

Steiner Waldorf: Distance Travelled - An evaluative review of progress from 2018-2024

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Steiner Waldorf: Distance Travelled

An evaluative review of progress from 2018-2024

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Introduction

This documentary analysis was requested by [Waldorf UK](#) as they were keen for an updated review of the progress made by their schools in the UK since 2019, when Dr Richard Pountney carried out a rapid review of their curriculum. As independent reviewers, our intention is that this document provides a summary-level overview of the findings of inspection reports for SW schools between 2018 and 2024. This document will highlight the progress identified within these reports whilst also noting further areas for development. In addition, the report will include commentary from Waldorf UK executives, who explain how the changes identified were enacted. Three key aims underpin this report: to provide an outward facing document that evidences the progress that SW schools have made since 2018; to serve as a validation document for SW staff, recognising and celebrating the dedication and hard work of those in the SW family of schools; and to serve as a CPD tool, highlighting areas of strength that can be further built upon, as well as those areas identified by Ofsted as requiring further consideration.

The context of SW schools

The first Waldorf school was opened in Stuttgart in September 1919, and the first Waldorf kindergarten in 1926. At the time of writing there are 1,283 Waldorf and Rudolf Steiner schools in 71 countries and 1,922 Waldorf kindergartens in operation worldwide, across more than 60 countries (from the [Waldorf World List](#), 2024). When Pountney carried out his review in 2019, Steiner Waldorf (SW) was celebrating its centenary, but Steiner schools in the UK were experiencing unprecedented challenges. Newspaper reports at that time were scathingly critical of SW schools following a damning Ofsted report of one SW school (Turner, [2018](#)). Following this report the then head of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, called into question the underlying principles of SW, and called for Ofsted to “further investigate why so many of the Steiner schools inspected are neither protecting children adequately nor giving them a good standard of education” (found [here](#), no page). Even though at that time conspiracy debates rumbled concerning the fairness of the ensuing inspections (Roberts, [2019](#)), and the ‘bullying’ nature of Ofsted (Busby, [2019](#)), Waldorf UK’s response was, commendably, a proactive one- a commitment to carrying out its own review of its schools and their curricula. Dr Richard Pountney played a pivotal role in this.

At the time of Pountney’s [2019](#) review he referred to 31 SW schools in the UK. [Waldorf’s School Location](#) pages now show a total of just 17 schools and one academy across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This drastic reduction in number reflects the significant number of schools that were not able to pull themselves out of the mire created by the 2018 and 2019 inspections controversy. In his conclusion, Pountney identified ‘what might happen next?’ for SW schools, and it will be useful for us to consider his suggestions, whilst we reflect upon the journey travelled by SW schools over the last five years. The key areas identified by Pountney were:

- The need for greater transparency in the approach taken to curriculum design in SW schools and a clearer articulation of the pedagogical values underpinning it.
- A more effective alignment of the SW curriculum with current developments in the English national curriculum. This does not call for submission to, but rather for reassurance that SW pupils will not be disadvantaged by disjunction in their future lives.
- The need for a more effective way of recording the curriculum's impact upon student learning. The possibility of designing a bespoke Curriculum Assessment Tool was proposed.
- To become bolder in articulating the direct benefits of a SW curriculum and its associated pedagogy, both within the SW community and externally.

The following report demonstrates the alacrity with which these suggestions have been actioned. As Pountney (2019) was tasked with interrogating curriculum development, he did not touch upon the key area of Safeguarding, the chief cause of 9 schools being deemed inadequate at the time. We mention this for a very significant reason; at the time of writing this report, of the 14 SW schools inspected from 2022 to 2024, not one safeguarding concern was recorded¹. The developments evidenced in the reports in the years that followed Pountney's report are by no means restricted to the curriculum, they evidence rejuvenation across all areas of SW culture and practice.

The analysis that follows is based upon Ofsted reports (and similar, for example the Independent Schools Inspectorate reports, and the Pickles-Rees Stage II Investigation) between 2018 and 2024. There was a hiatus between 2020-2021, as a result of the pandemic, with very few schools inspected, just 3 in total, and at the time of the documentary review only one report was available for 2024, so the years that are of most significance here are 2018, 2019 and 2023, when a total of 34 inspections took place. This review takes an appreciative approach (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) with a focus on those areas where there have been most improvement, and an unpacking of what contributed to that improvement. To this end, the review of documentation was supported by interviews with the Executive Director and Education Co-ordinator of Waldorf UK, to elicit a narrative of the ways that change was brought about. This narrative has been woven into the review of documents, and excerpts from the interviews are shown in italics.

Key areas for development identified in the 2018-2019 Inspections

In the inspection reports from 2018 -2020, curriculum, leadership and governance were identified as key areas in need of improvement. At its most extreme leadership was referred to as dysfunctional, with no clear lines of authority, and it was noted that this had exasperated issues related to safeguarding. Safeguarding, it was reported, was not treated robustly enough and in some schools with ambivalence. The reports noted a lack of capacity, experience and confidence in this area, resulting in confused and sometimes careless decisions being made.

Conflicts of interest were also highlighted in reports, resulting in inadequate responses being made to complaints. Over-familiarity was documented between some staff and parents, with a lack of clear boundaries between professional and personal lives. Failure to effectively record and communicate vital information was noted, as was the inadequate recognition and support of SEND. Inspectors reported a failure to implement school policy, as well as the existence of 'in' and 'out' groups within schools and bullying amongst both staff and students.

