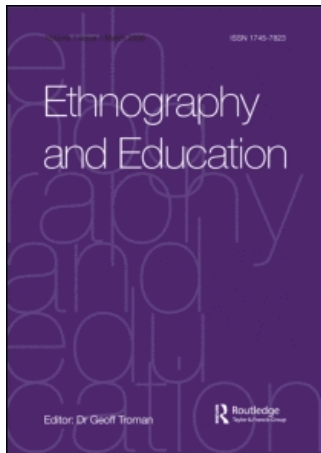


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Laugh so you don't cry: teachers combating isolation in schools through humour and social support

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The structure of the teaching profession leaves teachers professionally and personally isolated from other adults. This article will discuss the results of an ethnography focused on the rare informal social interaction that occurs among teachers in a United States' school, with a particular focus on the lunch hour. Specifically, this article explores the reciprocal nature of support provided within self-generated congregational spaces. This study demonstrates the positive use of humour in combating stress in the teaching profession, and how these relationships support Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour.

Keywords: teachers' lounge; teacher spaces; congregational spaces; emotional labour; humour; teacher isolation

Introduction

One classroom. One teacher. Thirty-two students. No adult interaction. The role of a teacher provides little time for adult–adult interaction, which makes it a very lonely profession. Once the classroom door is closed, each teacher becomes separated from the rest of the school. The isolationist and alienating culture (Little 1990; Rogers and Babinski 2002) endemic to the teaching profession (Court 1999) are a norm throughout the majority of schools in the USA, making teaching a private activity (Wheelan 2005). Current educational reforms and new curricula have intensified the teacher workload, leaving less time for professional interaction among teachers.

The isolation among teachers creates a lack of community (Rogers and Babinski 2002), and teachers are forced to adopt an autonomous working style (Tickle 2000). Both older and more recent studies have found that teacher isolation lessens teachers' interest in their work. Eventually, this isolation undermines their long-term interest in their school (Forsyth and Hoy 1978; Williams, Prestage, and Bedward 2001; Zielinski and Hoy 1983).

Teacher collaboration is needed in order to overcome teacher isolation (Court 1999; Firestone and Pennell 1993; Rogers and Babinski 2002; Williams, Prestage, and Bedward 2001; Zielinski and Hoy 1983), as indicated by research in the literature. Some school districts have acknowledged the need for teacher collaboration, and have implemented reforms for structured teacher collaboration. On the contrary, Williams, Prestage, and Bedward's (2001) research discovered that the teachers value 'spontaneous collaboration' developing from informal conversations over structured collaboration. Essentially, research needs to be conducted observing the spaces where teachers have informal social interaction: the teachers' lounge and

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other school-based congregational spaces used for teacher-to-teacher interaction. This will provide a picture as to the importance of these interactions.

Literature base

There have been very few rigorous studies focusing on informal social interactions among teachers. Despite the international implications, most of the research has been conducted outside the USA in countries such as England, Israel, France, and South Africa. Moreover, most of the research strictly looks at the teachers' lounge and ignores the use of alternative congregational spaces.

A small number of studies conducted outside the USA have explored interactions occurring exclusively within the teachers' lounge. Some research outlines the teachers' lounge and the relationships. These relationships are used to develop membership within the school (Dutercq 1991; Kainan 1994; McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Nias, Southworth, and Yeomans 1989) and that the interactions within the space provide a support mechanism for the teachers (Ben-Peretz and Schonmann 2000; Hammersley 1984; Kainan 1997, 2002; Pollard 1985, 1993; Woods 1979, 1984). These studies have provided a fertile ground for research on informal interactions among teachers.

Hallett's (2005a,b) work on interactions between administrators and teachers is one of the rare research projects conducted in the USA. Hallett observed informal teacher interactions in school hallways to gauge teachers' perspectives on their school administration. Researchers in the USA are ignoring the importance of teacher-teacher interactions, but practitioners and administrators are discussing teachers' lounge interactions (Bateman 1988; Graves 1995; Keller 1999, 2000; Walke 1994) on websites and in professional magazines.

