

ARE YOU READY?

By Wilson McCaskill

I think that too many children come to school believing that their main obligation is to simply roll-up. After that, teachers take over and do the work and if they are successful, children will learn and if they're not, children won't.

There are of course things required of children. They should have the necessary materials and equipment, be on time, have their hat and lunch, but apart from these basic requirements little else is needed.

If these basic and simple requirements are not met it's alright, because when the bell rings teachers will take over and whatever gains and losses occur in the day are primarily the responsibility of those in charge. If you haven't got a hat you'll be given one from lost property. Don't worry, no one will let you starve and as learning is the main game you will be given the implements to expedite the process.

That schools are places where teachers give and students receive appears, in my observations of children's behaviour, to be a prevalent belief. How much they receive and how well they use it seems, for so many children, to be outside their realm of personal influence and dependent on factors over which they have no control, namely; the teacher's ability as the giver, the child's intellectual capacity as the receiver and the school environment in which the learning transaction occurs.

Whenever people arrive at the table of learning and development bringing their physical selves and little else, they are disempowered.

To come to the table empty handed does not increase the chances of leaving enriched, satisfied and fulfilled - quite the reverse. To benefit from the laden table of learning, children must arrive empowered, with hands full and willing to make a significant contribution to their own education.

Learning and development works best when all parties are empowered – when all parties contribute to the benefit of all gathered at the table. Put simply you can't learn if you're not ready (in the broadest sense of the word), nor can you teach.

Children are ready to benefit and profit from learning when they understand the need to contribute something significant to the process. Simply rolling-up is not enough, and there is no such thing as passive engagement. All engagement is active, transactional and reliant on the constant movement of give and take.

The following strategy helps children to get the idea and it's simple to use.

THE STRATEGY:

Simply get a wide roll of masking tape and stick it across the floor at the doorway to your classroom. Once your students step over this line they are in the classroom.

Write on the tape in big bold letters, **ARE YOU READY?**

On the first day of the strategy let your students enter the class as they normally do without referring to the tape. Many will notice and comment. You will get many reading it out aloud and asking you what it means. Simply advise them to take their seats and that you will soon explain.

Once they are all in, go through your normal start process and then draw their attention to the line marked, **ARE YOU READY?**

The first thing is to get them to speculate as to what it means. Teachers are quite often surprised how quickly students guess correctly.

After this first step, you enter into a talk about what makes successful learning, effective classrooms and a fulfilling, rewarding school experience. Your singular objective is to get every child to see that for learning to work, they must bring things to the classroom above and beyond their physical attendance.

However, before starting the strategy there needs to be a little preparation.

Get your roll book and look at your list of students and consider what each of them needs to bring to the table of learning if they are to increase their profit.

Imagine that you are standing at the door of your classroom asking them the following question that they must answer to gain entry – “What are you ready to do?”

EXAMPLE

Teacher: Good morning Francine.

Francine: Good morning Miss Logan.

Teacher: Are you ready to come in and start learning?

Francine: Yes.

Teacher: Then tell me, what you are ready to do?

Francine: Stay in my seat and listen.

Teacher: A strong decision. Now please say, I am ready to stay in my seat and listen.

Francine: I am ready to stay in my seat and listen.

Teacher: Then it's a pleasure to invite you into our class. Hello Brian. What are you ready to do?

Brian: Good morning Miss Logan. I am ready to not give up on maths today.

Teacher: I look forward to that. We don't beat mistakes by running away from them. Please come in.

Take a look at that list and think of what each child, in a best-case scenario, might answer.

EXAMPLE

CHILD: I am ready to....

CHILD 1: Work with others.

CHILD 2: Stop calling out.

CHILD 3: Share equipment.

CHILD 4: Ask more questions.

CHILD 5: Try not to rush.

CHILD 6: Give difficult things a go.

CHILD 7: Stop seeking attention.

CHILD 8: Help others who find things difficult.

CHILD 9: Work harder than yesterday.

CHILD 10: Not get angry when I make mistakes.

CHILD 11: Stop showing off.

CHILD 12: Respect other people's property.

CHILD 13: Talk quietly.

CHILD 14: Work with boys.

CHILD 15: Share ideas.

CHILD 16: Make strong decisions.

CHILD 17: Be my own boss.

CHILD 18: Stop my feelings taking control.