General findings across all reports were that leadership and management needed strengthening through strategic improvements, more robust accountability, and a stronger safeguarding culture. A need for improvements in behaviour management, attendance, and the overall learning environment were also

¹ It is important to acknowledge that subsequently, in December 2024, Greenwich Waldorf School was inspected by ISI and failed Safeguarding plus other areas, following a period of leadership from two mainstream heads. The report was not published until February 2025.

identified. Staff training in behaviour management, safeguarding, and the use of new resources was seen as essential, as was ensuring that staff receive ongoing professional development. The reports called for more precise support for SEND pupils, including updating the disability access plan, and stronger assessment structures. Finally, compliance with independent school standards and statutory requirements was highlighted as essential, particularly in relation to behaviour management and safeguarding.

The directives given in these reports included enhancing curriculum clarity and planning across all subjects and improving teaching quality, with a focus on effective and consistent use of assessments and more tailored support for pupils, particularly those with SEND. The reports recommended that schools focus on enhancing curriculum implementation and development by ensuring that the curriculum built upon pupils' prior knowledge, and making sure that it is well-sequenced, with clearly defined essential knowledge and skills. Reports also stressed that improving teaching quality was crucial, with an emphasis on effective use of lesson time, adapting tasks, and challenging the most able pupils. Finally, it was recommended that early reading and phonics be prioritised, and that all staff should be proficient in these areas.

These reports served as a harsh 'wake up call' for SW schools in England, schools that had previously been criticised for a culture of complacency. With the non-negotiable requirements of Ofsted pressing, changes were rapidly implemented, and the inspection reports from 2021 onwards demonstrate a vastly different picture from the earlier reports; evidencing SW schools' proactivity and tenacity in responding to their previous failings.

The later reports (from 2021-2024) demonstrate that SW schools have begun to excel in several key areas, including strong leadership and governance, with effective responses to inspection issues and active involvement from trustees. They paint a picture of schools providing high-quality teaching and learning, with well-planned curricula that build on pupils' prior knowledge and skills, leading to good progress in key subjects like reading, mathematics, art, and modern foreign languages. The reports note that upper school pupils excel in GCSEs, and post-16 students often secure higher education places, gaining strong subject knowledge, confidence, and resilience.

The reports from 2021-2024 also show that pupils in SW schools benefit from opportunities for spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development, and that they exhibit good behaviour, cooperation, and respect. What is more, they describe a curriculum that is creative, rich, and inclusive, with enrichment activities that engage and motivate pupils. Early years provision is judged to be of high quality, with children making good progress and developing strong foundations. Strong relationships between teachers and parents, along with robust safeguarding measures, are seen to contribute to a supportive and positive school environment. These reports paint a vastly different picture of SW schools than those that were produced just several years ago. Below we explore how such drastic change was brought about in so short a time span.

The building blocks of change

Changes in Leadership, Management and Governance

The reports from 2021 onwards specifically outline how new leadership has brought structure, professionalism, and a clear vision to SW schools, with 13 out of the 16 reports judging the leadership as 'good'. The reports describe how leaders have enhanced the schools through motivating staff and ensuring compliance with all independent school standards. Importantly, one report identified high staff morale and well-being, with leaders carefully considering workload and staff well-being when making decisions. It was also documented that leaders and governors demonstrate strong potential for further improvement, with a clear vision for future development. The 'dysfunctionality' that was identified in earlier reports has been replaced, just several years later, by highly professional and caring competence.

The first action taken by the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (now Waldorf UK) was a consultation with schools to ask what *they* needed (this resulted in the Trevor Mepham Report). This was vital if schools were to feel ownership of the changes that were to come. The result of this consultation was the identification of three key areas for development: Vision, Leadership and Expertise. Alongside this, the Rudolf Steiner School Kings Langley stoically documented the failings that were highlighted during their own inspection, sharing this as a learning tool for others. Their *Lessons Learned* document was sent to all SW schools and trustee boards.

Saint Paul's school were forerunners in structural change, bringing in an interim head teacher and soon after passing their Ofsted inspection. Likewise, Elmfield Rudolf Steiner School, a school that had also appointed an education lead, achieved a positive outcome in their inspection. It very quickly became clear that it was almost impossible to get through an inspection without some kind of hierarchical leadership, much as this jarred with the traditionally flat structure of SW schools. From 2019 onwards, other SW school trustee boards went about creating new hierarchical structures in their schools, appointing Headteachers and/or Senior Management Teams.

In September 2019, an Executive Director and Education Co-ordinator were employed by Waldorf UK to help drive developments across all SW schools, joining the Early Childhood co-ordinators already in post, and forming the Executive Group (EG). Whilst both new recruitments were involved in SW settings when their own children had attended, and both were passionate about its aims, they also had considerable experience outside SW settings. This experience supported them in taking a balanced and widely informed view of the changes that were needed, whilst understanding the very specific culture and context of SW schools. The Education Co-ordinator had previously implemented SW pedagogical approaches into mainstream settings with great success, achieving 'Outstanding' Ofsted ratings. Meanwhile the Executive Director had played a pivotal role in the Greenwich Waldorf School's growth from early years setting to established school, subsequently leading it through several successful inspections. The Executive Director had also specialised in institutional safeguarding and child protection as a lawyer, and had been a senior leader in two national charities, bringing a level of experience that was vital at that time. She also had experience of inspection as an HM Inspector, albeit within the specific context of children's experiences within prisons.

