

## The Wilderness College – *learning without walls*

### Outdoor experiential Learning - Open Dialogue - Sustainable Practices

#### The Challenge

Education is a preparation for the future and must include exam qualifications and skills in English, Maths and IT but it needs to be much more than that. It must give young people the capacity and confidence to survive in a rapidly changing world where tomorrow's jobs do not even exist. To do this they need resilience, openness to learning and the ability to collaborate. They need flexibility of thought and strength of purpose to adapt to the needs of a challenge. Above all they need character.

There is a lack of genuine vision in education. More than one third of schools are failing students according to government criteria. We have an industrial, fast food model of education; efficient, easily managed and measured but ultimately unsustainable and unsustaining.

Mainstream education focuses on what you know and fails to understand the nature of knowledge has changed. It focuses on academics and what you can do but with an ever narrowing spectrum that leaves no room for being or creativity. At the Wilderness College our focus is different. We focus on an understanding of who a young person is and empower them to be the person they aspire to be.

#### Those in need

The Wilderness College is an emerging **educational enterprise** catering for the needs of all students aged 10-19 who are not flourishing in a mainstream context. At The Wilderness College we promote student wellbeing and success through our small group sizes, our support systems, our outdoor context and our innovative curriculum. The close relationship between students and mentors allows our young people to develop true self efficacy, the belief that they can succeed and accomplish the tasks they set themselves; the power to choose their own future. We are radical in encouraging, respecting and empowering the student voice. Young people learn because they are free to and because they choose to.

We are especially capable of meeting the needs of students who may find the environment of a large secondary school too overwhelming. They may be individuals challenged by mental health issues or negative experiences of schooling. They may have specific learning difficulties linked to behavioural issues which have led to them be suspended or excluded from mainstream school.

#### Our solution

### Outdoor experiential Learning - Open Dialogue - Sustainable Practices

Our approach is a radical reworking of the educational paradigm. At the heart of what we do is **Real Life Experiential Learning**. Modern schools are data-driven institutions where symbols and theory attempt to replace reality. But many young people cannot learn theoretically. They need to learn by doing, by engaging their hand and their heart as well as their head. Through the experiential learning cycle students are required to take initiative, make independent decisions and be accountable for the results. This active involvement produces a perception, crucial for the adolescent, that the

experience is authentic. Our curriculum includes English, Maths, Science and IT but approaches these from a real life perspective. When each class build their own home room at the start of every year they are engaged in academic learning but through their own lived experience.

To ensure that we learn by doing over 50% of our lessons are taught outside the classroom, most of them **Outdoor**. We are a school without classrooms. Traditional classrooms are intended as *teaching environments* but they are much less effective as *learning environments*. For many students the demands of the typical norms; remain seated, face forward, be quiet, listen to the teacher, passively doing what you are told, are barriers to learning. Classrooms are artificial environments, disconnected from the real world of streets or cities. They are especially disconnected from the **Natural world**. Learning in nature stimulates cognitive learning and creativity and has been proven to reduce such things as attention deficit disorder. It is multi-sensory and thus ideal for students with specific learning difficulties. **Learning expeditions** every three weeks, designed, resourced and managed by students provide the context to test learning and challenge theory. Are bearings understood well enough to navigate across the channel? Can my team function efficiently to complete a series of challenges in a city?

The Wilderness College runs an active mixed farm with horses, sheep, goats, dogs, chickens and pigs. We grow a wide variety of vegetables and herbs for our table with a class of students preparing lunch every day. The process of growing plants and caring for the animals provides an authentic and powerful context for learning all across the curriculum, from Science and Technology to Maths and English.

The Wilderness College is built on **Dialogue** and thus challenges the existing paradigm of top-down communication. Students dialogue with staff and with each other to plan and complete their study. Students engage in group dialogue to challenge and develop school systems. Individuals dialogue with nature through time alone in wild places. And all are engaged in a mindful dialogue with themselves. Through dialogue a stream of meaning emerges. We believe that the maxim, 'I think therefore I am' is far less powerful than the one which recognises that, 'You are, therefore I am'.

Thus the majority of the work at The Wilderness College is collaborative, where students experience the exercise of personal power within the context of group challenges. They experience the power that comes with working from lasting values of kindness, generosity, compassion and awareness. They exercise these values towards themselves and towards others and in doing so they develop the resilience to keep moving forward in the face of setbacks. They learn to let go of dependence on external, temporary sources of value; money, appearance or performance. Instead they learn to be truly aware of their value as individuals in their own right. As **young leaders** our students learn that there are a number of ways that you can use your power that are need-satisfying for you so that they become need-satisfying for those you are trying to lead. Our focus is on *power with* other people rather than *power over* them. The more powerful you're perceived to be, the more you should listen to what other people say and in this way your power helps them get power too. Thus we teach and practice **servant leadership**.

Underpinning all work at The Wilderness College is **Sustainability**. Sustainability is the heartbeat of our school and it represents the fundamental paradigm shift that is needed in our world. It can no longer be an add on to our education. Following the UN Sustainable development goals we will live the solutions to climate change, pollution and to unsustainable practices of building, eating and

transport. We help transform young lives by allowing them to see and experience things differently. We will be a national beacon school in sustainable living and our students will be eloquent ambassadors for a way of life that respects the needs of both people and planet. We will regularly host other groups and demonstrate both new and ancient technologies that allow us to live in harmony with the planet.

### **Our team**

Our team is led by Bobby Acworth; teacher, housemaster (Worth School) Head of Sixth Form (Bedales School) and Assistant Head (New Zealand). It includes Minna Bruce; teacher (Montessori) and festival entrepreneur (Boomtown) Chris Jackson; higher education, Forest school teacher, sustainability teacher and Maria Arpa; business owner (Centre for Peaceful Solutions) mediator (Chair of Mediator UK) social entrepreneur (The Dialogue Road Map). Also on our steering group are 3 other teachers, two educational psychologists, a serving army officer (The Rifles) a business owner and a school bursar.