

IMAGINEd

Learning that ignites big change



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Beyond the Desk

Introducing Cartography in Early Childhood

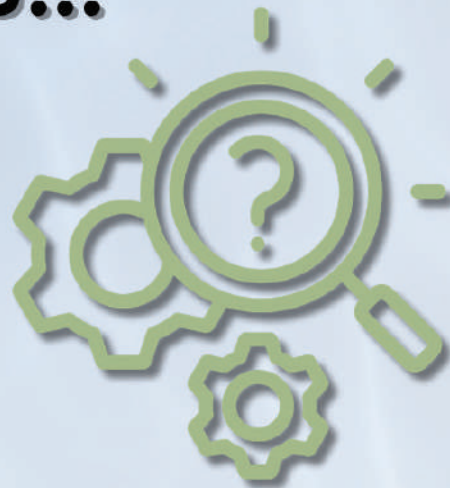
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experiences guided
by objectives...**



**to inspire inquiry and
exploration...**



**to generate curiosity
and passion...**



that leads to learning.



WOODLAND STAR
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL KENYA

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THOUGHTS FROM THE EDITORS



Amanda Mwangi speaking to an interested parent at our International School Fair booth at Village Market in March. Photo provided by FX Photography.

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the second edition of **ImaginEd: Learning that Ignites Big Change**. We are excited to share another collection of stories, reflections, artwork, poetry, and innovative practices centered around inclusive education and meaningful learning.

This edition brings together voices from our local community and beyond, including both new and long standing Woodland Star educators, students, and partners who are passionate about creating learning environments where all students can thrive. Inside, you will find highlights of inclusive practices, mastery based learning, student creativity, and the growing role of technology in supporting authentic learning experiences.

This year, we were also proud to represent Woodland Star at the Village Market International Schools Fair, where the school stood out as a unique offering among many conversations about modern education. Our approach continues to show that education can be innovative while remaining deeply human, inclusive, and community centered.

"You have really blown my mind. I was looking for something new and you have really shown it to me." - parent at VM Int'l School Fair

Thank you for being part of this journey with us. We hope this edition inspires new ideas, meaningful conversations, and continued growth for learners and educators alike.

Warmly,

Heath G. *[Signature]*



A WSS Classroom. Photo provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.

LETTER FROM THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

A YEAR OF LISTENING, LEARNING, AND LEADING:

Reflections from a New Headteacher

Stepping into the role of Head of School at Woodland Star has been both a privilege and a responsibility. Joining a community with such a strong sense of purpose, place, and possibility is something I have not taken lightly. Throughout my first year, my focus has been simple: to listen carefully, understand deeply, and begin leading in a way that strengthens what already makes Woodland Star distinctive. What has struck me most is the authenticity of

"The future of Woodland Star is not defined by one person or one plan." - Rory Parkinson

this community. Woodland Star is not trying to be everything to everyone. It is a school with a clear identity. It is rooted in belonging, curiosity, and meaningful learning and that clarity gives it real strength.



One of my earliest impressions was how strongly relationships shape daily life here. Students greet adults with confidence.

Teachers know their learners well. Families engage and are passionate about the school.

These are not small things.

They are the foundations of a school where young people feel known and valued, and where learning can genuinely flourish. Our shared values, Be, Belong, Become are visible not just in our language, but in our actions and expectations as a community.

As a new Headteacher, it has been encouraging to see how deeply these values already live within Woodland Star. Woodland Star is at an exciting stage in its journey. It is a school with a strong foundation and a clear vision, but also one that is still evolving. That creates opportunity.

Leading a growing school requires balance. It means protecting what already works while thoughtfully building what comes next. In any new leadership role, there is a temptation to arrive with answers. Instead, I have tried to begin with ques-



tions that have not always come naturally to me. I tend to move quickly and enjoy turning ideas into action, yet I have learned that even small changes can create uncertainty if introduced too fast. This year has reminded me that strong leadership is not only about momentum, but also about timing, listening, and bringing people along with you.

Through the journey I have been asking some critical questions.

- What do families most value about Woodland Star?
- Where do staff see opportunities for growth?
- What do students want that Woodland Star is not already providing?
- What kind of graduates do we want our students to become?

These conversations with students, teachers, parents, and the board have shaped the direction of our work together. They continue to guide how we strengthen systems, support staff, and ensure that growth remains thoughtful and sustainable. Strong schools are not built quickly. They are built carefully, one step at a time.

One of the most encouraging aspects of this year has been the sense of shared ownership across the community. The future of Woodland Star is not defined by one person or one

plan. It is shaped by collective effort. Families who speak warmly about the school to others. Teachers who invest deeply in their students. Students who take pride in their learning and environment. Together, these voices create momentum.

Looking ahead, our priorities remain clear: strengthening excellence in learning, continuing to grow our Senior Years program, supporting staff development, and ensuring that Woodland Star remains a place where young people feel both challenged and supported. These priorities have been carefully shaped in partnership with the board and are now reflected in a clear strategic plan that will guide the school's next stage of development.

It is still early in my journey as Head of Woodland Star International School, but what I already know is this: Woodland Star is a special place, and its greatest strength is its people. I am grateful to be part of this story and excited for what we will continue building together.



THE THREE F'S OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

by Heather Adkins

Heather is a seasoned educator who has taught all over the world and is now the Assistant Head of School at WSS. She is a life long learner who appreciates the constant challenge that the field of education presents.

Inclusive education is a buzzword that can be thrown around, debated, and applied in many different ways. What is inclusive education? In its simplest form, I see inclusive education as holding a space for all learners to explore their talents, gifts, and potential. However, the execution of this is difficult and far more complex than this simple definition would imply. The scaffolding for inclusive education includes a variety of essential components, but through my journey with Woodland Star International School and my doctoral studies in Special Education, I have learned that the theoretical and academic literature rarely speaks about some of the key principles that I have found to

WSS professionals learning throughout the year.
Photo provided by Heather Adkins



be essential in creating such a space of inclusion: *failure, flexibility, and flourishing.*

When I started in education, I had a mentor say that I needed to be “willing to know less than your students.” At the time, I didn’t fully understand what this mentor was referencing. It wasn’t until a few years down the line that I understood. As a teacher, I increasingly realised how much I did not know about teaching and, more importantly, about learning. The students had a much stronger natural understanding of learning that somewhere I had lost along the way to adulthood. It was an odd realisation when it dawned on me that I had settled into a single approach to learning and that my teaching was hampered by a perceived need to present knowledge and facts while throwing in a few activities to keep the children from dying of boredom.

What I discovered was that I needed to allow children to learn through exploration and, more importantly, through failure. Children, particularly younger ones, are ready to fail, ready to retry, and ready to learn. It is a beauty of childhood that often gets lost the older we get. Learning should remain rooted in the bravery of failure and the courage to attempt again. That is the intersection where learning takes place. A failure at something should not be the end of learning but merely the beginning. As we grow, even into our teen years, a part of that development is our self-consciousness, often a desire to not “look stupid” or “be in the spotlight.” We take fewer risks. What I don’t think we realise, until we are forced to face it, is that failure is the first step to learning.





As teachers, particularly in schools where inclusive education is our mandate, we must be willing to uphold failure as a virtue of learning. Teaching children to fail well means that we are

“principles essential in creating such a space of inclusion: failure, flexibility, and flourishing.”

- Heather Adkins

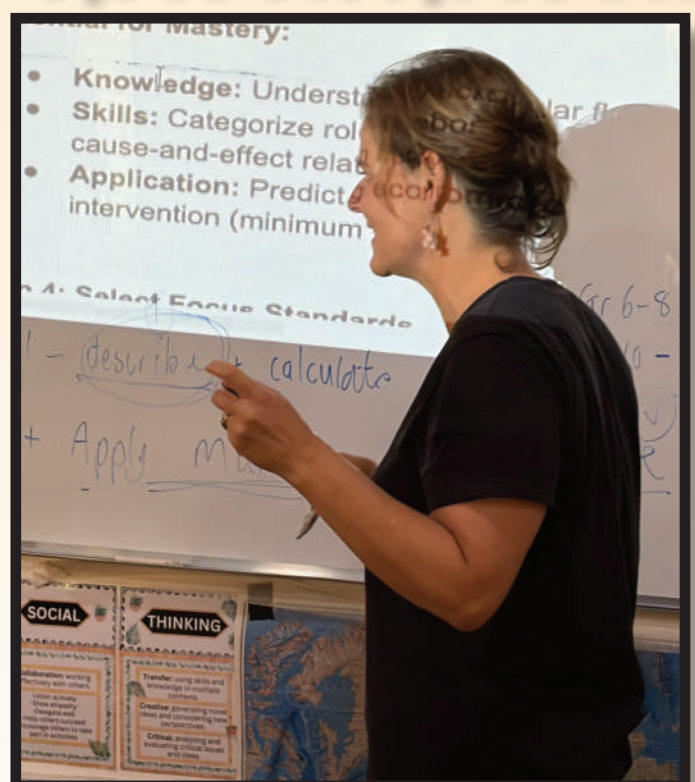
teaching them to use their failure as a catalyst for learning; turn their experience of failure into a passion or curiosity, which sparks inquiry and exploration and ultimately leads to learning. At WSS, we are working towards this with our students, but we are also reminded of this daily in our practice as a school; when we fail as teachers, we must turn this into an experience that leads to learning. Implementing inclusive education is a tough journey, but one principle you must embrace is failure.

The second principle that all inclusive schools must embrace is that of flexibility. One of the most challenging aspects of inclusive education is being able to pivot to meet emerging needs. In theory, teachers know and train for this flexibility but the reality of that flexibility in the classroom is far more disruptive to our “planning” than we want to allow. To bend without breaking is a physical image of what flexibility offers. In the classroom, this means being flexible in our style of teaching, the route we take to a lesson, and the resources we use for each child’s needs without losing the quality of what we are teaching. To be inclusive means having the flexibility to adapt to the

needs of each individual student, maintaining their zone of proximal development to support growth while acknowledging that we all have different needs.

The third principle that we must embrace as inclusive educators is the mindset of flourishing. To have a mindset of flourishing means that you are focused on growth and the successful expansion of a child as a holistic being. This means that achievement is not the goal, finishing is not the goal, the destination of any education is not the goal. The goal lies in the journey of growth and in helping a child develop into their fullest potential. This requires education to give them more than facts and figures. To embrace flourishing as a principle of inclusive practice is to shift both your mindset and that of your students towards growth rather than achievement, creating the conditions for genuine flourishing.

