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The social role of humour in classroom management: towards a theoretical understanding

Anne Chappell^a , Sharon Lockyer^b , Jonathan Sandling^c  and Simon Weaver^b 

^aDepartment of Education, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge, UK; ^bDepartment of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge, UK; ^cUniversity of Portsmouth London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This theoretically-informed paper brings together the fields of education and humour studies to examine the complexities of humour in social interaction and relationships in school classrooms. We address the lack of understanding of humour in the classroom, and the nuances of education and humour, in examples of contemporary English education policy. We argue that education and humour are theoretically aligned in their social purpose of creating and disrupting social interaction and relationships. We illustrate that examples of English policy discourse that foreground behaviour management rather than classroom management are narrow and fail to consider important aspects of social interaction and humour. Humour's social role provides a critical lens to examine the complexity of classroom interactions and social relationships that are crucial in classroom management. We conclude that humour is a part of the complexity of classroom management and challenge examples of reductionist regulatory discourses of behaviour management in current policymaking.

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Introduction

The use and role of humour in educational contexts has preoccupied researchers for over fifty years. Some of the research focuses on how humour can assist with classroom management strategies (St-Amand, Smith, and Goulet 2024) or recall of information (Garner 2006). Particular types of humorous expression used by educators are examined to reveal how they can contribute to teaching, including *Commedia dell'Arte* (Di Niro and Muslera 2015), improvisation (Berk and Trieber 2009), stand-up comedy (McCarron and Savin-Baden 2008), theoretical theatre (Gravey et al. 2017), jokes (Ahmad et al. 2013) and the comedic trickster (Rice and Rice 2015). This is in addition to how the use of stand-up comedy clips can aid the teaching of challenging topics, such as race and racism (Lindo 2015). Much of this existing research is based on empirical data to access opinions on the use of humour in the classroom (Ahmad et al. 2013; Di Niro and Muslera 2015; Garner

CONTACT Simon Weaver  simon.weaver@brunel.ac.uk  Department of Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University of London, Uxbridge, UK

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2006; Gravey et al. 2017). There is limited consideration of how theoretical foundations and insights from education and humour studies can deepen understanding of the opportunities provided by using humour in social interactions and relationships in classrooms, and the nuances involved. Indeed, in their comprehensive review of research on humour and classroom conducted over four decades, Banas et al. (2011) conclude that more theoretical developments and understandings of the use of humour in the classroom are required.

This interdisciplinary paper addresses this dearth of theoretical application in existing research on humour in the classroom by innovatively combining theoretical understandings of discourse (Foucault 1997; Foucault and Gordon 1980), theoretical understandings of the purpose of education (Biesta 2007, 2010, 2020) and humour studies theory (Aristotle 2016; Billig 2005; Meyer 2000) for a reading of some examples of English education policy (DFE 2010, 2011, 2019, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c) that omit the opportunities, and limits, of the use of humour in the classroom. We argue that education and humour are both predicated on creating, building, maintaining, reconfiguring and disrupting social interaction and relationships. Combining theoretical insights from education and humour studies, with reference to examples from the English policy context, provides unique opportunities for deeper understandings of classroom interactions and relations. We examine how humour can fruitfully be used as a critical lens through which to examine the complexity of classroom interactions and the resulting social relationships that are crucial in classroom management, and how humour can create the best conditions.

The new knowledge on the theoretical complexities of the use of humour in classroom social interactions and relationships provided by this paper is relevant for current education policy. This paper is important in the context of a new UK government being elected in 2024 and the longstanding focus on behaviour in school classrooms which continues to underpin discussions about what it means to be a teacher in a school (Bennett 2017; DFE 2024a; Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2010). It is important to note that in the UK, education policy is devolved and so different in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and English policy examples are used in this paper as illustrative examples of the theoretical problem under discussion. Although there is no single appropriate and comprehensive definition of humour due to its complexity, and its paradoxical, multi-faceted and interdisciplinary nature, we consider Scheel's (2017) view of humour useful in the classroom context. Scheel (2017, 12) considers humour a 'communicative process that includes incongruence and evokes a variety of emotions, either in the 'producer' of humour, in the 'receiver' of humour, or in both'. Scheel's definition follows Gervais and Wilson's (2005, 399) understanding of humour as 'non-serious social incongruity'. For the purpose of the paper we specifically focus on humour, social interaction and social relationships in school classrooms and we use the term 'student' to include all school-aged children and young people. However, given that humour occurs in all cultures and is a universal part of human experience (Apte 1985; Martin and Ford 2018), we suggest that the theoretical insights provided by our arguments may be productively applied to other educational settings, such as colleges and universities, and to international contexts.

