



THE ROLE OF HUMOUR IN ANGER MANAGEMENT AMONGST SIX TO TWELVE YEAR OLD CHILDREN IN BUEA SUB-DIVISION***Dr Roland Nji Angu**

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Abstract

This study was an investigation on the role of humour in anger management amongst six to twelve year old school children in Buea sub-division. The theoretical underpinnings of the study hinged on the cognitive development theory of Jean Piaget, Freudian Psychoanalytic theory, cultural-historical theory and moral development theory. The design considered appropriate for this study was a pretest, posttest quasi experimental design whereby 32 male and female children were randomly assigned into the experimental and control groups. Eighteen of the selected samples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the other eighteen to the control group. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection. Data were analyzed using the t-test where the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups were compared, as well as a comparison of the mean scores for the pre and post-tests scores. Results indicate that when trained, children are able to use humour related skills like clowning, joking, jesting, riddles, blind folding, and laughing which helps them communicate properly, build relationships, express negative emotions, diffuse anger and gain a sense of connection with others. Such connections go a long way in building trust, respect, and understanding. Most importantly, through the use of humour, children are not only able to develop cognitive and linguistic competences, but as a way of coping with the psychological, social and physical constraints of growing up. Recommendations were made to Parents, caregivers and teachers to take advantage of opportunities that present themselves to teach children anger management skills especially those related to humour and play.

Keywords: Humour, Anger management, Six to twelve year old children.

INTRODUCTION

Anger is an emotional state that can cause frustration, affect relationships and influence children's playground harmony and social development. It is as a result of this that it becomes imperative for parents, teachers and other care givers to train children on anger management skills that would imbibe them with the necessary tools to manage frustration and other aggressive behaviours. Humour has been identified as one of the necessary tools at the disposal of children in anger management (Loizou, 2007). Children between the ages of five and twelve do demonstrate appropriate skills in using humour to establish relationships as well as diffuse anger (Okhuizen-Stier, 2008). Cognizance must be taken that humour allows children to express negative emotions and gain a sense of connection with others, especially adults in their lives. Most importantly, through the use of humour, children are not only able to develop cognitive and linguistic competences, but as a way of coping with the psychological, social and physical constraints of growing up. When children make jokes, laugh, say riddles and create their own play environment, they do demonstrate an appreciation for humour. McGhee (1979), while making use of Piaget's Theory (Piaget, 1962) maintains that it is during the concrete operational stage of development, that is, from about seven to eleven years that children are bestowed with the cognitive capacity to comprehend multiple meanings and give reasons to why they may be amused or happy. Bariaud (1989) meanwhile opines that the concrete operational stage of development gives children the latitude to be able to interpret and appreciate the complex nature of humour. As children age, they have the capacity to learn how to use jokes in a way that humour becomes an acceptable form of play (Wolfenstein, 1954).

It is generally understood that jokes and jesting begin when children comprehend the meaning of humour (Freud, 1960).

Review of related works

Rogers (2017) posits that adult personalities in children's lives should never convey to children that they are bad simply because they get angry. To him, it is imperative to give children the necessary assistance in understanding the difference between angry feelings and angry behaviour. But then, what happens when children frequently regress to angry outburst? How can this be managed? It is in this light that a number of skills in managing anger have been proposed. For the purpose of this study, focus will be on the use of humour in managing angry and aggressive behaviour. Digney (2009, p. 55) holds the view that "Tapping into a young person's sense of humour can be a key to establishing a connection". According to him, such connections go a long way in building trust, respect, and understanding. From observational studies, researchers (Schultz, 1972; Bergen, 2003; Neuß, 2006) came to the conclusion that the types of humour most prevalent amongst children are: the performance of incongruous actions (for example, putting on a funny looking dress to school on a normal school day). The second type of humour identified by these authors is humorous response to incongruous actions and objects (for example, a singing cat). Finally, expressing joy in the course of play, as well as using nonsense words was identified as another type of humour. Clowning (making funny looking faces, verbally or behaviourally teasing others, laughing at others' mistakes, using riddles and jokes) were other types of observed humours (Schultz, 1972; Bergen, 2003; Neuß, 2006). After observing children's sense of humour, Dowling *et al.* (2003), Okhuizen-Stier (2008), Taxis *et al.* (2004) concluded that their sense of humour is a shielding

