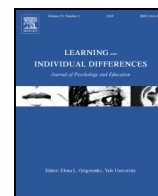




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The association between class clown dimensions, school experiences and accomplishment

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ABSTRACT

Recent research (Ruch, Platt, & Hofmann, 2014) identified four dimensions of class clown behavior (identifying as a class clown, comic talent, disruptive rule-breaker, and subversive joker). This study investigates whether these dimensions show differential relationships with school achievement, self-reported school satisfaction, positive experiences at school, and teacher-rated classroom behavior in a sample of 157 secondary school children (mean age: 15.4 years). School achievement showed a negative relation to two of the four dimensions of class clown behavior. Class clown behavior was related to less positive classroom behavior and with lower school satisfaction, which was mediated by the dimensions of school experiences. While class clowns experience positive emotions at school, their negative relationship with teachers might impair their school satisfaction and achievement. Positive psychology concepts give new insight into the field of class clown behavior and may also be able to offer some solutions.

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1. Introduction

Nearly forty years ago, Damico and Purkey (1978) pioneered a study on class clowns that became a benchmark publication in the field. Utilizing sociometric assessment methods, they screened 3500 pupils, eventually selecting 96 class clowns that yielded 10 or more “class clown” nominations from peers. The class clowns were compared to a randomly selected sample of 237 non-clowns on the bases of teacher ratings, student self-esteem, and school-attitude measures. They report class clowns as being predominantly males, having lower positive attitudes towards teachers and the principal than non-clowns, and they saw themselves as leaders and as being vocal in expressing ideas and opinions to their classmates. Moreover, they were judged by their teachers to be higher than the non-clowns in *asserting*, *unruliness*, *attention seeking*, *leadership*, and *cheerfulness*, but lower in *accomplishing*. Thus, a new and coherent picture of the class clown was emerging; but little additional research took place, with no study replications.

Before building upon these findings, and extending them, a few issues need highlighting. The first relates to the assessment of class clowns. Is there really only one type of class clowns or do more types exist? Is a “type” approach still appropriate, as psychology has moved to dimensional conceptualizations? In the Damico and Purkey (1978) study, there are gradual differences and a criterion of 10 nominations was rather an arbitrary set. So utilizing a dimensional approach to class clown behaviors is more appropriate. Another set of issues relate

to the domains of measurements. Are teacher self-reports of *accomplishing* sufficient or should they be supplemented by the objective grades of the student, as well as the student's own perspective and peer reports?

Recently, Ruch, Platt, and Hofmann (2014) proposed a variable-centered, dimensional approach, as an alternative way of investigating class clown behavior. They used a questionnaire depicting a variety of class clown behaviors derived from the literature and developed a hierarchical model of class clown behaviors distinguishing a general factor and four positively correlated dimensions of “identified as a class clown,” “comic talent,” “disruptive rule-breaker,” and “subversive joker.” While factors two, three, and four describe different styles of class clown behaviors, the first factor describes that pupils have adopted the role of a class clown and are aware of it. Thus, “being identified as a class clown” (sample item: In my class I am the class clown) represents the crystallization of demonstrating these behaviors over a period of time and high scorers are aware that others expect certain actions from them. The “comic talent” (sample item: During class it does not take long until something funny comes into my mind, that I can share with the person next to me) refers to a class clown behavior that is based on quick-wittedness and is more characterized by spreading good cheer and entertaining others. Unlike the two remaining class clowning dimensions, the comic talents are less conflict-prone, as they don't go against classroom rules or directly challenge the authority of the teacher. The “disruptive rule breaker” (sample item: Some rules in class I find stupid and I laugh at them) is the visible opponent of the teacher; he or she does not take seriously what the teacher says, dismisses what is said to be important, pokes fun at what the teacher

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says or does and undermines his authority. The “subversive joker” (I make the other kids laugh at what the teacher said or did) is undermining the authority of the teacher, but not necessarily in direct confrontation. He or she also plays pranks on classmates and needs the attention of the class. While these four types are different, the results also clearly confirmed that there are gradual differences among these, and there is no dichotomy of being a class clown or not.

Interesting insights were derived from this preliminary model. For example, when studying class clown behavior in the context of character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), signature strengths, and orientations to happiness (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005), Ruch et al. (2014) found features that all class clowns share but also features that are specific to the individual dimensions. Class clown behaviors were more frequent among those who had humor as their signature strengths (i.e., the most central strengths), replicating the findings by Damico and Purkey (1978) who found class clowns to be high in “cheerfulness.” However, humor does not necessarily lead to class clowning, only when it is paired with low prudence. The four factors yielded different but meaningful correlations with the strengths. For example, factor 2 (comic talent) and 1 (identified as a class clown) went along with leadership, replicating Damico and Purkey (1978), but this was not found for “disruptive rule breaking” and “subversive joking,” which were characterized by a lower orientation to the community (i.e., lacking other-directed strengths). Additionally, high scores in “disruptive rule breaking” were also associated with low intellectual strengths and being low in life of engagement and life satisfaction. Not being equipped with school-related strengths (e.g., love of learning, perseverance) and not disposed towards flow (i.e., not leading a life of engagement) facilitates feelings of distraction and boredom at school, which might trigger class clown behavior. Thus, the low accomplishing found by Damico and Purkey (1978) might be characteristic of the disruptive rule breaker. While this type of class clown was low in 14 strengths but high in one (i.e., humor), the opposite was found for the comic talent, with 9 strengths being positively correlated. Thus, the theory proposed by Jewell (2005) might refer to this type of class clown. He stated that to be a gifted humor producer, the class clown requires an empathic ability and “sensitivity to people’s feeling and beliefs” (p. 200).

