

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE USE OF HUMOR AS A TEACHING TOOL BY
MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand perceptions of instructional classroom humor used to help students learn and master new material, among teachers at middle and high schools in rural Appalachia districts. Using humor in the classroom is generally defined as deliberate planning and utilization of subject relevant humor in an attempt to improve students' learning outcomes. Rural Appalachia was defined as the area geographically located in or near the Appalachian Mountain range, and the dominant socioeconomic culture found there. The theories guiding this study were (a) Bandura's social learning theory, as it describes the way students learn from observing others and through vicarious experiences, such as teachers' use of humor, (b) Vygotsky's social development theory as it relates to the idea of children learning first socially then individually, and (c) the incongruence theory of humor as supported by Kant, as it provides an explanation for humor as the act of understanding something unexpected. Data were collected through interviews, a focus group interview, and classroom observations conducted with 10 purposefully selected middle and high school teachers who used humor in the classroom. Data were analyzed using a modified version of Moustakas' seven steps, as described by Creswell. Analysis revealed humor use fell into three major themes: relationships, instruction, and environment.

Keywords: environment, humor, incongruence theory, instruction, phenomenology, relationships.

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this to my insightful and loving wife, Michelle. She has always seen more in me than I have ever been able to see in myself. She has always seen the path to bring the best of me to the forefront and has had the courage to guide (drag) that part out for others to see. Nothing I ever do is alone because I can always count on you being by my side, and that knowledge is a never-ending source of courage and comfort to me. Thank you for believing in me, even when I didn't deserve it. You have my love, forever.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
Copyright Page.....	4
Dedication	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
List of Tables	11
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	12
Overview.....	12
Background.....	12
Situation to Self.....	18
Problem Statement	19
Purpose Statement.....	19
Significance of the Study	20
Research Questions.....	21
Definitions.....	23
Summary	24
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	25
Overview.....	25
Theoretical Framework.....	25
Related Literature.....	27
Humor and Teaching.....	27
Humor and Relationships.....	36
How Humor Functions.....	44

Humor and Student Engagement	52
Summary	55
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	57
Overview	57
Design	57
Research Questions	58
Setting	59
Participants	60
Procedures	61
The Researcher's Role	62
Data Collection	63
Individual Interviews	63
Focus Group Interview	66
Observations	68
Data Analysis	69
Trustworthiness	71
Credibility	72
Dependability and Confirmability	72
Transferability	73
Ethical Considerations	73
Summary	74
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS	75
Overview	75

Participants.....	75
Adam.....	76
Bethany	77
Clement.....	77
Daniel.....	78
Elijah.....	78
Felicity	79
Gloria	79
Hannah	80
Isaac	80
Julia.....	80
Results.....	81
Major Theme One: Relationships	83
Major Theme Two: Instruction.....	91
Major Theme Three: School/Classroom Environment	100
Research Question Responses.....	110
Research Question Responses: Central Research Question.....	110
Research Question Responses: SQ1	113
Research Question Responses: SQ2	115
Research Question Responses: SQ3	115
Research Question Responses: SQ4	117
Summary.....	118
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	119

Overview.....	119
Summary of Findings.....	119
Discussion.....	123
Empirical Literature	124
Theoretical Literature.....	130
Implications.....	132
Theoretical Implications	133
Empirical Implications.....	135
Practical Implications.....	137
Delimitations and Limitations.....	141
Recommendations for Future Research	142
Summary.....	145
REFERENCES	148
APPENDIX A.....	163
APPENDIX B	164
APPENDIX C	165
APPENDIX D.....	166
APPENDIX E	171
APPENDIX F.....	172

List of Tables

Table 1: Participants' Demographics	76
Table 2: Themes.....	83

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The roles and responsibilities of K-12 teachers are complex. While attempting to teach subject matter, teachers must also deal with student discipline issues, collect and disaggregate assessment data, and prepare students for high-stakes tests (Kaya, Kablan, Akaydin, & Demir, 2015). Teachers face increasing responsibilities while losing valuable instructional time to testing, making effective instructional practices more important than ever (Anderson, 2012). Among the variety of instructional practices available to teachers, scholars noted that classroom humor is a potential teaching tool for maintaining students' attention, improving their perceptions of the classroom, and increasing learning (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015; Dix, 2015; Moradi, 2014). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand perceptions of instructional classroom humor used to help students learn and master new material, among teachers at middle and high schools in rural Appalachia districts.

This chapter provides information needed to contextualize the current study. Chapter 1 begins with a background section that provides historical, social, and theoretical contexts for this investigation. I provide a statement of researcher positionality followed by the problem and purpose statements. I discuss the study's significance and present guiding research questions. Finally, I conceptually define key terms.

Background

Many people may conjure images of class clowns and students facing punishment when they think of humor in school. Humor in fact serves as a cohesive element of social interactions (Unsal, Aggam, & Aydemir, 2018). Humor provides opportunities for teachers to interact

positively with students, and an examination of what this experience entails provides a greater understanding of the teacher-student relationship dynamic (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004).

Historical Context

Humor serves a variety of purposes in society (Gordon, 2014; Killion & Torres, 2017; Yue, Chun-Lok, Hiranandani, 2016). Among the many benefits of humor are increased social cohesiveness and stress relief (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). However, humor may also have negative consequences, such as social seclusion and ridicule (Banas et al., 2011).

Humor occurs when incongruous material presents in a manner that elicits laughter or joy on the part of the spectator (Banas et al., 2011). Research on classroom humor dates back to the latter part of the 20th century, and many findings indicate a positive relation between classroom humor and student achievement and healthy student behaviors (Banas et al., 2011). A relationship exists between teachers' use of humor to better classroom management, a feeling of belonging among students, and improvements in students' perceptions of teachers (Banas et al., 2011).

Students in modern classrooms face differing expectations and experiences from previous generations (Scogin, Kruger, Jekkals, & Steinfeldt, 2017; Zapata, 2016). Teachers gear classroom instruction toward high-stakes testing and scripted curriculum that inhibits teachers' natural creative abilities. Students are most often media savvy and have interests and skills that are profoundly different from those of teachers; these differences create a situation in which teachers must be very economical in their selection of strategies to engage and teach students (Akin, Çiray, & Sönmez, 2013; Fitchett, Heafner, & VanFossen, 2014; Khan, Farooqi, Khalil, & Faisal, 2016). Findings from previous research support teachers' use of humor to hold students' attention and provide meaningful instruction (Banas et al., 2011; Fingon, 2016; Serafini & Coles, 2015; Wanfang, 2013; Yueh-Min, Ming-Chi, Chia-Hung, & Chia-Ju, 2017). Students may more

accurately recall material presented in a humorous manner (Mansson, 2013; Seidman & Brown, 2016; Sparks & Lang, 2015).

Many researchers have focused on the ways technology provides humor to students (Kilburn & Kilburn, 2012; Nadler & Clark, 2010; Zillmann, Williams, Bryant, Boynton, & Wolf, 1980). Technology provides teachers with a variety of humorous materials for the classroom. For example, books, anecdotes, cartoons, riddles, jokes, and humorous images exist on the Internet and teachers find them through a simple search (Riddle, 2015); such humorous content can create humor in the classroom (Yueh-Min et al., 2017). Because of the array of available humorous materials, teachers need not be inherently funny to create humorous learning opportunities in the classroom. With humorous content widely available to teachers and the knowledge that humor can improve student outcomes, an opportunity exists to enhance instruction.

Humor has historically been discouraged in the classroom because of possible negative effects (Poirier & Wilhelm, 2014). While there are potential dangers of some types of humor, such as sarcasm, teasing, and blurring the lines between the role of the teacher and the student, the potential benefits of appropriately applied classroom humor can outweigh the risks (Bosacki, 2013). The key to successful use of humor lies in its integration (Hellman, 2007). In fact, rather than being a disruptive agent in the classroom, teachers can use humor to establish classroom social norms and improve student behaviors (Rainsberger, 1994). Teachers also connect to students through the use of humor.

Social Context

Humor plays a significant role in human interactions by providing people with a greater sense of satisfaction (Ho, 2016). Furthermore, humor “represent(s) a rather complex higher-order

emotional process” (Vrticka, Black & Reiss, 2013, p. 860). One study using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) found dopamine production increased in healthy human brains when subjects watched humorous movies (Mensen, Poryazova, Schwartz, & Khatami, 2014). Accordingly, humor can produce internal rewards and emotional release; that is, humor creates opportunities for people to feel good and express their feelings.

Humor is also an important interpersonal skill in human interactions (Davidhizar & Shearer, 1997). Humor facilitates positive relationships between people despite existing social hierarchies, while also promoting motivation, productivity, relaxation, and stress reduction (Davidhizar & Shearer, 1997). Furthermore, “Humor can provide a way to deal with tension and to view situations more optimistically” (Davidhizar & Shearer, 1997, p. 83). Humor can foster positive relationships among people, including the relationships between superiors and subordinates (Davidhizar & Shearer, 1997).

Humor’s role in relationship building also has implications within a broader societal context. Humor serves as a bonding agent between people in social situations (Thompson, 2013). Bonding from social interactions occurs because humor increases the release of endorphins in the brain, which then builds connections between the endorphin response and the speaker who delivered or created the humor (Thompson, 2013). Humor is also a tool for building trust between people, as it offers an intimacy not found in non-humorous interactions, especially between people who do not have existing relationships (Thompson, 2013). Intimacy is further fostered when humor is self-deprecating, because human society requires a certain degree of protection for others; such self-deprecation can trigger the need to look out for someone else (Thompson, 2013).

A key aspect of relationship building occurs through communication, and one of the most critical components of effective communications is gaining and holding an audience's attention (Sabri, 2012). Humor serves as conduit of attention by creating relationships between performers or speakers and the audience (Davies, 2015). Humor creates connections between people through empathy and introspection. The performer prompts empathy through humor by referencing commonalities with listeners and then offering insights to the performers' thoughts and feelings, via an introspective reflection or commentary (Davies, 2015). Humor is also an outlet for commentary on society and social mores, thus producing cathartic relief (Davies, 2015).

Evidence of humor exists in every documented society in history (Hall, Keeter, & Williamson, 1993). Humor can protect and propagate society's history and traditions (Hall et al., 1993). Newcomers to a society can become acclimated to norms and values through humor, much in the way play acclimates children to society (Hall et al., 1993). At the same time, individuals use humor to expose and address social injustices such as racism, gender inequality, and discrimination (Hall et al., 1993).

Theoretical Context

Theoretically, humor is often situated within three general theories: relief theory (Shouse, 2007), superiority theory (Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela, 2013), and incongruity theory (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Sigmund Freud, who supported the relief theory, posited that experiencing humor allows individuals to relieve stress or express true emotions (Shurcliff, 1968; Wilkins, & Eisenbraun, 2009). While relief theory provides a way of examining the function of humor, it does not address the cognitive aspects of humor. Superiority theory, which Plato and Aristotle ascribed to, but is often attributed to Thomas Hobbes, states that humor is used to place the user above the recipient of humor (Barber, 2015). Incongruity theory, as

promoted by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966), describes the idea that humor occurs when an observer expects a particular outcome, but instead observes an unexpected funny outcome. Incongruity theory lends itself to education, because as the mind works out incongruities, it is learning and making connections. Accordingly, incongruity theory is important for establishing students' learning focus and educator decision-making.

College students in classrooms where humor is present are more likely earn high grades, communicate with instructors, and participate during classroom discussions (Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan, & Griffen, 2015). Higher grades, communication with the instructor, and classroom participation are also indicators of better student achievement in college courses. Students report a preference for teachers and classrooms that employ humor, indicating that instructor humor is key factor in students' positive perceptions of a class (Moradi, 2014). Students' preferences for teachers who employ humor indicate the potential impact humor has on students and education, in general. By understanding the role of humor in education, teachers may design more effective lessons and courses.

Humor is also an effective way to help students overcome feelings of anxiety related to school assignments. Randler, Wust-Ackermann, and Demirhan (2016) found students who were about to participate in an anxiety-inducing assignment reported lower levels of anxiety after viewing humorous videos on the subject. The researchers reported a link between stress-reduction and classroom humor, making humor potentially valuable for helping students cope with stress (Randler et al., 2016). An understanding of the use of humor in the classroom by middle and high school teachers could help teachers design instruction that is more impactful.

Humor can also be used to create the classroom environment. Through humor, teachers can help students understand established safety rules and class norms (Van Praag, Stevens, &

Van Houtte, 2017). Humor helps students understand classrooms are safe spaces, but teachers must establish and maintain boundaries about acceptable classroom behaviors (Mayo, 2010). Humor can sometimes blur those boundaries, creating situations in which students are unsure what is acceptable and in what connotations of humor are appropriate (Frymier, Wanzer, & Wojtaszczyk, 2008). Humor can be a valuable classroom management tool when used to diffuse situations that might otherwise result in student discipline (Bullough, 2012).

Situation to Self

As a former middle school reading and civics teacher, I observed students seemed to prefer my instruction when I used humor. I also found that when material was especially difficult, humor seemed to help students learn. Some of my former students still occasionally speak to me about the things they thought were funny in class. After noticing this trend, I began to incorporate increasingly more humor in the classroom, especially with images and videos. Students began to anticipate the humor and asked where the humor was when it was not present in a lesson.

Because of my experiences, the current research had an inherent ontological assumption. Through understanding the essence of the lived experiences of teachers when using humor in middle and high school classrooms, a larger motif emerged about the use of humor as a teaching tool. The inherent ontological assumption acknowledged that reality is relative to the individual experiencing it, which correlates with phenomenology's search for the essence of an experience (Creswell, 2013). Humor is a communicative experience and meaning can be attached to such experiences. This meaning may be assigned by the participants or by others, such as researchers who study the experience. This meaning assigned to the experience is the epistemological assumption of the study. The ontological assumption of multiple realities also connects with the

incongruity theory of humor because individuals involved in humorous exchanges perceive and experience humor in different ways (Kant & Barnard, 1966). I employed the social constructivism paradigm in this research, as I sought to understand the experiences of classroom interactions centered on the exchange of humor, and how those interactions fostered social interaction norms between teachers and students.

Problem Statement

Classroom humor can improve student-learning outcomes (Goodboy et al., 2015). Specifically, research indicates teachers' use of classroom humor can positively affect student performance on comprehension assessments (Hackathorn, Garczynski, Blankmeyer, Tennial, & Solomon, 2011). In addition, Moradi (2014) found students held positive feelings toward classes where the instructor used humor. Despite the possible benefits classroom humor, a research gap exists on teachers' use of humor in the classroom. Therefore, the problem of this transcendental phenomenological study was the lived experiences of teachers at middle and high schools in rural Appalachia districts who used instructional classroom humor to help students learn and master new material.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand perceptions of instructional classroom humor used to help students learn and master new material, among teachers at middle and high schools in rural Appalachia districts. The use of classroom humor is defined as deliberate planning and utilization of subject-relevant humor with the intent of helping students gain subject-specific skills, master new content for academic success, or create and maintain student-teacher relationships. The following three theories guided this study: Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, as it describes the way students learn from

observing others and through vicarious experiences such as teachers' use of humor; Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, as it relates to children learning first socially, then individually; and incongruity theory of humor, as supported by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966), which provides an explanation for how humor is an act of understanding something that is incorrect or perceived to be incorrect.

Significance of the Study

Findings from this research study contributed to the body of literature on middle and high school teachers' use of humor in the classroom. Previous researchers focused on students' perceptions of humorous classrooms (Barnes, 2012; Dix, 2015) or the communicative role of humor, but not the role of humor in instruction (Meyer, 2000). Because this study sought to determine the essence of teachers' experiences with humor, it addressed a significant gap in the existing literature.

Findings from this study provide justification to teachers who use humor in the middle and high school classroom, through data on their experiences. This research helps teachers understand the importance of designing lessons that utilize humor. Furthermore, teachers are able to connect humor in the middle and high school classroom with learning objectives and assignments that utilize humor (Ogurlu, 2015). The use of humor provides another tool for teachers to reach diverse learners in the classroom.

Administrators, central office personnel, and school board members can use findings from this study to plan professional learning experiences on humor to increase student achievement (Goodboy et al., 2015; Hackathorn et al., 2011). Furthermore, findings may help parents and community stakeholders better understand the role of humor in classrooms. A potential impact also exists in the development of commercially produced teaching materials.

Companies that understand the positive effect of humor on student learning (Goodboy et al., 2015; Hackathorn et al., 2011) may create new materials that integrate humor. Teacher preparation programs could introduce opportunities for preservice teachers to practice using classroom humor.

This research also created connections between educators in rural Appalachia, as rural educators often feel removed from one another and from the larger professional body (Parsley, 2018). Furthermore, by engaging teachers in discussions about why they use humor, a greater sense of self-efficacy may result from conversations about, and awareness of research about humor may provide teachers with awareness that humor in the classroom is a practice that exists throughout schools. Teacher self-efficacy is important in the classroom because it affects student achievement (Shaukat & Iqbal, 2012). Kearney, Smith, and Maika (2014) determined that an increase in relationships between teachers and students created an increase in student engagement. The focus of the current study was on how teachers felt their use of humor influenced student-teacher relationships and student engagement.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study on the use of humor in the classroom was guided by the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What are middle and high school teacher perceptions of using humor during classroom instruction as a lived experience?

While research exists on students' perspectives of humorous classrooms (Goodboy et al., 2015), there were no investigations on teachers' experiences and perceptions of the use of classroom humor. The experience of teachers was a valid phenomenon to investigate because it

may influence the decision-making process used when deciding whether classroom humor is an appropriate and effective teaching tool (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Fitchett, 2014). It is important to determine what consequences the experience of using humor in the classroom has for teachers.

Sub-questions

SQ1: How do middle and high school teachers describe their individual approach to using humor during classroom instruction?

Humor can be used to bolster creativity (Senol & Aksu, 2015) or improve student academic performance (Wanzer, Frymer, & Irwin, 2010). An understanding of the ways teachers use humor in the classroom may foster understanding of the practical and potential uses of humor for all teachers.

SQ2: How do middle and high school teachers describe their reasons for using humor during classroom instruction?

A link has been established between humor in the classroom and higher student performance, especially on comprehension assessments (Hackathorn et al., 2011). This link does not, however, provide a full explanation for why teachers use humor. A variety of teaching strategies can improve student achievement, so an understanding of teacher preference for humor may elucidate its value as a teaching tool.

SQ3: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction impacts student attitude?

Research supports several positive outcomes associated with the use of classroom humor (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). Among the positive outcomes are improved grades, better scores on assessments, and higher levels of satisfaction with classes (Banas et al., 2011). However, these positive findings rest on students' perspectives of humor in the classroom.

Research is lacking on the perceived benefits of classroom humor from teachers' perspectives. Humor does not always facilitate positive experiences as it can also allow people to assert an authoritative position over others (Barnes, 2012). The use of humor to assert authority over others is evident when students use humor to respond to situations that make them uncomfortable, or that they wish to avoid (Barnes, 2012). When examining the essence of humor in the classroom, it is important to explore any unintended consequences the experience provides to ensure humor does not create a negative assertion of authority (Barnes, 2012).

SQ4: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction affects the learning environment?

Humor can affect relationships between superiors and subordinates; for example, employees report higher levels of satisfaction with managers who use appropriate humor (Garner, Chandler, & Wallace, 2015). Similarly, Chiang, Lee, and Wang (2016) found students were more satisfied with classrooms in which teachers used self-deprecating humor. Humor is a key element in the development of student-teacher relationships, which in turn, is a key factor in learning environments (Van Praag et al., 2017). The fourth research question sought to determine how teachers thought humor helped them establish and maintain classroom environments.

Definitions

1. *Humor* – Humor denotes any material, language, or situation that provides an observer with a sensation of joy or which induces laughing (Banas et al., 2011).
2. *Self-efficacy* – Self-efficacy is an individual's perceptions of their own competence of ability to complete a task (Mahasneh & Alwan, 2018).

3. *Student engagement* – Student engagement is a measure of students’ focus on learning activities. Engagement is a known predictor of student success, motivation, and academic achievement (Cilliers, Mostert, & Nel, 2018).

Summary

This chapter included an introduction to the current transcendental phenomenological study of teachers’ use of classroom humor. An examination of the existing literature on humor as a teaching tool revealed a lack of research from teachers’ perspectives. In this chapter, I identified my personal motivation for this study on using humor in the classroom. I also described my philosophical assumptions and the research paradigm that drove this study. In Chapter One, I identified both a problem and a purpose statement for this research. Finally, I noted the significance of the study and provided a central research question, and four sub-questions that this study sought to answer.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework and a review of literature relevant to the current study on teachers' use of humor as a teaching tool in middle and high school classrooms. I grounded the present study in Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, because of the social function of humor. I also grounded the present study in Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, as it related to the stages of growth and learning. Finally, I explored the incongruity theory of humor as refined by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966), because humor occurs when an observer witnesses a humorous event and processes the humor by understanding what is expected to happen, as opposed to what actually happens. By understanding the inconsistency between expected and actual outcomes, people process humor, which can lead to learning. The relevant literature focuses on the function and role of humor in educational settings, along with different aspects of humor and possible ways it may affect learning and teaching processes.

Theoretical Framework

Humor is a form of communication that affects several social aspects. Humans learn not only from social interactions, but also from social observations (Bandura, 1971); this is the foundation of Bandura's (1971) social learning theory. Humans can learn from vicarious experiences rather than personal experience (Bandura, 1971). Bandura (1971) noted that humans learn through the process of observation, imitation, and modeling. As students observe others use humor, especially in positive ways, they will first imitate the behavior, and then after reinforcement, they will model similar behaviors (Bandura, 1971). The ability to learn from others' experiences helps explain why cultures pass down stories and humor (Bandura, 1971).

Thus, social learning theory is helpful for understanding the use of humor in the classroom (Bandura, 1971).

Learning is the process of adding new knowledge by making connections with existing knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory describes the zone of proximal development, which refers to the difference between how much a student learns and how much a student can potentially learn with help. Therefore, learning is a process of change and individuals have greater potential for learning when offered instruction from someone more advanced than them (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) also promoted the idea that humans develop socially through interactions with those who are more experienced with social norms, and then they develop intellectually to grow into the norms they are imitating. Thus, humans learn about how their society uses humor before they learn about constructing humor.

The processes by which humor can help students reach their learning potential lies in the incongruity theory of humor (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Incongruity theory describes how humans process humor. According to Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966), humor occurs when a person experiences something that is incongruous to that which is expected. However, the event is only humorous when the observer is able to determine what the incongruity is and what the expected norm should be (Kant & Bernard, 1966). This determination of incongruity is where learning occurs, and the ability to understand incongruent material provides a common ground that allows understanding to emerge (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Kant developed the idea of an incongruity laying at the heart of humor, from a mere unexpected twist, to a more physiological element that creates a change in an individual who observes the unexpected occurrence (Kant & Bernard, 1966).

