

## **The Role of Humor in Teaching and Educational Processes**

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### **Abstract**

Several surveys were performed in 2016-2017 in the school and academic communities concerning the effect of humor on various processes of teaching and education. Among other factors, the researchers examined how humor was used by teachers of secondary schools and academic lecturers in the teaching and educational processes. The degree of appreciation of humor used by teachers among school and university students was also examined. These analyses were aimed at searching for universal forms of humor accepted by teachers, lecturers and school and university students. The study also analyzed humor styles (according to Rod Martin) used by individual groups of participants. All the groups were also analyzed in terms of resilience viewed as a process (Block and Block, 1980). Most researchers (Block and Block, 1980, Block and Kremen, 1996, Letzring et al., 2005) approach resilience as a relatively stable disposition that determines the process of flexible adaptation to constantly changing demands of everyday life. Therefore, it seems that humor may be useful in both school and academic settings.

The present article presents a report on the examinations performed among teachers and students from secondary schools. The analysis concerned the frequency of the use of humor in the teaching and educational processes and its appreciation and understanding by students. Two analyses were performed, separately for teaching and educational activities.

**Keywords:** humor, school education, teaching process, educational process

### **1. Introduction**

As an institution characterized by its hierarchy and educational tools, regulations and sanctions, school has been criticized for many years for compulsion used with respect to students. Some treat it as a necessary evil, while others persistently search for the way to eliminate it from school. There are also advocates of significant educational and teaching values of compulsion. Compulsion can originate mainly from three elements. The first is compulsory education i.e. legally established compulsion of attendance at school by all children. In most countries, nobody asks whether a child wants to attend to school but it is generally accepted that each young person has to learn at school. The second source of compulsion at school is its

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formalized organization, which led to the development of numerous internal mechanisms of compulsion. Consequently, codified principles were created, of which part concerns students and other part refers to teachers. This is also connected with assignment of specific roles to students and teachers. There are also other sources of compulsion at school, directly connected with its teaching and educational tasks. Therefore, it is unsurprising that facing compulsion at school at various levels changes the attitude and motivation of students for participation in compulsory school activities. In the first contact with a group of students, teachers are often forced to neutralize negative emotions and attitudes to compulsory educational classes.

In this context, humor used by teachers plays a significant role in everyday life of school while performing many roles. According to Stebbins (1980), humor can be approached as a strategy and can exist in various forms. As a weapon in the conflict, humor can be an expression of aggression. It can also be a means of preventing unfavorable activities (so-called control humor) or used for solving educational problems. Humor may also be an expression of solidarity, good nature and friendship (humor accepted by both sides). Humor helps teachers familiarize with their students, their personality and temperamental traits. It is the factor that affects the subjective, symmetrical relations. It helps form the plane of agreement between teachers and students and represents the teacher's trait expected by students. At school, humor can play the role of a safety valve, promotes relax and helps meet school challenges.

These are only certain functions that can be performed by humor in school reality. As a tool, humor can be used in both teaching and educational settings.

Actually, the teaching and educational processes are inseparable, which means that teaching someone also involves educating (raising) them. Inseparability of teaching and education consists in that it is impossible to impact an area of human activities in an entirely isolated manner.

More specifically (Populcz, 1978), the teaching and educational process is presented in the context of teaching activities. Among them are preparatory, motivating, informing, control, directional, corrective or protection (in the case of physical education teachers) activities.

The present study attempts to analyze the problem of humor functioning in the school environment in the teaching and educational processes.

## **2. Material and Methods**

The aim of the study was to determine whether teachers integrate humor in their teaching and educational activities and how much it is appreciated by students. A survey was conducted

at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017 in comprehensive secondary schools. The research sample was 204 teachers of various specializations and 383 students. In total, 587 people from 9 secondary schools responded by filling in the survey questionnaire. The random stratified sampling was used, proportional to the sample size. During the sampling the first step was to compare all the secondary schools in the city of Kraków, followed by stratification according to the districts of the city (the old division into 5 districts was adopted). Since the number of schools in individual districts differed significantly, an additional form of group sampling was used (proportional sampling). The study surveyed schools which met the assumptions of group sampling according to city districts. A sampling interval was determined and a starting point was randomized. This led to choosing an adequate number of schools, proportionally to the number of schools in a district. The research sample was teachers and students from randomized schools.

