

**STAFF REFLECTIONS for End of the Year 2009**

*"We are a courageous, passionate and hardworking team that through co-creative, organised effective systems, and continuing personal and professional development while consciously deepening our personal relationships, we experience a synergetic, inspiring and self-believing team that impacts the broader community." STAFF VISION 2009*

Dear parents,

As we get to the end of another six months and, in this case the end of the year, we all reflect on what our experiences and areas of growth have been. There is something different about this year's reflection. They are not just words printed on a paper, but show a wisdom that has emerged in each and every staff member. Applied facts result in information. Applied information results in Knowledge. And applied knowledge becomes wisdom. What you can read below is not only wisdom per se, but the application of it as well. See how our school's philosophy is being applied to the staff's own lives as well as how powerfully this impacts the children. It is clear to see how inspired the staff are in seeing the possibility of this kind of learning environment throughout South Africa.



**Robin Booth, School Founding Principal**

From my side, there has been a huge degree of learning in the area of organisational development. This year has seen the shift from being a small starter school to a national educational organisation that is becoming known and recognised throughout country. One of the exciting things for me was working in the Gauteng area where people seemed to have heard about what we do and were all excited about it being taken to that area. It seems as if the last 5 years of our growth has had a positive impact on people's vision of the future.

Another fulfilling time for me was working with the staff in one of our key strategy meetings. Developing strategy and resolving challenges is successfully done when a group of people come together and are skilled at relating to each other. There is a sense of flow and unity where ideas are generated and shared. For me, this was an experience of a 'synergy'.

I have also thoroughly enjoyed working with a business mentor who supports our school in shaping it into a successful organisation, such that both business and educational models are incorporated. Out of this, our school will grow and expand in consistent ways.

I also stand humbled by the staff reflections below which so adequately describe what this educational approach set out to achieve and demonstrate. For everyone, even after being here for one, two or three years, the learning just continues to deepen and deepen. I think this has been one of my greatest experiences achieved to date.

**Hebert Mbiba (Grade 5 & 6 teacher)**



Reflecting on the first six months of the year I pointed out that communication is a virtue, a desirable merit that every educator must have and that I had grown from strength to strength. I feel I have grown even more to a deeper level of being able to function at a multi-functional level where I am able to deal with multiple tasks. My own self evaluation has been that my organizational skills that are necessary in an institution where team work is an important value have grown significantly. I attribute this growth to school expectations of a classroom practitioner to lead and co-ordinate other non-academic activities. From handling the school social, the top house camp and the School Share, I have learnt a great deal of organizational skills that one needs to have. Co-ordinating and supporting the **L.O.V.E** kids, helping them to be organized helped me to be organized.

If I were to be asked to describe Synergy in few words I would simply say an institution of higher learning where lives are transformed and a transition is experienced from one level of competence to the other. Why

describe it as thus? One needs to work within the environment of the Synergy community in order to gain a full understanding and the implication of my utterance. It challenges even the most ambitious for academic and professional competence. It offers an environment of unlimited potential for professional growth and educational advancement. My experience during this first year of service in this synergetic environment has been that once somebody captures the spirit behind this form of educational philosophy and innovation, they would actually discover the value of it. It is unfortunate however that due to the way the general populace has been brought up, a noble innovation and divergent thought can appear to be detrimental. I brought my own training and skills gained over years of educational practice which I believe have blended well with the continuous training and development basics that are offered at Synergy. As I reflect back and celebrate my successful year at Synergy I would like to reiterate that there are a lot more benefits of having your child receiving education in a nurturing secure environment where they can express themselves without fear. There are even more benefits of having children at Synergy. More than you may have observed. It is a functional pre-requisite in today's society that children speak out. Just take some time to ponder on these points:

- every child is viewed as resourceful and competent learners,
- the program occurs within a warm, nurturing and stimulating environment,
- children participate actively with the teacher in planning and researching projects,
- children are given opportunities for increased decision making, independence and responsibility,
- children are empowered to be full expressive and stand for and to their convictions.



Vuyo Madlingozi (Grade 3 & 4 Co-Teacher)

My biggest learning about myself is that I am a complete person and I don't need anyone to complete me. For me that means I am capable of making things happen for me instead of waiting for people to do things for me. It takes courage to act even if the fear that you are having is overwhelming. At the same time what drives me is the fact that to make things happen I have to be proactive. My life is slowly changing for the better as I give myself time to explore things and in that I find things that I really love doing. So I have realized that happiness is not something that is far away but it is within, and when I am happy I get contentment and fulfilment.

This has impacted my class positively because I am happier and mostly present. Being in a good space supports me to be productive because my head is clearer. In that my intellect is liberated, able to give new ideas and learning to understand the children as I have learnt to understand and know myself. It is easy for them to relate to someone who is genuinely there and able to support them.