The need for more research on teacher interactions is highlighted by the fact that teachers' cultural patterns are very often formed within congregational spaces, but little research exists that actively observes these non-lounge interactions. Hallett's (2005a,b) research on non-lounge spaces are secondary to his main purpose. On the contrary, McGregor's (2003) work in South Africa explored and tracked patterns of teachers' social networks throughout the school, which is a pinnacle piece in this area. Ultimately, there remains a very limited understanding of the teachers' lounge and congregational spaces in the USA as spaces for informal social interaction in order to reduce teacher isolation.

Theoretical framework

Aside from social isolation, teachers face the constant societal and professional requirement of masking their emotions. The profession of teaching is a public service where the professional is expected to provide a learning experience for students. All emotions toward the students or job are to be suppressed, while a consistently positive and professional person stands in front of the classroom. Frustration, anger and sadness are some of the emotions that teachers are expected to continually suppress. The suppression of emotions makes teaching an emotionally taxing job. As an inherent requirement of their workday, teachers are expected to do both the outer work of teaching and the inner work of emotional labour.

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) developed the term emotional labour, which is ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value’ (7). She initially outlined emotional labour theory while studying flight attendants and bill collectors. For example, flight attendants (similar to teachers) had to suppress their feelings in front of passengers, but would relieve their frustrations to co-workers in the galley of the plane.

Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour applies to occupations with three characteristics:

First, they [the jobs] require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person – gratitude or fear for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees. (147)

The theory states that not all jobs with emotional labour contain all three characteristics, though I would argue that teaching carries all of the characteristics listed. Teaching is a profession where teachers are interacting face-to-face with students and administration daily. Additionally, most teachers attempt to create an emotional state within their students that will benefit the classroom experience, attempting to produce emotions such as respect, appreciation, or even fear in order to manage their classrooms. As this process is occurring, administrators are monitoring the teachers’ emotional labour. Teachers are expected to conduct surface acting (Hochschild 1983) in the classroom, disguising their true feelings about students, co-workers, or their job. If negative feelings were to be openly expressed in the classroom (e.g., screaming or crying), the monitoring administration would have cause for concern due to the teacher unsuccessfully suppressing his or her emotions.

Hochschild’s interpretation of how emotional labour affects the professional experiences of flight attendants and bill collectors is similar to the structure used in this project. Emotional labour theory also helped to ground the research by examining if and how a teacher’s work experience interacts with the social networks he or she encounters on the job, and how these social networks support or hinder their views of their job.

Emotional labour theory can also expand and provide insight into the different professions that require emotional labour of their workers. For over 20 years, numerous research projects have used emotional labour to explain the demands of various professions, such as those of police officers (Martin 2002), guidance counselors (Mann 2004), and early childcare workers (Uttal and Tuominen 1999), and how gender or race plays a role in these professions. Hochschild and others have found that professionals who experience emotional labour only reveal their true emotions to co-workers in private spaces.

Methodology

This study was designed as an ethnography using qualitative data collection techniques of observations and interviews. Data were collected during the 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 school years in one K-8 inner city school in the USA called John E. Farmer School.¹ Specifically, this research addresses the following: What

occurs in the interactions between teachers in congregational spaces?; What are the teachers' perceptions of interactions and relationships that are created in the congregational spaces? Observations and interviews were employed for this research.

Observations were completed in order to document teacher interactions and concepts of culture in the congregational spaces during lunch. The observations were conducted among three groups of teachers: the kindergarten to second grade lunch group ($n=10$), the fourth grade lunch group ($n=7$), and the seventh and eighth grade lunch group (self titled the 'Lunch Bunch') ($n=11$). Approximately 312 hours of observations were completed.

Moreover, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small number of informants ($n=16$), including 13 teachers, one principal interview and two student teacher interviews. The interviews were between 20 and 40 minutes in length, but some interviews with teachers were conducted over multiple days. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed.

Observational fieldnotes and interview transcriptions were guided by the use of Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) called MAXqda2. Constant comparative analysis and classical content analysis were the applied qualitative data analysis techniques. Constant comparative analysis was used to compare coded themes (Hewitt-Taylor 2001), while classical content analysis was used to count the frequency of codes (Kohlbacher 2006; Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2006).

The profession in context

Before discussing the teachers' informal interactions, it is important to situate them in a larger professional context. In this section, I discuss the policy context at both the national and district levels in which these teachers operate on a daily basis. This underlying context provided the background for their conversations.

