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The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher leaders' perceptions of the use of humor in the high school classroom. For the purposes of this qualitative research the case study method was used. The question of what makes teachers successful with their use of humor in the classroom has been divided into four categories: climate, communication, engagement, and relationships.

Nine high school classroom teachers from various curriculum areas comprised the sample. This research was completed using a case study methodology allowing for observations of teachers and personal interviews. Two observations of each classroom were completed during a 10-day period during spring 2012. Following the classroom observations, these teacher leaders participated in interviews about their perceptions of the use humor in the class and then they discussed their conceptions in a focus group format. Coupled with the information garnered during the classroom observations, the teachers' responses during the interviews and focus groups provided information about their attitudes toward the use of humor in the classroom.

The use of teacher leaders' humor in the classroom has not previously been studied at the high school level in any detail. Based on the information gathered, as well as teacher comments, conversations, and discussions, it is clear that these teacher leaders all believe that humor makes instruction more effective. Using humor supports the classroom climate and the communication between students and teachers and their

relationships and it also, encourages engagement. All of these topics, which are key to successful instruction, are covered in this study. A significant finding from this study is that teacher leaders support the use of humor in their effective instruction.

TEACHER LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF HUMOR  
IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by

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Approved by

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## DEDICATION

Thanks to the many people that have supported me in this very long activity. This work is dedicated to all that have provided laughter ... family, friends, students, teachers and pets.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Bonnie Kosiczky, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Used effectively, humor can assist with one of the many challenges facing educators today: motivation. When classroom instructors successfully use humor in the learning environment, students are motivated to learn: “Students indicate that humor can increase their interest in learning, and research has demonstrated that students who have teachers with a strong orientation to humor tend to learn more” (Garner, 2006, p. 180). Research and data supporting the use of humor as a pedagogical tool is not new. As Zemke (1991) stated, “It can be clearly shown that humor has a direct impact on learning” (p. 27).

The use of humor can support a more positive learning environment. Humor can make the classroom a more welcoming place. If students feel secure, they are more apt to openly communicate. Since communication is a characteristic of instruction, instruction can be more engaging with the use of humor. Using humor in instruction can make the teacher more approachable, promoting stronger student-teacher relationships, and fostering student engagement. A final outcome with an effective use of teacher humor is improved student learning (Berk, 2007).

Educational experts Cotton (2000), Danielson (1996), Hunter (1990), and Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) have identified climate, communication, engagement, and relationships as characteristics of effective instruction. They encourage

the use of teacher humor as a catalyst for attaining sound instruction. The exchange of ideas and knowledge often occurs with the teacher communicating a concept to the students. Humor provides a platform for effective communication. “Humor is a basic ingredient of binding society; it provides an effective means of communicating a wide range of ideas” (Shammi & Stuss, 1999, p. 657). Lessons are not always of interest to students: “Humor can be the avenue by which one grabs the attention of disinterested student” (Minchew & Hopper, 2008, p. 236). Humor, as discussed by Epstein (2007), by its very nature garners attention and draws in people. Humor encourages student learning in the classroom (Astleitner, 2005). Using humor makes the teacher seem more human and approachable. Moreover, according to Bazzini, Stack, Martincin, and Davis (2007), humor “creates a greater sense of the understanding that we have of each other” (p. 31). As teachers and students communicate, they relate to each other and a mutual understanding can support student success.

MacHovec (1988) identifies humor as a universal quality. He also notes that the use of humor generates feelings of pleasure and security that students want to experience. Spencer (1995) compares the use of humor in instruction to the sound of music which is considered by many to be a universal language. For students and teachers alike the use of humor for supporting instruction can be a mutually beneficial experience.

### **Rationale and Purpose**

My initial interest in teacher humor as an instructional tool is related to my personal belief that if students are laughing, they can be learning. When we hear people laughing, we naturally want to know what is going on. During the 15 years of teaching at

the high school level and being regularly informed by students that my classes were both humorous and instructive, I gradually began to recognize the potential for the effective use of humor in instruction.

The purpose of this research is to support the incorporation of humor into lessons to yield positive effects in the classroom. Too many teachers still hold onto the expression, “Don’t smile until after the December holiday.” People engage in activities that they enjoy; people discontinue and neglect tasks that they find unpleasant and distasteful. Education is under attack nationwide, and the importance of test results are at an all-time high; new and innovative ways of engaging students need to be implemented. Students do not seem to be learning what state governing bureaucracies consider to be “enough,” and they also seem to fall short on exhibiting the needed skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Although most research on the inclusion of humor comes from studies of college-level courses, there is limited research on the use of humor at the elementary and middle school levels. At the elementary level, the effective use of humor is very basic, focusing on climate in the classroom (Morgan, 1998). Research on humor in middle schools expands into different curriculums and starts to focus on communication (Gadanidis, 2005). One thing that is missing from the research is how high school teachers leaders use humor to influence and support effective instruction.

Many articles written by Wanzer and Frymier (2007, 1999) and several of those coauthored with Wojtaszczyk (2006) investigate student perceptions of the ways in which instructors use humor and their connections to learning. This research has all been done

at the college level Wanzer and Frymier (1999), where instruction differs somewhat from that at the high school level. Some college courses have longer sessions and large class sizes; however, most instructional strategies are similar. Wanzer and Frymier (1999) found that “students will attend class more often, pay attention during class more often, and ultimately learn more from humor-oriented teachers” (p. 51). Their hypothesis was that there is a “significant correlation between student perceptions of a teacher’s humor orientation and student learning.” (p. 51). This research supports humor’s positive influence on instruction and learning. While it focuses on the college level, it lends credibility to the possibility that humor may also support instruction at the high school level.

Educational research supports the premise that the effective use of humor facilitates successful instruction (Garner, 2006; Weaver & Cotrell, 1987). Strengthening the climate, communication, engagement, and relationship between the teacher and student in the classroom has a positive effect for which humor has a particular function (Aria, 2003; Gadanidis, 2005). By highlighting and adding to the research on the use of humor in the classroom, more instructors may consider using humor effectively in their instruction at all grade levels.

### **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this research is to study the incorporation of humor in instruction to see whether it yields positive effects in the classroom. According to Tamblyn (2003), “You can and should create states of attention, curiosity, confidence, and more, as they are needed. And one of the easiest ways to do this is through the appropriate use of

humor” (p. 26). Learning is not always fun. The goals for students today are set higher and are more complex than ever before. The world for which educators prepare students has also changed.

The broad question to be addressed from this study is how do teacher leaders use humor in the classroom? Pink (2006) comments that “People rarely succeed at anything unless they are having fun doing it” (p. 186). People are drawn to positive experiences. Consider that people return to places they enjoy such as restaurants.

This particular study is directed at how teacher leaders use humor to influence climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. For the purposes of this research, the question of what makes teacher leaders effective in the classroom has been divided into four themes: climate, communication, engagement, and relationships (Cotton, 2000, Danielson, 1996, Hunter, 1990, Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock, 2001).

My primary question for this study is what are teacher leaders’ perceptions of the use of humor in the high school classroom? Subquestions are as follows:

1. What types of humor do teacher leaders use in the classroom?
2. How do teacher leaders use humor to influence classroom climate?
3. How do teacher leaders use humor to influence communication?
4. How do teacher leaders use humor to influence engagement?
5. How do teacher leaders use humor to influence relationships?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This review of professional literature serves several purposes. When examining the teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction, instruction must first be considered effective. Effective instruction may or may not occur within effective schools. The first goal of this review of the professional literature is to establish the characteristics of effective schools. These correlates of effective schools are identified by Lezotte (1994). The second goal of this review is to define commonly held beliefs about successful instruction within effective schools. Four experts, Cotton (2000), Danielson (1996), Hunter (1990), and Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001), agree that climate, communication, engagement, and student-teacher relationships are core components of effective instruction. The third goal is to shed light on what humor is while identifying the common perceptions, influences and benefits the use of humor has within effective instruction.

#### **Correlates of Effective Schools**

An educational leader considered by many as an expert on effective teaching and effective schools is Larry Lezotte. According to Lezotte (1994), effective schools have seven identified correlates. Six of these deal with the instruction of the student; the last correlate deals with home and school relations.

The first correlate is that of a safe and orderly environment, which refers to the absence of undesirable behaviors. There should be a businesslike atmosphere, where the goal is student learning, with the absence of any type of physical or emotional threat. The desired type of behavior and instruction encourages team or cooperative learning and emphasizes students assisting one another with both academic and nonacademic tasks. This type of positive behavior, according to Lezotte, depends upon the teacher's clear communication of high expectations "... the adults must model collaborative behaviors" (p. 1).

A climate of high expectations for all students is the second correlate. Under this correlate of high expectations, Lezotte (1994) supports the idea that teachers should use strategies that include reteaching and regrouping to support students as they reach the mastery level for each objective. Expectations of student achievement contribute to an atmosphere, which in turn nurtures these expectations. Students are expected to achieve, supporting an atmosphere that, in turn, nurtures these expectations. The connection to effective instruction is the teacher's ability to reteach and rearrange a lesson using different strategies that might include a regrouping of students: "A broader array of responses will be anticipated and planned for ..." (p. 2).

Lezotte's (1994) third correlate is instructional leadership. Recognition of each teacher as having the knowledge to organize the class to achieve academic success for each student, allows teachers to regroup students if necessary and design lessons in accordance with the curriculum to best fit the students in terms of learning levels and time allotted to each specific concept. His belief is that the teacher should take charge of

the classroom to ensure the provision of the best instruction: “The leadership will be viewed as a dispersed concept that includes all adults, especially the teachers” (p. 3).

The fourth correlate of effective schools is a clear and focused mission. A clear statement concerning what is to be learned is crucial in selecting successful teaching methods. A focused mission includes the concept of learning for all and allows teachers to determine when to move from the basic skills tasks to higher-level learning objectives. Teachers need to develop lessons with the final assessment in mind. Higher-level thinking is the key to achieving mastery of curriculum concepts, and mastery learning is the goal of effective schools and instruction. The consideration is that of learning for the student, not teaching to the student.

The fifth correlate is the opportunity to learn and time on task. The combination of the opportunity to learn and time on task may lead directly to successful learning. Students must have sufficient time to master skills and objectives. Providing scaffolding for a lesson and the appropriate amount of time on each task is key to achieving a goal. It becomes a priority for teachers to determine what skills and objectives to focus on: “Teachers will have to become more skilled at interdisciplinary curriculum ...” (Lezotte, 1994, p 4).

This prioritizing of the curriculum fits into the last correlate for successful instruction: the frequent monitoring of student progress. This goal speaks to adjusting the pace of teaching, which is determined by observing the students and their achievements toward mastery. In effective schools, teachers closely monitor student progress and are

flexible about regrouping and reteaching to ensure that students have every opportunity to master concepts (Lezotte, 1994).

Effective schools depend upon effective instruction. Effective instruction should contain the elements of climate, communication, engagement, and student-teacher relationships to be considered successful (Lezotte 1994, Marzano 2001, Danielson 1996). The following descriptions summarize the findings of each educational expert on each of the components found within effective instruction.

#### *Classroom Climate*

According to Schmuck and Schmuck (2001), *classroom climate* refers to the “emotional tones associated with informal interaction, attitudinal responses to the group, and both the self-concepts of students and their motivational satisfactions and frustrations” (p. 40). All classrooms have an intangible feeling; some classrooms are welcoming where as others are not. The feeling within the classroom environment, according to research, directly affects student learning.

A “warm and relationship-based” (Cotton, 2006, p. 250) climate creates a supportive classroom environment. There are 10 key practices that foster a positive classroom climate, ranging from communicating high expectations to communicating interest and recognizing achievement. The classroom that has a positive climate is one in which there is a “concern for students as individuals” (p. 6). Cotton sees the responsibility for a positive environment as broadly shared.

Danielson (1996) also lists the environment, or the classroom or its atmosphere, as a factor for affective instruction. She charges the teacher with the task of establishing a

place that is “conducive to learning, including both the physical and interpersonal aspects of the environment” (p. 2). Components that deal with a positive classroom climate include respect and rapport, the establishment of procedures, and the management of behaviors. Setting a standard of communicating high expectations also supports a positive workspace or climate within the classroom. The teacher should be in charge of the understanding and is, therefore, in control of the climate within that environment.

Hunter (1990) also charges the teacher with establishing a positive climate. She calls the climate for a lesson the “set” (p. 1). This is also called the “hook” for a lesson and sets the stage for student learning to occur. In her summary of elements for effective instruction, she lists motivation or “tricks.” Under this category, “feeling tone” is listed as the main factor. Hunter expresses the need for the classroom climate to be positive and provide a springboard for instruction. For Hunter, climate is the feeling and tone within the classroom.

Marzano (2003) agrees that the teacher is in charge of the classroom climate and emphasizes that classroom climate should be created so that students feel “safe” (p. 56). His definition of climate broadens to include student-teacher relationships, which he sees as connecting with clear communication and engaging instruction. When asked how communication can be assessed, Marzano (2007) responded: “Student engagement and ownership of the learning process increases when learning goals are identified” (p. 4). Thus, observing the students and to what degree they are engaged can be a good indicator of how effective communication is within a given classroom. Climate can be considered the emotional feeling in the classroom. This emotion should be positive, supportive, and

inviting. A critical part of any individual's environment is determined by how people relate and communicate. The classroom should be a place where communication flows openly and easily between students and instructors. Climate is the all-pervasive atmosphere within the classroom.

### *Communication*

One of Cotton's (2000) major elements is clear communication: "Plain language and clear written and verbal directions" (p. 23) leads to student understanding. If students understand a specific goal and the actions to engage they are more likely to reach a higher level of achievement. Cotton identified communication as a domain that is essential for instruction to be effective.

For Danielson (1996), communication relies mostly on the teacher's ability to be a clear communicator. This researcher divides teaching into four domains. One of these describes what is needed for effective instruction. Students need to know what to do and how to do it to complete any task completely and effectively. She argues that communication must be consistently clear, expressive, and appropriate to enable students to successfully complete the required tasks. Clear communication must occur for instruction to be effective.

Within Hunter's (1990) four instructional processes, three steps depend on student-teacher communication: watching or modeling, working together, and guided practice. Without adequate communication, little can be accomplished in the classroom in terms of effective instruction. With Hunter's model, a give and take relationship between students and teachers exists to exchange, model, modify, correct, and gain information.

Hunter's instructional model has the teacher "directing" the learning. Each step requires clear and concise communication and instruction. The outline for direct instruction includes objectives, standards, anticipatory set, teaching, guided practice, closure, and independent practice. From step 3, the beginning of the lesson, until the end of step 6, closure, the teacher is communicating. The basic concept of this presentation model places the teacher in the role of "explaining," "leading," "questioning," and "checking" for knowledge acquired. Student learning depends upon the effectiveness and clarity of communication.

Marzano et al., (2001) discuss communication procedures, emphasizing the necessity for clarity in both instruction and procedures. A consistent point in all this research for classroom teachers is the establishment of clear learning goals. Communication, he argues, must be clear for students to reach expected learning levels. Connecting students instructionally requires that they become engaged in the lesson.

### *Engagement*

Engagement means there is activity and interest on the part of students. To say that students are interacting with the lesson they are is a positive notation that should be the standard in all classroom activities. Students are involved in their own learning when they are engaged and interested in the lesson. They are the participants in the classroom and are not simply "receiving" instruction (Berk, 2007).

Under the topic of instructional time the connection between academic learning and student engagement and achievement is a "strong positive relationship" (Cotton, 1989, p. 3). She places student engagement in the category of contextual attributes and

instructional attributes. The first section of contextual attributes of student engagement is linked to maximizing learning time, or academic learning time spent engaging in tasks at an appropriate level of difficulty. Cotton (1989) finds “a strong positive relationship between academic learning and student achievement and the effects of academic learning time” (p. 3).

In the instructional attributes category, engagement is a fundamental part of each lesson, arousing students’ interest and curiosity about the lesson is the task of the instructor. Another task for the teacher in terms of engagement is the use of effective questioning, emphasizing that the teacher must be adept in effective questioning. The teacher is “asking questions that engage student interaction” (Cotton, 2000, p. 23). It is necessary for the teacher to provide a hook to facilitate the lesson and lead the student to the next level of engagement.

Danielson (1996) concurs that making instruction effective means that students are engaged: “If one component can claim to be the most important, this is the one” (p. 7). Teachers should use activities that cognitively engage students and leads them to greater mastery. *Engaging* students includes having a clear objective, providing activities and assignments that are appropriate to the setting, and consistent pacing. Motivation and active participation are also critical elements in effective instruction. “School is not a spectator sport” (Danielson, 1996, p. 8). Drawing students into a lesson is not an easy task.

By using an instructional hook, the teacher can lure students into the topic of study. The Hunter Method illustrates how to grab a student’s attention and focus the

students on a lesson (Hunter, 2004). For Hunter, engagement starts with the introduction or letting students anticipate what will happen in the lesson: This hook invites student involvement.

Tapping into student interest increases student motivation and engagement, positively affecting student learning. Bushman (2004) highlights the engagement factor by reviewing the areas of engagement: “The level of engagement is in the context of the lesson . . . student retention is enhanced when teachers ask students to engage” (p. 30). This initial interaction with the academic material sets the stage for the remainder of the lesson. These four experts agree that engagement is an essential consideration in the learning process.

The goal of the classroom teacher is keeping students on task. Marzano (2007) states: “Arguably, keeping students engaged is one of the most important considerations of the classroom teacher” (p. 98). He supports high levels of student engagement so that students obtain greater knowledge. Using humor has proven to be an effective and valid means of getting and keeping students engaged.

### *Relationships*

An extensive study by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) characterizes the teacher who fosters a positive relationship as a “teacher who recognizes an individual student’s emotion . . . motivates [the] student’s behaviors” (p. 493). The emotions inside a classroom are the underpinning of student learning. Students’ receptivity to learning reflects the classroom environment as a positive vehicle for education.

The supportive classroom climate is the approach in which Cotton (2000) describes student teacher relationships. Relationships can be formed by sharing experiences: “Sharing anecdotes and incidents from their personal experience and using humor are appropriate methods to build rapport with students” (p. 18). Cotton’s respect for the student-teacher relationship is evident in her comment: “Sharing with students...provides a strong personal sense and attachment, which are part of effective leaders within the school” (p. 18). Cotton (2006) later describes practices that have an impact on instruction and student learning.

Interaction and interpersonal support come from the demonstration of respect. Danielson (1996) deals with respect and rapport in her rubric for effective teaching titled “Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport” (p. 5). Detecting rapport and the evidence of student-teacher relations can be identified with Danielson’s “look fors” and “listen fors” (p. 7). The word choice and the actions of the teacher demonstrate the establishment of each relationship. Her step-by-step guide to establishing a positive climate supports relationships between teacher and students as the interaction and communication between them becomes stable.

Hunter (1984) also provides a slightly different step-by-step instructional model. This model incorporates relationships within the context of teacher-made decisions. From this vantage point, “Teaching is a science in human learning based on human learning and behavior” (p.172). Hunter (2004) acknowledges the emotional and motivational aspects of instruction when she discusses the feeling tone in the classroom and makes the connection to relationships:

The way students feel in a particular situation affects the amount of effort that students are willing to put forth to learn. . . . Recognizing that the brain is an emotional structure, we know that the relationship between student and teacher is tremendously important. (p.18)

The underlying assumption is that students' emotions are crucial to learning, and that the student-teacher relationship is pivotal to emotions and outcomes within the classrooms.

Marzano (2003) states that when students learn, relationships form. Students and teachers start to build relationships as students begin the learning process. Marzano highlights the importance of these relationships: "Being able to communicate appropriate levels of concern and . . . convey that you are interested in students as individuals" (p. 41). When the students realize that there is an interest in them personally, they become more receptive.

In this 2003 study, Marzano declared that the "quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of the classroom" (p. 1). He further describes relationships by identifying specific behaviors, which include "appropriate levels of dominance and appropriate levels of cooperation" (p. 2). In particular, at the high school level he suggests that taking a personal interest in students, using equitable and positive classroom behaviors, and responding appropriately to students' incorrect responses opens the pathway to building positive relationships.

The conclusion from this study supports that high dominance (by the teacher) within the classroom and high cooperation (between students and teachers) results in "optimal teacher-student relationships" (p. 42). It should be common sense that for

relationships to have any chance at “being,” there must first be constructive communication between students and teachers. The climate in the classroom should encourage communication. Communication should allow for positive engagement, which then is conducive to student-teacher relationships. Each element of the lesson can be supported with the effective use of humor.

### **Humor Defined**

There are several theories that account for the functions of humor. The definition of humor may vary widely but a basic definition is “The quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech; the quality that makes something laughable or amusing” (Oxford University Press, 2010). A description of humor is from researcher Ruch (2007) who states that “Early characterological observations assigned humor variables to the sanguine temperament” (p. 3). Ruch explains that humor entails “processes [that] are slower than those of the physical or immediate reaction [and] that it is an attitude of mind ...” (p. 6). Whether humor is a quality or something that provides an attitude, it has an effect on the classroom.

Humor has also been described as producing a cognitive-affective shift. Situations can be less threatening, with a decrease in concomitant release of emotion associated with the perceived threat (Dixon, 1980; Martin, Kuiper, Olinger, and Dance, 1993). Some students shy away from the classroom and the teacher, which could inhibit learning.

Meyer (1997) defines humor as a “uniting” mechanism that may provide a way to negotiate an understanding of relationships. Using humor or something that might be perceived as funny or comical can allow for a bonding between people. Gurtler (2002)

says that humor is “rooted in a positive state of mind and extends to students appreciation” (p. 11). The appreciation of humor used in a classroom might be considered as a motivational factor.

Lynch (2002) echoes this definition of humor. Humor provides a social function (e.g., communication) and is a reaction to ambiguity providing relief. Lynch adopts a psychological view of humor, intertwining it with motivational aspects. The teachers’ message should be encouraging, grade appropriate which could engage the students, and could assist in the goal of effective instruction.

In conjunction with this idea, Wanzer and Frymier (1999) developed a standard for the use of humor in accordance with their belief that “humor must help achieve the teaching goal . . . it most likely helps students learn the content by creating a positive teacher-student relationship, generating a positive classroom climate” (p. 48). These researchers explain, “Regardless of the context, humor is an important form of communication” (p. 48). Instead of defining humor, they give examples of how a humor orientation can increase student learning.

Thus, there are several ways to view the use of humor: the individual use of humor and the function, or how humor is used in society. From the individual perspective, there are three theories, including incongruity, relief, and superiority. Each of these theories helps to explain the influences in successful instruction and the connection psychologically. Humor helps us in the thinking process.

### *Incongruity Theory*

The most prominent theory is the incongruity theory, which suggests that laughter is based on intellectual activity. This connects to the notion that humor is cognitively based and relates to the individual's perceptions; in opposition to what might be "expected" (Martin, 2007, p. 428). Ideas that do not "fit" together may be considered humorous when connected. This "incongruity" often makes ideas seem funny, in part because "incongruity" is something of an umbrella. This theory attempts to "stretch the mind" (James, 2001, p. 4). In a similar light, Douglas (1975) suggests that all humor is a human reaction to ambiguity within their environment. Since the students' perceptions form their beliefs, their beliefs will either be validated or rejected depending on the level of engagement and the relations between students and teachers.

### *Relief Theory*

The second theory behind the use of humor is the relief theory. Relief theories attempt to describe humor along the lines of a tension-release model. Rather than defining humor, they discuss the essential structures and psychological processes that produce laughter. Two prominent relief theorists are Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. There are two versions of relief theory: (1) The strong version holds that all laughter results from a release of excessive energy, and (2) the weak version claims that humorous laughter involves a release of tension or energy. Humor allows people to deal with topics that may be frightening, and humor permits people to confront and make "light" of troubling events or experiences. It is a relief of tension or stress. Humor used in this way can be face-saving and increase trust between people (Lynch, 2002).

Students may find certain classrooms or subjects difficult, intimidating, or dull. This theory relates to the classroom's climate and the engagement and relations of effective instruction. Students may find that the use of humor in classrooms allows them to relax. Others may find the use of humor engaging enough to encourage their involvement in the curriculum.

### *Superiority Theory*

The superiority theory, according to Lynch (2002), is connected to the writings of Thomas Hobbs. This type of humor is associated with *laughing at others*: mockery or disdain. According to Lynch (2002) "humor is an expression of superiority can be either a mechanism of control or a form of resistance" (p. 426). With this theory, humor has a social function which may create or connect those that may be *laughed at*. Feinberg (1978) suggests "that humor is aggression, but in a nonviolent and socially acceptable fashion" when humor is used in this negative way (p. 426). Negative humor is not well accepted, but it does occur. Humor used in this negative fashion may offer some classroom control or management.

Each theory of humor can be linked to positive influences when used with effective instruction. Humor provides a way to communicate, and communication within the classroom influences the climate, engagement, and relationships between teachers and students.

There are more than 50 educational experts who have cited the influence and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction. The oldest writing concerning humor that I use is from Freud and the notion that humor provides relief. The earliest

research-based article I have chosen is from 1982, and the most recent is from 2008 after which the material decreased. Humor is considered a characteristic of the most effective teachers (McCabe, 1995). In a similar vein, the use of humor in instruction brings learning to life through engagement (Dickinson, 2001).

### **Types of Teacher Humor**

Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) researched humor, specifically dealing with the “appropriate” nature of the humor and assessing students’ perceptions of the use of humor. This study looked into the many ways humor can be included in instruction. Recent high school graduates were participants in a study as freshmen at the college level. There are limited studies dealing with humor that have used secondary students in the classroom. The age group in this study is similar to the oldest high school students. There were several types of appropriate humor that were revealed in the study findings, such as humor related to material, media, or external objects, jokes, and examples. Inappropriate uses of humor included disparaging or self-disparaging humor, targeting students, and offensive humor. Both types of humor were divided for further investigation. The standard used for this research was that “humor must help achieve the teaching goal . . . it most likely helps students learn the content by creating a positive teacher-student relationship, generating a positive classroom climate” (Wanzer, et.al, 2006 p. 14).

Additional findings from Frymier, Wanzer, and Wojtaszczyk (2008) supported their original work. Students related to and acknowledged the use of positive humor, such as joking and playacting. Sarcasm, racial, and sexual humor is labeled as negative and as

detracting from the goal of the lesson. This 2008 study reports that the use of different types of humor in the classroom will offer expected results.

Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) also studied students' perceptions of the use of different types of humor. Students identified funny stories, comments, jokes, and professional humor. These findings indicated that humor used appropriately has the potential to humanize, illustrate, defuse, encourage, reduce anxiety, and keep people thinking. These uplifting categories of humor helps prepare students to receive instruction. Negative types of humor such as sarcasm, seemed much less effective. Different types of humor have also been identified and coded (Neuliep, 1991).

Neuliep's (1991) research found that humor can be used to prepare the classroom for learning. The details of this research include taxonomy and a coded typology of humor. While the list of techniques begins with being lighthearted and smiling, it expands to including jokes. Neuliep explains his findings and makes connections to the themes of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. The uses of humorous instructional techniques range from directing a humorous comment to telling a personal anecdote, while keeping the tone conversational. This conversational tone allows the instructor to relate the subject to everyday life and appear more human.

#### *Teachers' Connections between Humor and Improved Student Performance*

Researchers and authors working in elementary to graduate schools concur that a benefit from the use of humor within effective instruction is the positive effect on student performance. Berk (1996) started reporting about the connection between the successful use of humor and improved student performance. According to Berk, humor has "the

potential of a teaching tool to change attitudes, decrease anxiety, and increase achievement and is unlimited and, at this point, largely unrealized” (p. 88). From the college level to the middle school level, Gadanidis, Gadanidis, and Huang (2005) agree that humor helps students to gain insight into subject areas. These authors cite improved comprehension and cognitive retention with the inclusion of humor. McCabe (1995) links the use of humor to “affective domains of teaching and learning” (p. 124). Michelli (1998) connects humor to successful problem-solving. From improving retention to developing problem-solving skills to increasing student comprehension, teachers are continuing to review the advantages of using humor in the classroom.

More recently, Minchew and Hopper (2008) advocated the use of humor in high school language classes. This research is a part of the limited investigations done in high schools. The authors view humor as a creative approach that supports academic achievement. Administrators also confirm the use of humor in instruction.

Glenn (2002), an experienced principal in South Carolina, supports the use of humor in effective instruction. His support is based on numerical evidence: “Humor increases learning and . . . research indicates that the use of humor can increase retention from 15% to 50%” (p. 28). This essay lists several connections between humor and achievement. Administrators want teachers to find ways to increase student learning and achievement.

The elements of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships relate to successful classroom instruction, and each element may be enhanced by the use of humor. Students will achieve in classrooms where the climate is positive. For the climate

to be positive, the teacher must use clear and direct communication, which leads to teachers engaging students in their lessons, as well as establishing strong student-teacher relationships.

### *How Humor can Influence Classroom Climate*

A positive climate is one that is “conducive to instructing and learning . . . wherein everyone is considered a teacher and student at the same time . . . promoting respect among all” (Hashem, 1994, p. 6). Hashem directly links humor as a teaching technique to a student’s feeling safe within the classroom. A classroom that provides a welcoming environment and positive climate encourages learning: “Play and humor are two of several ways . . . to improve classroom atmosphere and develop relationship-building skills” (Hashem, 1994, p. 10). The idea that a classroom is fun or a teacher is perceived as funny reflects the classroom environment: “Teachers and students share the belief that learning should be fun” (Hashem, 1994, p. 6). Humor provides a welcoming environment for students. Humor will also lay a foundation for strong interpersonal relationships. Students should feel secure within the classroom, not only in the physical sense, but in the academic areas as well.

A student should be able to take risks for academic growth and feeling safe allows a student to take a guess or make an attempt. This feeling is intangible, yet it is clear to both students and teachers. The student must feel that it is acceptable to make a mistake. The climate must support the notion that “it can be safe to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes” (Hashem, 1994, p. 3). Hashem concludes that “using play and humor in

the classroom actually pays off in increased achievement and better attitudes” (p. 17).

The feeling of safety promotes a positive social climate.

Humor fosters an open social climate (Gurtler, 2002). Gurtler’s study provides insight into the use of humor as an enhancement of the social climate. He used interviews, questionnaires, and reconstructions with both teachers and students. Interviews led to analysis of concepts relating to humor. He notes that humor must be connected to the learning situation to be effective. Gurtler writes that “humor is also an emotional experience” (p. 5) and creates a pleasurable feeling in the classroom.

In a classroom with a positive climate, students will become more engaged and involved, according to Zemke (1991). Students who are “involved” must be able to “feel safe in a learning situation” (Zemke, 1991, p. 6). Zemke reports on what he has found to be effective. He provides guidelines in which he references Gruner (1978) and Ziv (1988), who are leading researchers in the field of humor. Zemke notes that as students feel safe, at ease, and welcomed in a classroom environment, they are more apt to engage in the academic program. A suggestion for the practical and useful incorporation of humor is that humor must be relevant and appropriate. There are three cautionary guidelines for the use of humor. Self-disparaging humor *may* or *may not* enhance the presenter’s image. Too much humor may get in the way of an objective. The use of satire or sarcasm has unpredictable results that may detract from the positive feelings (which include that of safety) within the classroom setting.

Done (2006) writes about the use of humor in the elementary classroom. In his essay, Done emphasizes the importance of the emotional climate by explaining that fear

inhibited his own learning of subtraction. He instructs teachers to motivate students with the use of humor, saying,

We want to motivate our students. We want to create an atmosphere of openness . . . we want them to feel comfortable . . . to take risks . . . to be active learners . . . using humor helps facilitate all of this. (p. 34)

Berk (1996) expands the recommended use of humor and suggests that it be used in every classroom. He writes about humor in education and the “fostering of active learning” (p. 89). In his essay, dealing with humor at the college level he advises that humor can reduce stress and enhance recall. This study spanned 3 years and evaluated the effectiveness of 10 systematic strategies for using humor as a teaching tool in a statistics class: “The potential of humor as a teaching tool to change attitudes, decrease anxiety, and increase achievement is unlimited” (Berk, 1996, p. 88). Berk found that decreasing stress and making positive changes in the classroom environment came from the use of humor.

Knowing how to deliver a lesson effectively is essential. Askildson (2000) reports that “humor usage creates a more comfortable conducive learning environment overall” (p. 54). His pilot study involved 236 second-language learners. The majority said that they felt more relaxed as a result of the instructor’s use of humor. All students responded in a positive fashion to a question concerning the learning environment and the use of humor: “The indirect and ancillary effects on the classroom environment and other affective variables conducive to learning are seen as the result of the employment of humor in the classroom” (p. 49).

Practical and positive suggestions for improving the classroom come from Sousa (2001). He encourages the use of humor to promote learning within a positive environment and to “improve the classroom climate” and “make it more conducive to learning” (p. 264). Sousa connects the idea of using humor in the classroom to neuroscience, linking the science of teaching to how the brain processes humor. He delves into the functions of humor and details how scientific evidences connect to the teachers’ use of humor. He claims that the use of humor is motivational in student learning.

#### *Climate Connects to Engagement*

Creating an atmosphere that is relaxed should lead to more learning and engagement rather than less: “One of the benefits of using humor is to release endorphins, which are natural painkillers produced when laughing” (Hellman, 2007, p. 37). When we laugh, we relax, and when we relax, our minds seem to be more receptive and, according to this author’s essay, “more conducive to learning” (p. 37). Not every student will understand and relate to every type of humor.

Wanzer and Frymier have published several articles dealing with humor. The first, published in 1999, deals with student perceptions of an instructor’s use of humor. Their findings concerning the effects humor has on the climate state that “instructors’ use of humor helps to create an enjoyable classroom environment where students are less anxious and more willing to participate in class” (p. 48).

Wanzer and Frymier (2006) furthered their earlier work by suggesting that: “Humor must help achieve the teaching goal” (p.187). This supported their other opinion

that humor “most likely helps students learn the content by creating a positive teacher-student relationship and by generating a positive classroom climate” (Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006, p. 192). Frymier, Wanzer, and Wojtaszczyk (2008) agree that humor has a place in the classroom.

While a math classroom would seem to be an odd place for humor, Gadanidis, Gadanidis, and Huang (2005) tackle the difficult arena of middle school math and suggest the addition of humor to those lessons. Reasons for the use of humor range from creating a more positive learning environment to increasing understanding and improving comprehension and cognitive retention. Gadanidis et al. (2005) lists the use of jokes, comics, poems, skits, interviews, and ads for allowing students to experience mathematical humor. In this essay, the authors support the use of humor, because they believe that humor will alleviate tension and facilitate learning. They conclude that “Mathematical humor and insight are creative and pleasurable experiences. Both develop a positive attitude toward mathematics and facilitate higher-order thinking” (p. 250). Gadanidis et al., (2005) also recommend the use of humor as a strategy to maintain attention and interest and, by reducing stress to improve comprehension and cognitive retention.

### *Humor and Motivation*

Keeping student attention and maintaining a positive environment may sound easy in theory but in practice, many instructors could use help formulating effective techniques. Two separate research studies compile a list of techniques for developing the use of humor in the classroom (Weaver & Cotrell, 1987; Weaver, 1982). Teachers should

simply smile and be lighthearted. An earlier study by Weaver (1982) asked undergraduate students to identify positive attributes they found in large group lectures. Students ranked a sense of humor high among traits desired in a lecture setting. Humor was identified as serving to relieve anxiety and lighten the atmosphere in the classroom. Students ranked sense of humor and the ability to laugh and interaction between teacher and student in the top five motivational factors for learning.

Humor is a motivational factor that makes the classroom climate more personal for students. Wandersee (1982), a biology professor, sees humor's positive effect as "making learning more personal and enjoyable, and establishing a more efficient learning climate," and humor's main strength as producing a "classroom climate conducive to learning" (p. 213). Wandersee suggests many reasons for the use of humor as a teaching strategy, but his focus stays on his belief that humor has a positive effect on the environment and then strengthens the relationship between students and the teacher.

