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Humour in a holistic learning process in a preschool setting

Unique soft toys and stories inspired and further developed by children's sense of humour

Abstract

This study aims to examine the learning outcomes among preschool children of a holistic arts-based learning process in which humour was the core theme. The study involved 17 preschoolers, who were given the task of working both collaboratively and individually and designing a soft toy supported by a story that would make other people laugh. The results suggested that humour and a variety of activities make an inspiring formula for holistic arts-based learning. Humour, in the case of the children's activities, meant creating incongruence and surprise. The soft toys the children created were funny, well-meaning characters with comical features. Children seemed to recognize the significance of cheering other people up; in this respect, girls were more product-oriented than boys. Craft-making with the ingredient of humour motivated the children and gave them story ideas. Additionally, the stories highlighted the meaningfulness of the soft toys to the children. The collaborative phases of the learning process helped children to come up with ideas for their story, as well as get feedback on these ideas. The individual phases, on the other hand, gave the children enhanced opportunities to express their own ideas.

Keywords: humour, holistic approach, craft-making, stories.

Introduction

The learning process presented in this study is based on a holistic approach, the application of which is one of the key principles of the Finnish National Board of Education. Holistic learning approaches are important frameworks of all learning and are used to take account of learners' interest in the subject, enable learners to adopt an active role and expand the school environment. Accordingly, such approaches form an integral part of the Finnish national curriculum for pre-education, aiming to offer children a complete, comprehensive and inspiring learning experience that supports their growth and welfare and offers a versatile foundation for the development of their knowledge and skills. The holistic approach is believed to increase learners' subject area knowledge and understanding, as well as improving their attitudes, logical thinking, evaluation methods, coherent thinking and artistic creativity. The starting points for implementing a holistic approach are the subjects of the children's interest and the common objectives set for teaching. The holistic approach also offers opportunities to work on tasks that contain learning challenges suitable to each child (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014a, 2014b).

The Finnish National Board of Education (2014a, 2014b) emphasizes also that children should be encouraged to use versatile ways of expression (e.g. music, crafts, visual, verbal and physical) and linguistic communication in learning. Different multisensory, multi-material and experiential starting points are commonly used in holistic learning processes and for analysing artefacts, nature and the environment (FNBE, 2014a, 2014b). Imagination, stories, drama, games and the surroundings are often used to create inspiration for arts-based education (Laamanen & Seitamaa-Hakkarainen, 2009; 2014). Various arts-based activities, accompanied by the freedom to implement their own ideas, seem to be natural ways for children to analyse their learning experiences and to make their thoughts and learning visible (Aerila, 2010; Aerila

& Rönkkö, 2015). At best, they help children comprehend the world from different perspectives, expand their thinking and allow them to brainstorm new ideas (Campbell, 2001; Kirby, 1995).

In this study, Finnish preschoolers created soft toys in a holistic learning process connected to storytelling, drawing, discussion and collaboration. The framework for this process was children's sense of humour, deployed both in collaboration with others and individually. The aim was to investigate the role and different expressions of humour in the creative process. Previous studies have indicated that using humour in educational settings supports learning and enhances children's wellbeing (Anttila, 2008). Humour also has the capacity to make the atmosphere more relaxed and creative. Humour may be a valuable resource within arts-based or problem-solving activities in different school subjects. Since humour emerges from communication and the situation in which it is used, the user of humour is unable to predict how it will be perceived (Järvelä, Keinänen, Nuutinen, & Savolainen, 2004). Therefore, it is important to make the different perceptions of humour visible and learn to tolerate different approaches to humour (Aerila, Laes, & Laes, 2017).

In our previous studies, we used children's stories and craft products to visualize their interpretation of literature and their experiences in different learning environments. These studies indicated that stories and craft products are well suited for describing children's experiences and involving children in learning (Aerila, Rönkkö, & Grönman, 2016a, 2016b; Rönkkö, Aerila, & Grönman, 2016). In these studies, the children made up their stories before they engaged in the craft-making or a follow-up story (individual story ending, ISE). In the present study, we asked children to tell a story describing the imaginary life of a soft toy, with a view to discovering what kinds of expressions of humour were present in the soft toys and stories they created.

