

southern schools

Synergy Schooling

by Sean Houghton

We all want the very best for our children. We all want them to grow up to be happy, fulfilled and successful adults.

School obviously plays a huge role in the sort of adults our children will become. The South African education system and the school curriculum have undergone a vast transformation over the last decade or so, and while these changes have been effected to best serve the majority of children in the country, the basic fundamentals of education remain the same.

Schools have teachers who teach large numbers of children and the needs of the individual child are not always met. Even in small classes the teachers still 'teach' and the fact that the children actually learn anything is not guaranteed.



Someone who saw a problem with this prescriptive, linear process is Robin Booth, a qualified pre-school teacher. Robin was concerned that teachers had to teach according to strict criteria based solely on the premise of exposing children to as much information as possible and without too much regard for what the children actually learned.

Robin believes that it's not what we teach that is important, but what the children are learning while we are teaching. He further believes that education has to develop the skills, knowledge and life wisdom that children need to foster their individual and collaborative talents, passions, dreams and potential to achieve synergies throughout their lives. This is best achieved through experiential learning and quality relationships.



He also believes that people should not criticize a system unless they are willing to actively do something to find a solution.

So passionate about this ideal and so committed to making a difference is Robin that he decided to start his own school, based on education that was more interactive, multi-dimensional and emphasising what the children

learn as opposed to what the teachers teach. He wanted to maximise personal development with the goal of establishing a strong sense of self in all the children as individuals and in relation to others, believing this synergetic relationship to be supportive for a child to lead a productive and fulfilling life.

He discussed his ideas with like-minded colleagues and soon gathered five current and ex-principals of some of the countries most dynamic schools to formulate and guide a new process in education. They would add specialists from child development, occupational therapists, relationship counselors, physiotherapists, psychologists, parents, children, futurists and curriculum writers and ask them to articulate their dream schooling experience. Out of these synergies a vision was born. The vision was Synergy Schooling.

Robin then sold his assets, borrowed money, bought two hectares of land along the Kommetjie Road and built his school.

Synergy Schooling has been operating for three years now using an emergent curriculum which originates from the children's interests and is then framed by the teachers. This creates a personal ownership of the learning programme within the classroom. The children are part of making things happen, they can direct the learning and their unique personalities affect the group's learning. Each child is acknowledged as an integral part of the learning experience. This affirms the self-worth of the child and



acknowledges their opinions and contributions to the group discussions and confirms they have been heard.

It is the teacher's role to guide this learning to ensure that the class explores the full depth of topics to achieve their learning outcomes. It is important not to flit from subject to subject and here the role of the teacher is to keep that passion going by providing the right questions to keep the children interested in the topic as well as exciting and interest-grabbing activities to keep them thinking. In this way the teacher will keep track of what has been covered in the curriculum and ensure that nothing is skipped.

So successful is this concept proving, that children can't wait to get to school. They are excited, enthusiastic, enquiring and productive. In many cases children don't want to go home after school. They ask their parents for 'just a little longer'.

As parents witness the growth and development of their children and speak to friends about it, word of this happy, successful school is getting around



and enquires have come in from all over the Peninsula and country. Some people from around the country have even expressed an interest in moving to the southern Peninsula just so that their children can experience Synergy Schooling.

It's not just in South Africa that Synergy Schooling is generating such excitement. Robin has been invited to education conferences and symposiums around the world to present and discuss the concept of Synergy Schooling. So impressed have international educators been that he has received funding by international organizations to sponsor children from Masiphumelele.

Synergy now educates 55 children ranging in age from three-and-a-half years to Grade Six. Robin's goal is to expand the school to encompass pre-school to high school.

Tony Ryan, Principle of Rondebosch Boy's Preparatory School, who is also a board member of Synergy Schooling, believes that:

"Robin is a truly wonderful man. He has tackled something on his own that others would be scared of and nervous to take on. The way he has made it work and the passion with which he operates are very inspiring. I believe that, in future, Robin will be recognized as a pioneer in the way children are managed and educated. He has conceptualized and realised a system that is far more effective and will have longer lasting education benefits for the child that will result in a more authentic adult emerging. People just need to go and visit the school and it will become very apparent to them."

Change is often uncomfortable and many people struggle with things that challenge the established order, but Synergy Schooling is generating a lot of excitement in education circles around the world and while no one is suggesting that the national education system be turned on its head, perhaps there are concepts, systems and practices that they could borrow from Synergy Schooling for the benefit of all children.