Three theoretical research questions frame the paper: 1) what are the possibilities of using humour in classroom social interactions and relationships?; 2) what are the complexities of using humour in classroom social interactions and relationships?; and 3) what are the potential influences of a more detailed and nuanced understanding of humour on future education policy, practice and development? In addressing these questions, we reveal how

complexity is intrinsic to classroom management, and contest examples of a reductionist regulatory discourse of behaviour management. We begin by examining aspects of the current education policy in England to reveal how consideration of social interactions and social relationships are limited in some iterations of education policy, frameworks and standards. We then move on to consider the ways in which humour is of central importance to social interaction and social relationships, before examining the possibilities for humour in classroom social interaction and relationships. Our focus then narrows to theoretically unpack the complexities and limits of humour in classroom social interaction and social relationships. We conclude by critically reflecting on the implications of our theoretical arguments for future education policy, frameworks and standards.

The limitations of behaviour management in contemporary English education policy

This section explores illustrative examples from current policy for English schools and teachers, with reference to specific policies that provide the context for this paper and its theoretical discussion of the terms ‘behaviour management’ and ‘classroom management’.

The societal functions of schools have been understood over time as critical to both the education and socialisation of children and young people. As Wood suggested, ‘learning how to act on the world and discovering the consequences of action form the bedrock of thinking itself’ (1988, 5). An ongoing political, policy and public debate facing schools is what teachers do and how, and what they *should* do and how. It is generally accepted that the teacher’s role includes ensuring that each student attains against criteria in order to achieve qualifications (Biesta 2010). However, since the late 1970s, audit, accountability, and performativity have become embedded in policy, leading to the requirement that teachers ‘organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations’ (Ball 2003, 215). Beyond the focus on qualifications, the purpose of education can be contested (Biesta 2010, 2020).

The recent Conservative British Government (2010–2024) expanded on the expectations of teachers and schools. In ‘The Importance of Teaching’ (DFE 2010), the government’s ‘vision of the teacher as our society’s most important asset’ (DFE 2010, 7) and that ‘raising the status of teaching also requires a significant strengthening of teachers’ authority in the classroom’ (DFE 2010, 3) are stated. This connects with the current iteration of the ‘Teachers’ Standards’ (DFE 2011), which outlines the eight professional areas that school teachers must meet and maintain for Qualified Teacher Status recognition in England throughout their teaching careers. The introduction states:

Teachers make the education of their pupils their first concern, and are accountable for achieving the highest possible standards in work and conduct. Teachers act with honesty and integrity; have strong subject knowledge, keep their knowledge and skills as teachers up-to-date and are self-critical; forge positive professional relationships; and work with parents in the best interests of their pupils (DFE 2011, 10).

‘Positive professional relationships’ are theoretically and conceptually important in considering the potential role of humour in the classroom, particularly given the emphasis on achieving high standards in conduct. The extensive themes of the ‘Teachers’ Standards’ (DFE 2011) include requirements to ‘manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good and

safe learning environment', 'establish and maintain rules and routines' and 'frameworks for discipline', promote 'good and courteous behaviour', 'have high expectations of behaviour', 'manage classes effectively', 'maintain good relationships with pupils', and 'exercise appropriate authority and act decisively when necessary' (DFE 2011, 12). Teachers must 'inspire, motivate and challenge pupils', in a 'safe and stimulating environment', 'demonstrate consistently the positive attitudes, values and behaviour which are expected of pupils', 'promote a love of learning', 'have a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils' and 'encourage pupils to take a responsible and conscientious attitude to their own work and study' (DFE 2011, 10–12). Additionally, the importance of 'treating pupils with dignity, building relationships rooted in mutual respect, and at all times observing proper boundaries appropriate to a teacher's professional position' (DFE 2011, 14), to include safeguarding (DFE 2024b), is also noted. The substantial focus on behaviour, discipline and authority, often termed 'behaviour management' (Bennett 2017, 64; DFE 2024a, 19), is a key focus over good relationships and managing the class. For example, the DFE's 'behavioural toolkit' expects that teachers will 'be precise, and carefully communicate what behaviour will help pupils to succeed, what is prohibited, and what the consequences of both will be' (2024c, para 6).

The term 'behaviour management' used in this paper refers to the representation of the teacher as a figure of authority who exerts power and control in the classroom. In contrast, we use 'classroom management' to offer a framing of the role of the teacher in line with Postholm's (2013, 397) suggestion that teachers need 'good self-understanding and social and emotional competence' because teachers and students 'are continuously in a dynamic relationship with each other'.

The potential role and use of humour in this context depends on how the classroom is understood and whether the teacher's role is recognised as a narrow one of behaviour management to facilitate the delivery of the curriculum leading to qualifications, or a broader one of classroom management that has its foundations predicated on Biesta's ideas about the purpose of education for 'qualification', 'socialization' and 'subjectification' (2010, 19–22). 'Subjectification' is understood as becoming 'autonomous and independent' individuals and 'encouraging an 'appetite' for trying to live one's life in the world' (Biesta 2020, 21, 97). It incorporates an existential idea of freedom to choose as essential for selfhood. This is not an absolute freedom but one that, in the context of education, creates a nurturing and self-affirming environment (Biesta 2020, 96), and connects with a Foucauldian concept of the self as a project in a state of becoming (Foucault 1997). This exists in a tension with a disciplinary, behavioural management pedagogy evident in some current policy contexts.