Humour and children's humour

The ability to produce and understand humour is as much a talent as mathematical, musical or artistic talent (Fern, 1991). Studies have shown that humour has a positive impact on learning, improving outcomes and the relationships between children and educators. Although humour has been widely investigated in educational settings, little research has been conducted on children's individual humour in the context of education (Anttila, 2008; Martin, 2007; Özdogru & McMorris, 2013), in particular in Scandinavia. Children use humour for many purposes, one of which is to protect them in stressful situations by enabling them to see the situation from an alternative perspective (Martin, 2007).

Humour is commonly defined as the communication of multiple, incongruous meanings that are amusing in some manner (Dunbar, Banas, Rodrigues, Liu, & Abra, 2012; Martin, 2007). Humour theories can be classified into three groups: incongruity, superiority and relief theories. Incongruity theory is the leading approach. It focuses on ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance and inappropriateness (Carrell, 2008; Smuts, 2016). According to incongruity theory, humour emerges in an incongruity between a concept involved in a situation and the real objects related to the concept. The main point of the theory is not the incongruity itself but its realization and resolution (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002).

Children's everyday lives contain several humorous elements. They play with the logics of language, violate customary rules and combine things that are not normally combined (Neuss, 2006). They tell one another jokes, riddles and funny stories. They follow cartoons on television and read books whose charm resides in humorous events and situations (Serafini & Coles, 2015). They seem to appreciate many kinds of humour: they like incongruous actions and objects and use nonsense words. They also like clowning, verbal or behavioural teasing, riddles, joking, toilet humour, practical jokes and self-disparagement (Franzini, 2002; Loizou, Kyriakides, & Hadjicharalambous, 2011). Some expressions of children's humour can be

challenging for adults (Aerila, Laes, & Laes, 2015). Breaking rules causes incongruity and is therefore an essential element of some children's humour. The children know about rules and adults' insistence that rules be obeyed; therefore, they find breaking rules irresistible and delightful (Loizou, 2005; Lucca & Pacheco, 2001; Socha & Kelly, 1994). Later in life, this kind of humor may be interpreted as a social competence, especially among boys when they are constructing their masculinity and social status in a group (Huuki, Manninen, & Sunnaria, 2010).

Children's sense of humour develops in stages. They often start by manipulating concrete objects and then move on to playing with language and concepts (McGhee, 2002). According to Loizou et al. (2011), children demonstrate the ability to produce stories involving humour by the age of six, usually creating incongruity in the form of violating rules and using humorous symbols. By the age of six or seven, children are capable of telling simple jokes and riddles, but they may not be able to explain why the joke or riddle is funny. Children are able to explain the humour in their words or actions at around the age of 10. By the age of 12, jokes are the most popular type of humour, and children are able to explain jokes with complex word play and cognitive incongruities (Bergen, 1998; 2006; McGhee, 2002).

Using and understanding humour is a subjective matter, because it depends on various factors such as the person's worldview, previous experiences, age, gender and culture (Dowling, 2014). Previous studies (Aerila et al., 2017; Dowling, 2014; Neuss, 2006) indicate that girls and boys appreciate and use different kinds of humour. Girls usually prefer things like tickling other people, whereas boys are amused by the misfortunes of others and aggressive humour (Dowling, 2014). According to Neuss (2006), girls laugh at aesthetically produced comedic things such as funny sounds and appearances, while boys laugh at others' mishaps. Similarly, Dowling (2014) suggests that boys find various mishaps that happen to themselves, friends, family members or pets to be humorous. For girls, humour means pleasing others and laughing together, whereas boys tend to laugh at the expense of others (Aerila et al., 2015; 2017).

One of the earliest studies on children's humour was conducted by Roger Piret in the 1940s. He aimed to produce child-centred information on the sense of humour by asking children to make drawings based on the following instruction: "Draw a picture that would make other people laugh." He claimed that drawings are a natural way for children to express their thoughts and feelings. Through these drawings, he was able to recognize individual differences in humour. He created categories of humorous features based on the similarities of the drawings. The main finding of his study was that children's feelings towards the comic seemed to arise from the perception of a contrast, an incongruity or a deviation from physical, intellectual or social standards (Piret, 1941).

