

Just Clowning Around: Classroom Perspectives on Children's Humour

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Using a post-structural, interpretive perspective, we studied children's humour in a grade-1 and -2 classroom. In this article, we report our observations of two boys who took on the role of "class clown." The boys used humour to negotiate power, which we defined as participation in discourse, taking on the role of class clowns and playing these roles, based on the context of their actions and responses of their peers and teachers. They were also defined by their roles because their teachers and peers came to expect certain actions from them. These two boys contributed to classroom discursive practices and also limited the classroom discourse.

Keywords: primary education, discourse community, humour, class clown, post-structuralism

En utilisant une perspective interprétative post-structurelle, nous avons étudié le sens de l'humour des enfants dans une classe de 1^{ère} et de 2^e année au primaire. Dans le présent article, nous rapportons nos observations de deux garçons qui ont adopté le rôle de clown en classe. Les garçons utilisent leur sens de l'humour comme pouvoir de négociation, que nous définissons comme « participation au discours », en adoptant le rôle de clown de la classe et en jouant ces rôles, basé sur le contexte de leurs actions et de leurs réactions à leurs pairs et enseignants. Ils sont aussi définis d'après leurs rôles parce que leurs enseignants et leurs pairs en sont venu à attendre d'eux certaines actions. Ces deux garçons contribuent aux pratiques discursives en classe tout en limitant le discours dans la classe.

Mots clés : primaire, communauté de discours, sens de l'humour, clown de la classe, post-structuralisme

In a study of humour in a grade-1 and -2 classroom, we became interested in the class clown. Traditionally, researchers have considered class clowns problems in classrooms (Cohen & Fish, 1993; Condon & Tobin, 2001). We studied two boys as part of a classroom discourse community, a complex and changing context. Although we do not consider ourselves

post-structuralists, we drew on aspects of post-structural theory to enhance our interpretations of our class clowns. From a post-structuralist perspective, the role of class clown may be considered a location that one or more students in a class may occupy, a location from which they can negotiate the right to affect the future of conversation. Through our interpretive perspective, we came to understand the role of clown as allowing the boys to negotiate power, a role that allowed them to both contribute to yet limit the classroom discourse.

POST-STRUCTURALIST THEORY AS CONTEXT

Post-structuralism is not always a well delineated term. Many theorists of the latter half of the twentieth century questioned the modern enterprise of well-delineated categories and objectively verifiable truths. Postmodernism postulates that category boundaries are human rather than naturally existing creations. Humanly created boundaries can be deconstructed through examination of language, discursive practices, and other structures – anything that can affect the future of interactions.

Lather (1991) argued that post-structuralism was a way around the dualisms of modernity, such as the oppressors and the oppressed or labourers and capitalists. Post-structuralists examine discursive practices to increase understanding of the multi-faceted nature of human negotiations that alternately create and deconstruct structural boundaries. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) grouped postmodernism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction together: the intent of all three terms is to challenge and subvert the project of the modernist (p. 450). They identified structuralism as a theoretical framework that suggests the existence of innate structures, either in nature, in human nature, or in language, that limit the subjectivity with which humans interpret their perceptions. Thus, for Pinar et al., post-structuralism is an attempt to deconstruct beliefs in invariant and limiting structures. Mills (1997) noted that post-structuralism examined more specifically the structures of language, or as she wrote, "The sense of the world of objects being constructed by institutions within social groups, particularly through language, has been a concern of a great many post-structuralist theorists and linguists" (p. 56). Meacham and Buendia (1999) believe that postmodernism and post-structuralism are both characterized by the assumption that

there is no "one-to-one correspondence between a sign (i.e., word of other linguistic symbol) and the object of tangible experience to which the sign refers" (p. 512). The difference between the two, they claim, is that the term post-structuralism has more commonly been used in the discipline studies of language and philosophy, whereas postmodernism is more commonly used in the discipline studies of art and social experience. If we were to hold to their differentiation, we could use either term because classrooms are language-based and social experiences. We have chosen to use the term post-structuralism in this paper because we draw on Davies (1991), Mills (1997), and Foucault (1972, 1979, 1981), who are commonly connected with post-structuralist theory. For us, post-structuralism involves an examination of power as it is displayed and negotiated in discourse.

