

Ambivalent laughter: the key to preserving playtime

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Abstract

Arguments over the future of school playtime continue back and forth. Opinions range from the interval period envisaged as a waste of teaching and learning time to sentiments supporting a child's right to free play. Neither view, however, addresses the principal issue. If all laughter is ambivalent, which is the issue proposed here, then the central means by which pupils communicate on the primary school playground cannot be an indication of their contentment alone. The double, contradictory nature of ambivalence means that pupils' laughter can also be an indication of their unhappiness. Playtime's substantially serious dimension, therefore, invalidates any claims that playtime is simply a frivolous occasion and therefore expendable. Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the language of relationships and on ambivalent laughter provides this qualitative study with the fresh insights that can make a positive contribution to the ongoing playtime debate.

Keywords: primary school, laughter, playtime, ambivalence, Bakhtin.

1. Introduction

“Playtime” is in fact “break-time” for older pupils, who see the former as a term more appropriate for use by – and to describe the activities of – children at Key Stage 1 than Key Stage 2. This was explained to me by two Year 6 girls at lunchtime as they strolled around the playground hand in hand as though they were taking a digestive promenade. These girls may indeed have been enjoying the designated play period, but they were not “playing” as would fit any typical understanding of the term. Some younger boys nearby were similarly engaged, wrapped up physically, exclusively in one another, their arms extended across and around each other's shoulders in a mutual embrace that was splendidly matey and distinctly old-fashioned. There they were, these boys and girls, amply content it seemed to be in enjoyable company, moving around the playground with little obvious purpose, no doubt affirming their friendship, their camaraderie, but not really playing, and not yet laughing.

(Nugent 2016)

The vignette (above) formed part of a larger ethnographic study concerned with laughter in a local authority primary school. It does, however, contain some of the issues that bear today upon the contentious matter of school playtime. Opponents of the interval period, for example, might

draw attention to the lacklustre setting evoked, where pupils appear to spend their time occupied in aimless wandering behaviour. Proponents, on the other hand, could see in it just the type of occasion that makes for some useful interactive opportunities, when friendships with peers are formed and consolidated. The tricky playtime/breaktime designation, highlighted by the girls from Year 6, raises questions not only about what that particular phase of the school day should be called, but what that phase of the school day actually represents. And the lack of any laughter, in a place where it would normally be expected, may be the confirmation needed that the school playground no longer fits in with current educational requirements.

Restrictions on times allocated for periods of play have gained momentum in recent years. Since laughter remains the communication and behavioural habit most closely associated with playtime, any constraints upon free play will adversely affect pupils' laughter production, and may call into question a school's commitment to upholding the principle of "children's voice." Laughter is a particularly important voice within the culture of any school. It no longer serves simply as an indication of pupil contentment. For many pupils, laughter functions as a sincere but also as a strategic communicative medium – a flexible channel with which to negotiate their way across a variety of on-site encounters and interactions.

2. Methodology

Laughter, it has been claimed, is about relationships (Provine 2000). Few people have deliberated more on the principles of levity and relativity than Mikhail Bakhtin. His way of understanding the world was grounded in the belief that nothing can be sustained without the company of others. And a significant component in any form of human association tends to be laughter. When Bakhtin described the carnival laughter that flourished in the Middle Ages as ambivalent, he did not mean that it lacked conviction, that it was an expression of indifference. His intention was to acknowledge its capability of being articulated and interpreted in contradictory and conflicting ways. It can, he claimed, be gay and triumphant as well as mocking and derisive. "It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (1984: 11).

Irrespective of the particular message being communicated, it will be argued here that all laughter is ambivalent. Some maintain that ambivalence is an attitude that develops as a consequence of incongruities or contradictions present in the social fabric. It is said to thrive where bureaucracy and rationalisation, where order and control tend to dominate (Habermas 1991; Bauman 1991). Although interesting laughter data were gathered from different areas across the school setting, the playground returned a greater quantity and richer variety, making it possible to organise material into a manageable number of relationship-themed case studies. Fieldwork was conducted without the use of any recording equipment. While in classrooms and on the playground, pupils were aware of my presence at all times since my role was that of a participant observer, a role incorporating the essential interplay of 'involvement and detachment' normally expected of ethnographers (Powdermaker 1966: 9). Maintaining such a balance was not only helpful in explaining the complex nature of the school under study, but supported attempts to make better sense of school playtimes. It helped clarify previous judgements insisting that it is an occasion for pupils simply to let off steam, and instead portray it as an event whereby sophisticated schemes and calculations affecting the management of personal friendships endure.

