing an iterative ebb-and-flow effect, is a contestable point. But one thing that seems certain is that either way, laughter would remain uniform throughout (Boston, 1974). It must be acknowledged that the number of laughter theories and our understanding of laughter may over time have improved. But, for the most part, in respect of laughter's ability down the ages to be inclusive and exclusive, 'nothing much has changed' (1974, p.14). While the sense of humour concept may have undergone a significant transition, laughter has remained an anthropological constant (Pfister, 2002), a changeless element of human nature.

Even though the course of human history has been marked by laughing *with* and laughing *at* behaviour, it is not unreasonable to assume that along the way there must have been some changes in laughter attitudes. It seems unlikely, for example, that we have become so insensible to moral and ethical dimensions over time that our laughter habits have not become more discriminating. As if to give this idea greater credence it is customary to introduce the well-rehearsed line of argument which usually begins ‘...we no longer go to lunatic asylums to laugh at the inmates’ (Boston, 1974, p.15). This refers to the Sunday entertainment that was available, at the cost of one penny, to the casual spectator in the early nineteenth-century (Foucault, 2009). The argument is certainly true, although what is rarely acknowledged is that this practice did not stop because of some evolving moral improvement process on the part of society’s collective conscience. This disturbing pastime only ceased when hospital governors denounced it as a scandal. It did not stop because members of the public suddenly lost interest or no longer found it entertaining. On the contrary, it can be argued that the general public’s enthusiasm for such prurient mockery has continued undimmed. If people are still prepared to be amused, to find time to laugh, at the death of Lady Diana and to make jokes directly after the events of 9/11 (Conroy, 2004), they are in all probability the kind of people who would be queuing around the block should the Bethlehem Royal Hospital in south London ever consider opening its doors to the public in the manner of its infamous predecessor 200 years earlier.

People have laughed at the misfortune of others since the beginning of recorded history. Even when society has reached its lowest ebb, even in the very worst set of social or political circumstances, laughter continues its singular expression without respite (Billig, 2005). Today’s children have maintained that remarkable tradition (Morreall, 1983). Whether or not

it is appropriate to think of laughter as a phenomenon capable of being 'handed down' as it were, it must be acknowledged that there are few communicative activities that rival its ability to provide us with information about people's expressions, their behaviours, emotions, or the institutions they inhabit. As we have seen, laughter can be a performance indicator, a mood predictor, a sign of individual and institutional well-being, and a symptom of breakthrough and breakdown. It is ultimately an ambitious but also an ambiguous signal. So that we can begin to make brighter use of laughter's remarkable properties, its inclusive and exclusive capabilities, we need to ensure that our social settings which play host to - and often encourage - these behaviours, remain bold enough to acknowledge their own intrinsic ambiguities. Until that time, children's laughter can only tell us part of their story.

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APPENDIX: A

Research in Education

“Laughter and Inclusion”

A Summary of Key Findings

Presented to

The Cross Primary School,



by Michael Nugent

University of Birmingham

9th February, 2015

In compulsory schooling generally, and within the primary sector in particular, laughter is considered to be a commodity of some value. For the most part, it is conceived as being a force for good. Claims have been consistently made that it can be employed as an effective instrument with which to improve pupil motivation and concentration. It can also provide a means to sharpen pupils' focus, and ease through difficult concepts and topics by helping to make them appear more accessible, less intimidating. Moreover, laughter can send out a positive signal about a school's sense of community. Somehow its familiar acoustic signature seems to indicate that learning is taking place, and even manages to provide a largely favourable impression about the quality of relationships pupils enjoy with their peers and their teachers. And yet, fundamentally, laughter is two-faced. In its ability to display affiliation and friendliness laughter can indeed bring people together, but it can just as easily set them apart. Situated against its inclusive, open face, laughter has a dark, exclusive side, as pupils at a primary school in Bolton, Lancashire recently found. While their playtime laughter was interpreted by school staff as a desirable sign of happiness and contentment, it was deemed an anti-social disturbance by families living nearby, who were so inconvenienced by it during the spring and summer months they instigated legal proceedings against the school for perpetrating an intolerable 'noise nuisance'.

The purpose of my research has been to identify some of laughter's functions in a primary school setting. These have included not only the deliberate - but also some of the contrived - acts and commissions. In addition, I have tried to unpick some of the myths commonly associated with laughter. This particular process required an exploration of some of the instances of ambiguity which continues to bedevil its interpretation. Instances, for example, whereby children's laughter was not produced spontaneously (as many people suppose) but voluntarily, strategically, were given careful attention. Children, of course, laugh when they



find something amusing, but they also laugh when something is unfunny. They will laugh in situations where they know that it would be to their detriment if they did not laugh, for example, when they are told a joke by another pupil as a test of intelligence, a test of friendship, or a way to assess (and hopefully preserve) their 'in-group' status.

The role of the teacher in pupils' laughter production is crucial. Since they are, in principle at least, the main laughter conduit, their classroom duties in this regard have also been considered. Naturally, it is down to the teacher to establish the right kind of atmosphere so that children can feel at ease in a pleasant, relaxed learning environment. In this capacity they are key figures in helping to set the right laughter tone. But if they should get this wrong, they run the risk of becoming risible themselves, of becoming the object of their pupil's scorn and mockery. So, exploring laughter's inherent inclusive and exclusive dimensions will provide an estimate of the kind of impact it might have on primary schools that declare themselves to be, for example, actively promoting an inclusive ethos. This will hopefully lead to examining in more detail whether exclusive forms of laughter, such as mockery, ridicule, and teasing, can ever have a place in an avowedly inclusive learning environment.

I was given permission by the then head teacher to conduct a series of classroom/playground observations, and a small number of informal interviews, with children at The Cross Primary School. The results of those interviews and observations formed the foundation of my PhD thesis as well as the fundamental part of this smaller report summary, a summary which is intended for the benefit of school governors, staff, pupils, parents, and other parties of interest.

It may have been nothing more than a coincidence that my fieldwork began at a time when a national report had been published indicating that laughter levels in Britain were in steep decline. Evidence appeared to show that we are not laughing as much as our forebears did in the 1960s, and this news - if the gloomy reports in the national press were to be believed - seemed to trouble and irritate the national consciousness. A range of legitimate, as well as anecdotal, reasons were mooted for this downturn, everything from the gloomy economic situation to the rise in work and domestic-related pressures. My own view is that since our levels of social capital have experienced a similar downturn (social capital describes the strength of our family, neighbourhood, and community connections, i.e. how well-connected we are) a corresponding diminishment in laughter behaviour would not be unexpected. In order for there to be more laughter, so the argument goes, people need to get together more often. But this all too simple panacea is not without its problems. The series of school-based interviews and observations I conducted show that the task of getting people together is not always so easy to achieve. Nonetheless, the behavioural and communication theorists put it plainly: laughter is about relationships, for without them there is unlikely to be much laughter. Fundamentally, laughter is a social behaviour and we seldom laugh, it is said, when alone.

