

“No harm done”: Teachers’ humorous talk about children’s safety

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the forms of humour employed by New Zealand primary school teachers when talking about children’s safety in the outdoor classroom. A discourse analysis, guided by the notion of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1990, 2004), suggests a tension between safe practice and enjoyment with humour as a mediating factor. Three repertoires were named from analysis: safe practitioner; adventurous risk-taker; fun, pleasure and excitement seeker. A surprising and unexpected aspect was the place of humour in teachers’ talk, as analysis indicated that humour was an interpretative resource employed in all three repertoires. I suggest humour is a mechanism through which teachers negotiate and manage both providing for children’s enjoyable outdoor educational activities and ensuring their safety.

Keywords: teachers; child safety; humour; interpretative repertoires; outdoor classrooms.

1. Introduction

In New Zealand, the space outside the four walls of the formal classroom is used for teaching and learning. The generic term EOTC, education outside the classroom, defines this space (Ministry of Education 2009). The outdoor classroom has been an important aspect of New Zealand’s educational system since the first education act issued in 1877. The space has been used in the past for military training, health exercise, nature study, recreation and, currently, environmental awareness and sustainability. The term EOTC, introduced in 1980, consolidated support for learning outside the formal classroom (Hill 2010). An EOTC document *Bringing the curriculum alive* encourages student’s positive learning experiences in

outdoor environments (Ministry of Education 2009). Currently, in Australasia there is a focus on contextual learning, social and cultural contexts alongside pedagogic responses (Brown & Fraser 2009; Wattoo & Brown 2011). Yet, while such place-based pedagogies highlight environmental awareness, alongside the learning process, there is an important requirement for teachers to keep these learning environments safe for students (Ministry of Education 2009).

Keeping students safe at school, and particularly in the outdoor classroom, is of paramount importance in Australasia. As New Zealand's Ministry of Education (2009: 4) states, alongside the gains from learning in outside there is the potential for "mishap if programmes are not effectively managed". Both learning and safety are entwined in New Zealand's EOTC. Ensuring children's safety is an accepted aspect of contemporary EOTC practice. This is unsurprising for reasons, such as, for example, children's vulnerability and their need of protection. Yet, learning in the outside classroom can be enjoyable at the same time as keeping oneself safe from harm. For New Zealand children, enjoyment and fun are important aspects of learning in the outdoors. There are indications that children gain pleasure from outdoor experiences whether for recreational or educative reasons. For teachers, however, a tension arises between both providing for children's safety, and encouraging their positive experiences in EOTC. Andkjoer (2012) maintains that, for New Zealand outdoor educators, an ambiguity exists between fun and the seriousness of providing for safety.

In an empirical study, Lupton & Tulloch (2002) examined participants' understanding of risk, and while risk was associated with negative connotations, for many risk-taking was represented as positive. Risk-taking can be pleasurable and rewarding (Mythen 2007). Breivik (2007) argues the importance of risk-taking for children and young people to aid in their development – to be challenged and willing to take risks.

Children are able to balance both risk and safety simultaneously alongside their enjoyment of participation (Christensen & Mikkelsen 2008). Yet for teachers, with the overall responsibility for children's safety, it is another matter. Managing the equilibrium between enjoyment, safety and risk is a complex task and in this study the ambiguity was apparent in teachers' talk about safety and EOTC. While this qualitative research investigated teachers' understanding of safety in the outdoor classroom, one effect of their understandings was the employment of humour when talking about children's safety.

2. Theoretical framework and method

The position taken for the study regards the world existing only through people's knowing of it, a social constructionist approach (Burr 2003; Gubrium & Holstein 2003). While not denying the existence of a material world, the world of human experience, interactions and events exists only as people know those things. Such knowledge, gained through the signs and symbols used for thinking and communicating, is primarily represented in language (Stainton Rogers 2006: 79). Hence discourse analysis was appropriate for the study.

