

This week is another perfect example of just how much happens in five school days. Children are dancing, swimming, playing violins and visiting the library, while staff are undertaking everything from first-aid and conflict-resolution training to early language development, whilst welcoming three PGCE students into school to work alongside colleagues in Years 1, 2 and 4!

👤 Learning Isn't Just for the Children

We rightly expect our children to be learners, but exactly the same expectation applies to the adults at Woodlands.

This week's professional development includes Team Teach, conflict resolution, early language development, writing, Gestalt Language Processing, first aid and peer – peer professional coaching and development. That is quite a breadth of professional learning in five days, but it matters. Children's needs change, professional knowledge develops and our school itself continues to evolve. Some training develops teaching; some helps us understand children's communication and regulation; some keeps children physically safe. Collectively, it means knowledgeable and confident adults around our children. First-aid training alone takes place across two full days, involving colleagues from different areas of school. With children ranging from babies through to 11-year-olds, including children with complex medical and additional needs, maintaining that expertise across our workforce is incredibly important.

🏠 🎨 🥋 Bringing Learning to Life

Our children continue to benefit from a huge variety of opportunities too. Year 3 continue their judo programme, KS2 Breakfast Club children can try archery, and our partnership with Vara continues with dance clubs for Years 3 and 4 and Years 5 and 6. Friday is Year 4 swimming, Year 3 violin lessons and Year 5 visits to Hope Farm Library.

I make no apology for talking so often about learning beyond the classroom. Education should be broad, interesting and memorable. We cannot possibly know which experience will ignite an interest or uncover a talent in a child. When I was a child (in Liverpool in the 70s) we had school milk, the cartons for which had a range of different countries on them. I would always choose the Kenya one and therein developed a love for Kenya and a desire to visit when in reality there was no hope of that, given my background. Imagine then, years later, when I found myself in a position to visit Kenya, and then live there, some years later – fulfilling a childhood dream and creating a wonderful chapter in what has been a truly amazing professional career to date. Someone in our school may discover a love of music, sport, dance or reading; somebody else may simply discover that they are brave enough to try something they have never done before, but the fact remains, school is for more than what we teach in maths and literacy lessons.

That is why these opportunities matter.

💚 Doing the Right Thing When Nobody Is Watching

Sometimes the most important evidence that education is working comes when children are nowhere near school and no adult from Woodlands is watching them. This week I received the loveliest email from Mr Pye, Library Coordinator at The Whitby High School, about three of our boys – who I can't name online but who are all in KS2. Why? Well, a Whitby pupil had dropped their lunch card, our boys found it and, rather than ignoring it or leaving it for somebody else, took the time to go to Whitby High School to return it so that the pupil would have it the following day. Mr Pye specifically contacted us because he was so impressed by how polite, respectful and thoughtful the boys were and asked that they be recognised for their kindness. I absolutely LOVE this.

There was no member of Woodlands staff watching them. There was no house point on offer and no expectation that anybody would ever tell us what they had done. They saw an opportunity to help somebody and simply chose to do the right thing. That is character education in action and precisely what we mean when we ask our children to be Ready, Respectful and Safe. Well done to all three boys. We are incredibly proud of you. 💚

🥬 A Small Incident – But an Important Food Safety Reminder

Another incident this week provides a very different learning opportunity and a useful reminder about why our rules around food and allergies matter so much. Some food from an older child's snack found its way over the fence into our Hedgehogs outdoor area, where two of our babies picked it up and almost began eating it. Thankfully, our staff spotted what had happened very quickly and no harm was caused. However, this could have been very different.

Food being shared, swapped or passed between children can present a serious risk, particularly for our youngest children and for pupils with allergies, medical conditions or specific dietary requirements.

The children involved were spoken to, but importantly this was treated as a learning opportunity. Something that may seem completely harmless to a child (giving another child some food) can have consequences they simply haven't considered.

Please help us reinforce this at home: children must never share, swap, pass or give their food to another child, and unwanted food should always go into the appropriate food-waste bin.

With children from nine months to 11 years old on our sites, alongside children with a wide range of allergies and medical needs (known and unknown), our rules around food are not us being fussy, or draconian, nor are they about removing a parental right to give your child what you want to. Our rules have to exist because they keep children safe – a whole of the school community endeavour.

An Opportunity Lost

Sadly, there is something else this week about which we are genuinely disappointed.

We have had to make the difficult decision to cancel our planned Year 3 and Year 4 visits to Liverpool Synagogue because too few children had been signed up for the visits to remain viable. A considerable amount of work had already gone into arranging these visits: detailed risk assessments, coaches, liaison with the venue, staffing arrangements and parent volunteers. More importantly, however, our children have now lost what would have been an extremely valuable opportunity to bring their learning about Judaism to life.

Whilst I completely understand that events taking place in the wider world can make adults anxious, and we will always listen to genuine concerns about children's safety, every educational visit we undertake is appropriately risk assessed and we would never knowingly take our children somewhere we believed it was unsafe to go – despite media hype, disinformation and misinformation (rife throughout the western world).

However, education also has a hugely important role in ensuring that fear does not become ignorance and difference does not become something children learn to avoid. I know I have written to you all earlier this month about PREVENT and how that fits the safeguarding teaching and learning in school but moreover, at Woodlands, we teach our children about different religions, cultures, beliefs and communities because it is a curriculum expectation. We teach inclusion, tolerance, curiosity and respect. We want children to ask questions and to meet people whose lives and experiences may be different from their own, may challenge and enhance their thinking. Visiting a place of worship provides something that a photograph, worksheet or video simply cannot replicate.

We visit museums, theatres, libraries, sporting venues and places of worship (from Gurdwaras to Mosques, churches to Synagogues) because learning beyond the classroom matters. No activity, whether at school, on a school visit or in everyday family life, can ever be entirely without risk. Our responsibility is to assess and manage that risk professionally and proportionately.

I am particularly sorry for the children and families who had enthusiastically supported the visit and for those parents who had volunteered to accompany us – we have had far more emails of disappointment and support of our approach than derogatory emails about our intent to take the children on this visit, which is hugely reassuring. We know that the vast majority of you are just as disappointed as we are that the low numbers mean the experience cannot now go ahead.

Be reassured, we will continue to seek opportunities for our children to encounter different cultures, communities and faiths because broadening children's understanding of the world, rather than narrowing it, is fundamental to the education we provide at Woodlands and their future ability to navigate the world in which they live.

The Lessons That Don't Fit Neatly into Exercise Books

Reflecting on those two very different incidents this week reminded me that schools teach children far more than reading, writing and maths.

Children learn that returning somebody's lost property is simply the right thing to do. They learn that an apparently kind act such as sharing food can sometimes have unintended consequences. They learn how to disagree, how to resolve conflict and how to keep themselves and others safe. Plus, we want them to learn that understanding people whose lives, cultures or beliefs differ from their own makes their world richer, not something to fear.

Sometimes those lessons are carefully planned into our curriculum and sometimes they emerge unexpectedly from everyday life, but all of them contribute to developing the thoughtful, responsible, knowledgeable and respectful young people we want Woodlands children to become.

Thank you, as always, to our staff for the enormous amount they continue to do, to our children for embracing the opportunities we provide and to our families who support us in providing them.

As ever, have a lovely weekend.

Victoria
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