Saussure (1916/1983) believed in the existence of both internal and external structures in language — internal structures being innate. Although he believed languages have structures, and that these structures might reveal social structures of their home culture, Saussure did not presume that language comes from or creates invariant structures across all cultures. The structure of one language can be compared to the structure of others, but they are different. The external elements of language, the words or signs that a culture assigns to objects, are arbitrary, but they are agreed upon by the culture. Although he acknowledged that history, politics, institutions, and power are involved in the external aspects of language, Saussure did not examine these external aspects.

Mills (1997) pointed out that "discourse" has a variety of meanings, from oral language, to oral and written language, to a sustained argument, to the rules for interaction, and all those things that support the rules of communication. Foucault (1972) wrote that he had expanded the idea of discourse in treating

it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements; and have I not allowed this same word "discourse," which should have served as a boundary around the term "statement," to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application, as the statement itself faded from view. (p. 80)

Foucault's intention was to examine the ways in which societies negotiate power. Thus, discourse for Foucault may include all those practices that can be used to negotiate power.

Power

In this article we use Foucault's notion of power: "as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle" (Foucault, 1981, pp. 52–53). Discursive practices can be searched for power structures because humans are constrained and constructed, and constrain and construct themselves and others, in discursive practices. Thus, classroom discursive practices were central in our examination of humour in a primary classroom.

Post-structuralists focus on the external aspects of language: how language conventions and rules of discourse (all forms of communication, including spoken and written language; body language; when, where, and who laughs; how seating is arranged) create power and meaning. "Poststructuralism denies all appeals to foundational, transcendental, or universal truths or metanarratives. . . . Above all, there is an attention to language, power, desire, and representation as discursive categories" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 452). According to Mills (1997), post-structuralist psychoanalysts describe "subject positions" that individuals might choose or be relegated to "because of their past developmental history or because of the actions of others" (p. 34). In other words, individuals have some degree of agency, but discursive practices constrain them to greater or lesser degrees.

Mills (1997) further argued that post-structuralists believe "power is dispersed throughout social relations . . . it produces possible forms of behaviour as well as restricting behaviour" (p. 20). Power is inherent in discursive practices. The set-up of furniture, the arrangement of rooms in schools, the tone of voice and body language of people in classrooms, all these communicate the rules of classroom discourse. Although beginning teachers are often taught to seize control of their classroom early in the year or else a few students will, a post-structuralist may view the situation differently. Members of a discourse community affect the future of communication — to greater or lesser degrees. Those teachers who think that they have control over "their" classroom may be mistaken. Students might invent their own "conversations" — possibly daydreaming of different locations. Students might begin surreptitious conversations with one another. Students could also find ways to challenge their teacher. Foucault (1979) wrote, "If power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?" (p. 36). Power does not belong to one person or another, to one

group or another, nor is it based on one factor (e.g., money, education, ancestry); rather, people negotiate power in each discursive interaction.

The Post-Structural Self

A second aspect of post-structuralism, the definition of the self, is also central to our study. Post-structuralism marks a break between the modern humanist self and the postmodern self. Post-structuralism has not led to the "death of the subject" but rather to the death of the "unified, monolithic, reified, essentialized subject capable of fully conscious, fully rational action" and given birth instead to a "provisional, contingent, strategic, constructed subject which . . . must be engaged in processes of meaning-making" (Lather, 1991, p. 120). Rather than the subject being constructed once as invariant, but occasionally putting on masks to appear different, it is constantly being reconstructed and is reconstructing itself and others (Davies, 1991).

Davies (1991) introduced the concept of discourse communities to explain the nature of the post-structuralist self. People participate in discourse communities and have different locations (roles) in these communities. Roles are defined by "[our] own and others' acts of speaking/writing" (p. 43). (We have taken Foucault's expanded notion of "discourse" to include not just verbal language, but also the rules and the variety of ways in which those rules are communicated.) Because people occupy different locations, "one's subjectivity [or role] is therefore necessarily contradictory" (p. 43). The person, the self, is not an integrated whole to be contrasted with other wholes. Rather, many aspects of the self come into being in the discourse communities in which that self participates.