element that might sway a child's ability to deal with tense or difficult life's circumstances. Okhuizen-Stier (2008) found that children who used humour to deal with pressure or traumatic situations had minor level of worry and less signs of behavioural anxiety. As far as Honig (1986) and Martin (1989) are concerned, humour can give children the latitude to perceive anxiety provoking events from a completely different perspective and reevaluate it as less menacing and of course an occasion to transform into a challenge. As a matter of fact, humour has been known to curb, if not reduce related feelings of worries, anxiety, panic, annoyance, frustration and distress. Looking at Piaget's stages of cognitive development, children's use of the different types of humour is a function of their developmental stage and age. Franzini (2002) posits that second and third grade thinking is at the level described by Jean Piaget as concrete operational thinking and often makes use of slapstick humour, clowning, word play, exaggeration as well as other socially unacceptable topics. Fourth and fifth graders, on their part, look at humour from the view point of prosocial and antisocial jokes. In this regard, emphasis is more on the opposite gender as focus is directed on mistakes of friends and slips often referred to as Freudian slips (Bergen, 2003; Franzini, 2002). As far as sixth graders are concerned, Piaget's theory of cognitive development maintains that thinking moves from concrete to abstract. Looking at the use of humour within this context, sixth graders are better able to understand incongruities, make use of sophisticated jokes and riddles and even extend their jokes with the classroom teacher. Moreover, children at the formal operational stage of development extend their jokes to aggressive and sexual content whereby grossness, crude behaviour and body noises are perceived. When humour is used within the context of interpersonal relationships, relational, emotional and physical benefits become inevitable. The use of humour by school age children often results to stress reduction, less anxiety, increase in emotional expression, family cohesion and coping (Digney, 2009; Nelson, 2008; Dean and Major, 2008; Reiger, 2004; Everts, 2003). Humour, it should be noted, further gives children the ability to learn self-regulation skills especially within social contexts like playing, problem solving etc. According to Loizou (2007), humour is often experienced in a social context whereby children grasp opportunities to learn about themselves and their play partners which further help them develop and regulate the social self.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study leans on the cognitive development theory of Jean Piaget, Freudian Psychoanalytic theory, cultural-historical theory and moral development theory (Klein, 2003). Looking at the Psychoanalytic perspective of humour, Sigmund Freud talks about the development of humour from three to seven years old. In his view, humour is seen as a coping strategy, as well as a means of expressing meaning and emotion. Freud placed humour into three core developmental categories notably: play, jesting and joking. As far as play is concerned, Freud posits that this occurs between the ages of two and three whereby children are more focused on performing incompatibilities inside their surroundings. Looking at the jesting stage, Freud maintains that this stage is derived from children's ability to come to terms with the fact that adults prefer what is reasonable than what is absurd. Thus children have fun in exploring with the absurdities. However, Freud maintains that this stage requires an audience. Finally, the last stage, which is the joking stage, gives children the latitude to express repressed feelings via laughter (Freud, 1960). Adding her voice