The Ofsted reports from 2021-2024 comment on the way that school leaders and trustees acted swiftly to address weaknesses. The steps taken by Waldorf UK to improve structure and practices included:

1. Supporting new leadership teams with regular meetings (which continued to take place online during Covid).
2. Individual support through a helpline (as some new leaders were mainstream teachers and some were Waldorf teachers who had 'stepped up' to the role, it was recognised that there was a broad range of unique needs).
3. Working closely with School Improvement Partners and subsidising training with a number of providers (Big Education, Big Leadership Adventure and Big 8- now Rethinking Schools).
4. Delivering training on complaints handling and understanding the potential impact and implications of conflicts of interest.
5. Providing schools with training (and even pilot inspections) to help them understand what Ofsted would be looking for, and how to more clearly articulate that it was being effectively met by SW practices and approaches.

The work related to Ofsted was approached with extreme pragmatism. Waldorf UK's Executive Group met frequently with Ofsted and the DfE in order to ensure a shared understanding of what was currently missing in SW schools and what was required. A constructive dialogue between both parties was developed, within which Waldorf UK accepted that many of the criticisms made in previous inspections were warranted, and they shared with Ofsted the steps being taken to improve inadequate areas. But the exchange of knowledge was not all one-sided; Waldorf UK also supported Ofsted to better understand some of the unfamiliar, idiosyncratic approaches taken by SW schools, and the pedagogy that underpinned those approaches. As a

result, Ofsted adjusted their *Guidance for Inspectors* when working with SW schools, so that more informed judgements could be made where key differences to mainstream schooling were observed; for example, the later start to formal literacy that SW schools take. It did not take long for the impact of this productive dialogue to be seen in improved inspection results, which then fed into a more positive, ongoing relationship between inspectors and SW schools.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding was a key priority and school leaders quickly went about addressing the most concerning inspection issues, such as improving site security. The competent way in which this was tackled was reflected in later Ofsted reports, with one noting “effective safeguarding measures with a strong culture of vigilance and thorough checks”. The Waldorf UK Education Co-ordinator explained how this vital area was tackled, sharing that:

we were very, very determined that safeguarding would not be a bureaucratic exercise, that it had to be an entire change in safeguarding culture ... ethically and morally, and for children's safety, but also ... for it to be ongoing and embedded change.

Through Waldorf UK training and network meetings the views that many SW teachers had previously held of their schools as a ‘safe bubble’ were challenged. Staff came to understand that abuse was equally distributed across all classes and cultures, that it was extensive, and that it could very easily take place within their own schools. Because of this, the responsibility of every staff member to recognise even the smallest of signs that something may be wrong- and to share it, was stressed. Staff came to understand the possibility that those individual puzzle pieces of information might join together to show a concerning picture. Training, and the dialogue that was initiated concerning safeguarding, made very clear that this was not simply a bureaucratic exercise- reporting incidents was vital to SW practice if they were to keep children in their schools safe.

Another challenge arising from previous Ofsted reports was the concept of ‘cosy relationships’. One notable report referred to the concern that the parents and teachers at the school were too closely connected, socially as well as professionally. This blurring of boundaries meant that the professional distance needed for making reasoned judgements was compromised. Waldorf UK delivered training which explored what effect these relationships could have upon ‘conflict of interest’. Following this training cultures began to shift, and with greater distance between parents and teachers, staff started noticing safeguarding issues within their schools that might previously have been overlooked; and this became a reinforcing cycle. The Executive Director stressed that this did not mean that caring relationships became absent from schools, but that staff learned “*to simultaneously hold love and trust and community and whilst being alert to risk*” within their professional roles.

Safeguarding dovetailed with leadership through ideas of responsibility and accountability. These were very difficult concepts to reconcile with flat staffing structures, as ultimately someone had to be responsible for final decisions made. Conversations took place within governing boards, as they questioned who had ultimate responsibility for the running of the school. Prior to the condemnatory Ofsted reports some trustees did not fully understand the responsibility that they held for ensuring that the school ran competently and legally. Because of the enormity of the reconceptualization of hierarchical management structures and accountability that was needed, the Executive Group recognised the importance of supporting members of Governing Boards as individuals, as well as them being encouraged to attend training and network meetings as part of the wider staff body.

Schools were proactive in embedding new approaches, with newly appointed leaders having a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibility. All SW teachers had their statutory training renewed, and all were signed up to Educare online training for safeguarding. Schools’ implementation of clearer professional boundaries was supported by the introduction of new software (for example, CPOMS and My

Concern) to enable more effective reporting of incidents. Finally, networks were created for the Designated Safeguarding Leads who had been appointed, enabling issues that were common across Waldorf schools to be discussed with empathetic peers.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching, learning, and assessment were judged as good in 13 of the 16 inspections carried out from 2021-2024. This is a significant shift from the 17 schools described as requiring improvement or inadequate in the same area in previous inspections. Effective learning sequences, effective use of the school's curriculum planning, and strong subject knowledge were all highlighted as strengths in the later reports. One report evidenced "high-quality education with an ambitious curriculum that prepares pupils well for their next steps" and another that "the curriculum is creative, rich, inclusive, and well-planned, with a strong emphasis on communication, language, and equalities". This is markedly different from the "poor standards of education" reported across all SW schools by Ofsted lead Spielman in 2018. Alongside schools' own staff development, this change was supported through over 100 CPD sessions, INSET days and conferences that were organised by Waldorf UK between September 2022 and June 2024, including networking events and webinars. In some ways the pandemic contrarily helped with this, as it shifted most training experiences online, enabling more staff to attend.

