

**Carve That Opossum and Plucky, Ducky Underwear:  
A Narrative Inquiry of Laughter in a Preschool Classroom**

by  
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(ABSTRACT)

This thesis is a narrative inquiry of laughter in a University Lab School preschool classroom that describes the many situations in which children laugh as well as laughter's importance for the children, for me, and for all of us as a whole within the context of our classroom. To date, there is a paucity of research on children's laughter, especially in young children. The majority of research that has been conducted has been quantitative in nature, with few attempts to comprehensively describe the many situations in which laughter occurs. For my study, I felt it crucial to look at, document, and describe preschoolers' laughter, taking into consideration the many facets of their school day including free play, story time, playground time, and snack time. My sample included all of my 14 preschoolers, who ranged in age from 3 years to 4 years, 4 months at the outset of the study. I also deemed it important to look at what these laughter-producing situations meant to me and the children in my classroom, including what deeper worth laughter for all of us, how we used it in the classroom, and how it helped me to grow both personally and professionally through my research.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*“To laugh is to live is to laugh is to live until you choke to death from laughter.”*

(Sarah Smidl, 2002)

#### ‘Til Laugh Do Us Part

When one begins the formality of a thesis, it is hard to imagine becoming so engrossed in a topic and so passionate about the research that it encompasses every ounce of who you are and have ever been, especially when you have remained undiscovered to yourself throughout the process of life. As I began to anticipate the thought of constructing a project of thesis magnitude on something that would capture my heart, or at least my attention for an entire year, I became so swallowed with hopeless trepidation that I either came up with 100 ideas or none at all. I did not want to do research simply to do it; I wanted to be it, but I didn’t know how.

Then one day in the fall of 2001 I met myself and became my research on laughter. The month was October, one month into the school year, date unknown, as I did not immediately recognize that this day would be significant at all. To that point I knew myself only as one who sees her body naked and vulnerable everyday for 27 years knows herself—very superficially and surely not satisfactorily. I had knowledge of existence, but was afraid to stare in the mirror with the realization that I may look too deeply, past the skin, and see my unconquerable age, unanswered meaning, and impending deterioration. For the first time in my life since early adolescence was I able

to look myself in the eyes without looking away. Then after some time had passed, when I did look away, I was able to look back. And back again and again. Now 1-½ years later I can still look with uneasy conviction that I am comfortable with the person that I am and have become through circumstance, and I have finally accepted the person who I know as me.

“We know ourselves only insofar as we know others and we know others only insofar as we know ourselves” (J. Garrison, personal communication, June, 2001). Since stumbling upon this quote the summer before last, I have contemplated its meaning. Being a lover of others’ wisdom with the knowledge that I am still unable to be eloquently wise myself, it was one of those quotes that was obviously deep, though I could not yet relate it to my life. I wrote it down. I read it. Over and over and over and over. I looked at it with conquering eyes. I memorized it. I sang it even though I cannot sing worth a damn. Not until that random day in the fall did it become meaningful to me in a way that has made me grope its depth everyday since. Somehow through laughter, the children taught me its meaning and showed me how to look to others to discover myself. Now when I sing it I don’t hear my voice but its power.

On the day that I knew I needed to study humor and laughter, I was in my toddler classroom and we were in the middle of snack time. Anyone who has worked with toddlers knows that snack time is tumultuous enough without any extraneous occurrences. Suddenly, Ethel, 2 years and 4 months old at the time, put down her spoon, pushed back her chair, stood on it, smiled with pure intent to smile (I know it was intended as I saw it thoughtfully creep upon her face), and proceeded to laugh, all the while making direct eye contact with me. Immediately, because we have rules in the

classroom that say you shouldn't stand on your chair while you are eating because you might choke or fall, I looked at her sternly and stated in my deepest and most serious of teacher voices, "Ethel, please sit down during snack time." Much to my surprise, she continued to stand, seemingly precipitously, on the edge of her chair. Again, and I know my eyebrows were raised this time as I could feel them ascending toward my hairline, I emphatically declared, "Ethel, I said please sit down." She stood, she stood, she stood, and on she stood, smiling and laughing throughout.

Immediately I knew why she continued to stand. She did not tell me, as her language and intuition were not developed enough to let me know her thoughts, and I don't believe she was consciously aware of why she was still standing. But *I* did. Suddenly it was not about social norms, manners, rules of the classroom, or the fact that I was "in charge" of the classroom of 7 toddlers." The only thing it was about, was that somehow, deep in her complex 2-year-old unbelievable mind, she knew there to be a deep-rooted intersubjectivity in the situation—she somehow knew I thought it was hilarious and my actions were not representative of my true feelings. The truth was, I did think it was fantastically funny, from deep down to my very core of being, and I only tried to hide it because I thought I was supposed to be in control—*of something*. I was torn between their chair-standing behavior, which was defying my authority as a teacher, and my desire to let them be children with their own voice.

Of course there was much more to the situation, as there always is. After the second time I told her to sit down and she declined, Greg, Cindy, and Bobby, a set of triplets, all put down their spoons and stood on their chairs, at first hesitantly, then confidently. A few seconds later, Gilda, a girl with speech apraxia who had no words at

the time, did the same. Still seconds later, Jerry stood upon his chair. And after that, Gordon stood on his. Before I knew what was happening I had all seven of my toddlers standing on their chairs around the snack table, each one looking intently at me, some smiling and some laughing, though each somehow understanding that in the large scheme of the universe it was all right to do this in our classroom. In the deepest of senses they knew me.

Then I stopped trying to control the chair situation and myself. Thereafter, I stopped trying to control everything I did and every thought in my mind. I asked myself, “Why did I feel the need to be in control of this? What is it about me that has such a hard time relinquishing control of something that is against the rules but obviously so meaningful? How can I even try to make others feel I have control when there are seven children on chairs who should be eating snack but are laughing at their humorous defiance of the norm. I began to smile, and then the giggling began, and then I began to laugh and subsequently tear up with laughter until I decided to join them and stand upon a chair to show them that I understood, accepted, and definitely appreciated this act of pure laughing defiance. This act of my toddlers, seemingly simple and meaningless had a profound impact on me. I laughed throughout the class about this, and then I continued to laugh throughout my day about it, and then I continued to laugh and laugh and am laughing about it now as I am writing this.

I kept thinking about why this laughter-producing event was so self-realizing and meaningful for me. Through laughing with the children in my classroom on this day, I realized that few times in my life had I been that comfortable laughing with anyone else, including myself, especially myself. I had been maintaining a false sense of control

over my life when in fact I had none, and in all reality I had less control over myself than anything else. I shockingly realized that I was seeking in children the pure happiness of living that I had been missing for so long. Being a sufferer of depression and an anxiety disorder for many years made me stop living life passionately. I suddenly realized that the majority of the time I was happy was when I was in the classroom and the children were laughing or when I could make them laugh. Their laughter and my laughter was what made me as alive as I could be.

Knowing that laughter had helped me so positively, I began to contemplate how I felt it had an impact on the children. I realized that it indisputably added to my overall image of the child and teacher and helped me see the things that are important to add to a person's burgeoning sense-of-self throughout the lifespan. Children's constant laughter showed me their need and desire to be in an accepting, non-rigid environment that values and nurtures these traits. It helped me to see children as happy, carefree, creative, and competent; as creators of their life and knowledge; as passionate lovers of life; and as socially observant, interactive, and adept. It was the joy of laughter in childhood that I found particularly important and it was this sheer happiness that propelled me to begin my laughter journey. I began to think about the significance of laughter as children progress from the innocence and joy of youth to the responsibility and demands of adulthood, and in my heart and soul I knew it was one of the most crucial means to a functional, fun, stress-reduced, and happy adulthood that retains the characteristics and meaning of childhood. I suddenly saw so clearly how much of this joy and laughter becomes stifled or unacceptable as we enter adulthood, and I became determined to understand this phenomenon more clearly.

Rabelais sums up this joy of laughter in his poem:

Tis true that it brings forth to you no birth  
Of any value, but in point of mirth;  
Thinking therefore how sorrow might your mind  
Consume, I could no apter subject find.  
One inch of joy surmounts of grief a span;  
Because to laugh is proper to the man (Boston, 1974, p. 15).

So now I am studying laughter and will do so until I part from the earth. I feel indebted to study the thing that has helped me begin to live my life again and understand it in a way that I thought I would never know. I also feel a deep responsibility to help instill the value and power of laughter in children as they embark on their difficult journey through life since I have experienced it firsthand. For me, laughter is not just important in life, it is a **way** of life. And, it is all I can do because now that I have started laughing, I can't stop. "The sound of laughter is like a ray of sunshine in a dark room. It is the universal language of happiness that reflects no dialects and needs no translation" (Michelli, 1998, p. 16).

### **Why Study Laughter?**

My growing love of laughter and my knowledge of the literature on laughter immediately helped me understand what I wanted the purpose of my study to be. To date, there is a paucity of research on children's laughter, especially in young children. The majority of research that has been conducted has been quantitative in nature, with few attempts to comprehensively describe the many situations in which laughter occurs.

Before I could delve more deeply into its meaning, I felt it crucial to first look at, document, and describe preschoolers' laughter in the context of their preschool environment, taking into consideration the many facets of their school day including free play, story time, playground time, and snack time. Only by closely documenting the many situations in which children in my preschool classroom laughed, could I begin to understand and make meaning of the laughter for myself and the children.

It was my initial intent to study children's humor. However, the more I researched the more I realized how little information there was on the thing that humor researchers use to define and gauge the fundamental behavior that is often, though not always, a response to humor—laughter. Because of this, I felt that I could not yet study humor effectively without taking a step back. I felt this exploration of laughter, both humorous and nonhumorous, would increase overall understanding of laughter as a phenomenon in and of itself, and as a behavior that could help researchers gain a better and more accurate understanding of how it can be used to describe the humor response.

I also deemed it important to look at what these laughter-producing situations meant to me and the children in my classroom. I began to wonder what deeper worth laughter had for the children. I wanted to watch the many ways in which they used it and try to comprehend what this meant for them during their time spent in the classroom with me and their peers. What did laughter say about their development? What were they learning through laughter? Because laughter has such personal meaning for me, I sought to discover how I was growing both personally and professionally through my research, and reflect on this development throughout the process of my study. Overall, I wanted to

document laughter, and understand its importance for the children, for me, and for all of us as a whole within the context of our classroom.

### **Move Towards a Heavyweight Topic**

In the world of serious science, laughter is seen as a lightweight topic, and has always dangled at the threshold of scientific scrutiny. It is often seen through a cloudy lens as something capricious that warrants little prestige if studied. In the past, it has had an unfortunate reputation, as seen by the earliest studies of laughter that were completed by researchers who did not study it rigorously, but rather, enthusiastically without method. Because of these things, there may be no other facet of human behavior that has so many unanswered questions about its origin or purpose (Provine, 2000).

In my study, I felt it was essential to move beyond the minimal scientific understanding of laughter and begin to look deeply into its importance to human development. It was time to know more about this subject that is so integral to being human...and happy. There is a growing body of literature that supports the value of laughter in many life areas including improving psychological well being, enhancing interpersonal relationships, understanding children's cognitive awareness, improving health, reducing fear and anxiety, and understanding culture. However, despite the beginnings of some very important research on these benefits, there is still too little for practitioners and scientists to begin to fully acknowledge its value in life for children, adults, and adults who work with children. For these reasons, I saw the importance of a qualitative study that could potentially help expand this knowledge and add new dimension and depth to the scantily published research on children's laughter. I believed

it could also open the door to a better understanding of how children relate to one another and their teachers, and show how they learn from laughter.

### **My Research Questions**

The following questions for this study were based on my review of the extant literature as well as my personal laughter inducing experiences with young children in a toddler and preschool classroom. As I have discussed, these questions were created from the delight that laughter has brought to me throughout my latter life, and from the person laughter is helping me to become. With this in mind my questions were the following:

1. When do children laugh, and more specifically, in what situations?
2. How does the context in which children laugh in the classroom illuminate their relationships with their peers and teachers?
3. How does children's laughter influence their learning in the classroom and their ability to cope with stress or difficult situations?
4. How does my research on laughter continue to enhance my understanding of self?

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Laughter: An Overview

##### From Spasmodic Utterance to a Whole Lot o' Eggs: Laughter Defined

Given the common sound of laughter, our ignorance of it is remarkable. What would a group of nonlaughing aliens think if they suddenly appeared on our planet? What would they think of these “large, featherless bipeds emitting paroxysms of sound from a toothy vent in their faces” (Provine, 2000, p.6)? When thought about, the sheer phenomenon of laughter is extraordinarily complex. Some have called laughter the “human song.” “The verb ‘laugh’ is from the Old English *hliehhan* which is of onomatopoeic (sound-imitating) origin” (Boston, 1974, p. 19). In The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, laugh is defined as meaning “to manifest the spasmodic utterance, facial distortion, shaking of the sides, etc. which forms the instinctive expression of mirth, amusement, sense of ludicrous, scorn, etc. (Boston, 1974, p. 19). Another interesting definition from over 400 years ago is from Joubert (1579/1980, p. 73):

Laughter is a movement caused by the jubilant mind and the unequal agitation of the heart, which draws back the mouth and the lips, and shakes the diaphragm and the pectoral parts with impetuosity and broken-up sound, through all of which is expressed a feeling over an ugly thing unworthy of pity.

The noun laughter is given two meanings: The first is the “action of laughing,” and the second is “the whole number of eggs laid by a fowl before she is ready to sit” (Boston, 1974, p. 19). Though I focused on the spasmodic utterance of laughter for the purposes

of my research, I also hoped to discover exactly how many the “whole number of eggs” is for the fowl.

### Haughter or Lumor? Lumor or Haughter? Laughter’s Relationship to Humor

Many researchers often interchange humor with laughter and find the theories of humor and laughter synonymous. This is a misconception and may lead to a misunderstanding of these phenomena, as it is often smiling and laughter that are a response to humor and can be seen as physical overt behaviors (Apte, 1985). Those who embrace theories of laughter must also take into account the many nonhumorous types of situations that produce it, whereas theories of humor differ in this respect as they strictly embrace humor-producing scenarios (Chapman & Foot, 1996).

Gibbon (1988) believes that studying laughter is a precursor or simultaneous topic that needs to be addressed during any study on humor. Past research has focused on humor in children without taking note of how to accurately define the humor response. Though most researchers will concur that laughter is the response to humor, few of them have made attempts to richly describe it and its occurrence and even fewer have considered the cases where laughter is a nonhumorous response. Overall, most researchers will exasperatingly agree that it is very difficult to decipher between the semantic borders of laughter and humor, though they will undeniably concur that there is a very intimate and definite relationship between them (Apte, 1985).

## **Benefits of Laughter**

### Good for Relationships: Social Benefits

The social significance of laughter has been researched and documented most often. Studies have focused on the enhancement of interpersonal relationships, development of group cohesiveness, easing communication, and decreasing social distance (Graham, 1995; Hertzler, 1970; Masten, 1986). Several studies into the above listed subjects have concluded that they are fundamentally a social phenomenon (Hertzler, 1970; Morreall, 1983; Panksepp, 2000; Stearns, 1972). The very fact that we cannot tickle ourselves may imply that it is social cues and the emotional need for social interaction that guide our neural system. This also suggests how our brains, through evolution, may have been molded by social priorities (Panksepp, 2000; Telfer, 1995). Also demonstrating the social process of laughter is the fact that whereas crying appears at birth, laughter does not occur until the third or fourth month and coincides with the development of social interaction with the parent (Apte, 1985).

The almost exclusive evidence of the social nature of laughter can be seen in a study by Chapman (1973b) which concludes that children laugh more when with a companion than when alone. While listening to audiotapes with headphones, this is even true when their companion is unable to hear the humorous material on the tape (Chapman, 1975). This shows how laughter, like smiling and talking, is engaged in almost exclusively during social encounters, and mirth responses are rated as funnier when they are shared with others (Chapman, 1975; Provine, 1996). It has been a general observation that one rarely sees a child laughing alone during his or her play (McComas, 1923). McComas (1923) believes that mere companionship seems sufficient to keep

many children in a mood that easily bubbles over into laughter. Bainum, Lounsbury, and Pollio (1984) found that laughter only occurs when the child is alone in 5 per cent of all recorded situations, thus reinforcing laughter as a relationship-forming phenomenon. Gregg, Miller, & Linton, (1929) also found that children rarely laugh when they are alone, concluding that laughter is an indication of social awareness and responsiveness to others.

Scholars of laughter believe that in the course of social interaction, laughter serves as a means of communicating and bringing people closer. Coser (1959) speaks of this closeness in the following quote: “To laugh...is to invite those present to come close. Laughter is indeed like an invitation to start a conversation; it aims at decreasing social distance” (Graham, 1995, p.162). In communication, there is a transfer or exchange of messages that occurs between the sender and receiver. Laughter can help to facilitate this exchange of interactions because whether or not it is intended as a communication transaction, it contains meaning and mood, which is usually positive. Somehow we manage to produce laughter at precisely the right times in a variety of social situations by picking up on cues that dictate exactly when we use this form of communicating (Hertzler, 1970).

### Good for the Brain: Cognitive Benefits

McGhee & Chapman (1980) assert that we can gain knowledge about a child’s understanding of the world by paying attention to what he or she laughs at and listens to in different situations. Looking at what children laugh at has a lot to say about how and what they think, and it can help adults begin to understand the complexity of child

development. A study by Brown (1993) found that showing children a four-category system of pictures and gauging their laughter responses could help the adult understand the level and complexity of a child's thinking. For a practical example, watching children laugh at things such as twenty clowns coming out of a small car, an adult speeding up or slowing down the pace of everyday actions, or seeing a rabbit pulled out of a hat, we can come to realize a child's understanding of concepts such as space, time, and causality (Elkind, 2000). We can begin to learn about children's theories of how things work, and watch the incongruous events that disrupt their perceptions and cause laughter. In terms of Piagetian theory, we can determine which cognitive stage children are in by their thinking as well as the types of things they laugh at and understand (Chapman & Foot, 1996).

#### Good for the Body and Soul: Physiological and Psychological Benefits

“When one laughs, everything appears brighter. When one is anxious, everything appears bleaker” (Panksepp, 2000, p. 185). Laughter can affect a child physiologically by reducing arousal, increasing stimulation, promoting relaxation, or reducing anxiety or fears (Masten, 1986). This is an example of how laughter is not always a humorous response, as reducing anxiety may be seen as more of a defense mechanism when a child is presented with conflict or stressful situations.

Laughter can also be monumental in helping children develop sense-of-self, self-esteem, and a positive outlook as they grow to become adults. It is an unfortunate fact that as we get older we become more aware of the realities of life such as school, work, and relationships. It is a misconception when parents and teachers say, “What do you

have to worry about? Who cares what people think? You are just a child.” Children have many daily issues and concerns that affect their self-esteem and self-image as they try to figure out how and where they fit in the world. By teaching children to develop and use laughter to look at the positive and humorous in everything, they can learn to maintain an attitude that helps give them a more accurate and non-devastating perspective about themselves and their problems, which can then help them develop a better framework for beginning to learn how to constructively deal with life issues (Michelli, 1998). Psychologists often define an emotionally healthy person as one who has the capacity to laugh, to put things into perspective, and to separate genuine tragedy from mere annoyance (Rogers, 1984). Laughter has also been identified as a factor in creating resilient youth who have a greater capacity to deal with conflict (Carlson & Peterson, 1995).

I believe that being able to laugh at one’s self is a unique attribute in that it is the most humbling, yet empowering thing a person can do. It is the sign of a confident and well-adjusted child, adolescent, or adult who can put things in perspective and learn to accept and take in stride the things that might be upsetting but are not the end all. Laughter can create a healthier psychological functioning that directly relates to overall physical health. This includes getting fewer illnesses as well as recovering from illness faster. Norman Cousins describes how laughter helped him recover from a disintegrating collagen disease. He made the discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and gave him at least 2 hours of pain-free sleep. The doctors took sedimentation rate readings of his collagen levels prior to, and several hours after the laughter episodes, and found that each time the rate dropped by at least five points

(Rogers, 1984). One statistic says that 50% of all illnesses are due to lifestyle (Michelli, 1998). This demonstrates that adding more laughter to one's lifestyle could significantly decrease this chance of illness due to how one lives. For children, this means adding it to their daily lives at home and in school.

### **Importance of Culture**

When looking at children's laughter, one must pay particular attention to differences in culture and ethnicity, as it can be anticipated that the value of laughter would vary in different cultures as do "language, manners and habits of thought" (McComas, 1923, p. 51). Laughter has very rarely been studied in children of Non-Western societies even though these studies are essential in understanding cultural diversity. This lack of study has to do with many issues that arise concerning methodology and translation of research.

In some cultures laughter is not perceived as a desirable trait and is not something that is cultivated in children (Apte, 1985). In two studies (Alexander & Babad 1981 and Babad, et al., 1983), differences were found in whether or not children who smiled and laughed were perceived as competent by their teachers. Israeli teachers perceived children who demonstrated these behaviors as *less* socially competent, whereas American teachers perceived that children who smiled and laughed were *more* socially competent. The Israeli goal to help children grow up quickly because the defense of their country depends on serious and competent adults suggests that we need to be extremely sensitive to differing socialization goals in cultures (Sarraf & Ota, 2001). Other cultural differences can be seen in the Dobuans of New Guinea who negatively value laughter and

positively value dourness. A non-embracing attitude about laughter can also be found throughout the classical world and in classical Indian culture. Even in the Bible, laughter is seldom mentioned and when it is, it is a laugh of scorn (Apte, 1985).

We also need to be aware of different cultures that may embrace laughter more than our own culture. For example, the Pygmies of Central Africa are not the least bit hesitant about showing their emotions, and they will laugh until they cry and can no longer stand, no matter where they are and what the context. Another example is the Saluteaux and Ojibwa Indians in the northeastern United States who restrain almost every other emotion *except* laughter (Apte, 1985). Looking at cultural differences could be particularly important in my own research as I have two culturally diverse students, one of Indian descent and one of Korean descent, out of a sample of 14, and a denial of the importance of culture or ethnicity could lead to particularly skewed assumptions.

## **Theories of Laughter**

### I am Superior! Superiority Theory

The first, oldest, and most widespread theory of laughter is the Superiority Theory, which contends “laughter is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people” (Morreall, 1983, p. 4). Plato, this theory’s first proponent, believes that laughter was harmful and a pain in the soul. “We laugh at vice, particularly self-ignorance, in other people who are relatively powerless” (Carlson & Peterson, 1995, p. 7). He argues that when we laugh heavily and lose control of ourselves we become less than fully human. An unnamed monk supports this by saying, “laughter shakes the body, distorts the features of the face, makes man similar to the monkey” (Kuschel, 1994, p.

27). Plato sees laughter so much as vice and malice that it should not even be portrayed in literature (Morreall, 1983). Plato looks at how pain and pleasure are associated with laughter, and makes the analogy between the laughable and satisfying an itch by scratching. Just as scratching satisfies the itch, the pleasure of laughter relieves the pain associated with gloating over friends misfortunes (Piddington, 1963; Provine, 2000).

Poet, Mrs. C.A. Robbins, expresses this idea quite eloquently:

“We laugh, but our laughter is vain!

That someone’s unhappy, is plain—

At others’ sad plight

We scream with delight!

Getting pleasure from other folks’ pain” (Gruner, 1978, p. 37)!

Aristotle is not as emphatic as Plato about the evils of laughter, though he still believes that laughter is a form of derision. “The laughable is a subdivision of the ugly that does not cause injury or pain” (Provine, 2000, p. 13). “Even wit,” he says, “is really educated insolence” (Morreall, 1983 p. 5). He thinks that if a person laughs too much, he cannot live a good life, though a little bit of laughter is a desirable thing (Morreall, 1983; Provine, 2000). He feels laughter should be allowed for useful functions as a way of taming it (Kuschel, 1994). The goal should be to laugh in moderation but most people enjoy laughing and jesting more than they should (Morreall, 1983).

Not until Thomas Hobbes began his writing on laughter was the Superiority Theory expanded in form. He asserts that laughter can be harmful to a person’s character and there is something gravely wrong with the person that only feels good about himself by making fun of or looking down on others (Morreall, 1983). In essence, laughter is our

own sense of superiority to others in recognition of our own inferiority in the past (Boston, 1974). Anthony Ludovici talks about Hobbes' theory from an evolutionary perspective. He believes that the baring of teeth during laughter occurs because originally it was seen as a challenge or threat to an enemy to let the enemy know they were stronger or more threatening (Apte, 1985). As humans developed, their superiority was focused not only on their physical prowess, but also on cleverness, intelligence, or wealth (Morreall, 1983).

According to Albert Rapp, all laughter stems from aggressive, primitive behavior and most likely occurred before there was language. He sees this primitive behavior as paralleling the child's laughter today where children laugh at physical deformity that is soon followed by laughter at mental and cultural differences (Bergler, 1956). This superiority during laughter even occurs when we laugh at ourselves and what we are ridiculing is a picture of ourselves in a certain predicament. "In laughing at yourself, the part of you that is laughing has dissociated itself from the part of you that is being laughed at" (Morreall, 1983, p. 8).

Bergler, cited in Gruner (1978), has a slightly different take on the Superiority Theory by claiming we have psychic masochism. He describes this as turning externally perceived displeasure into internally perceived pleasure because at heart, we are all unconscious masochists. Though we try to transfer this displeasure, our superego will not allow it, nor is the ego allowed this pleasure. Subsequently, what happens is our ego develops the ability to respond to this displeasure with pseudoaggression rather than real aggression. The laughter that results is an alibi to escape the censure of the superego. To mediate, the ego argues: "How can I be accused of masochism? See how aggressive I

am” (Gruner, 1978, p. 27)? Bergler’s most interesting and gruesome picture of why we become masochistic and end up expressing laughter in these ways is that we suffer from extreme fear and megalomania in infancy. “We suffer from a septet of baby fears including the fear of starvation, of being devoured, of being poisoned, of being choked, of being chopped to pieces, of being drained, and of being castrated” (Gruner, 1978, p. 27).