3. Case study: The girls in the gazebo

One mid-morning playtime I approached a polygonal gazebo which occupied one corner of the school playground. After slowly walking around it I happened upon a small opening and found

four girls lying face down on the wooden floor, one on top of the other. It looked as though they were re-enacting Hans Christian Anderson's story of *The Princess and the Pea*, or rehearsing some moves for a future Physical Education class. But what attracted most attention was the sound of the girls' laughter. Each child had been reduced to a state of collapsible hilarity. The sound that rang out soon encouraged a crowd of adult and pupil onlookers who, curious as to the source and nature of the exhilaration, were soon laughing among themselves having been happily and helplessly contaminated. If the tower of bodies was not the most elegant sight ever seen, it certainly produced the most attractively natural sound one could ever wish to hear. Their fabulous laughter continued for some minutes, more so perhaps out of sheer delight than despite their high humour the girls had managed to preserve the integrity of their vertical shape – that somehow none of the upper bodies in the human construction had toppled over.

Although laughter may be inclined to spread like a contagion, quite often it develops from the least significant detail. Sometimes it has little or no purpose at all (Zijderveld 1983). The laughter cascading from inside the gazebo appeared to have no preceding influence beyond the incongruity of the girls' physical arrangement. A wry or risible comment could easily have passed between them and set in chain their appealing harmonics. But equally, their laughter may have simply been a natural accumulation, with the sole reference point being their immediate and exclusive company, the sheer delight and pleasure of peer group association (Woods 1984). In attempting to demonstrate how friendships can hold people together, the girls' declaration of togetherness was every bit as meaningful and expressive as the conventional affirmations demonstrated, for example, by the pupils in the opening vignette. It was probably not intended for a wider audience, but simply to underline to themselves how much each person in that human assembly embodied the vital group virtues of dependability and support.

3.1. Contagious laughter

With its homely appeal to the eye, the modest gazebo, along with the humble playground, provided the girls with a low, unobtrusive profile. They could not, therefore, have anticipated the consequences their behaviour would have on any outsiders. Their laughter was not, as they may have hoped, only located in – and between – themselves. Once it broke free from its confines, it gave them and their privacy away. But it also succeeded in creating a second relational front, one that broadly echoed their own. Laughter very quickly began to reverberate across the playground, encouraging a spreadability factor for which its infectiousness, its ability to touch others, made complicit partners of all those in attendance.

Attempts to explain laughter's infectious effect range from the prosaic to the esoteric. It touches people, according to Tahhan, not in any obviously physical way, but emotionally so, in a "touching at depth" (Tahhan 2013: 49). Those who succumb to it do so on account of its sound pressure, its "sonorous touch" (Tahhan 2013: 49). Provine acknowledges that "laughter itself may trigger laughter" (Provine 1992: 2), but suspects that mimicry is the critical issue. He wonders if it is a "relic of an automatic social synchronisation process" (Provine 1992: 2), an unemotional herd instinct that we all perhaps unconsciously share, to duplicate the behaviour of others in order to be part of a particular group, for example.

Bakhtin also equated laughter with the contagious touch. He was, however, inclined to link it more to the common touch, with an accent not on the sonorous but the sensuous. While Tahhan's laughter touches at depth, in a spiritual sense, Bakhtin's has a down-to-earth aspect to it, achieving a more material form of connectedness. Nothing makes a greater contribution to the festival atmosphere, he argues, than the publicly pressed flesh of a densely packed gathering (1984). Individual revellers quickly transform into one homogenous body, conferring upon each member a profoundly visceral sense of community (Cunliffe 1993). The ensuing laughter

signals a mass transmission; its choral effect confirming the power of the crowd. For, above all else, group laughter, Bakhtin argues, conveys a feeling of solidarity and strength (1984).

3.2. Ambivalent?

How, then, is it possible to even consider describing the gazebo girls' laughter as ambivalent when every indication of it appeared to be transparently whole-hearted? Bakhtin would argue that we should think about relationships in terms of their connectedness *and* their separation. He believed that all social processes are the product of a "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies" (Bakhtin 1981: 272). It is a struggle that lies at the very heart of social life, a never-ending conflict between centrifugal forces that are heterogenous and aim for diversity, and centripetal forces that are homogenous and strive for unity. These tendencies, Bakhtin maintains, are not fixed in opposition but dynamically interactive (1981).