Focus group interviews were conducted with 22 teachers in 5 schools in Auckland's greater metropolitan area. A discourse analysis of the interview data drew on Gubrium & Holstein's (2003: 215) view that shaping reality centres on a methodical construction of "configurations of meaning". A particular analytic guide was that of Potter & Wetherell's (1990) notion of interpretative repertoires, the recurrent language units that enable speakers to construct their accounts. Analysis was completed alongside safety and risk literature to provide another background for reading the results. A deeper scrutiny of the data addressed

how teachers' beliefs about safety affect their practice in the outside classroom. Of particular focus was the linguistic resources employed by teachers when discussing particular versions of EOTC. The transcripts of teachers' talk were not simply seen as descriptive accounts of teachers' realities but as specimens of collaborative interpretive practices (Talja 1999).

Repertoires are always particular versions of events or narratives organised in particular contexts and in the performance of procedures or actions. Identification of repertoires depends on their recognisability and on shared social and cultural knowledge (Taylor 2003). A fine-grained analysis (McCreanor & Nairn 2002) is necessary to identify the most systematically used terms; analysis concentrates on the language used, the kinds of descriptions and accounts of EOTC and the construction of differing versions. For example, a safety focus draws on risk discourses, danger and the possibility of death. An adventurous focus employs discourses of adventure and challenge, while an enjoyment narrative draws on fun, pleasure and excitement.

The process of identifying repertoires used by teachers relies on the shared discourses of children, safety, pleasure and outdoor classrooms. Signalling the common language patterns permitted a mapping of how particular versions of events, or narratives, were constructed and made to appear factual. Descriptive resources of the repertoires were identified. Persuasive argument used to support particular versions, or the way versions were manufactured was indicated during analysis. Also taken into account were the positions held by teachers. Those with greater power in the school hierarchy were in a position to have greater sway in argument. It was evident that positioning struggles occurred between teachers and the repertoires they employed were signs of a "rhetorical struggle" (Potter & Wetherell 1990: 3). Rhetoric or argumentative threads signal when talk is displayed as rational and difficult to challenge, as happens when teachers employ a dominant repertoire.

Naming the repertoires is the endpoint of the analytic process after systematic examination of data (McKenzie 2005) with recognition of the recurring patterns, themes and concepts in teachers' talk. The language resources employed were drawn from New Zealand's wider social environment of children and both policy documents and teachers' experiences with children in the outdoors. Consequently, three repertoires were identified in talk about EOTC, safety and enjoyment. Through the analytic process I named the repertoires; the *safe practitioner*, the *adventurous risk-taker* and the *fun, pleasure and excitement seeker*. Teachers' talk consistently drew on these identified repertoires to describe their EOTC practice.

3. The repertoires

The safe practitioner repertoire was the most prevalent linguistic pattern drawn upon when talking about EOTC. Given the paramount importance of keeping children safe, this was unsurprising. The safe practitioner repertoire drew on linguistic resources that included terms such as *risk management*, *being aware*, *our school*, *being professional* and *focus on safety*.

The adventurous risk-taker repertoire was generally employed by those experienced teachers who had a history of outdoor teaching. The adventurous risk-taker repertoire included descriptions of education outside the classroom such as the following: *it is a challenging experience*, *children learn to take risks*, *they can learn about their boundaries and move outside their comfort zone*. New Zealanders' historical relationship with the bush, the great outdoors, is invoked in this repertoire; walking through the bush, investigating the wilderness, crossing rivers, climbing mountains and facing challenge and risk. It was, however, difficult to argue for risk-taking against the paramount focus on safe practice, particularly when the topic of children's accidents or deaths arose.

In contrast, the fun, pleasure and excitement-seeking repertoire constructed outdoor education as an exciting experience for both children and teachers. When drawing on this repertoire teachers evaluated children's behaviour in terms of pleasure and excitement. They used descriptors such as *the students had an excellent time* or *we all had fun*. Teachers employing this repertoire were enthusiastic in their accounts of outdoor education experiences, both for themselves and their students.

While the safe practitioner was the most commonly drawn-upon repertoire, the fun repertoire, which drew on resources of laughter and humour, was the least utilised repertoire. Children's safety is an important matter, and fun pleasure and excitement were not regarded as particularly legitimate in a serious conversation about education outside the classroom. When it was, it was more likely employed by experienced teachers with a personal history of enjoyment being in the outdoors. Aspects of humour were employed to sustain a pleasure orientation to outdoor education.

While humour was a resource employed in the fun repertoire, a surprising analytic aspect was the place of humour in all teachers' talk. I suggest that the mobilisation of humour enables teachers to manage the difficult work of both commitment to children's safety, and their enjoyment of being with children in educative outdoor environments.

