

# **Teachers' Perceptions of their use of Humour in the Primary Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

Minimal qualitative research exists on primary teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the UK. This research is a contribution towards redressing this imbalance.

**Method:** Semi structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers who taught in the upper primary age range (ages seven to eleven years) in London. **Analysis:** Thematic analysis of the results identified five key themes which represented the ways in which teachers reported using humour in the classroom. **Findings:** Teachers reported using humour 1) to engage students in their learning, 2) facilitate relationships with their students and 3) as a coping mechanism. The ways in which teachers reported 4) varying their use of humour with their students were also discussed as well as their views on students' age and ability to understand abstract forms of humour. Some teachers also discussed 5) caveats. The teachers defined and developed their own view of humour from their own perspectives. **Implications:** Implications for educational psychologists (EPs) included recommendations for EPs to disseminate the findings to schools, teachers in training and to other EPs who are advocates of the development of students' well-being. Further implications included the use of humour to facilitate rapport between EPs and parents and as a communication skill in therapeutic relationships. Suggestions for future research were also presented. **Conclusion:** Humour should be part of the existing repertoire of human strengths already identified in positive psychology. This area should appeal to educational psychologists whose focus is on students' ability to flourish in spite of adversities in school, relationships and in other areas of life.

Keywords: Humour, engagement in learning, coping, student-teacher relationships

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a result of my own work and endeavor and is being submitted as part of the requirements of the Professional Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology.

Where other sources of information have been used they have been acknowledged in the text and in the reference list.

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged and that the thesis has not been submitted previously either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other University.

I acknowledge that I have complied with the University's policies and procedures where understood, in relation to my higher degree research award and to my thesis.

**Janet O'Connor**

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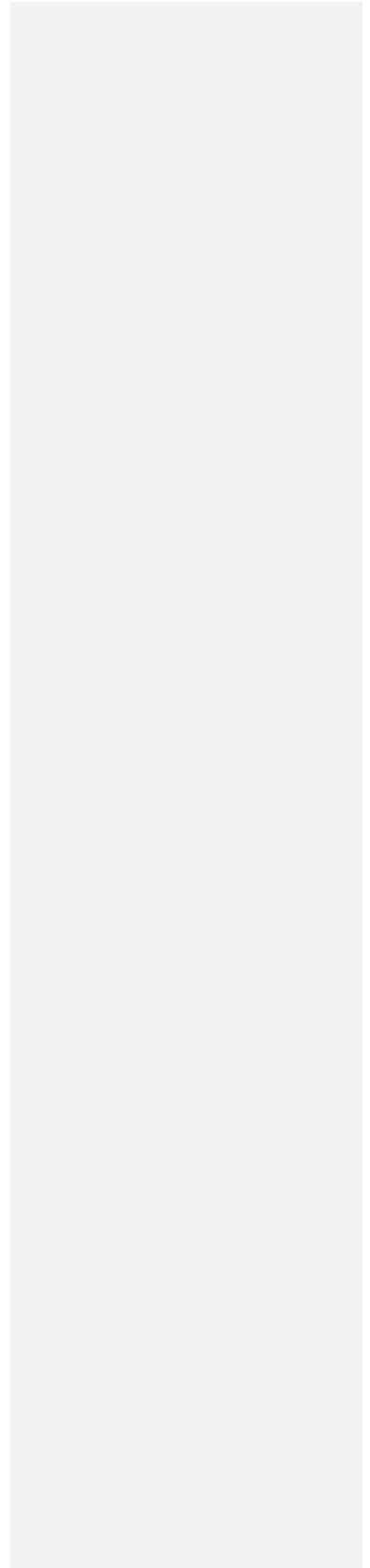
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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*I think it's lovely to reflect on humour as it was not something that... never came up when I was at college, not teacher training college. It would be really fantastic to see teachers' ... humour used appropriately.*

(M: p. 14-15; 317-320). (M: participant, p 14-15, line number 317 to 320).

The quote above is a validation of the researcher's core rationale for undertaking this research, namely, that it would be professionally enlightening for teachers to have the opportunity to think about their use of humour in the classroom context.

The quote above refers to the importance of the use of humour as it is an aspect of human life. Humans indulge in humour and derive pleasure from it as they interact with others. Humour can be used between strangers, in informal, social gatherings and in formal meetings and conferences. Therefore humour is a social phenomenon as it is used between individuals. Why then, does little research exist regarding the use of humour in the 'serious' context of the classroom? The following research seeks to give teachers the opportunity to reflect on their use of humour in the classroom context and to explore their perceptions.

This chapter begins with the focus of this current research (1.1). This is followed by the context, definitions and terminology (1.2), used in this research. A brief history of the changing perceptions (1.3) and the cultural perspective of humour are also presented (1.4). The chapter then outlines the relevance of educational psychology (1.5) for this research which is reinforced by evidence of educational (cognitive), social and psychological benefits of humour in the classroom. The original and distinctive contributions of the research are discussed (1.6), followed by the research aims (1.7) before ending with a chapter summary (1.8).

### 1.1 Focus of the Research

To date, few qualitative studies, based in the literature exists regarding teachers' use of humour in the classroom. Fewer studies have specifically addressed primary teachers' use of humour as a subgroup (Fovet, 2009). In order to fill the gap in the existing research and explore the role of humour in the classroom, it appears essential to ask teachers about their use of humour in class.

Morrison Gutman, Brown, Ackerman, and Obolenskaya, (2010) argue that the well-being of children in the UK is currently of major public concern. In 2003 the previous government's vision for childhood well-being was expressed in Every Child Matters (ECM), a national agenda to establish services around the needs of children and young people to maximise opportunities and minimise risks.

Concern was more recently sharpened by a UNICEF report (United Nations Children's Fund, 2007, cited by Morrison Gutman et al. 2010) rating the UK as among the bottom third of developed countries for child well-being. The approach taken in this current research focuses on teachers' use of humour to facilitate the well-being of students that arises from the role of humour in the cognitive, social and emotional aspects of children's development.

With specific reference to psychology, Martin Seligman (2005) started the notion of *positive psychology* to convey the importance of understanding what makes life worth living. He argued that, as a consequence of studying human attributes, positive psychology researchers will learn what works best in treating and preventing mental health, leading to enhanced well-being. Of primary importance however, is that educational psychologists can investigate how to establish strengths that enable students not only to endure and survive, but to thrive in their learning, relationships and with life's adversities. The use of humour in these areas was found to be of great significance for the teachers in this thesis, and reinforces the author's view that humour can be used to enhance the well-being of students.

In general, it has been concluded that humour in the classroom helps to decrease stress and tension, establishes student-teacher relationships, makes learning more enjoyable, stimulates interest and attention in learning and reinforces cognitive retention (e.g. Berk

and Nanda, 1998; Davis and Apter, 1980; Zielger, Boardman and Thomas, 1985). It has been suggested that based on the cognitive, social, emotional and psychological benefits of humour, some teachers believe that the development of humour can enhance student's well-being, and should be included as an appropriate tool in education (e.g. Mosselos, 2003).

The key objective of this research was to explore teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom. This qualitative research involved a unique exploration of the views of teachers who taught children in the upper primary age range (7-11 years) and their thoughts behind their use of humour in the context of the primary classroom.

## 1.2 Context, Definitions and Terminology

### Context

The context of this current research is the British primary classroom in which teachers explore their experiences of their use of humour. It is important to provide some context and definition in order to provide clarity and further understanding of the study. The perceptions held by students regarding their teachers are that they are intelligent, knowledgeable but humourless and tedious (Ziegler, 1998). If students reminisce about their past educational experiences, they would probably recall lessons that were dull, boring and un motivating and led by some teachers who smiled infrequently or failed to produce fun-filled lessons (Lei, Cohen, and Russler, 2011). Teachers may have taken their subjects seriously, either because they were following tradition, or because

expectations of the student-teacher relationship were of a professional, serious and impersonal nature (Lei, Cohen and Russler, 2011). Unsurprisingly therefore, humour was once viewed as a distraction technique that adversely affected classroom teachers quality (Torok, 2004). However, laughing in class does not imply that students are undermining the seriousness of the lesson. In fact, laughter indicates that students are alert and attentive to the teachers (Cottrell and Weaver, 1987). Today, humour has a solid foundation in the classroom because of the many proven psychological, social and cognitive (educational) benefits for teachers (Torok, 2004).

#### Definitions of Humour

A significant problem in the development of this topic area has been the clear operational definition of the construct to be studied. A clear definition is a basic scientific requirement (Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, and Woods, 2007) but it has so far eluded humour. Martin (2007), a Canadian psychologist, has reviewed psychological studies of humour across various disciplines and in various contexts including the home, workplace and in education and as a result, has proposed one way in which humour can be defined.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1997) defines humour as “the quality of being amusing or comic”. It has also been referred to as “expressive in speech or in literature”, an “ability to take a joke, a mood or state of mind” (p. 662). It can be seen from these definitions that the ‘word *humour* is an umbrella term with a generally positive, socially



desirable connotation which refers to anything people say or do that is perceived to be funny and evokes laughter in others' (Martin, 2007, p. 5).

The reason behind the researcher's aim to draw the reader's attention to given definitions of humour, has led to an inclination to search for teachers' definition of humour in this current research. The researcher aimed to explore with teachers whether they viewed humour positively, whether they thought humour only involves jokes, or whether it always involves laughter. Given the ways in which teachers initiate and receive humour both when they are not teaching, i.e. during their leisure time which is outside the classroom; and inside the formal context of the classroom, the researcher was interested in how teachers defined humour in this current research.

Four styles of humour have been identified by Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray and Weir (2003), based on a review of previous empirical and theoretical research. These styles, they argued, were theorised to be beneficial for individual's well-being. Affiliative and self-enhancing humour are two positive styles, while aggressive and self-defeating humour are two styles detrimental to mental health. *Affiliative* humour refers to telling jokes, eliciting amusing comments and anecdotes to make others laugh and encourage group cohesiveness and facilitate relationships. *Self-enhancing* humour is characterised by the use of humour to regulate emotions and cope with stress by sustaining a humorous perspective on life. In contrast, *self-defeating* humour includes identifying ways to make others laugh at one's own expense, while *aggressive* humour demeans or intimidates

others by using sarcasm, teasing or ridicule (Martin, 2007).

The humour styles outlined above have been extensively studied and found to be reliable and valid across various cultures (Martin Puhlik-Doris, Larsen and Weir, 2003), and account for the way in which individuals use humour spontaneously in their daily lives. However, they fall short of their capacity to show how well *all* individuals use these styles to build social bonds with others. For example, Fitts, Sebby and Zlokovich (2009) found that shy individuals use affiliative humour less, perhaps due to their lack of self confidence in their social competence and high anxiety which indicated their heightened perceptions of loneliness. In addition, shy individuals used self-defeating humour more, tending to increase their loneliness. It appears that, self-defeating humour tended to produce the undesired effect of alienation of others, rather than group acceptance that is associated with affiliative humour (Fitts, Sebby and Zlokovich, 2009).

Affiliative humour is related to building relationships and personal disclosure, which are crucial skills in the development of interpersonal relationships (Fitts, Sebby and Zlokovich, 2009). As both affiliative and self-defeating humour mediated the relationship between shyness and loneliness, it seems that the shy person's tendency not to utilise an interpersonally adaptive humour style, perhaps is as important factor to understanding their possible loneliness (Fitts, Sebby and Zlokovich, 2009).

The context would appear to be a significant factor in understanding humour. Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Tedeschi (1983); Martin and Kuiper (1999) and Provine (2004), argue that humans laugh and use humour more frequently with others than when they are alone. For example, individuals who were asked to rate the funniness of cartoons rated them as funnier when they rated the cartoons in the presence of others who also found them amusing. However, individuals sometimes laugh when they are by themselves in such situations as watching a comedy programme on the television; reading a funny book or recalling a humorous experience. This can, in part, be viewed as social in nature as individuals can still engage in humour as they watch funny characters on television, or listen to humorous material on a radio which, in both instances involve humour as stimuli and generate individuals' amusement in response (Martin, 2007).

Therefore, given this research, even if individuals are physically alone it appears possible to use self-enhancing humour because this type is concerned with having a positive, humorous outlook on life, despite life's adversities. As affiliative humour is concerned with creating and forming social bonds, this humour style cannot be used by a lone individual as there is no one with whom the individual can build a relationship.

As discussed above, a focal point of understanding humour is linked to the way in which humour is used, especially in the area of social interaction and coping with stress (Martin, 2007). Conversely, in relation to the use of humour in one's own company, no theoretical

or empirical literature exists that evaluates how affiliative humour is engaged in by solitary individuals. This may be perhaps because the majority of studies on humour have examined humour between people in social situations rather than when people are alone.

In conclusion, the four humour styles describe the ways in which humour is used spontaneously in peoples' daily lives, and encompass both positive and detrimental aspects of humour. However, specific humour styles, including affiliative and self-defeating humour may not account for the way in which shy individuals use humour to facilitate social interaction. In addition, not all four of the humour styles can explain how they can be used by individuals in the absence of others.

An explanation that can be put forward however, is that humour is a multifaceted rather than a unitary concept (Martin, 2003), and is therefore difficult to pinpoint to a single definition. It is this multi-dimensional approach towards humour that drew the researcher's attention to this topic area. The researcher was interested in exploring the ways in which teachers defined humour, given the range of ways Martin (2007) and his colleagues identified the various forms of humour used spontaneously by people. The researcher aimed to find out whether teachers perceive humour as a concept which is positive or detrimental; whether humour brings the class together in unison with laughter and amusement or whether it was something that could be divisive in the classroom; or indeed, whether humour had an impact on or bore any relation to children's learning.

The broad definitions of humour and terminology above were developed more recently but have evolved from various theories over time. In fact the word “humour” has a fascinating and complex past which began with a different meaning and developed new connotations over the centuries (Martin, 2007). For these reasons, humour can be difficult to pinpoint with a single definition that is specific to the time or culture within which one lives. Wickberg (1998), a historian, provided an analysis of humour over time which is detailed below.

### 1.3 Changing perceptions of Humour

The word humour is derived from a Latin word meaning fluid or liquid. In fourth century BC, the Greek physician Hippocrates, believed that humorous individuals were defined as those with an imbalance of four main bodily fluids each of which were thought to determine a person’s physical or mental abilities. An imbalance of these fluids – yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood meant an imbalance of temperament and was manifested in terms of deviant behaviour. Humour retained this physiological connotation until the eighteenth century. At this time, views of laughter were changing. Laughter was viewed in negative times where it was commonplace to laugh at others’ suffering including the derision and mockery at levels of deformity. During the eighteenth century, *ridicule* became socially accepted but then gave way to sympathetic humour rather than aggressive humour in people in the upper classes. Up to the twentieth century, these changing views were reflected in the prevalent norms of the period

(Wickberg 1998, cited by Martin, 2007).

Along with changes in the word humour and conceptions of laughter, perceptions of humour also evolved over time. Prior to the twentieth century, a sense of humour quickly became an esteemed virtue in the United States. By the 1930s it was seen as an important ingredient in positive mental health. Over time, a sense of humour was viewed as having a role in research in physical health (Baker, Dillon & Minchoff, 1985; Burns, Carroll, Corkhill, Harrison, Harrison and Ring, 2000, cited by Martin, 2007) and links were suggested between emotions and alleviation from physical illness (Kimata, 2004). These developments in health research also contributed to an increased interest in the use of humour in other areas such as business, the workplace and education (Wickberg, 1998, cited by Martin, 2007).

Although the examination of the cultural differences in humour was not the main focus of this research, the cultural aspects of humour are an important consideration as humour occurs in many different contexts – either within homogeneous cultures or in ethnically diverse societies. An example of some research into the cultural approaches towards humour was outlined in the following section.

#### 1.4 Cultural perspectives of humour

Although this research project is not a cross cultural study on humour, it is important to acknowledge that the use of humour appears to be context dependent and can be open to

the interpretation of situations within a particular culture. That which is regarded as funny, in addition to when, where, with whom and in what contexts one may joke, undoubtedly varies cross-culturally and even amongst individuals within the same culture (Hymes, 1972; Raskin, 1985: 2; cf., cited by Bell, 2007).

While humour may be a universal attribute of human practice that takes place in all cultures (Apte, 1985; Lefcourt, 2001, cited by Martin, 2007) and indeed has been argued by some as being important in enhancing survival for human beings (for example, Caron 2002), different cultures have their own social norms in terms of what they consider to be humorous and the contexts in which laughter is deemed appropriate (Nevo & Nevo, 2001). Therefore, the comprehension and use of humour between individuals from different cultures may be exposed to misinterpretation (Bell, 2007).

Martin (2007) argued that there are crucial cultural influences on the way humour is used and the situations that are considered appropriate for laughter. Nevo & Nevo (2001) found that, in general, when compared with their American counterparts, Singaporean students use humour less as a coping strategy to deal with difficult situations. Abe (1994) also found that in Japan, humour was not used as a coping strategy. In contrast, the American media endorse American politician's use of humour in times of stress or crises and consider humour use as 'good public relations'. Further, when comparing American and Spanish samples, Carbelo-Baquero, Alonso-Rodriguez, Valero-Garces and Thorson (2006), found that Spanish participants preferred using humour for a specific purpose,

such as a coping strategy, while Americans tended to use humour for its own sake.

These cultural studies of humour have implications for teachers who use humour in schools, particularly those in which communities are ethnically diverse. Although exploring cultural differences of humour was not a focus of this current research, it is important to note that individuals from different cultures may hold different perspectives of humour and approach humour differently. Although cultural differences were an important, but not an essential consideration in this research, the study mostly took place in an inner London borough which is ethnically diverse and in which teachers from various cultures may have held different meanings based on either the culture in which they lived or, was based on their ethnic origin.

#### 1.5 Relevance to Educational Psychology

Having considered the historical and cultural significance of humour, it is also important to consider the relevance of educational psychology to this research in order to provide further justification for humour use in the classroom as an area worthy of scholarly exploration.

‘At its core, educational psychology underpins our understanding of how children learn and develop’ (AEP 2010, p.1). Educational psychologists Lei, Cohen and Russler (2011) argue that humour has psychological, social and cognitive (educational) benefits. With regard to cognitive attributes, they advocate that ‘humour is an appreciated teaching tool



for instructors to facilitate student learning if used appropriately, constructively and in moderation' (p.1). The ECM identifies *enjoying and achieving* as an outcome to emphasise that students should have the opportunity to attend and enjoy school. Furthermore, Lei, Cohen and Russler (2011) argue that students should not only enjoy the classroom but also learn to truly enjoy and appreciate the subject material. One way in which students can be engaged sufficiently to enjoy their lessons is to incorporate humour which can enhance students' well-being (Kuiper and McHale, 2009).

The incorporation of humour helps to enhance cognitive development in children. For example, humour helps to increase student attention, motivation and understanding of the learning material (Freda and Pollak, 1997). Humour also helps in problem solving tasks in which students are encouraged to think creatively and to extend their reasoning skills (Ziegler, 1998). At times, attempting new ideas can inspire students to think of situations from various viewpoints which is an important feature of creative thought (Freda and Pollak, 1997). In addition, humour not only helps to increase student's perceptions of their learning (Wanzer and Frymier, 1999) but also helps to enhance their achievement (Ziv, 1988). It appears therefore that schools are in a pivotal position to facilitate students' cognitive development through the use of humour.

Morrison Gutman, Brown, Ackerman, and Obolenskaya (2010) argue that 'Schools can play a positive role... in fostering engagement and enjoyment of learning' (p. 8). A main objective of teaching is to promote and optimise student's learning as they become active

pursuers of knowledge (Lei, Cohen and Russler, 2011). Another aim of teaching is to encourage students to enjoy and obtain pleasure from lessons. Some teachers may think of creative, interesting and innovative ways to present their lessons that are motivating and stimulating for their students (Freda and Pollak, 1997) and it is humour that has the power to make instructors popular and approachable (Lei, Cohen and Russler, 2011).

In addition to the cognitive benefits, humour has psychological benefits. 'Humour is a major psychological tool that can help students cope with stress, enhance their sense of well-being, boost self image, self esteem as well as alleviate anxiety and depression' (Check, 1997; Führ, 2002; Martin and Kuiper, 1993; Rainsberger, 1994; Rareshide, 1993). To support the notion that laughter is the best medicine, not only does the use of teachers' humour alleviate students' stress, but humour can also assuage teachers' stress associated with the teaching profession (Mawhinney, 2008). Schools have a significant role to play in helping students to reduce any potential stress and anxiety in such situations such as tests and exams and help students develop a more positive attitude towards other such potential crises (Cann and Ezzel, 2008). In addition, teachers have an important role in using humour to teach 'dread courses', which some students perceive as those subjects that cause them anxiety. As a result, some students avoid such courses due to their low self confidence, perceived difficulty or a previous negative experience (Kher, Molstad and Donahue, 1999). Some dread courses such as maths, chemistry and statistics may not only be associated with negative feelings, but may also be allied with strict and unapproachable teachers. Many students enjoy the lessons when they are led by teachers

who alter the tone of the teaching process from an adverse to a positive one and it is with humour that students can learn to enjoy these courses (Kher, Molstad and Donahue, 1999).

Moreover, humour functions to serve social purposes. In the educational context, it can help to build student-teacher relationships (Davis, 2006). Humour can help to build rapport by breaking the ice, reduce tension and encourage “humanness” (Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Cottrell and Weaver, 1987). Lei et al (2011) argue that students like to view their teachers as real human beings. Humour can reduce the distance between teachers and students as they unite in the pursuit of knowledge (Cottrell and Weaver 1987). This may suggest that by using constructive humour, teachers can encourage the formation of positive relationships with students that may otherwise be distant and difficult (Davis, 2006). If teachers are able to maintain a warm relationship with their students who perceive them as approachable, they can help students to maintain their engagement in learning.

#### 1.6 Original and distinctive contributions

This current research was unique in several respects. First, this research was conducted in the UK in contrast to the majority of studies on the teachers’ use of humour in the classroom which were conducted in the United States (e.g. Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; 2006; 2008; Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Rainsberger 1994; Rareshide 1993; Steele 1998; White, 2001; Ziv, 1998). Second, the majority of the studies in this area focused on

the views of college students who were based in university settings in the USA. This is in stark contrast to this current research which aims to focus on the views of teachers who are based in UK primary school settings. Finally, the majority of these studies have utilised quantitative methodologies. This current research utilised qualitative methodology to gain rich and in-depth perceptions of those who used humour in the classroom context. In addition, previous research on children's development of humour examined children's understanding of humour in terms of what they found funny and what they could comprehend from the material presented to them including jokes, cartoons and funny stories (Shultz and Horibe, 1974; Pexman, Glenwright, Hala, Kowbel and Jungen, 2006). This current research asked teachers to discuss real life interactions between teachers and their students to elicit laughter which included humour in relation to learning and coping.

It was evident from the literature review (presented in the following chapter) that teachers have a significant role to play in the development of children's humour. Given this, it appears important to ask teachers about their perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom. The findings of this research can contribute towards a set of guidelines for the use of appropriate humour that student teachers could find useful, and EPs might be best placed to provide these directives.

### 1.7 Aims and Approaches of the research

In this respect the main aim of this research was to gain an insight into teachers' use of

humour in the primary classroom. As the views of teachers were sought, semi-structured interviews were selected as the most suitable method. Interviews are used to explore the perceptions of eight teachers as the purpose was to seek their rich, in-depth views. Thematic analysis was used as a means of identifying the themes from the interview data. Thematic analysis is a flexible tool which provides a deconstruction of the ways in which humour is used and perceived by teachers. Unlike other forms of analysis, this method is not wedded to any particular theory (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

#### 1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter began with a rationale for this research and outlined several positive benefits of appropriate humour used in the classroom. It has been argued that there is evidence to support the notion that humour serves to reduce stress and tension, create a positive classroom atmosphere, increase students' engagement in learning, motivation and academic achievement and builds student-teacher relationships. Humour is also effective in the development of psychological well-being. The relevance of this research to Children's Services and the EP role was outlined in terms of the ways in which EPs can support teachers to consider the development of humour in children and think even more creatively about how to engage all children in their learning, including those with additional needs, and enhance their well-being.

Distinctive contributions referred to the exploratory, in-depth qualitative research of this study, conducted in the UK rather than in America as has often been the case. In addition,

teachers who taught primary aged children rather than university students were the participants in this study as their viewpoints are sought. Semi structured interviews were the method utilised by this research. The data was analysed using thematic analysis.

In the following chapter, a systematic review of the relevant literature was presented regarding two core themes. The first was how research was developed in the area of humour and the use of humour, notably the cognitive, social and emotional aspects. The second theme addresses research on the use of humour in educational contexts.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The previous chapter provided justification for the exploration of teachers' use of humour in the primary classroom. The rationale and aims of the project were summarised and described in relation to the context of the research and the researcher's professional role. The approach, on which the research is based, its potential origin and distinctive contributions were also introduced.

#### 2.1 Overview of this Chapter

The chapter is divided into the following sections: overview of the chapter (2.1), the research problem (2.2), the purpose of the literature review (2.3), the systematic search process (2.3.1), children's development of humour (2.4), followed by associated studies on children's development of humour (2.4.1). Psychological theories of humour (2.5), humour in educational contexts (2.6), descriptive studies of teachers' use of humour (2.6.1), teachers' views of humour (2.6.2), synthesis of the literature review (2.7), current knowledge (2.7.1), the need for and significance of new research (2.7.2), methodology – the quality of the current research (2.7.3), research questions (2.8) and summary (2.9).

#### 2.2 Research problem

There has been, to date, minimal research carried out on primary teachers' views of their

own use of humour in the classroom. The majority of research on humour has been conducted in an American context, focusing on the perspectives of college students. To redress this imbalance, teachers' views need to be explored in the UK in order to appreciate varying perceptions within the British culture. The introductory chapter in this thesis briefly referred to the different ways in which different cultures approached humour. The research involved the use of semi structured interviews with eight primary school teachers who taught students aged seven to eleven years and explored their views of their use of their humour in the context of the British classroom.

Given these objectives, it is important to understand what humour is and to explore the psychological theories that are used to explain humour in order to provide the reader with an understanding of how humour has been conceptualised in UK society and as a basis for this current research. As the context of this research is the classroom, and an exploration of teachers' interactions was within such an environment, it was necessary to consider how children's comprehension of humour develops over time, as well as teachers' understanding of the use of age appropriate humour. A review of the research of humour in the educational context has revealed a plethora of research involving views of college students and their teachers, usually in the USA. Yet, a review of the literature has unearthed a lack of research in the UK on the use of humour in education.

### 2.3 Purpose of the literature review

The purpose of this literature review was to provide a context for this current research,



identify gaps in the research and to highlight how this current research could provide an original contribution to this topic area (Murray, 2002 cited by Cresswell, 2009).

Another purpose of the literature review was to establish a foundation for the importance of this current research and to provide a baseline for comparing the results of this research with other findings (Cresswell, 2009).

Fink (2005) defined a research literature review as:

*'a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners'* (p 3).

A review of the literature relating to the use of teachers' use of humour in the classroom was conducted to provide the reader with a summary of the existing research in this topic area and to strengthen the justification for this current research. Guidance was sought from Fink (2005) and Cresswell (2009) on how to conduct a systematic literature review. This is detailed in the following section.

### 2.3.1 The systematic search process

A systematic review of the literature linked to teachers' use of humour in the classroom context, was completed to provide the reader with a synthesis of the relevant findings

from studies. The studies were rigorously assessed for their quality and inclusion criteria in the literature review. The reader is also provided with an interpretation of the findings and with a balanced summary of the findings. Following on from this process, an assessment of the studies for their relevancy and inclusion and a summary of the research findings is provided in the current chapter.

A broad reading of the literature of humour in education and in psychology was conducted as little was known about the topic. Keywords were used to search for articles in an academic library based at the University of East London (UEL). Due to the majority of studies in this topic area being based in the USA, a selection of keywords, (including American spellings) were used: 'humor', 'humor and young children', 'humor development', 'humor in children', 'humor in the classroom', 'humor and learning and 'humor and education'. The keywords were based on previous reading of a seminal book by Canadian Psychologist Rod Martin (2007) entitled 'The Psychology of Humor'.

During the keyword search, email correspondence with three researchers took place. Email correspondence with Rod Martin, a Canadian Psychologist, consisted of discussions about ideas to narrow the focus of humour in the educational context. Some of this can be found in appendix one at the end of this thesis. Articles were also searched on the google scholar website, using the same keywords used above. Chapters from 'The Handbook of Positive Psychology' (Snyder and Lopez, 2005) proved useful as did manual searches from 'The Journal of Humor Research'.

Articles were read and assessed in terms of their relevancy to the focus of the research. Studies that were selected for the literature review were chosen based on their focus of teachers' humour in the educational context. These included studies in relation to humour that was a catalyst for learning. Other studies that were included were related to the use of teachers' humour that focused on the facilitation of positive relationships between teachers and their students. In addition, studies that focused on teachers' humour and coping were also included. These studies were included as part of the literature review because of their link to aspects of children's development and classroom experiences. The educational context is a place where children learn and therefore humour could be a motivating factor in children's learning. In addition, the classroom is a place where teachers build a bond with their students and help students develop good interaction skills. In line with the focus of the current research, it was deemed that teachers' humour may strengthen the link that they have with their students. Further, by helping students to cope with academic challenges, teachers' humour can be used to help students to develop coping skills.

Within the initial literature search, a large number of studies were found. Therefore, it was important to exclude some studies based on exclusion criteria because they did not relate specifically to the current research. The focus of the research was on teachers' use of humour in the classroom context, with children of various ages and ability.

As the context of the current research was the classroom and not the workplace, studies in this area were also omitted. Although the classroom and the school is the workplace for teachers, some research was found linking to humour and the workplace which focused on employers' use of humour and their leadership and motivational styles in creating a more productive workforce. Despite extensive searches, it was not always possible to locate primary sources of information as some articles were either unobtainable from the university's library website; through manual searches or were out of print.

The researcher then developed a literature review map which is a visual representation of organised groups of studies on a topic (Cresswell, 2009). This map can be found in appendix two. This map also reinforced how this current research contributed towards and was placed in the existing literature and general body of research.

The reader has been introduced to the way in which the research process started. Before proceeding to suggestions into *where* and *why* humour occurs, it was imperative to momentarily focus on *when* humour occurs in children. Teachers are aware of the fundamental importance of play for learning in young children, but humour also makes significant contributions to young children's development. It facilitates vocabulary development, creative thinking, social interactions, self esteem and as a foundation for coping with stressful events during the adolescent and adult years (McGhee, 2002). To the knowledge of the author of this research, McGhee's model of humour development is

the only known model that parallels cognitive development which is a key aspect of development in young children. This model is presented in the following section.

#### 2.4 Children's development of Humour

Paul McGhee's (2002) seminal work: *Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humor*, focused on *when* individuals start laughing at things that are actually funny. According to McGhee (2002), it is around the age of six years that children begin, with remarkable discovery, to find out that words can have two or more meanings. However, McGhee (2002) believes that children's dalliance with humour begins even earlier than six years of age. He felt that children develop an understanding of humour in stages, implying that children's comprehension of humour advances with age. The following section outlines McGhee's staged model of humour development which is also aligned with Piaget's model of cognitive development (Piaget, 1970, cited by Martin, 2007). This information is influential in this current research as it provides a broader understanding of humour development in children and adolescents and an indication of the comprehension level of humour in children between the ages of seven and eleven, which is the age group taught by primary teachers who participated in this research.

With regard to developmental characteristics, McGhee (2002) believed that children's ability to understand, appreciate and use humour progresses with age. McGhee (1979) provides a staged model of humour development which is presented to inform the reader about the progression of stages of humour development. In addition, the research findings

of this research will be compared with the proposed developmental model of humour and to explore whether teachers have an understanding of children's humour development.

McGhee (1979) proposed that children develop humour in four stages. He referred to the first stage as *incongruous actions towards objects* which coincide with Piaget's (1970) pre operational stage. At approximately two years of age, most children in this stage for example, are able to produce humour by assimilating objects into their existing mental schemas which develop over time as they mature into adolescence and adulthood.

McGhee called the second stage of humour development *incongruous labelling of objects and events* which begins early in the third year of life when the child is able to play with language. The child mislabels objects or situations during this stage. The third stage is referred to as *conceptual incongruity* when the child for example, recognises that words can be categorised in terms of objects or events that have key features.

The most relevant stage of humour development for this research is McGhee's fourth and final stage of humour, which is also referred to as *multiple meanings*. This stage coincides with the stage at which the child advances from the preoperational to the concrete operational stage of Piaget's cognitive stages of development (Piaget, 1970). At around six years of age, the child is able to operate schemas in such a way that they can imagine actions impacting on objects without literally having to carry out those actions. They are also able to understand conservation, reversibility of thinking, and become less

egocentric.

With regard to humour and language, evidence suggests that an analysis of many verbal jokes show some sort of linguistic ambiguity that leads to a successful resolution (e.g. Horibe and Shultz, 1974). Understanding more complex language and knowledge of the multiple meanings of words children can begin to understand and develop a clever play on words. The multiple meanings are associated with the ambiguity in words and the incongruity that is generated. Once the incongruity is understood and resolved, children understand the humour.

With reference to linguistic abilities, children begin to be familiar with the ambiguity inherent in language at different levels including morphology, semantics, syntax and phonology (Robillard and Shulz, 1980 cited by Martin, 2007). Thus they can enjoy the play on words and double meanings that are an essential aspect of many jokes and riddles. For example, consider the pun, 'what's brown and sticky? A stick'. This might be basic but such puns are popular with many children who are around six years of age (McGhee, 2002). The childhood discovery of puns is referred to by McGhee (2002) as 'riddle disease'. The preoccupation of this type of humour in young children occurs when they, rather than adults, get to be the one who provides the answer.