Inclusive education is an art, as is all education. Educators must be prepared to approach children as the holistic beings they are and meet their needs in the classroom while fostering a sense of being, belonging, and becoming.





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INTRODUCING CARTOGRAPHY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD:

Building Young Explorers Through Real Experiences

by Catherine Njore

Catherine Njore holds a higher diploma in Cartography. She is both a cartographer, woman in conservation and an author of map books. Catherine is currently the National Coordinator for Kenya in the Barbara Petchenik Children's World Map Drawing Competition organised by the International Cartographic Association (ICA) and an Extended Council Member of International Society of Digital Earth (ISDE). She has served at Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Lands and Physical Planning, and is a lecturer at both the Kenya Institute of Surveying and Mapping and Dedan Kimathi University of Technology. She currently serves as a director and lead cartographer at GeoMind Solutions Ltd.

Something is fascinating about watching a child try to make sense of their world. At a recent school workshop, I asked a group of Grade 8 learners to draw a simple map of their journey from home to school. What started as a quiet activity quickly turned into an animated discussion. Students debated landmarks, argued about directions, and laughed as they tried to remember every turn. Some drew roads as straight lines, others curved them around imagined hills, and a few even added trees, shops, and people along the way. At that moment, without formal instruction, they were already practicing cartography.

This experience reinforced a simple but powerful idea: cartography is not something children need to "grow into" it is something they naturally do. From drawing their homes to describing routes, children already think spatially. Introducing cartography in early childhood simply gives structure, l a n -

guage, and confidence to these instincts. At its foundation, cartography helps children understand relationships in space, how places connect, how distance works, and how movement happens. In our sessions, we began with familiar environments. Learners mapped their classroom, identifying doors, desks, windows, and shared spaces. What stood out was how differently each child perceived the same room. One student focused on pathways between desks, another emphasized where friends sat, while another carefully positioned the teacher's desk as the "center" of the space. These variations highlighted not only spatial awareness but also how personal experience shapes how we "see" the world.

As the workshop progressed, we introduced simple mapping elements, symbols, colors, and basic orientation. Rather than presenting these as rigid rules, we encouraged experimentation. A tree symbol could mean a playground, a green patch could represent a field, and arrows could help show direction. This approach allowed learners to build meaning in a way that felt intuitive rather than technical. It also created space for creativity, where maps became more than just representations; they became stories. One particularly engaging activity involved creating "treasure maps." Students were tasked with hiding an imaginary object within the

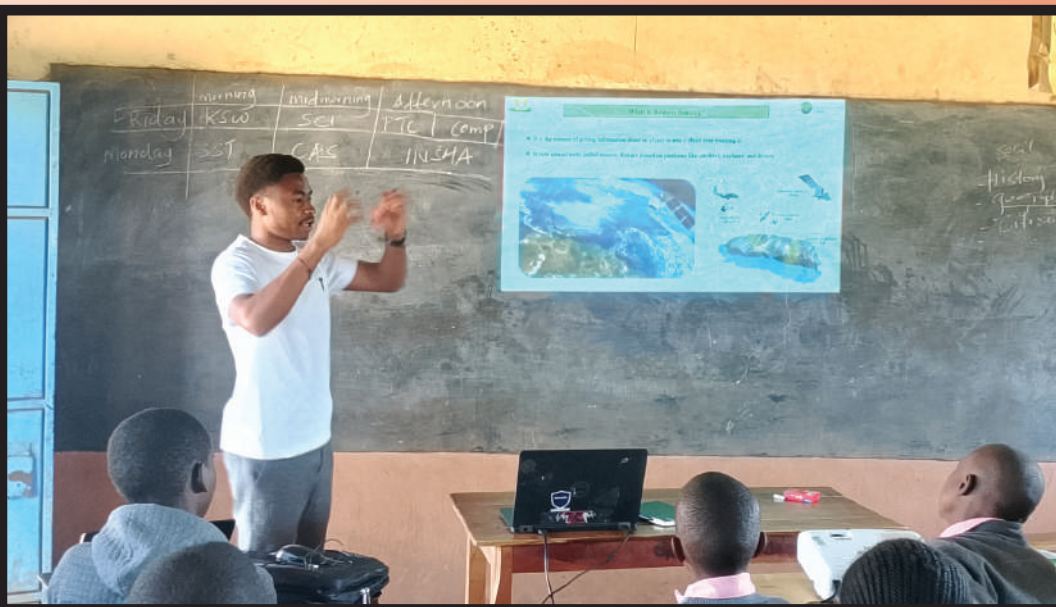




school compound and designing a map that would guide a classmate to find it. The excitement was immediate. Maps became more detailed, with landmarks carefully chosen and directions thoughtfully added. When students exchanged maps and attempted to follow each other's instructions, they quickly realized the importance of clarity, accuracy, and detail. It was a powerful lesson: a map is only as useful as how well it communicates.

Beyond creativity, these activities quietly build essential cognitive skills. Spatial thinking, understanding position, distance, and relationships, is strengthened through mapping exercises. These are the same skills that support success in

Students enjoy the lens of cartography as they engage in a variety of activities using maps as the main tool. Photos provided by Naomi Nyoro and GeoMind Solutions.



Maps help people make daily and big decisions...

- Google Maps: going to a friend
- Weather maps: predicting rain
- Game maps: Minecraft and FIFA fields
- Emergency maps: finding safe routes

mathematics, science, engineering, and even everyday problem-solving. When a child learns to interpret space visually, they are also learning how to organize information, identify patterns, and think critically. Another meaningful outcome we observed during the workshop was a growing sense of place and belonging. When learners mapped their school and surrounding environment, they began to notice details they had previously overlooked: paths they walk daily, spaces they gather in, and features that define their environment. This awareness fosters a deeper connection to their surroundings and encourages responsibility toward the spaces they inhabit.

Cartography also opens a window to the wider world. During the session, we extended the conversation beyond the school by introducing simple maps of countries and continents. Students were excited to locate places they had heard about, connect them to real-world contexts, and ask questions about different environments and cultures. Through maps, learning became an exploration—one that sparked curiosity far beyond the classroom. What became clear through these workshops is that teaching cartography in the early stages does not require

complex tools or technical depth.

It requires creating opportunities for exploration, encouraging observation, and allowing children to express how they understand space. Whether through drawing, storytelling, or interactive activities, the goal is to nurture a way of thinking rather than enforce a method.



As educators, we are not just teaching children how to read maps. We are helping them develop the ability to interpret the world around them. In doing so, we equip them with skills that extend far beyond geography. We empower them to navigate, question, explore, and imagine. In a world increasingly driven by spatial data and digital mapping technologies, these early experiences matter. The children who sketch simple maps today may one day design cities, analyze environmental changes, or build intelligent mapping systems. But even beyond that, they will carry with them a deeper understanding of space, place, and connection.

During our visit to Woodland Star International School (WSS), learners were excited and continuously engaged with the cartographic books. They were fascinated to realize that the maps in the different books connected and were actively involved in the session. Time ran



MAPPY MARIA! Plants Trees

With a pullout Map!



Author: Catherine Njore

Mappy Maria Plants Trees

The pages of this book are colourful and the map activities simple for the young learners. The pull out map herein is pictorial, easy, and friendly to explore. Mappy Maria learns about maps is the first book in this series of four Map books. With the first we introduced maps and the basics. Mappy Maria plants trees is now on a thematic map as the children learn about the environment.

The map element of key is explained in a friendly and simple way. Combining map use to real world activities is the aim of this book and all our map books.

I hope your child has as much fun as my team had!

out, yet they still wanted to proceed with the works in the entire series. I could tell for sure that they are looking forward to more activities that GeoMind Solutions has to offer. The Digital map session and drone demonstration were also filled with curious minds ready to learn.

GeoEducation and Community Outreach program, and we look forward to once again interacting with Woodland Star International School (WSS) in the future.



At GeoMind Solutions, we curate age-appropriate activities for our



THE STORY OF LITTLE HANDS SCHOOL

By Celia Mascher

Celia Mascher is the Director of Little Hands School in Naivasha. With over 20 years of experience in education, she specialises in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities.

My husband's parents founded Helping Hands Organisation of Kenya, Naivasha in the late 1990s. They had spent many years involved in church and community work with the Maasai people in Narok. After some time away, they returned to Kenya and reconnected with local leaders and pastors. During one visit, they were shocked to discover that a young man with disabilities had been living right next to the church throughout their time there, yet they had never known about him. Even many of the community members were unaware of his presence. This experience inspired the vision to build an inclusive learning centre where people with disabilities could learn and train alongside their peers.



The initial focus was on adult education. Over time, the idea grew to start a school where children with disabilities could learn together with others.

In 2006, we launched Little Hands School, a pre-school and primary school serving children from the local community. Initially, finding children with disabilities was challenging as many families kept them out of sight. Through our community connections, we gradually began to reach them. Today, the school has grown to such an extent that it has become our main project.

Little Hands is a mainstream school that follows Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework and places inclusive education at the core of its ethos. Around a quarter of the pupils have complex needs such as autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, Down syndrome and learning difficulties.

The shift from the 8-4-4 system to CBE has generally been a positive step for our learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The previous system with its heavy emphasis on grades and exams, made few provisions for these pupils. By contrast, the CBE framework is designed to be more flexible, learner focused and inclusive. It offers two pathways: the age-based pathway, where children progress according to chronological age, and the stage-based pathway, designed for learners who need individualised approaches due to cognitive, physical or developmental challenges.

A strength of the stage-based pathway is that it allows children to work towards a government-issued certificate, opening doors to vocational learning. However, no single curriculum can meet the needs of all learners. Some activities are too easy for certain pupils, while others are too difficult. To ensure each child progresses at an appropriate level we continue to set individualised targets through Individual Education Plans (IEPs).



We believe school should be a place where children learn to interact with others who may be different from themselves and learn to accept diversity. It is within the school environment that changes in attitude can take place, with positive implications for society both in Kenya and internationally.

We have witnessed the transformative impact of inclusion in our school community. Children learn from one another and accept each other regardless of ability. Recently, I watched a young girl guiding the hand of her friend, a wheelchair user with muscular dystrophy, so that he could write in his book. Such moments happen often. Teachers also have grown in confidence and understanding. Some admitted they were initially fearful, having never interacted with children with disabilities. Today they comment that when they meet a child with SEND in the community, they make a point of greeting them warmly.



For parents, the journey is not easy. Many face prejudice and stigma, with some communities viewing disability as a curse or punishment. Mothers have shared painful experiences of fathers abandoning the family, claiming disability “did not run in their family.” Parents often tell us of their relief in knowing there is a safe, supportive place where their child can learn alongside others.