It should be noted that this moral objection to laughing at others has not traditionally been a part of all cultures, thus reinforcing the importance of examining and appreciating cultural diversity when attempting to unanimously describe laughter. Not very long ago in American culture, it used to be common practice for the wealthy to go on excursions to the prisons to laugh at inmates or to the insane asylum to laugh at the mentally ill (Provine, 2000). A tradition that still exists is one among the Greenland Eskimo whose judicial proceedings consist of the two parties ridiculing each other until one collapses in humiliation, even for the case of murder. The outcome of a case is determined by the sole observation of which party receives more laughs, even if the accusations are slanderous (Morreall, 1983).

#### Mismatched Expectations: Incongruity Theory

When looking at our next theory of laughter, Incongruity Theory, we need to shift our focus from the emotional side of laughter to the cognitive side of laughter, for the Incongruity Theory is “an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate” (Morreall, 1983, p. 15). This theory suggests that we laugh when there is a breach to our orderly world as we have come to understand and live it. When

something does not fit into our anticipated experience it surprises us and subsequently produces laughter. Aristotle originally suggested at Incongruity Theory, though he did not develop it because it conflicted with the concepts of his Superiority Theory. Perhaps he felt too superior to suggest there may be more to laughter. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that it resurfaced with the thinking of Kant who stated, “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh, there must be something absurd” (Morreall, 1983, p. 16).

Arthur Schopenhauer has more comprehensive ideas about this theory whereby laughter is caused by a mismatch between perception and conceptual understanding (Morreall, 1983; Piddington, 1963). We have an understanding of the real relation of objects in the world and then perceive a new concept that challenges our reality, and our subsequent laughter is an expression of this incongruity. He believes it is our perception, rather than our conception that is always right and we are always glad to see “this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency” (Greig, 1969, p. 253-254).

Charles Darwin is also a proponent of this theory and believes something incongruous or unaccountable makes us laugh, though we must be in a pleasant frame of mind. Hutcheson believes that all mental laughter arises from a “perception of the ludicrous” (Telfer, 1995, p. 360). James Beattie, cited in Greig (1969), believes that we laugh when our mind recognizes the peculiarity of a relationship, as long as it does not arouse stronger emotions like anger or pity. Joseph Priestley, cited in Greig (1969) also sees laughter as arising from the perception of contrast or the disproportionate.

## Whew! Relief Theory

The next theory, Relief Theory, shifts to a physiological and psychological explanation of laughter. There are many different versions of this theory though they all suggest the basic premise that we laugh in order to release pent-up energy. The first example of this theory can be seen in Shaftesbury's essay of 1711, "The Freedom of Wit and Humour," which stated,

The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged on their constrainers (Morreall, 1983, p. 20).

The Relief Theory suggests there are two ways that relief might fit into situations of laughter: Either a person may come into a situation with energy that needs to be released, or energy may build up during a situation, which is then released during the course of the situation (Morreall, 1983).

Sigmund Freud, another Relief Theorist, believes that laughter occurs because society prevents us from openly expressing our drives of sex, hostility, and obscenity. He postulates that we have a certain amount of psychic energy that needs to be released to gain satisfaction. The amount that is unneeded or pent-up is discharged in laughter (Greig, 1969). Freud's theory of laughter focuses mostly on jokes, which like dreams, have hidden benefits that tap into the unconscious (Provine, 2000). He feels we create and use jokes in order to bring to the conscious the things that society has forced us to repress (Morreall, 1983).

Herbert Spencer speculates that there is a close connection between nervous energy and our motor nervous system (Morreall, 1983). He believes that when one is in a “pleasurable state of mind” any little event may cause an escape of nervous energy that takes the form of laughter (McComas, 1923, p. 49). Whenever our emotions reach a certain level, they are demonstrated by bodily action. In the case of laughter, the release of energy occurs when we have an overabundance of emotion that we deem to be inappropriate (Greig, 1969; Morreall, 1983). This extra energy is first released through muscles connected with speech, and then if these channels are not enough, through the muscles of respiration and the diaphragm. If still more energy needs releasing, the person may begin to sway back and forth, slap their knee, or clap their hands (Morreall, 1983). Spencer sees laughter as very different from other types of emotion because it is not the early stage of an emotion that escalates into something else. He gives the example of anger, which if escalates turns into a practical action such as fighting. He compares laughter to opening a valve in a steam pipe where the valve releases excess pressure upon its opening (Provine, 2000). He feels that the nervous energy of laughter is let go in just this way as a quick and necessary release of surplus energy (Piddington, 1963; Provine, 2000).

#### Other Theories That Just Don't Fit Anywhere Else

There are also numerous other theorists in the above classifications, numerous other classifications of theories, and some theories that stand on their own. One that is mentionable is the theory of Henri Bergson who believes that anything similar to the makeup of a machine is laughter producing. He sees laughter as “something mechanical

encrusted on the living” (Bergler, 1956, p. 192). From here, he discusses that laughter is purely for social purposes in a group or society as a whole (Bergler, 1956; Provine, 2000), and a “method of forceful adaptation” (Bergler, 1956, p. 192). In order to fit into social situations, there are two complementary forces that are at work: Alertness and tension are needed in order to assess an event as it is happening, and elasticity of mind and body are needed so one can adapt. Without these in balance in the mind and body, insanity and illness encroach, which make society uneasy in their presence. Society then creates the gesture of laughter in order to prevent those who are imbalanced from becoming detached (Bergler, 1956). Here the function of laughter is not to harm or humiliate any member of the society, but to help him so that the inelasticity in him will be eradicated and he will be changeable enough to adapt himself to the demands of social life (Appan, 1977).

Max Eastman looks at laughter as a higher degree of smiling, though both express pleasure rather than pain. Contrary to many of the early theorists, he sees laughter as an act of acceptance rather than one of rejection and believes it to be a human element or instinct that does not need further analyzing. He feels we use laughter as a means of gaining pleasure in social communication (Piddington, 1963) and looks at all laughter as playful (Boston, 1974). He dismisses the laughter of scorn in his theory by believing that the laughter of scorn and that of delight use different neural mechanisms, and therefore cannot be compared (Piddington, 1963).

It should be noted that all of these are general theories of laughter and are non-specific to children. However, coming up with a children’s theory of laughter would be a monumental task since a child’s continuous developmental changes would somehow

need to be ingrained in the theory. Though these theories are not all encompassing for children, they still have many important tenets that can be applied to an overall view of child development. For example, looking at the Superiority Theory may help us further understand children's emotional processes especially as they begin to engage in aggressive or taunting types of humor. The Incongruity Theory says much about children's cognitive development by allowing us to look at how they view and understand the world. By understanding and documenting what children think is funny we can begin to learn how they think and what they know. By embracing the Relief Theory we can come to more understanding about how children's use of humor may be related to their fears or anxiety. By understanding Bergson and Eastman's theories, a greater understanding of social development can be gained by seeing humor and laughter as ways of being part of or belonging to a social group.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

I used my knowledge of all of the theories of laughter as I embarked on my research, though I did not adhere to them strictly. Because so little is known about laughter and there are not any theories of laughter that are specific to children, I feel going into my study with predetermined theories could have constrained both my thinking process and reflection. Strauss and Corbin (1990) believe that in qualitative research one does not start with a theory and then corroborate it. Instead, the researcher begins with something to study and then allows what is pertinent to that subject to emerge.

To reiterate, I wanted to expand on the existing research on laughter by looking at the situations in which children laugh, and gain insight into how their laughter enhances relationships and learning. As my research was extremely personal and meaningful to me, I also engaged in a study of self and the meaning that laughter brings to my life.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Methods

*“Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment.”*

(Emerson, 1842)

So there I was in my classroom knowing that I had to do a study, though feeling the unyielding timidity of a first-time serious researcher. Even though I consider myself a lifelong researcher because I have always unsystematically studied and contemplated everything I’ve seen, it was suddenly different knowing that this would be possibly meaningful to many, and not just satisfying my own personal fancies. I had so many things to ponder. How would I document what I was seeing? For how long? How would I make meaning from it? How would I survive it while simultaneously needing to be, drink, teach preschool, eat, take classes, and sleep... in that order.

One of the major things that researchers leave out of their writing when they discuss the progression and methods of their research is how damn painful and frightening the process can be. Perhaps by the time they are in the final stages of writing up their data, they either forget what it was like to begin, or feel they deserve to leave the strife out of it as a reward for getting through it. Luckily, the distress is one that lessens as you become more adept, and though it is arduous at first, you have to have confidence in the notion that great researchers aren’t born, but developed and grown. Otherwise, the process can be monumentally discouraging, and you will end up hiding somewhere you don’t intend to be found. I have a comfy secret hideout, though I can’t disclose where.

When I began writing, I wanted to give up several times and created hundreds of excuses and ways that I could incapacitate myself so I could get out of it. Then once I started there were some days that I wanted to skip life so I could write, and other days I could only write a sentence. This is the hardship and reality of writing authentically. Having deadlines help (Dillard, 1989).

### How Did I Begin?

When deciding how to approach my research in a manner that would allow me to make the most subsequent meaning of it, I had to first go back and think about my purpose, which was the desire to explore the situations and relationships in which children's laughter occurred in their preschool classroom. The very nature of my research questions lended themselves to be explored qualitatively because I was interested in reflecting on how laughter created meaning for the children and me (Creswell, 1998). Doing qualitative research also made sense because I wanted to engage in an interpretive, multimethod, and naturalistic approach to the subject of laughter, which I felt was limited in the literature (Creswell, 1998; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). I knew that utilizing a qualitative approach would also help me give more meaning to my research findings by using myself as the main instrument of data collection, and by focusing on the meaning that the participants brought to the study by being able to look deeply into each child's personal context. As it was also one of my goals to share my findings with a diverse group of people, I felt using qualitative research would help me make my study more readable by general educators and other practitioners because of the narrative style used to report the methodology and findings (Goodwin & Goodwin,

1996). I reflected back on my own experiences of having to read quantitative articles in big-pompous-word lingo that also reduced people to numbers. I could never make sense of these articles, because if there was meaning it was obscured by formulas, numbers, and scientific writing. I determined, “What use would my research on laughter be, if those whom I wanted to read it could not or did not want to get past the abstract?” In addition, I believed that using a qualitative approach would allow me to explore the meanings related to my role as a teacher and to better understand the meaning of laughter in my own experience.

More specifically, I engaged in a narrative inquiry of laughter. Simply stated, “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It is a way of understanding experience, a collaboration between researcher and participants over time and in a social context. It is living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). When I began to document the laughter situations in my classroom, I saw how fitting this was. I was documenting specific laughter situations; however, I began to see each situation as a miniature story (each particular situation), within a bigger story (relationships and meaning within the situation), within an even bigger story (the meaning of the situation in the overall context of the classroom).

Narrative inquiry also highlights the centrality of my own experiences of who I am not only as a researcher, but also a person, which promotes and enhances personal growth. Being a person, a teacher, a researcher, and wanting to understand myself better, this approach was perfect for my purposes. It also makes use of materials that naturally promote reflection and reflexivity such as personal journaling and conversation (Connelly

& Clandinin, 1990). I also felt narrative would provide me with the impetus for understanding my life and work (Goodson, 1997) and the value of my research, because by using stories, I could have one of the most useful ways of helping other teachers, parents, or practitioners understand themselves, their students, their children, and their practice (Fenstermacher, 1997).

The narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications but rather rich texts that allow the reader to create his or her own uses and meanings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997). Since laughter has so many possible uses for so many diverse groups, the narrative style of my research creates the potential to challenge each reader's background assumptions and beliefs and allows them to take away their own meaning and understanding from it (Phillips, 1997). Overall, for my study of laughter, I felt using narrative inquiry would allow me to describe the laughter situations through story in a way that integrated the meaning for the children along with the meaning it created for me as a person, teacher, and researcher, all within the context of our lives in the classroom. Stuart Taylor (cited in Doyle, 1997) sums up the importance of story in the following quote: "The world is not held together by molecules but by stories."

### My Role in the Research

Since I was interested in understanding laughter in the context of relationships in the classroom, and was using narrative inquiry to study and report it, I knew my role in the research was extremely important, and so decided to use participant observation, an ethnographic technique that serves to allow the researcher to observe and participate simultaneously, as to better understand the participants thoughts, feelings, and

perceptions about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Wolcott, 1999). There is a range of participating and observing behaviors within this method, which fall on a continuum including mostly observer, observer as participant, participant as observer, and mostly participant (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). The very nature of working with children and being a teacher-researcher allowed me to engage in the full continuum of these behaviors, as the manner in which children will “let” you play with them is usually *quite* different depending on the day, activity, or child. I have observed throughout the year that there are some children who never accept my leads at initiating play, never invite me to engage in their play, but are accepting when I sit and observe. Other children accept all or most of my attempts at initiating play and always invite me to participate in their self-initiated play. Still others are a combination of all of these levels and will let me fully participate sometimes and partially participate during others.

When I started my research I found that children are never consistent, though overall I participated in these levels on the continuum fairly equally, even if I did occasionally have to beg the children to let me join their play and be something other than the monster or alien. In addition, the one-way window outside of our classroom permitted me to be a covert observer of their play. Often I would sit outside with my headphones on, laughing side-splittingly too loud because the headphones prevented me from hearing myself laugh. I felt there were many benefits to engaging in this full continuum of participant observation including more objectivity on one hand by being able to step aside, and more significant exchanges and understanding on the other by embedding myself in the interactions (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996).

## Parental Consent and Child Assent

Next came the mission of attaining consent from the parents of the children I would be studying. I provided them with a description of my research (see Appendix C) that they all promptly signed. I also felt it equally important to gain assent from each of the children in the study to respect their rights to participate or not participate. Let me be viciously honest when I say that this was a very difficult process and required much patience and a Herculean-strong belief that the children have the ability and the right to decide to participate. Getting assent from young children is not for the weak or weary because you will definitely be both of these by the time you are done getting it. I really felt that each of the children would say yes, though depending on their daily level of contention they would agree or disagree. Most readily agreed while four of them said, “NO WAY!” The last three were simply copying the lead of the first. Of course when they heard their other classmates give permission they quickly changed their minds. Luckily, being very familiar with the majority of them helped me to facilitate this process in an open, collaborative, and *very* patient manner.

I began by discussing with them the different methods that my research assistants and I would be using throughout the duration of the study. This included taking notes, taking pictures, talking to them, and audio and videotaping. A full description of my research assistants and methods will follow. After I discussed all of the cool equipment we would be using, I allowed the children to become familiar with it so that it would distract them at little as possible once the study began. The children had been exposed to and had played with the digital camera all year so I did not need to focus on familiarizing them with it. Less recognizable to them were the cassette recorder and video recorder, so

I brought these into the classroom the first 2 weeks of the spring semester. I talked about what they did, how they worked, and allowed the children to operate and investigate them with the assistance of the teachers. In general, I let them know that I would be using all of these methods to document their normal activities throughout the course of their school day.

Following this step, the children were presented with an assent form that was written in language they could verbally understand (See Appendix D). I had originally thought that the language I used on their assent form was appropriate, but now I see that I could and should have made it only two to three sentences long to get my intentions across. The children did not have a difficult time understanding the language, but rather sitting through the entirety of it when they wanted to play. I attempted to read it completely, but in eight cases I simplified it significantly in a way that I felt did not affect the content and would not influence their decision to participate. When the child verbally agreed to take part, I signed the assent form in his or her presence, in very permanent ink.

## **Methods of Data Collection**

### Handwritten Fieldnotes

Now I was ready to go, but had to determine how I would collect my data in a way that would make it possible, useful, trustworthy, and easy, since I also had to be in charge of the classroom simultaneously. I decided to use handwritten fieldnotes as my primary source of collecting data, as I felt it would be easiest for me to carry around my little black journal throughout the day and write down the laughter-producing situations that I saw. I initially had the intention of putting my fieldnotes into the computer at the

end of each day, though I found it more beneficial to sit with my journal at night and replay the day and reflect on the happenings before typing all of the information into my machine. I jotted down additional notes in my journal at the end of each day and then transcribed them into my computer at the end of each week. I quickly realized when I began my research that intentions do not necessarily translate into action, and I had to be flexible and find the way that worked best for me, and then make my approach consistent. I documented in handwritten fieldnote fashion for a total of 11 weeks, with a 2-week pilot study prior to beginning my research in order for my research assistants and I to become adept at the various data collection methods and to make sure all of our equipment was accessible and working. Also, in preparation of my study I engaged in an exploratory action research project on children's humor in the context of my toddler classroom during the 2001-2002 school year that helped me develop my observation and notetaking skills.

### Audiotape

I used audiotape to capture verbatim the dialogues of the children and researchers, though I only used this method five times during long dialogues. Regardless of my attempts to familiarize the children with the cassette recorder prior to collecting data, this is one device that they never seem to tire of, and many times I tried to audiotape, but just as soon had to surrender my recorder because of the fascination of the children. They love buttons, buttons, buttons, and more and more buttons, especially when they can successfully control them. However, allowing them to use my recorder also had its benefits in that their use of the recorder was often a continuous source of laughter.

## Videotape

I also decided to use videotape as I felt it would allow me to capture even the smallest of body gestures that could increase my understanding of laughter, including things as small as a raised eyebrow or a slight upturn of the lips (Goldman-Segall, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Also, since children also excitedly watched the videos, it permitted for the continuous adding of new layers of interpretation (Goldman-Segall, 1998). I videotaped sporadically during the last 6 weeks of my study depending on the availability of the video camera and my ability to hold the camera and not be directly involved in zipping up pants or resolving conflicts. Being a teacher in charge of the classroom, I soon realized that teaching was still my primary responsibility, and I had to choose to videotape during times when I was less needed for hands on activities such as snack and playground time.

## Discussion With the Children

It was difficult to decide how much to allow the children to participate in the process of watching the videotapes and verbally discussing or interviewing them about the laughter situations in which they were involved. Goodwin & Goodwin (1996) talk about the potential difficulties of interviewing children in the following quote: “Physical, social, cognitive, and political distances between the adult and child make their relationship very different from the relationship between adults. ...one can never become a child. One remains a very definite and readily identifiable ‘other’” (p.134).

Despite this potential impediment, and even though the children in my classroom are very young, I believed it crucial to try to understand what these laughing incidents

meant to them personally and while interacting with their peers. There are a number of studies that reveal that young children can provide reliable, consistent information about past events and I felt the gathering of this information could be monumental to understanding the meaning of my data (Bruck & Ceci, 1996). After I videotaped, I sat with the children whom I had videotaped and let them watch it. Usually, several other children would come and watch the tape even if they weren't on it, though they often became disgruntled if they could not see themselves. In both cases the children readily talked about what was going on in the video, and the children on the tape always remembered the videotaped incident and accurately recalled details about what had occurred.

### Personal Diary

Now I had to decide how to study myself, something that I found is not at all easy, and often not even desirable. The primary method I used in my study of self was to keep a personal diary that I attempted to write in on a daily basis, though occasionally skipped a day here and there, because some days I was just too tired to write. Though I was unsure as to how my daily entries would progress, I began by writing my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about my personal involvement in my research. I also commented on general day-to-day moods and feelings about my study, especially the times when I was particularly excited or discouraged. I tried to make a point of focusing on myself as an individual as well as an integral part of a group. Mostly, I wrote about things that did not have to do specifically with research at all but had an impact on me in

a way that changed me as a person, researcher, and teacher such as a parent meeting gone awry and my relationships outside of school.

### Research Assistants

In order to cover all areas of the classroom and attain intersubjectivity and credibility on the data I was collecting, I used research assistants who were part of a group of student teachers doing their yearlong internship in the preschool classroom I was teaching. Also, as we cannot separate ourselves or personalities from the research we engage in, I felt it vital to make sure these assistants were the best matches for the subject content of my research, the best matches for the children who were allowing us to study them, and the best matches to work with me on both a personal and professional level. Handwerker (2001) believes that to be successful with a study, a cohesive team needs to be built, rather than just a group of researchers, and I tried to capture this through careful selection. However, when it came down to it, only 4 people out of a possible 13 were interested (two of whom I would have naturally chosen) in helping me with documentation. Overall, I have mixed feelings about how useful they were for my study. They were very helpful in verifying accuracy and meaning of the situations that we would simultaneously write down; however, I had difficulty using most of the situations that they documented without me present, because without a firsthand experience, I had trouble gathering the full meaning. My personal relationships with the research assistants also had an impact as I had differing levels of rapport with each of them.

My research assistants were given a 1-hour training session about the purpose of the study and the methods that would be employed for collecting data and each was given a small amount of background information to take home and review about children's laughter. I also gave them written information about what to look for, how to document, and how to be as comprehensive as possible in describing the scenarios they saw. With this I also gave them an example of a situation that I had documented. Subsequently, we met as a group two more times to discuss strategies, ideas, and findings. Since I was unable to pay these assistants monetarily, each was compensated for their time, effort, and dedication to the study by receiving variable credits in an independent study course depending on their level of involvement.

### Conversations With My Major Professor

In order to discuss the process and progress of my research, I also met with my major professor an average of every other week throughout my data collection and interpretation in order to receive feedback, get ideas, support, encouragement, and a lot of red marks on my writing.

### **Setting**

#### The School

I gathered all of my data at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Child Development Laboratory School (CDLS) located on campus in Blacksburg, Virginia. Blacksburg is a small town of approximately 60,000 people, located in Southwestern Virginia, approximately 30 miles from the West Virginia border in the

New River Valley. The CDLS program follows the academic school calendar running from early September to early May.

The CDLS is a NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) accredited program and follows established guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. The program is inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education, which is an approach that views children as competent, active participants in their learning, whose interests and ideas are integral to curriculum development. There is an authentic and individualistic approach to assessment where a portfolio is crafted for each child based on his or her baseline of development upon entering the program rather than following set developmental guidelines. It is an approach that supports imagination and creativity and does not focus on the end products of activities, but rather, the learning that occurs through engaging in the process. It also sees the environment as a third teacher in the process of learning that supports children's developing knowledge through exploration and interaction (Fu, Stremmel, & Hill, 2002).

The CDLS setting is also a learning environment for research and teaching. There are six graduate student head teachers in Child Development who teach the morning and afternoon classes as their graduate assistantships. The CDLS provides a yearlong learning and teaching experience for undergraduate students who are in the 3rd year of a 5-year master's program in Early Childhood Education. Each student spends a total of 6 hours per week in the classroom and acts as a teacher assistant to the Head Teacher during the first semester, before taking over responsibility for planning and curriculum in the second semester. Overall, the purpose of this internship is to facilitate students' understanding of child development, curriculum development, documenting children's

progress through portfolio style assessment, and learning to work with families and caregivers.

The CDLS consists of three major classrooms with the infants and toddlers sharing the largest classroom. On the opposite side of the hallway are two separate preschool classrooms, which are also shared by an afternoon program. A hallway connects these two classrooms where the communal bathrooms are located. Also in the hallway is a storage area with cabinets where many types of art materials, puzzles, and games are kept.

### My Classroom

My classroom, which is the one where I did all of my documentation, consisted of the 3 to 4 year-old preschoolers. Being a Head Teacher in the younger morning preschool class, I decided to use this setting for its familiarity and the fact that I am a teacher-researcher who wanted to study laughter within the context of my classroom. Being able to conduct my research as I was teaching allowed me to expand and improve my role as a teacher by working collaboratively with others and systematically investigating an issue that I found important (Copper, 1990). Also, as I was in this classroom approximately 4 ½ hours per day from 8:00-12:30 (18 hours per week) it was the ideal place to conduct my research. Also, because the research focus at the CDLS is discussed with all of the families prior to entering, I knew I would probably have full consent from each family and a very consistent sample, which was exactly the case.

My preschool class runs from 8:30 am until 12:00, Monday through Thursday, for a total of 14 hours per week; however, many children and their parents or caregivers

often talk to each other or the teachers until 12:15 or 12:30. Also, as the classroom is a very close community, many of the parents of children are very close friends and spend a lot of time together both inside and outside of school.

Upon entering the doorway to my classroom there is a couch directly to the right, which serves the purposes of a quiet space, especially for some of the more difficult transitions; for my own personal respite when the children are driving me crazy; for relaxing with books; or, in some cases, jumping on until one of the teachers sends a discerning look to the offenders. Immediately to the left is a bookshelf that separates and encloses an area where the media table, science area and our pets Hamster Mousy (hamster) and Princess and Goldie (Goldfish) are kept. Also enclosing the science area is a sink with a counter that each of the children turns on and plays in at least five times a day.

*Figure 1.* Science, pets, and popular sink



On the carpet directly through the door is a round table that seats eight where there are often activities set up or where some of the children eat snack. It is also good for running

circles around, especially when trying not to be captured by a teacher. On the left side of the classroom in the middle is a hallway that connects to the bathroom and to the other preschool classroom. Also on the left side of the classroom are two rectangular tables pushed together that allow for up to 14 children to sit. These tables are also used for snack time as well as for larger activities that require more space and promote group participation. Next to the tables is the unkempt art shelf where all of the supplies such as scissors, paper, markers, crayons, beads, corks, tile pieces, and glue are kept. The children's favorite thing is also right here; their cubbies where they store half of the things that really belong at their house including dolls, toy cars, balloons, flowers, and even mail. In the back, right corner is the loft, and the most popular area in the classroom, which ultimately makes it the most crowded and out of control. The underneath part is set up for dramatic and imaginary play and includes dress-up clothes and a pretend kitchen area. There are stairs that lead to the upper part of the loft where there is a bookshelf and numerous pillows and blankets so the loft can be used for quiet reading time, group time, or safely expending energy by running or tumbling.