As McGhee (1979) viewed this stage as the final stage of humour development, he believed that this humour continues into adolescence and into adulthood. Nonetheless, it

may be speculated that with Piaget's (1970) formal operation stage, children's thinking becomes more abstract. Children have more adaptable, inventive and analytical ways of thinking. They can recognise inconsistencies in a series of statements, to hypothesise sequences and to predict future results of actions. All of these cognitive abilities allow the young person to play with ideas to a more abstract degree than expected in the concrete operation stage (Martin, 2007).

The majority of research on cognitive aspects of humour development focuses on children's understanding and enjoyment of jokes, cartoons and riddles. However, they are only a small proportion of the humour used by children in daily interactions (Bergen, 1998 cited by Martin, 2007; Kuiper and Markin, 1999) and omit other forms such as irony, sarcasm and satire (e.g. Glenwright, Hala, Jungen, Kowbel, and Pexman, 2006; Alexander, Howe, Recchia and Ross, 2010).

#### 2.4.1 Associated studies on children's development of humour

The literature review did not reveal any recent studies of teachers' views of children's ability to understand their use of humour in the classroom. However, although dated, but perhaps the most compelling study for this current research was a study conducted by Rareshide (1993) who asked teachers how they varied their use of humour with their students. This study is the most relevant as views were sought from teachers who taught the same age group as the teachers who teach students in this current study. Additionally, Rareshide's (1993) study also raises the idea of sarcasm which, as the above research



suggests, is a form of humour which younger children may not comprehend.

Rareshide (1993) surveyed fifty teachers who taught in an elementary school in Virginia. The teachers taught students who were aged 10 to 12 years of age. The study revealed several important findings that are relevant for this study. It was found that the most common means by which teachers reported varying their humour was in terms of the abilities of the students they encountered. Teachers tended to use more sophisticated humour with the “cleverer” students without stopping the class to explain the humour to those students who didn’t necessarily understand. Although Rareshide (1993) does not make an explicit point in his study, the ability of the students to comprehend teachers’ humour may not necessarily correspond with the age of the students. Rareshide (1993) has identified an interesting point. The teachers felt that children were not expected to understand humour at the level expected for all children of the same age. The level of sophistication of humour corresponds with the ability rather than the age at which the child is expected to comprehend the humour.

This current research extends Rareshide’s (1993) finding by using semi structured interviews to explore whether teachers have an awareness of the varying abilities of understanding humour amongst their same-age students, and how they varied their humour to communicate with children with differing abilities.

McGhee’s (2002) focus on humour was mainly concerned with the approximate ages and

stages of children's cognitive development. The following sections refer to the various theories of humour. The aim of presenting these theories is to convey to the reader *why* humans laugh at the things they do. The sections below present a brief introduction and overview of the main psychological theories of humour, beginning with one of the earliest group of theories - relief theories, followed by incongruity theories and the reversal theory of humour. Each of these theories is appraised in relation to relevant research later.

#### 2.5 The psychological theories of humour

The topic of what constitutes humour has been the topic of debate for philosophers for many years with little consensus. From a review of humour theories, these explanations can be categorised into two groups: relief and incongruity theories.

An overview of the relief and incongruity theories of humour is presented in this chapter to give the reader an understanding of the ways in which humour has been theorised in their attempts to answer the question 'what is humour?' Most theorists attempt to answer this question by discussing important features of humour. Each of the presented theories highlights some theoretical and empirical importance, for example, the relief theories of humour emphasise the emotional aspects of humour. The incongruity theories of humour focus on the cognitive features of humour. These theories are presented with their significant contributions and limitations. A third theory, referred to as a reversal theory of humour, is less well known but is presented as the main theoretical framework on which

this current study is based. This latter theory is the most comprehensive and integrative theory of humour as it incorporates the emotional and cognitive aspects of humour (Collins and Wyer, 1992; Martin, 2007). Each theory will be followed by associated research.

#### 2.5.1 Relief theories

Relief theorists believe that humour responses are a release of stress or tension, or a reduction in arousal (Martin, 2007). For example, Freud (1928; 1960) argued that humour responses to stimuli are motivated by a need to release tension or arousal. Freud felt that nervous energy which was excessive, and therefore not required, must be released in some form and laughter was one way in which it could occur. Freud argued that there were three categories of laughter based phenomena: 1) wit or jokes, 2) the comic, 3) humour. Each of these requires a different mechanism by which psychic energy is released or saved and eventually released in the form of laughter. For the purposes of this research, humour is the laughter based phenomena that is the main focus. While it is recognised that teachers may tell jokes and play the comic in the classroom in particular, this current research explores the general use of humour with the teachers who may also talk about telling jokes or playing the comic. Therefore, as an all-encompassing topic, there are opportunities for teachers to discuss how they perceive their use of humour in general, telling jokes and playing the comic in particular.

According to Freud, humour occurs in stressful situations in which individuals would

usually experience adverse emotions such as fear, sadness or anger but the perceived amusing or incongruous characteristics of the situation helps them experience the altered state and avoid negative affect. Humour is the result of a release of energy that would have been related to painful emotion but has become redundant. An individual who is able to view the funny things in life despite their adverse circumstances would be an example of someone who is able to demonstrate their ability to cope with stress using humour. Thus, Freud viewed humour as one of several types of defence mechanisms that enables individuals to encounter difficult situations without feeling overwhelmed by negative emotions.

There is evidence to support Freud's theory of humour but the studies tend to be limited and inconsistent (Levine and Redlich, 1995; Levine, Redlich and Sohler, 1951; O'Connell, 1960; Ruch and Hehl, 1988; Holmes, 1969; Singer, Gollob and Levine, 1967 as cited by Martin, 2007). The main limitation of this theory is that it does not provide a holistic explanation of humour (Martin, 2007) as the theory places much emphasis on the dynamics within the individual (Martin, 2007) and marginalises the cognitive and social aspects of humour in children.

However, considerable evidence supports the notion that people are able to use humour to cope with adverse circumstances. Theorists argue that humour functions as a way of helping children to cope with anxiety provoking topics and events during childhood (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Chen and Martin, 2007; Erikson and Feldstein, 2007; Fuhr, 2002;

Henman, 2001; McGhee, 2002). Although considerable research exists concerning the role that humour plays in coping with adults (e.g. Cann and Eztel, 2008; Donahue, Marziali & McDonald, 2008; Kuiper & Martin, 1993; Mawhinney 2008), these studies focus on how adults use humour to cope with either a physical or mental illness or personal challenges. More importantly, qualitative studies that focus on teachers' views of their use of humour to facilitate children's use of humour in coping is limited (Martin, 1997).

#### 2.5.2 Associated studies of relief theories

Rainsberger's (1994) research is included in this literature review as it focused on humour used by teachers and students to reduce stress in the classroom. The study also assessed the degree to which the respondents felt they used humour as a coping mechanism. Rainsberger (1994) asked ninety-eight 9-11 year old students and twenty three fifth and sixth grade teachers to complete the Coping Humor Scale (CHS, Lefcourt & Martin, 1983) which was devised to examine the role of humour in the mediation of life stress. Data analysis revealed that more teachers than students reported using humour as a coping mechanism. Twenty two percent of teachers compared with sixteen per cent of students strongly disagreed with the statement, 'I lose my sense of humor when I am having problems.' In contrast, the reverse was true for the respondents who 'strongly agreed' with the statement. Twenty six per cent of students compared with thirteen per cent of teachers felt that they lost their sense of humour. This means that, when having problems, more teachers than students maintained their sense of humour. Perhaps

teachers had developed the capacity as adults to cope with difficulty using humour. Rainsberger (1994) suggested that amongst a myriad of obstacles facing students, young peoples' difficulties can include stressors associated with grades, homework and tests, whereas classroom management may be the main source of stress for some teachers.

Although Rainsberger's (1994) study collected data from teachers who taught the same year groups of children who are the target of this current study, he used a questionnaire as the instrument for his study and used a quantitative method of analysis. The nature of the questionnaire was such that respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire that focused on coping humour and shows that teachers regarded humour in emotional terms. Rainsberger's study confined participants to questions about coping with stress but this does not mean that this is the only means by which teachers regard humour. The aim of this current study is to explore how teachers generally view humour rather than just focus specifically on humour as a means for coping.

By focusing solely on emotions and arousal, relief theories marginalise the cognitive aspects of humour. Incongruity explanations of humour provide an explanation in terms of how people think about humour. This is detailed in the following section.

### 2.5.3 Incongruity Theories

These theories focused more on cognition and less on the social and emotional components of humour (Reddy 2003; Martin 2007), suggesting that the perception of

incongruity is the essential ingredient in determining whether or not something is humorous, i.e. things that are amusing are incongruous, startling, bizarre, unusual or unanticipated. This view provides insight into the cognitive-perceptual processes that are involved in humour and the means by which one perceives people, events and situations from the viewpoint of two or more incongruous perspectives simultaneously. The following joke may demonstrate these concepts,

O’Riley was on trial for armed robbery. The jury came out and announced, “Not guilty.” “Wonderful” said O’Riley, “does that mean I can keep the money?” (Suls, 1972 cited by Martin, 2007).

The punch line is incongruous as O’Riley is implicitly admits his guilt After being found not guilty. This surprising ending elicits two contradicting perceptions: he is guilty and not guilty simultaneously. In this way, in the humorous frame of mind, an item, individual or event can be X and not X simultaneously (Mulkay, 1988 cited by Martin 2007). In incongruity theories it is the establishment of two incongruous thoughts that is the fundamental source of humour.

Incongruity theories have been one of the major theories of humour for centuries. The incongruity perspective to humour was developed by Koestler (1964, cited by Martin, 2007) who coined bisociation to refer to the cognitive processes involved in humour in addition to creativity and scientific discovery. Bisociation occurs when an impression,

incident or situation is perceived simultaneously from two discordant frames of reference. Therefore, an event “is made to vibrate on two wavelengths” (Koestler 1964, p. 35). One example is a pun, which two different variations of a word or phrases are simultaneously brought together. For example, “why do people become bakers? Because they knead (need) the dough (money)”.

Incongruity theories have been credited with making important contributions to the understanding of humour. They drew the attention of theorists in the late 1960s and early 1970s to the cognitive-perceptual aspects of humour which were not seen as important features in the relief theories. However, the incongruity theories do not wholly account for all aspects of humour. More specifically, they do not explain the social and emotional aspects of humour that are important characteristics of other theories (Martin, 2007). Nonetheless, this research generally supports the notion that incongruity is an essential component of humour.

#### 2.5.4 Associated studies of incongruity theories of humour

A review of the literature of studies of the cognitive aspects of humour in the educational context focuses on children’s ability to understand humour, particularly irony and sarcasm. In general, older children (aged six or seven to eleven years of age) understand more complex forms of humour than do younger children (aged four to six years of age) (Shultz, 1972; Shultz & Horibe, 1974; Pien and Rothbart, 1976; De Groot, Kaplan and Rosenblatt, 1995; Dews, Hunt, Kaplan, Lim, Rosenblatt and Winner, 1996; Creusere,



2000; Glenwright, Hala, Kowbel, Jungen and Pexman, 2006; Alexander, Howe, Recchia & Ross, 2010). These studies provide evidence to support McGhee's (2002) model of humour development in terms of children's ability to comprehend more abstract forms of humour and the double meaning of words with advancing age.

However, like the research on humour and emotional coping in the educational context, research on the cognitive aspects of humour has been overwhelmingly conducted with quantitative methodologies. Similarly, studies in this area have been conducted by recruiting children or parents as participants rather than teachers. These studies may have been more compelling if they had included teachers' perspectives of how they think humour helps children learn in the classroom context.

A review of the literature revealed few studies of humour in the naturalistic context of the classroom. The promising findings by Schmidt (1994) and Ziv (1988) show that humour can be a powerful tool that can help students retain and recall learning material when humour is used in relation to learning. For example, Ziv (1988) investigated the effects of humour on student learning on a semester course of introductory statistics which was replicated in a second study. In the first study, one hundred and sixty-one students were randomly allocated to one of two groups. Both groups were taught by the same teachers who used prepared humour using jokes and cartoons relevant to the statistics course. Three to four jokes were used per lesson to avoid students' perceptions of the teachers as a clown or prevent student distraction from the content of the lesson. The students were

tested after fourteen weeks on the course.

The results were analysed using ANOVA to compare the scores to investigate any sex differences. It was found that there were no gender differences but the experimental group obtained significantly higher scores than the control group who received no humour at all during their lessons. A replication of this study found similar results using a different student population and teachers, in a college in Tel Aviv.

Earlier research showed that retention of information that is accompanied with humorous illustrations is most effective when the examples are relevant to the information taught and the test items are related to it (Kaplan and Pascoe, 1977). In a more recent study, Schmidt (2004) investigated the effects of humour on memory in a series of four experiments. Humorous and non humorous sentences were presented to forty five undergraduate students. It was found that a greater proportion of humorous sentences were recalled ( $M = .35$ ) than non humorous sentences ( $M = .27$ ). The results showed that sentence humour is an effective mnemonic variable. When sentences were carefully controlled, humorous sentences were recalled better than nonhumorous ones. Overall, the results suggested that humorous information receives both increased attention and rehearsal in comparison with nonhumorous material. The results from both Ziv's (1988) study and Schmidt's (1994), is that humour can be one contributory factor in increasing one's memory, listening, retention and recall. With this in mind, an aim of this current research is to explore whether teachers think they use humour to improve children's

cognitive skills in the classroom.

Thus far this chapter presented the relief and incongruity theories of humour which delineated their own explanations behind the occurrence of humour. For some, humour occurs either as a result of a release of stress and tension or reduction in arousal (e.g. Freud, 1905); for others humour occurs as a result of the resolution of an incongruity (e.g. Koestler, 1964). For others still, humour is a function of interpersonal connectedness and group cohesion (e.g. Davis, 2006). Using an all-encompassing approach, Apter (1982, cited by Collins and Wyer, 1992) argues that the *reversal theory* of humour incorporates the emotional and cognitive elements of the aforementioned theories and extends to address the interpersonal aspect of humour development in children. As this is the most comprehensive and integrative theory of humour (Martin, 2007; Collins and Wyer, 1992), it appears appropriate to use reversal theory as the foundation on which this research is based as it incorporates the social, emotional and cognitive aspects of humour.

#### 2.5.5 Reversal Theory

The social aspect of humour cannot be understated (Martin, 2007). Humans laugh and joke more frequently with other individuals than when they are alone (Fischer and Provine, 1989). Individuals do laugh when they are by themselves, including watching comedy programmes, reading a humorous book or recalling a personal experience. However, these are partly social in nature, as they respond to TV characters or those in a book, or reliving a memory of an incident that involved other people.

The social context of humour is one of play. In fact, humour is a means of interacting in a playful manner. Peoples' ability to produce humour to amuse one another appears to have developed as a way of providing people with extended opportunities for play. Apter (1982) viewed humour as a form of playful activity. He believed that individuals engage in one of two states: the paratelic state and the telic state. The paratelic condition is the playful state. This is concerned with attaining goals but achieving them is secondary. The telic state is concerned with achieving goals and humour is enjoyed for its own sake. Individuals switch back and forth from one state to the other, being playful or not during the course of a typical day. This is the reason behind the name reversal theory. In the telic state, high arousal is unpleasant (anxiety) and low arousal is preferred (relaxation). In contrast, in the paratelic state, low arousal is unpleasant (boredom) and high arousal is pleasurable (excitement).

To increase their degree of arousal in the paratelic state, individuals engage in exciting activities such as hang gliding, roller coasters and other forms of risk taking. Even normally negative emotions can be seen as enjoyable even in the paratelic state as shown by the popularity of horror movies. Emotionally arousing features that may be present in humour, including sexual and aggressive subject matter are ways of increasing the pleasurable feelings of arousal and as a consequence make the humour appear funnier (Freud 1928; 1960). Similarly, humour includes subjects that would usually arouse feelings of disgust and revulsion including "sick" jokes that can be enjoyed because of

the way they add to the pleasurable arousal when one is in the paratelic frame of mind. Therefore, humour accounts for the tendentious features of humour in times of their arousal-increasing effects.

This theory also addresses the cognitive aspects of humour. Apter (1982) developed the concept of synergy to describe the cognitive process in which two incongruous perceptions of the same item are simultaneously retained in one's mind. In the playful, paratelic state synergies are enjoyable and emotionally arousing, eliciting the gratifying sensation of having one's perceptions alternate back and forth between two contrary interpretations of a notion.

Collins and Wyer (1992) argue that, as well as addressing the cognitive aspects of humour, the reversal theory of humour addresses the social aspects. By including the social aspects of humour, Apter (1982) was able to propose a series of necessary conditions for humour elicitation that apply not only to jokes and cartoons but also to witticisms and fortuitous social experiences that were not intended to be funny. Apter (1982) argued that the information in a joke or statement, that is told in a social context not only involve people, objects or events to which the joke or statement makes reference. To comprehend the dynamics of humour, all parts of the experience must be considered, including the social characteristics which are assigned to people in the jokes. Apter (1982) identified two factors that affect humour elicitation: non-replacement and diminishment. To illustrate these factors, consider the following joke:

A young Catholic priest is walking through town when he is accosted by a prostitute. “How about a quickie for twenty dollars?” she asks.

The priest, puzzled, shakes her off and continues on his way, only to be stopped by another prostitute. “Twenty dollars for a quickie,” she offers. Again, he breaks free and goes up the street. Later, as he is nearing his home in the country, he meets a nun. “Pardon me, sister,” he asks, “but what’s a quickie?”

“Twenty dollars,” she says, “The same as it is in town.”

The above joke provides examples of two shifts in interpretation. One is a semantic shift in the interpretation of “What’s a quickie?” The initial interpretation leads one to think that the priest asked “What does ‘a quickie’ mean?” the nun’s response however creates an alternative interpretation, particularly “What does a quickie cost?” The second shift happens in the view from being a nun alone to being a prostitute in addition. In each case however the first interpretation is not negated by the second; i.e. the reinterpretation “What is a quickie?” that is implied by the nun’s reply does not negate the interpretation that was apparently intended by the priest.

Another objective to note is that the nun who is meant to be holy and assumed to have the characteristics associated with members of the social category is diminished in value as a result of being a nun on the side. In this way, both factors proposed by Apter (1982) are imperative for humour elicitation.

#### 2.5.6 Associated social studies

A study that supports Apter's (1982) theory was reported by Nehrhardt (1976, cited by Collins and Wyer, 1992). Blindfolded subjects were asked to estimate several weights. After a number of trials they tried a weight that was either heavier or lighter than the others. This elicited some amusement amongst the subjects which leads to the question why. This can be addressed by the diminishment assumption. In other words it appeared reasonable to assume that the subjects who came across the deviant weight felt they were being deceived and that the experiment was not a serious study of weight estimation After all. The subjects reinterpreted the event as a whole less important task than their original interpretation and this reinterpretation generated amusement.

This aspect of Apter's (1982) theory is of interest to the researcher as, in association with teachers' understanding of age related humour; an aim is to explore the variety of reactions of students who comprehend teachers' humour without being amused. In other words, do the reactions of the students include moans, wry smiles, sarcasm or witty banter? The reactions of the students that have been observed by teachers may show some demonstration of teachers' insight into the way in which teachers feel about humour in their relationship with their students.

While Apter's (1982) theory does not directly refer to the teachers' use of humour and the quality of the student-teacher relationship, the theory highlighted the importance of

the social aspect of humour which appeals to the researcher. The following studies are included because they discuss the use of teachers' humour and how its use impacts on the nature of the student-relationship in the educational context.

Other research which has focused on the social aspect of humour development in children relates to Davis's (2006) exploration of the relationship between students and elementary school teachers. Davis (2006) found that both teachers and students identified humour as a significant factor in helping them to 'develop connections with each other' (p. 209) showing that humour is an essential ingredient in establishing a healthy student-teacher relationship. This in turn, as Davis (2006) reported, contributes towards student motivation and academic achievement. Davis' (2006) study is included to compare with the findings in this current research in order to explore whether teachers perceive the function of humour to be one that builds and strengthens student-teacher relationships.

Davis (2006) conducted a year- long study collecting and analysing survey data from 905 students and twenty five teachers; interview data from six students and six teachers and journal data from twenty eight teachers who lived within a rural (unknown) area. She used inductive methods on the interviews, journal data and regression analysis on the survey data. Although she used, in the main, quantitative data collection and analysis methods, she used a large sample population producing results which could be generalised to the whole population of teachers and students from a similar setting.



In an attempt to assess the quality of the student-teacher relationship, Davis (2006) used interview data. Humour was a factor that was identified as that which had an impact on the quality of the student-teacher relationship. Davis (2006) did not seek to explore teachers' views about their use of humour in the classroom. Neither did she seek to explore what role teachers thought humour played in the classroom context. This current research adds to the existing research in that teachers' views of humour are explored with teachers. In addition, teachers were asked about the role that humour played in the context of the classroom.

The important contribution that this finding makes to this current study is concerned with interpersonal development and how humour can be involved in the classroom for both motivation and learning. This current study builds on research completed by Davis (2006) by exploring how teachers used humour to build rapport with their students. By using qualitative research rather than survey data, the teachers in this current study will have the opportunity to elaborate on how they facilitate this bond. Davis's (2006) study is further supported by Fovet (2009) who investigated teachers' and student's views about teachers' use of humour with adolescents with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Fovet (2009) used a mixed methods approach to obtain the views, both from participants in Canada and the UK. Twenty questionnaires were sent to teachers and students whose responses were correlated with one another. In addition, three focus groups were conducted with teachers to further investigate teachers'

perceptions. Remarks and responses were taped and transcribed.

It was found that most teachers rated humour as a tool of crucial importance and as something that they frequently used. The majority of teachers also reported using humour confidently but all reported using humour instinctively rather than in a pre-meditated way. Again, the majority of teachers felt that humour signified a degree of openness on their part to compromise. Teachers were also more willing to build a personal relationship with their students. The use of humour as a door to teachers' openness and negotiation with students is congruent with humour that leads to an 'implied bond' between teachers and their students (Martin, 1983; Woods, 1983, as cited by Fovet, 2009).

Fovet's (2009) study showed that humour enabled a mutual bond to occur in the face of institutional circumstances and events beyond the control of the students, such as having to take exams. The use of humour also enabled teachers to verbalise their feelings with their students in difficult and potentially overwhelming situations when expressing their allegiance against authority figures.

However, when evaluating Fovet's (2009) research, the researcher became interested in a more general view about teachers' perceptions of their use of humour, with all of the students that they work with, that is, not only with students who have been diagnosed with SEBD. Fovet's (2009) study appears to suggest that the function of humour was to

support teachers' relationship specifically with children with SEBD whereas this current research was interested in teachers' views who teach in mainstream contexts. Therefore, the focus of this research is focused on teachers who teach some students who have no needs and others who do have needs, including, and other than, SEBD. The teachers who participated in the research may include those with autism, adhd or specific learning difficulties. Therefore, this research may involve talking with teachers who teach a broader range of children with needs rather than just students with SEBD.

Furthermore, Fovet (2009) used focus groups to obtain his data. The disadvantage of using this method is that, while all members of a group have an equal opportunity to express their views, some participants may find it difficult to have their views heard or included. This results in missing contributions that may be invaluable to the quality of the research, whereas in interviews, the views of individual participants is more likely to be noted. In addition, unlike focus groups, it is possible to obtain in-depth and rich information from an individual which is not possible in focus groups (Mertens, 2005). In this current research, the semi structured interview will enable the researcher to further explore, prompt and probe the participant and seek further elaboration on the responses. Furthermore, in the semi structured interview, the researcher is able to build a rapport with the participant. Rapport may enable the participant to relax in the interviewer's company and disclose more open and honest answers which is less likely in focus groups. In this current research, it is hoped that the semi structured interview would enable the researcher to put the participant at ease and develop a good rapport with all the teachers

who would divulge their perceptions without reservation.

Although Fovet's (2009) study was partly based in the UK and used qualitative methods of analysis for the focus groups, this current research expands Fovet's study because the perceptions sought are from teachers who teach primary aged students in general, rather than students with social, emotional, behaviour difficulties in particular.

The research findings that provide evidence for the relief and incongruity theories may also be viewed as supportive evidence of the reversal theory of humour. A review of the literature has revealed some research by Davis (2006) and Fovet (2009) whose studies have highlighted the importance of the role that humour can play in the shaping of positive teacher-student relationships. The exploration of humour as an ingredient in building student-teacher relationships is of relevance to this current study.

In summary, the reversal theory of humour is the framework underlying this current research because of the incorporation of the social, emotional and cognitive aspects of humour development which were not collectively taken into account by the other theories. By exploring these areas, the researcher aimed to find out the degree to which teachers thought they facilitated these areas of children's development.

The reversal theory of humour has implications for this current study. The first consideration was whether teachers define humour as a playful entity which is distinct

from a serious state and how they consider being in a playful frame of mind while working in a serious context. If teachers themselves switch between a playful and serious state when they are engaging in humour with their students, how would they perceive their mediation of these states in their students? Given that classrooms may be frequently viewed as serious, academic contexts which may require teachers and students to be in telic states (Kerr and Tacon, 1999 cited by Collins and Wyer, 1992), the inclusion of humour may consequently require good classroom management techniques. Second, this study aimed to explore whether teachers felt their humour facilitated their students' cognitive understanding of humour and whether they, like Rareshide (1993) "cognitively matched" their humour with their students' level of understanding of the construct. A third aim of this research was to explore whether teachers view themselves as facilitators of the development of coping skills in children through their use of humour. This chapter has outlined one model of humour development in children and the main theories of humour. It was imperative to focus next on the research on humour in the educational context as teachers' use of humour in the classroom was the context of this current research.

## 2.6 Humour in educational contexts

In general, researchers have found that humour in the classroom helps to reduce stress and tension; enhances student-teacher relationships; creates a relaxing atmosphere; increases student's motivation and academic achievement (Davis, 2006; Erikson and Feldstien, 2007; Janes and Olson, 2000; Steele, 1998; Rainsberger, 1994; Rosenfeld and

Stuart, 1994; Schmidt, 2004; Ziv 1988). Studies of the teachers' use of humour in the classroom are described and followed more specifically by teachers' views of their use of humour in the educational context.

#### 2.6.1 Descriptive studies of teachers' use of humour in the classroom

A review of the literature in the educational context has revealed descriptive studies of teachers' use of humour in the classroom (Martin, 2007). A number of researchers have investigated the many ways in which teachers use humour in the educational context (Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Wanzer and Frymier, 1999; 2006; Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001). On the other hand, although one would recommend that the teasing and ridicule of students should be avoided, aggressive humour may be more common than is assumed. On the other hand the research also suggests that the value of humour in the classroom may be associated with facilitating a sense of immediacy. Immediacy is an educational concept that refers to the close bond that teachers form with their students in contrast to remaining distant (Andersen, 1979). This appears similar to the idea that humour helps to build and reinforce student-teacher relationships formerly described by Davis (2006) and Fovet (2009). It appears that humour may be one means by which teachers can reduce the psychological distance between themselves and their students by increasing the degree of immediacy. Andersen's (1979) idea of immediacy, that is, a bond that teachers build with their students by using humour, is relevant here as the use of constructive humour can build the student-teacher relationship, reinforcing Davis's (2006) and Fovet's (2009) findings. Results of other studies of teachers' use of humour in the educational context

revealed significant positive correlations between teachers' positive types of humour and immediacy (Christophel and Gorham 1990; Frymier and Wanzer 1999; 2006). In this way, humour appears to be one feature of a broader series of teachers' behaviours that contribute to immediacy.

These studies however, sought the views of American college students who were asked to observe and record instances when teachers used humour and assessed the degree to which the teachers engaged in immediacy behaviours. Students' views were also sought regarding their evaluations of their teachers and perceptions of their teachers' humour to perceptions of learning. More relevantly, the following studies are presented as they have generated data which came from the perspective of teachers as well as students. However, they are also included here as they generally describe how teachers reported using humour in the classroom.

#### 2.6.2 Teachers' views of their use of humour in the educational context

In a study that investigated teachers' humour in the classroom from the perspective of the teachers themselves, Neuliep (1991) performed a large-scale survey by mailing 388 questionnaires to high school teachers and university lecturers regarding the frequency of their humour in the classroom, its appropriateness and their reasons behind the employment of humour. The teachers were also asked to record the most recent incidences in which they used humour in the classroom. Neuliep (1991) devised a taxonomy of humour based on their responses and categorised them: 1) *teachers-directed*

*humour* which included self-deprecation or described a personal experience which was embarrassing; 2) *student-targeted humour* which included insulting jokes or teasing a student about a mistake; 3) *untargeted humour* which included telling jokes, incongruities or facetious communication; 4) *external source of humour*, for example, identifying with humorous historical situations, using a cartoon that is linked or disassociated with the subject and 5) *non-verbal humour* including making a funny facial expression, humorous vocal sounds or humorous physical positions. Despite teachers' awareness of the potential threat to use aggressive humour, ten per cent of the humour used involved teasing, insults and jokes targeted towards students.

In another study that focused on teachers' views of their humour, White (2001) conducted a study involving a comparison of two surveys which investigated the use of humour in the classroom from the viewpoint of university professors *and* their students. He mailed a questionnaire to 365 university teachers in fourteen Arkansas universities. The response rate was thirty five - approximately 126 teachers. A second questionnaire was posted to 206 students who attended sixty five institutions. White (2001) reported that he received a one hundred percent return rate but gave no reasons as to why this occurred.

It was found that the majority of teachers and students agreed in terms of how teachers used humour: eighty five per cent of students and ninety six per cent of professors felt that humour was used to relieve stress. The same percentage of teachers and students felt



that humour was used to gain attention and eighty per cent of students and ninety three per cent of professors felt that creating a learning environment was the third objective for using humour. Additionally, both groups felt that humour should not be used to embarrass students, to intimidate them or to retaliate against students. The greatest variance between the two groups emerged in regards to the use of humour to handle an unpleasant situation with fifty nine per cent of students believed that humour was appropriate compared with fifteen per cent of faculty. There were also discrepancies between the professors and students using humour to provoke thinking (fifty six per cent of students compared with seventy nine per cent of professors) to motivate students (sixty five per cent of students, compared with eighty three per cent of faculty) and to reinforce their knowledge (forty five per cent of students compared with seventy seven per cent of teachers).

Unfortunately, in terms of the validity of the surveys which were postal questionnaires, it is not known whether respondents who completed the questionnaire did so accurately and honestly and whether those who did not return their questionnaire would have given the same responses. Empirical research on effects of humour in education are limited, the majority of the studies have been conducted from the viewpoint of college students rather than teachers. In addition, most of these studies have employed quantitative methods of data collection and of analysis rather than qualitative research.

These studies however, have highlighted important contributions to this current study.

The studies reviewed have shown that teachers use more aggressive humour than might be thought, teachers use humour in a variety of ways that are aggressive as well as positive, either towards themselves or others. Humour also appears to be one component that contributes towards the development of student-teacher relationships. More specifically, studies from teachers' perspectives have produced a detailed taxonomy of their humour thus, resulting in an index of the variety of ways in which teachers use humour. The current research was designed to explore the ways teachers purported to use humour, from their perspective by interviewing them rather than use quantitative methods of data collection and analysis.

## 2.7 Synthesis of the literature review

Fink (2005) referred to the synthesis in the following way,

*'...the synthesis is used in describing the status of current knowledge about the topic, justifying the need for significance of new research...and describing the quality of the available research'* (p. 186)

### 2.7.1 Current knowledge

Despite a growing body of research that has focused on humour in the educational context, the search for an empirical definition of humour by which researchers can be guided or a definition about which researchers can agree, appears to be under investigated. In one attempt to define the construct, humour has been deemed to involve

positive connotations, while in another attempt, humour has been described as a multi-faceted concept (Martin, 2007). In attempts to explain humour and what the concept constitutes, various theories of humour have provided explanations but from varying perspectives.

In the context of humour in education from students' perspectives, evidence has shown that university teachers use humour in various ways, with many teachers using humour more negatively than may first be assumed. Some teachers may use humour that is related to course material, in aggressive, self-deprecating, verbal or non-verbal ways. Other research suggests that teachers use humour appropriately: as an effective means to motivate their students, provoke their thinking and to relieve stress. More importantly, research on studies from the viewpoint of teachers revealed that teachers associated their use of humour with the enhancement of their students' learning as well as using humour for a variety of other purposes. A review of the literature has revealed limited studies on an increasing body of research on students' ability to understand adults who use humour but none are on teachers' views on their students' ability to comprehend their humour. Similarly, although a growing body of research exists on teachers' use of humour to reduce stress and tension in the classroom as well as students' ability to cope with challenges, the majority of these are from students' perspectives.

#### 2.7.2 The need for and significance of new research

To date, there has been no known, qualitative, UK-based research conducted from the

viewpoint of the primary school teachers regarding their perceptions of their use of humour in primary school. This study was an attempt to fill that gap. The current study involves semi-structured interviews with eight primary school teachers who teach students aged seven to eleven years. In the absence of an empirical definition of humour, this study aimed to ask teachers how they define humour as regular users of the concept. The significance of this new research could be useful in helping teachers reflect on how they currently use humour and how teachers in training and newly qualified teachers could use humour constructively to promote children's capacity for coping, learning and interpersonal development. Additionally, this current research also provides the opportunity for EPs to consider how humour can be used in practice with parents and students.