4. Humour

Humour was important analytically providing insight into the interpretive processes in teachers' talk, and exposing how the repertoires worked. Different forms of humour served certain functions in discourse. As a facet of teacher talk, while humour was a resource of the fun repertoire, it was also part of the other two identified repertoires. For Mulkay & Gilbert (1982), humour revealed the interpretative resources that scientists used to create meaning. Sanguinetti (1999) identified teachers' humour as a tool to lampoon an Australian national educational initiative, while for Wetherell (1998), laughter served a specific purpose in conversation when descriptions were heard as a joke or otherwise. Humour is used as a coping strategy (Warner 1991), to scorn opponents and lower their status (Bonaiuto et al. 2003; Tumkaya 2007) or to maintain group solidarity (Everts 2003; Fine & De Soucey 2005). Humour serves to disrupt one's version of reality but in a non-serious way (Bonaiuto et al. 2003). Humour can ridicule oppressive regimes, or challenge and subvert normal practices (Vaughan 2007).

Humour was identified and characterised through examination of instances during interviews when teachers laughed, as humour is generally defined in terms of this characteristic expression (Weisfeld 1993). The points where laughter occurred were analysed to uncover the reasons for the humour response. The purpose of the laughter, and responses from others were the focus. Use of humour illustrated the complex ways of bridging tensions in teachers' talk. Five types of humour were identified from the interview data, using categorisations drawn from literature (Everts 2003; Fine & De Soucey 2005; Kotthoff 2006; McLauchlan 1989; Mulkay & Gilbert 1982; Weisfeld 1993). As I was an interview participant as well as the interviewer, I judged the effects during interviews and in post-interview analysis. The types of humour used by this group of teachers were then named as examples of *black humour*, *put-downs*, *nervous laughter*, *mocking* and *delight in silliness*.

Black humour was a darker form of humour, employed in cases where tragedy and death were averted. Humour was used to put down others, nervous laughter was used in cases of uncertainty, mocking humour ridiculed and made fun of others, and the humour I

characterised as delight in silliness occurred during recounting mirthful or absurd events in outdoor education.

5. Results of analysis of humour types

5.1. Black humour

Black humour satirises life's tragedies. While black humour can be a resource employed to help deal with the possibility of child's death or serious injury, there were very few instances of laughing at tragic cases or mocking them. The closest was recounting when death or serious accident *did not* occur and tragedy was averted. Strong claims were made in all the interviews that the death of a child would be the worst thing that could happen in EOTC. It is unlikely that teachers would employ black humour in a public sphere, as in the formal interview situation with an unknown interviewer, moral restraints operate around children's death. Possibly black humour is employed in teachers' more private spaces, "backstage", (Vaughan 2007) away from public view, but I did not experience this.

Humour identified as black humour was employed when relating dangerous situations that could have, to use one teacher's term, "*turned to custard*". Situations where there had been the possibility of death or accident were laughed about and any subsequent damage was downplayed as being only minor. In one group interview, a teacher laughed at the possibility of children being hit by cricket balls when discussing a case where a number of games were played simultaneously in a very small playground. In another interview, teachers laughed at the impossibility of a child drowning when the child's parents would not let the child anywhere near water, "*we have some children where it's very hard to ... convince their parents to let their children swim*". This comment caused an interjection from another teacher claiming "*well, no drownings here then!*", resulting in uproarious laughter from the group.

5.2. Put-downs

Humour was employed to put down others, or to dismiss others' anxiety or risk-management systems (or lack of) or their position. Laughter accompanied these put downs but was often done in a kindly joking fashion. It was not necessarily to hurt, but to denigrate the other teacher in a laughable way; "having a dig" at another. The other is put down for their lack of ability in whatever area is in discussion. It served to brush off others and make their contribution meaningless with a retort equivalent to "I don't think so!", that is, a joking response that indicates disbelief and disagreement.

Put-downs were also used on occasion to vent frustration at others. These others were often parents who were considered as lacking in ability in comparison with teachers:

Ha ha, we have to be careful, we are very careful who we choose to go. The way we do it sometimes is we say oh, we took the first five parents that applied or we did a draw and we drew the names out of a hat, and we haven't done that at all we have actually chosen the parents very very carefully before we take them.