National pressures

Teachers at Farmer were impacted by recent pressures coming from the national No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. In 2001, NCLB was created under the authority of President Bush. The purpose of the act is to reduce the achievement gap for minority and disadvantaged students (US Department of Education 2007). In order to achieve this mission, standardised testing has been used as a tool to measure students' progress, and there is more emphasis on teachers being 'highly qualified'.

Larry Heffler, Farmer's computer teacher, talked about what he perceives to be the pressures of NCLB.

Especially No Child Left Behind, you know, everything is about the kids, and teachers are demoralised. I have seen more than ever teachers breaking down and crying just because of the pressure, and not only, you have this report, and then this report, and then this report that summarises these three, it's like ridiculous! It never ends with these teachers. It's not about teaching anymore, it's not about the kids anymore, it's about the damn test. And teachers, they're demoralised like crazy and not just here, not just in [the city], EVERYWHERE!

The additional pressure, for some teachers, added stress to an already high pressured job. This has caused emotional turmoil for some, as indicated by Larry.

Part of the added pressure for NCLB is the additional paperwork. Out of the teachers that were interviewed ($n=13$), 77% indicated that paperwork was a major source of stress in teaching. Eighth grade teacher, Linda, explained her perception of teachers' reactions to the added pressures:

You know, you want to do a good job and I think for the most part people really do try to do a good job, but I think that they just keep pouring on, and pouring on, and pouring on. They don't even give you the opportunity to show what you can be able to do, and they just pile on more and more. And I feel that everybody is kinda looking over their shoulder now in fear of their own position, and therefore it kind of trickles down.

Linda indicated how teachers are now looking over their shoulder due to the added national pressures. In addition, there are also pressures from the district level.

District distrust

Coupled with the pressures brought on by NCLB, there is also an undercurrent of distrust between teachers and administrators within the large, urban school district. Many of the teachers do not trust the administration that runs the district. In an interview, I asked the librarian and former teacher, Martha Pryer, about what is stressful about the job. She flatly stated, 'It is administration at the top, at 440 [address of the administration building]. I don't think anybody's is running the ship. I don't think they know what they're doing'. This lack of trust was talked about while I was doing observations. During my research, the news was riddled with stories of teachers in the district being harmed or not supported by administration.

The Lunch Bunch talked about a story concerning a teacher on the news. Seventh grade teacher, Elaine Redtree, started off the conversation. 'Did you see the story on the news about a teacher getting beat up?' Erin added, 'The news van taped the kids at [Elijah]. I'm glad I'm not there. It's called [C.M. Elijah], but they need to call it [S.M. Elijah] for Smoke and Mirrors. The neighbourhood is nice, the school is nice, but once you close those doors it's fucking hell in there. They say she was lying, but [the CEO] is crazy and just turns an eye to what is going on which is all around the district'. The news story displayed some of the realities for these city school teachers, but on a deeper level, the teachers' conversation shows the ultimate distrust with the district. This distrust within the school district puts extra stress and pressure on the teachers.

This section on putting the profession in context is not to just indicate the complaints of the teachers, but to understand the realistic changes that are occurring in the profession. On the other hand, the congregational spaces and social networks provided a space for release of all the stress, pressure, and lack of trust teachers do experience. These are safe spaces where the mask of emotional labour can be removed temporarily. As Martha stated, 'I really start to look forward to lunch because it's the only thing that will get me through the day'. This speaks to the idea that teachers really look forward to spending time with each other in order to fulfil their need for exclusive adult time.

The congregational spaces provide a safe space for teachers to have adult time in order to relieve some of these pressures. The teachers at Farmer talked at length

about their need to have adult time and adult interactions, since it is very limited throughout the day working with children.

Erin Burrows, a seventh grade math teacher, and I also talked about isolation. After she acknowledged that isolation does occur in the profession, I asked Erin, 'Do you think also eating with the lunch group that it helps to alleviate the isolating nature of teaching?' Erin replied:

Absolutely! Absolutely! I mean 'cause you're in your room all day with the kids so at least if you're getting out at lunch you're getting other adult interaction. I mean, it's not as bad in 7th grade because you can have a more one-on-one conversation with them anyway, but it's nice to have a real adult to kind of bounce ideas off of or that this definitely didn't work or what does work, so yeah, absolutely.