Our biggest learning as a group is that it is always possible to work together and that a community's made up of different individuals that are unique. But we are all committed in one goal; that of having a community that is flowing through respecting our classroom agreements. We need each other to complete this environment.

Parents would be pleased to know that their children's individuality is complemented and embraced. Children are highly respected in so much, that it is only here at Synergy that I agree with this statement that respect is a two way thing. Children are not only seen they are heard too. Their innovative way of finding solutions to their problems is really inspiring because that is really exposing them to the real world. A world that needs thinkers and people who take initiative and are responsible. How powerful our world would be if things were done the Synergy way, and people were on the same page. One of the things that make children enjoy coming to school is that they are given space to be who they want to be without being judged. We also value their ideas and inputs and in that we as teachers learn from them as they learn from us. We don't see teachers as people with all the answers but respect the fact that children are intelligent beings who need support to unleash what is already there. Even in challenging situations we treat children in what they ought to be and in that we support them to become what they are capable of.

I am inspired to step into my greatness as in these past few weeks I have tested and enjoyed the power of being great and doing exactly what inspires me. I have grown to be confident and that is thanks to Synergy as it is an environment that supports personal development and growth. My fear has kept me from being who I really am, so now my class is going to experience a whole new me. I strongly believe in transformation at the same time it starts at the moment I decide to change. What I know is there are no limitations on what you can be, have or do except the ones you place on yourself so I can be this changed person that I want to see me being.



KIM WEBBER (Grade 3 & 4 Teacher)

As I come to the end of my time at Synergy and I reflect back on the year that has passed, I am so aware of so many changes that have happened both in me and in the children. Many of you are aware of the change of my outward appearance – yes I lost a lot of weight. For me this change is an outward manifestation of what has gone on inside and it is these changes which I feel I have brought to the class and that have impacted the children.

I feel that in the previous year (2008), I was in survival mode and I was on a mission to swim and not to drown. The tension was created for me to look at myself and see who I was being and how this impacted others and sometimes it was very hard.

What this year has felt like is that I have been able to face myself, not from a space of that I am wrong and that I need to fix myself but rather to look to see what it is that I want to shift in myself so that I experience my life differently. It was not always easy but I found that the more I took myself on, the calmer I got inside. I feel that this is something that I bring to the classroom where the children do shift how they are experiencing things and look for ways to make those experiences different and to make their relationships different.

I am aware that I am much clearer in what my boundaries are and the shifts that I see in the children are that they are more prepared to take a stand for their own boundaries and to speak up and to ask for what it is that they need to be different in what they are experiencing with each other, with me or in the class.

What I feel like inside is that all those critical voices are quieter – they will always be there, yet I am able to manage them rather than have them control me. This comes from looking deep inside and being okay with where I was at. This then gave me the space to see what it is I do like and what it is that I want to shift without it all being about there being something wrong with me. This makes for a much quieter headspace which allows me to be more centered and grounded and calm. This is something that the children pick up on and which creates a safer space for them to be comfortable with who they are.

I am aware too that I have been able to shift from operating from a space of being a victim to having more of what I want in my life. I have changed my relationship to the things I “have” to do as part of being a family and a working mom to being something that I do AND I can choose to do other things too. What this means for me is that even while there are still the same things to be done, I can also have fun and that my life is not just about how much I have to do. What this means in the classroom is that I am more open to making our learning fun and we have done some things that have been really fun AND really meaningful – like Entrepreneur’s Day and the camp. How this has impacted my family is that we are doing a lot more fun things as a family, even when I am really busy at work – we even had supper on the beach the other evening and only went home after 8.00 – my kids were ecstatic and I felt refreshed and energized enough to go and tackle all those “have to do” things!

And so all these areas of growth have brought me to the end of my time at Synergy and I am profoundly grateful for what it is that I have learned at Synergy – some of them important life skills and some of them of what it is to be human. I am so aware of what it is that I am giving up and at the same time excited about the prospect of creating a new life for me and my family. And this is another gift that I have learned at Synergy and it is having the courage to change my life and even in this state of uncertainty knowing that this is a time of creation and that anything is possible and having this deep belief that I WILL make more of the kind of life that want for us.