In conjunction with this idea, students often benefit because teachers are more comfortable. "Humor makes for a more relaxed atmosphere, which I am comfortable in. So, it helps the teacher, as well as the students, when humor is incorporated into the lesson" (Rareshide, 1993, p. 19). He surveyed fifth and sixth grade teachers and found that they believe that humor is an "integral part of teaching" (p. 1). He provided guidelines, as well as a humor survey in the conclusion of his essay to help determine how and when humor is an efficient technique. Deciding how and when to use humor in the classroom may determine how engaging a lesson can be.

A happy and comfortable classroom can be established with the use of just one minute of humor, “If one minute of concentration can be gained for a minute of laughter, the classroom and our teaching world will be a far happier place . . . where laughter abounds, curious minds can flourish” (Morgan, 1995, p. 246). In addition Rareshide (1993) and Rainsberger (1994) deal with humor at the elementary level. These authors concur that if one minute of laughter can make the elementary classroom more comfortable, all classrooms could benefit.

Classrooms are not always places where students feel at ease. Humor provides comfort in potentially uncomfortable places (Rainsberger, 1994). In his work on stress and tension, Rainsberger notes that the use of humor in the classroom “makes us feel more comfortable in situations in which we would normally feel as if we were not entirely in control of our feelings” (p. 20). He finds that the reduction in stress resulting from the use of humor can also make “learning more enjoyable, which, in turn, leads to a more relaxed atmosphere, as well as positive attitudes about school” (p. 22).

Students and teachers may not agree which subjects cause discomfort or stress. Flowers (2001) comments “Although technology teachers may think of their classes as relatively low-stress environments, their students may not and might benefit from the inclusion of humor” (p. 10). In fact, many students taking technology courses experience stress. Flowers, a technology instructor, notes in his conclusion that “humor may be employed as a particularly effective tool in a technology education classroom” (p. 11). Another type of instruction that may cause stress is an online class.

Online learning can be just as frustrating as learning that takes place in the classroom. James (2004) connects the ideas of technology education and online education. He argues that technology education benefits from the use of humor and adds that online learning can also be stressful. “Adding humor to an online course is possible and, according to many, necessary . . . it is known that humor, when used appropriately, creates a nonthreatening learning environment” (p. 93). James notes that incorporating humor into online courses requires a considerable amount of time; however, he adds that “demonstrating a sense of humor helps bring students fully into their virtual classroom,” . . . a key component of having learning taking place and having students “*there*” (p. 94). Creating a positive climate with students taking online classes has been found to be difficult, but many authors suggest that humor may increase participation.

Shatz and LoSchiavo (2006) also present reasons to use humor in online courses. Shatz comments that humor can facilitate interactions and boost student interest and participation. He also identifies the use of humor in online courses as a “social lubricant that can facilitate interactions” and adds that the sterile online situation can be decreased with the use of humor, adding a sense of “personal” flavor (p. 1). The addition of humor to online courses can encourage engagement within the lesson and provide a foundation for student-teacher relationships.

Regardless of the subject or method of instruction, there are some instructors are cautious about using humor. Sudol (1981) supports the use of humor in the classroom, but he also warns that “one danger in joking lies in setting the proper classroom tone . . . [another] is that such joking can lead to other extremes . . . and the classroom becomes a

playroom” (p. 26). Dangers aside, humor can provide connections among students, teachers, administrators, and the school. A classroom environment laced with humor can provide a comfortable, safe, and welcoming place where students want to go to learn, and, while the environment is key, personal relationships provide another factor in student success. Sudol agrees that humor can make the classroom a positive and welcoming place where relationships can then be built.

#### *How Humor can Influence Communication*

Communication is the way in which people exchange thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Durant and Miller (1988) examine humor as a factor in communication. Their conclusion about the use of humor is straightforward: “Humor provides an effective means of communicating a range of ideas, feelings, and opinions” (p. 17). Durant and Miller’s definition of humor fits securely into communication and the ways in which people express themselves.

Wrench and McCrosky’s (2001) research focuses on the communication aspects of humor and understanding humor orientation. Wrench and McCrosky also discuss exhilaration and give a humor assessment. These focus points all relate to communication and how the use of humor accents communication. The expression of thoughts and ideas between students and teachers is a major part of sound instruction. Teachers are expected to be the leaders in the classroom and effective leadership relies on sound communication.

Irmsher (1996) comments on the communication skills of school leaders and suggests that the use of humor has been found by “various researchers to be the seventh

sense necessary for effective school leadership” (p. 4). She further reports on a study by Pierson and Bredeson (1993) that proposes that principals should use humor for four main reasons: (1) to improve school climate, (2) to relate to teachers, (3) to break down the bureaucratic structure, and (4) to assist in delivering unpleasant news. It would stand to reason that if researchers are suggesting and supporting that leaders use humor with teachers, then teachers should also use humor with students for effective results.

Effective results are discussed in an essay by Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo (2002). They detail how humor can be used to build relationships and enhance communication with students. These three professors also cite humor as a tool for reducing stress, as well as a way to make a course more interesting and increase the long-term recall of information. Friedman et al found that the use of humor helped increase engagement in a dreaded statistics course at the undergraduate level. The age level of the students does not negate the fact that engagement is a crucial element in instruction that can be influenced by the use of humor within effective instruction.

#### *How Humor can Influence Engagement*

Teacher leaders and educators use the term *best practice* to describe techniques that have a proven track record of success. Practitioners, or people who are currently teaching, are used to hearing this terminology in regards to lessons and lesson planning. Done (2006) has created a guide of 21 ways for a teacher to include humor and engage students in a lesson. He writes that teachers do not need to be comedians, but “comedy can bring a lot of joy and learning opportunities to the classroom” (p. 32). Done’s guide includes telling stories, breaking the routine, creating hooks, using cartoons, and laughing

at oneself. He notes that teachers should be sure to direct the humor at themselves and never use sarcasm. Done concludes that using humor facilitates motivation, creates an atmosphere of respect, and develops students into active learners.

Humor has the power to not only engage a learner, but encourage creative thinking (Astleitner, 2005). Astleitner considers 13 principles essential in effective instruction. These findings are based on results of research that confirm and meet the criteria of social empirical research, which considers cognitive characteristics, motivation, and emotional aspects. Humor is identified in principle two, as a “multiple supporting of cognitive, motivational, and emotional characteristics” (p. 4). The engagement of the student comes with sustained attention. Humor, according to this researcher, keeps a student’s attention and is actively involved in the lesson.

Many instructors who have used humor have done so because they believed that their subject or curriculum was difficult or dry. Many curriculum areas have an author who supports the use of humor because of the actual course material. Course material in history is what Henry (2000) discusses, commenting that “perhaps laughter is the key to energizing history in your classroom” (p. 64). He goes further, writing that “we should inject laughter into our history lessons, for it will surely bring rewards” (p. 64). This instructor has identified the reason for using humor is to gain and hold students’ attention, while encouraging students to engage in the lessons. Henry explains his use of humor by saying that “The use of comedy is natural in teaching history, and we can draw from many amusing episodes and quotes” (p. 64).

Gadanidis, Gadanidis, and Huang (2005) tackle the difficult arena of middle school math and suggest the addition of humor to those lessons. They also connect the use of humor to a more positive learning environment, keeping attention and interest, and, by reducing stress, improving comprehension and cognitive retention. Gadanidis, et al. write that “Humor helps gain student attention and keeps their interest in classroom activity” (p. 245). For these authors, humor “may be a way of cleansing students’ mathematical palettes, a way of engaging students creatively with mathematics and setting the stage for attending deeply to mathematics” (p. 246).

Attending to high school English is the focus for Minchew and Hopper (2008) who found that the use of humor was beneficial. They believe that “Humor can be used effectively as a tool to engage students, to enliven the classroom, and to enhance learning” (p. 236). These former teachers offer a variety of ways to include humor in a lesson. They look at using humor for the sake of creative teaching and sparking interest and promoting learning. Suggested techniques include poetic word play, games, and something they call the Carson technique. The Carson technique has as its roots the comedy of Johnny Carson on late night TV. Carson’s wording and the ways in which he timed his responses proved humorous to audiences worldwide. Carson’s use of humor often put guests at ease and provided an escape from the daily tensions of life for viewers.

Ziv (2001) pinpoints the reason that humor can be considered such an important strategy in teaching. Ziv looked into the cathartic effects humor had on aggressive responses in the classroom. He determined that as students get frustrated in the

classroom, humor tends to diminish the tendency toward aggression. His subjects were high school-aged students in Tel Aviv, Israel. If aggression is decreased, engagement should increase. This investigation included an experiment that afforded students with a situation where humor sparked laughter, thus providing the possibility for relief from tension. With a decrease in tension and frustration, Ziv found that an increase in learning should occur. Humor can reduce adolescent frustration in the classroom.

Berk (2007) lends credibility to humor as a tool for motivation and engagement. He also supports the use of humor to enhance the student-teacher relationship and make a subject more appealing, thus more engaging: “There are two classroom applications. First, it can improve your connection with your students. Second, humor can bring dead, boring content to life” (p. 102).

Some students may find certain subjects hard to deal with for different reasons. Students who have little interest in a curriculum seem to respond quickly to humor. Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo (2002) found humor and laughter to be a “powerful tool” (p. 2). They go slightly further to remind educators that “humor can make a potentially boring subject more interesting” (p. 2). Gaining, sustaining, and engaging a student’s attention with a lesson and subject matter is key for student success; keeping students alert and engaged in any lesson at any level is not an easy task.

The use of humor has been linked to keeping students alert and engaged. Gordon (1992) studied humor at the graduate level and remarked: “The need for more alertness in university classes has been long recognized” (p. 314). He writes that humor may increase

receptivity in the room and encourages students to listen closely. Humor may also reveal the human side of teachers, supporting the relationship between students and teachers.

Humor and immediacy, the term used to describe the relationship between students and teachers, are discussed by Gorham and Christophel (1990). They intertwine the ideas of positive relationships with engagement in the academic setting, writing that “individuals who use humor are seen as likeable, which facilitates teacher/student rapport,” and “when people are feeling good . . . they are more likely to engage” (p. 47).

“Reaching” students is another expression used to define student engagement. Gurtler (2002) takes humor as key to connecting to students and engaging them: “The active processing of humorous events leads to an enhanced awareness of what happens and what is going on. . . . Humor easily catches attention . . . it can also direct attention and give importance to relevant learning topics, issues, and details” (p. 6). Humor can be used as more than just an introduction for a lesson. It can influence and sustain engagement.

Students often complain that they are bored and that classes are not entertaining. Henry (2000) writes about the teaching of history. He notes that students today are even more tuned out than those of the MTV generation. Henry suggests that to energize the lessons, teachers should “inject laughter into our lessons . . . by mixing historical facts with amusing stories and humor” (p. 64). His closing comment leaves no question about his support of the use of humor to help engage students: “Without a doubt, putting laughter into your curriculum will enhance your student interest” (p. 65).

Laughter signals enjoyment. James (2001) describes how humor relates to instruction. The main focus of this essay spotlights the research-based fact that humor “can increase attention and enjoyment, assisting in learning and retention” (p. 1). James’s research discusses the theories of humor, as well as the reasons teachers should include humor in their instruction: “Humor has only been recognized as a legitimate area of study in education for the last 25 year ... classes filled with relevant humor are perceived as interesting, high in support, and affirming by students” (p. 5). If lessons are considered enjoyable, students will pay more attention and be more engaged.

Many authors warn about the use of the lectures. Sudol (1981) recognizes the dangers of lectures, writing, “The great difficulty in lecturing, of course, is trying to keep students’ attention for an entire period. . . . I punctuate my lectures with anecdotes or comic ditties to relieve the tedium. . . . I’ve got their attention” (p. 26). Sudol is also quick to note that humor should not signal frivolous behavior. Getting and keeping students’ attention and keeping them engaged is clearly a key to student academic success. Including humor in instructional strategies within the classroom makes sense.

Using humor as a teaching strategy in biology is discussed in detail by Wandersee (1982). This author makes a definitive point in regards to engaging students with humor using a comparison to educational television: “If educational television is an indicator, the fast pacing and frequent humorous inserts were most effective in attracting attention and keeping interest” (p. 217). Wandersee makes another point supporting the engagement potential of humor in instruction when he states that “It appears that teachers

should consider a daily dosage of humor in their lesson plans as an investment with the potential for paying high dividends” (p. 217).

Wanzer and Frymier (1999) agree that humor provides the benefit of holding power: “The theoretical explanation for the humor-learning relationship is explained by the attention-gaining and holding power of humor” (p. 49). Many of the authors and researchers write about the benefit of humor in regards to engagement and its power to retain student interest.

#### *How Humor can Influence Relationships*

A connection between the student and teacher occurs in most classrooms in some form or fashion. As the connection between these two individuals strengthens, many positive reactions can occur. Using humor makes any instructor more human.

A sense of humor . . . increases learning and is one of the major goals of interpersonal communication . . . being able to joke or have fun . . . teachers can enhance their recognition of students as individuals. (Hashem, 1994, p. 2)

Students may not show their nervousness on the first day of school. Using humor helps to alleviate anxiety for not only the teacher, but the students as well: “Humor helps to relieve stress, improves attention, and enhances learning” (Shatz and LoSchiavo, 2006, p. 1). They focus on the use of humor in online courses, saying: “Our empirical study demonstrated that the planned, systematic use of humor enhances the social aspects of online instruction” (p. 2). The authors also found that the use of humor “bridged the student-teacher gap by allowing students to view the instructor as more approachable” (p. 2). This article supported the use of humor in that “pedagogical humor has the potential

to reduce student anxiety concerning difficult subjects, to make challenging concepts clearer and more memorable, and to improve the student-teacher relationship” (p. 8). The classroom can be a more enjoyable place when the instructor uses humor, strengthening the relationship between the student and the teacher.

White (2001) reached a similar conclusion regarding improved student-teacher relationships. Her research supports the idea that “both faculty and students believe humor should be or has been used to relieve stress, gain attention, and create a healthy learning environment” (p. 337). White also promotes the idea that teachers can gain respect and build rapport with students using humor. She notes that the judicious use of humor can facilitate classroom learning without endangering the teachers’ credibility. Her study focused on the use of humor to relieve stress and create a healthy environment and rapport.

Being seen as a human being, as well as a teacher, by students strengthens the relationship between students and teachers. Teacher-to-student humor is Millard’s (1999) focus. She suggests that laughing with your pupils about dumb things you have done is a good way to begin. Millard explains that laughter reminds a student: “teachers are human, too, and this makes your room a safe place to make mistakes” (p. 9). This can, Millard says, create a better “feeling tone” in your class, affecting student comfort, learning, and potential achievement.

The potential for achievement can also be linked to student appreciation of the subject matter. Statistics courses are generally some of the most unpopular classes students take, and they are often found to be “difficult to the point of being

incomprehensible” (Friedman, Friedman, and Amoo, 2002, p. 2). These authors encourage the use of humor specifically in a statistics course to ensure that a relationship is established between the student and teacher. Friedman and colleagues describe several functions of humor including the building of relationships and the enhancement of communication. They write, “It is very important to start a course with a bit of humor so that students recognize that you are approachable” (p. 3). These authors note that humor can “create a positive learning environment and improve communication between students and the teachers” (p. 8).

This primary theme is also noted by Flowers (2001). The reasoning for the use of humor in the classroom includes “a reduction of stress, increased motivation, less psychological distance among students and to the teacher, and increased creativity” (p. 3). Specifically, for technology teachers, Flowers suggests the use of humor because of the benefits to both teacher and student: “An instructor using humor in a positive way may find that it helps to lessen the gap between the teacher and the student” (p. 1). He also cautions that the use of humor should be “judicious” (p. 2). In this regard, Flowers refers to Rareshide’s (1993) seven guidelines.

Teachers who take the opportunity to strengthen the student-teacher relationship often depend on the use of the affective domain. Astleitner (2005) comments that for instruction to be effective, motivational and emotional aspects must be taken into account when designing a lesson. He makes a connection between emotion and effective learning. The idea is that, if instruction motivates students, it is because their students’ attention has been aroused. Astleitner goes further and suggests that to arouse and sustain interest,

teachers should use of humor in their lessons. He identified the use of humor as part of effective instructional design, based on the connection between student and teacher.

The connections of humor to the affective domain and student-teacher relationships are also discussed by Askildson (2005): “Humor has been shown to lower the affective filter and stimulate the prosocial behaviors that are so necessary for success within a communicative context” (p. 45). He notes that the “indirect and ancillary effects on the classroom environment and other affective variables conducive to learning are the result of the employment of humor in the classroom” (p. 48). Immediacy depends upon the communication within the student-teacher relationship.

Mehrabian (1969) first discussed this notion of immediacy of behaviors. Askildson (2000) uses the term *immediacy* while discussing the use of humor as a pedagogical tool. Immediacy behaviors are characterized as “communication behaviors that improve the physical or interpersonal relations or interactions between two or more individuals” (p. 47). Immediacy means a behavior that results in a positive effect within the classroom context. Askildson connects the use of humor to the affective domain and the establishment of the student-teacher relationship. The research results revealed that “80% of student respondents and 82% of teacher respondents thought that an instructor’s use of humor made him/her more approachable to considerably more approachable” (p. 54).

Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2005) describe communication between advisors and advisees. The use of a humor assessment connected to affective learning. The study further purports that a teacher’s humor “assessment was positively related to both student

affect and student cognitive learning in the classroom environment” (p. 305). These researchers articulate their belief that the use of humor in the instructional process positively affects students’ communication skills, which directly relates to the building of relationships.

Gorham and Christophel (1990) explain the idea of the immediacy as a crucial factor in the student-teacher relationship building process. Immediacy is defined as behaviors that bring students and teachers closer. Verbal immediacy is often associated with using humor, and encouraging student input and fostering engagement. Gorham and Christophel take the use of humor as a focal point for teacher-student relationships and the immediacy of student learning. These researchers are definitive in their findings that “Laughter and humor are indeed like an invitation, be it an invitation to dinner or an invitation to start a conversation: Humor serves a dual purpose of reducing conflict and enhancing human relations” (p. 47).

Research by Wanzer and Frymier in 1999 looked at the relationship between instructors and their “humor orientation” and “student learning.” Their findings included the fact that humor should be used to “put students at ease, gain attention, and show that the teacher is human” (p. 58). In their research, Wanzer and Frymier directly connect humor to the development of the student-teacher relationship and the “immediacy as physical and or psychological closeness” (p. 50). These researchers note that teachers who used humor closed the perceived distance between themselves and their students. In 2007, Wanzer and Frymier report that teacher immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, is useful to “reduce physical and psychological distance between themselves and their

students to create more positive teacher-student relations” (p. 273). The goal is to decrease the perceived distance between students and teachers and establish a strong relationship.

McCabe (1995) interviewed 10 11th grade students in regards to their thoughts on the best teachers. Humor ranked as an important quality in both teacher personality and teaching strategies. Comments from the students included, “He had a great sense of humor,” “If you know a teacher better, you’re going to listen more,” and “He related to you. . . . he cared” (p. 120). These candid insights help to legitimize the continued use of humor to break down walls and build the connections between students and teachers. Humor and laughter have been shown to strengthen the connection between students and teachers.

Humor and laughter improve relationships (Bazzini, Stack, Martincin, and Davis, 2007). Referencing laughter in the context of motivations and emotion, the study reports that “It creates a greater sense that we are understanding each other” (p. 1). Understanding one another is part of the bond that forms between students and teachers, and it underlies a strong relationship. Laughing together or having the memory of laughing together about something strengthens the positive bond between people. Laughter and humor are integral parts of a successful bond.

Aria and Tracey (2003) regard humor as a key item in vocabulary instruction and in the social arena. The researchers used middle school students from an ethnically mixed, middle-class suburban school in their study group. A comparison of vocabulary instruction was analyzed. One had humor-laced vocabulary instruction, and the other did

not. The results were significant, with “higher achievement associated with the humor-laced vocabulary instruction” (p. 165). The reasons for the increase in achievement were connected to the use of humor and the fact that “humor appeared to . . . diminish the emotional distance between students and the teacher” (p. 165). They acknowledge that the social benefit of humor “helps minimize the differences between educator and student and engenders students with a sense of kinship with the teacher . . . humor has been found to be an effective means by which the teacher can establish rapport with their students” (p. 162). This research supports the conclusion that humor is a “worthwhile strategy to investigate in the context of vocabulary instruction” (p. 162). Using humor with instruction removes some obstacles to communication.

Humor “helps reduce barriers to communication and increases rapport between teacher and students” (Gadanidis et al., 2005, p. 244). Humor, according to these authors, fosters mathematical learning. They consider the use of humor to alleviate the tension connected to mathematics. They comment that insight and humor have similarities in that both are creative actions that lead to exploration and the possibility of understanding the complexity of math.

Fostering learning is not easy, and neither is placing humor within a lesson. Hellman (2007) provides seven steps to assist instructors with the process of adding appropriate humor into the classroom. His article provides reasons to use humor and examples from his own use of humor in his computer information systems course. He provides several reasons to weave humor into the lesson, writing that “Humor can be an icebreaker and set the tone . . . humor creates an atmosphere conducive to learning. . . . We

as educators want to alleviate the possibility of an adversarial relationship” (p. 37).

Hellman clearly encourages the use of humor and believes that it has a place “in any classroom” (p. 39).

Gordon (1992) studied law school students. Many law students find the use of the Socratic Method intimidating. Gordon feels that humor can relieve some of the tension: “Humor allows a professor to reveal his or her humanity to the students, which can improve teacher-student relationships. It helps reduce tension and stress . . . it improves the students’ receptivity” (p. 315). Positive teacher-student relationships are established with the use of humor. As students’ emotions are touched in a positive fashion, the bridge that connects students to teachers is strengthened.

No matter what the level, humor is a positive influence (Neuliep, 1991). Neuliep makes the statement that humor should be used as a strategy: “Most teachers indicated that they use humor as . . . an attention getter . . . and to make learning more fun” (p. 355). His study deals with high school teachers, and it investigates the frequency of the use of humor, types of humor, and reasons for the use of humor.

Neuliep’s research found that high school teachers use humor less often than college instructors, and the details of this research include taxonomy and a coded typology of humor. Overall, a main finding indicates that the use of humor has a positive outcome for both teacher and students. These positive results include: teachers are seen as more approachable, which allows for a positive rapport to develop and stronger relationships to form.

### **Summary**

According to the research, effective teachers have found that the use of humor can positively influence classroom climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. Climate is improved and seen as a benefit when added to instruction because the classroom is a better place to learn. Where the climate is positive, students react enthusiastically and communicate more. Humor allows for communication to be beneficial and for engagement to occur within the lesson. When students engage more with their teachers and with the content of the lesson the bond between them grows. Humor influences effective instruction by adding value to the lesson. The literature supports the inclusion of humor into effective instruction.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **CASE STUDY METHODS**

The purpose of this case study was to explore teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction. For this purpose, data were collected in three different ways to determine how these teacher leaders used humor within effective instruction. There are too many teachers that still hold on to the expression, "Don't smile until after December." People engage in activities that they enjoy and they avoid tasks they find unpleasant or distasteful. Students do not seem to be learning what state governing bureaucracies consider "enough," and they also seem to fall short on exhibiting the needed skills to carry our society into the future. Teacher leaders provided both formal and informal leadership (Harris, 2003). Examining the perceptions of these teacher leaders who have used humor within their effective instruction and identifying the influences and benefits may lead other teachers to begin to incorporate humor to support their instruction and potentially provide enjoyable experiences for students. No other literature on humor talks about teacher leaders.

#### **Positionality/Subjectivity**

Positionality for the purposes of this research will include my bias as a practicing school-based administrator. The establishment of partnerships between "the researcher and the researched, an unbiased sampling process, triangulation of data and the adoption of a grounded approach to data analysis are likely to moderate a researcher values to

avoid bias” (Greenbank, 2003). Due to my position as an assistant principal, it was important that I disclose my positionality at the beginning of the study. As an administrator on campus, I continue to have the opportunity to observe each teacher on staff both formally and informally. The teacher leader participants who allowed their classes to be observed and who participated in interviews and focus groups were not being observed for any reason related to their employment. Each member was given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time and was under no known influence to comply with my study requests.

My subjectivity and fondness for humor played a role in shaping this research. Glesne (2006) discusses the topic of subjectivity and states that “subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research, and subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research” (p. 119). Teacher leaders reviewed results from all observations, individual interviews, which were transcribed as well as the discussion notes and focus group transcriptions, which *allowed for* triangulation of the data to be authenticated. My request for the teacher leaders review of classroom observations notes which were typed, individual interviews and focus group discussions provided support for the process as described by Morse, et al. (2002): “Qualitative researchers should reclaim responsibility for reliability and validity by implementing verification strategies ... during the conduct of the inquiry itself” (p. 13). Through member checks and dialogue from the focus groups and data analysis, I believe that I have been able to acknowledge my personal and professional bias. For example, it is worth noting and would be verified

by the teacher leaders involved in this study that my preferences for lessons lean toward the use of humor within the classroom setting.

### **Description: Research Site and District Cooperation**

This research was designed to examine teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits from the use of humor within preselected instructional leader's classrooms. The urban high school in this study has an enrollment of approximately 1,200 students as of 2012. It has a population ratio of approximately 40% African-American students, 30% White students, and 30% Hispanic students. Most of the students receive free or reduced lunches. There are 85 full-time instructional staff members. Five guidance counselors and four administrators, in addition to a full-time social worker and school resource officer, complete the licensed and certified staff.

### **Case Study Methodology**

This study investigated teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction in the secondary school setting. The choice of this specific research design, case study methodology, allowed for observations, interviews, and focus groups to be conducted. Additionally, the case methodology, described by the American Psychological Association (2009), states that case studies include "reports obtained while working with an individual, a group ... which illustrate ... or shed light on needed research clinical applications, or theoretical matters" (p. 11). The teacher leaders' perceptions of the benefits and influences from the use of humor within effective instruction are considered a social phenomenon. Glense (2006) explains social phenomenon to be "used in qualitative research methodology in order to

understand from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues ... and sometimes to transform or change social conditions” ( p. 4).

Additional support for the use of the case study method comes from Yin (2003). He promotes the qualitative case study particularly for school-based research. The use of this methodology supports researcher observations and interviews. These methodologies also include the use of focus groups to gather evidences. Yin (2008) emphasizes that a chain of evidence is part of the process which leads to a fair analysis of the data. Chain of evidence refers to the documentation of the handling of evidence (or data) collection. The chain of evidence in this case study includes observations and interviews in addition to focus group meetings, all of which were reviewed by the participants to support the credibility and authenticity of the evidence.

Observational case studies are studies in which “the major data-gathering technique is participant observations supplemented with formal and informal interviews ...” (Bogdon & Biklen, 2003, p. 55). In this phase of the case study methodology, the identification of themes and categories is in alignment with the basic influences and benefits found concerning the use of humor within effective instruction in teacher leaders’ perceptions both with my literature review and the data analysis. Lunenburg and Irby (2008) describe the significance of reporting themes and subcategories including any anomalies. (The surfacing themes, subcategories, and anomalies are discussed in detail within the following chapter.)

Four major themes (i.e., climate, communication, engagement, student teacher relationships) emerged from the review of the professional literature and from the data

collected. My three data collection methods were classroom observations, teacher interviews, and focus groups. As Creswell (2013) suggests about the results of a case study, the researcher and participants will have formed conclusions. In my case, the teacher leaders' perceptions about the uses of humor within effective instruction were already established.

This research was triangulated according to Silverman (1997): "case studies that combine observation with interviewing allow for corroboration and . . . some form of methodological triangulation" (p. 121). Classroom observations were the first step in my data gathering process. I conducted 17 interviews of teacher leaders after my observations of them. These individual interviews followed the observations by not more than one day. After completion of the first round of observations and teacher leader interviews two focus group meetings were conducted. Both focus groups met on the same day. The order of the information followed Hatch's (2002) suggestion: "With the case study, observations and interviews are the crux activities used to gather information and the data . . . within specified boundaries" (p. 30). Following this pattern, even further, a second round of observations and teacher leader interviews took place. Once the second round of observations and interviews were completed, a final focus group meeting convened.

The unit of analysis (Patton, 2002) for this study was the use of humor. The event of using humor defined the study's boundaries. These events included classroom observations, teacher interviews, and focus group sessions. To illustrate the importance of the teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits of using humor to support

instruction at the high school level, I believe the case study method is acceptable to other teacher leaders. It is important for teacher leaders and other teachers in general to see how teacher leaders experience the influences and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction. “Keeping it real” by acting naturally in classroom with students is the catch phrase of my work with humor and teacher leaders. This supports the authenticity of the evidence and the results garnered from this investigation.

Community consensus (Lincoln & Denzin, 2011) targets what is real and useful within the data. Teachers need to see how teacher leaders experience the influences and benefits of the use of humor with effective instruction. This community consensus made the analysis more valid. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) support using study participants to check for the accuracy and credibility of the data collected and their own statements and meanings.

### **Research Design**

Nine high school classroom teachers were selected for this study in the spring 2012. These teacher leaders covered a variety of academic areas; CTE, Dance, Drama, English, Life Skills, Science and Social Studies. There was only one exception to the two observations planned for each classroom: one observation was held with Katrina. The classroom observations lasted 45 to 90 minutes. The observations were completed during the same time-period of the day to insure the classes being observed would be the same. The two observations of these 17 classes occurred within a 10-day research period in spring 2012.

The classroom observation protocol I developed with the support of my dissertation chair was used during each observation, allowing me to record verbal and physical signals of humor being used. On the protocol form, in my role as an observer, I recorded the basic types of humor and identified the places in the lesson where humor was incorporated. The form included space for note-taking for the teacher leader's review.

#### Classroom Observation Protocol

##### Verbal Signals

- Teacher to Student
- Teacher to Class
- Use of Jokes
- Use of Stories: relating to the lesson
- Use of Stories: relating to behaviors- students and teacher
- Use of Stories: unrelated
- Use of Examples: positive teacher self-deprecating
  
- Negatives: Sarcasm: cynical
- Negatives: Picking: demeaning of students

##### Physical Signals

- Physical actions-use of hands
- Costumes: props
- Laughter
- Giggles
- Smiles-at students
- Grins
- Grimaces

##### When is Humor Used:

- Start: opening: hook
- To engage when interaction lags
- When introducing an activity
- To encourage discussion or to assist with question and answers
- To manage behavior
- Through- out the observation
- At the conclusion- wrap-up – or ending

Follow-up interviews were held in all cases one day after the participant was observed. They were held for 30 – 60 minutes during the workday in all cases. A copy of the observation notes was provided for each teacher leader to verify for accuracy and commentary before the interviews were conducted. Each interview was recorded using a hand held digital recorder and transcribed. Interviewees received a hard copy of the questions that were used in the private interview session and the transcriptions of the interview that were transcribed by a professional transcriber after each session. The protocol for the teacher leader interviews follows.

1. What comes to mind when I use the word *humor*?
2. Give some examples of how you use humor in the classroom.
3. Describe the students' reaction to your use of humor in the classroom.
4. Do you think that humor can be thoughtfully planned as part of a teacher's lesson?
5. What might cause you a teacher leader to hesitate to include humor in their classroom?
6. What benefits have you noticed when teachers use humor in the classroom?
7. What drawbacks might you have noticed when teachers have used humor in their classroom?

Upon completion of the first nine observations, two focus group sessions were conducted. Participants had the choice of which group to attend, in the same day and were provided in advance with the four questions below which were used as a basis for discussion.

1. Do you believe that humor can be effectively used in all subject areas?
2. Do you believe that humor can be effectively used with all student groups?
3. Do you believe that other teachers can be taught to include the effective use of humor in their classrooms?
4. What are some reasons teacher would plan to use humor in their lesson?

The follow-up question of *why* was available but never used. This group of teacher leaders discussed their answers with each other in a dialogue as opposed to yes and no answers. This dialogue enabled me to collect data concerning their perceptions of the use of humor within their instruction. The teachers had advanced knowledge that the group discussion would be digitally taped and transcribed and that they would have the opportunity to review their group's transcripts for accuracy.

Focus group one and focus group two met on the same day. Due to schedule conflicts the third and fourth focus group invitation were merged into one. Focus group three assembled after the second round of observations and individual teacher leader interviews had been completed, reviewed and verified. The teacher leaders agreed to meet again in the morning before the start of the school day. The process of distributing the questions for the focus group was repeated as was the verification process following the discussion by providing copies to each individual member for their review.

Table 1. Focus Group Meetings

Friday May 11			
Group	Teacher Leader	Teacher ID	Department/Subject
Group 1am	Wayne	M	Math
	Sheila	Be	English
	Emma	O	Social Studies
	Shawyne	V	Life Skills
	Alegercia	R	Dance
	Jackie	S	Science
	Paul	A	Sports Mkt
Group 2 pm	Alegercia	R	Dance
Wednesday May 23			
Group 3am	Sheila	Be	English
	Terry	B	Drama
	Emma	O	Social Studies
	Shawyne	V	Life Skills
	Wayne	M	Math
	Jackie	S	Science
	Alegercia	R	Dance
	Paul	A	Sports Mkt

### Description of Study Participants

Nine of the 12 high school teacher leaders initially identified participated in this study. Each of the nine teachers represented a different academic area (e.g., Career and Technical, Math, Science, Social Studies, English, Cultural Arts, Life Skills). There were six female and three male teachers, of whom six are White, two African-American and one Hispanic. They were all between the ages of 30 and 55.

Regarding the leaders I have observed on staff, the teacher leaders selected to participate have several descriptors in common. Each instructor had obtained career status and all were considered teacher leaders. Each fulfilled the role of a teacher leader in a formal role, and an informal role. I had firsthand knowledge of teacher leaders in the

building because I have been in each teacher's classroom for time-periods as short as short as three minutes and as long as 90 minutes as an administrator. As a researcher I narrowed the sample to one teacher in each academic area. I do not have any authority over their professional status. There was no basis of race, gender, or ethnicity in this selection.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Both the university and the school system provided International Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection in spring 2012. In accordance with IRB approval, all data were kept secure and all statements were kept confidential. Pseudonyms are used to protect teacher identity and to assist in the coordination, compilation, and comparison of the data being used. The teacher leaders studied gave permission for their classes to be observed and recorded and they signed the consent form. Teacher leader participants had access to the questions used in the one-to-one interview, focus group sessions, and the observational notes. The researcher explained that if there was discomfort in any situation, the observations, interview, or focus group, that all actions would stop and participants could discontinue involvement. There was no compensation or incentives for participants, and the level of risk for participants was deemed minimal.

This research project was designed to investigate teacher leaders' perceptions of the influences and benefits of the use of humor within effective instruction in the high school classroom. With this in mind, case study methodology was used. Merriam (1998), who is an authority on case study research, writes that the case study "provides thick

description ... simplifies data to be considered by the readers, illustrates meanings and can communicate tacit knowledge” (p. 39).

Data and information were collected from observations, interviews, and focus groups. This data collection activity is in accordance with Creswell’s case study methodology: “Extensive forms may be used...interviews, observer field notes, interview and observation protocols ...” (Creswell, 2013, p. 140). Data were also obtained from focus group activities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in which teacher leaders discussed their perceptions in regard to their use of humor in the classroom setting. Using the participants’ insights and quotes from these group sessions provided depth and the opportunity for teacher leaders to share their reflections, experiences and insight with other teacher leaders. These shared events also offered the researcher the opportunity to gain supporting evidence of the teacher leaders’ beliefs about the use of humor within effective instruction.

The data gathered from observations, interviews and focus group sessions was coded in accordance with preselected themes from the literature of climate, communication, engagement and relationships. Using these preselected themes allowed the researcher to categorize the teacher leaders’ comments and reactions into four areas. The number of quotes and responses in regards to climate, communication, engagement and relationships was difficult to organize until the coding was complete. The next consideration of the research concerned the most effective way to share this information.

Graphs may be used to organize and display data that has been gathered. Bar graphs have been used in Chapter 4 to organize the data by the observation protocol and

the major themes. Organizing the data from the classes observed and from the teacher leader interviews required connecting the information to the themes. Robbins (2005) states that “graphs can communicate information” (p. 6) and “... be incredibly powerful tools in creating order from chaos ...” (p. 1). Using bar graphs enabled the researcher to display data and connect the data to the major themes from the observations and the interviews.