Erin talked about an important concept here in her need for adult interaction and conversation. The congregational space provides the time and space for Erin to fulfil her need for adult time.

Linda Goldman, eighth grade English teacher, also talked about the need for adult time. She discussed the benefits of spending lunch with other adult teachers.

Well, just to have some, you know, social interaction. I just think spending a day with kids, and I also think spending the day with 8th graders, in particular, can be extremely stressful. Obviously, you get a whole different set of concerns with different grades, I understand that. But with 8th grade, you can get beat up pretty good, in terms of disrespect, not doing their work, and having to maintain a certain amount of control. And I do think spending the day, just like I was when my children were little, I longed for when I had an opportunity with adults. I think that is the same case here. We spend all day, and without a breather, for me. It is not as healthy as having a break.

Linda discussed how she looks for a chance to be with adults and have breaks. Again, the congregational space is generally the only time where exclusive adult time can occur. Moreover, Linda explains the disrespect she encounters from students. In a field where Linda is obligated to not reveal her emotions to the students, the congregational space provides a break from the emotional labour.

The adult time for many of the teachers is very important to them. Elaine Redtree, the seventh grade English teacher, also explained how adult interaction provides a release during the day. In an interview, Elaine stated, 'Oh, because I've been with the children all morning long, talking with the children, and at times it's a release and you want to eat with ADULTS, to have adult conversation and maybe tell a nasty joke or talk'. Elaine's reference to nasty jokes references the importance of humour in the teachers' interactions in order to provide social support.

Laugh so you don't cry

In an interview with Kate, a fourth grade student teacher, she was asked what she learns from the others at lunch.

I'm kind of quiet but I like listen to their [4th grade lunch group] conversations, and I think they're helpful. And I think it's funny too because out of the other lunch rooms that I was in, like being a student, they [previous lunch groups] can sometimes say negative things. You can still get this feeling like they [4th grade teachers] still care about their students. They're just joking, like they REALLY do care about them, and they do.

A lot of times the negative things they say are like jokes because sometimes it is sad and there is nothing else you can do but laugh about it. So, I don't know. All the teachers, like at other lunchrooms that I've been in, like other schools, they're very negative and I just sit there and I just hated it. They were so like, I don't know, depressing. I just wanted to be like 'why are you doing this?' But they're not. Everything is like joked about.

Kate raised an important point when she stated, 'There is nothing else you can do but laugh about it'. The tool of laughter is used as a coping mechanism for many of the teachers. The adult interactions within these groups would often revolve around humour. Each congregational space had a different use of humour. The kindergarten to second grade group would find humour in the latest television shows that they collectively watch. The fourth grade group would find humour with inside jokes, while the seventh and eighth grade group would actively find humour in telling stories or doing practical jokes. No matter the congregational group, humour was used as a tool to support each other in emotional labour of teaching. As Gwen Penny stated in her interview, 'Then we joke around [voice gets lighter]. It's crazy. So, we laugh a lot. We laugh a lot. It's important because this job can be so stressful and we need to laugh'. Woods' (1984) work in England also found this to be true in the teachers' lounge, as teachers use humour to develop solidarity and cope with the realities of the profession. Part of the coping is that teachers can reveal their emotions within a safe space. The emotional labour of the profession comes to a temporary halt in congregational spaces and among fellow teachers.

The results demonstrate the use of humour in congregational spaces at Farmer School. Three themes evolved as to how the teachers used humour: to laugh at themselves and each other; to deal with irritations about students; to deal with frustrations about the job. At times, these themes within humour overlap with each other. Ultimately, humour was a coping mechanism that was used within the safety of the congregational spaces. The humorous interactions provide a social support for the teachers. The themes of humour are specifically drawn from the seventh and eighth grade group (Lunch Bunch) because their humour revolved around general concepts and was most accessible to outsiders.

Laughing at themselves and each other

The one thing that the seventh and eighth grade group does frequently is laugh at themselves and each other. This is perpetuated by a few people in the group that are known for their humour. One of these people is Kat Lever. Kat is the seventh grade history teacher. She is witty, sarcastic and always keeps a light energy about her. Kat wears sweaters with farm animals all over them, which reflects her fun and jovial nature.