We should, moreover, be mindful that playtime laughter is not always as innocent as it sounds. The girls' laughter certainly seemed to elicit a positive affect, but much depends on how it is interpreted and – importantly – by whom. Not everyone would have found it so beguiling. While many people on the playground that morning were pleasantly intrigued by the sounds issuing from inside the gazebo, other pupils would have been irritated by them since they gave every indication that the four girls were not just having fun, but were having the very best fun.

The quantity as well as the volume levels of laughter raised on the playground can often be intended to intimidate and aggravate rival individuals or groups. Pressures placed on pupils to perform at school are not restricted to the classroom. The playground can be a highly competitive environment, and laughter can at times communicate a message that is anything but good-natured. Coordinated laughter displays might project, for instance, an affirmation of group togetherness, suggesting a playtime cohort comprised of members who are ideally matched, deeply content, and who feel perfectly secure in each other's company. Projections of group unity are a common playtime affectation. Pupils will exploit any opportunity to get one over their rivals. In some cases, such point-scoring is just a ploy to conceal divisions within their own ranks. Either way, it remains a potent and popular way to create the impression that pupils have struck relational gold. The girls in the gazebo's combined laughter announced this particular achievement with a fanfare of the highest rhetorical colour.

3.3. Classroom and/or playground

The gazebo provided the four girls with a relatively safe space in which to play. But its value does not rest solely on its use as a popular item of playground furniture. It can be a useful starting-point from which aspects of the school's physical environment can be considered, with the aim of identifying possible triggering conditions for ambivalency. A significant crisis of identity, for example, concerns the school's two principal venues, the classroom and the playground. They represent the key features of a school's inside and outside, and in all likelihood this separation accounts for the ongoing tension that shapes their relationship. The way each space is considered within school, in particular the favouritism show towards the classroom, highlights a bias that has, up until recently, become difficult to sustain.

One taken-for-granted assumption is that the classroom and the playground are qualitatively different places (Pellegrini & Blatchford 2000). Indeed, few people have been prepared to demonstrate how these venues have any features or values in common. The nearest attempt at a conjunction is the claim that they operate in "parallel" (Pellegrini & Blatchford 2000: 92). The appeal to geometry here is interesting. It acknowledges that their arrangement is based on matters of variance, with each venue located alongside, but separate from, the other. There is always a significant gap, for they are quite distinct school spaces. They exist, but without affecting one another in any significant way. As such, their connectivity is seldom mentioned,

which may explain why many teachers are inclined to consider the school playground as extraneous territory, a region to be navigated only on the very rarest occasion.

Such feelings about the playground are unsurprising given our broader opinions about, and experiences of, inside and outside. According to recent research, Britain has become a nation of insiders. Adults spend most of their daily lives indoors (Gleave 2018). Children of school age, meanwhile, spend 90 % of their time each day within a building of some description, a figure that includes the amount of time spent in their own homes (Mullan 2019). In this context, the term “inside” is associated with protection and intimacy, whereas “outside” denotes a measure of risk, of uncertainty. From the data provided, it is easy to see how these particular dimensions can assume either positive or negative significance.

But Bakhtin had a way of breaking down binaries. He could show how the two parts in any pairing are not distinct phenomena, but are in fact closely connected. They can be “made to touch and know one another” (LaCapra 1983: 298). Bakhtin asks us to consider stepping outside the prevailing logic, to look out for unusual unions, to see the possibilities and benefits whenever contrasting and improbable relationships can be established (Bakhtin 1984a). Carnival life, Bakhtin explained, was a “world inside out” (Bakhtin 1984a: 11). Carnival participants were the beneficiaries of a vigorous physical, social, and attitudinal intermingling, whereby processes of transposition and realignment affected all forms of identity, all categories, all individuals and institutions. Accordingly, there were no rigid distinctions. Nothing was static, ready-made, or complete. Everything was dynamic, transformative, in a process of “continuous change and fusion” (Bakhtin 1984a: 433).

There are indications of a similar effect at work in the life-world of a primary school, with attempts to undermine some of its more traditional foundations. Conventional fixtures and boundaries are it seems subject to regular bouts of transgression. Schools have now become centres where notions of inside can acquire an outside dimension, and vice versa. As opportunities for playground play have steadily diminished, for example, it is noticeable that the amount of playful classroom instruction has steadily increased (Berkhout et al. 2010). And a further disturbance of inside-outside orthodoxy concerns the idea of exterior classrooms. It was noticed that the four gazebo girls were playing inside a small building which was situated outside on the playground. A minor but significant breach of the school’s ordered topography had occurred. The girls were, in effect, situated within *and* without, occupying an indeterminate position, one that very lightly blurred the inside-outside distinction.