As far as pupils are concerned, the two main laughter arenas in any school are the classroom and the playground. The school playground provides a convenient recreational space in which they are able to present and cement their friendships. It also provides a suitable environment for children to develop physical stamina, encourage motor development, and to release nervous energy. The Cross school's impressive playground system is a product of the school rebuilding programme which reached its peak during the middle period of the last century. In response to a sharp increase in the birth-rate immediately after the Second World

War, new schools were built on the peripheries of towns and cities where more space was available. Situated in the west of the city this particular school materialised from one such suburban settlement, benefiting from both the revolution in modern design materials and progressive ideas in education. Thanks to an ample site that was made available, a network of playgrounds could comfortably accommodate pupils from the upper and lower school without any need for playtime to be staggered. Plenty of additional space which lay around it had been carefully cultivated into facilities of undisguised charm, like the adventure play area complete with climbing frames, rope swings, and slides, all dressed in a soft wood mulch to minimise injuries. There was also a dedicated nature trail with maze-like low hedging, natural pathways, boxes for nesting birds, and logs formed into small piles to replicate the natural habitat of a variety of small creatures and insects. Both sites were adjacent to, and overlooking, a great swathe of green-belt land where, during fine weather, pupils were allowed to play.

One of the largest items of equipment/furniture in the playground occupied one corner of it. A wooden gazebo proved to be a popular rendezvous point for pupils, particularly the girls. One morning break-time I found myself drawn towards this polygonal structure. At first sight it seemed empty, but after slowly walking around it I happened upon the small opening and found four girls lying face down on the wooden floor, one on top of the other. It looked as if they were attempting to build a column of bodies as one would find in a circus. But what attracted my attention was the sound of the girls' laughter. Each child had been reduced to a state of collapsible hilarity. The sound that rang out soon encouraged a crowd of adult and pupil onlookers who, curious as to the source and nature of the exhilaration, were soon laughing among themselves having been happily and helplessly contaminated. If the tower of bodies was not the most elegant sight ever seen, it certainly produced the most attractively

natural sound one could ever wish to hear. Their fabulous laughter continued for some minutes, more so perhaps out of sheer delight that despite their high humour the girls had managed to preserve the integrity of their vertical shape - that somehow none of the upper bodies in the human construction had toppled over. Such an innocuous, trivial occurrence almost went unnoticed yet was responsible for holding a small playground audience spellbound, and encouraged a spread-ability factor for which laughter's infectiousness - its ability to touch others - could and indeed should be of fundamental social importance.

One of laughter's more remarkable features is its ability to produce a highly contagious effect. Its infectious quality can provoke laughter in others, a case of laughter begetting laughter, causing a chain reaction capable of quickly touching individuals and entire communities, arousing feelings of closeness, inspiring a sense of togetherness, and proving almost impossible to resist. Although laughter may be apt at times to spread like a contagion (like yawning), quite often it develops from the least consequential detail, sometimes having little or no purpose at all. The cascade of giggles issuing from inside the gazebo had no obvious stimulus beyond the incongruity of the girls' precarious physical position. Their laughter may have simply been a natural accumulation, with the sole reference point being the girls' immediate and exclusive company, the sheer delight and pleasure of peer group association. And yet it also successfully managed to affect a thoroughly inclusive outcome. The girls' laughter was not only located in - or even between - themselves, but concentrated in the relationship between them and the small party of onlookers, reverberating around all those concerned who were, momentarily at least, indelibly connected. The group of people who shared in this playground experience may have gone away slightly richer, more warmly disposed towards their fellow beings, and possibly set to gain one day on the strength of their having been touched that morning by laughter's awesome sociality.

Among the many adult onlookers intrigued by the playground laughter that morning were some playground supervisors. Of the many tasks that are generally allocated to them is an expectation to become familiar with those spots and corners, those obvious and not-so-obvious places where children congregate – sometimes with every innocent intention, but sometimes to try and keep out of sight of official scrutiny. At such places many pupils choose to gather and talk, to stand around and laugh, or plot and conspire as a mischievous prelude to some rough and tumble play. Supervisors tend to be a mix of teaching staff and designated playground stewards; most of the stewards are parents who live and have been recruited locally. Their range of duties include acting as chaperons to the ‘quiet ones’, those pupils with a tendency to cling to adults for companionship, as well as being alert for signs and instances of misbehaviour. To that extent, it can be very difficult for them to make accurate distinctions between playful and aggressive interactions. Furthermore, it can be very difficult for them to distinguish laughing *at* (exclusive) behaviour from laughing *with* (inclusive) behaviour. They cannot always rely on what they see or hear in certain situations since laughter is not always a reliable communication or behavioural indicator. Supervisors will, however, usually err on the side of caution. Upon hearing or meeting with ambiguous forms of laughter they will judiciously urge children to “play nicely”, even if the children are already doing so.

Data collected from the school has helped to identify some of the enduring as well as the fleeting dynamics that lie behind the management of pupils’ playground behaviour. Taking laughter and play as the key reference points has made it possible to consider the quality of their interactions in order to test the rhetoric that ‘every child matters’. The playground affords a much clearer view of how physically and socially included children feel within their

school community, which may go some way to predicting how they will be disposed to view the prospect of making future ties to, and within, the wider adult community. The principle has been to fix extra attention on laughter's disquieting absence, i.e. on pupils who were, for whatever reason, unable to show any evidence of interacting with their peers, those offering few if any of the typical signs of maintaining acquaintanceships, those who might be lacking the wherewithal, the inclination, or the necessary social skills to get the very best out of all that the playground and playtime could offer.

The cacophony of noise on the playground, a mixture of screaming, laughing, and shouting, meant it was difficult initially to fix on one particular child or group of children so that their playtime interactions could be considered in detail. Happily, the vast majority of children were playing together, interacting with their friends freely and energetically. Even children who showed no inclination to play seemed perfectly content to sit on benches at the edge of the playground either chatting or snacking together.

