

STAFF REFLECTIONS for first 6 months 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 2008/2009

Robin Booth, School Principal



“As teachers, we bring our own growth and development into play. We value educating ourselves as well in the current context. We are, **ourselves**, becoming, changing, in a passionate, compassionate, and meaningful **relationship** with those we are educating.”

The staff reflections for these first 6 months can be easily divided into 2 categories of what it is like being part of our school. The first category is the one where staff experience the powerful results of an approach like ours. Hebert in his first 6 months has experienced how powerful communication is and how those skills will make a classroom experience meaningful or not. He has come on all the available workshops and now sums up his self esteem as, *“I have grown from strength to strength and I feel that I am the kind of teacher that the present generation needs”*. Likewise, Vuyo recalls the impact of learning the communication skills of how to make another person feel understood and how this has impacted her classroom experience as well as her personal relationships. Kim sees her personal growth reflected in the security her children feel. When Kim found where her boundaries were and was skilled at implementing them, the impact of this on the children was greater connectedness, cohesion and sense of belonging. Annette has expressed the lovely expression of being ‘ok with where you are at’ but open to what you may still become. Victoria has experienced what it is like to be valued, as an individual and as part of a team. We help make another who we are by how we treat one another. Cindy has experienced the immensely fulfilling impact of parents, teachers and children Living and Learning together, the meaning made when you experience the Synergies of being in relationship. Debbie sees her own questions about the world being reflected and mirrored in those of the children in her class. How do we come to understand each other and celebrate our differences?

The second category reflects the times when we face challenges which seem overwhelming and frustrating; when our challenges seem like really hard work; when a school like ours relies on the quality of the relationships with the parents, children and teachers around us. Kerri expresses how undermined she feels when people don’t trust or value her and how her happiness is not dependent on the absence of problems but our ability to deal with them. Patsy finds out more about who she is and what she values through successful conflict resolution. And in my case, I have become clear that my time and energy is diminished when I try and persuade and convince education departments, parents or teachers of the possibility of doing something differently when they still need the persuading and convincing in the first place. I felt so energised and fulfilled when at the end of the Siblings with Success workshop, a mother shared that in the 3 week duration of the course she had gone from her 3 young children fighting non-stop every day to hardly any fighting and to the children beginning to express their love for each other. At the end of the “Being Understood” workshop this last weekend, two of the couples there shared that before they started the course, they were really stuck and without hope. Now they can see that by aligning their communication and understanding of each other, the possibility of re-creating their relationships became really present to them. For me, making a difference in people’s lives is immensely fulfilling.

Everything I have shared above and what you will read below falls in the design and influence of the SynEDgy Schooling Approach. As always, this is about *Living and Learning Together*.



Hebert Mbiba (Gr 5 and 6 teacher)

Six months at Synergy, half way through the year, it's amazing to look at how time flies. A lot has happened, transformation, empowerment and a complete turn around in my professional career has happened.

Communication is a virtue, a desirable quality of high merit. I have come to realise that teaching is not all about passing judgement on learners and deciding who is wrong and who is innocent, nor about giving rules, and monitoring how often they are broken. Neither is it about problem solving but more about facilitating problem solving. A teacher as a facilitator, the teacher as a councillor and as a powerful communicator will nurture children's potential to be powerful communicators and solve problems that they encounter everyday and not shy away from standing for what they believe. Understanding children's feelings, accepting them as they are and listening to them empathetically boosts their confidence and trust which then lays the firm foundation for teaching. Learners trust an educator and become more receptive to teaching and instruction.

It is one thing to speak to children and it's another to be heard. My greatest insight has been that there is more to communication than simple exchange of words. It is the difference that a way of speaking brings to a whole lot of conversations that I find to be a useful tool in daily classroom interactions. Communication to me has therefore proved to be so central to the success of any classroom management techniques. It is a functional pre-requisite that every educator has to be empowered with skills to facilitate smooth dialogue between and among learners. Communication is what the heart is to the body, malfunctioning of it thereof; causes cardiovascular breakdown, so is communication to the whole schooling environment. It is an indispensable tool of educational classroom success. Understanding my learners, listening to them making them feel understood has been an effective instrument that prevents resentment and harbouring negative feelings of anger and bitterness towards a teacher. The power of the Synergy approach lies in the way teachers engage learners and the ability of the empowered learners to dictate the pace, content and direction of learning.