Incongruity theory stands in opposition to other theories of humor, such as the relief theory (Shouse, 2007) and the superiority theory (Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela, 2013). Relief theory states that humor is a release of emotion caused by a stimulus (Morreall, 2014), and is unrelated to education. The same is true for the superiority theory, which describes humor as a reaction to feelings of superiority (Morreall, 2014). Morreall (2014) equated incongruity theory with philosophy, stating that both practices require observation and a determination of the essence of an object, situation, or idea, and provide opportunities for understanding and mastery. Furthermore, Morreall indicated that both humor and philosophy deal with subjects like truth and aesthetics, which are some of the key building blocks for a liberal arts education; thus, humor is a potentially powerful tool for education.

Related Literature

Researchers have found many applications for humor. I present the related literature for this study in four broad categories that include humor and teaching, humor and relationships, the function of humor, and humor and student engagement.

Humor and Teaching

One important aspect of using humor to aid student learning is that the incongruity must be a planned experience to teach a desired outcome (Watson, 2015). While students may learn from a chance incongruity that might occur from a slip of the tongue or an unintended pun, there is no assurance that the learning will meet the desired learning outcome (Watson, 2015). Instead, teachers must think about how humor can lead students to new ideas and help them develop skills needed to master key concepts (Watson, 2015). Purposeful humor provides opportunities for learning (Watson, 2015). Teachers can use humor that does not support learning to improve student attitudes toward classes and instructors (Watson, 2015).

Not all people are able to utilize humor successfully; individuals must be skilled in humor to use it effectively (Dix, 2015). Some studies note that non-humorous people should not try to use humor (Dix, 2015). However, just because someone is not inherently funny does not mean he or she cannot leverage the humor of others. Researchers in one study observed that prepared humorous materials achieved humor when utilized in class (Hackathorn et al., 2011). Videos, memes, and parody songs are available on the Internet and provide teachers with humorous resources that support learning (Hackathorn et al., 2011). All teachers can utilize humor as a teaching tool if they take advantage of other people's humorous materials (Hackathorn et al., 2011).

Students consider classroom humor to be a desirable characteristic (Neuliep, 1991). Teachers who use humor tend to receive higher evaluations than their non-humorous peers (Neuliep, 1991). Students perceive humorous teachers as more approachable; teachers who use humor may more easily develop positive rapport with their students (Neuliep, 1991). When teachers use humor to enhance the learning environment, it helps to bolster behaviors that influence immediacy such as those that enhance verbal and nonverbal closeness both of which help to build student-teacher relationships (Neuliep, 1991). However, Neuliep (1991) stated that the effect of using humor to create immediacy is more pronounced in males than in females. Immediacy has a positive effect on student-teacher relationships and may play a role in student achievement when used regularly (Neuliep, 1991).

Practitioners may over report the use of humor, or use it in a way that is ineffective in the classroom (Perret, 2016). For example, humor may be ineffective if it is inappropriate for a context or student age; when used as a teaching tool, humor must be appropriate for the audience and setting (Perret, 2016). If humor is not appropriate for the age and developmental level of

students, it will not provide opportunities for learning through incongruity (Perret, 2016). Such inappropriate humor would not aid in learning and may confuse students (Perret, 2016).

Teachers should consider humor to be one tool in the teacher's toolbox, and not the only way to teach a class (McLaughlin, 2015). Teachers should not shift their focus from instruction to entertainment, nor should they use so much self-deprecating humor that students lose respect for them (McLaughlin, 2015). Teachers should direct humor toward learning goals and not just use humor in an attempt to be funny (McLaughlin, 2015). Thus, teachers should use humor to enhance student understanding of material and not as the primary presentation method for every lesson (McLaughlin, 2015).

The role that humor plays in learning is not restricted to cognitive intelligence; it also plays a role in emotional intelligence (Ogurlu, 2015). Thus, humor may be a valuable tool in traditional classes, as well as those that focus on developing students' emotional intelligence (Ogurlu, 2015). Teachers can use humor as an essential learning tool for a variety of learning purposes (Ogurlu, 2015). In fact, previous researchers reported teacher humor was particularly important in the instruction of drier material (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004). Students judge statistics, law, and grammar courses more favorably when an instructor uses humor (Torok et al., 2004). Humor helps students learn new and difficult materials while improving their problem-solving skills (Torok et al., 2004). There is also a link between the use of humor in class and how well students perceive they are doing in class (Torok et al., 2004).

Classroom humor can have positive effects on student learning outcomes. Bolkan and Goodboy (2015) found college students who identified their previous professor as humorous were more likely to have positive feelings toward the class, in general. Bolkan and Goodboy's study supported previous findings regarding the value of humor in improving student outcomes.

However, the focus of the study was on how humor affects students; the role of the instructor in humor choices was not investigated (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015).

Other researchers reported classroom humor is directly and positively associated with student outcomes. Goodboy et al. (2015) used questionnaires to examine how humor affected the outcomes of students. The researchers discovered that students who found a class humorous were more likely to participate in class, exhibit extra effort, learn materials, and communicate with professors outside of class hours. However, no instructors were a part of the study to determine how or why humor was used (Goodboy et al., 2015).

Hackathorn et al. (2011) supported the link between humor and student success when they provided some students with instruction using humor, and some without humor. The group that learned with humor scored higher on assessments at the Bloom's taxonomy level of comprehension than did the group without humor (Hackathorn et al., 2011). Hackathorn et al.'s findings support the idea that humor aides in the understanding of new materials. However, the researchers largely ignored the role of teachers in the use of classroom humor (Hackathorn et al., 2011).

Humor in the classroom is a cognitive function in the broader scope of communication. While students do stand to learn more when humor is used, the humor must be appropriate to the students' ages, the social setting, and the subject taught in the class (Sidelinger, 2014). Humor also helps regulate inappropriate conversations. Sidelinger (2014) found humor buffered the impact of inappropriate conversations. Thus, humor may be useful for teaching uncomfortable or sensitive subject matter (Sidelinger, 2014).

A number of researchers reported an underlying connection between humor and students' perceptions of a class (Moradi, 2014; Wanzer et al., 2010; Ziyaeemeher, Kumar, & Abdullah,

2011). In these studies, college students described their experiences in previous classes to researchers (Moradi, 2014; Wanzer et al., 2010; Ziyaeemeher et al., 2011) and reported significantly more positive attitudes toward humorous classrooms. However, the researchers did not capture teachers' experiences with using humor or explore the reasons why they chose to use humor (Moradi, 2014; Wanzer et al., 2010; Ziyaeemeher et al., 2011).

Other classroom benefits are associated with the use of humor. When teachers model the use of humor in the classroom, students learn to use and incorporate it into their own classroom products. Teachers report increased student attendance and less tardiness when humor is present in the class (Seidman & Brown, 2013). Teachers also use humor as a motivational reward to facilitate smooth transitions during class or between classes, such as putting away books, or moving through the hallways (Seidman & Brown, 2013).

Humor also plays a role in alleviating student anxiety. Randler et al. (2016) found students reported less test anxiety after experiencing humorous instruction in the form of videos. Prior to a trout dissection lab, one group of students viewed humorous videos about fish, while another group viewed videos about trout behaviors (Randler et al., 2016). The group viewing the humorous videos reported less anxiety about the dissection assessment (Randler et al., 2016). Randler et al.'s (2016) study provides evidence of the role humor plays in relieving stress and helping create classroom environments where students are comfortable learning.

In a study of high school students' performance in grammar classes, the use of humor resulted in better outcomes, and students reported a preference for the use of humor (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). The researchers administered a grammar pre-test to 120 male students in an Iranian high school; 60 students were chosen to be a part of the study based on their scores (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). The researchers split the 60 students into two equal groups: a

control and an experimental group. Over 12 weeks, both groups received instruction in English grammar, with the experimental group receiving a 90-minute humorous lesson each week, and the control group receiving a non-humorous placebo lesson (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). Results indicated the experimental group scored higher than the control group on posttests after receiving humorous instruction and reported higher levels of motivation on a questionnaire (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). In addition, members of the experimental group reported better attendance, more respect for the teacher, and greater active learning (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). Kavandi and Kavandi's (2016) findings support the use of humor as a teaching tool to improve students' academic performance and motivation.

Ridanpää (2014) examined the role of humor in geography education. The researcher found that popular culture and cartoons communicate important geographical ideas and concepts in a humorous manner, helping students learn and think critically (Ridanpää, 2014). Satire and sarcasm were valuable tools for helping geography students understand current geopolitical situations and attitudes (Ridanpää, 2014). Ridanpää emphasized the role of humor in helping students think critically and analytically, also noting the role of humor in socializing and normalizing societal concepts. Teachers' use of humor can foster higher order thinking skills in students across subject areas while building community and societal relationships among students (Ridanpää, 2014).

Bolkan, Griffin, and Goodboy (2018) examined if integrated humor helped students learn content area material. The researchers conducted two studies to determine if integrated humor improved students' scores on tests in college communications classes. In the first study, researchers randomly assigned 87 participants to one of two groups. One group received written instruction that included integrated humor, and the other group received written instruction

without integrated humor (Bolkan et al., 2018). Both groups were given a multiple-choice test to determine how well they learned the material; students who completed the lesson without humor scored higher on the test (Bolkan et al., 2018). In the second study, the researchers divided 93 participants into two groups: one with integrated humor lessons, and the other without (Bolkan et al., 2018). After the lesson, each group completed a test with multiple choice and open-ended questions (Bolkan et al., 2018). Again, Bolkan et al. found the group receiving instruction without humor performed better on the test. While this research suggests humor may be a distraction to learning (Bolkan et al., 2018), it should be noted that most classroom instruction does not occur through only written means. In addition, the researchers did not examine the effects of contiguous humor, or humor not directly associated with learning (Bolkan et al., 2018). Findings from Bolkan et al.'s study support the need for a transcendental phenomenology to examine teachers' experiences with using humor as a teaching tool. In addition, because teachers did not conduct pre-tests, it is unknown whether participants' test scores simply reflected prior knowledge.

Classroom humor also influences students' perceptions of their instructors (Richmond, Berglund, Epelbaum, & Klein, 2015). For example, Richmond et al. (2015) examined correlations between teacher-student relationships, teacher humor, student engagement, and perceived teacher effectiveness. A sample of 252 participants completed an online assessment of instructors' rapport with students, uses of various types of humor, and student engagement. The researchers compared the results of the responses to instructor ratings completed by students as a part of teacher evaluation. Analysis revealed student-teacher relationship had the greatest influence on students' perception of teacher effectiveness; humor and engagement influenced perceptions to a lesser degree (Richmond et al., 2015). The specific types of humor that

influenced student perceptions related to the subject taught in the classroom, personal anecdotes from the instructor, and self-deprecating humor (Richmond et al., 2015). The researchers further posited that humor plays an important role in students' perceptions of instructor effectiveness because humor creates a sense of approachableness, helping students build relationships with instructors (Richmond et al., 2015). This last point further supports the idea that teachers may choose to use humor in the classroom to foster relationships with students (Richmond et al., 2015).

As teachers attempt to use humor as a teaching tool, it is important to understand how humor comprehension works in humans; this idea was central to a study by Tian et al. (2017), who sought to understand how the brain works during the moment when someone understands humor. To examine this moment of insight, the researchers conducted MRI imaging of brain activity during use of pictorial humor, written humor, and no humor (Tian et al., 2017). Participants included 33 paid volunteers from a university in China (Tian et al., 2017). Participants observed image series, which might have a humorous image in either the first, second, or neither series (Tian et al., 2017). On other series, no images were humorous, but the story had writing, which would either have humorous writing on the first image, second image, or neither image (Tian et al., 2017). Brain imaging revealed humor comprehension involved activity in the portions of the brain associated with semantics and language, regardless of whether the story series contained writing (Tian et al., 2017). Tian et al. (2017) further determined that the portions of the brain involved in humor were the same as those known to be involved in insight. This finding led the researchers to conclude that as humans comprehend humor, they experience insight that fosters an understanding of the humor. Thus, teachers may provide students with insight by using humor as a teaching tool; if the humor relates to the

subject, students can improve comprehension as they gain insight and understanding of the humor (Tian et al., 2017). Findings from this study support the use of humor as teaching tool to help students comprehend material.

Unsal, Agcam, and Aydemir (2018) attempted to determine whether student views on humor differ based on student gender or the school attended. Unsal et al. (2018) noted the important role humor plays in education in areas such as helping students focus and improving relationships between teachers and students. Unsal et al. (2018) collected demographic information and surveyed 505 secondary school students in Turkey to determine the role of gender and school attended on students' views of humor. The researchers determined no significant difference in student views of humor based on gender (Unsal et al., 2018). When researchers compared the type of school attended among students, the researchers determined that academic school students held a more positive view on humor in education than their peers enrolled in vocational schools (Unsal et al., 2018). The researchers also found that students' preference for instructor use of humor did not vary by the grade level of the student at the time of the study (Unsal et al., 2018). Unsal et al. (2018) noted that with positive views on humor held by students, humor should be a quality sought after in teachers during the hiring process, and that textbooks should look to include humor to help engage the students.

In a study, Sultana, Jabeen, Jamal, and Hassan (2019) sought to determine if using humor improved student perceptions of learning English as a foreign language, and if the participants felt as if different types of humor affected learning in different ways. Sultana et al. (2019) described that humor serves several positive functions in the classroom including reducing stress, building relationships, and better engaging students. Sultana et al. (2019) also noted several shortcomings of using humor in the classroom, including using hostile humor can create lower

self-esteem in students, and that over using humor can negate any positive outcomes from humor use in the classroom (Sultana et al., 2019). Sultana et al. (2019) surveyed 98 participants enrolled in an intensive English course at the undergraduate level to determine how participants perceived the instructor's use of humor. The researchers determined that students perceived that the use of humor helped them to relax in class and that the participants related that humor helped them to better retain information during class (Sultanan et al., 2019).

Humor and Relationships

The use of classroom humor improves students' abilities to discern fact from opinion. Baumgartner and Morris (2008) found students who used a satirical textbook in conjunction with a standard textbook in a college civics course were able to identify incongruities in the satirical text. Students reported higher course engagement when using the satirical text. Students in a class where humor is used are also more likely to sign up for future courses with the same instructor (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008).

Humor serves functions other than creating learning opportunities, such as asserting superiority over others. While this is common amongst peer groups (Barnes, 2012) it is hoped that humor is not used in this manner by classroom teachers. Another way people utilize humor in the superiority function is to assert control over situations. This is true especially of children who find themselves in situations where they are uncomfortable and "use humour (sic) to bring [the situation] back under their control" (Barnes, 2012, p. 246). By knowing students may use humor to exert control over uncomfortable situations, teachers can better gauge students' comfort levels and manage classrooms (Barnes, 2012). Teachers must also work to ensure humor usage either supports learning objectives or fosters safe learning environments, avoiding the use of humor in the manner of superiority (Barnes, 2012).

Humor can also help teachers establish connections with students, thus serving as a classroom management tool (Ackerman, 2007). Teachers who promote positive humor experiences in the classroom help to create safe learning environments for students (Ackerman, 2007). When teachers laugh at their own mistakes, they promote positive relationships and students learn it is acceptable to make mistakes (Ackerman, 2007). However, teachers must ensure humor is positive and does not ridicule students or undermine students' respect for teachers (Ackerman, 2007).

Huang and Lin (2014) examined teacher charisma as an evaluative measure and found teachers' use of humor was an overlooked dimension of teacher charisma. The researchers sought to determine if teacher evaluations were more accurate when they assessed teacher charisma rather than teaching effectiveness. Huang and Lin (2014) developed a scale to evaluate teacher charisma. The researchers reported that humor was a key characteristic of teachers who received strong student evaluations. Students reported teacher humor was essential to a positive classroom experience, suggesting humor is an important characteristic of charismatic teachers (Huang & Lin, 2014).

In students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, the use of humor by teachers to establish and maintain relationships may be even more crucial (Fovet, 2009). Because there are medical benefits to humor, such as complex immune system reactions, improved cardiovascular activity, and endorphin release, humor may improve the conditions of those who suffer from mental and physical illnesses or disabilities (Fovet, 2009). Furthermore, researchers consider humor a positive tool when interacting with new or difficult situations, which are experiences that are more common for students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties (Fovet, 2009). Most importantly, humor acts as structure that allows students with

social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties to build positive relationships with peers and teachers (Fovet, 2009).

Curseu and Fodor (2016) developed a scale for evaluating affiliative and aggressive humor in groups. The researchers noted the influence of humor on group dynamics, including communication and atmosphere in group settings. Curseu and Fodor argued that humor could exist as an individual concept or as a group characteristic. As a group characteristic, humor influences groupings in school settings. Accordingly, determining the dynamics of group humor is essential to understanding the use of humor in schools. The researchers explained that because group members have shared goals, they often develop a shared set of characteristics or traits, including humor (Curseu & Fodor, 2016).

Gordon (2014) reported that humor connects to both friendship and intimacy, both of which foster relationship development. While the characteristics of relationship dynamics in a classroom are not friendship, there is a basic level of intimacy in any relationship. People establish intimacy through trust and in group dynamics through humor and group traits (Gordan, 2014). Gordon posited that relationships serve as a way people group together to help to foster new knowledge and skills. In an educational context, teachers' use of humor to build relationships can also enhance learning opportunities through the intimacy of those relationships (Gordon, 2014).

Olin (2016) described the use of humor as a tool of socialization among humans. Infants recognize humor before they are able to process incongruity, which may serve as an explanation in part through observations of humor used by those around them. Furthermore, Olin (2016) posited that not all incongruities that result in humor could be resolved. The humor of some incongruities lies in the absurd nature of the incongruity, itself. Just because something is

incongruous does not make it funny; at times, such incongruities can be offensive or grotesque (Olin, 2016).

From a social perspective, humor serves a variety of purposes, including influencing and regulating social behaviors and establishing and sustaining relationships (Bell, 2013). Bell (2013) examined what happens when a humor exchange did not occur due to lack of understanding by receivers. Bell (2013) argued that each humor interaction is a check on understanding. Accordingly, for a teacher to use humor effectively as a teaching tool, students must understand the humor. Bell (2013) had 22 undergraduate students tell a difficult-to-understand joke to five strangers, five acquaintances, and five intimates. The students observed recipients' reactions to the misunderstood joke and then followed up with questions to understand those reactions (Bell, 2013). The most common responses among recipients who did not understand the joke were to repeat the punchline or politely laugh. Bell (2013) also found people who failed to understand a humor interaction were likely to admit they did not understand when questioned about it (Bell, 2013). In an educational context, teachers who use humor as a teaching tool should assess student understanding of the humor to determine its effectiveness (Bell, 2013).

Because humor involves human interactions and is therefore subject to influence from humans and their beliefs, it is also a communicative device for those ideas and beliefs (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). Humor embodies many of society's virtues, and therefore reflects or rejects social norms and rules (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). Ruch and Heintz (2016) studied the use of benevolent humor, which is that used to examine incongruities in life and society, and corrective humor, which is used to reveal virtuous ways of living and behaving. The researchers wanted to understand whether justice, transcendence, and courage were virtues supported by only

benevolent and corrective humor (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). The researchers gathered data from 340 German-speaking participants using an online questionnaire designed to measure benevolent and corrective humor. Results indicated a relationship between benevolent humor and corrective humor; a connection also existed between the use of these forms of humor and human virtues (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). Ruch and Heintz's (2016) findings support the idea that beyond teaching content and skills, teachers can use humor to teach important societal virtues. In addition, humor provides an avenue for identifying social injustices and addressing them with humor techniques, such as satire (Ruch & Heintz, 2016).

Plenty, Bejerot, and Eriksson (2014) sought to determine if a connection existed between motor skills, social skills, and victimization by bullies. The researchers used humor creation as a measure of social skills (Plenty et al., 2014). Researchers employed the Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larson, Gray, & Weir, 2003) to determine the style of humor participants were most likely to use. Questions were also asked to assess how well participants performed in physical education classes and whether they were ever bullied (Plenty et al., 2014). Participants included 626 Swedish health care workers who attended a training course on bullying (Plenty et al., 2014). Results indicated participants who reported poor physical education performance were more likely to experience bullying. In addition, these participants were likely to either report low humor skills or humor skills that reflected self-defeating humor (Plenty et al., 2014). Conversely, participants who reported high physical education skill were less likely to have experienced bullying and had higher humor skills (Plenty et al., 2014). Men who reported high physical education skills and less bullying were more likely to report use of self-enhancing and affiliative humor, while women who reported high physical education skills and less bullying reported higher humor in all four categories (Plenty et al.,

2014). These results show a correlation between motor skill and the use of humor, which may be an important consideration as teachers plan humor activities (Plenty et al., 2014). Teachers may consider incorporating movement into activities that involve humor (Plenty et al., 2014). A limitation of this study was that results were based on adult participants reflecting on their childhood motor skills and bullying experiences (Plenty et al., 2014).

Kosiczky and Mullen (2013) attempted to understand the use of humor by teacher leaders at a high school in North Carolina. Specifically, the researchers conducted a qualitative case study to examine the role of humor in public relations, with a focus on creating relationships between teachers and students (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013). Kosiczky and Mullen (2013) conducted observations, interviews, and two focus groups with nine teacher leaders at the high school level. The five teachers who used classroom humor most often also used humor in their one-on-one communications with students (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013). The teachers reported humor helped them create the classroom atmosphere and connect with students (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013). Teachers also reported that humor improved student engagement in class (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013). The most common ways teachers used humor was through telling stories. The teachers reported these stories helped nurture relationships between teachers and students. All participants mentioned the need for teachers to gear humor toward the theme of the class, so teachers do not treat serious and sensitive subjects with the same kind of humor as more light-hearted subjects (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013).

Kosiczky and Mullen (2013) also reported that several teachers used spontaneous humor to communicate information, rather than planning the humor ahead of time. Another effect of the study was that teachers' use of humor was validated through focus groups; knowing other teachers' used humor helped participants realize the importance of humor (Kosiczky & Mullen,

2013). Kosiczky and Mullen's (2013) study provides a look into why and how teachers in a large North Carolina high school used humor, providing a foundation for the current study on classroom humor use among middle and high school teachers in rural Appalachia.

While humor is present in cultures all over the world, its value, and use differ by culture. Wu and Chan (2013) examined how Chinese teachers used humor to relieve stress. Participants included 789 Chinese teachers who were administered the COPE questionnaire to assess stress management (Wu & Chan, 2013). Results indicated few participants used humor to cope with stress, as the only two categories that produced lower scores were denial and use of drugs/alcohol (Wu & Chan, 2013). Other researchers have similarly reported that adults in other countries used humor infrequently to cope with stress (Abel, 2002), indicating that the use of humor varies by culture. For example, one study revealed that Canadian students more frequently used humor to deal with stress than did Chinese students (Wu & Chan, 2013). Findings from Wu and Chan's study emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity when using humor as a classroom teaching tool.