In 2019 the British Government introduced the 'ITT Core Content Framework' (DFE 2019) alongside the 'Teachers' Standards' (DFE 2011) for those undertaking Initial Teacher Education in England, noting that '[t]he complexity of the process for becoming a teacher cannot be overestimated' (DFE 2019, 4). The acknowledgement of this in teacher education is important given the recognition of the classroom as complex and dynamic, and populated by individuals with an array of social experiences. However, the policies sometimes take a reductionist 'what works' approach (Biesta 2007, 1). As an example, the Carter Review (DFE 2015) of Initial Teacher Education in England examined the knowledge and skills required to educate the most effective teachers. In the review, the word 'behaviour' is used 60 times and 'behaviour management' 21 times. The word 'relationship' (between teachers and students) is only used twice and the 4 references to 'class management' are in relation to data

collected as part of the review. This illustrates an explicit emphasis on behaviour and behaviour management rather than broader ideas about relationships and class management.

There is ongoing discussion about what a 'safe', 'nurturing' and 'effective' classroom looks like. The focus within a performative climate of 'what works' (Biesta 2007, 1) often returns to the knowledge and authority of the teacher for behaviour management to ensure attainment. This risks undermining the importance of being highly skilled in human interaction and developing relationships, which humour can contribute to directly (explored in the next section). This positioning of the teacher as the knowledgeable controller resonates with Foucault's 'techniques of power...designed to observe, monitor, shape and control the behaviour of individuals situated within...institutions' (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 3). We have seen that some current policy discourse is limited in reference to social relationships and interactions, with a preference for behaviour management over classroom management. This reductive focus on control and authority narrows the possibilities for relationship development, and specifically the use of humour. It also offers no consideration of humour as an important component of social relationships and interactions, or classroom management. This suggests that some current English education policy discourse is unlikely to enable the conditions for a realistic or holistic understanding of classrooms. Moreover, it explicitly and implicitly signals a mode of discursive behavioural control and management, while making no reference to humour. It works to frame a disposition towards both education and humour that mirrors reproduced power/knowledge relationships embedded in creating social and discursive boundaries and control, over more creative or self-affirming impressions of both education and humour.

It is in this context that we investigate the possibilities for a use of humour by teachers and students through a broad understanding of classroom management, rather than behaviour management and teacher authority and control, and the associated conditions of possibility and becoming (Tamboukou 2008) that humour can offer.

Humour as discipline and creativity in social interaction and relationships

Taking the concepts of behaviour management and classroom management as juxtaposed and constructing different discursive power relationships in classrooms, there is evidence that these approaches are supported through the different uses and functions of humour (Meyer 2000) which has implications for qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta 2020).

Humour can function as a mode of discipline and punishment through acting as a mode of ridicule (Billig 2005), othering (Weaver 2011), and a device for constructing in-groups, out-groups, and intergroup division (Abrams and Bippus 2011). The oldest of the three canonical theories of humour – superiority theory – points to this idea. Plato was concerned with the ways in which humour created 'unfounded attitudes in audiences' (Shelley 2014, 574). The idea of humour as ridicule refers to its ability to other, be aggressive, and create caricature or stereotype. Billig (2005) details this disciplinary power of humour and laughter – 'laughter, far from indicating an escape from such disciplines, is complicit within them' (Billig 2005, 237). This follows Bergson's discussion of comic discipline as essential for social life and a mode of social regulation or correction, but also that the 'comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart' (1911, 4b) or intellectual disinterestedness. While Bergson suggests that laughter is essential for social life, there is an 'absence of feeling'

(Bergson 1911) in the moment of laughter, where empathy might be suspended. This sets up the potential for humour and laughter to ridicule and exclude but also to correct through bringing the joke target back into the social group. Bergson describes the mechanical inelasticity of the humorous object, as '[s]omething mechanical encrusted on the living' (Bergson 1911, 14a), to emphasise how the objects of humour as social discipline have often moved away from 'normal' social behaviour. This demonstrates both the social and political impact of humour as it has the potential to be used as a tool of othering that can be directed at individuals and groups, and used to reinforce exclusionary social structures of social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, religion, and other identity characteristics. Applied to the classroom, humorous ridicule might become a questionable form of strategic, disciplinary behaviour management.