### **3. Analysis of Study Results**

The results contained in Table 1 and Diagram 1 illustrate opinions of teachers and students about using humor in the teaching process. Six situations during a lesson were presented, during which it is possible to support teaching processes by means of humor and the teachers were asked whether they used humor in such situations. Furthermore, students answered from their own standpoint whether they actually had seen teachers using humor in specific school situations. The results were collected in tables and answers from both study groups were compared.

Analysis by means of the Mann-Whitney U test demonstrated statistically significant differences. This means that in the opinion of teachers, they used elements of humor during teaching, but the student's answers do not support such opinions, at least in the areas declared by the pedagogues.

In all six situations, teachers declared that they often used elements of humor during teaching activities. They used it in order to create a good learning atmosphere during classes (93%), reduce fatigue and passivity among students (92%) and support memorizing of the contents to be learnt (84%). High results were also obtained for other teaching situations, such as releasing tensions in students before a difficult test (exam) (83%), improving motivation for learning (82%) and helping students relax after intensive mental work (77%). Assessment made by students differed statistically from those declared by teachers. This means that they do not share the opinions of their teachers concerning the effects of using humor at school. However,

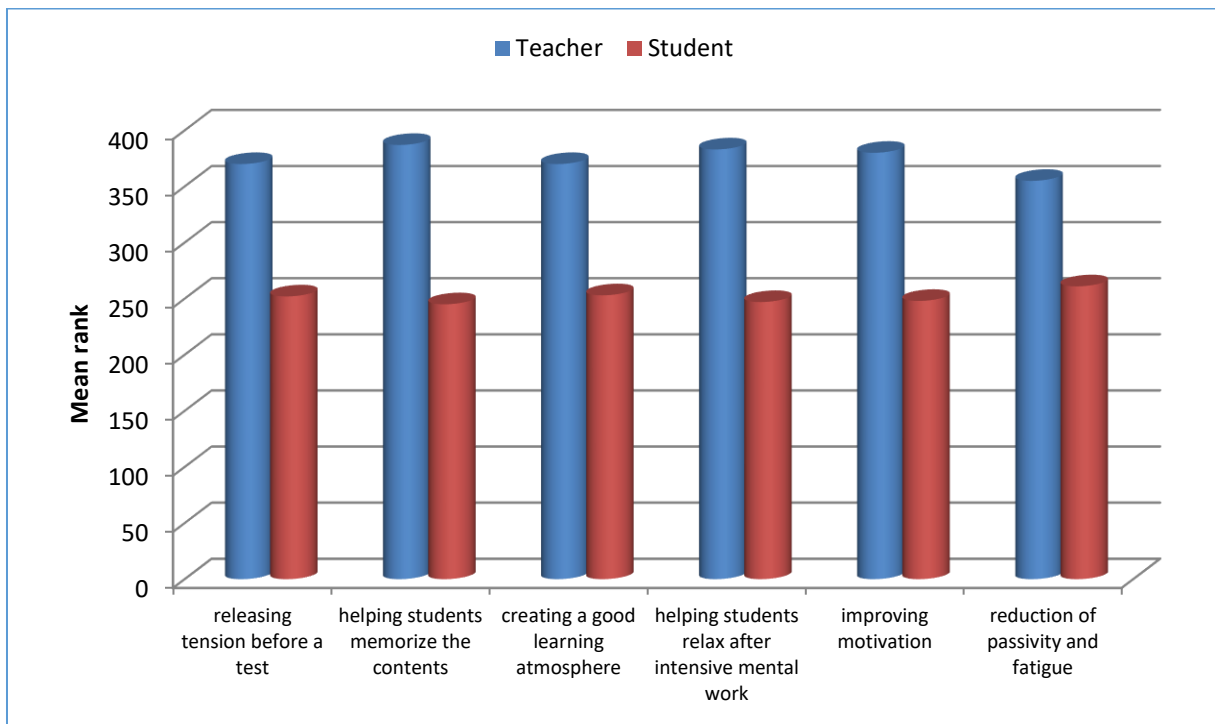
taking a closer look at the results indicates that students at least partially appreciated teachers' efforts to use elements of humor over the teaching process.