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Students at the Little Hands School enjoy each others company and deonstrate inclusiveness by engaging their peers in every aspect of school life. Photos provided by Ceila Mascher.

Yet opportunities for children with SEND to attend school remain limited, particularly for those with complex needs. True inclusion requires trained staff, support workers and solid infrastructure, resources that community schools often struggle to provide. One of our greatest challenges is the high demand for places at the school. We cannot accommodate everyone who applies and it is heart breaking to decide who can be admitted and who must remain on the waiting list.

In many ways, these challenges inspire us to keep pursuing inclusive education as a foundational value of the school. As long as there is need and



as long as we see lives transformed within our community, we will do our best to accommodate as many children with SEND as possible.



WHY I LOVE GOING TO WOODLAND STAR

**By Ares Pascoe,
Nandi Flame Village (3rd Grade)**

Internationals from afar,
where young stars know who they are.

The classrooms are nice,
they add a little spice.

The playground is great,
a place to make new mates.

The competitions rock,
you also won't get mocked.

There are friendly faces of different races

It's inclusive too,
so sounds like the place for you.

Friendly teachers,
not just two,
which means more
help for special
you.

It's a small school
hidden in nature,
no need for a navi-
gator.

It has an outdoor globe theatre,
and fireplaces for classroom heat-
ers.

Caring for trees in the cool, Tigo-
ni breeze
So tall they make you feel wiser,
just like Ms Faeza.

Celebrations like Earth Day rule,
they really are so cool.

**So what are you waiting for?
Give a knock on our door!**



Photos provided by Jennifer Halton.



BEYOND THE SURFACE:

My First Year

By Juma Koofhethile
(Sulwe Village, 9th grade)

Joining this school community has been a total game-changer for me. For the first time, I feel like I'm in a place where being creative isn't just a hobby, it's actually how I learn and how I can express my understanding. Having teachers who support the way my brain works has helped me lean into my strengths, not just in the art studio, but in all my subjects. It feels amazing to be in an environment where my teachers and my family are genuinely proud of the progress I'm making. I've met a great group of friends here, and for the first time, school feels like a place where I can truly be myself.

This piece of art is about that feeling of breakthrough. It represents the idea that there is an entire universe of thoughts and ideas under the surface, just waiting for the right moment to come out. Sometimes you have to "crack" the



Photos provided by Amanda Mwangi.

old mold to show the stars underneath. I'm so grateful to be at a school that encourages me to express that energy and helps me turn my ideas into something real. This year has been an incredible journey, and I feel like I'm just getting started.



REFLECTIONS IN THE GLASS

By Hugo Hartman-Hay
(Engalong Village, 11th grade)

Atop the bedside table, a small alarm clock glowed red light into the room. The time read: 6:50 am. The light didn't reach far. It hovered faintly in the air. It was Tuesday, Kimani's favorite day of the week. In just an hour, he would be leading his weekly team meeting. To make it on time, he knew he had better start heading out.

He strode into the front room where his wife, Betty, was already seated with her morning tea. "Good morning dearest," he said to her, as he did every morning. She responded with her usual warmth, asking if he was off to work already. He stopped in his stride and turned to her with a smile, explaining that he was holding an early staff briefing. Betty stood up, gave him a quick hug, and sent him on his way. For a moment, as she stepped back, he felt as though he had forgotten something, not an object, something more transient. Before the feeling slipped away again.

Kimani headed out to the driveway, where he found his small Peugeot parked. The engine sputtered and spat as he turned the key. The familiar fussing eventually subsided into a steady rumble. As he pulled out of his compound, the sun was just beginning to emerge from the darkness. The fog diffused the light, casting a pale blue light over the slick, wet Kiambu roads. It was the rainy season, and so every morning was cold, foggy, and wet. The old cars' thin aluminum walls did little to keep out the chill. The sound of the engine filled the car completely, leaving little room for anything else.

Even back when he had first purchased the vehicle, it was already an older model. Kimani was a man of habit and frugal-



Photos provided by Amanda Mwangi.

ity; as long as the car turned on and got him to the bank, he was satisfied. Though the Peugeot seemed to be testing that patience lately.

The ABSA branch where he worked was small, but Kimani was proud of it. But today, he felt something else. It came and went quickly, that feeling. Not quite sure. Not quite anything he could name. He had worked his way up for years to reach Branch Manager. And yet, lately, he sometimes wondered how many doors he had actually opened for anyone else. Looking at his reflection in the rearview mirror, the glass slightly blurred with condensation, he thought about how nearly thirty years had passed since he was a young man in a very different position. Back then, he was one of many young men in Kiambu County facing a future muddled by the rising unemployment rates. Lately, that thought has been there more often. Not quite forming. Just there.

The turning point in his life had been a project led by a group of students. He remembered voices before he remembered faces. They had come in small groups. Some weren't from the area. That much had been clear. They brought clipboards, notebooks, and questions that felt quick. Questions, mostly. The same ones, again and again, until they didn't sound like questions anymore. What do you do during the day?" one of them had asked him once. He hadn't answered straight away. "Nothing," he had said

eventually. The word kind of lingered in the air.

They had launched an awareness campaign focusing on the struggles of unemployed youth in Kenya. The campaign had highlighted the issues, encouraged the local community and business leaders to recognize what was transpiring in their own backyards, and the potential that was sitting on street corners. They hadn't stayed long. Long enough to ask their questions. Not long enough to see what came after. After that, things began to move. Not quickly. But they moved. He couldn't remember when things began to shift. Only that, at some point, they had. It opened doors for Kimani to gain his first real business skills, which eventually paved the way for university and his long career in banking.



Photos provided by Amanda Mwangi.

As he arrived at the bank, he greeted the security guard and the front desk staff. The building was still sleepy, the frantic rush of the day yet to begin. He walked into his office, set down his briefcase, and checked his watch. It was almost time.

The meeting that followed passed in a blur of voices that seemed to settle into the same rhythm. They discussed figures, targets, and spreadsheets. One voice bled into the next. It was hard to tell where one person stopped and another began. But as Kimani sat at the head of the table, he looked at the younger staff members around him. They nodded at the right moments, took notes when expected. Kimani found

himself wondering whether they were learning anything at all, or simply learning how to appear as though they were. The students thirty years ago, they had been insistent. Uncomfortable, even. They had asked questions no one else was asking, but that everyone wanted the answer to.

As the meeting adjourned and the room emptied, Kimani caught his reflection once more in the glass partition of his office. He took a moment to adjust his lapel, his mind drifting back to the day those students first approached him with their project idea. By the door, a man stood. He was one of the younger clerks. He was lingering, as though waiting to be dismissed. Kimani watched him, maybe for a moment too long. The man noticed Kimani's glare and began to turn to leave.

"Daniel," he said, before the young man could leave. "Walk with me for a moment."

He now saw the young man's reflection. Lingered near him in the glass partition. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then he turned away from it. There was still time before the day truly began. Then the two of them stepped out of the office, already thinking of what he would ask, and how carefully he would need to listen this time. Slowly, the sound of their footsteps faded into the rest of the building.

This story was crafted in our 11th grade Service Learning class as a strategic foresight exercise designed to illustrate how student-led advocacy functions as a "seed" for generational community transformation. While the immediate goal of the service learning project is to raise awareness about youth unemployment, the writing process had students look beyond current statistics and visualize the long-term systemic shifts their work could trigger. By projecting thirty years into the future, the narrative demonstrates how a single awareness campaign can evolve from a classroom requirement into a cultural turning point that reshapes local employment infrastructure and mentorship networks. This exercise serves to remind the community that today's student initiatives are not just academic tasks, but the foundational movements that will eventually define the professional landscape and economic resilience of the next generation.



PROUD TO BE ME!

By Lana Sikaonga
(Mutunguru Village, 8th grade)

Brene Brown once said, " ...True belonging requires presenting your authentic, flawed self to the world. Whereas fitting in requires changing who you are to be accepted. Psychological research shows that people with a high need for uniqueness are less likely to conform to majority opinions and more likely to resist social pressure. So why is it that everyone is trying to be the same if being unique is actually a positive thing? A large-scale survey of over 1 million people from 2000 to 2020 showed a decline in the general desire to stand out, suggesting cultural shifts toward conformity or caution in the face of social scrutiny. But what even is normal?! I would like all of you to reflect for a minute and think about if you have ever tried to fit in by changing who you are?

Everyone always hopes they can be perfect. I know I did. I have always been someone who stands out. Most of my life, I have been the tallest in my class. When I was younger, it was cool; I felt a sense of pride whenever someone pointed out that I was the tallest. But the older I got, the more it affected me. I was a very shy kid, and I hated it when the spotlight was on me. But I was never able to avoid it. When people met me, the first thing they saw was my height. I would always be the one everyone hid behind during dodgeball. There were many times that I wished that I were smaller, and I knew they never meant to hurt my feelings, but whenever someone talked about my size, it was proof that I could never hide from the spotlight. I know now that it is not that important and there is much more to me than my height. This experience has taught me that fitting in is boring. And that weaknesses are sometimes just strengths in disguise.



Lana giving her speech during the Mutunguru Circle Talks. Photos provided by Amanda Mwangi.

There is a quote from Alice in Wonderland that says: "A world of the same old thing would be no fun at all." I believe that from now on, we should all be our unique selves and not try to be someone else because being our true selves is the only way we can ever be truly accepted.

These two pieces began as speeches presented during our Mutunguru Circle Talk: Stories That Grow Us. Through personal reflection and authentic storytelling, these students shared meaningful messages that challenged, inspired, and connected us. We are delighted to feature their words in this edition of the magazine.



SMALL THINGS MATTER

By **Neriah Ebenezer**
(Mutunguru Village, 8th grade)

The first days of school are tough. Take it from me I have changed schools 7 times, and it's hard trying to fit being the new kid but one thing moving around has taught me is the importance of helping others belong.

And small things are all it takes.

One of my first encounters of helping a person belong was a while back. There was a girl in school who didn't really have any friends. We were paired up for project time and made a poster. At first I was skeptical about what to do but then something flipped in me. She was trying to belong, to fit in just like I was. What did I do? I talked to her helped her draw a shoe after that I got an award for being inclusive so I continued including her and helping her. I didn't think it would matter until I had a conversation with her sister, at the bus stop and what she told me changed my perspective on belonging. She told me that I was her sister's best friend.

In my head, I never imagined how such **small things** could change a person's life.

Take a sticky note.

On it, write down what belonging means to you.

It can be one word, a phrase, or a feeling.

Once you're done, fold it up. This is just for you.