The idea of humour as disciplinary, behaviour management and ridicule connects with Foucauldian governmentality and works against Biesta's idea of subjectification (Biesta 2020). Foucault defines governmentality as 'the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior. *Government of children*, government of souls and consciences, government of a household, of a state, or of oneself' (1997, 82, emphasis added). Governmentality, as a technique for directing behaviour and an internalisation and self-regulation through discourse, can have an abrasive relationship with freedom through subjectification. Importantly, it also has implications for an understanding of humour in the classroom as a key mechanism of social control. Where discipline is constructed through discourse and discursive practice, ridicule can become a disciplinary power relationship in classrooms that is not aligned with humour as a creative and educative potential. Humour in this power/knowledge configuration is regulatory and similar to the regulatory nature of behaviour policy explored earlier.

Viewing humour as disciplinary behaviour management through ridicule and othering is not the only conceptualisation of it and an alternative approach fits coherently with a more positive concept of classroom management. For a creative view of humour and education, we turn to Aristotle's (2016) ethical approach to wit as virtue, where he offers a path through the idea of the boor and vulgar buffoon, as under and over-subscribers to humour, towards the use of a 'balanced' wit as a virtue. Aristotle points to the 'amount' of humour a speaker uses and how this creates an impression of 'seriousness'. An idea of wit as virtue can be reconfigured as an understanding of the context for humour and the various functions it serves. This translates into an educative, instructive, rhetorical use of humour and incongruity to be applied in classroom management without ridicule.

The ideas from Aristotle can be connected with Biesta's freedom through subjectification and Foucauldian understandings of humour as becoming or as potential. Brigstocke (2022) employs 'Foucault's account of *'parrhesia'*, or courageous truth-telling' (2022, 173) in an account of anarchistic laughter and satire. This is not the same as resistance joking and is characterised as 'self-work'. Brigstocke explains that '[p]arrhesia is less a form of resistance, than a productive form of power that produces new reflections on how people relate to themselves, to others and to their environments' (Brigstocke 2022, 178). These are examples of truth-telling or reconfigurations of dominant discourses. The implications of this for the classroom highlight the self-work that could be encouraged through forms of humour. It points to the idea of humour as a condition of possibility, through allowing discursive creativity or reimaginings in discourse that create new subjectifications. Thus, an idea of self-work directly connects with an understanding of both socialisation and subjectification.

Similarly, through a Foucauldian lens, Crocket examines how athletes use humour and irony to 'develop alternative understandings of self to the problematic instrumentally rational subjectivity that has been theorised as dominant within Western sports' (2015, 569) and found that 'practices of humour and irony are central ways through which many, but certainly not all... produce their athletic selves in ways that show concern for their self and others' (Crocket 2015). This connects with an understanding of humour as self-reflexivity (Lockyer and Weaver 2022) or reflection and, as there are parallels between instrumental rationality and discourses of governmentality, as a resistance to disciplinary practices.

The idea of humour as a useful, constructive tool in classroom settings also points to how the discursive production of truth can be transfigured through the idea of humour, which has an unstable relationship with truth, falsehood, ambiguity and anomaly. This connects with a discussion of humour and creativity that has implications for curriculum. The potentials of humour stem from its formation through incongruity, a semiotic structure that relies on movement for meaning creation. Humour has been described as fundamentally a creative process (Koestler 1949).

Humour can function as a mode of discipline that reinforces discursive practices of behaviour management and as a classroom management tool for divergent thinking, creativity and for building constructive relationships.

The possibilities of humour in supporting classroom management

Humour can play a complex role in positively influencing social interactions and relationships in the classroom. The possibilities of humour supporting classroom management are numerous, as is demonstrated in existing empirical evidence on the impact of humour on group cohesion and the development of idiocultures, improved student perceptions of teachers, enhanced cognitive abilities and improvements in the regulation of emotions. This paper draws on the outcomes from this existing research alongside our theoretical arguments to explore the possibilities of humour in supporting classroom management.

Student perceptions of teachers can be influenced by humour, with humorous teachers being perceived as more approachable and caring, promoting open communication and improved rapport (Frymier and Houser 2000). Mettee, Hrelec, and Wilkens (1971) found that students liked teachers more when humour was used, compared to when humour was not used, irrespective of their prior expectations about the teacher.

Humour has the ability to facilitate group identity and social cohesion through developing enhanced levels of trust, empathy and authenticity. The concept of 'idiocultures' within groups is discussed by Fine (1979) as the construct of knowledge, values and behaviours by which a group identifies. Fine suggests that idiocultures can be influenced through humour, offering group members a sense of belonging and cohesion, supported by the use of friendly 'in-jokes', playful teasing, nicknames and shared slang.

