

FUN IS FUNDAMENTAL : LEARN TO LAUGH - LAUGH TO LEARN

All teachers remember their favourite lessons - the ones that 'went well', the ones in which 'time flew' and the ones in which all children were completely and profitably immersed. What was the common element of these 'magic' lessons? Were they 'flukes'? Why did they work so well? Why did they appeal to the children? Why did they make one glad to be a member of the teaching profession? I believe that, if such lessons were analysed, they would invariably contain the mysterious ingredient called humour.

June Factor writes *'It seems to me that all children love to laugh. They also like to tease, and play with words, and trick the 'innocent' bystander. Perhaps that is why there are so many jokes and riddles in the world, and why every child knows dozens and dozens.'* The Declaration of the Psychological Rights of the Child developed by the International School Psychology Association during the International Year of the Child in 1979 states *'A child has the right to love and freedom from fear: personal, spiritual and social development: education and play.'* The play referred to, and expanded upon, contains vast quantities of humour.

Modern educational theory demands that all learning be of a holistic nature - considering the learner to be a complete entity and not a series of unrelated facets or compartments. This has undoubtedly caused a revision of current teaching practice with a stronger emphasis being placed on studying the environment, social relationships, strengths, weaknesses, interests and potential of the learner. One component that plays a significant part in our lives, yet still often goes unacknowledged, is humour.

Eleanor W. Hoomes Ph. D. expresses her thoughts about humour thus: *'Humour is one of the most useful educational tools available to teachers. It costs nothing, requires no storage space, and is readily available. It helps keep a balanced perspective in the classroom, it lessens tensions, and it helps bond students into a co-operative group. A little bit of humour makes a lot of learning easier to take.'* I believe that humour in the curriculum has impact on the students as well as the wider community. Members of the community tend to become fully involved in schools that are non-threatening. Humour supports rather than threatens, does not conflict with curriculum development and the Frameworks documents, and provides simple, practical, low-cost support for pupils, teachers and parents alike. It also has the potential to effect long-term change, reduce stress, improve communication, stimulate creativity, provoke thought and develop friendships. It is also people-centred.

The teacher who acknowledges the important place of humour in life will have greater insight into discipline problems involving students who are consistently the butts of jokes, those who make frequent sarcastic remarks, those who poke fun excessively, and those who persist in drawing attention to themselves by constantly clowning. It will also assist greatly in meeting the requirements of gifted and talented children.

Understanding the nature of humour also helps to explain why some students have difficulty in taking things seriously, why some laugh at the wrong times, and why some have trouble understanding certain types of humour such as puns or plays on words.

REASONS FOR THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMOUR.

1. Humour is healthy because a good laugh makes you feel better.

Paediatrician Dr. Lenon Smith believes that three things are necessary to lead a happy, healthy life - children's self-images should be protected, diets should consist of wholesome foods with plenty of vegetables and vitamin C, and daily doses of laughter. Dr. Joel Goodman states *'If people laughed about fifteen times a day, there'd be a lot less doctor's bills.'* There are physiological reasons for this including increasing oxygen in the blood, a drop in pulse rate, increased production of the body's natural pain killers (endorphins) and the exercising of the lungs, diaphragm and face muscles. The length of time decreased tension continues may be as long as three-quarters of an hour. Dr. William F. Fry, a psychiatrist affiliated with Stanford University, states that *'not only is laughing one-hundred times a day equal to ten strenuous minutes on a rowing machine, but one good laughing fit can be vigorous exercise for organs such as the diaphragm, heart and lungs.'* Dr. Fry likens the exercise one gets from laughing to 'inner jogging'. Dr. Bob Montgomery adds to this by observing *'stress reduces your body's ability to protect itself from infections and cancer, and contributes to disease processes including heart and blood vessel disease'*. Dr. William Fry, a leading academic psychiatrist, states *'a good laugh reduces tension by forty per cent. When you shed a tear you literally shed chemicals that are stress-induced toxins'*.

2. Humour helps to gain friends because it promotes group membership and helps us deal with awkward moments.

We develop relationships with individuals and groups because laughter is pleasurable. The contagious nature of laughter generates emotionally positive experiences and a sense of security and self-confidence. Smiling, like laughter, can break down social barriers. There are many different ways of smiling - in greeting, sympathy, apology or appreciation. Dr. Tony Bourne, of Deakin University, advocates that *'learning to smile more often can also assist us in our careers, especially if we deal with people'*. Psychologists from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada suggest that people with a good sense of humour can cope with *'negative life events'*. Bad situations have less impact on the moods of such individuals when compared to those with a poor sense of humour. Many potentially disruptive situations can be diffused by a realistic serve of humour. It does not undermine discipline but promotes a feeling of 'us' rather than 'me' and 'them'. At no time should humour be used as a 'soft option' to divert attention from curriculum and administrative issues but it should certainly be a component in effective decision making.

3. Humour attracts attention and provokes thought.

Successful public speakers have long used the ploy of introducing their remarks with a joke or humorous anecdote. Some of our most troublesome discipline problems are students who seek attention through any means available - there are creative ways for these students gain the attention of their peers by using humour positively.

4. Humour improves communication.

Puns, figurative language, homonyms and homophones are all staples of good jokes and riddles. Accurate reading and/or precise listening is involved in finding a good joke or riddle and to deliver it effectively requires speaking skills related to pronunciation, volume, rate, tone and timing. For the people who seem unwilling to allow themselves to make a single mistake and adopt a 'perfectionist' style a humorous approach may save them from stressful experiences by giving them an escape from potentially embarrassing errors.

5. Humour stimulates creativity.

From their early fantasy play, creative children grow into adults who thrive on discovering incongruous relationships. Highly creative people have been found to initiate humour more often, to place greater value on having a sense of humour, to appreciate and understand each other's humour more and be more playful verbally when interacting with others. It should also be noted that stress results equally from situations of over and under-demand. Monotonous, repetitive, boring activities are major stressors. Professor Blair Justice, of the University of Texas Health Science Centre, provides us with an extra insight, *'being enthusiastic - as opposed to cynical or hostile - protects against the risk of heart disease'*.

6. Humour helps us to deal with difficult moments.

Coping with embarrassing moments by making fun of ourselves enables others to laugh with us, and we save face at the same time. In a few seconds a disastrous incident can be rendered impotent, and in the process all can enjoy laughing together. Humour should also be non-sexist. Comedian Wendy Harmer believes that there is no such thing as 'women's comedy'. *'I don't think there is, the same as I don't believe there is such a thing as "women's music", or "women's art" or "women's writing"'*. American comic Joan Rivers once said *'If something is funny, it's funny. Dorothy Parker would have been considered just as funny if she were a man'*. British entertainer Victoria Wood says *'I don't believe that any audience has ever gone "Oh, God, she's a woman, I'm not going to laugh". I don't think there's a problem, because I think personality transcends gender in comedy'*.