**Table 1.** Frequency of using humor by teachers in the teaching process according to the respondents (teachers and students)

Using humor by teachers in the teaching process	Group	YES		NO		M	SD	r	Z	p
		n	% of the group	n	% of the group					
Using humor in order to release tension before a difficult test	Teacher	170	83	34	17	3.15	1.21	370	8.37	<0.001
	Student	237	62	146	38	2.25	1.13	252		
Using humor in order to help students memorize the contents to be learnt	Teacher	172	84	32	16	3.07	1.26	387	10.13	<0.001
	Student	179	47	204	53	1.94	1.13	245		
Use of humor in order to create a good learning atmosphere during classes	Teacher	189	93	15	7	3.41	1.07	370	8.35	<0.001
	Student	272	71	111	29	2.54	1.13	253		
Using humor in order to help students relax after intensive mental work	Teacher	158	77	46	23	2.59	1.13	383	10.15	<0.001
	Student	123	32	260	68	1.63	0.99	247		
using humor in order to improve	Teacher	167	82	37	18	2.94	1.19	380	9.45	<0.001
	Student	174	45	209	55	1.92	1.10	248		

<b>motivation for learning</b>										
<b>Using humor in order to reduce passivity and fatigue</b>	Teacher	187	92	17	8	3.25	1.17	355	<b>6.64</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	278	73	105	27	2.55	1.12	261		

n - sample size	SD - standard deviation	Z - result of Mann-Whitney U-test
M - mean	r - mean rank	p - level of significance for the Mann-Whitney U test



**Diagram 1.** Frequency of using humor by teachers in the teaching process according to the respondents

The situations when students confirmed the use of humor by teachers include in particular the attempts to reduce passivity and fatigue among students (73%), care for a good and friendly learning atmosphere during classes (71%) and efforts to release emotional tensions and stress before a difficult test or exam (62%). In other situations, differences in opinions of teachers and students were more pronounced, as illustrated in Diagram 1. It should be noted

that the differences found between the opinions expressed by teachers and students may have partially resulted from different appreciation of humor used by teachers. Decoding humor contents is not obvious, especially if people who use it differ substantially from recipients. Among the factors that differentiate between perception of humorous contents are sex, age and intellectual level (Plessner, 2004). Hence age gap between the pedagogues and their students, which often reaches several decades, may represent a natural obstacle in understanding the humor used. Reception of humorous contents produced by teachers may be misunderstood by students or not received at all. Intentions of teachers who use humor to help students relax before a test or exam may be received as e.g. filling the leisure time or managing the "idle time" during a lesson. Therefore, it can be adopted that proper reception of the intentions of the person who uses elements of humor may be difficult to the addressee, especially if communicational barriers or misinterpretation occur. Despite these limitations, it can be observed that students saw a sense of humor in their teachers and their attempts to support the learning process by means of humor. Especially important are the activities which help create a friendly atmosphere, which is conducive to non-conflict communication, openness and trust. An especially important aspect of the teacher's work is to stimulate students' thinking using humorous puzzles and riddles to be solved or surprising comparisons, which also helps reduce monotony and fatigue. The contents produced in a humorous manner are memorized faster and better. At a level of secondary school, especially useful are such forms of humor as humorous comparisons, purposeful slips of the tongue, mental shortcuts or riddles based on word-play. These forms of humor make teaching the contents easier and improve the efficiency of memorizing them by students. This phenomenon is defined as the von Restorff effect (Tamblyn, 2003)

An important competence of a contemporary teacher is ability to motivate students for learning. Skillful dosing humor by the teacher can support such motivation. This mechanism is especially useful in the pedagogical practice and occurs based on the principle of positive feedback. If a teacher is able to create a friendly learning atmosphere and the students like their pedagogue, they are more willing to learn the subject and show more commitment to learning the contents. Furthermore, this impacts on school successes and, consequently, improves motivation.

During transfer of knowledge, teaching process is somehow simultaneous with education. The latter is inherent in interactions between teachers and students. Transfer and reception of knowledge cannot occur without a variety of activities of educational character. It

is impossible to isolate teaching from education. Therefore, both areas should be viewed from the standpoint of concrete teaching activities which are aimed to teach and educate. Among them, the most frequently emphasized are preparatory activities of the teacher, whose aim is to ensure successful conditions for the achievement of the task. The efficient preparatory activities, and, consequently, the achievement of the task, depend on the ability to utilize organizational forms and teaching resources. Motivating activities consist in attracting attention, interest and mobilization of the student's strength to perform the task. They are closely linked to emotional processes. Motivating activities concern, to the same extent, teaching and education. Moreover, they are interrelated since encouraging students to learn also instils desired attitudes and behaviors. Encouraging positive attitudes of students towards work (through solving various tasks) also helps develop other values (characterological, moral and social). Control activities are aimed first and foremost at the analysis of the effects of the activity and can be also oriented at organization of students' behaviors.