### 2.7.3 Methodology – the quality of current research

The majority of the existing research reviewed used a quantitative approach where most of the researchers administered surveys or questionnaires to university settings. While the researcher is able to administer these methods of data collection anonymously to a large number of participants and yield considerable amounts of data as a result, the methods do not obtain in-depth, rich information that can be provided by interviews (Mertens, 2005). While the use of quantitative methodologies in the research has provided fascinating evidence of humour studies in the educational context, qualitative research that utilises an in-depth exploratory approach of teachers' use of humour in class from the teachers' viewpoint is limited. Qualitative methodologies can add to the existing repertoire of the

knowledge of humour in the educational context. With this in mind the following research questions were presented.

## 2.8 Research questions

How do primary school teachers define humour?

What are primary teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom?

## 2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter began with an overview and continued to describe studies that generally used humour in the educational context and children's development of humour. An outline of the major theories were presented and were followed by supportive evidence from the viewpoint of teachers. A theoretical framework was also presented that underlies this current research.

The following chapter focuses on the epistemological position of this research which this research is based. Unlike the majority of studies in this area, this research adopts a social constructionist position as teachers socially construct the meanings underlying and attributing to humour.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The previous chapter presented an outline of the stages of humour development in children and the various theories that provide a broader understanding of the concept. In addition, a review of previous research in teachers' use of humour in the educational context was also presented.

#### 3.1 Overview

This chapter explores the epistemological and methodological framework that informs this qualitative research (3.2). Social constructionism (3.2.1) is the researcher's epistemological position in this research. Qualitative research is the methodology concerning this research (3.2.2). Credibility and confirmability (3.2.3), transferability, authenticity, subjectivity (3.2.4) and reflexivity (3.2.5), are criteria that judge the quality of qualitative research. The method (3.3) used to collect the data, respondents (3.3.1) selected, the context and location (3.3.2) of the study, and the procedure of the project (3.3.3) are also outlined. Ethical considerations were included to protect the respondents (3.4). Thematic analysis (3.5) was used to analyse the data and the chapter ends with a summary (3.6).

#### 3.2 Epistemological and methodological framework

The existing research into teachers' use of humour in the educational context from the

quantitative, positivist paradigm revealed the ways in which teachers used humour. One of the most valuable means reported was the way in which humour impacted on students' learning (Ziv, 1988). It is possible in Ziv's (1988) study and that of others (i.e. Neuliep, 1991; White, 2001) that humour served a variety of functions that shaped the views of the students and teachers. In the absence of a known, empirical definition of humour, this raises the question about how humour may be conceptualized by individuals. This, in turn, with reference to this research, provokes thinking about ontology and epistemology. That is, issues about the nature of reality that is 'humour' and how may it be known.

Ontology refers to the nature of the world, i.e. what 'is' (Mertens, 2005). In this current research for example, in ontological terms, a question may be asked, what is humour and how is it perceived by primary school teachers? Epistemology refers to how knowledge of the world may be produced, i.e. how we come to know things. Epistemology is concerned with how one finds out about the phenomenon. From the social constructionist viewpoint 'humour' may be understood as a concept which is socially constructed by individuals (Mertens, 2005).

Methodology refers to the kind of approach used to research topics (Mertens, 2005). The methodology used in this research project is qualitative. A researcher who is a social constructionist will approach research topics through the collection of data rather than through theoretical frameworks. Social constructionism is introduced with its rationale for this research.

### 3.2.1 Social Constructionist assumptions

Social constructionists believe that things which individuals take for granted as real, natural and true are in fact created by culture, history and language (McGhee, 2001). This means that what is viewed and experienced is not simply a direct replication of what is observed but what must be interpreted and inferred. This suggests that there is not one single correct way of knowing something but there are multiple ways, based on those different interpretations. Although determined by personal taste, the degree to which individuals find something humorous is reliant upon a range of factors, including geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, intelligence and context. In terms of age, for example, young children may enjoy slapstick forms of humour, while adults may appreciate more satirical forms of humour. In terms of cultural contexts, as mentioned in the previous chapter, research suggests that despite its universality, Singaporean people told less sexual jokes than Americans, perhaps due to the conservative nature of Singaporean society (Nevo & Nevo, 2001).

Historically, the majority of research on humour was conducted during the last twenty years in America, possibly when political correctness came to the forefront of western society. While the existing research on teachers' use of humour in the classroom found that aggressive humour was more commonly used by teachers than was initially thought (e.g. Christophel and Gorham, 1990), subsequent research began to consider distinctions between the appropriateness and inappropriateness of teachers' humour in the educational



context (e.g. Frymier and Wanzer, 1999). McGhee (2001) pointed out that constructionist accounts are concerned with objects and subjects (people) that are an aspect of social practices that emerge from, and reproduce meanings. In contrast with previous research, this current research, which is based in the UK and conducted in the twenty first century, seeks to explore the meanings of humour which are constructed by the teachers and how they felt their humour was used in social practices in the context of the British classroom.

The acknowledgement that humour is perceptively variant and used differently historically and culturally means that there is not one single correct view of a particular social construct such as humour, but that different meanings are held by different individuals. Rather than hold a direct view of the surroundings, it is more important to explore the interpretations of situations in the surroundings. In this current research, it is the teachers' various perceptions, experiences and views of how they use humour in the classroom based on their experiences that is of primary concern rather than an investigation of the number of respondents who responded in a particular way. The research data obtained from such frequencies is often the focus of quantitative research. In contrast, the data obtained from qualitative research, affords more depth because of the wider variety of ways in which teachers respond.

Another belief underlying social constructionism is that individuals' knowledge of the world is constructed from the social processes and interactions that people have with each other (Burr, 1995). In this research, the understanding of humour is constructed by people

who develop shared versions of the knowledge of the construct through the use of the language that they use. The kinds of words used to describe perceptions and experiences of humour are important as they shape the ways in which teachers discuss the construct. From the social constructionist position, humour is not a consequence of unbiased observations of the world but of the social interactions in which individuals are engaged (Burr, 1995).

This epistemological position lends itself to the use of qualitative methods. In order to understand the different perceptions held by the teachers, it is important to ask them what they think about how they use humour. This can be achieved using qualitative research. The rationale for this methodology is provided below.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative research

Willig (2008) argues that qualitative research enables the researcher to investigate meanings. It provides the researcher with an opportunity to explore the perceptions and interpretations that respondents place on a construct. This consequently leads to the development of real insights into new perspectives. Qualitative research also captures the individual's viewpoint through in-depth interviewing which will be discussed further. Qualitative research allows the researcher to feel more connected to the research, in contrast to quantitative research. In addition, the richness of data can be obtained which is much valued by qualitative researchers (Cramer & Howitt, 2005).

Unsurprisingly, the aims of qualitative versus quantitative research are very different. The former is concerned with understanding the meaning of a phenomenon while the latter is generally concerned with understanding the causes of a phenomenon. The quantitative researcher may want to find out ‘what factors cause humour to occur?’ while a qualitative researcher may alternatively ask, ‘what do teachers understand by how, when and why they use humour in the classroom?’ The quantitative investigator may seek to test whether the phenomenon can be produced under certain conditions (normally in a laboratory). In order to understand meaning, however, a qualitative researcher may seek to interpret the processes and structures that give cultural and social significance to the phenomenon in real world settings (Mertens, 2005).

As the aim of this research is to obtain detailed information about teachers’ perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom, interviews are the method of choice. Quantitative research examines the use of validity and reliability to assess the rigorousness of the studies. Qualitative research has been criticised for lacking the same rigorous standards as quantitative research. McGhee (2001) argued that qualitative research has been belittled for failing to produce valid or reliable observations as they are inherently subjective. They cannot be reliable in the traditional sense as each researcher brings with them their own subjectivity.

Some advocates of qualitative research, such as Guba and Lincoln (1985), have devised alternative criteria to the rigorous standards used in quantitative research. Some of the ways in which the quality of qualitative research can be assessed is to refer to the

credibility and confirmability, transferability, authenticity, subjectivity and reflexivity of the research.

### 3.2.3 Credibility and confirmability

Defendants of qualitative research have now argued that the quality in qualitative research can be assessed using an alternative set of criteria to that of quantitative research (Mays and Pope, 2005; Yardley, 2009; Davidson, Fossey, Harvey and McDermott, 2002). Mertens (2005) argues that *credibility* refers to the correspondence between the ways that the respondent perceives social constructs with the way the researcher portrays their view of the construct. Member checks can be used whereby the researcher confirms the respondent's constructions as they are developing. For example, at the end of the interview, the researcher in this study summarised and clarified the respondents' views, thus enhancing the researcher's ability to represent others' viewpoints accurately. Willig (2008) argued that qualitative researchers should link examples with analytic categories in their accounts to illustrate their understandings. This *grounding in examples* enables the reader to examine the congruent correspondence between the researcher's interpretations and the data. This research used examples from the transcripts to illustrate the researcher's understandings of the teachers' views of how they use humour. Finally, Mertens (2005) refers to *confirmability* which measures the extent to which the researcher's conclusions and interpretations are evidenced from the data. In this research, a colleague of the researcher reviewed and discussed some of the interview transcripts with the aim of determining if the conclusions and understandings were located in the

data and were 'not figments of the researcher's imagination' (Mertens, 2005, p.15).

#### Transferability

Transferability refers to the researcher's ability to provide enough detail in order for the reader to assess the degree to which the conclusions drawn in one setting can be transferred to another (Horrocks and King, 2010). However, because of the small sample size, the researcher in this current research hoped to ensure that the finding in this current research could also be found in other primary and elementary schools in other boroughs in London, other parts of the UK and in other countries.

#### Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the extent to which the respondents' views are presented in their own words and their quotes are presented verbatim (Davidson, Fossey, Harvey and McDermott, 2002). The researcher used an audio tape recorder to record the respondents' responses which were then transcribed verbatim. In this way, the voices of the respondents were recorded in their own words. A broad range of views and voices of the respondents are represented in the analysis, to give the reader the understanding that a scope of views are represented, particularly when teachers discussed what 'humour' meant to them. The interpretations of the data were recognisable to those respondents who discussed their experiences of using humour in the classroom. For example, the researcher aimed to check whether the interpretations of data were linked closely with the ways in which teachers reported using humour. If a participant felt that he or she used

humour to aid the students' learning, the researcher looked for comments in the transcript that linked with the ways in which the teachers related the humour to the learning material.

#### 3.2.4 Subjectivity

Two of the theoretical assumptions that sit alongside the social constructionist approach are subjectivity and reflexivity. Researchers who use a positivist paradigm claim that their results represent the truth and objectivity. Researchers who use a traditional scientific approach claim to be able to stand back from their own humanity and reveal the objective nature of the study without bias and influence of their own personal involvement. However, according to the social constructionist position, objectivity is impossible to achieve, given that individuals encounter the world from their own perspective and develop theories and hypotheses from the assumptions made from their own viewpoint.

In contemporary interview research, Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) argued that issues may arise concerning the lack of explicit formulations of research questions to a text. They distinguish between *biased subjectivity* and *perspectival subjectivity* to help the reader understand the importance of interpreting the meaning that different researchers would assign to the same interview. Biased subjectivity refers to the researcher's only attention being made to the evidence that supports their own views, selecting only, and reporting on those comments that justify their own conclusions, while overlooking any other

alternative evidence (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009). In contrast, perspectival subjectivity refers to the way in which the researcher employs a variety of views and different questions to the same interview and identifies different interpretations. When the researcher's various perspectives are made explicit, the different analyses should also be logical. Subjectivity in this sense is not a flaw but proof of the productiveness and dynamism of interview research (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2009).

The purpose of the interpretation of the interview data was to analyse teachers' perceptions of their use of humour. The researcher hoped to exercise perspectival subjectivity to acknowledge the different possible interpretations of the same interview. For example, if teachers were asked about the form of humour that they used in class on one particular occasion, the researcher may interpret the responses to mean that the same teachers may use either self-deprecating humour to raise a laugh at their own expense or self-enhancing humour to model a positive outlook despite making a mistake before raising a laugh at oneself. The researcher attempted to ensure that her own views of humour were not imposed on the views of the respondents when they were asked to discuss the types of humour that appealed to them and the reasons behind their choice. The researcher has outlined the type of humour that appeals to her to explicitly reveal her subjectivities to the reader, and how they may have shaped her interpretations of the interviews.

The researcher's own view of humour is that which involves individuals coming together

and sharing a joke, particularly in ethnic humour, i.e. the laughter that arises from the humour found in afro Caribbean culture that only members within it can understand. Humour related to the afro Caribbean lifestyle including the language spoken, dress code, hair styles and discipline may be the butt of afro Caribbean jokes that typify such humour. TV programmes such as *Desmonds*, *The Lenny Henry show*, and *The Fosters* all contain ethnic humour with which afro Caribbean families can identify. For example, another TV series *No Problem* was a comedy show consisting of a family of five adults whose parents had returned back to the Caribbean. Although the characters were first generation siblings, they retained a lot of the afro Caribbean culture. Although most of the characters spoke in Standard English, they frequently 'broke out' into the patois (a dialect that is spoken in Jamaica) if they were feeling an emotion. As a family, they ate afro Caribbean food such as ackee and salt fish, a traditional dish. Hair care was an issue with which many viewers of the programme could identify. Black hair care is something which has been a longstanding issue for women. Care around combing, straightening, moisturisation and styling have been a topic for decades. The female characters in the programme wore their hair in braids or dreadlocks which are styles that are frequently used today. Black females can relate to the issues of hair care that involve styling it in a presentable way and finding humour in it.

Other shows which do not involve ethnic humour but still appealed to the researcher by bringing about a sense of cohesiveness was the TV series *Friends*. The various characters had their own, personalities which are humorous in various ways. However, although



they were amusing in different ways, the characters seldom laughed at each other and always expressed how fond they were of each other. It is possible that many individuals would be familiar with at least one episode of *Friends* and would be able to identify with something that one of the characters has experienced. An additional element to the show is the canned laughter that may contribute to the compulsion of laughter from the audience at home.

A favourite comedian of the researcher is Graham Norton. Graham appears to exceed the social boundaries of UK culture. Some of his humour may shock some audiences but also involves making fun of individuals who do not appear to live their lives 'like the rest of us'. The targets of Graham's jokes tend to be rich celebrities who have vast wealth, or aristocrats such as the royals. The jokes bring about a sense of unity among the audience while the 'out group' are the celebrities.

The researcher was aware of the benefits and challenges while revealing her own preferred humour to the participants. The challenge related to the negative features of the humour which may be unappealing and undesirable to the participants. For example, the humour utilised by Graham Norton, may be risky humour that includes exceeding the social boundaries, producing humour at the expense of such individuals as the royals and celebrities to initiate laughter. This form of aggressive humour may be unattractive to the teachers in this current research, who may feel that humour in class should be positive to students' well-being. In terms of the TV series *Friends*, aggressive and self-defeating

humour might have been used between and within the characters to elicit humour. This may again be considered unattractive to some of the teachers in this research, despite the fact that the characters have affection for one another and are a cohesive group of friends.

Despite the potential drawbacks, the researcher felt that there were benefits associated with the disclosure of her preferred humour to the participants. First, as a celebrity comedian and chat show host, Graham Norton could also be viewed as an individual with great observation skills and insight into peoples' characters who is able to pick out others' flaws and exaggerate them. In addition, Graham also possesses a sarcastic nature which may appeal to some teachers' preferred sense of humour and the way in which he communicates the humour.

Second, by revealing her preferred humour, the researcher aimed to build rapport with the participants to reduce any potential psychological distance that might have existed in a power imbalance between her and the participants. By showing that she enjoyed humour that was riské or inappropriate at times, the researcher aimed to be seen as someone with whom teachers could be open and honest in terms of their preferred humour.

The above examples show the reader that the researcher was aware of her subjectivities and preference for humour. However, rather than claim to be objective in this research,

the researcher understood the need to acknowledge the influence of her own biases that could have shaped the interpretations of the participants' responses. At the same time however, the researcher aimed to explore and understand the perceptions of teachers whose views were different to her own. The researcher made no attempt to introduce her preference for humour or comedy until the participant had expressed their own. This is discussed further in the discussion chapter in this thesis.

The aim of qualitative research is therefore to acknowledge and work with the researcher's own intrinsic involvement in the research process and the role that this plays in the findings that are produced. Researchers must view the research as a co production between themselves and the people they are researching (McGhee, 2001). In this current research, the researcher aimed to understand the experiences of the teachers' use of humour. In this way, teachers gave full accounts from their perspective without any influence from the researcher's view of humour in terms of how humour was used in her classroom, or how the construct could be used. Another aim of the researcher was to represent the data authentically. However, it is important to acknowledge the degree to which the researcher has influenced the research process and data collection. Biases need to be acknowledged from the outset in order to enhance the credibility of the findings (Mays and Pope, 2005). This is referred to as reflexivity which is detailed in the following section.

### 3.2.5 Reflexivity

Qualitative methodologies can be categorised in terms of the degree to which they stress reflexivity and by the emphasis they place on the influence of language (Willig, 2008). Reflexivity includes an awareness of our own contribution to the construction of meanings and the impossibility of conducting research whilst remaining ‘outside of’ this subject matter. Personal reflexivity refers to the means by which our own attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and political interests influence the research (Willig, 2008). It also implies how the research may have altered the researcher’s way of thinking as a person and as a researcher (Mays and Pope, 2005; Willig, 2008).

In this current research, the researcher hoped to use her good interpersonal skills with the respondents in order to enable the respondents to speak openly and freely about their experiences of their use of humour in the classroom. In particular, the researcher hoped to obtain information from the teachers who felt sufficiently relaxed because of the development of the positive interviewer-interviewee relationship. The teachers may have felt that, because they had not built a positive rapport with the researcher, they may have felt reticent about disclosing too much information that may have made them feel inadequate users of humour or poor teachers. However, by using skills of empathy, open ended questions and probes, the researcher aimed to obtain in-depth and rich information about the ways in which their use of humour ended with a negative outcome such as students’ misinterpretations of teachers’ humour. This information may be used to reinforce the ways in which humour should not be used and raise the need to be aware of

pitfalls in the use of humour in the classroom.

Epistemological reflexivity, in contrast, compels the researcher to address questions such as how the research describes and restricts what can be ‘found’? How has the research design and analysis constructed the data and findings? What alternative ways could the research have been investigated? To what degree could this research have produced different understandings of the phenomenon? Therefore, epistemological reflexivity empowers researchers to think about how our assumptions of the world influence the research and findings (Willig, 2008).

While social constructionism describes how knowledge is acquired, and methodology refers to the approach of the topic, methods are concerned with the research tools used to gather information. Semi structured interviews were used in this research. Given that humour is viewed from the social constructionist perspective which is congruent with exploring what teachers think about their use of the construct, it follows that the semi-structured interview is the most appropriate method to utilise.

### 3.3 Method

The benefits of interviews have been outlined by Roulston (2010) and form the rationale for this method of choice for this research. She argued that in using interviews it is possible to obtain a fuller range of in-depth information that cannot be obtained by using quantitative methods and analyses. In addition, unlike questionnaires, interviews give researchers the opportunity to develop a rapport with the respondent. Furthermore, the

semi-structured and unstructured interview can be used flexibly. The actual words used in questions may be different for different respondents where misunderstandings and misinterpretations of questions by the respondent can be avoided. Similarly, the order of the questions may be different for different respondents, particularly if the interview question follows on from the answer to a previous question (Robson, 2002).

Cramer & Howitt (2005) provide further reasons behind the choice of this research tool. Interviews provide a more holistic understanding of subject matter of the research; the method facilitates the study of the complexity of constructs in their natural settings such as the classroom. Interviews are also suitable when the research questions relate to the complex use of language that can be found in extended conversation such as in interviews. These reasons provide further support for the use of interviews in this current research.

The choice of the use of semi structured interviews in this current research was to 'elicit respondents' views of their lives as portrayed in their stories and to gain access to their experiences, feelings and social worlds' (Davidson, Fossey, Harvey and McDermott, 2002, p 273). This approach to data collection has the advantage of ensuring sensitivity to respondents' language and illuminates their knowledge (Davidson, Fossey, Harvey and McDermott, 2002).

In this current research, the researcher used prompts to seek further description, clarification and exploration of the language that teachers used to describe their use of

humour in the classroom. For example, if teachers discussed using ‘irony’ or ‘dry humour’ with their students, the researcher asked about what they meant by these forms of humour, whether they felt that their students comprehend such forms of humour and to provide examples of their practice.

In addition, the researcher sought to be sensitive to the language used in areas that involved discussing teachers’ negative experiences of using humour in class and hoped that teachers would feel sufficiently relaxed to talk about those occasions. For example, when asking the teachers to discuss any negative experiences of using humour, care was taken to think about the language used. To introduce this question, the researcher used an example during her teaching experience with autistic students who understand literal language. In this way, the researcher aimed to show empathy towards the respondents who may also have used humour in the way in which it was not intended. The wording that the researcher used when asking the question was: “tell me about those times when you used humour and it was not received in the way that you intended?” In this way, the researcher hoped to avoid the respondent from feeling uneasy about discussing a sensitive area; given that both the researcher and teachers had recently met for the purpose of the interview and that the dyadic relationship was not based on friendship but on a professional level.

In semi structured interviews, the researcher referred to an interview guide that included a number of open-ended questions. The researcher followed up questions with probes to

obtain further detail about what the respondent previously discussed (Roulston, 2010). The interview guide included a list of open-ended questions and prompts to seek further detail and description based on the responses and to guide the interview in a focused, flexible and conversational style. Examples may include, “can you give me an example of this?” or “can you tell me more about..?” In order to use probes, the researcher also used good listening skills to check whether each question had been addressed by the respondents and to assess during the interview when it is appropriate to use follow up probes on the responses provided.

However, interviews are not without their disadvantages. One shortcoming is that interviews can be time consuming (Mertens, 2005; Robson, 2002). The actual interview itself can take a long time to complete as respondents vary in times of how long they take to answer specific questions. Interviews are also time consuming in the sense that making arrangements, rearrangements, transcribing and analysing are the challenges which include time planning and budgeting (Robson, 2002). The researcher aimed to complete each interview between one hour and an hour and a half. Even though the teachers were willing to participate in this current research, it was necessary to be aware of the time and appreciate that their participation came from their free time and not out of the school day.

Another, potential problem linked with interviews relates to the status of the researcher and respondent which may influence the quality of the interview (Horrocks and King,



2010). In qualitative research, there is a tendency for concerns to be associated with the perceived higher status of the interviewer above the interviewee. This is frequently reported in topics about power dynamics in interviews and the aim is to re-balance the power (Briggs, 2002, cited by Horrocks and King, 2010; McKie, 2002, cited by Horrocks and King, 2010). Differences in status can affect the nature of the interview in two ways: either by hindering respondents from discussing topics in an open and honest way, for fear of giving 'wrong' or undesirable responses; or by inhibiting the building of a rapport between the interviewee and respondent (Horrocks and King, 2010).

Reference is frequently made towards status issues in the dynamics of the interview and the need to re-balance power between the interviewer and interviewee. Interviewees may view themselves as lower in status than the interviewer due to differences in educational level, occupation, age etc, but any perceived discrepancies should be addressed wherever possible by the interviewer (Horrocks and King, 2010). In this current research, the teachers may have perceived themselves as lower in status than the researcher. To reduce any psychological distance, the researcher sought to avoid using any academic jargon during the interview and used examples of using humour during her own teaching practice to identify with the teachers rather than assume superiority over them. The researcher also suggested meeting the teachers at their schools to conduct the interviews, where the teachers would feel comfortable in familiar surroundings, rather than the clinical rooms at the educational psychology service.

The researcher understood the skills involved in interviewing, i.e. the need to listen carefully while continuing to sustain a sense of who she was and where the interview was going. Whatever the degree of experience, good preparation can add to the quality of the interview. Thinking beforehand about the phrasing of the questions, using prompts and probes, starting the interview, building rapport and status issues enabled the researcher to anticipate and consider issues in advance (Horrocks and King, 2010).

#### Interview schedule

A copy of the interview schedule can be found in appendix three. The interview schedule was piloted on a year six teacher in South East London with whom the researcher worked as an educational psychologist. A copy of the pilot interview transcript can be found in appendix four. The teacher, known as 'A' to protect her anonymity, was an experienced teacher who had taught students in the upper primary age range (i.e. seven to eleven years of age). The purpose of the pilot was to address any flaws in the wording of the questions and to check the inclusion and exclusion of relevant questions. No questions were excluded from the schedule but more consideration was given about enabling the respondents to talk in more detail about their 'own stories' and consideration was also given about respondents to give examples to illustrate their points. In addition, the teachers were asked about their views of their use of humour in children of different ages and their responses were referred back to McGhee's (1979) model of the development of humour in children. The teachers' responses and comparison to the model were used to

assess whether teachers demonstrated an understanding that humour comprehension and complex use of humour develops in children as they grow in maturity.

The questions were rephrased appropriately, new questions were formulated and probes used in response to remarks expressed during the interview and to engage with the participant in a relaxed approach to standardization. The interview started with a general question and developed into more specific areas. Sensitive questions, such as asking teachers to discuss their negative experiences of the use of humour with their students, were placed in the middle of the interview guide in order to prevent the interviewee from dwelling on any unpleasant thoughts and perceptions about their own practice at the beginnings and endings of the interview as well as how they might feel judged by the researcher. For clarification and illustration, the researcher asked for examples of experiences to elaborate on responses particularly those concepts that appear abstract. Notes were taken to restate the comments made in the respondents' own words to convey to the participant that the interviewer was attentively listening. The understanding and clarification of the respondents' responses were checked by the interviewer who summed up the responses at the end of the interview.

### 3.3.1 Respondents

The researcher was an educational psychologist who worked in a number of schools in a borough in South East London. The majority of the respondents were selected on the basis of an opportunity or convenience sample as they were convenient for allocation

purposes for the research (Hagger-Johnson & Landridge, 2009).

Regular visits to the primary schools gave the researcher an opportunity to gain relatively easy access to the teachers. The teachers were selected on the basis of their interest to participate in the research. While purposeful sampling consciously selects subjects against criteria to produce what is viewed as a representative sample, and is likely to achieve a cross section of participants across genders, ages and ethnicities, it is possible to omit important bias from the sample (Gray, 2006).

In contrast, opportunistic sampling involves the selection of the participants without conscious bias (Gray, 2006). The opportunistic sample increased the likelihood that the participants would be a heterogeneous sample, i.e. the sample would consist of interested participants who varied in terms of their ethnicities and across both genders. The aim was not to select a purposeful sample which focuses on specific characteristics. For example, by employing a purposeful sample, other important criteria may have been missed. A purposeful sample of white, female, newly qualified teachers, may yield data which may be qualitatively different from other teachers across other racial groups, gender and ages. These other teachers may have invaluable data to contribute to the research which would otherwise be missing from a purposeful sample of teachers.

Eight teachers participated in this research project. The respondents consisted of six female teachers and two male primary teachers, all of whom taught Key Stage Two (KS2) children in the upper primary age range, from seven to eleven years of age. All the

teachers had two years minimum teaching experience.

Table 1: *Teachers' gender, experience, ethnicity and role*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years of experience</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Currently teaching</b>	<b>Role</b>
<b>1</b>	Female	14	White British	Whole class and small groups, in year 3 to 6	<b>Class teachers</b>
<b>2</b>	Female	12	Caribbean 'other'	Whole class, year 3 to 6	<b>SENCo, Assistant head</b>
<b>3</b>	Female	17	White British	Year 6	<b>Class teachers</b>
<b>4</b>	Female	6	White British	Year 4	<b>Class teachers</b>
<b>5</b>	Female	14	South American	Small groups years 3 to 6	<b>SENCo</b>
<b>6</b>	Male	8	White British	Year 6	<b>Class teachers</b>
<b>7</b>	Female	17	White British	Year 5	<b>SENCo</b>
<b>8</b>	Male	2	White British	Year 3	<b>Class teachers</b>

### 3.3.2 Location

This research was conducted in South East London and North East London within two ethnically diverse boroughs. The researcher was the link educational psychologist for

eleven schools in the eastern part of one of the boroughs.

### 3.3.3 Procedure

In September 2009, the researcher was allocated eleven primary schools within one of the boroughs and each school was approached for this research. The researcher asked the special needs coordinator (SENCo) of each school to put a flyer up on their staffroom notice board to draw the teachers' attention to the research. Interested parties were asked to approach the special needs coordinator. The SENCo then gave the names to the researcher who sent a letter of consent and an information sheet by post to each participant at their school, informing them of the aims and objectives of the research and how the data would be used and analysed. The respondents were also given assurances around the ethical principles of the research including confidentiality and storage of the data. The teachers were asked to return the form of consent to the researcher's work base in the pre addressed envelope provided. A copy of the consent form can be found in appendix five. Upon return of the informed consent, the researcher contacted the teachers to make an appointment to conduct the interview. Alternatively, in some cases, the interested teachers gave their email address to the SENCo to pass on to the researcher, as a point of contact. In these instances, the teachers were sent the letters via email and asked to have signed, hard copies ready for the date of the interview to hand them to the researcher. The participant was reminded that the interview would be audio taped and analysed by comparing the responses and categorising them into common themes.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

The ethical principles followed in this research are found in the revised principles for conducting research on human respondents detailed by the British Psychological Society (2007), and within guidelines from the University of East London. A copy of the application for ethical approval can be found in appendix six of this thesis.

The principles refer to the conduct of research with human participants including physical and mental harm, informed consent, deception, debriefing, confidentiality, the right to withdraw and anonymity. The researcher fully informed the respondents about the nature of the investigation before obtaining their informed consent. In addition, the four ethical principles were referred to by the researcher in this current research. These refer to the researcher's competence, responsibility, integrity and respect for and of the participants (<http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/>). The main ethical issues that were used to apply to the researcher and research, were outlined. These included informed consent, the right to withdraw and confidentiality.

The researcher fully informed the participants about the nature of the investigation before obtaining their informed consent. The participants were sent written information and permission form prior to the interview, which they were asked to read. They were also given opportunities to seek further clarification and ask questions about any aspect of the

information about the research, either in writing or in person prior to the interview. They were then asked to sign the form. The researcher was mindful that, while occupying a perceived higher occupational position than the participants, that undue pressure was not placed on the participants to take part in the research.

Given this, the written consent also included the participants' right to withdraw, even after they had given their consent. This withdrawal included the right to have their data eradicated. The participants were given the option of withdrawing at any time if they felt distressed or uncomfortable about discussing an incident in which they felt, ridiculed, embarrassed, or, for no other disclosed reason, they felt that they no longer wished to participate in the interview. In view of this, the participants were informed that, at any point during the interview, the interview could be stopped and suspended or re-scheduled to avoid their discomfort.

Finally, care was taken to ensure that the participant's responses remained confidential throughout this study, and their anonymity protected. The researcher took care to respect and preserve the privacy of the participants by assuring them that all data was locked in a secure place and was only shared with the researcher's supervisor. In order to protect their anonymity, the participants were also told that their comments would not be traceable to their identity and all names would be changed.

In addition to the ethical codes of conduct, the researcher also considered the ethics of



being both a researcher and educational psychologist in relation to the participants. While the researcher hoped that the teachers would reveal their views about humour in an open and honest manner, they may have felt compromised because she was an educational psychologist. Rather, the researcher was mindful of the need to remain non-judgemental of the views of the teachers as her focus was on the data-gathering exercise rather than on an assessment of their ability or credibility as teachers.

### 3.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was the chosen method of analysis because it allows a large amount of data to be summarised and categorised into key areas or issues in a way that is accessible to the majority of readers. It is the most used approach which is free from allegiance to any particular epistemological position (Coolican, 2009). As thematic analysis is independent of theory and epistemology, it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches. In essence, thematic analysis is a flexible method which allows for a wide range of analytic options meaning that the potential range of information that can be generated about the data is broad (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The aim of thematic analysis is to provide a rich description of the entire data so the reader is able to obtain a sense of the predominant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An inductive approach was used to analyse the data about teachers' use of humour in the classroom as this is an under-researched area and the views of the primary teachers were previously unknown. Thematic analysis is at the core of the analytic process as in many

other qualitative approaches.

The current data set consisted of eight transcribed interviews. Reference was made to Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps in thematic analysis for the analysis of this data. Such an approach was employed since the principle aim of this current research was to highlight the perceptions of teachers' use of humour in the classroom.

Thematic analysis involves producing initial ideas from reading and re-reading the extracts, generating and collapsing initial codes, sorting the codes under subthemes and categorising the subthemes under themes. The steps followed in this process are based on the procedure followed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The procedure involved a number of steps in the process which are detailed in the following pages.

### **Step 1: Familiarisation with the data**

Familiarisation involved immersion in the data. Transcripts of the eight interviews were read and re-read and initial ideas were noted in the margins. For example, when asked about how humour was used in the classroom, responses included 'to lighten the mood, relieve tension, and use it to laugh at myself' other responses included were initially noted as 'reasons for using humour'. An example of this is provided below.

JO: Ok Mairi we're going to talk about humour, humour in class, what is humour to you?

M: humour is something funny, laughing at something funny

JO: Do you use humour in class?

M: Yes I do

**Comment [J1]:** Definitions of humour

JO: How do you use it? How would you say you use it?

M: I try and use it kindly so it's never personal or upsetting. It might be personal. I try and gauge how to use it so I use humour generally to lighten the mood, to relieve tension, when I get to know children better I might use it in a teasing way. I use it to laugh at myself I make mistakes for the children to see that I am human and that humour is quite an important thing in life its good to teach children that its good to laugh at yourself but the humour needs to be used appropriately, there are boundaries with humour. I talk about humour I suppose and try and create an atmosphere with humour within those agreed boundaries is acceptable.