*Figure 2. View of classroom from main entrance*



## The Playground

The playground is a space approximately 120 feet by 150 feet that is enclosed by a chain link fence. There are numerous apparatus that are part of the playground though the majority of the playground is open space, often with large muddy areas after a slight rain or snow that serve as a good place to jump, slide or fall. The equipment includes a swing set with three swings, which is directly next to a tire swing. A set of monkey bars is next to the swings that have tires to climb on so the children can reach them independently. A large grass and dirt hill stands alone near the middle and is used for the children to roll down, run on, push vehicles up and down, or attempt to dig through to the other side of the world. There is a large wooden structure with a ramp and a set of stairs to walk up that immediately connects to a movable bridge that in turn connects to a slide and another stable bridge. Several large tires position fastened to the ground are standing in their upright and used to climb through, over, or on to get up to the bridge. There is a 12-foot by 12-foot sandbox and another wooden structure that has benches and a steering wheel that is often used for imaginary play to take others on boat, airplane, or train trips around the world. Usually I ask them to take me to the Caribbean. There is also another wooden structure that has metal rungs that can be climbed upon to get to a platform that leads to a covered slide. Three large tree stumps are located near the middle and used to climb on or jump from one to another. At one end is a large shed that houses hundreds of toys for the playground including sand toys, all sizes of balls, bats, tricycles, large trucks, numerous types of large blocks and much, much more including endless nests of yellowjackets, which frequently must be removed. Next to the preschoolers' playground and divided by the fence is the infant and toddler playground. Parking lots immediately

surround the playground on three sides. I made observations on the playground whenever the weather permitted that we go outside. Though I did document many laughter-producing scenarios on the playground, only one is discussed in my findings because often, other situations were better representative of the categories I created to demonstrate the situations in which children laugh.

*Figure 3. Playground*



## **Analysis**

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis are closely related, and therefore, analysis occurs throughout the entire data collection process as well as after it is over (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In order to engage in this ongoing process of analysis, I reflected and re-reflected each day on all of the situations my research assistants and I documented. I wrote my thoughts and ideas as well as any questions the situations brought to mind. It was a continuous and dynamic process throughout

I did not engage in a strict analysis of the data, but rather a reflective discussion that followed with the traditions of using narrative inquiry. I comprehensively described the scenarios during the laughter-producing situations, while taking into consideration each child's individuality, meaning, and relationships with others. With this, I interwove my own experiences as a person, teacher, and researcher to create a narrative based on individual experiences as well as relationships. Since I was interested in documenting specific situations in which children laugh, I reflected on and read each scenario a total of four to five times throughout my study in order to come up with categories that would best demonstrate times when children laugh. From there, I tied in my other research questions to further demonstrate how and when children use laughter.

### **Trustworthiness**

Guba & Lincoln (1985) offer the trustworthiness criteria as more appropriate than the usual reliability and validity used in quantitative studies. They define trustworthiness as “the quality of an investigation and its findings that make it noteworthy to audiences (p.164).” They use four criteria that parallel the traditional criteria of reliability and validity. In these terms, I ensured that my study had credibility by keeping my objectivity and carefully recording my data, especially the children's thoughts and perceptions. I addressed its transferability by comprehensively and accurately reporting my research methods and results. My study is dependable because I used multiple methods of data collection, including research assistants. I also addressed its confirmability by “linking my assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in readily discernible ways” (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, p. 164).

## **Participants**

### The Children

The magnificent children in my study included nine girls and five boys who ranged in age from 3 years, to 4 years 4 months at the first date of data collection. All of them were from middle to upper-middle class families as measured by parent report. All of the children were from intact families with the birth mother and father together and married. They were all Caucasian with the exception of one child of Indian and one child of Korean descent. I initially was only going to include the main participants, though I realized if I left anyone out, it would not be a true representation of the context and dynamics of the classroom. I also felt that by only including the children who laugh the most, I would be missing valuable information about how the more serious children fit into the bigger picture of laughter. To view a table that contains the children's names, dates of birth, and ages at the beginning of the study, please see Table A1.

### Lucy

I have come to believe you can determine Lucy's mood and thoughts by her eyes, which seem to change from a light brown to hazel to gray, like the colors of the night fade in and out. Her short, light brown hair is cut bluntly above the shoulders with straight bangs, and she always has it pulled into ponytails, braids, or buns in different places, directions, shapes, numbers, and sizes. Lucy loves princesses and seems to believe she is one, and plays the role without flaw, teaching everyone an inordinate amount of information about Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White in the process. She loves to wear her princess dresses to school; lacy, silky, floor touching and

flowing dresses in a variety of colors, even in the chill of winter, albeit with a pair of pants underneath so her legs don't turn blue. Her stature is small but this does not affect her personality or voice, and she demonstrates a gregariousness that is unmatched by most. She is also a leader and likes to be in charge of anything and everything, expressing a very wide range of emotions when things don't go her way. I like to call her a show and teller and each day she comes to school with a backpack, bag, purse, or some kind of container that holds more stuff than my own backpack and seems to weigh more as well. Her show and teller name comes from the observation that she likes to show others her things, talk about them in great detail, though not necessarily share them. She can usually be found playing with Marge and more recently Elaine, often engaging in dramatic play or craft activities. Lucy was 3 years, 6 months old at the beginning of the study and I had also taught her for half of the previous year, knowing her for a total of 13 months. I feel it was her dynamic personality, her ability to closely connect home and school, and her relationships with the teachers that made her one of the main participants in my study.

### Ethel

Ethel has a way of making people want to eat her up and it is a good thing she tells me no when I ask her if I can. Her outgoing nature allows her to blend flawlessly into various groups, yet she has an air of solitude, thoughtfulness, and independence about her. Unlike many of the other children, she enjoys spending quiet time alone or sitting on my lap on the couch, at ease just to cuddle or chat. She is a helper and likes to be given responsibility in the classroom, such as passing out snack or delivering

messages. Her unusually keen sense of morality and empathy surfaces in her great concern for her and others' actions and well being. In appearance she has lightly tanned skin and lightish brown hair with streaks of blond, like a piece of cinnamon toast topped with melted butter. It is cut just below her ears with bangs, and her hair is always left down. She often smiles with her chocolate-colored eyes, as well as her perfect smile. She loves Disney characters, and is often sporting these on her T-shirts, which she wears with pants or jeans. While in the class she often plays in the pretend kitchen area cooking up a storm or she can be found at the art table making creations, often something that requires her expert scissors skills. Ethel was 3 years, 8 months old at the start of the study and I had known and taught her for 2 years. Though I had known her for awhile, our relationship only became particularly close at the beginning of this year, and since then it has rapidly flourished. She is a particularly happy, bright, and endearing child and is one of the children in the class who chooses to spend a lot of time with me. I feel this frequent contact and what I see as similarities in our personalities facilitates a very intersubjective relationship. We understand each other well, which allows for the right climate for a lot of laughter and silliness to take place.

### Laverne

Laverne reminds many of a compact, mature adult rather than a child. She is blessed with an air of elegance and social grace, fitting in beautifully and comfortably with everyone she meets of all ages. She is self-assured, yet sensitive, and her feelings are easily hurt by others, which subsequently leaves her in tears. Her sense of adventure always makes her available for a challenge and willing to try anything and everything

new. Her imagination is unbelievably complex, and I am often dumbfounded at the play she creates as well as her resourcefulness with materials. She has a delicate complexion like fresh cream and her eyes are cerulean blue and as round as a cat's eyes that is getting ready to pounce on its prey from its secret hiding place. She has a small, high voice that is so endearing it has brought tears to my eyes several times to hear her speak. Her single-length blond hair descends almost to her waist and is the color and texture of corn silk. Her bangs are pulled back into a small ponytail each day to keep it off of her face. Each day she can be found in pants, jeans, T-shirts or sweaters, usually in bright colors. She was 4 years old when I began collecting data, though her ideas and commentary leads one to believe that she is older. She was new to the class this year with me knowing her for a total of 5 months, though in these months we have become tremendously close. She has major alliances in the classroom, especially with Shirley, though overall, she is the one child in the classroom whom everyone else seeks out for a best friend. Her quick wit and joking nature make her one of the targets for games and silly play, by both the teachers and other children, which in turn makes Laverne and others around her laugh and laugh and laugh.

### Shirley

Shirley has curly brown hair, often put in two braids or a ponytail that falls about her face in wisps by the end of the day. Her eyes are the color of freshly roasted coffee beans and a small space between her top, front two teeth adds to her unmistakable smile. She can usually be found wearing jeans or overalls and T-shirts, though will wear an occasional dress or skirt if her younger sister does. Her aloofness with the teachers

shows in her enjoyment in playing much more with the children, unless the adult is playing a monster role. She is very independent, self-determined, and patient, and will attempt a task many times before being willing to ask others for help. She is a collector in the classroom and usually has a bag or container of random materials by the end of the day that no one knows where they came from. She is generally not an initiator of play or laughter, though is one of the children who laughs at almost everything and follows others' leads, especially Laverne and Woody. She is an easygoing, and extremely cheerful child who sheds few tears and is very accepting of others' personalities. Since the beginning of the year her closest friend has been Laverne, though Woody and Jerry have been greatly on the rise since my study began. This was Shirley's first year in my class and I had known her for 5 months when I started data collection. She was 3 years, 8 months old at the beginning of the study. Our relationship is well established and trusting, however, her preference to interact mostly with children, limits the depth and quantity of our interactions.

### Marge

Marge is a 3 year, 9 month old child who has black hair the color of soot and a soft complexion reminiscent of eggshells. Her acorn-colored eyes are filled with wonder, excitement, contemplation, and a great joy of learning. She initially comes across as shy, clinging to her father's legs in the morning, though is quick to warm up once she gets settled in the classroom and her friends arrive. She has a creative mind and loves to engage in imaginary play, usually with Lucy, and the two are often inseparable throughout the schoolday, and are also known to play outside of school. More recently at

the end of my study, Ethel also came into the picture, which instigated much dissension and jealousy. Marge has emerged as a silent leader who enjoys controlling play and events, though in an unobtrusive manner. Her love of nature is seen by the critters she frequently finds and brings to our class including spiders, snakes, and turtles. She also is quite fond of all types of craft activities that include painting, gluing, or writing. Marge started in my class at the beginning of the school year with me knowing her for 5 months at the outset of the study. I am quite close to Marge, though as she is one of the more serious children in the class, our relationship is unique in that we engage less in silly play with more of a focus on discussions about real events and people. However, knowing this as her personality it has given me the opportunity to attempt to foster this playfulness in my relationship with her and her relationships with others.

### Edith

Though the youngest in our class, you couldn't tell from her assertiveness and independence. Edith was 3 years old at the beginning of the study and brand new to our class as well, with me only knowing her for 3 weeks when I began data collection. Though new, she immediately became closest to me, as I am the only teacher who is there all 4 days each week. She has fair skin and blond hair the color and texture of sunflowers that is always pulled back into a ponytail on the back of her head. She has sky-blue eyes that are joyous and alive. She is still honing her social skills and learning about the other children in the classroom, so she hasn't established the network that the other children have, though she has begun to initiate play, mainly chasing games with Bill and Woody. She has a very wide range of emotions and becomes frustrated very

easily when she wants something or can't communicate her needs fast enough. This lability in her emotions, which I believe is due to her younger age and less social experience, made it somewhat difficult to establish a playful relationship initially with the exception of chasing and tickling games, though it is obvious she is learning through engaging with the other children. Notable to mention is the relationship she has developed with Annie, the most playful and one of the most patient of my student teachers who never gets frustrated with Edith.

### Gilda

Her perfectly light blond, almost white hair is like the color of a peeled banana. Her eyes are equally captivating and translucent, like looking through the ocean and being able to perfectly see the life at the bottom. She is very small in stature and the size of a child much younger, though she was born prematurely. Gilda has some difficulties with language, and though she understands what you say very well, she can only communicate through a few verbal words and some sign language. She is very shy and introverted, though can be very assertive when she knows what she wants. She is also extremely watchful of others, which causes her to be very loving to others and sensitive to their needs. She prefers to spend time with the teachers than the children, though throughout the study she began to initiate more play with her peers. She highly enjoys being read to, though her favorite activity remains quietly coloring, or engaging in crafts at the table alongside a teacher. Gilda was 4 years, 1 month old at the start of the study and I had known and taught her for 2 years at its outset. Our relationship is variable depending on which of the student teachers is available for her each day. As I am the

Head Teacher and have to be in charge of the entire class, I often don't spend as much time with Gilda as I would like to, as she has greater needs than the others in the class. However, one of the student teachers is always available to spend one-on-one time with her to help facilitate her language and extremely close relationships in the process. She is a child who laughs infrequently, though I believe this to be directly related to her difficulty communicating, which gives her a lesser sense of security and comfort in the classroom.

### Elaine

The texture of Elaine's short, silky, black hair reminds me of my mother's roses in her garden that I would smell when I was young, the soft petals brushing my face. She has dynamic, deep brown, almost black eyes, that sparkle like fireworks in the July night sky. She is of Indian descent with flawless, deep, brown skin. She is extraordinarily petite though tall like a stalk, and seemingly fragile, though she surprises others with her strength. Her size has absolutely nothing to do with her determination and she is one of the most frustratingly and wonderfully strong-willed children I have met. She has a fascination with babies and baby dolls, which has much to do with the birth of her baby sister this semester. She also loves anything messy, the messier the better. She can often be found up to her elbows in paint, shaving cream or playdough, and especially loves to help measure and mix ingredients to help create a variety of concoctions. Elaine was new to the class in August and I had known her for five months when I began my study, at which point she was 3 years, 6 months old. Our bonding wasn't immediate, though she had very sporadic attendance throughout the first and beginning of the second semester.

Now, on many days she is quite fond of following me wherever I go, especially if I leave the classroom for something. We also spend much time with her sitting in my lap and talking to me with her face pressed against mine while she plays with my hair. I feel she would have been one of the main participants in my study; however, her inconsistent attendance prevented her from being well documented as well as slowed down her capacity to form relationships. At the end of my study, however, she had a burst of socialability, and began to take charge of her ability to develop close relationships, and is now spending much time with Lucy and Marge.

### Roseanne

Roseanne was 3 years, 8 months old at the beginning of my study. I have known her for 17 months as she was in my class last year, though she took a semester off before returning to my classroom in January. She has flaxen colored hair that hangs past her shoulders with straight bangs. Her tawny eyes are pensive and wide-set on her full-cheeked, round face with a complexion similar to buttermilk. She is usually garbed in brightly-colored matching pant and shirt outfits. She is extremely shy in the morning, especially when her mother brings her, and her mom often stays with her for a majority of the day. She usually does activities alone, but over the last 2 weeks of my study she began to make more attempts at joining others' play. Roseanne enjoys activities that are typically quieter, especially art. She has great love of fine-motor activities that require paintbrushes, markers, glue, scissors, or any scraps of material that she can manipulate. Reforming my relationship with her has been difficult, due to her desire for solitude, as well as the fact that when her mother is there Roseanne prefers to interact solely with her.

Though I did document a few laughter situations for her, they were rare since I feel she has not yet really opened herself up to others and still does not feel completely comfortable in the classroom.

### Woody

One soon learns never to underestimate the knowledge of children after spending 10 minutes talking with Woody. He has an inordinate amount of knowledge about the world and the things in it. He is a philosopher, extraordinarily bright, and often questioning why things are as they are and how they became that way, making adults think more deeply about the world than they usually want to. His variety of interests are plentiful, most notably trains, firefighters, vehicles and construction trucks, and most recently tornadoes. He loves to dress up in a variety of hats and outfits and engage in fascinating imaginary play. He is an avid book lover and will sometimes sit for well over 45 minutes while being read book after book after book...after book, until the reader's mouth is dry and voice is gravelly. And he knows if you skip a page. He has thick, blond hair with questioning, sapphire eyes and his stature is suggestive of a much older child. Woody was 3 years, 9 months old at the start of my study and I had known him for 5 months at this point. He was one who had a great deal of difficulty with social interactions when the year started, as he had few experiences with other children, though he has made miraculous strides in initiating appropriate play, learning gentleness, developing friendships, and resolving conflicts. Because of this difficulty, his relationships with peers and teachers were slower to develop; however, now he is one of the most missed when he is not there. Woody and Jerry are often together in class and

also spend time together outside of school, though he also has developed other friendships, especially with Shirley.

### Jerry

Jerry was 3 years, 10 months old when I began gathering data, and I had known him for 17 months at this time. He has short, brown hair the color of walnuts and his eyes are the color of new growth after a barren winter. He is thin and wiry, and as I call him, rascally, because he always seems to get away from me when we are engaging in tickle play and he just as easily sneaks up on me without my knowledge. He loves trains, construction trucks, and loves to build things with any materials he can get his hands on. He loves to mix, measure, and pour and is always up front when we have provided the materials to engage in this type of play. He can be outgoing or introverted, depending on his mood or the activity he is occupied with. He often plays with Woody, Laverne, and Shirley, though will join other alliances if what they are doing is exciting enough. He also immensely enjoys and has great attention for solitary play. He is an inherently gentle and loving child, but has a great capacity to become very physical in certain company. When he smiles his entire face agrees, and his once serious nature has turned into extreme silliness and playfulness throughout the year. As his personality has blossomed, so has my relationship with him, and now we are great learners, collaborators, and laughers together.

## Bill

Bill was 4 years, 4 months old when I began my study and I had known him only 3 weeks. He is of Korean descent and understands some English though only speaks a few words of it. His black, silky hair is cut short and off his forehead, the color and sheen of a sunbathing raven. His deep-set charcoal eyes are like perfectly shaped almonds. He is extremely serious and focused during all of his activities and once involved he can easily lose himself in his play for well over an hour. He plays mostly in solitude favoring many quiet activities including drawing people, shapes, and animals, playing with trains, constructing things with legos, blocks or other manipulatives, or gluing a variety of materials to other materials to other materials. He has begun to try to initiate play with the other children, often by chasing them or taking their toys, and though this is a game for him, it often makes some of the other children upset and then avoid him. He is slowly learning other ways to interact, and it is only during these attempts at interaction that I have seen him smile or laugh. Our relationship has been slowly growing, however difficultly, due to the fact that he ignores me much of the time when I attempt to interact. When we do engage with each other, it is through chasing or hiding games that he can play without language. He has not formed noticeable friendships yet, though the others have become more willing to let him join their play and also engage him in conversations even though he only responds through body language.

## George

George is a boy of short stature with dark brown hair that is often brushed forward and poking up in all directions. He has sparkling, blue eyes, slightly protruding

ears, and a spattering of freckles across his nose. He is always seen in jeans with a T-shirt or sweatshirt, and sneakers. He is highly fond of imaginary play and spends most of his day in the kitchen mixing up stews, soups, casseroles, cookies, as well as many gross concoctions. He is creative in his use of materials and can find anything in the classroom and make it represent what he wants. He is a highly physical child and loves any games that entail superheroes, play fighting such as karate, or chasing. It is these game choices, however, that make several of the children avoid play with him because he is often rough and space invading in his approach, and they fear getting hurt. He prefers to play alone or with the other children and rarely seeks out the teachers unless in collaboration with another child. He had spent the majority of the year playing with Ethel, however, their changing interests and play styles no longer support their interactions together, and they have mostly gone their separate ways with the exception of snack time. He has begun to develop new friendships with others and shows versatility by engaging in play with whoever is having the most fun. He was 3 years, 10 months old when my study began and I had known and taught him for 2 years prior, though my relationship with him is not as developed as it is with many of the other children. This is simply due to us having very different personalities and tolerances for rough play, as well as the fact that he often does not want the company of the teachers during his play.

### Ben

His straight, dirty-blond hair reminds me of the color of the sun-streaked sand, covered by waves on the shore. It hangs down over his forehead to his eyebrows and he has a perfect olive complexion often tinted with reddish cheeks when he gets chilly or

excited. When he laughs he shows two of his top, perfectly straight, white teeth, and his smile is one that you could never tire of, and never forget even when he is not in your presence. He has bright, blue eyes that get as big as planets when he is engaged in play with teachers or children. He is a watcher, often hesitant to initially engage, though absorbed when he makes the choice to do so. He comes to school in tow with Bunny, his beloved stuffed animal whom we now consider a member of the class. Ben loves to participate mostly in quiet fine-motor activities such as stringing beads, and gluing, gluing, gluing..... and he can guarantee that nothing he glues will ever come loose. He is not fond of large, group activities, preferring to stay in the area of the room where there are the least amount of children and he can sit at the one of the two quieter snack tables. He is sensitive, intuitive, empathetic, giving, and moral, more so than most of the other children can understand or appreciate. Ben, who was 3 years, 6 months at the beginning of my study was new to the class in August, with me knowing him for 5 months prior to data collection. We developed a close relationship initially, as he had a great deal of transitioning difficulty at the beginning of the year, though since then he has become more fond of three to four of the student teachers who have the time to spend a lot of one-on-one time with him, or walk him around the building...his favorite activity. When not alone or with teachers, he primarily seeks out Laverne, whom he plays with outside of school, though he will often join the play of others as well.

### Teachers

Though to me the children were the main participants in my study, I know I was also a major participant, more major to some of them than others. My student teachers

were also participants, as they were also involved with each of these children 2 days per week. In reality, since my study cannot be understood without a focus on relationships, it cannot be plainly stated how participants' importance is divided; it is a dynamic that is constantly evolving for each child, each teacher, and each relationship, which continues to change each day and each week and so on. I do, however, know that for my study we all needed each other, they me, and I them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings and More

*“The most wasted day is that in which we have not laughed.”* (Chamfort, 1805)

#### Laughter is Like a Head of Lettuce

With all of those formal questions and methods said and done, I can write like a real writer now. Laughter is a funny thing, both literally and figuratively. I never imagined that something that seems so natural and visceral could have the depth and multifaceted complexity that it does. Laughter is like a big head of iceberg lettuce. The appearance on the outside makes it seem like a big solid ball but then you realize you can peel off layers, and more layers, and more layers before you get to the core. But the core still really doesn't have the answer, as it shouldn't because it is a head of lettuce. So you have to keep wondering and exploring while at the same time hoping there is a lot of good, cheap produce at the grocery store.

#### What is to Come?

The remainder of this chapter documents laughter-producing scenarios to give examples of the variety of situations in which laughter was used in my classroom. It is important to remember that even though each scenario is placed in a category, the category is not meant to be limiting in any way. I have only separated them in this manner to try to better describe this wide variety of situations in which laughter occurred, as well as the meanings that I felt the situations had in the context of my particular room

based on each individual child, my relationships with the children, and their relationships with each other. Each situation is multileveled, intricate, and dynamic. In fact, each situation has the capacity to be placed in more than one category, though I only put each in one for reasons of simplicity and for purposes of representing a concept. As every other interaction or phenomenon in life, the meaning changes based on each individual's interpretation, and I know the meanings will be different for each reader, however, I feel this does not detract from the value since it is these variable meanings that always leave room for more discovery.

### **Laughter and Relationships**

*“Laughter is not at all a bad beginning for a friendship, and it is far the best ending for one.”* (Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891)

I have begun this chapter with the social importance of laughter because I believe it to be at the very heart and soul of what laughter is about; uniting, bonding, and developing intersubjective relationships. The evidence in the literature suggests that laughter is almost solely a social phenomenon, and all of my documentation strongly supports this finding. At the outset of my research, I knew that I already had sustaining relationships with most of the children. Now my question was how to define these relationships in terms of the laughter that occurred in the classroom. What does it mean to laugh with someone? How do teachers and children use laughter to build relationships? How can children and adults help to facilitate personal development in the

other? I have come to vividly see that there is a process of reciprocal transformation that goes on in this development, whereby each participant in the interaction is influenced and altered by the other or others. The next six scenarios will help to define the social meaning and importance that laughter can have.

### Children or Teachers Initiating or Sustaining Contact With Other Children

“You’re Stinky!”

Our snack time is a particularly garrulous occurrence. What else can happen when you suddenly have 14 children, many of whom I endearingly call hummingbird mouths, all sitting around a table with their elbows touching? I have closely watched these snack time get togethers and realized this was the time of day when I documented the most laughter. Sometimes the laughter scenarios were so continuous and intertwined I had difficulty capturing them because there was too much to document, or I was laughing too hard to write.

In my classroom I have speculated as to why the laughter frequency goes up while the children are eating. Throughout the morning, the children are engaged in the several activities that are set up around the room. At least one to two of them are fine-motor activities that often require much skill, precision, and concentration, which from my readings and experience make the amount of language happening decrease, thus lessening the possibility that laughter will occur.

Sometimes I feel like I am teaching high school for the amount and depth of the cliques that have already developed by 3 years of age. Throughout the day, the majority of children stick to their gang, interacting with others only by fault of proximity. Only at

snack and story time do the children all come together in a unified space, which naturally creates the opportunity for sustaining the relationships and interactions between already established pals, but also provides the opportunity to extend their relationships to others. Even though the majority of laughter at snack continues to be between friends, *only* at snack have I documented this much laughter amongst non-friends. For the teacher, this increase in laughter may suggest that engaging in larger group activities could increase the overall amount of laughter in the classroom.

Here is an example of laughter amongst a group of children, some of whom rarely interact outside of snack:

Woody: To Shirley sitting next to him he yells, “You’re stinky.” His eyes are bright and he begins to giggle.

Jerry: To Woody he says, “You’re stinky.” Both are giggling and pointing their fingers at each other from opposite sides of the table.

Woody: He replies to Jerry, “You’rrreeeee stinky.” He is laughing so hard his voice sounds shaky.

Lucy: Screaming to everyone she says, “You are ALLLLLLLL stinky.”

Woody: Not talking to or looking at anyone in particular he retorts, “You’re stinky.”

Ethel: She looks at George and says, “You’re stinky.” She says it quietly because he is sitting right next to her but she immediately throws her head back and laughs out loud after she makes eye contact with me.

George: To Ethel he says, “No, you’re stinky,” while he laughs and points his finger almost in her eye.

Woody: To Lucy he hollers, “You’re stinky.”

Lucy: She screams in a voice that is louder than you would think could come from a child, "I AM NOT STINKY!!!!!" She begins to whine and stops playing the game.