Guiding activities occur in the phase of learning new information and new skills by students. A characteristic feature of the guiding activities is to help students perform independent goal-oriented work. This includes such activities of the teacher as inspiring children to think properly, and giving clues and advice on the methods to find a solution for a specific situation.

The survey discussed in this study attempted to determine the role of humor in individual teaching activities which are related to the educational process. Table 2 presents ten educational interactions between teachers and students where the use of elements of humor seems to be possible. Similar to teaching activities (Table 1), the answers obtained from teachers were compared to those provided by students.

As it was the case in the previous analyses of the teaching process, the use of humor in educational settings can also lead to some misinterpretations among students. This concerns proper decoding the teachers' intentions in using the elements of humor in educational situations. For example, if a teacher uses the humor in order to encourage life optimism among students, this aim is obvious for the teacher as he or she is an optimist. However, students can interpret this situation differently. For this reason, answers provided by students can be affected by the error of misinterpretation. However, looking closer at overall results obtained during the study may lead to the conclusion that students defined educational situations unequivocally and confirmed or explicitly denied teachers' declarations.

Analyses performed using the Mann-Whitney U test demonstrated statistically significant difference in the most of presented situations. This means that, according to teachers, humor was used more often in the presented educational interactions compared to what was observed by students.

In educational settings, teachers used elements of humor in order to encourage life optimism in students (92%), maintain a good atmosphere in the class (90%) and earn trust among students (84%).

The most frequent observations of the students were activities aimed at maintaining a good atmosphere in the group (73%), encouraging life optimism (57%) and reduction in the distance between the teacher and students (55%). From the standpoint of the analysis, it is interesting to compare educational situations where answers provided by the students did not confirm teacher's declarations.

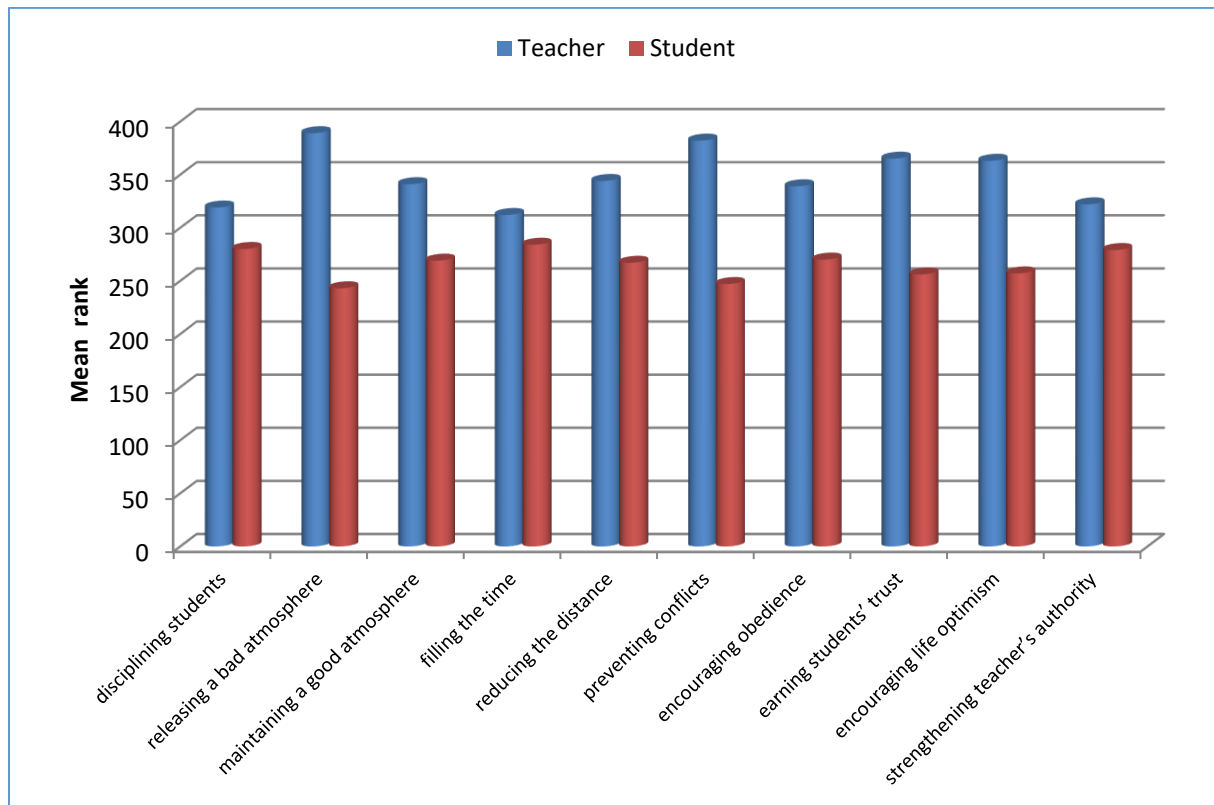
**Table 2.** Frequency of using humor by teachers in the educational process according to the respondents (teachers and students)