**Comment [J2]:** Reasons for using humour

JO: tell me about inappropriate humour then

M: well inappropriate humour is when they use rude words for example or it could be humour that is upsetting or personal to another individual and you have to weigh that up. Sometimes potentially not intending to upset the other person but maybe they're not good at laughing at themselves which gives them something to do or too crude. There are different perspectives of what is funny and what is humour so some people think that its funny to laugh at something that is actually unkind sometimes people laugh because of something that is embarrassing but that's not the same as humour but that's just their reaction to it.

**Comment [J3]:** Aggressive humour

**Comment [J4]:** Different perspectives

## **Step 2: Generating initial codes**

After reading the transcripts and noting initial ideas, the first of two phases involved working systematically through the transcripts, looking for repeated patterns of the initial ideas. For example, each transcript was re-read to look for 'definitions of humour,' 'reasons for using humour'. Extracts of the repeated patterns were cut out from the transcripts and filed in a plastic file which was labelled 'reasons for using humour'.

This stage resulted in a number of filed extracts which were labelled under initial ideas. One file contained extracts and were labelled 'reasons for using humour'. Other extracts contained in other files were labelled under other initial ideas including 'age differences of humour', 'a class without humour', 'caveats', 'types of humour', 'definitions of humour', 'negative experiences', 'lessons and humour' and 'spontaneous versus planned humour'.

The next stage involved assigning codes to the data. The researcher re-read each cut-out extracts labelled ‘reasons for using humour’. Each extract was assigned a code to represent the extract.

Table 2: Extracts, initial ideas and initial codes

<b>Extract</b>	<b>Initial Idea</b>	<b>Initial code</b>
<b>R: I think it relaxes everybody, if you’re in a group, especially a classroom situation the last thing you want to do is to have a really dry presentation &amp; as a teachers you are presenting a lot of the time &amp; teaching at the same time as that &amp; humour relaxes all of the people that are listening. It allows them to free themselves up as well they don’t feel they have to get everything right you’re learning together in a way &amp; its like having a cohesion in the class &amp; everyone feels comfortable &amp; laughing is about feeling comfortable</b> RL: 64-70	Reasons to use humour	<b>relaxing</b>
<b>I feel that humour is good to use to lower those barriers in learning and allowing the children to relax in my company. I think that’s a key element of, of not necessarily teaching but of learning and if the child is to learn they need to feel comfortable in the presence of whoever is, because it allows the trust to develop, it physically relaxes the child to be more willing to erm for example to make a mistake without you know fear of, reprisal or you know of somebody being cross or whatever.</b> NL: 8-14	Reasons to use humour	<b>Lower barriers to learning</b>  <b>relaxing</b>
<b>A: I use humour in class, one because I think its motivating to the children, two it relaxes everyone a bit more three I think it helps you to get to know the children well &amp; for the children to get to know you quite well you can see who picks up on the humour, you can scan the class to see who’s getting it.</b>	Reasons to use humour	<b>Motivating</b>  <b>Relaxes students</b>  <b>Interpersonal</b>
<b>M: I try and use it kindly so it’s never personal or upsetting. It might be personal. I try and gage how to use it so I use humour generally to Lighten the mood, to relieve tension, when I get to know children better I might use it in a teasing way. I use it to laugh at myself I make mistakes for the children to see that I am human and that humour is quite an important thing in life its good to teach children that its good to laugh at yourself</b> ML: 6-10	Reasons to use humour	<b>Laugh at oneself</b>  <b>Lighten the mood</b>  <b>Relieve tension</b>

<p>I think using humour relaxes them cos they might just have the answer in there its just that they're scared about bringing it out, reluctant to bring it out they don't want to be seen as failing I think if you creative a safe environment for the children if you make them feel very safe then actually any answer should be acceptable. DL: 175-179</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Relaxes students</b></p> <p><b>Humour creates a safe environment</b></p>
<p>Especially as I use it in my job with children with difficulties or with emotional barriers or with behavioural problems or relationship or impaired interactions. NL: 6-8</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Lower barriers</b></p> <p><b>Use with impaired interactions</b></p>
<p>I taught year 6 for four years &amp; I find it particularly useful for classes of that age as a tool to use humour to engage the children in the learning. Erm I think at that age they tend to I don't know I suppose this could be a myth but its easy to think of children who engage unilaterally with computers and game boys etc &amp; I find myself, maybe this is just a perception but I find myself competing with this active, environment where erm they're interacting in and I don't find the pace of the classroom or type of learning or the types of activities which sometimes are quite passive are very engaging but I do find if erm together with humour you try to make the learning meaningful &amp; in times of what they enjoy NL: 15-24</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Meaningful learning</b></p>
<p>I've never thought right this is a good point to put humour in so in times of me using humour its been spontaneous apart from when I want someone to learn certain things within my planning like remembering things so I use it for remembering but I don't know how we are going to make that funny I just leave it up to them. RL: 84-88</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Remembering things</b></p>
<p>Some children can't learn things by rote they can't remember things; they need a trigger or cue. Humour can act as that trigger or cue. RL: 11-13</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Trigger/cue</b></p>
<p>R: Yes, not in relation to how they can use humour to do this but I have talked about how they can relax more &amp; be open &amp; kids respond to that rather than being dictatorial person standing in front of them. RL: 194-196</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Be more open</b></p>
<p>NQTs see that we use humour &amp; we do talk to them about using humour because we feel that is important. It breaks the ice, AL: 83-84</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Break the ice</b></p>
<p>ShL: Erm it relaxes me in myself like I love having fun in my class and it reminds me of why I became a teachers in the first place because I just love interactions with children you know. ShL: 66-68</p>	<p>Reasons to use humour</p>	<p><b>Relax the teachers</b></p>

### **Step 3: collapse the codes**

After the data was read and re-read and initial codes were generated, the codes which appeared similar were collapsed, resulting in a smaller number of codes. This involved noting down all the initial codes on a single piece of card and reading them to see whether they were similar in meaning, and represented the ‘reasons behind the teachers use of humour’ in the classroom.

The initial codes generated from the data were as follows:

Relaxing  
Lower barriers to learning  
Interpersonal  
Motivating  
Remembering things  
Lighten mood  
Relieve tension  
Laugh at oneself  
Meaningful learning  
Use with impaired interactions  
Creative a safe environment  
Be more open  
Breaking the ice  
Trigger or cue  
Relax teachers

To collapse the initial codes, these were selected because they were related to learning:

‘Remembering things’ and ‘trigger or cue’ were collapsed to **memory** because humour can help student to associate the humour with a concept to be learned and recalled.

‘Lower barriers to learning’ and ‘meaningful learning’ were collapsed to **meaningful**

because the use of humour can make the learning more interesting and appealing to the students if incorporated in the lesson

‘Motivating’ was left alone it appeared that humour served to capture and maintain students’ attention.

Table 3: Initial codes and collapsed codes in relation to learning

Initial codes	Collapsed codes
Remembering things	MEMORY
Trigger/cue	
Lower barriers to learning	MEANINGFUL
Meaningful learning	
Motivating	MOTIVATING

The same procedure was applied to the other initial codes:

For example the next group were selected because they were based on humour in relation to feelings. These were ‘relaxing’, ‘relieve tension’, ‘Lighten the mood’, ‘creative a safe environment’ and ‘laugh at oneself’ and ‘relieve teachers’.

‘Relaxing’ ‘relieve tension’ ‘Lighten mood’ and ‘creative a safe environment’ were collapsed to **de-stress students** as the teachers aimed to enable the students to relax in the classroom. ‘Laugh at oneself’ was placed alone as this referred to one’s tendency to develop a positive outlook on life, particularly towards threatening situations. **Relax teachers** was also left as this was related to using humour to relax the teachers themselves.

Table 4: Initial codes and collapsed codes in relation to feelings

Initial codes	Collapsed codes
relaxing	
Relieve tension	
Lighten mood	DE-STRESS STUDENTS
Creative a safe environment	
Laugh at oneself	POSITIVE OUTLOOK
Relax teachers	RELAX TEACHERS

The remaining initial codes generated, i.e. ‘Interpersonal’, ‘use with impaired interactions’, ‘be more open’, and ‘breaking the ice’ were selected because they appeared to be related to teachers’ humour that impacts on the relationship with students. These were collapsed into a code: **Interpersonal** because these initial codes were similar in times of the teachers’ views of their humour to help to form a bond with their students.

Table 5: Initial codes and collapsed codes in relation to social aspects of humour

Initial codes	Collapsed codes
Interpersonal	
Use with impaired interactions	INTERPERSONAL
Be more open	
Breaking the ice	

Therefore, the collapsed codes were:

**MEMORY**  
**MEANINGFUL**  
**MOTIVATING**  
**DE-STIMESS STUDENTS**  
**POSITIVE OUTLOOK**  
**RELAX TEACHERS**  
**INTERPERSONAL**



#### **Step 4: search for subthemes and themes**

After the initial codes were collapsed to a reduced set of codes, the next stage of the analysis involved sorting the codes into subthemes. The researcher considered how these codes could be sorted by writing each code on a postcard and arranging them in accordance with the semantics behind them. For example the code ‘de-stress students’ was different to ‘positive outlook’ because de-stressing students were related to teachers’ aim to relax students in teachers’ company, in order to aid students’ listening during lessons. In contrast, ‘positive outlook’ was related to the encouragement of teachers to enable students to feel confident and optimistic about attempting a challenging task and risk making mistakes with learning tasks but overcoming potential embarrassment or a fear of failure by the using humour. In contrast still, ‘relax teachers’ was related to the use of humour to de-stress the teachers themselves. Therefore because of their discrepancies, some of the codes were sorted into the following subthemes.

Table 6: Collapsed codes and subthemes

Collapsed codes	subthemes
MEMORY	
RELEVANT	
MOTIVATING	
DE-STRESS STUDENTS LIGHTEN THE MOOD ATTEMPT TASKS	POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS A TASK
POSITIVE OUTLOOK	TAKING RISKS AND LAUGHING AT MISTAKES
RELAX TEACHERS INTERPERSONAL	RELAX TEACHERS

The final stage involved categorising the subthemes under themes. This involved referring the subthemes back to the data and the research questions. In pursuit of teachers' 'reasons for using humour' in the classroom, it appeared that teachers' perceptions of their humour was to use humour for the reasons above, i.e. learning, for emotional reasons, to de-stress teachers and for social reasons. Therefore, to answer the research questions about teachers' general perceptions of humour and the reasons for its use in particular, teachers used humour to engage students in their learning; to help students increase their coping capacity and to relax teachers. The final reason behind teachers' use of humour from their perspective is to build a relationship with their students.

Table 7: subthemes and themes

subthemes	THEMES
POSITIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS A TASK	ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING
TAKING RISKS AND MAKING MISTAKES	COPING
RELAX TEACHERS	STUDENT-TEACHERS RELATIONSHIP

Even though the subthemes were distinct from one another, they had an emotional component in common. All three subthemes above were related to teachers' views about using humour to cope. The first subtheme was about the students' capacity to deal positively with potentially stressful events in their life.

The second subtheme was for coping with attempting perceived threatening tasks and risking failure but demonstrates one's ability to cope with failure by using humour. From the teachers' comments, they were aiming to model this to the students in the hope that they would develop this way of having a positive outlook themselves.

The third subtheme was related to using humour to relieve teachers' own tension associated with the pressures of teaching.

What these three subthemes have in common are related to the teachers' use of humour to develop a capacity for coping. Therefore the researcher categorised the three subthemes

under a theme: COPING

The same procedure was completed for the other extracts, codes, subthemes and themes. These can be found in appendix seven and eight at the end of this thesis. A thematic map was drawn manually and then on the computer. This can be found in appendix nine at the end of this thesis.

The next section will describe the analytical approach taken to address how teachers defined humour. Rather than seek to categorise the definitions, the researcher used the teachers' own words to retain the essence of the meanings that they attributed to the concept of humour. As a result, a wide range of views were generated. The teachers' definitions of humour are presented as "vignettes" which can make important points in participants' attitudes and beliefs (Barter and Renold, 1999); and are valuable to researchers who construct vignettes around actual experiences (Kelly, Lesh and Mason, 2002). In this research, the "vignettes" of the teachers' constructs of humour were used to explore rather than explain the teachers' perceptions about humour and experiences of humour in the classroom.

The researcher extensively read and examined the individual views of the teachers and decided that simply categorising and collapsing their views into themes, omitted the real essence of how they conceptualised the construct. For example, one teacher referred to humour as "a feeling of funniness". Another viewed humour as "something funny". Yet,

other teachers perceived humour as an ability to “cope with life’s difficulties” and that which helps to “build relationships”. The teachers were given the opportunity to express their definitions of humour in their own terms, and with that in mind, the researcher lifted the teachers’ words by quoting them verbatim from the transcripts. This was a decision made by the researcher as the retention of the real meaning of the data was more important than its deconstruction and reconstruction into themes.

### 3.6 Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the research which employs a social constructionist stance employing qualitative methodology. The rationale for using semi structured interviews for this research project is also outlined. The procedure of the study is detailed including the selection of the respondents and the analysis and ethical considerations during the study are outlined.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The previous chapter presented an outline of the epistemological and methodological frameworks on which this research is based. The chapter also explored some potentially relevant criteria for an assessment of this qualitative research. An outline of the method and procedure of this research was also presented as well as the rationale and procedure for the analysis of data.

#### 4.0 Overview of this Chapter

This chapter presents the research findings. It begins with a presentation of the qualitative data analysis by unveiling the main themes and sub-themes which were identified in the teachers' interview transcripts (4.1) through thematic analysis. A vignette from each teacher (4.2) is discussed with selected quotations which illustrate their individual perceptions of humour. Within the analysis, including an analysis of the themes and subthemes (4.3), the researcher also attempts to relate the themes back to the literature and previous research. The main themes and sub-themes were not selected because of the frequency of the teachers' views but as important findings addressing the research questions. The first theme includes the use of humour to engage students in their learning (4.4). Teachers also felt that their humour was used as a coping mechanism (4.5) by taking risks and making mistakes (4.5.1); as a potential stressor (4.5.2); and as a relief for teachers' own stress (4.5.3). Another theme identified also included using humour to

build student-teacher relationships (4.6). However, teachers also felt that the differentiation of humour (4.7) was also important in terms of students' age (4.7.1) and their ability (4.7.2). Some teachers also felt that some caveats should be borne in mind (4.8) when using humour. All teachers appeared to have developed their own subjective view of humour, including definitions, but due to time and space restrictions, two are presented (4.9). The findings are compared with the reversal theory of humour which frames the research. The theory is included to explore whether teachers are able to manage the arousal level of their students. The findings are also compared with McGhee's developmental model of humour to explore whether teachers understand the comprehension level of students at approximate ages and whether they feel they use age appropriate humour. The chapter ends with a summary (4.10).

#### 4.1 Qualitative data analysis: teachers interview transcripts

The transcripts collected from the semi structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During the process the researcher identified comments which were built up and developed into themes. The subthemes are themes within a theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p 92). The researcher felt that these subthemes provided a framework to the main themes that were large and complex and required breaking down into smaller units of meaning.

## 4.2 Vignettes

A vignette of each teachers' overall view of their use of humour is presented as a way of enabling the reader to understand each teachers' perspective and social construction of humour. The teachers' assorted definitions of humour, led to difficulties with the organisation of those definitions into subthemes and themes. Therefore, definitions are quoted with the vignettes to give the reader an understanding of the essence of the meaning each teacher ascribed to humour. Later in this chapter, two examples are provided to help to increase the reader's understanding of the viewpoint of two teachers who held different philosophies of humour. It is important to note that the philosophies do not form part of a main theme or subtheme but give the reader a sense of the teachers' views of humour. The teachers' names were changed to protect their anonymity.

R was a teacher who taught whole class groups within the upper primary age range (KS2 at seven to eleven years). She defined humour in terms of a 'feeling of funniness' smiling or giggling (RL: 283-284<sup>1</sup>). She recognised that humour can be used detrimentally and inappropriately as well as positively. As well using a self-defeating humour style, she also purported that she used sarcasm. She frequently associated the value of using humour as a cue to help students to learn and remember key concepts.

A was a special needs coordinator who taught small groups of students in the upper primary age range. This teacher viewed humour as the 'ability to give and receive

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<sup>1</sup> RL: 283-284 indicates the respondent's name. L refers to the line number



pleasure' (AL: 191) from a situation or other people. She felt that receiving pleasure was possible without the use of aggressive humour. She also felt that she frequently used humour as a strategy to increase students' motivation, build relationships and create a relaxing classroom atmosphere. She used humour in a self-deprecating manner both by discussing personal, past experiences and to convey acceptability in making mistakes.

S was a year six teacher who viewed humour as affiliative. She referred to humour as that which involves 'cohesiveness where people build relationships with each other' (SL: 4-5). When asked to define humour, S reported that humour functions to diffuse difficult situations between students and teachers and has an emphasis on building positive relationships. S also reported that humour can be applied to teaching, something that she has been able to do, particularly when producing plays with the students. She felt that humour allowed students to play with words, thus increasing their communication skills and creativity. She also felt that the sophistication of humour has become more advanced over time with more subtle forms of humour appearing on students' television programmes such as 'Horrible Histories'. S enjoyed her students' capacity to apply humour from TV programmes to aspects of lessons in the classroom.

Sh was a year four teacher who viewed humour as a means of "dealing with things in life" (ShL 327-328). She felt that humour was useful to help her students 'deal' with a potentially difficult 'thing in life' such as an anxiety provoking test. Therefore, for Sh, humour provided a useful function to help people deal with difficulties and overcome

adverse situations. Sh's views were in contrast to those of A and S whose approach to humour was to facilitate students' learning and to encourage closeness amongst groups of students. Sh in contrast, appeared to be more focused on using humour for herself, to cope with incidences that her students faced, and to decrease any potential stress and tension in her relationship with her students.

D was a year five teacher who viewed humour in terms of making 'others laugh, smile and put them at ease' (DL: 5-6). He reported that he generally used sarcasm with his students. However, he felt that sarcasm should only be used when both teachers and students know each other sufficiently well, so that students know that the teachers do not literally mean what they say. Should this type of humour hurt or offend, D felt that teachers should be prepared to apologise.

N was a special needs coordinator who taught year five and six classes and small groups in KS2. Although she reported using humour as a strategy for a number of purposes, such as to help students cope with adversities, she defined humour as a way of coping with life's difficulties (NL: 682).

M was a special needs coordinator who taught a year five class. She felt that humour was synonymous with 'something funny' (ML: 3). She appeared to understand that perceptions of humour vary amongst individuals. For her, humour also constituted self-

deprecation, to show the students that it was acceptable to make mistakes and to laugh at oneself.

T taught year three students in a whole class and defined humour as that which constitutes 'laughter and amusement' (TL: 2). He felt that humour was a part of his personality which he was not always conscious of utilising. He felt that he was perceived by his colleagues as a funny teacher. He reported using affiliative and self-enhancing humour styles in class.

In summary, the teachers defined humour in a range of ways, i.e. from notions around fun and laughter and relationship building to coping with life's difficulties. Therefore the researcher felt that, to reduce the teachers' varied definitions of humour into themes would result in the omission of the core of what humour meant to them. Instead, the researcher chose to present a vignette of each teacher's concept of humour to represent the meaning of humour from each perspective.

#### 4.3 Analysis of themes and subthemes

The author will now transfer the reader's attention from the vignettes and towards the analysis of the data findings. The data was not analysed on the basis of the frequency of the occurrences of particular codes but on an attempt to address the research questions in this research. The themes and subthemes that were generated, along with their meanings are detailed in the following table.

Table 8: Themes and subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Meanings
Engagement in learning		This refers to the use of humour as a strategy to help students remember things, to motivate them and to capture their attention
Humour as a coping mechanism	Taking risks and laughing from mistakes made	This refers to laughing at oneself
	Positive attitude towards a potential stressor	This refers to using humour to help students cope with stressful events
	Relieve teachers' own stress	This refers to teachers using humour to form a bond with their students
Building student- teachers relationships		This refers to teachers' reports about using humour to form a bond with their students
Differentiation of humour	Age of student	This refers to the ways in which teachers consider using their humour invariantly with students of different ages or ability
	Ability of student	
Caveats		This theme refers to the guidelines that teachers feel should be considered when/if using humour in the classroom

The majority of teachers reported using humour to achieve a goal. The main themes are identified and detailed in the following sections.

#### 4.4 Engagement in learning

The first important theme which developed from the data was that teachers used humour as a strategy to engage students in their learning. Some teachers felt that their application of humour to topics helped students understand material which had been delivered in a creative way. This may suggest that the use of humour as a learning style or part of a multi-sensory approach can be one way in which students can learn.

Extract 1: R

*If we're doing something like the planets we might make them really humorous. I just taught a group and trying to get them to learn their times tables and attach different numbers of the times tables to different parts of the body and just got them doing something really ridiculous and that's helped them. Some students can't learn things by rote they can't remember things; they need a trigger or cue. Humour can act as that trigger or cue.*

(RL 8-13).

Others felt that their humour was used to make learning meaningful and fun rather than staid and dull.

Extract 2: N

*I taught year six for four years and I find it particularly useful for classes of that age as a tool to use humour to engage the students in the learning. Erm I think at that age they tend to, I don't know, I suppose this could be a myth but its easy to think of students who engage unilaterally with computers and game boys etc and I find myself, maybe this is just a perception but I find myself competing with this active, environment where erm they're interacting in and I don't find the pace of the classroom or type of learning or the types of activities which sometimes are quite passive are very engaging but I do find if erm together with humour you try to make the learning meaningful and in terms of what they enjoy those elements together bring a massive change to their attitude*

(NL 14-25).

N felt that the use of humour was a means of capturing student attention in lessons. She also felt that I.T. based leisure activities engage and motivate students more than learning lessons in the classroom environment. N seemed to be conveying that, in the educational context, subject content and delivery could impact on student motivation and interest, leading to disengagement with learning. N felt that humour incorporated in lessons could make learning more meaningful, engaging and interesting, particularly if used in conjunction with computer based activities. Other teachers provided examples in terms of how humour was used to make the learning material more creative. Another example is detailed on the following page.

Extract 3: S

*I've used it a lot in teaching. For example we were doing the Tudors and doing the Tudor period and trying to make it really funny and put lots of jokes in there and...also just in the day-to-day just like little things and you pick up things from the media and make links, I think that we make links all the time and at the moment I've got quite a funny class and they go like "oh yeah" or they groan at you (smiles) and I think "try again."*

*JO: what year do you teach?*

*S: year six*

*JO: so what of things do you think they find funny or don't find funny? Or they "groan at?"*

*S: like they're doing a play at the moment and I take little quotes from the play out of context and in the classroom they like that and it helps the day go by (laughs) and using stuff off the TV like catch phrases and things that I know they know about and just change them to make it slightly...which is good (laughs). We have a quite a fun time and I'll say something and no one reacts so I'll go "phoo" (laughs) and "phoo its lost miss" (laughs) that kind of thing.*

(SL16-33).

S felt that the use of humour in learning involved jokes that her year five students could understand, even though she felt that humour was not just about jokes. She also made reference to using humour generally in her daily life. The source of the humour, was

made more appealing when both S herself and the students learnt about the usefulness of making links about what they had seen on the TV or newspapers, which are real life forms of communication that students can access, and apply this type of humour to the learning context. S felt that humour appears to make the learning material 'come alive' as it makes the topic more relevant. If the teachers could apply the humour learned from the home context to the context of the class and link it to the topic, students' attention would be captured. The successful transfer of the humour from the home context and to the learning context appears to be an important skill. For S, whose husband is a writer, the idea that humour could make links across settings, came from her family who enjoy watching humorous TV programmes and encouraged her to transfer some humorous ideas into some lessons in the classroom.

S's comments suggest that she has shown some recognition of students' understanding of humour in year five which appears congruent with McGhee's final stage of humour development. This stage describes students' ability to comprehend the multiple meanings of words and concepts (McGhee 1979, cited by Chaney, 1993) which allows for the same words to be used in different ways because many words have different meanings and therefore can be used in different ways, depending on the context. S views humour as a play on words that can be used to express ideas in learning that promotes students' creativity as she discussed using humour with her students in plays and in history. While teaching her students, S felt that it was possible to maintain some playfulness in relation to words.



With regard to the reversal theory of humour, humour can be a playful activity. S appears to help students engage in learning by playing with words and ideas and connecting them from one context to another. In this way, the students have switched from the telic mood to the paratelic state while they are creatively having fun with their work. When finished with their work in the Tudors for example, the students may revert back to the telic state but their interest may be maintained because they remember the enjoyment that they associated with the Tudors. The reversal theory of humour appears to assess teachers' ability to mediate their own and students' emotional state – from the playful to the serious. Another theme that was generated from the data may suggest that teachers need to be sufficiently skilled to differentiate, not only their teaching in the classroom, but also their humour. The ways in which teachers differentiate their humour is detailed below.

#### 4.5 Humour as a coping mechanism

Three subthemes were categorised under the main theme of coping humour. These subthemes were 'taking risks and laughing from mistakes made, relaxing students and relieve teachers' stress. These subthemes are representative of humour for these participants as a coping strategy.

#### 4.5.1 Humour as a coping mechanism: Taking risks and laughing from mistakes made

First, most of the teachers reported using self defeating humour to convey to the students that it is acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them. In this way, the teachers' modelling shows that it's acceptable to take risks, getting one's attempts wrong and forming hypotheses when engaging in problem solving tasks. Consequently, students should not feel embarrassed, ashamed, and awkward but should instead, laugh at themselves without feeling self conscious. The following quote produces an example.

Extract 4: R

*I think it's a good way for people to know that they can laugh at themselves and that we're not going to do everything perfectly right & the best way to do it when you've done it totally wrong is to have a little laugh about it so I think its about helping them develop coping skills in life, everyone needs to laugh at themselves at some point in time...*

(RL 27-31). Another example is provided by M.

Extract 5: M

*Yes I have most of the time I talk to teachers about positive behaviour management and you know how important it is to create a positive classroom atmosphere in the classroom, its important to get to know the class and the different personalities and I say sometimes it's important you know to lighten the load. As teachers you can sometimes become very driven and earnest, there is a need for there to be a certain amount of relaxation after and its good to bring that into play and what I tend to do rather than*

*preach to them which I show them myself like you know “I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been” and when they see that they laugh I think actually that helps bring a bond I think that you have to be confident to do it and that you can bring things round to get the students back but also they see the human side and the humour side of you as well*

(ML 45-54)

The above quote illustrates that middle school students are developing more autonomy and middle school is where students can feel empowered to build their independence in a safe environment (Freda and Pollak, 1997). The atmosphere is greatly enhanced by the use of humour. Teachers who present themselves as ongoing learners form a community of learning in the classroom with the teachers as a participant of the “learning group.” The role of the teachers is not only to teach but to teach how to learn (Freda and Pollak, 1997). In this way, the discrepancy between the teachers and student is reduced and similarities are optimised giving students a sense of autonomy. By raising a laugh and exclaiming ‘how stupid’ she’s been, M felt that humour helped to form a bond and reduce the psychological distance between herself and her students, resulting in increasing the perception of ‘humanness’ by her students. ‘Humanness’ is referred to the way in which M felt she can be seen as a ‘person’ rather than a ‘teacher’ in her students’ perceptions. M feels that students’ perceptions of her as a ‘person’ may have helped them identify more closely with her as a teacher. M provided an example of being able to raise a laugh by pretending not to know how to resolve a maths problem in order to help her students recognise that she too, is capable of making mistakes. She demonstrated that both

students and teachers could learn from mistakes, cope with them and progress forward.

Extract 6: M

*The students, they like it when I get things wrong and then put them in my role to the teachers when they have to articulate and they right and correct me and I think that the students like that I mean not obvious out there humour but its still a form of humour you know just this week just saying to the students 'stupid Mrs X she's forgotten again the grid method of multiplication can you believe it?' you know they love all that sort of thing and you've got ten students who want to come up and help you so you go 'oh thank goodness I've got it now'*

(ML 84-90)

In this way, M showed that by taking responsibility for the error, she has shown her 'humanness' and ability to overcome this and move on. Herein lies the humour – the capacity to give and receive pleasure from the joke at her expense. By using humour, M modelled the learning process in its reality. The reality of learning involves trial and error (Freda and Pollak 1997) and by pretending to struggle and then recover, M has demonstrated that this is part of the learning process. M appeared to use humour as a coping strategy to ensure that students become more empowered as learners by perceiving more control over coping with a mistake and recovering from it.

In summary, by M's use of humour, the students were able to perceive more autonomy and feel sufficiently safe to take risks in learning, make mistakes and recover. The realisation that teachers too, as authority figures make mistakes thus show that struggle and mastery of learning are part of the learning process. The following sub-theme is concerned with coping with a potential stressor.

#### 4.5.2 Humour as a coping mechanism: Positive attitude towards potential stressor

While humour may function to help students cope with errors, other teachers felt that humour can help students cope with a potentially stressful event such as an upcoming test. Sh used one example to illustrate how using an activity can elicit laughter and amusement amongst her students and help to reduce their stress and anxiety levels. Unlike the previous examples however, this type of humour appears to describe affiliative humour rather than self-defeating humour as the teachers sought to create a sense of cohesiveness in the classroom.

#### Extract 7: Sh

*I can remember a few times when we've had fun and laughed last year. For secondary transfer tests last year they were all a bit stressed and er, I guess it wasn't my humour it was just a situation I bought about I guess but erm so they were all stressed and I thought before we start the secondary transfer tests we were just erm, just erm like we played this silly little game of ball and when the students dropped it they were kind of "argh for goodness sake" you know just silliness they were like and so they're all going for*

*goodness sake and but they're all just laughing along that nice game and so when it was all over it was ok now we're ready to do it now we're ready and we're not so stressed and now and suddenly the whole tension and stress was gone, yeah so we do kind of those sorts of things and I guess before tests. One of my students reminded me of this last time she said "remember we were going to do maths tests and you were hitting balls at our heads to get the worry out of our heads?" I don't really remember but apparently I had this soft ball and I was going "get that worry out of your head" or something like that (ShL 35-47)*

In this way she felt that the students would develop a more positive attitude towards the test. Sh's comments appear to show that the humour elicitation allowed for more positive reframing, despite negative experiences (Kuiper and Martin, 1993; Cann and Etzel, 2008). The capacity to use humour in order to see the positive side of events, in the face of anxiety-provoking circumstances, or to use humour as a response to threats, helps to instil a positive outlook when faced with stressors. It appears that Sh is facilitating her students' capacity for developing self-enhancing humour to deal with the adversarial challenge of the test. Self-enhancing humour is concerned with an individual having a positive outlook on life, even in the face of difficulties (Martin, 2007). By engaging in self-enhancing humour, the students can enhance their ability to cope, not only with a sudden, stressful event, but also with future challenges.

#### 4.5.3 Humour as a coping mechanism: Relieve teachers' own stress

Some teachers commented that they used humour, not only to relieve stress within the classroom and to relax their students, but also to relieve their own stress and tension. Sh's comment is a case in point.

Extract 8: Sh

*Sh: Erm it relaxes me in myself like I love having fun in my class and it reminds me of why I became a teacher in the first place because I just love interactions with students you know. I've been stressed and I've had to discipline someone or tell someone off and then and so the whole atmosphere of the class is harsh and you don't want that to continue you want that to stop so you can get on with the lesson and get on with the day so that's when I'd use it to "right enough of that" so it can change the whole atmosphere of the classroom so it can change the atmosphere of how the lesson it is going.*

Sh: 66 – 72

Even though Sh used humour to relieve students' stress, she also used humour to seek approval from her class, resulting in the reduction of her own stress and tension. For her, the use of humour was associated with being relaxed with her students and a developed rapport with them. Once she reprimanded a child however, she then sensed the tension in the class and within herself, resulting in a psychological distance between herself and her students. She appeared to use humour as a strategy to regain a positive relationship with her students that she momentarily lost.

The need for teachers to relieve their own stress is something that is reinforced by N.

Extract 9: N

*I use it in my life anyway I use a lot of humour to cope, to relieve stress I suppose*

(NL :107)

N reported using humour for a number of purposes to relieve her stress. In the transcript she goes on to explain that she used humour to laugh at herself. N's humour appeared to stem from her personal challenges. Her challenges appeared to include coping with having a young daughter with autism and feeling unable to share age-appropriate humour with her child.

In addition, N also commented on using humour when she felt 'under attack' by other staff in her school. She claimed to use affiliative humour with staff to relieve tension both for herself and in the atmosphere of staff meetings. However, the type of humour that she reported using could be more closely described as self-defeating humour used to ingratiate oneself with staff and raise a laugh at one's own expense. Rather than retaliate with a negative remark, N appeared to use this type of humour to rid herself of the tension and awkwardness that she felt in the room with staff. It would have been interesting to explore what humorous comments she made to illustrate the use of affiliative humour she said she used to form a sense of cohesiveness amongst the staff. Instead she referred to making comments about English being her second language.



Extract10: N

*I can't remember exactly what was said but I can remember saying a few things in the meeting to reduce tension I said something in the meeting and a couple of people looked at me like what and somebody actually said that doesn't make sense it felt to me like a bit of a funny comment to make. I remember feeling under attack but my reaction was to make a joke about English being my second language or and this happens all the time so if I find I do something you know if I really struggle with something or if I'm having a difficult time with some of my kids I will say special needs teachers they will laugh at or I'll say if some parents are being difficult or the child can't because they have special needs and I will go to them and say special needs child special needs parent and I can say that you know I laugh at myself because I'm one of them so I try to cope with things like that particularly when I feel I'm under attack*

(NL 299-311).

