Where Has All the Fun Gone?

Growing up in the 1970s, I don’t remember many days that school wasn’t fun. We had morning recess and snack, lunch, and afternoon recess. There was plenty of rigor—the most recent overused education buzzword—but there also were positive social relationships with adults. The janitor, Mr. Gardner, was part of our daily routine; Mrs. Howes helped with lunch; and Mrs. Horsch worked in the library. Our families respected and admired teachers, and we looked forward to what new adventure they would take us on.

In the age of school accountability, teachers work hard and have expanding responsibilities. Our kids are tested and retested. As a result, some of the fun of school has had to go by the wayside.

Humor Infusion

Years ago when my son was in second grade, I asked his teacher why she had eliminated snack time in the morning. He was a typical second-grade boy who needed a morning snack and a chance to run around. With a tone that betrayed her anxiety, she asked, “Do you want him to have a snack or learn to read?” I didn’t ask many questions that year and I was pretty sure the fun had gone out of her classroom. I have recounted that story numerous times in my work with teachers and administrators. It’s a good laugh line discussing humor in the classroom, but that particular teacher took her job seriously and was overwhelmed with district and state accountability expectations.

Unlike my son’s second-grade teacher, humor was my go-to teaching strategy. Early in my career, my teaching partner and I always seemed to be assigned the kids who were labeled “difficult.” What started for us as a survival mode tactic became our hallmark. Students labeled difficult did better in our class because we remembered to have some fun.

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I’m not advocating that classrooms become sketch rooms for Saturday Night Live. When I used humor, I always had a plan and used myself as the subject. A simple infusion of levity can change the day for a student whose family is in transitional housing or in the process of separating. The students we taught appreciated the laughter at our expense, and the humor created a safe space for many of the students. In employing self-deprecating humor, the students were in a student-centered environment generally free from bullying behaviors.

Find the Punch Line

Teachers are my people. I am most comfortable mentoring and coaching emerging professionals. I have tremendous respect for the frontline work that classroom folks do every day, and the job gets tougher every year. I remind my team frequently to remember to find the punch line. This is not the easiest strategy for every teacher and we all have different comfort levels using humor. Teachers who find this challenging can start by simply using funny examples with students. The math teacher develops a different type of word problem highlighting cats, elephants, or giraffes. The science teacher can look for ways to point out oddities of certain species. By finding humor in small examples, we focus on student achievement in a different manner.

The Rutgers University Social-Emotional Laboratory has examined ways that classrooms can be more infused with humor. There are subtle changes that can be made to daily routines such as humor boards for jokes and drawings. More transformative changes that overhaul programs include building humor into writing assignments and adding humor to formative and summative assessments. This can be as simple as making a word problem funny or assigning a reading book that has a lighter topic. The No. 1 humor strategy highlighted by the Rutgers Lab is encouraging adults in schools to laugh at themselves—when you do something silly or wrong, mention it and laugh at it. That may lead to one less student afraid to speak up in class.

A little bit of fun in the classroom doesn’t have to overtake the priorities of Common Core or district standards. Overall, the focus is to improve the school day for students and teachers. I’d like to think that if Mr. Gardner, Mrs. Howes, and Mrs. Horsch were working in schools today, they would be influential to another generation. Not just as school employees or volunteers, but also as approachable model adults who might share a laugh and join the assessment prep team.

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