to that of Freud, Klein (2003) maintains that "Joking may neutralize social differences among individuals or groups, especially by enhancing bonds among them". Franzini (2002), in synergy with the above views, holds that exaggeration, absurdity, inconsistency, scorn and mockery, jesting, amazement, jokes, puns, riddles, and violence are the most shared forms of humour that children use and respond to. Piaget's theory of cognitive development posits that at the toddler stage of development a game of peek-a-boo is the emergent stage of humour for babies. At this stage, physical and visual humours appear first, thanks to primitive language development. At this stage, a talking apple or an adult wearing a pant on his head will be funny for a child. Looking at preschoolers who fall within Piaget's stage of preoperational development, perception rather than logical reasoning will influence what is funny (Franzini, 2002). At this stage, incongruities within the environment will be influenced by what the child knows to be true about a particular concept at the center of a joke. At this stage, children have difficulties appreciating the rational inconsistencies of verbal humour. Preschoolers will often laugh at things they consider far-fetched and unbelievable (Poole, Miller and Church, 2005). A closer look at the concrete operational stage tells one that this is the stage whereby school going children make use of language to express their jokes (Franzini, 2002). Poole, Miller and Church (2005) posit that at this stage of concrete operational development, children are able to hone the rules of conversation and skills necessary in a logical linguistic pattern. At this stage, children come to the realization that humour is used in different ways within a given environment. Children at the concrete operational stage use humour as a way of acceptance in a social group and building relationships (Poole, Miller and Church, 2005). Franzini (2002) claims that at this stage, children believe that making jokes attract a lot of attention. Finally, at the formal operational stage of development, children are "able to perceive and create sympathetic humour and can channel negative feelings into positive humorous situations" (Franzini, 2002). Formal operational children often prefer humour related to verbal and witty situations. Humour at this age is often used to accomplish their personal and social goals. The importance of interpersonal relationships directs the path of humour at this stage.

A number of empirical studies have been undertaken by researchers in the domain of humour and anger management. The first of such study to be reviewed here was that of Everts (2003) who conducted a study of family humour at home. According to her, humour leads to the accomplishment of a number of goals in the family ranging from family solidarity to intimacy. She thus found that humour serves as a socialization agent for family members as it bestows them with an attitude of competency and hope. Other research studies have focused on humour, stress and coping. One of such studies undertaken by Reiger (2004) found that humour serves as a means of getting rid of negative emotions and as a stress therapy. He further observed that humour also provides a structure for learning, problem solving and having connections with others. The study of Reiger (2004) also came out with the finding that humour serves as a form of communication, as well as a means of building positive thinking. In a related study, Parrish and Quinn (1999) studied how humour can be used to manage emotions especially from a child/caregiver perspective. They found that humour can give individuals, especially children the opportunity to get out of frustrating and painful situations. The

authors further found that humour often provides people with alternative ways of solving a problem that could otherwise lead to a tense atmosphere. In a study conducted by Abel (2002), on humour, stress and coping, he arrived at a similar conclusion that persons with a high sense of humour often make all necessary effort to distance themselves from stressful situations and could better regulate their feelings than those with a low sense of humour.

Statement of the problem

Children's cognitive development does not occur at random. Rather, it is a well programmed process whereby as children interact amongst themselves, especially during playground activities, arguments, conflicts, disagreements and frustrations become inevitable. However, when left to themselves, children can sometimes translate their frustration, anger and disagreement into something positive whereby they seek to understand others' feelings, seek for ways to join play groups, as well as form relationships and communicate with others. During playground time, children often develop their own strategies to curb anger and manage conflicts in relationships. One of such strategies which children often use is humour whereby cracking jokes, making use of riddles or other fun activities can help them laugh in situations considered to be anger provoking. It is, however, unfortunate that teachers, parents and other caregivers whose responsibility it is to groom children have not harnessed the skills involved in humour such that they incorporate it in the teaching and learning activities of children. Skills in using humour as a strategy of managing aggression and frustration can be taught to children whereby the adult figures in their lives take advantage of every frustrating opportunity to transform it into a moment of laughter. Therefore, this study seeks to make the case for the fact that humour, as a skill can be taught to children so that they can better hone it during playground activities to manage conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