This extract also illustrates N's repetitive pattern of her reported use of self-defeating humour to raise a laugh at her expense not only with members of school staff but also with students and even with parents who have children with difficulties.

N's comments were revealing. First, self-defeating humour is a support to help reduce tension and stress. However, it might have been interesting to explore how well such uses in these sorts of contexts were received by the recipients. N may use humour to generate laughter at her expense but this does not mean that it is always well received.

The comments from both Sh and N appear to suggest that the teachers' attempts to reduce stress may not be confined to the realms of the staffroom but at home too. Both teachers reported using humour to reduce their stress and tension during the school day, either with their students, or in N's case, with parents and staff too. Using humour as a tool in ongoing attempts to reduce their own stress and tension associated with the occupation is one means by which teachers can cope with the stresses of the job.

#### 4.6 Building student-teacher relationships

As well as using humour as a strategy to enable students to cope and feel comfortable, teachers reported using humour to build relationships with their students. This theme emerged from the data.

Extract 11: R

*R: it might bring the shy ones out of their shell if they find something humorous in class and it helps to build relationships between the teachers and pupil as well*

*JO: Have you ever had to use humour to build relationships yourself?*

*R: yes I have especially with those more reserved, quiet students so I might target them and so I might try to bring themselves out of themselves or sit them next to someone who is humorous so that you get to know them a little bit more*

(RL 73-79)

R suggested that humour functions as a mode of communication and interaction with students who appear reserved. R felt that her use of humour could help these students relax in the social context of the classroom as well as in interactions with her. In this way, she felt that she could create a bond with her students by using humour to ‘break the ice’ with them, creating an avenue for her to get to know them. From the students’ perspective, they may remember the positive feeling that R’s humour evoked in the first instance and come to associate that positive feeling with her. R would hope that her students would find her approachable and want to build a relationship with her by being more receptive to her conversations.

For some teachers, humour appears to diminish the harshness associated with reprimands. This is perhaps because some teachers would aim to build relationships with their students rather than break them down, particularly when students have a volatile temperament. Rather than provoke students into retaliation, some teachers would seek to dampen the student’s escalation of confrontational behaviour.

Extract12: S

*When dealing with difficult situations or students’ repetitive behaviour and which can be rather annoying or disruptive I always try and go for the humour first to deflate it to get that child on side. I think its really helpful cos it stops that abrasiveness with the child it kind of gets the child to come round to your way of thinking and to work together so they kind of share that joke with you so its (humour) that shared thing that can disperse that*

*situation.*

SL 11-16.

S used humour to build a rapport with her students and sought to establish a conducive climate for learning. S appears to consider that, prior to sharing knowledge with her students; rapport is a prerequisite for learning to take place. Rather than deal with the students misbehaviour by using a reprimand, S has recognised the value of using humour as a softer approach to help the students change their behaviour. She felt that humour enables the student to understand that the teachers would like them to alter their behaviour and humour can be a positive way of bringing the student and teacher together in a shared understanding of the joke, rather than the discordant function that a reprimand can serve. Freda and Pollak (1997) point out that humour is one way to diffuse a student's anger and hostility. If S had chosen to confront her student's misbehaviour, she may have paved the way for forming negative relationships with her students. Instead with the incorporation of humour, used to diffuse conflict-ridden situations with her students, S aimed to establish a positive relationship with her students in order to work well together. Thus humour can be harmonious rather than divisive in the classroom. The harmonious function of humour is alluded to by Sh.

Extract 13: Sh

*You just bring them round to you and it gets the kids on your side as well because some*

*children get that feeling of, some kind of authority and they have trouble with authority and they can't take anyone being over them because they like to remain in control and with the humour they almost don't know you're in control but they do know, do you know what I mean? So it's a case of letting them know you're on their side and letting them know you're behind them.*

ShL: 73-77.

On the surface it may appear that Sh is concerned about only forming a relationship with her students. Previously, in her experience she found that being strict and formal with her students produced a tense atmosphere. In order to create a tension-free environment, she reported using humour to 'get the kids on her side'. Sh felt that humour enabled students to form a positive student-teacher relationship in which both individuals in the partnership were able to have mutual respect for each other. She did not feel that students can approach teachers who are authoritarian and detached. Through the use of humour, Sh felt that teachers who can be seen as authority figures but who are popular can have the respect of their students over whom they have control. Sh appeared to be reporting that in one sense, humorous teachers do not appear as controlling as non-humorous teachers (*they almost don't know you're in control but they do know*) but at the same time, students still perceive these teachers as authority figures. Therefore the use of humour to form a rapport with the students is one way that students can feel some sense of control in the classroom.

Through an exploration of Sh's extract, it seemed that Sh was a teacher who felt that she was a "control freak" (ShL, 216) who sought to simultaneously build relationships with her students while maintaining control of her class. She did not feel that it was possible to have one or the other. The kind of teacher that she perceived herself to be, purposely focusing on controlling the class, was one who was cold and distant from her class and who liked to create a formal class environment. On the other hand, building a relationship based on humour could produce a relationship where students lost respect for her as a teacher when she attempted to manage their behaviour for learning to occur. While she sought control of her class and to be perceived as an authority figure, Sh also appeared to fear being perceived as unpopular by her class. By maintaining control and by letting her students know who was in control, by using humour, Sh felt that she could form a relationship with, and gain respect from her students. This, she felt created good relationships and a positive environment for learning.

In line with the reversal theory of humour, the students appeared able to switch from the telic to the paratelic state when Sh, S and R used humour. The total amount of times the teachers utilised humour may leave students with the memory of a popular teachers whom they found approachable and one of the reasons they remembered the teacher was because of their humour. These teacher may be fondly remembered and therefore may even bring a smile to the students' face because of the way the teacher formed a rapport with them and created a positive and relaxing atmosphere which was conducive to student learning.

Remaining on the same theme of the use of humour to build student-teacher relationships, McGhee (1979) recognised that humour helps to promote students' social development. He argued that a shared laugh towards a joke, riddle or amusement towards an object, individual or situation, facilitates students' social development. This theme illustrates that teachers use humour regularly to 'break the ice' and helps to form positive student-teacher relationships.

#### 4.7 Differentiation of humour

This theme refers to the ways in which teachers used their humour with students of different age groups and ability.

##### 4.7.1 Differentiation of Humour: Age of student

Some teachers commented on using their humour with the age groups and classes they currently teach and showed some understanding of younger students' understanding and development of humour.

Extract 14: A

*A: The humour that I use with the year 3s is more literal and tangible based on maybe physical attributes etc. the year 3s love anything to do with farts and burps and you're teaching about sounds and talk about gases and you talk about passing wind and they want to hear it someone in the class wants you to say it so you give it to them so they can*

*have their laugh so very basic humour with the younger ones and you tend to sophisticate the humour the old they become*

*JO: what do you mean sophisticated humour?*

*A: erm they're more able to read between the lines. For example the film 'Shrek' they could see, you know, Shrek has got so much adult humour in it but it depends on your level of intelligence at which you get the humour and at which level.*

AL: 49 - 60

A reported that the humour that appeals to young students is tangible, obvious and visually observable forms of humour that seem apparent to them. She is saying that young students want to hear the teachers actually say the words 'fart' and 'burp' in order to giggle or produce shrieks of laughter in the classroom. This is because younger students enjoy slapstick humour, which is visual humour. In contrast, she uses more complex, inferential and subtle forms of humour with older students whom, she feels, can understand this form of humour. A also feels that older students can understand the complex forms of humour that adults use and make reference to themselves. This is in line with McGhee's thinking that students who reach his fourth and final stage of humour development tend to remain at this stage as there is no more advanced level beyond this stage (McGhee, 1979, as cited by Chaney, 1993).

A recognised the need for teachers to use humour differently with different age groups. Another teacher, N also appeared to understand that what distinguishes younger and older



students' sense of humour and their understanding of teachers' use of humour is their level of language complexity which develops with age (McGhee 1979, as cited by Chaney, 1993).

Extract 15: N

*Yeah I think it is, I think it's also age related because as I said, at the moment I only do the whole class teaching with years 5 and 6 and what I find is that they can cope generally with a level of language complexity which younger students wouldn't so perhaps the humour would be a lot more subtle or there would be less sarcasm or irony or double meanings that younger students would not understand so that is more age related.*

NL: 88 – 93.

Like A, N understood the nature of age related humour that appeals to students of different age groups. She felt that older children, who had more developed language skills than younger children, were more capable of understanding humour that was not slapstick but more abstract and intangible than younger children's comprehension of humour.

Some teachers reported using sarcasm. Martin's (2007) model of humour styles perceives sarcasm as an aggressive form of humour. However, some teachers felt the use of sarcasm was appropriate to use with older age groups, i.e. those students who are seven to

eleven years rather than younger age groups. R, for example, felt that she could confidently use sarcasm with her year six students because she felt that they knew that she did not literally mean what she had said. Therefore, the students would not take her sarcastic comments seriously. The reason for this was attributed to R's understanding that older students can understand the inference involved in sarcasm and not take this form of humour personally.

Extract 16: R

*JO: You talked previously about your perception of your use of humour as being mainly verbal and you teach year three and six do you think you're humour is different between the two age groups?*

*R: Oh massively different.*

*JO: What are those differences?*

*R: With year six I suppose I probably use sarcasm more with this age group as I don't really mean what I'm saying, we're just having a laugh at ourselves where year three are probably a lot more sensitive*

(RL 166-175).

R appeared sufficiently confident to use sarcasm with year six students whom, she felt, were unlikely to take her humour personally. In contrast, she felt that year three students with whom she also came into contact were likely to feel hurt or humiliated by her sarcastic humour. Rather than use sarcasm with the younger age group, R felt that the use

of affiliative humour which was a cohesive and positive form of humour was more appropriate to use.

In another example, D reported using sarcasm frequently as he views himself as a sarcastic individual and sees this type of humour as a quality that is part of his personality.

Extract 17: D

*D: I used to teach year two I did it for four years and I was never sarcastic with them. I might have had jokes and smiles and laughs but I don't think I used sarcasm. That for me is being selective now, that was me going back that was eight years ago as a teacher thinking but maybe I did it was my personality...but now I wouldn't.*

*JO: Not with the year twos, why?*

*D: They wouldn't understand it. They would take it literally; they would take a literal interpretation of what you're meaning. It wouldn't look metaphorical idea of what you're saying whereas I think the older ones understand that but I think that until you've taught for different age ranges for three, four, five, six years you don't understand.*

(DL: 57 – 69).

Even though D would have not considered using sarcasm with the year two students, like R, he felt that using this form of humour was more appropriate with older age groups. During his teaching experience he appeared to have learned that younger age groups do

not understand sarcasm, but respond better to more obvious humour such as “jokes and smiles”.

Teachers appeared to have an awareness of the need to vary their humour in accordance with students’ development of language. David provides another example.

Extract 18: D

*I think that you’ve got to be careful not to be too sarcastic all the time and I like to have jokes with the students and I think because I teach the older students. There are some students I wouldn’t use sarcasm with because I don’t think they would understand what I say to them and they might take it as a personal joke personally. I taught year five and year six a lot and I think I, throughout the year, I gradually, I’m a bit more humorous with them. A bit more sarcastic with them, they get to know my personality they get to understand that its not sarcasm that its sarcasm that they should take personally you’ve got to be very, very careful and I must admit that I’ve said something and thought afterwards that really wasn’t the correct thing to say.*

(DL 24-33).

This extract demonstrates that D felt that the use of sarcasm was legitimate to use. However, he recognised that there were occasions when it was inappropriate. Therefore, although D felt that, in general, sarcasm was appropriate to use in his classroom, he recognised that this was only dependent on the context, which mediated his judgement of

the use of this potentially negative form of humour. He felt that students' comprehension of sarcasm as a form of humour, differed in terms of their age, ability and maturity (This is discussed further in the following chapter).

In terms of the development of students' humour, it appeared that D's comments were incongruent with McGhee's (2002) who discussed that students were able to comprehend more complex forms of humour, including sarcasm when they reach the final stage of humour development (McGhee, 2002). He felt that students could not comprehend sarcasm in year two (approximately seven years of age), while McGhee's final stage of humour development begins approximately at the age of five years.

Martin (2007) pointed out situational forms of humour, including sarcasm, were used mainly in the social, interpersonal context. In the social context of the classroom, teachers reported using it in relation to what was occurring at the time. For example, D used it during the lesson to tease his students, but appeared confident that both he and his students knew one another sufficiently well in the context of the classroom where the students felt safe and secure. This appears to present a contradiction in terms: the use of teasing prosocially, rather than destructively, in relationships. Is it possible to use prosocial teasing in student-teacher relationships? It appeared that D thought that this was possible on condition that both students and teachers developed the kind of relationship that was based on mutual understanding of personalities and boundaries.

Extract 19: D

*Ok a good example I think in this class is erm when I say to them all you know we're all learning no one knows everything so when we're doing our work then I joke and say to them no one knows everything apart from of course me and I'll say that a few times and then I'll have one of students now who's started to mimick what I have just said and he'll say to me "well I know everything because you know everything" and I was well no, no I was being sarcastic I wasn't being serious*

(DL: 40-45).

In addition, Apter (1992) who developed the reversal theory, felt that humour that is too difficult or too easy to understand is not viewed as funny by the recipient. He felt that for humour to be regarded as funny, it required a moderate degree of effort from the students. In this way, teachers may have considered the effort that the students needed to understand the humour and may have felt that it doesn't make much sense to use humour that the students will not comprehend. Also, they didn't use humour that was "too easy" for the students as the students would not find it pleasurable. In order to 'pitch' their humour at the right level of understanding and 'comfort' (avoiding hurt and offence) for their students, teachers may have had some understanding of the humour that appeals to those students whom they teach and therefore some understanding of experiential humour development in students. In their teaching experience, some teachers recognised that older students approximately aged six years and older, rather than younger students

comprehend more abstract and complex forms of humour.

#### 4.7.2 Differentiation of Humour: Ability of Student

These accounts illustrated how teachers consider varying their use of humour according to the age of the students. In addition to the variant use of humour with different age groups of students, teachers reflected on the use of humour with students of different abilities. For example, N and M discussed how they used humour with students who have special educational needs. They recognised that not all students have the “natural” capacity to develop humour in the same way or at the same time or pace as those students who do not have these difficulties. N provides an example of this point.

Extract 20: N

*I work with students with social communication difficulties and I look forward to the day when they can understand a simple joke it's a fantastic breakthrough when they can play with language in that sort of way and obviously the sort of humour that I would use with a child with difficulties would be very different with a child, for example with years five and six I would use even irony or sarcasm as a form of humour when I'm absolutely sure that we're both having fun at something. Erm I wouldn't do that with a child with social communication difficulties I would use more slapstick or something you know more physically funny you know where they can actually see so you know so I'll drop something you know not on purpose just accidentally and I'll call myself a name I tend to you know and just say something silly and just those kinds of things.*

(NL: 42 – 52).

N recognised that students with social communication difficulties have difficulties comprehending abstract language and therefore abstract forms of humour that are associated with inferential thinking. She also recognised instead, that students with social communication difficulties understand more literal forms such as slapstick humour and verbal humour that involve silly words and names. N appeared to highlight an issue about the use of teachers' humour in the classroom: while it is possible to use divergent forms of humour with different groups of students with similar needs but how do teachers manage to use a form of humour with students of varying needs where some understand the humour and others do not? M gave an example of the different ways of eliciting humour with children of variant needs.

Extract 21: M

*M...with English as an additional language sometimes like with autistic students its visual humour...I think visual stuff as well is great to have to explain it and also there's a role through literacy I'm talking about things like you know funny expressions like 'raining cats and dogs' its really about your skill as a teacher to bring those different things that help students to engage so that they can understand what is going on in the classroom you know funny idioms you know and I suppose those students with real language issues and you try and explain to the parent about what's gone on*

ML: 63 – 77.



M's comments highlighted the need for teachers to understand that autistic students, particularly older students, do not understand non-literal language such as idioms and metaphors. M felt that great skill is required by teachers to be able to explain such abstract language to autistic students in a way that is humorous and easy enough to comprehend.

M remarked that teachers need to use humour with caution as humour involves double meanings and incongruity as purported in McGhee's model of humour development (McGhee, 2002a). M felt that, as autistic students have difficulty interpreting incongruity and inference, they may take the humour personally and misinterpret it. Similarly, M felt that students whose first language was not English may not necessarily lack academic ability but may have problems understanding the humour that their English speaking counterparts are able to comprehend. This is important as some humour may include some students but exclude others during the humorous interactive experiences between the teachers and students and, therefore, impact on the quality of the student-teacher relationship.

The findings suggest that the ways in which teachers tended to differentiate their humour was in terms of their students' age, level of language complexity and ability. The use of sarcasm, as an advanced form of language, reinforces this point. Teachers talked about the inappropriateness of the use of sarcasm with younger age groups because young

children would not have developed and understood the same level of complexity of language as older age groups.

Reversal theory posits that the humour that students perceive is expected to exert a moderate degree of effort from them to understand it. Therefore, teachers are required to pitch the humour that corresponds with the students' age, language level of development, intelligence and English language level. Teachers appeared to convey that abstract humour cannot be understood by students with social communication needs as they do not understand the multiple meanings of words. It appeared therefore that teachers not only need to differentiate their learning to teach all students and enable them to enjoy their learning. Teachers also need to differentiate their humour to communicate not only with mainstream students but also with students who have social, language and academic needs. To understand students' personalities and needs means knowing the kinds of humour that appeals and attracts them and is based on their level of understanding.

The ways in which teachers appeared to use their humour in the classroom were varied. Similarly, the ways in which teachers felt that there were important considerations when using humour were also divergent. Some teachers felt that the use of humour should be used with caution in order to prevent stress, tension in atmosphere as well as in interpersonal relationships and poor classroom management. Some teachers discussed caveats as they recognised that not all humour produced positive consequences.

#### 4.8 Caveats

This theme referred to the perceptions of some teachers who felt that their use of humour required some reflection and after-thought as the outcome of some humour resulted in ways in which teachers had not anticipated. Some teachers felt that humour should be used with some consideration. Indeed, just as teachers have their own perceptions of their *use* of humour, students may also develop their own perceptions as recipients of that humour. Some humour may be vulnerable to misinterpretation, resulting in some students who may not have understood what the teachers had inferred at the time. Other teachers may have reflected that they had exceeded the acceptable boundaries of their humour and felt it necessary to apologise. R illustrated an example of one way in which she felt humour should be used with some consideration.

Extract 22: R

*You've got to be careful with humour because it can escalate and the whole class fall apart. I think once the students have a laugh they have to get themselves back together. Jokes are fine we can all have a laugh and it gets us all relaxed but then we need to settle down and get back to your work and get focused and that can be quite a difficult skill*  
(RL: 13 – 17).

R appeared to express that the use of humour and in particular, affiliative humour which is a cohesive form of humour, could sweep or drive the class into a heightened degree of

frenzied laughter and furore, beyond the teachers' control. She felt that, when engaged in humour, students might need some support from teachers to return to the telic state. R seemed to convey that, with the utilisation of these skills, teachers were not only required to use age-appropriate humour but also to manage the class by reducing the laughter and potential hysteria and settle the class back to work.

In addition to the requirement of classroom management skills to elicit and reduce humour engagement in the classroom, some teachers felt that reflection was another criteria for using humour to consider the appropriateness of humour. D reported that teachers used sarcasm occasionally. However, he also reported that he was a sarcastic person who actually uses sarcasm all the time – much more frequently than he first reported. However, even he felt that sarcasm should be used with caution. An illustration is provided.

Extract 23: D

*I must admit that I've said something and thought afterwards that it really wasn't the correct thing to say. I will speak to a parent after school and... shouldn't have used sarcasm with your child. The parents accept that its fine, it doesn't matter and I think you have to reflect on the way you use humour because sometimes, I think you can use it a bit too much, cos there are times and places for it.*

(DL 32-36)

D felt that at times the humour that he used had been inappropriate in terms of its form (sarcasm) and occasion. Even though he unrepentantly enjoyed using sarcastic humour, he recognised that he had exceeded social boundaries where his humour was either too crude, rude or personally targeted towards a student. In terms of rationalising the use of humour and bearing in mind important considerations, M discussed the circumstances in which teachers should consider before using humour in the classroom.

Extract 24: M

*humour depends on lots of things the mood the ways in which you will receive it how you participate or you will not so you really need to have what I would consider to be a degree of emotional intelligence about things and the ability to read situations and know people and understand and you know to not be embarrassed if its gone wrong you know so you know "I'm sorry its gone wrong I didn't mean to upset you" I think that is all part of it really.*

ML 331-337

M felt that successful humour elicitation is reliant upon the teachers' mood, mood of the students and that of the classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, M felt that one's mood influences the way in which an individual interacts with the instigator of the humour, which in this case, are the teachers. She felt that the teacher requires a degree of emotional intelligence to understand and manage one's own moods as a teachers as well as that of their students and the classroom atmosphere. M expressed that teachers must

assess and be attuned to their students' feelings, thoughts and emotional states before using humour. In this way, teachers should understand the appropriate occasion in which humour should take place. Perhaps students enter classrooms feeling unmotivated to learn for various reasons. If the teacher is able to use humour to motivate students for example, they are helping to engage students in their learning. Alternatively, in situations where the teachers may have wrongly assessed the appropriateness of a situation where humour is used, they should be prepared to apologise. M had stressed the importance of building student relationships with the class who had previously experienced the sudden departure of their teachers. She also reported using humour to help to build a rapport with the students. However, she also recognised that, if her use of humour was not perceived by the students in the way she intended, or if the students were offended or hurt by her humour, she felt an apology was appropriate to attempt to re-build a positive student-teacher relationship.

In addition to the themes referred to above, teachers appeared to have developed a subjective view of humour based on their own past experiences of using, being the recipients of, and participating in the construct. This is detailed below.

Several teachers were asked to provide examples that demonstrated how they felt they used humour. Most of the teachers failed to do this. The failure was perhaps because, when the teachers reported using humour spontaneously and frequently, the moment, and therefore the memory for using specific humour or jokes that were relevant and

humorous at the time, were lost.

#### 4.9 Definitions of humour

Two teachers had their own philosophy of humour which had developed from their more personal, and more subjective than objective views of humour which may have informed their definitions of humour. Due to space restrictions, the author of this research is not permitted to detail all of the teachers' definitions. Each teachers' summary of humour with their definitions have been given earlier in their vignettes in section 4.2 in this chapter. However, two examples of teachers' ideas of humour are given below. M often discussed using self-defeating humour with her year five class. She discussed how the self-defeating style of humour was encouraged in her family.

#### Extract 25: M

*I think that with the years you become more confident just because you're more rehearsed with the different year groups so definitely, I think that I've always liked and appreciated humour. I had a very, very funny Father and family that were funny and I was brought up you know one of four students you laugh at yourself you don't get huffy with a 'petty lip,' that's an expression my parents would have used you know to laugh at yourself that's an important quality to have really I think that and I can't possibly expect that of students if I don't demonstrate that myself*

(ML: 120 – 127).

M believed that the use of humour developed with years of teaching experience that involved working with students across the age range. M reflected on the invaluable contribution that humour has made in her family life. She felt that she had been taught by her family to laugh at herself which, she felt was a valuable attribute to possess as it encourages people to adopt a positive outlook towards life's challenges. M's capacity for self reflection enabled her not to take herself too seriously. As described earlier, in order for students to learn to laugh at themselves, M felt that they need to see her model self-defeating humour, showing that she was similar to the students by making mistakes, thus reducing the psychological distance between herself and her students.

From her childhood, it appeared that M was saying that the approach that her family employed towards humour was one which helped her to develop an amount of resilience as an adult. It appears to be resilience that M aims to develop resilience in her students by showing them that attempting tasks, making mistakes and dealing with them positively is one way that develops their resilience. However, what also appears apparent but missing from M's comments are that, in order to attempt tasks and risk making mistakes also involves having a degree of self confidence. From years of teaching experience, M has developed the confidence to use self-defeating humour. Students who are developing their social and emotional development may not have the confidence to risk failure in the presence of others. While M may understand that having the self-confidence to use self-defeating humour takes time, she is teaching her students what she has learned from her life experience. She illustrates this below.



Extract 26: M

*I love looking at the humorous outlook on life as that was very much a feature of my family life and you know still with my siblings and my husband, I love doing that to, attention or even you know goodness me at our parents' funerals you know, the saddest days of our lives and I come from a very big catholic-Gaelic family where laughter is you know a real feature of self-deprecating so I think you know I like that part of me as well.*

ML: 220 – 225.

In an interpretation, it appears that as a child, M learned to develop the use of self-defeating humour that she has crafted as an adult to model to her students. At the same time, she appeared to have developed a self enhancing humour style which she felt was a characteristic of her current family life. She felt that she used this form of humour in the face of adversity. However, the humour style that was employed to cope with adversity may be self enhancing humour. M commented that humour has helped her cope with a difficult time in her life. This showed that individuals developed the different styles of humour and use them in different contexts with different individuals, during different times, in various situations and contexts across one's lifespan.

This is further illustrated by N who developed the use of different styles of humour in different contexts and with different individuals. The context in which she developed self-defeating humour was the primary classroom in her native South America as a child

and in the UK school as a teacher.

Extract 27: N

*...my primary years were very difficult and things started to look up I had to do a lot of work etc I had help and erm and I developed mechanisms for coping. I think it was a big turning point in my life. I had to cope with something really stressful very traumatic and you know I had a choice well I didn't think of it as a choice at the time but you always have a choice to cope with things and I think the only way I managed to cope was by developing these strategies which was included you know humour, laughing at myself saying that it doesn't really matter it makes me laugh and in time I really think it doesn't but that took a long time and it also marked my erm, first of all it's the reason why I started teaching because my experience had been particularly successful particularly from an emotional, social side that's what interested me about teaching it wasn't about maths or English... I do take some pride in making a child feel some having a hard time feel comfortable in school and feel happier, one if you can touch one that would be enough and that is a lot of motivation behind you know what I do with students. It is a personal thing.*

(NL 770-786).

N's philosophy of humour which was based on the way in which she adopted the use of self-defeating humour to help her cope with her personal trauma, and as a way of attempting to be liked by her peers. As N did not have the chance to develop friendships

with her peers in the first formal years of her schooling, she might have felt that she had to catch up on her social development. She may use self-defeating humour therefore to raise a laugh with her peers at her expense, thus attempting to build a relationship with them. As an adult, she may also be using self-defeating humour to build relationships with both her peers and adults in the school. She appeared to convey that put-downs of oneself served to facilitate friendships with her peers.

Extract 28: N

*I can think of students as having a negative experience of schooling always mindful that there might be students who you know I was a child once upon a time and maybe the truth is that most of the you know love it and they don't have any worries but I think I always prefer to err on that side to think well I better teach as if they do find it hard as if they have stresses as if they have worries that they can't leave at home and they go through the school gates because it won't hurt the ones that are happy anyway bit it might and only might build those for whom coming to school each day is really hard or life is hard full stop so I think it starts from there but definitely it's a purposeful action it's a name in itself you know it is important to me to know that students feel comfortable in school and certainly feel comfortable in my presence.*

(NL 802-812).

On the one hand, she had reported using humour for coping which is a self enhancing humour style as she talked about her experience of humour to help her cope with her

early trauma. On the other hand however, she claims to have used self-defeating humour by laughing at herself. N developed both styles simultaneously to help her cope with her trauma which has contributed to her overall philosophy of humour. As an adult she feels that these styles and past experiences have influenced her chosen occupation. From her past experience, it appears that N has felt compelled to promote the emotional and social aspects of students' development by using humour. She uses humour to increase their self confidence and social interaction skills by laughing at herself and creating relationships in the process. To increase students' confidence and enhance interpersonal skills with her, N aims to enhance students' well-being and motivation for learning.

With reference to the philosophy of humour and developmental psychology of humour, N and M's development of humour over the years appeared to originate from their learning. They appeared to scaffold their knowledge of humour that they had built from past experiences. This is perhaps the implicit foundation on which McGhee's (2002a) staged model of humour is based as students develop humour on previous experiences. The comments made by N and M appear to show that the confident use of humour develops over time from childhood to adulthood based on past experience of the use of humour in different contexts.

Regarding the reversal theory of humour, the teachers appeared able to switch their own state and that of the students from the serious to the playful moods, perhaps due to the frequency with which they had successfully used humour in the past. It appears that,

congruent with their numbers of years of teaching experience, N and M are experienced teachers who have become accustomed to using humour and therefore, used to lifting the moods of their students to motivate them for learning tasks.

#### 4.10 Chapter summary

This chapter began with a vignette of each teacher's view which also included their individual definitions of humour. The chapter then continued with the themes which were developed from the data extracts of the teachers' transcripts. An analysis of each theme was presented, along with reflections of the themes to the developmental psychology of humour and the reversal theory of humour. In the following chapter, a comparison of the findings of this study is compared to the previous findings. Limitations and strengths of the study are outlined, along with recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

#### 5.0 Overview of Chapter

The chapter begins with a summary of the main findings and relevance to background

literature (5.1) which includes teachers' definitions of humour, answering research question one (RQ 1) (5.1.2). Research question two begins with a summary and reference to the literature (5.2), followed by the use of humour to engage students in learning (5.2.1), a specific outline of teachers' use of humour to establish student-teacher relationships (5.2.2), the reduction of stress and tension (5.2.3), and differentiation of humour (5.2.4). Overall, teachers felt that using humour in the classroom was a good technique to utilize in the classroom, with some caveats (5.2.5). The chapter discusses epistemological considerations (5.3), reference to the criteria for quality research, i.e. credibility authenticity; transferability and subjectivity are also included. Personal reflexivity (5.4) followed by epistemological reflexivity (5.5) and reflexivity as a learning process (5.6) are detailed. This is followed by implications for educational psychologists (5.7). Applications for educational psychology practice (5.8) limitations of this current research and suggestions for future research (5.9) and a summary (5.10) are outlined.

#### 5.1 Summary of the main findings and relevance to background literature

The main findings consist of the address of the two research questions in this current research. The findings in relation to the definitions of humour (RQ 1) are presented and compared to the relevant literature. This is followed by the teachers' perceptions of the ways in which humour was used in the classroom.

The following section is not a theme because of the difficulty in combining teachers' views into a coherent definition of humour. Instead, in an attempt to address the first

research question: 'How do teachers define humour,' what follows are descriptions of teachers' subjective views of humour based on their own experiences.

#### 5.1.2 Teachers' definitions of humour (RQ: 1)

Chapter one referred to the various ways in which humour may be defined. Martin (2007) identified various forms of humour to claim that it is a multifaceted phenomenon. Chapter two presented an outline of the various perspectives of humour, namely, the emotional, social and cognitive standpoints which echo the conclusion that the search for an empirical definition of humour is more complex than it initially appears.

To truly understand the core of each definition of humour, each teacher's view was sustained during the analysis, rather than being subsumed into categories that would have diluted the core of the teachers' narratives. Maintaining each teacher's view helped the researcher to understand how the teachers defined humour and how each definition related to the context of the classroom. In addition, it was important to bear in mind that, as this research selected a small sample of teachers, their views were retained, not because of the number of times that they were repeated amongst the teachers, but by the various ways in which the teachers' definitions addressed research question one.

The teachers' definitions of humour appeared to be described as a concept or a function that fell within more than one area. According to the definitions, teachers felt that humour

functioned: 1) to help individuals process experience; 2) as a cognitive-perceptual process; 3) as a vocal-behavioural expression of laughter 4) as a social facilitator and 5) to serve mood-changing benefits. As such, humour can be seen in broad terms to encompass these definitions.

One teacher (Sh, who defined humour as ‘dealing with things,’ ShL: 312), felt that humour helps individuals process experiences that may threaten to overwhelm the individual. Sh saw humour as that which gave her the capacity to cope. She in turn, attempted to encourage her students to develop the same capacity to process the experience of coping with an event such as taking a test. The test could have been perceived as a stressful event. For this teacher, engaging her students in humour served as a temporary diversion for them from any potential anxiety the students associated with the test. The diversion enabled the students to re-frame the test as a positive challenge that could be overcome. Sh felt that processing experience was the function served by humour that she had developed and hoped that her students would also develop to cope with challenging situations in relation to school.

Another teacher (N), also defined humour as a means of processing experience (‘coping with life’s adversities,’ NL: 745). Her philosophy of humour was borne out of a personal childhood experience. Humour helped her to cope with her personal trauma and develop the confidence to build relationships with her peers. She continued to use humour as an



adult to build relationships with her colleagues and with parents. However, she felt that by using humour in this way, she developed confidence as a teacher and also aimed to help students to gain the confidence to tackle challenging tasks. She too, like Sh aimed to enable children to gain a positive attitude towards perceived obstacles but unlike Sh, for N, processing experience involved an appreciation of humour and as a result, help her students develop more self confidence as it had done for her.

Humour was not only defined in terms of processing experiences, but was also defined as a concept involved in cognition. M defined humour as ‘something funny; (ML: 3). This implied that she viewed humour as that which involved a cognitive-perceptual process. For N, the presentation of humorous stimuli has to be perceived as incongruous and resolved before it is seen as something funny. However, M did not use jokes or riddles as stimuli for students to perceive them as funny. Instead, she used self-defeating humour to present herself as someone who could make mistakes and overcome her feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. Rather than present a contradiction, where M defined humour in one sense and used it in another form, perhaps for M. humour performed a dual function, i.e. humour involved cognition but also involved a boost for a student’s deflated self esteem. This also reinforces the notion that humour cannot be neatly defined and packaged because it can be defined as a concept but also be used in a number of forms, but still represent humour.