Effective classroom management relies greatly on the students' ability to appropriately regulate their emotions and cognitively engage in their learning (Garner 2006). Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki (1987) conclude that individuals exposed to humour demonstrate improvements in cognitive abilities, enabling them to think more creatively to solve problems, memorise and recall information, and make better decisions. Further, Isen found that individuals demonstrated improved social behaviours, such as helpfulness, generosity and social responsibility. Acting as a coping mechanism, humour can be a tool for building

emotional resilience by defusing arguments and de-escalating conflict, allowing students to positively reframe challenging situations (Martin and Ford 2018).

Teacher perceptions of the use of humour as a tool for teaching and classroom management was explored by Lovorn and Holaway (2015). The study found the majority of teachers considered humour not to be a structured classroom strategy and felt humour ‘just happened’ organically in lessons. Teachers believed it was their responsibility to ensure that humour did not distract students from achieving lesson objectives, citing more negative, than positive, factors, thus aligning with the policy discourses cited previously.

Complexities and limits of humour in social interaction and social relationships in the classroom

When assessing the role humour plays in the classroom, it is important to consider both the complexity of the classroom environment and the complexity of humour, and how bringing these discourses together can provide a greater understanding of the potential impact of humour on social interactions and relationships in the classroom.

Classrooms are complex adaptive systems that are unpredictable, with variation in student and teacher needs, backgrounds and personalities, as well as contextual differences in social dynamics and preferences. Physical layouts, access to resources and utilisation of technology all contribute to the complexity of classrooms, and require careful planning and management. Classrooms are not isolated environments and are broadly influenced by political, societal, economical, technological, environmental and legislative factors (Sahlberg 2021).

In addition to the complexity observed within classrooms, humour presents its own level of complexity. Billig (2005) offers three humour paradoxes which highlight the complexities associated with the use of humour in the classroom: (1) humour is both universal and particular; (2) humour is both social and anti-social; (3) humour is both mysterious and resistant to analysis, and understandable and analysable. The universality of humour is evident in humour being common to all cultures and societies, whereas the particularities of humour can be seen through humour being influenced by unique cultural norms and values (Apte 1985). The proposition of humour as both social and anti-social is supported by Meyer (2000) who conceptualises humour as a ‘double-edged sword’ in its ability to both unite and divide. This ability to unite and divide could also then be understood to include and exclude individuals, groups and societies (see below for elaboration), along single axes of identity such as gender (Tomsett 2023), race and ethnicity (Weaver 2011), disability (Lockyer 2015), class (Friedman 2014) and nationality (Kay 2018), and also multiple axes of identity/intersectionality (Weaver and Lockyer 2025). Martin and Ford (2018) acknowledge the mysterious phenomenon of humour, highlighting humour as broad and multifaceted, however when assessed in a more controlled manner, humour can be analysable and understood in context.

Given such complexities, it is not unexpected that guidelines on the use of humour in the classroom are limited and variable. It is commonly proposed that humour should not dominate lessons but instead be used sparingly to have greater impact on learning. Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) propose a general guideline that humour constitutes approximately 10–20% of a lesson, ensuring it does not overshadow learning objectives. How this type of guideline has been reached and how it can be applied in practice is questionable

and practically unhelpful, given the diversity of contexts, relationships, situations, personalities and needs. Similarly, types and styles of humour are reported to offer differing positive and negative effects. By acknowledging the universal, yet particular, social, yet anti-social, and understandable, yet mysterious nature of humour, teachers will be better equipped to ensure humour has a positive effect on classroom management.

Both humour as a condition of subjectification, creativity and divergent thinking, and as discipline and ridicule, depend on viewing humour as having a rhetorical or persuasive potential. Although Billig (2005) positions humour and its rhetoric as a mode of ridicule and social control, the perspective offered by Burke explains humour as an alternative to othering, scapegoating and violence in particular instances, that encourages ambiguity, playfulness, irony, and alternative frames of perception. Burke argues ‘the comic frame should enable people to be *observers of themselves, while acting*’ (1984 [1937], 171. Original emphasis), and foster a sense of self-reflexivity (Lockyer and Weaver 2022). For classroom management, a self-reflexive, non-othering, mode of engagement could work against ridicule to foster a creative environment of becoming and potential that aligns with Koestler’s (1949) observation of comedy as a creative frame for human activity.