Blaming was an element of this humour. One teacher accounted for her accident (sprained ankle) by blaming a father who moved a child's bed into her path; "*I felt like slapping the father!*". Another teacher used this type of humour to put down a parent when

they suggested school camps were like holidays, “...*the parent said yeah, I’m going to take my deck chair, and book and I’m going to have such a good holiday*”. The teacher employed a “yeah right!” laughter response, that is, a New Zealand joking response that disputes the claims made.

When humour was employed to put down others, it was also used for silencing effect and to position the speaker as more knowledgeable than others (Bonaiuto et al. 2003). In one example, an adventurous young teacher is silencing an older *safer* teacher, by laughing at her claims that outdoor education is as challenging nowadays as it was in the past (employing a “yeah right!” response). This type of humour was also used to put oneself down. In one case, a teacher puts himself down because he is not as well prepared as others might think. When I commented with admiration to him on the thickness of his health and safety folder, he snorted with laughter, “*I’ve no idea what they are ... what the rules and regulations are!*”

5.3. Nervous laughter

Humour was employed to defuse nervousness and anxiety at accounts of close calls. Accidents were minimised and the laughter has the sense of “you really have to laugh, don’t you!” (an element of the “she’ll be right” attitude – don’t worry, the worst didn’t happen). If this attitude was not held, the situation would be too ghastly to contemplate. While this form of laughter invokes death, it also reminds us of the *lucky escape* and the *not death*. In one interview, a teacher recounted an event where a girl slipped off a railway platform onto the train tracks. The girl had dropped her lunch box and wanted to retrieve it. All the interview participants, myself included, laughed nervously in an “Oh my god! Oh no!” manner; the possibility that the girl could have been killed was too horrendous. Nervous laughter united the group in reliving the event. At the end of the narration, when the girl was lifted off the tracks by her hair just before the train came, there was further nervous laughter. When an explanation was given that the girl had tried to get her lunchbox because there was still lunch in it, the interview group moved from nervous laughter to erupt into cheers of laughter – a celebration of life.

Some of the situations faced in EOTC were minimised using humour; nervous laughter accompanied such minimisations. The skiing incidents and the grass burns case are examples of minimisation of danger. In one group-interview, a situation was related where the child could have been allergic to bees, and this is worthwhile noting because it has the sense of slapstick about it, and had the effect of uniting the whole group with laughter:

One of the kids poked a stick into a beehive and the bees chased him down the hill – and he had bee stings all over him, but nothing swelled up – he obviously didn’t have allergies and he didn’t want to ring his parents because he’d be in trouble because of the bee stings. We didn’t have cellphones then, there was no phone at the nearby Scout Hall or anything like that, but we had a bottle of vinegar and we tipped it all over him and that’s what we did, [laughter] and he survived. He could have died, but the first thing I asked him was are you allergic to bees and he said no, but we would have rushed him to the doctor because there was a little township about 10 miles up the road and we would have, but he could have died in that time. But he had these little bumps all over his head and up his arms and on his shoulders and ...when I think about it we were so casual about it and we had a bottle of vinegar for the chips that night and we just poured it over him, and there was no phone in the Hall, and the parents had all dropped their kids off there and left them in our care ... [laughter] ... and this happened!

This description elicited much laughter with comments regarding the loss of vinegar for the chips that night. The story had the function of uniting the group in laughter because the child survived and it was fortunate that he was *not* allergic to bees.

5.4. Mocking

This type of humour was employed by the teachers to make fun of others (or self) or situations. Safety action plans were mocked because there are too many of them and, for example, was there an action plan if a child got packed up inside a tent when de-camping? A teacher was mocked because glitter was left behind inside school tents after a camp, “...and glitter – what was she doing on camp with glitter?”

There is limited cellphone coverage in some areas used for EOTC (national reserves, wilderness reserves, some coastal areas), so when I asked a question in one focus group about the usefulness of cellphones I was mocked: “*It depends where you are!*” (laughter from the group). “*If you’re in the Hunua Ranges¹ – there’s no phone coverage!*” (laughter).