Now, I want you to think about this question
Do you belong or do you fit in?

Fitting in is when we change ourselves to be accepted.

Belonging is when we're accepted for who we already are.

How many of you have changed yourselves just to join a friend group?

I know I have, especially when I was younger.

But that changed when I met a girl named Marie in 5th grade.

She let me be my goofy self. A small thing.



BEYOND THE DESK

I didn't need to like makeup or fashion.
I got to like playing in the mud, having mud wars, and just be me.

That was the first time I felt like I truly belonged because I was accepted for who I was.

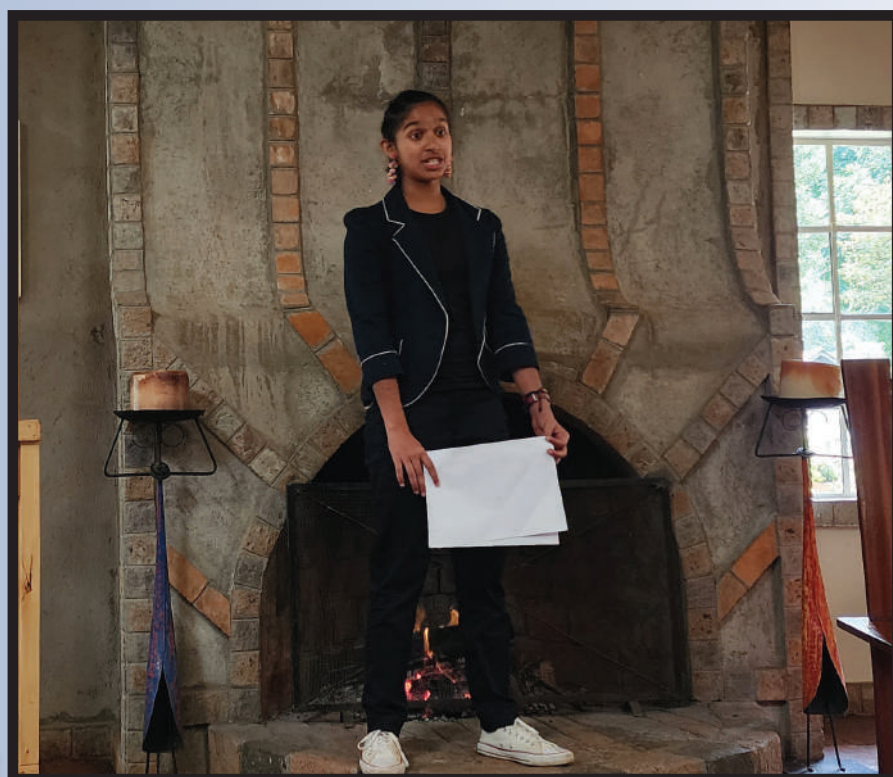
And because of that, I started making friends who were like me. Being around them pushed me to be better academically. I started challenging myself in reading and it worked.

Years of my mom begging me to read turned into her telling me to "put the book down Neriah do the dishes." What happened to me isn't just a story, it's backed by science.

A study by the American Psychological Association shows that children who feel socially included are more likely to have better mental health, higher self-esteem, and improved academic performance.

Studies have also shown that Between 2003 and 2015, the propor-

Neriah giving her speech during the Mutunguru Circle Talks. Photos provided by Amanda Mwangi.



tion of students who felt like an "outsider" at school rose by 10 percentage points (from 7% to 17%) across OECD countries. That is a big change and that is only till 2015. Current studies are now showing an even smaller amount of people feeling like they belong.

So what can we do?

Go back to the sticky note I gave you. On the back of the sticky note I want you to write one person's name, someone who you feel is trying to fit.

I want to share a quote by Brené Brown "Belonging is being accepted for who you are, not being tolerated for what you do." So don't try and tolerate the new friend accept them.

Make it your goal this week to help that person feel like they belong.

Sit with them.

Talk to them.

Invite them in.

Because you never know your small action might lead you to be someone's best friend without even realizing it. And it all starts with a small realization that we don't have to tolerate people we have to accept them even if they put pineapple on pizza!



THE Q.U.E.S.T. ACRONYM

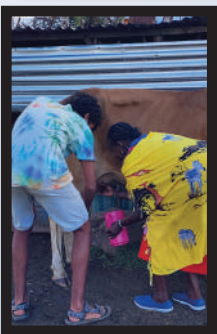
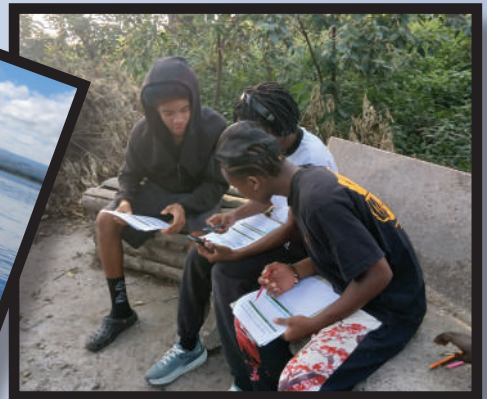
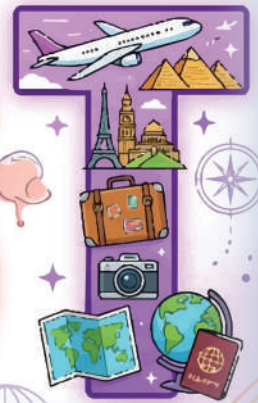
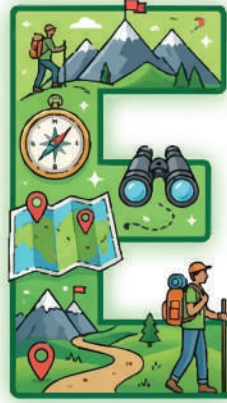
QUESTION
Ask, Inquire,
Seek Answers

UNDERSTAND
Comprehend,
Connect,
Learn

EXPLORE
Discover,
Adventure,
Investigate

SERVE
Contribute,
Give Back,
Help Others

TRAVEL
Experience,
Journey,
Go Places



Q.U.E.S.T. trips are a wonderful opportunity for students to take their learning from the classroom into the real world. Our trips this year were focused on environmental conservation and community engagement. Our students were hands-on in every activity and grow closer as classmates in each experience.

MORE THAN A SCHOOL PLAY: Learning at Woodland Star

By Gert Herrijgers

At Woodland Star, we believe that learning is more than memorising facts and completing worksheets. It is about engaging with ideas, asking questions, making connections, and creating something new and meaningful. We challenge our learners to read deeply, think critically, collaborate creatively, and produce original work.

Our Secondary Years production, *Not History, But Herstory*, is a perfect example of this approach.

The students began by reading the works of Ancient Greek and Roman poets and playwrights, such as Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Ovid, whose myths and dramas have shaped Western literature for thousands of years. Rather than accepting the stories at face value, they analysed the authors' choices, questioned the perspectives presented, and considered whose voices were included and whose were missing.

They then became writers themselves.

Revisiting these classics with fresh eyes and modern questions, they asked: Did Helen really cause the Trojan War, or was she simply blamed for it? Was Medusa truly a monster, or was she the victim of someone else's narrative? Isn't the story of Galatea surprisingly



similar to today's conversations about AI and idealised relationships? Would Penelope

really have welcomed Odysseus home after twenty years? Why was Cassandra doomed to speak the truth without ever being believed? And when Clytemnestra kills her husband, is she

a villain or a mother seeking justice?

Working together, students turned familiar

stories upside down, rewriting them from the perspectives of women who have traditionally stood in the background. They researched, debated, wrote, revised, acted, designed, rehearsed, and solved creative problems together. Along the way, they developed literacy, research skills, public speaking, collaboration, empathy, and confidence. The result is an interdisciplinary project that transformed classical literature into an authentic learning experience.

This is project-based learning at Woodland Star in action. Our learners do not simply consume knowledge. They investigate it, challenge it,

and use it to create something new. The final product is important, but the true learning happens throughout the journey.



Photos provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.



THINKING OF BUYING OR SELLING?

If you're considering selling or buying in Tigoni, it would be my pleasure to offer you a complimentary market assessment of your property. Backed by in-depth local knowledge, area market insights, and an understanding of what makes each home unique, I'm committed to providing informed guidance tailored to the Tigoni market.

Why Partner With Me?

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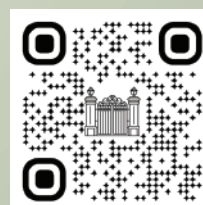
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Dedicated support whether buying, selling, or starting your next chapter



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THE CHALLENGES IN MODERN EDUCATION

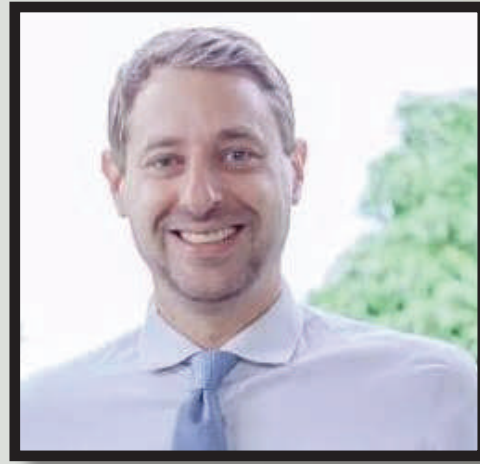
By Eric Sampson

Eric has over a decade of experience in education, teaching English Language Arts, Geography, and History while serving in leadership roles, including Vice Principal, in international schools. He is passionate about helping students develop strong communication, critical thinking, and real-world writing skills. Eric also leads extracurricular activities in racquet sports, chess, and outdoor education. Having lived and worked in multiple countries, he brings a global perspective to his work. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and History and a Master's in Educational Leadership. Outside of school, he enjoys traveling, exploring new cultures, and staying active.

I was flattered to be asked to contribute my thoughts on the challenges in modern education to the *ImaginEd* magazine for Woodland Star. I think the challenges in modern education stem from the fundamental questions: What is education for? Who does it serve? What is its purpose?

In education today, the standard answer on the purpose of education is that it is to help students think critically. But, like so many great ideas, when it is repeated often enough, it sometimes loses its meaning. The problem isn't that critical thinking is a bad answer. It is that it might mean something different today than it did twenty years ago.

To me, the most challenging thing about education is preparing students to think critically in a world where information flows so quickly, from so many different directions. With AI and social media, there is so much out there that isn't true, and the temptation to rely on these outside sources is always present. In the coming years, the ability to decipher what information to use and what information to discard will become tremendously important. It will matter more



to be able to determine what is true, navigate the sheer quantity of information, and find ways to contribute meaningfully in

an ever-changing environment.