Since the welter of noise on the playground was temporarily off-putting, would a regime of silence make observations any easier to manage? Before I began my classroom observations I was asked to accompany a group of pupils across the school car-park on one of their regular visits to the church situated nearby. Admittedly, it seemed an unlikely venue for too many interactions let alone instances of laughter since it was anticipated that firm behavioural restrictions would be in force. It was nonetheless interesting to note that before and during the service, although there was a good deal of ambient noise inside the sacred building, there was very little laughter from the mainly pupil congregation. The occasional snicker/titter could be heard, but there was nothing like the amount of laughter activity I was expecting. Instead, all emotions appeared to have been carefully controlled. There were few, if any, profane

outbursts. The small number of pupils who so much as dared to transgress in any capacity were typically fixed with the cold stare of disbelieving outrage by highly affronted members of staff. It was enough. No words were necessary.

On the whole, the pupil church-goers seemed to have little interest in wanting to break this particular silence, either through laughter or via any other means. And yet, only a few days previously I had been in a classroom (at another school) during a silent reading lesson where for the entire period all that could be heard were the sounds of pupils attempting to stifle their laughter through a series of half-suppressed snorts, giggles, and grunts. Quite often a regime of silence can be considered by most people, but particularly by schoolchildren, as presenting them with something akin to a challenge. However, these pupils' self-restraint was impressive. This may have been due to there being a greater sense of respect for the premises they were in, since it was an environment where silence was naturally to be expected (unlike a classroom). It is after all what helps to make religion so revered, lending atmospheric weight to its grave and awesome, if not ominous, sense of ecumenical mystery. Although the children may not have felt entirely comfortable with this silence, they at least understood its solemn significance. Whether they happened to be believers or not, they recognised - if not appreciated - the rationale behind it; they could see the point in being carefully respectful and reflectively contemplative.

In a school setting, on the other hand, silence has a tendency to do the opposite. It can, for example, mean painful associations for some children who may have first-hand experience of the 'silent treatment', a form of ostracism routinely instigated by their peers, which involves deliberately avoiding eye contact and verbal communication, effectively excluding the concerned party from their usual peer group association. Historically, silence formed a

dominant part of the school curriculum. Indeed, the teaching and learning experience was founded on an appreciation for and respect to its maintenance. Until very recently its application remained widespread, and included official use as a form of chastisement, a formidable feature of Monday morning assembly, and a fundamental part of the behavioural code that enjoined children to stop talking when the teacher was teaching. However, with a growing interest in and concern for the concept of 'pupil voice', silence has become something of an anachronism in modern school education. Children are now privileged, to some extent, to speak openly, to have their say, to let nothing stand in the way of their right to self-expression. Whether many teachers would care to confirm this is, of course, a debatable point. But the principle, if not its actual practice, is the key thing, and it's fair to say that generally speaking silence is no longer such a prominent feature of children's education. Today, apart from the obligatory period of national testing when talk is necessarily suspended, silence in a primary school setting is pretty much unheard of.

But if laughter was noticeable by its absence on certain parts of the playground, and in the local church, it proved to be an abiding presence among many of The Cross's classrooms. Instinctively, I would have thought the situation to be the other way round. As it happened, however, classrooms at this school managed to provide the very richest material in my laughter quest. The practice of playful instruction has, nationwide, been gaining steadily in popularity - just as opportunities for pupil's free play on the playground have steadily diminished. This situation merely reflects the wider view circulating among some educational theorists that the main laughter and entertainment hub in any primary school is actually the classroom. To that end, the class teacher bears much of the responsibility in helping to create the kind of climate conducive not only to learning, but also to meaningful and happy classroom interactions. In an educational sector where few men actually feature, one could be



forgiven for thinking it might indicate the significant presence of a laughter vacuum. Male teachers continue to be viewed as the more natural, instinctive, humour providers. The idea that women lack a sense of humour is one that sadly lingers on in the minds of many. Fortunately, this was one of the laughter-related myths it became a pleasure to set right. In fact, it is by considering the ways in which female teachers actually demonstrate their proficiencies in humour production, and as consummate laugh-getters, that no credence can be given to such out-dated and clichéd thinking.

Not that their humour production is any better or worse than that of their male colleagues, but it was noticeable that female teachers use humour differently. Quite often the difference between them was that women were more inclined to deploy humour in ways that sought to consolidate teacher-pupil relationships. Their focus was not so much on being able to deliver smart one-liner's, thereby forcing pupils to simply laugh on cue, but on creating the conditions most favourable to reciprocation through constructing appropriately engaging, integrative opportunities that encouraged a range of pupil contributions. In such an environment humour and laughter may emerge in a mutually equitable way, and not as if they were specific episodes to be drawn out by force. If male teachers could be criticised at all it is because some viewed themselves as though they were solo artists performing on a classroom stage. This was not the case with their female colleagues. Most - if not all - of them ignored my presence when observing their classes and simply got on with performing their regular duties.

Insofar as developing good teacher-pupil interactions in the classroom, great stress has been placed on a teacher's personality, and in particular on their sense of humour. Some have argued that an ability to use humour, to engage in light-hearted banter with pupils, can

improve learning conditions by improving his/her attitude towards them. How highly a pupil chooses to rate their teacher can often depend rather perfunctorily on whether a teacher is able 'to make them laugh'. Yet the importance attributed to a teacher's sense of humour may be overplayed. For one thing, there is no agreement as to what this trait actually constitutes. If it is assumed to be only an aspect of an individual's personality, then this creates a problem. A teacher, for example, may have a particular liking for the risky stand-up humour of Sarah Silverman, or the very dangerous comedy of Frankie Boyle. But how then does their sense of humour relate to pupils who are only amused by the visual slapstick of TVs 'Dick 'N' Dom'? Humour and laughter are used best of all, in my opinion, when applied strategically. It worked particularly well at Our Lady school when teachers did exactly that, and delivered it prudently, in a very precise manner. I sense that many teachers have learned that what is far more important than having a sense of humour is having the good sense to know exactly when to apply humour, i.e. when to change direction during lessons, when to move from the formal to the informal, knowing when to introduce some light-hearted relief at the first sign of pupils showing fatigue or restlessness.

Among the classrooms and along the corridors at The Cross School, one particular teacher stood out from all of the others. She was considered by some of her pupils to be 'too strict'. Her uncompromising approach to the art of teaching certainly caught one's attention. She was indeed strict, in the sense that she demanded that classroom codes and norms be obeyed and respected without question. Away from the classroom, I found her to be not only a disciplinarian but someone who cared passionately for the academic well-being of her pupils. But any evidence that she had a sense of humour was not immediately apparent. It is possible that privately at least she may have had a very competent degree of humour appreciation, and that during her public duties she was simply choosing to be more discriminating in terms of

her humour performance and level of humour awareness. All the same, she didn't seem too troubled by it; indeed, there were periods when it looked as though she may have even revelled in her no-nonsense notoriety.