The same outcome, although on a much larger and more significant scale, is produced whenever prefabricated classrooms become part of the playground landscape. These “temporary” structures remain a fixture on many school sites, and are normally put into service to provide additional teaching space whenever pupil numbers exceed the statutory limit. Pupils, by and large, seem to enjoy the modular learning experience, an enjoyment heightened no doubt by the incongruity of their inside-outside status. And it is this interdependence that complicates the continuing claim of a classroom-playground difference. In Bakhtinian terms, these domains now enjoy a far more interactive dialogue. The use made of portable classrooms helps to redefine the conventional playground-classroom hierarchy, stressing the continuity, not the separation, of their spatial and their pedagogic relations. They do this by placing pupils in an ambivalent position. For once inside the temporary classroom, pupils are faced with something of a dilemma – suspended between an obligation to learn and a competing urge to play.

4. Case study: Tahir

Near to the flight of steps leading into the drab Portakabin played a boy called Tahir. Despite exhibiting coordination difficulties, most noticeable whenever he ran, Tahir’s overall

playground movements were only slightly inhibited by his developmental delay. But he did like to run. And he liked to laugh, too. In fact, whenever Tahir was observed on the playground, he was engaged in what looked like spontaneous running and laughing activity, evidence perhaps of some form of hyper-mobility. Any casual observer would be forgiven for thinking that he was indulging in dynamically interactive free play. But Tahir's activity, for the most part, was a solitary pursuit. His unaccompanied performances were carefully crafted, for they were managed in such a way as to give the appearance that they included the active involvement of others.

In this case the "others," a group of four classmates, were the unwitting targets of Tahir's legerdemain. This quartet of friends regularly indulged together in playground "tig." It was one of their favourite games, and demanded lots of running and produced lots of laughter, due largely to the exhilarating experience of chasing and being chased. But even though he was not a member of their group, Tahir made it known that he would play with them nonetheless. Taking it upon himself to instigate proceedings, his routine began by running up to any member of the group before touching them, crying "tig," then running away excitedly at speed, expecting, but usually failing, to provoke any kind of response. Occasionally members of the group would protest, express annoyance that he was not in their game, and try to "shoo" him away each time he ran past or through the group. But Tahir would invariably become animated by this response, inclined to believe that their "shooing" was in fact a feature of the game, which only spurred him on to run even harder and laugh even more excitedly.

In taking such a bold step, it may have looked as though Tahir was attempting to force his way into the boys' clique because he was too impatient to wait for an invitation. Equally, he could have been attempting to disrupt the group's ongoing activities because he felt aggrieved by its exclusivity. A speck of resentment would have certainly lent his laughter a slightly bitter edge, a covert note of his own frustration perhaps, except that Tahir did not seem the type of lad to wilfully upset others, to deliberately flout playground codes or peer-group protocols. It makes far better sense to recognise in the shape of his behaviour a determined means by which to convey information about his play-competencies, so that their merits could be subjected to peer-group approval. Tahir was hoping to pass what was, in effect, an audition.

His behaviour amounted to a practical display of his skills and abilities. It provided interested parties with some indication of his character, his background and personality, and whether they would make him an attractive candidate, one with the right group-member potential. He may simply have felt that in having all the credentials necessary to play "tig" it would go some way towards impressing the group's gatekeepers. Tahir's expressive playing ability was, for one thing, fully coordinated with theirs. In his quest for acceptance, he was demonstrating that he could run and laugh just like them. Echoing current members' behaviour in the hope of impressing them is an established tactic for those with aspirations to access and join a particular group (Cromdal 2001).

4.1. Parody

Tahir's laughing and running display certainly made an impact. He appeared to revel in his "half real and half-play acted" persona (Bakhtin 1984b: 123). His laughter, in particular, appeared to be perfectly judged, a carefully crafted model of the boys' own mirth. His reproductive technique was rightly admired. But, as ever, Bakhtin is careful to highlight the presence of those competing centripetal and centrifugal forces. He makes repeated references to one of the favourite laughter-making formats that enjoyed particularly vivid expression during the Middle Ages. Using a particularly memorable phrase, he notes how the mechanics of parody made it possible for a person to use the legitimate authority of laughter in order to, as it were, go undercover (Bakhtin 1984b).