The Design considered appropriate for this study was a pre-test, post-test, follow-up control group quasi-experimental design. Quasi experimental designs tend to present the situation under investigation in real-world conditions, increasing the external validity. A total of 36 pupils (both males and females) between the ages of six and twelve were randomly selected for this study. These pupils were selected from three primary schools within the Buea Municipality. These schools were: Government Nursery and Primary school Molyko Town (GNPS), Craddle Bilingual Nursery and Primary School Check Point (CBNPS) and Catholic Nursery and Primary School MolykoBuea (CNPS). 18 of the selected samples were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the other 18 to the control group. A five point Likert scale questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection with pupils expected to circle one of five options (Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often/Always). A training manual was constructed to guide the researcher in training the children on how skills of humour like clowning, riddles and jokes, laughter, word play can be used to manage anger or frustration. The manual was designed in a tabular form with each column having a sub skill, short term objectives, teaching activities, learning activities, materials needed, work assigned, evaluation and result. The sub-skills and short term objective sections were designed to impart children with the ability to distinguish thoughts from

feelings, laughing at a joke rather than at people's weaknesses or disabilities, playing the clown game, playing a blindfold etc. The column of materials needed were trainer designed questions, chalk, chalk board, pencil and paper, cloth for blindfold, card board papers, football, locally made ball etc. On the column for teaching and learning activities, they were activities designed to be carried out via role play, modeling or direct instructions. As far as validity is concerned, randomization of the sample in a quasi-experimental study like this helped eliminate about nine threats to validity. As for the instruments, the researcher further presented the training plan of activities, questionnaire items and observation guide to friends, experts on conflict resolution, as well as faculty staff in the Department of Educational Psychology of the University of Buea for critical examination. Some of the items were rejected for their ambiguity and incomprehensible nature and replaced with less ambiguous ones. Moreover, items that were not deemed to be indicators of the variable under question were replaced with more appropriate ones. In addition, some of the materials introduced to be used for play activities were rejected by the teachers of these children on ground that they did not represent contextual realities (that is, these were not materials used by the children in their everyday lives and every day play). They suggested locally made materials that represent the real life interactions of these children. For example, instead of using a computer game to teach these children, the teachers suggested local games like "dodging" (a game made out of locally made ball intended to shoot a target, being one of at least three players) which these children play all the time.

Procedure

This study was composed of three phases. The first phase was the selection and assignment of participants to the experiment and control conditions, followed by a pre-test. The second phase was to administer treatment to the experimental group. The researcher himself conducted the training whereby humour related activities were incorporated. The training program lasted for a month and consisted of eight sessions that were held two times a week. Each session was applied in the classroom setting and lasted for half an hour (30 minutes). In the control condition the children were not trained. The training program was aimed at equipping children with constructive skills of using humour to manage anger. The third phase of the study entailed administering post-test measures (the same rating scale that was administered to them before the training was once more administered after the training). A few days after the treatment procedure ended the posttest measures were administered to participants in the experimental and control groups.

Ethical consideration

An experimental research of this magnitude involving children could not have been done without the researcher taking cognizance of and respecting the necessary ethical principles of research. In the first place, the ascent and consent of the participants, their parents and teachers was sought prior to the experiment. Secondly, they were all told about the experiment, its nature, purpose and how it will benefit them as children and as individuals within the community. Thirdly, the privacy and confidentiality of the participants was assured. Moreover, in the course of training, the researcher ensured that the participants were not subjected to any form of harm, be it psychological or physical harm from the environment.

Table 1. Comparing the pre- and post-training mean of both the Experimental and Control Groups

Hypothesis	Mean (Standard Deviation)				Decision	
	Experimental		Control		Experime-Ntal H0: Pre = Post H1: Post > Pre	Control H0: Pre = Post H1: Post > Pre
	PRE	POST	PRE	POST		
Ho: Children's ability to use humor does not significantly affect their anger management skills.	3.42 (1.34)	4.93 (0.54)	3.22 (1.2)	3.50 (1.28)	t = 10.8487 Significant at 1%. Reject Ho. This means that post training performs better than pre-training.	t = 1.6396 Though significant at 1% there is only slight difference between pre and post training.

Finally, after the research, the researcher had to go back and provide a similar training he gave participants of the experimental group to those of the control group. This was to prevent issues of bias and to make sure that everyone benefited from the training.

RESULTS

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the t-test where the mean scores of both the experimental and control groups were compared, as well as a comparison of the mean scores for the pre and post-tests scores. After calculation, it was tested against the t-table. The t-calculated value was compared against the t-table.