Woody: To Jerry: "You're stinky."

Ethel: "Stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky." She is cocking her head from side to side and seems to just be playing with the sound of the word.

George: "Stinky, stinky, stinky." He imitates Ethel and her actions.

Throughout this interaction, there is constant laughter, almost a group glee situation, myself included, and I have to admit that stinky is a very fun word to say. Stinky, stinky, stinky, stinky. As I would have anticipated, Lucy was the only one who got upset, and I feel it was partially because the game suddenly turned when Woody focused directly on her and called her stinky, and as I mentioned in her biography, she likes to be in control. This interaction continued several times throughout the morning and each time, except for the instance with Lucy, it produced a pleasant reciprocal response and laughter, which seemed to unite those involved.

There was also an element of questioning social appropriateness when Ethel looked at me during the game. She seemed to know that this game could possibly have social repercussions, as I don't usually let the children call each other names, however, I felt it was really a game of social interaction and playing with words rather than a game with the intent to hurt. This shows how early in life a child comes to learn about social norms and what a large part these norms have to do with laughing potential of the child.

“Hi, Wethel!!”

I often think of the children as demanding because they are constantly commandeering my attention, usually several of them all at once, so I can't address any of them and my head starts to spin from the overstimulation of 14 small voices needing to eat, play, go to the bathroom, ask a question, or cry... miraculously all at the same time. It feels like being inside of a racquetball court and someone throwing 100 bouncy balls off of the wall, bouncing at you from all directions with no order. I have become good at handling chaos, though it must be ordered chaos. I can assure that this bouncy ball image is no mere exaggeration, however, what has even more truth is my acknowledgement of this quality in myself, and the extent to which I likely make the children feel this same way. I may even be more demanding than they are on any particular day, and as soon as none of them want to play with me, I am demanding *their* attention and contact. Many times when I am feeling left out, I initiate play or conversations by doing something that I feel will make them laugh, and in my narcissistic thought process, make them more accepting of my gestures and willing to play with me.

Often when I see Ethel we play a name game, one that I initiate so she will laugh with me, play with me, or just have a conversation.

Sarah: “Hi, Wethel!!!”

Ethel: “My name is not Wethel.” She begins to giggle.

Sarah: “My mistake. Hi, Zethel.” I say it very seriously.

Ethel: “My name is not Zethel.” A full laughter is beginning.

Sarah: “Oops. Hi, Bethel.”

Ethel: “My name is NOT Bethel.” She is laughing harder though with a look on her face

like, “Can’t you get it right?”

Sarah: “Well, what is it then?” She is seemingly confused.

Ethel: “MY NAME IS ETHEL!!!”

I love to play this game with her, especially to see how far I can take it. It is interesting to watch how her response to me varies depending on her mood. If she is somewhat cranky she gets annoyed by my game and immediately says, “Don’t call me Wethel!!!!” with a scowl on her face. When this happens, I walk away with the immaturity of a new sprout. It yanks at my feelings like a puppy playing tug o’ war with a new toy. I feel inadequate because I have failed to entice her into interacting with me and it is amazing how much rejection a child can make me feel. Other times when she comes in cranky, it can help to make her receptive and get away from her early morning grump in a manner that a nonlaughing attempt doesn’t. Then I am on my pedestal because I have succeeded in bonding with her. Sometimes the game can go on and on and on and on without tire and other times it only continues for two to four turns before she gets frustrated.

This is a good example of how teachers need to be particularly careful in the use of humor with children to initiate social interaction, as one day the joking may be taken very well, and on others may be upsetting or bothersome. In the 2 years since I have known her, Ethel has taught me that I need to use my attempts at using laughter for interaction judiciously and keep an accurate understanding of the children in my class, especially their particular sense of humor and personality. For the teacher, this requires a high level of intuition and understanding of each particular child, as well as how you both perceive the depth of your relationship.

## “YUCKY!!!” and Naked

In another example, here is a situation when two children who normally interact throughout the day, are sharing laughter at snack time. Woody begins a game with

Shirley:

Woody: “YUCKY!!!!”

Shirley looks at him and giggles.

Woody: “YUCKY, YUCKY, YUCCCCCKKKKKKKYYYYYYYYYY.” His words are changing in intonation because he is laughing so hard.

Shirley continues to laugh hysterically. Suddenly, Woody hops up from the table and starts stripping off his clothes. I ask him what is wrong and he tells me blatantly, “I peed in my pants.”

Sarah: “Why didn’t you go to the bathroom?”

Woody: “It was an accident. I was laughing too much.”

I, laughing on the inside because I think it is really funny that a child peed his pants from laughing while I was doing my laughter research, go with him to the bathroom to help him change.

Sarah: I begin to giggle slightly, wanting him to know that he wasn’t in trouble and asked him, “What was so funny that you peed in your pants?”

Woody laughs for at least 30 seconds with his head thrown back showing me his teeth.

Sarah: “What is so yucky?”

Woody: “Yucky milk and yucky water. It was a joke.”

I begin laughing even more at the joke he created based on the two choices of drinks we give them at snack time. He hurries and sits back down at the table, naked below the waist because he doesn't have any underwear and we have to go and search in the lost and found for a spare pair. He leans proudly back in his chair and shows Shirley that he is naked, pointing to himself and laughing riotously. Shirley stares at him in bewilderment and also laughs. He immediately begins the yucky game with Shirley again for another 2 to 3 minutes until I tell him to eat his snack. At this point Woody again attempts to initiate interaction with Shirley by saying something that he knows will make her laugh. He tells her five times, "Look!!! I'm naked!!" and each time she responds by looking at him and roaring.

Shirley, who is continuously reacting to the antics of Woody, never engages in the word part of the game and only laughs, though by laughing she is positively reinforcing the interaction and helping to sustain the game. I think like "stinky," "yucky" is another word that has the same sound and, therefore, is fun to say. Back many years ago, before gravity and adulthood, I recall the exhilaration and humor that was attached with being naked, especially in a place where nakedness was not common. For Woody, sitting naked at the snack table seemed to make him laugh more, because this is something he has definitely never done, very well may never do again, and he was able to share the exhilaration of it with Shirley.

## Noncommunicative Children Initiating Contact With Other Children or Teachers

### Tug o' War

At the outset of my study, I mulled over which children would probably be the main participants based on what I knew of their personalities. Soon I realized that even though I was documenting much more for some children, they were all still included to different degrees, and I therefore needed to incorporate the entire class in my dialogue if I wanted to discuss the true context of laughter in my classroom. My first bias about who would not be participants (the noncommunicative children) was knocked down flat in the same manner that a karate chop to the stomach would do; you know you will soon have the realization of a hand in your stomach, but until you experience it you don't know how realizing, awakening, and breathtaking it is. I was absolutely elated when I determined how wrong I was about who would laugh. I tried so hard to remain completely open-minded about my research but the undeniable truth is that when you are living your research, you can't *not* think about it.

I have two verbally noncommunicative children in my classroom. Gilda has an expressive language delay, and the other, Bill, is Korean and learning English as a second language. For these two children, I have always been cognizant of the difficulty in social interaction that not being able to verbally initiate play could cause, though they have demonstrated to me that they have other strategies to compensate for their lack of language. In the following three examples, I will describe laughter-producing situations that occurred over a 5-week period and were initiated by Bill in order to establish relationships or gain acceptance of his classmates.

When I documented this first situation, Bill, who had been in our class only 4 days, demonstrated smiling and laughter for the first time. This was especially exciting as none of us had ever heard him speak or even make a semblance of a sound, and we knew he understood very little English and spoke even less. We were out in the atrium of our building because the frigid and unrelenting temperatures enforced it. We always take some things to play with when we go out there to prevent the children from wall climbing, and on this day we had some long ribbons that they could swing around or run with. Jerry had picked up a ribbon and was running around with it, watching it swirl around his body. Bill surreptitiously walked up to Jerry and grabbed the end of the ribbon that was lying on the ground behind him. I watched with surprise because up to this point, Bill had played in complete solitude, seemingly without recognition that the other children were even there. At first it appeared that Bill was trying to get the ribbon away from Jerry but as time continued, what I thought was going to turn into a precarious battle of ribbon ownership became a game. It started with Bill displaying a jack-o-lanternesque smile, watching Jerry the entire time. It immediately escalated into a reciprocal smiling, giggling and mass hysteria fest as they yanked back and forth playing tug o' war for the next 10 minutes.

I did not realize exactly how meaningful this interaction was for Bill, until 3 weeks later when the other teachers and I sat at our weekly Teacher Talks and discussed how to get him to stop yanking things away from the other children including toys, books, and even the chair from under them. I contemplated his behaviors endlessly until my "Aha!!" made me aware of how simple the answer was. I thought back to this first situation where he initiated a pulling game that produced an intersubjective laughter

episode. This was his first attempt at developing an interaction and it had worked. Because he was successful at this, he began to try to commence all of his interactions in this same manner; by pulling something away from another child and laughing as he did it, however, the receiving child did not find it humorous at all. Once we determined that he was using this negative behavior in a way that he believed to be positive, we were able to redirect his intentions and provide him with other opportunities to use laughter for initiating play that the other children would accept.

### Peek a Boo

Two weeks after this first incident, Bill made his first attempt at building relationships with the teachers. It was story time up in the loft, and Bill had quietly come to join us for the first time, even though he obviously wasn't listening to the story. I was sitting on the steps and saw him peering through the railing at me, all except for an eye shrouded by the wooden bars. He caught me looking at him, grew a huge grin, and quickly moved his head so both of his eyes were covered. I waited and 20 seconds later I saw his other eye gradually peer around from the opposite side of the railing. I opened my eyes wide at him and he disappeared again, this time with one, quick laugh. The next time when he looked around the railing, my face was right up close to it, waiting to be discovered. He saw me, jumped back surprised, got a huge grin, and started to laugh continuously. This game continued for the next 10 minutes of story time, and never ceased to amuse him. In the weeks since, it has become a game he plays frequently with whoever will engage in it. This interaction was a great relationship builder for both Bill and the teachers, because it helped us to know him and his personality better, and it all

occurred with only body language. We all felt like his laughter and positive interaction in this scenario was the breaking point when the teachers felt like he was now comfortable in the classroom, and in turn it made the teachers more comfortable playing with him. This demonstrates how cultural barriers can be surmounted, reciprocity through laughter can be achieved, and relationships can be started, all without the use of communication.

### Bookhead

Another 3 weeks later, this next scenario occurred and further established Bill's desire to initiate play, this time with the entire class. As a teacher, it was one of those things that made me say, "What the hell is he doing?" I still don't know, though he did it to make the class laugh and initiate an interaction. One of the student teachers was reading one of the Rainbow Fish books when Bill walked up to the book on his knees and rubbed his head on the page. He had a huge grin. Laverne and Woody immediately began laughing. He sat down, only to do it again 10 seconds later. Then Shirley and Jerry also started laughing. Was I missing something that only children can understand? He sat down again and then another 10 seconds later rubbed his head on the page again. Now Ethel, George, Lucy, and Ben started laughing. This time Bill didn't stop and he kept doing this with a colossal smile on his face. The children laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed for several minutes. All of the teachers present were extremely confused as to what he was thinking that made him begin this interaction. Each child was looking at other children in the group.

I was really interested in this interaction, because despite nine of the children laughing uncontrollably, there were also four children who did not laugh at all, and they

were the four children whom I would designate as the more serious children in the classroom. It helped me begin to understand how different each child's sense of humor is as well as how different his or her threshold for laughter can be. The more Bill got socially reinforced, the more he rubbed his head on the book, with less time between each interval. I feel the children viewing this interaction were laughing for the silliness factor, though it helped them to view Bill in a more non-threatening way that they had not yet done. Immediately following our story time, Jerry and Shirley began to talk to Bill, when previously they had avoided or ignored him. Though he still can't communicate with the others verbally, it seems that he was using his sense of humor to communicate through his only means available; his actions.

### **Laughter as a Strategy**

*"A jest often decides matters of importance more effectually and happily than seriousness."* (Horace, 35-30 B.C.)

What better way for a teacher to ease pain, hurt, or conflict than by causing a child to laugh? What better way for a child to get out of doing something necessary than to laugh at an adult? What better reason for a teacher to use laughter than to get the children to do these necessary things they are trying to get out of? What better reason for a teacher to laugh than to prevent going insane while working with these children? Laughter has helped set me free in my life, but also in my teaching. Laughing and not laughing in teaching is the difference between a Ferrari and a farm tractor, Camembert

and Velveeta. Some authors suggest that laughter can be used successfully to deal with strife in teaching and parenting (Michelli, 1998), though nowhere have I read about children using it to manipulate adults, and do they ever!

### Teachers Using Laughter to Divert a Child's Attention in Difficult Situations

#### If the Bead Fits.....

One day, and you can assume this story is not missing any integral details because it happened just this morning and is too fresh in my memory, I had to use laughter to get a child calmed down in quite a precarious situation; Ben stuck a bead up his nose. It was a case of pure experimentation, to see if it fit he told us. Well, it fit quite well, so well in fact that it wouldn't come back out. He had put the bead in his nose during story time and then went under the loft to try and get it out by himself in private, of course jamming it in deeper.

He was immediately very afraid and I imagine somewhat embarrassed at doing this because it was not something that this child would regularly attempt. I know from experience that sometimes, even if you know something probably isn't right, the impulsive urge consumes you and compels you to temporarily lose your wits. I distinctly remember the time that I was riding my bicycle in fifth grade, and suddenly wondered what would happen if I stuck my foot in the spokes as I was riding. I knew it was probable that I would get hurt, but I was determined to see if I was wrong. I also could imagine my foot simply stopping the tire dead. I was probably traveling 10 miles per hour when I hesitantly took my foot off of the pedal, and slowly stuck it out right into the spokes. I was right that the bike would stop, though I didn't anticipate that I would be

ejected five feet from it only to land squarely on my elbows and knees, and attain a severe road rash on all exposed extremities. My brother was behind me and I began laughing, even though it hurt like hell. While on the ground, I had the sudden thought, “How stupid could I be to think this wouldn’t happen?” It was the same as the urge that I often have to turn the car off while I am driving to see what happens, though I have been able to fight it off so far.

Ben was crying hysterically and his nose was bloody from trying to get the bead out on his own. He had three teachers with him who immediately began to console him, but at the same time make a joke of what had happened to alleviate his fear and embarrassment. We asked him if he knew what color the bead was and he replied, “Green” with a smile. We all laughed thinking it was funny that he knew what color it was before sticking it in his nostril. We continued to make light of the situation and joke about it as though it was something that was just silly and not even remotely a big deal. He began to stop crying, knowing that we were accepting the situation without judgment of him, and forgetting his embarrassment because we were making it a joke. We continued by asking him what he was going to do with the bead when the doctor got it out and in the process we gave him a plastic bag to put it in for a later “show and tell.” One of us joked with him about whether or not he would give it to Laverne, his best friend in the class, and many of us tease...his future wife. He began to giggle more and more. After 10 minutes he was no longer upset at all, but rather in a fine mood. Shortly after this his father arrived, surprised to see him so spirited... in fact, Ben did not want to leave anymore, but play.

I was highly surprised at my own personal reaction to the situation as well. I am not proud of it, but I immediately laughed when I realized what the problem was. This was not a direct response to this particular child, but rather, to my life in the classroom. Just my fucking luck, I thought. Plainly, I have had an especially difficult time in the classroom with child accidents. It used to behoove me, and I used to think of myself as a bad and neglectful teacher. But I am not neglectful at all, in fact I am overly conscious of every happening in the classroom. The truth is, sometimes you have a certain group of children with a certain group of dynamics that cause a certain group of accidents. Children with social skills who do not yet know how to solve problems constructively. Children with dichotomous personalities who say they are best friends and want to play together but in reality only want to play with their own toy and hit another child with it if infringed upon. Children with daredevil personalities that do not yet know they can't jump off the couch like Superman. Children who love to have physical contact but don't yet know that if you run into another child full force that you are likely to knock heads. I am not a bad teacher, only a realistic and fallible one. And I feel my classroom represents this reality, a too real reality. My only choice is to laugh about it, for a strategy. Luckily with Ben everything "came out" OK, and the big, fat dollop of guilt I was feeling dissipated.

### On the Toilet

In another example, I used laughter to prevent a child from having what could have easily developed into a tantrum, something that is moderately common for her in

situations where you definitely would not expect it. I also realize that in talking about all of these laughter scenarios, I am placing all of my former dignity way past the line.

I go to the bathroom with Lucy, Ethel, and Marge who really have to pee, in contrast to their usual rendezvous to the bathroom to play in the sink. In our preschool bathroom we have a buffet of toilets and there are five in a row with absolutely no privacy. We go to the bathroom, and there is something interesting and blue at the bottom of the first two toilets. We engage in a discussion of what it is and why it is there, from secret alien powers, to paint, to blue goo. After contemplating its origin, the girls decide to try and flush it down. After flushing, the second toilet still has secret and undesirable blue stuff, and because of this they decide that none of them want to sit on it to go to the bathroom. Therefore, Lucy ends up sitting on the first toilet, Ethel on the third, and Marge on the fourth. Everyone takes down their pants and begins to pee. Lucy shouts in her grating voice that she uses to let everyone know she is definitely upset and demands something, “SOMEONE SIT BY ME!!!!!!” She is greatly bothered that the toilet sitting is not occurring in a line.

Knowing her for 1-½ years, I have become quite accustomed to her moods and have developed a multitude of strategies to deal with the contention when it arises. She immediately screams again, “NO ONE IS SITTING BY ME!!” Knowing that the other girls are not going to switch toilets as it would be quite difficult in mid-stream, I immediately sit down on the toilet (fully dressed of course). At first she looks at me questioningly, but then she begins to laugh hysterically, along with me. I begin to laugh at the fact that I am a grown adult sitting on a child-sized toilet, fully dressed, and could be potentially exposed if any of the other teachers came in. Lucy, however, had other

ideas about what was funny. She laughs and screams, “You have to pull your pants down or you will pee on them!!!” Only Lucy and I laugh at this while the other two girls go about their business, so to speak.

Here, I was luckily able to use laughter to avert potential difficulty. Though this child has a wide emotional range, easily escalating from pouting to anger to playfulness to hysterics to standoffishness, knowing her personality has allowed me to learn that she can be easily and positively distracted by laughter. Of course, I am not always successful, and I have heard many times, “LEAVE ME ALONE!!! Sometimes this is just a chance you have to take, because when it works it is worth it.

#### Abracadabra

Laverne had poked her finger on something and began to cry. Tears were rolling down her face and she seemed inconsolable, crying in the way that makes the teacher or parent fear the child will suffocate. Our relationship is such that Laverne often seeks me out in times of need so I take her hand, kiss it, and say vehemently, “Abracadabra, zippity zoo. Take away this painful boo boo!” She is still crying, but begins to laugh, and within 10 seconds stops crying completely and goes back to play.

Laughter as a distracter is my savior. Immediately after looking at her finger, I knew Laverne was not really hurt in a way that should cause the type of reaction she was having, though I also did not want to minimize her feelings. On this day, she was already in a ill-tempered mood and I anticipated that her finger probably hurt a little but her reaction was one that occurred due to her crankiness, fatigue, desire for attention, or fear of being hurt. I feel that had I responded with complete sympathy, her reaction would

have been to become more and more upset, because it would be reinforcing her emotional cycle. In 2-½ years of teaching I have found this to be true in almost all cases. Children follow the lead of adults and if an adult makes an enormous deal out of anything, the child will follow suit. By dealing with her injury using humor and making her laugh, I let her know that I acknowledged her hurt, however calmly, and then used a strategy to allow her to gain control over her emotions and come to terms with the reality of it.

### Child's Pure Avoidance of Necessary Tasks

#### To Clean or Not to Clean

In my classroom, children love to play, love to make a mess, love to dump out every container of every possible thing, love to mix all of the materials on the art shelf, but for some reason hate to clean up. I can't blame them. I clean up the classroom at school so well only because of the reason that others will see it. But the truth of the matter is, I am somewhat disordered myself. Just a little. So I empathize. And I hate clean up time too, especially because I am not the one who makes the mess. The children also feel this, and at clean up time they retort, "But I didn't take that out," yet they are still not willing to clean up the things that they did take out. When they don't want to clean up, they don't. And they use an excessive amount of laughter in order to avoid it. I love children for everything they are. Sweet, loving, brilliant, amazingly cute, yet the best manipulators around. I am trying to learn some life skills from their techniques. Maybe if I had just started laughing at my first committee meeting when I was told I had to write a thesis, I could have gotten out of it somehow.

I have documented that laughter and this persevering desire to not clean up coincide and are demonstrated in the classroom. It is my own downfall that I probably see this much laughter in these types of situations because I am not the strictest or most consistent of teachers, and when you are this way the children quickly learn they can get away with absolutely anything, often by laughing about what you want them to do. Then again, to compensate for my laxity, I frequently turn it around and use laughter to get them to do what *I* want.

During clean up time, all of the teachers were attempting to get the children more involved with helping put toys away and clean the classroom, as we attempt, often unsuccessfully each day. One of my teachers, Annie, went under the loft to see how things were going because the children often hide here when they hear one of the cheesy clean up songs, and she noticed that Woody was still playing. She gently, yet firmly, let him know that we had to clean up the kitchen and playtime was over. He wasn't paying much attention while she talked to him, so she turned him around so he could see her and not possibly still ignore her. He began to laugh and struggle in her grasp until he escaped and ran away looking back at Annie in his dust, laughing riotously. She caught up to him and told him that this time she was *really* serious and we *really* weren't playing anymore and he *really* did have to clean up the kitchen now. *Really!* Eventually, after much frustration and 10 reminders, he went over there, and Annie helped him pick up.

Rascals. It was this refusal to clean up that in the first semester, provoked me to remove all of the toys from the room and pretend that the Toy Thief took them and wouldn't bring them back until the children had a new attitude about clean up time. Of course they only found this funny, and did not even care that the toys were gone. I felt

that this observation could put toy companies out of business because when it really comes down to it, children are very adept at entertaining themselves. Now clean up time remains just as much of a game, but one that I now have a more realistic perspective on and one that I can play even better than them. Recently, I have noticed that if I stop chasing them and ignore them for a few minutes they will stop laughing and come back to clean up when they see I am not acting like a raving idiot and chasing them around the room. The laughter in this scenario, and many more like it, prompted me to reevaluate clean up time, my expectations of the children, and the ways in which I could better encourage them to clean up.

### Lucy's Makeup

In addition to loving princess dresses, Lucy also loves makeup. Occasionally she comes in with her lips and eyelids haphazardly colored red, and other times when she tells us she is running late, she brings it to school to put on. She digs out her powder puff, which is similar in size to her head, and dabs it all over her face while telling herself she is beautiful. This makeup application is usually a one-time occurrence, though one day she decided to use her need to beautify to get out of cleaning up. She had already tried numerous strategies in the past to avoid this menial task, but nothing like this. The red light came on to let the children know it was time to do the dreaded deed and Lucy was playing under the loft. I said, "Lucy, would you please put away the books under there?" She screamed, "No, I am NOT cleaning up today or EVER!" This continued three more times until she suddenly popped out from under the loft and sprinted to her cubby while saying, "NO! I can't clean up until I am beautiful again!" She was laughing

hysterically and I was trying hard not to. She snatched her make-up and ran over to the mirror and started pressing her powder puff all over her face. Evidently she needed a complete makeover because 2 minutes later she was still dolling herself up in the mirror with her back to me. I told her again to put the books away. “One more minute,” she hollered!” Of course by now most of the room had been cleaned up by the other children. Now I just watched her to see what would happen next. She stood there for 2 more minutes, but now began to look around the room to watch what everyone else was doing. She put on more and more makeup, maybe so that I wouldn’t recognize her anymore and would stop hassling her. She looked around the room again, which was now clean and she said, “OK, I’m ready to clean up now.” All I can say is this kid knows how to work it.

### Hiding Shoes

In one of my parent-appeasing acts of the year, I had to tell the children they couldn’t take their shoes off in the classroom anymore. I didn’t really know why this was a concern and still don’t, though I had to sacrifice my personal belief that I have that children should be barefooted, especially babies since they cannot even walk yet. I think adults should go barefooted too, and the year that I went without shoes was one of my happiest. I could never understand what difference it made if you went into a restaurant tracking dirt and germs in on the bottom of your shoes or the bottom of your feet. Can you not go into restaurants and stores barefooted simply because feet are ugly?

Months had passed since our new rule when I caught Shirley up in the loft with her shoes off and perfectly placed beside her, and I reluctantly had to tell her to put them

on. She ignored me completely. I told her that I would be back in 5 minutes and I wanted her to have them on or ready for me to help her put them on. I faithfully came back in 5 minutes to find her sitting in the same place, though with no shoes next to her. She saw me and averted my eyes when I asked her where her shoes were. She began to smile, though I could tell she was trying not to. I said, “Shirley, where are your shoes? Did they get up and walk away?” There was a sudden burst of laughter, kind of like how it sounds when someone has been holding his or her breath too long. She was now hysterical and rolling around the floor and said, “They are gone.” I said, “I guess you will have to go barefooted forever.” She was still laughing and said, “Nuh-uh. I was just tricking you. I didn’t want to put them on.” She then went and pulled them out from under one of the pillows.

Shirley had created a game and used laughter in order to try to get out of, or at least delay, putting on her shoes. She knew it was the rule, though obviously didn’t agree with it. From our relationship, I believed that she knew I would accept this game with laughter.