In an investigation into the possible connections between self-esteem and humor, Vaughan, Zeigler-Hill, and Arnau (2014) noted four types of humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-depreciating. Participants viewed affiliative and self-enhancing humor as positive, and aggressive and self-depreciating as negative. Self-enhancing and self-depreciating humor are concerned with the self, while affiliate and aggressive humor are concerned with the outside world (Vaughan et al., 2014). Vaughan et al. (2014) also reported that high self-esteem is considered a good characteristic but can also be a sign of negative psychological factors. The researchers defined self-esteem instability as having high self-esteem while demonstrating

negative factors. Self-esteem instability occurs when self-esteem changes between measures such as aggression and prejudice, which results in a fragile self-esteem (Vaughan et al., 2014).

In Vaughan et al.'s (2014) study, 499 participants (101 males and 398 females) answered online questionnaires on humor style and self-esteem and completed daily logs of self-esteem for 7 days (Vaughan et al., 2014). Analysis revealed a correlation between high self-esteem and both affiliative and self-enhancing humor, whereas high self-esteem instability was associated with self-depreciating humor. The researchers also noted that individuals with high self-esteem instability often used the same kinds of humor as individuals with low self-esteem. Findings from Vaughn et al.'s (2013) study suggest that self-esteem, rather than pedagogy, may explain why some teachers are more comfortable using classroom humor. Furthermore, if teachers model and design activities that give students opportunities to use self-enhancing and affiliative humor, students' stable self-esteem may increase (Vaughn et al., 2014).

Salavera, Usán, and Jarie (2018) examined the relationships between humor style, social skills, and gender. Social skills were described as tools used to interact with others, including self-expression, defense of own rights, expression of disapproval, saying no and interrupting, making requests, and initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex (Salavera et al., 2018). Salavera et al. (2018) found that positive humor types (affiliation and self-enhancing) correlated with the social skill of self-expression, while negative humor types (aggression and self-depreciating) correlated with expressions of disapproval and saying no. A sample of 643 university participants completed a survey to assess humor style and social skills (Salavera et al., 2018). The study survey consisted of the Humor Style Questionnaire (HSQ) (Martin et al., 2003) and the Social Skills Scale (EHS) (Gismero, 2000). The researchers hypothesized men would score higher on humor styles, while women would score higher on social skills. Results indicated

that men did score slightly higher than women on humor styles and the social skill of saying no, while women scored higher on showing disapproval (Salavera et al., 2018). While the overall relationship between humor and social skills was low, the correlation was slightly stronger for females (Salavera et al., 2018). Teachers should be mindful of the results of this study because it is important to note gender differences in social skills and humor style when planning to utilize humor in the classroom (Salavera et al., 2018). Findings also suggest it might be possible to use humor as a teaching tool to help both genders learn important social skills (Salavera et al., 2018).

How Humor Functions

Humor's role in learning is not simply an observable classroom event. Researchers have viewed humor's effect on the brain to create brain activity in the centers that control higher order thinking and pleasure (Mensen et al., 2014; Vtricka et al., 2013). Humor can prompt the release of endorphins associated with pleasure (Mensen et. al, 2014). Teaching with humor provides students with a chance to learn because as they process incongruities from the humor, the brain activates higher order processing (Vtricka et al., 2013).

In a study by Chiang et al. (2016), students in Taiwanese junior high schools participated in a survey about their attitudes toward the use of humor, and how those attitudes affected students' personal use of humor. The researchers found students responded more favorably to self-deprecating and devaluing humor, which were the two most frequently used forms of classroom humor used by students (Chiang et al., 2016). Students claimed personally to use more self-deprecating humor but reported that their peers used more devaluing humor. Chiang et al. (2016) suggested that self-reporting devaluing humor might be uncomfortable for students because of the fear of possibly disappointing authority figures. The researchers also posited it is

important to understand the influence of humor use on students because of the possibility of maladaptive humor development in students.

Ramsey (2016) attempted to determine if humor type and use varied by personality type. The researcher examined personality test and humor use results from 323 students to determine how different personality types used humor. Participants completed both the Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett., 1985) and the Functions of Humor Scale (Ramsey & Meyer, 2014). Researchers used the Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck et al., 1985) to assess categories of psychoticism, extroversion, and neuroticism (Ramsey, 2016). The Functions of Humor Scale (Ramsey & Meyer, 2014) identified four functions for humor, including clarification, identification, enforcement, and differentiation (Ramsey, 2016). Participants who were classified with high psychoticism used humor for clarification, enforcement, and differentiation (Ramsey, 2016). Participants classified with high extroversion used humor for identification, enforcement, and differentiation (Ramsey, 2016). Notably, neuroticism did not significantly predict humor use (Ramsey, 2016).

Humor improves persistence in students especially when it is self-enhancing (Cheng & Wang, 2015). Cheng and Wang (2015) conducted two investigations with 124 students in Australia. Participants completed a depleting task, designed to compare results from doing two tasks, and then watched one of three videos before completing another task (Cheng & Wang, 2015). Participants exposed to humor showed more persistence in the second task than those who did not watch a humorous video (Cheng & Wang, 2015). The researchers determined that the emotion of amusement mediated participants' reactions to humor, indicating that humor alone was not enough to increase persistence. Instead, individuals must experience humor and amusement to gain persistence (Cheng & Wang, 2015). In addition, if someone were to

experience humor while feeling an opposing emotion, such as grief, the humor may not have the same benefits (Cheng & Wang, 2015).

Incongruous humor can cause observers to *flicker* between perspectives of what should happen and what has happened, or what was expected and what occurred (Kotzen, 2015). This mental flickering requires an understanding of the event or object, as it should be, along with an understanding of how the outcome differs from expectations. When teachers use humor as a teaching tool, students must understand both the expected and unexpected through this flickering activity (Kotzen, 2015). Kotzen (2015) also pointed out that incongruity does not ensure a humorous occurrence, as people often make mistakes or have assumptions violated in ways that do not result in humor. Thus, the need exists for an aesthetic value for humor to occur. There must be an understanding of the incongruity and the expected, and this understanding describes the aesthetic value and helps explain why there appear to be no universally humorous events. Many factors, such as life experiences, perspective, mood, and understanding, all affect whether a person perceives humor in an incongruity; teachers should consider these factors when using humor as a teaching tool (Kotzen, 2015).

Lee and Hao (2015) examined the use of multimedia modules for sixth grade science classes. Participants included sixth grade science students in a Taiwanese elementary school; researchers divided the participants into an experiment group with 49 members and a control group with 51 members. The experimental group learned about science topics through multimedia modules that utilized humor, while the control group watched videos based on the text (Lee & Hao, 2015). While results indicated higher scores on assessments for the experimental group, some students reported humor was distracting (Lee & Hao, 2015). Lee and Hao reported that students might perceive humor as distracting because it was unrelated to the

science lesson. Findings from this study emphasize the need to ensure classroom humor focuses on the subject matter and that teachers do not add humor for humor's sake (Lee & Hao, 2015).

Research on humor and brain activity shows that the portions of the brain activated during the production of humor differ based on the creator's experiences with humor (Amir & Biederman, 2016). Amir and Biederman (2016) tasked comedians of various experience levels with giving a humorous caption to a cartoon while researchers measured brain activity. Less experienced participants had greater activity in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), while more experienced comedians had greater activity in the temporal association regions (TMP; Amir & Biederman, 2016). The mPFC is associated with creativity, while the TMP is associated with episodic memory. Findings suggest that less experienced comedians relied on creativity to caption the image, while more experienced comedians rely on memories to complete the task (Amir & Biederman, 2016). These results indicate that when creating humor, experience with the task can help creators more easily access humor (Amir & Biederman, 2016). Findings from Amir and Biederman's study indicate that teachers may find it easier to create humor as they gain more experience with the task.

In an effort to determine which types of humorous advertisements had the greatest effect on viewers, Spielmann (2014) tested viewers' responses to humorous advertisements. According to Spielmann, advertisements contain two types of humor: arousal-safety (AS), and incongruity resolution. The advertisements using AS type humor utilized on the relief theory of humor, which states that humor is a relief to pent-up emotions. Advertisements using incongruity resolution relied on the incongruity theory of humor, which says humor occurs when the observer comprehends an incongruity (Spielmann, 2014). All participants completed a pretest. Researchers selected some participants to complete questionnaires and some were part of two

different focus groups (Spielmann, 2014). Analysis revealed higher humor ratings for advertisements utilizing AS type humor than advertisements utilizing incongruity resolution (Spielmann, 2014). While findings do not support the use of incongruity theory, it is important to remember that advertisements do not always try to educate; in fact, the goal of advertisements is often to just be memorable (Spielmann, 2014). Thus, if a teacher is simply trying to have students remember something rather than understand it, AS might be a useful type of humor (Spielmann, 2014).

Different types of humor connect to different parts of human personality, including intelligence and character traits (Ruch, Heintz, Platt, Wagner, & Proyer, 2018). Ruch et al. (2018) sought to determine if a connection existed between different types of humor and different parts of the personality. The researchers conducted two studies to examine these possible connections, the first of which sought to identify markers for comic style, while the second refined these markers (Ruch et al., 2018). This first study identified eight markers for comic style, including fun, nonsense, humor, wit, irony, sarcasm, satire, and cynicism (Ruch et al., 2018). The second study included an online personality scale that used bipolar adjective choices and an intelligence measure (Ruch et al., 2018). The personality scale revealed character traits and the intelligence test assessed self-identified intelligence; the researchers compared results of these measures to the comic markers. Analysis revealed a correlation between the use of wit and verbal intelligence, while other markers, such as satire, linked to character traits such as justice and compassion (Ruch et al., 2018). Findings suggested the use of wit might help students build their intelligence and character (Ruch et al., 2018). Teachers seeking to use humor in class should also consider their audience's capability to tap into the various character traits and intelligence levels (Ruch et al., 2018).

In another study on the link between intelligence and humor, Christensen, Silvia, Nusbaum, and Beaty (2016) examined the connections between humor, broad intelligence, and narrow intelligence. The researchers asked 270 participants to complete three humor creation activities: (a) caption a single panel cartoon, (b) complete a joke stem given a brief scenario and the opening of a joke, and (c) define odd noun-noun combinations (Christensen et al., 2016). Researchers assessed participants' intelligence using measures of fluid intelligence, crystallized intelligence, and broad retrieval (Christensen et al., 2016). Results revealed that when all three intelligence tasks were considered together as the broad measure of intelligence, there was strong correlation with humor-creating and broad retrieval tasks (Christensen et al., 2016). Crystallized intelligence and broad retrieval were also strongly correlated with humor creation, while fluid intelligence was not. Christensen et al. hypothesized that the strong correlation between broad intelligence and humor creation described the relationship between fluid intelligence and humor creation. Because this study revealed a correlation between intelligence and humor creation, teaching students to create humor may help increase intelligence (Christensen et al., 2016). In addition, humor used by teachers may create a normalization of humor in relation to intelligence (Christensen et al., 2016).

The conceptualization of humor as a psychological function and its relation to physical stimuli on the body was the focus of a study conducted by Kaspar, Jurisch, and Schneider (2016). Specifically, the researchers examined the correlation between a physical weight stimulus and humor perception, and whether correlations differed by gender (Kaspar et al., 2016). Physical stimuli can affect emotional and psychological responses. For example, holding a pen in the mouth makes an individual more likely to laugh because the pen forces the mouth into a smiling position. Kaspar et al. (2016) divided 120 participants who were walking alone on

a college campus into two random test groups. Researchers gave both groups a weighted clipboard with 20 cartoons on it and asked to rate how humorous they thought the first 10 cartoons were, and how humorous they thought their peers would rate the second 10 cartoons (Kaspar et al., 2016). Researchers gave participants in one group a clipboard weighing 430 grams, and provided participants in the other group with a clipboard that weighed 1710 grams (Kaspar et al., 2016). Results indicated male participants in the group with the heavier clipboard rated the cartoons as funnier than women in the heavier clipboard group did (Kaspar et al., 2016). However, both men and women with heavier clipboards reported less humor than did both genders with the lighter clipboards (Kaspar et al., 2016). Findings from Kaspar et al.'s study suggest physical stimuli mitigate humor, as a teaching tool (Kaspar et al., 2016). Another important consideration for teachers using humor is gender differences (Kaspar et al., 2016).

While researchers have identified correlations between intelligence, creativity, and humor, Kellner and Benedek (2017) examined if a link exist between intelligence, creativity, and humor production. The researchers had 152 participants caption one-panel cartoons to assess humor production. Researchers used an intelligence task to determine intelligence, and participants listed five examples their own creative actions. Raters, selected by researchers who had experience with humor, then rated both the captioned cartoons and the creative accomplishments of the participants (Kellner & Benedek, 2017). Findings revealed links between intelligence, creativity, and humor production. Crystallized intelligence positively correlated with humor production, while divergent thinking provided a positive correlation between creativity and humor production (Kellner & Benedek, 2017). Kellner and Benedek's study is important for teachers using humor because it illustrates the value of humor production, and how it might foster creativity and intelligence gains for students. Furthermore, teachers

seeking opportunities to utilize humor as a teaching tool can focus on the relationships between creativity, humor, and intelligence to create meaningful learning activities (Kellner & Benedek, 2017).

Parovel and Guidi (2015) tested the incongruity factor of humor by having participants view icon movement patterns in a series of videos. The researchers posited that humor is complicated by its many components, including cognitive, social, and emotional competencies (Parovel & Guidi, 2015). The researchers further stated that while humor results from understanding the incongruity of a situation, not all incongruities are funny; some might cause confusion, fear, or other emotions. To understand what makes an incongruity funny, Parovel and Guidi (2015) designed several tests to examine reactions to various incongruities. In each test, university students viewed videos with icons that moved in an incongruous manner. In the tests, the icons either moved at odd speeds, in unexpected directions, or in ways that appeared to violate physical laws (Parovel & Guidi, 2015). The researchers determined that incongruity was an important condition of whether participants found the videos to be funny (Parovel & Guidi, 2015). The researchers claimed that when animated objects moved in a manner that was unexpected, observers perceived humor (Parovel & Guidi, 2015). Findings from this study may help teachers understand what constitutes a funny occurrence so they may design humor activities that foster student learning (Parovel & Guidi, 2015). If incongruity in movements can generate humor in videos, it can help teachers to select humorous material such as cartoons, and videos that may help students to learn.

Researchers sought to compare humor style with both emotional intelligence and life satisfaction to determine whether humor had any mediating influence on emotional intelligence and/or life satisfaction (Huang & Lee, 2019). The researchers asked 260 undergraduate students

in Taiwan to complete questionnaires about emotional intelligence, life satisfaction, and humor styles and compared the results (Huang & Lee, 2019). Huang and Lee (2019) found a correlation between emotional intelligence and life satisfaction with the participants. The researchers further discovered that participants who identified as using more positive types of humor had higher scores on both the emotional intelligence and life satisfaction scales (Huang & Lee, 2019). Alternately, participants who identified as using more negative types of humor scored lower on both the emotional intelligence and life satisfaction scales (Huang & Lee, 2019).

Researchers have also determined that a relationship exists between humor and a person's ability to change and remain happy (Rad, Ignat, Maier, & Redes, 2019). Researchers had 220 Romanians complete a Linkert scale questionnaire on the value that participants put various areas such as security, humor, power, and achievement (Rad et al., 2019). Researchers found a very high correlation between humor and universalism, meaning that humor plays a part in open-mindedness to change since universalism is a measure of self-transcendence (Rad et al., 2019). Rad et al. (2019) note that lower levels of humor indicate that someone is less open to change and thus less open to transcendence, but higher levels of humor indicate a greater propensity for transcendence.

Humor and Student Engagement

Berge (2016) examined the use of humor by college students in an introductory physics course. Students used humor in a same-age peer group to help understand basic physics ideas, and then transitioned into using humor during class (Berge, 2016). The researcher found that humor influenced the working dynamics of the student group and its operation. Furthermore, the use of humor influenced the ways students interacted with the epistemology of the course (Berge, 2016). Berge (2016) found humor occurred in four different ways during the

collaborative learning sessions: when something was obvious, when something is absurd, when something was said incorrectly, and when something said was difficult.

Not all humor interactions are created equal, as Barry and Graça (2018) asserted in their research on humor in marketing. The researchers examined whether humorous commercials were more engaging than non-humorous commercials on a social media platform (Barry & Graça, 2018). The researchers examined 1,777 humorous videos and 1,134 non-humorous videos on YouTube. The videos were all commercials that had run on television but were no longer aired at the time of the study. Researchers examined viewer comments to determine engagement and whether videos were humorous or non-humorous (Barry & Graça, 2018). Overall, commercials that used humor were more engaging than those that did not use humor (Barry & Graça, 2018). However, the researchers also found that when the videos were further subcategorized into types of humor and non-humor, inspirational commercials were more engaging than humorous commercials (Barry & Graça, 2018). Thus, while humor is an engaging tool, it should not be the only tool that teachers utilize; teachers should use a variety of engagement tools with students (Barry & Graça, 2018).

James and Fox (2016) examined if upper elementary age students had developed self-enhancing and self-defeating humor styles. The researchers conducted paired interviews with 10 students of an average age of 9.6 years old. Analysis revealed students understood the use humor in a self-enhancing manner, as they described using humor to deal with difficult situations. Some students responded to questions about self-defeating humor, explaining that when other students laughed at them, they believed they could enhance relationships by building trust. However, most students did not understand why self-defeating humor would be used (James & Fox, 2016). James and Fox (2016) also noted that students reported the use of humor when they were alone.

Researchers have questioned whether relationships exist between humor appreciation and humor production, and how these factors relate to the demographic characteristics of individuals involved in appreciating and producing the humor (Moran, Rain, Paige-Gould, & Mar, 2014). In a study with 159 participants, including 93 women and 66 men, Moran et al. (2014) used single panel cartoons to test humor production by asking the participants to caption them. Researchers assessed humor appreciation by asking participants to rate the humor of single paneled cartoons with captions (Moran et al., 2014). The researchers had impartial judges rate the captions created by the participants. While the researchers used the same 67 cartoons for all participants, half of the cartoons had captions while the other half were uncaptioned; researchers swapped the captioning variable between two groups of participants (Moran et al., 2014). The captions rated by the participants were all created professionally, so that one group of participants did not rate the other group's captions. Results indicated a negative relationship between humor production and humor appreciation, suggesting that participants who produced the funniest captions provided lower ratings for the professionally written captions (Moran et al., 2014). Age and English fluency were the two demographic features that correlated with humor production (Moran et al., 2014). Moran et al. (2014) determined that no link exists between humor production and humor appreciation, and they proposed that the two functions might be influenced by different factors. This study is useful for teachers as they plan humor instruction because they should consider that humor appreciation and humor production are separate functions (Moran et al., 2014). Researchers noted that because the study used cartoons as humor appreciation and production medium, results might not apply to humor of other medium such as videos, skits, or oral humor (Moran et al., 2014).

Humor is not the only factor in determining student engagement. Researchers sought to determine if the type of humor used by an instructor and the gender of the instructor would affect students (Nienaber, Abrams, & Segrist, 2019). The researchers noted that humor is a factor in student engagement and remarked on the role that instructor humor plays in student evaluations of instructors and the frequency of out-of-class student and teacher communication as well as in-class student participations (Nienaber et al., 2019). Nienaber et al. (2019) provided six vignettes that described a classroom where the instructor used humor. The 157, undergraduate participants then rated a series of items based on the vignette they read and answered questions about their own introversion (Nienaber et al., 2019). The researchers found that affiliative humor was more likely to foster student engagement than hostile humor (Nienaber et al., 2019). The researchers also found that student preferred a teacher that did not use humor to a teacher that used hostile humor, and that the gender of the instructor had no bearing on humor use and students' preference for the class described in the various vignettes (Nienaber et al., 2019).

Summary

The research reviewed in this chapter provides evidence of a gap in the literature on the experience of teachers using humor as a teaching tool. No literature was found to examine this phenomenon in rural Appalachian middle and high schools. The relationships between humor and three theories, Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, and Kant's (1966) incongruity theory, were established in Chapter Two. Furthermore, I examined the role of humor in teaching. Previous researchers reported a relationship between humor, student learning outcomes, and student perceptions of classes and teachers. In addition, I explained the connection between humor and human relationships. Research also indicates humor can help allay student anxiety. I also explored research on the

function of humor. The literature demonstrates areas of brain activity triggered by humor.

Finally, I reviewed studies on the link between the use of humor and student engagement. Humor can foster student engagement in classroom activities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This chapter provides details of the methods used in the current study on middle and high school teachers' perceptions of their use of humor during classroom instruction, at selected school districts in rural Appalachia. The chapter includes a description of the research design, research questions, study setting, samples, and procedures for data collection. In addition, my role as the researcher and data analysis procedures are detailed. The chapter concludes with details about the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study.

Design

This study followed a qualitative method and employed a transcendental phenomenological design. A transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me, as the instrument of research, to collect data in participants' natural settings (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, a transcendental phenomenological approach was appropriate for the present study because it utilizes a process that flows "from philosophical assumptions, to interpretative lens" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). This approach was also appropriate for the current study because the aim was to use participants' stories to discover common themes (Creswell, 2013). Participants included middle school and high school teachers who used humor as a teaching tool. In general, the study sought to understand the phenomenon of using humor in the classroom, among teachers at middle and high schools in schools in rural Appalachia.

According to Creswell (2013), a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research, "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 76). Transcendental phenomenology has origins in philosophy, with thinkers like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2013). This

philosophical underpinning posits that humans understand the world around them through their consciousness, which is what separates the subjective world from the objective world (Creswell, 2013).

Moreover, Creswell (2013) claimed, “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 76). By exploring the shared, lived experience of using humor in the classroom, a generalized and broader meaning of the experience may be revealed. Transcendental phenomenology follows the steps set forth by Moustakas (1994), which require researchers to bracket out their personal feelings and views about the studied phenomenon, and then collect and analyze data to determine common themes and describe the essence of the experience. Following the steps laid out by Moustakas (1994), phenomenological researchers must bracket out their personal experiences, thoughts, and beliefs concerning the phenomenon. Bracketing reveals biases to the reader and the analysis focuses solely on participants’ stories (Creswell, 2013). With bracketing, data were collected and analyzed to determine the textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ stories. This analysis yielded the essence or key of the phenomenon; for the current study, the phenomenon of focus was humor as a teaching tool.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and four sub-questions.