Cindy Adams, Grade 1 & 2 teacher

Enthusiasm, perseverance and commitment. In these last six months I have learnt that if I embrace challenges with enthusiasm, commitment and perseverance then I can work through my fears and come out the other side of stronger, clearer and with a great sense of achievement. A big fear of mine was needing to complete my teaching practical for my PGCE this year. It was daunting at the outset! Doing ten weeks of teaching prac with lots of lessons to plan and carry out, endless documentation to fulfil, resources to make and new classes to teach. All this on top of teaching my group with excellence and ensuring the continuity and consistency in their learning. Talk about overwhelming! There were times when I contemplated giving up and doing it next year, waiting for a ‘better’ season and space to become available. I have come to realise that that is my way of keeping a back door open. In that awareness I chose to close all back doors and embrace this daunting task with the context of having fun and being creative. Not only have I achieved excellent marks for my teaching prac I also became aware of the standard of my teaching in the feedback from UNISA. I realised that I am capable of more than I thought, that I am influencing children’s learning at deeper depths than I had originally been aware of. On top

of that I had ensured that the Grade 1's and 2's had an excellent term 3 filled with learning, fun and meaningful connections and relationships. I became aware that I am able to do more than I had hoped or imagined was possible. My belief is that this was due to embracing rather than resisting; persevering rather than giving up; being committed to complete instead of taking a back door. I chose to look the scary situation in the face and move towards it, rather than away. I chose courage and stamina, instead of fear and defeat. This resulted in achieving more than was expected, way more!

So, how has this learning impacted the children in our group? I have noticed that children have started to take bigger risks too. They are embracing their fears with more confidence and willingness. For example:

- writing a long story
- talking to a friend about feeling hurt or disrespected
- learning to ask for what they need.

I have seen children climbing taller trees, learning new games, speaking with greater confidence and taking on their fears and challenges in the goals they set for themselves! There is a greater sense of adventure and willingness to try something new in our group. An example is the Egyptian projects that we completed this term. Children worked in groups of three or four to produce a poster and a model about ancient Egypt. Initially children wanted to work only in pairs, because they are well practiced and comfortable at working in pairs. Groups of 3 and 4 was a challenge, it was unknown and scary! What if it was too difficult or did not work? In the face of these fears children embraced the challenge. They closed all back doors and focused their energy on working together to complete the project. It has been so inspiring to watch this process. Children have worked through disagreements and the challenge of including each individual in a group task. They have learnt to work with children with differing abilities, strengths and weaknesses. I have loved seeing the children grow through this. Initially children who preferred to be told what to do learnt to share what *they* want and how *they* see things working. Children learnt to allow other children to share their opinions; and to ask rather than tell other children what to do. Children learnt to share, to let go of some of their own ideas and embrace the ideas of the group. This has been a stretch out of their comfort zone for all involved. There has been much growth, deepening of friendships, learning to take on increasing levels of responsibility and learning to include and to share. Lifelong skills have been learnt.

Because I am learning to embrace and persevere, I can support children to learn this in the same way. I can share my journey with them, allowing them to know that I too am learning and growing, taking risks and facing my fears. In this way they will learn to do the same in their own way. Instead of fixing and working it out for them I can ask questions, set tasks, stay silent or intervene with support. Next year there will be new challenges, perhaps bigger fears to face. I will need new strategies and new creative ideas. I will also need to continue to embrace, persevere and remain committed to the challenge. In that way not only will I grow and develop, the people around me will too. I look forward to seeing what new dances can be danced, what new mountains can be climbed, new trails blazed and new growth experienced.

For our dreams to become our reality we need to embrace our fears. In this way we can live and learn with greater ease and flow together, experiencing consistently more of what we are wishing for.



Kerri Hamlett, Pre-school teacher

In the last six months, amongst a number of other learning's, I have grown and deepened in my understanding of how powerfully our approach to schooling influences and impacts children's lives and how they learn.

What stands out for me most powerfully at this point is that children are empowered **to ask** for what they want to take on, by this I mean, **it actually occurs** to children to ask for what they want to do or learn about in the classroom environment. Children feel "safe" and "okay" to ask for what they want. They have an awareness that their requests and interests are taken seriously and that their teachers follow through on what they're asking about.

I am curious to know if they have the same experiences in other learning environments.

The impact in the classroom has been that children have consistently expressed a desire to engage with learning experiences that are well outside of what, (I would imagine) the average four, five and six year old ask for. An example of this is children ask me to write them a page full of sums, or to make them a BIG book of worksheets so they can write and practice doing "harder stuff". Children ask me to show them how to read.

As the pieces of the puzzle have fallen into place for me over the last few months, realizing that how we choose to support children in education has an undeniable impact on their capacity to learn, I am inspired to explore the deepening of that concept.

What this means for children in the classroom is exploring ways of making further and increased learning opportunities available to them. I am not clear on what that looks like, it could be having computer access in the classroom or increasing the number of learning resources that are available... I realize the impact on children's learning of taking this on and making it happen.

I'm looking forward to seeing what the classroom will hold and uncover in the next six months...