Back to critical thinking: what does that mean? In a nutshell, maybe it means dissecting information, considering various sources, and landing on a conclusion using some combination of reasoning and experience. The danger in the second quarter of the 21st century is relying too heavily on external, mechanized systems, and not enough on one's own judgment and experience.

In some ways, the challenge educators face has always been the same: how do we help students go from passive learners to active participants? When students engage in meaningful

Photos provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.





quired knowledge because they allow the student to practice critical thinking actively.

That is one of the things that excited me about joining Woodland Star. Woodland Star's emphasis on student-led, inquiry-based learning really serves modern students. With the focus on going deeper into topics rather than skimming for surface-level understanding, students can develop real life skills that prepare them flexibly to meet the challenges of the coming decades. Mastery-based learning allows students to reach competency before moving on to new topics, rather than following a standard class pace. This kind of flexible learning mirrors the way the real world actually works: not on a fixed schedule, not at a uniform pace, but in response to readiness, curiosity, and the unique path each learner takes.

activities, they learn more than just the lesson content. They gain experience in key life skills such as risk-taking, debate, conflict resolution, resilience, and openness to new experiences. These skills are often far more valuable than ac-



MY JOURNEY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

By Kym Arensen

Special Educator in Kenya for over 30 years attributes her joy in teaching to discovering the beauty of this world through the eyes of her learners.

Recently, my daughter-in-law asked me what hobbies I enjoyed as we walked behind my husband and stopped along the trail on a birding adventure. That question stopped me up short! "Well, I used to sew quilts and do a variety of crafting," I replied. As I reflected on the question I tried to think of what I enjoyed the most. If I could do anything, what would I do? I realized that one of my favorite things to do is sit down and do brain training with young children who struggle in school. Passionate about seeing the "lightbulb" go on in my clients' minds brought me such joy! Can my vocation also be a hobby? My journey as a teacher has grown and developed over time. Having kids shortly after I married shaped my understanding of children. It was during that period I fell in love with children - not just my own but others as well. From a very early age, little ones taught me how to "wonder" about the beautiful creation that is a

part of our world. Stooping along the path to watch a line of ants, trying to pick up a squiggling lizard, feeling mud squish between our toes. Joy - pure joy - in discovering life - life that brings delight and life that can also result in pain. But it is in the discovery process that real learning happens. Becoming a certified teacher in my late 30s when my kids entered school was reflective of my love of discovery. My classroom was living! We created biomes from our research. A huge paper mache rainforest spread throughout one corner of the classroom - complete with an ever-growing array of plants and creatures on each "story" of the rainforest. In another corner, an igloo made from huge sponges became our reading corner. And on and on we studied, discovered and created. Every day my learners had something new to teach me about the process of becoming a life-long learner. Interruptions became some of the best learning experiences. Sitting at lunch one day on the outdoor patio, one of the boys spotted an animal we hadn't seen before - we ran to the library to get out our African mammals book and delved deep within. Our bus driver was up for an adventure, so we quickly jumped into the van and followed the animal that had hidden himself in the long straw grass. We found that a caracal had visited us! What a perfect time to sit and appreciate this beautiful specimen and spend the afternoon writing mystery adventure stories about caracals.

Photo provided by Kym Arensen.



These learners also taught me that all kids learn differently. And some really struggled. As I sat beside each student, learning, watching how each one approached learning differently, I discovered that what worked for one student didn't work for another. Thankfully, I had a small classroom size so there was plenty of time to work with my learners individually. But it was my own daughter that taught me the most about learning differently.

After moving to another school, she struggled to learn in a more traditional



Photo provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.

classroom. As a mother, I found myself spending time after school researching what to do to help her. Books filled my desk about learning styles, mind maps and visual learning, since she was in the 98th percentile in visual spatial learning and quite weak in auditory processing. It was through my daughter that I discovered how to use her strengths to remediate her weak

"My classroom was living! "

- Kym Arensen

areas. It worked! And I still teach my learners that way. It was my desire to help struggling learners that caused me to become a certified special educator. My training helped to some degree. But I felt that often my students would get so discouraged with the techniques I was taught.

Discovery learning led me down many paths, helping me to reflect on how I needed a more holistic approach to teaching children with learning challenges. I became a naturopathic doctor because I noticed how much diet affects the gut where many of our neurotransmit-

ters are born. I discovered the brain is moldable and not fixed (like previously thought). So, I trained in brain gym and rhythmic movements that integrated primitive reflexes, which are the foundation of our neurological system. I discovered how specially modulated classical music and light frequencies strengthen the brain's neural pathways. Over the years, while doing psycho-educational evaluations, I found that every one of my struggling clients had a poor working memory, slow processing speed and weak attention. During Covid, when stuck at home, I finally had time to train in the Equipping Mind cognitive therapy program, using games to strengthen all areas of the brain. It was the icing on the cake of holistic learning. So now when working with my clients I provide all of the above techniques to develop a strong mind, body and soul ready for learning and the joy of discovery!



OUTDOOR EDUCATION IS GREAT:

Its Even Better With Intention

By Tim Snieder

Tim is a science educator with international teaching experience in Kenya, Canada, and England. He is passionate about creating engaging, inquiry-based learning experiences that inspire curiosity, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the world.

Outdoor experiential learning has an undeniable appeal. Take students to a national park, a power station, a sea-shore, and engagement is sure to follow. But as fun as these experiences are, they are not necessarily all that educational. Meaningful learning happens when experiences are designed to connect the experience with the skills and knowledge we want students to walk away with. Without such intention, a field trip risks becoming little more than a memorable day out.

A book that had a great impression on me early on in my career is Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods*. In his book, he argues that direct encounters with nature deepen attention and memory. All of my anecdotal experiences confirm this! As a hook for my grade 7 for *The Carbon Cycle*, I took the class on a short 70 minute outing into the woods next to our school. To give the activity purpose, I gave pairs of students a booklet. Each page had an item such as 'a rotting log', 'fungi' or 'evidence of animals foraging'. Students had to locate each item and answer a question linking it to the carbon cycle before

Carbon cycle scavenger hunt in Victoria, B.C., Canada Photo provided by Tim Snieder.



moving on to find the next item. They also drew a sketch of the item. To ensure that this would be a success, I did scout the trail before -

hand to make sure that all of the items were actually findable, otherwise it would have been difficult to drag them back to the school, so determined were they to locate each and every item! While out on the trail, I had an interesting



Carbon cycle scavenger hunt in Victoria, B.C., Canada Photo provided by Tim Snieder.

interaction with a security guard for the university that owns the woodlot. He was quite annoyed that I was allowing the students to go off-trail, outlining the many possible injuries that could befall them. My immediate thought was one of defiance at this over-protective attitude. "This goes totally against my philosophy that we should not teach kids to fear nature" I thought. But I knew I was not in a position to argue with the man, so with a toot of my whistle, I summoned the students back to the trail and explained the new directive. When we returned to the classroom, I explained to them that I did not want to diminish their exploratory spirit, but sometimes you have to follow other peoples' rules when you're in their backyard. This activity was full of engagement because a clear

objective and boundaries were set in place. Without these, the students could have easily run wild in the woods (which is a great thing for children to do in my opinion, but not in this particular context!).

My students have also had very rich learning experiences when a summative assessment was designed around a full-day field trip of data collection. One glorious trip was when I took the grade 10 BTEC Science students to Nairobi National Park for their Environmental Monitoring unit. For their summative, there were some required practicals: soil analysis, water analysis and quadrat sampling. Soil from two sites within the park were compared (red soil and black cotton soil), water was sampled from the Athi River (using a long pole with a cup on the end of it – under close supervision of a ranger of course!), and quadrat sampling was undertaken at Kingfisher Picnic Site. In addition, we conducted a mini waterbird count at the Nagolomon Dam and the students conducted a very interesting interview with two park rangers about how they carry out enforcement.

We meant to interview HQ staff about revenue collection but in the end we ran out of time, but hey, we managed to squeeze in quite a lot! In a book called *Outdoor Experiential Learning in Canada* (Buttler and Kiers, 2025), my belief in such authentic, task-driven experiences to foster not only engagement but a deeper sense of relevance and responsibility when it comes to learning was fully reinforced.

In my years as a science educator, there are a few things I've found to be advisable when planning outdoor education experiences. They will seem obvious to some, but nevertheless, useful to remember.

- 1). Communicate well in advance with clear learning objectives. If you tell the principal with plenty of time in advance and clearly outline the learning value of the trip, it will be hard for them not to approve it.

2. Structure pre-learning and post-learning activities around the trip. For the Nairobi National Park trip, we spent a lesson preparing our data tables and interview questions

Walking with the rangers in Nairobi National Park, Photo provided by Tim Snieder.





Quadrat sampling in Nairobi National Park, Photo provided by Tim Snieder.

and familiarizing ourselves with the equipment. This ensured minimal time wasting so we could make the most of our visit. Upon return to the lab, the students spent a lesson organizing and processing the data into their reports.

3. Establish clear boundaries at the start of the trip. In particular, I am a big fan of a 'no phones' policy for maximum engagement. For the forest walk with the grade 7's, students knew very well that they needed to always be within sight of me, to be with their group partner and to regroup when they hear my whistle.

4. Record evidence of learning. Even for a relatively brief learning experience, something as simple as a written reflection allows students to process and articulate their learning.

Outdoor learning is powerful. But if we take the time to plan out what we want the students to learn, what clear boundaries we want them to adhere to, and what evidence of learning we want them to produce, then we can truly make the most of these experiences without sacrificing the fun and excitement.

LEARNING FRENCH THROUGH PLAY

By Georges Mborro

Georges is a French educator with more than 20 years of teaching experience across Africa and in international schools. Passionate about French language and Francophone cultures, he creates engaging learning experiences that foster communication, cultural understanding, and a lifelong love of language learning.

I n French as a foreign language class, one of the main challenges for beginner learners is overcoming their fear of making mistakes. Learning a new language necessarily involves taking risks: trying out new words, constructing sentences that are still imperfect, and daring to express oneself in front of others. In this context, incorporating games into learning





Photos provided by Georges Mborro

becomes a particularly effective teaching tool. At Woodland Star International School, playful activities play an important role in French language teaching, as they encourage active participation and boost students' motivation.

Research in Educational Sciences strongly supports the use of play in learning. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896 - 1980) explained that play allows children to actively build their knowledge by experimenting with their environment. Russian Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934), meanwhile, showed that learning develops through social interaction and collaboration between peers. Playful activities promote precisely these two dimensions: active exploration and collective learning.