The idea that humour can be defined in terms of more than one definition or meaning, is reinforced by M who perceived humour as ‘something funny.’ However, humour was viewed as ‘a feeling of funniness’ (RL: 283) as well as something that involved ‘smiling and giggling’ was also viewed by the same teacher. R felt that funniness represented a ‘feeling’ rather than a cognitive-perceptual process. Perhaps she meant that humour represented an embodied feeling illustrated by physical activity such as smiling and giggling. T also defined humour as ‘laughter’ (RL: 2). Smiling, giggling and laughter appear to be vocal-behavioural, outward expressions. For R and T, humour involves mild forms of behaviour such as smiling, to more intense looking expressions of chuckling and ultimately onto loud guffaws or shrieks of laughter. These vocal expressions of an appreciation of humour imply that laughter is a means of communication and a way of letting others know that one is experiencing delight.

It may be argued that laughter implies a degree of communication between individuals as initiators elicit laughter from recipients who communicate their amusement by laughter. Humour was indeed defined as ‘cohesiveness where people build relationships with each other’ (SL: 4). Humour was deemed to be a social facilitator by S who felt that humour helped to build positive student-teacher relationships and good peer relationships as students learn together. She felt that humour involved a play on words, particularly those that possess multiple meanings helped students to be creative with their language and communication. Humour involved social bonding between individuals and it was humour as a form of communication to build relationships that was fundamental to S’s definition

of the construct.

Finally, for the two remaining teachers, humour appeared to have a positive, mood-altering impact for users and recipients. Both teachers, A who defined humour as ‘giving and receiving pleasure’ (AL: 191) and D who felt that humour involved making others laugh and smile but also to ‘put them (others) at ease’ (DL: 5). They felt that humour had the power to change the classroom atmosphere and lift students’ own mood states from either sadness, disaffection and anxiety, to joy and delight, enjoyment (of lessons) and relief from tension. For them, humour was not primarily about cognition, social bonding, behavioural expressions, etc. Humour involved boost-enhancing affects, resulting in the shift of one’s mood.

In summary, humour was perceived in five different ways, either as a concept or as a construct that performed one of several functions. It is involved in processing experiences which are anxiety provoking and may overwhelm individuals. Alternatively, humour was also perceived as that which can help individuals to process experience to build confidence. Humour was also defined in terms of cognitive-perceptual processes that involved the appraisal and resolution of incongruous elements. Humour also included the vocal-behavioural expression of laughter which occurs when an individual is amused by the humour. Humour was seen as a social phenomenon, in which humour was used to communicate playful words and meanings between individuals. Finally, humour was also seen as a construct that had the impetus to alter negative moods and change them into

more positive and elevated feelings of pleasure and easiness.

Although, the teachers' definitions of humour spanned a broad range, most teachers' views were not congruent with Martin's (2007) conception of humour which consists of both positive and detrimental forms of humour. No teachers explicitly reported that humour can be both positive and negative. Teachers defined humour as a positive construct in a variety of ways to perform certain functions. Despite the apparent differences between the findings of this research and Martin's (2007), there were similarities. One similarity referred to the way in which S used humour was to socially bond with the students and to encourage unity amongst the students. This compares with Martin's (2007) affiliative style of humour which is a unifying concept of humour that brings individuals together with laughter. Another similarity referred to the way in which two teachers (Sh and N) saw humour as dealing or coping with things in life. This compares with Martin's (2007) self-enhancing humour style with which individuals maintain a positive outlook in the face of adversities.

The findings of this research led the researcher to appreciate the breadth of definitions from teachers whose ages, gender, ethnicities, years of teaching experience and use of humour in their own families were varied. Research question two was: What are primary teachers' perceptions of humour? This is addressed below.

5.2 RQ 2 What are teachers' perceptions of humour?

Some teachers perceived their use of humour as an intervention. Teachers felt that their use of humour was used as a strategy to help to increase students' engagement with their learning and to establish positive student-teacher rapport. Additionally, teachers felt that their use of constructive humour functioned as a coping mechanism to help students cope with taking risks in their work and risk academic failure. Teachers also felt that humour not only served to help students cope with academic stress but with their own stress related to the teaching profession. The findings of this research compare with Neuliep's (1991) study, the results of which were used to develop a taxonomy of humour, based on college teachers' views. In this research, teachers reported using humour to relax their students, establish a student-teacher relationship and engage students in their learning. However, this research continued to develop a main theme for coping with the following subthemes: relaxes students, relieve teachers' own stress and make mistakes. The similarity of the findings suggest that, more than two decades later, very little has changed in teachers' perceptions, irrespective of the age groups of students that they taught.

However, there were also differences. Neuliep's (1991) study focused on developing categories based on the percentages of students, as recipients of their teachers' humour, who gave similar responses. This research generated comprehensively analysed themes and subthemes representing the ways in which the teachers reported using their humour. The teachers' responses and analyses in this qualitative research were based on their narratives, obtained through detailed discussions, rather than through the restricted mode

of answers obtained from closed questionnaires.

### 5.2.1 Engagement in Learning

Several teachers reported using humour to engage students in their learning. However, when asked to provide examples to illustrate how they use the construct, teachers appeared unable to identify ways in which they did this. The majority of teachers reported using humour spontaneously, rather than thinking beforehand about incorporating humour in their lesson plans. This may be one of the reasons behind the lack of recall of examples. The propensity of the teachers using humour in the classroom spontaneously rather than with premeditated thought in lesson plans echoes the notion made by teachers who felt that the use of humour in the classroom was a natural part of their general sense of humour used in everyday life and was therefore a part of their personality. The extent to which teachers reported using humour in learning with their students was generally to adopt a humorous approach towards lessons during lesson time, rather than to the learning material itself.

This is in contrast to the studies by Ziv (1998) who found that the humorous and non-humorous lectures delivered on psychology undergraduate and statistics courses, led to a significant discrepancy of scores at the end of a semester. Students who received the humorous lectures received higher scores than their counterparts who received the non-humorous lecture. Perhaps the incorporation of humour in lesson planning takes considerable time which teaching and support staff do not have. More time in lesson

plans may give teachers the opportunity to utilise more effort, creativity and resources. With more opportunities, teachers can use humour in their lessons plan by, for example, linking humour used on television and relating it to the learning material in the classroom as suggested by S. Other ideas may include using jokes that are age appropriate and relevant; exaggerated intonations in speech, visual imagery and wordplay may also be incorporated in lesson material (Donaldson and Scheffler, 2007).

An example that illustrated how humour was used to engage students in their learning provided some insight into how students' attention can be captured and retained with the use of humour. Humour was incorporated into a play relating to the Tudor period. However, rather than seek inspiration from their teachers' use of humour, the students themselves used their own jokes to make the play humorous. This incorporation not only served to maintain the students' own interest, but the students appeared to recognise that the humour incorporated potentially captured the audience's attention and maintained their interest. This showed that a humorous ethos in the classroom served to create a positive classroom atmosphere that helps to relax the students (Rainsberger, 1994). Following his series of studies on humour in memory recall, Schmidt (1994) hypothesised that the recall of humorous sentences received more attention than non humorous sentences and therefore more time was devoted to rehearsing the sentences that received increased attention. Both the example given from the current study and Schmidt's (1994) study suggest that humorous messages receive more attention than non-humorous ones and that the students themselves recognise the valuable role that humour

can play in increasing attention and motivation, not only for themselves but also for others.

In terms of educational psychology, humour may be associated with locus of control. From a review of the literature, little research has been conducted on the relationship between these two topic areas. Studies that have focused on locus of control have used students as subjects but have not all focused specifically on teachers' use of humour in the classroom (for example, Bolick and Nowicki 1984; Prerost, 1983) and are outdated (Lefcourt, 1973 for example) but have found correlations between a students' internal locus of control and humour. They found that failure experiences were more frequently evaluated by internal locus of control students than their external counterparts. The findings of this current research highlight the need for teachers to use humour with internals. If internal locus of control students are encouraged to cope with their failure with humour, this may help to increase their acceptance of reinforcement and to exert more effort into their work by paying more attention and listening in class. This increased listening and attention may, in turn may result in higher achievement.

#### 5.2.2 Building student-teacher relationships

The findings support those of earlier studies which have found that teachers appear willing to engage in an informal relationship with their students (Davis, 2006; Fovet, 2009). This echoed the notion of humour as an implied bond between students and



teachers. In this way, teachers showed that they were just as ‘human’ as their students and therefore, were more like their students than their charges might have believed. This may be in contrast to students’ perceptions of teachers as those who hold ‘fountains of all knowledge’ and as individuals who do not make mistakes.

By using humour in the classroom with their students, teachers perceived their use of humour as a contributory factor in building rapport with students with whom they could establish a level of reciprocity. While understanding that humour itself is not sufficient in building relationships, teachers felt that their constructive use of humour can function as an integral step in the development of warm and constructive student-teacher relationships.

In terms of educational psychology, the constructive use of humour by teachers may be of relevance to cognitive dissonance theory. Research suggests (e.g. Davis, 2006; Fovet, 2009) that humour can serve as a ‘connector’ or an effective tool to bridge the psychological gap and help to form positive relationships between teachers and their students. Teachers who use humour may be encouraged by educational psychologists to use it constructively to reduce the psychological distance between them and their students. Teachers’ constructive humour can contradict any negative beliefs that students may have about their teachers. To resolve this dissonance, students can either change their beliefs about their teachers, or continue to rationalize their views. Through teachers’ use of humour, it is hoped that the students will change their perspectives to avoid the

incongruent pairing of thoughts about the teachers, such as, 'I don't like this teacher', and 'this teacher is actually funny and is likable after all'. In this way, teachers can be encouraged by educational psychologists to use humour to develop a rapport with their students, resulting in students' ability to become more discerning of their perceptions towards teachers.

### 5.2.3 Reduction of stress and tension

The findings in this current study are consistent with previous research studies that have found that teachers use humour in the classroom to relax their students (Rareshide 1993; White 2001). Unlike Rareshide's (1993) study and White's (2001) research, this study's findings however go even further by discussing the way in which teachers use humour to relax their students, implying a reference to the importance of students' development of a positive attitude towards challenges (e.g. Kuiper, Martin, and Olinger 1993). The findings of this research are harmonious with Rainsberger's (1994) study who found that humour in the classroom is integral to the reduction of stress and tension in students. Potentially stressful events and experiences including tests and exams (Kuiper, Martin and Olinger 1993), homework completion, maintenance of grades and peer pressure (Cann and Etzel, 2008; Führ, 2002) are examples of some of the adverse circumstances some students encounter.

Educational psychologists can help teachers to become more reflective about being even more sensitive to the stresses that adolescents experience, which can give rise to

emotional disturbances including depression, helplessness and anger (Slavin, 1997). Führ (2002) found that students aged between 11 and 14 years of age perceived that humour was most effective when used to cheer them up. Therefore, an implication for educational psychologists is that they can inform teachers about the benefits of humour to lift the moods of students. In this way, the negative states that some students experience can be altered to more positive emotional states.

In addition to the reduction of stress and tension in children as an intervention strategy, teachers in this current research also felt that their humour is an effective mechanism to help them cope with stress in the teaching profession. Unlike Mawhinney's (2008) research however, the relief did not necessarily arise from the staffroom which provided the congregational space for teachers to relieve their tension and was therefore perceived by staff as a source of social support. Rather, teachers in this current study felt that their use of humour helped them to relax within the classroom and create an atmosphere that was conducive to learning. Both Sh and N for example commented that they use humour to 'relax in themselves'. This led to an implication that they (Sh and N) appeared to find their teaching profession stressful, and that humour functioned to reduce their tension. Teachers felt that children need to feel sufficiently comfortable to take risks, make choices and decisions during lessons in order to make mistakes and learn from them without the fear of failure.

More specifically, the findings suggest that it is possible to use humour as a coping

mechanism to cope with potentially stressful events such as exams and tests. This is congruent with previous research (e.g., Cann and Ezel, 2008; Kuiper and Martin, 1993) that investigated students' approach towards exams as real life events. Following exposure to humour, students demonstrated positive appraisals of their performance and towards exams in general than other students who were not exposed to humour. Interestingly, O'Hara (2011) found that SEBD students who were supported on an emotional literacy programme led by peer mentors improved their attitude towards problem-solving tasks and challenges. The findings in this current research reported that teachers used humour to help students attempt tasks, and cope with mistakes, despite the risk of failure by using humour.

Put together, all the above research has further implications for educational psychologists. Educational psychologists can help learning mentors or peer mentors who implement the emotional literacy programme to help students develop a more optimistic, jocular, and cheerful approach towards perceived threatening situations. When exposed to humour some SEBD students who may feel threatened by challenging tasks can go through a transformative process. The process can involve some movement from feeling helpless to a feeling of empowerment. A positive outlook can be developed by peer mentors who use humour to help the students have a more relaxed but positive attitude towards threatening tasks.

#### 5.2.4 Differentiation of humour

Like Rainsberger's (1994) study, teachers in this current research acknowledged the importance of differentiating their humour to correspond with students' ability level as well as with the age of students. While research in the literature review discusses the importance of the appropriateness of humour for all in the classroom (Frymier and Wanzer, 1999) these research findings more specifically raise the importance of the consideration of students' ability to understand the teachers' humour. When probed, teachers felt there were students who may not understand abstract humour in the classroom but this did not stop them from using sophisticated humour beyond the understanding of some students. Although teachers showed an awareness of the need to vary their humour however, they didn't necessarily use simpler humour with their lower ability students in the same class. Rather, in general they appeared to feel more comfortable using abstract humour which was, usefully understood by older than younger age groups and was more in keeping with their own natural use of humour. Perhaps part of the teachers' appeal for teaching older children was that older children comprehend more abstract humour which teachers felt was similar to their own sense of humour.

Therefore, because of this similarity, teachers indicated a preference for using their humour with the older age group. It appeared that some teachers may have expected students to assimilate into their sense of humour rather than consider how they could have modified their humour to fit in with younger students' understanding or with older students who have lower abilities of comprehension of abstract humour. The consequences of teachers' failure to distinguish their humour between students of the

same age and various ability groups may result in the inclusion of some students and the exclusion of others. The inclusion and exclusion of students may be dependent on their comprehension level and participation in the teachers' humour and may therefore hinder the quality of their student-teacher relationships.

#### 5.2.5 Caveats

Although all teachers asked fully endorsed using humour with their students they also felt that some humour should be used with some caution. Martin (2007) did not discuss the idea that sarcasm should be treated with some care. While Martin (2007) emphasised the use of sarcasm as an aggressive form of humour, the teachers in this research viewed sarcasm as a form of humour that should be used when the teachers and students know each other sufficiently well, so that the students won't take the sarcasm seriously. Teachers who use sarcasm must feel confident that their students won't take the sarcasm literally and know that the teachers don't mean what they say. Teachers also discussed the way in which they used humour or would only use sarcasm with students who actually understood their sense of sarcastic humour. The teachers reported that they used humour with students whom had the ability to understand sarcasm. The teachers felt that it was fruitless therefore to use humour with those who simply didn't understand this form of humour because of its subtle and complex nature.

The complexity of sarcasm would inevitably lead to confusion for some students. Few teachers acknowledged that at times, their humour was not received by the students in the

intended way. In some cases, students had misinterpreted the humour either because they did not comprehend it; they felt that they were victimized; or did not feel receptive to the teachers' attempt to lift the students out of a negative mood.

The lack of understanding of sarcasm or ironic remarks may have implications for students who have social communication needs, language difficulties, and global developmental delay despite being in the upper primary age range. The findings may suggest therefore that teachers need to be more mindful of using humour to communicate with students with special educational needs and consider how to modify their use of humour to include all students, regardless of students' ability.

### 5.3 Epistemological considerations

A social constructionist approach was employed for this current research with the principle belief that knowledge is socially constructed and is reliant on the cultural, historical and linguistic context (Burr, 1995). The epistemological position impacted on the findings of this current research in two ways. First, the teachers developed their own personal views of humour from their individual perspectives, experiences and beliefs. The discovery of teachers' various responses to the same question around how they defined humour showed that humour is perceived differently by individuals. The teachers were given the opportunity to express their views in their own words and therefore, able to explore how they used humour. Second, due to the nature of the individual views, not only in times of the teachers' personal definitions of humour in particular, but also for the

remainder of the responses in general, humour is a multifaceted phenomenon. This multidimensional construct shows that humour is more complex than it first appears. The teachers expressed using humour in a number of ways suggesting that humour serves a variety of functions with some teachers finding some uses of humour more effective than others.

The data generated that enabled the researcher to develop an understanding of the topic began with the adoption of the qualitative perspective. This choice of design was based on the nature of the research questions and the method that was best suited to achieve the knowledge that was sought (Mertens, 2005). As a qualitative researcher, the author believes that all respondents' views are unique and equally important (Mays and Pope, 2005). Given this view, to find out from the teachers what their views were regarding humour, it was necessary to ask the teachers themselves. In terms of qualitative analysis, advocates of qualitative research argue that the criteria used to judge qualitative research cannot be the same as that used to assess the rigorous standards of quantitative research. Advocates of qualitative research methods, including Yardley (2000), Mays and Pope (2005) for example, referred to such criteria as credibility, authenticity, subjectivity and transferability.

A key principle for guiding qualitative research is the idea of credibility. Credibility may be viewed as the extent to which a description of human experience is such that those who are experiencing it recognise it immediately, and those outside it can understand it



(Baxter & Eyles, 1997). In other words, credibility seeks to assess whether there is an association between respondents' perceptions of constructs and the degree to which the researcher portrays their views (Mertens, 2005). In this current research, primary teachers were asked about their experiences of using humour in the classroom. The researcher, who was placed outside those experiences, sought to understand those experiences through exploration with the teachers themselves by interviewing them. Extracts of the data from the teachers' comments and interpretations made by the researcher were used as examples to illustrate and represent themes that were identified from the data.

Credibility is based on the assumption that there is no unitary reality but that there are multiple realities, a fundamental belief of the constructionist epistemology (Mertens, 2005). In this current research, teachers may hold various views of the same topic and how they use humour in the classroom. Multiple realities mean that responses are neither correct nor incorrect. Confirmation is not the goal from respondents but a commentary from them on the plausibility of the interpretation given (Baxter & Eyles, 1997).

In order to enhance credibility, qualitative researchers focus on the selection process of participants, interview practices and analysis (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Several strategies were used to enhance the credibility of qualitative research. The use of these strategies helped to provide evidence from a range of sources which boosts the quality of this current research. Prolonged engagement, is associated with the selection process, interview practices and analysis, and therefore, has implications for the credibility of the researcher and the researched (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). In terms of the selection process of

the sample, prolonged engagement is concerned with involving as many experiences as possible in research in order to obtain a wide range of experiences and therefore, information-rich data. Baxter & Eyles (1997) argue that this strategy is concerned with scope and the impact of multiple influences and contextual factors. The influences and factors are associated with the kind of sample selected for the study and assesses whether for example, the sample represents a wide range of participants who are selected based on their various experiences of the same construct being studied.

On reflection, with regard to the credibility of this current research, the recruitment process could have been more robust. The teachers in this current research were selected on their interest in, and willingness to participate in the study. As the researcher, as an educational psychologist who regularly visited a number of primary schools, the teachers were accessible. The selection process was dependent on the willingness of the special needs coordinators with whom the researcher frequently worked, to ask humorous teachers who they felt used humour in the school and who were willing to participate in this current research. On reflection, this restricted the sample in terms of the diversity in race, gender and ethnicity of the teachers. Wax (1971 as cited by Baxter & Eyles, 1997) suggests that researchers should aim to select participants as broadly as possible in order to include as many experiences as possible. Prolonged engagement in the recruitment process is discussed further as a learning process in section 5.5 of this chapter.

The researcher was a black, female educational psychologist whose personal

characteristics and job status were dissimilar to the majority of respondents whom she interviewed. The majority of the respondents were white female with two white male teachers. As such, the respondents may have been sensitized to the dynamics of the researcher-respondent relationship because of the discrepant characteristics in the dyad (Mays and Pope, 2005). Song and Parker (1995) pointed out that respondents' revelations are dependant on the race of the researcher, with same-race reseachers producing more disclosure in respondents than from opposite-race respondents. However, Maylor (2009) contends that same-race interviewers and interviewees do not always result in the latter being more willing to engage more with the researcher and research process. However, Johnson-Bailey (1999), argued that same-race dyads tend to disclose more as there are fewer obstacles to overcome. The respondents in this current research may have felt that they could not be as open and honest in their responses as much as if they had been interviewed by a researcher with the same race and gender characteristics. This may have therefore limited the depth of the research.

To address the confirmability of the research, the researcher checked and rechecked the themes by reading and re-reading the transcripts to ensure that the extracts used illustrated the themes. In this way, the themes could be traced back to the data and were not conjured up by the researcher. The authenticity of the research was also addressed to ensure that the findings were a reflection of the teachers' views. The transcripts were transcribed verbatim in order to include all nuances of the research interview. A broad range of the teachers' views were represented to show the broad scope of the teachers'

responses, regardless of the numbers of teachers who responded similarly to some of the questions. For example when asked exploring about the various strategies involved in using humour, only two teachers reported using sarcasm as a negative form of humour. Although only a minority of teachers responded in this way, the researcher felt that this was an important point to make within a theme (caveats) because it represented part of the broad range of forms of humour that teachers used in the classroom and to highlight teachers' recognition that not all forms of humour are constructive, even in the classroom. In this way, teachers were given the opportunity to discuss humour use in the classroom as broadly as possible and the aim was to ensure that all avenues were represented.

Qualitative researchers argue that some degree of self reflection must take place when undertaking research. For example, Kvale (1996 cited by Goode-Cross, 2011), argues that understanding researcher expectations and bias is important as personal perspectives may influence the collection and interpretation of data. The influence of the researcher, both as a person (personal reflexivity) and as a theoretical thinker (epistemological reflexivity) is crucial in this research as it encouraged some reflection on the ways in which the author was involved in the results and their interpretation (Willig, 2008).

#### 5.4 Personal Reflexivity

Personal reflexivity refers to the ways in which the researcher has influenced the research as a person (Willig, 2008). McGhee (2001) offers one way of examining this more

closely. He refers to the way in which qualitative researchers take some time to ‘bend back’ the research questions on themselves. For example, in this current research, teachers are asked about their use of humour in the classroom. In terms of personal reflexivity, the researcher in this current research as an educational psychologist thought about how she perceived her use of humour with the teachers during the interview. By examining the researcher’s interactions during the interviews, researchers are afforded the opportunity to learn more about themselves as co-constructors of data (Roulston, 2010). First, the researcher occasionally asked closed questions which may have influenced the participants’ responses. For example, questions such as, ‘do you think humour is important though?’ (AL: 76) resulted in an abrupt end as the teachers did not continue to elaborate on their brief response nor did the researcher pursue the response with a probe. An example of a probe that could have generated more data could have been “how or how much is humour important?” Or, “in what ways is humour important?” In addition, the researcher did not use a sufficient number of probes with the teachers to seek more clarification on the short responses.

Second, the researcher felt that her own subjectivities may have had an impact in shaping some responses provided. For example, the researcher recognised how her own subjectivities and beliefs impacted on the inclusion of questions which were not part of the interview schedule, such as “who is your favourite comedian and comedy shows?” The researcher in this current research felt tempted to ask this question because she wanted to find out if the participants had a similar preference, i.e. comedian Graham

Norton and the television programme 'Friends'. It might have been more pertinent to ask teachers about their favourite comedians and television programmes leading to a question about how their favoured humour users may shape their humour enjoyment and influence their use of humour in general and in the classroom. This may be a potentially future research area.

Nevertheless, in general, the researcher asked open ended questions which enabled the teachers to talk at length about humour from their own perspectives. In this way, the teachers were able to elaborate and explain how they defined humour as a concept from their experiences of humour as users and as recipients. Responding to open-ended questions including, "you mentioned that...tell me more about...", or "can you say more about...? Can you give me an example?" also gave the teachers the opportunity to tell their stories. As a result, the researcher found that the teachers produced detailed descriptions about the topic which may not have been otherwise generated.

The researcher recognized that good rapport skills were required to form a positive relationship with the teachers in order to elicit as much detail and honest information as possible from the teachers. Crabtree and DiCicco-Bloom (2006) argue that rapport consists of the interviewer's ability to have respect and trust for the interviewee and the information he or she shares. In addition, it also involves the means by which a comfortable environment is created for the interviewee to share personal experiences. The researcher in this current research felt able to use excellent rapport skills with the

teachers, some of whom had met the researcher just for the purpose of the research. The researcher felt privileged to listen to some of the personal experiences of the teachers who discussed how they developed their philosophy of humour. For example, N discussed her personal experience of how she developed her use of self-defeating humour to cope with her experience of being hospitalized during her early years and consequently missing her early education with her peers and looking physically different from them. This level of in-depth information may not have been achieved by using other methods of data collection alone such as focus groups, experiments or questionnaires.

The impact of the position, perspective and presence of the researcher and the researcher's unconscious motives (D'Aubyn and Kanellakis, 2010) are concerned with the researcher as a person who has influenced the research. Epistemological reflexivity, in contrast, refers to the theoretical foundation on which this current research is based. This is discussed in the next section.

### 5.5 Epistemological Reflexivity

This refers to the ways in which knowledge was known and in what alternative ways, knowledge of this subject could have been obtained. More specifically, epistemological reflexivity also refers to how the research questions could have been asked in a different

way to achieve more honest accounts and further considerations of the ways in which data could have been obtained using alternative research methods or methodologies (Silverman, 2001; Willig, 2008).

The first of the two research questions in this research was: How do teachers define humour? The aim of the research was to find out what primary school teachers in the upper primary age range thought about humour. As they were asked to discuss their use of humour, it was important to address, from the outset, what teachers thought 'humour' meant from their own perspectives. Even though one type of group of people was sought for the data collection, i.e. primary teachers, it was recognized that the teachers may hold various viewpoints of the construct.

The second of the research questions was: What are primary teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom? This question sought to address the ways in which teachers thought they used humour in positive as well as in negative ways; how they used humour with specific outcomes; the frequency with which they thought they used humour and the reasons behind their motivations for using the construct. It was hoped that the answers would generate ideas for the researcher to justify the reasons underlying how and why humour is a valuable tool that can be used by other teachers in positive ways to enhance students' well-being. The researcher in this current research felt that the research questions were both pertinent and relevant to the topic area.



Finally, the epistemological position on which this current research was based was also relevant and most suited to this research. Previously mentioned in the methodology chapter of this thesis, was the idea that social constructionism is concerned with the historical, cultural and social aspects of human experience (Burr, 1995). Meanings of concepts are co-constructed by individuals and are dependent upon an individual's age, gender, experience, culture, their various roles in life, political persuasion etc. The introductory chapter briefly discussed the changing perceptions of humour, with historically popular conceptions ranging from the ridicule of those less fortunate, to more acceptable forms of humour that do not target particular individuals or groups. Cultural differences may play a part in construing and emphasising what constitutes humour. The researcher recognised that teachers may hold a different perspective from one another, depending on their culture and upbringing. This appeared true of the South American teacher who reported that self-deprecating humour was used most widely amongst people in her culture but was viewed as putting oneself down by her British counterparts.

Having considered both the personal and epistemological reflexivity of this research, the researcher also reflected on her learning through the process of reflexivity. This is discussed in the following section.

#### 5.6 Reflexivity as a learning process

As a result of this current research, the researcher acknowledged her personal reflexivity in terms of her interview practice as an educational psychologist. First, the researcher learnt about the importance of using open-ended questions more in consultation meetings

with support staff, teaching staff and parents to understand their perceptions of their concerns about issues associated with their students. In this way, the scope and breadth of information could be considerable and helped the researcher to understand peoples' lived experiences in the pursuit of accurate information.

Second, the researcher also understood the importance of the use of more probes and follow-up questions based on the answers provided by the respondents to obtain a fuller and more in-depth amount of information from which to make more informed recommendations in her role as an educational psychologist. Using probes to obtain more information and follow-up questions from the consultees' own words helps to validate their perceptions and responses.

On reflection, the researcher felt that more consideration could have been given to the selection of participants to reflect the diversity within the community. This may have provided data on teachers who use humour based on their own experiences. For example, in terms of ethnicities, the majority of teachers were selected from an ethnically diverse borough. If teachers from ethnic groups such as Asian, Portuguese and Turkish were approached for participation in this current research, a broader range of experiences and uses of humour may have been obtained and included in the data, adding potentially more richness to the information. As part of the selection process, a questionnaire could have been posted to all of the upper primary school teachers based in an inner London borough. An instrument such as the Humor Styles Questionnaire devised by Martin et al

(1995) is one measure that could have been used to assess individuals' use of humour used spontaneously on a daily basis. An initial question asking the teachers whether they use humour in classrooms with their students could have been added to the original list of questions in the questionnaire. This would provide data on those teachers who use humour in the context of the classroom which is the context of interest in this current research. Asking teachers from the outset would have given the researcher the opportunity to divide the responses into two groups and would have enabled the researcher to focus on those teachers who reportedly used humour.

In addition, the sample of primary teachers used in this research was restricted to teachers who taught children aged from seven to eleven years. An explicit aim made earlier in this thesis, was to seek the views of teachers who taught in this age range because of the lack of previous research conducted on teachers who taught this age group. An outcome of this research was to add to the existing research on teachers' use of humour in the educational context and to complement research conducted in universities (e.g. Christophel and Gorham, 1990) and in the home context (e.g. Reddy, 2008).

As a result of this research process, the researcher felt that the utilisation of social constructionism, on which this research was based, was an influencing factor that encouraged the researcher to consider how the epistemological position impacts on how her attitudes, beliefs and assumptions influence her decision making and judgements about adults and students with whom she comes into contact. For example, as part of her

role as an educational psychologist and as a foster panel member, who's role is to recommend the approval of applicants to the foster carer role, the researcher has understood that panel members approach the task using their own views and beliefs. These perspectives are based on their past experiences, age, gender, religious background, race, political persuasion etc. Panel members' views on the personal or social characteristics of applicants are shaped by the above factors. Similarly, the multiple realities of the teachers' experience of using humour in this current research show that their own perspectives influence, and are influenced by, their various philosophies of humour. Unfortunately, the varying philosophies made it impossible for the researcher to summarise into a single definition of humour but did highlight the importance of the social constructionist position.

Similarly, the researcher learned to understand that teachers, support staff, parents, children and young people with whom she comes into contact in consultation meetings and in assessments, hold particular beliefs and attitudes about constructs based on their own perspectives which are neither correct nor incorrect but are many and varied. This research has further broadened the researcher's understanding of the views of others which may be very different to one's own, and has served to further deepen the importance of the researcher's role in terms of being non-judgemental of those who are service users.

In terms of prolonged engagement with the research, the transcription of the interviews

gave the researcher the sense of being deeply involved in the research which may not have been possible if the transcription task was assigned to an experienced transcriber. In doing the transcription, the researcher remembered the smiles, laughter, pauses, and the classrooms in which the interviews took place. In recalling the memories, the researcher felt connected to the research and to the willing participants.

As well as the recall of memories, the researcher also felt connected to the teachers because the researcher was a former teacher who used humour. The conversations reminded the researcher of the potential ways and the experiences of the ways in which humour was used with the researcher's own students.

#### 5.7 Implications for Educational Psychologists

The findings of this current research have revealed a number of implications for educational psychologists and educational psychology practice on a school level, wider level and on an individual child level. On a whole school level, the findings of this study and recommendations can be disseminated to teaching and support staff regarding humour development in students and ideas can be given on strategies that schools can implement to make learning fun and create an ethos of positive humour that is conducive to the emotional well-being of students.

The findings of this and previous studies highlight the importance of the need to improve

students' listening skills. Good listeners may become good learners (Garner, 2003; Glenn, 2002; Hill, 1988). Educational Psychologists can highlight the benefit of the incorporation of humour in lessons, particularly for key concepts and as a device to help students improve their listening and attention. Thus, if humour is used to draw attention to specific key concepts, the information is likely to receive attention because of the humour used to draw students' attention to it and therefore facilitate students' engagement in their learning.

This current research has further implications for incorporating humour in the classroom. An implication of attribution theory and locus of control for education is that teachers' feedback influences students' self-perceptions (Blumenfeld & Pintrich, 1985). Attribution theory is important in understanding how students might interpret and use feedback on their academic performance and suggests to teachers how they might give feedback has the greatest motivational value (Ames, 1992). Educational Psychologists can encourage teachers to use appropriate humour prior to feedback for work completed. If humour is used prior to negative feedback to help students develop a positive frame of mind, they would be more accepting of the feedback and be more optimistic about their future performance.

In addition, teachers can use humour prior to "dread" situations or events to reduce student anxiety. Humour can relax students and create an atmosphere conducive for

learning. Humorous intervals during a lesson can also promote learning by enabling the brain to process and absorb learning information (Loomans and Kolberg, 1993).

Humour can also be used to communicate issues associated with classroom management. Teachers can display “top ten peeves” to correct behaviour in a humorous way without reprimanding particular students. Humour can be used to enforce class rules, promoting greater understanding and rapport between teachers and students (Proctor, 1994 cited by Kerr, 1999). Water (1990 cited by Kerr, 1999) argued that students who are amused reduce the tendency to lash out. While humour alone in the classroom is not the resolution for class management issues, it can be a preventative measure and can diffuse tense circumstances (Loomans and Kolberg, 1993 as cited by Kerr, 1999).

