



Principal's report AGM 2010/11

If you want a great organization, you have to have fantastic people.

Take a moment to recognize the contributions of the people in our school community- the fantastic people

Children- they keep us laughing; they give us courage

Parents- an intrinsic part of the partnership

Long service awards: M Wilder, E Moyo and V v Staden

Staff - grounds, admin and professional

Right hand: Theresa

Executive: Fleur Durbach, Miriam Wilder, Viv van Staden, Amanda Jacquet

Wider community: all our outreach opportunities

Parents Association: Les Vercellotti

Board: Bill Marshall and full complement of governors: always available to guide, support and advise.

2010 was a year of celebrating the FIFA 'Gees', but moreover, a year of preparation for us- laying the road and finding the map for the key strategic areas we'd identified in 2009:

- excellence in education: Reggio, CEA
- excellence in remediation: dyslexia
- resource centre to the community: Conferences and College
- Outreach: ongoing and constantly evaluated
- Technology in education, especially in remedial education

Reggio Children: Lets start at the beginning

In the swirl of 2010's volcanic ash, we sent Miriam Wilder off to Italy in a quest to learn more of the Reggio schools- a model of early childhood education that is esteemed and hailed as excellence worldwide by all the 'who's who' in educational theory.

In South Africa we are in desperate need for a radically different approach to education. We believe that implementing the Reggio philosophy in our country's ECD sector would provide the sure foundation we so badly need for the long term development of an excellent educational system. Along with St Mary's School and the Ridge School, Bellavista School will be hosting the first Reggio Children Conference in Africa from 28 June – 30 June 2011 in Johannesburg. This will be a conference of international significance with 2 speakers from Reggio Children and several national representatives from other countries in which the approach is being implemented. In what has proved to be an extensive collaboration between the Italian Community, the Department of Education and ourselves as key Independent schools, delegates from all over SA and other countries in Africa will attend.

Permeating the ethos of Reggio is that each child from birth is intelligent, competent, resourceful and rich in potential. There is a belief that every child has rights as opposed to needs and constructs his/her own knowledge and understanding of the world in relationship with others and the environment. This contrasts with more traditional ideas whereby

children are often seen as dependent, vulnerable and needy and are measured only against developmental norms and standards. This very positive view of children informs everything that happens in these schools and holds significant resonance with our Bellavista beliefs too.

Cognitive Education

Rushing like a wave over leading South African schools is the idea marketed and branded as 'thinking schools'. Bellavista has been riding the wave since 1995 already! What is a thinking school? It's a school steeped in educational theory of how children learn, of how cognition occurs and develops and of how we can mediate learning to best develop a child to solve problems. CEA, IE, Cognet, Bright Start? All familiar terms for tools we use to achieve the objective. Most mainstream schools receiving our children comment on their 'strategies', and 'equipping'. It is this focus on cognition that they are noting. Last year, we began with Freurstein's Instrumental enrichment curriculum in addition to CEA and Cognet. This year, we have added RAVE-O as a cognitive reading strategy in Grades 2 and 3. In June, Miriam and Fleur will travel to an international Cognitive Education Conference to learn more.

Bellavista Graduate School

South Africa's education system is in a crisis. There is a gross under provision of specialised teacher training, especially in the area of special needs education.

In keeping with the practices and philosophy of Inclusive Education, outlined in the White Paper 6 of 2001, and The DoE Guidelines for Full Service/ Inclusive Schools 2009, special needs schools will need to become vital resources centres if we are to offer equal access to all learners to all schools in the next decade.

There is a scarcity of accredited professional courses available locally whereby a teacher can, in service, study aspects of remedial education specifically. Well-resourced individuals and schools travel internationally to receive training but this is far from neither accessible nor sustainable for our region at large.

Around the country, teachers are crying out for quality in-service training that equips them with practical skills, academic understanding and professional accreditation. Bellavista School, with its well qualified and professional team, is well positioned to answer this need. This year, 2011, we added to the services of Bellavista Assessment and Training Unit by offering a part-time course to train professionals and literacy specialists, particularly equipping them to effectively identify and remediate difficulties with reading, including dyslexia.

The course is delivered in the auditorium on the premises of Bellavista School. The venue is equipped the necessary IT equipment for efficient course delivery.

The course can be taken by post graduate professionals- therapist and teachers who live and reside in the Gauteng region. Because the school is centrally situated in the city, main road access makes it accessible to a wide area. The course assumes and builds on undergraduate exposure to principles of education and childhood development in the early childhood, primary and secondary schooling phases. It is recommended to students who have some experience behind them. This year, 16 external students and 30 from Bellavista School are engaging the course!

