

# Should we open up schools for parents?

The education of parents needs to go hand-in-hand with the education of their children.

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THEY WERE ALL NODDING THEIR HEADS IN agreement. Three hundred and fifty teachers, principals and educators at the International Education Conference on Integrated Human Values, India, were thinking along similar lines. They were responding to a joke I had made, "It's the parents who influence the children most. They are the ones who need supportive education. We should therefore close the school to the children and open it up for the parents instead."

Suddenly my joke no longer seemed so funny as I gazed out over this undulating sea of consensus. Suddenly my joke became a serious proposition. If parents have such a powerful impact on their children's lives then surely they too need to be part of the schooling process. So should we be focusing on opening schools for parents instead of just trying to constantly alter the structure of a school, the curriculum we provide to the children or the demands placed upon educators?

At present I don't know of any other school which has a program for parents that is more than just an add on. Many educationalist and schools acknowledge this need and have provided parents with workshops, information evenings and support in varying degrees. But these have often been optional and sporadic. Public Parent-Centres have also been developed to support parents in becoming effective parents. Public schools often use their PTA meetings as an opportunity to impart information about effective parenting to those who attend.

Generally speaking, these programs and workshops are voluntary and do not facilitate self-discovery and personal transformation. I have noticed in my own work that children tend to reflect their parent's emotional and behavioural patterns. For this reason, I feel that the education of parents needs to go hand in hand with the education of children. A sprinkling of voluntary workshops designed to impart information rather than facilitate self-discovery is inadequate.

The three hundred and fifty heads all nodding in agreement to opening up schools for parents, points to a sense of agreement

that if we support parents in their development and relationship to their children, we will see the positive changes in their children naturally and automatically. It's often not the children who need to change, but first the parents and as a consequence the children's views and behaviour patterns shift. Parenting is about taking charge of the development of their child, but who is there to support the parent in exploring this commitment and responsibility? Who is to say that schools should only focus on the education of children?

So perhaps this leads to an awareness that the educational context could be broader than just 'child-centred' or 'parent-centred'.

changed over time and schools remain a dynamic space within society. Perhaps this becomes clearer if we look back at some of the shifts which have occurred in schooling in recent times.

The industrial era brought about a rapid increase in the number of schools in our society. With both parents moving out into the work force, their children needed to go to some place safe, and to learn certain skills that would support them in obtaining employment. Much focus was placed on the curricula and content, with little regard to individual needs or the needs of human and personal development. School was a place where you needed to go to obtain information



The next step may be to see the parents-teachers-children relationship as a triadic approach with neither one being seen as more important than the other. By doing this more emphasis is placed on the relationships between these participants opposed to on a specific individual and it seems that schools are the perfect place to support this process.

**Many may argue that this is not the purpose of schooling and that schools have been created to focus on training children to become productive members of society.**

However, the purpose of schooling has

and knowledge. With the mass production of books and the introduction of the information age, this information was no longer limited to the schooling environment but readily available from libraries, books bought off the shelves and of course the Internet.

Children no longer needed to go to school to obtain all this information. As such, the curriculum has adapted slightly by placing more emphasis on learning skills opposed to the memorising of content and data. Schools began a shift from 'content-centred learning' to what may be called, 'child-centred places of learning'. The understanding behind this

is that by placing the child at the centre of the educational process, we would be able to accommodate their needs more. Children would be seen as unique individuals with specific needs and not solely a number on the educational conveyor belt.

This recent shift to “child centred” education has had a dramatic impact on contemporary education, but children are not just individuals, they are individuals-in-relation-to-others. They develop in the greater context out of their relationships to others. Their perceptions, their views, their beliefs and attitudes are formed by their interactions with other people. So if you wish to support a child in changing ineffective attitudes or perceptions they have on themselves, (most noticeable their levels of self esteem), then perhaps we need to look to the parents and teachers first as they are the ones who need to shift.

**Using the triadic approach, how can we create a learning environment for all the teachers, the parents and their children?**

Can we explore a curriculum that looks broader than just developing the academic and personal development of the children? Can we create time and space for teachers



to develop their own sense of self, and for parents to explore their own interactions with their children? But perhaps more importantly, are we willing to take a stand that this is no longer a selective option for some parents but now becomes an integral part of the educational process for all?

Schooling as a process where parents (care givers) as well as children are enrolled in to the educational environment.

So what may an effective parent programme and curricula look like? My initial response to that question is, “What ever you wish for it to be like.” I don't think

there is any specific recipe which can be implemented. What schools implement will depend on their understanding of what effective parenting is and the priority (i.e. time and finances) they place on supporting the parents.

Some schools may request parents spend one day a week in the schooling environment. Other schools may say once a month, or once a term. Schools may say that a certain number of the workshops on offer through the school are compulsory. Maybe parents need to read certain articles, or books, or meet once a month with other parents to debate and explore their understanding of how to develop their parenting skills.

It could include parents writing termly reports on how they see their child's progress and development.

It could include the keeping of a reflective journal or a photographic journal.

It may be frequent conversations with the child's teacher.

It could be a certain number of life coaching sessions that empower and support the parents in consciously creating the life they wish.

It may be a programme of activities that would support relationship building

between child and parent. It may include workshops and assignments on effective communication, conflict resolution or the building of self esteem. It may be just the acknowledgement that by enrolling yourself as a parent in the schooling process, you are acknowledging that you play a primary role in the development of your child.

Whatever form an effective parenting programme may take, it needs to ensure that parents are able to understand that their child's development and education cannot be separated from their own development and learning. Effective parenting

programmes need to ensure that parents are engaged with their child's education as well as their own personal development in a structured manner through the school.

**At Synergy Schooling we are moving towards the implementation of such a programme for parents.**

These programmes will support the following skills, values and patterns listed below which we feel contribute to effective parenting:

- **Treating others with respect (you don't have to like them),**
- **being passionate,**
- **taking risks,**
- **being assertive while at all times respectful (i.e. full of respect),**
- **being proactive,**
- **owning your own stuff and stop blaming others for where you are at,**
- **to make others feel understood,**
- **being compassionate,**
- **being effective communicators,**
- **being on time,**
- **being committed to what you say,**
- **say what you mean and mean what you say,**
- **work towards understanding another's understanding of the world,**
- **be tolerant and patient,**
- **have informed judgement,**
- **follow your dreams,**
- **be empowered and decisive even though you don't feel like it,**
- **take full responsibility and understand that you are fully accountable, whether you want it or not,**
- **be sincere and authentic,**
- **engage and participate,**
- **make and handle agreements impeccably and with integrity**

After my talk at the educational conference in India, I was inundated with people who thought this idea was really exciting. Many people warned to know how they could involve parents more in schools. It is important to acknowledge this is not an easy process and one that will take time, but as the three hundred and fifty nodding heads have confirmed, it is an essential change which needs to take place.

As teachers and parents we bring our own growth and development into play. We have to value educating ourselves as well in the current context of education. We are, ourselves becoming and changing, in a passionate, compassionate, and aesthetic relationship with those we are interacting with. We help make one another who we are by how we treat one another. 🌱