CHILD 19: Follow instructions.

CHILD 20: Get over things.

CHILD 21: Stop being silly.

CHILD 22: Keep my hands to myself.

- CHILD 23: Try and write neatly.
CHILD 24: Watch how angry I get.
CHILD 25: To ask for time out before things get bad.
CHILD 26: Try new things.
CHILD 27: Speak up.
CHILD 28: Be patient.
CHILD 29: Include others.
CHILD 30: Be friendly to help me make friends.

AND MANY MORE

Several, if not many, will say what others have said but so long as it's something worthwhile for them to practise, that's fine.

The idea, and this needs to be fleshed out in your initial talk with the students, is for every student to choose an area that needs to be addressed to improve their learning. Being aware of their weaknesses is a sign of self-awareness and effective self-evaluation. Choosing to work on their weaknesses to turn them into strengths should be their objective.

To that end, a child may work on a deficiency for a few days before selecting some other area on which to focus. Others may change their area of focus daily or choose one for today based on their experiences yesterday. So long as it's worth their while to work on, they won't be wasting their time.

By offering a few suggestions, and especially some that are pertinent to members of your class, you trigger the reflection and analysis necessary for each student to determine what is best to work on.

The earlier list of examples may be of help.

By checking your roll book, you will prepare yourself for the first class discussion about the meaning and intent of, **ARE YOU READY?**

The next step in your preparation is to think about your responses to their answers. Sometimes a simple, thank you and come in will suffice but at other times a more tailored answer will work best.

EXAMPLE 1

- Student: I am ready to work with others.
- Teacher: Glad to hear it Michael, but what happens if they're not your friends?
- Student: I'll still work with them.
- Teacher: Then add, "Even if they're not my friends" to your answer.
- Student: I am ready to work with others even if they are not my friends.
- Teacher: I'm sure everyone will feel a little safer knowing that. Please take your seat.

EXAMPLE 2

- Student: I am ready to follow instructions.
- Teacher: Umm. This is the second day with this one. How do you think you went yesterday?
- Student: Not very well.
- Teacher: I agree and it's good that you know that. What is going to make today go better?
- Student: I don't know.
- Teacher: Then I doubt if it will go better. Tell you what, take some time to think how you might help to make that happen by going to the end of the line and coming up again.

HE ARRIVES AT THE ENTRANCE

- Teacher: Thought of anything.
- Student: No.
- Teacher: Were you trying?
- Student: Yes.
- Teacher: I could see you were. How about this for a suggestion? Anytime I'm going to give the class some instructions I'll give everyone a few seconds before I start. You can make sure you put everything down and move slightly away from the people near you and look at me. When I see you have done that I'll start the instructions. Sound good?

- Student: Yes.
- Teacher: Now tell me what you will do.
- Student: I will put everything down and move away from the people near me and look at you.
- Teacher: Hang on. Start again and start with I am ready.
- Student: I am ready to follow instructions and I will put things down and move away a bit and look at you to hear them.
- Teacher: You've got it. Please come in.

EXAMPLE 3

- Student: I am ready to stop seeking attention.
- Teacher: You're not going to find that easy, Claire.
- Student: Na.
- Teacher: I'm glad you're going to try. Attention seeking – does it make you weaker or stronger?
- Student: Weaker.
- Teacher: How does, "I'm ready to be strong and stop seeking attention" sound?
- Student: Good.
- Teacher: How does, "I'm ready to be strong and stop seeking attention and trust that my teacher will give it to me when I need it" sound?
- Student: Good.
- Teacher: Try saying that.
- Student: I can't remember it all.
- Teacher: I'll help you. Let's say it together. Ready?

Your responses can certainly reinforce their commitment to their self-development and it doesn't take long before you can respond succinctly and effectively to those who need it.

HOW LONG DO I KEEP DOING THIS?

After your initial discussion, get all the children to go outside the classroom. Have them enter saying what they are ready to do. This will be their first time and I recommend that you keep doing it at the start of every day for two weeks.

If your class is what you'd consider problematic or difficult, then get them to remind themselves, and you, of what they are ready to do every time they enter the classroom.

There's no need to go through the full acknowledgement of their answer after you have done it at the start of the day. Having them declare their intention after recess and lunch will suffice. Keep this up for either one or two weeks based on the results you're getting.