Except that this teacher was capable of delivering some sublime pedagogic moments. Every so often, without any warning, she would dramatically change tack and alter the entire mood-structure of the classroom. During one particularly stressful Maths lesson, at a time when many in her Year group had been left truly befuddled by the rules pertaining to fractions that no amount of depictive pizza portions or imagined slices of chocolate cake could make palatable, she introduced the children to a memorable routine aimed at helping them to remember their multiplication tables. Pupils were made to stand to attention, face each other in pairs, and then at her command begin beating-out the time-honoured times-table rhythm according to the format of a traditional hand-clapping game. "Three 7s are 21, four 7s are 28...", they chanted to a cross-handed tempo, that all too frequently collapsed as the children collapsed with laughter as they tried and usually failed to remember the sequence of each numeric table's string, as well as perform the clapping moves in unison. The meeting of words and hand actions proved too difficult for many of the pupils.

It could, however, be said that this teacher, much like the very best comedy performers (and the very best teachers), had impeccable timing. She did the minimum of things necessary to alleviate the oppressive atmosphere which, although of her own making, were just enough to rejuvenate the pupils' interest, executed at a precise time when she anticipated signs of pupil fatigue, waning interest or just sensed a general restlessness brought on by lengthy periods of seatwork. She knew very well, for example, that pupils respond not only to the context of what they are taught but to the ways in which it is taught. She knew what it meant to the

children to experience these adjustments or pieces of relief, however mechanically and passionlessly they were applied. They showed nonetheless that she had the wit and the wisdom to recognise what was needed and when it should be applied in order to affect a small mixture of both formal and informal activities. Perhaps having a sense of humour is not nearly as important to teachers as having the gumption or good judgement to know when to introduce a change, to bring some light relief to pupils' learning. It could be said that the teacher had the wit, without ever once being witty. Her achievement was based not on having an aptitude for humour, or possessing a creative flair for it, nor even an ability to appreciate it, but rather on having a wonderful appreciation of what sort of thing humour actually means to other people.

Previous appeals for teachers to have at least some understanding of the role played by humour in education have been made. It was suggested that those who use or plan on using it in their classrooms really ought to know about some of the humour processes involved. When applied inappropriately, humour can damage any prospects for building teacher-pupil rapport. But when used thoughtfully, status differences can be momentarily forgotten and a form of social cohesion is produced through the pleasant experience of laughing together. Given the range of identities and behaviours that comprise and enliven today's mainstream classrooms, it is a sign of good practice to try and broaden a teacher's humour knowledge-base. This would allow them the opportunity to absorb and connect with the diversity of classroom influences, taking into account, for example, cultural and gender differences, and being altogether mindful of related sensitivities associated with laughter production.

If laughter can indicate to us anything about schools, teachers and pupils, we should always be mindful of its double-sided nature, its inclusive and exclusive orientation. Laughter builds

relationships, and it can also destroy them. Nonetheless, those who have argued that the central function of primary schooling is the dissemination and absorption of knowledge may be underestimating the importance of providing opportunities for children to laugh and play. Laughter in the classroom instead of bored uniformity seems to be an accurate summation of a new spirit in teaching and learning. But then, laughter is a learning act in itself – why else do pupils and teachers laugh strategically? As we have seen, both parties have learnt how useful it can be to apply laughter deliberately, to make specific provision for it, to use it artfully, to suppress it, to make laughter appear (and disappear) when and where it is deemed necessary. That teachers and pupils at The Cross School were able to demonstrate these principles shows how this institution has proved to be such a wonderful resource in helping to acquire hitherto unknown data. It is to be commended therefore and should take great pride in making such a significant contribution to the ways in which new interpretations of one of our most used, but least understood, facets of behaviour and communication have been made.

APPENDIX: B

Research in Education

“Laughter and Inclusion”

A Summary of Key Findings

Presented to

The Crescent Primary School,



by Michael Nugent

University of Birmingham

3<sup>rd</sup> February, 2015

In compulsory schooling generally, and within the primary sector in particular, laughter is considered to be a commodity of some value. For the most part, it is conceived as being a force for good. Claims have been consistently made that it can be employed as an effective instrument with which to improve pupil motivation and concentration. It can also provide a means to sharpen pupils' focus, and ease through difficult concepts and topics by helping to make them appear more accessible, less intimidating. Moreover, laughter can send out a positive signal about a school's sense of community. Somehow its familiar acoustic signature seems to indicate that learning is taking place, and even manages to provide a largely favourable impression about the quality of relationships pupils enjoy with their peers and their teachers. And yet, fundamentally, laughter is two-faced. In its ability to display affiliation and friendliness laughter can indeed bring people together, but it can just as easily set them apart. Situated against its inclusive, open face, laughter has a dark, exclusive side, as pupils at a primary school in Bolton, Lancashire recently found. While their playtime laughter was interpreted by school staff as a desirable sign of happiness and contentment, it was deemed a disturbance by families living nearby, who were so inconvenienced by it during the spring and summer months they instigated legal proceedings against the school for perpetrating an intolerable 'noise nuisance'.

The purpose of my research has been to identify some of laughter's functions in a primary school setting. These have included not only the deliberate - but also some of the contrived - acts and commissions. In addition, I have tried to unpick some of the myths commonly associated with laughter. This particular process required an exploration of some of the instances of ambiguity which continues to bedevil its interpretation. Instances, for example, whereby children's laughter was not produced spontaneously (as many people suppose) but voluntarily, strategically, were noted. Children, of course, laugh when they find something

amusing, but they also laugh when something is unfunny. They will laugh in situations where they know that it would be to their detriment if they did not laugh, for example, when they are told a joke by another pupil as a test of intelligence, a test of friendship, or a way to assess (and hopefully preserve) their 'in-group' status.

The role of the teacher in pupils' laughter production is crucial. Since they are, in principle at least, the main laughter conduit, their classroom duties in this regard have also been considered. Naturally, it is down to the teacher to establish the right kind of atmosphere so that children can feel at ease in a pleasant, relaxed learning environment. In this capacity they are key figures in helping to set the right laughter tone. But if they should get this wrong, they run the risk of becoming risible themselves, of becoming the object of their pupil's scorn and mockery. So, exploring laughter's inherent inclusive and exclusive dimensions will provide an estimate of the kind of impact it might have on primary schools that declare themselves to be, for example, actively promoting an inclusive ethos. This will hopefully lead to examining in more detail whether exclusive forms of laughter, such as mockery, ridicule, and teasing, can ever have a place in an avowedly inclusive learning environment.