Using humor by teachers in the educational process	Group	YES		NO		M	SD	r	Z	p
		n	% of the group	n	% of the group					
to discipline students who behave improperly	Teacher	138	68	66	32	2.44	1.19	319	<b>2.83</b>	<b>0.005</b>
	Student	201	53	183	47	2.16	1.26	280		
to release a bad atmosphere in the group	Teacher	156	76	48	24	2.47	1.16	389	<b>10.9</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	101	26	282	74	1.50	0.92	243		
to maintain a good atmosphere in the group	Teacher	184	90	20	10	3.36	1.13	341	<b>5.08</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	279	73	104	27	2.78	1.27	269		
to fill the time	Teacher	130	64	74	36	2.15	1.07	312	<b>2.02</b>	<b>0.044</b>
	Student	182	47	201	53	2.02	1.20	284		
to reduce distance between	Teacher	145	71	59	29	2.71	1.28	344	<b>5.50</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	209	55	174	45	2.13	1.15	267		



<b>the teacher and the student</b>										
<b>to prevent conflicts between students</b>	Teacher	137	67	67	33	2.21	1.09	382	<b>10.6</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	82	21	301	79	1.38	0.83	247		
<b>to encourage obedience in students</b>	Teacher	140	69	64	31	2.54	1.31	339	<b>4.97</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	186	49	197	51	2.00	1.21	270		
<b>to earn students' trust</b>	Teacher	171	84	33	16	3.02	1.23	365	<b>7.68</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	206	54	177	46	2.18	1.21	256		
<b>to encourage life optimism among students</b>	Teacher	188	92	16	8	3.06	1.04	363	<b>7.49</b>	<b>&lt;0.001</b>
	Student	217	57	166	43	2.24	1.20	257		
<b>to strengthen teacher's authority</b>	Teacher	127	62	77	38	2.26	1.16	322	<b>3.13</b>	<b>0.002</b>
	Student	184	48	199	52	1.96	1.10	279		

n - sample size	SD - standard deviation	Z - result of Mann-Whitney U-test
M - mean	r - mean rank	p - level of significance for the Mann-Whitney U test



**Diagram 2.** Frequency of using humor by teachers in the educational process according to teachers and students

In the case of teachers using elements of humor to prevent conflicts between students (67%), most of students (80%) did not share this opinion. Similar pattern is observed for teachers' releasing a bad atmosphere in the group. Most of teachers (76%) claimed that they saw this problem and attempted to improve the atmosphere by using humor. However, most of the students (74%) disagreed. Similar discrepancies were observed when the lesson organization was changed and students did not do anything or the topic of the lesson was exhausted and students waited for the bell to ring (so-called idle time during the classes). Over half of teachers (64%) declared that they used elements of humor in such periods of time. However, half of students (53%) did not confirm such activities. The results presented in Table 2 lead to another conclusion: large group of the teachers studied used humor as a tool to discipline students. In the two presented educational situations, most teachers (70%) used humor in order to ensure obedience and discipline among students, which is confirmed by every second student. Discipline at school is a significant factor that ensures effective teaching and education. Discipline is often identified with punishing students for improper behavior. However, this is not an appropriate approach to the phenomenon of discipline since it captures

