

WOODLANDS PRIMARY SCHOOL: HEADTEACHER'S BLOG – 04/12/20

Thanks to all for my birthday wishes, it was the strangest birthday ever but nevertheless being 46 is a gift that some people haven't enjoyed so I am grateful and happy! Birthdays are good times to reflect on the past year, and my goodness what a year!

I shared some little school gifts we received in the last couple of weeks, a real winner! 'Soundiculous Kids' sent us 2 games for free, we had a Hanson Box and have ordered another one, and also look forward to the Snowman film in the next week!

The impact of Covid-19 has undoubtedly been unprecedented. It has thrown the world into a great deal of confusion, decimating economies and resources along the way in an unstoppable and uncontrollable *tour de force*, the likes of which are only seen in nature through such things as forest fires, tsunamis and hurricanes.

The aftermath of such huge scale destruction and devastation is usually a fallow period of shock, where everyone surveys the landscape and wonders how to pick up the pieces and rebuild. The strength of the human spirit, the tenacity and resolve that we see post life-changing event such as this is remarkable, and I believe, as a primary school Headteacher, that we are on the verge of just such an evaluation of how to reconstruct our education system. What a time to be alive and experience reform at its roots, because let us be honest, do any of us, having been through the 'reset' that was a national 'lock-down' want to go right back to how things were before? Isn't it an amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity to build a future based on authentic social conscience and collaboration?

From a relatively simple, school leadership perspective the real life, visceral issues that we have faced have been under reported and, where they have been nationally highlighted, have been given a particularly unpleasant slant that has undermined our profession and our motivations. I could wax lyrical about the negatives, but instead I will focus on the positives that for me, will signal change as we look ahead.

Remote (Online) learning – something that has done more to illuminate the gross inequalities between the rich and the poor, the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in our country – has proven to be a time consuming, stress laden, and yet in many ways, a very positive outcome of Covid-19. Not least for exactly that reason, when such a huge proportion of children and families are known to be unable to access digital content through poverty, then the dissonance is irrefutable! Our government can only bury its head for so long when faced with the clanging truth of the differences in life experiences for our youth.

Also, however, because of children and their ability to manipulate digital platforms, assimilate information in a way that they will in the workforce of the future, and learn from the comfort of their own homes, it now means that there are new ways of working, born from immediate need, that can be implemented for a range of things. Children who are in hospital, injured at home, away from school with family for any number of reasons, can all seamlessly continue to access learning! *This* is unprecedented! This is a useful change and a tool perhaps, with huge and necessary social investment from the Government, that could revolutionise learning for the foreseeable future. The caveat to this, of course, is that unlike when it was forced upon school leaders as a directive, without the infrastructure to implement it effectively wholesale, the Government need to redirect funds from other sources in order to ensure the future efficacy of this project. More about that later, but the inclusion of school leaders, not the stooges of the Government, but real ones, who are at the pointy end, so to speak, who will iron out the issues and come up with some real innovation and opportunity is key to the long term success of this.

Online parent's evening – genius! I have one teacher, she knows who she is (so do you...) and we all laugh about it, in an eye roll way, who goes over her parent's evening times by almost 2 hours every time! I think you will agree, that the beauty of so many online tools now, both as a mum and a school leader, are that the timings are tight, the meetings focussed and therefore it is much more 'slick'! This is DEFINITELY a keeper! I loved attending my daughter's parent's evening online 😊

PE – as a one-time PE middle school teacher, the bane of my life was the inordinate amount of time given over to changing, transportation/storage/loss of kit, etc. We no longer have this issue! Children come in on PE day in their kit, and wear it, and then go home in it – thus ensuring they get the maximum PE time doing PE (rather than

huddling in drafty rooms, changing and being embarrassed about changing, and muddling up socks and jumpers). This too, a definitely keeper!

Our curriculum design was 2 years in the making and has largely been unaffected by Covid-19; we have continued to provide high quality experiences for our children, many of which can take place outside! We had invested in training and continue to do so, focusing on staff mental health and wellbeing, which means by extension they can focus on regulating children and their wellbeing. Of course, the impact of Covid-19 on our finances is likely to be catastrophic and I did allude to the government redirecting funds earlier, so I think this is a real opportunity for them to do so on many levels.

What has proven superfluous to actual teaching and learning last year was the following (in effect a multimillion pound business in itself): SATs, phonics testing, Ofsted inspections, league table creation. If we agree that schools do not need to produce league tables, and agree that standardised tests do not really add value to children or their learning, if we acknowledge that they have been absolutely fine and nobody has been disadvantaged without the tests taking place, then we should rethink the national investment into them, redirecting the money into schools to tackle issues like digital poverty, and mental health. I do not think one sensible parent, with their child at the heart of their thinking (rather than empty government rhetoric about lost learning and lost generations!) would choose pointless testing over their learning and mental health. Ofsted can be repurposed, and upcycled so that they are refreshed and made modern, rather than in the image of an antiquated system, not fit for purpose in the future landscape of learning.

Our PTA have been exceptional during the entirety of both national lockdowns and engaged in our community in ways that really brought everyone together. At one point, before the summer, they came up with an idea where children could paint beach pebbles and leave them in a line (Larry The Lockdown Snake) along the hedgerow outside school, connecting people on their permissible daily exercise when they were so disconnected through the restrictions. I have since had the pebbles set in concrete outside the main entrance as a reminder of our school values. They also worked with me to source a huge outdoor Christmas tree, so that where parents could not mix, nor come into school, we could still bring a bit of festive magic to our children and families, again, to bring our community together, they have also sold outdoor baubles that children decorated and filled with 'wishes' to hang on the tree! A visual reminder each day that even in dark times, schools provide light, and we can still dream of a brighter future. As for them working within the strict confines of our Covid-19 Risk Assessment to film the entire school and create a wonderful Christmas video for our families to enjoy 'rights of passage' like the Nativity in Reception, and the Carol Concert further up the school, I am thrilled. We will be donating a DVD of this to the local care home, Astbury Lodge, where we usually go (over 600 of us) each Christmas to sing in the gardens to the residents. The virtual fair last weekend was an absolute hit and who knows, may be the way forward next year (although this is one thing I must say I hope returns to face-to-face!).

Again, our place, and importance, in the community cannot be denied, despite the foolhardy press coverage of 'lazy teachers' (who actually worked throughout lockdown and their holidays to provide child care for the key workers); the 'work shy' teachers who are being called to strike rather than go to work (a disingenuous clickbait headline when in fact they were, and are, the group of key workers, the country wide, who have been given minimal PPE and maximum exposure to the largest number of people every day, shaky and very contradictory guidance based on limited published evidence and no public support); and finally a pay freeze as their job has not been deemed as important as that of other key workers, despite the fact that without schools providing care as a basic minimum, no other services could have continued to operate.

On a personal level, having had the virus and suffered dreadfully for weeks, it has reminded me of mortality and that we should all live our lives in the best way possible, giving where we can and trying to smooth the way for others. It enabled my leadership team to step in and develop skills that they perhaps would have not developed otherwise and we built relationships with parents that we never thought possible. You have experienced first-hand the lengths that we will go to in order to support you all, be that taking lunches to your homes, phoning you each week or supporting your mental health from afar. I think in times of great diversity come opportunities for great development and profound depth formed in relationships. I am lucky that I lead the kind of school where that transformative experience has happened and it has left me feeling supported, valued and galvanised for the undoubtable challenges we will all face as we rebuild the country post Covid-19. It is not yet Christmas, but we have a lot to do in the next 2 weeks, and I am grateful to all those of you who have supported and continue to support us.