Approaches to literacy

A key focus for improvement was literacy development, as the need for a more structured approach to phonics was highlighted in the earlier reports. The *Sounds Write* programme was identified as the most suitable and credible approach for phonics in SW schools. (Having experienced a range of approaches to phonics within mainstream schools, the Education Co-ordinator was aware of the limitations of most of these programmes within the SW context). The implementation of *Sounds Write* was initiated through 12 Waldorf teachers undertaking 4 days of training in the summer of 2019. There has been a Waldorf *Sounds Write* course delivered every year since. Finding an approach that would not diminish the "*beautiful, artistic, creative teaching of Waldorf education*" was vital, and the impact of the *Sounds Write* approach was described by the Education Co-ordinator as "*phenomenal*". Although not explicitly identified as a problem area by Ofsted, a new maths programme was also introduced through the organisation Math for Love. This creative and exploratory approach to maths teaching was also recognised as having marked positive impact.

A clearer articulation of SW pedagogy

An important step toward greater preparation for Ofsted was supporting Waldorf teachers to better articulate what they *already* did extremely well to an outside audience. Prior to the inspections, there was a tendency for Waldorf teachers to be so immersed in their specific culture and approaches that they did not have reason to step back and to question the theoretical underpinnings of them. Without being pushed to reflect upon why they did what they did, they had not learned to explain this to an external audience. The Education Co-ordinator stressed that even during the earlier inspections there was already some excellent practice in place, but at that time the teachers were not confident in how to clearly articulate why they made the choices that they did within their classrooms. It was important for Waldorf teachers to learn how they could explain their pedagogical decisions in a language that inspectors could understand, but likewise inspectors needed to better understand what they saw in SW classrooms, as has already been mentioned above, and which is revisited in a later section.

One example of the need for the clearer articulation of pedagogical approaches was enabling inspectors to understand SW schools' rhythmical approach to learning, an approach that includes children sleeping on new information before they are asked to recall it. The Education Co-ordinator explained:

Dr Martyn Rawson [a founder teacher of York Steiner School, author and academic] and I transformed that [the rhythmical approach] into a seven-part process... that started with attunement ... we

presented it to teachers as part of preparing for Ofsted inspections... And we embedded it into the training that we do for Ofsted inspectors. So, Ofsted inspectors were being told that there was a coherent approach to learning. There was a systematic, coherent approach to the process of learning in Waldorf education. And then when teachers were speaking to Ofsted inspectors, they had a language that they shared about that approach to learning. So, the teachers could say, 'oh, when you visited my classroom, we were in the recall portion of the process of learning'. And that really made a difference. But it really built on what teachers certainly felt they were already doing it. It wasn't something different that we were asking them to change. It was about describing what they were doing already with a more accessible language.

Re-structuring the curriculum

In the later Ofsted reports effective teaching was noted in art, crafts, design technology, music, and modern foreign languages. However, as pupils were also recorded as *excelling* in reading, mathematics, and creative arts, it is fair to assume that strong teaching was witnessed across the entire curriculum. Whereas reports from 2018-2020 criticised a lack of clear sequential milestones within, and a lack of differentiation in the delivery of the curriculum, later reports observed that staff had a deep and accurate understanding of each child's learning and development and worked effectively with parents to ensure that everyone knew the child's next steps. Although later reports recognise high quality teaching across all ages, the reports specifically identify upper school pupils excelling in GCSEs, and gaining strong subject knowledge, confidence, and resilience, which aided their success in further education, employment, or training. These significant developments were the result of an equally significant body of work.

After the 2018 and 2019 reports it was important that the curriculum be reviewed and reframed, if new life was to be breathed into it. Once again supported by Dr Martyn Rawson and his concept of the 'layered curriculum', groups of teachers worked together to unpack the 'why, what and how' of their existing SW curriculum. They explored the underlying principles and how these could be clearly articulated to a non-SW audience. Another important aspect of this training was to stress that what was delivered within the micro-curricular of individual classes should be context dependent, and that it should be adapted to be of relevance to the children at that specific school. So, for example, understanding of the wool trade and learning the skill of knitting would be far more relevant to a school in Hereford, than it would be to a school in Dubai. Likewise, it might be more beneficial for a school in a fishing village to explore fishing rather than farming. The discourse around curriculum development also stressed that teachers must make efforts to decolonize and include diverse representation in their delivery through, for example, including black farmers. Finally, it was important that teachers recognise the chronological context, and that what may have been relevant fifty years ago, may not be now.

During these developments it was regarded as vital by those driving them that the SW approach did not slip into the normative content and assessment, data-led versions of curricular that are seen in mainstream schools. There was a determination that the Waldorf curriculum would not become a deficit model that children were measured against, and Waldorf UK were very careful in both the design and the wording of the guidance given. The Education Co-ordinator stressed that the 'expectations' of the child were not to be used as a measure of whether the child was behind or ahead of where they 'should be at their age', instead they were used in correspondence to where the child was beginning their learning journey in that specific area, providing potential next steps accordingly. She explained:

We have age-related learning opportunities, and that's in the language of 'every child at this age should have the opportunity to' and then it has very active verbs. So, explore, experience, encounter, practise. It's not 'they should learn that' it's 'they should have these experiences'. And then the learning descriptors describe a child's learning journey through each subject. And they do not have an age attached to them. They run parallel to the age-related learning opportunities, and you would

say that most children in Class 2 are at the 'Beginning' stage of each of those subjects. So, the learning descriptors are the assessment criteria. But you assess a child against the place that they're at.