Discourse communities are fluid and changing. Davis and Sumara (2000) describe how cognition is not just about an individual's brain, but rather is "caught up in layers of dynamic process that range at least from the sub-cellular to the planetary" (p. 829). In other words, thinking is not simply internal and personal but can involve and be shaped by communications with others. They note that language and other human tools are not just products of intelligence, but also enable our intelligence, allowing us to conceive and do what would otherwise not be possible. Because of this ability, one learns much from examining children in their discourse communities. Discourse communities might be organized around topics of conversation, whether that conversation is verbal (spoken or written) or carried through some other method of communication (Bakhtin, 1986). As Davis and Sumara noted, small

discourse communities comprise individuals who are part of larger ones: for example, a classroom may form its own discourse community but also be part of a school discourse community. Group members may also be members of families, religious groups, sports teams, or Internet communities. The defining aspect of the discourse community is the communication that is the focus for the members coming together. Although Davies (1991) concluded that membership in a community meant the self believed that she or he could participate and had a reasonable expectation of affecting the future of the conversation, discursive practices determine how much each member can say, and how much each person can affect the future of the conversation. Post-structuralism offers potential to see how children are constrained and shaped, and how they constrain and shape, their classroom communities. In our study, we examined the humour roles that grade-1 and -2 students chose or were relegated to — in particular, the role of class clown.

Grade-1 and -2 Classrooms as Discourse Communities

The role of a grade-1 and -2 teacher is complex: providing a language-rich environment and teaching the rules of discourse while covering mandated subject matter or content. Part of teaching the rules of discourse for a teacher involves normalizing children into school discursive practices. Although normalizing has become a pejorative term, a teacher must establish his or her right to silence students to further other goals. The teacher must consider which students need greater encouragement to speak, and attempt to keep students focused on the mandated curriculum.

Establishment of the teacher as authority is one of the first power negotiations that take place in the classroom. With 20 to 30 students in a class, each might get at most (in the large group) one turn to speak out of every 30. Because the teacher poses questions that usually have an expected answer, students' answers do not often affect the future of the conversation. However, students are members of this discourse community. Their non-verbal ways can affect the future of the conversation: some might opt out of the classroom conversation by daydreaming, others listen carefully and participate silently, still others will act in ways that are sometimes considered pathological. In this study, we do not consider student participation pathological, believing rather that students participate in ways available to them. We

acknowledge that teachers, peers, and school associates have ways to exclude some students from classroom conversations. This exclusion, however, does not necessarily diminish a person's potential to continue as a member in a discourse community. Speech alone does not define participation in a discourse community. Silence (even that which leads to oppression) is an active form of discursive practice. For this reason, we observed students' conversation and their non-verbal communications to better understand their roles within the discourse community of the grade-1 and -2 classroom.

HUMOUR

Humour has no one standard; different people find different things funny (Barreca, 1991). For this study, we defined humour as the expression or appreciation of that which is funny or amusing and elicits a physiological response from others: smiling or laughing. A search for prior research on class clowns revealed three academic pieces, all of them from the perspective of "class clown" as a classroom management issue needing to be corrected (Cohen et al., 1993; Condon et al., 2001; Strother, 1991). With the exception of Martin and Baksh (1995), there has been, to date, very little research carried out on student use of humour in the classroom.

Humour can be a tool for socialization (Read, 1998). Consider superiority humour (Nilsen & Nilsen, 1999): by expressing hostility in the form of a racist joke, the teller feels superior to the target; further, it establishes the target as inferior to all those who "get the joke." The teller uses superiority humour to gain power by normalizing "race" as if it were a natural, rather than a social, construct. The target of the joke can laugh at the joke, thus colluding with the oppressors in his or her oppression. Or she or he can refuse to participate or express disagreement with the negative stereotypes in the joke. In this situation, the reaction of the teller and of audience members is often dismissal: it was "just a joke!" Thus the oppressed remains oppressed whether accepting or reacting against the humour. Other options exist. For example, the target can take control of the situation by using humour against the oppressors.

Kamler (1999) argued that social constructs in the classroom are "fluid, negotiated and [often] changed" (p. 2) and that children are not necessarily socialized by the dominant ideologies. To consider the classroom discourse community as a place where students have power or not is to take a structuralist stance. From a post-structuralist

perspective, one might interpret the use of humour as a deliberate way to shift power relations within a social context. Humour can be an indicator of social status in a classroom (Hobday-Kusch, 2001; Martin & Baksh, 1995); a post-structuralist lens informs how students negotiate power in classrooms.

THE STUDY

We used qualitative research methods to better understand a complex context (Lather, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Roberts, 1982). Using ethnographic research methods we focused on the quality, meaning, and sociolinguistic aspects of curriculum (Janesick, 1991, p. 102). Our approach was reflective and the research was collaborative (Lather, 1991) through conversations with teachers, students, and co-researchers.