Hypothesis Testing

Ho: Children's ability to use humour does not significantly affect their anger management skills.

There is every indication from table 1 above that the post-training mean score of 4.93 with a standard deviation of 0.54 was far higher than the pre-training mean score of 3.42 with standard deviation of 1.34 for the experimental group. For the control group, the pre-training mean score of 3.22 with standard deviation of 1.20 was not significantly different from the post-training mean score of 3.50 with standard deviation of 1.28. By comparing the post-training mean score of the control and experimental groups, there was evidence that the experimental group outperformed the control group (as indicated by a post-training mean score of 4.93 for the experimental group as against 3.50 for the control group). Given the t-value for the experimental group at 10.8487 and a 1% level of significance, the null hypothesis was therefore rejected and the alternative hypothesis accepted. Therefore, children's ability to use humour significantly affects their anger management skills.



Figure 1. Children being trained on how to use humor to manage anger using a blind fold

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the present study are in synergy with Barnett (1984) who found that the anxiety levels of the high-anxiety children declined much more in free play than in listening to stories, and that the high-anxiety children in free play had spent significantly more time in pretend play than the low-anxiety children. This study clearly demonstrates that pretend play serves a role in the reduction of anxiety. The results of this study are also supported by Novaco's (1983) study who recommends addressing definitional parameters of dysfunctional anger at the early sessions. He argues that while we all experience anger, anger only becomes a serious concern when an individual is angry too frequently, too intensely, and for too long. Thus following the views of Novaco (1983), children will limit the frequency of their anger as well as the degree if they learn to manage it with appropriate use of humour. Instead of allowing tense moments to escalate into violent series of conflicts, children who learn to make others laugh, to tell funny stories to their mates or act in a funny way will definitely be adding a novelty into their relationship by using humour to diffuse anger. These results are in sync with Everts (2003) who conducted a study of family humour at home and found that humour leads to the accomplishment of a number of goals in the family ranging from family solidarity to intimacy. She thus found that humour serves as a socialization agent for family members as it bestows them with an attitude of competency and hope. This study further replicates Reiger (2004) who found that humour serves as a means of getting rid of negative emotions and as a stress therapy. He further observed that humour also provides a structure for learning, problem solving and having connections with others. The study of Reiger (2004) also came out with the finding that humour serves as a form of communication, as well as a means of building positive thinking. Finally, the results obtained here concur with Parrish and Quinn (1999) who studied how humour can be used to manage emotions especially from a child/caregiver perspective. They found that humour can give individuals, especially children the latitude to get out of frustrating and painful situations. The authors further found that humour often provides people with alternative ways of solving a problem that could otherwise lead to a tense atmosphere. In a study conducted by Abel (2002), on humour, stress and coping, he arrived at the conclusion that persons with a high sense of humour often make all necessary effort to distance themselves from stressful situations and could better regulate their feelings than those with a low sense of humour.

Conclusion

This study has been able to ascertain that when children are trained on the necessary skills to manage anger, deal with frustration and alleviate stress, they easily adopt these skills,

hone them and put them to practice during playground activities. The study also proved that when trained, children are able to use humour related skills like clowning, joking, jesting, riddles, blind folding, and laughing which helps them communicate properly, build relationships, express negative emotions, diffuse anger and gain a sense of connection with others. Such connections go a long way in building trust, respect, and understanding. Most importantly, through the use of humour, children are not only able to develop cognitive and linguistic competences, but as a way of coping with the psychological, social and physical constraints of growing up.

Recommendations: Parents, teachers and caregivers should be able to incorporate humour related activities like joking, jesting, clowning, laughing, blind folding in children's play activities so that they will learn to use it to relieve frustration, diffuse anger, communicate their emotions and build relationships. In schools, children should not only be taught skills related to mathematics, languages and other school subjects, but should be taught life skills and other problem solving skills whereby skills related to humour can be taught for children to be able to apply during playground activities to curb aggressive and anger related behaviours.

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