

# Beginning the Year in Grade 5/6

- Jeff Wilson

The start of grade 5/6 is a special time for children who are entering into the middle years of schooling. Many of these children are at a crossroads; some are already hitting adolescence and most consider peers and friendships as the most important part of school. The teacher then needs to maximize the classroom as a community of learners, fostering both independence and interdependence amongst these young human beings.

## Before School Starts

Being well prepared before starting the school year gives a new teacher the chance to get on top of the range of school routines that need to be established during the first few days.

### Preparing the Room:

- Arrange access to the room before school starts. Have the room very well organised, with equipment such as stationary that has been labeled and is easily accessible for children. Make the room look like an inviting space.
- Have a meeting area where the class can sit together.
- Have some soft furnishing in the room. Room layout can be done in negotiation with the children during the first day.

### Books to Read / Buy:

Setting up a professional library is quite a challenge. Teacher professional books are often expensive and need to be built up over time. Also we need to be discriminating about what we buy. I usually rely on trusted colleagues to assist me in this. We need to get hold of some books that will benefit our work directly, but also inform our overall understanding of teaching and learning.

### Here are some recommendations:

Harvey, S & Goudvis, A (2007) 'Strategies that Work – Second Edition.'  
Stenhouse.

Wilson, L (2002) 'Reading to Live – How to Teach Reading for Today's World'  
Heinemann

Wilson, L (2005) 'Writing to Live – How to Teach Writing for Today's World'  
Heinemann

Calkins, L (1994) 'The Art of Teaching Writing' Heinemann

### On the First Day:

- Arrive early and lay out all the items you need during the day so that you can be relaxed and not have to go looking for equipment / resources at the last minute.

- Read a piece of beautiful literature to the children - Colin Thompson titles such as 'Tower to the Sun' or 'Falling Angels' are wonderful works. Or works by Gary Crew such as 'The Water Tower' are great picture books for older reader.
- Make sure the children read and write on the first day.
- They could write about hopes and ideas for the year – What are you looking forward to?
- Spend time with the children setting up a room plan – Set certain criteria eg. Tables must be arranged for cooperative learning, there must be a whole class meeting area.
- Plan some 'Ice Breaker' experiences; especially if the children have come from a whole range of other classes, they may not know each other so well. Eg. A People Search.

## During the First Week

- Children need to read and write every day.
- A wonderful affirming activity is to get kids to write a letter to the teacher, the letter is about why it is great to have \_\_\_\_\_ in the room.  
The letter might sound something like this,  
Dear Jeff,  
I want to tell you about why it is great to have me in your class.

There are many texts with themes about individuality, uniqueness and being able to help others. 'Wilfred Gordon Macdonald Partridge' by Mem Fox, might be a title that can be used for this.

Children can write about personal traits, skills and interests or ways they help others. This is a great way to get to know about the lives and interests of the students you teach.

- Classroom Yellow Pages: Get the children to put together a skills directory that can be copied for each child. This will allow them to seek help from peers and not just the teacher.
- Start an assessment folder and begin taking notes about the children you are teaching. Dated observations of this type are invaluable as they map a child's progress over time.
- Do some professional reading, continue to inform your learning.
- Read all kinds of books to your children including picture books. Continuing to make picture books a regular part of classroom culture allows less experienced readers access to books that they can read with understanding. Picture books that you read to older children

should have some more in depth themes, or imagery, however, reading an old favourite or getting children to be a 'guest reader' is valuable also.

Here are some of my favourite titles for older readers:

'The Deliverance of the Dancing Bears', by Elizabeth Stanley

'The Tower to the Sun', by Colin Thompson

'The Water Tower' by Gary Crew

'The Wreck of the Zephyr', by Chris Van Allsburg

'The Sweetest Fig', by Chris Van Allsburg

'Wolves,' by Emily Gravitt.

Don't be afraid to read some simpler text. Validating picture books in a grade 5/6 classroom, will allow less experienced readers access to books they can read without feeling self-conscious.

- Put together a fantastic classroom library. This is about finding the right books for the kids you teach.
- Have high expectation of all students.

## Planning for the first day of school.

On the first day and indeed in the first weeks of school we need to develop both classroom routines, as well as, a positive class tone. The following shows a possible plan for the first day.

### A Sample First Day Plan

Plan / Schedule	Commentary
<p><b>9.00 Welcome and greeting.</b></p> <p>Getting to know each other ice-breaker.            'A People Search' – This task requires children to gather information about different people in the class, it requires cooperation, speaking and listening. Its main purpose is to begin building a 'community of learners'. Positive and open communication are a mainstay of this.            (Samples are at:  <a href="http://www.teachingwithpurpose.com/Classbuilding%20Activity%20-%20People%20Hunt.pdf">http://www.teachingwithpurpose.com/Classbuilding%20Activity%20-%20People%20Hunt.pdf</a>            or  <a href="http://712educators.about.com/od/icebreakers/a/scavengerhunt.htm">http://712educators.about.com/od/icebreakers/a/scavengerhunt.htm</a>            Or make up your own.</p> <p><b>10.00 Writing / Publishing:</b> Children use publishing resources to label their classroom locker.            Purpose: Children will use appropriate use of colour and size to produce a label.</p> <p>Read a book to the class before recess.</p>	<p>Before School: Children and parents often want to visit before school. Being in the room at 8.30 am will allow time to meet and greet.            Children will be eager to talk to their peers and excited about school. Hence a speaking and listening task is appropriate.</p> <p>In this time the teacher will then have an opportunity to roam and talk to children individually, giving feedback on the way.</p>
<p>Recess</p>	
<p><b>11.30 Reader's / Writer's workshop</b></p> <p><b>Introductory Activity</b> – 'What makes a just right book for reading?' – Class chart.  <b>Independent Reading</b> - Sustained independent reading time 20-30 minutes.  <b>Share time focus:</b> Which books did you find were just right, easy or difficult to read?</p> <p><b>Introductory Activity</b> –</p> <p>What makes a good writing topic? – Class chart.  <b>Topic / Writing ideas list</b> – On large paper in small groups get children to brainstorm lists of writing ideas,</p>	<p>*At the beginning of the year we want children to be developing their ability to read for extended periods. Integral to this is that they have books that they can read independently.</p> <p>* If there are very few books in the room it might be necessary to take out a bulk loan from the school library. Aim to</p>

<p>during the first week this list can be synthesised into a class lists</p> <p>Children choose a topic and begin writing a draft. 20-30 minutes sustained writing.</p> <p><b>Share time focus:</b> Who had a great opening line?</p>	<p>have 500 books in the class library</p> <p>*Once again this first writing session is an excellent time to gather some information about the children as writers.</p>
<p><b>Lunch</b></p>	
<p><b>2.30 Redesigning the room layout –</b></p> <p>Discuss with the children the importance of shared ownership of the classroom. Ask children in small groups to draw a floor plan for the classroom based on (for example) the following criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There must be a shared meeting space, where the whole group can sit together.</li> <li>• Tables should be arranged so that there are places where group talk can occur and other places where just one or two people can work.</li> <li>• There must be a central position in the room to set up a sensational classroom library.</li> </ul>	<p>During this time the teacher might begin noting down information about class cooperation, general sense of student understanding of spatial relations, use of graphic organizers. Essentially gathering an understanding of background learning experiences.</p>