During the summer term of 2011 and the winter term of 2012, I was given permission to conduct a series of classroom/playground observations, and a small number of informal interviews, with children at The Crescent Primary School. The results of those interviews and observations formed the foundation of my PhD thesis as well as the fundamental part of this smaller report summary, a summary which is intended for the benefit of school governors, staff, pupils, parents, and other parties of interest.



It may have been nothing more than a coincidence that my fieldwork began at a time when a national report had been published indicating that laughter levels in Britain were in steep decline. Evidence appeared to show that we are not laughing as much as our forebears did in the 1960s, and this news - if the gloomy reports in the national press were to be believed - seemed to trouble and irritate the national consciousness. A range of legitimate, as well as anecdotal, reasons were mooted for this downturn, everything from the gloomy economic situation to the rise in work and domestic-related pressures. My own view is that since our levels of social capital have experienced a similar downturn (social capital describes the strength of our family, neighbourhood, and community connections, i.e. how well-connected we are) a corresponding diminishment in laughter behaviour would not be unexpected. In order for there to be more laughter, so the argument goes, people need to get together more often. But this all too simple panacea is not without its problems. My own series of school-based interviews and observations have shown that the task of getting people together is not always so easy to achieve. Nonetheless, the behavioural and communication theorists put it plainly: laughter is about relationships, for without them there is unlikely to be much laughter. Fundamentally, laughter is a social behaviour and we seldom laugh, it is said, when alone.

As far as pupils are concerned, the two main laughter arenas in any school are the classroom and the playground. The school playground provides a convenient recreational space in which they are able to present and cement their friendships. It also provides a suitable environment for children to develop physical stamina, encourage motor development, and to release nervous energy. The Crescent school's old-style playground, a Victorian remnant bounded on all sides by walls, railings and other school buildings, forms an elongated L-shape. One of the most common non-ball games played here was, appropriately enough, the

game of 'tig'. This pastime, popularised in the Victorian era, is a chasing game that has over the years amassed many additional (and regional) variants, but remains constant in its ability to elicit paroxysms of excitable laughter from its players. The relative paucity of play-related equipment available to pupils may be deemed at one level a failing. But it must be acknowledged that it did encourage children to engage in more peer-peer interactions. The drive in recent years to offer school children a range of playtime resources and activities can sometimes cause confusion. An abundance of play-related equipment available to pupils can sometimes mean they get spoilt for choice and end up choosing none.

It became clear that children's play is influenced largely by the environment in which it takes place, and not so much by the materials that they have access to. Lately, there has been a nationwide effort to provide children with an array of play spaces, such as designated quiet/play areas, nature gardens, and an assortment of seating types. But all of these can restrict the kind of interactions we have come to expect when trying to build up pupil's levels of social capital. More than that, they can also put a strain on playground space. Such innovations, of course, might not even be possible in some inner-city schools. For many such institutions the asphalt playground is sacrosanct, since it is an entirely practical space and surface given the school's urban location. Admittedly, the playground looks forbidding when idle – a miracle of dullness – and not at all child-friendly. But a great deal of effort has gone into making it appear less depressing. For instance, a series of bright, colourful murals decorate some of the walls, and a small number of saplings have been introduced to add some interest and variation to the stark yards of tarmac. But when operational the playground takes on the vibrancy and vitality of a modern plaza. It is an ideal location for a spot of people-watching since it functions as an efficient rendezvous-point, a site for a small community's coming together that easily transforms into a teeming social system, a dynamic spectacle that

(after the initial) assault on the senses offers up areas of regularity, patterns of ordered interactions and measured territorial negotiating. It remains, first and foremost, a venue where children gather at their usual spots and favourite corners.

Among the many tasks allocated to playground supervisors is an expectation to become familiar with these spots and corners. It is at such places that many pupils choose to congregate. Many just gather and talk, some tend to stand around and laugh, and there are those who plot and conspire as a mischievous prelude to some rough and tumble play. Supervisors tend to be a mix of teaching staff and designated playground stewards; most of the stewards are parents who live and have been recruited locally. Their range of duties include acting as chaperons to the ‘quiet ones’, those pupils with a tendency to cling to adults for companionship, as well as being alert for signs and instances of misbehaviour. To that extent, it can be very difficult for them to make accurate distinctions between playful and aggressive interactions. Furthermore, it can be very difficult for them to distinguish laughing *at* (exclusive) behaviour from laughing *with* (inclusive) behaviour. They cannot always rely on what they see or hear in certain situations since laughter is not always a reliable communication or behavioural indicator. Supervisors will, however, usually err on the side of caution. Upon hearing or meeting with ambiguous forms of laughter they will urge children to “play nicely”, even if they are already doing so.

Data collected from The Crescent School has helped to identify some of the enduring as well as the fleeting dynamics that lie behind the management of pupils’ playground behaviour. Taking laughter and play as the key reference points has made it possible to consider the quality of their interactions in order to test the rhetoric that ‘every child matters’. The playground affords a much clearer view of how physically and socially included children feel

within their school community, which may go some way to predicting how they will be disposed to view the prospect of making future ties to, and within, the wider adult community. The principle has been to fix extra attention on laughter's disquieting absence, i.e. on pupils who were, for whatever reason, unable to show any evidence of interacting with their peers, those offering few if any of the typical signs of maintaining acquaintanceships, those who might be lacking the wherewithal, the inclination, or the necessary social skills to get the very best out of all that the playground and playtime could offer.

The cacophony of noise on the playground, a mixture of screaming, laughing, and shouting, meant it was difficult initially to fix on one particular child or group of children so that their playtime interactions could be considered in detail. The pleasing thing however is that the vast majority of children were playing together, interacting with their friends freely and energetically...or so it appeared. A pupil in Year 3, who I have called 'Tahir', seemed to be a particularly active member of one playground group consisting of five similar-aged boys. He caught my attention because his laughter and running behaviour looked to be unusually vigorous. But this display was not quite what it seemed. I came to the conclusion that he had very nearly succeeded in executing a most skilful and highly original piece of behavioural gamesmanship. Tahir wasn't a member of this playground group at all. In fact, he had deliberately chosen to gate-crash this group's boundaries, giving every outward impression that he was actually a group member. His regular intrusions clearly annoyed the existing members of the group. They made it clear that his attentions were not welcome and invariably responded by attempting to chase Tahir away. Unfortunately, this activity looked to the casual observer as if all of these boys were mixing freely together.