Connecting the direct responses from the focus groups, I used a circle graph to highlight basic information. The short responses to the focus questions are shown in pie graphs to illustrate the significance of the teacher leaders’ perceptions.

### **Data Segments Completed**

All nine teacher leaders, with one exception, were observed twice and interviewed twice (one teacher was unavailable). The total number of classroom observations was 17. Teacher leaders were interviewed after each observation and the total number of individual teacher leader interviews that were 17. In focus group one, six teacher leaders attended. Focus group two had two teachers in attendance and focus group three had eight members in attendance. (See Table labeled Focus Group Meetings under section Research Design)

#### *Observations*

Teachers selected their classes for observation. For each of eight teachers, two classes were observed. Only one class of the ninth (Katrina) was observed. To avoid any unordinary disruptions, a schedule of the observations was shared with each teacher. As a

frequent visitor to classrooms, students rarely acknowledged my presence and did not at any time question what I was doing.

Observations of these classes ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes in each setting. I took notes on a notebook computer. My observations were focused on the lesson delivery system, aided by the protocol described previously.

#### *Teacher Leader Interviews*

Each teacher leaders interview occurred in the privacy of their own classroom with the door closed. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours in duration, allowing the teachers' time to review, reflect on, and discuss their lessons. Each teacher leader responded to the questions asked and commented on parts of the lesson and certain students' reactions to the lesson. Interviews were completed within 2 days of the observations. These teacher leaders shared perceptions concerning the influences and benefits that they believed humor had within that class.

#### *Teacher Leader Focus Groups*

Eight of the teacher leaders also participated in focus group sessions. Three focus group sessions took place, each lasting from 50 to 70 minutes. The questions were provided to the participants prior to the meetings. These teacher leaders did not need any prompting to respond and illustrate their answers.

Providing the questions prior to the group meetings allowed the teacher leaders the opportunity to reflect on conversations, interviews, and their opinions in regards to the influences and benefits of the use of humor. The questions for each focus group were the same and teacher leaders were prepared. The third focus group session ended with a

comment from Sheila: “I wish all our PLCs had this much conversation and comparison, I kinda (*sic*) like this topic and sharing this way!”

### **Organization of Data Analysis**

#### *Validity*

Using Creswell’s (2013) idea that a focus group can be used to accomplish member checking, the researcher incorporated this idea. Member checks provided a large measure of the credibility of the data results in this study. Teachers individually reviewed and authenticated the classroom observational notes for the purpose of establishing the credibility and authenticity of what was recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions of each individual interview were distributed to the teacher leaders. A final step that supported the authenticity and credibility of the focus groups involved the delivery of the transcribed focus group session’s conversations to the participants with a request to comment. Scheurich (1997) has concluded that Lincoln and Guba’s [1985] assertion that if a study could be trusted, so could the results.

#### *Authenticity*

The term authenticity can be related to the “voices” that are heard in the research. This description of authenticity derives from Rowley (2002), who leans heavily upon the work of Yin (1994). Each participant checked observations, interviews and focus sessions for accuracy of perception and opinion. Herein perceptions are reviewed. The classroom observations offered authentic evidence for the teacher leaders to evaluate. Their perceptions in regards to the influences and effects of humor were recorded. This was

done after the observations providing specific topics to be used within the conversation. Their interviews were individually reviewed and found to be accurate within 2 days.

The information that was gathered from the focus group meetings was also individually reviewed and found to be accurate according to the work of Hartas (2003). With the authentication of each data source these sources could provide enough data to support conclusions. Noting that the data has been accumulated in a fashion that meets the demands of authenticity, it should also meet the standard set by Yin (2008) for reliability: “The goal of reliability is to minimize the errors and a bias in a study ... the objective is to be sure that if a later investigator followed the same procedures as described ... the later investigator would arrive at the same findings and conclusions” (p. 37).

### *Observations*

Organized by themes and categories, data have been gathered from classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups. The four themes generated were climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. During each teacher leader’s observation the Classroom Observation Protocol was completed by the researcher and reviewed by each teacher leader. These data were then compiled under each category in each observation of the teacher leader. See Table Chapter 4.

The Tables display what the researcher observed during each classroom visit. The teachers verified the accuracy of the observations after each observation. The observation data are divided according to teacher, and each observation is indicated by A1, A2, and so forth. The use the first initial of the participants’ pseudonym was used in a similar

fashion in each of the Tables where individual data is displayed. Three categories are further divided into different elements. The first category is comprised of verbal signals. The second category consists of physical signs that were apparent to the researcher. And, the third category notes when and how humor may have been used throughout the observation.

The first category of verbal signs totals nine different types of communication. The nine different types are split into two subsections. The first subsection is comprised of signals to the class, signals to the students, the use of stories relating to the lesson, the use of stories relating to behaviors, examples used in an effective way but indicating teacher self-depreciation, the use of jokes, and the use of stories unrelated to the lesson. The second subsection includes negatives, the use of sarcasm and cynical commentary, and picking on students or making demeaning comments toward students.

The second category, taken from the classroom observations, is physical signals. Seven physical signals were recorded in each observation: smiles, laughter, grins, physical actions, grimaces, costumes and props, and giggles.

The third category notes when and, in some cases, how humor was used throughout the lesson. Individual notes, added clarity when necessary, assisted with the coding and analysis of each visit. Under this section, the times and the part of the lesson being observed were noted when humor was used. These instances included the opening of the lesson, the engagement of students, when interaction lagged, the introducing an activity, the encouragement of discussion or assisting with questions and answers, the

management of student behavior, the use of humor throughout the lesson, and at the concluding of the lesson.

An analysis of the data occurred, after the researcher concluded the observations, interviews, and focus group sessions. The observation forms were tallied according to the frequency of events and then they were Tabled for comparisons between observations and teachers. The interviews were coded using the themes of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. The teacher leaders' responses were tallied by the number of comments in connection to the themes identified and Tabled by interview and by teacher participant. The comments made in the focus group sessions were graphed by responses and comments were then used to support statements and theories found in the literature regarding the use of humor within effective instruction.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

A limitation of this study is the small number of active participants. The sample number of teacher leaders is small. This study was confined to one building, one district, and one state.

### **Summary**

The idea of using humor in instruction has been examined for many years. Many authors such as Berk (2007), Frymier (2008), Garner (2005) and Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) believe that the use of humor has a beneficial effect and positively influences effective instruction. The influences and benefits described by the professional literature include climate, communication, engagement and student teacher relationships. These themes are recurring throughout the literature on the use of humor

within effective instruction, and these teacher leaders have demonstrated the benefits of the inclusion of humor within their classroom instruction.

Each teacher leader recounted a variety of ways that illustrated his or her own use of humor within effective instruction that reinforces the professional literature on humor. The themes that continue to appear are climate, communication, engagement, and student relationships. The participants' comments mirrored the writings of Askildson (2005) where the focus on humor centered on climate and Done (2006) who detailed how humor fosters communication. These teacher leaders also remarked on engagement and student teacher relationships in regards to the influences and benefits from the use of humor, which substantiated the work of Minchew (2008) and Sanders (2007).

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULTS**

In this case study research, I explore teacher leaders' perceptions of their use of humor in high school classroom. According to the literature, the use of humor in the classroom can support instruction. Teachers will use tools that support and encourage student learning. Teachers will use the tools, strategies, techniques they perceive as successfully more frequently.

As they recognize that humor works, it may be used with more frequency and shared with other teachers and students-leading to increased student learning.

The data from this case study may provide insight into the perceptions of teacher leaders' use of humor in their classrooms. As humor is recognized as a true support for instruction, it should be used by more teachers in more classrooms with more positive results. Making education a more pleasant experience can only be a positive. The effective use of humor, according to the teacher leaders' observed and interviewed supports effective instruction.

While this research is not designed to encourage teachers to provide comic routines, it is designed to examine perceptions and share the ideas that the use of humor can provide a positive climate with enriched communication, more student engagement, and better relationships, all of which have concrete connections to student learning. The teacher leaders' perceptions and discussions were all positive in regards to the inclusion

of humor. They all indicated that the effective use of humor was something that for them, was after their group discussions, an effective addition to instruction.

### **Observations**

Each teacher was observed twice, teaching the same class at the same time each day and no more than 10 days apart. Each teacher was given the opportunity to review the form used in each observation to correct or amend what was recorded. These observations were given to each teacher within 24 hours of each observation. There were a total of 17 observations carried out, each not less than 45 minutes in duration and none longer than 90 minutes in duration. Each observation was coded into three different categories. Each category had different elements.

#### *Verbal Signals*

The first category on the classroom observation form contains nine different types of communication. These nine types of verbal signals have been divided into two subsections. The first type of communication is considered positive. It is comprised of seven signals, or types of verbal statement, to the students. These include verbal signals to the class, verbal signals to the students, the use of stories relating to the lesson, the use of stories relating to behaviors, the use of self-deprecating examples, the use of jokes, and the use of stories unrelated to the lesson. The second subsection includes only negatives, the use of sarcasm and cynical commentary, and picking on students or making demeaning comments toward students.

### *Verbal Signals to the Class*

There were 62 noted instances of teachers using humor with the class as a whole. While humor in this category was higher than the use of humor with individual students, it is clear that certain teachers used humor and felt secure using it. Nine teachers used humor toward their entire class more than one time during the observation period. The frequency of using humor also indicates that the majority of these instructors found success with the inclusion of humor; otherwise, they would have been far less likely to use it in a second observation.

The two teachers who had the highest usage of humor with a class showed a large difference in their observations, indicating that it may have been the subject matter or particular lesson that generated the highest number of comments. While both Alegercia and Jackie were ranked quite high in their usage of humor, Jackie had the biggest difference on the second observation, only using humor once. The first observation had several different strategies involved in the lesson, providing more opportunities for conversation. The focus was DNA and cells. The second observation had another topic of reviewing material related to upcoming state exams and dealt more seriously with several scientific topics and did not provide as much opportunity for humor.

Student reactions in the first observation were much more vocal than in the second. In the first class, students were in more of a discussion mode, and comments went back and forth between the students and the teacher. Such comments such, “Yea!” to a positive answer, “Whoa, Isaiah is on fire!” and “Mia, keep it going!” were free-flowing as Jackie was linking vocabulary words to answer a question. In the second class,

when the students were in the last days before state testing, responses were more direct and individual without the chiming in of other students.

The second teacher, Alegercia, had the highest ranking of humor toward a class, with 10 uses noted. Alegercia's class was in the process of fine-tuning a part for an upcoming presentation. Students were nervous and perhaps needed some relief from the stress, which was offered with the use of humor, when Alegercia said, "Yes, Ashley we are waiting for you to join us" and "How many left legs do you have?" The instructor actually did more directing in the second observation of not only individual dancers, but groups and the movements between groups. This additional reviewing may have accounted for the additional humor used while trying to relieve tension and correct student actions. Alegercia spoke to the groups as they moved, adding comments such as: "Move now like cats" and "Stay still as you can." She would then smile and make small comments like, "Do we need a dog behind the cats?" and "Still as you can means stop!" Students responded with nods and different movement styles during the next run-through.

The use of humor in these classrooms contributes to an overall positive climate in a classroom. Making the classroom a positive and welcoming place allows teachers to interact and communicate in a more open fashion, and relationships start to form. The relationships between students and the teacher are another documented crucial feature in student learning. Jackie became reflective about the use of humor with her class in her second interview when asked about her definition of humor and whether it had changed since the first discussion. Jackie commented, "My perception has expanded a little bit.

It's been validated, like wow, something is being done right here. It's the techniques that makes the kids receptive and buy into what I teach them.”

Humor used to make the classroom a comfortable environment may also assist with the lessons being presented. While the theme of climate was among the last two mentioned and commented on in individual interviews, there may be a connection between the establishment of a positive classroom and the degree to which students become engaged. Alegercia shared the following comment: “They stay on task with me more . . . when I maybe do an impression, a silly exaggerated impression . . . it is the overall feel of the classroom.”

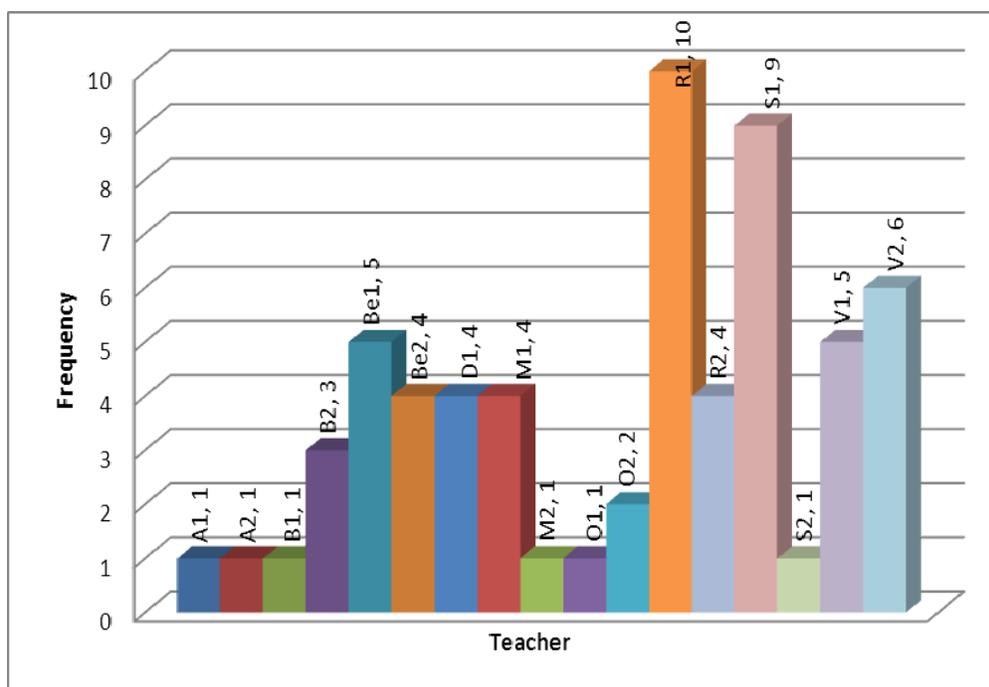
The legend that follows is relevant for all the Tables that follow. Teacher leaders are identified by their pseudonyms first names only and coded on the Tables that follow by letter. The citing refers to my observational data, e.g., Teacher A. The additional information displays the number of observations in addition to the subject area of each teacher leader.

Table 2. Identification of Teacher Leader Participant

	Teacher Leader Name	Teacher Leader Identification	# of Observations	Teacher Leader Area
1	Paul	Teacher A	2	Career Technical Education – Sports Marketing
2	Terry	Teacher B	2	Drama
3	Sheila	Teacher Be	2	English
4	Katrina	Teacher D	1	Career Technical Education – Drafting
5	Wayne	Teacher M	2	Math
6	Emma	Teacher O	2	Social Studies
7	Alegercia	Teacher R	2	Dance

8	Jackie	Teacher S	2	Science
9	Shawyne	Teacher V	2	Life Skills

Table 3. Humor Used by Teacher-to-Class Ratio



The five teachers who used humor the most toward the class were also the teachers who used humor with the highest frequency toward individual students (see Tables 3 and 4). Alegracia kept up a constant stream of positive comments to the class as they were in practice mode for an upcoming show. Students were focused on what they were doing, but the reminders of “come on now I see too many left legs” brought smiles and grins to their faces. Smiles and grins were quickly noted in Jackie’s class, as she made such statements as “look at how many of you share soda from a bottle” as they talked about viruses. Soda bottles were on the floor, but the majority looked to the floor and started to grin and nod.

Teachers who used humor toward students did this more consistently than the teachers who used humor toward the class. The teachers who used humor with individual students had a slightly lower frequency. Wayne, Paul, and Jackie had the greatest differences between the two observations. The comments in Wayne's class directed to students came during group work. These were mostly made in a playful fashion, and the facial expressions of both the teacher and the students were indicative of the positive nature of the relationship. Calling on one group's talkative activity "like a group of girls" promoted the girls to comment back, "What?" followed by smiles all around because it was obvious that the girls were making more progress. This "picking" comment pushed the boys' groups along, while giving a backhanded compliment to the girls.

Individual comments to students were verbalized in a rapid-fire tempo by Paul. While dealing with attire, Paul directed personal comments toward several students about clothing. These comments were linked to sports teams and personalities that had been studied during this sports marketing class. When Paul made these more personal comments, he was grinning in anticipation of the student reactions. It was obvious that a relationship was in place, because the students replied with explanations or additional reasons to defend the logos being worn.

Singling out students with direct and individual conversational remarks worked throughout Jackie's entire class. One of her remarks was, "Hey, Isaiah is on fire today," to a student who was answering stunts in a correct fashion. In addition, this teacher was able to use humor to encourage students to stay on the right track and support behavior that had been demonstrated in her classroom. "Felix, haven't seen you on the most

wanted list” was a comment made to a student who often found himself in discipline situations and was often removed to a different classroom setting. With that comment, Felix smiled, as did Jackie, both recognizing that he had corrected his behavioral mistakes and was being rewarded by being in class.

### *Verbal Signals to the Students*

There should be little surprise that the teachers who employ humor with the class as a whole also use humor with individual students. Four teachers, Alegercia, Jackie, Shawyne, and all used humor in high amounts both to the class and individual students. There is a more consistent use of humor when it is directed toward students than when it is directed toward the overall class. A greater number of teachers used humor toward individual students more than once with such comments as, “as long as your head (prop) doesn’t talk back!” and “Are you gonna drink that after we talked about viruses?” The average use of humor toward a student was 3 times. This average was exceeded by five of the nine teachers involved in this research. The teachers who used humor the most towards students were Wayne, Jackie, Paul, Terry, and Alegercia. These teachers used humor between 4 and 6 times in a single observation.

The climate in these classes was open and pleasant. Students generally seemed comfortable and receptive in these environments. Students were actually laughing in the math classroom during the observation, not because of the topic, but because of the activity, which directly connected the objective to the action. A comment overheard from a student in Wayne’s class was that “This was too much fun to be in a math class!” Comments of this nature were also heard from students in Paul’s room. Again, the

climate was very positive, and the communication seemed to flow freely because of the environment. A student made the remark that “We got the point Paul! You drove it home all right!” with a grin on his face and a subtle laugh. The observer noticed that the lesson had, in fact, engaged the student, and the review allowed for greater communication.

This consistent use of humor toward individual students forms a pattern. This pattern can be supported by the fact that the numbers of uses of humor with individual students were similar in the majority of teacher observations. When teachers use humor with an individual student, they have most often formed a relationship or bond with that student. There is a comfort factor in this connection, and the teacher may now be seen as an “actual” person, not just an instructor.

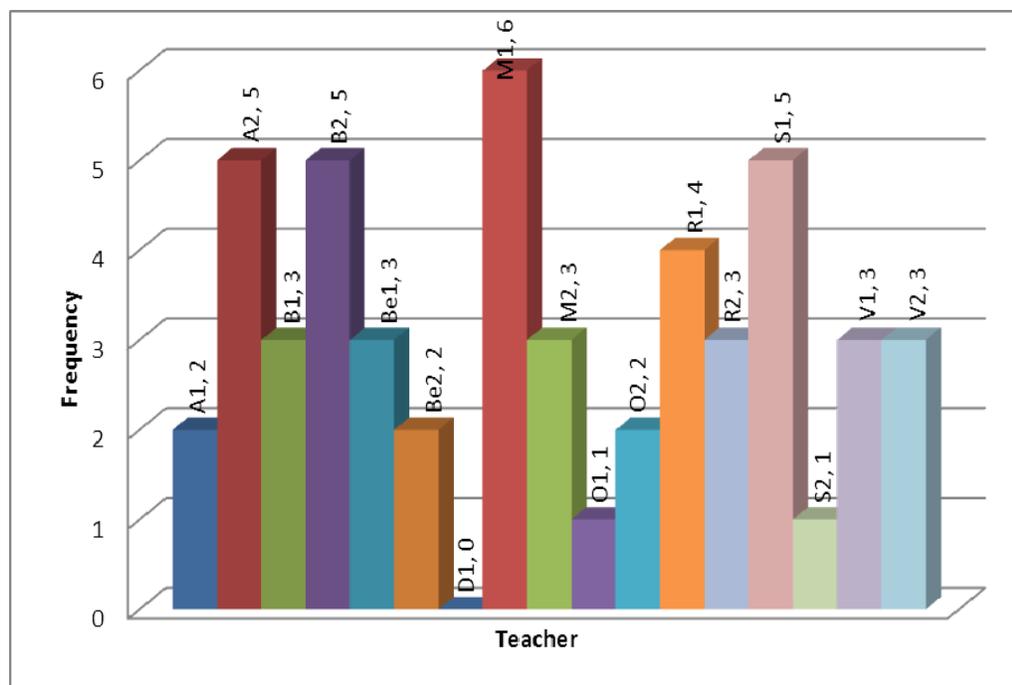
The greatest decrease in frequency was 4 times in regards to the use of humor toward a student in comparison to the larger difference of 8 times in the frequency of humor used with a class by the same teacher. This pattern may illustrate that this teacher has found humor to be an engagement piece that draws the student into the lesson, and so it is repeated. Using humor to hook a student or students into a lesson is documented in the literature. This engagement supports academics and also lends continued support to the relationship that was initially formed between the student and teacher.

Communication and climate were among the last two themes noted in the teacher interviews; however, there were 11 observations in which humor was directed toward individuals more than 3 times and should be noted as communication. The pattern that can be seen is that teachers use humor toward individual students repeatedly. The teacher may not have been aware that this particular use of humor could be considered

“communication,” but teachers were communicating with students in a humorous fashion. For example, Paul remarked, “Hey Pudge, those Yankees lost! Yea Buddy!” as he was being humorous with a particular student in the sports marketing class. This student knew he was a fan of that particular team. Other students may have responded to this type of interaction. As the students responded, this could have caused a chain reaction of events. The climate within the class would have become more positive, which would have resulted in increased engagement. In this case, using the Yankees, the class was able to talk about the marketing of team jerseys and other merchandise.

The number of signals to students individually and the class as a whole in these observations strongly indicates that teachers found humor to be useful. Each observation had instances of humor being used. While there may have been many forms of humor used in the classrooms, there were five types of humor noted. The first and most frequently used type of verbal humor was the use of stories related to the lesson.

Table 4. Humor Used by Teacher-to-Student Ratio



The types of humor were also observed and coded under the verbal signals category. There were several types of humor identified. These included jokes, the use of stories related to the lesson, the use of stories related to behaviors, and examples given by the teacher of their own depreciation in a positive fashion. Table 5 indicates that the utilization of stories relating to the lesson was the most popular use of humor. Of 17 classrooms observed, only 5 teachers did not have a story to tell in relation to the lesson. Eight of the nine teachers observed used stories in their lessons.

### *Use of Stories Relating to the Lesson*

There was a strong use of stories relating to the lessons among these teacher leaders. In 12 teacher observations, instructors used this tactic, which is a clear indication of how powerful these “tales” are in relating to students. There were only four teachers who did not use a story in a classroom visit. Only one of those teachers, a dance teacher, did not use a story in any of the classroom visits. She instead often demonstrated what should be done. Rather than talking to her students, she actively showed them what to do.

Students appear to internalize the stories being told by their instructors. Shawyne told his students about a highly charged emotional event from his own life, and students were very still and quiet. They were intent as he related personal experiences, and when he inquired if there are any questions, the usually gregarious group hesitated to ask for any details. The focus of the lesson was healthy relationships and the emotions involved. Some of the experiences shared were positive, but some were negative as well. This use of stories displayed how Shawyne develops relationships with students. They are so riveted to vicariously reliving this shared experience that the curriculum objective was covered almost instantaneously.

Each teacher used some sort of story to illustrate some part of their lesson. Ironically, both the mathematics (geometry) teacher and technology teacher used stories that related to their subjects. These are curriculum areas that typically do not seem to incorporate many humorous ideas. The geometry teacher connected making paper rocks with the mathematical formulas for volume and diameter. For the boys it was about how

the object would fit into their pickup trucks, and for the girls it was about how their shopping packages take up room in any vehicle.

The second classroom where humor is not always expected is the technology classroom. Incorporating her personal experience into her lesson plans, the teacher discussed the placement of toilets in houses on house plans. She managed to attach meaning and humor to a CAD program by telling students about an expensive mistake relating to a bathroom in a house that she had built. Her humorous stories continued and were connected to neighborhoods and how they develop. Students were attentive during the brief lecture, and reactions were positive, with nods and such verbal comments as, “For real?” and “So that was fake?” as students related to different parts of the story. The teacher also detailed the move of a funeral home and the reaction of the community, aligning that with the concept of community centers. Again, students were attentive.

The strongest use of stories relating to the lesson came from Shawyne, who instructs upper-level students in advanced health. This subject area allows for many personal stories to help illustrate the topics and concepts in the curriculum. On the second observation, this class was dealing with interpersonal relations, the emotional part during the first observation, and then the physical part during the second.

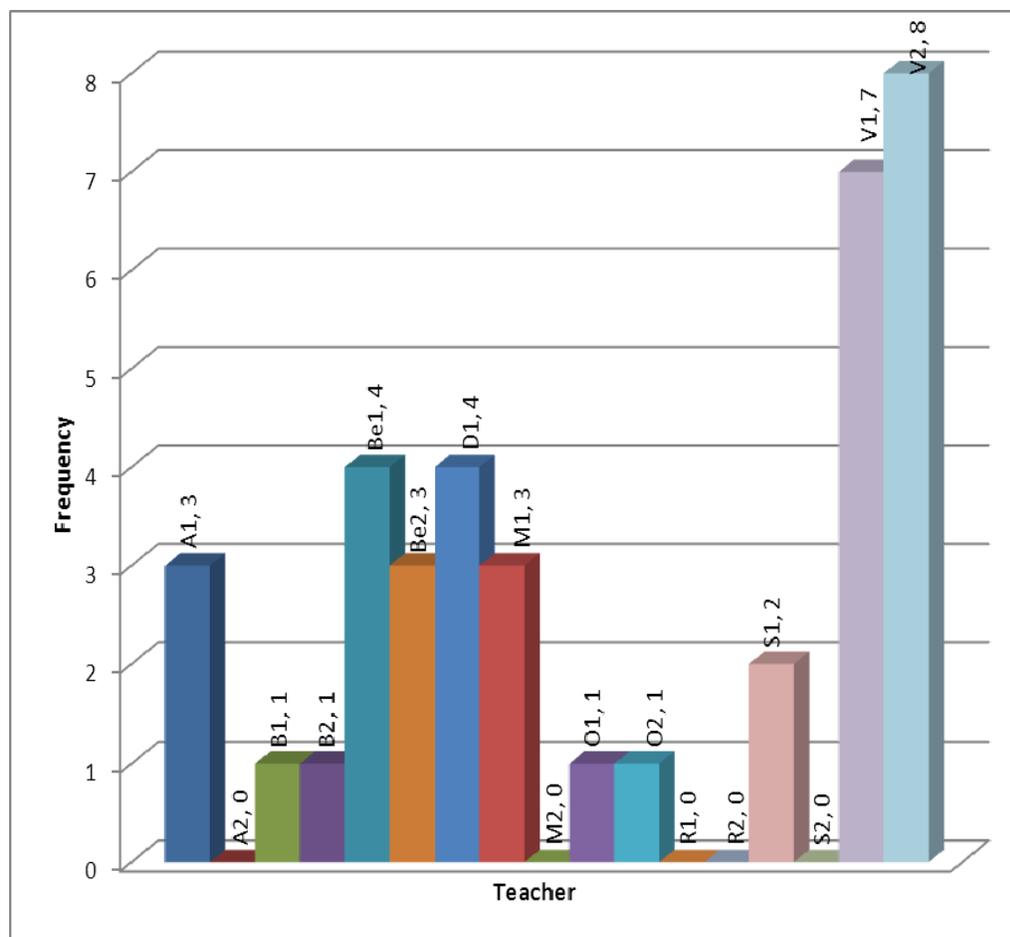
Students were exceptionally involved in this lesson: There were no side conversations, and no one appeared to be off task. Questions were carefully phrased, and there were not as many queries as there might have been because of the observation. While students are accustomed to many administrative visits, this topic may have made it a bit uncomfortable. According to Shawyne, “The minute you walked out I bet R had five

more questions. He was just saving them up but he wasn't comfortable saying them with a female assistant principal there . . . so they may have toned it down a little." Shawyne made his point with the following sentiment: "If you don't use humor, this would be a very difficult thing to teach." Many of these students had interacted with this teacher in other areas, particularly in athletics. This may have accounted for the extra interest in his personal life and experience. It may also have accounted for the increased number of signals given to both the class and the individual students.

There were 38 stories told in 17 observations that, in some fashion, related to the teachers' lesson, curriculum, or activity in the classroom. The reason for the use of stories relating to the lesson being the most frequently used or most popular among teachers may be that these are stories specific to the curriculum area that these professionals chose. Teachers are better able to relate to areas that they enjoy, and so this is one way to pass along information in a positive way. Teachers are able to select their favorite subjects and share their passion with students. And they are able to demonstrate their perception with the continued use of stories that they believe work.

The stories that are shared by these teacher leaders lend authenticity to the lessons, along with knowledge. These events strengthen the relationships between students and teachers, allowing teachers to be seen as human and approachable. When teachers are open and communicate with students, the students will then ask more questions, which supports greater understanding, providing not only a sense of success for the student, but fostering more engagement.

Table 5. Use of Stories Relating to the Lesson



The teacher who used stories the most in relationship to the lesson was Shawyne. During his second observation, he used stories 8 times and had the second-highest frequency of laughs overall. His stories were from personal experiences, which included his own conceptions and perceptions of events. Several of these shared experiences had racial and sexual overtones. Part of the objective for this class was STDs and related behaviors, so these stories coordinated with the topics being discussed. Shawyne related his own venture into a different racial culture in the form of dress. His point was clear,

that people have to be “who they are” and should not try to “be anyone else.” His comments in regards to this lesson in particular reverberated with the use of humor as he compared his use of stories to that of another teacher, saying, “We both use humor, and we are both funny, and we both get to the same point, but we have different stories that get us there . . . the people listening to the humor, the kids are all the same in many ways, especially in terms of classrooms and behaviors.” The point that was being emphasized from this teacher’s perspective was that stories can be used, but each teacher has a different story. His perception is that all students can relate to these stories, especially when the subject matter is difficult or sensitive. Shawyne elaborated saying, “But my point is that certain things are difficult to teach. I mean if you don’t use humor.”

His point is well taken and supported by Katrina, who also used several stories in her lesson. Katrina commented that the stories she used that related to the lesson were also connected to her students’ comfort level, and thus the climate in that classroom. According to Katrina, having that “a-ha” moment means that “you are comfortable, when you are having fun and/or your mind is free to roam or free to associate humor is there.” Because she teaches technology, her comment was that she is always telling students to “relax and lighten up a bit.” In this way, she lets students associate her stories with the objectives.

The use of stories in this classroom allows the teacher to be the center of attention if there is anything even close to being a negative. If there has to be a negative example, I make it on me. They laugh with me, or they hone in on that common experience that we are laughing about . . . they are able to remember certain concepts or objectives in the lesson because it was associated with some level of humor.

There were plenty of expressions of humor in Terry's class during the first observation. As students were engaged in creating props, this teacher had a wide variety of stories from her background in the theatre that underscored the students' activity. This teacher's comments incorporated humor into communication, and her use of stories was a clear fit. Her first example related to the steps in a lesson.

In introducing a lesson, you can find a story to tell that has something to do with whatever you are getting ready to introduce . . . they are going to remember it if they . . . if they laugh at it.

For this teacher leader, stories that relate to the lesson engage the student and also provide a positive sense of communication.

#### *Use of Stories Relating to Behaviors*

Stories relating to the subject or curriculum will be different within each instructional area. Stories that relate to behavior can be used in all classrooms. Teachers used stories relating to behavior in an effort to manage students in six of the classes observed. Teachers are responsible for managing their classrooms. Each teacher develops his or her own student management style. Teachers may use stories relating to behaviors for two essential purposes: (1) to stop a behavior and redirect it, or (2) to suggest how a student should behave. Examples are not always school related. Teachers may also attempt to expose students to potential life situations. These stories are often from previous personal experience as a "person" or from experience as a teacher. Recent events or new related events are frequently used as humorous examples.

Three teachers used humor as a form of student management more so than the other six. Katrina, Emma, and Shawyne each used humorous stories unrelated to their subject for specific reasons. Katrina's class had a majority of young men during the third period of a block day that incorporated the lunch segment. She used examples of behavior—what was expected and what was not expected—during class and during lunch because I was in the room. There were both fortunate and unfortunate comments. Students no longer act differently when I, as an assistant principal, observe a class because it happens so often. This indication of my presence caught me off guard, but then, as the teacher continued to tell her story, the reason became clear. She was coaching her students with a funny example of her early teaching years when another administrator was in the room unnoticed. As she told her story, illustrating her mistakes, students smiled and quickly got the “message.” The message was to be aware of your surroundings, and not necessarily act differently, but simply be observant.

Being observant and being aware of events was also a part of the rationale for Emma's use of a story not completely related to the lesson. While discussing international trade, the conversation turned to the Mall of America. There was a potential link to international trade with the number of stores in that complex, but the discussion centered on the behaviors of young people. With only 1,200 students at this school, it's considered a middle-sized high school. The behavioral comparison was based on “what would happen if” scenarios. The point was that while one activity could be considered acceptable in one place, it might not be in another. The illustration was humorous, and students' reactions indicated to Emma that they understood, and so the lesson continued.

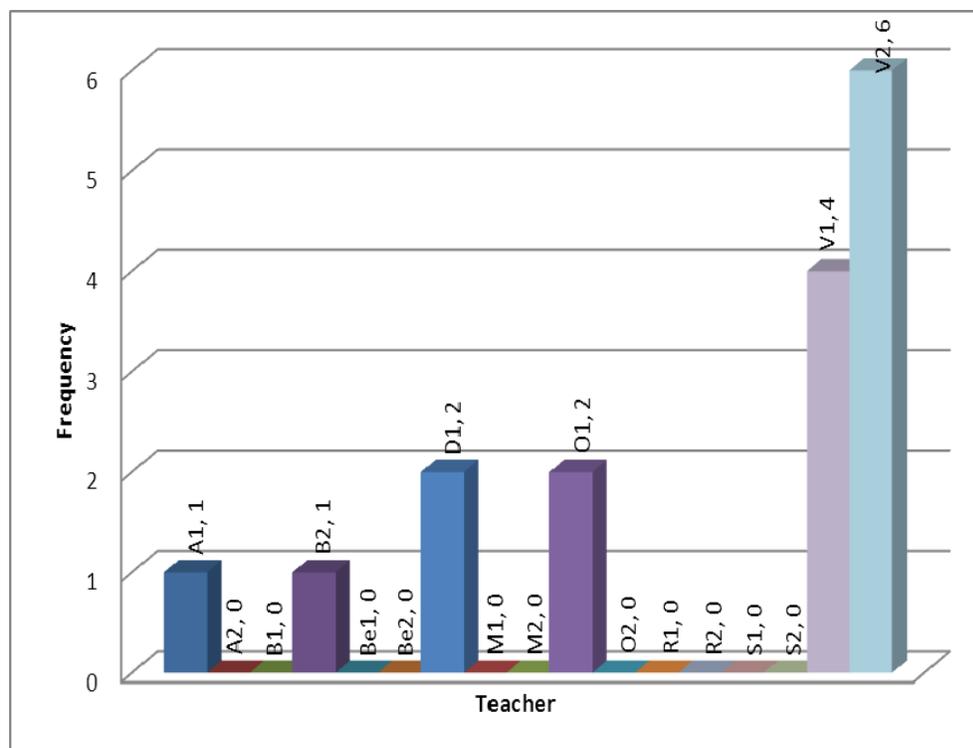
There are many lessons for student behaviors that continue from one class to another. These behavioral lessons examined by Shawyne were designed to provide examples of how to deal with stressful issues outside the school environment. While teaching about relationships, he shared a personal situation involving violent activity. As previously noted, the majority of this advanced health class is made up of upper classmen, 11th and 12th graders who had prior experiences and connections to this instructor. The majority of these students are male students who are all known on campus.