In Woodland Star's French classes, the use of interactive digital tools greatly contributes to this engagement. A particularly effective example is the use of Kahoot, an interactive quiz game that students participate in from their devices. The questions focus on vocabulary, grammar, or comprehension. The competitive and dynamic aspect of the game creates an enthusiastic atmosphere in the classroom. Students concentrate more, actively review what they have learned, and receive immediate feedback on their answers. This practice transforms a simple review into a stimulating moment of collective learning.

Quizlet is another frequently used tool, particularly for vocabulary development. With its variety of game modes, students can associate words with images, listen to pronunciations and take on timed challenges. This multimodal approach promotes memorization, as students engage their sight, hearing, and action. In be-

ginner classes, these activities help to anchor vocabulary in a lasting way while making learning enjoyable.

In addition to these two games, several others can also be used in FLE classes to reinforce learning for beginners. For example, the game *"Qui suis-je?"* encourages students to ask simple questions in order to guess a character, animal or object, which develops their ability to form sentences. *"Bingo du Vocabulaire"* and *"Chaîne de mots"* allow students to quickly review and memorize vocabulary while stimulating listening and participation. The *"Jeu de mime"* helps learners associate words with actions or concepts in a fun way, making them easier to remember. Activities such as *"Le marché"*, where students play the role of sellers and customers, encourage the practice of authentic dialogue in real-life communication situations.

Finally, team-based language challenges are also a highlight of French lessons. Students work in small groups to solve language puzzles, complete sentences or construct dialogues. This collaborative approach encourages mutual support and communication. Students discuss with each other, test their hypotheses and encourage one another. This makes learning a social and dynamic experience where everyone contributes to the group's progress.





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The impact of these practices is clearly observable in the classroom. Students show increased motivation and participate enthusiastically in the activities offered. Even the most reserved learners gradually find their place in these interactive formats. Play creates a positive atmosphere where mistakes are seen as a natural part of the learning process rather than a failure.

Integrating games into French language teaching does not mean lowering academic standards. On the contrary, these activities allow students to practice linguistic structures repeatedly and in context. They offer students numerous opportunities to use the language, consolidate their knowledge and develop their confidence.

At Woodland Star International School, games become much more than just a moment of relaxation: they are an essential teaching strategy that transforms French learning into an engaging, collaborative and lasting experience.

WE WALK TOGETHER

By **Jessen Carley**

Jessen Carley is a veteran teacher, currently leading grade five at WSS in Tigoni, Kenya. She strives to create meaningful, inclusive learning experiences that help every child feel seen, valued, and capable.

Our class is a beautiful patchwork quilt made up of 13 students. When even one person is missing, we feel it deeply. Every Thursday, our class heads out on a walk to the Tea Waterfall just beyond the WSS grounds. Along the way, students climb trees, splash through streams, and laugh together as we hike the 3 kilometres of narrow dirt paths and tea fields.

But for too long, one student had to stay behind in the classroom with a teacher: Hellen.

Each Thursday, Hellen watched her classmates leave for the waterfall she had only seen in pictures, knowing her wheelchair could not manage the uneven trails. As she listened to stories of stream jumping and bushwhacking through overgrown shrubs, she shared her dream of



Photo provided by Jessen Carley

seeing the waterfall, even just once. Soon, it became our dream too - to keep our class together, even on the smallest adventures.

"But for too long, one student had to stay behind in the classroom with a teacher: Hellen."

- Jessen Carley

After a conference with Hellen's mother, I began searching for a solution. Through research, I discovered We Carry Kevin, a U.S. non-profit that creates specialized backpack carriers for wheelchair users. Thanks to an incredible international crowdfunding effort, we raised over \$500 USD in less than 48 hours to purchase Hellen's carrier.

The first time Hellen joined the Tea Waterfall walk, her excitement was impossible to miss. She laughed with friends, chatted along the trail, and became fully part of the adventure. What stood out most was how natural it felt. Students talked with her face-to-face, and as her carrier, my presence seemed to fade into the background.





Photo provided by Jessen Carley

Hellen was no longer just dreaming. She was a hiker, an explorer, a classmate, and a friend. A part of our whole.

Since then, Hellen has joined weekly walks, forest classes, and even rainy outdoor learning experiences around WSS and beyond. The backpack has given her far more than mobility - it has deepened her sense of connection and belonging.

Another unforgettable milestone came during our annual overnight camping trip. Although Hellen has attended WSS for years, this was the first time she could join an overnight off campus. Teachers took turns carrying her to a lake-side campsite, where she experienced many firsts: making s'mores, becoming the unofficial class DJ, and even dipping into the lake with her classmates nearby.

What made the trip especially meaningful was hearing students share how sad they had always felt when Hellen could not join previous field trips and overnights. Now, that door

has finally opened, and our class feels whole no matter where we go.

Hellen lifts those around her through her joy, courage, and resilience. Her classmates have learned empathy, patience, and kindness simply by walking beside her. She reminds us that courage can look like a smile during difficult moments, and that leadership can come quietly through kindness and perseverance.

In many ways, while we carry Hellen physically, she carries all of us emotionally, teaching us what inclusion, gratitude, and community truly mean.

EDTECH FROM ALMA

Schools are buying tools to improve student outcomes. But disconnected tools can't do what a strong SIS already does.

By Lauren Cybulski

Lauren Cybulski is Director of Growth & Revenue Operations at Alma, the modern K-12 Student Information System built to empower educators and improve student outcomes. She has spent more than a decade working directly with schools and districts across the United States and internationally.

Over the past year, one thing has become clear in conversations with school leaders across the country: the tone has changed.

ESSER funding is gone. Budgets that once left room for experimentation are now under scrutiny line by line. At the same time, skepticism around technology in schools is growing. Communities are questioning screen time, phones in classrooms, and whether all this investment has actually improved outcomes for students.

Some of that skepticism is fair. In many cases, it is overdue.

But it is also leading some schools to make a consequential mistake: cutting technology spending broadly, without distinguishing between optional tools and essential infrastructure.

That distinction matters. And no platform is more foundational than the Student Information System.

A different kind of budget year

Schools are now trying to absorb costs that temporary relief funding once covered. Contracts are being reevaluated. Positions are being cut. Every technology purchase is being asked to justify its place.

At the same time, the public conversation around tech in education has grown more complicated. Research on distraction has changed how families and boards think about devices and digital tools. Many leaders feel caught between wanting better systems for staff and not wanting to defend another expensive line item.

So some schools are pulling back across the board.

The problem is that not all technology serves the same purpose.

The SIS is not just another tool

When I visit schools, I pay attention to the friction educators have learned to accept.

A teacher logging into multiple systems to understand one struggling student. An attendance coordinator moving data between platforms. A counselor sensing something is wrong, but unable to quickly see attendance, grades, interventions, and family communication in one place.

Those may look like workflow issues, but they are student outcome issues.

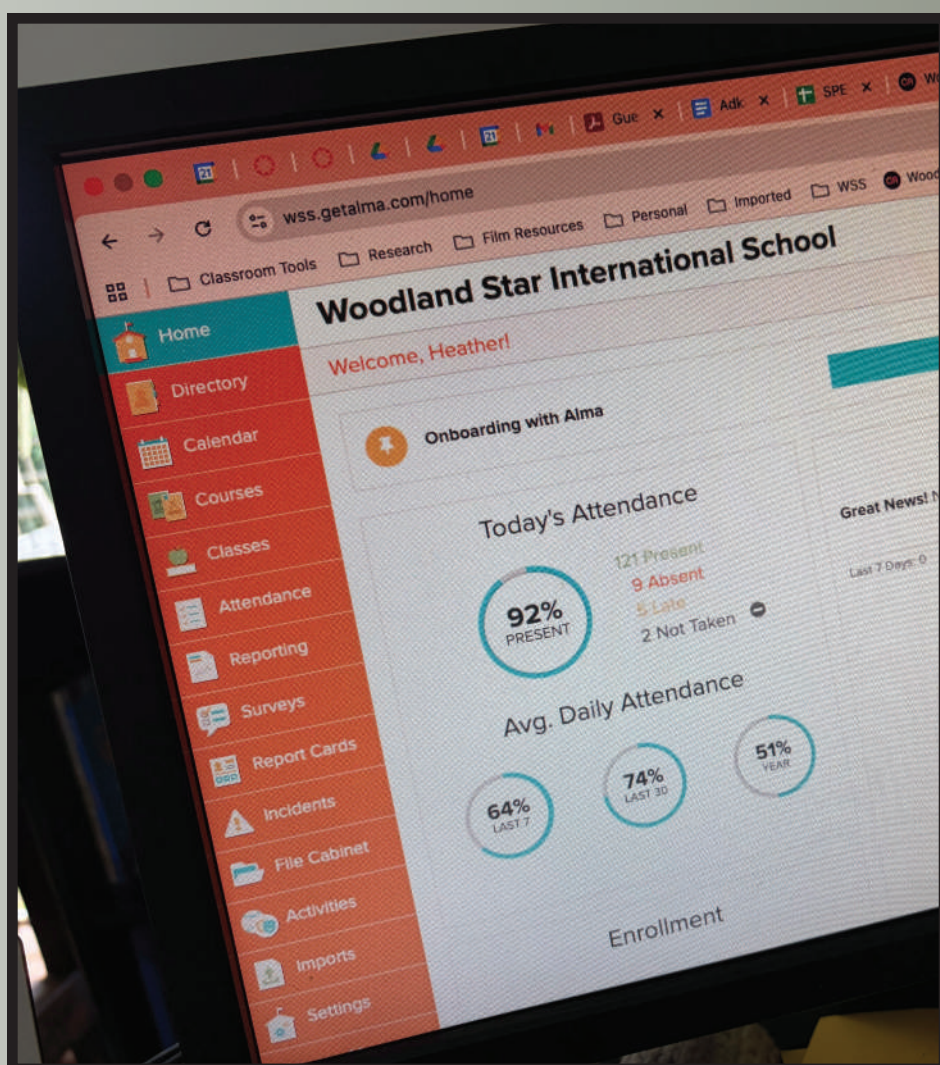
The SIS is the connective tissue of a school. It holds the attendance record, academic history, family information, intervention notes, and the context educators need to make informed decisions. Every other platform a school buys, from analytics to communication tools, relies on that foundation.

When the SIS is outdated, rigid, or difficult to use, it does more than slow down operations. It weakens the visibility schools need to support students well.

The whole child requires a complete picture

Schools talk often about supporting the whole child. But that only works when educators can actually see the whole picture.