### Teachers Trying to Engage Children in Necessary Tasks

#### Are They Clean?

Just as I believe that children shouldn’t always have to wear shoes, I also feel we make them wash their hands way too damn much. What ever happened to building up a certain amount of germs in order to make your immune system stronger? However, I do think they should wash before snack, because whereas they should have certain germs on their hands, I don’t think they should lick them off of their fingers while eating. Often

before snack, many of the children come up to me and say, “I already washed my hands,” though I know they have not. I came up with a game, initially not knowing that they would respond in the manner that they did. Jerry came up to me with the common line, “I already washed them.” I bent over and whispered as though it were a secret, “Do you know what my secret power is?” His eyes opened to spheres and he said, “Whhhaatt?” also in a whisper. I replied, “I have the secret power to know if you *really* washed your hands.” I proceeded to grab his hands, bring them to my face and smell them. He looked bewildered. I stated, “My secret powers tell me that you didn’t wash your hands yet.” He began laughing raucously. “How did you know???” I said, “My secret powers let me know.” He ran in the bathroom and washed his hands. In the following days this game caught on like a wolf to a fresh carcass. At snack time, every child began to run up to me with their hands in my face, exclaiming, “Smell my hands, smell my hands! Did I wash them?” Let them believe that I really have secret powers, but the truth is I can really smell the soap on them. In 3 months this game has sustained and the children faithfully wash their hands, though there is the random time when they try to dupe me, but I always catch them.

### Song and Dance

When we were getting ready to wash hands following clean up time, one of my student teachers was trying to get the children a little more excited about it, so she started to dance and make up a song to sing to them while they washed their hands. The children, engaged in a mundane task, found this funny, and then laughed endlessly while

they washed their hands, especially since it was an adult acting in a way that was not typical during their routine experience of hand washing.

This teacher is one who's personality really facilitates laughter in the children... more so than any of the other teachers, and the children's response shows its influence. She is not afraid to be silly, which most adults and teachers are, and this seems to cause the children to have a more positive response to doing the things they don't want to do. It is rare that I see any of the other teachers act in this similar manner, and their interactions with the children show that the children feel their differing personalities and capacity to engage them in doing things that are not normally fun.

#### Airplane Clean Up

When there is absolutely NO WAY the children will clean up I have to bring out the tactics. In the middle of them whining and hissing about how unfair it is, I ignore them, run over to them like a maniac, swoop them up into my arms, and run them around the room to different items that need to be cleaned up. Of course you have to be really willing to put forth all of your energy or it won't work. I have found that I need to put many words with actions. "The plane is ready for take off. The engines have started. Here it goes down the runway. Faster, faaastter, faassstteerrrr, and TAKE OFF!" Then I fly them around the room, both of us laughing and me saying, "Oh, no. I think there is an engine failure. It is going to crash unless it picks up those books." Then I swoop them down towards the ground and they pick up the books and I fly them over to the bookshelf to put them away.

This method isn't always foolproof and many of them want to see if I will really make them crash. If they are waiting for it then I tell them the plane will stay in the air forever unless it helps clean up. Either way, it usually ends up being successful, produces endless laughter, and I can get the children to do what they need to do without pain. The only problem is that every child wants to be flown around, even the ones who would clean up without it. Needless to say that by the end of the day I am horribly tired.

### **Laughter and Cognitive Understanding**

*“We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things.”* (Sigmund Freud, 1930)

My mind is definitely unraveling like a big ball of yarn that someone holds the end of and throws off of a skyscraper and I know I can never roll it back up again unless I want a tangled, frayed mess. Children are the most brilliant, wonderful, creative, funny creatures around, and I can't believe that these people who have lived so little can know and understand so much. I realize this every time the children express their knowledge and a few of the children in my class have begun to do this in a variety of ways that produce laughter. At the end of my data collection there was a huge surge in laughing in the children while demonstrating their cognitive understanding through engaging in word or conceptual play, and understanding and using objects to show they understand differences or incongruity in something. Following are some more stories demonstrating these abilities.

I was amazed at the sudden onslaught of cognitive related laughter that surfaced towards the latter half of my study. What was even more amazing was the observation that *all* of this cognitive laughter was only engaged in by five children, only three of which initiated it. At first I contemplated the possibility that I was paying more attention to some children than others, though considering the fact that most of this cognitive play occurred at snack time when all of the children were present, I knew that this wasn't the case. I believe the reason that only a few children engaged in this play is twofold. A child must first have the personality, willingness, and creativity to engage in this type of play with others, and it is well known that every child plays and interacts differently. However, I think just as much can be attributed to the child's *ability* to engage in this kind of laughter-producing play including their cognitive understanding and their capacity to think quickly.

#### Children Changing Words of Something Known

##### “What Do You Hear?”

Once children know or learn the words to something, they love to begin to manipulate and play with those words to make new and exciting ones. This scenario occurred 2 days after we had read the book, *Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What Do You Hear?* several times. They were sitting at snack when the following occurred:

Woody: “Watch this one. Odie, odie, what do you hear? I hear, I hear a white brick in my ear.”

Woody: “Watch this one. Hup, hup, what do you hear? I hear a hup beat beating in my ear.”

Laverne: “That’s a good one. I hear a cheek in my ear.”

Woody: “I hear a cheek, cheeking in my ear.”

Laverne: She tries to begin with, “Watch this one. Watch this one,” though Woody interrupts.

Woody: “M&M, M&M, what do you hear? I hear an M&M eating in my ear.”

Laverne: “Cheerio, cheerio, what do you hear? I hear a sink in my ear.”

Woody: “Uppity,Uppity, what do you hear? I hear a (...) in my ear.” No one is really listening to him so he proceeds to wait until they are.

Woody: “Hey, watch this one. Mr. Uppity, Mr. Uppity, what do you hear? I hear a Mr. Uppity giving Mr. Bone hitting him a black eye.”

Woody: “Watch this one. Watch this one. Pretzel, pretzel, what do you hear? I hear a pretzel water in my ear.”

Laverne: “Gummy elephant, gummy elephant.” No one is listening. “Watch this one. Gummy elephant, gummy elephant, what do you hear? I hear a, (pause and laughter) I hear people eating in my ear.”

Woody: He begins to talk over Laverne. “Watch this one. Watch this one.” No one is listening. “Hey, Shirley. Hey Shirley. Watch this one. Pat, pat what do you hear? I hear a pat patting in my ear.” Shirley gets up and leaves the table.

Laverne: “Watch this. Pretzel, pretzel, what do you hear? I hear (pause, she looks around the class and sees SpongeBob on Ethel’s hat) SpongeBob eating in my ear.”

Woody: “Watch this one. Pretzel, pretzel, what do you hear? I hear a (...) up in my ear.”

Laverne: “SpongeBob, SpongeBob, what do you hear? I hear SpongeBob in my ear.”

Woody: “Blue, blue, what do you hear? I hear a puff, puff puffing in my ear.”

Shirley comes back to the table after changing her shirt and immediately begins laughing again.

Laverne: “I’ve got a good one. Hey, hey.”

Shirley: She finally joins in with, “I hear a buzzing in my ear.”

This situation goes on for another 7 minutes while the children laugh continuously throughout it. Shirley now continues to play the game along with Laverne and Woody. They were all having fun playing with the words, though they wanted the others to listen to them as well and when the others didn’t they would repeat what they had said. It appears that Vygotsky’s principle of scaffolding in play could be applied to these cognitive laughter situations where only a couple of children are really engaging. For example, in several documented situations, including this one, Shirley will often only laugh instead of participate. She is very hesitant and unsure. It takes her more time to “get” the joke and reply. However, she will eventually reply when given enough examples, usually by Woody. He scaffolds her and gives her reinforcement, and allows her to participate in a way that she cannot or does not on her own (Goldhaber, 2000).

#### “Ten Little Birdies”

We were up in the loft after snack and the children were singing “Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.” As many people know, each of the ten unstable little monkeys goes to fall off the bed and bump his head. Laverne was sitting listening to the song and quietly laughing. The second the song was over she looked like she was going

to burst and immediately looks at Jerry, and screams with laughter, “Ten little birdies jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his beak.”

Though Laverne didn’t make her new version of the song rhyme like the “real” version, it didn’t matter. It seems she was initially laughing because she was immediately thinking about what she was going to say when the song was over knowing that it was an ingenious creation. Then she was laughing because she was successful at changing the animal “monkey” to “birdie” and then made him bump his beak instead of his head. She was able to take a song that she already knew very well and cognitively manipulate the words to create a new version. When she told this to Jerry he also began laughing and then they said it together three more times, giggling throughout the entirety.

#### “I Ate My.....”

Woody, Laverne, Jerry, and Shirley are sitting at the table at snack time. Woody goes over to the others at the other table and kneels down and begins a game. Woody says, “I ate my hair.” Approximately 10 seconds pass. Laverne begins to giggle and then comes back with, “I ate Jerry’s hair.” Jerry replies with a huge smile and retorts, “I ate Woody’s hair.” Woody throws his head back with his mouth wide open laughing and states, “I ate Jerry’s hair.” No one replies for several seconds so Woody tries again still laughing and says, “I ate my door.” Now Shirley joins the game with, “I ate my wheel.” Woody says, “Oh yeah? Well, I ate my motorcycle.” Once again there is silence, seemingly too much for Woody so he says right away, “I ate my eyes.” Jerry goes back to the initial body theme and jumps in with, “I ate my ears.” Woody returns to the vehicle theme and says, “I ate my lights.” Shirley stays with her original statement of, “I

ate my wheel.” Woody replies, “I ate my tongue.” Jerry then changes the theme altogether and says, “I ate my T-rex,” his favorite dinosaur. Once again unrelated, Laverne laughs hysterically and says, “I ate the palm trees at the beach!”

There is constant laughter throughout and each child is laughing as they are talking as well as in response to the others. As much as they are laughing at each other, however, I feel they are laughing more at themselves. The fact that the theme changes almost every other turn suggests to me that the children are paying more attention to what they are going to say next, rather than to what each child is saying in the present, and it just takes them this long to come up with a reply. Following this exchange, the children become extremely excited and it turns into a chasing and running game around the tables in the room while they are hysterically laughing throughout. Lucy joins when the running begins.

Woody’s parents told me that he has been playing this game a lot at home and Woody told me that it was a known game from Cookie Monster’s antics on Sesame Street. It was a priceless exchange of silly, creative bantering. I feel the game shows an interesting evolution from simply copying each other, to following a vehicle theme, to being silly and creative. This scenario also says a lot about each individual child’s development. For example, Shirley always waits for many exchanges to take place before she has the confidence or ideas to enter the dialogue, which to me is representative of her tentative personality and less developed social skills. Woody, who has made a phenomenal jump in his social skills and is one of the brightest children in the class, uses his ingenuity and quick wit to come up with the majority of the game. It also demonstrates his desire to initiate and sustain social contact as he was the one to get up

from his seat and go to the others. Also, when there was a silence he quickly filled it in order to keep the game alive.

### Understanding or Playing With Words or Concepts

#### *Bark, George, Bark*

In the last 3 out of 11 weeks in my study, I began to see much more laughter in response to cognitively understanding wordplay and concepts. It was miraculously sudden, like the day when I was 3 ½ and the dentist told me that if I didn't stop sucking my thumb my teeth would stick straight out of my mouth. I stopped that day just like that.

Once again, the class was up in the loft where they were listening to the book *Bark, George, Bark*. In the book, George's mother is trying to get George to bark, but much to her dismay, he can only meow, moo, oink, etc. Frustrated, she takes him to the vet who bravely sticks his hand down George's throat only to pull out a variety of animals that are making the unwanted sounds. At the end, George is home again after successfully barking once at the vet's office. His mother says, "Bark, George, Bark," but instead George says, "Hello." Lucy begins to laugh hysterically, followed by Laverne, Shirley, Ethel, and Jerry. I ask them why George can't bark now? Laverne gets a look of surprise on her face and opens her eyes like basketballs and shouts, "There's a person in his stomach!" The other four children shout with laughter, "There is a person in his stomach!"

After the vet pulled the animals out of George's stomach, they understood why he was making these sounds, so when George suddenly says, "Hello," they are able to solve the puzzle based on their previous knowledge. The cognitive awareness and AHA! of

understanding that George saying “hello” meant there was a person inside of his stomach caused them to laugh due to understanding and success. I know Laverne understood this, because she answered the question. It is possible that other children who repeated it only got it once Laverne said the answer or did not really understand it at all, and were only laughing as a response to Laverne.

### “Nowhere, Nowhere”

Laverne had returned from a 2-day trip to Washington, DC. I ask her, “Where did you go?” She replies with a smile, “Nowhere.” I say, “Where is that?” She laughs and says, “Nowhere.” I laugh and say, “How did you get there?” She giggles and states, “No way. You get to nowhere and then you leave and get to another nowhere.” I ask her, “What did you do in nowhere?” She laughs and screams, “Nothing!”

Throughout my documentation, I felt this was one of my most exciting observations because I saw the laughter in this scenario as clearly demonstrative of cognitive understanding and appreciation of language play with equal understanding of the social reciprocity that goes into these exchanges. I love how the positive feedback she got in this scenario has carried on ever since and now if you want to make Laverne laugh, all you have to say is, “Hi, Nowhere, Nowhere.” Since that initial interaction she began telling everyone that her name was “Nowhere, Nowhere,” so when anyone repeats it or calls her this, she finds it absolutely hysterical.

## Guessing Name Game

In addition to all of the other up and coming types of play with words and concepts, guessing games are becoming huge. Ethel and George were the only two left at the snack table when I heard them engaging in some kind of guessing game. In fact, the reason they were the only two left is because they were playing the guessing game instead of eating their snack. It was going on for at least one minute before I went over and began recording it. I heard:

Ethel: "Is it eyes?"

George: "No."

Ethel: "Is it ears?" She is smiling and giggling.

George: "Nooooooo."

Ethel: "Is it lips?" While she is laughing, she slowly moves closer to George while putting her feet under her on the chair.

George: "Noooooooooooo." He is looking at Ethel and his face is now only inches from her. He begins to giggle.

Ethel: "Is it lipstick?" Now that I am documenting, she looks at me, and begins laughing harder.

George: "Noooooooooppppppeeee." He is still smiling and giggling and shaking his head in an overexaggerated manner back and forth.

Ethel: "Is it legs?" Laughing, laughing, laughing.

George: "NOOOOOOOOOOOO."

Ethel: "Is it hand?"

George: "Nope." He also now changes his position in his chair to be sitting up on his

feet.

Ethel: “Is it Beggy?” Ethel is now laughing so hard that I can barely understand her.

George: “Nooooooooooooooooo.” He is still shaking his head, even though Ethel is talking.

Ethel: “Is it PoohBear?” She continues to look back and forth from me to George, watching both of our reactions while she is laughing.

George: “Uh-uhhhh.” He is giggling harder and harder.

Ethel: “Is it North Carolina?” Still laughing....

George: “No.” He is now only about six inches away from Ethel’s face, teetering on the edge of his chair, anxiously awaiting her next surprise question.

Ethel: “Is it Piglet?”

George: “NOOOOOOOOOOOO!” His voice is getting louder and more drawn out with each “no.”

Ethel: “Is it cup?” She is still laughing, laughing, laughing, and completely ignoring her snack.

George: “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Ethel: “Is it Iggy?” By this point I am laughing audibly at the length of the game, their creativity, and the fact that I have no inkling what they are trying to guess.

George: “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Ethel: “Is it the letter s?”

George: “NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Now both begin pushing their faces close together and laughing while George takes his hands and begins touching Ethel all over her face in a way that suggests this game and

interaction has made him feel very excited and close to Ethel. They were obviously deep into their interaction, as they had no idea that everyone else had even left the snack table.

We never found out the answer to the big question was but after they made physical contact the game ended. Afterwards, I asked Ethel what she was trying to guess and she tells me, “George’s babysitter’s mother’s name!” I wish so badly that I had seen this from the beginning to document its full splendor. How did they come to talk about George’s babysitter’s mother’s name? Ethel also knows and had been watched by this babysitter so the person was not impersonal to her, however the babysitter’s mother was. I am so intrigued by the “stuff” that she randomly pulls out of her head. This guessing game and play with words shows her diversity in thinking because at first she stayed with a theme (body parts), but into the interaction she began to randomly mix up her questions. The funny thing is, I know George did not know the final answer but it didn’t matter. It was the process of the guessing game, the word play, and the interaction that it created that was so much fun.

#### “Plucky, Ducky Underwear”

One day, after several other shenanigans at the snack table, Ethel begins some word play to no one in particular, though she is watching me as I am writing things down.

“I’m a stinky, winky head.

My inky, winky head is coca.

My binky, winky is a doca.

My daddy has yucky, ducky underwear.

Plucky, ducky underwear.

Plucky, ducky underwear.

Plucky, ducky underwear.

Plucky, ducky, stinky underwear.”

She laughs with each line she says and then lets out a big burst of laughter when she has finished.

You know you love something a child says when you go home and call three people to read them your documentation and then go out that night and read it to everyone in the bar..... restaurant, I mean. When you want to make it into a T-shirt, it must be funny. Ethel was absolutely thrilled at her ability to devise this “poem” and was exercising her cognitive rhyming abilities while laughing at her play on words and ability to create it. This situation occurred promptly after engaging in the stinky game that was previously reported, and she was ingenious in using pieces of a previous game and integrating it with her new ideas.

Immediately following this first rhyme, she was obviously feeling confident in her abilities and continued her play. She said,

“I love my stinky head and I hate my stinky brain.

I bit my tunca.

I bit my tunca.

I bit my tunca stinky head.”

A general observer or passerby might say, “HUH?” but it shows Ethel’s clever ability to coordinate and put together a situation that combines opposites (love and hate), incorporate different parts of the head (head and brain), and continue to incorporate the previous hilarity of the word stinky.

## Child's Knowledge of Incongruity

### “I Made the Cookies”

Over the past two months, I have had numerous heated conversations with parents who tell me things that their child comes home to report happened at preschool. At least half of the time these things *didn't* happen. When I tell the parents this they often say, “Well, I guess they could have made it up,” though I still somehow know they believe aliens are torturing their child at school. The truth is, children lie. They lie a lot. A lot, a lot. And I mean a lot. I have wondered about this endlessly and one day had an epiphany after I began my study on laughter. I have come to theorize that a young child fibbing really has nothing to do with wanting to tell a lie, but the desire, ability, and cognitive understanding that comes with being able to take a situation and change it into something opposite, imaginary, or what I call “real-imaginary.” These “real-imaginary situations are ones that are not correct, but exaggerated with the capacity to be correct if someone is willing to believe them. In fact, I don't believe that children this age even really understand what it means to lie. In terms of Piagetian Theory, this would make perfect sense, as most children of this age are still unable to look at multiple aspects of a situation simultaneously, which could lead them to illogical perceptions or conclusions about events as they really happen (Papalia & Olds, 1993). This age group has a magnificent milestone to achieve; the difference between real and imaginary, true and false, same and different, and opposites. When they realize that they can change around the truth, it is a sort of cognitive mastery. The following situations fall into the category of children laughing because they know what they are saying is incongruous with what they have learned, or at least believe to be true.

We were eating cookies for snack. Ethel looks up, belly laughs, and exclaims to everyone else at the table, “I made the cookies we are eating!” She continues to laugh and Woody follows. This same situation occurs again just minutes later and produces the same reaction. This statement was very simple, yet obviously untrue to Ethel’s knowledge. Her knowing she was “fibbing” caused her to laugh, and then caused Woody to laugh, though I am not sure that he really knew Ethel *didn’t* make the cookies. His laughter seemed more of a social response.

#### “I’m a T-Rex”

One of my student teachers, Carol, was under the loft engaging with some children in imaginative play. Jerry approached and asked her to put a costume on him. She began the often-difficult process of squeezing shoes and hands through poorly defined holes, but after a few minutes he was fully garbed in his cow costume. Carol complimented Jerry on what a splendid cow he made, and he thoughtfully looked back at her and said, “Look at me, I’m at T-rex.” He then began laughing as though it was the silliest thing he had ever heard.

Jerry was obviously well aware of the difference between a cow and a dinosaur, but decided to call himself something other than what he was. He was practicing his cognitive understanding of incongruity by calling himself a dinosaur rather than the cow he was dressed up as.

## “Duck, Duck Zebra!”

This was a day when we had a lot of student teachers so I was working in the office on some other things while the children went to the atrium to play since it was cold outside. Laverne was last to leave the classroom and she wanted to say hello to me in the office before going on her way. I asked her what they were going to do in the atrium and she told me “run and play games.” I told her my very favorite game was “duck, duck, zebra,” and she immediately began to giggle and said, “That’s not what it’s called, Sarah,” in her perfectly angelic voice.

She went to the atrium and started going around the circle saying, “Duck.... Duck..... duck.... duck....duck.....ZEBRA!!!!!!” All of the children started to laugh. Woody was next and followed Laverne’s lead though put his own spin on it saying, “Pig.....pig..... pig..... COW!!” The next time he went around the circle he said, “Dog..... dog..... dog.....CAT!!!” Each time he said a new phrase he’d laugh harder and harder causing the other children to do the same.

I was highly surprised that Laverne took back what I said to the group and then incorporated it into their game. When everyone laughed, they all understood that this was the game they usually play, though it had a different, and incongruous name. Then from her game, Woody took from what Laverne had said, but he made it his own by changing the names of animals around even though he kept the language structure the same. Overall, they all found it a humorous change from the norm because they understood the difference.

## Child's Use of an Object in an Incongruous Way

### Red Eyes

Often the children extend their knowledge of incongruity to objects. One day we had red strips of paper, amongst other materials, on the table for the children to create art. Laverne and Shirley were both at the table with the children while creating their own masterpieces. The red strips of paper were intriguing to both of them and they began to explore what they could do with the paper other than glue it. They started collecting as many as possible and sat them in front of them on the table, contemplating. While Shirley was looking away, Laverne placed one of the red strips over her eyes and turned to Shirley giggling. Shirley turned around and began to laugh at Laverne's new look. Then Shirley went for a red strip and placed it over her nose and Laverne began to laugh at Shirley. The girls went back and forth for a few minutes putting the strips on their faces, taking them off, and laughing at themselves.

The paper strips on the table were intended for an art project, though Laverne and Shirley had other plans for their use. This use of the paper for purposes other than it was intended in a silly way made them laugh and begin a game that was socially reinforced by the other. I have found that this use of objects to hide body parts, especially the face, is very common and almost always a source of laughter.

### Feathers

The following is another game that had this element of using objects incongruously, though it also has a major element of pure silliness. Feathers are one of those materials that are fascinating to children and I am convinced they have some

magical aura by the way children sort them, touch them, and hoard them. Woody was walking about the classroom when he found two feathers lying randomly on the floor. Because of their magical powers, he was drawn to them and picked them up. He began to play with one, holding it, blowing it, caressing it. Right after exploring its properties he decided to put it on his head. When he took his hand away he watched the air to see it fall, but it did not fall. I looked at him and began to laugh because I saw that it is stuck to the side of his head. When he realized it was not in his hand anymore, he began to grope around on the side of his head, found where it is stuck, and took it off. He began to laugh in a way that I rarely have heard others laugh; that deep guttural, straight from the soul kind of laughter that shakes the body.

Following is a 10-minute feather-laughing episode and game. Woody repeatedly takes it, sticks it back to his forehead, roaring with laughter each time his hand comes down empty. He walks over to the sink where Laverne and Shirley are standing and begins to say, “LOOK, LOOK!!!!” while pointing to the feather sticking to his head. Shirley giggles, barely looking at him and walks away. Laverne, on the other hand, begins to laugh voraciously and she and Woody begin this reciprocal interaction of laughing. It is a pure interaction and they are completely in tune to one another and no one else. They are watching each other intently and making direct eye contact with each other throughout the game. They move away from the sink and Laverne now gets more involved and proceeds to take the feather off Woody’s head and then stick it back on. Woody lets her and laughs harder and harder each time the feather sticks to his head. They are absolutely hysterical, so much that they fall down on the floor and begin writhing like earthworms on the sidewalk after the rain. It keeps escalating and

escalating until I eventually have to stop it as it is becoming too physical and Woody often has difficulty gauging where his body is, which has caused injuries in the past. It was also cleanup time throughout this episode and while the others were already trying to put things away, Laverne and Woody were still playing.

This scenario at first represents an unexpected surprise because Woody did not expect the feather to get stuck on his head. Once it happened it was riotous and something that he wanted to make the feather do over and over. When his game was successful and the feather did in fact stick to his head repeatedly it was even funnier. Then when he was able to engage Laverne in his game and make her laugh it was funnier still, because he now had intersubjective understanding of the situation. When Laverne took action and became the one putting on the feather it was *still* funnier because the game had achieved another new level of Laverne as a participant, and no longer just a watcher. With each change and new addition to the game it became even more hilarious.

### Ice Cream Clouds

This incident occurred at the media table the day the student teachers had shaving cream “clouds.” The student teachers had been attempting to understand the Reggio Emilia philosophy of having open-ended materials to facilitate creativity and imagination, to name two, though as it is against the traditional end-product-oriented view of public schools it takes time to grasp the concept. The teachers were attempting to do a sky and space theme, and told the children that the shaving cream in the table was clouds. The children had other ideas and used the shaving cream in ways that were different from what they knew, as well as what they were “expected” to do. Laverne had

her hands and elbows covered and was talking softly to Shirley. Both girls started giggling and they screamed, “Ice cream!” They were taking shaving cream and making small “balls” in their hands while pretending to eat them. As they ate the “ice cream” they blew the shaving cream off of their hands at each other causing small pieces to fly up haphazardly in the air. After seeing the pieces fly up in the air they starting yelling, “Snow, snow!” and giggling. As the pieces fell on them they laughed and pretended to shake saying, “Brrrrrr!” They were completely covered in flecks of white and they loved it.

In watching the two girls I saw that they were able to take the medium of shaving cream and turn it into a wonderful expression of symbolic play. While using the shaving cream to represent other items they laughed as they realized that the shaving cream wasn’t really ice cream or snow, and they were using it in a manner that was different than what they and the teachers thought it was for.

### Teacher’s Perception of Child Being Incongruous

#### Tornadoes

Since all of the teachers were also participants in this study, I couldn’t leave out the laughter of the teachers that is caused by children saying things that adults wouldn’t normally expect them to say. I have demonstrated how children laugh at incongruity, and I theorize that the reason children laugh so much is because everyday there are so many things that they newly experience or things that challenge their knowledge of old experiences. Adults also laugh at incongruity, though not as much, because by the time

you have lived so many years there just isn't that much that is really new or surprising anymore. My big brain ball of yarn is almost to the ground.