This lesson's main idea centered on relationships, and so Shawyne shared that he had been engaged to a woman that he ended up not marrying. (He and his wife both currently work at the school, so extra information was shared.) He also shared that he had been assaulted by this person. He explained to the class his actions, or lack thereof. He related this story to both school behaviors and real-life situations. Shawyne was quick to note that had he reacted in a physical manner, he could have been criminally charged. This was a story with a serious nature that was illustrated and laced with humor. Students were visually locked on this teacher's every movement. As he moved around the room, he talked with a great deal of emotion. He added the personal and moral ideas that placing your hands on others is not acceptable, especially between men and women, whether on campus or outside in the "real world." During the discussion about this lesson, Shawyne remarked, "I want people to laugh at me, because I think if they laugh at me they might remember the story even better . . . and that means they might not do the same thing that I did."

Teachers often use their own mistakes as examples with the hope that others will learn from them without making similar missteps. These mistakes are seen as “funny now” and are shared with the intention of putting students at ease. As teachers tell these stories that relate to behaviors and actions to either practice or avoid, it allows these adults to be seen in a different light. By sharing their mistakes, students see teachers as human.

Using themselves as the center of a story also tends to increase students’ attention and thus the possibility of increased engagement. As students see teachers as human, they may begin to communicate more, concerning both academics and personal situations. As the level of communication increases, the classroom environment is more positive and conducive to student learning. This communication between individuals lays the foundation for a relationship. Students can now relate to teachers and make a connection. This connection, relating back to a humorous story related to a behavior, has opened the way for a positive educational experience.

Table 6. Use of Stories Relating to Behaviors



The second most frequently used type of humor came in the form of stories relating to behaviors. Five of nine teachers used stories that related to behaviors. While these stories were humorous, they had clear themes. The stories often had themes and were related to desirable or undesirable behaviors in both the classroom setting and real-life situations. While incorporating the discussion of behaviors, teachers often used their own personal histories to make a point. Teachers were often the main characters in the stories.

Katrina used herself as an example in relation to mailbox size and neighborhoods. She was able to connect cultural behaviors to neighborhoods and mailboxes. At first, the students looked at her as if she was crazy, but as she explained that the size of a mailbox

is often in proportion to the perceived income level of a neighborhood, she then articulated a cultural theory connected to a behavioral theory. She took people with post office boxes and not wanting to get mail because it is usually all bills and contrasted them with people with big boxes and getting too many catalogues to order from. Students not only got the point, but they related to her interjecting herself into the story with how people act versus how they should act in those neighborhoods. The laughs, smiles, and grins were acknowledgments of her relating to common experiences.

While talking about common experiences, Emma was able to intertwine expectations and behaviors with talking about international trade and the Mall of America. Her story was not personal but related to the ways in which people alter their behavior based on their environment. She compared inappropriate behaviors in the very large Mall of America to inappropriate school behaviors. Students related to her comments, as they grinned and grimaced as they shyly acknowledged what she was alluding to. Students were not only engaged in this class discussion, but the climate in the classroom supported students being able to communicate their knowledge base about acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors.

Shawyne used stories to relate to behaviors. He used four stories during the first observation and six during the second observation to illustrate behaviors. The focus of the second observation actually included the term *behaviors*. His lesson to this class was of a serious nature, and he told the class that he was “a little scared to talk about all this” with them “because it involves STDs.” His admission was quickly followed with a story about him being embarrassed during his college days, and the reaction from the class was

laughter but also a sense of decreased tension. Shawyne commented on this lesson during his second interview, saying, “My whole point is that this was a difficult thing to teach... and this proves it [humor] is effective.”

#### *Use of Self-deprecating Examples*

Teachers who tell stories about themselves often do so in a self-deprecating fashion. There are four teachers in this study who were observed making fun of themselves. The total number of examples using this type of humor was 14. This was not the most popular use of humor observed; however, one teacher, Shawyne, used it 6 times in one class period. Shawyne told a story about how he tried to dress in a different cultural fashion while in college. He readily admitted that he looked a fool and that a friend finally told him that it was completely “uncool.” While dealing with relationships, this lesson also highlighted how he handled a self-esteem issue with humor. The active listening on the part of this class was easy to see.

This class was diverse. The membership included several students who had participated on the varsity basketball team the previous year. The comments from this group were verbal and perhaps a bit underplayed because there was an observer in the room. The story that was related involved racial statements that could have easily become divisive, but instead they became “funny” because of the use of humor. There were chuckles and guffaws coming from many members of the class, which served as proof that the story was not only engaging the students, but that it offered support in the climate and provided the means for open communication for which this teacher leader is known.

Another teacher, Alegercia, used self-deprecating humor 4 times. She made fun of herself while doing a recreation of a movement from the dances in preparation for the class's performance. These were often subtle movements, but, in her exaggeration, the incorrect moves became humorous. A telling comment from this teacher explained why she chose to share what might have been uncomfortable examples: "Students need to know it is okay to make a mistake." As she described humor, her words detailed the fact that self-depreciation is key because, "One should not think of themselves in a haughty way." For her, this concept includes the development of relationships with students. She stated that "It's being willing to be silly and be foolish to make other people comfortable." She also explained that sometimes a class just "doesn't get it and so I'll do something outrageous." This, she comments, hooks and keeps students engaged in the lesson.

Midway through the lesson, Alegercia demonstrated a step in the dance program. Her rendition was so silly that the students, who were sitting, waiting to see a detailed, slow, correct version of the movements, laugh aloud when they realize that she is "playing" with them. The second realization comes when she completes the step and then smiles at them. The laughter continues until she says, "Do you see now?" And it is clear that they each see what remedies are needed to correct their own actions.

Two other teachers used self-deprecation but were selective with their stories. Sheila said that she will, on occasion, tell stories about herself growing up. She said that it tends to make students laugh. When asked what she thought that reaction indicated, she replied, "I see them become more involved in the lesson. Seems like they listen a little

closely to see where I am going with this.” During Sheila’s first observation, she did, in fact, use a story that related to the lesson. Her key words, “that smarty at the party,” had been used before, which was obvious by watching the class. The focus of the stories cued students in, and they began to make the connection to the curriculum. For this class of seniors, making connections to the teachers and linking it to British literature appeared to have become “habit.”

The second teacher who used self-depreciation infrequently (Terry) said that she uses it to “draw attention” and to “restart students to be focused on me and not each other.” This teacher keeps a constant check on the climate in her room. “Teaching high school is exhausting . . . sometimes I just have to make fun of myself.” She sees climate, engagement, and relationships as interchangeable. She continues saying:

For the most part, I have a pretty decent interpersonal relationship with the students. They know that I’m the boss, but they also know that I want them to enjoy what they are doing . . . and I prefer to keep that in light.

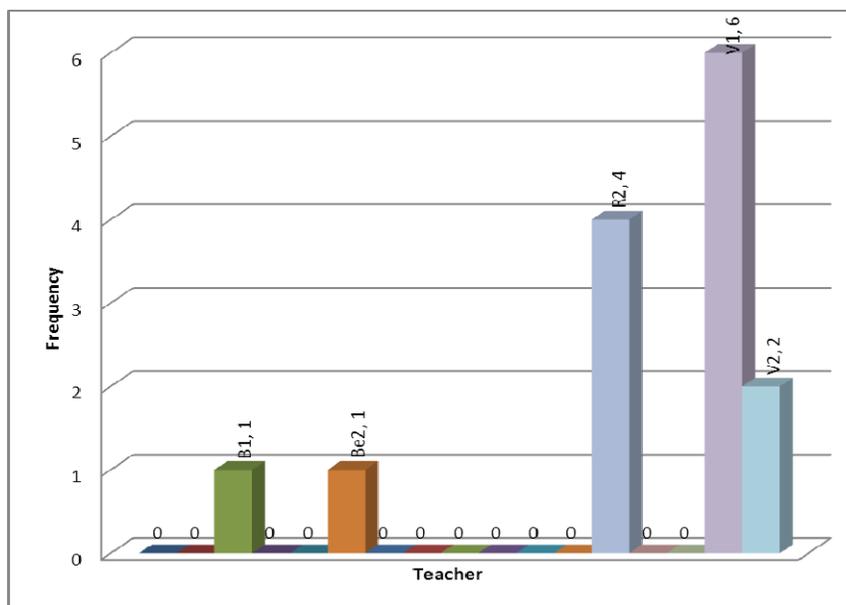
Instruction in her room is described as “a dialogue and a class discussion.” This is certainly true as she describes how to make fake blood and make it look real. Students are intrigued and engaged as they stay on task.

The themes that are supported when teachers use self-deprecating humor are similar to those supported by the use of stories that relate to behaviors. These teachers take more of a risk by selecting themselves to use in regards to specific mistakes. Alegercia was very concrete in explaining her reasoning for using this type of humor when she said, “I usually make myself look silly, honestly.” This opens the classroom up

with a very positive environment. She also links this positive climate to hooking and engaging students into the lesson. Knowing that it is allowable to be mistaken, to be wrong, or to do something incorrect without great fear of punishment or negative comments supports students who may not find initial success in a lesson.

Feeling free to offer a thought or an opinion without fear is a key part of educational communication. Shawyne wants students to know they are free to communicate in his room. He commented that “I want [them] to feel free to say whatever [they] want to say . . . we are not going to make fun of making a statement or mistake.” As Shawyne makes fun of himself for something that he has said or done, it fosters engagement and relationships within the classroom. To see teachers as humans, not perfect in any regard, helps students relate and feel more comfortable in their academic endeavors.

Table 7. Use of Teacher Self-Depreciation



Inclusive in the use of stories, teachers used themselves as examples in a self-deprecating fashion. With 14 examples being used by four teachers, the use of stories and examples were ranked 2, 3, and 5 in frequency (see Table 5). The use of examples with the teacher acting in the examples was the third most used humor signal. Using themselves as the individual that both made a mistake and recovered or as a role model in the story was common. This type of humor was not employed as often as stories relating to the lesson or stories relating to behaviors. This type of humor was used in a common fashion and often by the teachers who used it. Two of the four teachers (Alegercia and Shawyne) who used this type of humor used it as often as any other type of humor.

Alegercia used herself as an example for her class as they were in the last stages of preparing for a school presentation. Her examples were more demonstrations of dance steps she had done while on stage in an attempt to show students potential errors and to remind them of movements the audience would be able to see. She had all the students either grinning or smiling as they recognized their own foibles. As she noted in an interview, she did this intentionally so that students would “realize what they did.” And she continued by saying, “There was more than one person doing this, and everyone assumes I’m talking about them!” Allowing students to see that their teacher makes mistakes and then seeing how to address incorrect actions also provides an entry for humor.

In here a mistake is very, very public. If you fall on your butt, everybody sees you—but if I fall on my butt before kids, then they’re not embarrassed because it has already happened and they know how to fix it.

Fixing a situation is something that Shawyne used as part of his lesson during his first observation. While dealing with relationships and the emotions involved, his question to the class after a given scenario was often, “So how do you fix this?” or “What do you do now?” He not only used stories that related to behavior, but he used his own experiences and mistakes to highlight what not to do in a self-deprecating fashion. Stories could be considered as a norm in most classrooms. Each of the nine teachers observed all used some sort of story or example in their daily teaching.

#### *Use of Jokes*

The idea of using humor with instruction has not always been acceptable. Using humor does not mean that there should be a circus atmosphere or that teachers should become stand-up comedians. Joking with students and using humor is a method designed to support and foster learning. The use of jokes in the classroom is a common denotation of humor. Six teachers of the nine observed used jokes at least once, and three of the teachers used several jokes throughout the period.

The teachers, who used jokes (Paul, Terry, Katrina, Alegercia, Jackie, and Shawyne), cover a broad range in subjects. Teachers who taught the subjects drama, math, and social studies did not use jokes while observed. While the drama teacher did not use jokes, she often acted in a joking manner. The math teacher was one of the few teachers who used some sarcasm. This too was done in a joking manner. There is ample material in every social studies course that is funny, but not every teacher feels that they can tell jokes. In her interview, Emma commented that when she used jokes it was “quick.” She elaborated, saying, “Humor for me in the classroom is when I tell anecdotal

stories and it becomes lighthearted . . . I can't plan to tell a joke." As an example, she referenced her story about lollipops during her first observation. While this was not a joke, it was humorous and helped set the climate. For some teachers, telling jokes would be the "joke" in itself. For others, joking is a natural part of their personality. And still for others, telling something that is humorous can support the climate, communication, and engagement of students.

By her own admission, Jackie has a fun-loving personality, and that happy-go-lucky attitude includes joking around. She explains, "Sometimes I will throw a bad joke at them and then say like oh yea, I'm human!" Jackie walked around her room as if she was doing a grid search. As she moved around the room during the lecture phase of her lesson, she included comments about different bugs and the noises they make and reacted, as she told the students, "like my kids do." She also suggested how one of the students (M) would act, and all the students, including (M), laughed. This shows that relationships are in place between teacher and students and that communication, with the inclusion of humor, can engage students.

Jackie also cautioned that jokes and humor cannot be faked, saying:

There is humor everywhere, you just have to find it, but it has to be part of your . . . of who you are. You can't fake who you are, because they will know if you are faking. If you don't know how to be funny, they'll call you on the carpet.

In many ways, the climate of the classrooms of these teacher leaders is a mirror of their personalities. Climate and relationships were the top themes mentioned in the initial interview with Jackie. Her class was very lively, and students appeared quite at home

with her demeanor and teaching style. In both observations, there was a high degree of interaction. “Bantering” with her is normal. She explains:

I don't want to say like making fun of the kids but like you know they do the same back at me and banter with me . . . but it's the relationships that we have built that has allowed us to have that . . . and it allows us to break through walls and they trust me.

The teachers held on to the perception that a person's personality determines their use of humor. Personality accounts for much of the reason that Shawyne uses jokes in his classroom and in his coaching. He readily admits to having been the class clown. When asked to define humor, he responded saying, “I think it's in my personality . . . it's just who I am. I use humor . . . if it's a tense moment . . . I might even tell a joke!” He also stated that humor helps with communication, relationships, and climate. He continued, saying, “With the communication part, I think I am a people person, and humor absolutely helps, and with the relationship with my kids too.” He tells students, “I want you to have an enjoyable experience away from what is going on in other classes.”

Jokes usually make people laugh. When people laugh, they relax. When students relax, they are more receptive. Teachers who use jokes initially use them with the climate in the classroom or the classroom environment in mind. Katrina commented that the use of humor, in particular jokes, helps “create a pleasant atmosphere.” She further explained that the use of jokes can provide the “embodiment and a positive feeling . . . laughter is therapy.”

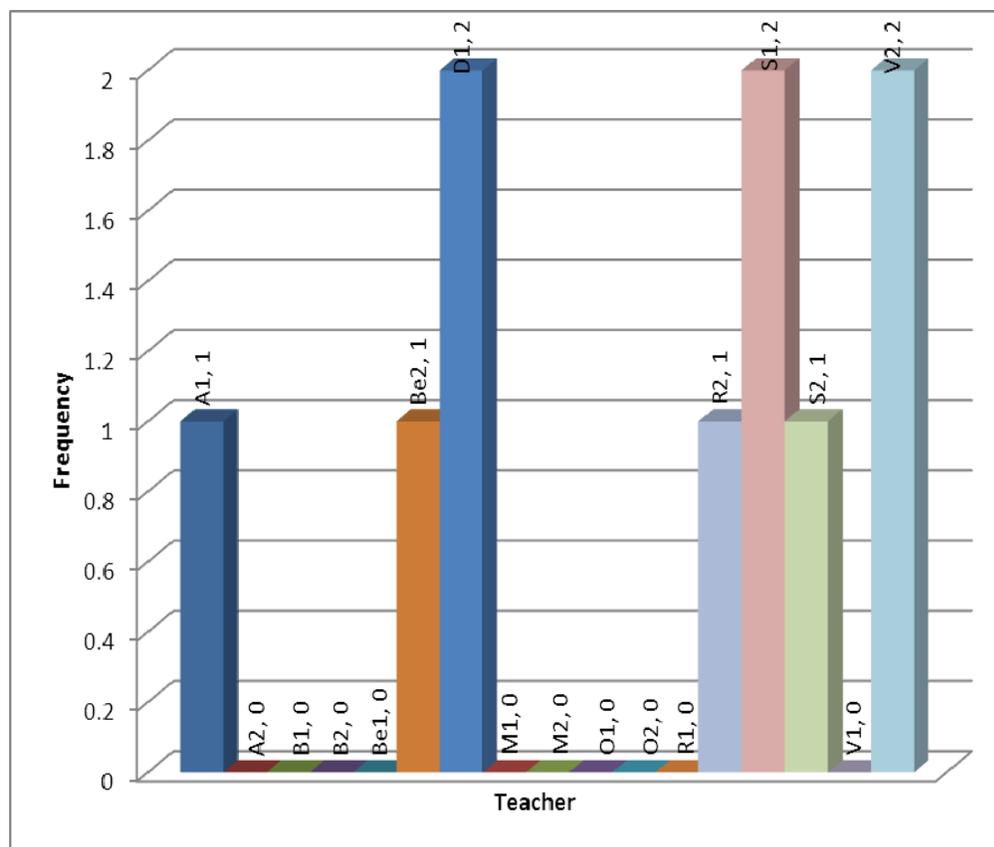
Laughter opens the lines of communication. Joking with students is a positive verbal signal. This positive signal, according to Jackie, is the lighthearted banter that

exists in her classroom. She commented that because she teaches the same thing twice a day, she is able to use jokes. She elaborated, saying, “Sometimes I know that a joke is really going to come off, and then I can emphasize it in another class.” This type of communication is recognized by teacher leaders as an avenue that can engage or hook students into the lesson.

The use of humor as a communication tool is highlighted by Terry. She finds that lighthearted banter and jokes “break down a barrier,” which also allows a “relationship to build that makes it easier to communicate and easier to teach.” This type of humor also provides the “ice breaker” to both the relationship and the lesson. In specifically discussing the use of jokes, Terry insists that laughter is not always necessary. She articulates, “And even if they don’t laugh, that shows humor too, because sometimes people don’t laugh aloud at jokes.” This action, with or without laughter, engages students. Terry continues that she believes students are thinking, “Let’s see if I can come back with something,” when jokes are used. Their brains are engaged.

With the use of jokes providing the positive climate, communication, and engagement, students will also see that teachers are human. Being able to joke with students often requires a prerequisite relationship so that there is no miscommunication. Opportunities clearly exist for the jokes to provide the building blocks for the relationship. Paul made a reference to the relationship between teachers and students in regards to jokes as a piece of the “camaraderie” communication. His jokes are often about certain sports teams that are favorites of his students. By joking about sports, he engages students in conversation that is germane to his sports marketing class.

Table 8. Use of Jokes



Another type of humor used frequently by teachers was jokes. This humor was used by six of the nine teachers observed. The only strategy used more often by instructors was the use of stories relating to the lessons. Overall, there were 10 instances of jokes used in the 17 classroom visits. As shown in Table 8, the teachers who used jokes were somewhat cautious with this particular use of humor. Only three teachers were observed using jokes twice within one class period. While used by the majority of teachers, joking does not appear to be used in any routine way.

Jackie joked with the students about getting comfy before going into a brief lecture mode. Students appeared to shift around as if they were in fact getting ready for

what was coming next. Students received the signal in a positive fashion and knew what to expect going into the next part of the lesson. The tone that Jackie injected into this statement was positive, as were the reactions from the students. Her humorous style was accepted by the class as being quite natural and routine. In her own words, Jackie stated that joking “draws them in to paying attention. You can do it in that tone to make lecturing a lot more entertaining.”

Using humor to provide relief and a break for students is one of the reasons Shawyne commented that he uses humor. He stated, “I think for a moment it [humor] will take you out of a situation and kind of bring you back . . . and give you a little sense of let’s get out of this serious moment.” During the discussion concerning behaviors, Shawyne made several jokes during somewhat sensitive parts of the lesson. He poked fun at himself and called himself a “white speck” as he talked about his college basketball teammates. He may have had an advantage in doing this during this class, as several of his minority teammates were among the students. Still, the reaction was a positive one, and students who could relate commented.

Both of these teacher leaders were concerned with the climate in their classrooms and believe that joking with students can help to sustain a positive climate. “I want them to have an enjoyable experience away from what they are going through in other classes,” said Shawyne concerning the use of jokes and humor in his classroom. “I set up the whole environment in my classes to make sure they feel comfortable . . . there is not a right or wrong answer in what I am teaching.” Students seem to feel comfortable and appreciate the climate in his classroom. Many students also appear to feel that these

teachers have worked hard to build relationships with them. Jackie attributes this to her use of humor and the fact that “we have fun with it [biology].”

#### *Use of Stories Unrelated to the Lesson*

The last form of verbal communication that connects to humor is the use of stories unrelated to either the lesson or behavior. Three teachers used this form of humor. The teacher who had the majority of this category, with two instances, is Sheila. This English instructor teaches two senior English classes in which the reading and analysis of British literature is mandated. Teaching 17-year-old and 18-year-old students’ classic literature requires a great deal of creativity. The use of stories seemingly unrelated to the curriculum is a method that uses humor to underscore the lesson. For Sheila, regaling students with stories from her early life offers a bridge to both engagement in the lesson and a heightened sense of relationship. She offers that students often respond with “laughter and sometimes they say ‘Oh boy, here she comes with another story.’” And she said that she has added stories about herself growing up, and it tends to make her students laugh and become more involved with the lesson. Sheila recalls that students “get very inquisitive, especially if I am talking about my life . . . they want to know where am I going with this . . . they actually want to know what is coming next!”

The other two teachers who used unrelated stories may have had some link that was not apparent. Emma and Shawyne are spontaneous teachers. If asked a question, they will try to answer student inquires to the best of their abilities. They both will also do their best to try to connect material to their curriculum in some fashion. The ability to use

off-topic questions and remarks in a lesson and in support of the curriculum is a part of being goal-oriented as a teacher leader.

During the first observation, Emma talked about international trade, and the conversation included a story about the television program *House Hunters International*. While at first glance there was only a small connection, any type of connection would have acted as a hook to this economic lesson. As Emma discussed humor in her first interview, she made a comment about time spent off task. She said that:

There is a degree of time off task . . . because if sometimes you say something and it sparks something else . . . I mean it's neither good nor bad, but on that same end, they'll remember that conversation that maybe lasted 30 seconds, so if it works . . .

The idea is that the use of a humorous story not directly related to either the curriculum or behaviors still might support instruction.

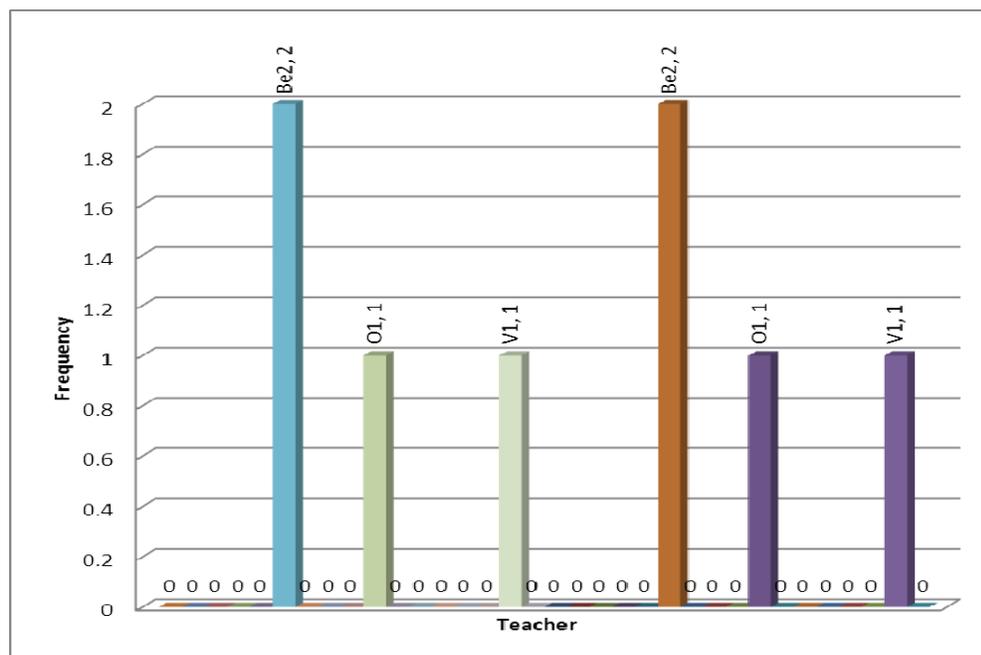
The second teacher, Shawyne, was focused on the emotions involved in relationships. He told his students two personal stories about blind dates he had experienced. The students were intrigued, and they seemed genuinely interested in his life and the authenticity of the story. The introduction to the lesson only had a fleeting connection to Shawyne's seemingly unrelated story about blind dates, but the story may have provided a setting through which students could better understand the lesson. Students became engaged in both instances. In both cases, the stories had humor woven into them. These stories may have provided a memory for students to connect with. The humor may have been used to establish the climate and also begin to establish engagement in the lesson.

Time is a crucial factor in classroom instruction. This category of stories unrelated to either the curriculum or behaviors had the smallest frequency of use and a tiny percentage overall. When stories that were unrelated to the lesson were used, the two teachers who used them may have used humor to provide a positive climate or to set the stage for engagement, hooking the students in to the lesson. According to her statements, Emma is concerned about not only the climate in her room, but the way students engage and retain information. She commented, "It's amazing when we are reviewing for a test how they'll remember one particular thing that I said, often part of a story." She also noted that students connect needed facts to sometimes unrelated stories, saying, "And I will often say to them, 'Guys, don't you remember the day we were talking about \_\_\_\_\_,' because of the story I told or maybe somebody said something." For her, an off-task story may lead to an on-task answer. This allowance of off time use of humor pays dividends through students' abilities to engage with the lesson and see teachers as more human, which is coupled with the relationships that are established inside a teacher leader's room.

Shawyne strongly perceives that humor is reflective of a person's background. The use of the story concerning the blind date fits into the notion of setting the stage for student understanding. Students need to have some clue about a concept before in-depth learning can occur. This story, while initially weak and unclear in connection strength, provided limited prerequisites for understanding the basis or lack of basis for an emotional relationship.

Shawyne sets up the climate, and while he has the students' attention, he introduces the topic. Because of his relationships with his students, he is able to use humor and communicate with humor even when it comes to difficult topics. He was quite up front about his abilities, saying, "I tell them, this is a serious thing [abuse], but there is a story that comes with it where there's a little bit of laughter, based on what was said." This is an example of Shawyne's ability to communicate and explain how something serious can still have humor, which can provide some relief for students while dealing with life's negative issues.

Table 9. Use of Stories Unrelated to the Lesson



Each classroom observation lasted 45 to 90 minutes. Time, in many teachers' minds, is a most precious commodity. Stories relating to the lesson and in regards to behavior and their use as examples are frequently used strategies that include humor. The

category that was used the least was the use of stories unrelated to the lesson. There were only three teachers who included this form of humor which accounts for the last type of positive verbal signals. With only three teachers using this strategy and one teacher using it twice, the infrequency of its use is noticeable (see Table 9). Overall, stories that had no connection to the lesson were used only 4 times during the 17 classroom visits, showing very infrequent use.

The teachers who used stories unrelated to the lessons (Terry, Emma, and Shawyne) often related personal events to students. Teachers Terry and Shawyne made the points that they did this so that students would see them as human:

Students get very inquisitive if I am talking about my life in a kind of laughing way . . . they want to know . . . and so they get this human aspect of who we are. . . I think the biggest thing is to show you're human.

Being human does sometimes mean that a teacher can get off track and stray from the lesson's objective, but teacher leaders generally find a way to somehow touch on or relate a concept no matter how far they may have wandered.

Emma was successful in relating a story from the television show *House Hunters International* to a lesson on international trade. Students had been studying economics and international trade. The subject was international trade, and the teacher started the lesson by asking some general questions about trade, combined with some about economic behaviors, to lead to how people behave. Then she asked if anyone watched the television show *House Hunters International*. While this got a chuckle out of many students, the topic was quickly connected by Emma saying that if someone from the

United States bought a house abroad, that too could be an example. This story was not really related to the question and answer segment, but this instructor made it fit.

This teacher regards this type of action within a lesson as taking an opportunity to use humor to “at least entertain in an educational setting.” Being slightly off task, according to Emma, is acceptable, because students will remember the conversation, and “you have put it in context, and you are not going to talk for the next 30 or 45 minutes . . . so there is a benefit of using some lightheartedness.” She also stated that “when I am telling anecdotal stories that may not start out as humorous, but somehow I tie it in . . . we’ll laugh and then move on.” The benefits of being lighthearted with students and being seen as human are certainly perceived by these teacher leaders to be effective.

#### *Use of Sarcasm and Cynical Commentary*

There were only four teachers who used any type of negative humor during any of the classroom observations. The majority of the literature dealing with humor indicates that negative humor should generally be avoided. This type of humor belittles or tends to demean and could potentially embarrass students, proving to have little positive effect. The teachers, who used this type of humor, in most cases, only used it one time and with care, indicating that they already had relationships in place with the students who it was directed toward.

The single use of sarcasm was directed toward students in a motivational way. Emma had students working in the media center, where it is easy to get off task. Her comment was, “glad to see you working,” to a student. Taken out of context, this statement could be seen in both a positive and a negative fashion: however, the student

was very clear about the meaning, which was to get to work. Comments were more numerous coming from teachers Wayne and Shawyne. Both of these instructors deal with older students in more advanced classes. Wayne made a comment to a group of young men that again, could be considered motivational with the idea of getting students engaged in a task or activity. He said, “Low score does not win- are you just gonna sit there...F does not mean fantastic!” The group came back with a comment, and Wayne responded, “Yes, I am making fun of you.” This signaled that a relationship was already in place and that this type of humor was being used to communicate, that is, saying one thing but meaning another to the people who were listening.

Shawyne’s use of sarcasm, according to him, is based on his personality. He explained, “Depending on what your level of humor is . . . some people have sarcastic humor it, but it can be used anywhere, and if I have ever gone too far, I have apologized...which helps the relationship.” He then went on to explain how he believes he can say to a student, “Hey, you went too far. That’s enough. I’m calling you out, now let’s move on.” His perception is, “If I try to use humor and I step on somebody’s toes, I will definitely apologize, and that shows I am human and can make a mistake.”

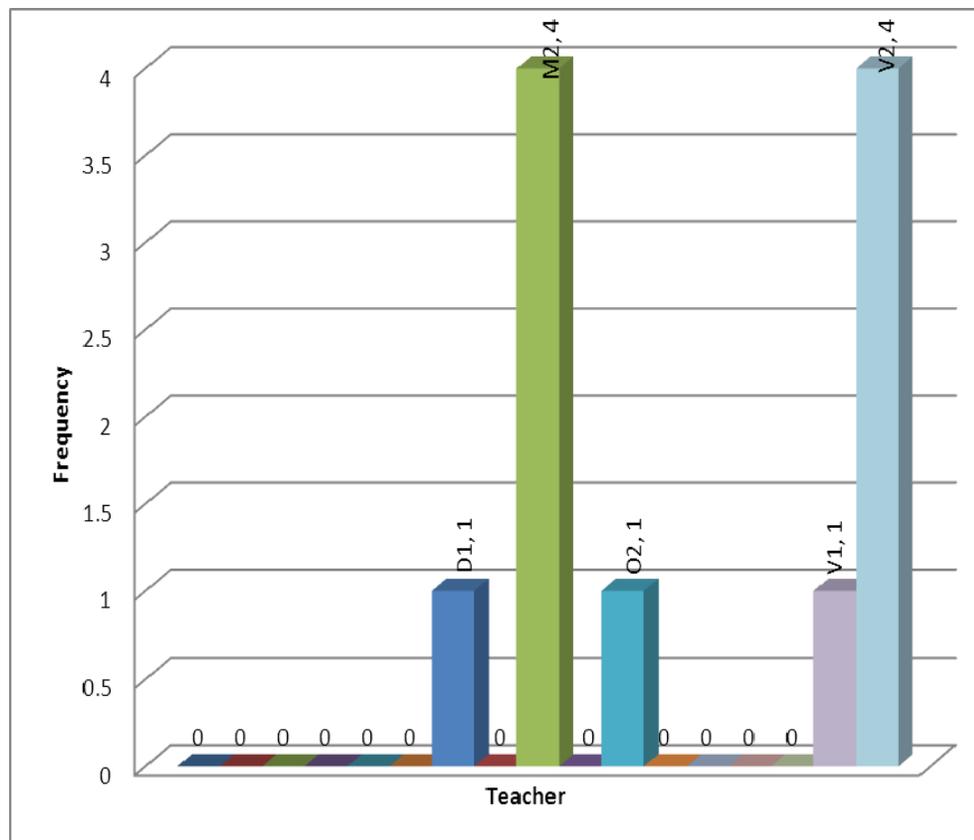
Several teachers agreed that if sarcasm is used, and it hurts or demeans a student, an apology will actually strengthen the relationship. One teacher explains that “If it was in my class, and I would have gone too far, emotionally the next day would be stronger because I would have apologized and had a good talk about it.” Other teachers also supported this comment. If this type of humor is used, the student-teacher relationship

could be strengthened after students realize that teachers make mistakes too, both in the classroom and in their own communication.

Sarcasm is perceived by Wayne as having a place within the use of humor. When asked if he was sarcastic, he replied: “Oh, most definitely. Sarcasm is the best humor for me.” As the questions continued and the students’ reactions were discussed, Wayne explained how he uses this type of humor, saying, “It ruffled some little feathers, but then they understand . . . it helps the kids realize that you need to have a little bit thicker skin . . . this is not all warm and fuzzy, life isn’t like that.” This type of communication builds what is called rapport between students and teachers, which can lead to a solid teacher-student relationship.

Negative humor may lead to a relationship between the student and the teacher because of the type of communication that has been established. The negative signals are not necessarily internalized by the student, but recognized as directional or re-directional comments designed to engage them in an activity or keep them focused. Similar comments concerning the use of sarcasm came from Shawyne, who also used sarcastic comments during his class observations. He states that “I think it goes back to my personality. I think they understand who I am and what I’m about, so they know I am not going to do anything to hurt them intentionally.” He went on to comment that he believed that this type of humor may have, in fact, “furthered some relationships.”

Table 10. Use of Sarcasm and Cynical Commentary



The last two aspects considered in the verbal signs observed include negative uses of humor, for example, sarcasm, and picking on or using demeaning actions toward students. Four teachers chose to use sarcasm in their lessons (see Table 10). Two of the four teachers accounted for the majority of the frequency of these comments. In regards to the two teachers with the highest usage of sarcasm, each used it 4 times within the observation period. The other two teachers used it only once each during the classroom observation.

Wayne used some sarcasm, not to students, but about their behaviors. The comment, “Are you having a Tupperware party over there?” directed toward a group of

young men because they were talking off task was apparently designed to return the students to the task at hand. Based on their facial expressions, the students did not appear to have any negative reactions to this behavioral management technique. Wayne responded in a positive fashion when asked about humor as a management tool, saying, “Let’s say that a child is getting a little out of hand. Then you can, I guess the words are crack a joke to sort of put them in their place . . . sarcasm is the best humor for me. . . . I think that can garner better rapport with students.” For this teacher leader, the sarcasm is carefully used. His perception is that students realize at some point what is actually meant by his comments. “They are a little ruffled . . . but then they understand that it’s just, okay what he is really meaning is for me to be quiet, and they are fine with it . . . they don’t have a problem.” Targeting a student could be perceived as picking on them, and when asked about this perception, Wayne replied, “If the child is willing to be the so-called target by what he has said, then that shows you right off the bat that they are willing to be a participant in whatever is getting ready to come up and they know that there is going to be sarcasm involved.” For Wayne, “slaying” a student means attention getting. He believes that this, in part, builds a relationship, because, “by the time you finish, they realize that, well gosh, he is human, and yes he knows how to get me through this.”