the problem unilaterally. The definition of school discipline proposed by Kohut and Range (Kohut and Range, 1986) assumes that school discipline should lead to creation of an atmosphere that facilitates learning, and allows students for the development of internal control and allows for monitoring of student's behaviors. Therefore, problems with discipline in class concern the behaviors of students that disturb the teaching activities, infringe on others' rights to learn, are physically and mentally dangerous or consist in destruction of someone's property (Levin and Nolan, 2000). Accordingly, discipline in a class at school allows for effective learning and teaching. As results from the research on disciplining interactions, teachers sometimes use various interventions using humor in order to instill students' obedience (Ochwat, 2011). Among them are such interventions as laughing conflict situations off or making humorous comments to a student in order to guide him or her towards a proper behavior. The situations where the teacher used irony or even sarcasm towards a student in order to discipline them were also defined. It also turned out that such interventions are used more often by men and by teachers of physical education.

An important aspect of the teachers' work is ability to create an adequate climate and friendly atmosphere of classes. The study demonstrated that this is an important element in the teacher's work. Teachers used humor in order to maintain good atmosphere during the lesson (90%), release a bad atmosphere (76%) or to prevent conflicts between students (67%). These efforts were not entirely confirmed by the students. However, the students confirmed the teachers' declarations concerning maintaining a good atmosphere during classes (73%).

Interestingly, nearly all teachers (92%) declared the use of humor in order to improve life optimism, with this observation supported by over half of students (57%). In order to instill optimism and cheerfulness in others, a person needs to have such traits himself or herself. Optimism and cheerfulness are important personality traits, which are especially appreciated by students. These characteristics are included in psychological competencies of the teacher, which improve the efficiency of the educational and teaching work. It can be presumed that the teachers studied did not only declare using humor for encouraging optimism in students but they also were characterized by such traits. People with optimistic attitudes are attractive to society: students trust such people more and turn to them for help and advice. Optimists often encourage others with their attitudes and are attractive to the environment and it is easier for them to convince others to adopt a similar point of view. This represents the effect of the psychological phenomenon of self-fulfilling prophecy, which, although does not guarantee a pedagogical success, but it improves its likelihood. The effect of the sense of humor on the

problem of occupational burnout is also important. It can be presumed (Maslach, 1982) that humor prevents the appearance of three basic symptoms of occupational burnout: depersonalization of others, sense of defeat in meeting your own expectations concerning professional achievements and emotional exhaustion. Other symptoms include a feeling of chronic fatigue and decreased sensitivity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to Woods (Woods, 1979), due to performance of varied and imposed social roles, the communities of teachers and students relate to each other rather stand-offishly. Although humor helps reduce distance between members of both groups, it disturbed the already sanctioned order. Bullough (Bullough, 2012), who referred to a study by Mayo (Mayo, 2010), emphasized the need for finding some common ground for pedagogues and their students at school, where humor, needed for well-being in teaching and learning, creates a relaxed space to relieve stress, free of responsibility and duties assigned to specific social roles.

The social changes that have been observed in the world of education, such as development of modern technologies, structural changes in the educational sector, evolution of social norms in young people and changes in the relation of young people to authorities lead to transformation in the dialogue between students and teachers. Each dialogue, including at school, means conversation between at least two people. However, there are several types of dialogues connected with hierarchy or atmosphere of the conversation. Martin Buber (Tamblyn, 2003) defined three types of dialogue: technical dialogue, discussion and actual dialogue. The first consists in the exchange of information in order to reach an agreement. The second type is a dialogue which is "a monologue in disguise", with the participants communicating something not because they do want to learn something but because they want to strengthen their self-esteem and improve their own mood. In a real dialogue, the prerequisite is to see the interlocutor as a partner in the discussion and to accept each other. Acceptance does not mean accepting someone's views but striving for talking about what we really think about a specific topic with consideration for the standpoint or motivations of the other person. The basis for this educational dialogue is to create proper relations between a student and a teacher. From the standpoint of the teacher, this means creation of trust using several methods to ensure greater openness of students. Partnership relations do not mean getting closer to students unthinkingly but rather the readiness to respect different views of students, and having the distance to yourself and ability to take a joke (without degrading yourself). Teacher's concerns about

reduced authority and seriousness of the teacher's profession caused by the use of "laugh community" are well described by the statement by Bakhtin (Bachtin, 1975), who argued that "real laughter, ambivalent and universal, does not deny dignity but it supplements and purifies it. Furthermore, it relieves dignity from dogmatism, one-sidedness, rigidity, fanaticism and relentlessness, fear and didacticism of gullibility and illusion [...]".