Kat's humour often stems from her storytelling. One day in March, Sandra Zimmerman, Elaine Redtree, Kat, and I were sitting eating lunch. Sandra started talking about family pictures she was going to have taken soon. Kat started to tell a story of her family pictures, 'I went to Sears to get a family picture. They had me in the middle with the two [children] on the sides. I had shoulder pads and they were scrunched up to my neck like this (gestures and demonstrates with hands). Now she

[the photographer] actually looked through the view finder and took the picture like that. I mean they were up to here (gesture to neck)’.

By now everyone was laughing extremely hard. Kat saw this and continued with the story. ‘Then she keeps calling me and asking me if I want to buy it for only \$5.00. Yeah sure, if you just want to cut out my head (gestures neck cutting) and their heads’. Now the laughter started to get out of control. As everyone was all laughing, Sandra stated, ‘I needed that today. I really was stressed and needed to laugh. You always make me laugh. I’m glad I came in to lunch today’.

Sandra’s comment is telling. First, laughter is a support to help reduce stress. The fact that teachers need to keep their emotions inward means there is no real outlet for their stress. The safety of the congregational space and the humour among the teachers helps to reveal some of their bottled emotions, reduce stress, and cope with the hardships of the emotional labour profession. Second, Kat is known to make people laugh. It is almost as if for Kat making people laugh was a way of letting out some of her own stress. Kat’s humour was influential to the lunch group and appears time and time again in the ethnographic analysis.

Kat knew how to laugh at herself, but the members of the Lunch Bunch also enjoyed laughing at each other. For example, there is Bea Razelli, the seventh grade science teacher. Bea likes to do work and have students in her room during lunch, but she will come in to the seventh and eighth grade group for about the last 10 minutes. On other occasions, she will pop her head in to share something with the other teachers, and then go back to her classroom. The other teachers have been trying to get Bea to come into the seventh and eighth grade group for the whole period. In an interview, Elaine explained her desire for Bea to come in for the full lunch period:

You need to [have a break], I keep telling [Ms Razelli], will you get out that classroom and come and eat lunch with us. You need a change! Stop doing that. I mean, you want to do good for the kids, but that’s your time. Check your time and keep your time, ‘cause you have 45 minutes for lunch, use it for you to benefit. The kids, alright, come in early or either stay after school, and she does stay after school, but she still wants to be with the children at lunch time. I can’t do that. I need my time to eat my lunch and get myself rejuvenated to go back and do the rest of the day and I’m happy. So I try to encourage other people to do the same thing.

Although the group would like to have Bea come in for the full lunch period, she still comes into the Lunch Bunch space for a few minutes a day to laugh.

One day the laugh was on Bea. During spring break, Bea and her husband went on a trip to Mexico through a local university. Bea has strong Italian roots, and she tends to tan very dark. She walked in to the lunch group the day after, and Dave Tall, the eighth grade history teacher mentioned to Bea, ‘You know what one of the students said. He said that today [Mrs. Razelli] changes colors like Michael Jackson’. Bea and everyone started to laugh. Larry Heffler shared his story, ‘Yeah, my kids say she looks like [Ms Williams]’. Denise Williams is an African-American teacher and was in the room laughing along with everyone else.

Bea started to tell about her time in the Mexican rainforest and why she tanned so darkly, ‘We were hiking in the rainforest and we were told in the tour group that we were not allowed to wear sunscreen because it would kill the plants and animals. EVERYONE was red at the end of it. And it was crazy because they eat monkeys and rats there. It’s like that movie Indiana Jones. I swear the Mayans were laughing

for the day when they saw us coming'. Maria, a substitute, asked, 'So everyone was white on the trip?' Bea explained, 'No they were all different, but we were all red at the end!' We all started to laugh. Bea continued, 'I called Jenny Craig because I gained 8 lbs., but I didn't eat monkey!' Everyone continued to laugh. This detailed example again shows how the congregational space and conversation revolved around the teachers laughing at themselves and each other. This use of humour provides an outlet of release where teachers are expected to mask their emotions throughout most of the day.