Central Research Question

What are middle and high school teacher perceptions of using humor during classroom instruction as a lived experience?

Sub-questions

SQ1: How do middle and high school teachers describe their individual approach to using humor during classroom instruction?

SQ2: How do middle and high school teachers describe their reasons for using humor in the classroom?

SQ3: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction impacts student attitude?

SQ4: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction affects the learning environment?

Setting

The setting for the research consisted of two rural school districts in the Appalachian region of the United States. I selected these districts based on the high number of middle and high schools in comparison to other districts in the same region. Each of these districts had multiple middle and high schools, creating a larger pool of potential participants. I also selected these districts due to the ease of travel between sites. I requested access to buildings in the districts to conduct interviews and observations. I worked with the participants of the focus group to determine a central location for the focus group meeting.

I selected pseudonyms for all participants and locations, including district names, and school names. I assigned pseudonyms beginning with the letter “A” and then progressing through the alphabet, as needed. Participants included both men and women who were currently teaching in one of the selected school districts in Appalachia. In the first of the three districts, there were four high schools, four middle schools, and eight elementary schools with a total student population of 7,342 students. The overall percentage of students eligible for free and

reduced lunch in this district was 58%. The second school district had two high schools, three middle schools, and six elementary schools. The student population of this second district was 5,372 students, of which 71% were eligible free or reduced lunch. The third district had three high schools, three middle schools, and seven elementary schools. The third district's total student population was 7,154, with 61% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Teachers had at least 5 years of experience and taught any subject or subjects in grades 6 through 12.

Participants

I utilized purposeful sampling in this study. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants who have specific knowledge of, or experience with, a particular subject (Creswell, 2015). In this study, the participant pool consisted of current teachers in one of the participating rural Appalachian school districts, which meant they were accessible for interviews, focus group, and observations most of the time. I selected ten participants for the study and all participants met the same criterion to take part in the study (Creswell, 2013). Participants had to self-identify as using humor in the classroom to teach their students. Participants also had to be current teachers in grades 6 through 12 at one or more of the middle or high schools in the participating school districts. All participants had at least a Bachelor's degree and participation was open to both male and female educators. Five years of teaching experience was required for participation. The final sample included 10 participants.

With permission from participating school districts, I sent an email to all middle and high school teachers, inviting them to participate in the study. The email simply asked for interested teachers who used humor in the classroom and had at least five years of teaching experience to reply to indicate their interest in participation. Snowball sampling occurred as some teachers who did not respond initially to the email, decided to participate once they communicated with other

teachers who did participate. I assigned all participants a first name pseudonym in such a manner that the first assigned name began with the letter “A” such as Andrew, and continued throughout the alphabet, as needed, with the next participant’s pseudonym beginning with the letter “B” and so forth. Pseudonyms remained gender specific as gender may prove an important aspect of the experience of using humor in the classroom.

Procedures

Procedures for this study began with obtaining the appropriate approvals. Following a successful proposal defense, I sought approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University. After gaining approval from the IRB, I sought permission from the school districts to conduct observations in the identified teachers’ classroom. Additionally, I obtained permission to email the study invitation to all middle and high school teachers. Respondents were required to verify their use of humor in the classroom to be eligible for the study. I distributed consent forms to participants and collected the same consent forms at the time of data collection.

I collected data first using individual semi-structured interviews with 10 of the teachers who responded to the email. I interviewed all participants at the school where they worked, and recorded the audio of the interviews. I then collected data through a focus group interview with half of the participants who completed the individual interviews. The focus group was conducted at a mutually agreed upon location, and was both audio and video recorded. Finally, I conducted classroom observations with the five teachers who participated in both the interviews and focus group, recorded my observations using the observation protocol (see Appendix C). I purposefully selected the classrooms for these observations based on responses from the individual interviews and focus group interview (Creswell, 2013). I analyzed data using the

modified approach of Moustakas' (1994), as advanced by Creswell (2013).

The Researcher's Role

I am currently a principal of a middle school located in the Appalachian region of Virginia; while some of my participants did come from the school where I worked, evaluative and other responsibilities were given to the assistant principal for any participants of the study. I am a 45-year-old, Caucasian male, who taught social studies and reading for 13.5 years at the middle school level. I follow a Christian worldview, which means the paradigm I use to interpret the world is influenced by Christian beliefs and faith, and the teachings of and belief in Jesus Christ. This worldview is established and maintained through the influence of my wife, as I had strayed from the faith of my childhood. I also believe in the transformative power of public education because it provided a basis for my transformation from growing up in a single parent household in poverty, to maintaining a stable family and having a middle-class lifestyle.

Humor played an important role in my life from an early age. Growing up in the generation that had learning opportunities from programs like Sesame Street, which used humor to help children learn, I associated learning with fun and humorous interactions. In late elementary school, I began to read my brother's Mad™ magazines, but in order to understand the humor, I found myself asking questions about popular culture and learning about the subjects of satire and humor. As I became a teenager, my interest in humor turned to Monty Python, and the works of authors such as Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett. As a middle school teacher, I quickly found that using funny pictures, mnemonics, and songs helped students master important information and skills.

My role in this study was that of the human research instrument. As I conducted the study, my own experiences and biases came into play. Therefore, it was important that I describe

how humor in the classroom related to me. I taught sixth through eighth grade reading and social studies for over 13 years. As a teacher, I found students not only responded more positively to humorous instruction, but also often approached me years later to discuss the humor from my class. I began to purposefully seek out ways to tie humor into the class materials. I discovered that humor helped foster relationships with my students and improved students' learning outcomes. My own experiences with using humor in the classroom did not hinder this phenomenological study; rather, these experiences helped by providing a personal lens through which to find the essence of the experience.

Data Collection

Data for this study came from semi-structured individual interviews, a focus group interview, and classroom observations. I first collected data through individual interviews with 10 teachers who self-identified as using humor in the classroom. Half of the individual interview participants then participated in a single focus group interview. Based on responses to the questions in the individual interviews and the focus group interview, I conducted observations in five of the participants' classrooms. I conducted observations in classrooms of participants whose responses indicated a high likelihood of observing humor being used in the classroom. This sequence of data collection allowed a progression from broad ideas to fully saturated ideas about the use of humor as a teaching tool in middle and high school classrooms.

Individual Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face, individual interviews with 10 teachers who reported using humor in the classroom. I employed open-ended questions that allowed for broad and flexible discussion. I followed up with clarifying and probing questions as needed (Moustakas, 1994). I conducted the interviews at the school where each participating teacher

worked, during a time that was mutually convenient. I recorded the interviews using two audio recording devices and transcribed them verbatim. In addition, I took notes throughout the interviews to capture additional thoughts or observations. The interview consisted of open-ended questions about the use of humor in the classroom and tied back into the research questions of this study. Creswell (2013) noted the importance of in-depth interviews in phenomenological studies. Interviews lasted between 20 and 46 minutes.

Open-Ended Individual Interview Questions

1. What impact has humor had on you personally in your life? (CRQ, SQ2)
2. What are some examples of humor you have used in the classroom? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
3. Why do you choose to use humor in the classroom? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)
4. How does your use of humor affect your classroom, including how students respond and how parents perceive your use of humor? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3)
5. Have you always used humor in the classroom? If not, what differences do you see between using humor and not using humor? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2)
6. What has been the most positive experience you have had with using humor in the classroom? (CRQ, SQ2, SQ3)
7. What has been the most negative experience you have had with using humor in the classroom? (CRQ, SQ2, SQ3)
8. What else would you like to share with me concerning using humor in the classroom that has not already been covered by the questions? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, SQ4)

I designed question one to understand how important humor was to the participant while identifying any social or educational connections participants personally had with humor

(Bolkan & Goodboy, 2015). The responses to question one answered the research questions concerning how teachers described why they used humor.

I designed question two to set the tone and help the participants feel more comfortable with the interview process. It also answered the research question about experiences using humor (Seidman & Brown, 2013). As participants answered subsequent questions, they sometimes came back and described other experiences.

I used question three as a direct restatement of the research question about how teachers used humor in the classroom and designed the question to provide information about teachers' motivation to use humor (Sidelinger, 2014). Question three also answered sub-question four about learning environment. When answering this question, some participants provided an answer to the research question about why they used humor or alluded to their reason for using humor.

I designed questions four and five to investigate the relationship between humor and social interactions, between both teachers and students, and teachers and other teachers (Kosiczky & Mullen, 2013). These questions also gave further insight into learning environment, which was the focus of sub-question four. While this question might be answered with participants' responses to previous questions, no complete answers were given, so no questions were omitted during the interviews.

Questions six and seven sought a deeper understanding of positive and negative outcomes of humor use, and experiences of using humor. This question explored how humor use influenced the overall experiences of teachers, not just the classroom experience (Barry & Graça, 2018). I designed question eight to allow teachers to describe personal experiences in which humor was successful and unsuccessful in the classroom (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). While

participants sometimes answered this question prior to being asked, teachers appeared to enjoy relaying experiences with humor and were willing to share experiences even if they had already done so.

I piloted the individual interview questions with two teachers who were employed as high school teachers, and a third who was employed as a middle school teacher in one of the study site districts. None of these teachers were eligible to participate in the study after participating in the field test. The process of field-testing helped ensure the questions were not leading and captured data related to the phenomenon of using humor in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Group Interview

I conducted the focus group interview with Adam, Gloria, Julia, Hannah, and Isaac, who had all previously participated in individual interviews. The focus group interview is a type of interview in which multiple participants interview together (Creswell, 2013). I recorded the focus groups interview using two audio recording devices and two video devices. I transcribed the recordings verbatim and took notes during the focus group interview. The focus group interview questions were open-ended and followed a semi-structured format so information could be pursued as it was revealed. The use of the focus group interview allowed participants to interact with one another while discussing the phenomenon, providing more information for a thick description.

The following were focus group interview questions.

1. Please introduce yourself, giving your name, position including school, and years of experience?
2. In what ways do you use humor in the classroom? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ4)
3. Why do you use humor in class? (CRQ, SQ2)

4. What instances are there when you choose not to use humor and why? (CRQ, SQ2, SQ3)

5. How do you use humor in class? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3, SQ4)

6. What have been some of your most successful uses of humor? Why was it successful? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3, SQ4)

7. What experiences have you had when using humor has been unsuccessful? What made it unsuccessful? (CRQ, SQ1, SQ3, SQ4)

I developed question one to confirm demographic information of the participants and to help introduce focus group members to one another. By allowing the participants the opportunity to interact with one another prior to the data gathering questions this question serves as an icebreaker (Moustakas, 1994).

I designed question two to allow participants to describe how they used humor in the classroom (Seidman & Brown, 2013). Since participants have already participated in individual interviews, this question offered a chance for focus group participants to hear what others had to say and then add to one another's answers and conversation. The participants provided insight into sub-questions one and four with their responses to this question.

I developed question three to have participants provide insight into the reason or reasons why they personally use humor in the classroom (Sidelinger, 2014). I sought to answer sub-question two with this question, and hope to participants reveal what motivated them to use humor, either they hoped for an educational gain, or because of their personal experiences, or for another reason that I had not anticipated.

I developed question four to learn about participants' views on the limits of humor. I wanted to see if there was a societal or educational reason that an educator might chose to avoid

using humor. The idea of not using humor is related to motivation to use humor (Sidelinger, 2014). Participants' responses helped to answer sub-questions two and three.

I developed question five as an attempt to understand specific uses of humor and the purpose behind the use of humor (Seidman & Brown, 2013). I sought to discover if the humor was present to help with learning tasks, to build relationships, to help the teacher control the classroom, or for some other reason. I hoped for participants' responses to provide answers to all of the sub-questions.

I developed questions six and seven to provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect on how humor use has actually worked in the classroom (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016). I sought to discover what specific instances participants could describe that would help provide an accurate picture of how using humor in the classroom functions. I hoped to answer sub-questions one, three, and four with this question.

Observations

I conducted observations in five of the participants' classrooms. I observed Adam, Gloria, Julia, Hannah, and Isaac. An observation is the act of witnessing a phenomenon as it occurs, and collecting data on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). I took field notes during each observation, with a focus on how humor was used in class, from a nonparticipant observer perspective. This provided me with the opportunity to, "record data without direct involvement with activity or people" (Creswell, 2013, p. 167). I selected classrooms for observations based on the information gained from teachers during the focus group and interviews. I arranged observations ahead of time so the use of humor in the classroom could be observed and selected an alternate observation date in case class was cancelled due to weather, emergency, or unforeseen schedule changes. Each of the observations lasted one class period. Because different

districts and different schools use varying times for classes, the actual length of the observation was dependent on how long a class period was at each school. Each teacher observation lasted as long as needed to achieve saturation (Creswell, 2013). During three of the observations I observed the teachers illicit a reaction from students that indicated humor had occurred. In two of the observations I did not note responses indicating humor.

Data Analysis

To determine the essence of the experience of using humor in the classroom, data were analyzed using the steps of data analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994). These steps included determining the significant statements from individual interviews and focus group interviews, looking for the horizons or broad themes about using humor in the middle and high school classroom, organizing the ideas into broader ideas, synthesizing the textural significance of the themes based on what the participants told me and what I observed about using humor in the classroom, describing the structure of the themes and subthemes, and constructing a description of the phenomenon of using humor in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). I transcribed the individual interview transcripts and focus group interview transcripts using Microsoft Word. The participants then member checked the transcripts to verify that I had represented them correctly. These transcriptions served as the basis for data analysis, along with the video recordings of the focus group interview and the notes taken using the observation protocol. Throughout the process of data analysis, I utilized memoing to capture personal feelings and ideas about the use of humor in the classroom to allow the process of bracketing out my biases when the essence of the experience was determined (Creswell, 2013). Memoing is the process, “in which the researcher writes down ideas about the evolving theory throughout the process of open, axial, and selective coding” (Creswell, 2013). Memoing allowed me to track my personal views on the

phenomenon of using humor and to note how these views changed because of exposure to the data gathered during the research. I found the memoing process valuable as I had considered that many of the participants would relate how humor was useful as a teaching tool, because that was the reason I had utilized humor in the classroom. Rather than trying to force what the participants had told me into my preconceived ideas of humor, memoing allowed me to step back and note what I believed and what the participants were actually telling me about using humor in the classroom.

I practiced horizontalization to try to discover recurring and overarching themes about using humor in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization describes the perspective-based nature of the themes that occur. In other words, the themes that emerge are viewed from a human paradigm and perspective, in the same fashion that the horizon is a phenomenon based on observation and not a concrete place where someone may go. The themes that emerged were grounded in the data collected about teachers in middle and high schools using humor in the classroom, but they exist based on the perspective of the analyst. The same data viewed by another researcher, with another perspective may produce different, but no less trustworthy themes. As perspectives change about humor in the classroom, so too can these horizons or themes (Moustakas, 2014). As the themes emerged, I took care to eliminate the areas of overlap and refine the themes. This process provided significant, meaningful themes that represented the larger ideas of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). I conducted this process via open coding practices. As I evaluated the transcripts I searched for common words or phrases, or for common sentiments from participants. I then created a theme based on the commonalities, either from a repeated word or phrase or a theme that described these commonalities.

Next, I created Imaginative variation from the themes (Moustakas, 1994). This consisted of a rich detailed description of participants' experiences about using humor in the middle and high school classroom. In addition to the experiences, I developed a description of the factors that influenced participants' experiences using humor (Moustakas, 1994). The detailed descriptions provided insight into commonalities shared by middle and high school teachers who used humor in the classroom.

By comparing the broad themes and textual details from the data, I determined the essence of the experience of middle and high school teachers using humor as a teaching tool in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). Examining the essence helped determine shared structural features of the experiences of the individual participants in order to discover generalities and larger truths about humor in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). I gained important ideas about using humor as a teaching tool that may serve the larger educational community during this process. Perhaps more importantly, the process can bolster an empathy of the experience to those who have not used humor in the classroom understand what the experience involves (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research requires validity to, "attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants" (p. 250). To achieve this trustworthiness, "The researcher is expected to articulate a reasoned selection regarding the strategies that will best serve to strengthen any given study" (Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013, p. 764). The use of three separate data collection methods allowed me to perform triangulation and enhance trustworthiness. These methods included open-ended individual interviews, a focus group interview, and classroom observations. In addition,

credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability enhanced the trustworthiness of this investigation.

Credibility

Findings must accurately reflect the information gathered from a study, which describes the concept of credibility. Member checking is the practice of allowing participants to review study information (Creswell, 2013). In this study, participants member checked the preliminary analysis and transcripts. In this way, they not only checked the accuracy of the recording and transcription, but also ensured the analysis accurately captured the ideas they intended to convey. The practice of member checking also provided participants with a voice during the research process. To further ensure credibility, I presented phrasing and language from participants through direct quotes when possible to convey the participants' views.

Dependability and Confirmability

To ensure findings were dependable and confirmable, I invited members to check both transcripts of individual interviews and the focus group interview, as well as the preliminary analysis to can ensure they were not misrepresented (Creswell, 2013). I placed emphasis on the connections between participants' ideas since connected themes may emerge, so it was vital that individuals confirm the information provided was correct. These checks, along with document checks that allowed participants to examine the complete observation protocols, helped avoid misinformation or incorrect analysis.

In addition to member checking, I had a member of the dissertation committee who was accessible to me peer review this study. This reviewer was familiar with qualitative research and acted to ensure data were represented in a valid manner. The peer provided me with honest

feedback and asked tough questions about the methods, findings, and interpretations, while participating in give and take (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability

Transferability describes the way findings from a study can be applied to similar studies in other settings (Creswell, 2013). In order to ensure the transferability of the current study, I provided rich, thick descriptions to the reader. These descriptions about “the participants or setting under study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) provided a concrete image of the information, allowing “readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82).

I indented bias to make sure that it did not interfere with the study. As a former teacher who used humor in the middle school classroom, I have seen how humor can affect student participation and performance. I also have a strong value of integrity that helped ensure reported findings were accurate and presented the information gained during the research. I bracketed out personal biases and experiences (Creswell, 2013) in order to focus on the experiences of the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting any research, I gained approval from the IRB of Liberty University. To ensure I did not mislead, I informed participants of the general purpose of the study. I assigned pseudonyms to ensure participants and locations remained confidential. I kept all research materials securely in a locked location. All digital and electronic data were stored in a password-protected file. As I was the human instrument in the data collection and analysis, the responsibility to report results honestly existed. To give participants a voice in the research, I shared results with participants and stakeholders (Creswell, 2013). I informed participants that

their participation was voluntary that they could choose to withdraw at any time. Additionally, participants could choose to participate in only portions of the process, or not to answer any question presented in either the interview, focus group, or both.

Summary

Chapter three of this study described the transcendental phenomenological approach that I used to investigate the use of humor by teachers in middle and high school classrooms. The purpose of the study was to understand the use of humor in the classroom, by teachers at middle and high schools in school districts in rural Appalachia, to help students learn and master new material. I identified and described the site and participants. In addition, I explained data collection and analysis procedures. I also described the steps used to ensure trustworthiness. I concluded chapter three with a discussion of ethical concerns and how I addressed them.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter presents descriptions of the participants and how their shared, lived experiences highlighted themes that addressed the research questions. I analyzed the data using Moustakas' (1994) steps, as advanced by Creswell (2013). I collected data from 10 participants who taught middle or high school in two rural Appalachian school districts. I data coded thematically to answer the research questions. During the analysis, I bracketed out my own emotions and ideas to focus on the information gathered from the participants and understand their shared experiences. I used the transcripts of individual interviews, the focus group interview, and my observation field notes to code for emerging themes that were common among all or most participants. This chapter provides a description of the participants, using pseudonyms, the themes that emerged from the data, and a brief summary.

Participants

Ten teachers participated in the study. I interviewed all 10 participants, and five participants participated in a focus group and classroom observations. To be eligible for this study, participants had to have at least 5 years of teaching experience and work in either a middle school or high school in one of the selected districts. I targeted three school districts in Appalachia for the study; however, only participants from two of the districts volunteered to participate. I sent study invitations to all middle and high school administrators in each of the three districts. One teacher in one of the districts responded and agreed to participate, while no teachers responded to the invitation in one district, and nine teachers agree to participate in the third district. All participants signed the informed consent form and I gave all participants an opportunity to member check the transcripts of interviews, focus groups, and observation

records, as appropriate. A short description of participants, using pseudonyms, is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Level Taught
Adam	36	Male	13	Middle School
Bethany	50	Female	21	High School
Clement	60	Male	29	Middle and High School
Daniel	61	Male	17	Middle School
Elijah	50	Male	18	High School
Felicity	31	Female	7	Middle School
Gloria	46	Female	8	Middle School
Hannah	40	Female	19	Middle School
Isaac	49	Male	25	High School
Julia	54	Female	34	Middle School

As follows, I provided a description of each participant, including their age, gender, ethnicity, years of experience, subject taught or previously taught, other relevant educational work experience, and a personal view of the effects of humor in their lives.

Adam

Adam is a 36-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the individual interview he had 13 years of teaching experience at the middle school level. He taught math at the time of the

interview but had previously taught 11 years of special education and served as an area coordinator for the eastern portion of the school district for 1 year. Adam was eager to provide answers to the interview questions and seemed very interested in helping out. He was thoughtful while answering and would refer to the questions often to make sure he felt his answers were complete. He said he loved to laugh and that many of his best memories were connected to humor. He also said he like to use humor to help students feel at ease. Adam said, “I guess some of my favorite teachers going through school, and probably the ones that I related to the most in school were the teachers that were willing to have a good time and joke” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019).

Bethany

Bethany is a 50-year-old Caucasian female. At the time of the interview she had 29 years of teaching experience at the high school level. She taught chemistry and A.P. chemistry at the time of the interview, but previously taught physics and other sciences. Bethany claimed to be nervous at the beginning of the interview but she was thorough with her answers and quick to respond. Bethany related much of her interest in humor and the use of humor in the classroom to her parents’ use of humor. She also credited the movie *Airplane!* (1980), about which she said, “You don’t realize what your sense of humor is when you’re 10, 11 years old, but that movie has resonated with me from that point on” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). She believed her use of classroom humor set the mood for the classroom and helped students relax. She also associated humor with her personal relaxation.

Clement

Clement is a 60-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the interview he had 39 years of experience as a music teacher at the middle and high school levels. At the time of the interview,

he taught middle and high school choir. Clement was an eager and willing interview participant and seemed very concerned with my comfort, as the interviewer. Clement discussed his love for puns, riddles, and puzzles. Clement noted, “I feel that I’m pretty quick on the uptake, to catch various forms of humor. I personally like humor that is, how would I describe it? A little campy, plays on words. I think puns are universal humor” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). He also spoke to his belief that humor is universal. Clement believes humor use in the classroom is important for setting the classroom tone and diffusing otherwise difficult situations with students.