Elaboration of the rhetorical or persuasive potential of humour is offered by Meyer (2000), who discusses humour through four communicative functions, which can be applied for classroom management. For Meyer, humour is used for both ‘unification and division’ (Meyer 2000, 311) which matches the idea of creative exploration versus ridicule and othering, and is a demonstration of inclusion and exclusion through humour. Meyer describes how humour, while moving towards unification or division, provides four functions. First, ‘[i]dentification... [where] humor serves to build support by identifying communicators with their audiences, [by] enhancing speaker credibility... and building group cohesiveness...’ (Meyer 2000, 318). In classroom management, this translates into humour as potentially building a learning environment where engagement is based on positive group belonging or socialisation. Second, ‘[c]larification... [where] [c]ommunicators... employ humor to encapsulate their views into memorable phrases or short anecdotes, resulting in the clarification of issues or positions’ (Meyer 2000, 319) translates into the idea of classroom humour as a mode of persuasion that works for clarity of knowledge, thus adding qualification. Third, ‘[e]nforcement... [suggests that] [h]umor allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by levelling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with the audience’ (Meyer 2000, 320). This suggests humour may act as a management strategy before it reaches ridicule or othering. Finally, Meyer outlines ‘differentiation’ (Meyer 2000, 321) which is the idea that, through humour, differences or contrasts can be highlighted. In the classroom, this translates into the communication of points through contrast or juxtaposition, which again aids qualification. All of these pose the risk of failing or being used purposefully for exclusionary practices but if engaged with ethically, promote the productive potential of humour in the classroom. Each of the functions emerge in particular contexts or in ‘situationally dependent’ (Meyer 2000, 316) conditions that require self-reflexive engagement with classroom management, yet all have the potential to move beyond education as a disciplinary practice of behaviour management.

Ethical usage of humour

As our discussion on the complexities of humour suggests, concerns about the ethical usage and implications of humour are longstanding, linking back to Plato’s ideas about, and

critique of, humour. Critical reflections and theorisations on the ethics of humour have grown in recent years (e.g. Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Lockyer and Weaver 2024; Wilk and Gimbel 2024). One of the key debates in discussions about humour ethics relates to the ways in which those involved in the creation of humour have the power to define who is classified as ‘the other’ and to determine the basis on which this othering is justified, which inversely links to the ideals of socialisation and subjectification, which value the student as the subject rather than the object of education (Biesta 2020). The direction of humour and its target are important when considering the ethics of humour and comedy, which have implications for both the use and place of humour and the relevance of teaching about the use and place of humour. Despite the rather rudimentary way of understanding the different positions and choices those creating humour have, Littlewood and Pickering (1998, 295) argue that humour can be directed at ‘those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated’. Therefore, the position of the target of the humour and whether the humour ‘punches up’ or ‘punches down’ is important in the ethical usage of humour. Lockyer and Weaver argue that:

It is generally regarded that humor and comedy that ‘punches up’ is more ethically acceptable than that which ‘punches down.’ This highlights the importance of the social position of both the humor and comedy creator and the target of the humor and comedy in ascertaining the impact of the humor and comedy (2024, 543).

The different social positions and power relations in classrooms between teachers and students, and between and within student cohorts, and the social position of those who create humour and those who are the target of humour in the classroom are important considerations for ascertaining its ethical implications and its potential to reinforce or deepen power relations and othering, thus impacting social relations. Teachers making humorous remarks targeting one of their students are likely to raise ethical concerns, whereas a student mocking their teacher is less likely to. However, the ethical usage of humour is much more complicated when intersectional social divisions and related power differentials are considered. Social positions are fluid and power relations shift from one humorous interactional moment to another - we can move from a powerful to a less powerful position across interactions depending on shifting intersectional social divisions and social relations. For example, a student making a humorous comment about their teacher can gain power in the humorous moment – meaning that what can be considered as an un/ethical use of humour shifts from moment to moment. Furthermore, the ‘punching up’ versus ‘punching down’ distinction is more complex and multi-faceted given the dynamics of humour. The importance of social positions and power relations are complicated when questions of intention, meaning, language, subversion and the polysemic nature of humour are taken into consideration in the ethical usage of humour (Lockyer and Weaver 2024), making the un/ethical use of humour harder to determine.

In contrast to the positive associations that have been found in the use of humour in the classroom, it is important to acknowledge the potential negative associations. Lovorn and Holaway (2015) acknowledge that misuse of humour can create a hostile atmosphere and reduce open communication and collaboration. As we argue above, humour can be exclusionary, and humour that is considered offensive or insensitive has the ability to alienate groups, emphasise stereotypes and cause social division. Further, negative uses of humour can actually stifle creative and critical thinking as students are discouraged from taking

intellectual risks, thus limiting their potential for abstract thinking. If experienced regularly, these negative uses of humour can be detrimental to students' self-esteem and negatively impact their social and academic development. Humour can be used to reinforce status and power dynamics in the classroom, where individuals may use humour to assert dominance or challenge existing positions of authority. Martin and Lefcourt (1983) explain that misuse of humour can undermine a teacher's authority, leading to a lack of conformity and respect being given by students to classroom order and rules.

The complexity and ambiguity of both classroom environments and humour, the rhetorical potential of humour as a mode of classroom communication and the need for an ethical approach to humour that is not disciplinary can be applied to navigate the application of humour in the classroom. We now move to a consideration of the theoretical implications of these observations for future education policy decisions and directions.