I am more than inspired to explore more of the benefits that arise from workshops that Synergy offers. The value that these training sessions bring to the classroom and any individual who works with human minds is invaluable. I have grown from strength to strength and I feel that I am the kind of teacher that the present generation needs. I am inspired to explore more pro-active ways of demonstrating that while empowering children emotionally and socially, Synergy is doing enough and meeting the academic needs of the learners by offering so excellent a curriculum that is an edge above the traditional school system. The amount of money that teachers and parents spend on trying to solve problems when it is late is far more greater than paying for a workshop and being informed. Furthermore, the cost of not sending a child to a school that is value based is not felt today but later when society imparts its own lessons through its own natural way.

Finally, with all my experience in the traditional schooling system I have observed that the public school attempts to a very limited extent to do what Synergy offers. Among other unique characteristics, these stand out clearly for me:

- Treatment of children as individuals as compared to the group. Why should children be treated as groups when they have their individual needs and unique personalities?
- Promotion of learner autonomy and independence where there is room for free exploration of a child's potential.
- Parental involvement is positively utilised and promotes learning. Parents as important stakeholders who are actively involved in the daily learning of their children.
- Daily journals and weekly mails that keep parents connected to the daily activities of the school

What more should I say? I have chosen not to remain enclosed in my cocoon when things are happening in education, new frontiers are being forged ahead, new horizons are being launched and new paradigms are being explored? In my opinion Synergy is closer in achieving the goal of providing quality education that is useful today and sustainable in the future.



Annette Schikerling (Secretary)

I learnt that I am more flexible than I realized and can adjust to any setting once I put my mind to it. This makes it possible for me to deal with various situations and people and make a position my own. I have learnt that 'being yourself' is the best place to be.

What parents should know is very simple - they should truly appreciate what they have at

Synergy – it is a special place for their children to be.

My inspiration will be to reach my “I will” as opposed to “I can”. Currently I am at the “Should I?”. Get involved in some activity / learning / project that will lead me to my ultimate goal, but live the journey while I get there. It would put me in a positive space which will pass the same energy onto those I deal with.



Cindy Adams, Grade 1 & 2 teacher

Power in uncertainty

In beginning my sharing there is something that I am deeply grateful for this year, something which has strengthened me when I am exhausted and inspired me when I feel spent. This is the amazing cohesiveness, support and deep sense of community that I have experienced from the parents and children within our group. This year stands out for me in the way that parents, children and teachers in our group have worked together to co-construct the beautiful experience of connectedness and interdependence that we experience this year. I am deeply grateful for this; it renews my motivation and belief in creating an education environment where teacher, parent and child create synergies together.

One of my biggest learnings this year has been that I can have power in uncertainty. Most of my life I have gained power from being aware and having insight into a situation. I know that when I am faced with uncertainty, I get afraid and want to ‘fix’ the situation or find the answer as soon as possible. I have grown to learn that when I am uncertain or the situation is uncertain then I can still have power, I can be empowered through it. Just standing in that space and being okay with the ‘grey’ is a powerful experience. Learning that I don’t need to have all the answers and that just as much learning happens when the outcome is not fixed, when there are risks to be taken and new things to explore. In some ways I have learnt that uncertainty can be exciting, the not knowing is scary and it is surprising too.

A big growth point for me has been managing the curriculum development team as we pioneer designing a new curriculum that better supports our SynEDgy approach. There was great uncertainty there for me, many questions and few answers. What will it look like? How do I get us there? Do I know enough about this? Are we being too ambitious? Even though the fear, anxiety and inner pressure was there (and sometimes still is there) facing my fear and galloping through this challenge has created a rewarding and extremely successful experience for me and for our team! I am blown away by what we have achieved and the power that I experienced in facing the uncertainty and taking the risk. It has grown my self esteem and my self expression; its been deeply rewarding.

