

WHEN SCHOOLS GET READINESS WRONG



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I often wonder what a school ready child looks like, just like I wonder what a ready parent or teacher looks like. After three decades in this job and 21 years as a Principal enrolling 128 Grade 1's each year, I have never been able to identify a school ready Grade 1.

Oh yes, most of the girls are ready! Dressed in their uniforms months before the first day, this group, as a gender, play school, handing out work to their mates, marking and awarding accolades or cross-faced put-downs. The very concept of sitting still for five hours puts most boys on the non-ready, slippery slope

towards boredom and, for many, eventual drop-out from a system that neither ignites nor stirs a desire to learn.

Rather, how ready are our Grade 1 educators to receive a brain wanting to learn. Too many educators busy themselves finding fault with the lack of readiness, doing various diagnostic assessments, instead of designing ways to ignite a brain. The six-year-old brain is at an extremely vulnerable stage in its development. A good Pre-School teacher would have prepared that brain through play – not desk and book work, to be able to cope with the demands of starting to learn to read, write and manipulate qualities.

So, is play the essence of school readiness? The answer is a resounding YES! A child who has been in an environment where there has been endless hours of structured and more importantly, unstructured play, engaging with other children, learning to take turns in the sandpit, sharing toys and constructing creative shapes with boxes, paper and straws and afterwards verbally explaining in full sentences how this new and exciting invention will change the world, is so ready for school.

Our children have stopped playing, climbing trees and balancing on narrow poles. Parents fill their lives with

structured events so that there is not sufficient time to simply play. We need a bunch of highly-trained play therapists in our Pre-School classes. Educators who understand that the Pre-School year is not about teaching children to cope with the irritations of the frustrated Grade 1 educators, but rather to set up the brain's neural infrastructure to cope with whatever the Grade 1 teacher demands in our high pressured and poorly designed national curriculum.

So how do we ensure that children arrive in Grade 1 ignited and stirred? Pre-School must be about fun, play and meaningful 21st century themes that will ignite the brain to want to learn. Too often the weekly theme in the Pre-School class is mundane and so 1980s. This group of children are going to hit the world of work in 2030. We must expose their brains to meaningful topics and big ideas.

Home too, must be about first-time listening, constant talking, using big words to describe events and hours of exposure to books and stories. Construction toys should litter the home. Bake regularly with your child, calculating and weighing quantities, mixing, sifting, stirring clockwise and anti-clockwise and folding in the flour to maintain the air, and then enjoying and sharing the final product. Garden

with your child. Produce a mini-veggie patch digging in compost and selecting the favourite veggies that she will love to eat. Plant seedlings and water daily, filling a watering can and explaining how photosynthesis works. Never drive anywhere without talking about what you see out of the window. Discuss the life lessons – why people drive badly, why some people get cross so quickly on the road and how kind and courteous behaviour relieves tension in others. Model these behaviours – for it takes 2 000 experiences for your child to apply the model in their own lives.

Turn off the TV. Turn off the iPad games. Switch on physical play, communication and doing things together. Put out some newspaper on the kitchen table and allow creative painting. Then display the creations on the fridge door.

Ready children are fearless because they feel confident and successful. Knowing how to respond first time to an instruction, engaging with different people in a limited space, expressing themselves confidently, taking turns and completing a task are the scaffolding skills needed to ensure mastery within the formal schooling system. With that in place they will be ready to reach for the stars. 