Shawyne claims that being sarcastic is just part of his personality when introducing this type of humor into the conversation. He says, “I think they understand with me, and I think it goes back to personality . . . so they know that I am not going to say anything to hurt them intentionally because of the relationship.” So he uses sarcasm

as a management tool as well. He relates a story about his expectations for students taking notes. He reminisces that each semester someone always asks if they have to write down what is on the board. His standard answer is always, “Well, I don’t know since this is the first time we have done this!” The students get the point, and generally without any harm being done to the climate in the room or the relationships that have been established.

#### *Picking on Students or Making Demeaning Comments*

Fortunately for everyone involved there were no observations of teachers verbally picking on or making demeaning comments toward students. Notes and comments indicate that teachers have used limited physical signals to caution students.

Table 11. Picking on Students

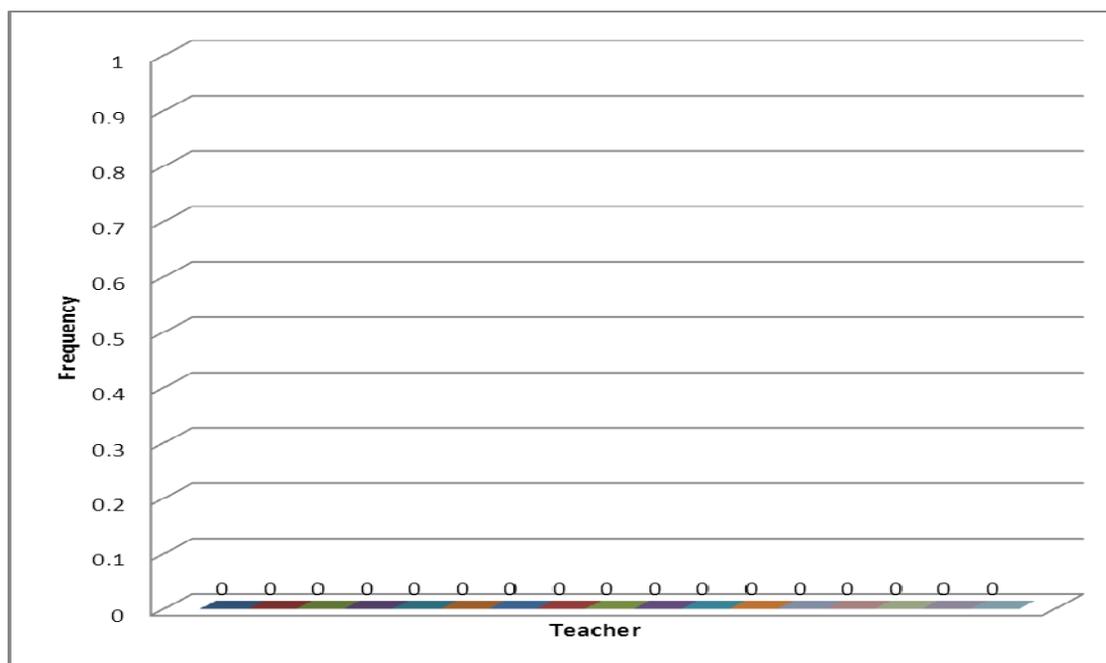


Table 11 in the verbal signals section is clear. While there was some sarcasm and cynical commentary in few of the classrooms, there were no observations of teachers picking on or being demeaning toward students (see Table 11). This type of humor is noted in the literature but was not observed during the researchers' time in these particular classrooms.

### *Physical Signals*

The second category listed on the form for classroom observations is physical signals. These seven visually apparent signals are connected to humor in one way or another. The use of physical signals can be linked to a slapstick type of humor or any physical action designed to add humor. Smiles, laughter, giggles, grins, and grimaces are facial and sound signals that give notice of something humorous, funny, amusing, or pleasing. Costumes and props are indications of their own, clearly meant to encourage humor. There were 274 physical signals recorded by the researcher in the 17 classroom observations. Physical actions, smiles, and grins were all used by each teacher. The physical signal that had the highest frequency of use was the smile.

Tables 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 represent the physical signals teachers used during their lessons. This second category of physical signs is broken into seven different actions, which include smiles, laughter, giggles, grins, physical actions, grimaces, and costumes and props. Again, after each observation, teachers verified that these observations were correct and accurate. These occurrences are discussed according to the frequency with which they were observed.

### *Teacher Smiles*

Every teacher smiled at each class at least once, with the majority smiling often. Sheila used this signal in several ways. For most, it was at the start of class, welcoming students into the room. Sheila used this facial expression 11 times in the classes that were studied. The first class was discussing conflict and words that related to conflict. Groups were instructed to use charades in doing this. Sheila directed the greatest number of smiles at the class and at individual students or small groups as a sign of a job well done. Students were very engaged with this lesson. The discussion in the groups was on task and on target as they got ready to show the class their presentations. The presentations were well received and seemed to support and encourage the discussion that followed.

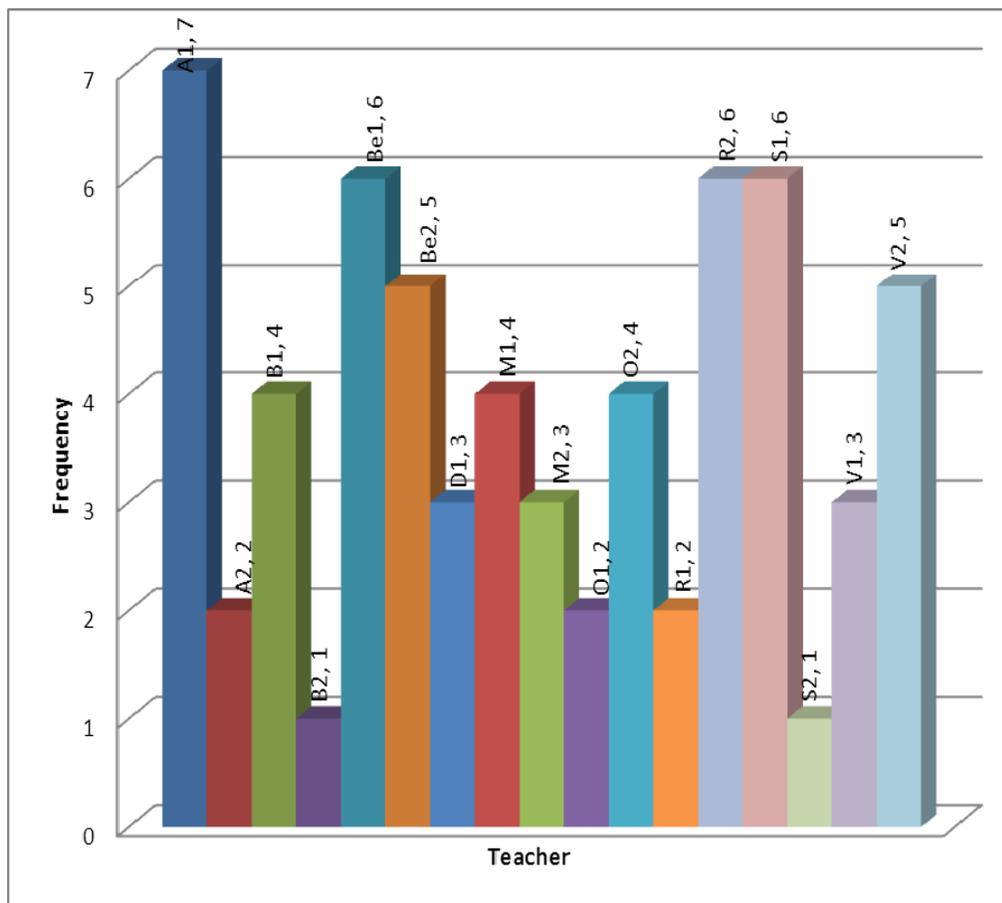
Ironically, Terry (the Drama teacher) had one of the lowest numbers of smiles in this study. She had four in the first observation and only one in the second. Students were engaged in making props for an upcoming production in the first situation. This provided an opportunity to support hands-on activity and make supportive comments, not only about the work that was going on, but about the finished product as well. This was a difficult undertaking, which was reflected by the limited use of humor. The second class was designed as more of a critique of the finished product, thus the layout of the class did not afford the opportunity for quite as much support with the completed task.

Whether or not a task or activity is completed, smiles incorporate four themes. A smile to welcome students into the class sets up a positive climate and invites students into the room. Using this facial expression also communicates pleasure on the part of the teacher, encouraging students to continue with their action or response without over

communicating. As students are supported in their action, they will continue to engage in the activity and gain more from it.

The simple task of smiling at a student also lets that student know that they have pleased the teacher. This reaction is natural and often provides the basis for the student to see the teacher as human. It can also be the foundation for establishing a relationship. Relationships are often developed because of common feelings, reactions, or beliefs.

Table 12. Frequency of Use of Smiles



Ranked by frequency of use, smiles had a total of 64 occurrences. Each teacher smiled at least one time at their students during each observation. All of the teachers studied used smiling as a physical form of humor in their classrooms. Among the different types of physical signals, smiles had the highest frequency of use with teachers (see Table 12). There were only four other singular actions among different teachers that outranked the use of the smile. While each teacher used this visible expression at least once, there was an average of more than 3 smiles per classroom per observation. The teachers who smiled during the observations seemed to use this action in each class in a similar nature. While there were discrepancies, five of the nine teachers smiled more than 3 times in each observation.

Three teachers smiled throughout the majority of the classes observed. Sheila, Alegercia, and Jackie seemed to have a pattern of positive reactions. Sheila's class was dealing with charades, student improvisation skits, and vocabulary. This group appeared to be looking for the approval that each smile provided. The smiles became a silent communication that not only seemed to engage students but solidified the relationship between the teacher and the students. Sheila spoke about this lesson, saying, "We did charades with vocabulary words in teams with no speaking . . . so we could guess . . . it became funny, and everyone was smiling and everyone was involved." This was a happy class. The climate was good, and the engagement was the proof.

As teachers show positive reactions, students react as well. Jackie not only maintained a constant flow of positive communication, she displayed her pleasure as well. Her class was studying DNA and cells. There were several activities and

discussions that followed that part of the lesson. Correct answers brought smiles, nods, and such verbal affirmations as “good response” and “very good,” along with “Whoa, Isaiah is on fire!”

This physical display of humor was also exhibited by Alegercia in the final class before a performance. Students completed several of the dances in a dress-rehearsal style. After each dance, smiles went out to the class, and then to individual students with singular parts. This was a type of reinforcement for positive actions. As Alegercia said in her second interview, the students “are used to me being playful, when they stay on task. But then there are days when they take advantage, and I take it away.” This classroom observation was clearly seen on an “on” day, as the students were very much on task.

### *Laughter*

Laughter may highlight items or actions that are believed to be funny or humorous. Laughter can be a welcome sound in a classroom. It can be a sound that is desired to relieve stress or tension within a room. Laughter should be used for positive reasons, not negative ones. Laughter can be used to ease into difficult subject matter and assist students in dealing with complex situations. All of the teachers used laughter in their classrooms, save one. Emma did not have instances of laughter noted in either of the visits. In that particular class, during which students were studying international trade, there were stories shared and smiles and grins, but no overt sounds of laughter. Emma’s second class was in the media center, where students were conducting research. Comments made during this class reflected that the instructor had to answer similar questions from multiple students. Her answers were clear and very gracious considering

the repetitious nature of the inquiries. Being gracious is a part of good humor and good will, and in this situation, it clearly encouraged students to continue working on their research.

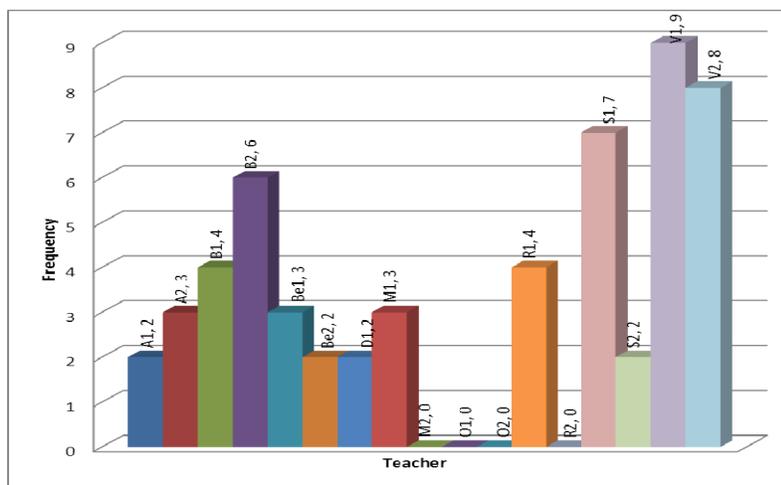
In contrast, Shawyne used laughter 17 times in two class periods. The subject matter of the classes that Shawyne was conducting had a very serious tone. Ironically, the use of laughter eased students into discussing the serious topics of personal relationships and STDs. These two topics can be intense and quite sensitive. With the use of humor and then laughter, students were able to interact without any hesitation. “Breaking the ice” in serious discussions can also show that teachers are human. Finding humor in emotional issues allows students to take on different points of view and become more aware that there may be more than one way to deal with a situation. Shawyne spoke not only about breaking up with his fiancée, but about perceptions of people who had contracted STDs. As he spoke about his personal life, he added his own self-deprecating thoughts. Students were initially quiet, and then, with some disbelief, they began to ask questions. Students would not normally ask personal questions of this nature, unless the teacher had indicated openness. Shawyne’s use of laughter—at himself—allowed this to happen.

In a similar experience, a discussion about STDs was initiated with a personal commentary about race relations, another sensitive topic. As Shawyne related another personal experience, he told the story in such a manner that there was laughter as he was speaking. The laughter and humor was directed at himself and the situation. This laughter

eased the atmosphere in the room and allowed students to relax and get “into” the essentials of the lesson.

Teaching subjects that may be difficult or uninteresting provides unlimited challenges, but those challenges can be met with the use of humor. Using laughter in a classroom can create a positive climate. As the climate becomes more and more positive, students will start to become more comfortable and engage in the lesson. As this engagement continues, students will also begin to see the teacher as human. Identifying with situations and experiences provides a common basis between students and instructors, and relationships start to form. These relationships are accented with an increase in communication. With the use of the very obvious sound of laughter, students can take this as a signal. This signal directs student action and interaction. This engagement opens the way for communication and further engagement.

Table 13. Frequency of Use of Laughter



There were four occurrences during the observations where there were smiles but no laughter. Eight of the nine teachers observed used laughter (see Table 13). Only one teacher had no laughter in either of the classes observed. The average number of laughs counted was 6.8 per class, because there were three classes that had between 7 and 9 episodes. Excluding the teacher who had no laughs in either observation and the two teachers who had no laughs in one class, each teacher had at least two inclusive laughs in each class. Most, but not all, teachers used laughter.

Some teachers noted in their interviews that laughter makes their job more enjoyable, and several commented that it's better to laugh than to cry! Terry spoke about her class, which was not particularly "jolly" in her words, saying, "I make them laugh at me, so they focus on me." One event that Terry retells is when she "dropped dead" in class. According to her, students "were shocked and then they laughed and we laughed." Students would certainly have a memory to connect to that activity and would have stayed engaged.

Staying engaged appears to be an easy task in classes where there is frequent laughter. Shawyne had the highest frequency in both the classroom observations. A classroom focus for this teacher leader is the climate within his room. Focusing on maintaining positive climate would surely include the use of laughter. Both classes had serious themes and objectives, but Shawyne made use of stories in his lesson and was able to make fun of his own wedding planning, along with his outfits from his college days. Students signaled their enjoyment of his stories and dramatics with their laughter.

There was engagement with the lesson because of the climate and humorous communication.

Humorous communication seems to be what Jackie is all about. When asked about laughter, she stated, “I like to laugh . . . they say you live longer . . . life is fun and you have to enjoy it.” According to Jackie, she believes that her students actually “want to laugh and they are like bringing it on . . . it engages them it . . . makes them active.” One of Jackie’s final comments concerning laughter and her belief in its use was, “If we don’t laugh this will be torture!”

### *Giggles and Grins*

Seven teachers giggled a total of 31 times in the classrooms observed. Not surprisingly, the theatre arts teacher had a high frequency of giggles as students worked on preparing props and she reacted to their comments about one another’s creations. This type of emotional release was used by Shawyne in dealing with serious topics. This type of short release by the teacher enabled students to refocus on the topics of relationships and sexual diseases, and it helped Shawyne maintain some sort of composure.

Other teachers also giggled during their lessons, and again they apparently giggled to relieve stress or lessen tension. Alegercia giggled after telling her students to try again to “get it right and not left” in relation to which direction a group of dancers was supposed to exit the stage. Her response helped students feel more comfortable.

While not every teacher laughed, every teacher did grin at their class or individual students. The use of grins was the third most frequently noted physical signal. Grins are

often quick and differ only slightly from smiles. To grin at a student is a short, quick movement, while smiling takes more time and appears to be more intense.

Alegercia grinned at students the most. As a dance teacher, she is no doubt conscious of the value of expression. Her grins were most often directed to individual students, while she would smile at the class as a whole. Her classes were practicing and in final preparations for a performance. Her use of humor worked as a supporting reaction to the activities that the students were participating in. The positive reactions seemed to keep students engaged and provided a positive climate. Alegercia did smile at students more during the final preparations for the performance, but most often she grinned at a student after making a comment.

During the first class, she made the comment, “I see so many left legs!” She followed that up with a grin to a certain student. During the second class, where the tension caused by the upcoming performance was evident, the comment that preceded a grin was, “Remember to wake up y’all. This is supposed to be physical.” This was directed at a student who yawned. This use of grins encouraged students to get moving, and they did indeed “shake it off.”

This type of class has the advantage of being more physical in comparison to a social studies class, where while grins were seen, they were not the most prevalent signal. To say that international trade has no areas in which humor can be incorporated would be false. Emma commented in her first interview that humor does not necessarily mean “cracking jokes.” For her, humor is about making the classroom “comfortable,” where the “atmosphere has easiness.” From the ease of the classroom, Emma links the use of

humor to relationships, saying, “It’s about the relationship that we have . . . when the kids know that they can come in and they can talk to me . . . that’s a good day.”

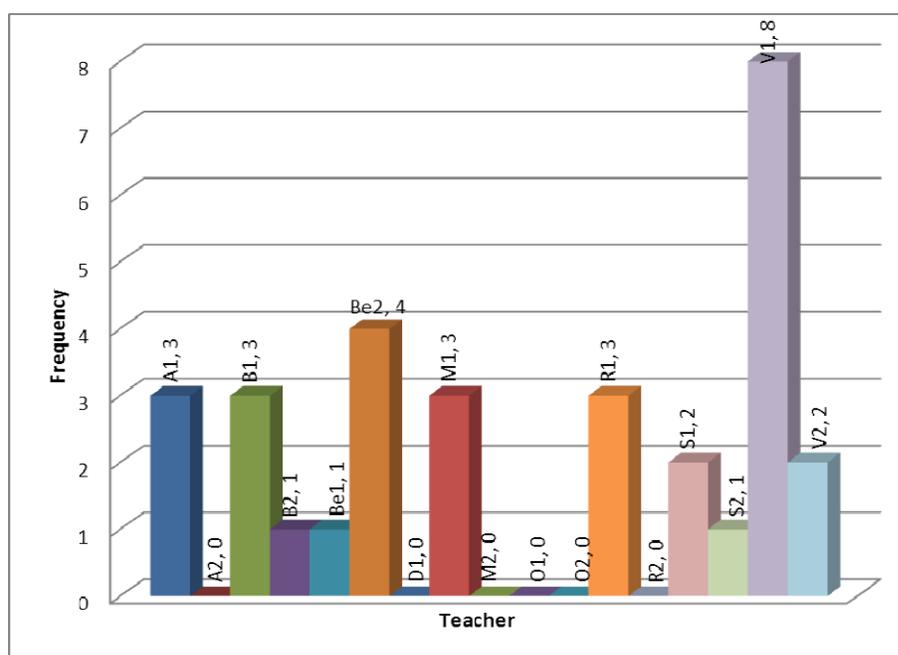
Even with the brief use of physical signals, Emma has connected climate, communication, and relationships to the use of humor. She goes further when talking about joking with students and telling stories saying that, even if the students don’t get “it,” “I have everybody’s attention and we make eye contact, then I know that they heard me for one thing!” Emma said that her humor is not sophisticated, yet it “engages the learner in a conversation that lends itself to a dialogue.” In an attempt to make a connection to international economics, her introduction included the show *House Hunters International*. Students somehow made a connection to Hawaii. This led to an “Oh yea! What a place to live! And if only!” coming from Emma. Her idea is that communication spurred by humor can engage the student.

It is not always easy to distinguish laughter and giggles in the classroom setting. Laughter is generally longer and more sustained, while a giggle is somewhat shorter in duration and less intense. Giggles or giggling is ranked fifth in frequency, with teachers giggling 31 times in 11 of the 17 observations. Teachers Shawyne and Terry reacted with giggles the most (see Table 14). In the case of Shawyne, his somewhat awkward topics of STDs and relationships may have contributed to this reaction as he introduced uncomfortable information. A teacher using the giggle as an emotional release and a reaction to the stories incorporated into the lesson demonstrates the high charge of the climate in the classroom. This further supports the idea that when humor is used, all subjects can be explored. As Shawyne reflected on his lessons, he commented that “these

are difficult things to teach about, within the topics themselves, and so if you don't use humor . . . there may not be a way to do it.”

Terry's use of giggles was not in regards to a difficult topic, but rather during a difficult activity. During Terry's first observation, her theatre arts class had the difficult assignment of making props. While this class has an extremely wide curriculum, this activity was actually difficult and trying for the students in their efforts to create realistic looking items. This level of difficulty was noted by Terry, when she said, “I try to draw attention to me like telling a story or telling a joke to change the emotional temperature in the room.” The giggles in this case came from Terry after she made the comment, “Gonna be a blue eye!” Students reacted in a positive way to this type of communication and remained engaged in the lesson.

Table 14. Frequency of Use of Giggles



Grinning at students provided the third most frequently noted physical sign of humor. Each teacher who smiled at students also grinned at students. These two categories, smiling and grinning at students, each occurred in all of the observations (see Table 15). Teachers who smiled at students had an average of 3.7 grins in relation to teachers who grinned at students an average of 3 times. Only one teacher was noted grinning at the students more than smiling at them.

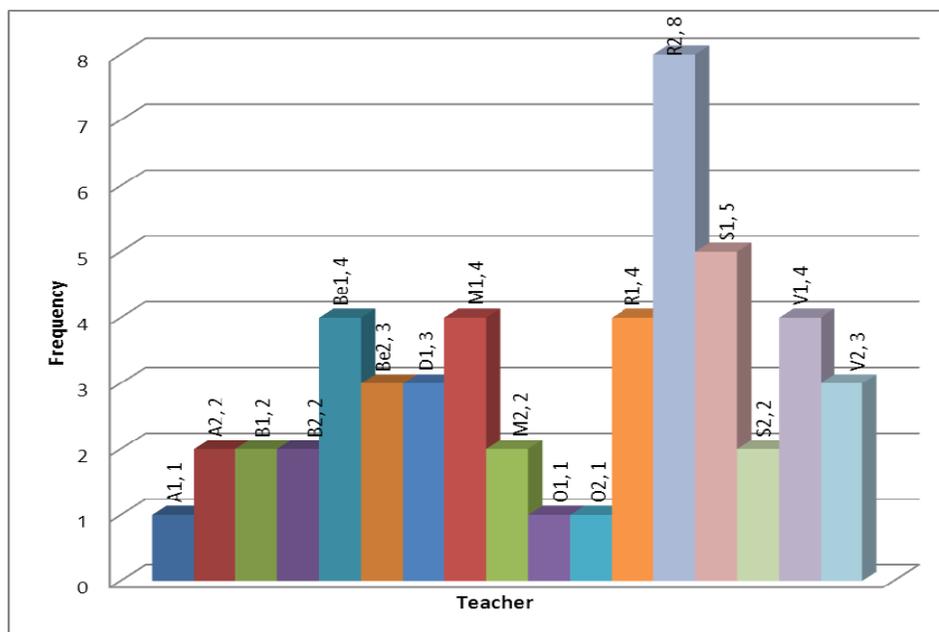
Using facial expressions to communicate with students is something that all teachers who were observed did. Three of the teachers who grinned at their students had similar comments in regards to the use of humor in their classrooms. Teachers Sheila, Wayne, and Alegercia all shared the idea that the classroom climate should be comfortable for students. Sheila talked about the use of humor and how students feel in her classroom when she physically shows her positive feelings with a grin, saying, “It fits in with the climate of the classroom . . . it makes them feel more relaxed because we’ve developed this kind of laid back environment.” This was evident in the observation, when students had to perform charades and a different form of communication. The grins that Sheila gave to the students during their presentation clearly support her comment that there is a more laid back environment in her classroom, so much so that students can engage in an activity that is more challenging.

It was in the environment in Wayne’s first observation, during which students had to deal with imaginary rocks and trucks, that his grin became the signal that encouraged students to proceed. Wayne grinned at a student and said, “Chris, you are messing your group up!” And he then moved on to other students. Chris’s group was left trying to

figure out what was wrong. They knew something was amiss because of Wayne's reaction. The group was not upset, however. They took their teacher's physical signal as a positive and began to examine their computations for the rock in the truck. This has the effect of communicating a problem to students in a more positive fashion, and it also keeps them engaged with their work.

Alegria took note of the affects her physical reactions had on her students. She commented, "I'd say that it makes people feel more comfortable in an uncomfortable place doing something that they have never done before." While in her second observation the routines had been practiced, they may not have reached that level of perfection before. This class was actively looking (and the mirrors in the room assisted in this) for her reactions. Once they saw her grin, the students appeared to be more focused on and more confident in what they were doing.

Table 15. Frequency of Use of Grins



### *Physical Actions*

Getting students to think and engage in their learning is crucial. Teachers are typically active in their classrooms. Physical actions tend to keep students' attention. These physical actions, which can be linked to humor, have an added plus in terms of not only keeping visual attention but also engaging students mentally. Physical actions serve as a highlight or accent to the lesson. All the teachers observed used physical actions in each class, with one exception. None of the teachers used any type of slapstick or clowning around humor. The majority of teachers used physical activity as examples or made fun of themselves in a self-deprecating manner.

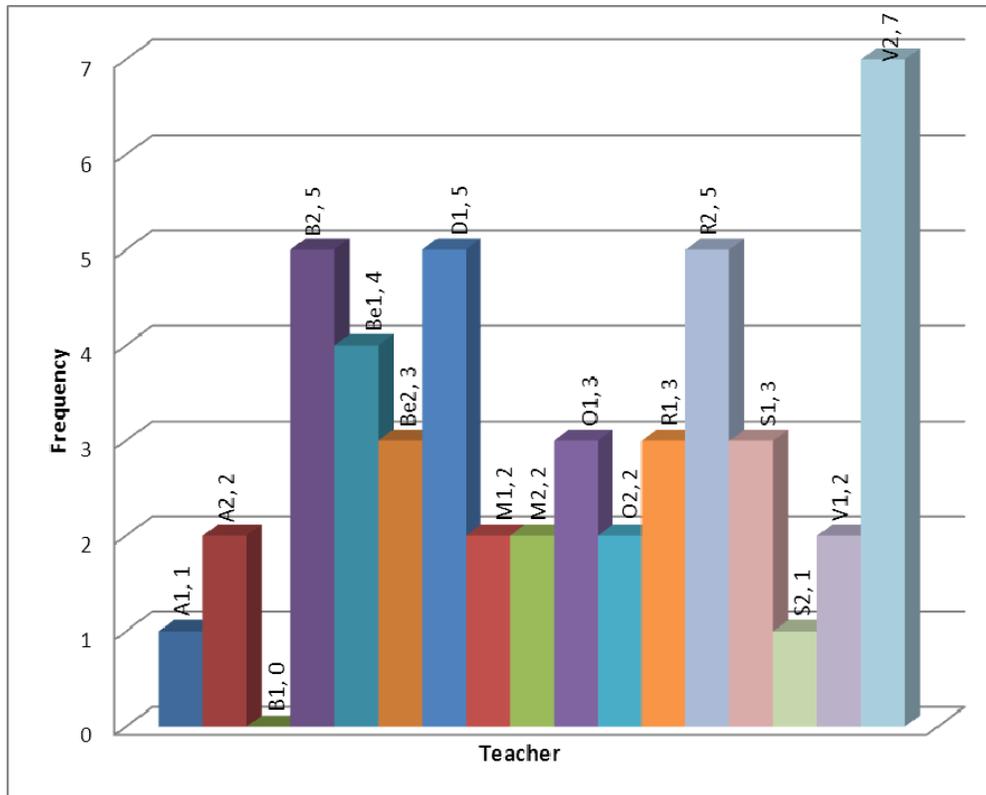
Shawyne utilized the most physical actions. He used his hands and face to signal emotion to his students while explaining various situations. The majority of what he did was self-deprecating as he explained how he acted and reacted when handling a racially sensitive situation. Students then reacted to his physicality. They took clues and cues and were obviously thinking about what was being displayed in front of them. Students did not interrupt during the explanation; rather they waited for a physical cue or pause to ask a question. The topics that this teacher delved into were highly charged issues.

As students saw Shawyne as human and capable of errors, they were free to engage and communicate without fear. When asked in an interview if humor helped communicate with students, Shawyne responded, "Absolutely." Students were comfortable because trust had been established in the classroom, and engagement in the lesson required free communication. Shawyne said, "I set up the whole environment in my class . . . so I can feel comfortable. . . . I let them realize I am human." He tells his

students, “I want you to feel free to say whatever you want to say in here, but we are not going to pick on or make fun of people.” This enabled free-flowing communication and energized each lesson, which was demonstrated by the amount of student engagement and interaction.

Using a wide variety of physical actions allows Shawyne to invigorate and engage the class. The students were watching him as he used the classroom space as a demonstration area, and students waited for any telltale moves to which to respond. By using humor physically, Shawyne was able to make fun of himself, which in turn allowed students to be more forthcoming with their comments and replies.

Table 16. Use of Physical Actions



Whether smiling, laughing, or grinning at students, there are many ways teachers can display physical humor. Table 16 represents physical actions, which are actions that cause positive reactions from students. Using different types of facial expressions, as well as more physical actions while moving about the classroom, were tallied.

With only one exception, each teacher in each observation had some type of physical action that produced a positive response from students. Teachers used this type of humor slightly less than the use of grins. Teachers who used physical actions to cause positive reactions seemed to be consistent in the classrooms with this type of technique. A majority of the physical actions noted were facial, but much of the activity included movement around the classroom in a demonstration type of action. In addition, teachers who used physical actions often added a type of slapstick movement to illustrate points within the lessons.

Three teachers who seemed to get the “most” from students with their physical actions were Terry, Katrina, and Alegercia. Terry works in the drama department, so her actions and level of activity in her classroom stays standard. She used her hands and was slightly more expressive with students as they were critiquing their projects during her second observation. Terry considers herself to be a nonverbal communicator. She stated that “just the way students turn their bodies when we are talking to each other, if my hands are open or yours are closed, the way you carry yourself matters, even with the ninth graders.” Students were quite attentive as their classmates were critiqued. Students appeared to watch Terry’s movements closely. They were definitely on task and involved.

Staying involved and on task with her lesson is something that Katrina does in a very physical way. Her movement around the classroom and to each table of students engaged the students as the lesson progressed. This technology teacher took complete advantage of the time away from any particular piece of equipment. Her time was used setting up her students' activities using computers. As she gave directions prior to the students moving to the computers, she pointed at different students, identifying their strengths from a previous assignment and then moving to another section of the room, where, in dramatic fashion, she illustrated the step for the activity listed on the dry erase board. Students were engaged and followed her movements by turning their heads and moving chairs. Her expressions changed as questions and answers were given in direct relation to what worked and what did not work.

The last two actions noted within the physical signs of humor are the use of grimaces and the use of costumes and props. Few teachers used grimaces to any great degree during the observations. Two teachers on two occasions displayed this action; however, the majority of the nine teachers observed were either never observed grimacing or grimaced only once (see Table 17). Notes from the researchers' document revealed that when grimaces were used, they were generally in response to a student comment, and they were followed by a humorous reaction from the class. The use of a grimace often produces a reverse reaction and can spur positive engagement.

### *Grimaces*

Physical signals that can be given to indicate displeasure or discourage behaviors or responses are known as grimaces. Grimaces were observed with very little frequency.

The math and science teachers were the only two instructors who grimaced at their classes more than once in any class observed. There were 15 grimaces noted in all of the observations, and there were six teachers who used this tactic.

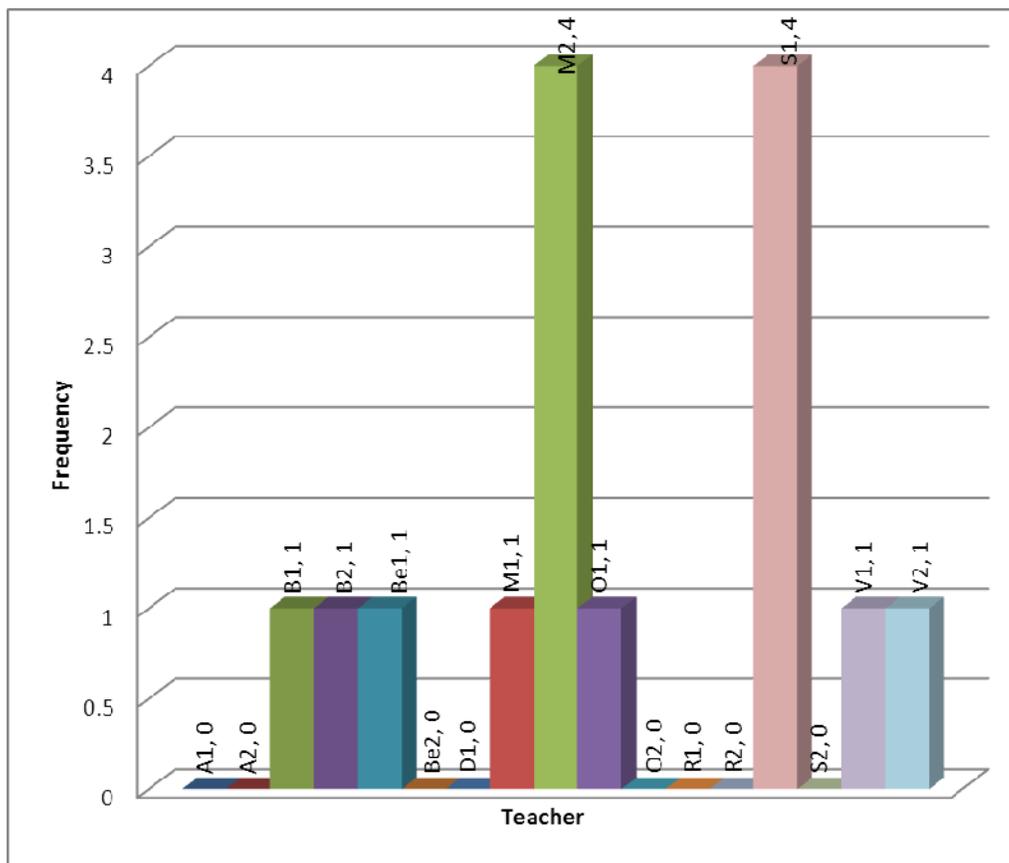
Teachers most commonly reacted in this visually negative fashion instead of speaking to the child who had acted in an inappropriate manner. This was done in a humorous fashion that did not appear to be negatively directed at the student, just the behavior. This allowed the students to change, redirect, or respond again having gotten the intended message. The humor in this “message” was directed at the teacher’s reaction, not at the student.

Jackie dealt with students who were trying to garner attention by giving incorrect answers. This was initially done because she would answer back with what she called in her interviews a “zinger,” intended to redirect a student in a humorous fashion. As the class continued, the discussion revolved around DNA and sicknesses. She used her grimace to warn students and remind them to stay on task “Gotta do the five facts . . . mosquitoes . . . how come you didn’t get sick this year” were the comments she made, along with the negative facial warning. The comment that illustrated that Jackie was aware of her expressions came to light when she said, “So I can make fun of M?” This student, who had made several positive contributions to the class, had started veering off task, and this comment seemed to redirect her energies.