After the two-week period you can reduce the process down to alternate days for a further two weeks. On each alternate day get every child to declare their intention and on the other days you can just ask a few select children what they are ready to do.

By now, students will have got into the habit of entering the room by making the behavioural and mental shift necessary to contribute to the process of learning.

The hope is that they will not take the act of entering the classroom for granted. Instead, they will see the need to make the appropriate *code switch* before entering. In so doing, they will set up a "*feel*" in your classroom that in itself reminds them of the best way to behave.

You will understand what I mean if you think of churches, war memorials, libraries or other places that carry within their very structure a message about how to behave. It doesn't matter where I have been in the world, I have never seen people (be they tourists or otherwise) enter a place of worship and not speak in quiet tones and behave in a calm and respectful manner.

Now, I'm not suggesting your classroom should be treated like hallowed ground, but nor should it be treated like the playground or the rumpus room at home. It is a place of learning and although we want children to feel free and liberated within its walls, we don't want them being disrespectful and contemptuous.

As the term and year progresses, children can enter the classroom without an obvious and deliberate expression of intent. However, for good measure and to make sure that students keep up the habit of preparing to enter you should, on the odd occasion, run everyone through the entire process. Every now-and-then asking individuals to tell you what they are ready to do will keep people on their toes.

CHILDREN WHO AREN'T READY

EXAMPLE 1

Teacher: Good morning Nathan.

Nathan: (*Aggressively*) I am ready to try and stay calm when I make mistakes.

Teacher: I think a good start would be to be friendly and good mannered.

Nathan: (*Looks defiantly back*)

Teacher: This morning I asked myself if I was ready to be friendly to everyone entering our safe classroom and I was. That's why I smiled, was happy to see you and said good morning to you. Let me try it again. Good morning Nathan, I'm happy to see you.

Nathan: Good morning Miss Logan.

Teacher: Thank you Nathan. Now let's be honest with each other. You seem upset and a little bit angry. You likely have good reason to feel upset. Would that be right?

Nathan: Yes.

Teacher: It takes time to think your way through your feelings and be ready for class. There's nothing wrong with taking that time Nathan. Why not wait just over there and when you're ready join the line and let me welcome you to class. Okay?

Nathan: Okay.

NATHAN REJOINS THE LINE

Teacher: Well you certainly look to be in a better place. Have you used some strong thoughts?

Nathan: Yes.

Teacher: We get better at everything we practise and you're certainly getting better at that. Now, tell me what you're ready to do and see if you can use the words, "strong thoughts" in your answer.

Nathan: I am ready to use strong thoughts and not let my anger take over when I make mistakes.

Teacher: I'm looking forward to working with you today Nathan. Please come in and take your seat.

EXAMPLE 2

- Teacher: Nice to see you Siska. Good morning.
- Siska: Good morning Miss Logan.
- Teacher: Are you ready?
- Siska: No.
- Teacher: There's nothing you are ready to work on?
- Siska: No.
- Teacher: Interesting. Can you tell me why?
- Siska: Because this is silly and boring and I don't want to.
- Teacher: And you're?
- Siska: What?
- Teacher: Well, you have told me what you think of this; can you be as accurate about how you feel right now?
- Siska: Yes, but I'm not going to.
- Teacher: Annoyed, obstinate, defiant and perhaps even unhappy. That's my guess about how you feel right now. Those feelings certainly won't help you get much out of the class. I think we'd both show good thinking to let you wait a bit.
- Siska: *(Sulks to the side of the line. Eventually, everyone is in the class. Duty-of-care means you can't just leave Siska sitting outside so you feel trapped. If you let her in she wins and if you leave her outside she wins. What to do? Firstly there is no winning or losing for you. There is only helping someone to self-manage his or her learning).*
- Teacher: Boys and girls, please work on your own for a bit. I'm going to speak to Siska and see if she can use her thinking to make some strong decisions.

TEACHERS GOES TO SISKA

ALTERNATIVE 1

Teacher: Siska, how about you go into class and quietly read a book, draw a picture or just sit until you're ready to participate. Is there a chance that will work?

Siska: Yes.

Teacher: Good. I'm glad you're ready to work on preparing to participate. Let's see if you can do that quickly and take charge of the way you're feeling.