Research methods

Study context

The research was conducted during a period of five days in the spring semester of 2015 in a municipal preschool group in an urban area of western Finland. The preschool group consisted of 17 children (7 boys and 10 girls), aged 5 to 6 years. The staff consisted of three female educators, two kindergarten teachers and one trained nurse, and the research took place at the preschool. The holistic learning process was planned and conducted by the researchers. However, the researchers discussed both the preliminary plans and the plans for the learning process itself with the staff, and the staff participated equally in all the activities. To facilitate the holistic learning process, a sequence of clearly defined phases was devised (Figure 1).

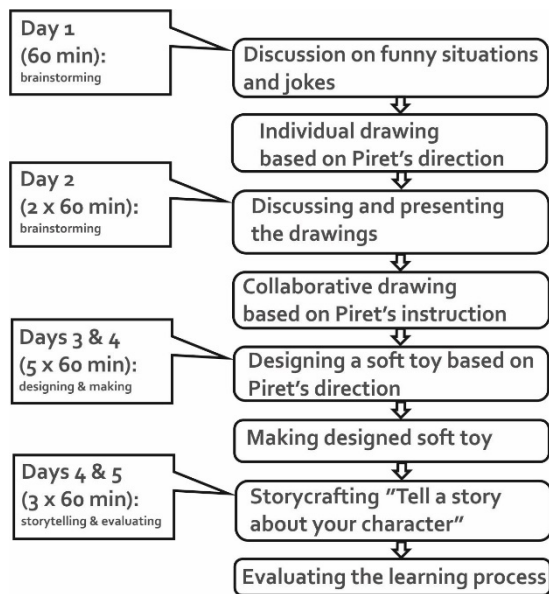


Figure 1: The learning process.

The first two days of the learning process were used to brainstorm for different manifestations of humour. The first day entailed a discussion with the children about different kinds of jokes and funny situations, after which the children were assigned the task according to Piret’s (1941) instruction: “Draw a picture that would make other people laugh!” (see Figure 2). These drawings were supplemented by verbal narratives explaining the humorous features of the drawings.



Figure 2: Melinda’s individual sketch, “Funny clowns that play tricks”.

The second day started with the children and the researcher becoming acquainted with individual drawings and talking about sense of humour. Thereafter, the children were asked to collaboratively draw a character that would make others laugh, in accordance with the original instruction of Piret (1941) (see Figure 1). One example of these collaborative drawings is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: A collaborative sketch of a character called “Röllli Pappanen” (Röllli is an imaginary troll fairytale character in a TV series).

On the third day, the children started making the unique soft toys that were meant to make others laugh. The designing of the character was done with coloured pencils on A3 paper (see Figure 4) and the design was complemented by verbal narratives. The design formed the basis of patterns for the soft toys. The children cut the characters out of the paper and used them to create different elements of the model (circles, triangles, squares, and strips), which were taped together. The outlines for the characters were drawn with oil wax on fabric and painted with liquid fabric paint. Each child made two patterns of each character, which were sewn together. The adults helped with the sewing with sewing machine. (see Figure 1).



Figure 4: John's sketch of a funny character, whose shape is based on a mountain and who is a fan of hockey league TPS (TPS is a hockey team in a neighbouring city). He likes eating carrots.

During the fourth day, the children filled their fabric characters with cotton wool and sewed them together by hand. The children were then asked to add details (e.g. pearls, buttons and strings). On the fifth day, when the soft toy was ready, the children were asked to tell a story about it. It was emphasized to them that the story could be anything as long as it involved the character. Because most preschoolers were not yet able to write, we facilitated the stories using the story-crafting method (see Figure 1), a process in which a child or a group of children acts as the narrator, and a story crafter writes the story down word for word. When the story is finished, the story crafter reads it to the narrator to offer him or her the opportunity to change the text. The stories are also often read aloud to others and collected (Karlsson, 2009). After the storytelling, the soft toys and their stories were presented to the whole preschool group.

Data collection and analysis

This research is a qualitative case study. It aims to illustrate an event or operation in a certain environment, and to use diverse acquired data in many different ways. Case studies are suitable for clarifying the roles of individual actors where some factors cannot be controlled or where it is impossible to perform an experiment to test the relevant causal relationship (Yin, 1994).