Daniel

Daniel is a 63-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the interview he had 17 years of teaching experience and taught middle school keyboarding at the time of the interview. He had previously worked at the elementary level as a development assistant. Daniel welcomed me to his room and pointed out several humorous posters and images hanging on the walls. He also told several jokes prior to the interview. He said he relied on humor to relieve stress and engage his students. Daniel believed that with testing and other stresses on students in the modern classroom, humor was a good way to help students relieve stress, about this he said, “And what’s my main goal? I want to have fun and I want them to have fun” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Elijah

Elijah is a 50-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the interview he had 18 years of teaching experience at the time of the interview. He had previous military experience and had taught math at the high school and middle school levels. Elijah engaged fully during the interview and was interested in the research. He asked questions to understand more about the

study. Elijah described how humor helped him cope with stress in his personal life. He also talked about how humor can help students deal with stress. Elijah noted, “I think humor is the key, I think, to me humor is a destresser” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah believed humor could be used to create a positive classroom environment and improve student engagement.

Felicity

Felicity is a 31-year-old Caucasian female. At the time of the interview she had 7 years of experience as a math teacher. At the time of the interview, she taught middle school mathematics, but had also taught math at the high school level. Felicity repeatedly expressed hope that her participation would be helpful and that she was nervous. She talked about how much of an impact her grandmother had on her, and that her grandmother had used humor. Felicity noted “I enjoy to laugh, I love, love, love to laugh. I grew up like that as well. My grandmother, she played a major role in my life, and she was extremely funny” (Felicity, Interview, March 27, 2019). She believed humor in the classroom helped build positive relationships between students and teachers. She also spoke to the idea that humor helped students be comfortable with teachers and in the classrooms.

Gloria

Gloria is a 46-year-old Caucasian female. At the time of the interview she had 8 years of teaching experience in various subjects but was teaching special education at the time of the interview. She had previously taught social studies and English as a long-term substitute. Gloria was eager to participate and talked about growing up in a home with a lot of humor. She credited her humor to her parents and said they had a big impact on her life, “I grew up in a home where my mom and dad joked with us a lot. My dad’s got a personality where he starts out a story or

telling you something by using a joke” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Gloria talked about how humor could help students make connections with teachers and learning materials.

Hannah

Hannah is a 40-year-old Caucasian female. At the time of the interview she had 19 years of teaching experience at the high school and middle school levels. She taught physical science at the time of the interview and had previously taught various sciences throughout her career. Hannah spoke about being nervous, and while she provided helpful answers, they were generally short and to the point. She believed humor improved her personal attitude and outlook and described how classroom humor provided a better classroom environment for students and teachers. Hannah noted, “I use humor in disciplining my children and other things because like I said it tends to de-escalate things” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019).

Isaac

Isaac is a 49-year-old Caucasian male. At the time of the interview he had 25 years of teaching experience at the high school and middle school levels. At the time of the interview, Isaac taught high school social studies, which was the subject he had taught for his entire career. Isaac was willing to participate and talked openly about humor and how important it was to him, saying “Huge impact. I think some days it (humor) seems like what I live for. Just something to laugh at, kinda make you forget your day a little bit or something” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). He described how humor made his life easier and work more enjoyable. The main reason he used classroom humor was to create a pleasant classroom atmosphere.

Julia

Julia is a 54-year-old Caucasian female. At the time of the interview she had 34 years of teaching experience in multiple states and in Australia. She taught special education for her

entire career, at the middle, high, and elementary levels. Julia was very happy to participate in the interview and asked questions about the research. She said humor was important to her because she liked to laugh at herself and it gave her a positive outlook on life. Julia described herself thusly, “I guess I’m the person who always liked to look at life as half full instead of half empty” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). She believed humor allowed teachers to develop relationships with students and diffuse tough situations with students.

Results

The results of this transcendental phenomenological study follow. I collected data via individual interviews, a focus group, and classroom observations. Study themes emerged from interview and focus group data, which I triangulated with data from classroom observations. Data analysis followed the steps presented by Moustakas as described by Creswell (2013). The following sections describe the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis, in alignment with the research questions.

This transcendental phenomenological study examined the perceptions of middle and high school teachers in rural Appalachian school districts. I conducted individual interviews with each of the 10 participants, followed by a focus group and classroom observations with five of those participants. I transcribed and then coded the audio recordings of individual interviews and the focus group for analysis. The codes, major themes, and subthemes that emerged during the analysis are presented in Table 2. I analyzed field notes from the classroom observations to provide further insight into the themes, and all data sources provided answers to the research questions. The focus group provided an opportunity for participants to engage in interactive discussions about humor in education, providing further insights and clarification. Analysis of

field notes from classroom observations provided evidence of the humor practices discussed during the interviews and focus group.

I grounded the present study in the incongruity theory of humor, as advanced by Kant (1966). According to this theory, humor occurs when something unexpected occurs and the observer processes this difference in a humorous manner (Kant, 1966); in this way, humor is a comprehension activity. I also framed the study by Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, which purports individuals learn by watching others. That is, if teachers model the use of humor, students may learn to use it themselves. Finally, I based this research on Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. According to social development theory, learning occurs through social interactions such as humor. Analysis revealed three major themes, six subthemes, and 18 codes. A summary of the major themes is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes

Major Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Relationships	Student-teacher relationships	Student Attitudes (24), Student Easiness (22), Student Investment(18), Trust (6)
	Collegial relationships	Work-place (13), Friends (8)
Instruction	Student retention	Academics (21), Recall (17), Grades (10), Understanding (8)
	Student attention	Focus (15), Student Work (7)
School/ Classroom	Classroom management	Discipline (23), Situations (8), Procedures (5)
Environment	Climate	Less Stress (12), Respect (6)

Major Theme One: Relationships

The first major theme to emerge from this study related to the use of humor to build relationships. Participants identified humor as a tool to help them make connections with students, which fostered trust and acceptance. Humor helped teachers set students at ease and develop positive and appropriate relationships. Humor was also essential to building relationships with other educators. Participants preferred a workplace where they could laugh

and interact with their colleagues in a positive manner. The two subthemes to emerge for this theme were student relationships and collegial relationships.

Student relationships. The first subtheme to emerge from the major theme of relationships addressed how teachers related to students. Participants noted that humor provided an avenue for building relationships with students. Adam said, “I think it makes you more personable, I think if the kids recognize that you like to have a good time and have fun” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). By revealing the human side of their nature to students, teachers may help students feel more comfortable in the classroom and build relationships. Humor offers students an inlet into developing safe and secure relationships with teachers.

Another related aspect of relationship building is the ability to identify with someone else. Julia noted the role of humor in helping students build relationships with teachers. She stated, “I found that humor kind of levels it out, and if a kid can laugh with you, it kind of, not that I’m their equal, but I guess they can identify maybe” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). The opportunity to identify with teachers helps students build relationships because they have an opportunity to see the teacher as a human rather than just a teacher. When students make connections with teachers, they build relationships that foster effective instruction and classroom management.

Humor can also serve as a tool to connect with difficult-to-reach students. Some students lack trust in adults because of past life experiences. Humor may be a way to reach these students. Clement believed humor allowed him to build relationships with students by helping them relax around adults. Clement shared, “It disarms a lot of students’ defense mechanisms. It allows them to laugh. Psychologically they let their walls down a bit” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019).

The idea that humor disarms students may also explain how humor can help students feel more trusting towards adults, fostering the development of student-teacher relationships.

Humor may also influence the transactional aspect of relationships. Relationship building involves transactions between parties involved, such as anecdotes of shared moments or interests. Bethany noted that humor served as an interaction that built relationships with students. She said:

Well, most of it is probably just a day-to-day banter with the students. I'll make jokes with them, especially if I've come across something funny or ironic or punny (sic). I'll share that with my students, which then gives them the opportunity to respond or to share back that, "Oh yeah, I've heard that. Have you seen this one?" and they'll show me a meme or something. (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Humor allowed Bethany to create relationships with students through the transactional nature of humor communication. The shared use of humor between teachers and students creates commonalities through which relationships may develop.

Some participants described the importance of relationships and sought opportunities to build them. Felicity shared, "I think it just helps (to) build those relationships and those relationships are so important" (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). Felicity also noted her personal use of humor to help build relationships with students. She explained, "I think that humor creates really good relationships and those (student teacher) relationships especially" (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019).

Participants seemed to understand that building relationships with students provided them with opportunities to improve student outcomes. Elijah noted he intentionally worked to

incorporate humor into his classroom, which led to success for his students and himself. Elijah stated:

I like to tell stories about stuff. Usually try to throw some humor some humor in there, something about my cat at home or something that might happen in the way to work, or...What all that leads to, in my opinion, is relationships. That's exactly where it goes. I had an administrator this year tell me that they thought they could sum my success up in one word, and it was 'relationships'. And the more I think about it, I think that's really key. (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Elijah described the importance of building relationships with students and discussed the role of humor in this relationship building.

Gloria also noted the role of humor in developing relationships between teachers and students. She said, "I think using humor in a classroom, for me, allows me to make a personal connection with the kids" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). She also addressed her ideas about how humor helped create those relationships. She noted, "I find that most students tend to respond positively to humor, and I feel it helps them make connections a lot of times when you use something funny or relate you something you've taught" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019).

According to Isaac, humor can help teachers and students connect despite roadblocks that might otherwise hinder those relationships. While age differences between teachers and students can impede relationship building, Isaac claimed his use of humor helped him overcome this barrier. Isaac said:

Yeah. I think it (humor) just helps the relationship between me and the students. I'm getting older now and there's kind of a generation thing there that's hard to overcome. So, a lot of times we can laugh about TV shows we've watched or

jokes that go across that divide. It's a relationship builder, too. (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019)

The idea that humor connects people across generations through a larger connection to society helps explain the larger role of humor in communication. By building relationships, students and teachers can work toward the greatest possible success.

Hannah also described humor as an equalizing agent in the relationships between students and teachers. She believed humor was not just a tool to build relationships, but also a means for helping students and parents overcome boundaries that might limit their interactions with teachers. As Hannah noted, "I hope that it (humor) helps parents and students find me easier to talk to, and more approachable, and more I guess easier (sic) to resolve things with. So that they feel comfortable talking to me" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah believed humor could be used to provide parents and students with comfortable and accessible relationships with teachers.

Collegial relationships. Collegial relationships emerged as the second subtheme under the major theme of relationships. Teachers not only talked about the ways humor helped them build relationships with students, but also how humor fostered relationships with coworkers and administrators. Several participants enjoyed using humor to make their jobs and classrooms a better place to work, while growing relationships with colleagues.

When Gloria described her experiences with humor and its effects on her professional relationships, she shared that as a special education teacher who co-taught with other teachers, both she and her co-teacher used humor to make students' days more enjoyable. She reflected, "I think laughter takes you a long way, and if you can kind of lighten the mood, it makes the workload that we carry a lot easier, for sure" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Gloria believed

using humor made her job more enjoyable. She further noted, “So I’ve never had an experience where I’ve not got along with the co-teacher, and we’ve not joked and picked” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). That is, Gloria integrated humor into co-teaching, which she believed improved her professional relationships.

Other participants echoed Gloria’s ideas concerning humor and professional relationships. Isaac described his use of humor with colleagues, sharing, “Yeah, I think it builds rapport with other faculty members” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). Isaac further noted, “And if the administrator appreciates the humor, then it goes well. Same thing for coworkers” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). For humorous exchanges to be successful, Isaac believed both parties must be receptive to humor; when an administrator, as a leader, acknowledges and accepts humor, relationships between teachers and administrators are fostered. Another consideration for humor in collegial relationships may be expectations that others develop for someone to be humorous. Isaac described the following example:

When I get called on in a faculty meeting, everybody starts grinning before I even answer. So, of course, that becomes hard too, because then you become the class clown and it’s almost like they expect you to do stuff. (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019)

The use of humor sets an expectation that it will be used again, which Isaac described when sharing how his coworkers anticipated his humor.

The effects of humor on teachers and administrators may extend beyond personal relationships between coworkers. The atmosphere of an entire school can be affected by the use of humor. Hannah described larger collegial effects of humor, sharing: “Humor with your coworkers always makes for a better day. I think that it helps with the climate of this school in

general when you can laugh with people” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah also shared her opinion about lacking a sense of humor: “If you can’t laugh about something, I think that creates for a much harsher school climate” (Hannah, Interview, 29, 2019). Hannah also believed school climate influenced perceptions of humor within a school. She posited that humor created desirable work climates, while a lack of humor resulted in a negative climate.

Adam also reflected on how humor helped build relationships with coworkers. He noted, “Yeah, it’s not huge school so there’s people that you work with on a day-to-day basis that you don’t just consider co-workers but you probably consider them friends on a certain level” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Adam also described some of his interactions with colleagues: “My neighboring teacher here, we’re always picking at each other, and it’s just kind of fun to go out in the hall between classes and as you’re watching kids, have something go on” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Adam echoed the idea of relationships with coworkers contributing to climate when he remarked about the use of humor: “I think it makes the day go by faster. It makes life funner (sic) if you are joking and picking and having a good time” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Adam reflected on how humor built positive collegial relationships and added, “I think it’s good for the kids to see you having positive interactions with other adults, too, because they have a hard time sometimes recognizing that you can get along with anybody” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019).

Another aspect of collegial relationships was how humor influenced teachers’ perceptions of one another. Bethany addressed that when she stated:

I just don’t want to be taken too seriously in that regard. I don’t want my class to be drudgery. I don’t want my coworkers to see, ‘Oh she’s not any fun, don’t talk

to her'. And I think I was like that when I first started teaching, and I realized that that's not the best way to be. (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019)

For Bethany, it was important that her colleagues perceived her as fun, so she made the conscious decision to use humor with her peers. She detailed her deliberate decisions about humor use within collegial relationships, noting, "The people I associate with the most, both in the building and out of the building, are people with similar senses of humor" (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). Bethany also touched on the idea that humor must have boundaries when used with colleagues. She opined, "You can be funny with your peers, as well as your students, as long as you watch where those boundaries are. I've heard of teachers who have crossed those boundaries, and I don't think that's very professional" (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Humor is also valuable within collegial relationships by allowing teachers and others to release stress. Felicity discussed the use of humor and the stress of teaching a course with high-stakes testing. She said:

But there's still humor. It's still keeping it light. There's so much stress that is put on all of us, administrators, and my coworkers, and our students, that sometimes they just need a release a little bit. It's good to come in a classroom and not feel so, I guess, maybe so tense. (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019)

Within collegial relationships, humor can provide stress relief and release. Felicity further addressed the idea that humor should only be used when appropriate, sharing, "You have got to know when to be serious and when to try to be funny" (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019).

Julia talked about a different aspect of collegial humor related to her unique personal experiences. She had lived in several different states and another country; frequent moving often

required her to make new friends. Julia said, “I found that it’s (humor) been a good in for me, because I might just be there a year, and I have to come in and I guess fit in very quickly” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Julia also reported that with her co-teaching responsibilities, she found humor to be a situation-by-situation aspect when working with other teachers. She stated, “Especially with co-teaching, I have to change with every person that I have. Some teachers I can use a lot of humor, other ones I can’t because that’s not their personality” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019).

Elijah used humor to determine how happy people were at work. When discussing humor, he said, “I think it’s a benefit. You’ve got some kind of workers that come to work unhappy every day, and I think sometimes I even try to look at them and say something” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah cautioned against using humor indiscriminately, urging, “Professional interactions, I think you got to be careful. You can feel a person out” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah believed humor could be inappropriate for some occasions and people.

Major Theme Two: Instruction

The second major theme to emerge from this study was the role of humor in the actual instructional process. Participants recognized humor was a tool to help students learn. The responses participants provided about instruction broadly fell into two subthemes: student retention and students attention. The first of these subthemes, student retention, described the use of humor to help students engage with and work toward mastering new skills and knowledge in the classroom. The second subtheme, student attention, described times teachers used humor to help students focus on learning and access the curriculum.

Student retention. As a teaching tool, participants used humor to help students learn, retain, and master new material and skills. Bethany noted her use of humor to help students learn material, specifically discussing her use of Far Side™ cartoons by Gary Larson. She described one such usage when she said, “I do make them do a Far Side cartoon for the mole, just to try to convey the size of a mole in a humorous or interesting or ironic way, and a lot of them struggle with that” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). Bethany also described her use of humor to bridge difficult or uncomfortable topics. She shared an example of her use of humor when teaching about evolution in Kentucky. Bethany was not allowed to use term *evolution* in front of students, so she “Wrote in big letters, evolution equals change overtime, on the board, and said since I can’t say that word I will say this phrase” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). By addressing the controversy or perceived controversy of evolution with humor, Bethany felt as if she put students at ease. When she used the phrase repeatedly in lieu of the term, students learned the topic and thought exaggeration was humorous.

Not all uses of humor to help students retain knowledge were necessarily intentional. Felicity talked about being focused on teaching her math students about the coordinate plane. In an attempt to make it easier, she planned to abbreviate the term point-of-origin. She recalled, “I said, ‘Okay guys, we’re just going to abbreviate, point-P, O-of, origin-O. P-O-O.’ I turned around, I’m like, ‘What are y’all (sic) laughing at?’ I turned around and just cracked up, but those kids have never forgotten it” (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). Felicity used this humorous accident as a teachable moment at the time, but then made the intentional decision to use the same tool for the other classes. Felicity then added to her use of the term POO to teach coordinate planes by talking about proportions. Felicity recalled, “Well on a coordinate plane, here’s the middle. Here is POO. If it goes here it can’t be a proportion. Proportions can’t go

through POO” (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). She said using humor helped her relate to her students.

Julia also talked about how humor could help students connect an unfamiliar classroom topic with an idea they already understood. Julia related teaching students about interest in math class and using humor to help. She said, “The interest is PRT, principal times rate times time, and I say, ‘Like the Michael Jackson song PYT’ and then I play the song for them. They remember it now and I carry on with them” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). As another example of using humor to teach, Julia recalled, “And like domain, I’ll say, ‘X’s and O’s, hugs and kisses’ and my boys will be like, ‘Ugh’” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Julia felt like the boys protested the hugs and kisses reference but said most of her students did well on domains after she used humor as a teaching tool.

Humor also played a significant role in Daniel’s classroom. He pointed out several humorous signs and posters that reflected on computers and computer skills. He said he liked to tell students, “If you step in anything in my classroom it is GOO, G-U-I. That’s a Graphic User Interface, and it’s how we tell computers to do things. The kids always remember that one” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Daniel also shared, “Your brain can only learn as much as your butt can take” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019); to facilitate this idea, he allowed students to get out of the seat and punch a Bozo punching bag. He felt that physical movement helped students learn class material (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Daniel used the humor from his posters to help students master coursework.

Clement discussed his motivation for using humor with students, saying, “It disarms a lot of the students’ defense mechanisms, allows them to laugh, so psychologically they let the walls down a little bit, makes them more teachable” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). He also

noted that he allowed students to tell music- (his subject) related jokes at the start of class. He claimed, “So they’re looking outside of class time. It may be a back door, but it lets, it makes them think about my class when they are not in class” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Clement also provided an example of using humor when teaching. He relayed that when he taught the Pink Panther theme to his band students, he asked them, “What did the Pink Panther say when he stepped on an anthill? Dead-ant, dead-ant, dead-ant, dead-ant, dead-ant, dead-ant, dead-ant” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). He said the students remembered the melody of the song, and got a laugh out of the joke.

Gloria also described using humor-related songs that students knew. She helped students become better writers by saying, “Talking about in a paper not to start a paper with, ‘Hi my name is’ and so we used Slim Shady, like don’t say, Hi my name is” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Because students were familiar with the Eminem song, they remembered to avoid using the direct address in their papers. Since Gloria went into several classrooms where different subjects were taught, she also described using funny mnemonics to help students retain information, such as Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally in math for the order of operations, and the saying Old People Smell Stinky for the duties of a citizen in civics. During my observation of Gloria’s English class, she used humorous video clips to help students remember figurative language. One such clip was from Disney’s Aladdin, when Genie was singing “Friend like Me” and the class discussed the idea of hyperbole.

Isaac provided a prolific description of his use of humor to help students learn. He described using funny Twitter posts and having students recreate them with a history theme. Isaac had students create memes, explaining:

I started out using the memes just because the kids like them. So, it was a way just to get them to my page. Heck, some of them, I've had like a thousand likes on some of these things. They'll pass them around to others. And I guess when I know I'm winning, when they send me a meme back of something they have found. (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019)

On top of the history memes, Isaac related memes back to pop culture with themes like "Make the school great again" or "Straight out of the town" (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). He even said one of his more advanced students created a parody account of his Twitter.

During the focus group interview, Adam talked about how humor serves as a pathway for students to remember important instructional concepts and material. Specifically during the focus group Adam said, "Some of the material we cover is pretty dry, and so I think that when you use humor you give the kids something to remember that jogs their memory about the material" (Focus Group Interview, May 15, 2019). Adam describes the way that humor can help to build neural pathways to connect something the student does understand to something they do not understand yet. This is similar to the process involved in the incongruences of humor.

Student attention. The subtheme of student attention emerged from participants' descriptions of how they used humor as a tool for helping students focus on learning tasks or fostering appropriate classroom behaviors. This subtheme might be considered part of the classroom environment major theme; however, most participants focused on the ways they used humor as a tool to focus on instruction. Teachers described humor as a useful way to bring students' focus to important learning topics.

Bethany used humor to help students focus on learning, explaining that after students completed a particularly difficult assignment, she would introduce them to something new with

humor. She described, “So today, when they come in, we’ll have a light moment just to kind of let them know, ‘It’s okay, let it roll off your back’” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). She used humor to refocus students from the previous day’s work to the new subject. She further described how, “We [the students and she] laughed for a good five minutes. I don’t think anybody said anything. They just kept looking at each other and laughing” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). This interaction fostered student teacher relationships while helping students focus on upcoming assignments.

Adam also used humor to focus students on learning, sharing:

I think it makes you more personable. I think if the kids recognize that you like to have a good time and have fun, if we’re all engaged and having a good time, I think we’re more apt to pay attention, if for another reason, to just see what he’s going to do next. But you know, I think anybody, if they’re having fun with something, they’re more likely to be paying attention to whatever is going on in the classroom. (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019)

Adam believed humor could help students focus while adding value and making learning more desirable. Adam also connected the idea of student attention to the idea of uncertainty of what may come next. Adam believed students were more focused when they were uncertain of what would come, suggesting humor was a safe way to fill this void of uncertainty.