The way in which parody operates makes it a good fit with Tahir's double identity. "Double voiced" discourse (Bakhtin 1984b: 195) was among the most popular themed type of entertainment deployed during the carnival season. And parody was behind much of the festive mimicking-inspired ridicule. Much of it was aimed at high-minded prelates and law-makers, figures of authority within the ruling regimes. Imitations of this kind were often highly exaggerated, although some pointed criticisms lay behind the mockery. Tahir's enactment could be construed as a form of parody, except that the sounds made by his laughter were so similar to the boys' original that any stylised exaggerations, any sense of ridicule or reproach normally associated with this genre, were not immediately apparent. But in highlighting this notion of an overt-covert opposition, Bakhtin also raises our awareness of Tahir's surreptitious laughter.

4.2. Imitation and innovation

Imitation remains a key feature among the varying forms of parody. It is also a crucial component of pedagogy. It is very likely that the classroom was a major source of inspiration for Tahir's *divertissement*. Teaching and learning methods, as Bakhtin describes them, proceed according to information gleaned as a result of "reciting by heart" or "retelling in one's own words" (Bakhtin 1981: 341). Tahir may, in fact, have been guided by both of these formats. The skilful reproduction of his classmates' laughter owed something to the prevalence – and continued importance – of rote learning in education. Much of Tahir's laughing routine was a direct copy of the original. But it is possible that smuggled among the genial-sounding articulations was a cackle-or-two of his own scorn, some biting laughter ad libs. Few of the people who were aware of Tahir's playground situation would have begrudged him the opportunity to introduce a note of opprobrium. Incorporating bouts of new retaliatory laughter does not amount to paraphrasing as such, but Tahir's laughter was always open to adaptation since it could be easily and seamlessly reworked. This tactic gave his performance its parodic edge, turning it into a blend of affiliation and hostility, transforming what could have been a mechanically repetitive exercise into a critical show-stopper. Tahir's routine was clearly imitative, but it wasn't only that. It was imitative *and* innovative.

Had Tahir produced in his English class a composition that demonstrated thoughtful planning and drafting, that was stimulating, inventive, and intelligently presented, it would have earned him deserved accolades. Yet, showing similar initiatives out on the playground, in real world conditions, pupils will usually find that their industry and enterprise goes unnoticed. Teachers are always said to be on the look-out to find in their classrooms those pupils who are able to express themselves in imaginative and creative ways, those capable of producing innovations worth nurturing and of genuine pedagogic value. It is, then, frustrating to see pupils with undoubted skills and talents, whose creative abilities are shown in unconventional ways, with little hope or opportunity of them being harnessed and properly channelled simply because these capacities occur outside of formal learning zones.

Establishing relationships with individuals or groups can be a daunting prospect for many pupils. For those like Tahir it can present significant challenges – although it can provide opportunities, too. His attitude towards playtime was to make good use of its recreational frame in order to develop a spiritedly friendship-making initiative. Naturally occurring small talk will often be enough to break the relational ice, but occasionally pupils will feel compelled to employ alternative strategies. Even though the outcome of Tahir's enterprising effort remains unknown, it may be considered a "success" inasmuch that it was commendably inventive and it complied with acceptable behavioural norms, conditions that, in this particular instance, were brought safely and correctly into alignment

5. Case study: Peter

Having newly arrived from Poland, Peter joined his Year 5 cohort at the most awkward of times, right in the middle of term. His command of English was such that in most of his classes he was accompanied by an interpreter who translated some of the more technical and vernacular strains of teacher-talk that was apt periodically to confuse him. At playtime, however, he was very much on his own, an indication perhaps that “play” is still conceived in some quarters as a universal language, one that requires no translation (although it could be argued it was on the playground where Peter was in most need of additional support). But what he may have lacked in English language skills he more than made up for in ambition, creativity, and sheer guile. For Peter practiced a very different kind of play, a type that although relationship-driven was problematic nevertheless. In an effort to make some form of contact with his unfamiliar peers, most of whom were busily engaged in paired or group activity, Peter pioneered a form of play-acting that recalled the ruses and schemes cited and studied by the likes of Erving Goffman (1970) and Stephen Potter (1962).