Special Projects: IT

It's hard to believe there was a time, not terribly long ago, when the idea of 6-year-olds having media habits -- much less media habits requiring them to multitask -- would have seemed absurd. Now, however, kids are using a range of media platforms from smartphones to console games -- and starting younger.

By age 6, kids are playing video games, using social media, watching videos and seeing movies meant for older people. But their parents are exercising the caveat that if they do so, they -- the parents -- have to participate. Such activities now make up more than a quarter of a 6- to-12-year-old's waking life. By age 5, many kids are already using multiple devices on their own. By that age, according to parents polled, kids are playing cell phone games, console video games, watching online videos, and listening to music on digital devices. The firm says video games have already become a favorite recreation as early as age 3. Facebook is officially verboten for kids under 13 years of age. In fact, 41% of 11- and 12-year-olds are already on Facebook.

While a lot of kids are using the platforms designed for older consumers, parents are watching. "In this wave of the study we included a question for parents: 'If your child goes to a social network, are you their friends?' Seventy-nine percent are saying 'yes.' Likewise with movies. "Seven out of ten are letting kids go to PG 13 movies and playing over age games, if they are accompanying them."

It's an Amazing Time to be a Learner!!

Let's be clear: it's an amazing time to be a learner.

- Two billion teachers now connect to on the Web,
- the myriad of entertaining educational video games we can play
- the potential to answer almost any question we can pose through a few keystrokes on the phones in our pockets

We live at a moment of ubiquitous learning, one few of our ancestors could have imagined. It's a moment that in many ways we ourselves are still struggling to make sense of, struggling to imagine the endless possibilities that we find ourselves swimming in.

Take my child learning to play the piano:

Music teacher can be a YouTube video

sheet music can be downloaded

In fact, if she had the Magic Piano app for the iPad, no piano needed!

It's a story that's being played out repeatedly every day, around the world, by kids and adults of all ages. We can learn what we want, when we want to, if we have the desire and the connection. More and more of us are finding both.

The Web and its accompanying technologies, as well as the games and mobile devices we're all carrying around, are driving a surge in personalised learning that, ironically, most people alive at the moment still don't even know exists. Sure, most in the developed world have at least heard of Facebook by now, and as more people get access, the idea of social networking online is growing in

dramatic spurts around the world. But lost in the thrill of the social connections we can now make with friends past and present have been the opportunities to use these spaces to learn and learn deeply. We live in a world where we can literally create our own *learning* networks in which we pull in content and mentors and collaborators to participate with us. If we know what we're doing, we can create our own classrooms, our own curriculum, and to some extent, fashion our own online learning portfolio for others to evaluate and assess.

All of which, by the way, poses huge challenges for places like ours where your kids go off to each day to learn the stuff that others have deemed important for them to learn. My daughter (and my son) are both getting used to learning what they want to learn, when they want to learn it, with whom they want to learn it, and they're wondering why they can't do more of that in school. I'm wondering that too. That's not to say that we should turn the kids loose and let them Google and game their way to an education on their own. Not at all. But it is to say that what they need schools to prepare them for today is much different than what schools have been preparing students for over the past 100 years or so. In this fast changing moment, our kids don't need so much to be learned, a quality the philosopher Eric Hoffer says will render them "equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." Instead, they need to be *learners*, solving real problems, creating new knowledge, and sharing and reflecting on those experiences with others. Unfortunately, that's not what the vast majority of our current schools are about.

Oprah wrote an article recently which she headed "What I know for sure". To sum up Bellavista's present position on the matters of Information Technology, I'd like to share some thoughts under her same clever title.

What I know for sure

- we *have to* advance the school technologically; it is a strategic imperative
- our children are more comfortable with technology and all its devices than we are
- the children will embrace new technologies better than we can- we may learn from them
- there is a plethora of software available now that will
 - a) assist, support and aid children to overcome their barriers to learning
 - b) enhance the curriculum and open up a world of knowledge
 - c) accelerate us through our two decade IT lag quickly
- not every child will want, need or use every type of software available- our role is to familiarize them with their device and support them as they choose what helps them most before they reach senior schooling years
- 21st Century kids want personalised devices
- technology costs money
- our research into the product market leads us firmly to the INTEL classmate (tablet) device as best choice for the primary schooling years

What I know I can answer

- Can we promise that if you buy a device your child will rapidly and immediately become a competent and independent user? No, instead, I can say that this would be the start of an exploration and a journey that will be so individual that we can only learn with your child as we go. Like any skill, the computer proficiency set will take time and practice.