Debbie Ntshangase, Pre-school teacher

This term I was present to changes that happened around me. My experience over the years has been that this can sometimes be frightening and unsettling. I have learned that even though I was uncertain about something, it was important to make a decision and then deal with the impact of my decision. The important thing is to be in action about it. What was not working yesterday might work today. Keep on checking in to see where everyone is regarding the changes in their lives and finding ways of how to support.

This can be said about children starting at a new school, having a new teacher, having to make new friends... All this can be very overwhelming and still, if I look back over the last few weeks I would like to think that we can pat ourselves on the shoulders and say that actually we all did just fine.

Some might have done better than others, even faster than others and differently, but we were in action: and this is what Synergy is about, embracing each others differences when action needs to happen.

My wish is for myself and everyone else is when change happens, to be in action so to leave us feeling inspired, moved and touched.



Patsy Hamilton, School Manager

In the movie Under The Tuscan Sun, the heroine of the story buys this beautiful villa in Tuscany. (Like I have to tell you, you most probably all saw the movie). Being in my role is a little bit like buying that house. It's beautiful and full of potential and taking the step one knows there might be curveballs and upheavals and that in the end you'll look back and say that it's totally worth it.

Knowing that the curveball might come does not necessarily mean that you are prepared for them. It's just not a surprise. The curveballs came flying at my head, among them the seemingly never ending drama with the water feature pump, a major server crash that left us high and dry technology wise and a flood in the preschool.

The last six months is a bit of blur. There were times when I had to learn a new skill very fast. (My IT knowledge has quadrupled.) There were times when I plainly just didn't know, I learnt to ask for support. And then there were the one or two times when I doubted my ability. Then I realized that that is just my story and I needed to decide whether I want that to be my reality or not.

I look forward to the next six months. I am looking forward to knowing my job. I look forward to having systems in place that will streamline me doing my job. I look forward to acquiring the skills that are needed to manage relationships with staff and parents better. And like that tap in the middle of the room that eventually ran, I am looking forward to being in flow.



Victoria Hanratty (Co-Teacher)

My biggest learning over the past 6 months is that I take my job seriously. This has impacted my classes in such a way that they take me more seriously. Things that I need to be done are happening in such a way that works for me and the dynamics of the classroom. The biggest learning as a group is that I have received is getting to know the preschoolers. The thing that I would like to share with the parents is that I have completed my first year of studying teaching through UNISA.

Over the next 6 months I am inspired to study hard, get great marks for my assignments and exams, relax during the holidays and take care of myself and my needs during the holidays. Studying hard and getting great marks will give me more knowledge and confidence in the classroom. By me relaxing and taking care of myself during the holidays I will come back in the first term fresh and ready for anything. The environment will be calm and organized which will make a great learning environment for the children and the other teachers in the preschool



### Ursula Coetzee (Aftercare Co-ordinator and Operations Manager)

I have had a difficult time with this reflection .I have sat for hours thinking what to write.....and that made me feel anything said would not be authentic. I am already a day overdue and one quote I have just heard, now inspires me to just say it as it is." The more you play, the luckier you'll get"-Gary Player.

This term, in my new position at school, has initially been what I would call lonely and unrewarding for most of the time in the early stages. I have been left feeling unproductive and despondent. Then, slowly things starting coming together and signs of the hard work I have put into promoting Synergy have been seen, seen as in by me. I have realised it takes time to see how what I do impacts the School. I have learnt I am way more impatient than I have ever believed. I have also learnt to believe in myself more and to be just me. To never be what someone else may or may not want me to be.

I have also recently, realised just how much Synergy has done for me in the area of my personal growth, in the way of how I would have reacted to conflict in the past. I had an extremely difficult situation where I did not retaliate nor take the comments personally. I have not taken part in acting victimised as I would in the past. I have tried to see others perceptions and realities and still keep my own reality what it is.....mine.

I look forward to finding out more about myself, good or bad in the future.



### Thyrsa Philips (School Bursar)

The last 6 months have been fun. I am more confident in what I am doing. I am so bad at remembering names, but I am slowly learning parent's names. I know it can be frustrating for the parent when I ask a parent who they are, but as I only see them once or twice a term it can be a struggle. I also enjoy it when the little ones come and visit me, and draw pictures that I can put on my wall, or come and use the calculator to do sums with me. They are a joy and always have something to say. They are always welcome. I am hoping that next year will run smoothly.



### Annette Schickerling (School Secretary)

Due to certain circumstances the past few months, I had to do some soul searching. I have come to the conclusion that I should not be too hard on myself, but rather remember that we are all only human and, therefore, no-one is perfect. Doing the very best I can is the very best I can do. The challenges, and/or opportunities, that may come my way in the next few months will be faced head on, dealt with in my own inimitable way. I am very much at ease with being me.