Firefighter Duane came to our class to talk about fire safety and let the children explore the fire truck. The children were so excited, and that day everyone sat down quietly, eyes like saucers listening intently. Out of the blue Woody blurts out, "Chief Duane, What do you think about tornadoes?" The children remained silent, while the five adults in the classroom busted out with laughter. We thought it hilarious that Woody asked the firefighter about tornadoes because it was completely random, out of the blue, and had nothing to do with firefighting. We also thought the manner in which Woody asked the question was grown up and hence, funny. Shortly after, he piped in again with, "Chief Duane? Does the fire engine have four-wheel drive?" What kid really knows about four-wheel drive and asks questions about it? The thing was, Woody really wanted to know the answer because he had been learning about it over the winter due to only one of his family cars having it. Once again all of the children, including Woody, remained quiet while the teachers and Firefighter Duane laughed with a shared understanding. Woody then began laughing after he looked around at all of the teachers and saw that we felt it was funny, though I know he didn't understand why we were laughing; he was only responding to it.

This laughing only out of response is something that I have been curious about throughout my research, since I witnessed it in the children. When I go out in public I like to begin laughing, whether I am alone or with friends and watch people's response. A large proportion of people will also begin to laugh or at least smile. An equal proportion look annoyed. The biggest portion, however, look at me wide-eyed as though

I am raving mad. Once again, this shows the social nature of laughter by demonstrating how much people can be influenced by others' laughter, as well as how few people would expect a person to laugh when alone.

“All I Did Was Watch TV!”

Laverne, Shirley, Jerry and one of my student teachers, Carol, were conversing with some of the older adults and their caretakers next door in Adult Day Services. During their discussion, Laverne asked Carol whether she thought school would be cancelled again due to snow, as it had been the day before. Carol said she didn't know and asked Laverne if she had enjoyed staying home on the day that it *had* been cancelled. She replied “NO!” The older adults thought that her answer was amusing so she encouraged Laverne to explain why she had not enjoyed it and she replied, “All I did all day was sit around with my grandmother and watch PBS Kids on TV!” All of the adults and the other kids broke out in laughter, as did Laverne when she saw everyone's reaction to her description of her boring day at home.

I love it when the kids make it known that they would rather be at school than at home, simply because it feeds my teacher ego. I especially love it when she said she disliked watching TV. I imagine the adults thought this was funny for that precise reason; we don't expect kids to say they are bored watching TV. The answer was incongruous to what the adults expected to hear her say, because I suspect most children would relish the opportunity to sit with their faces glued to the TV on a day off from school.

## Carve That Opossum

During snack, Woody randomly said, “Uncle Dave says, ‘Carve that opossum!’” One of my student teachers and research assistants, Annie, was sitting there when it happened, thought it was absolutely hilarious, and responded with a burst of laughter. I wasn’t exposed to this situation until I sat down at my computer at the end of the week to reflect on what the research assistants had sent me. When I got to this scenario and read it, I started laughing hysterically until I had tears in my eyes. I tried to stop and I couldn’t even breathe. This was one situation that I did not feel the need to be engaged in to gather the meaning. His mother happened to call me 15 minutes later to talk about something that had happened at school, and I immediately began my surge of laughter again while I asked her what it meant. It turned out that this was one of his favorite songs, and he must have been reminiscing about it right then. Still, knowing where it came from didn’t detract from the reason we thought it was hilarious, which Annie and I thought was self-explanatory. Evidently not, because when Annie told the story of it at our weekly Teacher Talks only she, four other teachers, and I thought it was funny. It is so demonstrative of how important a person’s personality is to appreciating humor. It was also a great relationship builder for Annie and I because I now had a better understanding of her as a person, and realized how similar we were in our personalities, sense of humor, and the manner in which we interact with children. Now many times when Annie and I see each other we say, “SARAH! (or ANNIE!). You know what?” The one on the receiving end says, “What?” The other says, “Uncle Dave says, Carve that opossum!” Then we both laugh about it every time.

## **Child Demonstrating Competence or Success**

*“Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter.”* (Thomas Hobbes, 1651)

I have not read much, if any, research on people laughing from achievement. The closest thing is scholars who believe you can laugh at success, but only if it is to demean another person for not being as successful. Or as the theory would have you believe it, one would laugh at finding this unsuccessful person a complete jackass idiot imbecile. This was one category of laughter that I found to be somewhat small in the amount of situations I documented, though it was also one that was really obvious and important. I believe the amount I observed in this category was small only because these successful moments are hard to capture. They happen so suddenly, when the observer doesn't know they will happen, because without a sixth sense we don't really know what will make a child feel successful or when that will occur. The following three scenarios demonstrate those ephemeral and magnificent moments in time when a child laughs at her own achievement.

### I Did it!

#### Swinging

Being able to pump your legs and swing is not something that many children under 4 years of age can do. Every day on the playground I hear at least 10 little voices screaming for someone, usually me, to push them on the swing. On this day I heard Ethel

scream, “Sarah!!!” My back was turned at the time so when I turned around I was extremely amazed to see Ethel high in the air laughing, pumping her legs, her head back and hair billowing in the breeze, all of this with no one around her. She was smiling and laughing and so terribly proud of herself when she said, “Look at me! I’m swinging and you don’t have to push me anymore! You only have to give me a boost to start!” I immediately began applauding and screaming words of encouragement because I was amazed. The previous weeks she had been trying and trying to pump but just couldn’t quite coordinate it yet. We would go really slow and I would help her keep her legs extended when she went forward and help her bend them as she went back so she could experience how it felt. As a teacher, this was one of those moments that made me tear up and recognize how much I love to be a teacher, and not just because I feel I may have helped teach her how to swing. It was because I love her. I love her and here I was watching her master something that she had worked so hard on. She was so proud and I was so proud to be able to see her do it.

#### Conversation at the Sink

I often forget how miraculous it is to have the gift of speech, because I am often wishing a very large percentage of people in the world did not. However, when you are only able to say a few words and are around peers and adults who speak fluently, it can be the cause of great success and laughter when you are able to communicate, after spending much of your time unheard or misunderstood. One day before snack, Gilda asked one of my student teachers, Rhoda, to go with her to the sink to wash her hands. Rhoda, who has a very close relationship with Gilda played a game with her. While she

was washing her hands she looked up in the mirror and pointed to Rhoda's reflection and signed "red" for Rhoda's sweatshirt. Pretending to be confused, Rhoda pointed to her jeans and said, "These?" Though Gilda doesn't have many words, she does have a few, and is often vociferous when she can use them. Suddenly Gilda yelled out, "No! Blue!" and turned to point at Rhoda's sweatshirt. Again Rhoda pretended to be confused, pointed to her sweatshirt and said, "Blue?" and then pointed to her pants and said, "Red?" Gilda began to laugh, shaking her head while placing her hand on Rhoda's leg and said firmly, "Blue!" and then laid her hand on Rhoda's arm and said, "Red!" She laughed again and turned to look at herself in the mirror. She again pointed to the mirror but this time pointed to herself and said, "Purple," telling Rhoda that her shirt was purple. She pointed to herself again and showed Rhoda four fingers. "You are four years old?" Rhoda questioned. She nodded her head vigorously and then showed Rhoda the sign for "brother" and held up five fingers. Rhoda replied, "Your brother is five?" Again she nodded definitively while smiling and laughing.

Very few people can communicate with Gilda enough to understand her needs, much less be able to joke with her. First, Gilda felt great success in being able to have a conversation where the other party did not have to guess at what she was saying, and I believe it meant even more to her to be able to converse through jesting as well. Gilda often gets very frustrated if we don't know what she is saying as will be seen in a later scenario, though when she is able to actually carry on a full conversation with someone it often results in laughter. Gilda's laughter showed Rhoda that she was happy to see that Rhoda understood what she was saying, and was communicating back to her.

## Name Spelling

Parents are often pushing me to get the children to learn how to write their names. As a teacher, I feel that this is something that should never be enforced until the children are ready, both physically and mentally. So when I get a child who really wants to learn, it allows me to sigh with relief. Ethel has been excitedly working hard on learning to write her name for a couple of months. Ethel and I were sitting at the table when she asked me if I wanted to see her write it. “Of course I do,” I said. We went through her first name, which she could spell and write with the exception of one letter, which she had me write for her. I asked her if she wanted to trace the letter I had written so she could learn how it felt to make it. Intently and slowly, she completed tracing it over the next 30 seconds, then quickly looked over at me and began to laugh. Next, we moved on to her last name. She could not spell it so I began to write it letter by letter. This time she didn’t trace it, but was able to identify the letters to spell it. She said the last letter with conviction, threw her head back and began to laugh, laugh, laugh.

Ethel was successful with something she hadn’t succeeded at before. This competence at being able to trace a difficult letter seemed to give her great satisfaction and caused her to laugh. Also knowing how to spell her last name by reading the letters was quite an accomplishment, and one that she had also been working on. I think about my own present experiences, and know that I will laugh if I am ever successful at completing this thesis. I can even laugh now at the thought of being successful in the too near future when this chapter is due.

## **Novelty and Fun**

*“Look for the ridiculous in everything and you will find it.”* (Jules Renard, 1890)

I realized in the middle of my research how much entering a researcher’s frame of mind can cloud one’s head and make the very obvious unapparent. I was deep into my data, documenting, rereading, reflecting, rereading, analyzing, rereading, interpreting, and rereading when I got overwhelmed, began to feel schizophrenic, and took the escalator back down. In research you have to have the ability to separate your mind from your data and the keenness to know when to do it. I let myself just be a person and a teacher for a few days and then I realized that there does not always need to be this mega-complex scenario or reason for when children laugh. I went back to the basics and realized that more often than not, children just laugh because something is new or fun.

### Child Engaging in Something Novel

#### Ethel on Video

I was sitting on the couch reviewing some of the video I had taken during my research and I asked Ethel if she wanted to watch it with me. She sat pressed against me on the couch for the next 35 minutes reviewing videotape, much of which included her. In my pilot study I had video recorded a time when she cunningly found herself in charge of my cassette recorder and laughed repeatedly as she recorded herself singing and saying nonsense words and then played them back. Each time she heard her voice on the recorder she began to laugh at herself. We began watching the video and this scenario

came on. She began laughing first at seeing herself on the tape and then started to laugh even harder when she saw herself laughing on the tape. I turned it off and, Ethel, still laughing, immediately began recalling the incident from 9 weeks prior by asking me if I remembered the day we were in the office and she was talking in the tape recorder and laughing really hard. I told her, “No,” and though I was duping her, I wanted to see what she could tell me about what had happened, and she recalled it flawlessly with the exception that she said it had occurred last week. We continued to watch the tape even after this scenario of her; however, she became somewhat disinterested when there was a large section of Laverne on the tape rather than her.

This was a novel experience for Ethel, at least within the context of our classroom, and she was very excited about being able to watch her actions from the past. I was fantastically amazed that she could recall it at all, much less the fine details. In addition to the novel experience of watching videotape with your teacher on the couch in preschool, it was also extremely fun.

### Go Fly a Kite

Why is it that when someone tells another to “Go fly a kite,” they take offense? Personally, if someone said that to me I would think they were doing me a favor and go and do just that because I think flying a kite is great fun! A better statement might be, “Go chew on a rotten animal carcass!” Once the first frigid day had ceased, we went to the drillfield on campus to fly the kites that the children had created in hope of sunshine. They all loved watching the kites fly behind them as they ran, but Bill had a different reaction when he laughed throughout the duration of the activity.

Culture is a word that is really even more complex than its many implied meanings. This incident with Bill made me see the importance of really understanding how necessary it is to know not only what a child is allergic to, but also how they interact within a family system. It is obvious that Bill's experiences have been very unlike the other children's, and whereas most of the children have already done the things that we are doing in class, Bill has not. This prompts him to react to these new experiences in a manner different than the other children; with laughter. Knowing his culture more closely surely could have helped me in knowing him and his interests better.

Bill picked up his kite and began running with it. It flew back behind his head as he ran forward, though with his head turned to watch. He let out a big squeal and kept running until he would accidentally drop it only to pick it up again and continue the game. He had never experienced this before and he loved this new experience, loved it, loved it, and laughed.

### Firefighter Annie

This happened on the same "tornado and four-wheel drive" firefighter day that was previously mentioned. Firefighter Duane loves to embarrass one of the adults and have them put on his fire suit piece by heavy piece and talk about how each piece of the firesuit protects him. Annie had been chosen. She put on the bibs. The children and adults laughed. She put on the jacket. The children and adults laughed. She put on the boots. The children and adults laughed. She put on the mask. The children and adults laughed. Firefighter Duane wanted to show the children what you should do if there is

smoke in your house so Annie crawled on all fours towards the children. The children and adults laughed hysterically.

This was an interesting scenario because Annie putting on the suit was a slow process and each stage of it caused laughter, and more as she was almost fully dressed. It was a completely novel situation for most of them, and even though a couple of them had seen this Firefighter before, they hadn't seen *Annie* dress up in a firesuit. The children's laughter was also reinforced by the teachers who were present in the room who thought this situation was even funnier than the children, probably because our adult expectations of what grown-ups and teachers do was being challenged by Annie dressing in a 50-pound fire suit.

#### Child Engaging in a Fun or Silly Action or Game

##### Cheese Crackkkeerrssss

I hope I don't somehow warp the children for as many times as I call them "goofballs." The children were eating crackers at snack and Laverne begins to feed them to Shirley who willingly accepts them. Before Laverne gives one to her she says, "Do you want one of my cheese crackkkeerrssss?" Shirley, Laverne, and Jerry laugh riotously while Shirley chews her cracker, spitting crumbs out while laughing. They repeat this process five more times before Jerry starts trying to feed them to Laverne. She accepts them graciously, though has trouble because her mouth is agape with laughter. Laverne then changes the game and begins to hold crackers over Shirley's head, which Jerry copies and does to Laverne. They all giggle when Shirley stretches for them and can't reach them. Laverne suddenly turns around and puts her knees on the floor with her

elbows on her chair. Let me interject and say that I usually would not allow them to act like monkeys at snack time, but oh well, it was good documentation. Shirley, then Jerry follows and now the three of them have their backs turned with their elbows on their chairs eating crackers while laughing feverishly.

This scenario made me see just how much of children's laughter is stifled by adults who have other agendas and plans for the children, or who have ideas about how children should behave appropriately. What is too much laughter for a child? Why do we only allow so much silliness? In terms of classroom management I can see how it needs to be limited simply to maintain some semblance of order, but often it is limited when it doesn't need to be. This game is also based on friendships because allowing someone to feed you crackers demonstrates a lot of trust in someone, and the children have exactly this in each other. The game became sillier when Jerry joined in, which subsequently reinforced it even further. Laverne was definitely the leader in this and the other two followed her lead completely without trying to change the game. Eventually I asked them to get up and eat their snack though they had power in numbers and they continued their game for another 3 minutes.

#### Hot Lava

During some imaginary play, Lucy and Marge were pretending that certain parts of the classroom were hot lava. When the two of them play together, they are always very dramatic, and they take it as seriously as movie actresses would. Lucy would lie down on the floor and laughingly yell for help, because she was stuck in the hot lava or it was creeping towards her. Sometimes Marge would try to pull her out or lie next to her

to be swallowed. When Annie would try to save them they would laugh and struggle ferociously and then Lucy would claim that an alien couldn't save them.

This continues to be a game that they engage in frequently, and they continue to laugh each time they play, especially if an adult is playing with them. I have wondered about this observation that children seem to laugh much more with adults than with other children when they are involved in play. It seems part of it has to do with the exaggerated role the adult tends to play that another child typically would not. However, there are two other, and probably more significant things that play a part; the children laugh at being able to boss adults around, and they are playing with an adult who is fun, contrary to how most adults act.

### Run and Hide

A game seems like it suddenly becomes even more fun for the children when it occurs outside of the classroom and they should really be in it. It was early in the morning and only a few children had arrived and Shirley and Laverne wanted to hang out in the hallway rather than in the classroom with everyone else. I went into the hallway with them where they initiated a game. They ran up and down the hallway, back and forth, back and forth from the kitchen to the office, screaming as they ran. Each time they got to the kitchen, they ran into the pantry and squatted down waiting for me to come. I would sneak up on them with my hands out in my best monster form and shout, "RRRRRROOOOAAAARRRRR!" They would jump up and run past me, though I fleetingly tried to capture them as they were trying to escape. Then they would run towards the office screaming as if in grave danger. They would get to the office and

throw themselves under the desk in the copy room, waiting, waiting. I would tiptoe into the copy room sometimes catching them immediately, and other times waiting in the shadows for them to peer out. If I took too long to get them, Shirley could not stand the anticipation anymore and would bellow, “SARAH, GET US!!” Sometimes I could see their faces under the desk without them noticing me. They sat smiling and laughing, giggling into their hands and watching each other, waiting, waiting. They would often talk to each other in a whisper, anticipating my arrival.

This sequence took place over a period of 25 minutes, and they never tired of it. I had to go back into the classroom to check on things and welcome more children, and so ended the game. Once they got in the class, the chase was on again and their hide and seek game continued with the other teachers for at least another 30 minutes. Each time they laughed but did not pick a new spot, probably because they really do want to get caught. It is the adults differing plans of attack and joy of being discovered that continues to make it so much fun. Hide and seek is big, big, big fun and being allowed to run in the hallway out of the normal classroom environment adds to the exhilaration, though it is these things that I sometimes allow that make other teachers and parents get annoyed with me. I can't help it if they don't know how to have fun.

### **All About the Body**

*“The body says what words cannot.”* (Martha Graham)

Running and chasing and being caught and being tickled and touching cool things and burping and farting and screaming. Ahh, the pure essence of childhood. What more

could there possibly be to life? The following scenarios document exactly these physical games that make children laugh as well as the things that come out of their bodies that make them laugh. Believe me, if I could get away with these things that children do I would do them as much as possible, and be all the happier for it.

### Child Engaging in Physical or Tactile Play

“WHOOAAAAA”

Shirley and Woody were in the upper part of the loft alone. Woody begins to spin around for several seconds and then immediately falls down on the floor with a thud. Shirley laughs at his antics and joins in the same action. They begin to vocalize as they are spinning, saying “WHOOAAAAA, WWHOOAAAAA, WHOOAAAAA!” Each time they fall down, they overexaggerate their landing, burst out in laughter, and get up and do it again, and again, and again. It tirelessly continues for 10 minutes. At first I watched unobtrusively, but as their game got more active they began to fall on top of each other. Being the cautious teacher that I am, and well aware of the size difference between them, I went to sit on the stairs to watch in case I needed to put on my teacher cape and fly to the rescue. After I made my appearance clear, each time they fell and laughed they made eye contact with me to see if I was watching their frolics.

This was also a silly game that caused laughter, though it had the element of the pure physical sensation of spinning and falling, coupled with the companion of a friend. Their game had a resurgence when they saw that I was watching and seemingly supporting and enjoying what they were doing. Their eye contact with me suggested they

were seeking my approval and laughter, as the loft is the only place where they are allowed to safely exert energy in this way.

### Catch and Tickle Me

I can't express how many dozens of times a day the children want me to chase them or engage in another type of physical game. I have come to disagree that tickling is really a pain response, because unless I have 14 burgeoning masochists in my class, which I don't think I do, they wouldn't tell me, "TICKLE ME!!!!!" This is the primary game that Edith has played with the teachers in order to develop relationships and closeness; however, she loves the physical act of being chased, caught, and then tickled. She runs away from me laughing but constantly looks back to see if I am really coming. If I don't run after her or if I am not chasing fast enough she stops on the spot and says, "SARAH, CATCH ME!!!!" This is only one example of the more than 100 that I saw over 11 weeks. There were so many I had to begin just putting tally marks by their names when it occurred. I have to wonder though, how much do these children really think I am capable of running in one day?

### Hand Painting

The sensory experiences that go along with preschool are in my opinion the best part of it all. Usually most of these entail a big mess, which parents are not willing to deal with at home, so preschool becomes a very special place for these kinds of activities that help children to explore their world. Ethel was painting on a table covered with butcher

paper and several paper plates of paint. She set two plates of paint side by side and for the next 30 minutes dipped her hands palms down into the two plates simultaneously, rubbed them around, opened and closed her fingers like scissors and then lifted them up covered with cool, silky paint. She held them up for one of the student teachers and I to see while she laughed in the process. After each time she dipped them she rubbed them on the paper slowly and deliberately, watching the patterns and color mixtures that she was creating. When most of the paint had come off she dipped them in the paint again and repeated the process, though she always swirled her hands around on the plates more time than was needed to cover them. Each time she pulled them out of the paint she laughed and laughed. This time I asked her why she was laughing and she replied, “I like the way it feels.”

For Ethel, this kind of sensory stimulation was extremely laughter provoking, especially because it was something that is not normally done so freely. I could see Ethel’s sensory cells absorbing everything, rubbing her hands completely in the cool paint, feeling it ooze between her fingers, watching the colors blend as she rubbed the paint on the paper. She was very excited with this stimulation caused by the sensory properties of the paint, and while laughing, she held her hands up for me to see her pleasure.

### Body Sounds

“I FARTED!!”

I feel that this laughter at producing noisy gas is very self-explanatory. Noises are funny to begin with, but when it comes from your own body it has even more hilarity.

And because this behavior from children often embarrasses the parents when they do it in the company of others, children quickly learn that it is something you should hide. It being a *faux pas* makes it even funnier when it happens, because it then has an element of unknown social response attached to it. At snack time, Woody begins to laugh wildly, looks over to Shirley and shouts, “I FARTED!!” Shirley starts to giggle with her hands over her mouth. Two more times he claims, “I FARTED!!” each time getting the same response from Shirley even though he is laughing much harder than she is. I am not sure if he did indeed fart (even though I have heard him do so in the past), or if it is just a fun thing to say, but what it comes down to is farting is a funny thing to do and talk about.

“EXCUSE MEEEE!”

Burping is also very funny, though not as funny as farting because at some point in history it was decided that gas coming out of your mouth is more socially acceptable than it coming out of your butt, which detracts from burping’s appeal. We were sitting at snack when Ethel burps louder than I thought a child could. She looks up at me and laughs. Her face is scrunched up in anticipation of my reaction. She smiles shyly at first, and then it turns into a big grin and she says, “EXCUSE MEEEE!”

It was apparent that Ethel was trying to make this audible to everyone because it looked like she was preparing for it, sitting up straight in her chair, taking a breath, and burping. Though she did it on purpose, she in turn made it socially acceptable by saying excuse me. In my family, the one who burps loudest gets the most applause.

## Screaming

A more innocuous, or shall I say innoxious form of funny body noise is screaming, especially when you do it inside where you are not supposed to use your “outside voice.” Lucy, the drama princess, loves to scream in her play or randomly throughout the day just to hear herself do it. Every time she shrieks for no reason she begins to laugh crazily at the sound of her voice, though she probably also laughs to make the teachers laugh, who she knows will immediately come over and tell her not to scream inside the building.

She came up with something at her house that she brought to school with her one day; a scream box that she had made out of paper. As soon as she told me what it was, I thought, “Uh oh,” though I was really excited to hear about it. And, oh did I hear about it. Each time she would open paper lid to her box, it screamed. It didn’t just scream a little, it screamed like it had been trapped inside itself for 1,000 years and was finally being opened and freed. Every time she screamed, she laughed so much she almost fell over, especially because she pretended to scare herself when it screamed. She absolutely loves the sound of her own voice and I believe she knew she would be able to get away with hearing herself scream at school if she brought the box in. She was also very proud of herself at devising such a clever game. I finally had to suggest that the scream box looked a little worn out and might need to rest its voice, but it was only after she had shown it to 10 other people, at least five times each.

## **It's Not Funny!!!**

*“Anything awful makes me laugh. I misbehaved once at a funeral.”* (Charles Lamb, 1815)

I will never, ever, ever forget the time when I was in second grade and we were having pigs in a blanket for lunch at school. I sat down to eat and began to dig into the blanket of dough with my spork, which as a sidenote, is one of the most ingenious creations unless you are an infant and just learning to eat. When I got through the dough I came to a hot dog that was completely desiccated and blackened. Hungry, I began to tear through the skin to eat the moister inside and ultimately leave something that looked like a hollowed out shell. Like a bat, one of the mean lunch ladies swooped over, began laughing like a demon and screamed to her other mean lunch lady friends, “HEY!!! LOOK AT WHAT THIS GIRL HAS DONE TO HER HOT DOG!!!” The rest of the mean lunch ladies, and I can’t remember how many there were but it seemed like a gazillion, waddled over and began pointing at it and laughing the way that only mean lunch ladies can. I can’t express it in words because the memory is too painful, exactly how horrifyingly embarrassed I was. At last, when I began studying laughter I decided I could finally forgive them for these dreadful antics because there was no way that they did it to make me embarrassed, and wouldn’t have done it if they thought it might... unless they really *were* mean lunch ladies.

In this section I have included those times when children or adults display laughter for things that are in response to events that they do not really find funny. Also included are those situations when an adult or child is laughing and trying to prompt another child to laugh and it does not work or receives a rather negative response.

### Nonhumorous Laughter of Fear, Anxiety, Embarrassment, and Relief, in That Order

#### Lost Child

It is one thing to be a parent and responsible for your own child and a completely different thing to be responsible for someone else's child. Losing or misplacing a child is one of my biggest fears as a teacher, especially when I am so careful and do at least 30 head counts a day to make sure no one has escaped through the door on their own accord. But once in awhile one slips away like a fish through your hands, there one second and gone the next.