I have seen this new growth in me directly impact our class. I am less attached to things working out exactly how I planned them. There is more space for children to explore and create, for us to journey together rather than me directing the way on my own. I have seen that this has supported children in creating their own solutions, finding their own ways to construct their own learning and self expression. I have structured lessons with much more space for children to explore and discover independently. One of the biggest benefits of this has been that children have started to take more risks. I see this in the way that their goal setting (what I am working at) has become more personal. Instead of everyone choosing to work on the same thing that is mainly a physical growth, children are choosing to work on managing their anger, getting to sleep on time and choosing other goals less certain for them. I have also seen that children have started to take risks in doing things that are more challenging and less guaranteed of success for them. Like trying a difficult sum or wanting to write a newspaper article or talking to a friend about something that is not working for them even though they are unsure of how the friend will respond. This year I have seen children grow in independence and in making things work for themselves. I hear them managing their own conflict on the playground. There are many times when I see spontaneous acts of kindness within our classroom from tidying up someone else’s mess to helping each other spell a word or find a solution to a challenge.

Their growing power in uncertainty was clearly demonstrated for me when they decided as a group to approach the top house children and ask them to stop calling them names. In discussing how this will work the children in our group were so anxious and afraid, scared of being laughed and of not being taken seriously. Even though they felt this way they together stood up in front of the top house children and teachers and asked for what they needed. They did this with power and clarity and I have seen that since that time there is a growth in confidence and self respect within each of them. When we spend break at the top house children are now more confident, they will even stop a soccer match and ask for a teacher’s support to say what they need. Their step into uncertainty grew their own sense of power and awareness of themselves being valuable human beings. What a powerful awareness!

I am so excited about what else is possible for us as a group as we come to grow in our ability to have power in uncertainty. I can see that the second half of the year will be a space for us to have more fun together, to

grow closer as a group, to take more risks and develop in creativity. I look forward to more projects being tackled and more problems being solved. I am excited to adventure into further and more frequent opportunities for experiential learning where the end result is co-constructed by the group. I look forward to children growing in self expression, learning to ask for what they need and want with respect and social awareness. It feels like we have a firm and solid foundation from which to launch off into new and exciting explorations and adventures in living and learning together.



Kerri Hamlett, Pre-school teacher

Out of the five reflections I have written since being at Synergy, this is the first time that I write coming from a space of being exasperated and frustrated. My choice has been not to deny this as part of the natural journey of life, rather to be with it and trudge the uphill.

Some of what I've learnt in the last six months of this year is that the journey of life is not always a positive and happy one, it does not always work out well and at times people are not going to support me, value me and understand me.

Experiencing this I have learnt that the negative parts or the uphill stretches of the journey remind me to value the times that work with flow and appreciate the people in life that support me. I am reflecting on what to do to prolong those times of being in the flow.

I am grappling with accepting that hard times seem to be an essential part of the journey which must be tackled, wrestled with, beaten and left behind.

To the back of this learning I am walking away from the first six months of this year being clear in my personal boundaries around what I tolerate as acceptable treatment from other people in my life and with the knowledge that I am an expert in the field I chose to work in. I am clear it is not my mission in life to convince or persuade people of that.

In terms of children, I am presume it is most parents obvious and natural response to protect them and keep them "safe" from experiences in life that are hard or don't work out. I have shared with the children that sometimes teachers/adults do feel sad or angry and that those "feelings" also impact those around you. I have also shared that on those days when I also feel that way, I need to find ways to make the day work and how to keep engaging respectfully. At times that may mean calling on them for their support, what ever that looks like. It is my belief that I am also giving children the opportunities to develop coping strategies for tough times which are an invaluable lessons and imperative to a successful and fulfilled life.