A digital planning tool was used to map out learning opportunities. This helped not only with designing cross curricula blocks, automatically including the relevant learning descriptors, but it was also used to monitor the curriculum coverage experienced by a class, and to record which learning opportunities have been offered. True to the pedagogical reflections of 'why are we teaching this and why are we teaching it now?' that underpin SW teaching, the app also incorporates research resources to deepen teachers' knowledge and understanding of the topic, alongside teaching resources and learning tasks that can be used with the children, including ideas for experiential learning opportunities.

In comparison to the perceived disjointedness of the National Curriculum delivered in mainstream schools, the Curriculum Co-ordinator stressed the holistic approach taken to the Waldorf Curriculum explaining:

The learning journey through each subject is woven, the learning journey through each subject is really coherently planned. The way that the developmental stage of the child is taken into account in everything, the pedagogical approach, the curriculum content, the teaching, everything is woven into the horizontal curriculum, and then the vertical and the horizontal are woven together into these curriculum blocks with ultimate teaching economy.

The use of 'teaching economy' here is in direct reference to Steiner's recommendation that teachers design their teaching so that "the maximum amount of material can be presented to the students by the simplest means possible" (Steiner, 2003, p118). However, Bransby (2024) highlights the "significant caveat" to this, "that at no time should children 'have the feeling that they have lost the overview'". The 'joined-upness' of SW learning experiences is what makes them meaningful and purposeful. SW schools started to use this new curriculum in 2021, and the curriculum is clearly displayed on school web sites; most schools are now also using the app.

Assessment

With the criticisms raised by the 2018-19 reports in mind, it was important that the new curriculum guidance also offered ideas for how differentiation might be approached, as well suggestions for how the child's work might be assessed. The Education Co-ordinator stressed that none of the developments implemented in these areas were designed to be prescriptive, instead they are suggestions and guidance to be used as needed by each individual teacher. Assessment had been identified as being particularly weak by Ofsted in their early inspections, perhaps resulting from a lack of training taking place in this area; as a result, it was one of the key priorities when leadership was appointed. The timing of these developments, in 2019, was key, as it coincided with mainstream schools' data-driven curriculum being increasingly criticised, and Ofsted reconsidering the data that they should be inspecting within their frameworks. The context provided opportunity for a balanced approach to assessment to be developed within SW schools, and this came in the form of '*the purple folder*' that sat in each classroom.

The data that was collected for these folders took the form of 'point in time assessments', an approach that the Education Co-ordinator had used in a previous role. She explained that these 'assessments' were simply a judgement by the teacher "*about whether the child was on track to meet the curriculum expectations by the end of the year*". This was based upon a 6-point scale for English, maths and a more general assessment of attitudes to, and engagement in, learning. What was also central to this process, however, was the dialogue about each pupil that took place in pupil progress meetings. These happened two or three times a year and involved the teacher and a senior member of staff having professional conversations about the children. The Education Co-ordinator explained that these conversations were not focused on assessments and outcomes "*but on the children and the next steps [and] that made a huge difference*".

The combination of a practical and meaningful monitoring of children's development, as well as a well-structured curriculum, resulted in many of the positive comments that we see in later Ofsted reports. But still further steps were taken to improving curriculum delivery and monitoring progress, with the appointment of subject leaders in schools; over the past five years SW teachers have not only become more open to collaboration and feedback within their own schools, but also across schools. Many schools have begun to make use of more standardised assessments, but at an age and stage applicable to SW schools and their children. There is some evidence from these assessments that despite their later start to more formal approaches in reading and maths, children in SW schools very quickly catch up with, if not overtake, those in mainstream schools (Independent School Parent, 2025).

Supporting children with SEND

A specific area mentioned in the 2018-2020 reports was the need for better assessment and support for children with SEND. In many of the schools, SEND support was being provided directly by the SENDCo and/or teaching assistants, often outside of the classroom. Potential learning delays and difficulties were not being identified early, and expectations of children with specific needs were sometimes low. Despite the efforts of SWASEND (the Steiner Waldorf Association of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) over many years, and despite a small number of SW teachers who were passionate about changing existing approaches, additional training was still needed, alongside a shift in culture, if all teachers were to view SEND as part of their responsibility.

Even after the intervention of Ofsted, there was still no requirement to have a qualified SENDCo in SW schools, so to move practice forwards the issue needed reframing. It was important to shift teachers' thinking from them 'coping' with SEND, to them better understanding and supporting those with specific needs in creative ways – a new perspective that built upon the existing strengths and qualities of SW teachers. From 2019 on, many schools employed SENDCOs with national qualifications, and training was provided on, for example, the graduated approach, the early identification of SEND, and neurodiversity. Subsequently support has been provided for all SW schools on more effective approaches to developing Education and Health Care Plans, and the first SEND hub has been established in a Waldorf school.

As part of this cultural shift a different approach to admissions was also needed, to ensure that the needs of all children could be adequately met. The Education Co-ordinator explained how SW school leaders and SENDCOs were working together to create more accurate admissions assessments and processes, carefully considering what level of need it is possible for the school to support. In the spirit of continued development, schools are encouraged to make it a learning opportunity when they reject a child because they feel unable to meet their needs; to reflect upon *why* they were unable to adequately support that child, and what might be put in place to meet the needs of a similar child in the future. Another aspect of reframing approaches to SEND support, was to ensure that prospective parents had a clear understanding of what a SW school is, and what it offers, to clear any misconception that joining a SW school would mean 'opting out' of SEND support processes. It was accepted as essential that SW schools were transparent about the fact that if needs were identified then external referrals might be made, and specialist support might be sought.