As Kat likes to tell funny stories, Erin Burrows (seventh grade math teacher) and Dave Tall (eighth grade social studies teacher) like to play practical jokes. This is their way of making people laugh, but it is also giving social support to the teachers. For example, one day in December Erin and Dave got up to leave lunch early. Kat noticed and mentioned, '[Erin] and [Tall] just left so they must be up to something. I think they're plotting trouble'.

What Erin and Dave did was pull a prank on the principal, Mary. A few days before, Mary fell and hurt her leg, so she was using a cane to walk. Erin and Dave hijacked the cane, decorated the cane to look like a Christmas candy cane with a large, red bow at the top. Then Erin, Dave, and Mary took pictures together with the cane on a digital camera. This is a small example of the practical jokes Erin and Dave pull, but the jokes are done in order to put a smile on the hurt principal's face. Again, this reiterates the point that humour is used in order to soothe and support co-workers.

Practical jokes are important because they are structured humorous events that provide relief from the daily stresses of the profession. The nature of practical jokes has a long history in the school. One day during lunch, Dave and Larry talked about their friend, Bill, the music teacher and the practical jokes he used to play on the old principal, Frank Robinson. Larry stated, 'He used to pull pranks with the old principal. He'd put saran wrap on the toilet so when he goes [to urinate] it splashes everywhere. He used to put porn in his lesson plans and on the bathroom walls'. Larry continued to discuss how the principal, Frank, would also pull practical jokes back at Bill.

The use of practical jokes and storytelling provided a way to lighten the mood of a stressful, emotional labour profession. The teachers not only laugh at themselves and other teachers, they sometimes use the students as focal points of humour. The humour towards or about students is not malicious, but a way for relieving stress and providing support for each other – where they cannot otherwise reveal those emotions.

Laughing about students

When the teachers use humour about the students, it is sometimes used as a way of releasing frustration. In the classroom, teachers are expected to not reveal these frustrations, as is the nature of emotional labour professions. Instead of getting upset at a situation, the teachers find humour in it. For example, Linda one day talked about her recent book reports. This was a project that Linda was working on with the students for weeks. One of the students plagiarised their work. Instead of getting upset about it, Linda and the Lunch Bunch laughed about it. Dave took the student's report, which was written on Nicole Richie's *The Truth about Diamonds*, and started

to read aloud to everyone. He read in a loud, boisterous voice. ‘Listen to this! “In her electrifying first novel, Nicole Richie tells the sensational story of Chloe Parker, a rock royalty princess and card-carrying member of Hollywood’s inner circle”.’ As Dave was reading, everyone was laughing aloud. People were laughing at the absurdity of the book report. It was clear that the words were not from an eighth grader’s mind, which provided humour to the situation. The one laughing the hardest was Linda. She got to the point that she had tears coming out of her eyes.

This obvious plagiarism by the student was made into a humorous moment by a fellow teacher, which ultimately made Linda have a good laugh. The book report reading reminded Laura of her recent writing project. Laura started to recapture plagiarism moments she had in her book reports that she had recently received, but she talked about them in a humorous way. Laura stated, ‘I had a fifth grader that did his book report and talks about “the blood ridden coup d’etat”. Fifth grade! Also had someone hand in their book report early, and it has one sentence. One. “The oysters live in the water”. That is the sentence. All I asked was for a half a page and that’s what I got’. Laura and the members of the lunch group were all laughing at the story. It is obvious that there is frustration behind Laura’s story, but she was choosing to find humour in the situation. The humour is a coping mechanism, and the fellow teachers support the coping in the safety of the congregational spaces. In the classroom, the teachers could not reveal these perspectives and emotions about the situations. The emotional labour of the profession would prevent such an experience, but the humour in these spaces provides an outlet for these feelings.

My previous teaching experience and relationships with teachers also taught me the importance of laughing about the students. One day I found myself starting to provide comfort to Laura concerning her frustrations with a student. Laura vented, ‘I have [Mohinder] today because he did not go on the trip. He would just sit there with a smug look on his face’. I replied, ‘You know what that’s called, right? Grown ass man syndrome’. Everyone started to laugh. Laura laughed, but looks at me with a puzzled face. She continued, ‘You know that 8th and 9th grade year. They think they’re a grown ass man. My students used to tell me, “Ms Mawhinney, I’m a grown ass man”.’ Everyone continued to laugh. Erin chimed in, ‘Grown ass man. I have grown ass woman moments!’