A fundamental belief in qualitative research is that a researcher must acknowledge his or her own subjectivity and recognize that his or her understanding of the world is always partial (Ellsworth, 1989). In much post-structuralist research, self-reflexivity and concern for the researcher or researched roles are integral considerations (Lather, 1991). A researcher must constantly be alert to his or her participation in the research — being there affects the outcome. Further, the researcher comes to the research with beliefs that affect what is seen and how she or he interprets events. Self-reflexivity leads to catalytic validity (Lather, 1986): the researcher must consider how his or her beliefs have changed as a result of the research.

To conduct the research, we first established rapport with a grade-1 and -2 class in an urban school in mid-western Canada in October 2000, and continued the study until June 2001. We were participant-observers: a role between complete participant and complete observer where the participant-observer takes a less active role in the situation that is being observed (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993, pp. 380–384). As observers we attempted to be as unobtrusive as possible in the classroom and hallways to observe humorous incidents and students' responses. However, the students look to the adults in their classroom for assistance and guidance; thus we were constructed as teachers and we helped when we could.

The two boys who became the focus of the study, Jackson and Lewis (pseudonyms), were members of Mrs. A's grade-1 and -2 class. They stood out from the other students because of their attempts at humour.

JACKSON AND LEWIS: CLASS CLOWNS

Jackson and Lewis caught our attention on the first day of classroom observations despite our intentions to be open to all students. We noticed how these two names appeared most often in field notes: "The class clowns stood out, and I was as trapped by their powers to command attention as [were] many of their peers." They were male, of average height and build, and appeared to be strong and healthy. They were almost always seen in groups of children, and everyone in the classroom seemed to like them. Mrs. A believed them to be of average to above-average intelligence.

Early in our first set of observations, Jackson singled himself out as a humour-initiator. On one occasion, he tried to create amusement from the otherwise ordinary task of handing out printing books.

Jackson leapt out of his desk toward the girl, swiped the top printing book from her pile, and grinned wildly. The little girl did not. She turned on her heel, marched back up to the front of the classroom, and resumed her paper-porting task. Jackson happily turned the pages in his book, seemingly unaffected by the fact that the recipient had not appreciated his attempt at humour. (Hobday-Kusch, 2001, p. 34)

On the first day, Lewis also initiated humour. Lewis and several other students were in a reading group with the classroom teacher while other students were gathered in small groups with teacher associates. Lewis seemed bored with reading the book and, turning to the boy beside him, began to make faces. The other boy did not notice him, intent instead on the teacher-set task. Lewis babbled "Aka laka la la la . . ." while wandering away from his group toward another group, where he did get a laugh. For disrupting the learning space, Mrs. A subsequently corrected him.

The other students considered Lewis funny and often rewarded his behaviour by laughter. We wondered, however, whether he might also have been using humour to distract from his own perceptions of inadequacy because Lewis was struggling to learn to read. He was in first grade for the second time and, although he could sight-read, he had difficulty interpreting new words. Perhaps Lewis changed the activity to one he was successful at: humour. By doing so, Lewis received attention from those who appreciated what he had to offer, thus negotiating more power for himself. The self who was Lewis-the-class-clown might have come into being during the reading group to help cope with his perceived failure as a reader.¹

Several months into our observations, an interesting event emerged in the grade-1 and -2 physical education class. During a lesson on square dancing, Jackson, perhaps embarrassed by holding hands during the dancing, became very disruptive, which finally earned him a spot on the sidelines. He proceeded to blow kisses and laugh alongside the gymnasium wall. Most students did not notice him, but he continued clapping, blowing kisses, and laughing. He did not seem concerned about the lack of reaction from his peers. Rather, he seemed to be having fun, perhaps creating humour for its own sake. It is also possible that Jackson was creating humour for the researchers. Jackson knew the researchers were watching him. A field note by Hobday-Kusch (2001) noted that Jackson would "call out to another student, say something he considered to be amusing, and then check back to make sure that I was watching; that I was appreciating and observing it."

By contrasting these two boys (Jackson playing to the researchers, Lewis to his peers), we saw interesting differences between their locations (roles) in the classroom discourse community. It seemed that for Lewis, it was important that his peers acknowledge him. On the other hand, it seemed that for Jackson, peer acknowledgement was not as important.

We obtained permission from Jackson's caregiver to do one semi-structured interview about humour. When asked, "Who seems to like humour the most in school?", Jackson replied, "ME! But lots of people make me laugh — my friends, my teachers. . . ." To the follow-up question, "Do you 'make' other people laugh, Jackson?" he replied, "Yeah," but would not offer any further comment or elaboration.² Jackson did not wish to continue the interview beyond this time.