- Are all staff fully competent and proficient users and trainers? No, but we are willing to learn with you and your child because we know and understand its importance
- Will the path be smooth and the implementation easy? Probably (and statistically!!) not, but we specialise in hurdles and we've found reliable, competent people to help us solve problems and customize solutions
- Will this be "it"? No, as much as you upgrade your cellphone device, technology will advance and your child's laptop will need an upgrade in due course. Probably by early high school years.
- What is the school's plan?
 - a) Get the administration off the written page; enhance communication and make the admin efficient
 - b) Network the school with a stable intranet and available, well controlled internet access
 - c) Put technology (in sundry forms) in the classrooms
 - d) Integrate the children's devices
- Will it make a difference, really? We believe so, but as a school we want scientific evidence. As such we have invited WITS to run a study. The data will speak.
- Where do you, the parents, come in? I answer with another question: will you join us? The timetable for rollout is in the parents hands. While we have a three year plan, you have the opportunity to engage and step up the pace.

BELLAVISTA COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Bellavista School continues to be involved in Community Projects of a diverse nature. These encompass serving the educational needs of both adults and children within the Gauteng region, and at times beyond these perimeters in other provinces of South Africa, on an invitational and voluntary basis.

Workshops and Training for Educators

Bellavista remains committed to making a difference and with continued determination, has since January of 2009, initiated a Community Project with the Educators of Bertrams Primary School. During the course of 2010 the focus of workshops was on Design & Technology; provision of workshops to develop underlying skills for learning by our Speech & Language and Occupational Therapists, as well as Literacy and Interpersonal/personal Skills.

Our special partnership with Bertrams continues this year, 2011, in the way of workshops focusing on Cognitive Development, Literacy, as well as Sponsorship of individual educators to attend the SAALED National Conference, Reggio Emilio Conference, as well as the Bellavista Post Graduate year long Diploma in Literacy and Dyslexia.

Sewing Classes

Bellavista continued the sewing classes offered to the community throughout last year. Regrettably, this service has not proved viable financially going forward.

Many of the women and men participating have established their own enterprises to supplement their income, which Bellavista School has encouraged, and supported, when opportunities to apply their skills have arisen. We thank Bernadette van Rensburg for her interest and support of the programme since starting last year.

Ukukhanya Kwe Zwe Nursery School:

Our Community Project with the Ukukhanya KweZwe Nursery School in Alexander, has been underway since 1990. Our involvement has been and continues to be with both the educators and the children.

The Bellavista children bring vegetables on a weekly basis, to form the basis of a healthy lunch for the 120 children in the Nursery School. This is usually their main meal of the day.

The Bellavista Children donate toys, books and useful equipment to ensure that the children of Ukukhanya KweZwe School, have ongoing learning opportunities.

In addition to dispatching boxes of Easter eggs in April each year, Bellavista School Staff organise an exciting Christmas Party each year, for the children and teachers of the nursery school.

GRADE 7 COMMUNITY PROJECT

Over the past eight years, our Grade Sevens have been involved, and continue to engage in a service programme within the community. New initiatives linked to the Grade Sevens' Life Orientation lessons have been implemented this year.

General Community Service

As a whole school, Bellavista children, parents and staff continue to support charities and respond to drives in the event of dire situations. Phenomenal generosity of spirit, empathy and practical consideration have been observed from our small community.

Last year, each phase of the school elected to support specific charities, i.e. Guide Dogs, Smile Foundation and The Free Me Project.

Adoption of these charities for the year served as an enriching experience for the children as it allowed for a depth of understanding and sense of pathos to develop.

This year the Community Projects continue in a similar vein, with the Grade R's, 1's and 2's endeavouring to adopt a 'Brown Bear' from the Johannesburg Zoo; the Grade 3's and 4's linking up with an inner city school – The Albert City School and the Grade 5's and 6's supporting Animals in Distress.

SAALED – South African Association of Learning and Educational Difficulties:

As a member school of SAALED some of the Bellavista Staff play an active role within this organization, on a voluntary basis. They are involved in the initiation, planning and organisation of workshops, as well as give of their time generously to share their knowledge of education and their experience of working with children within the inclusive environment, as well as in situations where higher support needs are required.