Discussion

Throughout this paper, we have discussed the possibilities created by the place and use of humour in the classroom by teachers and students with reference to the English policy context through the potential impact on social interactions and relationships. This is theorised through a multiplicity of effects, one of which coalesces around the idea of humour and laughter as ridicule, which points to a disciplinary mode of doing humour that can align with a simplistic concept of behaviour management. This view and use of humour is elaborated through various philosophical contributions and describes the function of humour as a mode of ridicule that can construct outgroups, the other, and reinforce hierarchies of symbolic violence and power. It is argued that examples from current English Department for Education policy discourse implicitly move towards such an interpretation of humour through a presentation of a disciplinary conceptualisation of behaviour management. On the other hand, the possibilities created by using humour in the classroom through its impact on social interactions and relationships also point to the creative potential of humour *via* its usage of ambiguity, incongruity and paradox as examples of creative processes in classroom management. This creative potential is highlighted through its impact on social cohesion and idiocultures of knowledge co-creation or discovery. This points to some of the classroom-based improvements that humour may provide, such as in cognitive ability, creative thinking, problem solving, memory, recall, and decision making.

The article also addressed the complexities of using humour in the classroom and the impact for social interactions and relationships. Our theoretical discussion above has highlighted that humour is seldom fully controllable or predictable, and the organic and emergent nature of humour means that any attempt to strategically mobilise humour cannot be prescriptive, but must rather be reflexive and contextual. These include a need for a consideration of the complexity of the classroom environment, and the paradoxical nature of humour as polar in a number of characteristics that range from the social to the anti-social. The potential of humour as a rhetorical activity is also a sign of its complexity, as impacts on knowledge creation and communication as rhetorical potentials always have the potential to not create the intended meaning. Connected with this, there are also a variety of ethical implications that arise from using humour. These focus on the potential for a humour and laughter of ridicule that requires reflection on the power relations of humour usage, the idea of disruption, and its potential for alienation, stereotyping and perpetuating social

division. Also of concern in relation to the ethics of humour are its potential to be inappropriate, create offence and generally backfire on ethical intentions. If the view is taken that humour is derived from some form of superiority and surprise, the possibility of misinterpretation resulting in unintentional offence is always present. Therefore, the use of humour in the classroom requires continual critical judgement from teachers and students. As noted earlier, the appropriate uses of humour in the classroom could be modelled by teachers as part of everyday communication, as well as taught to students to ensure that it is both positive and ethical.

Our theoretical arguments, and the connections we have made to existing research, offer potential considerations for policy and practice which are key for developing a deeper understanding of the social role of humour in classroom management.

Considerations for policy

There is international education policy emphasis on values-based aims as is evident in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education) (United Nations 2015) and UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda (2015). As an example, UNESCO's focus on 'transformative education' and 'global citizenship education', which value critical thinking, empathy and student agency, are positive enhancements which could be offered through pedagogically grounded and ethically applied humour. However, emphasis on values-based aims is somewhat limited at national policy level in England. Focused more on reductionist and regulatory approaches, greater emphasis is placed on control, discipline and compliance. As we illustrate above, English education is shaped by such policy documents as the 'Teachers' Standards' (DFE 2011), the 'Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework' (DFE 2019) and the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted 2023). These policies may lack a necessary focus on the role of relational strategies as being critical to achieving effective classroom management, positive relationships and student wellbeing. Curriculum, inspection and assessment frameworks could be refined to reflect a clearer focus on relational strategies in the assessment of existing or new evaluation criteria. Humour can be implicitly considered in all aspects of the classroom, but could be explicitly housed within areas of the curriculum that address education about the personal and social, where students could explore the role of humour as a tool for emotional regulation, ethical communication and positive relationships, and the social limits of humour. Such an approach would move humour from something students experience, to something students actively think about. National level policy associated with educational leadership could be updated to promote humour-positive learning environments which encourage playful pedagogies, creativity and resilience.

When considering how policy may change to incorporate humour, there is a need to both offer practical recommendations whilst also acknowledging the previously discussed complexities associated with strategically mobilising humour. Therefore, any policy proposal can be framed around a need for teachers and students to exercise critical judgement and contextual sensitivity. At school level, policy documents could incorporate and promote humour by recognising it as a valid relational and pedagogical tool within classroom management and teaching frameworks. By promoting humour-positive classrooms, traditional behaviour management policies could be reframed as *relationship and classroom management* policies. Within such policy, the pursuit of more relational models of learning would be undertaken, with humour explicitly referenced for its role

in rapport building, conflict resolution and emotional resilience. Expectations and guidance would be required for staff to ensure humour is utilised in an appropriate and beneficial way. Support for the use of humour in lessons through professional development processes would support teachers in their planned and organic management of humour. Professional development might involve, for example, the examination of typical classroom scenarios where humour could be used to diffuse tension, support group work or generate interest in a topic, with teachers exploring how they could mobilise humour in their own professional context. Student voice, extra-curricular programmes and other student-centred activities could harness the benefits of humour. Similarly, humour could support staff performance reviews and professional development activities. Embedding humour into school-level policy and professional culture may help to develop dynamic, creative and relationally rich environments that will support performance and well-being for staff and students.