ALTERNATIVE 2

Teacher: Siska, would you come in now and sit close to the door please. When you feel strong enough to start work, please let me know and I will ask you to go back outside, and then enter by telling me what you are ready to do.

ALTERNATIVE 3

Teacher: Siska, can you accept my offer that you come in ready to give difficult things a go.

Siska: I don't want to.

Teacher: I know that you really don't like spelling, but nothing gets better if you run away from it. The big thing I'm asking from you is to give it a go. That will certainly take considerable courage and there is no way it will feel nice. However, you will have practised not giving in and that's a strength you and the rest of us will need often in our lives. So, can I ask you to be ready with your courage and come in to give something you don't like your best shot?

Siska: Yes.

Teacher: It's a pleasure to welcome a brave person into our classroom. Please come in.

ALTERNATIVE 4

Teacher: Siska, you have done this too many times. I have resisted your invitation asking me to be your boss. My hope for the past few days

has been that you will find the strength to be your own boss. As this has not happened I have to accept the invitation to be your boss.

It worries me and makes me sad that this had to happen. I hope that you can learn to master your feelings, respect yourself and your ability enough to make strong and often difficult decisions.

The teacher sets a specific time for further one-on-one behaviour education work with Siska.

EMBELLISHING

I have had the good fortune to see teachers take this idea and add to its impact and effectiveness by their own inventiveness. This only confirms my belief that good teaching is creative teaching. Let me share some of the embellishments I have seen.

TEACHER ONE:

This teacher had small squares of card on every student's desk. After stating their intention at the door she would ask them to write it on the card and decorate it while waiting for fellow students to enter. After everyone was in she'd give them all a few extra minutes to complete their cards and then ask students to stand one at a time and read out their "I am ready" card. (Think of the various skills being exercised and employed in this process).

With that completed, students would commence the day with the card sitting at the top corner of their desks reminding them of their intention. The cards served to remind her as well and she could, as the day progressed, comment on students' efforts to achieve their intentions.

She asked students to keep their cards. After the initial two-week period they were asked to look through them and assess how successfully they had been in fulfilling their intentions.

The students then stuck their cards onto strips of streamer paper with a card at the top bearing their name. These were hung around the room as a constant reminder of being ready – of coming to the place of learning empowered and with something to contribute.

TEACHER TWO:

For this teacher, walking over a strip of tape on the floor just wasn't dramatic enough. She purchased one of those door blinds made of wide, clear plastic strips that people hang up to keep out flies.

She had, **ARE YOU READY?** on the floor and above the door. As the first two weeks progressed she wrote those intentions that had been achieved by students on the plastic strips in black text. She of course didn't write the whole line, just the relevant

operative part of the line. After the line she wrote the students name in brackets in red text e.g. Work with others (John).

Her students loved it and thoroughly enjoyed the whole, **ARE YOU READY?** process.

I shared this story at a workshop and sometime later heard back from a teacher who copied the idea in part. Her variation was to type the successful achievements of her students, using the full sentence and the students name, onto envelope labels and stick them on the plastic strips. She wanted to keep the process going for as long as possible and reasoned that it would take a lot of labels to fill up the strips front and back. I imagine she was right.

TEACHER THREE:

This pre-primary teacher loved the idea but wanted something more physical and exciting for her little ones to do as they entered the class. As she didn't want them standing by the door for a long time she decided to shift the official entrance of the class to within the classroom.

Her technique was to make a tunnel about a metre long. She just got a big box, cut it to size and decorated it on the outside and the inside.

She placed the tunnel at one end of the room, near the door. Students came in the door and stood within a marked area behind the tunnel. She would move through the gathered group and pick someone to answer the, **ARE YOU READY?** question. Once answered, that student was allowed to crawl through the tube and pop out in what was now considered the classroom.

I remember watching, with much pleasure, the children's ability to accept that at one end of the tube they were outside the classroom and the other they were in.

They simply loved crawling through the tube and would pop out with excitement and beaming faces. It was a great idea and made the process of getting ready exciting for them. She never crawled through the tube herself, explaining to them that it was their tube and for their use only.

If the truth were known she would never have fitted (neither would I) but her students never once saw that as the reason. They fully accepted that the journey was theirs and theirs alone.

What was also enthralling was the fact that at the end of the day the children left the room without going through the tube. This posed no problem for them but everyone of them felt they could only enter the room by passing through the tube.