The present study suggests that teachers often use humor in teaching and educational situations, at least they declared to do so. However, the results obtained among students seem to confirm these declarations only partially. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers see the efficiency and effectiveness of using humor at school and attempt to use it. Unlike teachers, students did not seem to fully confirm these declarations, although they saw some efforts made by teachers and recognized part such situations in similar manner to their pedagogues.

As argued by Ziv (Ziv, 1988), using humor has a positive effect on the teachers' perception by students. This leads to the development of friendly feelings towards the pedagogue, increasing his or her popularity and credibility and strengthening of the authority. This also helps build partnership relations between students and teachers. From a sociological standpoint (Żygulski, 1985), humor is a type of social tie, which forms a community. The need for humor is common and constant in each human community, although its concrete manifestations, intensity and techniques may vary.

Most interactions between teachers and students are of asymmetrical character, connected with hierarchical relations between participants of the interactions. By its very nature, this type of relationship does not impact on creation of the atmosphere of trust and openness between students and teachers. Furthermore, one cannot forget about the common compulsion used at schools. Compulsory education (which forces students to perform specific activities and being obedient) is actually a natural feature of school as an institution. Therefore, the following dilemma arises: on the one hand, the compulsion seems to be a natural feature, which we should accept; on the other hand, the compulsion seems to be opposing to the critical precondition for education at school, that is, internal motivation of students for learning. For this reason, teachers during the lessons often have to neutralize this compulsion and obligation to participate in classes. The fact that the person is forced to do something changes motivation for this activity. Young students, full of vitality, energy and humor, are unable to accept the full seriousness, class rigor and excessive social distance. Consequently, this may lead to defiance or bursts of laughter as a safety valve.

Meyer (Meyer, 2000) distinguished between four functions of humor in communication between people that allow for determination of the boundaries of interpersonal relations and behaviors. These include identification, clarification, enforcement and differentiation. Identification consists in making views common and authenticating the speaker. During communication based on humor, the speaker expresses his or her emotions, thus becoming equal to the recipients. The clarification mechanism consists in using surprising punchlines, surprise zingers, and traversing or exaggeration, which lead to fast and good memorization. Enforcement of the principles of social interactions using humor consists in instilling educational principles in a humorous form. Recipients do not feel stigmatized in such cases since the speaker warns not only the recipients but also himself or herself. Differentiation consists in presentation of unpopular views or ideas in a safe manner. Using this approach, humor “pacifies” opponents emotionally. Instead of being irritated or outraged, they start laughing and start a dialogue that allows for objectification of views. In practice, all four functions of humor can be employed during communication between teachers and students. A study by Tomas Gordon (Gordon, 1974) emphasized that the communicational barriers make reaching an effective agreement difficult. Such barriers include e.g. moralizing, ordering, prohibiting and threatening. The messages sent by teachers often lead to resistance in students, sense of inferiority and anger. In this case, humor may represent an effective buffer in educational teaching activities that are aimed to correct inadequate behaviors of students and develop positive attitudes.

Many authors (Piętkowa, 2000) claimed that contact with humor helps acquire learning material. It is conducive to activation and concentration of attention, faster and better memorization, strengthening of associations, a more critical analysis of contents and reduction of cognitive difficulties (e.g. perceptual defense). A substantial value of humor is also encouraging and strengthening of interests, stimulation of interest and enthusiasm.

An important value of school humor is its effect on an overall atmosphere during classes. Humor used by teacher can significantly affect creation and maintaining a friendly climate of classes, reduced distance and, consequently, increased trust of students towards teachers. It also influences reduction in tensions and preventing conflicts in the class. A good climate often determines teaching effects, transfer and consolidation of knowledge and educational effects.

Therefore, skillfully used by teachers, humor may become a useful tool to improve the effectiveness of teaching and educational processes and, in general terms, can effectively bring

communities of students and teachers to each other since, as argued by Woods (Woods, 1979), they refer to each other with a reserve.

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