How humor makes or breaks student-teacher relationships: A classroom ethnography in Belgium

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Humor characterizes daily classroom interactions and student-teacher relationships.
- Teachers use humor to facilitate teaching and learning.
- Students apply humor to express their attitudes towards school and teachers.
- Humor varies across classrooms and serves different functions.
- Humor may add to the reinforcement of social inequalities through education.

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ABSTRACT

Humor characterizes daily classroom interactions and strengthens or weakens student-teacher relationships. Making use of ethnographic classroom observations, we examine how humor relates to student-teacher relationships. Results show that humor in the classroom serves different functions. While teachers use humor to facilitate teaching and learning, students apply it to express their attitudes towards school and teachers. The use of humor varies across classrooms and tracks. Our findings suggest the importance of analyzing the use of humor in classrooms for teachers (in training), and point to broader implications in relationship to the maintenance of and resistance to social inequalities in education.

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Jokes, funny remarks and mockeries characterize daily classroom interactions. Laughter influences interaction patterns and adds to the creation of the social structure in the classroom (Giles & Oxford, 1970; Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Martineau, 1972). As humor is part of all kinds of interactions and a necessary ingredient to maintain relationships (Kuipers, 2009), it is important to consider the role of humor in understanding the construction of teacher-student interactions in the classroom throughout the year. Positive student-teacher relationships increase the motivation, attachment and socio-cultural embeddedness of students in school (Davis, 2003) and enhance academic achievement, reduce disciplinary problems (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Previous research focused on the use of humor in the classroom and in teaching and its importance for the

functioning of the classroom (e.g., Garner, 2006; Wanzer & Frymier, 1999; Woods, 1976). However, a more systematic study of the use of humor in student-teacher relationships is required as these informal ways of communication shape classroom cultures (Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Walker & Adelman, 1976) and reinforce social, ethnic and cultural identities and inequalities at school (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Martineau, 1972; Lareau, 2000). This study contributes to the existing literature by understanding how classroom dynamics and the classroom context matter for the use and meaning of humor in classrooms, and to fully understand how this context shapes the nature of and determines the importance of student-teacher relationships (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Davis, 2003). These insights could inform teachers (in training) about the implications of using particular types of humor in the classroom for equality in school. In this study, we will examine: 1) how both the nature and function of humor changes according to classroom context and for students and teachers, and 2) how humor shapes

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student-teacher interactions and relationships, impacts class group dynamics and how this all varies across classroom contexts.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Humor in a classroom context

Humor can both break or make student-teacher relationships. The use of humor in the classroom helps students and teachers to express themselves, feel they belong and to communicate in a less formal way, bringing students and teachers temporarily closer to each other and break the routine (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Garner, 2006; Giles & Oxford, 1970; Ho, 2016; Kuipers, 2009; Lovorn & Holaway, 2015; Martineau, 1972; Pollard, 1984; Walker & Adelman, 1976; Woods, 1976, 1983). Nevertheless, humor can also be easily misunderstood, nourish existing conflicts and be a means of resistance (Woods, 1976; Willis, 1977). For teachers, laughter in the classroom is often used as a pedagogic tool to restore authority, to enforce classroom rules and to facilitate the curriculum implementation (Garner, 2006; Giles & Oxford, 1970; Woods, 1983).

To grasp the use and functions of humor in the classroom, one cannot neglect the specific classroom context, in which students and teachers have clearly described roles and power relations, and rely on particular cultural frames of reference, or repertoires based on other socializing contexts. As indicated by Goffman's (1990 (1959)) dramaturgic analyzes, people tend to engage in a theatrical performance during face-to-face interactions. In these interactions, people try to influence the impression others have of themselves by changing their appearance and ways of being. While this theatrical performance includes far more than humoristic remarks and jokes, humor is clearly a part of it. The focus on humor in the classroom from a dramaturgic point of view adds to the existing literature for two reasons. First, the classroom entails a fixed group of students who stay for a certain period of time in a particular place. Humor can give individuals the opportunity to adapt more easily to the group but also to influence the actions of and perceptions about others and one self (Woods, 1983). Second, the unequal power relations between students and teachers may affect the possibility to target jokes to particular actors. While powerful actors, like teachers, have perhaps more freedom to target humor to particular *actors,* students can resist against their teachers by making jokes or impress their fellow students and be part of an oppositional school culture (e.g., Willis, 1977).