The empirical data included individual and collaborative sketches, craft designs and soft toys, stories and video recordings of the activities of the preschool group. The research data were supported by semi-structured interviews and children's oral narratives, illuminating the children's assessment and their perspectives on the whole process. The analysis of this study was implemented by thematizing the humorous features of the soft toys and the stories children told at the end of the learning process (Lee, 1999).

The framework for thematizing was created based on theories of humour, and the analysis was partly data- and partly theory-driven. The theory-driven analysis derived from Piret's (1941) categories of humour. According to Piret (1941), children's humorous drawings (in this study applied to designs, soft toys and stories) can be classed as having *comic features*

or representing *comic situations*. Comic features are divided into three subcategories: distorted size (e.g. huge nose, hat or shoes), combinations (e.g. an animal combined with a human being, such as a duck with a hat or a girl with rabbit ears) and clowns, funny clothes and masks. Comic situations and behaviour relate to unnatural situations and absurd behaviour (e.g. a man riding a butterfly or standing on a roof with the sun in his hand) or to different kinds of accidents and practical jokes (e.g. stepping in a bucket or a child ringing a doorbell and then running away). In this study, the analysis concentrated on the comic features and their representations in the children's creation of humorous soft toys, confirmed by their narratives and interviews. The results are described with several examples of children's outputs.

Results

Humour in children's soft toys

The study revealed that humour motivates and inspires children in arts-based activities. Most children were sympathetic towards the soft toys and thought of them as human characters. They seemed to regard their humorous characters as whole persons. The names of the soft toys were humorous and giving names to them seemed to help the children design more detailed characters. Some of the names were borrowed from familiar figures in Finnish television serials (e.g. Jani-Petteri, who is an improvisational character created by a Finnish actor).

The humorous features of the soft toys were associated with various situations and combinations, and were added especially to the clothes, accessories and features (e.g. facial expression, hair and makeup). Given that clothes and faces are usually perceived first, adding funny features to these may therefore be the most effective way to create a humorous impression. For example, Billy's soft toy, called Super-four, has a big head and a strange, flat body, as well as a funny mouth and teeth and thick fingers that stick out (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Billy's soft toy called Super-four.

The most common tool for creating humour was incongruence, which was implemented in different ways and represented all the subcategories of Piret's main category of comic features.

Examples of funny clothes and incongruence are “men’s clothes on a woman”, “wearing pyjamas in the daytime” and “shoes that are too big”. Funny features such as “sticking-out ears” were painted on the faces. The figure designed by Betty is called Tutti Tulli (a form of word play like “Pacifier classifier”). According to the maker, the soft toy has several humorous features, such as short bow legs, a funny face with two teeth sticking out, clothes in amusing colours and a triangle for a nose (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The soft toy made by Melinda.

The humour in children’s soft toys was in most cases linked to positive matters, the aim being to cheer up friends and family members by surprising them or by giving them a nice piece of craft work. The craft process seemed to be more product-oriented among the girls; their objective was to make an aesthetic product that would bring joy and pleasure. For instance, Mirjam considered the soft toys and the humour in them as having the potential to heal loved ones:

Researcher: When you have finished making this soft toy, what are you going to do with it?

Mirjam: I am going to give it to my grandmother so that she can get better ... She is so ill, maybe she won’t—but I want to give it to her anyway. Maybe grandmother will feel better in herself and she will get well again.

There was also some toilet humour in children’s outputs, especially among the boys. For example, Willy made a ‘poo’ with a green stink as a separate part of the toy (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Poo with his stink made by Willy.

The humour in the stories

The soft toys seemed to be a source of positive and empathetic stories. The representations of humour in the stories could be divided into two main categories: details of incongruity and delighting others. Susan's story is full of incongruity:

Ulla wears only men's clothes. Also, she often has dirty teeth and her nose is purple. She is like this because she wants to be funny. Actually she has been like this since she was born. She loves chilli and so she has red hair. She has not always had red hair, but it has been dyed red. She also eats only food with chilli in it. The only friends she has are chili peppers, which she sadly usually eats.

Eva told the following story based on her heart-shaped soft toy:

I made this character funny and hope that it makes everybody laugh. I will always play with it. I have a gymnastics rod in my room and I'll throw my toy over it all the time. It is going to be fun.