On another day that we had to stay and play in the atrium of our building because of nasty weather, I was responsible for sitting at one end of it to guard the three possible doors the children could get through, two that lead to another part of the building and one that goes to the outside. Everyone was accounted for. I began to reattach the handle to one of the children's ribbons that had come undone and when I looked up Elaine was gone. I wasn't immediately alarmed and got up and walked around to see if she had run down to the other end of the atrium, but she was nowhere to be found. I asked the other teachers if they had seen her leave or knew where she was but no one did. No one had taken her to the bathroom. She had simply disappeared over a 20-second period. On the inside I felt a wave of terror overcome me and then I began to laugh. One of my student

teachers ran upstairs to look, while another one checked through the two doors that lead to another part of the building. She was nowhere to be found. I laughed again. In the atrium I called her name and somehow I remained calm as I walked out of the door leading to the outside, though knowing that she hates to be cold, I could not imagine that she would brave the bad weather. She wasn't outside as far as I could see. Now, not only had I lost a child, but it was pick-up time and parents were arriving during the fiasco, and knew what had happened. I laughed again. I began calling Elaine's name again with no answer. By now my student teachers had come back empty handed and I could smell my own fear. I laughed again.

Out of nowhere, I suddenly hear, "Miss Saaraahhhh." I swiveled around to see Elaine's head poking out from one of the benches that has so little clearance I couldn't believe that even *her* petite body could fit under there. I ran over to her and laughed again, this time just so happy to see her. Then I got mad and gave her a serious talking to.

I thought deeply about my laughter in this situation, which I feel was a direct response to my fear of losing Elaine. I didn't laugh because it was humorous; I was scared to death. It was a defense mechanism that allowed my mind and body to temporarily lighten the stress of the situation so that I could remain thinking level headedly. It helped to keep me calm with the assurance we would find Elaine. There was also an element of disbelief in my laughter because I just couldn't imagine how she could have escaped over a 20-second period. I know she will never hide under those benches again.

### First Come, First Serve

Gilda was the first to arrive in class and was standing in the middle of four student teachers. This was the first time she had arrived first and seemed extremely shy and “lost.” I tried to initiate a conversation with her but she just looked away and ignored me. Three of the other teachers tried to do the same with no response. She went and stood against the sink, not looking at us and apparently very uncomfortable. A few minutes later, Cara, another student teacher and Gilda’s favorite came in. Gilda’s eyes widened, she smiled hugely, and began to giggle while she ran over to Cara and grabbed her around the leg. Cara picked her up to greet her and Gilda continued to giggle.

Gilda was in a situation that she had never been in before by being first to class and the only child with a group of teachers, none of who were her favorites. I have also seen this anxiety or unease in other children who arrive first and do not have another child to turn to sneak away with. I am learning to be more sensitive to children’s early morning transition needs, and I have found that just because they don’t cry in the morning doesn’t mean that they are necessarily comfortable and ready to jump into play. When children come in to find themselves bombarded with four teachers, it can make them quite apprehensive and pull away in defense. When Cara came in, she provided the safety and comfort that Gilda was desiring. She was very relieved to see Cara come in and demonstrated it by laughing.

### Hit With A Rainbow

The children had been making pictures by placing crayon shavings on wax paper and then getting a teacher to melt them with an iron to have a translucent effect. Ethel

worked diligently for quite some time, carefully playing the crayon shavings in the form of a rainbow. After hers had been melted, she cut hers out. One of the teachers tied a string around it and she walked around the classroom with it showing it off and looking through it. She began playing with it by herself, not noticing that one of the teachers, Naomi, was watching her. She began to swing her rainbow by the string and she happened to smack herself right in the face with it. She initially looked very surprised but when she looked up and saw Naomi looking at her she began to laugh at what had happened.

This was laughter of embarrassment, especially since Ethel wasn't laughing before she saw Naomi see her hit herself. This is exactly like when you are walking and trip, and you either look back like the sidewalk stuck its foot out, or if other people are watching, you laugh in embarrassment at your inability to remain surefooted on a flat surface.

#### Napkin

Gilda, who is primarily nonverbal, was trying to sign to us that she needed something at snack time but we did not understand what she was signing. She signed it five or six times before she began to cry and vocalize her frustration through sounds. Cara and I continued to try to figure out what she was saying she needed until Cara discovered that what she wanted was a napkin to put her snack on. She asked Gilda, "Do you want a napkin?" Gilda started forcefully nodding her head yes. After Cara got up to get it and placed it down beside her, she nodded her head yes again and began to laugh.

How frustrating and mentally exhausting it must be for Gilda to need something so simple and not be able to get her point across. She was absolutely relieved when she

was finally understood and got her napkin, and could stop making the intense effort that getting it had required. Whereas finishing this thesis will cause me to laugh with success, I also see the true laughter of relief in the future.

I feel it is notable to mention that the nonhumorous laughter of fear, anxiety, embarrassment or relief I discovered, was relatively scarce. The scanty amount of documentation I compiled led me to once again evaluate the importance of safety to my study. The children rarely laughed from fear, relief, or anxiety because there is little to fear, be relieved of, or anxious about in the classroom. There was little laughter of embarrassment, as I feel our classroom is highly aware and accepting of children and their needs. Overall, the children felt safe, thus minimizing this type of nonhumorous laughter.

#### Child Avoiding Reprimand

##### Whack

When a child knows they are in trouble and have done something wrong, laughter often follows as a means to lighten the situation or get out of trouble. Woody wanted something that another child was playing with and went up to her, yanked it away and whacked her in the shoulder in the process, thus causing her to become upset, get a bruise, and require an ice pack. Immediately after making sure the other child was well, we approached Woody to discuss the situation with him. He took off like a lightning bolt, attempting to run away from us, smiling and laughing the entire time. As our classroom is contained, and I like to think I am faster than a 3-½ year old, I caught him and tried to talk to him about the situation. Much to my surprise he laughed at me, and

laughed at me and laughed at me, avoiding my eyes the entire time when I was trying to look at him. After several minutes he had finally calmed down enough to listen to me.

Woody knew he was in the wrong, he knew taking toys and hurting someone else in the process was against our rules, and he laughed. He was afraid he would get in trouble, so he laughed to avoid and lighten the situation. So much of laughter is an attempt to be in control of the self. Especially for children, they need this control when attempting to deal with adults, who also feel that they are the ones who have the ultimate control. But I am the teacher and I should have the control! Right?? Absolutely wrong. Never have I been so wrong. We often deal with children in a way that makes them feel the inordinate need to always be right, though they need this opportunity to be right. This avoiding reprimand also overlaps with the nonhumorous laughter of the fear or nervousness of getting in trouble.

#### Don't Push

This next incident occurred directly after Lucy had pushed Marge under the loft and a teacher had attempted to talk to her about what had happened. Lucy immediately ran over to Rhoda and tried to hide her face against her arm. When this teacher found out what had happened she also tried to talk to Lucy about it. Her reaction to this teacher talking to her was quite different in that she began to laugh and look around the room avoiding eye contact. Her laughing continued for about 2 minutes, the entire duration of which the teacher was attempting to talk to her. She finally listened and was able to repeat back to Rhoda what she had said to her, though she continued to laugh as she repeated it.

Once again, this laughter demonstrates a child trying to lessen punishment or get out of trouble, though it was also laughter of the fear of being *in* trouble. Lucy seems to be almost a master at it, but if you are going to be an adventurous child and attempt things that might get you in trouble, you need to have a strategy. What also made this scenario significant was that Rhoda is the teacher who she has one of the closest relationships with Lucy, and she also watches her outside of school. I think Lucy perceived that if she ran to Rhoda she would not get in trouble. Her laughing with Rhoda shows her strategy of trying to diffuse a situation where she was in the wrong but thought Rhoda would be on her side.

#### The Way the Plane Flies

The student teachers had planned a theme on flight and so one of the parents brought in several plastic airplanes for the kids to play with. Jerry had taken several airplanes up to the loft so that he and George could play airport. When we announced it was cleanup time, Jerry began throwing the planes down the stairs making “plane sounds” as they flew down. The first plane he threw hit Gilda square in the back so I went up to him and told him that he could not throw things off of the loft, and needed to carry them down. He said he understood, and I turned to deal with another situation down under the loft. There is always another situation. As soon as I turned he laughed softly to George and threw another plane down the stairs. I turned back up the stairs and placed my hands on top of the plane he was getting ready to throw and told him again very firmly that he could not throw toys off of the loft because people would get hurt. He

began to laugh and avoided all eye contact with me while I tried to talk to him. He didn't throw the planes again but continued to laugh after the event.

In looking back at this situation I see that Jerry's laughter was a reaction to being in an uncomfortable situation and trying to avoid getting in trouble. He was probably nervous knowing he had done something he wasn't supposed to do and was embarrassed that I had corrected him in front of his friend. In these situations I feel as though the child is saying to the adult, "Ha ha, fuck you, I don't have to listen to you and I am just going to do the thing you told me three times not to do. And I'll do it as many times as I can get away with, so there! And if you try to stop me I will get out of it by laughing at you because I know that I am going to do it again and probably get away with it again."

Often I am positive that children have an underdeveloped brain connection that prevents them from hearing something the first or second time it is said. At what point do they learn that it is rude to ignore people? I want to do an experiment and ignore all of the children the first five times they call my name—if I could stand it. I feel that this laughter to avoid reprimand is very related to children laughing to avoid something that they don't want to do, but adults want them to do. The issue still centers around control.

### Child Laughing Without a Response From Children

#### Fake Mouse

This is the category of laughter that really bothers me because I see it as detrimental to a child's self-esteem, as it is often the same children who try to initiate laughter to establish interaction that get pushed aside. Ethel and I are sitting and chatting when George begins to laugh and walks up and pretends to put a paper mouse on her

head. Ethel makes a grunting noise and pushes his hand away but he continues to laugh. He tries it again seconds later and this time Ethel completely turns her body away from him and screams, “NO!!” He tries to put it on her head a third time, still laughing, even though Ethel is now crying. At this point I feel the need to stop documenting and intervene, explaining to George that Ethel was trying to tell him she did not want him to do that. He turns, seemingly oblivious, and walks away.

George is a child on whom I have very little laughter documentation. He has very good imaginary play, but often is avoided by many of the children because he is very rough and doesn't interpret social cues or plain statements like “Stop it!” very well. He plays a lot of games, though they often involve shooting, pushing, tackling, or yelling, and usually with the children who are gentler and do not engage in this type of play regularly. His difficulty in reading social cues was seen in this situation because he was not reading the obvious signs that Ethel was unhappy with this game. It seemed that George had a plan of what he was doing and then tried to carry it out regardless of the recipient's feelings. He did not appear to be terribly bothered by Ethel's dislike of his game, however, these situations for him are accumulating in number and I fear that they will have an impact on his self-esteem in the future.

#### “Flip”

Another child who often has difficulty interpreting another's social cues is Woody, though this is becoming less and less as he gains more social experience. He runs up to me with a spatula in his hand, presses it on my stomach and says, “Flip.” I jump, pretending he turned me and said, “You flipped me over.” He immediately laughs

and runs over to Ethel to flip her but she does not receive his game well. He tries to flip her two times and she whines, “Leave me aloneeee. Sarah, Woody is bothering me.” I tell him that maybe he should try to ask a person if it is OK to flip them before he does it. He goes to flip someone else, Lucy this time, but he does not ask. He begins to run after her, which causes Lucy to run and begin screaming. He doesn’t seem to notice that she is screaming bloody murder because he continues to laugh and chase her.

Woody wanted to show everyone his game that he thought was funny. I began by giving him positive feedback for it, though no one else enjoyed it. This situation shows how Woody is still lacking in understanding of social reciprocity. He was so into his game that he paid absolutely no attention when the other children did not want to participate. Despite their lack of involvement he continued to laugh hysterically and run around the room until I had to make him stop chasing the others.

#### “He Dances Like a Girl”

Preschoolers still have a very difficult time saying what they mean, and will occasionally offend someone who mistakes their meaning. While standing near the couch, Lucy, Marge, and Jerry were twirling around trying to make themselves dizzy. One of the teachers was sitting on the couch with them, laughing at their behavior. She asked Lucy what they were doing and Lucy told her they were dancing. Marge was following Lucy’s lead and copying her movements and Jerry was following Marge. Lucy realized this, started laughing wildly and fell onto the couch. Suddenly she shouted, “He dances like a girl!!!” while pointing to Jerry. Jerry, very upset, yelled back, “I DO

NOT.” Lucy looked at him very seriously and told him, “You do so, you are copying Marge, and she is a girl.” Then she laughed again. The teachers who were nearby began to laugh because Lucy’s logic was right, and what she meant was that he was dancing like Marge, which he was because he was copying her. Jerry wasn’t very fond of this comment and he got very upset and changed his dancing to making silly gestures instead.

I was extremely interested in why Jerry was so upset about this comment. I wondered if he already had socially learned that boys are “better” than girls, or if he was upset because he wanted to have more independence than being compared to someone else. Either way, he did not find it even remotely funny and was quite offended that Lucy and Marge were laughing. This situation is different from the previous two in that it was the child on the receiving end of the laughter who ended up feeling rejected.

#### Adults Laughing Without a Response From Children

##### “Stop Laughing at Me!”

Sometimes, adults fail in trying to make children laugh. Shirley is a child who seems to be quite self-conscious about what people think of her and is quite aware of how she deals with her own emotions. When she gets hurt physically or emotionally in the classroom, she wants to go to a secluded corner and be alone without the comfort of another child or teacher. It seems like she is very aversive to having too much attention paid to her, as she is extremely independent. This dislike for attention and self-consciousness also arises in another way; Shirley does not like people to laugh at her. When Shirley says something that is amusing, she does not like to hear others laugh about it, unless *she* also finds it amusing. Naomi, one of my teachers, happened to be

laughing at something Shirley had said to her thinking that she also found it humorous but she was very wrong. Shirley yelled “ Stop laughing at me!”

Once again, teachers need to be very conscious of what they laugh at, who they laugh at, and when they laugh at them. Much sensitivity is needed to use it at the right times. I often wonder if they think I am making fun of them when I laugh and they get upset.

“I AM NNOOOTTTTT GOOFY!”

I hypothesized earlier if calling the children names in fun could warp them, and the answer is an emphatic yes. This is not to mean that I am being disrespectful to the children. When I call them names, it is my attempt to be playful in a situation that I feel will be perceived as joking. I have to admit that sometimes I am just in a better mood and feeling more playful than the children. So when Lucy was doing something silly that I didn’t understand and I asked her, “What are you doing, Goofy?” it wasn’t even close to being OK. She screamed with absolute vigor, “I AM NNOOOTTTTT GOOFY!” scowled, made a grunt like a perturbed rhinoceros, stamped her foot like a bull, turned her back and walked away. Sometimes you just never really know how volatile a child is on any particular day and you just have to suck it up and move on.

#### Tickle Monster Gone Awry

Every day it is, “Tickle me! Tickle me! Tickle me! Ohhhhh, the Tickle Monster is coming. We better run and hide. Get me. Get me, ” as they scream with pure delight. Then there are days when I try to initiate the game, though obviously at that time they are unable to fit the Tickle Monster into their tight preschool schedule. Then they yell,

“Leave me alone. I don’t WANT to see the Tickle Monster.” I can hear their exact, piercing, screeching voices now. Sometimes I do it anyway and they break down and laugh. I, too, sometimes forget the social rules and invade others’ space when I shouldn’t. Usually, I will just walk away or pretend to cry so they will laugh and come and comfort me. Then I try to tickle them again.

### A New Car

When I started studying and documenting laughter, I felt like you do when you get a new car, and start realizing the unbelievable amount of cars on the road that are like yours. There are so many that at first they do not appear unique, but the more cars you see and the more you get to know your own new car, the more you begin to recognize that they are the same make and model, with very different features.

It is absolutely unbelievable how much children laugh and how much they love doing it. Children’s laughter is everywhere, and it is rich, deep, complex, and monumentally important to life. You just have to acknowledge it to become more aware of its diversity and meaning.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Weaving Meaning

*“We must each find our separate meaning*

*In the persuasion of our days*

*Until we meet in the meaning of the world.”* (Christopher Fry, 1946)

Thinking or writing about the meaning something has is one of the most challenging parts of research, and life. What does it *mean* to have meaning? Writing about it is so difficult because meaning is often something that is implicit and felt, not something that is tangible or definitive. Meaning is also something that a person can claim ownership of. What I find meaningful is mine, and only mine to coddle, for no one else to hold, feel, see, or truly understand. However, I don't like to be selfish and will further attempt to weave together my findings with what all of this means to me, to the children, to children's development, and for everyone's potential for laughter. However, as I have stated before, each person must interpret the information for herself, and take away what she personally feels is meaningful.

#### **Children's Laughter and My Personal Development Through Metamorphosis**

When I thought about how to summarize my findings, I knew that I could not negate the fact that I was absolutely intertwined in my research. I could not compartmentalize myself and pretend that my complete experiences as a person-teacher-researcher were not influencing each other. I am, and will always be, these three things

simultaneously. I decided that I could not separate these roles in my discussion, because each role cannot exist in isolation, and certainly did not during my data collection. I also cannot discuss the children as separate throughout my process, because they were the biggest part of this dynamic. Each of my three roles affected them as a student and person, and their roles from inside and outside of the classroom equally affected me. What ended up being created from this interaction of multiple roles was a reciprocal and dynamic process of change, learning, and transformation, of which laughter was an integral part.

### **Stage 1: Fertilization**

A small, translucent egg is sitting amongst a group of hundreds, partially obscured by the shelter of a mossy rock. The rocking motion of the water causes it to billow gently in its place, patiently waiting. The female frog's partner is ready, and swims along to deposit the sperm that gives the egg the potential for life.

#### Honesty as Fertilization for a Person-Teacher-Researcher

For me, the difficulty of being a person-teacher-researcher simultaneously is that it demands honesty. When I began thinking about how to negotiate my multiple roles, I knew that I had to be very honest about how I felt about the children and me teaching each other, and who I am as a person, in order for me to be authentic as I merged from one role into another. It was this continuous honesty that provided me the fertilization for understanding myself as a person-teacher-researcher throughout my process.

One of the biggest parts of me is that I love teaching. Few things make me as proud as seeing a child develop a skill, form a friendship, or express creativity. Few things make me as thrilled as endless bear hugs, engaging in children's play, or making them laugh. Few things make me as satisfied as holding a child's hand, giving them praise, or having an unspoken understanding. Teaching is the most exhilarating, self-affirming, yet selfless act a person can do. Teaching is passionate and fulfilling in a way that enlightens even the murkiest of waters. Teaching is magnificent.

Teaching also sucks. It is as difficult as sucking on a piece of candy until it completely dissolves without chewing it. You move it around in your mouth, flipping it, clicking it against your teeth, rubbing your tongue on all sides of it, wanting to bite it but also wanting to savor it. Teaching and putting myself into teaching is fear. It is painful in a way that breaks the heart continuously. Opening it up, exposing the valves and chambers, craving oxygen though suffocating in the attempt to breathe. Teaching with honesty is an act that if done with care, forces one to look at the self with a variety of lenses. It demands that one cares and nurtures, and often, fails. Luckily, when this failure occurred in response to my good intentions, I was able to learn from it, and continue on my journey. I am so afraid of teaching, but I am also so afraid of not teaching, because I am so afraid of not learning. The two are inseparable.

### Safety and Relationships as Fertilization for Children

I found in my research that what the children need to begin a life of laughter is relationships that occur in a safe environment. The safety of the environment cannot be stressed enough, because only in a safe environment can children truly flourish. Though

the physical safety of the environment is extremely important, it is the relationships that grow within the walls that allow for the emotional safety that permits the children to know they are completely accepted as individuals. Only when the teacher has an image of children that adults and children are equals, and is respectful of their ideas, concerns, and thoughts, can a true relationship be established that allows for this level of safety.

The importance of safety was very telling in my study, in that two out of the three children who were new to my class the semester I began my research did not feel safe in the beginning. They would arrive, shrouded by their parents' towering and protective bodies while clutching their legs like a feeding piranha. You could find them playing alone in the corner with one eye on what they were doing, and the other squinting at what everyone else was doing, or trying to hide under the loft during group activities.

Throughout the day, you would barely hear them make a sound. There was no laughter. For these two children, only when they were comfortable in their new setting, could they stop putting their energy towards remaining alert and watchful, and focus more on their interactions. Only when they gained this comfort, did their laughter begin.

Through my research, I learned and demonstrated the monumental importance of children's relationships to laughter. Previous studies had discussed the notion that laughing is a social process and little laughter occurs outside of relationships, however, the studies did not discuss the dynamics that occur within laughing relationships or how laughter is used. My findings also support that laughter occurs almost solely in the context of relationships; however, it is for a purpose. Children use laughter to help initiate and build relationships, but once they have established them it is the qualities of an open and trusting relationship that facilitate an even deeper level of laughter within them. The

laughter then becomes an inherent part of the relationship due to an intersubjective understanding of one another.

I reflected constantly on the quality of my relationships with the children as I already had a long-term investment with them as their teacher prior to beginning my research. The fact that I had positive, enduring relationships with most of them, and knew their personalities fairly well, gave me additional insight to their involvement and meaning in many of the laughter situations and allowed me to immediately be accepted from the outset.

## **Stage 2: Hatching**

The time has come. The egg begins to quiver, gently at first, though soon with a force that demands freedom. A hairline fissure appears, and then grows larger, until a form emerges, simple, yet stately in appearance. The tadpole, stunned by its triumph, is tranquil for several moments. It accepts its new environment and swims off to begin its life.

### A Person-Teacher-Researcher Hatching and Breaking Free

I try to look at my life, my past, my present, my future, and what it all means to who I am in terms of a laughing person and how I got there. I thank the earth that I am a laughing person, even if my laughter is sometimes inappropriate, or partially due to my encroaching insanity. I can say with sincerity that I am thankful for my mental imperfections because they have made me think deeply about my life in a way that not experiencing these hardships would have. I used to blame my family for passing my

deficiencies on to me, but now I don't consider them as traits that were ungraciously thrown my way. One day in class, Lucy asked me for some ribbon she wanted for a project. When I gave it to her she said, "OOOOOO, a gift!" I started laughing at her response and Lucy got upset. She scowled and said, "It *is* a gift. You gave it to me." Days later I continued to think about her statement and realized that from genetics, chance, and experience, my depression and anxiety was given to me, which classifies them as gifts. They affect everything I do in all of my roles, though without them, I would not have turned my energy towards laughing.

#### Children Hatching and Breaking Free

Because I had a newly found acceptance of myself, I also changed as a teacher and a researcher. I now had more control of who I was as a person, so I was able to stop feeling like I had to control everything outside of myself, especially the children in my classroom. Relinquishing my power and control provided the children with a greater opportunity for them to show me who they really are as people. It gave them more chances to break free from the constraints that can often hinder them and their laughter. Because I also let them see who I was, they were able to interact more openly and honestly with me, and I was able to be more open and honest with them. Had I not been able to let go of the need to always manage the flow of events and the children's behaviors each day, I would have prematurely ended many of the interactions that ended with very telling and meaningful laughter. If I had not been able to be myself, I would not have been as playful with the children, which would have directly impacted their potential and willingness to develop laughing relationships with me.

### **Stage 3: Growing From Tadpole to Frog**

Several weeks have passed, and the tadpole navigates its environment effortlessly. It begins to feel a change. Its strong-finned tail begins to disappear. Its front and back legs emerge first as nubs, and then become more prominent. Its gills fade to the lungs needed for air breathing. Even its digestive system evolves to accommodate the one that is needed for a carnivorous land existence. It becomes what it was born to be.

#### A Person-Teacher-Researcher Growing and Learning Through Laughter

The children and I have all learned a lot through laughter, albeit different things. As a person-teacher-researcher, I have learned to use it to overcome my insecurity, low self-esteem, and issues with control. As a person-teacher-researcher, I have learned how to use laughter to develop meaningful relationships in my outside life and with the children in the classroom. As a person-teacher-researcher, I have learned to use laughter to deal with strife in my personal life, difficulties in the classroom, and the frustration of research. As a person-teacher-researcher, I have learned how much my love of laughter has helped me to become more authentic in my multiple roles, and how important it is for me to be in environments that support the real person who I am in these roles. As a person-teacher-researcher I have discovered how much laughter influences everything I do in my life. I feel that I have become what I was born to be. A laughing person-teacher-researcher.

## The Children Growing and Learning Through Laughter

My documentation and reflections on laughter in my classroom tell me with conviction that the possibilities for laughter in children are endless. I have already discussed the importance of laughter for developing social relationships and maintaining them once established. Children also learn to use laughter in mischievous ways to learn how to get out of doing something. When laughter occurs it can demonstrate their level of cognitive understanding to see how they perceive, understand, and interpret the world. Laughter can be from sheer delight, pleasurable sensations, or something new and exciting. They also use it to express nonhumorous emotions, or produce it in nonhumorous situations to others. The possibilities are endless.

In addition to these developmental benefits and implications, parents and teachers should also support a child's laughter just for the fact that it makes them happy. I was sitting on the couch where Ethel was giving me a "makeover." She was trying to put my hair into a ponytail, but was pulling really hard in the process. I repeatedly said, "Ouch, don't pull so hard," until I began to pretend I was going unconscious each time she pulled. She began to laugh vehemently and stated, "Do it again so I can laugh more." I said, "What do you want to laugh for? I put on my serious face and she started to push the corners of my mouth into a smile, giggling at my willingness to play as well as the absurdity of how she was making me look. I kept my serious face and said, "I don't think I am EVER going to laugh again." She laughed harder, reading that I was joking, and screamed, "You *have* to laugh or you won't be happy!" She has already learned the most important thing in life.

#### **Stage 4: Learning to Survive: Finding Food and Avoiding Predators**

The frog balances precariously on a branch, motionless. A mosquito swarms above looking for its next meal, then lands to remain discreet. The clandestine frog flicks out its tongue, scooping up the insect in a seamless motion. It hides in a nook to digest its prize, remaining unseen by those hovering and hungry. It doesn't anticipate the tree snake stealthily slithering towards its resting body. Its senses awaken and it feels the encroaching snake, only to flee just in time.