When asked what she meant by that comment, Jackie explained, saying, “Oh I don’t think it’s a derogatory thing, it’s more like I call everybody on the carpet for the things that they are doing that they probably shouldn’t be doing. I can just stare at the kid

and make a funny face and they know that you are holding them accountable in a lighthearted way.” The six teachers who used this form of humor did so with clear intentions. There were nine classes in which grimaces were used out of the 17 total classes observed. It seems that this type of warning worked, not only for the student, but for the class as a whole. It also seemed that the grimaces of the teachers allowed for there to be laughter while giving the student or the class the time and opportunity to adjust.

Table 17. Use of Grimaces



This was certainly the case in Wayne’s second observation. In one situation, he grimaced at a student who had asked to go to the office. Since Wayne’s class led into

the lunch period, his answer was, “No, take care of that on your way to lunch.” He then noticed a look of disbelief on the student’s face and countered with, “Why are you looking at me like I have three heads?” The students’ reaction was to simply refocus on what she had been doing. The same grimace was used when students asked a question that had been asked several times prior. The answers by Wayne were identical, but the grimaces became more pronounced, and other students often sighed. The display of a grimace for this teacher signaled a redirection in a positive fashion. His comment about this action was that “they have to be validated . . . for some reason a lot of kids love to ask a question that they already know the answer to . . . so ok we are going to stroke you, and yes as you heard before the answer is five.” So in this fashion a negative can become a positive communication and an engagement event with the reverse use of humor.

Turning a negative into a positive with this facial expression was done by Emma. When given an incorrect geographical answer, she quickly made a face expressing her displeasure but followed up with, “not South Korea, North Korea, and okay sometimes that could get confusing.” The student who had offered up the answer was initially seeking support, and with Emma’s initial reaction, a grimace, the student could have felt rejected. But it was the grimace that gave the student time to modify the answer and then receive support from the verbal response.

It was the verbal responses in Jackie’s class that got the facial reply of a grimace. Students were trying to decrease the number of items to be written about in a response writing dealing with mosquitoes. The response was a grimace and the comment, “Gotta do the five facts . . . how come you didn’t get sick this year?” Students were then clear

that they had to complete the task and they began to see its significance. The grimace was a signal of redirection indicating, without verbally fussing, that the students had to focus. The negative facial reaction worked, and the students completed the assignment.

### *Costumes and Props*

Class reaction can often be anticipated when costumes or props are used. The use of costumes or props was the least used physical signal observed in the classrooms that the researcher visited. Four of nine teachers used costumes or props in their lessons, but in only five of 17 observations, two of which occurred in a drama class (see Table 18). It should be noted that of the teachers using this type of physical signal, one is a theater teacher, one is an 11th and 12th grade English teacher, and the remaining two are instructing in sports marketing and physical education.

Paul, who developed the course materials for the class observed, used several pieces of sports merchandise that students would recognize. Using these props supported one of the objectives of marketing. Students responded in a positive fashion with their comments and their ability to connect the value of their recognition to the economic factors involved in the lesson. Students were clearly engaged and spoke freely because of the climate and communication that had been established in this classroom, where humor was welcome.

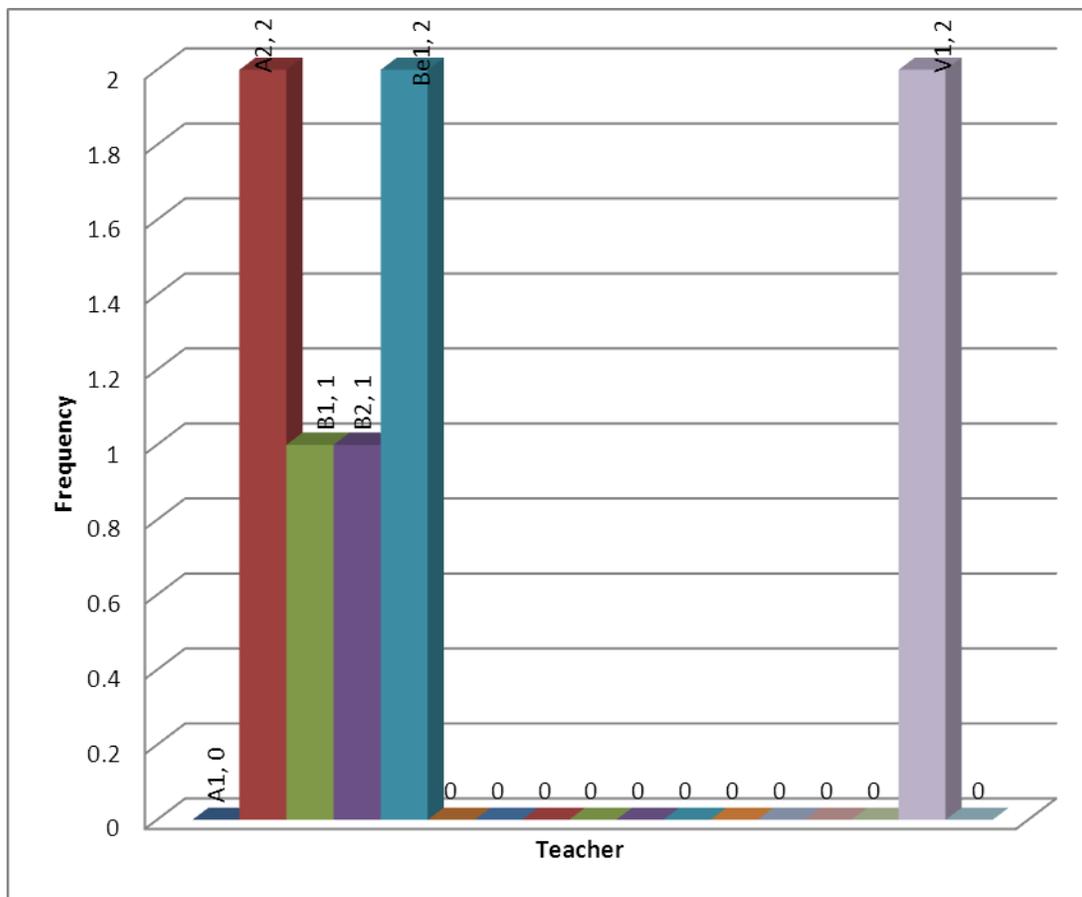
Modifying lessons and adjusting to students' varying learning styles occurs in many classrooms. This occasionally includes the use of costumes or props. This was the least frequently used humor-connected technique. There were eight uses of costumes and/or props, but it should be noted that Terry, who teaches drama, used this method in

her class during each observation. Another teacher who used props was Sheila. She used them to demonstrate “conflict,” the theme of the lesson. She used tangible items in the room to demonstrate how different items could be used to communicate without saying a word. As she did this, students were able to translate words into “acts” in charades.

The third teacher who used props to incorporate humor into his lesson was Paul. The lesson revolved around sports personalities and other famous individuals who have made very noticeable mistakes in public. This lesson also incorporated the use, or misuse, of clothing with logos and proved to be visually engaging. Students were eager to discuss the next mistake, and Paul intermittently used tangible props, like hats and shirts, to prove his point. His comment to one of the students was, “Pat this is what *not* to wear for class day!” and he displayed picture of a NBA star wearing a very provocative shirt.

Shawyne was the last teacher to use props. In his lesson concerning relationships, he used sticks to illustrate several points. This group primarily consisted of upper classmen who initially paid only “routine” attention to the use of the sticks. As the verbal instruction got more intense, the sticks received more attention. Students seemed to be pulled into the lesson by Shawyne’s interaction with the sticks. His reenactment of hitting someone was the crux of a very serious topic. Students were able to categorize the physical versus the emotional aspects of this lesson with the use of props, which enabled them to think through various issues. The use of the sticks incorporated small bits of humor and allowed the students to move away from the physical and into the lesson that was being presented.

Table 18. Use of Costumes and Props



The use of props supported the classroom activity of charades for Terry. Engagement was evident, as students attempted to copy her use of items to enrich their presentations. That enrichment opportunity demonstrated the positive climate shown by the clapping and accolades at the end of each presentation. A clever use of common items was also seen in Shawyne's classroom.

For part of his introduction of a lesson about relationships, Shawyne used sticks to demonstrate. While talking about marriages and breakups and the importance of how to deal with one's emotions, the sticks attracted attention without causing any commotion.

By using a still object, some of the emotional value was decreased, and the situation could be seen in different fashion. This supported the positive climate, while dealing with a very serious subject.

#### *Stages/Segments of a Well-Planned Lesson*

Well-planned lessons have several different segments, components, or steps, and humor can be used in each step. In the third category, there are seven segments or discernible parts of a lesson identified. Humor can be used in the following seven ways within a lesson: as the opening, or hook, of the lesson; in areas where engagement might lag; in the introduction of an activity; during a question and answer period; in the management of behaviors; in the continued use of humor; and in the conclusion of the lesson. In previous sections, the analysis and discussion started with the most frequent use of humor. This section is analyzed in coordination with the list of segments and the general steps within the lessons observed.

Tables 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 display the segments or parts of the lessons in which humor was used. The literature suggests that humor may be used in all sections or segments of a lesson. Teachers have control over when they purposefully inject humor. The information displayed is a result of the classroom observations conducted by the researcher. Analyses of these data are organized according to the stages involved in a well-planned lesson. The inclusion of “engagement when interaction lags” could be placed at any point in the lesson; however, it could first be observed after the initial introduction of the lesson, when the students’ attention might decrease. For this reason, “to engage” has been listed immediately following the opening.

### *Humor in the Opening (Hook) of a Lesson*

Introducing a lesson or at the start of class would seem like the best opportunity to use humor. Seven of the nine teachers observed used some humor to open their classes and “hook” students into the lesson. Paul used humor to open each class. Teaching a technical course entitled “Sports Marketing” provides somewhat of a more flexible curriculum than upper-level English. In both cases, the class started out in a very positive fashion. One class opened with sports trivia, which hooked students straight into the lesson’s focus. Using trivia not only got the students’ attention, it connected to the discussion about mistakes that famous athletes and individuals have made in the public eye that took place later in the lesson. “So who saw that trade between the Celtics?” and “Who is *still* a Lakers fan?” were opening questions, and visuals were used that drew either smiles and accolades or groans.

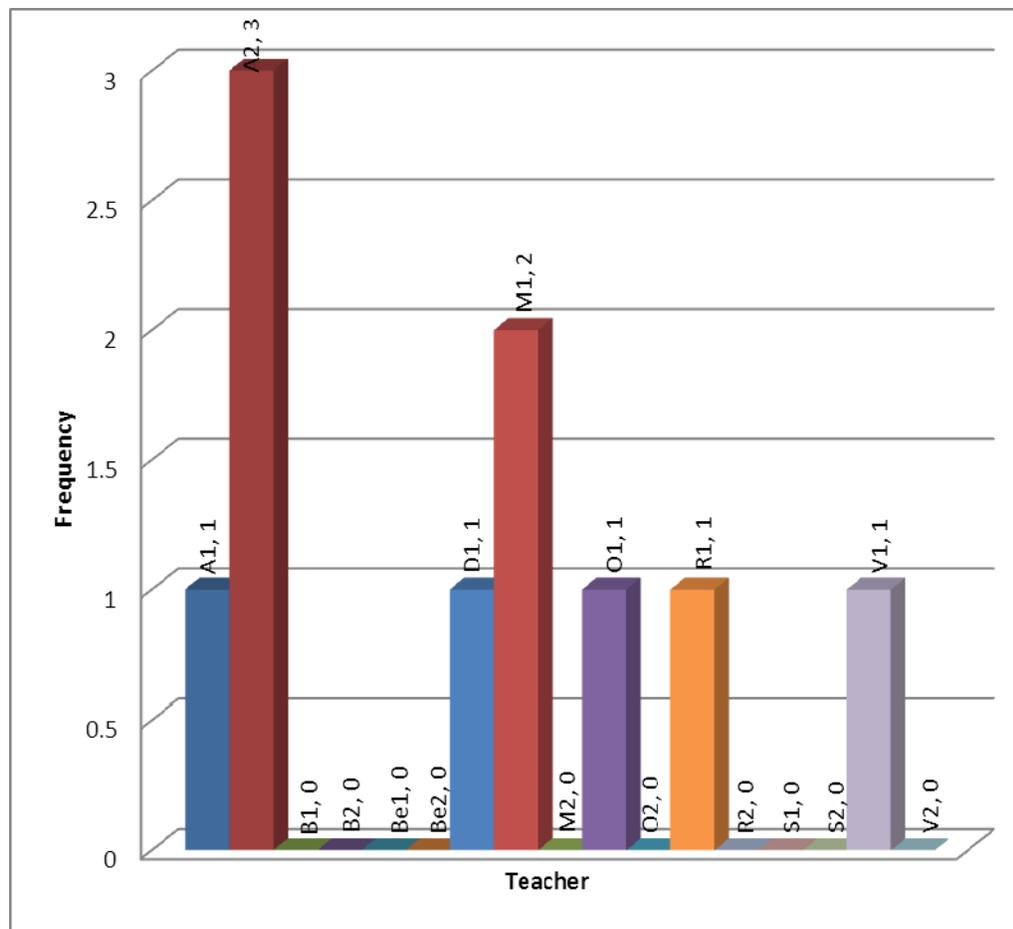
Paul was very forthcoming in his interview by saying that he would “give an absurd example to get a point across.” Talking in detail about the start of the class, he continued, “I either use humor as a hook or something that will make the students laugh, because it’s something that they all know.” Relating to students about concepts that they know about is certain to engage students. Students recognize commonalities; this should make the classroom environment more comfortable, fostering both communication and additional engagement. Paul commented further about his use of humor, saying, “They come in and they know that it’s not going to be some situation where we are all yelling at each other for 90 minutes. Humor creates a pleasant atmosphere.”

Not only does Paul believe that humor supports a positive climate; he also linked his use of humor to communication and a bond between students and teachers. As students acknowledge that there is a reason to learn something, they will engage more actively, and it will have nothing to do with the teacher or the state asking them to learn it. Humor, according to this teacher, “gives you a chance to take a dry topic and make it a little bit more enjoyable.” Getting the students “into” the lesson can create a positive climate for the classroom.

Setting the climate for any class is important. Wayne teaches geometry, a type of math that proves to be difficult for many students. He used humor to start the class and explained that “If I can get you to laugh, if I can get you to be a willing participant, now become an activated person, not yet an activated learner, but an active person, it is an easy step for you to become an activated learner.” For this math teacher, using humor builds a bridge into a mathematical lesson.

In the class where students were dealing with paper rocks, they had to take a moment and name their rocks. They then had to fit the rock into an area the size of either the back of a pickup truck or a shopping bag. Students began to smile and grin as the math concepts were recognized. They giggled and smiled as they began to struggle, but with no sense of unease; rather, they appeared to be comfortable working out this type of real but space-related problem. The opening act of naming the rocks allowed the students to have a comfortable start to figuring out the problem. This enabled them to step forward into the activity with less hesitation.

Table 19. Use of Humor at the Opening (Hook) of a Lesson



The first opportunity teachers have to engage in the use of humor is at the opening or beginning of the class. This time period within the lesson is also referred to as the “hook.”

Six of the nine teachers observed used humor at the start of the class. Seven of the 17 classroom visits revealed that humor had been added to open the lesson. While lessons may have different segments, this was noted in more than half of the observations where humor was used within the time period observed (see Table 19). Getting students

“into” the lesson with the use of humor is something Sheila touted, saying, “the humor . . . introduces the lesson . . . like an introductory hook.” While she did not use this method in her recorded observations, her comments were clear.

Paul agrees with the idea that humor can introduce a lesson. He also believes that using humor in the beginning of a lesson is advantageous. He stated, “If I can use it [humor] as a hook, I will,” and he did. During the second observation, where he dealt with sports merchandise and star power, Paul made several comments about teams designed to garner a response from the students. In addition, he used a slightly teasing tone when describing the design of some of the team decals, again designed to attract the students’ attention. Paul was reflective about his use of humor in the focus group, saying, “If I make them think I am funny, then they are more willing to pay attention.” Students paid immediate attention to his comments and started to disagree with one another, and this turned into a discussion, which helped to fulfill the instructional objectives.

In the same fashion, Wayne used humor in the beginning of his class. According to him, his comments were intended to be used as both a hook and to spur engagement. He stated his lesson while talking about pet rocks. Not only was it funny, but it got his students’ attention. When he then told the students that they would be working with rocks, they looked at him as if he were crazy. He further explained that the rocks would be paper, and the students were “into” the lesson. He described his use of humor in the focus group, commenting, “You have to play to their sense of humor. It’s sort of a hook, I mean if they enjoy coming to class.” He goes further to link his engagement. “In a sense you can look at it as, I got to go just to see what’s going to happen!” His students got into

the lesson quickly and stayed focused, even after the mathematical formulas were introduced.

*Humor in Areas Where Engagement Might Lag*

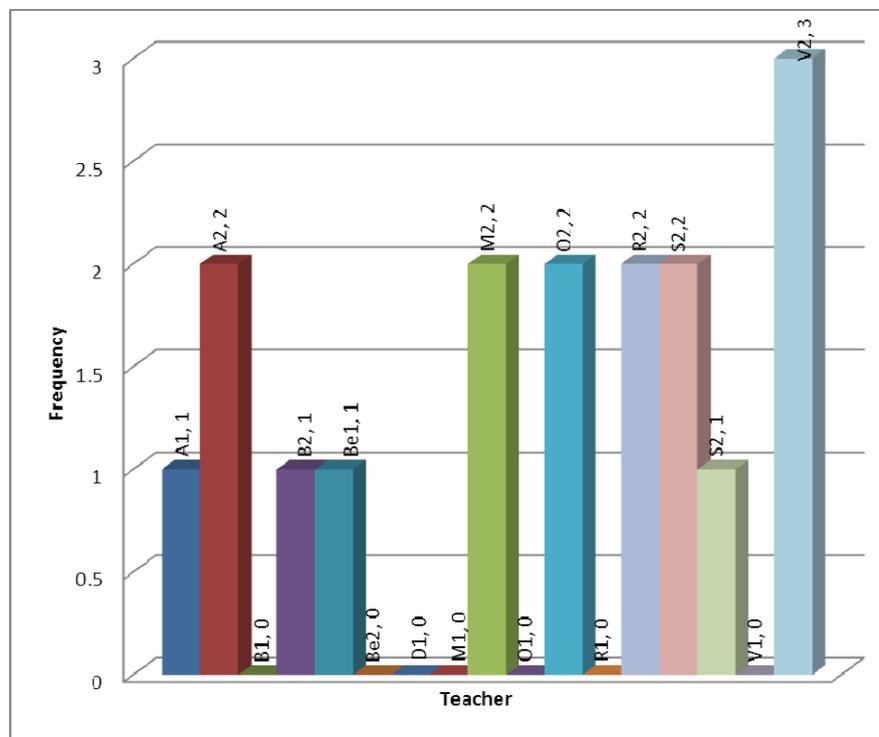
Eight of the nine teachers observed used humor when engagement lagged. This did not occur in all classes, but it was noted 17 times. During Shawyne's second observation, humor was used 3 times when engagement waned. The majority of the time, this teacher was lecturing or storytelling, while also giving students opportunities to respond and ask questions. Using humor to reengage or increase engagement may have been more of a necessity since this was a lecture-type situation.

Losing students' attention during a 90-minute class is easy, especially if the instructor is doing the majority of the talking. In Shawyne's class, the topic was quite serious, and students were engaged and involved with the teacher. Dealing with STDs, different types of behavior, and racial issues all in one lesson brought many opportunities for potential reflection. Calling himself a "white speck" and talking about the choices of color of his own clothing during his college days, Shawyne illustrated how people can act differently. The class was enveloped by the mental pictures this storyteller was creating for them. For a lesson of this nature, the right type of climate had to be established from the start to get anything accomplished. During the first interview with Shawyne, his comments about humor and climate indicated why he would continue to use humor with this class. He stated that "Humor gives you a sense of kind of let's get out of this little serious moment . . . and let's kind of relax, because I think humor is a great relation tool."

There was a great deal of emotion in the room during this lesson, and humor was also used to give students a break from the topics and an opportunity to think. Some of the students might have been uncomfortable dealing with these issues; however, Shawyne was able to use humor to engage them because of the relationship he has with them. Shawyne stated, “I think the difference between me and most teachers and how I can use humor is in the beginning of the class, I make them . . . I let them realize that I am human . . . so the guys are comfortable with me.”

Since there were students who had already formed a relationship with this teacher, it is possible that other students felt more comfortable as well seeing how their peers interacted with him and how he communicated back. This perhaps made them feel that they could trust him and openly contribute to the lesson and the class. Relationships with students develop as they communicate with teachers. Relating to students is crucial when humor is being used to increase student interaction. Knowing what to say and who to say it to with humor takes skill. Paul used this skill in both classes when students appeared to be losing focus.

Table 20. Use of Humor to Engage When Interaction Lags



As lessons progress, teachers often have to step in and assist where interactions wane. Each teacher did not use humor to reengage in each observation, but each teacher who was observed twice did use humor in this capacity at least once. Teachers used humor to engage more than half of the time while being observed. Humor was used at least once in 10 classroom observations (see Table 20). Six observations had more than one use of humor, and as many as 3 times humor was used at this stage in the lesson. Both the number of teachers and the frequency of the use of humor rose in this stage of the lesson. While seven teachers used humor to open with a frequency of 10, eight teachers used humor 17 times to reengage students.

Keeping students on track can be difficult, and keeping them focused on the objectives can be equally hard. Using humor to catch students' attention as interaction lags is something teacher leaders do, and some do it more often than others. Shawyne used humor to engage students almost as soon as they got quiet and had no additional responses. In his second lesson, while students were accustomed to the positive climate, the subject matter was taxing. To diffuse the tension and engage students, a variety of stories of a personal nature were used. This peaked the students' interest and also allowed for Shawyne to be seen as human, substantiating the student-teacher relationship and his communication with students. Even when the subjects are difficult, for example, death, Shawyne explains, "We talk about that in class. So we try to explain it, and we try to put humor in on death . . . you have to be careful . . . but it can be done."

Accomplishing her objectives is something that Emma has been commended for. Her second observation was not in her classroom, but in the media center. Students had been afforded time to work on a project for a test grade. The comments supported students' efforts both individually and as a class and incorporated humor. Emma said, "Good, you all are working faster than first period, and that's good!" Emma went to almost every student and made positive comments about their work when they seemed to slow down or hesitate. Additional comments like "Yea" and "Alright" were frequently directed at individual students whose reactions were to keep working. Being kind and gracious to each student when they appeared to be off task or tired was also a habit of this teacher, demonstrating what she later explained was a connection to using humor. When discussing students being off task and using humor to help them reengage, Emma

commented that “Being a good teacher is bringing them back.” She also remarked that humor to her is not necessarily an out loud laugh or chuckle, but, “especially in the early days, it’s establishing the easiness and knowing that the kids are comfortable.” This translates into her relationship with students and the success that she has achieved.

There were no lags in interaction during the classroom observation of Katrina; nevertheless, in regards to the use of humor when interaction might lag within her room, she stated that “A lot of times concepts relate and you still have them engaged . . . you can inject humor to keep them hooked in . . . to keep them not necessarily entertained, but to capture or recapture their attention.”

#### *Humor in the Introduction of an Activity*

Teachers use a wide range of activities to help students move from acknowledging a lesson to comprehending that lesson. The use of humor when introducing an activity ranked in the middle of the frequency range, with seven teachers using this method in a total of 10 classes. The two teachers who incorporated humor into their introductions the most did so in both observations. Sheila and Alegercia used some humor when introducing each activity in each class. Sheila dealt with seniors and, in the first class, used a game to illustrate “conflict.” There were three separate activities, and each time this teacher set the action with comments and facial expressions that demonstrated that these actions were free-flowing and designed to be entertaining. Students were engaged with this lesson and moved between the planning and the actual staging of their play actions without any interruption.

When asked about the idea of humor in the classroom environment, Sheila said that using humor “gives us a sense of liberty and freedom for everyone to express themselves and to get involved in whatever we are talking about.” Students’ expressing themselves is something Terry also connected to humor, saying:

I think it [humor] opens up communication, because I think they see it as teachers are lighthearted and maybe they can go past that wall . . . but for them to laugh about something that you said or something that you did, I think that it breaks down a barrier.

She was very direct about her belief in the use of humor when beginning an activity. She elaborated, stating,

I think they [students] are able to move with me as I am going from what humor is introducing into the lesson when we get a little more serious. They have kind of laughed about it, and I think it leaves an impression of what it is that I am trying to get them to learn.

Getting students to learn is often the result of getting students engaged. Alegercia is the second teacher who, in each class, used humor to start an activity.

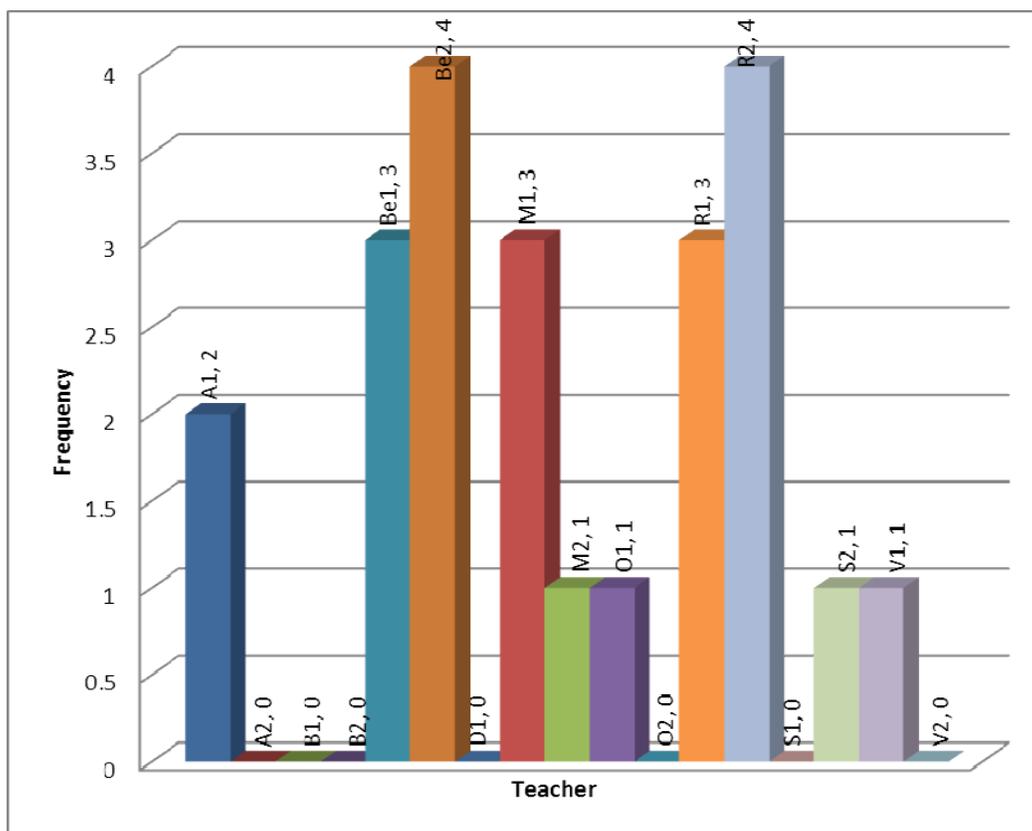
Using humor to try to explain things to students that they are unfamiliar with is not easy. As Alegercia noted, she had to recognize that while she had been doing the movements for the performance her entire life, the students had no clue what they were doing. She said, “But then I realized that they didn’t know how to do these very simple things.”

As she went on, her comments connected her use of humor not only to engagement, but to the relationship it supports between her and her students. Alegercia spoke about her “brand” of humor, elaborating:

I think it’s about the way that I talk or the way I phrase things or in a dance counting. They all think it is hilarious, and it makes them feel like they have a thing with me. . . . I think it’s having a certain rapport, and it helps them know that you care about them.

As a result of her communication, the relationship factor increases. Alegercia concludes, “I think that it makes me more human and makes them want to be good for me.”

Table 21. Use of Humor When Introducing an Activity



Following the beginning of a lesson, teachers generally include activities. Activities are often designed to foster movement and increase interaction and engagement. This category had more use of humor than the opening or when engagement started to decrease. While the number of teachers using humor at both the opening of the lesson and the introduction of activities were the same, the frequency increased from 10 to 23. The number of teachers using humor in the various segments has fluctuated slightly; starting at 7, increasing to 8, and then decreasing back to 7 (see Table 21). The use of humor appears to have increased as teachers moved through their lessons.

In the case of Paul, his humor frequency in the class increased in his second observation from the opening to introducing an activity. In his second class, the introduction to the activity was a presentation with sports stars. This invited attention from the very beginning, and students held on to the class objectives. In terms of planning to use humor with an introduction, Paul's comments were that "Some of the things I show video wise I know are going to be funny," and so those get used to set the stage and the climate in the classroom for student learning. Paul shared a video with students concerning certain stars' merchandise and their fashion mistakes. This roped students in, and their interest continued as they realized that the video had a connection to the project they would be completing during the learning process.

Getting students ready to learn and using humor to introduce an activity happens frequently in Sheila's room. According to Sheila, teachers will do this when they switch activities. This is a place where there could be negative activity in the room, or, as Sheila called it, "drama," She said:

I think humor is a good thing to plan. It gets students' brains engaged. It's like they know what we are doing . . . moving from one thing to another. . . . I can really see that when we did that with humor that it was a smoother transition because they went right in with no problem.

There were no problems for Alegercia as she transitioned through different activities in her lesson. In Alegercia's class, there was a limited amount of time before a program that the students would be participating in, so she introduced each part of the program. She did several physically funny steps to introduce the students to the order of the program. She demonstrated how to quickly change costumes for those students that needed to make a change. She also gave an exaggerated facial show of what the expressions should be as the students danced. The students were completely engrossed in these instructions, which were given with a dose of humor. Alegercia stated that she likes doing things this way because, "this way makes everybody feel more comfortable." Using humor to introduce activities got a very positive review.

#### *Humor During the Question and Answer Period*

Being "good" for teachers is a different concept in each classroom. Students can fulfill a general teacher's perception of being "good" by participating in discussions or answering questions correctly. Teachers use questions to help gauge student knowledge. Questions can also lead to discussions. The use of humor for both lesson segments was observed. All nine teachers used humor during question and answer segments a total of 35 different times.

The teacher who used humor the most during this part of the lesson was Paul. One of the focal points of his sports marketing class is fan loyalty. Paul was able to clue

students in during the question and answer segment by talking about New York Yankees fans and comparing them to Los Angeles Lakers fans. This humorous comparison led to a discussion and yet another comparison to NASCAR. Students were engaged, and the discussion continued. Lots of hands were raised as the questions began to be interspersed and related in greater detail to the discussion. When asked about his timing in regards to the use of humor, Paul responded, “I either use humor as a hook or to have students draw on their own experiences and add in.” The discussion in this observation was lively and often supported by such comments from Paul as, “What did they have, wheels with rockets?” and “How did he get into the NBA with those clothes?” Students took these comments and related them to all different types of sports media and trademark support.

Sheila did a good job of supporting students with humor throughout her class discussion. Her first lesson was focused on students making props. Both questions and answers were combined with humor, making the students realize that they were not yet experts and that what they were doing was difficult. With this lesson in mind, Sheila commented that she used humor to “change the temperature in the room.” When asked to be more specific, she said that her comments were made not “just to engage, but as a way to incorporate people into the conversation.”

In her second observation, during which students had to critique their own work, humor provided a softer way to suggest modifications. Humor can also lend support to students during both the question and answer section and the discussion section. In this case, the questions were about their projects, which led into a discussion about how to

improve them or enhance the final product. While talking about relationships, Terry made a comment in regards to the lesson, stating:

I started out not having a good relationship, because I am not hard on them, I am firm. . . . I try to say, yeah this is really a crappy project, but you have to learn how to do this . . . so come on let's go.

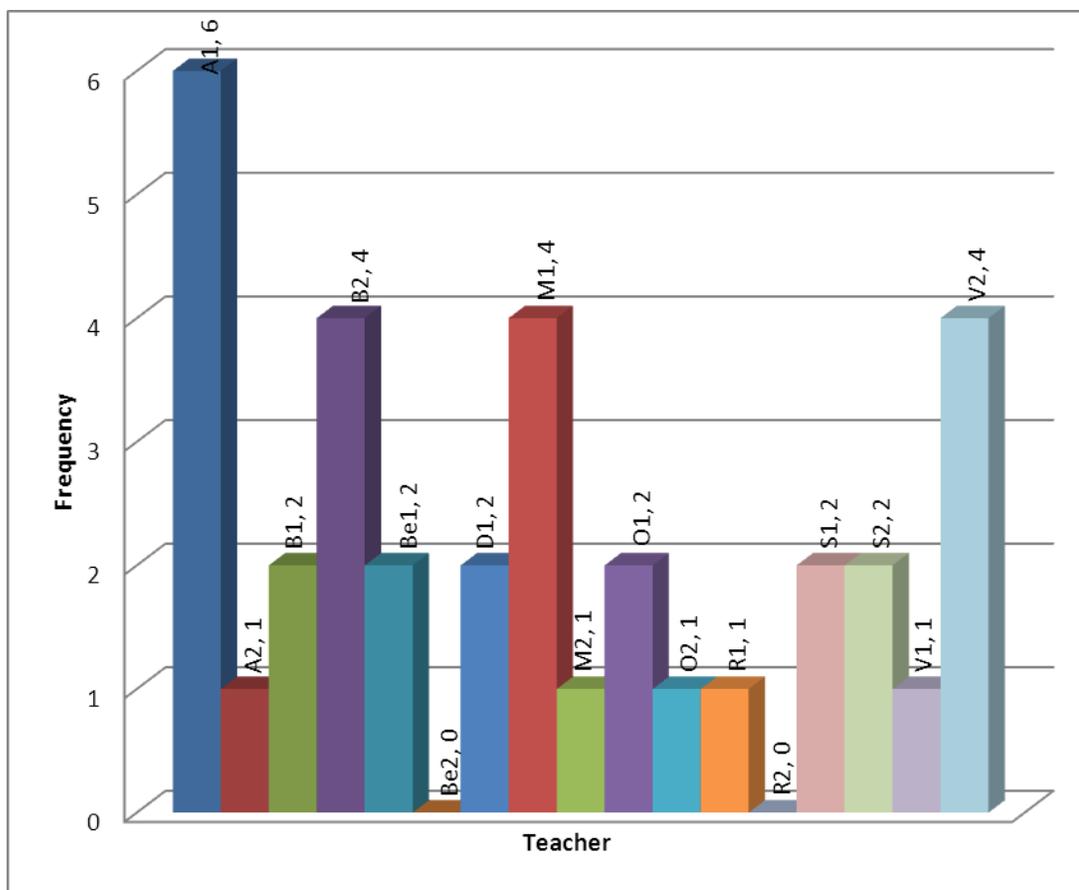
Criticizing students is often difficult. Terry uses humor within the discussion and reflective stage of this lesson, while pushing students to complete and better the task at hand. Students reacted in a positive fashion to the comments made concerning their projects. Terry used an example of having to make fake blood several times before getting its formula correct. She told this story as she was directing a student to make a mask scarier. As the student continued to work, she circled back to that group and noted that the final product looked “really ugly.”

At this juncture of the lesson, student interaction plays a large role in determining just how much of the objective has been learned or accomplished. Students can be encouraged to interact by the climate in the room, and this can be demonstrated with the degree to which they become engaged in the lesson. Engagement is fostered when students believe that they can speak freely and have the opportunity to express themselves or think outside the box.

Communicating to students that risk-taking is not only acceptable but encouraged comes in part from the relationship that has been built between students and teachers. Conversations between teachers and students should add to the positive environment,

which will then foster more engagement and more success. Supporting students' attempts is just as important as celebrating their successes.