That means noticing when a student's grades have quietly slipped over several weeks, even if attendance still looks fine. It means families receiving communication that is timely, relevant, and connected to what is really happening. It means teachers using systems that help rather than punish them.



When the SIS is frustrating or fragmented, staff do the minimum required to stay compliant. The result is incomplete data, shallow visibility, and missed opportunities to intervene early.

A modern SIS does more than store information. It helps educators see students clearly and act sooner.

The problem with buying outcomes one tool at a time

Many schools have added tools with good intentions: an early warning platform, a family communication app, an MTSS system, an analytics dashboard.

Individually, each may offer value. But too often they do not connect well enough to provide a usable, complete picture of a student.

That is because none of them are the source of truth. The SIS is.

An early warning flag is only useful when it connects to attendance patterns, grade trends, and staff notes. Family outreach is more effective when it reflects full student context. Interventions are more likely to stick when teachers, counselors, and families are working from the same information.

A modern SIS is not one more tool in the stack. It is the platform that makes the rest of the stack work.

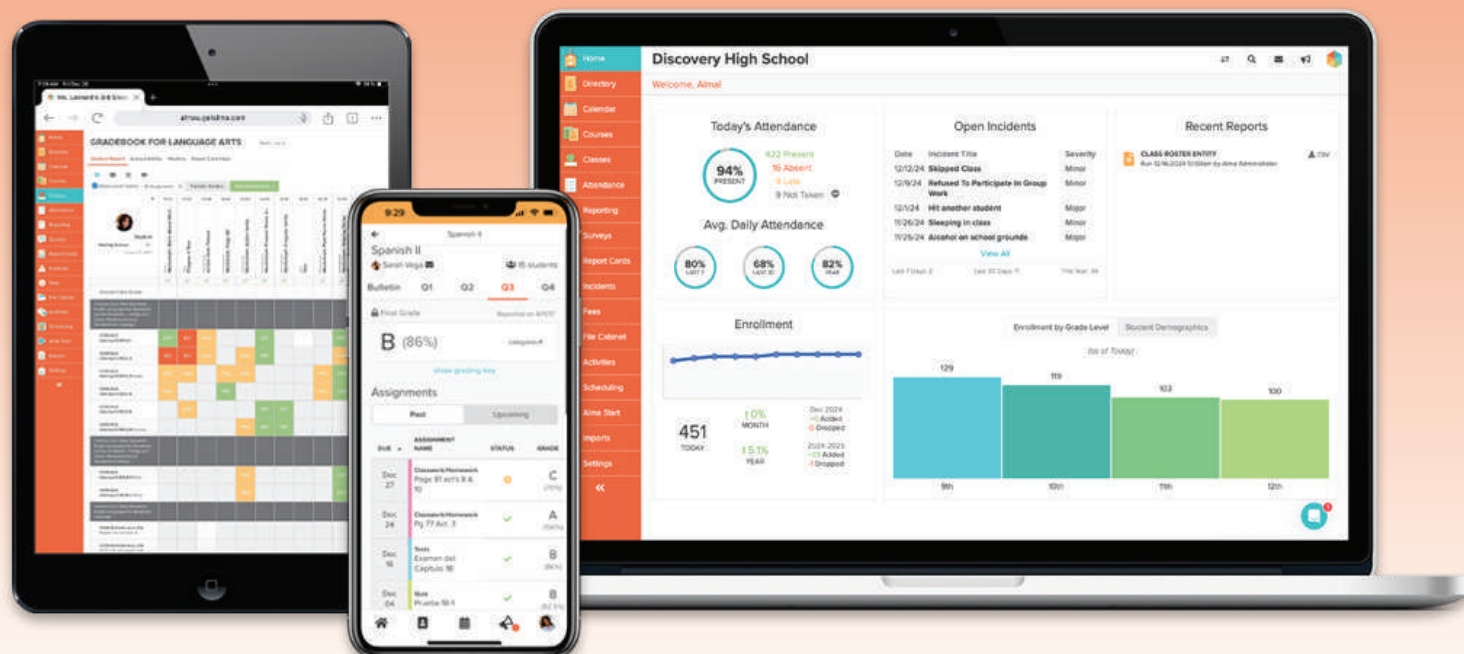
Healthy skepticism. Risky cuts.

Schools are right to question technology spending more carefully right now. Not every platform has delivered meaningful value.

But the SIS does not belong in the same category as optional add-ons.

It is the system that holds the student story and determines whether that story is visible, usable, and actionable. When that foundation is strong, educators can respond earlier, work more efficiently, and make better decisions. When it is not, every other investment operates with less clarity and less impact.

A modern SIS is not a replacement for the tools schools believe in. It is what makes those tools work the way schools hoped they would.



THE DOTTING LIFESTYLE OF KAVERE

By Sylvia Kavere

Sylvia Kavere is a Nairobi based artist who uses pointillism and Mandala as techniques to create her works of art that vary from landscapes to portraits and abstract art. Instead of sweeping brushstrokes, she uses tiny, precise dots to explore deliberate details and creates vast works of art that are vibrant and full of energy. She has been honing her skills in mixed medium art since 2019. Trained as an architect and interior designer, Kavere has blended her artistic skills with her over ten years professional experience, bringing about a perfect marriage of her two passions.

My journey into the world of artistry was anything but conventional. I am a self-taught artist, who uses Pointillism and Mandala as my artistic techniques.

Pointillism has become more than an art form to me; it has become a language through which I express emotion, faith, hope, and connection. Through thousands of carefully placed dots, I have discovered a unique way of telling stories that words alone cannot fully capture. Each piece I create reflects patience, intention, and the beauty that can emerge when small details come together to form something meaningful. Inspired by nature, vibrant colors, and

Photos provided by Heather Adkins



moments of quiet reflection, my artwork allows me to communicate peace, healing, and inspiration to those who experience it.

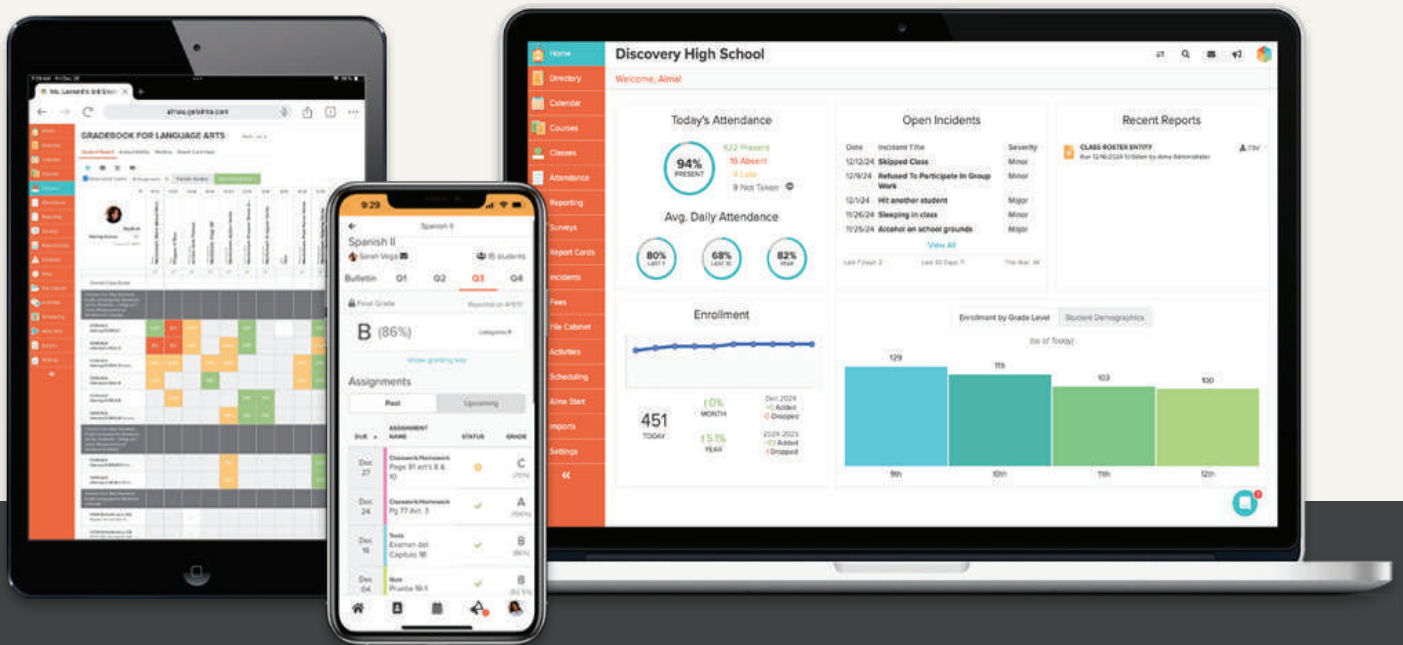
What makes pointillism special is the process itself. Every dot represents time, focus, and purpose. In many ways, it mirrors life — small moments, actions, and experiences gradually coming together to create a larger picture. As I create art, I often find myself reflecting deeply on personal growth, faith, and resilience. The repetitive and meditative nature of pointillism has helped me find calm during difficult moments and joy in seasons of creativity. It has given me confidence to embrace my voice as an artist and to share my perspective with others.

Beyond personal expression, art has also become my tool for touching lives and building connections. One of the most impactful experiences in my artistic journey was teaching a pointillism class to approximately 25 middle school students at Woodland Star International School, Kenya. Many of the students had never explored this style of art before, and at first, some felt intimidated by the patience it required. However, as the lessons progressed, I watched their confidence grow. They began to understand that art is not about perfection, but about expression, creativity, and persistence.

The classroom quickly transformed into a space of encouragement and discovery. Students who were initially shy became more engaged and willing



Empower progress. **Spark potential.**



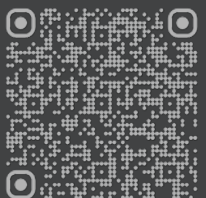
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Teaching the class changed my life just as much as it impacted theirs. It showed me that art carries the power to inspire, heal, and connect people across different experiences and backgrounds. Through those students, I realized that my work extends beyond creating paintings; it is also about encouraging others to see beauty within themselves and the world around them. Pointillism has not only shaped me as an artist, but also as a person committed to using creativity to uplift and positively influence others.



Photos provided by Heather Adkins

to share their ideas. Some found the process calming, while others discovered talents they did not know they possessed. Seeing their excitement as their individual dots slowly formed beautiful images reminded me of the importance of nurturing creativity in young people. Art gave them an opportunity to express emotions, build focus, and experience the satisfaction of creating something meaningful with their own hands.



