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**A SOCIO-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF
YOUNG CHILDREN'S PLAYFUL AND
HUMOROUS COMMUNICATION**

"The play's the thing" - Hamlet

**A thesis presented in the fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative and interpretive study explores how young children experience humour and playfulness in their communication. Data were gathered in three early childhood education centres. The ethnographic method used was primarily participant observation, with the aid of a video camera and tape-recorder. Socio-cultural historical activity theory informs both the methodological paradigm of the research and the framework for data analysis. The research focuses on systems of interactions rather than individuals. The diversity and complexity in children's playful and humorous communication is illuminated by presenting 24 narrative-like "events" involving such communication. This presentation makes clear the dynamic qualities and artifact-mediated dialectical nature of playful and humorous communication activity. "Artifacts" include material and non-material tools, symbols, and semiotic signs (Wartofsky, 1979). Relationships between the roles, rules, and the community of children and teachers engaged in each event are discussed. Tensions and contradictions in these relationships (including children's playful subversion of adult rules) are explored.

This thesis argues that humour, playfulness, and imagination are shared and distributed across groups of children. Thus children's imaginations, including their individual experiences, are dynamically shared with and connect the group. Playful and humorous communication involves words, sounds, gestures, posture, rhythm, and movement. At times the synchronous movements and speech of children having fun together are like a spontaneously improvised dance. Boundaries between children are blurred by the activity. The children become united by shared and distributed imagination in playful and humorous diversity.

This study suggests that individual children in early childhood centres should be viewed as fundamentally connected to each other. Individuals exist in relation to others. Children's relationships with others, their environment, and

artifacts are central to understanding children's experience of playful and humorous communication.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother. Aileen taught me to enjoy and appreciate history as real stories. With this historical awareness the addition of cultural and social contexts was a natural progression. From my father, Peter I learned to love words. So, this thesis is partly a consequence of their historical and literary influences. They would be so proud to read it.

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