The extremely positive results of the approaches outlined above are evidenced in Ofsted reports that refer to SEND pupils receiving well-planned and "expertly delivered" support (Elmfield, 2023), schools providing "strong support for pupils with SEND" (Iona, 2021) and pupils "thriving" in an inclusive environment which is designed to "meet the needs of all pupils" (York, 2022). Feedback from the additional inspection carried out on Michael Hall school in 2022 reflects the efforts that SW staff put into developing this area:

Significant progress has been made ... including a new inclusion coordinator, restructured SEND support, and ongoing staff training. Leaders have improved SEND provision, with better support

plans and classroom adaptations. The school now meets all previously unmet standards, but leaders continue to plan further improvements.

This statement demonstrates that support structures were not only put in place to appease Ofsted, but that they are meaningful, embedded and continuingly improving.

Changing school culture

Behaviour management

In place of the “poor behaviour” and “bullying” identified in previous reports, the reports from 2021 onwards note a “friendly and happy” atmosphere, good behaviour, and good attendance and punctuality. In fact, 14 of the 16 reports judged the behaviour and attitudes of the children as ‘good’ with one school being judged as ‘outstanding’ in this area. Pupils were recognised as being articulate, thoughtful, co-operative, confident, well-mannered, and respectful, and inspectors perceived that pupils felt safe and supported. These positives, it would seem, were created by several factors that were highlighted in reports, including: opportunities for spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development (strong personal development programs, including PSHE, were mentioned); a positive learning environment with high expectations; clear routines and positive relationships; and strong pastoral support helping pupils develop their personal identity. The use of the outdoor environment was viewed as a strength of Early Years provision within this area, where daily outdoor activities were seen to help children learn routines, rules, and social skills, and fostering a strong sense of belonging.

A notable strength across the later reports was strong relationships with parents and families, with one report observing that “Parents are overwhelmingly happy with the quality of education their children receive and are delighted with the caring, supportive, and creative community”. Reports mentioned that parents particularly appreciated SW schools' friendly atmosphere and strong communication. This provides reassuring evidence that the clearer boundaries to relationships that were introduced in the development of safeguarding requirements did not adversely affect the positive parent-school relationship that exist in SW schools.

There were certain aspects of practice relating to working with parents that needed to be carefully and sensitively reframed before appropriate policies could be established in this area. The Executive Director explained how attitudes toward attendance had previously been far more lenient in SW schools compared to mainstream schools. It was, for example, accepted when children stayed home to celebrate a birthday. Traditionally SW schools did not have attendance, lateness or absence policies, and so the Ofsted imperative for all children to achieve 94% attendance was a significant shift. The Education Co-ordinator explained how schools were supported to develop policies in which parents would be contacted “*when attendance dropped below 95% and 90%, just the same way that state schools do, but without the fines*” she also added that that they were “*a little bit gentler about it, probably*”. Schools were very transparent with parents, explaining how, if attendance rates remained poor, not only would the children miss out on important learning experiences, with the potential of this impacting negatively upon their development, but the school would not be able to pass their next Ofsted inspection. This, of course, was reinforced by a leadership team that were able to make sure that these actions were put in place.

Several inspections identified serious failures in how bullying was handled. Although ‘anti-bullying policies’ had always existed in SW schools, training increased understanding within this area, and more accountable leadership made sure that preventative approaches were implemented more rigorously. A school improvement partner, with expertise in behaviour management and anti-bullying, delivered training which focused upon better understanding the ways that bullying could impact upon children. They also worked with teachers to develop their understanding of the parameters of normal and acceptable interactions between children, and intervention strategies that could be used when needed. In addition, two senior members of

staff undertook diplomas in Trauma Informed and Attachment Aware Schools and rolled out INSET days across many of the schools. This range of development opportunities across all SW schools led to a better understanding of how adverse childhood experiences might be manifest in children's behaviour, and how teachers perceived, and reacted to, negative instances of behaviour.

The Executive Director explained that a contributory factor to some of the inadequacies that Ofsted had reported in these areas was the long-standing view held within SW schools that it was important for children to be provided the opportunity to work out social difficulties themselves, without adult intervention. This belief sometimes led to teachers not stepping in when they should. In addition to this, the Executive Director explained that some staff still held a historic view that children were 'working through karma' in their relationships with each other, which further discouraged teachers from intervening in disagreements, which, she emphasised, "*was clearly wrong*". She explained how:

These beliefs, combined with a lack of training in understanding children's behaviour and managing conflict, meant that bullying was not always properly addressed and vulnerable pupils were not always adequately protected. It was a high priority to introduce training to help shift these attitudes and provide effective strategies in supporting children.

Finally, it is worth adding that although poor classroom management was highlighted in the early inspections, the Education Co-ordinator proposed that some of the comments made about children's behaviour may have resulted from a lack of understanding regarding relationships in SW schools. She explained how when she had worked alongside an Ofsted team in an Independent School inspection this had resulted in some very open discussions on the topic. She recalled:

One of the things that they said was 'when we first walked into classrooms, we thought the behaviour was awful because there was a lot of talk and shouting out, and actually, when we listened, we realised that all the talk and all the shouting out was about the content of the lesson. It was all focused on the children's work'. And she said, 'once I got used to the volume, and the relationship between the teacher and the children, it's actually really, really respectful'.