To many new pupils, the teeming theatre of the school playground can make them ache to be a part of it, and then leave them frustrated when they are not. Peter’s game plan may have been hatched with both of these thoughts in mind. His plan involved throwing a tennis ball high into the air expecting, hoping, knowing, that before its fall to earth it had a better than average chance of hitting someone. He did not seem particularly choosy as to who got hit, but his aim was generally concentrated over an area where large numbers of his Year group peers played. His early attempts followed a set routine. Upon scoring a “hit,” he would rush over to the disconcerted victim and, being careful not to admit or show liability, simulate some concern for their well-being. Then, using a combination of suitably concerned facial expressions and animated gestures, he would begin speculating as to what might have happened. With a performance straight out of Huckleberry Finn, he would look around bemusedly, scratch his head theatrically, and then shrug his shoulders before pointing up at the sky as if to invite the possibility of *force majeure*.

Initially, it was assumed that his theatrics were enacted in order to make contact with one of his new peers. The consequences of any ball-pupil percussion might be enough to open communication channels and eventually result in Peter receiving an outright invitation to play. Anthropologists and psychologists have studied the effects of this behavioural phenomenon (Fox 2004; Crusco & Wetzel 1984), although Peter’s efforts to manipulate social encounters by means of provocative contact is a version yet to be explored or explained in any significant detail. But having observed many of his later efforts with the ball, at a time perhaps when he was beginning to grow weary of repeated failures and rejections, it became clear that his laughter had changed. Previous to this, his sheepish chuckles were always as a result of the ball having found a human target. It brought to mind the character of Muttley from the popular TV cartoon series “Dastardly and Muttley.” But for many of his later attempts, Peter was laughing before a ball had even left his hand. There were occasions when, standing with his back to the playground, preparing for a speculative launch high over one shoulder, he’d already be in a state of mild delirium. Peter’s laughter seemed out of sync; he was laughing before anything had actually happened.

What may have begun as a genuine if unorthodox attempt to engage pro-socially with his new peers, had taken a decidedly anti-social turn. If it was doubtful that Peter’s priority was to try and bond with his fellow pupils, it raised the possibility that his objective in fact was to succeed only in hitting some of them. Although he was surrounded by other children, Peter was very much on his own. Bakhtin notes how a person’s voice changes if it is deprived of any meaningful response, of any meaningful interaction (1984b). As Peter’s mood changed, so did his laughter. Not being part of any peer exchange, no longer playfully orientated, his laughter

became noticeably strident. The difference in tone marked a crucial point in Peter's emotional transition, demarcating the moment when he turned from hopeful to disheartened, from pleased to aggrieved, from Muttley to Dick Dastardly.

We tend to think about laughter and play in terms of their affinity. There is an expectation that they should be framed together, but it is a taken-for-granted combination that reflects a popular but largely ill-informed viewpoint. While we should not necessarily discount the existence of playful laughter, we should as a matter of good judgement be at least suspicious of it. Playtime has not suddenly become more aggressive. It has continuously played host to the unstable forces of amiability and hostility, and has long been an occasion when potential friends are viewed as potential enemies. Playful and aggressive laughter are susceptible to a flat and static form of classification, as either an inclusive or an exclusive category. But Peter's behaviour helps draw attention to laughter's inexactness. It highlights the way in which good natured laughter can swiftly transmute into an aggressive form. It signals the presence of a grey area situated at the interface of these contrasting emotions whereby laughter is capable of being perceived either way (Platter 2010).

5.1. Centripetal and centrifugal

As a venue frequently associated with vigorous interaction, the school playground can, to some pupils, feel like a cold and lonely place. Unsettling though such inconsistent judgements might be, they constitute the tension deemed necessary for the preservation of society's well-being. The argument, essentially, is that we should be careful about effacing exclusionary features or eliminating antagonisms, for they are precisely configured so as to ensure we do not slip into zones of comfort, of complacency, and thus assume an imagined invulnerability. The idea goes back at least to the philosophy of Kant, but has particular relevance when applied to Bakhtin's centripetal-centrifugal model (1981). These terms, which represent uniformity and diversity, separation and union, are used by him to describe the competing energies, forces and drives that we all possess, that we all employ. Both are in a constant process of change depending on the various settings and situations we encounter each day.