POST-STRUCTURAL THEORY AND JACKSON AND LEWIS

It is possible that Jackson and Lewis used humour for targeted and significant purposes. Both (like many children) spent their school days working at tasks that may have had little relevance for them. Perhaps to overcome feelings of boredom or disconnectedness, they initiated humour to take charge of given situations to get attention. We suggest, from a post-structuralist standpoint, that they chose locations from which to negotiate greater power in the classroom. Both assumed the right to speak and act; they acted in order to participate in their discourse community with a reasonable expectation of affecting future events. Perhaps they felt the role of class clown would give them a location from which to change the "conversation," and the rules, to

enable them to participate so that they could obtain greater control of future events.

For example, in the situation described previously where Lewis disrupted the reading group, he was occupying a place in a group in which he might otherwise have been marginalized. Lewis, despite having difficulties reading, negotiated a position with some power in this group. He changed the course of the conversation. Mrs. A had to intercede and move Lewis out of the group. He could be considered a problem in this group because he had taken the group off its academic task. On the other hand, Lewis was making a place for himself.

As described previously, Jackson was able to negotiate a place for himself in the physical education class. Perhaps he was uncomfortable with dancing. Whatever his reasons for non-compliance, he was able to negotiate some power, and to affect future events. Mrs. A sent Jackson to the sidelines, where she believed he would no longer get attention for his antics. However, some of the students and one of the researchers noticed his ongoing antics. Jackson, as noted earlier, would look to the researcher to see if he was being noticed for his humour. Jackson was interested in how others were constructing him — did they consider him funny? Jackson and his discourse community worked together to create him in his role of class clown.

Condon and Tobin (2001) described a teacher changing the way she attended to a class clown, which resulted in a gradual extinguishing of this behaviour. In this study, we focused on the clown as a member of the classroom community, rather than as a behaviour exhibited by a student. We are not suggesting that other ways of interpreting classrooms are wrong, merely different.

These two boys did not create the role of class clown because the role exists already. The role of class clown seems to demand a person or persons to fill it. In this sense, the discourse community creates the self who is the class clown. A field note (Hobday-Kush, 2001) from a hallway trip from the music room to the classroom is illustrative.

We were en route from the music room to their regular classroom when we became aware that a disturbance was building in the hallway. Students were everywhere, which is not common in elementary schools, except at recess and dismissal times. Suddenly, I saw red jackets, and I knew what we were in for. The Engineering college students were on their annual fall charity drive, and they had come to Castle School to throw a pie in the face of one of the teachers for money [for charity]. The gym teacher, Mr. G, had already been "pied," and his face was dripping with whipped cream. Right away, I took my cue from Mrs. A, and pulled over to the side of the hallway.

Initially, the students stopped moving; stopped walking to their classroom as they

sensed the hallway disruption. Mrs. A did not encourage them to step around the crowd, but rather, allowed the class to wait it out, to see what would happen. Upon seeing the pied gym teacher, many of the Grade 1 and 2 students looked scared. One little girl appeared ready to cry. Nobody laughed . . . nobody even smiled. I looked around for Jackson and Lewis, but Lewis had not come to school that day, and Jackson was still in the music room. Some of the older students (who had collected in the hallway earlier to witness the event) were hooting and laughing. Even this brave display of frivolity did not entice the grade ones and twos to smile. Suddenly, Jackson appeared on the scene. In a moment, he sized up the situation. As he figured it out, he hollered, "They threw a pie at Mr. G??????? That's funny!" The rest of his classmates immediately relaxed, and stayed to watch another pie-throw, right into the face of the Grade 5/6 teacher. This time, many of the Grade 1/2 students laughed, including Jackson, who could be heard above all of them, confirming "This is funny!"

"So that's it," I thought. The students need their class clown — for permission, and for translation of humorous interchange. He is able to advise and reassure them on matters of humour. The security that comes from knowing when it is safe to laugh is not to be underestimated. The reification of Jackson and Lewis as class clowns may be one of the ways in which emotional security is established in the classroom.

The school, for primary students, is a new and unfamiliar place in September. On the first day of class, the students will need someone — perhaps one of their own — to help them feel more comfortable. Because we were not in the classroom at the beginning of the year, we cannot say how quickly Jackson and Lewis took and/or were relegated to their roles. We believe the discourse community begins its development as soon as the students meet. At first, roles may be more open to negotiation. But roles and the discourse community continue to evolve as power is negotiated.