Debbie Ntshangase, Pre-school teacher

These last few months and especially over the last couple of weeks I realized that I need to respect my individuality and in a sense uniqueness. I stopped comparing myself to others which put the control of my life in the hands of those to whom I compared myself to. I became aware of how the children were comparing themselves to their friends, being constantly driven by other children's achievements and the impact it had on them as individual people.

I became aware that I wanted children to draw comparisons with themselves and to master things because *they* wanted to. My observation has been that when they achieved something that is important to them their relationship to it is much deeper. The expression on those faces is priceless most noticeable when they share an achievement with me. I experienced many such moments this term. I saw a child being so proud because she managed to go to the bathroom on her own. I saw children taking initiative in asking to ring the tambourine and how they process the feedback that they received from children and teachers on a daily basis. I saw children taking great pride in the work that they produced at school.

My aim is to continue on this journey with my class in creating opportunities for children to make learning fun and memorable. I am looking forward in finding the things in children that makes them even more special and unique so that they can make an even bigger contribution to the classroom.



Patsy Hamilton, pre-school co-teacher

I read and reread the questions that guide my reflection weeks in advance and then ponder them. Yet, when I sit down to put my thoughts to paper or screen in this case; I am faced with a blank screen and I am stumped as to how to start.

In the past I have focused on the positive. I have chosen to not to dwell on the things that were hard to do or that made me angry and frustrated. The truth is that those things happen and that they play a part in getting me to where I am now.

For me the first term of this year was extremely hard work. It seemed that the flow we achieved in 2008 had been lost. I felt like I was doing one thing and everybody else in the bottom house another. I felt disconnected from those around me. As this feeling grew I withdrew more and more. Out of that experience (let me reiterate: this is my experience and my perspective) I learned two things about myself. One: I can do what needs to be done despite what I think is going on and how I feel about it. Two: In order to feel empowered I need information and I need to be in continuous communication with those I work with. In a facilitated conversation on the last day of the first term I learned the most important thing: *Unless I take responsibility to share what I feel and need, and then keep at it, until those around me get what it is, and give me the kind of support I need, I will keep feeling frustrated and disconnected.*

The beauty of this horrible experience is that I now not only understanding this as a concept, but that I got it experientially.

Having that conversation set the stage for a much better, more hopeful and in-sync second term. Then the second term happened. (Sounding a bit dramatic, aren't I?) All the plans I made for some time doing resources and taking on other projects kinda back fired. Debbie's mom passed away, my mom had a heart attack, Kerri was very ill, we had students in our space for the first time ever and the school went through a major upheaval and to top it off somewhere in the workings of the water feature we lost gallons of water. I can remember saying to Cindy that I know I will not be tested beyond what I can endure and she replied with "This too shall pass." Well, the end of the term is looming and although I am physically a little whacked, I can say that there is a greater amount of connectedness and a sense of being in control. What made the difference is that I kept speaking up; I took responsibility for getting what I need.

So, what does that have to do with your child? In a school where I as a teacher constantly grow and re-assess, I am better equipped to support a child in their growth. In a school where I as a teacher have to keep engaging till others get me and I get what I want, I am better able to assist a child in doing the same. In a school where I face and deal with conflict (I don't like conflict) because I know on the other side there is a win-win, I am better able to mediate and support children in dealing with conflict.

I shared with a parent that I don't believe I would be able to be mom and a teacher. What I do know, if I had children, this is where they would be and if not at Synergy, then a school who had teachers like us.



Victoria Hanratty (Grade 4-7 assistant)

The biggest learning about myself in the last 6 months is that I am more valuable to Synergy School than I thought. What this means is that I have come to realize that I am valuable through the tasks and responsibilities that have been handed to me this year.

This has impacted my classes by making me feel empowered in my role, my responsibilities and my being with the children. By me feeling empowered I feel like I can be completely in control of a situation and can resolve conflict without having a sense of fear of the outcome or process.

The biggest learning as a class or as a group would be that I have come to know the children and the children have come to know me. This has created a comfortable feeling amongst ourselves as a group and has opened up the space for true, trustworthy and honest relationships to form. This also creates a more comfortable and at ease classroom environment.