Therefore, similar to teaching approaches, it was concluded that classroom management had not undergone seismic change, but an aspect that had changed was Ofsted's understanding of the behaviours that they were observing. Irrespective of the perspectives at play, weaknesses were acknowledged and rigorous training on classroom management was delivered to all schools as part of a suite of development activities.

Collaborative approaches

The Executive Director of Waldorf UK commented that it was difficult to convey just how significantly the culture of Steiner Waldorf schools had changed since 2019. She referred to several factors that had brought about that change, all of which related to greater connection and more effective communication within and across schools. Key to improvements was a more open culture of sharing and support that was emerging across SW schools, schools that had previously been quite closed, inward-looking spaces. Greater connectedness was one of the key things requested by schools in the wake of Ofsted's harsh criticism, and the evidence contained in the latter reports suggests that the impact of the improved collaboration across a wide team of talented and passionate teachers has been overwhelmingly positive.

Although emerging from a crisis, the changes implemented over recent years, whether through face-to-face meetings or online networks, have created openness and brought professionals together. Whilst schools have retained their own unique identities, the pooling of expertise has brought about deeper understanding and a shared lexicon, enabling all teachers to better articulate exactly what their schools are doing and why. But, perhaps more importantly, it has resulted in the improved overall performance of all SW schools, and improved opportunities for the children within them.

Initial teacher training

Although the need for Continued Professional Development is referred to throughout the earlier reports, Initial Teacher Training is not. It is, however, worth mentioning here, as it is extremely relevant to the ongoing developments within SW schools. The Education Co-ordinator shared how approaches to SW teacher preparedness had been far from rigorous in the past, saying:

You do not have to have any type of qualification to be able to teach in an Independent School in England... And so there has been no need to have university validated accredited teacher training. No legal need. And so for the last, probably, 20 years, the organisation of teacher education has been that it has been set up by individuals, not by organisations, who have developed their own teacher training courses...for primary school teacher training, no quality assurance, no accreditation, no external bodies, no internal or external moderation. Quite often, no written assignments or assessment of any form. No assessed placement in a school. No teaching practice, that has been entirely voluntary.

At the time of the damning Ofsted reports, SW teacher training courses also did not include a safeguarding aspect, and those delivering the training did not check a student's DBS; they left that responsibility to schools. The culmination of these laissez-faire approaches was that many new SW teachers were totally unprepared for what lay ahead, and many resigned within months of accepting their post.

One of the key priorities of Waldorf UK was to develop Steiner Waldorf Teacher Standards, as a benchmark for the content of the training to be delivered, and the expectations of practice in schools. These mirror the existing mainstream teacher standards, including the key elements of what all teachers must do and what would result in disbaring, but with specific adaptations for Waldorf teachers². Subsequently Waldorf UK also developed an accreditation process for those interested in delivering Waldorf teacher training. A partnership between the Waldorf Learning Foundation and Bath Spa University resulted in the development of a PG Diploma for those who already hold Qualified Teacher Status. This award is an additional 60 credits specifically based upon Waldorf education (but mirroring mainstream Initial Teacher Training requirements and core curriculum) which is added to an existing PGCE.

The Waldorf Teacher Standards were then used as the basis of another training pathway, an apprenticeship route, for graduates without a teaching qualification. This course was developed with Emerson College and is accredited by the University of Buckingham. This also results in a PG Diploma. Students on this route spend their first year as a teaching assistant in a Waldorf school, whilst completing an online training course with face-to-face residential weekends on Waldorf education. In their second year, they stay in their Waldorf school, but they do an apprenticeship PGCE. In this way, they complete a mainstream teaching qualification, but in a Waldorf school and through a Waldorf lens, having had the foundational experience of Waldorf pedagogy.

At the time of writing this report twelve students were on each of the training routes.

Conclusion and next steps

If we return to the advice provided by Pountney in 2019, it is clear to see that most SW schools have not only met but exceeded the recommendations that were made. The most recent reports provide clear evidence that significant strides have been made in curriculum planning and development; a rich and well-taught curriculum was noted across later reports, and inspectors were convinced by the quality of the education that they saw. However, some reports do still mention assessment as an area that needs further development.

The most marked improvements identified were in leadership and management, where new arrangements brought “structure, professionalism, and a clear vision to SW schools”. A cohesiveness in values is palpable

² It is worth noting that this approach to training emulated the SW Early Years training which had developed clear expectations for all teaching levels back in 2000, resulting in consistently high standards of teaching.

across the more recent reports, values which prioritise not just the wellbeing and future life chances of the pupils, but also the workload and wellbeing of the staff. In an education landscape marred by high levels of stress and dissatisfaction in the teacher workforce, that some Ofsted reports have noted “high staff morale” in SW schools is commendable, and indicative of effective practice worth sharing.

The distance that SW schools have travelled in so short a time is striking, but of course there is always space for further development. The Education Co-ordinator reflected on the balance between celebrating successes and the continued driving of SW schools to achieve their full promise, saying:

... it's really hard to remember to look backwards at how far we've come when on a day-to-day basis, you're still battling, there's still so much to do. There's so much to do. And there's only so much to do because of the potential of it. And it's just feels so frustrating because you can taste the potential. To change children's lives in all educational settings. You know, we're all on a crusade. We all feel like this has value and it needs to be more widely known.