Table 22. Use of Humor to Assist With Questions and Answers



Both the number of teachers using humor and the frequency of humor used increases when question and answer segments are utilized within a lesson. From the total of 17 teachers observed, 15 used to humor encourage discussion or assist with questions and answers (see Table 22). Only two teachers in two single observations did not add humor to this step in the lesson, and humor was observed 35 times overall.

The teacher who used humor to assist with questions and answers the most was Paul. Quick and short statements resulting in grins and laughs from students substantiated the positive communication that occurred. Paul commented that his use of humor at this point in the lesson helped to enliven the subject. He said that “There’s the quick one-liner or sides, and then there are stories that you can plan to tell.” He went further, saying, “I think it takes a subject that may be dry to them and it makes it something that we can do projects with and have fun.” His responses to questions were not only appreciated but understood.

Feeling comfortable enough to ask questions is important during this part of instructional step. According to Terry, she uses humor here because, “I want them to be receptive.” She used humor several times during her second observation, which included a peer and teacher critique of students’ work. Her comments about using humor to assist with questions and answers focus on the students. They are receiving constructive criticism about their own work, and this is also a point where Terry wants to earn their trust. Elaborates Terry, “I want to make it lighter, so they know that they can trust me. . . . I am honest with them. . . . I’ll be specific, and with constructive criticism I try to soften it.”

Being careful with communication is important to Emma. While she did not use humor as often as some of the other teacher leaders, her use of humor to support questions and answers displayed a strong sense of positive communication and of the relationships that had been established. Emma commented that communication and knowing how to engage a student is important, especially when using humor. She said, “I

think using humor is not just telling a joke . . . but knowing how to engage the learner in conversation . . . part of getting to know your students and having relationships is being comfortable enough to actually make the joke.” Communication with the use of humor takes care and knowledge of the students as people. Emma adds, “It’s not personal. You can laugh, and it provides some relief.” Going further with the notion of positive communication using humor to support the question and answer segments, Emma states that “The jokes and humor provide relief and break the tension and set the tone . . . Yes there is work to be done, but we are not going to be so uptight that we are not going to try to be fun in the process.” This fun can give students some freedom within the lesson.

Students are given freedom in several parts of a lesson. The question and answer period is one of those segments in which students may be without direct guidance. During a discussion period students are often encouraged to give opinions and offer ideas. It is at this time that the management ability of a teacher may be called into action. When the question and answer or discussion part of the lesson takes place students are generally given more freedom which may call for more management of behavior.

#### *Humor in the Management of Behaviors*

Telling a student that something they created was “really ugly” might not always be an appropriate reaction. Managing the behavior of students is a task of the teacher. There are many ways for teachers to manage behavior. In many cases, the teachers who were observed chose to use humor to direct and redirect students. Eight teachers used humor in 13 of the 17 classes observed for a total of 32 noticeable instances. Teachers in CTE, math, and dance used humor as a management tool the most often. Each used

humor 4 different times within a class period. Science and health teachers followed, along with English and drama teachers.

The most memorable of the observations was Wayne, who verbally told his students that he was making fun of them because they were off task. He said, “Low scores do not win—yes I am making fun of you!” Student reactions were positive, with the majority being reminded to focus on the assignment. Many grinned and shook their heads at the gentle reprisal and seemed comfortable with Wayne’s verbal observations. When asked about making fun of students after he made the comment, Wayne responded that he was helping them laugh at themselves, while redirecting their activity.

During the second observation of this teacher, the class was reviewing for an assessment with a group activity and detailed instructions. During the first observation, Wayne identified humor as a management tool, as well as a diversion to assist in understanding. This comment needed clarification. As the discussion focused on the use of humor as a diversion, I asked how the class stayed on task. Wayne replied, “Humor in the math classroom has to be to the point where, when a student is having trouble with something, you have to get their mind off what they are having trouble with . . . as a diversion.” So how is that diversion used while keeping focused on the follow-up question? “It’s a management tool . . . it’s molding them. It’s letting them understand that this is where you don’t need to frustrate yourself . . . let me help you get around this . . . it’s giving them relief,” said Wayne.

A second memorable observation when humor was used as a management tool happened in a science class. This class was focused on DNA and proteins and the

connection to viruses. The class was made up of mainly 10th graders. Conversation flowed back and forth between students and the teacher. There was an overall comfortable climate in the room, and the comments were both funny and targeted. Some of the students were starting to lose focus during a short video, and Jackie commented, “Put your pillows and blankets up.” They revived quickly. She went on to joke about a student taking a drink of soda in class—something not in accord with class rules—by saying, “I hope there was not a virus in there if it was open for any length of time!” This student reacted in a positive fashion, with a nod and a grin, acknowledging the incorrect action.

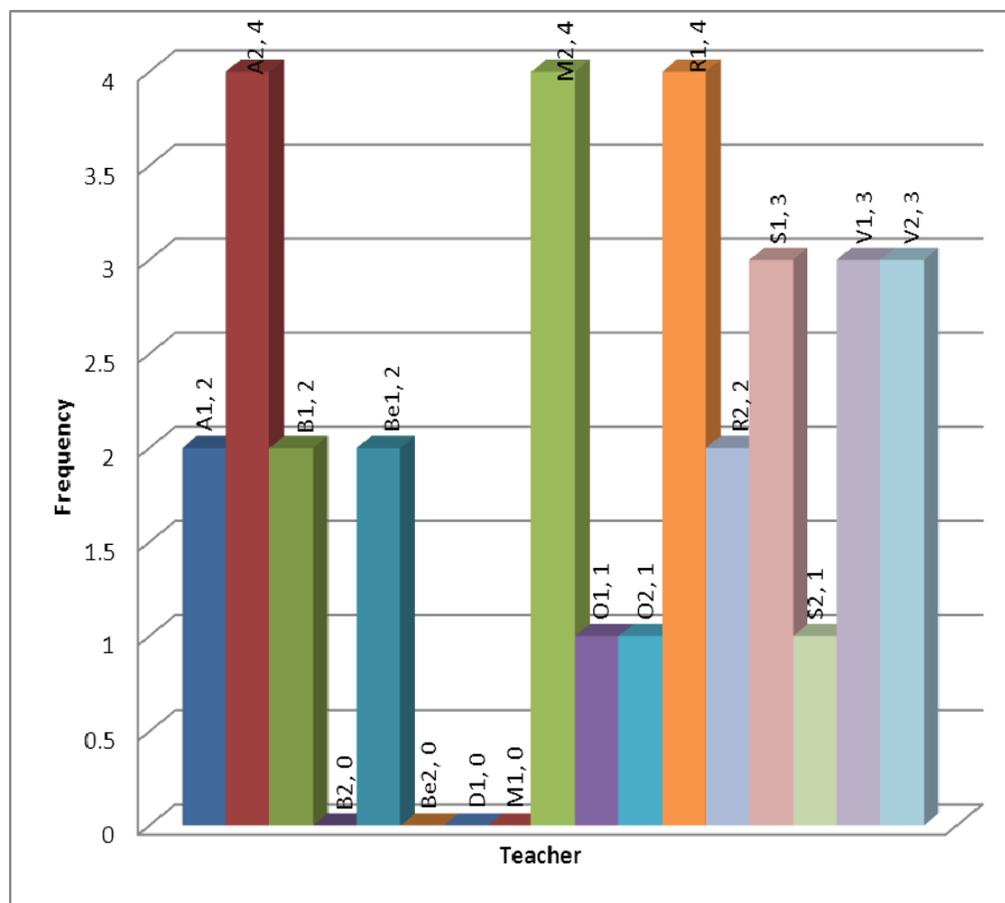
Jackie noted in her first interview that she not only links her use of humor to the curriculum, but she also uses it as a management tool. She went on to give specific examples, noting that she knows which students to use humor with and which ones would be “embarrassed because of being an introvert.” She also mentioned that as she uses humor as a tool in redirection, she is also certain to remind students that everyone makes mistakes. She further stated, “You know we make fun, and sometimes I make fun of mistakes on the board with my math, and they love to call me out on it!”

Humor used as a management tool aligns with communication and engagement. When the teacher uses humor to manage student behavior, communication is clearly a key. Wayne made the special note that the use of humor worked with communication specifically in math. Students are not always in the mindset that teachers want them to be in when they enter the classroom. Humor can help teachers get them there.

Wayne used a story to relate math communication to humor as a tool for both student management and student engagement. The story that he shared with the class was from his college days. The instructor had a strong foreign accent and introduced the lesson by saying that they were going to talk about “sexy math.” Students were inquisitive, as engagement with this type of topic is generally easy to achieve. The topic was actually “sets in mathematics.” According to Wayne, students saw the humor and laughed, and it was clear that they understood that mathematics has its own vocabulary. So engagement occurred, even if by accident, and the story assisted Wayne in managing students that may have wandered off task.

With humor, students are encouraged to rejoin the activity going on in class or refocus in a specific way. The way in which students are redirected matters. Jackie said that she uses humor as a tool, and her own “give and take” with the students is a special type of communication. The students know that she is trying to draw them back in to whatever the class is doing. Their reactions prove that they know she means no harm when she makes fun, not *of* them but *with* them. As Jackie bantered with Student M, her use of humor seemed commonplace to the class. The reactions were positive smiles and nodding heads to show that they respect the type of humor this teacher employs. Students are not only listening for what comment she will make next, but they are also engaged because of the communication that has been established as part of their relationship.

Table 23. Use of Humor to Manage Behavior



The management of student behavior using humor was the third most frequent use of humor in instructional time. Teachers used humor as an intervention to manage student behavior in 13 of the 17 class periods observed (see Table 23). Humor was used as an intervention a total of 32 times. More teachers used humor to assist with the question and answer discussion period than with the management of behavior, 9 teachers versus 8 teachers. The frequency, number of teachers, and number of observations of humor being used all decreased in comparison to other areas in which humor was observed.

Teachers who used humor to manage student behavior recognized what they were doing. According to Paul, “It’s a gentle way of getting kids to do what I want . . . there are lots of situations that you can diffuse with humor.” Paul told a story in relation to the use of cell phones in class. The use of cell phones is prohibited in the classroom, and, in his words, he says, “I tell them to put the phone away. Nobody loves you!” Instead of calling an administrator, this allows the student to change their behavior. Done in “a funny way so we both get a laugh,” this utilization of humor can turn a negative behavior into a positive relationship.

Katrina reacted to turning the relationship into a positive one while managing student behavior. While this technique was not seen during the observations, the use of humor in this fashion was talked about during an interview. When discussing the uses of humor, Katrina said, “I tell them all the time that I’m going to beat them with a belt, and they crack up laughing, but they also immediately correct their behavior, so it is a management tool for me.”

Taking humor away also works as a management tool for Alegercia. She commented, “I definitely use humor as a management tool. When I take [humor] away, they know I am serious. And I’ll hear kids say something like, ‘She’s not playing today ya’ll,’ and they get real and very serious.” This teacher was seen using humor to manage her class 4 times during her first observation. Most of the instances were role playing and modeling the incorrect behavior, but there was a definite change in the classroom climate as the program rehearsal the class was doing moved through different phases.

*Humor Used Throughout the Observation*

No matter how many sections, parts, or steps contained in a teacher's lesson, it is important to keep students focused and engaged. Using humor throughout the lesson had the highest frequency of being noted. It was a tactic used by all the teachers observed, with only two exceptions. The two teachers who used humor in only part of their lessons were both concerned with a different final product than the result of a singular class. Emma was in the media center working on research and setting the stage for other classroom events. Paul only used humor initially, as the subject of sports fans took on a more serious note and students were in the preparation stages for their own presentations.

Humor was noted being used throughout the lesson an average of 2.5 times. This type of humor was used in seven of the 17 observations. The teachers who used humor throughout the class the most frequently are the same teachers who also used humor in great amounts in the teacher-to-class ratio. These teachers, Alegercia, Jackie, and Shawyne, kept their classroom tone conversational, and, as Jackie noted while being interviewed, this type of banter "makes [students] feel important . . . they want attention and humor connects them and is engaging." Students in her first class were very positive. The climate in the room was also positive, as students were eager to please their teacher. They were highly engaged in the lesson, and there was a variety of banter like comments between the students and teacher as the lesson was presented. It was clear that there was a relationship in place that allowed for positive communication. Students were grinning, as was the instructor.

Alegercia feels that using humor throughout the lesson as a communication tool is “an easy way to make people understand what you’re trying to say . . . and get them to understand what your end goal is.” Her end goal during the last observation was to have their dance performance ready for the audience. Students were working hard and putting all their focus and energy into this last rehearsal. The expressions on their faces reflected their intensity. As they were critiqued, they were equally responsive to the comments. The majority of the comments were positive, as was the reception, which was indicated by smiles and sighs of relief. It was obvious that the communication and relationships between the students and teacher were solid. The students were waiting to hear the teacher’s comments, and Alegercia always started with a smile and was only slightly negative with her humor in explaining the steps that needed modification.

Shawyne spoke about his use of humor when dealing with very sensitive and highly charged topics, saying, “Even with sexual abuse, I kind of tell them, this is a serious thing, but there is a story that comes with it where there’s a little bit of laughter, based on what was said in the courtroom.” In responding to the question, Does humor help your communication? his reply was, “Absolutely, I think it helps with my relationships with the kids, too.” This teacher is very demonstrative and continued to talk about his use of humor throughout the class period. He related in his first interview that he tries to screen some of his comments, and when he catches himself doing so aloud, students often become even more engaged. Shawyne stated, “There was something I was getting ready to say, but I realized that it wasn’t in the right forum. Well then you know I heard ‘say it, say it!’” Students were clearly interested and engaged.

Keeping the interest and engagement of students may appear easy in a dance class or an advanced health class, but students' interest may not be as easily obtained in biology. Jackie reflected during her second interview about humor as a technique, commenting that "It's validated . . . for me it's the technique that makes me . . . like my job and . . . makes the kids receptive and they buy into what I need to teach them." She went a little further and shared a technique she learned from a history professor that she now applies to her biology classes:

I had a history professor say history is a blank canvas. I am going to give you the information for you to paint the picture of what happened . . . and so with biology . . . I'll give you time information, and I want you to paint what you think happens, with what's it's all about and how it relates in your mind.

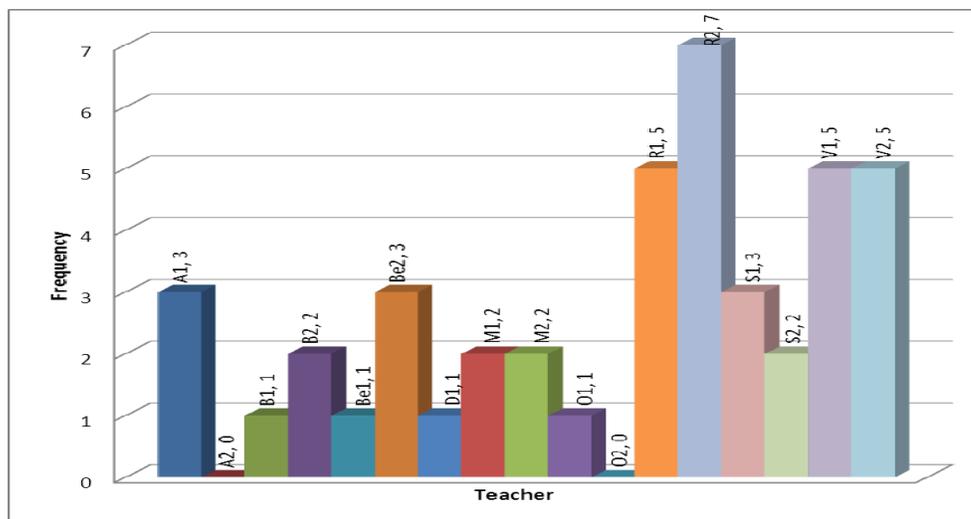
Again, according to Jackie, this relates everything back to the students. In her class, the students relate concepts back to the teacher. Students actually tried to make jokes about proteins to attract Jackie's attention, and, in return, she told them something about her children and their DNA. Giggles, smiles, and laughter were clearly common occurrences as both teacher and students appeared to enjoy the class and the lesson. This observation illustrates the point that the use of humor throughout the class both engages and entertains students.

Using humor for the duration of an entire period of 45 minutes or more is not easy. Teachers do not want to be seen as comedians. They do, however, strive to keep their students' attention. Each category of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships has a strong tie to humor. Jackie and Shawyne note that while humor is

being expressed by communicating, the relationships that they have developed with the students are what enable them to use humor. “I think humor goes with your relationship to the kids . . . you worry about the relationships first.” Shawyne’s concern for the relationships with students is mirrored in the responses during Alegercia’s interview.

When responding to a question about her continuous use of humor, Alegercia replied, “I think I’ve done it consciously more and more the longer I have been teaching. I have realized I get better results.” She also adds that humor “affects [students’] attitudes. . . . I can tell they are engaged and want to better themselves, and then the dancing is so much better.” She also cautions that the use of humor must be authentic, saying, “I think the kids know right away if you are being disingenuous. They start paying attention to how funny you are in a normal way.” She agrees that humor strengthens the relationships and enables communication. According to this teacher, humor can not only engage the students, but the results are a better attitude and a better dance.

Table 24. Use of Humor Throughout the Lesson



The use of humor throughout the lesson was the highest coded. The use of humor in this category indicates that humor was not necessarily used for any particular purpose, such as a hook into the lesson, but constantly throughout the class. In 15 of the 17 classes observed, humor was included by the teachers through the lessons (see Table 24). All the teachers used humor within the classrooms, but the use of the humor may not have been intertwined with instruction. Of the two teachers who did not include humor throughout their classes on those two occasions, one held class in a computer lab, and the other was preparing the class for an important presentation. The two teachers who had the strongest use of humor within their classrooms came from outside the academically tested areas. The life skills and dance teacher had the most notable use of humor. The other teachers from academic areas numerically indicated that they use humor throughout their classes approximately the same amount. The student observer noted that humor was used throughout each class, excluding the nonacademic teachers, at least once, and generally

more than 1.5 times. This accounts for the use of humor throughout the lesson being noted as the most highly coded.

The teacher leaders who used humor throughout the lesson knew that they favored the use of humor in the classroom. Shawyne mentioned several times in both his interview and the focus group settings that he believed it was in his personality. He stated, “I think it is who I am. I was the class clown, and now even with teaching and coaching, I use humor.” His use of humor within the class was frequent and consistent.

Being frequent and consistent with any tool or technique helps students with expectations. Alegercia commented that the hardest classes for her to teach are the ones with students who don’t “get it.” She continued, saying:

They just don’t get [the humor]. And for me those are the hardest classes for me to teach, because I think I really use it as a tool to get kids to work with me, and I use it on a pretty constant basis.

Alegercia’s use of humor throughout the class seems to have had an effect on each and every student. She had a great deal of enthusiasm for the duration of both classes that were observed, and students were certainly engaged and active.

Humor also must be authentic, as Alegercia noted. She commented, “You can’t really fake being funny to your kids.” This authenticity is a factor that also relates to the relationship and trust between students and teachers. The relationships that are built because of the use of humor in the classroom are declared as a positive by Terry as well. For her, personality plays a large role in her consistent use of humor. The use of humor throughout her classes is attributed by Terry to the fact that “it makes me happy. It makes

me feel better when I feel like my kids are getting something, and if they are getting it through my delivery, even better.”

### *Humor in the Conclusion of a Lesson*

While it would be ideal for all lessons to end with humor, teachers often want the last thought out the door to be of an academic nature. Just as any dancer can make a dance better, any positive part of a lesson adds to the overall effect of the lesson. The last step in a lesson is the conclusion, summary, or wrap-up. This section of the lessons that were observed contained the least use of humor. There were only two classes in which humor played any role in the end, and it was the same teacher who used this technique both times with Alegrecia used humor during her wrap-up on both occasions.

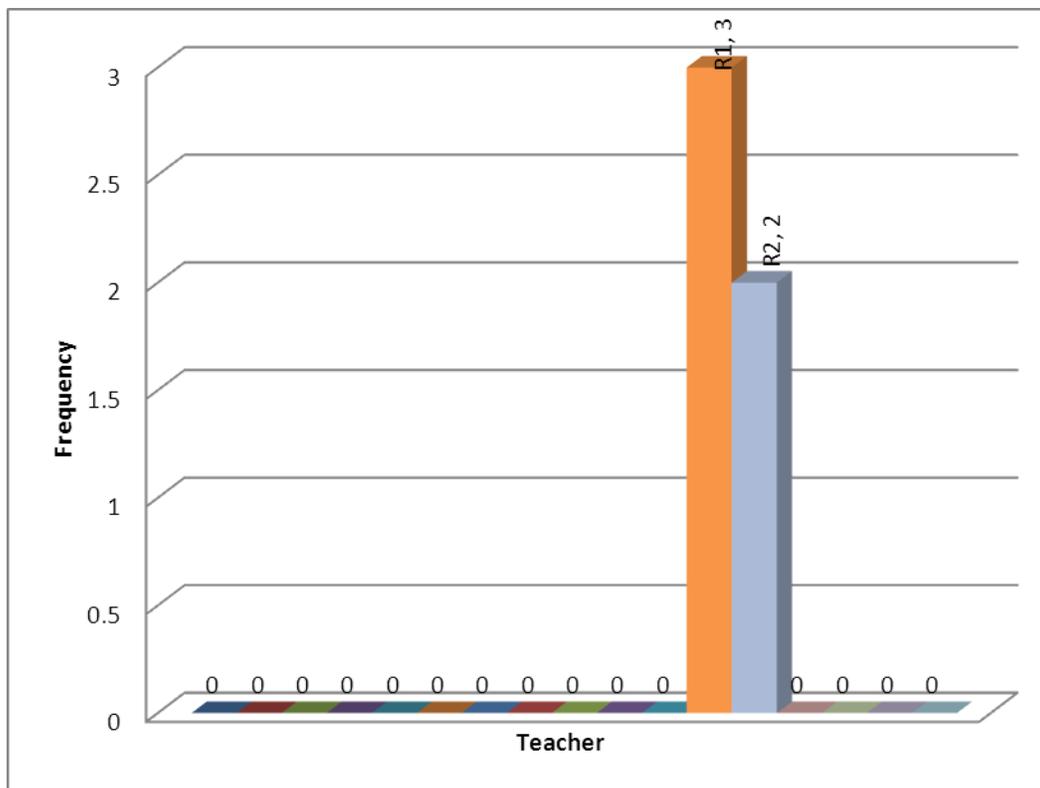
During the first observation, she bantered with students at the conclusion of her lesson about how she saw “so many left legs!” And when a student was a “step” behind, she called out their name with the comment, “Waiting for you to join us!” Students reacted by nodding their heads and making eye contact, letting the teacher know that her comment had been accepted with grace, and no sense of embarrassment was noted. Students were a bit more on edge during the second observation, since their performance was drawing near.

At the conclusion of the second lesson, the students were asked to sit in a circle and share some self-critiques. This was initiated by Alegrecia after she commented that there seemed to be some sleepy people in her room, after she herself let out a very large yawn. While being self-deprecating, her comment allowed students to relax as they got her meaning. They had done this so many times before that it was beginning to get

boring. Alegercia's tone was somewhat cautious, indicating that they should not be complacent.

Alegercia's use of humor at the end of this pre-performance session appeared to be clearly understood, signaling that her communication was clear and that the relationships with students were well established. This also set the climate for the performance, letting students know that they were in fact "ready." The three themes of climate, communication, and relationships were easily recognized in this class. Here, it was okay for students to laugh on the way out, because they were still focused on their performance. This was achieved with humor employed by the teacher, for the sake of the students, and communicated in such a fashion that only students who were students of this teacher would understand, a fact supported by relationships that were already in place.

Table 25. Use of Humor at the Conclusion of the Lesson



The least frequent use of humor was at the conclusion of the lessons. This infrequent use of humor occurred at the end of the lesson, not the class. Only one teacher used humor to conclude her lesson. This same teacher used humor at the end of the lesson each time (see Table 25) According to Alegercia, she has made it a point to ensure that her classes have a positive ending, because she “wants to hook [students] and make them feel like they want more and want to come back.”

### Interview Data

Each participant’s interview responses were also coded thematically and tallied according to theme. Seven questions were posed during each interview. The responses to

each question were coded by climate, communication, engagement, and relationships. The responses were Tabled and appear in Table 26 according to both the theme and interview one and interview two. Special notes were taken during the interviews of comments or observations made by the teachers that seemed especially poignant or significant to the study.

Tables 26 and 27 represent the data gathered from the teacher interviews. While these two Tables represent the same data, the way the data are displayed may be interpreted differently. Table 26 represents the responses of the teachers coded by theme from each individual interview. Taken in sequence by teacher and by interview, it can be seen which theme was the strongest in each conversation.

Paul related humor to engagement the most. His response varied, with the largest difference noted between engagement and communication. According to his comments, the strongest connection to humor is in engagement, which, again, according to his comments, depends upon the classroom climate. The comment “When you go through life, you can laugh or cry” readily explains this teacher’s philosophy. He tries to make the classroom a pleasant place, and students know that he attempts to make the lessons as engaging as possible. Regarding his students, Paul said, “I think their reaction when they walk in the room is that they seem to be pleasant. . . . They know that we are having a semi-enjoyable experience with the class.” He believes that the students think that his class “is going to be something that’s enjoyable to learn . . . and the humor helps get that across.” This teacher focuses on using humor to keep students engaged. He believes that this can be done by establishing a positive climate. A final remark from this teacher when

asked what is good about humor was, “Relationships are the good thing, pleasant atmosphere, and just being able to make your points about the curriculum.”

Using humor to make a point is something that the second teacher observed echoes. In the two interviews with Terry, her comments concerning engagement were the strongest. When dealing with Shakespeare, she recalled that she will “randomly use a quote, and some [students] will laugh, and some of them will be like what is she going to do next?” Terry expressed her desire to make the class fun and entertaining. When asked if she uses humor as a hook, she replied, “I think that people are able to use humor and understand, and I think it helps to broaden their way of thinking about things.” Her comments about communication and humor were strong as well. For this instructor, communication is not always verbal. This teacher connected humor with communication, saying:

A kid will be doing something really goofy and they don't realize that I am watching them, and I'll smile at them, and they will stop doing whatever it is and they'll smile . . . and then we move on.

This instructor sees humor as the key to engagement, which is made easier with communication. For her, that sets up the relationship piece and establishes a positive classroom climate. In a summary statement, Terry characterized humor as a technique that “makes me a better teacher and a better person.”

Making a lesson more engaging with the use of humor is something that Terry states as being crucial in the classroom environment. She commented that:

I think about something kind of lighthearted, something that could cause laughter or give them something to think about. This gets students involved. . . . They have kind of laughed, and it leaves the impression of what it is that I am trying to get them to learn.

As Sheila spoke about humor, she answered the question of how communication is related when she stated that “I think the kids talk more; I have noticed that they get more involved in the discussion.” Because of these discussions, Sheila also feels that humor provides not only an environment that opens communication but also encourages it. She elaborated, saying, “I think that [students] are more open to talk with me because they feel like they can . . . everybody becomes touchable and human.”

Being seen as a human is important to Katrina. The comments that this teacher made in her interview ranged from five statements about climate and relationships, to six statements concerning communication, to seven statements regarding engagement (the highest number of all teachers observed). When asked about using humor as a hook, she reacted, saying, “That’s the only way you are going to get them. If you just give it out to them the traditional style, it’s boring. I bring it to life with the hook.” As a follow-up question, Katrina was asked how she maintains student interest. Her immediate reply was, “Through association. A lot of times one concept leads to another, but you still have them engaged . . . you can inject humor to keep them hooked . . . to capture their attention.” Katrina uses humor in her communication. Humor, she said, helps her communicate “because it takes me out of my 42-year-old realm and . . . into their realm.” As she talked about her use of humor, she also tied in the relationship piece as well, commenting:

I think humor bridges and humor drives the relationship home. . . . I think there are very few people that you have shared a laugh with that you don't care for. If you are able to share a laugh with someone, there is some relation point.

For this instructor, humor fulfills each category.

The interviews that were conducted allowed for teacher responses to be separated into the four categories of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships, as indicated in Tables 23 and 24. Most of the teachers' responses indicated preferences in their views concerning their perceptions of humor. Shawyne's comments evidenced his preference in relationships and then classroom climate, followed by engagement and then communication. He linked his perceptions concerning humor, saying, "It goes back to personality and relationships . . . your relationship with the kids. . . . I want them to have an enjoyable experience . . . with the communication part. I think I am a people person." With Shawyne being a people person, his communication skills assist in the development of relationships with his students, which in turn supports a positive climate within the classroom.

A positive classroom climate can be established with the use of humor in communication between students and teachers. Wayne's interview comments were highest in the categories of communication and engagement. When Wayne was asked about humor in regards to mathematical communication, he explained that it was "a matter of vocabulary" and often a matter of climate. In Wayne's perception, students are "more engaged, more willing to do the work . . . humor lays a more fertile ground to where they are more open to what I have to say and offer." He further explained that he believes humor pulls you back into the conversation, and he commented that humor is an

“engagement tool.” He said, “I might use humor while I am teaching a topic to help [students] remember something or help them find a way to apply . . . and it sticks.”

Climate plays a large role in Wayne’s classroom. Humor, by Wayne’s definition, allows students to “laugh, chuckle, smile, and feel safe.” When humor is involved, he senses that students “feel engaged and are part of what’s going on. Not outsiders looking in.” This speaks to student and teacher communion and engagement, coupled with a classroom climate that enables both. This also intertwines the relationship that has developed between the student and teacher. The use of humor allows for a “feeling of being comfortable from the person who is on the receiving end of the humor . . . a feeling of connecting with the other person when you are the one delivering the humor.” Being engaged is part of being connected.

Emma suggested that humor is most strongly associated with engagement and relationships. When asked to define humor in the classroom, Emma talked about “people feeling comfortable making comments and back and forth . . . and making eye contact.” When asked about the potential benefits of using humor, she noted that “the number one thing is the relationships that you build with the students and to some extent the camaraderie.” Her focus clearly starts with engagement. She talked about using humor as a hook, saying, “We want to trigger memories and engage the learner.” She detailed what her perception of humor within the classroom can incorporate, explaining, “I think conversation and dialogue between the student and the teacher naturally lends itself to humor.”

This conversation, however, is partially dependent upon the relationship that has been established. Emma continued, stating, “Sometimes it is personal, but it’s because you feel comfortable enough with [the students]...It all goes back to the relationships you’ve established.” Emma also commented that:

Every teacher can be funny . . . it doesn’t necessarily have to be jokes that they have preplanned, but there can be an ease and a relaxed atmosphere, once you know what you are doing. The kids know when you know what you are talking about . . . it’s about the authenticity.

This indicates this teacher’s commitment to her students and the relationships that she works to build. The building of her student-teacher relationships is partly the result of her engaging lessons and the climate within her room.

The third highest topic for Emma was the classroom climate category. When asked for a definition of humor, Emma talked about ease in the classroom setting. She commented, “I think easiness. I think like in atmosphere . . . meaning I guess relationship ease. . . . People feel comfortable making comments and jokes.” The categories of engagement, relationships, and climate all work together with the use of humor for this teacher.

The use of humor comes in strongest in connection to engagement and classroom climate for Alegercia. When asked about laughter in coordination with humor, Alegercia related that for her class, humor “makes [students] more aware of themselves and therefore they are more on task.” She also said that students stay engaged when she is acting humorous “because they see me doing something with an exaggerated impression, and they want to look the right way and they want to do it the right way.” Alegercia

acknowledged that when she does this, she “hooks them into what she is doing.” She also acknowledged that she does this on a “pretty constant basis,” which accounts for her comments and strong perception that climate plays a significant role in the use of humor in the classroom. She concludes that “My humor makes people feel comfortable in an uncomfortable place doing something that they’ve not done before,” as she has young people enrolled in her class who have never danced before.

As students have new experiences, they may need encouragement to become engaged in the subject matter. By building relationships, Jackie believes that she can more easily engage students in science. During her interview she stated, “I just think that humor allows you to open up . . . you are opened up to them that you are human and they trust you . . . you have to really know your students. You have to build that relationship.” As she talks about the topics that she teaches, she comments that science “opens itself up to humor and laughter. . . . It’s funny but it engages them and then they pay attention.”

Emma summarized the connection by saying:

Like I said, humor helps me build relationships with the kids. I think I get more out of them. The kids will feel like you’re human, you are working just as hard as they are. You get more out of them.

The highest total number of comments concerning teachers’ perception of the use of humor linked humor to student engagement. The teachers observed believe that engaging students in lessons is the most important use of humor, followed by building relationships with students. These two categories often overlapped. The teachers feel that using humor to build relationships supports engagement, just as the climate in the

classroom plays into the building of relationships and the interaction between students and teachers.

The category of communication was associated with humor the least. The teachers held that communication with students fulfilled a large role in their relationships with students. Their opinion is that a positive climate in the classroom allows for communication between students and the teacher, which in turn supports both relationship building and student engagement. The connection between the themes of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships in regards to teachers' perceptions of the use of humor in their classroom was clear and supported by all their comments.

This first view of the data from teacher interviews represents each teacher's interview on the X axis, 16 total. While there were 9 teachers involved in this case study, two teachers completed only one interview, for the total of 16. The teachers' interviews are displayed in alphabetical order, with the first and second interview placed side by side.

The Y axis indicates the frequency with which the teachers commented directly or indirectly on the themes from the literature involving humor. Climate is labeled CL, communication is labeled CO, engagement is labeled E, and relationships are labeled R.

By rank, the theme most identified was engagement, with 117 comments. Only one teacher from the group of nine that were interviewed did not rank engagement of students using humor in the highest spot. From the 17 teacher interviews, 9 teachers mentioned engagement the most often. Using the sum of the two interviews, there was

only one teacher who did not consistently identify engagement as the most important theme in the use of humor.

The relationship with students was the second most frequently discussed theme, with 80 comments. The teacher who did not weigh engagement as being the most discussed theme chose the relationship between students and teachers to be the most regarded. While the number of teachers mentioning relationships in their interviews had the second-highest number in overall comments, it was not always the second most common theme among teacher interviews. Two teachers, Emma and Jackie, touted relationships as a second most common theme, with Terry identifying both communication and relationships as having equal importance.

The two themes of climate and communication followed in rank order (third and fourth), with 71 comments made regarding the climate in the classroom and humor, and only 60 comments made about the communication between teachers and students using humor. Classroom climate was the third most highlighted theme according to the teachers' comments. Six teachers talked about humor and the climate in the classroom 71 times, placing that theme in third place, or slightly higher in some cases. Six teachers cited climate more so than relationships in separate interviews. In four of the six individual interviews, teachers were tied in their responses regarding climate and another important theme.

While the total number of references to communication was the lowest, at 60 responses, it should be noted that the highest number of comments directed toward a theme from any individual interview was 11. The highest number of comments dealing

with communication was 10, coming from Wayne. Wayne indicated that while for him engagement was the most significant theme, the highest number, toward communication (10), came from the initial interview. Three teachers' interview summaries (Terry, Sheila, Katrina) indicated that communication was their second most accounted for theme.

The numerical differences between the themes noted were small. The largest split was between engagement comments, at 117, and communication comments, at 60. Overall, the differences between categories averaged out to be 19 comments.