The relationship between these forces tends to change depending on the social conditions present in different historical eras (Crowley 2001). During primary schooling's early-modern phase, for example, it might be fair to suggest that centripetal forces held sway. From the late nineteenth-century onwards, playground laughter was conceived as being a generally reliable emotional attitude. When pupils laughed, teachers were inclined to believe it was because they were happy. This was the standard interpretation. But after the publication of Dupréel's seminal paper in 1928, new understandings about laughter's inclusive and exclusive capabilities emerged. It was a time of great educational reform and a time of growing influence from continental philosophy. An attendant rise in the prominence of the centrifugal effect exposed the false division between it and its centripetal counterpart, making for a relationship that was non-conflictual, no longer monologic and single-sided, but one driven by a mutual contingency. It offered the prospect, among other things, for an improved understanding of pupil's playtime relations since it helped raise the profile of laughter's double-sided, essentially ambivalent, nature.

According to Bakhtin, tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces are present each time we express ourselves (1981). Every utterance is shaped by tendencies that incline towards uniformity and variation, official and unofficial, reverent and irreverent. Examples of these orientations were apparent in some of Peter's classroom and playground encounters. There was the authoritative voice of his Year 5 teacher, explaining with clarity and precision subject-related principles and procedures, yet lapsing into the vernacular whenever she wanted to lighten the classroom mood. And the business-like efficiency of Peter's interpreter, whose expert code-

switching, her rapid information processing from first to second language, was interspersed with her off-the-cuff attempts to render for Peter's sake some of the teacher's more colourful figures of speech. Out on the playground, Peter's efforts to find a friend were not helped by his idiosyncratic ball skills, nor indeed by his hybrid accent, the cadences of which seemed to parody the standard English spoken by most of his playground peers. It probably contributed to the rapid deterioration in his play-ability profile, which, in turn, may have produced in Peter his tell-tale laughter, those articulations that were simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, or, as Bakhtin might have described them, "cheerful and annihilating" (Bakhtin 1981: 21).

When justifying their decisions to abolish playtimes, some headteachers will take into account the number of ball-related injuries and instances of aggressive playground behaviour that occurred during the course of a particular week or term. They are held up as corroborating evidence, with the authority of the total figure almost guaranteed to make a highly persuasive case. It is by no means certain, of course, that Peter's headteacher would have reacted in this way had she been aware of his playground antics. What is clear, however, is that in Peter's behaviour there were certain indications that all was not well. He did his best to let people know there was a problem. Peter's sense of disconnection was communicated by his own disconnected laughter. Each outburst was a red flag, an earnest transmission for assistance. It is just a pity there were so few people available who could see, or read, the signs.

5.2. Relationships education

The introduction of "Relationships Education," a compulsory module intended to supplement existing PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) provision in the curriculum (DfE 2019) came too late to be of any practical benefit to Peter. But if, among the recommendations and suggestions, items that were covered included friendship formation (focusing on pupils who are unfamiliar with prevailing social and cultural etiquette), guidance on access and initiation rituals – the procedures that are generally followed when attempting to associate with unfamiliar peers, and advice to pupils who lack social skills or are lacking in conversational English, then it could help prevent other pupils from following Peter's unintentional attempt to bring new meaning to the term "making contact."

The availability of a convenient but informal assessment venue would allow teachers to evaluate these classroom materials by noting directly their impact on pupils' performativity. The playground would appear to be a suitable and an obvious location. Whilst checking how far the taught materials have been absorbed by pupils in terms of their relationship development, teachers could also check how laughter, the substance at the heart of most relationships, is being applied. They could assess, for example, how its ambivalent nature helps pupils avoid making taken-for-granted assumptions, of forming preconceived opinions about others, since ambivalency encourages a more balanced and, it is argued, a more accurate form of decision-making (Schneider et al. 2020).

The way objects and people are classified in schools usually determines who or what gets included and excluded. Appreciating the limitations of an "either/or" logic will help pupils to work against the perpetuation of binary thinking, given its association with personalised labelling and stereotyping. These discrediting effects are among the most familiar barriers to the way individual's coordinate their behaviour and how we relate to other people. The ordinary and natural manner in which, from a first impression, we assign certain attributes to others, can threaten the very nature and foundation of cooperative interactions. In a primary school setting, the opportunity to become acquainted with laughter's "both/and" approach might be the kind of model to ensure that categories as we currently understand them do not become inscribed and reified, and that the psychopathology of profiling and pigeon-holing no longer remains a burden for any pupil.