Bea added to the story with her students, ‘I had to give two kids to [Erin] that couldn’t go on the trip’. Erin replied, ‘I lay in bed at night and say my prayers that thank you God for [Bea] and for giving me [John, Paul, Raheem, and Shane]. Where would I be without her?’ Bea explained, ‘I told them they can choose who they go with and both of them picked [Erin]’. At that moment, something unusual happened, and two students walked into the room. Erin was about to reply, but immediately stopped in the middle of her sentence. It was in this moment that emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) of teaching was clearly understood. As soon as the students walked into the room, every teacher put their ‘teacher masks’ back on. The smiles were removed from their faces, and they immediately became more serious. Even the tone of the teachers talking to the students was different.

The two girls came to ask Elaine for a key to her classroom because they left their backpacks in there. Elaine responded, ‘I’m not moving because this is my lunch. I told you all not to leave stuff in my room’. Instead, Bea gave the students a master key to Elaine’s room, and the students left. Elaine explained her thoughts, ‘This is my

lunch, my time and I'm not getting up'. Erin added, ' 'cause you're a grown ass woman!'

Although this story was all done with humour, the frustration Laura was experiencing is evident. It is important to see that the humour of the situation does have a purpose, which is to provide social support. In addition, the humour is discussed in the safety of the congregational space where teachers can reveal their emotions, unlike within the classroom.

Laughing about frustrations with the job

The third place where teachers use humour is by laughing at the job itself. The stress and pressure placed on the teachers is sometimes challenged through humour. Humour is one coping mechanism that the teachers use in order to deal with the frustrations of the job. The congregational space and the relationships within the space provide an outlet to discuss these frustrations and emotions, where they may not be understood in the classroom or at home.

The irritation about the school system also came into play with some policy changes that took place during the 2006–2007 school year. There was a delay in payment to the teachers in the beginning of the year. In addition, there was only a 1% raise given to the teachers. No real explanation was given, but it was suspected the issue stems from the school district having budget issues. The district has an annual budget of \$2.04 billion, but the district was quoted at \$73 million short in the budget (Graham 2007), which later changed to \$109 million. In the second year of data collection, the district laid off 81 administrative employees around the Thanksgiving holiday (Graham 2007). In May 2006, the school district cuts temporarily ceased afterschool programmes because of funding. Thus, lack of money was a commonly talked about frustration among the teachers.

For example, Bea started to tell a story during lunch about businesses. Bea shared, 'I know the best business. There is this barber shop near us and they give out free beers. They give it for free because they don't have a liquor licence, and the kids get rootbeer. It's smart because it's only a dollar and they take it into the hair cut price'. Erin jumped in, 'What? I like that. I'll be like take off ¼ of an inch, now I need another ¼ of an inch. I'd be like fuckin' bald!' Everyone started to laugh. Erin continued, 'I'm a grown ass woman! I'd be like, I didn't get paid. I need a hair cut'. Bea expressed, 'We're in the wrong business'.

Erin's subtle commentary on not getting paid by the district was a recurrent theme. Other conversations that I observed also discussed the school's spending habits. This was played out one day in Carla's room. Carla was the new, young eighth grade science teacher for the 2006–2007 school year. She is taking over for Denise while she is serving the Army in Kuwait. Carla just had a computerised smart board put in her classroom because she and Larry were receiving training on how to use these boards in the district offices. While eating, Carla was setting up her lesson on the smart board. Linda, Kat, and Elaine were asking Carla questions about the smart board. Carla started to show how on the laptop you can blacken out certain sections to only appear on the smart board, so that the students do not see all of the information at once. Everyone 'oh's and ah's' at the feature. As Carla was demonstrating, Kat made a sarcastic joke about the tool, 'Now call me old fashion, but I would just take paper and cover it up to save \$8,000, but that's just me!'

Everyone started laughing at the funny and sarcastic comment. Kat continued, 'You know, use money to buy more books or give teachers a pay raise or ...' Laura jumped in, '... or pay us on time'. Larry added, 'Like our 1% raise'. 'Yeah, my 10 cents added to my paycheck', expressed Laura.

