

Explain it to me like I'm in Kindergarten

by SHERALYN ROMAN

There are changes coming to a classroom near you, changes that may or may not be beneficial to the learning of those INSIDE it. Remember the Minister of Education? We haven't talked about him much lately - he's probably thrilled. With recent announcements to changes in the classroom however, including some that are very specific to Peel, I'm going to need someone like Minister Lecce to explain the changes to me like I'm in kindergarten, because I'm not sure I fully understand why they are happening, or more specifically, why they are happening now.

Perhaps you are sick of hearing the words 'post-pandemic.' I'm getting a little tired of writing them, if we're honest. That said, the realities of the world we are living in right now are such that 'post-pandemic' is an apt (and short, easily summarized) reminder of the fact that much has changed, and significantly so. One might argue that such change, in the field of education, has been profound. With children out of the classroom altogether for months at a time and some little ones seeing the delay of their first day of in-person kindergarten by at least a year, any proposed changes now are likely only to further disrupt and cause harm to an education system already on the ropes. The government's proposed changes, coming on the heels of an announcement locally that in Peel Region a number of highly specialized teaching positions at Board offices will be eliminated, just adds (to use yet another metaphor) fuel to the fire.

To be clear, some of the proposed changes include references to enhanced opportunities to help students connect sound and letter relationships and develop phonics knowledge. These are not bad things at all. Rather, the issue is about managing the proverbial pendulum swing between two extremes of educational doctrine and doing it in a mindful manner that includes educators in the process and which acknowledges that when we have already experienced much upheaval, heaping yet more change on both students and educators, places an additional burden on an already overburdened system.

The changes, set to begin in September of this year, purport to help the 'youngest students develop core foundational skills' like reading, writing and math skills, by taking a 'back-to-basics' approach to education. This kind of language appeals to those who don't see, or value, that children can expand their critical thinking skills by exploring, asking questions and experimenting through play-based learning.

Meanwhile, here at home, we don't have to look too far back in history to find references to the Ontario government's previous position on play-based learning. In advocating for the introduction of the concept, the government had this to say: 'Play is a vehicle for learning and rests at the core of innovation and creativity. It provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive?' [as well] it has long been acknowledged that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children, especially in the areas of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, and mathematics, as well as the development of social, physical, and emotional skills.'

Because it was a Liberal government in power back when play-based learning was first introduced one can't help but wonder if this new 'back-to-basics' approach is a reflection of a true need to return to rote learning (typically only good for those with a great capacity for memorization and whom are not inquisitive by nature) or a reflection of politics, aka change for the sake of change. Coming at a time when some highly specialized teachers, right here in Peel Region, have been put on notice that their services are no longer required, and when student's needs 'post-pandemic' are at their highest, I think there are better opportunities for the government to enhance and augment student learning; by making classrooms a safe space for students, funding adequate supports for those with special needs and/or behavioural concerns, and by continuing to focus on, and enhance, mental health supports for children and teens.

These are the real issues we know to be facing students and educators in our post-pandemic world. We don't need a 'back-to-basics' approach when we are living in a world that is anything but. The new normal is one where children and teachers in the classroom need help. Period. Please explain to me, like I'm in kindergarten, why the focus is on yet more change when what's really needed is

stability, support and special needs education workers in the classroom.