By late October, when this event occurred, the grade-1 and -2 students were relying on Jackson to interpret unfamiliar and frightening events for them. In this situation, the students needed Jackson to be their class clown because the situation that erupted around them was initially frightening. Their choices of reactions were limited because of the unusual nature of the pie-throwing event. To determine how to react, the students needed a translator. Jackson was this person. He stated to his peers that the pie-throwing event was funny; once they knew this, they had a larger choice of reactions available to them. In terms of a post-structural perspective, if fear is the emotion accompanying an event, students might feel they have limited choices for action. Once the event is translated as "funny," more choices are made available to the students, which in turn allows them more power in the situation — at least, if nothing more, the power to interpret events in more than one way.

Jackson was not always the clown; he participated in many ways in the discourse community of his classroom. But he seemed to see the clown as an important role. As he became known as the clown and gained attention for this role, could he become trapped by it? His classroom teacher believed this was a danger. She described an incident on the last day of school. As one of Jackson's peers, Greg, was leaving the school, an older student ripped all the pages out of Greg's math workbook. Greg was crying and scrambling in the schoolyard, trying to collect the pages. Although Jackson was the student who ran to get Mrs. A to help his peer, when she arrived, Jackson proceeded to laugh. As in other situations, he seemed to be attempting to interpret a fearful event for his peer and, as before, he interpreted it as a humorous event. On the other hand, Jackson could have been aligning himself with the older boy, negotiating greater power for himself; the older boy was still present when the teacher arrived. Still, Jackson did fetch Mrs. A to assist Greg. In a follow-up discussion with Mrs. A, she suggested Greg needed physical help and consolation from Jackson. We wondered if Jackson was limited in the ways in which he could provide assistance for his friend.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Students and teachers negotiate classroom roles daily as they work to construct their lives in school. We analyzed classroom humour events that might have been dismissed as trivial or inconsequential or as signs of inappropriate behaviour, believing that people even as young as six or seven use humour to develop relationships with one another. In this article, we focused on two boys to consider how they used humour to establish their classroom roles.

The teacher, as the adult, has an obligation to socialize children into school culture; in fulfilling this mandate, the teacher marshals the discourse, deciding who will speak, when, and what about, as well as attempting to communicate what behaviours are "appropriate." Discursive practices of the school constrain the teacher — the physical set-up of the school mitigates what she would like to communicate, affects how she or he will communicate, even affects what she or he can conceive. Primary school students, who are just learning verbal conversation rules, test the discursive practices they are learning. They bring with them experiences from other discourse communities, but learn quickly what is considered appropriate and what not in their

new culture. As students test the discursive practices of their new environment, they negotiate power in their classroom communities, thus co-creating their communities with their peers, teachers, and with the physical and historical structures of the schools and their society. As the rules of their discourse community are negotiated, roles emerge. One of these roles is the role of class clown.

In this classroom, we observed two students in particular taking on the role of class clown where they noticeably affected the conversation — verbal and/or otherwise. We focused on the ways in which these students affected the future of the classroom conversation. We believed that their clowning around was as important to the audience as it was to the actors. Common existence in the classroom made it so.

However, learning how to use humour to negotiate power is only one side of a multifaceted role. In the incident where Greg lost his books, Jackson might have helped him more by consoling him than by laughing. Greg might have appreciated Jackson more had he helped with paper retrieval. If teachers are aware that their classrooms are discourse communities and of the different roles that exist for students to occupy, they could facilitate students taking those roles, value the students who take those roles, and suggest situations to enable those students to occupy other roles in the classroom. As Davis and Sumara (2000) note, we must be mindfully “attentive to the texture of existence” (p. 842). Knowledge, children, and the communities they live in are not “unitary, [are] never stable, never neatly bounded, and never able to be fully represented” (p. 834). It is impossible to predict with certainty who a child will become, although it is possible to predict a range of more likely outcomes. With mindful attentiveness, perhaps teachers can increase the possible outcomes for students.

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NOTES

- 1 We would have liked to interview Lewis about this, but his caregivers authorized participation only for our observations, not for interviews.

- 2 Interviewing children can be a tricky business, and given the nature of our timelines and the permission granted, we were unable to interview Jackson and his classmates extensively. It is possible that more thorough interviewing techniques might have offered a wealth of new insights, but so as not to become intrusive, we limited our interview/conversations with the children to 15 minutes or less, depending on their interests.

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