

Timothy Goodman – Saratoga Shores Elementary

When you ask students in Mr. Goodman’s 3rd grade class, “What makes Mr. Goodman a good teacher?” the overwhelming response you will hear is “He mixes learning with fun!” In addition, as you look around his room—better known to his students as Goodtown, USA—there is plenty of evidence that this is true. The brightly colored signs, student work displays, and Goodtown buildings invite students to learn in meaningful and engaging ways. You’re also likely to find Mr. Goodman somewhere in the room, armed with his Dewalt tool belt around his waist and loaded with markers, pens, highlighters, and “Goodies”—the currency of Goodtown. In addition to all these teacher tools, he also carries with him the belief that every child deserves a teacher who cares and will help students be their best selves, regardless of their individual learning challenges, struggles, or differences.

His students tried to explain to me what the phrase “learning mixed with fun” meant by pointing to examples of the types of activities Mr. Goodman employs to guide their learning throughout the year. They describe making clocks with pretzel sticks and caramels and then learning to tell time as they moved the hands of their clocks. Mr. Goodman uses music and song like “I Sure Like Being Me” to remind students to maintain a positive attitude towards themselves and others. Students also describe how Mr. Goodman uses puppets in class, particularly Positive Parker (a happy ape-like creature who leads a discussion of compliments and questions during the class council meetings) and Rocky the Rooster (a bird with a charming Southern accent who helps students review their homework expectations for the week). These strategies bring an element of fun to fundamentals and enliven what may otherwise feel like mundane tasks.

I think his students are right; as I observed his teaching, he did mix learning with fun. However, I also came to understand that the fun approaches and strategies are other tools in his belt that Mr. Goodman uses to motivate and empower his students to take control of their own learning. He seeks to foster

student autonomy and choice in the classroom and create a space where students feel safe taking the risks necessary to learn. For example, some might fear that giving 3rd graders autonomy results in anarchy and chaos, but Mr. Goodman teaches his students that they have power and that they can choose to effectively use it. At different times throughout the day, you will hear him invite students to please show your power. One student defines power as “What you control—like your body and yourself” and another as “the amount of choices we have.” Students in his class understand that respectful and thoughtful behavior leads to increased personal power. One student explained, “When you aren’t controlling yourself, you aren’t controlling your power.” Mr. Goodman’s students use their power to learn.

The choices available to students in his classroom also reflect Mr. Goodman’s belief in their individual ability to direct their own learning. Each week in the grand council meeting the student selected to be mayor of the week sets a character goal for the class. Whether they choose to focus on being positive, determined, honest, respectful, helpful, responsible or friendly, the class spends time brainstorming what it might look like when they put these attributes into action. Then, as the mayor see members of the class demonstrating this attribute, they recognize their exemplary behaviors.

In Goodtown Mr. Goodman also fosters autonomy and choice by helping students understand that their job is to be a learner. This includes choosing to participate in class, completing their homework, and taking on additional jobs to help the classroom environment. Some work as mail carriers who deliver work and papers, others as the town librarian who keeps track of the classroom books and organizes the classroom library. Others take turns filling the role of the absent friend who helps keep track of the day’s work for any students who are missing, while others work as online engineers who write weekly posts about the town activities and post it on the Goodtown, USA Facebook page. Through these and other practices Mr. Goodman tries to simulate real life experiences and choices that allow students to develop skills they will need in life outside of the classroom.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Mr. Goodman makes learning fun because he creates a space where students feel safe taking risks, making mistakes, and trying again—practices that good learners embrace. Students are

expected to ask questions and he rewards authentic inquiry. He does not lecture or tell students information, he teaches them to look for and discover the information themselves. He also helps students view mistakes as a part of the learning process and the class celebrate their individual and collective victories. For example, learning to say hard “R” sounds can be a struggle for some 3rd graders and sometimes kids get mocked for difficulties with their speech. However, in Mr. Goodman’s class students who need help with this skill are celebrated when they make progress and the whole class often claps to celebrate someone’s victory. On a larger scale, at the end of the year the class holds the “Goodtown Gala” where they give awards, present the “State of Goodtown” address; show what they have learned throughout the year. Mr. Goodman helps students view the challenges and setbacks they experience as temporary challenges that lead to long-term learning and success.

Many teachers love the students they teach and work to make learning fun, but Mr. Goodman stands apart because of his ability to help students develop attributes that will serve them as learners long after they leave his classroom. By creating opportunities for them to exercise their agency and choice as well as to take risks to learn, he creates the kind of classroom where I want to send the children I care about most to learn and grow.

-Dawan Coombs