1.2. Humor and social background

While humor plays a crucial role in the functioning of a classroom, the study of humor could add to a better understanding of the reproduction of social inequalities in education. Humor demarcates social boundaries and humor styles vary across gender, social and ethnic/racial lines (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Kuipers, 2009). This joking aspect of everyday life – namely 'the practice in which both parties tease each other without anyone taking offense' (Lund, 2015) – seems innocent. However, not all people share a similar sense of humor, and therefore, do not have the same possibility to bond with each other. The use of humor only adds to the establishment of positive student-teacher relationships, if people share similar ideas concerning the things that are perceived as 'funny' or 'humor'. People's sense of humor is important for boundary making, contain an element of exclusivity, and therefore, may work exclusive as well (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Kuipers, 2009). Additionally, humor can be used as a way to insult, humiliate or exclude the other (Grigg & Manderson, 2015; Mehan & Wood, 1994; Stevens, 2008; Willis, 1977). Differences in sense of

humor across social classes are crucial to understand how humor could add to the establishment of bonding student-teacher relationships across classrooms and the interpretation of each other's jokes. This is particularly so because the social composition of the class group does not always coincides with the background and characteristics of the teachers (e.g., Huyghe et al., 2010). This may complicate the use of humor as a pedagogic tool.

In sum, this study is innovative as it aims to develop a deeper understanding of the complex role of humor in shaping student-teacher relationships, classroom dynamics and the reproduction of inequalities in education, making use of a contextual approach.

2. Methods

2.1. Study context

In the Flemish educational system, students are grouped into tracks to facilitate teaching and learning and to prepare students for specific futures and professions (Van Houtte, 2004). Students are grouped into four tracks (academic, arts, technical and vocational tracks), according to their interests, abilities and capacities. Within each track, a ranked set of specific study programs are offered, characterized by different subjects and accents. In Flanders, tracks are commonly hierarchically classified by level of abstraction and theorizing; academic education is widely regarded as the most prestigious and demanding track and technical and vocational tracks are placed at the bottom of this ladder. The lower societal appreciation of manual labor has resulted in a specific pattern of educational practices and track choice. Students and their parents enjoy considerable freedom when making educational choices. At the age of twelve, students have to choose in which track in secondary education they will enroll, possibly following by non-binding teacher recommendations. The six years of secondary school are divided into three so-called grades (two years), after which students have to refine their curriculum choice. These transitions during students' secondary school career are institutionalized by certificates (A, B, C) given by teachers at the end of each school year. Only students in academic, arts and technical tracks have the possibility to proceed immediately to higher education after the sixth grade, while students enrolled in vocational tracks have to complete a specialization year first. These specific features of the Flemish educational system have resulted in a tendency to start secondary education in the most demanding and most prestigious fields of study (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013). Whenever students encounter learning difficulties, receive a B- or C-certificate or lose their interest in the courses offered, they change to less appreciated and cognitively less demanding tracks or fields of study. As the allocation and downward movement to less appreciated tracks is not equally distributed across ethnic and social groups (Boone & Van Houtte, 2013), only a small proportion of ethnic minority and low socioeconomic background students can be found in the most appreciated fields of study and tracks at the end of secondary education (Van Houtte, 2004; Van Praag, Boone, Stevens, & Van Houtte, 2014).

2.2. Sampling procedure

Fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2011 in three secondary schools in a large multi-ethnic city in Flanders. Theoretical sampling of schools was based on the track composition of the schools, the number of students of non-Belgian descent in each school and the track/field of study within a school. The three schools selected are St. Bernardus (vocational, technical and academic tracks, 444 students), Mountain High (academic track, 1159 students), and Catherina Atheneum (technical and vocational track,