Below, having considered the most recent reports, we have aggregated some key areas identified for continued development; areas that may help SW schools further enhance their effectiveness and achieve the recognised ‘outstanding’ accolade, whilst still prioritising the meaningful pedagogy underpinning their practice. It is important to acknowledge that there are areas listed below that are already well met in some SW schools. There are also suggestions made below that may be particularly challenging for SW schools and may even conflict with SW practice (the improved integration of technology, for example). As has proved the case in several of the successfully tackled areas mentioned above, for Waldorf UK the steps to follow may not be introducing change, but a more robust and accessible articulation of why things should remain the same.

Areas for further development identified within the 2021-2024 inspection reports:

1. Continued Professional Development:

Schools should continue to provide ongoing training for teachers to stay updated with the latest educational practices and technologies.

Schools should continue to encourage, and provide opportunities for the collaboration and sharing of best practices among staff.

2. Enhanced Curriculum Design:

Schools should continue to refine and innovate the curriculum to ensure it meets the diverse needs of all students.

Teachers should further develop their understanding and articulation of how the cross-curricular approach effectively covers the learning requirements of the national curriculum.

3. Parental and Community Engagement:

Schools should continue to strengthen partnerships with parents and the community to support student learning and well-being. Parent partnerships should be based upon clear, shared expectations and regular positive communication.

Schools might consider offering workshops and resources to help parents support their children's education at home.

4. Support for Diverse Learners:

Schools should continue to expand support for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to ensure they receive tailored instruction and resources.

Schools should also develop additional language support for students who speak English as an additional language (EAL).

5. Student Well-being and Mental Health:

Schools should continue to foster a safe and inclusive environment where all children feel valued and supported. In addition to this, schools should explore further, targeted support, for students' mental health and wellbeing.

6. Technology Integration:

In order to prepare all students for a future in which technology will, unavoidably, play a key role, schools are advised to review their policy on how technology is introduced and taught. Future policy development must be not only be appropriate and comprehensively justified but should also demonstrate coherence with the child's current socio-cultural context³.

7. Extracurricular Activities:

Schools are encouraged to expand extracurricular offerings to include a wider range of interests and talents, led by the interests of the children.

Teachers should encourage student participation in clubs, sports, and arts to foster a well-rounded education.

8. Feedback and Assessment:

Schools should consider how data-driven approaches might be further developed and incorporated into daily practice in useful ways that monitor students' ongoing progress and inform their instruction. Teachers should provide regular, constructive feedback to the students themselves, to help them improve and achieve their goals.

³ It should be noted that SW schools have traditionally been reticent about introducing technology too early within a child's education, with a focus upon nurturing imagination and creativity in the early years, instead (Early Excellence, no date). However, a new Waldorf digital curriculum has recently been published by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) which Waldorf UK are planning to pilot in the coming year.

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Appendix- Comparison of school inspection results from 2018-20, to 22-24

School (previous inspection)	Overall	Leadership and	Quality of TLA	Personal Development	Outcomes	Early years	Safeguarding
Alder Bridge 2019	4	4	4	3	4	3	Y
Beechtree 2018	3	3	2	2	2	2	Y
Brighton 2019	4	4	4	3	4	2	Y
Bristol 2019	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Cambridge 2019	3	3	3	2	3	2	Y
New School Canterbury 2020	4	4	2	2	4	4	N
Elmfield	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Greenwich 2018	3	2	3	2	3	1	Y
Hereford 2018	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Iona 2018	3	3	3	2	3	3	Y
Lancaster 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
London 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
Michael Hall 2018	4	4	4	2	4	2	N

School (latest inspection)	Overall	Leadership and	Quality of TLA	Behaviour and attitudes	Personal Development	Early Years	Safeguarding
Alder Bridge	School closed						
Beechtree	School closed						
Brighton	School closed						
Bristol 2023	3	3	3	2	2	3	Y
Cambridge 2022	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
New School Canterbury	School closed						
Elmfield 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Greenwich 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Hereford 2023	2	2	2	1	1	1	Y
Iona 2021	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Lancaster 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
London 2021	2	2	2	3	3	3	Y
Michael Hall 2022	3	3	3	2	2	2	Y

Moorland 2018	3	3	3	3	3	3	Y
North London 2019	4	4	2	4	2	4	N
Norwich 2019	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Ringwood 2019	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
St Michael's 2019	3	3	3	2	3	3	Y
St Paul's 2019	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
South Devon (Totnes) 2019	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
York 2019	4	4	4	3	4	3	Y
Michael House 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
Wystones 2019	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
Steiner Academy Exeter 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
Steiner Academy Frome 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N
Steiner Academy Bristol 2018	4	4	4	4	4	4	N

School (dark grey) = now closed, yellow = closed in the last year

Moorland	School closed						
North London 2021	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Norwich 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
Ringwood 2023	3	3	3	2	3	2	Y
St Michael's 2024	2	2	2	2	2	2	y
St Paul's 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
South Devon (Totnes) 2023	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y
York 2022	2	2	2	2	2	2	Y

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
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Number of schools inspected	12	12	1	2	3	10	1
% Outstanding							
% Good	8.3% (1)	33.3% (4)		100% (2)	66.6% (2)	80% (8)	100%
% Requires improvement	33.3% (4)	16.6% (3)			33.3% (1)	20% (2)	
% Inadequate	58.3% (7) All 7 schools had safeguarding failings.	50% (6) 2 of these schools had safeguarding failings.	100% (1) This school had safeguarding failings			No safeguarding failings recorded.	