Daniel used his own learning experiences to share another perspective on the relationship between humor and student attention. In addition to being a teacher, Daniel was a paramedic. He spoke about something he learned as a paramedic, which he also applied to education: “The first thing I was taught in paramedic school, not in education, in paramedic school, was that your brain can only endure as much as your butt can take. When your butt gets tired, your brain goes”

(Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Daniel believed humor helped pass time and maintain student attention: “Because when you type for two hours man, it’s murder” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Daniel felt humor kept the brain engaged and focused.

Elijah described how humor helped students pay attention and focus on school work. Elijah relayed the importance of humor in maintaining student attention, sharing, “Well I think the overall thing is the engagement because once those kids are in here for the first 2 to 3 weeks of school, they start sensing the environment” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah related class engagement to students’ expectations of his use of humor. Elijah also provided a description of how he used humor to help students focus their attention: “I (Elijah) would draw rivers between my equations and they would say Ms. little draws clouds” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah said students watched for his drawings, which he believed improved their attention.

Engagement through humor was also important to Isaac, who talked about using social media to post funny images and had students respond by posting their own images. When describing the impact of the humor, Isaac said, “Anyway, the humor gets them to my page. And then we do stuff where ... I wanted them to see local stuff... and so I went to the Davidson Log Cabin and I took a picture of myself” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). He then said he encouraged students to post pictures from the same place. He also captioned his picture with a funny statement and challenged students to do the same. He then pulled out his phone and showed me the post and said, “Look right here. Three-thousand engagements over a thousand” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). By combining humor with social media, Isaac engaged students and families beyond the classroom. This engagement through humor and social media helped students focus on learning.

Hannah also described her use of humor to engage students in the classroom. She noted, “And I’ll make funny noises or do funny movements to try to get their attention to help them remember things” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah used humor to encourage students to focus on important learning tasks. She shared how these attention-getting humor instances also helped students remember information:

There’s certain things that I can do like they know when I talk about a certain thing that I might make a certain hand gesture or a certain weird look and if just a month later helps them remember that. (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019)

For students to be successful in class, they need to focus on instruction. Hannah provided a way to use humor to improve student engagement.

Clement addressed the use of humor to help focus student’s attention, as well. He specifically reported, “It (humor) makes them more teachable. It does engage them more in the process” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). He described ways he engaged students through humor, sharing:

It engages them in the learning process. As we are learning music, I try to teach them listening skills. And sometime just the funny story will make them stop and concentrate for a few minutes, especially if they’ve lapsed concentration and I tell the punchline and they don’t laugh, then they’re more apt to lean forward and listen, because they missed something that was funny. So, it comes back to student engagement, participation. I tell my students I have one big rule in class, and that’s participate. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

As Clement mentioned, humor is not a fail-proof way to engage students. He explained that sometimes, students still missed information:

So, with that (music class) and with guitar, I insert hidden humor. Within a warm up I'll use a hidden melody that just plays in, and the kids that are attentive will catch it. The kids that are oblivious, they're just going through the routine, it will go over their head. But I'll insert the little things to keep the kids interested, keep them listening, keep them engaged. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Humor is a tool that helps students focus on instruction and can be used to refocus students when they are off task.

Gloria also used humor to engage students. She noted, "I find that students tend to respond positively to humor, and I feel like it helps them make connections a lot of time when you use something funny to relate to something that you've taught" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). These connections helped students focus on learning in class while engaging with instruction. It is important to note that Gloria explained engagement could only occur when positive relationships existed.

Julia addressed the concept of using humor to garner and maintain student attention during the focus group interview. She talked about how humor catches students' attention and helps to keep them focused on the material. Julia said, "We are just like entertainers. We are performers on a stage and we get their attention any way we can and humor works" (Focus Group Interview, May 15, 2019). The idea that teachers engage students through entertainment means that humor can play a role in student engagement.

During my observation of Adam's classroom I observed humor being used to gain student attention. Adam was teaching a lesson on probability. To introduce the lesson he had embedded a video clip of the movie *Dumb and Dumber* into his lesson presentation. The video clip had one of the movie characters question the chances of going on a date with him and the

female character replied that his chances were one in a million. To this the male character said so you are telling me there's a chance. The students reacted by laughing and throughout the lesson on probability they were general engaged with the lesson and the instructor

I also observed Gloria's classroom. She and a co-teacher were going over figurative language terms such as hyperbole, cliché, and simile. They showed a video that had Disney™ cartoon clips with an example of one type of figurative language. The video would pause after the clip and the students would work with a partner to figure out the figurative language. Then the video would give them the answer and explain why that was the correct answer. Since the source material was often funny the students were laughing and singing along with songs in the videos, and were engaged with the lesson.

Major Theme Three: School/Classroom Environment

The participants strongly indicated humor played a role in the school and classroom environments, contributing to the third major theme for this study. Within this major theme, two distinct subthemes emerged: classroom management and climate. Classroom management described the use of humor to maintain and run classroom procedures and routines, including discipline and dealing with student behaviors. Climate referred to the larger interactions within the school. This major theme related to the first major theme of relationships but was distinct in that it only dealt with the running of the school and the classroom, rather than the deeper, personal relationships explored in the major theme.

Classroom management. The subtheme of classroom management described strategies used by teachers to management student behaviors, including classroom routines and procedures. This subtheme also included interactions requiring teachers to maintain student behaviors. Participants discussed the use of humor as a classroom management tool.

One of the management issues Isaac addressed during his interview was how humor helped teachers deal with students who needed redirection. He said:

I use it (humor) every day. Every day I use it to interact with kids. Sometimes to diffuse bad situations, kids angry or something like that. Some days I'll use it as sort of a form of discipline. Not necessarily that we're trying to make fun of someone, but a good laugh sometimes works. (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2020)

Isaac also described how humor affected daily management of the classroom and student attitudes. On the subject of classroom humor, Isaac shared: "Students just feel more open to sharing information in class, answers in class" (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2020). Based on Isaac's responses, some teachers may find humor helpful for managing students' classroom behaviors.

Hannah described her use of humor to resolve conflict and deescalate tense situations. She shared, "It (humor) can diffuse conflict pretty efficiently most of the time" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). She also shared about her personal life: "And I use humor in disciplining my children and other things because like I said, it tends to de-escalate things" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah employed humor in discipline situations to reduce tension. Humor has a role in classroom management because it provides teachers with less conflicting opportunities to resolve issues.

Julia spoke about classroom management and the relationship this task had with humor. She described how humor could be a tool to manage the classroom when dealing with students. She noted:

I find that humor kind of levels it (discipline) out and where if a kid can laugh with you, it kind of, not that I'm their equal, but they can I guess identify maybe.

And then using humor in the classroom. Sometimes it just what would be, cuts the edge. (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019)

She then described two students who had been having difficulties with classroom rules. She said, “They’re really having a tough time right now because it’s the pressure on them. If I can use humor and it kind of distracts, that helps immediately, or to diffuse a situation, humor helps a lot also” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Julia seemed to promote the idea that disciplinary situations could be more light-hearted with the use of humor.

Daniel also described the way humor could diffuse otherwise negative disciplinary situations. He described how humor could relieve stress associated with discipline:

Stress relief. Have you ever seen a kid ready to kill somebody and then all a sudden you come up with something totally stupid, silly, off the wall? He’s laughing and the one he’s getting ready to kill is laughing, then all of a sudden they forget about why they wanna kill each other. (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Daniel suggested that humor could diffuse student anger and other emotions, and distract them from an immediate situation. He also suggested that classroom humor could relieve student stress, thereby improving student management. He explained, “They (students) realize because they’re not under the stress anymore. They realize that, ‘Hey, this is fun. I can sit back and relax’” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). The idea that humor created a less stressful classroom and allows students to relax, reducing the need for discipline suggested humor had an important role in classroom management.

Elijah described how a lack of humor in classroom management affected him as a student:

Some people may disagree with me but if I go in a room and there's no humor whatsoever most of the time there's no smiling. So I sat in that desk in some of those classrooms back in the day, it was tough, it felt like I was on edge the whole time. I think if you can get the kids in the classroom to relax, feel like they can speak, they can say what's on their mind to an extent. (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Elijah stated that humor allowed students to loosen up and not be scared during class. He related this notion to his own experiences as a student and emphasized the role of humor in reducing student stress. Elijah mentioned, "I think, to me humor is a destresser" (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Elijah described humor as a tool to make the classroom a more enjoyable atmosphere for students.

One part of classroom management involves correcting students when they misbehave, which is sometimes an intimidating prospect for teachers. Felicity shared how her use of humor helped with this aspect of management:

I think it (humor) keeps everything light. You got (sic) to know when to be serious and when too try to be funny, and I'm generally a no confrontation person whatsoever, so I think humor helps me in that way because I am a no confrontation type of person. I don't enjoy it whatsoever. So, humor gets me out of some confrontations that I would have to have. (Felicity, April 9, 2019)

Felicity also noted that humor improved classroom management through relationship-building. She provided an example of a challenging student:

She (the student) comes from a broken home and her little story is so sad. But we use, I use humor with her all the time. But sometimes, she will direct it in the

wrong direction toward other students and that's when we have to reign it back in and maybe redirect what she said and then get back to work. (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019)

From Felicity's perspective, humor can help manage student behaviors in the classroom.

A key aspect of using humor to manage the classroom was the idea that humor creates an inviting and welcoming classroom environment. As Gloria explained, "They (students) want be in there (classroom) because they know that you're going to say something. They are waiting for that next funny thing for you to say" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Because humor builds student-teacher relationships and garners student attention, it is useful in classroom management. Engaged students with positive teacher relationships are more invested in class and less likely to demonstrate behavioral problems.

Clement discussed using humor in discipline situations during his interview. He stated:

I feel like that it (using humor) is art of what makes my classes enjoyable, is that the students know that they can come in here, and the stress level is lower, because I'm not taking myself too seriously. Then they can come in and feel like that I'm on edge every minute. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Clement also described using humor to teach students life skills for self-management. He shared, "I'm teaching them that they can have healthy coping skills when they get in stressful situations" (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Clement's statements suggested using humor to manage the classroom can also teach students how to cope with challenging situations outside of the classroom.

Adam used humor as a classroom management strategy for diffusing situations. He stated, “I think it (humor) makes you more personable. I think if the kids recognize that you like to have a good time we’re more apt to pay attention” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2020).

Isaac demonstrated his use of humor in classroom management during the observation. When a student came into the classroom late, rather than engaging the student in a negative manner, Isaac said, “Thank you for taking time out of your day for math. I know you are super busy with all of the important stuff you have to do.” The use of humor in classroom management created opportunities to build positive relationships. Isaac was able to placate the student and not engage in a situation that could have resulted in confrontation through the use of humor.

An exchange between Julia and Hannah during the focus group interview illuminated the subject of humor and classroom management. When talking about students who would act out Julia said, “Humor helps me to let a situation just calm down instead of get out of hand”. Hannah interjected, “Yeah, students change from angry or upset to just wanting to play along when you can all have a good laugh”. Julia replied, “Yeah, you know it sometimes just gives those kids who don’t have a voice in anything in their lives, it gives them a chance to have a say, by being part of the joke” (Focus Group Interview, May 15, 2019). By redirecting student misbehavior toward humor teachers not only help to avoid confrontation but also support students who may not have many positive interactions with adults.

Climate. The subtheme of climate referred to the ways teachers interacted with parents, peers, and students, as a part of the larger school family. Climate could be considered most all-encompassing of all the other major themes and subthemes because it is a part of everything in a school. However, participant responses revealed specific interactions using humor that applied to the larger idea of climate but did not fit neatly into the categories. While not all participants had

specific comments on climate, enough of them talked about the idea for it to emerge as a subtheme.

One of the participants who addressed the idea of climate was Gloria. She talked about how humor made students feel when she said, “But I think for the most part, the students that I encounter, they enjoy the humor. They kind of feed off of it; it lightens the mood, and you can tell that they’re excited to come into the classroom” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). The idea that a positive influence over students’ attitudes toward school can be affected through humor was intriguing. Beyond the students, Gloria also indicated that humor had an impact on climate with adults in the building. She reported:

For me personally, I think I’ve just been blessed to work alongside teachers and we have a co-teaching type relationship where, in my experience, we just bounce off of each other; we get each other. Our jokes might not be funny, but we think they’re funny. So I’ve never had an experience where I’ve not got along with the co-teacher, and we’ve not joked and picked. I think laughter takes you a long way, and if you can kind of lighten the mood it makes the workload that we carry a lot easier for sure. (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019).

The idea that humor played an important role in the work climate for teachers might also imply it can help students to have positive school experiences.

Isaac described ways climate was impacted by factors beyond a teacher’s control. He relayed an experience when a school administrator was not very open to the use of humor. He said, “Well you know, she (the administrator) wasn’t really appreciative of the humor I used, and so it kinda (sic) led to a negative interaction between she and I” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2020). Isaac eventually left the school because he felt it was not a good place to work without

humor. He said humor was important to him personally because it, “Makes it easier to go home in the afternoon sometimes when you’ve had a hard day” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2020).

Isaac’s views suggest humor played a role in creating a climate that was inviting for teachers.

Hannah expressed her views on humor and how it could influence school climate: “I think it (humor) just gives you a better positive outlook on life in general if you can find something funny in anything” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah preferred working in schools where humor was fostered. She continued, “I think it (humor) just makes for a better atmosphere. Makes for a more positive learning environment” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Hannah believed humor fostered more positive and enjoyable school environments.

Felicity also discussed the role of humor in school environments, sharing, “If I personally didn’t use humor in the classroom, I would go nuts. I love to laugh, what a boring world that it would be without humor in our classroom” (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). The idea that school would be less desirable for teachers without humor reflected the important role of humor in school climate. Felicity also noted, “I’ve had numerous parents come to me over student issues that they want me to watch out for, because I’m the one joking and laughing with ‘em (sic)” (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). Felicity’s suggestion that humor fostered a climate of trust with parents relates to the major theme of relationships, but also supports the important role of humor in school climate.

In describing how humor affected the classroom, Julia explained, “It (humor) makes it to where I think they’re more comfortable and they can, if you use humor, then it makes it where maybe I’m more comfortable with asking a question that I may not ask” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). The idea that humor can create a sense of comfort relates to school climate. Humor can help foster relaxed environments by offering a level playing field:

You've gotta (sic) be very careful that they don't perceive that you're making fun of them. Because some kids, they can give a joke but they can't take it, and you have to be very careful with that, especially when self-esteem is low. (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019)

Thus, using humor as a climate-building tool requires an awareness of how students perceive it.

One aspect of climate that Clement addressed was the way positive climate can foster relationships between adults. One way to establish a positive climate was through humor. Clement described, "I think that the humor just it, makes for a more cordial workplace, great camaraderie. Sometimes the humor has a little edge to it, that little needling, ribbing. Sometimes it's a funny story" (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Clement believe humor could be used to maintain positive relationships among adults.

Daniel also felt humor could significantly influence school climate. He provided an example of a young girl who struggled with several issues but gained a new perspective, which he credited to his use of humor:

This one little girl, she was ready to commit suicide. They'd had her home a number of times, she hated school and then all of a sudden two weeks into my class, she had the flu but she still wanted to come to school because she didn't wanna (sic) miss keyboarding. (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Daniel further described how humor could be the release some students needed to get through a day:

If they [students] need extra bubblegum to make it through the day they know they can come get it. But if I can help any student through their stressful day, just

by giving them a few minutes of silly, I'll do it. (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Humor helps create a positive school climate by allowing teachers and students to build relationships that, in turn, foster a positive climate.

Adam presented another view of climate and humor when he described how he viewed teachers he had as he grew up. He stated, "We probably all have some of those teachers we model ourself (sic) after a little bit, but the ones I relate to are probably the ones that were using humor, just keeping a light atmosphere in the classroom" (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2020). Adam was influenced by the humor of teachers he had as a student and wanted to use similar humor to create a comfortable climate for his students. Adam also suggested that school climate can improve when students observe adults interacting with humor: "I think it's good for the kids to see you having a positive interactions with other adults, too, cause they have a hard time sometimes recognizing that you can get along with anybody" (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2020). The idea that adults influence school climate through humor opens possibilities for a larger role for humor to be used the adults in the building when making decisions about how the building will be managed.

Elijah addressed humor and climate in his remarks, describing his use of humor with other adults in his building: "Somebody knocks on the door. If anybody enters my classroom, I force them to answer a math question" (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). He said this act often resulted in uncomfortable responses from adult visitors, but plenty of humor from his students: "So I just think it's kind of fun too, the kids love it when somebody comes in and have to answer some" (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Research Question Responses

The research questions presented in the current study were designed to provide information not found in the current literature on the use of humor in the classroom. The questions were grounded in the guiding theoretical framework. The central research question explored the experiences of middle and high school teachers using humor as a teaching tool in the classroom. This broad question was supported by four sub-questions designed to focus participants' responses and provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences using humor in the classroom. In the following sections, I address each of the questions through findings from the analysis.

Research Question Responses: Central Research Question

The central research question of this study was: What are middle and high school teacher perceptions of using humor during classroom instruction as a lived experience? The central question was designed to provide the broadest level of understanding of the shared experiences of middle and high school teachers using humor in the classroom. While responses from the 10 participants seemed to provide a wide array of answers, coding revealed common major themes answered the question. These major themes were supported by answers to the sub-questions and were further investigated until supporting subthemes emerged. The central research question was answered by the themes relationships, instruction, and school/classroom environment, and by the subthemes student-teacher relationships, collegial relationships, student retention, student attention, classroom management, and climate.

Many participants attributed relationship building to their use of classroom humor. They cited humor as an important tool for building relationships with students and colleagues. Some participants noted they had been using humor to build relationships long before becoming

teachers. Adam recalled, “Probably some of the best memories are being with friends and cutting up and goofing off and just having a good time (Interview, March 19, 2019). Felicity linked happy moments in her life to humor, sharing, “I love to laugh. I grew up like that, as well. My grandmother, she played a major role in my life, and she was extremely funny” (Interview, April 9, 2019). Gloria also reported about humor in her family saying, “I grew up in a home where my mom and dad joked with us a lot. My dad’s got a personality where he starts out a story or telling you something by using a joke” (Interview, April 24, 2019).

Participants also noted the importance of using humor to build relationships with students. This was the main reason several participants cited for using humor. For example, Julia shared, “I find humor kind of levels it out and where the, if a kid can laugh with you, it kind of, not that I’m their equal, but they can, I guess identify maybe” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Isaac also reported using humor to build relationships: “I use it (humor) every day. Every day I use it to interact with kids” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). Gloria described using humor to build relationships with students, “I think using humor in a classroom for me allows me to make a personal connection with the kids” (Interview, April 24, 2019). Similarly, Adam employed humor to build relationships with students, sharing, “I think it (humor) lets your guard down just a little bit. Helps build relationships” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019).

Humor also helps teachers to build relationships with colleagues, which is another subtheme of the present study. Some participants described how humor affected their relationships with other adults in the building. Isaac shared how humor influenced his relationships with coworkers: “I think it (humor) builds rapport with other faculty members” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). At least one participant noted humor was not a tool that can be used with everyone. Julia explained, “Some teachers I can use a lot of humor, other ones I can’t

because that's not their personality" (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Adam described another important aspect of humor in relationships with peers when he addressed students seeing positive relationships between adults. He opined, "I think it's good for the kids to see you having positive interactions with other adults too, 'cause they have a hard time sometimes recognizing that you can get along with anybody" (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Elijah also noted the need to use humor with coworkers, especially ones who appeared unhappy: "I think sometimes I try to look at them and say something" (Interview, March 27, 2019).

Participants described the ways humor helped students retain information and become engaged with classroom instruction. Felicity shared, "Generally, it's memorization, but a lot of times, it (humor) goes beyond memorization" (Interview, April 9, 2019). Gloria addressed retention when she said, "And funny things and I think those are tools that you can use in the classroom. Kids remember that stuff" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Bethany used funny cartoons and songs to help students retain information. Clement detailed how humor fostered student attention: "So it comes back to student engagement, participation. I tell my students I have one big rule in class, and that's participate" (Interview, March 27, 2019). Adam also discussed student retention, sharing, "I guess it can help with that, retention, if they can tie it to something" (Interview, March 19, 2019).

The last of the major themes to emerge from the central question was school and classroom environment. Hannah addressed of classroom management when she noted, "It (humor) can diffuse conflict pretty efficiently most of the time" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Daniel was especially vocal on the topic of stress and classroom and environment, describing how humor helped him create a classroom environment for students to de-stress. When asked about why he used humor, Daniel answered, "Stress relief. Have you ever seen a kid

ready to kill somebody and then all of a sudden you come up with something totally stupid, silly, off the wall? He's laughing" (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Research Question Responses: SQ1

The first sub-question for the present study was: How do middle and high school teachers describe their individual approach to using humor during classroom instruction? This question sought to explore the use of humor by middle and high school teachers. Sub-question one was answered by the themes of relationships, instruction, and school/classroom environment and by the subthemes student teacher relationships, student retention, and climate. Participants' responses were varied and provided many perspectives on the use of humor. For example, Hannah shared,

I use humor in different ways. I'll use it sometimes as an example, like if I'm explaining the scientific method I'll come up with something silly and outrageous to try to say, "You know this is how you would test that." Or if a student is acting up sometimes I'll like, I said instead of yelling or fussing at the kids sometimes you can just be silly about it they laugh too and then the situation is over. And I'll make funny noises or do funny movements to try to get their attention to help them remember things. And there's certain things that I can do like they know when I talk about a certain thing that I might make a certain hand gesture or a certain weird look and if just that a month later helps them remember that, whatever that term was or that concept from before. (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019)

Hannah's sentiment spanned the three major themes by touching on relationships, instruction, and environment.

Most of the participants described how humor helped engage students in learning and fostered student-teacher relationships. Felicity explained, “I think it (humor) just helps build those relationships and those relationships are so important” (Interview, April 9, 2019). Other participants described relationship-building as a motivation for using humor in the classroom. Bethany explained how relationships could be built and maintained as a result of instruction when she said, “A student didn’t know the word extraneous, and he said, ‘You are looking at me like I should know it.’ I said, ‘Exactly, this is a look of incredulity.’ And he’s like, ‘Now I don’t know what that means either.’” (Bethany, March 27, 2019). This exchange demonstrated how humor created a context in which students and teachers could exchange communication in a nonthreatening way.

Other participants’ answers demonstrated how humor provided an instructional avenue for students to learn new skills and information. Julia related how, “It (humor) provides somewhere they can remember stuff. Like domain, I’ll say X’s and O’s, hugs and kisses, and students go, ‘oh gosh’, but they know it. When me and the co-teacher play off each other and giggle, kids love it” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Another example of humor use in instruction came from my observation of Adam’s classroom. The lesson during the observation was an introduction to probability. Adam used a clip from the movie *Dumb and Dumber* in which a character asks a girl if there is any chance they could be together, and the answer is one in a million. The first character gets excited because he has a chance. Adam pointed out that from a mathematical perspective, even a slight chance is still a chance. The students laughed and the lesson was introduced.