The frustration over teachers' paychecks also becomes clear in the humorous storytelling that occurs. After discussion about one of Farmer's custodians that decided to go to another school, Larry shared a story about a custodian that discusses their thoughts and frustrations about the profession and money. Larry explained, 'I had a custodian where I used to work and he came off educated. One day I asked and he said, "Oh yeah, I was a teacher". But he gets paid more especially with overtime and no one bothers him'. Dave jumped in, 'Yeah, they make money. My buddy teaches at [St. Ryan's] and was going to work at [Cardinal Tutu] and they showed him what he was going to be paid and laughed because he makes like \$100,000 with overtime'. Larry interjected, 'Wait! I'm not done. Then I see him at the workshop and now he's an assistant principal'. Everyone started laughing at the thought. 'Teacher to custodian to assistant principal. A normal trajectory', Linda stated sarcastically.

The frustration with the profession goes so far with the teachers, that Kat told me a story of how she channeled her frustration through humour on Halloween² one year. In October, I walked into the school before the last bell rang to do an interview. The school was gearing up because tomorrow was Halloween. Kat and Ann were sitting on a bench in front of the office. I stopped to chat, and Ann asked me, 'Will you be in tomorrow?' I replied, 'Yeah, I'll be here. I'm thinking, Butterfly', as I say it with jazz hands to be funny. Kat stated, 'I'm coming in like this [with regular clothes] and that will be my costume. One year I took one of my ex's things, you know, that people get from the hospital all the time [scrubs] and covered it with fake blood and then I had this fake machete and I covered it with blood (doing all this with gestures) and then I had a sign on the front that said "The teacher that lost control"'. Ann and I started laughing hard. 'I would walk around [Jefferson Middle School] and the kids would look at me like, ha (makes a face like she looks suspicious). They didn't know if they should laugh or take it serious'. Ann and I continued laughing at Kat's story. It is interesting how Kat's costume broke the mold of emotional labour by expressing her feelings, and the students did not know how to interpret the information. This is a rare explanation of how the role of emotional labour was temporarily eliminated within the classroom.

The teachers use humour to laugh at themselves, each other, the students and the job. Laughter is a coping mechanism for dealing with the hardships of the profession, while providing social support. This social support is able to be given in congregational spaces because they are exclusive to teachers, and the teachers can reveal their emotions in the safe space.

Discussion

The analysis of the ethnography reveals the importance of physical space for teachers. The exclusive adult time in congregational spaces became very important to the teachers. These relationships and interactions within the congregational spaces provide social support. Social support was given through the teachers' use of humour, as teachers were able to laugh to deal with their emotions. Ultimately, the

congregational space is safe for teachers to express their thoughts and feelings, while fulfilling their need to release tension. In essence, the social support within these spaces helped to ease the hardships of the emotional labour of the profession. The emotional labour of the profession would not allow for these expressions of feelings and perspectives within the classroom.

Laughter helps to sooth the battle wounds of the teachers that were observed. Teachers use themselves and each other as targets for their humour. It is easier to turn their humour on themselves and each other in order to deter thinking about the stress of the job. On the contrary, when the stress of the job becomes too much, teachers use humour to discuss the students and the job itself. The laughter created is a light-hearted way to try to think through and deal with the all-too-real concerns and pressures these teachers have on a daily basis.

For far too long, congregational spaces, and specifically the teachers' lounge, has been given a bad reputation for only being a space to perpetuate negativity surrounding the profession. Certainly there continue to be spaces where teachers come only to complain. I will not deny that there could be spaces where this theory of complaining exists. Put to rest, however, my data shows that congregational spaces and informal interactions at Farmer provide emotional support to teachers. I show how through using humour to release stress, teachers cope with the demands of the profession and find social and emotional support. My data illustrates that far more than complaining is occurring here. Teachers gain needed adult support from colleagues and release tension. Researchers need to further this work through exploration.

There is a serious need for more researchers to look at teacher-to-teacher interactions. Further clarifying and understanding these relationships can guide teachers, administrators, parents, and students to have open and honest discussions about the pressures facing teachers. More research will give some clarity and guidelines for discussion by understanding a portion of teachers' daily professional lives.

Notes

1. The names of the school and teachers are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of all participants.
2. A secular holiday observed on October 31st in the USA where people dress in costumes on the eve of All Saints' Day.

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