



WYNSTONES
A WALDORF SCHOOL

Principal's Report

As one of the longest established and most distinguished Steiner Waldorf (SW) schools in the UK, Wynstones' current fortunes have gathered wide attention and concern. Its current closure falls as part of a broader struggle for SW schools to find sustainable levels of operational and safeguarding integrity. This quest is currently being addressed and supported by many institutions, including the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF).

On coming into post in March 2020 my brief and task has been to reopen the school at the earliest opportunity. A revised action plan submitted to Ofsted and the DfE that month and shared with the parent community addressed fundamental issues with safeguarding, curriculum, SEND and leadership and governance. The aim was to reopen the school in September 2020 at a reduced capacity (KG & Class 1-4) whilst retaining registration as a 3-18yrs provision.

The action plan's principal strategy was to contract reputable external agencies and consultants to provide additional capacity for and effective quality assurance of all improvement measures. Its principal ethic was to claim and embody a progressive and professional expression of SW education. In doing this it sought to acknowledge Amanda Spielman's (Chief HMI, Ofsted) question as to the whether the failure of SW schools arose from their underlying principles but identify prevailing cultures as the primary area for scrutiny and development. Reorienting towards pedagogy over culture in this way led to many intrinsic elements of SW practice being explicitly articulated and placed within a broader educational context (eg safeguarding childhood, sensory-motor integration, metacognition, participatory communities, critical thinking, and global literacy).

The involvement of the NSPCC in helping to fundamentally reinstall the safeguarding culture and practice in the school continues to be essential. This is especially true in an environment where broader discussion in the SW movement can sometimes relegate improvements in safeguarding provision to an overly bureaucratic restriction of students' freedom (eg to climb trees) or teachers' autonomy. What these narratives fail to sufficiently acknowledge, in my opinion and experience as a head-teacher, are the nature and presence of child neglect, abuse and exploitation in our society, and the necessity of process and procedure, culture and behaviour in safeguarding. The history and legacy of the Warner and Munro reports and Saville and Harris cases challenge us as a society to accept and respond to the reality of such neglect, abuse and exploitation. All schools simply must ensure and aspire to excellence in safeguarding provision. That this (also in my view) chimes with the gesture in the SW tradition of honouring childhood, is an alignment that is now essential for SW schools, including Wynstones, to embrace.

Within the leadership and governance area of the action plan was an explicit requirement to interrogate and remodel the school's financial operations and integrity. As this was undertaken a financial fragility (lack of cash) exacerbated by the impact of the COVID19 crisis led to a lack of progress in applying the action plan and a decision in May to postpone the reopening of the school to September 2021. The impact on the school community of such a delayed reopening has been seismic and traumatic, with a lack of provision for pupils and redundancy for 62 out of 64 staff.

Whilst much is bleak in the school's current situation, financial and institutional housework is still underway and laying the foundations for the school's renewal. With the prospect of a Michaelmas term with no students, staff or parents to offer the community participation and stakeholder engagement necessary for an effective dialogue of development in areas of policy and pedagogy, open public forums will begin to feature as part of our outreach work, functioning also as opportunities to share the vision and values of the new school. With no staff, national and international educationalists at the forefront of effective SW and/or progressive provision will participate in

our journey towards September 2021 and the reopening of classrooms, workshops and woodland. Alongside this, in an operational expediency, I meet most Fridays with the PTFA exec, finally formed within days of the January closure, and offering an essential continuity and consultation that will form part of the bedrock of community involvement going forwards.

A central critique of the school by Ofsted in January was a lack of clarity and boundaries in community involvement and overall culture. The governance consultation and review that Ian Lawrie QC is leading on behalf of the trustees will need to address this in order not only to provide true dialogue but also clear boundaries and the effective oversight that will enable the school to thrive. Guiding, overseeing and scrutinising this journey is a new Board of Trustees. Distinguished alumni who are also independent from students, parents or staff are now stepping forward to join the board alongside other eminent volunteers who bring a wealth and range of expertise as critical friends and legal holders of accountability. The rigorous review of governance will ensure an effective tending of the school's effectiveness and an adherence to its charitable objects.

The school clearly has a responsibility to reset those aspects of policy, pedagogy and practice that led to its challenges and closure. In no way does that journey invalidate the incredible competence and care within the school's community and history. It does demand, however, a scrupulous capacity for self-reflection, and an adoption by ourselves as professionals and participants of the learning ethic we ask children to embody - that the judgement of a performance as inadequate (or a spelling or an equation's solution as wrong) does not equate to a judgement of ourselves as inadequate. Such a confusion is natural in children's development and often demands a considered and creative care in the feedback and narrative given by a teacher.

It is considered and creative care that needs to be brought to bear in our own development at this time, but not merely as reparations for past poor performance, but as an ambition for excellence in what provision might now be offered. SW education has a tremendous experience to offer children, particularly in the light of a new normal born from COVID19, #metoo, Black Lives Matter and the climate crisis. The multitude of movements in social ecology that Rudolf Steiner would currently be engaging with are astoundingly prescient, and it is the underlying principles of an education that honours and supports the developments of free-thinking individuals that we are tasked with embodying. For myself, it is the positive deep adaptation of mindfulness and social ecology that I find an alignment with in encountering the tradition of Waldorf education, rather than the charismatic and dogmatic culture of Steiner education. There is no illusion as to the scale of the task ahead, but equally no limitation to its potential impact. Whilst I have been challenged by the scale of the school's current situation, I am equally committed to its thriving, and its future, and look forward to sharing that journey.

Paul Hougham
Principal
July 2020