Research Question Responses: SQ2

The second sub-question for this study was: How do middle and high school teachers describe their reasons for using humor in the classroom? This question was designed to discover why middle and high school teachers chose to use humor in the classroom. Sub question two was answered by the theme of relationships and the sub themes of student-teacher relationships, and collegial relationships. Again, with this question, many of the teachers discussed how they used humor to build relationships. Julia described how relationships were affected by humor. She said, “I find that humor kind of levels it out and where the, if a kid can laugh with you, it kind of, not that I’m their equal, but they can, I guess identify maybe” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019).

Another common sentiment regarding the use of classroom humor involved the idea that participants personally preferred environments where humor was the norm. Hannah reported, “I think it just gives you a better positive outlook on life in general if you can find something funny in anything” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Clement used humor because it helped alleviate stress with his coworkers. He repeated a story he told one of his administrators to get people to laugh and relax. He said:

Four administrators were in a vehicle going down a hill. Halfway down the hill the driver turned to the others and said, ‘Look guys, I don’t want to panic anybody, but there’s no brakes,’ and one of the others looked at him and said, ‘That’s okay, there is a stop sign at the bottom of the hill. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Research Question Responses: SQ3

The third sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers perceive humor in the classroom impacts student attitude? Sub question three was answered by the themes of

relationships and school/classroom environment and by the subthemes of student teacher relationships and climate. Student attitude serves as a window into relationships between students and teachers, which is what the third sub-question was designed to explore. Felicity relayed how her use of humor influenced the attitudes of her students.

You have to know as an educator when to say, ‘Okay, let’s get back to work. Enough is enough. We’ve had our fun. We’ve had our laugh. Let’s get back to work.’ You just have to listen and you have to know your kids too. You have that relationship and, you have to have that relationship, but humor does help with that relationship. (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019)

When describing her positive experiences with humor, Gloria said:

For me probably seeing students that when they first come in, like on that first or second day, that are kinda (sic) quiet and withdrawn, and after a couple of weeks the mood starts to lighten and they start to play in with humor and you can kinda (sic) see that smile or spark. (Gloria, Interview, April, 24, 2019)

The change in mood Gloria attributed to the use of humor illustrated how humor can affect student attitudes.

Teachers placed a lot of value on relationships and discussed how humor helped them to deescalate stressful situations. Clement offered an example of a stressful situation in which he utilized humor:

Several years ago, the whole county had a spate of bomb scares. I was getting ready to have a concert, well, I was in a concert, a high school concert, and the principal at that time was in the audience. It was just this unspoken thing in the air. Everybody was just a little bit tense. I was making an announcement at the

beginning of the concert, and somebody's cellphone went off. And so, there was this beep, beep, beep, and the audience looked around, and I said, 'Oh no it's a bomb!' And of course, there was some nervous laughter, and I had some people rolled their eyes. Then I said, 'No, no, I'm sorry. Look I apologize. I did not mean to offend anybody.' And I said, 'Look if that bothered you, I apologize...that you have no sense of humor. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Participants also claimed humor could help diffuse situations in the classroom. Isaac shared, "I use it every day. Every day I use it to interact with kids. Sometimes to diffuse bad situations, kid's angry or something like that" (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). The ability to make positive relationships was a key benefit of humor.

Research Question Responses: SQ4

The last sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction affects the learning environment? The learning environment is a broad idea that encompasses how teachers manage the classroom and interact with students. Determining the way humor impacts environment was the purpose of the fourth sub-question,. Sub question four was answered by the theme school/classroom environment and the subthemes classroom management and climate. Many participants discussed how important humor was for building a positive work environment. Adam noted this when he described joking with other teachers, "My neighboring teacher here, we're always picking at each other" (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019).

Participants also discussed how they implemented humor to foster positive classroom and school environments. Elijah noted his use of humor to create a light-hearted classroom environment for his students. He reported, "Somebody knocks on the door, if anybody enters my

classroom, I force them to answer a math question. That's a good laugh for the kids because sometimes they'll go straight out as fast as they can" (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Another reason to use humor that affected the environment of the classroom was to reduce student stress. Daniel addressed stress when he reported, "I suppose humor makes it less stressful. Right now, there's so much stress. By having some humor in there, it breaks it up" (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Summary

Chapter Four of this study provided a detailed description of the participants of the study. Study participants included 10 teachers from middle and high schools in rural Appalachia who self-identified as using humor in the classroom. The study was designed to explore the shared experiences of middle and high school teachers who used humor in the classroom. Major themes were developed by coding transcripts of the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and notes collected from classroom observations. Three major themes that emerged from the data analysis, including relationships, instruction, and school and classroom environment. Each of these major themes was divided into subthemes for a total of six subthemes, including student relationships, collegial relationships, student retention, student engagement, classroom management, and school climate. Analysis results were used to address the research questions. The following chapter provides a discussion of study findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle and high school teachers' perceptions of their use of humor during classroom instruction, at selected school districts in rural Appalachia, to help students learn and master new material. A summary of study findings follows this overview. Answers to both the central and sub-questions are reexamined. The chapter also includes discussions of the theoretical and empirical foundations from the literature. Next, theoretical, empirical, and practical implications are described. Delimitations and limitations are acknowledged. The chapter concludes with recommendations for further research and a summary of key conclusions.

Summary of Findings

This research on the use of humor during instruction included data from individual interviews, a focus group interview, and classroom observations. These data provided insights into participants' experiences and allowed me to develop a broader view of the major themes. Audio recordings from individual interviews and the focus group interview were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The individual interviews were followed by the focus group interview. Keywords and phrases were identified in each interview and organized around the major themes to emerge. Classroom observations were recorded on an observation protocol and humor instances were analyzed to further understand teachers' experiences with using humor in the classroom. Three overarching major themes emerged from the analysis, including relationships, instructions, and school/classroom environment. Subthemes included student relationships, collegial relationships, student retention, student attention, classroom management, and climate.

The research questions guided my examination of the phenomenon of using humor as a teaching tool in middle and high school classrooms. The central research question was: What are middle and high school teacher perceptions of using humor during classroom instruction as a lived experience? This question sought to understand why middle and high school teachers used humor in the classroom. Many respondents said humor was important to them on a personal level. For example, Felicity shared, “If I personally didn’t use humor in the classroom, I would just go nuts” (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019). Isaac said, “It (humor) seems like what I live for. Just something to laugh at, kinda make you forget your day a little bit or something” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). The participants described a variety of personal reasons for using humor, but also shared a common sentiment regarding the value of humor in their classrooms. Hannah explained, “I think it just makes for a better atmosphere. Makes for a more positive learning environment” (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). All participants believed humor benefitted students. As Gloria shared, “I think using humor in a classroom for me allows me to make a personal connection with the kids” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019).

The first sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers describe their individual approach to using humor during classroom instruction? Participants provided descriptions of the different ways they used humor and their reasons for doing so. Participants described how humor affected them personally. For example, Bethany relayed the impact of a movie (Interview, March 27, 2019), while Gloria mentioned the influence of her grandmother (Interview, April 24, 2019). Other participants shared how they enjoyed classrooms with humor when they were students, themselves. Adam relayed:

As I talk about this (using humor in the classroom), it makes me think back about, I guess some of my favorite teachers going through school. And probably the ones

that I related to the most in school were willing to have a good time and joke.

(Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019)

All participants explained humor had positively influenced them and helped them establish healthy relationships with other people.

The second sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers describe their reasons for using humor during instruction? Participants reported a variety of reasons for using humor, including to help students relax, improve student retention, and help students relate to material taught. Participants repeatedly mentioned the stress caused by standardized testing and how humor could help students cope with those stressors. Daniel described using funny props to help students relieve stress: “Well Bozo and the speed bag (gesturing to his blow up punching bags) are called stress relievers. When you come in having a really bad day I say, ‘Take it out on Bozo’” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Participants also indicated that humor allowed them to build relationships with students, which fostered instructional delivery. For example, Gloria shared, “I think using humor in a classroom, for me, allows me to make a personal connection with the kids” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Clement described how he used humor to gain student attention on instruction, as students would be trying to catch the next joke:

Sometimes just the funny story will make them stop and concentrate for a few minutes, especially if they’ve lapsed concentration and I tell the punchline and they don’t laugh, then they’re more apt to lean forward and listen, because they missed something that was funny. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Isaac felt humor provided a creative avenue for assignments. He described posting humorous historical Tweets, posting pictures of himself at local historical spots. He then had students post pictures from the same spots and described how the students tried to copy his clothing and his

poses to be funny: “She (a student) did hers, she did the pink shirt just like me and tried to do the face too. A lot of them like clowning in their pictures, and I let them (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019).

The third sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction impacts student attitude? Participants reflected on how using humor in the classroom allowed them to build positive relationships with students. Elijah described how far-reaching those relationships could be:

I just, I think in this environment that we’re in every day, if we’re not trying to make the lives better for these kids, whether it’s a laugh, whether it’s a smile, whether it’s just the comfort zone in the classroom, I think if we’re not pursuing to get better at that every day then we’re not doing them justice. (Elijah,

Interview, March 27, 2019)

Adam described how humor created a positive classroom environment where everyone, teacher and students, could laugh and have a good time: “I think it helps the day go by faster. It makes life funner (sic) if you’re joking and picking and having a good time (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Julia noted that humor had a positive influence on interactions among the adults in her building, which helped her quickly acclimate to new schools: “Like I said, with working with so many different places, I found that it’s (using humor) been a good in for me too, because I might just be there a year and I have to fit in very quickly” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Bethany noted that students cited humor as a reason they wanted to take her chemistry class, sharing:

So, I have a reputation for the class to be enjoyable even if they don’t do well in class, and that’s with a lot of students. I will ask them on the first day, ‘Why are you taking this class?’ and they’ll look at me as if, ‘What answer are we supposed

to give?’ So, we just start writing things on the board about why are you taking this class? And inevitably, somebody will say, ‘I heard you were a good teacher’, or ‘I heard this was a good class to take’, or something to that effect. And I’m like, ‘Well, why do you think I’m a good teacher?’ Somebody always says, ‘Well, they say you’re funny.’ So that kind of opened the door, I guess, for me to be a bit more humorous in the classroom, or to find more ways to infuse it into the material” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019)

The final sub-question was: How do middle and high school teachers perceive using humor during classroom instruction affects the learning environment? Participants described a number of ways humor affected class environments. For example, Isaac shared, “I use it (humor) to interact with kids. Sometimes to diffuse bad situations, kids angry or something like that” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019), Several other participants also diffused situations with humor to avoid discipline. Julia explained, “If I can use humor and it kind of distracts, that helps immediately or to diffuse a situation, humor helps a lot also” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019). Participants also reported that humor amongst teachers and staff built better school environments; Adam noted, “My neighboring teacher here, we’re always picking at each other and it’s kind of un to go out in the hall between classes and as you’re watching the kids, have something going on” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Overall, humor was a key element in the climate of the whole school, and an important aspect of classroom management.

Discussion

This study yielded findings that aligned with both the empirical literature on humor in the classroom and the theoretical literature on humor and learning. Previous researchers focused on humor and teaching, humor and relationships, how humor functions, and humor and student

engagement (Barry & Garca, 2018; Bolkan et al., 2018; Huang & Lin, 2014; & Ramsey, 2016). This study was grounded in three theories: Bandura's (1971) social learning theory, Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, and the incongruity theory of humor as described by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Major themes of this study paralleled the related literature. An exploration follows of how this study adds to the empirical and theoretical literature and provides a view of middle and high school teachers' use of humor in the classroom in rural Appalachia.

Empirical Literature

The literature reviewed in Chapter two was largely supported by findings that emerged in the current investigation. Participant responses revealed major themes in relationships, instruction, and school/classroom environment, which mirrored many of the topics found in the literature. Notably, participants did not discuss how humor functioned. The existing literature focused on students' perceptions of humor in the classroom but lacked examinations of teachers' perspectives of the use of humor. This section describes how findings from this study relate to the previous literature, challenge previous research, and fill the gap in the literature about teachers' perspectives on the use of humor.

Humor in teaching was the first topic covered in the literature review; studies focused largely on how humor is implemented as a teaching tool. Watson (2015) described the need for teachers to intentionally plan humor within instruction for the humor to have the greatest instructional impact. Previous researchers also indicated that humor used in the classroom does not have to be original, but can be found in humorous items such as videos, comics, and songs that relate to the subject being taught (Hackathorn et al., 2011, McLaughlin, 2015). These findings were echoed in the current study. Several participants described the need to plan humor as a part of the lesson. Bethany related, "If I've come across something funny or ironic or punny

(sic), I'll share that with my students to help them engage" (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019). Participants also discussed the need to ensure classroom humor is appropriate and not hurtful or harmful to students. Participants believed it was important to consider how students perceive humor to avoid hurting them. On this point, Bethany shared an anecdote of an exchange between her and a student:

Like, we (she and her class) were burning Cheetos™ one day and a girl asked where Cheetos™ come from. I said, 'They come from Cheeto™ farms' and she believed it. And I kept going with it for a bit. And then when class was over, I thought, 'That really wasn't nice'. And I apologized to her the next day and she said, 'Oh, okay'. (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Most of the participants used humorous materials in class, such as videos, comics, and pictures. For example, Gloria used a video of a cartoon about idioms. In the cartoon, a character was describing his life to St. Peter using slang. St. Peter was imagining the story literally, resulting in cats and dogs falling out of the sky for raining cats and dogs, and a cat holding a tongue for cat got your tongue. The students laughed often and were engaged throughout the video.

Participants also indicated one reason they chose to use humor in the classroom was because it could improve students' academic success. Gloria described this when she said, "These little acronyms and funny picture, those are the tools that help the kids remember things" (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Many participants provided anecdotes about how using a funny picture, song, or phrase resulted in students being able to recall information on assessments. Felicity shared how students recalled math knowledge from a funny phrase. Felicity described teaching students about the mathematical idea of proportions and graphing them through the point-of-origin: "I drew a coordinate plan and I was labeling it and I abbreviated the

point-of-origin, P-O-O and the kids were cracking up because I wrote POO on the board and they still remember how to do proportions till this day” (Felicity, March 27, 2019). Some of the teachers even talked about students speaking to them years after being in class and still referencing funny educational tools that were used. These observations by participants reflected the literature on using humor in the classroom. Several researchers reported that when humor was used in classrooms, students had higher academic scores (Kavandi & Kavandi, 2016; Orgurlu, 2015; Torok et al., 2004). According to Ridanpää (2014), humor improved students’ abilities to think critically and analytically, supporting improved retention and academic performance. Bolkan et al. (2018) compared how two classes of students performed on an assessment when humor was used in one class and not used in the other. Findings revealed higher scores for the class that utilized humor (Bolkan et al., 2018), supporting results of the current study. Tian et al. (2017) examined brain images of learners when material was presented with humor and without humor. The researchers found a high degree of similar activity in the brain between viewing humor and achieving insight, further supporting the idea that humor fosters learning (Tian et al., 2017).

The relationship between classroom humor and social and emotional learning also emerged from the literature. Neuliep (1991) found students preferred to be in classes that used humor, and Ogurlu (2015) found classroom humor played a part in developing students’ emotional intelligence. Goodboy et al. (2015) reported humor in the classroom was associated with positive student attitudes toward the subject being taught. While participants in the current study did not report on emotional growth of students, they did discuss students’ attitudes toward class. Specifically, participants provided insights into positive feedback they received from students, directly related to the use of humor. One example of this was when Bethany questioned

her chemistry students, after they had commented on rumors she was a good teacher. She then asked them why she was a good teacher and they replied, “Well, they said you’re funny” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019).

The next topic addressed in Chapter Two of the present study was humor and relationships. This topic was discussed at length by participants. For example, Gloria shared that humor helped her “Make a connection with the kids” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Participants reported positive feelings toward the use of humor to build meaningful relationships with students and colleagues. Adam relayed an incident where the class had been out for a fire drill on a windy day. When students returned to the room, he told them, “That wind really messed up my hair” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Adam’s comment was funny because he had no hair. Adam said his humor helped students feel at ease and fostered his relationships with them. Participants also described the importance of ensuring humor was not offensive or mean to avoid damaging relationships with students. On this topic, Elijah shared, “We [he and his class] laugh, and everybody is okay, and you have to be careful because some kids take things a little seriously” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019).

Several studies tied the use of classroom humor to positive student-teacher relationships. Ackerman (2007) noted the power of humor to foster connections between students and teachers. Huang and Lin (2014) found students considered humorous teachers easier build relationships and communicate with in the classroom setting. Humor provides pathway to friendship and intimacy, which are fundamental to relationship-building (Bell, 2013; Gordon, 2014). Participants in the current study echoed these ideas, emphasizing the utility of humor in connecting with students. A common idea was that as teachers used humor and built trust with students, students were more apt to participate in class and contribute in meaningful ways. Elijah

described this situation thusly, “A kid’s not worried about answering a question that I may ask, getting it wrong, or getting it right, or not understanding. They don’t feel judged” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Teachers spoke about how humor provided opportunities to relate to students and to some degree, help students know they were safe and could make mistakes without fear of repercussions.

Another idea that participants described was that humor shaped the classroom environment. One example of this was when Elijah described, “But for most (students), there’s a comfort level that sets in because of the humor” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Participants including Daniel addressed how the humor used in class resulted in less stress and helped to build classroom dynamics. Daniel helped students relieve stress by punching his inflatable punching bags, “Bozo and the speed bag” (Daniel, Interview, March 27, 2019). Many of the teachers explained relationship-building was a primary motivation for using humor in the classroom.

Participants also described using relationship to reduce stress and foster positive community in their relationships with their peers. For example, Adam noted, “My neighboring teacher here, we’re always picking at each other, and just kind of fun to go out in the hall between classes and as you’re watching the kid, have something going on” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). These ideas were supported by several research studies. Fovet (2009) reported humor improved opportunities for students with social, emotional, and behavioral issues to build positive relationships with peers and adults. Curseu and Fodor (2016) found humor played an important role in building group dynamics. Findings from another study revealed humor could help people understand which actions were deemed right and wrong in a group (Ruch & Heintz, 2016). Results from other studies indicated humor could reduce stress and create positive

feelings toward classrooms or schools (Kosicky & Mullen, 2013; Salavera et al., 2018; Wu & Chan, 2013).

The next topic addressed in Chapter Two was the function of humor. While participants in the current study did not specifically discuss how humor functioned, they did touch on similar topics. Several of the studies in this section of the literature review addressed associations between humor, brain activity, learning, creativity, and personality (Kaspar et al., 2016; Kelner & Bedek, 2017; Ramsey, 2016).

Many participants considered students individually before using humor, explaining some students were more receptive to humor than were others. For example, Clement noted, “When it’s (humor) out of context, by the time the joke travels home, you never know how someone else is going to perceive it. I try to always have my filter set to maximum” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Teachers did not want to do anything that would make a student uncomfortable or feel as if they were being picked on during class. Several studies supported the idea that humor is linked to personality. Chiang et al. (2016) explained humor use is reflected by a person’s attitude toward humor. Ramsey (2016) discussed the link between humor and personality. Amir and Biederman (2016) reported that initial humor is based on creativity, but as people become more experienced with using humor, they begin to rely more on memory skills. Other researchers linked intelligence to humor and found humor creation was associated with the areas of crystal intelligence and broad retrieval (Christensen et al., 2016).

The final portion of the literature review dealt with humor and student engagement. Teachers in the present study repeatedly pointed to improved student engagement when humor was used in the classroom. As Gloria stated, humor allowed students to make, “Connections to the material. If you can come up with something funny, a way to remember something, it sticks

with them” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Humor engages people and can even have an effect on group engagement. At least one previous study also pointed to the ability to appreciate humor as a precondition for engagement by humor (Barry & Garca, 2018).

Berge (2016) found humor was useful for engaging entire groups, not just individuals. Barry and Graça (2018) found people were engaged by humorous commercials more than non-humorous commercials. Another study revealed one way to increase humor appreciation, and thus engagement, was to provide opportunities to create humor (Moran et al., 2014). Participants in the present study routinely reported humor was one of the best ways to engage students. Some reported students were more attentive in class because they did not know what might be coming next. As Clement shared, “It (humor) makes them think about my class when they’re not in my class” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Others reported students were more engaged because humor made subjects more relatable, especially when they were difficult subjects. Some teachers said students were engaged because they were looking for the chance to interact with the humor and inject their own humor back into class. Isaac discussed how students would post Tweets to try to one-up him in his humor or bring in funny pictures related to the ideas they were currently covering in class (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019).

Theoretical Literature

The current study was grounded in three different theories: two theories of learning, and one theory of humor. Bandura (1978) presented a social learning theory that described how students learn from people in their surroundings. The other learning theory was Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory, which describes the zone of proximal development, a sort of learning *sweet spot*. Finally, the current study was grounded in the incongruity theory of humor

as detailed by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966), which proposed humor occurs when there is an expectation for something to occur and something unexpected happens, instead.

Participants noted that humor fostered classroom community, and students interacted with the teacher and one another through humor. Isaac expressed this when he noted, “I think it (using humor) makes the classroom environment a lot more laid-back. Students just feel more open to sharing information in class, answers in class” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019).

Bandura (1978) reported that people watch those around them to learn how to interact and behave. Accordingly, students learn about the world around them through humor when they see teachers utilizing humor. One participant described the use of a social media account to share history information with humorous posts. He reported students often would repost to him with history information, which was also funny. According to Isaac, one student even set up a similar account as an homage to him. As students have humorous interactions reinforced by humorous teachers, they begin to adapt to and learn to use humor, themselves (Bandura, 1971).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed a zone of proximal development in his social development theory. The zone of proximal development represents the area in which learning occurs for students, meaning that the information or skill is neither too difficult nor too easy for the learner (Vygotsky, 1978). When learning material fits into the zone of proximal development, students can learn and master new concepts. To get into the zone, teachers build upon information or relate new material to old material. Teachers in the current study used humor to help students master new material. As Gloria shared, “These little acronyms, and funny things. I think those are tools that you can use in the classroom. Kids remember that stuff” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Humor can be a useful strategy that bridges new information to that which has already been mastered. Bethany described how she used a cartoon to help student understand the idea of

a mole in chemistry. This was an example of how humor can help move a student from previously-mastered material to new concepts, thus ushering them into the appropriate place in the zone of proximal development.