Table 26. Interview Responses by Theme per Teacher

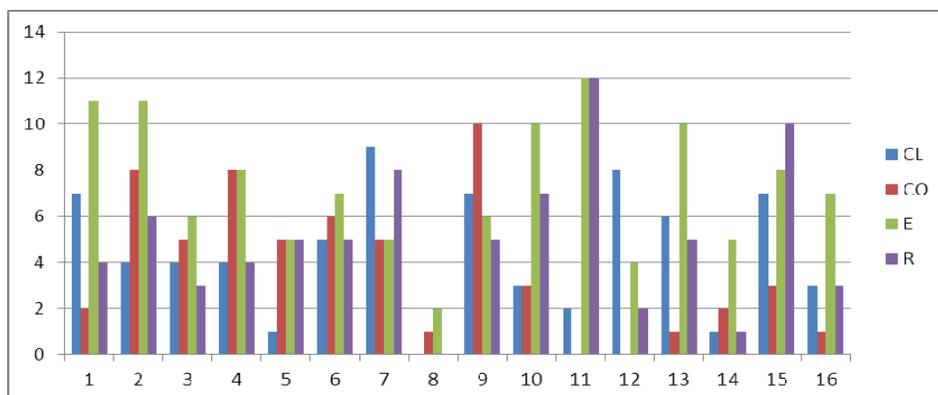
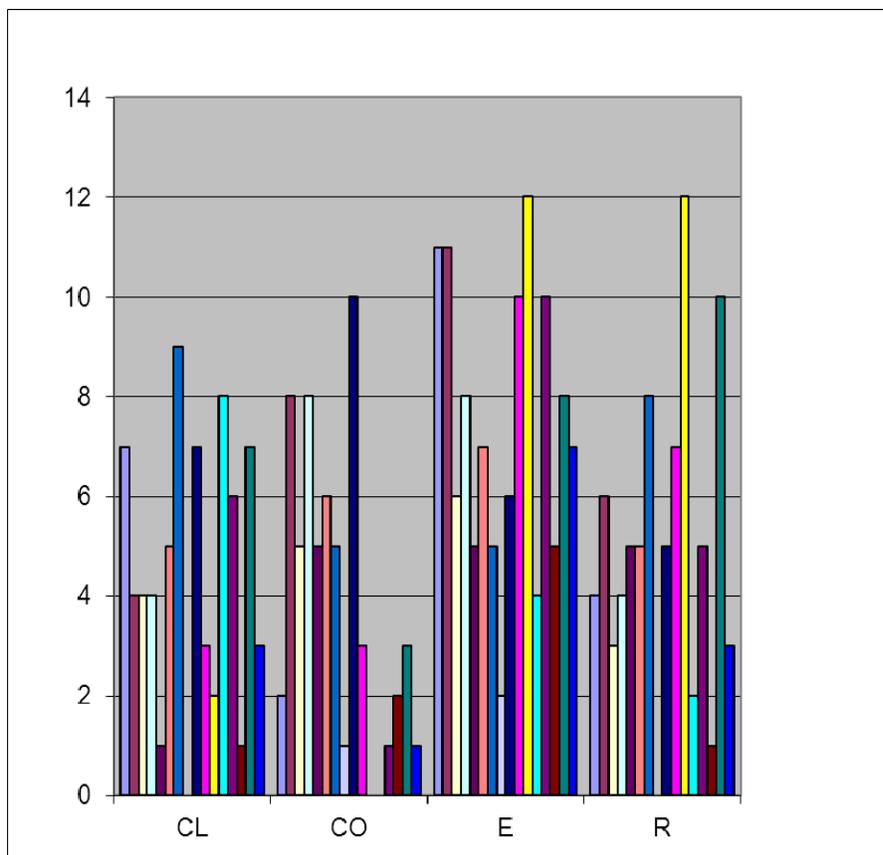


Table 27 also represents the teachers' interviews. It depicts the themes on the X axis as the unit and the teacher frequency on the Y axis. The information is the same in both Tables; however, this second Table is organized according to theme. The theme of engagement clearly has more comments from the teachers. The theme that was referred to the most was engagement, with communication showing the smallest number of teacher comments. The second most frequently referenced theme was the relationship between

students and teachers, and the last two themes mentioned in teacher interviews were climate and communication.

Table 27. Interview Responses by Theme



### Focus Groups

Data taken from the focus groups centered on the teacher interview questions asked (see Appendix B). While these questions could be answered with short replies of “yes” or “no,” in most cases, the participants added reasons and explanations. These data are represented in Tables 25, 26, and 27. An additional question was asked in summary

fashion designed to illicit personal reasons that teachers would plan to use humor within a lesson.

The first question that was poised to the teachers in the focus group meetings was, “Do you believe that humor can be effective in all subject areas?” All the teachers in attendance agreed that there was not a subject that could not benefit from the use of humor. Terry supported the idea that teachers can utilize humor in teaching all subjects, saying, “We all know the subject matter . . . we can stick some humor in there that will go along with our lessons.”

Finding humor effective also depends upon the content knowledge of the teacher. One teacher commented, “If you feel comfortable with your subject matter, I think it is easier to achieve humor. . . . I very much agree that all subjects can use humor.” An additional comment focused on subject matter and the use of humor came from Wayne, a math teacher, math being a subject that many would find difficult to align with any humor. Wayne acknowledged that:

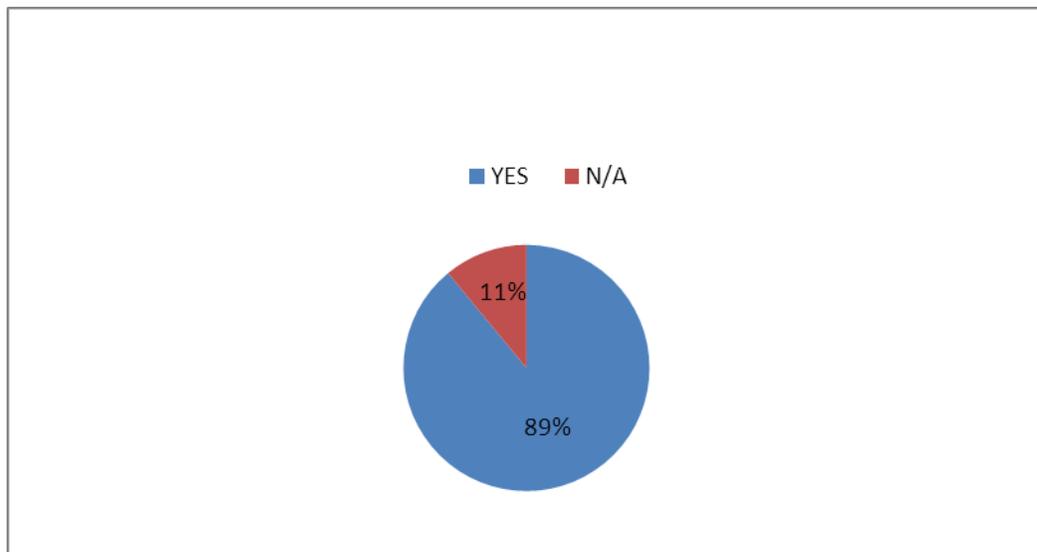
I agree. It deals with your perception or the way that you deal with children and your relationship with them . . . by the end of the year you know their sense of humor and you play to it. . . . It’s sort of a hook.

This part of the discussion was followed up with a statement from Jackie in regards to the relationships that are established with students. Jackie added, “You’ve got to get to know them . . . and if you don’t laugh, you’ll cry!” Each teacher clearly articulated their belief that humor can be used in all areas.

Two other teachers, Alegercia and Paul, concurred that they believe that humor can be used in all subject areas. Alegercia declared, “I definitely think all of the arts could have humor. I don’t see a course where it would be inappropriate. I could see there being classes where it would be a little harder to use.” Paul made a similar declaration, stating, “I think in every subject . . . there’s a place for it. I don’t know where it would not be appropriate.” Finally, a reply from the drama teacher concerning humor was as follows: “I don’t see why it shouldn’t be effective in some form.” A statement linking humor to all subjects came from an English teacher, who said, “I think it can be used in all subject areas. I think it has more to do with personality and making connections with the students to build relationships.” In terms of connecting humor and subject matter to students, Shawyne concluded a part of the discussion by saying, “I think it goes back to personality . . . and how the person can use it. . . . It can be used anywhere. . . . It helps the relationship.”

Table 28 indicates the percentage of teachers who believe humor to be effective in all areas. Eight of the nine teachers invited to meet as a focus group believed that humor can be used effectively in all subject areas. All eight teachers agreed on this while in the discussion groups. There was one teacher who did not participate in either group, and so the lack of a clear opinion has been coded as not applicable. That teacher did express an opinion in an individual interview, but it was given with qualifiers and thus was incorporated as noted.

Table 28. Percentage of Teachers Interviewed Who Believe Humor to Be Effective in All Areas.



### **Can Humor Be Used Effectively With All Student Groups?**

As the teachers talked about their relationships with students and the use of humor, the question of how to use humor effectively with all student groups was presented. The majority of the teachers concluded that humor can be used across all student groups. The strongest belief was shared by Paul, who stated:

I think some humor is universal, especially for kids. Because they all have a common experience of being at this school...So there are some things in common that no matter what group you belong to...there are some things that are going to be funny to all.

In terms of agreement that humor can be effective with all students, Wayne and Shawyne were both adamant. Both teachers quickly declared, “Absolutely!” when it was asked if humor can be used with EC, ESL, and other groups of students.

There were also teachers who hesitated when asked about the use of humor across all student groups. Terry lamented that “Sometimes they don’t. Sometimes you might have to kind of . . . coax them to understand.” In response, Terry said, “Part of it is that they don’t have the world view . . . and so when you make a reference to something . . . they might not know.” This teacher, while in agreement with the use of humor, was not convinced that it could be used effectively with all groups of students. Her concerns related to students who speak different languages. She continued, saying:

Because some things don’t translate . . . you have to be careful with students who are EC, mostly because they are EC and they might get insulted, might get confused . . . and if one kid gets it and one kid doesn’t get it, they might feel left out and that’s not cool.

While all the teachers agreed with these comments, they did not change the overall level of support for the use of humor.

As the conversation continued, the teachers began to reach a consensus, especially when a comment was made regarding race. Shawyne aligned himself with the group that felt that humor works in all student groups and added, “You were saying about can it go across all groups, well I guess white, African American, Hispanic, whatever, it goes back to personality and the relationships.”

The theme of relationships was also mentioned as a part of using humor with all student groups when Paul said, “I think some humor does hit some people differently and not others.” Shawyne illustrated this point by adding:

I think sometimes [the students] are laughing because everybody else is laughing... but I mean they don't want to be left out. Either way you still get your point across, and they still feel like the class is fun.

Making the class engaging is the direction that Jackie was going in when she commented, "You have to get to know [students] first. But once you get to know them you can figure out what works." Shawyne also expanded his connection with humor being used with all student groups to the themes of engagement. He explained, "Whatever their perception is, you're pulling them in so that eventually you can get your instruction in." Terry then related this to the relationship between students and teachers, adding, "I try to break the ice, to let the kids know who I am and to develop relationships... I believe that humor does develop a sense of relationship."

While talking about developing relationships with students, Emma related that she feels that humor can be used with all groups, but she also offered some guidelines that encompass classroom climate. She stated:

I want a relaxed atmosphere. But a couple of things . . . I think that all of us have self-awareness when we use humor. . . . We know how far to go and where to draw the line. . . . It goes back to the relationships as well.

She articulated that humor can make the classroom a comfortable place, but there also must be some discretion in its use. The climate of the classroom was a factor for Paul as well, who said that:

There are some things they [the students] have in common, no matter what group you belong to . . . so there are some things that are going to be funny to all of them. . . . The school experience . . . gives them a common dominator.

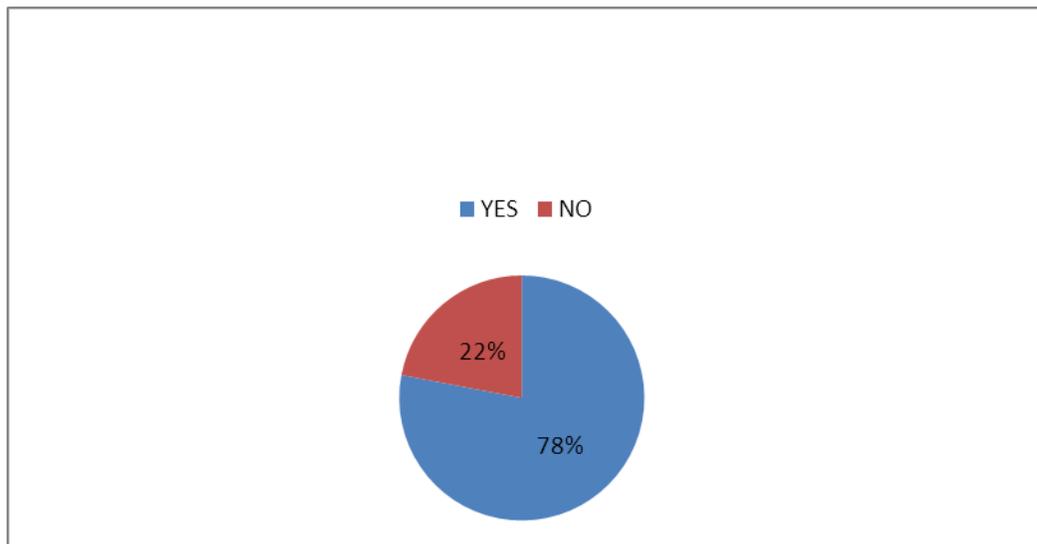
Given the common ground for the use of humor, who uses the humor is still an important factor. The identity of the person using humor is something that Alegercia spoke about. This teacher commented:

I think humor is usable with all student groups, but I am sure that there are people who are more effective with student groups. Like I might be more effective with the Hispanic student groups than with the African Americans . . . but a teacher who maybe was African American, I think, would make jokes that maybe I couldn't make.

Making jokes and using humor is something that all these teachers seem to be able to do naturally and with ease.

Table 29 represents the percentage of teachers who believe humor to be effective with all student groups and the percentage of teachers who believe humor to be ineffective with all student groups. Six of the teachers who responded positively to this question did so adamantly. One teacher was in basic agreement and then joined with the majority to say "yes." Another teacher agreed that humor can be effective with all student groups but is not always useful. This response has been included in the "no" responses. The teacher who did not participate in the focus groups specifically mentioned in an interview that humor could and should be used with all student groups. This comment was added to those that agreed with the effectiveness of humor. Specifics were discussed within the groups, but there were no changes in the answers.

Table 29. Percentage of Teachers Who Believe Humor to Be Effective Versus the Percentage of Teachers Who Believe Humor to Be Ineffective With All Student Groups



### **Do Teachers Believe That Other Teachers Can Be Taught to Use Humor?**

The reactions from these teacher leaders were essentially split. Out of the nine teachers who answered this question, four said yes, four said no, and one said it was different for every person. From the perspective of the teachers who believe that humor cannot be taught to other instructors, two reasons resonated. First, Shawyne, who initially verbalized his belief that humor was different for different people, expanded on his feelings. He elaborated on the fact that some people just resist change, saying:

I think it goes back to the fact of how open they [teachers] are to change and what it is they do from a personal perspective. We can sit here all day and say we want you to change this about how you teach . . . but we really can't.

He went on to say that, "I don't see how you could teach them. I would have a hard time . . . it has to be a part of their personality, it has to be real."

In the same vein, Alegercia added the crucial factor of authenticity. The comparison was made to a learning-focused lesson plan and the methodology behind teaching. Alegercia said, “You can totally, totally fake a lesson plan and be like, yeah I’m using it and it’s great, but then not actually use it . . . but you can’t really fake being funny.” According to this teacher, this is not to say that teacher humor cannot be interjected into a lesson. She added:

I don’t think you could teach [teachers], like feed them lines, but if you observed them you could probably help them identify the moment just like you can teach people to find a teachable moment. I think you can teach people to find the funny moment in what they already had planned.

Using humor to support instruction can therefore lead to an authentic teachable moment.

Shawyne’s support of the idea of authentic and inauthentic actions is also important to note. He commented that “You can see through the humor. If [teachers] are not comfortable or if I am not comfortable being funny, those kids are going to call you out.” This instructor was clear in his beliefs that humor is a personal choice and that “a lot of people would never want to put themselves out there and take that risk.” Paul hesitated to support the idea that teachers can teach other teachers to use humor, countering, “I don’t know. I think it would be tough to do. I think some people just naturally do it.”

Being natural with humor was a topic introduced into the discussion by Wayne. Using humor in the “moment,” just as Alegercia described the teachable moment, is what Wayne described as using humor advantageously. Wayne elaborated, saying:

I think it's something where you have to take advantage of a moment when it occurs in the classroom. . . . The majority of it is spontaneous. . . . Can it be taught? No. Can it be shown and encouraged? . . . Yes, depending upon the relationships that you have with the child.

As described by Katrina, the personality of the teacher plays a crucial role in illustrating why she believes that teachers cannot be taught to use humor. Katrina says that this reasoning is twofold, because:

One, a lot of adults are scarred . . . so humor comes out as rehearsed. It's phony and it's not real. The other is that what I think is funny and what you think is funny can be two different things. . . . And while everyone can tell a joke or a story . . . it's not always effective.

Choosing instructional methods that support educational goals is effective. Jackie talked about those choices and about authenticity in relation to humor, saying:

I don't think it's something you can teach to college kids, like Education 101: How to use humor in the classroom. You have to see it. You have to see how it's used in different ways, and it has to be a part of who you are, because you can't fake who you are. . . . If you don't know how to be funny, they'll call you on the carpet.

For these teachers, the use of humor comes from personality and from experience in using it.

Terry, a drama teacher, was one of those educators in the focus groups who believes that humor can be taught to other instructors. Her comment, which was directed at teaching others to use humor, included humor, when she stated:

A lot of what we all do is like improv. It's like *Comedy Central*, and there are improv games and improv exercises that we do in class to try and loosen up. . . . This makes me a better teacher.

She also made the comment that she believes that she could teach someone to be “amusing” and that she could also teach them to use humor “as a skill.”

Using humor as a “skill” is something that Sheila explained when asked about the possibility of teaching other teachers to use humor. Sheila elaborated, saying:

I think you could say to another teacher to go deep within their personality and find something that's humorous and funny to them. And is there a way that you could put that in the class to direct them in the curriculum, because all of us have a light heart somewhere . . . there is something that makes us laugh.

According to this teacher, laughter makes people “feel better.” Feeling better to her means being more warmhearted, as in we can do this! Doing “this” has the meaning of teaching. Doing “this” means engaging the student.

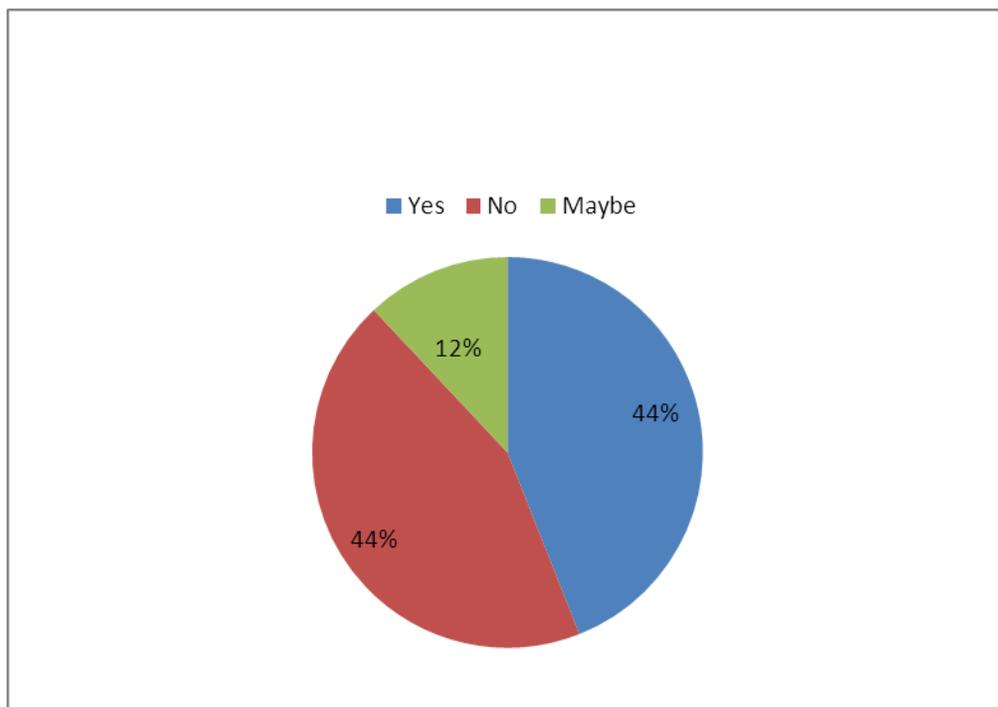
When Emma was asked if she thought that other teachers could be taught to use humor, her answer was not how to do “this,” but how to “engage” in “this,” as in conversation. She said:

I do think it is possible to teach other teachers to use humor, but I have to be honest, a lot of it is personality. I do think it is possible to teach humor in the classroom, but I think it needs to start not in how to tell a joke, but how to engage the learner in conversation. And I think conversation and dialogue between the student and the teacher naturally lends itself to humor.

Communication, talking, and engaging the student with humor is something this instructor believes can be taught to other instructors.

Table 30 displays the percentage of teachers who do believe that other teachers can be taught to use humor versus the percentage of teachers who not believe that other teachers can be taught to use humor. The teachers in the focus groups were split in their beliefs. Four believe that other teachers could be taught to use humor to the benefit of students and instruction. Ways that they felt other teachers could be taught to use humor in their teaching included having student teachers watch others use humor as a strategy during student teaching or adding this strategy to instructional updates. The teacher who did not join in the focus group meetings was asked this question, and the reply was a distinct “no,” as that instructor believes that humor comes from the personality of the individual and cannot be taught. The teacher who is listed as a “maybe” indicated that while it might be possible to teach humor, it would be difficult because humor comes from a teacher’s personality.

Table 30. Percentage of Teachers Who Believe That Other Teachers Can Be Taught to Use Humor Versus the Percentage of Teachers Who Do Not Believe That Other Teachers Can Be Taught to Use Humor.



### **What Are Some Reasons Teachers Plan to Use Humor in Their Classrooms?**

As the teacher leaders responded to this last group question, they all added explanations. Each educator had several reasons for adding humor to their lessons, which, in part, had already been discovered in their individual interviews. The majority spoke about the relationships that humor supported. Paul said, “I would say most of my humor is not planned, but I know there are times when I know I am going to use it in class. I think there can be a link between humor and the curriculum.” According to Paul, the reasons to build humor into your lesson are “relationships and a pleasant atmosphere and just being able to make your points about the curriculum.”

Illustrating points from the required curriculum is not always an easy task. Terry commented that for her one of the reasons to use humor is the relief it provides within the classroom. Providing a comfortable climate through communication is a key for this teacher, who stated that “[Humor] makes me feel better . . . and if [the students] are getting it through my delivery, which happens to be humorous . . . , I feel better.” She added that she has actually “made little notes ‘like don’t forget to tell the story about X’ . . . if they make a ‘he, he’ . . . they are going to remember it.” This too sets the climate for the lesson and gets students “in an introduction” state of mind, according to this drama instructor.

Using humor in lessons to hook students is a favorite part for Sheila. Cultivating students’ interest in a lesson with a hook helps to ease the communication and is reflected upon in terms of student relationships by this upper-level English teacher. When asked about planning to use humor, she emphatically replied, “I think that it would be a good thing to plan it even more. It gets students engaged physically, and then the brain is engaged also.” While the instructional part of humor is important, it is the personal element and the relationship with students that this teacher perceives as being the most crucial. Sheila added, “The biggest thing to me is relationship. I still think that if we can get a relationship with a student, it’s the relationship that lets us win them.”

Winning students over is an aspect of teaching that Katrina puts emphasis on. When asked why teachers plan to use humor, she first talks about hooking students in, stating:

It only takes a little bit to capture them. Once I have them captured, then I inject [humor]. It brings things to life. . . . A lot of times one concept leads to yet another, but you still have them engaged. There is always somewhere in the lesson that you can relate to something that's funny . . . that you can inject the humor into keep them hooked in.

This point of injection, the communication tools that this teacher uses with humor, combine for her in forming the foundations of the relationships that she builds. Humor, she noted, is “therapy for me.”

This therapy includes the development of relationships with students. Katrina adds, “If you are able to share a laugh with someone, there is some relation point.” She identifies herself as “a relationship and relativity-type teacher.” Humor, she says, is a “very easy way for me to include a number of things across the curriculum. It gives me an entry point.”

Every lesson has a point where humor could be interjected. Wayne was adamant that planning humor would decrease its usefulness. He posited, “If you plan for laughter it will not work . . . because they are going to look at it as that's just part of the lesson.” Still, he declared that using humor “garnered better rapport with the students.” He elaborated, saying, “You will find that if you do use humor that kids will automatically smile.” This type of communication provides a platform for engagement and relationships.

Wayne mentioned engagement as an additional benefit of the use of humor, saying, “It gives you the ability . . . to ask more of the child. They will want to work for you.” Wayne defined the simple use of humor, stating that it allows for a “feeling of connecting with the other person when you are the one delivering the humor,” opening

the door for a relationship between the student and teacher in which the teacher is seen as a human. For him, humor works as motivation in his math class. He continued:

I use humor while I am teaching a topic to help [students] remember something or help them find a way to apply it . . . and the reaction is a giggle or a laugh and it sticks . . . and it works.

For Emma, her use of humor supports relationships, camaraderie, and engagement. In terms of camaraderie, Emma reaches out to individual students. She revealed, “Sometimes you make a joke, just because you know that one kid will get it.” She reaches out with humor in terms of engagement and relationships. Emma also shared that “In my class I strive for humor because I need these kids to talk back to me . . . to take part in discussions.” She uses humor as a storyteller to engage students, which also lets her display a human side. Emma also said, “I believe it is about storytelling. . . . This will lend itself to discussions about you and your life experiences and then bring them into the discussions as well. . . . It can spawn from there.” For her, the focus on the use humor “goes back to relationships and knowing the kid.”

Knowing the student is the main focus when considering the use of humor for Alegercia. When asked what humor facilitates in the classroom, her immediate reply was “relationships.” Because her class is a dance class and has somewhat different objectives than regular classes, she added, “I don’ t think people always realize how much they have to step outside of their comfort zone in what we do in this class, and [humor]helps them.” For her, humor not only helps with student engagement, but with the climate in the classroom as well. She elaborated, “I use humor to get [students] to understand what

looks right and looks wrong in the dance perspective, and so using that humor makes them see the right alignment.” Alegercia says that it is this relationship that “makes [students] feel like they have a thing with me . . . a connection, and that makes them want to be good for me in certain ways.”

What it means for a student to be good or fulfill teacher expectations is different for each teacher. For Jackie, humor is a part of her life philosophy, which she indicated saying, “My life philosophy is that, yes, we can work hard, I bust my butt, but I also have fun at it.” When asked to define humor, she exclaimed, “Fun, part of my everyday routine . . . you have to laugh!” As a teacher leader, Jackie has incorporated humor into her classroom, and she sees the results in part as, “I get more kids coming to tutoring, and the test scores have been to the roof, but you are working hard.” For her, the hard work is softened by the use of humor. The scores are because “yes, we are working hard, but we are going to get to that goal, but we are also enjoying it. . . . Humor makes the student feel important.” For her, life “is fun and you have to enjoy it,” and that philosophy expands into her classroom and to her students.

Using humor in the classroom has become the norm for Shawyne. His teaching is student-focused. He openly stated that he was once the class clown and that he uses humor at the start to “lighten the mood and to show that he is human.” Starting with humor for Shawyne lets him “bring [students] in to break the ice.” Once the climate is established, his perception is that he can begin to build relationships with the students. During the discussion, Shawyne commented that he believes humor has enabled him to create connections with his students. He stated, “I think it’s my connection to those guys

on a personal level that lets me say the things I do.” For him, his humor establishes the relationships, and because of that his classroom flourishes.

In sum, three of the nine participants reflected that their definition of humor had changed as a result of participating in my study. They all discovered from my focus group with them that their use of humor was effective and they found support in each other’s dialogue. Initially these participants saw humor as a bonus to effective instruction. At the conclusion these participants agreed that the effectiveness of their instruction came in part from their use of humor within effective instruction. The best reflection came from the Science teacher:

My ideas about humor have expanded. . . . I don’t feel like I question myself all the time with [humor] because sometimes I don’t know if it’s effective. . . . But now I am hearing from other people in my profession, and they say ‘oh yeah, it works.’ And you know, those colleagues get results, and hearing the kids talk, I got to reflect, and wow, something is being done right here.

These teacher leaders’ concurrence concerning the use of humor supported their instructional beliefs and reinforced their individual teaching abilities.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS**

#### **Relevance for Educational Researchers from My Study**

Educational researchers are more likely to recognize the value of the use of humor in the classroom setting based on the findings from this study. The key elements of effective classroom, classroom climate, communication to students, the engagement of students and the relationships between students and teachers lend themselves to the study of the effects of humor. Previous studies have included the use of humor but in a limited fashion. This research builds on the educational literature (Fowler, 2006; Gordon, 1992; Minchew, 2008; Tatum, 1999) within the context of humor at K-20 educational levels by describing the perceptions of selected teacher leaders in a secondary setting.

It stands to reason that this case study has limitations because other literature at the different educational levels has also reflected small participant samples and brief time spans (Done, 2066; Glenn, 2002; Hellman, 2007). In this particular research, my case study has been confined to one school, one district, and one state and to the topic of the effective use of humor in the classroom by teacher leaders.

Some educational researchers may think that the study of humor is not a serious topic and that it lacks merit. Quite the opposite can be argued. Effective teachers have many desirable characteristics, such as patience and dependability. Humor is also

strength for teachers. Humor can be considered a positive component within instruction and providing effective instruction is the main task of any teacher. Administrators who select teachers with the ability to effectively instruct tend to use interview protocols. Within those protocols is a screening process informally called “The Haberman” (Habermann, 1995). This interview rubric is used for screening and employment of teachers. Having used this rubric in the interview process since 2009, it has not escaped my notice that “humor” is included on the rubric as a featured characteristic of teacher personality as is the “love” of students. The scoring is higher when humor is directly expressed by the teacher during the question-and-answer segment of the interview.

Future directions that build on my study for other researchers might include ways in which humor affects students. Students of wide ethnic backgrounds are enrolled in public schools. For example teacher directed humor may or may not translate into students’ ethnic backgrounds, which could enhance or detract from student learning. The climate, communication, engagement, and student relationships that result from the effective use of humor within classroom instruction can be observed with a lens toward student gender, cultural sensitivity, and overall well-being. Researchers can also assist in explaining how to evaluate the use of humor within instruction with the use of performance indicators such as measures of student learning, (e.g., GPA, graduation rates, and SAT scores), and staff development, PLC.

Relevance regarding the use of humor might be investigated within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). As teachers meet with an increased commitment to satisfy the new measures of student learning assessments a teaching strategy that includes

humor might help reach these growth measurements. Tasks of PLCs include unpacking standards, establishing common lessons, developing assessments and determining which methodologies or strategies are effective (Mullen, 2009). The PLC literature might benefit from an overview of the shared experience of teacher leaders who have successfully included humor in their instruction.

### **Relevance for High School Teachers from My Study**

Through my study the effective use of humor in the classroom was validated by nine teacher leaders. The participants espoused the purposeful use of humor for supporting classroom instruction. Teachers and classrooms are observed for many reasons. The questions surrounding the themes that follow are directly from my study experience:

- What is going on? (my theme of engagement)
- Why are the students laughing? (my theme of communication)
- What is enjoyable? (my theme of climate)
- What is the relationship between the students and the teacher? (my theme of relationships).

Using humor effectively can address the above four questions.

Teacher leaders in general can effectively use humor by focusing on the quality of the climate, communication, engagement, and relationships in their classrooms. Teacher leaders might want to begin sharing those professional practices that include the purposeful use of humor to accent student learning. Sharing those practices should enable the majority of teachers to experience the positive effects of adding humor to their

classroom. Teacher leaders can model the use of humor and professional engagement through PLCs, peer observations, workshops and other staff enhancements (Bond, 2011; Danielson, 2005).

My classroom observations of the teacher leaders provided evidence of the effective use of humor. While each lesson was not necessarily “funny,” the common themes of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships were all embellished with humor. Based on my observations as a researcher, from the very start of the class the teacher leaders welcomed students and effectively used humor throughout the lesson.

As the teacher leaders reviewed their data from my observations, they would often comment about the lesson such as “Great, my students listened to that statement concerning volume and how rocks would fit in the back of a pickup truck” (Wayne, Math teacher). My participants seemed somewhat surprised at the frequency of the tally marks on the observations sheets. Many did not seem to realize how much and how often humor had been used by them during their own class period. Some of the humor I observed in the observations was spontaneous and effective. For all the teacher leaders, this seemed to present an opportunity to enhance the lesson and their student-teacher relationships.

Classroom climate appeared to have benefitted from the teachers’ use of humor. Even the higher level math teacher’s actions reflected a positive classroom environment. The classroom environment was strengthened when students communicated with their teachers. Effective teacher leaders encourage communication and with the incorporation of humor students exchanged ideas.

The exchange of ideas and the engagement of students were high in Jackie's science classes. She seemed to make everything relate in a humorous fashion to both the students and the curriculum. Being able to be seen as "human" by the students was evident in Shawyne's classes.

The teacher leaders who use humor effectively seem to take a step towards building that all important relationship with the students. Alegercia had established a strong bond and relationship with her dance students. The students laughed as they took risky dance steps, which suggested to me that they had established a comfortable if not trusting relationship. In summary, the four themes of climate, communication, engagement, and relationships were all demonstrated by the teacher leaders' effective use of humor during the observation stage of this research.

My interviews and the focus group discussions were meaningful because of the personalized perceptions about the use of humor that they shared. When they would talk to me about the observations the teacher leaders made comments about the lessons. It was the Sports Marketing teacher who said he used humor because he wanted his class to be enjoyable. The Drama teacher declared that she told stories to keep the students involved and to make them feel at home: "They become my kids, and so I treat them like my own."

When the teacher leaders told stories there was a point to them. The Technology teacher said emphatically that she did not have time for slap-stick humor. She used stories as foundations for her lessons. As she talked about having a mailbox or getting mail through a slot, there was a technical reason for that story. She wanted the students to

relate to others. The engagement in this lesson was found with her effective use of humor.

Using humorous events to describe her own personal history with an event centering on Macbeth is how the English teacher used humor. She relayed to the students a comparison between the witches and her sisters in the ways that they plotted to get their way. These stories not only strengthen the communication but helped the climate in the room.

Taking risks without embarrassment is this teacher's goal. It is the fact and the way that she humorously communicated that seemed to win over the students. There was also a certain ease and openness reflected in the climate that the Social Studies teacher achieved in her room.

This Social Studies teacher believed that humor could be expressed by being "gracious." As the students reacted to the ease of the classroom, she said that engagement was enhanced and communication increased. She, like her teacher leader colleagues, felt that students should be able to make a mistake but have a path to recover. The science classroom also had a welcoming climate and the engagement appeared easily recognizable. Her use of humor was obvious with both the class and individual students.

However, the use of humor was not always positive in my data sets. For example the Math teacher quickly admitted to using some sarcasm, but added that students "sometimes need to grow a thicker skin." The students seemed to react positively to his teasing taunts. The engagement factor in the math lessons demonstrated that his use of humor may have been effective.

The Technology teacher said she made fun of herself making it easier for the students understand. Her comments were mirrored by the Life Skills teacher who said that he told his students that he would make them laugh. This connection for him signaled engagement and relationship building. He gave several examples of how other teachers tried to imitate his humorous demeanor. The cautionary point in regards to his statement was that not everyone may be able to use humor effectively. The perceptions of the teacher leaders studied support the inclusion of humor in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Humor may be considered a universal language in the classroom. However, it might be beneficial for researchers to examine any differences that the effect of humor may have on high school students with respect to their gender and ethnicity. One of the teacher leaders interviewed reported that on occasion that humor “just wouldn’t translate,” as in the instances where comments of hers left out the Hispanic students. While this unfortunate dynamic was not raised by any other participants, this issue is still a concern in our diverse world.

Through their reflections, each teacher leader in this study has reiterated the value of effectively using humor in the classroom. All nine participants addressed the dynamics of climate, communication, engagement, and relationship as part of effective schools, effective teachers, and effective instruction. It was not surprising that these teacher leaders all recognized humor as being an important motivator in effective instruction. Their perceptions about humor fit with the established literature on instruction, humor, climate, communication, engagement and student teacher relationships. My belief that

humor can and should be used to support instruction, with the goal of providing a successful education to all students has been reinforced.

My observations of these teachers' instructional practices revealed that they all used humor in some form. The interviews probed the teachers' perceptions of the use of humor. The focus groups encouraged the teachers to share their perceptions about how they viewed their classrooms. These three methods of data collection allowed me to triangulate the results and explore more fully instructional delivery in the classroom.

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