

# LEARNING HOW TO BE HUMAN

## A Critique and Vision for Education

by ROBIN BOOTH, SYNERGY SCHOOLING

**M**ANY YOUNG PEOPLE wonder why they are in school. To learn, of course, they are told. But why and to what end, they rightfully ask. To become productive members of society; education is your portal and path to opportunity, they are reminded. But that isn't the future they protest. What does school have to do with now, today, this moment of life? For many young people the experience of school is an

interactions and relationships with those around us and as a consequence, much of our emotional happiness and sorrow is directly linked to the quality and success of these interactions. We long for the creation of synergies with people where we feel connected and have a sense of belonging. We long to participate and co-construct a life of meaning that is shared and fulfilled, both with our friends, partners and children. We

it begins to acknowledge life skills and the development of 'whole' human beings.

At present, the active curriculums in our schools highlight academic excellence, sporting achievement and a theory on how to succeed in the world after school.

However, schools also function as agents of socialisation. Embedded within our school systems, are the hidden curriculums, the experiences to train and guide the



exercise in waiting for the present to matter. The justifications for their schoolwork seem related only to some invisible future. The present has little more than operational value; deeper meanings, understandings, contributions and satisfactions are not the goal here.

Childhood is little more than a holding pattern, a phase to pass through on the way to maturity. And children are not seen as capable of doing anything particularly useful, except 'getting ready' to do something useful. This disregard for the capacities of children and this dismissal of any value in the period of life we call childhood are all too common in our educational system. No wonder young people question why they are in school.

Much of life is about interacting with one another. We learn when we are happy, stimulated and playing. Relationships are what we depend on for our emotional survival and when they break down we feel the impact intensely. We spend much time seeking out

have a right to be who we really are and we help make one another who we are by how we treat one another. As building self-esteem is a priority outcome in our schooling we must accept the importance of empowering our children in the creation and development of relationships.

Despite a number of shifts that have taken place in educational thinking, a child is largely still seen as a *tabula rasa*, an empty vessel waiting to be filled with something, whether skills, facts, or sporting achievements. On the fringes of the education system, alternative approaches such as Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Constructivist approaches have established themselves.

A common theme among them has been a quest to provide an ideal environment that is supportive of a child's learning. The introduction of outcomes-based education has begun the process of shifting the national mindset about what the educational system is supposed to achieve. In some ways

children to become productive and cooperative members of our society. Prefects, class captains, sports captains, chairpersons and class helpers all teach the children about our societal structures and if you behave in a certain way, this is your reward and if you misbehave, then you get punished or detention. There seems to be a link that if you do well in school, you do well in life. And doing well in life is defined as being successful in a certain business sense. This definition doesn't seem to include much about being happy, or having successful and happy family lives though.

If you dig deeper, there are more layers of curriculums, unconscious ones that play themselves out in relationships. Children learn and model from observing the relationships between the individuals of their peer groups, teacher-child situations, teacher-teacher situations, principal-school relations and often a neglected one, that of school to parent relations. What views and life wisdoms do these teachers develop in

“... children are not seen as capable of doing anything particularly useful, except ‘getting ready’ to do something useful. This disregard for the capacities of children and this dismissal of any value in the period of life we call childhood are all too common in our educational system.”

the children through their communication patterns, their laughter, their openness, transparency, their integrity? It is through the actions and behaviours of teachers and parents’ actions that the children learn how to manage being human. The life skills and life approaches we as adults embrace, do not only provide a more secure environment for the children but, more importantly, they provide tangible examples and situations

sometimes through play but more importantly, to work through and process the conflict that arises. Conflict is a driver of growth and should not be seen as a negative part of ‘being human’. Can we as teachers and parents process the conflict with the children or do we ‘solve’ it quickly because it takes up too much time that we need for reading and writing? What do we do when a child says, “I don’t want to do this work anymore?” How

develop that is holistic, eclectic, adaptive and dynamic in that it draws on all areas of life and learning. It views parents as an integral part of the curriculum, not just as mere participants but as equals in providing an environment that is best suited to their child.

**Quality communication – the key for implementation**

It is said that the quality of an educational system can be rated by the quality of the



that the children can observe, reflect on and integrate into their own “humanity”. We help make one another who we are by how we treat one another.

**A paradigm shift in the curriculum – promoting qualitative interactions and the integral role of parents**

It is a growing understanding that the quality of our interactions with the children will have the most impact (positive and negative) on their development and more importantly, their concept of ‘self’. Therefore the question arises in how to develop these interactions and how to ensure that they have a positive outcome? This requires an understanding of a curriculum that focuses on providing situations where qualitative interactions can occur. This requires that children have time to engage each other,

do we process this conflict, or do we just override it by a use of our status?

The curriculum therefore uses varied learning opportunities as the vehicle to develop humanitarian skills. It is not an ‘either/or’ choice (humanitarian or academic) but the development of a system that embraces both aspects (academic and humanitarian). It requires an entire rethinking of the way in we teach, run the school or relate with parents. It requires a conscious attempt to promote qualitative interactions in the school environment.

At the same time, the relationships the child has outside of the school environment, most notably with their primary caregivers (the family), will also need to be considered as these impact considerably on the child’s whole development and their progress in the school. How can we bring parents into the educational process in a way that acknowledges them as the primary educators of the children’s ‘being human’?

As such an emergent curriculum could

relationships that make up the system. And the quality of a relationship depends on the quality of the communication within it. In understanding the dynamics of our communication patterns, we become empowered to effectively relate to each other. Our communication patterns reflect our life-understandings and self-processes with the world around us. How we communicate to the children of our classes, or to our colleagues, reflects the respect we have (or not) for them, and where we stand within our own integrity.

The future of education lies here, the curriculum based in relationships with the vision of extending and developing our personal potential into human potential. The skills that form the driving force behind the curriculum emphasise the skills to work synergistically with others, to understand their understanding, to articulate and share our perspectives in non threatening ways and to integrate differences to find meaning. Living and Learning, together. 🌍