The current study was further grounded in the incongruity theory of humor as described by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Kant proposed that humor occurs when someone expects one thing to happen, but something unexpected actually occurs. When this incongruous event takes place, the viewer must comprehend the reality that occurred versus the reality that was expected (Kant & Bernard, 1966). It is during this comprehension of an unexpected occurrence that learning can occur (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Teachers reported using humor that students would find unexpected as a means to keep them engaged in learning. Several participants noted inserting occasional jokes into instruction or assessments to further engage students in learning. Clement noted:

Sometimes just the funny story will make them stop and concentrate for a few minutes, especially if they've lapsed concentration and I tell the punchline and they don't laugh, then they're more apt to lean forward and listen, because they missed something that was funny. (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019)

Implications

A gap exists in literature regarding middle and high school teachers' lived experiences using humor in the classroom. The present study sought to address this gap by exploring how teachers perceived their use of humor in middle and high school classrooms in rural Appalachia. As follows, theoretical, empirical, and practical implications are presented.

Theoretical Implications

Several participants said humor helped them gain and maintain student attention and focus because students were more apt to pay attention when they did not know if humor was coming, and they did not want to miss it. Clement summed up this idea when he said, “Overall I think it (using humor) makes my classes more enjoyable, and leads to, coming back to this time after time, greater engagement in my students, and they look forward to the classes” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). This sentiment reflected the incongruity theory of humor as supported by Kant (Kant & Bernard, 1966). Incongruity theory posits that humor occurs when something unexpected happens, and the brain processes the difference between what was expected and what actually occurred (Kant & Bernard, 1966). The implication is that by establishing a classroom where humor occurs, students focus on instruction. Participants also noted the use of humor to help students to learn important skills and information in the classroom. This notion also related to incongruity theory, as the idea that humor requires an understanding of the difference between the expectation and the reality in order to “get it.” In order to understand humor related to learning, students must learn the material being presented.

I grounded the present study in Vygotsky’s (1978) social development theory, which describes a zone of proximal distance. This zone of proximal distance refers to the area in which a student is able to learn, where the material is not too difficult and not too easy. Participants’ reports of using humor to instruct implied that humor may serve as a conduit in the zone of proximal distance by bridging what students already understand to what they need to know. Gloria described how humor helped students learn when she noted, “These little acronyms, and funny things. I think those are tools that you can use in the classroom. Kids remember that stuff”

(Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). As students push to learn and master new material, humor can help them move from areas of experience to mastery.

The present study also has implications related to Bandura's (1971) social learning theory. This theory describes how humans learn from watching, participating in, and interacting with society. For students, the immediate society they experience is the one present in their school; thus, they learn from interactions with peers, teachers, and school staff. If teachers create a classroom society with humor, students will learn not only how to use humor as teacher models it, but also learn from the humor. Humor can serve as a vehicle for learning. Participants like Hannah also reported using humor to handle situations that might result in discipline in other classrooms. Hannah stated, "I use humor in disciplining my children and other things because like I said it tends to de-escalate things. Especially when dealing with kids being emotional" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). By normalizing humor responses to students, teachers socialize the behavior and the implication is that students may learn humor can be an appropriate response to situations. The way teachers use humor will also inform students' use of humor. If the way students experience humor is respectful and instructive, the implication is they will learn to similarly use humor in their interactions with others.

The theoretical implications of the present study for stakeholders span several areas. When teachers use humor in instruction, they are providing opportunities for students to learn new material and retain that knowledge. Therefore, using humor in instruction is an obvious benefit for other stakeholders, such as students and administrators. Humor also serves to help socialize students to expected behaviors in the classroom and in the school. Socializing helps students to avoid punishment and provides a benefit to teachers as it means students will be in school to receive instruction. Furthermore, fewer undesired behaviors also benefits parents who

will not have to make arrangements for students who receive discipline and for administrators who can focus on instruction rather than discipline when humor is being utilized.

Empirical Implications

Much of the current literature on humor in the classroom focused on what students thought about the use of humor. Other researchers sought to determine the role of humor in learning and retaining information (Bolkan et al., 2018). A gap existed on the perspectives of middle and high school teachers regarding the use of humor as a teaching tool in the classroom; the current study addressed this gap. Many participants also described ways humor helped them build relationships with students. Julia shared, “I find that humor kind of levels it out and where is a kid can laugh with you, it kind of, not that I’m their equal but they can, I guess identify maybe” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019).

Participants offered several perspectives on using humor to teach children, which came from their own personal experiences and from their overall perceptions of humor. Many participants personally appreciated the use of humor in their classrooms. Elijah talked about classrooms without humor that he experienced as a student: “So I sat in that desk in some of those classrooms back in the day, it was tough, I felt I was on edge the whole time” (Elijah, Interview, March 27, 2019). Participants felt they learned more and put forth more effort when humor was present because they received more personal satisfaction knowing the climate was friendly and fun. Adam offered insight into these ideas when he stated:

I don’t know, as I talk about this (using humor in the classroom), it makes me think back about, I guess some of my favorite teachers going through school. And probably the ones I related to most in school were the teachers that were willing to have a good time and joke. And I’ve never been somebody that gets really

engaged in a kind of stuffy classroom. I was always able to pay attention enough to get what I need, but didn't necessarily enjoy the class. But I could think of a couple of teachers from high school that you enjoy going to their class,, and it wasn't about content it was about getting to see them and you didn't know what was gonna (sic) be going on that day or what you were getting into. (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019)

The teachers also chose humor because they observed its association with improved student performance. Participants discussed how humorous sayings and phrases were useful as mnemonics, and students seemed to be able to recall information attached to the humor for longer periods of time.

Participants reported the strongest motivation for using classroom humor was to build relationships with students. Hannah provided insight into how humor improved her classroom environment: "I think it (using humor in the classroom) just makes for a better atmosphere. Makes for a more positive learning environment. And I think it goes back to the saying, 'You get more honey...'" (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019). Teachers felt the relationships they built with students impacted other aspects of classrooms, including academics and behavior. Participants also noted that students exhibited behavior that teachers associated with satisfaction, such as arriving to class on time, participating in class, and turning work in consistently, when they used humor in the classroom. Felicity noted, "So I think that in our little classroom, we have a really comfortable environment. We have a really inviting environment and it just makes people feel comfortable" (Felicity, Interview, April 9, 2019).

Various stakeholders stand to benefit from the empirical implications of this study. I recommend that teachers utilize humor in instructional planning to help student with retention of

material and with gaining and keeping student attention. I further recommend that teachers use humor to help them build and strengthen relationships with students. I also recommend that administrators include humor in their interactions with teachers to help build and maintain a collegial environment in schools.

Practical Implications

Findings from this study provide several practical implications concerning the use of humor in the classroom by middle and high school teachers. Participants detailed ways they used humor, which can provide blueprints for practitioners in middle and high schools. Many of the practices reported and observed during the present study could be employed with no training and minimal planning. Participants used classroom humor to build relationships, manage classrooms, and provide instruction.

One incident in which humor was observed in a middle school classroom was when a student was late to class. A student was tardy and other students made comments about it. The teacher spoke up and told the students that the latecomer had people to see and places to go. The students had a laugh and the teacher walked by the student and spoke with him privately. The situation was handled and the class moved on with the lesson. The whole incident took about 40 seconds to resolve and did not get the class off task for long. The situation was defused through humor, and no discipline was needed. Humor provides a practical way to diffuse situations before becoming difficult, possibly curtailing the need for disciplinary action.

Participants also used humor to diffuse a variety of other discipline or minor disturbance issues. Participants used humor to deal with students' refusal to work, inappropriate language, unkind remarks and actions, and classroom disruptions. As Hannah shared,

I think it keeps the atmosphere positive, and it can diffuse conflict pretty easily most of the time. And I use humor in discipline my children and other things because like I said it tends to de-escalate things. Especially when dealing with kids being emotional. (Hannah, Interview, April 29, 2019)

All participants reported similar routines for using humor to redirect student behaviors.

Participants were careful to treat the situation with respect while avoiding sarcasm and negative comments. They often used self-deprecating humor to ensure students did not feel teased.

Participants emphasized the need to build relationships with students prior to using humor in a deprecating manner. Teachers acknowledged humor can be inappropriate with students they did not know, or when used in ways that might insult or antagonize students. Julia addressed this when she stated, “You’ve got to be careful that they (students) don’t perceive that you’re making fun of them. I’ll be the butt of the joke rather than them” (Julia, Interview, April 30, 2019)

Another important practical implication was the way humor, as a communication tool, provided a path toward positive relationships with students and peers. Isaac described this when he stated, “I think it (using humor) helps the relationship between me and the students” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). Simple, humorous communications like placing a funny picture in a presentation, gentle ribbing between people who root for rival sports teams, and subject-specific jokes provide a level of comfort for the people involved. For example, Bethany described how she helped kids build relationships when she stated, “When they come in, we’ll have a light moment, and eventually somebody will say something funny and we’ll laugh and move on” (Bethany, Interview, March 27, 2019).

The use of humor to make meaningful connections with students was a practical implication of the present study. One idea reported by multiple participants was that teachers

chose to use humor because they experienced classes or workplaces that did not have humor, which were unpleasant for them. Adam provided an example when he stated, “And I’ve never been somebody that gets really engaged in a kind of stuffy classroom” (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). Because participants preferred fun, light-hearted environments, they believed their students would, as well.

Participants also reported they personally preferred to work and learn in humorous environments. When participants used humor with students and colleagues, they liked their jobs better. Isaac noted, “Just something to laugh at, kinda (sic) make you forget your day a little or something, Makes it easier to go home in the afternoon when you’ve had a hard day” (Isaac, Interview, April 29, 2019). Thus, one practical implication of humor is that it helps create workplaces that are more satisfying. Humor can help to reduce stress; thus, a workplace that nurtures humor can help reduce employee stress. Adam noted the importance of workplace humor:

It makes life funner (sic) if you’re joking and picking and having a good time. My neighbor teacher here, we’re always picking at each other, and just it’s kind of fun to go out in the hall between classes and as you’re watching the kids have something going on”. (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019)

Humor can also provide a practical means of accessing and mastering instructional material. Participants indicated a higher level of student engagement with instructional activities when humor was used. As Clement explained, “So it (using humor in class) comes back to student engagement, participation” (Clement, Interview, March 27, 2019). Humor can be used to improve and maintain student attention, and participants leveraged a number of humorous resources to achieve this. Cartoon strips, funny pictures, unexpected songs, and humorous social

media assignments where all humorous resources participants used to engage students. Classroom observations of Gloria and Adam both revealed the use of videos to engage students. If teachers implement humor in their instructional plans, they may improve student engagement. The potential to improve student engagement through these practices is another practical implication of the present study.

A final practical implication from this study was the use of humor to improve student learning. Participants reported students better remembered material and skills presented with humor. Gloria noted, “These little acronyms, and funny things. I think those are the tools you can use in the classroom” (Gloria, Interview, April 24, 2019). Participants reported the use of humorous pictures, sayings, or phrases resulted in higher grades and test scores. Teachers need not feel pressure to be funny themselves or to provide entertainment for the students; rather, they can use humor that already exists. Humor provides a means to relate material to students in a meaningful way so they can gain mastery. By implementing humorous instructional strategies, teachers could improve student outcomes in the classroom.

Several stakeholders stand to benefit from the practical implications of this study. School administrators can develop professional development for teachers that focuses on using humor in the classroom. When an administrator establishes a climate with humor it could result in fewer discipline referrals to the office. Teachers benefit from the findings of this study because they have justification for using humor for instruction and for building relationships with students. Consequently, students benefit from this study because as previously noted, the use of humor helps to build relationships between students and teachers.

Delimitations and Limitations

Decisions about how to conduct the research created delimitations and boundaries in the present study. I utilized a transcendental phenomenological design for this study; this was the most appropriate design for exploring the shared, lived experience of middle and high school teachers regarding the use of humor in the classroom. Transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to collect data from individuals to see if their lived experiences have any shared characteristics that define and inform the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological approach allowed for the understanding of personal, individual experiences and provided a framework to better understand the phenomenon.

The participant selection process was another delimitating factor of this study. Participants were required to be teachers at middle or high schools in one of the selected school districts in rural Appalachia. Participants were required to have at least 5 years of teaching experience and self-identify as using humor in the classroom. The participants included an equal number of men and women, with five participants from each gender. Middle school teachers made up a slightly larger portion of the participants, with six of the participants teaching grades six to eight. Eight of the participants were classroom teachers and two were special education inclusion teachers. The variability of participants' gender, teaching levels, and job responsibilities helped account for individual experiences while still encompassing enough similarities to examine their collective experiences. Female participants were more likely to use humor to improve instruction, while male participants used humor to reduce student stress and build relationships. Five teachers were interested in the study but were ineligible because they lacked 5 years teaching experience.

Several limitations also affected the study. While three school districts in Appalachia granted organizational permission, participants only volunteered from two of the districts. If participants from the third district had participated, more information would be available. The participants were unbalanced from the two districts as well, as only one participant volunteered from one of the districts and nine were from the other. The minimum sample of 10 participants was obtained; however, had more participants volunteered, a clearer picture may have emerged regarding the use of humor in the classroom. Another limitation emerged as the study unfolded. Several principals and district administration staff communicated that they had used humor in the classroom. Because the study was restricted to current teachers, I excluded these possible participants from consideration.

Recommendations for Future Research

I sought to determine how teachers in rural Appalachian middle and high schools use humor as a teaching tool. The study not only provided me with insight into the practice of using humor as a teaching tool, it also allowed me to think about other questions of humor in the classroom. The findings of the current study point to several areas where further study may provide insight into the idea of using humor in education.

One of the delimiting factors of this study was the selection of participants. All participants of this current study had five or more years of teaching experience and at the time of the study were current classroom teachers, which provides an opportunity for studies involving educators beyond the scope of the study. One area for future study would be a phenomenological study of the use of humor as a teaching tool by teachers in their first five years of experience. A phenomenological study would provide an extensive focus on the experience of using humor in the classroom by teachers in their first five years of teaching. Another phenomenological study

addressing the delimiting factor would be to examine the phenomenon of administrators using humor in their instructional responsibilities to the school and school district. Administrators are often responsible for designing and delivering professional development learning opportunities and guiding the instructional practices in a building or district and understanding how the view and use humor could reveal further insight into humor use in schools. A phenomenological study of administrators' use of humor in school could provide insight into the experience that administrators have with the phenomenon of using humor.

One of the implications of the current study was that the participants viewed humor as an important factor in building relationships with students and coworkers, and this was especially true of Adam. He noted, "I think it (humor) helps the day go by faster. It makes life funner (sic) if you're joking and picking and having a good time" (Adam, Interview, March 19, 2019). To further explore this aspect of humor in the school, a case study to examine how Adam plies humor in the school setting could broaden the understanding of the role humor has in school climate. The proposed case study of Adam could also provide understanding of the role of humor in relationship building with students. A correlational quantitative study comparing job satisfaction between teachers in schools where humor is present to teachers in schools where no humor is recognized could also add to the literature in the area of humor in education. Teachers in the current study had acknowledged their preference for schools where they are comfortable using humor with fellow teachers and examining if there is an overall preference for such a situation would be insightful.

This study focused on the phenomenon of teachers using humor and as such it involved teachers, but the use of humor in the classroom affects several stakeholders. Future research opportunities exist that examine humor in the classroom and other stakeholders. One such study

could be a correlational quantitative study comparing state testing scores of students in a classroom where the teachers uses humor to the scores of students in a classroom where the teacher does not use humor in the same subject area. By examining, the difference in test scores humor might prove to be a tool that could contribute to higher student achievement as measured by state testing. Understanding the perspective of students in classrooms where humor used as a teaching tool would also add to the literature in the field of humor in the classroom. A phenomenology exploring the experience of students in humorous classrooms would further the understanding of the experience of humor in the classroom. Examining the phenomenon from the perspective of the students in the classroom would further define humor in the classroom. Additionally, research to understand parents' perspective on the use of humor would further understanding of humor in the classroom. A phenomenological study examining the phenomenon of humor from parents' perspective would provide understanding of humor from multiple views and help to further the understanding of the phenomenon.

Another theme that emerged from the present study was that participants use humor in managing the classroom, specifically to defuse potential behavior issues before they result in discipline. One area for a future study could be a correlative quantitative study between the number and severity of discipline referrals from humorous teacher and non-humorous teachers. Such a study would provide insight into humor's effect on student behavior and the way in which teacher's approach discipline. Similarly, researchers could conduct a phenomenology of the experience of using humor to address student behavior from the perspective of administrators. Since administrators typically have the final decision in disciplinary matters and see the issue from a school-wide view, their perspective on teachers' ability to use humor and how teachers handle discipline could provide insight into the larger phenomenon.

Finally, one implication of this study is that humor is a teaching tool that helps with student retention and attention. Humor is obviously not the only tool that can help with student attention and retention. A correlative quantitative study to compare the outcomes of humor versus other teaching tools such as graphic organizers, mnemonics, or cooperative learning could provide useful data as to the efficacy of humor as a teaching tool. Another possible study based on the implication that humor improves student learning would be a case study involving Isaac. Isaac has a large, humorous social media presence as well as humor in all of his classroom presentations. By delving into an intensive study of Isaac, researchers may be able to gain understanding of humor as a teaching tool by studying Isaac's practices.

Summary

Students face many instructional and societal pressures in the modern middle and high school settings; they have high-stakes testing and are almost incessantly connected to the Internet in one way or another. Teachers must engage students in learning and build safe environments that are as stress-free as possible for students. One tool that teachers can use to help achieve these goals is humor in classroom. Middle and high school teachers from school districts in Appalachia participated in the present study through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and classroom observations. The information collected in this study aligned with previous studies about humor in the classroom and provides greater insight into the perspective of the participants. Findings from previous research and this study confirm humor is one way to engage students, build relationships, and manage classroom environments. Teachers have the option of include age appropriate humor for positive results with their students in a variety of interactions.

Teachers have reported that using humor in the classroom has helped students succeed academically. Participants reported that students were more engaged with the material and instruction when humor was utilized. Furthermore, better scores on assignments and tests were reported by teachers when they used humor. Teachers used humor as a communication tool to build positive relationships with the students and coworkers. Classroom management was another area in which participants talked about using humor to create a more positive environments and deescalate situations that might otherwise result in student discipline. Finally, teachers described the power of humor to reduce student stress and create more positive overall school environments. While humor is not silver bullet, it can be useful tool to improve many areas in modern education.

The implications of the present study are clear in that humor can be an important tool for teachers. Two important areas where humor is impactful are in building student relationships and engaging students in instruction. Participants often used funny pictures, cartoons, and phrases to help students to focus on instruction and improve their abilities to recall information. The most common refrain from participants was that humor allowed them to build relationships with their students. One instance where this was apparent was during one of the interviews with a high school teacher. The interview was before school, but as it was being conducted, a student knocked on the classroom door asked the teacher if she could help her write a college entrance essay. This surprised me a little as the teacher in question was not an English teacher. The teacher told her that she would be happy to but that she could not at the moment. She introduced the student to me and told her why I was there. The student told me that the teacher was very funny and that she knew that she could always come to the teacher for help because she had put

her at ease, and really connected with her. Humor is one way teachers can connect with students and make a difference in their lives, and that is the most important thing any teacher can ever do.

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APPENDIX A

Individual Interview Questions

1. What impact has humor had on you personally in your life?
2. What are some examples of humor you have used in the classroom?
3. Why do you choose to use humor in the classroom?
4. How does your use of humor affect your classroom, including how students respond and how parents perceive your use of humor?
5. How does your use of humor affect your professional interactions, including working with coworkers and administrators?
6. What has been the most positive experience you have had with using humor in the classroom?
7. What has been the most negative experience you have had with using humor in the classroom?
8. Is there anything you want to share with me concerning using humor in the classroom that has not already been covered by the questions?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, giving your name, position including school, and years of experience?
2. In what ways do you use humor in the classroom?
3. Why do you use humor in class, and are there times you do not use humor and why?
4. How do you use humor in class?
5. What have been some of your most successful uses of humor? Why was it successful?
6. What experiences have you had when using humor has been unsuccessful? What made it unsuccessful?

APPENDIX C

Observation Protocol

Date:

Location:

Teacher:

Activity:

Humor Observed:

Activity:

Humor Observed:

Activity:

Humor Observed:

Notes:

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 2/5/2019 to --

Protocol # 3624.020519

CONSENT FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE USE OF HUMOR AS A TEACHING TOOL BY MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

Chad Brown Liberty University School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of middle and high school teachers who use humor as a teaching tool. You were selected as a possible participant because you use humor as a teaching tool in your middle or high school classroom and have five or more years of teaching experience. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Chad Brown, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of middle and high school teachers who use humor as a teaching tool.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an individual interview with the researcher lasting approximately 20-25

Minutes. The interview will be video and audio recorded. 2. Half of the interview participants will participate in a focus group session with the Researcher lasting approximately one hour. The focus group will be video and audio recorded. 3. Up to five participants, based on responses to the interview and focus group, will be asked to allow the researcher to observe them teaching for one class period. The researcher will follow the observation protocol for classroom observations, and notes will be taken by the researcher. 4. Review transcripts of your interview and focus group responses and notes concerning observations and inform the researcher of any corrections you feel are necessary.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. It should be noted that the researcher is a mandated reporter. Therefore, if anything is observed during the observation that would require a report, the researcher would be obligated to report.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Observation notes and recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: The researcher serves as principal at Graham Middle School. To limit potential conflicts, I will discuss the voluntary nature of participation with all participants. I will further ensure that all school related observations and evaluations for participants will be conducted by the assistant principal during the research so as to avoid any situation where a participant might think that my research would reflect on their school performance. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate in this study.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not

answer any question or withdraw at any time

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Chad Brown. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at (276) 979-6842 or at cmbrown1@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Kenneth Tierce at ktierce@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____ Signature of Participant Date

_____ Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX E

Participant Solicitation Letter

Dear Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. In Curriculum and Instruction. The purpose of my research is to describe the experience of middle and high school teachers who use humor as a teaching tool.

If you commonly use humor to teacher materials or skills to middle or high school students, you are invited to participate in this study. If you are willing to participate in this study, please return the attached consent form with your typed name as your digital signature to cmbrown1@liberty.edu.

If you are asked to participate further in the study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with the researcher at an agreed upon time and location convenient to you; to participate in a focus group at an agreed upon time and location; potentially to be observed teaching by the researcher; and to review the transcripts of the interview and focus group, and the observation protocol. Both the interview and focus group will be both audio and video recorded to ensure accuracy. Notes will be taken during observations using an observation protocol. Your participation will be completely confidential, as you will be assigned a pseudonym. Pseudonyms will be assigned to schools and locations to further protect confidentiality.

Sincerely,

Chad Brown

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

APPENDIX F

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 5, 2019

Chad Brown

IRB Exemption 3624.020519: A Phenomenological Study of the Use of Humor as a Teaching Tool by Middle and High School Teachers

Dear Chad Brown,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(1), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

- (1) Research, conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who

provide instruction. This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research **Research Ethics Office**

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