I reasoned that Tahir was only trying to gain acceptance into the other group by copying the very things they were doing, i.e. running and laughing. Employing copy-cat behaviour is an established tactic used by applicants wanting to show they possess some of the necessary qualities that may entitle them to membership of a particular group. Tahir may have simply believed that being able to demonstrate that he and the other boys had something in common, that being in possession of shared interests, would improve his group entry prospects.

Therefore, his behaviour could be interpreted not so much as a reckless attempt at forcing entry, but as a performance tantamount to an audition, a way to show off his best side, his most favourable and sympathetic qualities to the others. As a prospective member of the group, Tahir was merely demonstrating that he had got what it takes to fit in. But his guile and tenacity illustrates the creative lengths some children may feel impelled to go in order to achieve a sense of affiliation and belonging.

Nevertheless, having an opportunity to express the kind of qualities it might take to secure group access may not always be enough. Negotiating this difficult entry stage usually takes more than an exhibition of a person's obvious eagerness to belong. By their very nature playground groups tend to be exclusive, and their structure, their internal workings, can be stoutly protected by existing in-group members. Although Tahir may have underestimated the exclusive nature of a friendship group, he would have had, however, some awareness and understanding of a school's exclusive tendencies as he ran and laughed his way around the playground. For this outside space, this laughter arena, is far less democratic than one might imagine. It was noticeable, for example, that one part of the playground was off-limits to pupils, this being the section employed as a staff car-park – a regrettable but necessary intrusion given the restrictions placed locally on street parking. Exclusive areas on the playground are nothing new. There are prescribed regions in most of them. Dedicated play

areas, for example, are often fenced off for the protection of infant pupils, and areas of the playground located near the school entrance/exit, or close to local properties will usually be out-of-bounds. But none are more obvious or widespread as the ones marked out in bright colourful lines and circles denoting the parameters of playground football.

When Year 6 pupils played football other playground users had to be very mindful of this activity. They had to be very accommodating, too, for there was an unwritten rule that they should pointedly give way for fear of intruding into restricted, and indeed hallowed, ground. The school's approach to playground football had a decidedly serious aspect, even to the extent that an outside coach was occasionally employed to come into the school and supervise games. Each game seemed more like an organised lesson than an informal play period, and as such little in the way of laughter could be detected. I was surprised, initially. I tried to convince myself that football never used to be like this, and it left me wondering as to its possible causes. Not unreasonably, I assumed that behavioural issues lay at the root of it. The boys of Year 6 had something of a reputation within the school. Perhaps the rationale for taking such a serious view of football was that an organised, highly disciplined, game could get the playground players so exhausted as to make them less disruptive when they returned to their classrooms. Alternatively, it might be because pupils can earn for themselves a measure of respect and admiration if they get recognised as 'good players'. It may only seem like an inconsequential knock-about to some, but playground football can promise all sorts of rewards and riches. A good sporting reputation could amount to a qualification of sorts. It might not have the same cache as a school award or a national certificate, but it can confer upon those with undoubted sporting abilities a measure of local stardom. A skill in any capacity - even in football - can secure children the esteem of their peers and even the admiring glances from their teachers. One of the few girls who played regularly possessed

such an array of fine ball skills that I adjudged them to be far in advance of those held by her male counterparts. In fact, so good was her footwork that it regularly caught the eye of scrutineers and spectators.

But among the boys at least, it was made clear to me that football was a game that many of them played with some reluctance. They declared rather ruefully that cricket, not football, was their game of choice. But because of health and safety concerns cricket was no longer a playground option. Perhaps this was the real reason that the pupils played football without any obvious kind of emotion or enthusiasm.

But if laughter was noticeable by its absence on certain parts of the playground, it proved to be an abiding presence among many of The Crescent's classrooms. Instinctively, I would have thought the situation to be the other way round. Conversely, classrooms at this school managed to provide the very richest material in my laughter quest. The practice of playful instruction has, nationwide, been gaining steadily in popularity - just as opportunities for pupil's free play on the playground have steadily diminished. This situation merely reflects the wider view circulating among pedagogic theorists that the main laughter and entertainment hub in any primary school is actually the classroom. And it is the class teacher who bears much of the responsibility in helping to create the kind of climate conducive not only to learning, but also to meaningful and happy classroom interactions. In an educational sector where few men actually feature, one could be forgiven for thinking it might indicate the significant presence of a laughter vacuum. Male teachers continue to be viewed as the more natural, instinctive, humour providers. The idea that women lack a sense of humour is one that sadly lingers on in the minds of many. Happily, this was one of the laughter-related myths it became a pleasure to set right. In fact, it is by considering the ways in which female

teachers actually demonstrate their proficiencies in humour production, and as consummate laugh-getters, that no credence can be given to such out-dated and clichéd thinking.

Not that their humour production is any better or worse than that of their male colleagues, but it was noticeable that female teachers use humour differently. Quite often the difference between them was that women were more inclined to deploy humour in ways that sought to consolidate teacher-pupil relationships. Their focus was not so much on being able to deliver smart one-liner's, thereby forcing pupils to simply laugh on cue, but on creating the conditions most favourable to reciprocation through constructing appropriately engaging, integrative opportunities that encouraged a range of pupil contributions. In such an environment humour and laughter may emerge in a mutually equitable way, and not as if they were specific episodes to be drawn out by force. If male teachers could be criticised at all it was because some viewed themselves as though they were solo artists performing on a classroom stage. On more than one occasion I suspected that some of the male staff felt they had an obligation to be funny simply on my account. Once they were aware of my particular interest in laughter it appeared as though they had a duty or some compulsion to demonstrate their wit, their cleverness. This was not the case with their female colleagues. Most - if not all - of them ignored my presence when observing their classes and simply got on with performing their regular duties.

Insofar as developing good teacher-pupil interactions in the classroom, great stress has been placed on a teacher's personality, and in particular on their sense of humour. Some have argued that an ability to use humour, to engage in light-hearted banter with pupils, can improve learning conditions by improving his/her attitude towards them. How highly a pupil chooses to rate their teacher can often depend rather perfunctorily on whether a teacher is



able 'to make them laugh'. Yet the importance attributed to a teacher's sense of humour may be overplayed. For one thing, there is no agreement as to what this trait actually constitutes. If it is assumed to be only an aspect of an individual's personality, then this creates a problem. A teacher, for example, may have a particular liking for the risky stand-up humour of Sarah Silverman, or the very dangerous comedy of Frankie Boyle. But how then does their sense of humour relate to pupils who are only amused by the visual slapstick of TVs 'Dick 'N' Dom'? Humour and laughter are used best of all, in my opinion, when applied strategically. It worked particularly well at The Crescent School when teachers did exactly that, and delivered it prudently, in a very precise manner. I sense that many teachers have learned that what is far more important than having a sense of humour is having the good sense to know exactly when to apply humour, i.e. when to change tack during lessons, when to move from the formal to the informal, knowing when to introduce some light-hearted relief at the first sign of pupils showing fatigue or restlessness.