#### My Laughter as Survival

There were several days in preschool that I almost snapped like a brittle, osteoporitic, bone. These were the days that I had to find laughter as food for my own survival. Every teacher knows about these days, the ones when nothing clicks; the children fight over toys, the room is a disaster, everyone spills their milk, no one will clean up, everyone whines at once. Seeking out laughter does not always work, because sometimes my mood is too far gone, but usually I am successful. A new finding in my research that has only been briefly mentioned in the literature is how wonderful laughter is for developing strategies to deal with difficult days or specific situations. It has also helped me to reevaluate my life to see the things that are really important to me, and I can now laugh at the things that before would have caused me days or weeks of anguish.

I used laughter as food for survival in the classroom, but I also used it as a strategy to avoid or ease the hunger of the occasional predators; disgruntled parents. Working with children is difficult, but working with parents can sometimes be impossible. I highly value the relationships I have with the parents and the insight to

their children they provide, but every teacher can empathize when I say, “Sometimes you just don’t get along.” After awhile it becomes easier to dodge or call a truce with the ones who you always have differences with, whether the difference is personality or philosophy of teaching, accept it and move on.

Where my new perspective on life and laughter has saved my soul is from the injuries of the predators that would strike without warning. My monumental example, though I could give many, was a parent meeting that I walked into at the beginning of the semester, believing it was going to be a routine checkup from parents who usually support me. What ensued was a lashing diatribe, and the message that I took away from it was, “You are a shitty teacher. Your classroom sucks. Your student teachers suck.” I was like a blind, flightless, baby bird surrounded by a ring of cobras. In the past, this situation would have been the death of my self-esteem and I would have become completely discouraged, possibly to the point of no return. But I said to myself, “I am not a shitty teacher, I am an unconventional one. I love the children and take time to be playful with them. I hang on their every word when they talk. My classroom does not suck, it breathes an environment of challenges. My student teachers are wonderful and learning. So there!” Then I looked around the table from parent to parent, drown out their comments, and thought of a few choice words for each of them, while picturing myself as a superhero fighting evil. They didn’t know it but I was laughing on the inside to preserve myself.

## Children's Laughter as Survival

The children also need laughter for survival. I have jokingly heard from a forgotten source that children have to laugh to make themselves seem more desirable, so adults won't kill them. There is truth in this. Many times I have been dangling from a very frayed thread, and a child's laughter has helped to put me back in perspective.

More important is children's need of laughter for themselves. Childhood is hard. I know for a fact because I did it once. I believe that all children have the propensity for laughter, and anything positive that can be fostered in them should be taught and nurtured. When children are presented with an opportunity to laugh that suits their personalities, they do it, and then seek further opportunities. It is integral to life in so many ways, especially as they transcend childhood into the demands of adolescence and adulthood.

## **Stage 5: Death**

The frog sits with resolve on its perch, tired and old. It has completed everything a frog can do in a short lifetime. Its eyes begin to close, its body twitches, and it dies.

## My Final Laughter With the Children

Death is coming to me soon but when comes it will not be my actual body, at least I hope not yet, but a part of my soul. This death will come at the end of this year when my program of study, my teaching assistantship, and hence my immediate relationships with the children will come to an end. When this realization of finality crept up into my

consciousness, I wanted to squelch it with all of my strength and just go on in my routine as I have for the past 2-½ years. But there is nothing I can do about it.

For me, finishing my job is exactly like ending a long-term romantic relationship. I initially felt like the children and I were having a mutual breakup, one of those endings where people still want to be together but circumstances won't allow it. So I blamed those who were in charge of those circumstances and started to display all of the behavioral manifestations that go along with a hurtful separation. I decided to distance myself both physically and emotionally from the children, so I would feel less pain about us leaving each other when the time came, even though this was when I needed to be with them the most. I was pained by the changes that would be occurring, not only in my classroom, but the Lab School as a whole. I was being pushed aside and left behind.

I know the children love me as much as they can love a teacher and adult friend, and I love them more than a teacher can love a child who is not her own. This makes it hard when I have to think about the knowledge that they will form new relationships with different teachers. I will no longer be the one they run to for consolation. They will not come to me to share their joy or ideas. They will soon be hugging or cuddling with someone new. Someone else will watch them develop their interests, attain their goals, play.....and laugh. I will probably never laugh with them again. I am completely possessive of them even though we are breaking up.

It will be a heartfelt time for me, as I have spent many hours with them and even more hours thinking and dreaming about them. My study on laughter has helped and is still helping me overcome my angst. Even though the immediate relationships will end, I have so many fabulous memories to keep forever. I am gracious for the time I have spent

and laughed with them, and feel so fortunate that I got to be part of their childhood, even if for a short while.

### The Children's Final Laughter With Me

Just as I will never laugh with the children again, they will never laugh with me again either. Their time with me is over. We were lucky to have formed relationships with one another for this short period of time in our lives. When talking about this chapter with my thesis chair, he disclosed his belief that relationships never end (Andy Stremmel, personal communication, May 1, 2003). After some thought, I realized that I also believe this to be true. An immediate relationship may end, but it leaves a person with an experience, and therefore, a piece to the entire puzzle that makes a person. I know I will always be a piece of their puzzle, as they will make up many pieces of mine. I might be a unicolor middle piece or a corner piece but it does not matter. They are all important and necessary.

### **Stage 6: Continuation of Life**

A small, translucent egg is sitting amongst a group of hundreds, partially obscured by the shelter of a mossy rock. The rocking motion of the water causes it to billow gently in its place, patiently waiting. The female frog's partner is ready, and swims along to deposit the sperm that gives the egg the potential for life.

### A Laughing Person-Teacher-Researcher Goes On

It was a shocking realization that no matter how hurt I was going to be when I left the children in my classroom, I was ready for a change. It is hard to realize when this is occurring for me, because despite wanting to grow, I also relish security, comfort, and familiarity.

I also know that it is possible that the children will forget me, but there is a greater chance that one day, in a week, a month, a year, or a long time down the road, one of them will be reminiscing about the past, and they will think, “I don’t remember much about preschool, but I do remember laughing.” Or they will remember my face or some other tidbit about our time spent together. Or, if I am really lucky, they will not remember what I look like or who I am at all, but their lives will somehow be positively affected or changed because of the relationship and laughter that we once shared. And that will be all the remembrance I need. With that possibility, I can confidently continue on my path, and though it still unknown, it is waiting. And laughing.

### Laughing Children Go On

And so the children will also go on without me. They will begin the life cycle over again with new trusting relationships with other teachers and peers. Hopefully, they will continue to use laughter in their new relationships, though a completely different dynamic will be created next year when they meet their new teacher. From the perspective of a person-teacher-researcher, I hope they live on and laugh on throughout their childhood and life. And I hope their next teacher will have a good sense of humor, an image of the child that sees them as competent and equal, at least six ears and eight

eyes to give them the attention they deserve, a playful disposition, and abdominal muscles strong enough for constant laughter.

### To Infinity and Beyond

There are endless planets to where researchers could go next with the subject of laughter. Though I have documented and described laughter in the context of my preschool classroom there could be limitless researcher-child relationship combinations that could provide additional insight into the situations in which children laugh. These combinations could include researchers with varying personalities, children with different personalities and social and economic status, researchers who have varying levels of interactions and familiarity with their subjects, as well as differing types of school, social, or family settings. As I discovered with laughter, it occurs in a multitude of situations and can be used for any number of reasons, and the potential to expand on any of these to gain further understanding is limitless. For example, using laughter as a strategy could be studied more in depth with the intention of focusing on how parents and teachers can use it more effectively in their parenting and teaching. In an understudied phenomenon such as laughter, the possibilities are infinite and waiting to be discovered.

### **The Beginning**

It starts all over again though I will keep my same three roles. I will always remain a person because that would be a very difficult thing to change. I will always remain a teacher in some capacity, even though my degree will not give me the qualifications to be a teacher. I will always be a researcher because the possibilities of it

fascinate me. I will always work with children, because they are the ones who have fostered my development.

It also starts over for the children who have and will continue developing through their experiences in the past with me, as well as through their experiences with others in the future. They will maintain their roles as son or daughter and student, and will add further roles as they discover themselves throughout the process of life.

For most, the process of writing a thesis is grueling or just something you have to do to get a degree. For me this cycle of thinking, reflecting, and interpreting was thrilling. I have also found a new passion in writing, though I believe that passion has only arisen now, because I am finally writing about something of extreme importance to me and will continue writing about it in the future. I have opened myself up to anything and everything.

And so, being my research on laughter has helped my metamorphosis into froghood. And this predator-avoiding frog would surely laugh to hear ol' Uncle Dave say, "Carve That Opossum!" Assuming an opossum would eat a frog, that is.

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## APPENDIX A

### Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects

#### Justification of Project

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge regarding when children laugh, and more specifically, in what situations. I also hope to discover how the context in which children laugh in the classroom illuminates their relationships with their peers and teachers, as well as how the children's laughter influences their learning in the classroom and their ability to cope with stress or difficult situations. In addition, because laughter is so personal to me, I hope to continue to enhance my understanding of self through my reflection of the interactions with the children in my study.

As a Head Teacher in the 3-year-old preschool room at the Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School, I will be using these observations to complete my master's thesis. My interest in studying the subject of laughter stems directly from my personal experiences with laughter throughout my life. I often reflect on my learning style and how certain teachers in my life have been able to stimulate my interest and learning, laughter of which was and continues to be a huge part. In essence, I want to study this complex subject for some very simple personal reasons: I love to laugh and love to watch children laugh. Laughter is fun and can make tedious things fun. Laughter feels good. Shared laughter is intimate and meaningful in relationships. I am happiest in my life when I am laughing. I am happiest in the classroom when children are laughing. For me, laughter and the use of laughter are not just important in life, they are a **way** of life.

I anticipate that this research will provide valuable information regarding how laughter can help develop teacher-child and child-child relationships, and help facilitate learning in the classroom. It may give insight into certain learning styles of children and help teachers to understand the importance of laughter in cognitive, social and psychological development. Also, it could provide valuable information for parents about how to use laughter in building stronger and less stressful relationships, especially in terms of how to discipline their children and make daily hardships easier to handle. Engaging in this research will also allow me to gain a better understanding of myself as a person, which I believe will enhance my practice as a teacher. Because I hope to learn how to understand laughter and how it affects and influences a variety of situations and relationships, studying human children will yield the most useful results for my purposes.

Despite wanting to study laughter because I love it, there is a growing database of empirical research that suggests laughter is of monumental importance to children. For example, most researched and documented are the social importances of laughter, a few of which include the enhancement of interpersonal relationships, development of group cohesiveness, easing communication, and decreasing social distance (Hertzler, 1970; Masten, 1986). Several studies into the above listed subjects have concluded that laughter is fundamentally a social phenomenon (Hertzler, 1970; Morreall, 1983; Panksepp, 2000; Stearns, 1972). The almost exclusive evidence of the social nature of laughter can be seen in a study by Chapman (1973b) which concluded that children laugh more when with a companion than when alone. While listening to audiotapes with headphones, this is even true when their companion is unable to hear the humorous material on the tape (Chapman, 1975). This shows how laughter, like smiling and

talking, is engaged in almost exclusively during social encounters, and mirth responses are rated as funnier when they are shared with others (Chapman, 1975; Provine, 1996). It has been a general observation that one rarely sees a child laughing alone during his or her play (McComas, 1923). Bainum, Lounsbury, and Pollio (1984) found that laughter only occurs when the child is alone in 5 per cent of all recorded situations, thus reinforcing laughter as a relationship-forming phenomenon. Gregg, Miller, & Linton, (1929) also found that children rarely laugh when they are alone, concluding that laughter is an indication of social awareness and responsiveness to others.

Scholars of laughter believe that in the course of social interaction, laughter serves as a means of communicating and bringing people closer. In communication, there is a transfer or exchange of messages that occurs between the sender and receiver. Laughter can help to facilitate this exchange of interactions because whether or not it is intended as a communication transaction, it contains meaning and mood, which is usually positive. Somehow we manage to produce laughter at precisely the right times in a variety of social situations by picking up on cues that dictate exactly when we use this form of communicating (Hertzler, 1970).

McGhee & Chapman, (1980) assert that we can gain knowledge about a child's understanding of the world by paying attention to what they laugh at and what they listen to. Looking at what a child laughs at has a lot to say about how they think and what they think, and can help adults begin to understand the complexity of child development. We can begin to learn about their theories of how things work, and watch the incongruous events that disrupt their perceptions and cause laughter. In terms of Piagetian theory, we can determine which cognitive stage they are in by their thinking as well as the types of things they laugh at and understand (Chapman & Foot, 1996).

Laughter can also be monumental in helping a child develop sense-of-self, self-esteem, and a positive outlook as they grow to become adults. By teaching children to develop and use laughter to look at the positive and humorous in everything, they can learn to maintain an attitude that helps give them a more accurate and non-devastating perspective about themselves and their problems, (Michelli, 1998) which can then help them develop a better framework for beginning to learn how to constructively deal with life issues. Psychologists often define an emotionally healthy person as one who has the capacity to laugh, to put things into perspective, to separate genuine tragedy from mere annoyance (Rogers, 1984). Laughter has also been identified as a factor in creating resilient youth that has a greater capacity to deal with conflict (Carlson & Peterson, 1995).

Laughter can create a healthier psychological functioning that directly relates to overall physical health. This includes getting fewer illnesses as well as recovering from illness faster. Norman Cousins describes how laughter helped him recover from a disintegrating collagen disease. He made the discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and gave him at least two hours of pain-free sleep. The doctors took sedimentation rate readings of his collagen levels prior to and several hours after the laughter episodes and found that each time the rate dropped by at least five points. One statistic says that 50% of all illnesses are due to lifestyle (Michelli, 1998). This demonstrates that adding more laughter to one's lifestyle could significantly decrease this chance of illness due to how one lives. For children, this means adding it to their daily lives at home and in school.

## Procedures

The subject pool for my thesis research will contain my class of 13 preschoolers from the Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School (CDLS). At the beginning of the study the children will range in age from 3 years 6 months to 4 years 1 month. There will be 8 girls and 5 boys represented. All children are from middle to upper-middle class families as measured by parent report. All of the children are from intact families with the birth mother and father together and married. They are all Caucasian with the exception of two ethnically diverse children, one of Korean and one of Indian descent.

Being a Head Teacher in the younger morning preschool class, I decided to use this setting for its familiarity and the fact that I am a teacher researcher who has the desire to study laughter within the context of my classroom. Being able to conduct my research as I am teaching will allow me to expand and improve my role as a teacher by working collaboratively with others and systematically investigating an issue that I find important in the classroom. As I am in this classroom approximately 5 hours per day from 7:30-12:30 (20 hours per week) it is the ideal place to conduct my research. Also, because the research focus at the CDLS is discussed with all of the families prior to entering the program, I anticipate that I will have full consent from each family and a very consistent sample.

To begin my study I will write a letter and consent form to parents to present them with the opportunity to let their child participate in my research. I also feel it important to gain consent from each of the children in the study to respect their rights to participate or not participate. I intend to discuss with them the different methods that my research assistants and I will be using throughout the duration of the study, while being careful to influence their perceptions as little as possible as it may influence my potential outcomes. The children will be read a consent form that will be written in language they can verbally understand.

I will document laughter situations that occur naturally throughout the day in my preschool classroom in a variety of different settings including playground time, free time, imaginary play, art activities, and group time. I will use the entire time the children are at school to gather my data until I feel I have reached saturation. Because I will be documenting the children's behaviors as they naturally occur, the children will not be required to do anything except be present in the classroom.

Writing fieldnotes will be the major method that I will use to gather data. Using this method, I will objectively document the laughter situations that occur while I am in the classroom watching and interacting with the children. This is the method I will use each day, and the children will always be free to ask about what I am writing or look at my notebook.

I am interested in documenting the children's meaning of the laughter-producing situations both as they are occurring and retrospectively, which I will do through child interviews and discussion. One time per week I will talk to the children and show them video about the things I have captured throughout the previous days to acquire a better picture of their insider perspectives and thoughts.

Audiotaping is a method that I feel will be extremely useful in capturing verbatim the dialogues of the children and researchers. I wish to use it most frequently during group meetings with the children so that I can focus closely on them, their interactions,

and gestures, rather than looking away to write fieldnotes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

I also believe the use of videotaping interactions will be beneficial for many reasons. This use of video will allow me to capture even the smallest of body gestures that could increase my understanding of laughter including things as small as a raised eyebrow or a slight upturn of the lips (Goldman-Segall, 1998 & Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). I will be videotaping throughout all activities of the week when I feel it would be valuable.

### Risks and Benefits

Risks to the participants in the survey are minimal to none. Benefits may include the children learning to laugh and appreciate laughter more, as well as reaping the many social, cognitive and psychological benefits associated with laughing. Discussion about laughter with the children's parents may also help parents to understand the many benefits of laughter.

### Confidentiality/ Anonymity

Only the investigator, my 4 thesis committee members, the children, my 4 research assistants who are student teachers in my class, and the parents of the children in my study will have access to the data obtained from the participants. I will enforce confidentiality by choosing an alias for each child.

## APPENDIX B

### Institutional Review Board Permission to Conduct Study



#### Institutional Review Board

Dr. David M. Moore  
IRB (Human Subjects) Chair  
Assistant Vice Provost for Research Compliance  
CVM Phase II - Duckpond Dr., Blacksburg, VA 24061-0442  
Office: 540/231-4991; FAX: 540/231-6033  
e-mail: moored@vt.edu

February 11, 2003

#### MEMORANDUM

TO: Andrew Stremmel HD 0416  
Sarah Smidl HD 0416

FROM: David M. Moore 

SUBJECT: **Expedited Approval** – “A Narrative Inquiry of Laughter in a Preschool Classroom” – IRB # 03-061

This memo is regarding the above-mentioned protocol. The proposed research is eligible for expedited review according to the specifications authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. As Chair of the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board, I have granted approval to the study for a period of 12 months, effective February 4, 2003.

Approval of your research by the IRB provides the appropriate review as required by federal and state laws regarding human subject research. It is your responsibility to report to the IRB any adverse reactions that can be attributed to this study.

To continue the project past the 12 month approval period, a continuing review application must be submitted (30) days prior to the anniversary of the original approval date and a summary of the project to date must be provided. My office will send you a reminder of this (60) days prior to the anniversary date.

cc:File  
J. Arditti HD 0416

## APPENDIX C

### VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

#### Informed Consent for the Parents of Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: **A Narrative Inquiry of Laughter in a Preschool Classroom**

Investigator: Sarah L. Smidl

#### I. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge regarding when children laugh, and more specifically, in what situations. The purpose is also to discover how the context in which children laugh in the classroom illuminates their relationships with their peers and teachers, as well as how the children's laughter influences their learning and ability to cope with stress or difficult situations. In addition, because laughter is so personal to me, I hope to continue to enhance my understanding of self through my reflection of the interactions with the children in my study.

#### II. Procedures

I, and my five student teacher research assistants will use a combination of written fieldnotes, child discussion, audiotaping, and videotaping to document laughter situation as they occur naturally in the classroom. Though written documentation will be our primary collection method, we will use the other collection forms to supplement our data when necessary. All of the children will have an equal opportunity for participation in the study. Verbal or written consent will also be obtained from each child in the classroom.

#### III. Risks to Participation

Risks to the participants in the survey are minimal to none.

#### IV. Benefits to Participation

There is no guarantee that there will be benefits, and these benefits have not been included in order to encourage you to allow your child to participate. Benefits may include the children learning to laugh and appreciate laughter more. They may also reap the many social, cognitive, psychological, and physiological benefits associated with laughing. Parents may also benefit from engaging in conversations about laughter, which could lead to more effective parenting.

#### V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Only I, my thesis committee, my research assistants, the children in my study, and the parents of the children in my study will have access to the observations I make and the documentation I collect.

VI. Compensation

There will be no monetary compensation for this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw your child from this study at any time.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Human Development.

\_\_\_\_\_  
IRB Approval Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Approval Expiration Date

IX. Subject’s Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

X. Subject’s Permission

I have been read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Sarah L. Smidl  
Investigator

[ssmidl@vt.edu](mailto:ssmidl@vt.edu) or 961-1585  
Email/telephone

Andrew J. Stremmel, PhD  
Faculty Advisor

[astremme@vt.edu](mailto:astremme@vt.edu) or 231-4671  
Email/telephone

Joyce Arditti, PhD.  
Departmental Reviewer

[arditti@vt.edu](mailto:arditti@vt.edu) or 231-5758  
Email/telephone

David M. Moore, IRB Chair  
Office of Research Compliance  
Research and Graduate Studies

[moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu) or 231-4991  
Email/telephone

## APPENDIX D

### VIRGINIA TECH

#### Informed Consent for the Children in Research Projects Involving People

Title of Project: **Laughter in a Preschool Classroom**

Investigator: Sarah L. Smidl

#### I. Purpose of this Research/Project

I want to understand when you (children) laugh while you are in the classroom. I want to know how your laughter helps you learn or helps you when you are afraid or upset. I also want to know how your laughter helps you make friends and helps me be a better teacher.

#### II. Procedures

Rhoda, Naomi, Annie, Cara, and I are going to write down the times that you laugh while we are playing in our classroom or on the playground. Sometimes, we will also use tape recorders or the video camera. During our group time we will also talk about times that we saw you laughing and you will be able to watch the videotape that we have recorded.

#### III. Risks to Participation

Nothing that we do will hurt or be scary. It will only be fun.

#### IV. Benefits to Participation

You may enjoy laughing with the teachers and other kids in your class and it might be fun to talk about the times that you laugh and watching the videotape of the class.

#### V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

Other people will see the information that we record about laughter but it will only be the teachers who write it down, some of my teachers, and your parents. You will always be able to see or ask about anything that we record about you.

#### VI. Compensation

You will not get any presents or rewards for letting us record times when you are laughing.

#### VII. Freedom to Withdraw

If you don't want me to record the times when you are laughing anymore, then you can tell me and the other teachers and I will stop.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Human Development.

\_\_\_\_\_  
IRB Approval Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Approval Expiration Date

IX. Subject's Responsibilities

I want the teachers to record times when I am laughing.

X. Subject's Permission

I understand how the teachers will be recording the times when I laugh and understand everything that I have been read. I agree to let the named teachers record my laughter in the ways they have told me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Child (Subject) signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact or have my parent contact:

Sarah L. Smidl  
Investigator

[ssmidl@vt.edu](mailto:ssmidl@vt.edu) or 961-1585  
Email/telephone

Andrew J. Stremmel, PhD  
Faculty Advisor

[astremme@vt.edu](mailto:astremme@vt.edu) or 231-4671  
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Joyce Arditti, PhD.  
Departmental Reviewer

[arditti@vt.edu](mailto:arditti@vt.edu) or 231-5758  
Email/telephone

David M. Moore, IRB Chair  
Office of Research Compliance  
Research and Graduate Studies

[moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu) or 231-4991  
Email/telephone

TABLE A1  
Children's Birthdates and Ages

<b>Child Name</b>	<b>Birthdate</b>	<b>Age at beginning of study</b>	<b>Sex</b>
Lucy	7/26/99	3 years, 6 months	F
Ethel	6/17/99	3 years, 8 months	F
Laverne	1/20/99	4 years	F
Shirley	5/27/99	3 years, 8 months	F
Marge	5/17/99	3 years, 9 months	F
Edith	1/30/00	3 years	F
Gilda	12/21/98	4 years, 1 month	F
Elaine	7/26/99	3 years, 6 months	F
Roseanne	5/28/99	3 years, 8 months	F
Woody	5/3/99	3 years, 9 months	M
Jerry	3/30/99	3 years, 10 months	M
Bill	9/27/98	4 years, 4 months	M
George	3/21/99	3 years, 10 months	M
Ben	7/30/99	3 years, 6 months	M

## Vita

Sarah L. Smidl  
1507 Boxwood Drive  
Blacksburg, VA 24060

### Education

Virginia Polytechnic and State University  
Blacksburg, VA

August 2000- May 2003

MS in Human Development

Thesis: Carve That Opossum and Plucky, Ducky Underwear: A Narrative Inquiry of  
Laughter in a Preschool Classroom

GPA 3.9

Florida International University

Miami, FL

August 1995-December 1997

BS in Occupational Therapy

GPA 4.0

### Experience

Virginia Tech Child Development Lab School

Graduate Assistantship

Head Teacher Infant/Toddler Classroom: January 2001-May 2001

Head Teacher Toddler Classroom: August 2001-May 2002

Head Teacher Preschool Classroom: August 2002-May 2003

Center for Rehabilitation and Development

Pediatric Occupational Therapist

January 1998- January 2001

Flowing Wells School District

Pediatric Occupational Therapy Internship

September 1997-November 1997

Tucson Medical Center

Pediatric Occupational Therapy Internship

May 1997-August 1997

### Certifications

Certification in Sensory Integration (SI)

August 2000-present

Certified Infant Massage Instructor (CIMI)

February 1998-present

Certified Occupational Therapist (OTR)  
May 1998-present

Conferences Attended

Reggio Emilia Approach to Education  
Reggio Emilia, Italy  
May 27-31, 2002

International Society for Humor Studies  
College Park, MD  
July 6-9 2001

Sensory Integration and Praxis Test (SIPT) Interpretation and Intervention  
Philadelphia, PA  
June 1-5, 2000

SIPT Administration  
Hickory, NC  
January 5-9, 1999

SIPT Theory  
Hickory, NC  
October 6-10, 1998

Neurodevelopmental Treatment (NDT) and Ball Techniques  
Myrtle Beach, SC  
June 19-20, 1998

Evaluation and Treatment of Oral Feeding Disorders in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit  
(NICU) and After Discharge  
San Diego, CA  
June 4-5, 1998

Infant Massage Certification  
Roanoke, Virginia  
January 1998

Working With School-Aged Children and Youth With Neurobehavioral Disorders  
Tucson, AZ  
October 17, 1997