As well as highlighting the ways in which humour can be incorporated in the classroom, educational psychologists can also enlighten others about how humour can be used to facilitate social development. As referred to earlier, educational psychologists can encourage peer mentors to incorporate humour in the implementation of emotional literacy programmes. Peer mentors as role models, can play an important role in helping students develop a more relaxed and positive attitude towards potentially stressful events that are either linked to learning, relationships or the development of coping skills. Humour can be used as an icebreaker or reduce stress and promote creativity (Korobkin, 1988). It can put students at ease and make learning more enjoyable. This is achieved

when teachers incorporate humour with the learning material and use both planned and spontaneous humour.

Educational psychologists can also be instrumental in encouraging school staff, and in particular learning mentors, to use humour with their students in order to build a positive staff-student relationship. In this way, students may learn that a positive relationship may help them to maintain good relationships with staff and help them to retain their attendance and engagement in school thus preventing school disaffection (Davis, 2006; Lovorn, 2008).

As well as considering how the positive use of humour can facilitate student-teacher relationships, educational psychologists should also consider how they use humour to build rapport with parents during parent-staff consultation meetings. Parents who may not have heard of educational psychologists and who may have little understanding of their role, may feel anxious about the prospect of meeting such a professional. Therefore, educational psychologists may use constructive humour to establish rapport and enable the parent to feel more relaxed without compromising the seriousness of the issues which would have led to the aim of the consultation.

While there are benefits of humour use for students, the researcher is not advocating that humour can be taught, but the propensity of teachers to use humour should not be discouraged. Used constructively, carefully modified to suit the ability level of students,



with some consideration of the nature of the context and of the relationship with the teachers, humour can be an invaluable tool to help students develop cognitively, emotionally and socially.

The research has implications for educational psychologists who work within the systems and context that support children and young people. At the local Authority level, educational psychologists are well placed to disseminate the results of this current research to policy makers who are responsible for increasing the emotional well-being of students and to facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the recommendations.

Educational psychologists can also be instrumental in the provision of information on humour development and strategies on teachers training courses. Student teachers could have the opportunity to learn about the development of humour in children in order to help them understand the approximate ages during which children develop their understanding of humour. In addition, information would equip student teachers to understand students' capacity to understand more abstract forms of humour such as irony and sarcasm. This information could give student teachers ideas about how they could use humour to promote the social, emotional and cognitive development of their students.

Not only can the findings of this study be shared at the local authority level and on teacher training courses, but can also be published in journals as an addition to the repertoire of articles in educational psychology and humour research. An aim of the

*'Educational Psychology in Practice'* journal is to publish articles that depict the theory and research that is associated with the practice of educational psychologists in the UK. A particular emphasis is applied psychology which is represented by research conducted by academic psychologists. This current research would make contributions to the existing knowledge base in child development and teachers' use of pleasant aspects of human experience that enhances students' emotional well-being.

The current research could be published in another scholarly journal *'Humor: International Journal of Humour Research'*. This journal consists of contributions from other, various disciplines including anthropology, biology, computer science, linguistics, sociology and neuroscience. The journal is published by The International Society for Humor Studies (ISHS), which is a multidisciplinary infrastructure of humour scholars who hold annual conferences. This current research can be added to the existing research articles in the journal or presented to the various areas of academia from an educational psychology perspective.

In addition, humour is a topic of interest to many other professionals in social work, education, health care and counselling. The Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor (AATH) is a professional society for individuals who are interested in the application of humour in their various fields.

At an individual student level, educational psychologists can also use humour to work

with students in therapeutic relationships to help students enhance their emotional well-being. Generally, there are three ways in which humour is applied to therapy (Martin, 2007). Some therapists view the use of humour itself in psychology and counselling, i.e. humour as therapy – to devise a system of therapy that is largely based on humour. Humour has been seen by others to be the foundation of particular therapeutic techniques that counsellors have as part of their repertoire that could be applied to some client's problems. For example, systematic desensitisation is used in treating phobias. Instead of muscle relaxation techniques, humorous imagery is used to treat phobias (Ventis, 2001). An alternative way in which humour is viewed is as a communication skill that, like aspects of educational psychology practice, include empathy and insight. Here the researcher is concerned with humour as a form of communication that can be used empathically in a genuine manner to foster the therapeutic relationship and to promote client self-exploration, insight and change. Bachelor and Horvath (1999), suggested that the results of the therapy research shows that the most effective therapists are those who show empathy, caring and genuineness towards their client. Therefore, humour is likely to be therapeutic if it used in a genuine way, communicating empathic understanding of the client.

The ability to use humour effectively appears to be best viewed as a form of social competence (Martin and Yip in press). However, the ability to use humour therapeutically as a skill needs to be developed by the educational psychologists just as they need to learn a range of other skills such as empathic understanding, active listening,

non-verbal communication etc. From this perspective, humour occurs spontaneously and naturally between the therapist and client, much in the same way that the teachers reported using humour in this current research. Humour may be used with varying degrees of skill and may be beneficial to the client, rather than being a particular technique that is used by the therapist. Humour per se is not therapeutic but must be used in a therapeutic manner to be effective (Marci, Moran and Orr, 2004, as cited by Martin, 2007).

One particular form of therapy with which EPs are familiar, is referred to as Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) techniques. SFBT operates to explore a student's preferred future for when the problem is solved and identifies the possible resources and strengths of the client. The core of solution focused brief therapy is to seek the person's resources rather than deficits, explore possible and preferred futures and to explore the existing factors that are contributing towards those futures (George, Iveson, Ratner and Shennan, 2009).

Although the range of therapeutic approaches differ in particular techniques, most forms of therapy share a number of common aims: i) establish rapport with the client, ii) gain insight and new perspectives and to iii) reduce the client's anxiety (Dziegielewski, Jacinto, Laudadio, Legg-Rodriguez, 2004). References are made from N and M to illustrate the ways in which they used humour as teachers in their everyday life in the classroom. They discussed how they demonstrated using coping humour skills to enhance

their students' emotional development. The teachers' use of humour in the classroom also strengthens the view that humour is a social phenomenon (Apter, 1982) because they used humour with their students. The social and emotional aspects of humour should convince educational psychologists that they can use humour as a communication skill in therapeutic work in their practice.

#### Establishing rapport with the client

Concerning humour as a communication skill to establish rapport, M and N reported using humour to get to know their students and relax them in the class. Gelkopf and Kreiter (1996) suggested that humour can be used to put the client at ease, make the therapist appear 'more human' and engage in an interaction with the client in a rewardingly reciprocal manner. Laughing together promotes friendliness and the client's trust in the therapist. In SFBT, educational psychologists can engage in 'problem free talk' a technique which involves the student talking about anything in his/her life aside from the problem. This is an opportunity for the educational psychologist to use affiliative humour to help the student feel at ease. Asking the student questions about activities which they are good at and ones which they enjoy may provide occasions for the educational psychologist and student to share humour, particularly if they discuss an activity that both individuals in the dyad enjoy. This helps to 'break the ice' between the two and helps the student to establish a rapport with the educational psychologist.

Gain insight and look at new perspectives.

M's own view of humour involved taking a positive outlook towards life's adversities. A real life adversity for primary students is their attitude towards a task which they find challenging. M had the insight to understand that this might be a threat to their self esteem if they attempted the task and risked failure. However, by modelling, M was able to communicate: 'have a go and if it is wrong, let's have a laugh about it and then move on.' In this way, she was able to encourage the students to look at an obstacle in an alternative way. In order to help a student reorient their perceptions, educational psychologists could model self enhancing humour for students to enable them to see things from another perspective. Humour could be used in a SFBT technique called a 'preferred future' which involves projecting the client's imagination forward in time. For example, the educational psychologist could ask the student to imagine their preferred future by visualizing themselves standing on their desk in class to symbolise their triumph over maths tasks which they find difficult to master. In this way, the student is engaging in self enhancing humour to take a positive attitude towards the subject and think of themselves as being able to tackle any maths problem, thereby developing a positive, rather than a negative attitude towards maths. For example, the student could be encouraged to cast him/herself as a comic book heroic character, who 'assaults' numbers, reducing their potency to evoke anxiety by turning them into objects of ridicule. Dziegielewski, Jacinto, Laudadio, Legg-Rodriguez (2004) argued that humour stimulates new ways of perceiving and comprehending attitudes and situations. This expansion of perceptions enables change to occur. As the stimulation of laughter was related to the relief from anxiety, the students would have more capacity to revise their approaches to

problem solving under less pressure.

Following on from M's aim to model making an attempt, risk failure and cope with mistakes using humour, this inevitably should help students reduce their anxiety towards a self-perceived threatening task. The 'miracle question' can help the student to visualise or even draw how they can combat their fear of the task, ineptness and of being laughed at. In turn, what may have been perceived as a threatening task, would then develop into a positive approach towards a challenge which can be overcome.

#### Reducing stress

The 'miracle question' illustrates a dual role in how an sbft technique can be used to help students *gain insight* and look at a problem *from a new perspective*, and also addresses how humour can be used to *reduce stress*. However, educational psychologists can use humour in another technique referred to as 'exceptions.' The exceptions questions are associated with exploring those times when the issue is not a problem. Asking the student when the issue did not make him/feel anxious. For example, the educational psychologist could explore those times when the student is relaxed, happy, having fun, is engaging in laughter and what makes them laugh.

Like the previous SFBT task, the educational psychologist could use the 'miracle question' technique to ask the student to visualise a self-perceived stressful situation such

as an exam and associate it with something that they would find funny. The educational psychologist and student can share humour to help the student reduce their stress and thereby reduce the potential threat that the problem raises for the student.

#### 5.8 Applications for educational psychology practice

Lefcourt (2001) pointed out that if the survival of the species is one of adaptation to situations then humour may have been one of those evolutionary modifications that enabled humans to cope with situations that draw individuals closer to one another. Individual differences are features of students' appreciation and utilisation of humour. However, individuals with a good sense of humour are likely to take an active approach towards life's experiences, making the effort to change negative moods rather than enduring them passively. Humans are social beings who need a degree of closeness with others, to help them combat adverse situations. Humour can be a positive alternative reaction to aggression in groups as well as a social tool by which interactions within the group are enhanced. Humour has the power to bring individuals together, generate sociability and empathetic behaviour from others.

This research set out to explore general perceptions of humour as a positive emotion that teachers utilised in the classroom, from their perspective. The exploration has resulted in the use of humour that has cognitive, social and emotional benefits. If teachers themselves recognise the positive impact of humour, why hasn't it officially been recognised by policy makers and other educationalists?



Lopez and Snyder (2005) argue that academic scholars should pay more attention to human strengths that include such attributes as forgiveness, love, courage and hope. More focus, they argue, should be focusing on the future of positive psychology, rather than continuing to look at the deficits in human experience. The findings in this research and the opportunities they present for educational psychologists show that humour can be a positive asset that could be added to previously identified human strengths. Humour, as do other strengths, can potentially play a role in mental health and the well-being of students.

#### Positive schools

Lopez and Snyder (2005) argued that school psychologists play an important role in enhancing the well-being of students. The principles of positive psychology should be appealing to school psychologists to promote the best in students with special educational needs. This view is founded on a range of the positive experiences that can be used in the classroom. For example, Lopez (2005) suggested a series of classroom experiences to enhance the hope of junior-high school students. Humour could be an addition to positive psychology as the findings reinforce the notion that humour helps to enhance the well-being of students. Ideas for the incorporation of humour in the classroom can help to increase student's attention and listening in lessons, to create a positive attitude towards challenging tasks and to build relationships. This in turn would improve the well-being of the students. Further, Lopez and Snyder (2000) argue that, in view of the suppositions

that educational activity are beneficial for both the psychological and educational development of students, positive psychology approaches should be part of teachers training courses.

#### 5.9 Limitations of the current research and suggestions for future research

A few shortcomings of this study have opened up opportunities for future research. First, an exploration of the views of children with needs and mainstream children about teachers' humour would be enlightening. The views could provide further information into understanding children's views about teachers who use humour and how humour impacts or influences the direction and progression of the teaching in the classroom.

Second, in addition to teachers in the upper primary age range, teachers in the infancy years and in secondary schools could be asked about their perceptions. Secondary teachers in particular could be asked about how humour could be used to build relationships with students and prevent school disaffection during the primary-secondary transition phase. Similarly, the views of students who are in the infant, primary and secondary phases could inform teachers' understanding of the humour that attracts the attention of students. In this way, teachers can use the appropriate humour as an educational tool to motivate the students.

Third, given the dearth of research that has measured how humour helps to increase students' listening skills, further research is needed to investigate how humour can be

used as a device to help to increase primary students' listening. The findings can provide insights into the use of age appropriate humour which can help to improve students' listening abilities and how humour can be used to help increase students' motivation.

Finally, the collection of data from a range of teachers who are from a broader range of cultures and ethnicities may have provided more qualitative data about the ways in which they hold perceptions and meanings which are qualitatively different from one another. Using thematic analysis, patterns may be identified regarding how teachers of afro-Caribbean heritage for example, hold different views from white teachers. Teachers of various ethnic backgrounds may hold different views, even if they live within the same, multi-cultural society such as the UK. Findings may be used to further understanding of the various ways in which students from various cultures approach humour.

#### 5.10 Chapter summary

The chapter discussed the findings, followed by a critique of this research, educational psychology implications and suggestions for future research. The following chapter

summarises the thesis into a conclusion chapter.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

## **CONCLUSION**

### **6.0 Overview of the Chapter**

The previous chapter presented and discussed the main findings of the research in relation to the pre-existing literature and theoretical framework. The credibility of the findings was discussed, followed by the researcher's reflexivity both as a reflection of the process of the research and as a learning process. Implications for the practice of educational psychology were included as were suggestions for future research.

This chapter will provide a summary and overview of the research questions and main findings of the research presented in this thesis (6.1). Implications for educational psychologists (6.2) are followed by ideas for future research (6.3). Reflection on the aims of the research are provided (6.4). The chapter ends with the researcher's concluding remarks (6.5).

### **6.1 Summary of research questions and main findings**

The research was carried out with eight teachers who were teaching children in primary schools. One of the aims of this current research was to explore each teachers' own definition of humour rather than obtain a single definition. Given the "serious" context of the classroom which involves the interpersonal relationship between the teachers and students the researcher was interested in the way in which humour was viewed by the

teacher.

The research addressed the following research questions:

1) How do teachers define humour?

As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, humour can be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon, referring to both positive and detrimental forms of humour. It was necessary to ask teachers about their definitions given that humour is multidimensional, aesthetic and that there is no known empirical definition of humour. The teachers' definitions were varied therefore making the thematic categorisation of definitions difficult. Rather, in order to retain the core of the teachers' views, their own words were used, preserving the richness of the data.

Teachers' definitions of humour were described as a range of concepts and as performing a variety of functions. Humour involved a processing of experiences that threatened to overwhelm individuals. This processing also helped individuals re-frame obstacles into more positive challenges that could be overcome. Humour involved cognitive-perceptual processes, whereby playful incongruity could be comprehended and resolved by individuals in order for humour to be perceived as funny. Laughter and other vocal-behavioural expressions such as smiling and giggling were also part of the definitions of humour. It seemed that for some teachers, individuals need to display their delight in response to initiators of humour.

Humour was also essentially a social phenomenon to a teacher who felt that humour served to build relationships between the students and teacher and amongst students themselves. Finally, humour served mood-enhancing benefits to boost deflated spirits and calm tensions and put students at ease.

Given that all teachers defined humour with positive connotations, no teachers conceptualised humour as a multifaceted construct, meaning that they did not produce narratives that referred to the ways in which humour can be both positive and negative. Neither did any teacher report on the multiple ways in which humour can benefit students academically, socially and emotionally.

Teachers defined humour from their own perspective, and it was the ways in which teachers defined humour, from their own perspectives which drew the researcher's interest. As a result of the number of different definitions of humour, this current research favoured humour in a broader sense, incorporating positive and negative aspects of humour as well as social, emotional and cognitive elements, resulting in an integrative psychology of humour.

All teachers needed time to think about the definition of humour before giving a response. All of the teachers hesitated before responding, with some appearing

unsurprised by, or unprepared for the question. This suggests that, even though teachers reported using humour, they perhaps hadn't consciously thought about the concept from their perspectives.

2) What are primary teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom?

It was found that some teachers felt that they used humour to motivate children in their lessons. They felt that, by incorporating humour, an exuberant atmosphere was produced within the classroom. Most teachers struggled to generate an example of the ways in which they used humour to motivate their students, but this may have been due to the spontaneous way in which teachers felt they used humour on a daily basis and hadn't considered 'humour' and by being asked to think of examples, they may have been caught off guard.

Some teachers felt they used humour was as a coping mechanism to help them relieve stress and tension for both themselves and for their students. In particular, teachers felt that humour-eliciting activities helped students to relax prior to a stressful event such as a test or exam. Teachers also felt when humour was used, anxious students could relax and feel sufficiently confident to contribute to whole class discussions without losing face. Teachers felt that, if they show that they can make mistakes but use humour to cope with the mishap, they hoped that students would also develop a positive outlook towards academic and other challenges. However, this may only be possible if students had the



self confidence from the outset to attempt challenging tasks and be able to cope afterwards.

Humour also facilitated relationships with students and helped to reduce psychological distance between teachers and their students. Humour functioned to ‘break the ice’ and facilitated rapport with students. Cognitive dissonance theory (Slavin, 1997) was applied here as a suggestion that humour can be used to remove the hostility and barriers that students feel towards their teachers. By using humour, students may be open to re-evaluating their negative teachers perceptions.

Most teachers appeared to be aware of the importance and appropriateness of using humour differentially with students of different ages and ability. They felt there was little point in using humour with students who would simply not understand more complex forms of humour including sarcasm. However, the majority of teachers felt that their use of humour was appropriate for the majority of the class.

Despite understanding the importance of appropriate humour, few teachers admitted openly they could get things wrong. Those that did acknowledge this shortcoming reflected that humour should be used with some caution. One cautionary step that teachers felt they should take was when they used sarcasm with their students. They reflected that sarcasm should only be used with children if they and their students know one another sufficiently well enough for the students not to take the teachers’ sarcasm

literally and personally. Teachers also felt that sarcasm should only be used when they felt that the students could comprehend the sarcasm. They felt that children who were younger than seven years may not be able to understand sarcasm and therefore, it appeared futile to use this abstract form of humour with the younger age groups.

The findings have led to implications for educational psychologists at the individual level, school level and wider level as educational psychologists work with individual students and have knowledge of child development, as well as work with teachers, in schools and as local authority representatives, researchers and trainers. The implications are detailed in the following section.

## **6.2 Implications for educational psychologists**

At the individual level, educational psychologists can encourage teachers to use humour with students to help them develop a positive rapport. In this way, positive student-teacher relationships can be formed. This may impact on students' positive evaluations of their teachers. Teachers may be perceived as funny, popular and entertaining, approachable and as professionals to whom students can turn regarding issues such as poor academic performance, peer pressure or exam stress. If a teacher is able to apply a humorous response to a student's question or use constructive communication to prevent the need to discipline the student, the student may perceive the teacher as an effective and credible teacher who remains both witty, professional, knowledgeable and trustworthy.

As well as encouraging the use of humour to develop social interaction and good rapport at the student-teacher level, educational psychologists can have a role in encouraging schools to use humour in classrooms by providing training to school staff. Teachers can be encouraged to use humour as an icebreaker to reduce any potential stress and anxiety in the classroom, thereby creating a relaxing, learning environment. Additionally, as discussed in the literature review, in the findings of this research, humour helps students to become better listeners. Educational psychologists can encourage teachers to use humour to help students pay attention and break the monotony students may associate with learning. This results in a reciprocal arrangement whereby teachers can remain attuned to their students learning, and students maintain their attention to their teachers' teaching as both are connected through the constructive use of teachers' humour. Furthermore, at the school level, planned instruction by teachers who use humorous strategies can transform the class into a motivating classroom atmosphere.

At a the wider level educational psychologists can be involved in disseminating findings of teachers' perceptions of humour on teacher training courses. Educational psychologists can make student teachers more aware of the stages of humour development in children, thus indicating the importance of using humour according to the students' age or ability. Further, educational psychologists can also highlight caveats, reinforcing the notion to student teachers that negative forms of humour and humour used inappropriately should be brought to their consciousness and have little value in the classroom. Findings of this

research can also be contributed to Journals, such as *Educational Psychology in Practice* and *Journal of Humor Research*. This can add to the existing research and to be springboard for further research. Ideas for future research are detailed in the following section.

### **6.3 Future research**

The role of humour in the classroom has turned out to be more complex than it first appeared. Humour appears to be best perceived as a form of social communication that can be used for a range of purposes in teaching. In this current research, some teachers reported using humour to engage students in their learning. More in-depth research is needed to investigate how teachers use humour with their students to engage them in their learning, and how, more specifically, teachers can use humour as an educational tool to increase students' attention and listening skills in lessons.

The views of teachers teaching students in the primary age range, should be broadened to teachers of other age groups. As discussed in the literature review chapter, the majority of previous research has been conducted in university settings. Further research is needed to explore the perceptions of teachers who teach in infant classrooms. Humour in younger children can involve irony, exaggeration and distortion (Martin, 2007). These forms of humour cause young children to misunderstand the intended meaning, and as a result, may learn inaccurate information. An exploration of appropriate humour with teachers regarding young children would be an important part of research on humour. To seek the

views of teachers about the things that make young children laugh and ideas about how humour can be used with children to enhance their learning, social and self confidence could broaden knowledge of children's development.

In addition, further research that explores the views of teachers who teach secondary aged students may also be enlightening. Teachers' perceptions about the types of humour that appeal to adolescent young people who experience peer pressure, may be fundamental in building positive student-teacher relationships. Overall, understanding the role of humour in the infant, primary and secondary classrooms can make positive contributions to children's and young peoples' humour development.

Moreover, as the views of students younger than those in university settings seem to be lacking in humour research, future research should include the views of students in mainstream school settings. The views of children with special educational needs in these schools should also be sought regarding what they think about teachers' humour. Students should be asked about the role and benefits of humour in the classroom as well as whether students view humour as an asset or hindrance in their learning. This information would broaden understanding of students' comprehension of humour, its impact on enjoyment and interest in lessons and views of students at varying ages and ability levels. The information would also be enlightening who need to know how to use humour age appropriately and constructively to match the comprehension level of students.

#### **6.4 Reflection on achievement of the aims of this current research**

For the love of learning, listening and laughter, the author of this research employed semi-structured interviews to appreciate the views of primary school teachers and to understand the ways in which they elicit amusement and laughter in the context of the classroom.

The aim of this current research was to explore how and why teachers reported using humour, given the author's own use of humour to build a positive student-teacher relationship in her former role as a teacher. The current research has assisted in addressing this aim in understanding the use of humour in the classroom and its direct impact on teaching and learning. From the findings of this research, humour if used age appropriately, contextually and constructively, can help students increase their motivation, enhance their well-being and create a positive classroom atmosphere which is conducive to learning.

However, the use of teachers' humour is not only restricted to cognition. Teachers feel that humour has social benefits in the classroom. Humour can function as a facilitator in the social interaction of teachers with their students and amongst students, thereby increasing its propensity to increase students' positive perceptions of their teachers.

In addition, to the cognitive and social impacts of humour, teachers perceive humour as a

buffer, not only to relieve their own stress, but to relax students in the classroom and reduce their anxiety. In this way, humour helps students to view obstacles in a more positive way, and view adverse circumstances as challenges that can be overcome.

Therefore, is humour, as a neglected topic area of study, worthy of scholarly attention in educational psychology? Absolutely. The findings show that teachers' humour can make a positive impact for all children socially, emotionally and cognitively. Humour would not be out of place in positive psychology which encompasses such positive attributes as happiness, love, joy and optimism. Martin Seligman (2005), pioneers of positive psychology, discusses in his new book, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, how humour as a human strength plays a supportive role in engagement which contributes to well-being. According to Seligman (2005), engagement is one of five elements (the others are positive emotion, relationships, meaning and purpose and accomplishment) and the strengths, including hope, humour and optimism, underpin them. Individuals use their highest strengths to combat challenges that come their way by going into 'flow.' Flow involves a sense of almost stopping in time while being totally absorbed in an activity. If the strengths are utilised, the individual experiences positive emotion, (good) relationships and a sense of accomplishment and meaning.

This current research makes an invaluable contribution to the well-being of students. As teachers and students use humour to socially interact in the learning context, students

become engaged in the flow of learning that absorbs their attention. Positive emotion is experienced by the students as they derive pleasure from the humour in which they are engaged. The students may also feel positive emotion from a sense of accomplishment as a result of mastering a challenging lesson. The positive emotion may also be attributed to the perception of the lesson having some meaning to them as learners. In addition, the students may also perceive that their relationship with their teacher as a positive one because of the nature of the interaction. Therefore, having experienced all five elements and other human strengths, the well-being of students is enhanced.

#### **6.5 Concluding remarks**

Humour is universal, ubiquitous and yet understated. The views from the teachers in this current research showed that humour facilitates important social and bonding functions, promoting the coordination of the interactions between students and teachers. This is important as the use of constructive humour can help to build strong, social relations between teachers and all students, preventing student-teacher relationship breakdowns.

Humour in the classroom can help teachers to think more creatively, become more credible and more crucial members of staff. Their flare for creating captivating lessons, can make teachers popular, knowledgeable, approachable and therefore valued teachers.

Teachers' humour in the classroom is satisfying, surprisingly stimulating and stress-free, meaning that humour can reduce anxiety. Humour can also be experienced as pleasurable



by both teachers and students as it reduces stress and tension and creates a relaxing atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Surely, if humour can *build* relationships, *break barriers* to learning and *boost* the classroom atmosphere, *bring* it on.

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#### **Appendix One: Email Correspondence**

**From:** Rod Martin [ramartin@uwo.ca]  
**Sent:** 12 March 2009 19:12  
**To:** O'Connor, Jan

**Subject:** Re: [Spam?] The psychology of humour from a social constructionist perspective

Hi Jan,

Your research sounds interesting. A limitation of this qualitative interview approach is that you're only able to draw conclusions about the subjective perceptions of the teachers themselves, rather than looking objectively at how they actually use humor, what functions it serves, etc. In other words, the teachers may be misperceiving things. But it is a useful research approach for generating hypotheses which could then be examined more objectively in future research.

"Social constructivism" is more of a sociology concept than psychology, so I'm not entirely sure what it means. I assume it has something to do with the way humor is used within groups to build up a shared perspective on things (eg, what kinds of behaviors are socially acceptable versus unacceptable among group members), or perhaps a shared group identity. I talk about this to some extent in my book in the chapter on social psychology (pp. 116-123). Gary Alan Fine has done some interesting studies of the way humor is used in small groups to build up a shared group culture. I'm not sure if this is what they're referring, but it's the only thing that comes to mind.

Good luck with your research!

Best,

Rod Martin

O'Connor, Jan wrote:

Hello Rod Martin

I have finally focused my research on teacher's views of their use of humour in the classroom and have decided to interview about 10 teachers to find out from their perspective:

How they define humour  
Why they use it in the classroom  
How they use it in the classroom  
What impact do they think it has on students

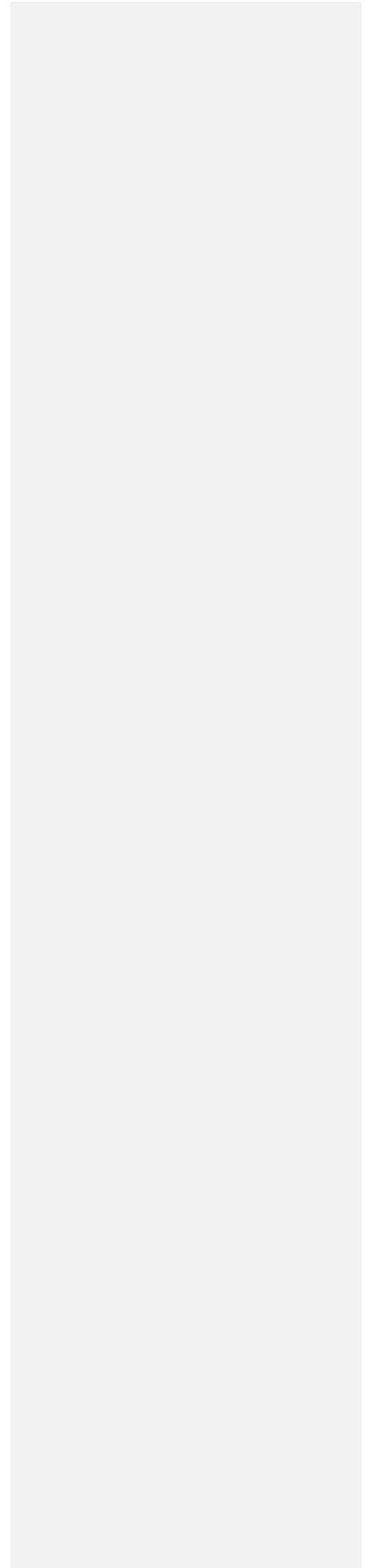
I am hoping to do a thematic analysis on the data.

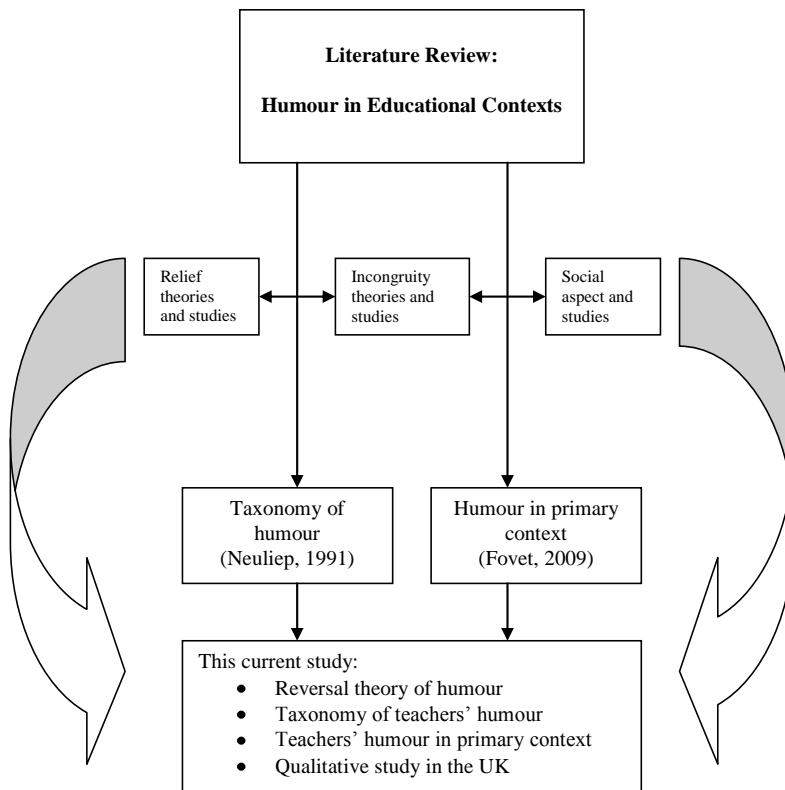
It has been recommended that I should consider the psychology of humour from the social constructivist position. Do you have any views/research/references on this. I have failed to find anything.

With best wishes

Appendix Two  
Fig. 1

Literature Review map





Appendix Three: semi-structured interview schedule for teachers

- 1) What is humour?
- 2) Humour in class – when is it used? How? Why?
- 3) What types of humour do you use in class?
- 4) Why do they think humour works in class?
- 5) What exactly happens if humour is experienced in class?
- 6) Who starts the humour in class?
- 7) How much/often is humour used in class?
- 8) Tell me about any negative experiences with humour in class
- 9) What happens when there is no humour at all in class?
- 10) Give me an example of a joke/humour that you intended to be viewed as funny but was not perceived in that way or you didn't get the reaction that you expected. What about those children for whom your humour doesn't work?



**JO:** What is humour?

**A:** Erm, something that makes you smile. It can be a funny story... a funny word.

Something that changes your face & makes you smile

**(FACIAL, OBVIOUS EXPRESSION)**

**JO:** Do you use humour in class yourself?

**A:** Yes everyday

**(FREQUENCY OF USE)**

**JO:** Why do you use it?

**A:** 2 reasons. One because there are many situations during the day when... just the use of humour can change something or change a perception erm about their learning erm but also fairly we recently had a speaker come to us one of our inset days called IG and he talked to us about the use of humour and making sure that we smile at the beginning of the day and this is what I took out of this inset day that I could use humour to continue to develop. We always have on the carpet now at the beginning of each day. We have something that makes us smile. The children can tell a joke or talk about something funny that they've seen or something funny on the telly but something that makes us smile. Erm and we also have something that makes us smile as we go out at the end of the day. If we're feeling positive about the environment we've been in it helps us with our learning. It makes a huge difference, a positive start.

**JO:** So you try and use it at the beginning and at the end of the day?

**A:** Hmm

**JO:** So how do you use it then? when you come into the class what do you and what do

you say?

**A:** Well usually I come in and chat with the children as we're coming up the stairs err just general chatter about what they've been doing and that often promotes a laugh or a smile.

Erm I always go through the routines of the day & try to do that in a humourous way.

They're quite used to me pretending I hasn't to add in a muddle & I'm not quite sure what I'm doing ahh silly me I've forgotten what to do so there are all sorts of ways they can bring it into the general conversation but then the children are used to being asked 'has anyone got something funny that they want to share with us & that's something we've developed over the last two months really so someone who is prepared to y'know come in & share something that gives us a smile before going off to start our learning.