Again, the idea that laughter is an uncontrollable human reaction can be challenged as a result of evidence obtained during fieldwork. The issue of temporality provides a good example. Temporality is a dimension that in many educational settings is often taken for granted. But time remains a dimension in primary school organisation of major importance. Everything, from the duration of individual lessons to the period in the school day when playtimes occur, has a specific time-related value. Evidence of temporal patterns in the way that schools conduct their everyday business, reflect its bureaucratic nature. But laughter, too, is temporally structured. There were, for example, requests for me not to attend the school, in respect of my fieldwork, during SATs week. These were made on the understanding that it would not be a good time, i.e. that pupils would either be too focused or too stressed for too much laughter to be available. Similarly, the school timetable is organised according to a

formal-informal split, with the serious, core-curriculum, subjects taught usually in the mornings, and the non-core curriculum subjects occurring in the afternoons.

We all seem to be tacitly aware of the way in which the amount of time we allow an event or activity to last is symbolically associated with the degree of significance we attach to it. That we are willing to spend a lot of time on a given activity is usually indicative of its great importance to us, particularly relative to comparable activities. The respective numbers of hours per week schoolchildren spend on mathematics and art, for example, clearly reflect the considerably greater priority we assign to the former over the latter. But it can work the other way, too.

It was the last lesson of the day and Year 4's class teacher, who had, I was informed, only recently qualified, announced to her pupils the topic in hand. It was just her bad luck that in this session she was left with the task of making an ICT class, which had as its main theme the forthcoming (2012) Olympics, relevant and interesting. After talking briefly to some of the pupils it was clear that very few of them were optimistic about her chances. Whereupon for the next hour or so the teacher did her level best to try and enliven what many believed to be an uninspiring topic. But it was an impossible task. For the duration of the formal study period her pupils were unnervingly quiet, unresponsive, offering very little in the way of positive contributions. These were unmistakable signals that all was not well. However, with 15-minutes of the lesson remaining the teacher suddenly and quite dramatically transformed the entire mood. The ICT lesson was brought to an end, and the class were brought back to life by the teacher's declaration that the last few minutes would be taken up with an impromptu game. From the many games that were available, she chose one called 'Heads Down, Thumbs Up'. The children cheered in delight.

As games go, this one seemed to me an odd choice. For one thing, it was unusually convoluted. It involved, if I have understood the rules correctly, the teacher selecting seven pupils who were prompted to stand at the front of the class. They were then required to move around the rest of the class (who remained seated with their heads down on their desks, unable to see, with their hands raised and thumbs outstretched) and to squeeze a pupil's thumb of their choosing before returning furtively to the front of the class so as not to reveal their identity. It was then the task of those whose thumbs had been squeezed to try and identify those classmates thought to be responsible. Given my somewhat unfavourable critique of this game, I was surprised to hear that throughout its short duration the children's laughter was unremitting. Even the teacher joined in. Her laughter, I estimated, was a sign of her satisfaction that a pronouncedly difficult lesson had been rescued at the death. Nobody wants to see children rushing out of their classrooms and into the arms of waiting parents or carers with confused or depressed looks on their faces. It was clearly important to the teacher and her pupils that the school day should end on a positive note. Even if their combined laughter may have been aroused largely out of a sense of relief (at having endured and defeated the featureless ICT subject) it was a calculated intervention, applied with absolute precision, that achieved a very successful, if unplanned, outcome.

It could be said that in many respects the pupil's laughter here had been stage-managed, carefully and cleverly marshalled by a NQT whose competence and pedagogic savvy belied her lack of teaching experience. But children are not above managing their own laughter, either. They do it all the time. They have learnt, for example, how to suppress it, and to deliver unvoiced nasal grunts and snorts instead of vocal laughter articulations. There is a difference between the two types – an acoustic difference, obviously enough, but they also

indicate a difference in context and circumstances. For example, non-vocalised (nasal) laughter can tell us a great deal about pupils, but it can also reveal information about the nature of classroom organisation, and how behavioural codes and norms function within them. For it was mainly in the classroom that these nasal forms were heard, serving to illustrate the extent to which pupils remain aware of classroom discipline and classroom regulations. It was very noticeable that there were no laughter snorts or grunts on the playground, since outside there would be no real reason for any pupil to try and hide or suppress their laughter.

There were, however, snorts and grunts a-plenty in Mr. Khan's (name changed) Year 5 silent reading class. As a classroom activity, silent reading tends to divide opinion. Some consider any opportunity a child has to read for pleasure to be worthwhile: others dismiss it as a waste of time unless it is governed correctly. Either way, Mr. Khan had his hands full trying to keep the class in order since many of them found every sound, whether it occurred inside or outside the classroom, highly amusing. It was as if the silence was presenting the pupils with a challenge, and some children were actively trying to break that silence. A squeaky chair, the sound of footsteps in the corridor, or an emergency vehicle's siren heard far off, was enough to set the group into spasms of half concealed snorts, giggles, and grunts.

Although a daily reading routine is to be applauded, and is much needed, it is difficult to see how unguided, independent reading can be helpful to all pupils, particularly those with low reading ability. There seemed to be no element of reading instruction in this class, thus the occasion felt more like an opportunity for some of the children to play and have fun. In fact, the only interactions the teacher had with his pupils occurred when he was remonstrating with them for laughing too much. As such, it became very easy for some pupils to become

disengaged – many were simply pretending to be reading. Of those that were actually engaged in reading silently it was interesting to note that they were ensconced in literature of a humorous nature. Roald Dahl, Jacqueline Wilson, and the Goosebumps series seemed to be among these pupil's favourites. But even with those children who appeared to be conscientiously following the teacher's instructions, it was difficult to tell whether they were laughing at humorous material in their books or laughing at the noises, manufactured and natural, they could hear in and around the classroom.