Considerations for practice

In order for effective policy change to be implemented there are implications for practice. Based on our theoretical discussions above, establishing a humour-positive classroom can begin with a commitment to the use of responsible and inclusive humour as a part of communication that underpins pedagogy in the classroom. Expectations, boundaries and positive humour modelling by teachers are essential for the promotion of positive and appropriate uses of humour in the classroom, with praise given to students who positively model humour. Additionally, humour can be used as a corrective feedback tool for undesirable student actions, using humour as a means of supportively highlighting the undesirable actions and their outcomes to prevent future repetition. However, the effectiveness of using humour to correct undesirable behaviour is largely dependent on the relationship between the teacher and student. If good rapport has been established, humorously addressing the behaviour will be more likely to be successful, whereas if poor rapport or limited rapport has been established, the use of humour might offend or irritate the student or even suggest that the behaviour is not a serious problem. Consideration must be given to cultural sensitivities and other factors which can affect classroom humour. Teachers are required to be mindful of the power dynamics that exist between teachers and students to ensure humour is ethical and equitable. It is important for teachers and students to use humour in a flexible and agile way, understanding the use of humour in different contexts and with different student profiles. This flexibility must also recognise situations where the use of humour could be inappropriate or where its effect cannot easily be predicated.

It is important to recognise the teacher's role as a facilitator of humour, not as the single source of humour in the classroom. Whilst it may be positive if a teacher actively plans a humorous experience for students, it would be an error for the teacher to consider themselves a comedian. Instead, the teacher can aim to create opportunities where humour is more likely to emerge organically for both teachers and students. This supports the 'subjectification' and 'socialisation' of students, proposed by Biesta (2010), valuing and enabling student contributions and empowering students through greater self-expression and agency. Teachers and students are required to understand and value the effect of both learning-related, and non-learning related, humour. Whilst teachers need to ensure unrelated humour does not distract students from lesson objectives, this form of humour can prime the mind to

think more creatively to solve problems and generate novel ideas (Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki 1987).

To ensure humour-positive classrooms are able to continuously develop over time, teachers and students would benefit from actively discussing humour in the classroom. This could take the form of critical reflection on the use of humour and how it influences key aspects of cognitive and social development. Humour could be incorporated in student feedback processes, student voice and other reflective practices. Developing such reflective practices and critical thinking capabilities extends beyond the classroom, enabling students to navigate humour in their future lives. A fundamental purpose of education is to prepare students for adult-life, of which humour is a universal component. By engaging critically with humour, students can become more perceptive in recognising when humour is being used to promote inclusion, when it promotes exclusion, and how humour can be used to contribute to positive societal and community cohesion.

Future research opportunities

The theoretical discussions framing this paper provide a useful foundation on which future research, focussing on Biesta's (2020) ideas about subjectification and Foucault's ideas on parrhesia and governmentality, could be built. A potential area of interest is humour's capacity to influence teacher-student relationships through disrupting and reshaping classroom practices and discourse. Future research could investigate the ethical boundaries associated with humour's ability to facilitate open dialogue which challenges or reinforces established norms. This may help to identify the conditions under which humour supports democratic interactions rather than humour acting only as a means to achieve managerial or disciplinary outcomes. There is a need to shift focus away from teachers onto students, with future research examining how humour influences social interactions within and between student groups. Studies could investigate how humour is used in real classroom-settings and how humour can shape peer relationships, group identity and feelings of belonging and exclusion. Such studies would offer deeper insights into the social dynamics students and teachers are required to practically navigate. This could highlight humour's potentially contrasting affect, in its potential ability to enhance cohesion and community-building, while also causing division and marginalisation.

Humour's role in influencing power dynamics and hierarchical relationships between teachers and students could be explored through empirical investigations. An examination of humour use in classroom interactions could highlight how humour can create room for greater student voice and advocacy and influence changes in authority and equality. In explicitly examining the different places and uses of humour in the classroom, and its complexity, the resulting increased knowledge and understanding could be used to enhance teacher education. This would contribute to existing work on humour and classroom management by illuminating humour's relational and social dimensions. Lastly, longitudinal studies would support an analysis of how humour use may evolve over time or differ across cultural and institutional contexts. Such studies will be more insightful if they reflect on broader ethical, political and discursive factors, rather than simply reporting differences. Findings would offer a valuable contribution to contemporary debates associated with the role of humour in fostering subjectification, relationality and critical engagement within modern educational contexts.

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ORCID

Anne Chappell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6876-2413>

Sharon Lockyer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4941-8067>

Jonathan Sandling  <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-9114-7590>

Simon Weaver  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7929-2920>

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