**(SETTLES THEM FOR LEARNING**

**HUMOUR AT OWN EXPENSE)**

**JO:** What types of humour do you use in class?

**A:** Try not to be sarcastic (laughs). So I remember that phrase 'sarcasm is not a teaching tool' (laughs)

**JO:** No its not (laugh)

**A:** So we try very hard not to be sarcastic

**JO:** So would you say you use positive humour?

**A:** Positive humour because I think its important for the children that they're there to laugh at themselves erm sometimes we all get things wrong, we all do things wrong we all y'know make silly mistakes. But if we can laugh at ourselves & smile about it it helps to move on from erm that negative feeling & erm change our view on things.

**(NEGATIVE HUMOUR IS NOT POPULAR IN CLASS)**

**JO:** But do you think that children of this age, year five, can laugh at themselves?

**A:** Yes very much so. Erm more now I think than when I first started teaching. Erm I think the children are...I suppose they're more streetwise. Erm they seem more grown up in many ways & certainly children in year five & six I've always found...the vast majority I've always found have got a quite well developed sense of humour. Erm there are lots of things that make them laugh like & they are quite capable...if they're nurtured in the right way they are capable of laughing at themselves. I think if you model laughing at yourself when you do things wrong y'know if they see you make a mess on the whiteboard and see you laughing at yourself it enables them to copy that in a sense that they feel comfortable

**(CHILDREN IN THIS AGE GROUP CAN LAUGH AT THEMSELVES)**

**MISSING QU: WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES THEM LAUGH)**

**JO:** So you think that humour works in class then?

**A:** Yes I'd hate to be in a class where there's no humour. It would be awful. (laughs)

**JO:** Which brings me to my next question: what do you think would happen if there was no humour at all in class?

**A:** I think it would have a negative effect on children's learning. It would be a harsh environment. Erm, it's not a natural environment. Humour is part of us erm & if there's no humour there children aren't laughing, they aren't smiling they aren't engaging with you in that humorous way, it's got to be because it's been suppressed because children naturally laugh so if there was no humour I would be concerned erm about the actual

learning that was going on in the classroom.

**(POSITIVE HUMOUR SHOULD BE USED IN CLASS)**

**JO:** Hmm, because there are some teachers who don't use humour at all.

**A:** possibly

**JO:** Do you think that there are some teachers have a more formal style of teaching of or that they don't get on with the children or the children don't get on with them

**A:** Well I don't know that if you speak to the children they know how far they can go... there are very clear boundaries erm but can establish those boundaries through humour erm, whether those teachers who choose not to use it are fearful that they're not going to be able to ..... or whether if they feel they're going to use too much humour they'll lose control.

**(USE HUMOUR & MAINTAIN CONTROL IN THE CLASS IS A SKILL)**

**JO:** Why aren't you fearful? Because you use humour.

**A:** Erm I use humour now, I obviously cant remember back to when I used humour in the first two or three years of teaching, probably not because I think you have to be confident in what you're doing to use humour & I've use humour & the majority of the time I've been at the top end of the school & with this age group so I'm very comfortable you know exactly what you can & can't do & what you get away with & what children will accept. Each class is different & I suspect that if you came into my class in Sept or October you might not see so much humour as you would the rest of the year because you have to go through that transition period of getting to know the class & the children have to get to know you & if they only see you in the playground or a senior manager

dealing with behaviour issues they won't naturally see you as somebody who uses humour. It takes them a while to see that side to you & that you're human.

**(CONFIDENCE IN ONESELF FIRST AS A CHARACTERISTIC  
USE OF HUMOUR WITH KS2 CHILDREN & AN UNDERSTANDING OF  
WHAT MAKES THEM LAUGH  
CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF THE TEACHER)**

**JO:** So when you've use humour, you've use it to diffuse situations (yes) & use it at the start & at the end of the day (hmm). Is it planned? It sounds quite spontaneous coming from you. Would you say you use it in your planning of lessons or do you incorporate it into your lessons?

**A:** I don't sit and plan in my lessons when I'm going to use humour erm it is a spontaneous thing. As far as my daily plan is concerned the first effort in the morning there is a conscious effort there...I'm a firm believer that you start the day right erm and they do come in with all sorts of baggage & they come when they've fallen out with mum or ...& I've got one or two in here who come in with faces like thunder erm & you have to do something about that or else you have a hellish day...all it takes is just an opportunity to laugh & relax them so that they're in that right frame of mind for learning

**(UNPLANNED, SPONTANEOUS HUMOUR. NOT USED IN LESSON  
PLANNING**

**USE IT TO LIFT THE MOOD OF SOME)**

**JO:** Do you think that all the children understand your humour? Because all children will have different learning abilities & different levels of understanding so when it comes to

children with special needs or school action plus

**A:** The ones who don't or who humour difficult are the EAL children. They find it difficult because their language is not developed enough often to understand what you're saying. If you do something silly or if they can see something visually then obviously they join in erm if they're watching something like at the beginning of term they were watching a doc on the Victorians at the end of the Victorian period we were watching laurel & hardy, there was no language & the EAL children were in hysterics they found it really really funny because it was very visual & they understand the humour but if you talk about funny things that happen they don't always see its funny so it takes a certain level of English to follow that

(CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT CULTURES MAY NOT UNDERSTAND HUMOUR)

**JO:** Do you think there's a lot of teachers who use negative humour & use it inappropriately?

**A:** Yes I think there is a lot of sarcasm that is used. It undermines what you build up & establish with the children & the children are very quick to pick up on sarcasm & it's the one thing that will set them off, even in the playground if they think that someone is being sarcastic with them it can cause major problems but I don't think that its just teachers working with children its adults working with other adults in school.

**JO:** You use self dep humour to raise a laugh at your expense

**A:** hmm

**JO:** What about affiliative humour which is about using humour to draw groups together

**A:** They love listening to me talk about when I was a child partly because they think I

live in a cupboard & the fact that they know that you were a child they find incredibly amusing. We often talk about funny things that happened to me when I was a child. I remember telling them a story at the beginning of the year when I was a little girl playing with my brother & sister & a time when one of the children came in with a sour mood they'd fallen out with their brother & sister before they came to school & I was telling them a story of when I was a little girl & we were at my grandparents & we were playing cowboys & Indians & I always had to be the Indian & whenever I was caught they would tie me up & my grandparents had a big fridge & they would tie me to the fridge & I was there for absolutely ages & I started to cry & Mum came to get me & cause my brothers would get bored & would go outside to play cricket but the children would often refer back to that story & would fall about laughing they thought it was hysterical the thought of me tied to a fridge but they do remember those things & they often ask you questions about what you did...did you do this? Did you do that? What did you do at school? The things that you remember are the funny things.

(GENERATIONS/HISTORY & HUMOUR)

**JO:** What do you think about teasing? Does that go on in class?

**A:** Yes & its one of those things that if you could wave a magic wand to stop children doing it would make life so much easier. They're very good at spotting a weakness to tease. It causes upset. We try & deal with it during our circle time activities. Its hard to get children to understand that teasing isn't all bad & that you can tease someone in a humourous way or you can tease others in a negative way & the children find that hard to differentiate between the two. It can be used as bullying as well which is another issue we

need to look at.

**JO:** Have you seen or have you used humour that one uses to ingratiate oneself?

**A:** I know the sort of humour that you mean. I've seen older children use it. The humour of a year 5 child is very different to the humour of a year 6 & 7 child. As the children get older it is something that begins to come in. I think its in lower secondary but humour has to be more developed. They're very superficial at this age.

**JO:** Do you think that all children laugh at the same things? Where do you think the level of sophistication changes or develops? For example do you think children from reception to year six laugh at the same things?

**A:** No if you watch them in assembly you'll see the head or deputy head who uses humour quite a lot & it either goes over the head of the younger ones hits the target of year 2, 3, 4s and goes off with 5 & 6 (laughs). We're too cool to smile. At times I do think they find things funny but you know, their street cred would go down if they found things amusing & at xmas time when they're watching a video the level of humour in the video the younger children will watch & the older children think it's a bit beneath them. Secretly they may find it funny but collectively, a smile would not pass their lips.

(CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGES LAUGH AT DIFFERENT THINGS)

**JO:** So are you mainly a KS2 teacher?

**A:** Yes. Most of my teaching has been with year 5 & 6. I have taught 3 & 4. I do have dealings with the little children & I would say I humour now with the younger children as it's a very good way of breaking the ice. Its easier with the younger ones when I see them out in the playground or doing assembly or covering or something like that, for me its my



way of coping with younger children & breaking the ice.

**JO:** so do you get stressed when you see the younger ones then? (laughs)

**A:** (laughs) every year Colleen (headteacher) says to me which class would you like to teach next year & I say nursery & (laughs) if she actually took me up on it one year & said, I'd think that'd really test my humour (laughs)

(INTRODUCTION WITH UNFAMILIAR CHILDREN)

**JO:** Do you think there are sex differences in the ways that teachers use humour? Do you think that male teachers use it differently to female teachers?

**A:** That's a very difficult one to answer that because I've been doing this job for over thirty years & I haven't worked with that many men. I think there's more of a danger of men going down the sarcasm route quicker than females do but that's a very sweeping statement. I get the impression that male teachers don't want to let themselves go. They've got to be the man & stand up & take control.

**JO:** Are there male teachers in this school?

**A:** Yes we have one male teacher in year 3 & one in reception?

**JO:** Would you say that they use humour?

**A:** Yes they do, erm in particular

**JO:** Do you think there are ways in which teachers use humour amongst themselves & students use it amongst themselves?

**A:** No I think we can come into the staffroom & be incredibly silly. We can make an awful lot of noise laughing about nothing. I think there's a child within all of us & it comes out Humour becomes an instinctive way of working. If you're relaxed and have a

good relationship with the children...

**JO:** If you were supervising an NQT would you encourage them to use humour?

**A:** Yes I would. I supervise NQTs from Goldsmiths & we do talk about humour because again its something they'll pick up if they're observing me. I use humour quite a lot & we talk about humour & when to use it, how to use it & be able to change very quickly you know you can be very cross but you need something to diffuse it & sometimes its hard for them to understand that & that humour is an incredibly powerful tool.

**JO:** The trick is to have that balance isn't it & get the message across that yes you are the boss at the end of the day & in control and you're managing their behaviour & there to create a positive relationship with the class. I think that NQTs might get nervous of losing that control (A: hmm) & of not getting it back.

**A:** They fall into two camps. They either come in & think they've got to rule with a rod of iron & show that they are in charge or they come in & they want to be big sister or big brother & they're almost too friendly & that's when the children take advantage & it all goes pear shaped. We always say to them you've got to tread the middle road. When you are confident you have the rapport & relationship with the children then you can go down the side road. You have to build that relationship first otherwise the children will not understand and in the first few weeks they are working out what is acceptable in this room. It must be confusing for them at times having someone who is controlled to someone who is not or vice versa. Which is the advantage of why I've got this year five class that I'm taking into year six. I haven't got to go through half term of building a relationship with these children. I was joking with them today as we're moving into a

new classroom & at the moment its practically derelict & I say to them its not been decorated do you really think we would put you in a classroom with the floor falling through etc, so we were chatting about this classroom & said that in those first few weeks when I get to know year six and we're painting & decorating & you know me & I know you so there we'll be from day one. They went urrrghhh. (laughs) but you know you can have a joke with them at their level.

**JO:** Would you say that you joke more with boys than with girls?

**A:** No it doesn't really matter. At the moment I have more boys than girls int the class but no

**JO:** We talked about NQTs using humour, are there any other circumstances in class where you think its ok to use humour in class with other professionals?

**A:** I try to use it with the TAs or anyone who is working in my class & they understand the way I work & why I work that way & they come in thinking they've got to fulfil a role & that they're there to deal with the discipline & that's not actually why they're there, they're there to help the children learn. We've got some very good TAs who are very good at using humour & they're always the ones looked on positively by the children and ones the children always want to work with. They don't want to work with those who are negative with them & don't give anything of themselves. Children are desperate to know something about you. If they find out your first name or how old you are or they saw me last weekend with my mum, some of them & they're just desperate to know something & I suppose you know something about them & it helps to create that relationship. In fact they know too much about me (laughs).

**(Teachers who do use humour are fondly thought about)**

**A:** I write reports for them at the end of each year & I get them to write a report about me & its quite amusing cos they write ‘could be better at...’ (laughs). They say all sorts of things. Usually they say that I’m funny so I say to them what do you mean by funny. The negatives are I cheer when they have to write or I do too much maths but they obviously like it because they pick up on it

**JO:** Do you think that adults can be taught to use humour?

**A:** I think so because as we were saying earlier humour is in all of us some people just have to dig deeper in order to find it & usually if they’re not using it its because they’ve got a fear of losing control or not being respected. You can teach people how to use humour cos humour rubs off & I think that if you’re in a room with someone who uses humour then its easier to have a go. I think you have to work alongside someone to really make it beneficial

**JO:** With you its quite spontaneous isn’t it?

**A:** Yes I think so I think its part of my personality. If someone said to me talk about your personality, I think I’d say I’m quite shy...I’ve got real thing about spelling but my spelling is not bad but I have an absolute thing about it. If I go into a staff meeting or something like that & write on the flip chart that just throws me into a complete wobbly they’re all there within us but its where you feel comfortable

**JO:** It’s the environment isn’t it (yes) where you are & who you’re with & when you’re with the children you feel at home. The classroom is like your territory. When you’re observed by an NQT or a colleague do you freeze then?

**A:** No I think that if you're doing something that is almost second nature to you then you just carry on & I think its really hard to not do it I would have to make a conscious effort to say I'm not going to use humour & I'm not sure cos it's a natural thing to do.

Appendix Five  
Consent form to teachers

This research is part of a doctorate programme which is concerned with teachers' perceptions of their use of humour in the classroom.

Research suggests that humour in class has numerous benefits including helping to reduce tension and stress, creating a relaxed learning environment, aiding classroom management and motivating students. It is hoped that your information will form an understanding of the ways in which teachers use humour in the classroom in order to promote the emotional wellbeing of their students. You are encouraged to speak as freely and openly as possible.

Your invaluable participation will provide insight not only into the ways teachers use humour, but also to discover good practice in teaching and how teaching staff such as newly qualified teachers can think about their own practice when establishing relationships with students and creating an atmosphere that is conducive to learning.

An informal interview will be used to gather your views and will last approximately for fifty minutes. The data will be audio taped but be rest assured that your views will be kept confidentially and your anonymity protected. The data will be destroyed at the end of the research. You are under no obligation to take part in the research and you are free to withdraw at any stage of the research process without fear of reprisal.

If you agree to participate in the interview, please complete the details below.

I dis/agree (please delete as applicable) to participate in this research

NAME (please print).....

SIGNATURE.....

Please tick the appropriate box

**GENDER**

Female

Male

**ETHNIC ORIGIN**

White

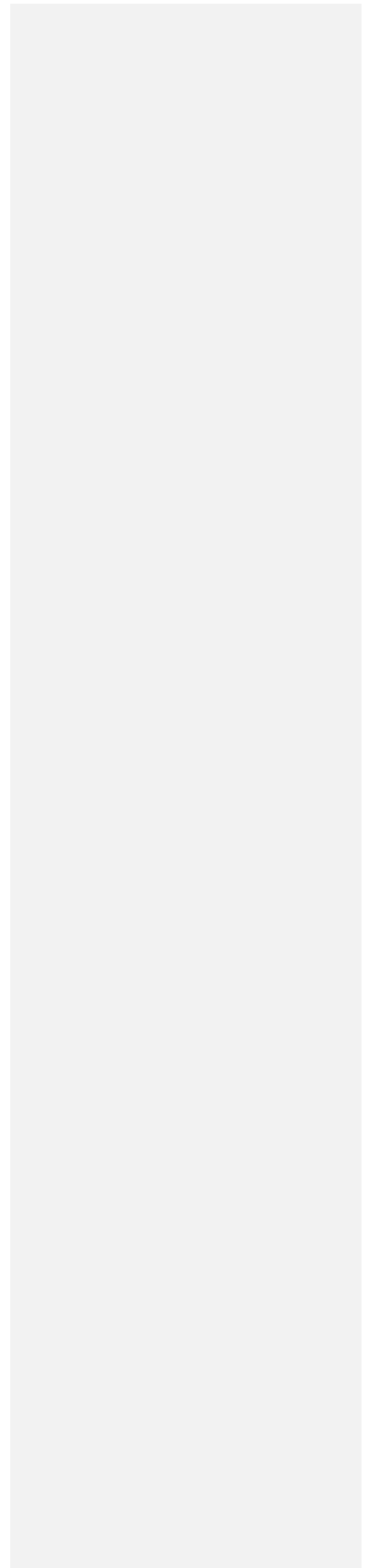
<input type="checkbox"/>	British
<input type="checkbox"/>	Irish
<input type="checkbox"/>	Turkish/Turkish Cypriot
<input type="checkbox"/>	other

Black or Black British

<input type="checkbox"/>	Caribbean
<input type="checkbox"/>	African
<input type="checkbox"/>	other

Mixed

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>



White and black Caribbean  
 White and black African  
 White and Asian  
 other

Asian or Asian British

Indian  
 Pakistani  
 Bangladeshi  
 Tamil  
 other

Chinese or other ethnic group

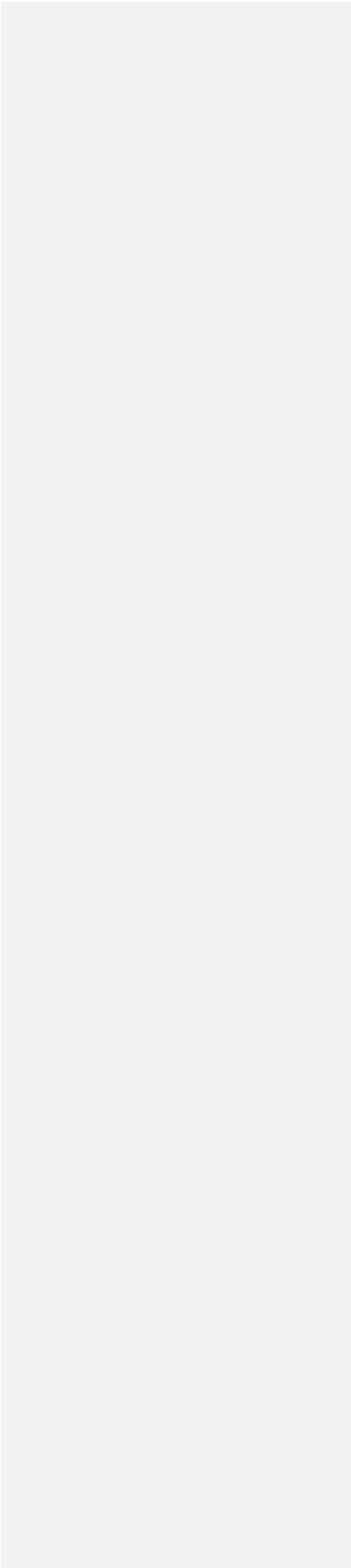
Chinese  
 Vietnamese  
 other

Name of School.....

(Number of years of) teaching experience.....

Contact number.....

Thank you for completing this form and agreeing to participate. I will contact you





shortly.

Jan O'Connor

Educational Psychologist

Lewisham Centre for Children and Young People

Appendix Six

**UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON**

**APPLICATION FOR THE APPROVAL OF A RESEARCH PROGRAMME INVOLVING  
HUMAN  
PARTICIPANTS**

**Please read the Notes for Guidance before completing this form. If necessary, please continue your answers on a separate sheet of paper: indicate clearly which question the continuation sheet relates to and ensure that it is securely fastened to the report form.**

<b>1. Title of the programme: Doctorate in Applied Educational and Child Psychology</b>  Title of research project (if different from above): Teachers' and Children's Perceptions of Teachers' Humour in the Classroom
<b>2. Name of person responsible for the programme (Principal Investigator): Irvine Gersch</b>  Status: Manager of the Doctorate Programme  Name of supervisor (if different from above) Martin Cook  Status: Tutor
<b>3. School: University of East London</b> <b>Department/Unit: Educational Psychology</b>
<b>4. Level of the programme (delete as Appropriate):</b>  (c) Postgraduate (research or Professional Doctorate)
<b>5. Number of:</b>  (a) researchers (approximately): 1  (b) participants (approximately): 8

**6. Name of researcher (s) (including title):**

**Ms Janet O'Connor**

**Nature of researcher (delete as appropriate):**

**(b) students**

**If "others" please give full details:**

**7. Nature of participants (general characteristics, e.g University students, primary school children, etc):**

**Primary school children in the upper primary age range, i.e. Juniors**

**Primary teachers in the Juniors**

**8. Probable duration of the research:**

**from (starting date): March 2009**

**to (finishing date): July 2009**

**9. Aims of the research including any hypothesis to be tested:**

**The aims are to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding their use of humour in the classroom and to explore the perceptions of children regarding their teacher's use of humour**

**10. Description of the procedures to be used (give sufficient detail for the Committee to be clear about what is involved in the research). Please append to the application form copies of any instructional leaflets, letters, questionnaires, forms or other documents which will be issued to the participants:**

Qualitative orientated techniques will be used in this study. The first method to be employed is to use semi-structured interviews with teachers who teach in key stage two (KS2) classes. The aim of this approach is to fully understand the respondent's views and experiences (McNamara, 1998). Use of this approach provides opportunities for the gathering of a wide range of rich, in-depth data and development of a rapport with the respondent. Another reason underlying the choice of this method is that the interviewer can be flexible with the client by asking open-ended questions and can explore routes that are different between respondents (McNamara, 1998). This is dependent upon the participant's own experiences and perceptions.

The second method to be employed will be video recorded classroom observations of the interactions between the teacher and children. The rationale for this technique is to make repetitive viewing of events possible and analysis more detailed, in contrast to the traditional observations where the watching of events can only occur once.

The final stage of data collection will end with interviewing children to explore their perceptions of teacher's humour in the classroom and its impact on their learning and the learning environment.

**11. Are there potential hazards to the participant(s) in these procedures? YES/NO**

**If yes: (a) what is the nature of the hazard(s)?**

**(b) what precautions will be taken?**

**12. Is medical care or after care necessary? YES/NO**

**If yes, what provision has been made for this?**

**13. May these procedures cause discomfort or distress? YES/NO**

**If yes, give details including likely duration:**

14. (a) Will there be administration of drugs (including alcohol)? **YES/NO**

If yes, give details:

(b) Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress, please state what previous experience you have had in conducting this type of research:

15. (a) How will the participants' consent be obtained?

The parents' permission will be sought using a letter of consent. Parents will be asked to sign at the bottom of the letter, giving their permission for their child to be involved in the research. A form of words will be written to the child and they will be supported through the form as checks will be made to ensure that they understand what they are asked. They will be asked to sign giving their permission to be involved.

(b) What will the participants be told as to the nature of the research?

Participants will be told that the research will be looking at and exploring the social interactions that take place in the classroom and how they impact on learning.

The social interactions mainly focus on the humorous and funny things said in the classroom by the teacher to the students.

16. (a) Will the participants be paid? **YES/NO**

(b) If yes, please give the amount: £

(c) If yes, please give full details of the reason for the payment and how the amount given in 16 (b) above has been calculated (i.e. what expenses and time lost is it intended to cover):

17. Are the services of the University Health Service likely to be required during or after the research? **YES/NO**

If yes, give details:

18. (a) Where will the research take place?

Observations will take place in the classrooms and interviews will occur in a teaching assistant's room in school

(b) What equipment (if any) will be used?

Video camera

(c) If equipment is being used is there any risk of accident or injury? YES/NO

If yes, what precautions are being taken to ensure that should any untoward event happen adequate aid can be given:

19. Are personal data to be obtained from any of the participants?

YES/NO

If yes, (a) give details:

Data will be gathered using interviews and observations

(b) state what steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality of the data?

The participants will be assured that whatever is discussed will not be raised with anyone other than my university tutor. However, my tutor will not know the names of the participants as all names will be changed to protect participant's anonymity.

Data will be securely kept in my home where no one will gain access.

(c) state what will happen to the data once the research has been completed and the results written-up. If the data is to be destroyed how will this be done? How will you ensure that the data will be disposed of in such a way that there is no risk of its confidentiality being compromised?

The transcribed data will be destroyed by shredding the material. All filming on video tapes will be erased to ensure that the participants cannot be recognised.

20. Will any part of the research take place in premises outside the University? YES/NO

Will any members of the research team be external to the University? YES/NO

Eleni Kasapi works at the University. She is my specialist research external advisor

If yes, to either of the questions above please give full details of the extent to which the participating institution will indemnify the researchers against the consequences of any untoward event:

22. If your programme involves contact with children or vulnerable adults, either direct or indirect (including observational), please confirm that you have the relevant clearance from the Criminal

23. **DECLARATION**

I undertake to abide by accepted ethical principles and appropriate code(s) of practice in carrying out this programme.

Personal data will be treated in the strictest confidence and not passed on to others without the written consent of the subject.

The nature of the investigation and any possible risks will be fully explained to intending participants, and they will be informed that:

- (a) they are in no way obliged to volunteer if there is any personal reason (which they are under no obligation to divulge) why they should not participate in the programme; and
- (b) they may withdraw from the programme at any time, without disadvantage to themselves and without being obliged to give any reason.

NAME OF APPLICANT:  
(Person responsible)

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME OF DEAN OF SCHOOL:

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Records Bureau prior to the commencement of the study.

YES/NO



Appendix seven: Table nine

Table to show analysis of the data into the differentiation of humour

Extract	Initial idea	Initial codes	Collapsed codes	subtheme	theme
<b>R: With year 6 I suppose I probably use sarcasm more with this age group as I don't really mean what I'm saying, we're just having a laugh at ourselves where year 3 are probably a lot more sensitive. I would probably use the affiliative humour more with year 3. RL: 172-175</b>	Sarcasm with older groups, younger more sensitive	Sarcasm with older Affiliative humour with younger	Different age groups	Age	<b>DIFFERENTIATION OF HUMOUR</b>
<b>What's nice is that the younger children laugh at everything. I take year four and I take year two and year two are constantly laughing at me which is nice but year four have their own sense of humour and they have their humour to play off my humour SL:45-47</b>	Younger laugh at anything, the older ones are more selective	Younger vs older Discriminate v non discriminate	Older discriminate	Age	

<p><b>Sh: Yeah and I've always been able to identify the children who really get me like I'll joke with my TA and I can hear then laughing and its like 'you got that didn't you?' and I wouldn't have expected anyone to get that</b>  <b>ShL: 294-296</b></p>	<p>Older students understand her adult level humour</p>	<p>Older understand adult level of humour</p>	<p>Older comprehend</p>	<p>Age</p>
<p><b>Sh: Pretty much yeah I mean that's why I really like the older ones because I can be myself and I can just do I wouldn't teach an infant class because I don't think, I've never taught an infant class I don't think I could be this teacher that I am with them I'd have to really adjust it and I don't know what that would be like because I've never taught that so I guess pretty much I treat my class like adults</b>  <b>ShL:268-272</b></p>	<p>Can't use humour with younger students</p>	<p>Feel helpless with younger</p>	<p>Outside comfort zone with younger</p>	<p>Age</p>

<p>N:for example with years 5 &amp; 6 I would use even irony or sarcasm as a form of humour when I'm absolutely sure that we're both having fun at something. Erm I wouldn't do that with a child with social communication difficulties I would use more slapstick or something NL:46-49</p>	<p>Sarcasm with those who understand, slapstick with SEN</p>	<p>Sarcasm SEN, slapstick</p>	<p>SEN vs non SEN</p>	<p>Ability</p>
<p>JO: we talked about irony &amp; sarcasm with year 5 &amp; year 6 children. N: yeah I think they do get it I think they're probably at the age, more year 6 than year 5 but they're right at the age where they start understanding it NL:698-700</p>	<p>Can't use irony and sarcasm with older groups who don't understand</p>	<p>Language complexity</p>	<p>Capacity to understand</p>	<p>Ability</p>
<p>I used to teach year 2 I did it for 4 years &amp; I was never sarcastic with them. I might have had jokes &amp; smiles &amp; laughs but I don't think I used sarcasm. DL:59-61</p>	<p>Younger don't understand sarcasm, take humour literally</p>	<p>Younger vs older</p>	<p>Older comprehend</p>	<p>Age</p>

I think with the younger ones you just smile more generally, you just smile more as a person I think you just have to be because a smile goes such a long way with children to bring them in & maybe you don't use any outright jokes with them cos that's desire (inaudible) to do some random jokes with the children but I think that the only humour you would use is smiling with them  
DL:394-399

Smile with younger

Feel helpless with younger

Outside comfort zone with younger

Age

<p>D: I think I tend to go into the nursery on a Tuesday afternoon for half an hour coming out of class &amp; I just, what do I do in the nursery, I just, you get on the floor &amp; play with them, I don't have to teach them I think its because I'm lazy. I have no idea how you plan &amp; deliver &amp; all of that because I just don't get it but I tend to get down &amp; be all smiley &amp; you become more animated don't you? &amp; become way more like 'ohh come &amp; dance around with me for a bit' its all singing &amp; dancing isn't it? DL:403-409</p>	<p>Smile and slapstick</p>	<p>Slapstick with younger</p>	<p>Different age group</p>	<p>Age</p>	
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Appendix eight: Table ten

Table to show the analysis of data into the theme of caveats of humour

Extract	Initial idea	Initial codes	Collapsed codes	subtheme	theme
R: Yeah I think it probably would be. I would be more nervous about my humour because I wouldn't want to upset the younger ones & I'd definitely be careful about the because you can use humour & upset them which is not what you want because its not what your aim is but I think I'd be scared hurting younger children. RL: 243-246	Upset younger students with sarcasm	Hurt with sarcasm	offensive	NONE	<b>CAVEATS</b>

**M: Before I came here a year and a bit ago I have been in a different school for twelve years not a faith school and there was a teacher in year six who was very, very sarcastic every minute almost and the year six children always enjoyed getting into year six cos humour was going to be a feature of it. However, I don't know if it worked for all of the children. You have to be quite robust to contend with that and know, sometimes it could boarder on the unkind, well, that was my perception of it and I think perhaps the humour was a bit more of a raw edge.  
ML: 156-162**

Sarcastic with year 6 have to be able to understand it and not take it literally

Sarcasm can be aggressive humour offensive

offensive

be aggressive

humour

able to

understand

it and not

take it

literally

very, very

sarcastic

every minute

almost and

the year six

children

always

enjoyed

getting into

year six cos

humour was

going to be a

feature of it.

However, I

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could boarder

on the

unkind, well,

that was my

perception of

it and I think

perhaps the

humour was a

bit more of a

raw edge.

ML: 156-162

Sh: Yeah cos you're always taking a risk with humour aren't you its always a risk whether they're ever gonna get it and especially if it's a new class and erm my previous two classes I've had before so I've had the same class for four years so its been really easy but I remember when I had them first in year three it takes them a while to get into your humour.

ShL: 102-106

Aggressive humour targeted at students

Aggressive humour

Detrimental to well-being

D: I use jokes with children all the time & obviously you have to make sure you're using it constructively as you said rather than being too sarcastic. I think sarcasm is used a lot in schools. I know I use it occasionally. I think you have to check yourself & bring it back occasionally because there is going too far

DL: 9-12

Too sarcastic Can go too far

Exceed boundaries into inappropriate humour

offensive



**R:** Using humour in class often means that you are likely to increase the risk of offending someone and you have to apologise if you do. But once you get to know your kids they accept it & move on in fact I don't think that teachers apologise enough. If they're expecting an apology you've got to model that & in way you're modelling good social skills.  
**RL: 348-**

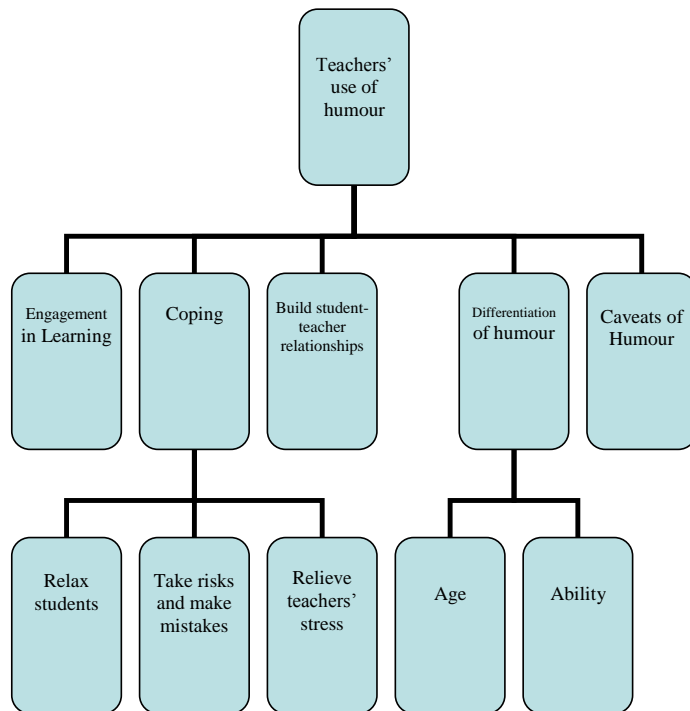
**Sarcasm is a risk  
Should apologise**

**Apologise if offended  
students**

**offensive**

Appendix 9  
Fig. 2

Thematic map



Intermediate Level: 'Themes'  
Lowest level: 'Subthemes'