If laughter can indicate to us anything about schools, teachers and pupils, we should always be mindful of its double-sided nature, its inclusive and exclusive orientation. Laughter builds relationships, and it can also destroy them. Nonetheless, those who have argued that the central function of primary schooling is the dissemination and absorption of knowledge may be underestimating the importance of providing opportunities for children to laugh and play. Laughter in the classroom instead of bored uniformity seems to be an accurate summation of a new spirit in teaching and learning. But then, laughter is a learning act in itself – why else do pupils and teachers laugh strategically? As we have seen, both parties have learnt how useful it can be to apply laughter deliberately, to make specific provision for it, to use it artfully, to suppress it, to make laughter appear (and disappear) when and where it is deemed necessary. That teachers and pupils at The Crescent Primary School were able to demonstrate these principles shows how this institution has proved to be such a wonderful resource in helping to acquire hitherto unknown data. It is to be commended therefore and should take great pride in making such a significant contribution to the ways in which new interpretations of one of our most used, but least understood, facets of behaviour and communication have been made.

APPENDIX: C

Communications to and from The Cross School











APPENDIX: D

Communications to and from The Crescent School









## ADDENDA

A new Abstract appears in the preliminary pages.

A new introduction to the Introduction chapter (pp.1-2).

Sub-headings appear throughout the document.

A new opening paragraph (p.22) and a new concluding paragraph (p.98) are included in the Literature Review chapter.

A new introduction to the Methodology chapter (pp.99-100).

A new introduction to the Playground Findings chapter (pp.147-148).

A new introduction to the Classroom Findings chapter (pp.174-175).

A new introduction to the Discussion chapter (pp.203-204).

A new introduction to the Conclusion chapter (pp.227-228).

The sub-sections entitled 'Ethics' and 'Feedback' appear in the Appendix on pp.272-278 and pp.279-281 respectively.

All critical references to the two teachers, identified as Mr Khan and Mrs Bradford, have been removed.

References to the role of women as (classroom) humour producers have been removed.

### Typos:

p.83 'it is been concealed' replaced with 'it has been concealed'.

p.107 'principal/principle' - could not be found.

p.109 'principal' replaced with 'principle'.

p.142 did not replace 'to get a hold on' with 'to get a hold of'

p.190 'childrens opportunities' replaced with 'children's opportunities'

p.212 'principle feature' replaced with 'principal feature'

p.216 Sentence with '...since they above all people' rephrased.


p.245 'lead' replaced with 'led'





The Cross School

①



9<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Dear Headteacher,

In 2012 your predecessor, Mrs xxxx, gave me permission to come into The Cross School to conduct some observations and casual interviews as part of my PhD research project concerned with children's humour and laughter in primary school settings.

My period of study is now coming to an end, but before it is completed I must provide you and your school with some details as to the kind of things the data I obtained actually revealed.


I would appreciate it therefore if we could arrange a meeting, at a time and date convenient to you, so that I can present my findings and also take the opportunity to answer any questions about the nature of my research or its conclusions that you, your colleagues, or the pupils may have. Thanking you in anticipation,

Yours faithfully,

Michael Nugent

The Cross School

②



21<sup>st</sup> January 2015

Dear Headteacher,

I wrote to you in November 2014 with a view to providing some feedback on the fieldwork that was conducted in your school as part of my PhD study on the uses of humour and laughter in primary school settings.

One of the conditions of my research programme is that feedback to a host school must be accomplished before I can be conferred with doctoral status.

If it is inconvenient to allow me a visit to your school for this purpose, will you permit me the opportunity to present you with a copy of my key findings? This can be arranged via the traditional postal service, although I ask of you in return written confirmation of this document's receipt.

Your help in this matter will be greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

Michael Nugent



21<sup>st</sup> January 2015

Dear Headteacher,

I wrote to you in November 2014 with a view to providing some feedback on the fieldwork that was conducted in your school as part of my PhD study on the uses of humour and laughter in primary school settings.

One of the conditions of my research programme is that feedback to a host school must be accomplished before I can be conferred with doctoral status.

If it is inconvenient to allow me a visit to your school for this purpose, will you permit me the opportunity to present you with a copy of my key findings? This can be arranged via the traditional postal service, although I ask of you in return written confirmation of this document's receipt.

Your help in this matter will be greatly appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

*M. Nugent*

Michael Nugent

Yes - please  
phone school to  
arrange a date /  
P.S. time.  
Your telephone  
number or email would  
have been useful !!  
Ms ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~



## Feedback report

Michael Nugent

**Sent:** 09 February 2015 05:47

**To:** headteacher@xxxxx.sch.uk

**Attachments:** Schools' feedback report -4.docx (40 KB)

Dear Mrs xxxx,

I have attached a copy of my feedback report, as per your instructions.

In it you will notice that your school has been identified by name. However, for ethical reasons, the school's identity together with that of any individuals will be disguised in my thesis.


If this report contains any inaccuracies, or if there is any information contained within it that causes you any concern, please let me know and I will make the necessary amendments.

Best wishes,

Michael Nugent

The Crescent School

①



4<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Dear Pxxxx,

During the summer and autumn terms in 2012 you kindly arranged for me to conduct a number of observations and informal interviews at The Crescent Primary School. The data that was subsequently collected formed an important part of my doctoral thesis on humour and laughter.

Now that my thesis is near completion, I'd like to return all of the help and support shown to me by the school by taking the opportunity to share my findings, at a date and time convenient to you.

Findings are often presented in the form of a written executive summary. But if you would prefer something different, perhaps something more interactive, please let me know and I will do my best to oblige.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Nugent

1<sup>st</sup> December 2014



Dear Michael,

Delighted to hear you have finished your PhD on laughter and humour. We would be very happy to meet with you to discuss your findings but will have to leave it until after the Christmas holidays.

If you could contact me in the New Year by phone I will put a date in the school diary. How do you want to present this information? Would it be just to the Head and myself or do you anticipate sharing it with the pupils?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Business Manager



The Crescent School

③



8<sup>th</sup> January 2015

Dear Pxxxx,

Many thanks for your letter. I am very grateful for your cooperation, especially coming so soon after the start of the new term.

I will be happy to present my findings to staff and pupils, although I am conscious that the feedback report I have written is slightly technical in some of its details. But I will leave the decision as to my audience, the time, date and the venue, up to you.


Yours sincerely,

Michael Nugent



The Crescent School

(4)



28<sup>th</sup> January 2015

Dear Pxxxx,

I enclose two copies of my feedback report. One is for you and the other for the school Head. You might like to have a quick read of the document before I arrive next Tuesday. If you then have any questions, criticisms, or general thoughts about it, we can perhaps discuss them informally between us. I appreciate that time is precious for you both. This approach should speed up the whole process considerably.

Best wishes,