In the same interview teachers mocked again when I asked about the value of camps (for children). Instead of responding with regard to children, the teachers turned the question around by referring to the value of outdoor education, or lack of it, for themselves. Monetary values were put on teachers’ experience of school camps because of the responsibility and time involved. They made fun of the amount of time spent on school camp, the lack of remuneration, and if they were paid per child it might have been worthwhile: “*We should get more money for being out on camp, we need to get paid twenty dollars per child (laughter), twenty dollars per hour multiplied by 180 children over 24 hours...*”.

In the same interview, another response to the question about the value of EOTC indicated support but also a challenge to mathematics and perhaps a call for subversion: “*Well I think that EOTC should stay in the curriculum and it should be more encouraged within the school as well... who cares about the maths!* (said in a whisper, as an aside, accompanied by laughter). *We should be subversive really*”.

There were examples of teachers mocking students. One recounted a situation where a student complained to the teacher that one of the boys in his group was ‘anal’ (linking to the psychoanalytic term *anal character* – in this case meaning overly fussy):

I asked what he meant by anal, and he said they had to line up their shoes in the tent, the tent had to be tidy and he planned all the food, and I said well did you go hungry and he said no, and I said did you eat well? And he said yeah we had better food than anyone else and I said so what’s wrong with being anal then? I said did you have a good time? He said yeah.

There were many occasions where mocking humour was used, often towards themselves, or at children, although, generally, a more gentle form of humour was employed when talking about children and the funny things they did.

5.5. Delight in silliness

Laughter occurred in sequences where the humorous things that children did were discussed. This form of humour could involve teasing children. Slapstick was also an element of silly humour. This form of humour was employed when describing situations of sheer enjoyment, delighting in the ludicrous or ridiculous. In one description of a camp’s organisation, a teacher

laughed at the ridiculousness of getting nine-year old children to pack up tents, but also mocked another teacher for their lack of organisation:

I've got the tents all numbered and I have to do that because [the other teacher] used to take them on camp you know and three tents would come back in one bag, and no-fly [laughter]. And the fly sheets would be over there and the tents ... there'd be no pegs for this one. So I made all these bags because when you get a tent it's so compressed and packed up and squashed together and fits perfectly in a zipped bag – but you try and get nine-year old kids to put it back in the bag and they can't even get the fly in let alone the tent. [Laughter]

In another example, one teacher recounts being approached by a child who said that he was not comfortable about being naked, the teacher laughed and commented that he wondered where the child got that idea from:

And I'm thinking where did he get that from? What's he talking about. Because it's the river you see. The child thought that he had to take his clothes off to cross the river. It was so funny – I said look, look you know, the moon's dull [poor kid]... he obviously thought we were going to have to take our clothes off and swim across the river ... and I was thinking oh my God ... where did he get that idea from!

This teacher has the classic New Zealand humour style of slap-stick – he laughs with delight when tricking children into doing something silly, or into believing something that is not going to happen, for example, telling children that they will be eating possum burgers for dinner. He laughed at the silliness of children taking doll tents to camp “...three of them blew over at night, they're ... you know ... the ones you put up inside the house”. I was teased in one interview too, because he could remember me coming back from a school camp once and saying: “I'm never going back there – it was cold, and the mince got burnt” [much laughter between the pair of us, “Did I? I can't remember”] “Yes, you were absolutely up to the back teeth with it”. I was flabbergasted because I could not remember saying this, as I have fond memories of school camps. I had forgotten, perhaps conveniently, the irritations and frustrations of taking children into the outdoors.

6. Discussion

In New Zealand, educating children in the outdoors is part of the national curriculum (Ministry of Education 2007), yet the outdoors presents challenges for teachers. I argue that educating children outside the classroom is a task where the balance between safety, risk and pleasure, or anxiety and enjoyment is a crucial element of interactions, and that managing the equilibrium is a complex task. While the analysis indicated a tension for these teachers between safe practice, adventure, risk-taking and enjoyment, the presence of humour was notable. This suggests that teachers mobilise humour to manage a difficult and demanding job.

On a descriptive observational level, I noticed that laughter was used to make fun of another person's position, serving as a put-down or in support of another speaker. Humour was also used on occasion to lighten talk about the possibility of children's accidents. For example, humour was employed after or during descriptions of “close calls” where children had been in dangerous situations. Tulloch (2004) suggests resisting anxiety is an alternative to

a discourse of risk, and for these teachers, joking was used to minimise anxiety about the near-misses.