The expression of character strengths is fulfilling (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the sum of strengths that can be expressed in a given context (e.g., schools) may contribute to the degree of well-being experienced in that context. Schools are typically more supportive of strengths such as love of learning, perseverance, zest, social intelligence, self-regulation, prudence, gratitude, and hope (e.g., Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber & Ruch, 2012; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016), and less so of humor. Thus, students high in these strengths are more likely to flourish in schools, and, in turn, will exhibit a higher level of satisfaction with school. Flourishing has different components and the different class clown dimensions will each be differentially sensitive to these. For example, Seligman (2011) distinguished five components of flourishing, namely positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (abbreviated as PERMA, an acronym). The study by Damico and Purkey (1978) provides first evidence for less flourishing of class clowns in schools by stating that class clowns were significantly lower in accomplishment (A) and reported less positive attitudes towards the school authorities (i.e., teachers and principal) (R). There was no difference in their attitude towards classmates, (R) suggesting a distinction between attitudes towards relationships with the teachers and the peers. There is indirect evidence for the remaining three components from the study by Ruch et al. (2014). While all four dimensions correlated positively with the life of pleasure (P), the disruptive rule breaker was also low in life of engagement (i.e., flow) (E). The correlations with life of meaning (M) were negative but not significant. This seems to suggest that PERMA is relevant, but the profile (P high, A, R, E low) will differ across the four class clown dimensions, and hence there may be different elements of PERMA mediating

the relationship between class clown dimensions and school satisfaction.

Thus, the present study aims at identifying the dimensions of school experiences (positive emotions, positive relationships with teachers and classmates, and accomplishment) that may contribute to a lower overall evaluation of satisfaction with school experiences in students displaying different types of class clown behavior. School satisfaction is defined as “a student’s judgment on the positivity of his or her school experiences as a whole” (Huebner, Gilman, Reschly, & Hall, 2009, p. 561; cf. Huebner, 1994) and it represents the cognitive aspect of childrens’ and adolescents’ subjective well-being in the domain of school. Prior research has identified school satisfaction as being positively related to positive emotions in school (P), school achievement (A) and to positive relationships in the classroom (R), both with teachers (see Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003) and with classmates (Baker, 1998). One can expect that for those identified as class clowns, comic talent (i.e., the dimensions strongly correlated to humor, a condition for amusement; Ruch et al., 2014) positive emotions will mediate the relation to school satisfaction. We expect that positive relationships with teachers (R) will mediate the negative relationship between the class clown dimensions and school satisfaction. This is based on the fact that the class clown is in opposition to the teacher and it is known that school satisfaction is negatively related with problem behavior (DeSantis King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2006) and withdrawal at school (Elmore & Huebner, 2010). Finally, we hypothesized that accomplishment (A) will mediate the relationship between the display of class clown behavior and low levels of school satisfaction, especially for the class clown type that lacks the school related strengths the most, i.e., the “disruptive rule breaker.”

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Students ($N = 157$), from nine classrooms of two secondary schools in German-speaking Switzerland (49.0% males and 51.0% females) participated. In Switzerland, there are secondary schools with basic and augmented requirements. The students in the present sample attended secondary schools with augmented requirements that qualify students for further education needed to attend universities. The participants’ mean age was 15.34 years ($SD = 0.71$; ranging from 14 to 18 years; with 88.4% being 15 or 16 years old). The majority (86.6%) had a Swiss nationality, other nationalities included Italian (3.2%), German (2.5%), Albanian (1.9%), Serbian (1.3%), and seven additional nationalities only mentioned once (4.4% in total). All participants had a good command of the German language.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Self-reports

The *Class Clown Behavior Survey* (CCBS; Platt, 2012) is an 18 item self-report instrument assessing a variety of class clown behaviors in a 6-point answer format (1 = *totally disagree* to 6 = *totally agree*). A total score is computed by averaging all items and yielded an internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.93$. Furthermore, items were averaged to compute the subscales of identified as a class clown, comic talent, disruptive rule-breaker, and subversive joker (see Ruch et al., 2014) and yielded internal consistency coefficients of 0.89, 0.86, 0.82, and 0.86, respectively.

The *Positive School Experiences Questionnaire* (PSEQ; Ruch & Wagner, 2014) is a self-report measure that assesses different dimensions of positive experiences in school. The measure is based on Seligman’s (2011) Well-being theory and measures the presence of the different elements of well-being in the school context, with the element of positive relationships being divided into two aspects: positive relationships with classmates and positive relationships with teachers. Since the students participated a few weeks before graduating from secondary school, we adapted the items so they were asked to look back on last years they

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