6. Discussion

In 2011, Månsson and Langmann asked ‘[w]hat place might ambivalence have in education? When does it arrive, and in what guise?’ (Månsson & Langmann 2011: 15). Given the changing nature of our world, and its growing diversity, they wondered if there was a concerted effort to keep ambivalence away from the ordinary life of teaching and learning. In the popular imagination at least, ambivalence is seen as a threat, as imprecise, and a sign of weakness. The established educational programmes in schools are built upon the promotion of order, control, and systemised administration. But since the effort to create more structure and order in the world only creates more uncertainty, the authors argue that ambivalence is a condition that we will all simply have to bear. Regrettably, laughter did not feature among any of their deliberations – an indication, perhaps, of how slowly new ideas about children’s behaviour and communication patterns are apt to emerge. Or, more likely, how hostile to the world of children’s education was an idea so radical, so counter-intuitive, as two-faced laughter.

But the proposal presented here is that all laughing situations, not just those specific to carnival, can be treated as ambivalent. It is not a new idea. It is just another way of stating that laughter has inclusive and exclusive tendencies (Dupréel 1928). Which, in itself, is just another way of describing Bakhtin’s centripetal-centrifugal paradigm. He believed that we live in a contradictory world (1981), and that life is a contradictory process (1984). It seems only natural therefore that our thoughts and actions should reflect the double-sidedness of that perspective.

Pupils will routinely express a range of conflicting emotions. Such affections and attitudes might simply convey a sense of the “complex, contradictory” nature of the school setting (Ball 2006: 96). They should not, therefore, be judged so negatively. Laughter’s ambivalent capacity can teach children to be aware that there are at least two sides to every argument (Johnson 2005). Laughter’s twin system can provide teachers and pupils with opportunities to explore an array of topical and untypical problems and discussions. Its potential to help address matters concerned with stigma and stereotypes, for example, has been mentioned. But the utility of laughter’s ambivalent nature extends far beyond matters affecting only PSHE. Its equivocal formula can act as an effective stimulant, a way to inspire pupils’ creative trains of thought, a way to establish unusual relationships between concepts, people, and cultures (Bakhtin 1984). It can, in turn, be applied to just about every subject, every programme of study, covered by the national curriculum.

Bakhtin’s centripetal-centrifugal formula applies chiefly to interpersonal relations. But it also covers the symbolic and physical boundaries between objects, such as the classroom and the playground. The playground is an expedient platform from where pupil’s performativity can be readily measured. Much depends, though, on teachers’ willingness to respect what might be called the law of placement. Being out of position, being so far removed from their playtime behaviour, means teachers will have no way of knowing if the information covering self-other relations that has been passed on to pupils in the classroom has been successfully applied on the playground. For it is here that performance indicators such as kindness and consideration, ingenuity and creative flair, will be brought to the fore. Being in the right place to appreciate and support these gifts will be the true hallmark of inspirational teaching and leadership. After all, of the different venues that are available to pupils during their years spent at school, it is the playground where many produce their best work.

The laughter examples highlighted in this study were intended to be as varied as possible, yet share a common relational theme. The seemingly joyful and spontaneous laughter of the four girls playing in the gazebo remains the abiding sound-effect most closely associated with school playgrounds. The addition of a cautionary note was never intended to diminish their merry-making, only to highlight the dangers in accepting laughter at face value. Tahir demonstrated that the skills and talents pupils employ on the playground deserve as many credits and merits

that can be earned by them in the classroom. His laughter, simultaneously endorsing and deriding his playtime peers, ably ratifies Bakhtin's dualistic, centripetal-centrifugal theory. And Peter's efforts, although more troubling than the others, were nonetheless an indication that, with appropriate supervision, outliers like him could have their laughing distress signals promptly recognised and properly managed.

If the future for school playtime continues to be dominated by programmes of reduction and elimination, it will have the additional effect of reducing pupils' communication habits, further limiting opportunities for pupils to have their voices heard. Those who see primary education simply as a results-driven enterprise, will see the school playground as a valueless venue, unworthy of serious notice or attention, serving only to frustrate the business-oriented goals of single-minded headteachers. But the double aspect of human life, those antagonistic social forces we habitually encounter – the consistent and the uncertain, the unifying and the different – provide our day-to-day experiences with their essential tension and energy (Bakhtin 1981). Projecting a particular model of pupils' playtime laughter, one that connects it to wasteful, trivial pursuits, betrays both pupils and their playground endeavours by turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to laughter's serious side – a dimension which rather belatedly but fittingly situates playtime at the indispensable business end of teaching and learning.

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