In two sequences of talk when teachers talked about skiing incidents where children had been in hazardous situations, humour was used to indicate relief and to argue that the children did not die and came to no harm. In one situation, the child went too fast downhill and smashed into a tree: “*she didn’t look very good but she was alright*”. The other child had to be airlifted off a mountain because of a skiing accident, which was minimised as “*just a little bit of drama*”. Another teacher laughed, recounting an incident where the children were sliding down a steep grassy hill, and hurt themselves, but: “*it was only a grass burn*”. The minimisation of these situations employed an argument of “She’ll be right”, a New Zealand identity characteristic claiming the worst is not going to happen, so do not worry about it (Braun 2008). This form of humour is also a defining characteristic of New Zealanders: understated, laconic, irreverent with a fondness for practical jokes (McLauchlan 1989).

Humour, in the “*just a little bit of drama*” situation, was employed both to support safe practice, and to resist anxieties about children in danger. Humour in this case conforms to Vaughan’s (2007) assertion that usual practices can be challenged with alternative views, and here was the possibility of an accident, yet the child was safe and unharmed. Humour presents a sense of relief as nothing dangerous occurred. Humour interrupts (Bonaiuto et al. 2003) the widely held ideal of safe children in EOTC, yet enables management of the tensions operating in the outdoor classroom.

Some teachers, conforming to Tulloch’s (2004) active resistance, rejected the “outdoors is dangerous” discourse, and employed humour to manage a form of “danger denial”. It is difficult to challenge familiar positions around safety and children, with tensions between anxiety about children’s vulnerability and children’s competent risk-taking. Contradictions and tensions were apparent within teachers’ talk. Yet, humour was mobilised as a coping strategy to deal with the possibility of accident, injury, death, but also to minimise any harm that occurred. This approach, however, only worked if nobody died or was seriously injured. That an accident could have happened, but it did not, served to reduce anxieties because death was not an outcome.

The fact that accidents could have occurred, but they did not, drew on visions of traditional risk-taking adventures in the outdoors but, at the same time, acknowledged and brought home the possibility for loss. On a number of occasions, harm to children appeared to be minimised in a joking manner with “*oh, she’ll be alright*”, or “*it’s OK, no harm done*”, but it was perhaps an expression of relief from a possible disaster. A near-miss while skiing, a grass burn, a saved lunch box from the railway line, bee stings that could have proved fatal, were all examples where humour was employed to resist discourses of danger, loss or risk. The examples of the use of humour from this study suggest that it was a strategy through which teachers were able to negotiate the tension between providing enjoyable and challenging outdoor activities and ensuring children’s safety.

There were teachers who acknowledged the place of fun and enjoyment for children and themselves, and these teachers were able to navigate the complexities between pleasure and safety, yet in this study these situations and those teachers were few. One teacher included the notion of “myth, magic and mystic” in the EOTC experience, but this was unusual. Minimising children’s fears with humour was more likely, though making fun of their fears was not. More obvious was the use of humour to deal with the anxieties of practice, particularly after difficult or dangerous circumstances. The use of humour illustrates the elasticity within situations, talk, action or experience where different forms of humour come into play depending on the circumstances.

7. Concluding comment

Teachers' humour is an important resource and one that needs further consideration. It is an important strategy to manage the concerns between safety and risk, pleasure and danger. Humour enabled an opening up of the anxieties around children's risk-taking and danger in the outdoor classroom. While safety was shown to be a significant factor in outside experiences, humour and pleasure mediated the safety regimes. Yet, pleasure and enjoyment are often not acknowledged because children's safety is an important aspect of practice. Further research might provide insights into the complexities of teachers' forms of humour in these situations.

This study contributes to humour research through the particular methodological approach employed. Social constructionism positioned teachers' talk as part of the constructive processes of meaning-making in the field. Potter & Wetherell's (1990) concept of "interpretative repertoires" guided the analysis providing opportunity to open up the ways in which the outdoor classroom is constructed and reconstructed in the talk of the teachers. This offered a more nuanced awareness of how teachers use humour in their interactions and descriptions of their outdoor practice.

Note

[1] A regional park on the boundary of Auckland city.

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