Most children referred to humour in their stories, but humour was not the central detail and the humorous details differed from the details of the soft toys. The most salient themes of the stories were friendship, happiness and acceptance of diversity, regardless of the features of the soft toys. In all the stories, the humorous features related to happiness and almost never to aggression or disparaging humour. This indicates that most children empathized with their characters and the humour in the stories was less important than the personality of the soft toy. The following story is about the soft toy called Poo (see Figure 7). In the story, the author refers to the poo (and the smell following it) as a person. The most obvious humorous feature, that the soft toy is a poo, has no relevance in the story: Poo is a friend.

This person meets another person. They start playing together. The other one has to go home. Then this person goes on playing on his own.

All the children were able to create a story based on their soft toy. The stories were of different kinds and represented different literacy skills. However, it seems that the learning process, involving a theme that aroused the children's interest and with a concrete product at the end, enabled all the children to create a story, and the process helped them differentiate the level of the story themselves. Children with advanced literacy skills were able to tell coherent stories with a logical storyline and detailed portrayals, as in Billy's (see Figure 5) story:

His name is Super-four. He can change himself into an airplane if he has to. The only problem is that once he has lifted off he can't change direction. Sometimes he floats down after a flight. He is flatter than a real person. That is why he can fly. He always flies to help someone who needs it. He is a superhero. He is the only superhero who can turn into an airplane. He is also famous for his large mouth. The mouth is so big because he always laughs when he wins against the bad guys. Superheroes can be avengers. The avenger always wins. This means that they work together. If somebody tries to hurt Super-four, Hulk covers for him and Spiderman captures the bad guy. Then Hulk hits the bad guy and the bad guy flies off into space like a ball.

In addition, the stories of children who were less familiar with story structure and literature were mostly visual portrayals, describing individual details that could be seen in the soft toy, as in Melinda's (see Figure 6) description of the character:

This character's teeth are funny. It is a bit chubby-chubby. It makes people laugh. It is funny. It can do somersaults and stuff. It has a crew cut. It has short legs.

Creating their own representations of humour before the storytelling seemed to help the children to empathize with the character and to be happy and confident about their stories. The process of making gave them material to think about and increased positive attitudes towards their own stories and the process of storytelling. The collaborative elements of the process helped children to come up with ideas for their story as well as get feedback from other children, whereas the individual assignments enabled children to better express their own ideas. For example, the boy who invented the soft toy called Poo had a lot of doubts about his idea for an amusing soft toy, but the other children supported him and at the end of the process he was very attached to his character.

Discussion and conclusions

This research reports a five-day holistic learning process in which preschoolers' sense of humour was used as a tool in different arts-based activities. The study shows that a holistic approach can be used in relation to different themes and phenomena (Laamanen, 2016). Additionally, this kind of holistic learning process supports children by giving them the opportunity to look for and find personal solutions. Equally, it requires teachers to make their teaching and the activities in which they engage children relevant to the children's lives (Rönkkö & Aerila, 2015).

Incongruity is a typical feature of preschoolers' humour and is reflected in their humorous outputs (Martin, 2007). The present study indicates that humour is a powerful force in various learning processes in early childhood education. This seems to be the case especially in arts-based education, since children's creative activities, such as storytelling, have many similarities with humour. They are entertaining, contain information and help children feel safe, calm and focused (Campbell, 2001; Lukens, 2007). Allowing children to express their thoughts

and ideas through stories and similar activities is especially significant for young children, and may be the only way for them to deal with abstract issues (Moffet, 1983).

The learning process described in this study enabled children to experience the significance of their thoughts. At the same time, they were able to find solutions to given tasks and felt joy in their successes (Karppinen, 2008). In craft making, the children were encouraged to design and make individual and collaborative craft products, using their imagination (Härkki et al., 2016; Yliverronen, 2014), and the soft toys and stories they created were tools for their personal expression (Rönkkö, 2011).

The learning process helped children to come up with ideas for stories that highlighted the meaningfulness of the soft toys to them. In their stories, they described friendship between themselves and the soft toys and valued the soft toys as almost human. Although some of the soft toys contained mildly degrading humour, the stories depicted the soft toy characters as humans and friends.

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