I am studying a Bachelor of Education for Foundation phase (grade R – grade 3) through UNISA and through my studying I am learning a lot about how children grow, develop, learn, what interests children have, how to plan a playroom and an outside playground, how to make and set up art activities, the value of fantasy play outdoor play and other types of play like playing with blocks. By me learning these aspects of children and the learning environment I am in turn bringing my fresh learning and knowledge to Synergy School.

I am inspired to learn about the schools curriculum over the next 6 months. This will impact my classes by me being more aware of how the process works, knowing how teachers put their themes for that term together and supporting me to get more involved in and exposed to the preparation of the lessons.



Vuyo Madlingozi (Grade 3 & 4 assistant).

We are half way in a year and my experience of these past two terms is extraordinary. The highlights are the staff development that we have with Robin. Those are really great and they really supported me to be where I am right now. One powerful workshop for me was understanding somebody's understanding and acknowledging feelings. That supported me in understanding the children better and being able to form relationships with the children. For them they are experiencing having two teachers in their space. My understanding of other people's understanding helped me in understanding Kim more. Our working relationship has grown so much and we are better friends as well. It makes coming to work easy as having good relationships with people that you are working really supports that.



Kim Webber (Grade 3 & 4 Teacher)

With the start of 2009, I started the year off with the assumption that my own personal growth would have reached some sort of a plateau after my first year at Synergy and that my challenges would be less for a while and that I would need to take myself out of my comfort zone less often. My experience has been so very different from my expectation and in many ways I feel that I have grown even more than I did last year. I feel that my growth is more conscious this year. I feel that I am dealing with my challenges in a way that accepts that these challenges are a part of my journey with a view to see what deeper understanding I will have of myself and how I will impact those around me, rather than in a way that is more reactive.

I have also become more aware that the more I take myself on, the more there is to take on and with that I find that my personal growth is constant. I have also found that as I grow so the challenges I face match my growth and in taking those challenges on, which take me out of my comfort zone, the deeper my growth is. I have learned too, that the more I take action, the less fearful a challenge seems. It seems to me that in facing something and in taking steps to deal with it, I am taking on my own power instead of allowing fear to control me.

Where I have consciously been aware of shifts in myself is in being clearer in my thoughts and my communication. As a result, I am aware that the children are very clear in what my expectations are of them which creates a flow in the classroom. I am aware that the children know what to do and even if I were not to be there, they would be able to get on with their own work because they have that clarity behind them.

I feel that I have a deeper understanding of what others say and mean, and, yes, I have children in my class this year that challenge me if they feel I am not clear in communicating back to them so that they feel that I understand them.

One of the most impactful shifts I have been aware of, is when I am clear on my boundaries. This causes quick shifts in the classroom and I start getting the results that I am looking for. One of the areas where I saw this so clearly was around the name calling and bad language that was happening in my class. As soon as I had real clarity inside of myself that this would stop now and took myself seriously and communicated this to the class, the shift happened. I feel that this has made a huge difference to many children's experience of school and in our class assessment we are getting 10 out of 10 for our results of feeling respected. But it had to come from me first.

Another aspect that I feel that our class has grown in, is in so many more children feeling like they do have a voice. A number of the Grade 3's had felt quite overwhelmed by the bigger children in the Top House. Through giving them the space to talk about what they were experiencing, in an environment that didn't make anyone wrong and for them to be heard and supported, this seems to have supported many of them to have had a growth in their confidence and for them to feel that they can create more of the experiences that they want. This has impacted the whole class and given both Grade 3s and 4s more of a sense of their own power. In some ways, I see this as a mirror of myself, as I grow more confident within myself and feel more confident in speaking out, the more I see it happening in our classroom.

I am excited about what lies in store for us over the next 6 months. I will be looking to supporting everyone in looking at how what we say and do impacts others, so that as we do or say something, we do it through choice, at the same time through an awareness of how this could impact others. Great growth for all of us!