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THE LANGUAGE NOBODY TEACHES

Code-Switching and the Hidden Work of International School Students

By Scott Martin

Scott R. Martin is the Founder and CEO of Global Student Solutions and the author of six books focused on international education and Third Culture Kid development. He hosts the Global Student Voices podcast and has spent more than twenty-five years working with students and families across Africa, Asia, and North America.

One of the most important skills many international school students develop is rarely taught, openly discussed, or intentionally supported. Yet they practice it every day.

The skill is code-switching.

Traditionally, code-switching referred to moving between languages or dialects depending on context. Today, the concept has expanded to include the ways people adjust their communication, behavior, values, and even aspects of their identity to navigate different social and cultural environments.

While most people engage in some form of code-switching, international school students often do so at a far greater scale. They move daily between home cultures, school cultures, peer groups, and global influences that may hold very different expectations about communication, relationships, authority, and belonging.

For many students, this constant adaptation becomes an invisible form of labor that educators and parents rarely recognize.

The Multicultural Experience

Multicultural students often carry multiple cultural identities simultaneously. They may have parents from different countries, have lived in several regions of the world, or belong to communities that maintain strong cultural ties despite geographic distance.



For these students, code-switching is not simply about language. It is about navigating different ways of understanding the world. Expectations surrounding family, inde-

pendence, achievement, and social interaction can vary significantly across cultural contexts.

The result is that many students learn to present different aspects of themselves depending on where they are and who they are with. While this adaptability can become a significant strength, it can also create tension when students feel pressure to choose one identity over another.

The Cross-Cultural Student

Cross-cultural students face a related but distinct challenge. These are students whose home and school environments operate according to different cultural assumptions.

A student may attend an international school that promotes inquiry, self-advocacy, and independence while coming from a family culture that places greater emphasis on respect for authority, collective decision-making, or traditional expectations. Neither approach is inherently better. However, moving between them requires continuous adjustment.

Many students become highly skilled at navigating these differences. Unfortunately, adults often mistake successful adaptation for comfort. A student who appears academically successful and socially integrated may still experience uncertainty about where they belong or how to reconcile competing expectations.

The Neurodivergent Perspective

For neurodivergent students, including those with ADHD, autism, dyslexia, anxiety, or senso-



ry processing differences, code-switching often carries an additional cognitive burden.

Many social expectations that are processed automatically by peers require conscious effort and interpretation. Students may be simultaneously decoding social cues, managing sensory challenges, adapting to cultural expectations, and meeting academic demands.

Particularly vulnerable are students who have become adept at masking their differences. Their apparent success can obscure the significant effort required to navigate daily interactions. When exhaustion or burnout emerges, it is frequently viewed as unexpected despite having developed over a long period of time.

Implications for Schools

International schools are uniquely positioned to address this often-overlooked aspect of student development.

The first step is simply naming the phenomenon. Students frequently report relief when they learn there is a term for what they have

been experiencing. Language creates awareness, and awareness creates agency.

Schools must also help educators recognize the hidden demands associated with cultural navigation. Behaviors that appear inconsistent, withdrawn, or situational may reflect the challenges of managing multiple cultural expectations rather than a lack of engagement or motivation.

Finally, student support systems should acknowledge the intersection of culture, identity, and neurodiversity. Effective support requires understanding students not only as learners but also as individuals navigating increasingly complex cultural landscapes.

Beyond Academic Achievement

The ability to navigate multiple cultures is one of the defining experiences of international education. Yet success should not be measured solely by academic outcomes or university placements.



The deeper work is helping students develop an integrated sense of self, one that allows them to engage confidently with multiple cultures without feeling they must leave part of themselves behind.

Code-switching is not a problem to be solved. It is a reality to be understood. When schools recognize and support this hidden work, they help students move beyond adaptation toward something more meaningful: a strong and authentic sense of identity in a complex and interconnected world.

Research and Further Reading

The concept of code-switching was first explored in linguistic research by sociolinguist John Gumperz, whose work examined how individuals move between languages and communication styles across social contexts. More recent scholarship has expanded the concept to include cultural frame-shifting, identity negotiation, and adaptation across multiple social environments.

The experiences described in this article also draw upon research related to Third Culture Kids (TCKs), multicultural identity development, and intercultural competence.

Scholars such as David C. Pollock and Ruth Van Reken have documented the opportunities and challenges experienced by globally mobile young people, including questions of belonging, identity formation, and cultural adaptation.

Research on neurodiversity further suggests that students with ADHD, autism spectrum profiles, anxiety disorders, and other neurological differences may experience additional cognitive demands when navigating complex social and cultural environments. As international schools become increasingly diverse, understanding the intersection of neurodiversity and intercultural development represents an important area for future study.

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A PLACE TO BELONG:

Choosing an International School With Heart

By Joy Olwande

Joy Olwande is an Administrative Assistant at Woodland Star School who enjoys bringing structure, warmth, and a touch of creativity into everyday school life. As a mother of three, she is passionate about building spaces where children feel seen, supported, and inspired to grow.



If choosing a school were as simple as ticking boxes on a checklist, the process would be stress-free. However, most parents and students quickly discover that finding the school is less about perfection and more about discovering where a child truly belongs. You visit, observe, and ask questions while waiting for that quiet “spark” when you just know. While glossy brochures and impressive facilities make a strong first impression, a school’s true value lies beneath the surface. Here’s how to look beyond the marketing and find the right environment for your child, with examples of how Woodland Star International School brings these ideas to life.

Look Beyond the Mission Statement

Every school has a polished philosophy, but what matters is how it shows up daily. At Woodland Star, the mission is lived through its “Village Agreements” and a shared commitment to being Self-Directed, Community-Minded, and Globally Mindful.

Observe how teachers engage with students and how students interact with one another. Instead of getting lost in jargon, ask a simple question: “What does a typical day look like here?”

Photo provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.



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The “how” matters just as much as the “what.” A strong learning approach moves beyond rote memorization to encourage critical thinking, student voice, and innovation. Project-based and thematic learning environments, like Woodland Star’s approach, allow students to question, explore, and create in meaningful ways.

Inclusion and Individual Support

A one-size-fits-all model rarely works. Strong schools recognize that each child learns differently and deserves support tailored to their needs.



Look for environments that embrace neurodiversity and provide inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). A helpful question to ask is: “How do you support a student who requires a non-traditional approach to learning?” The answer will reveal how deeply inclusion is embedded in the school’s culture.

The Power of Environment

A school’s physical setting acts as a “third teacher.” Some children thrive in structured, urban campuses, while others flourish in nature-rich environments.

At Woodland Star, the forest and botanical garden campus are not just scenic—they are integral to learning. Through programs like Green Focus, nature becomes part of everyday exploration. Small touches like outdoor classrooms, cozy learning spaces, and a home-like atmosphere can transform a school from an institution into a true community.

Holistic Development Beyond Academics

Education doesn’t stop at academics. The most impactful schools nurture character, creativity, and a sense of responsibility.

Look for opportunities that promote environmental stewardship



and service learning. Whether it's participating in restoration projects like a Miyawaki forest or engaging with the wider community, these experiences shape compassionate, grounded individuals.

Why Woodland Star School?

When viewed through these lenses, Woodland Star International School stands out as more than a place of learning. Nestled in the serene landscape of Tigoni, it is a "village" where education is a living, breathing experience.

Prioritizing nature-based learning, inclusive education, and creative expression, Woodland Star creates space for children to grow at their own pace while becoming thoughtful stewards of the world around them. For families seeking a school that values both voice and academic growth, it offers something truly special.

Trust Your Instincts

After the tours and conversations, take a moment to reflect. Can you picture your child

thriving here? Does the community align with your family's values?

The "perfect" school on paper may not be the right one in reality. Often, the best choice isn't the one that ticks every box, it's the one that simply feels right.

Take the Next Step

The best way to experience that "spark" is to see it for yourself. Whether you are nearby or across the globe, Woodland Star invites you to explore its unique learning environment through a virtual tour or an in-person visit.

Walk the trails, meet the educators, and experience the rhythm of the village. You might just find the place your child has been waiting for.



Photo provided by Derrick Milimo of Pictor Story Photography.



THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE IN AN AI WORLD

By Anjie Martin

Anjie Martin is a technology leader and family science graduate based in Indiana. Having managed digital transformations across K-12, higher education, and corporate spaces, she is passionate about using technology to streamline administration and protect time for human connection. She is a founder of Global Student Solutions and a proud Jiji to two granddaughters who inspire her daily to play, laugh, and learn.

As AI becomes more present in our schools and homes, a quiet fear has grown with it: What if the machine replaces the human? For educators and families alike, that fear is understandable. But in classrooms, the most important work has never been only about information; it has been about relationships, trust, belonging, and the subtle art of noticing what a child needs before they can say it aloud.

A great teacher does not just hear a student's answer. They see the hesitation before the answer, the joy after it, the body language that says "I'm confused," and the spark that says "I finally get it." They hear tone, notice posture, remember a difficult morning at home, and sense when a child is pulling back because they feel unseen. This is not data alone. It is humanity in motion.

AI can be powerful. It can organize, summarize, translate, and support. It can reduce busywork and give teachers back precious time. But it cannot sit beside a nervous child before a presentation and say, with a calm voice and a kind face, "You are ready." It cannot read the energy in a room after conflict and know when to pause the lesson and make space for repair. It cannot feel the weight of a family's trust or understand the cultural nuance behind a child's silence.

That is why the future of education is not about choosing humans or technology. It is about using technology in service of human connection. The schools that thrive will be the ones that protect time for conversation, reflection, and care. They will use AI to lighten the adminis-



trative load, but they will never hand over the sacred work of noticing, encouraging, and guiding.

In international schools, this matters even more.

These communities are rich with languages, identities, and lived experiences. A child may be navigating a new country, a new curriculum, or a new sense of self. No algorithm can fully understand the homesickness in one student's eyes or the pride in another's first successful effort to speak up in a second language. A human educator can. A human educator can connect the dots between context, culture, emotion, and learning.

This is the heart of inclusive education: not just access to content, but access to being known. Inclusion means a learner is not reduced to a score, a label, or a prediction. It means they are seen in full color, with all their complexity intact. And that kind of seeing depends on human intuition, the sense that comes from listening deeply, observing carefully, and caring enough to respond.

AI may become better at sorting and predicting. Humans are better at understanding and belonging. AI may process patterns. Humans recognize meaning. AI may scale support. Humans build trust. And in education, trust is not a luxury. It is the foundation.

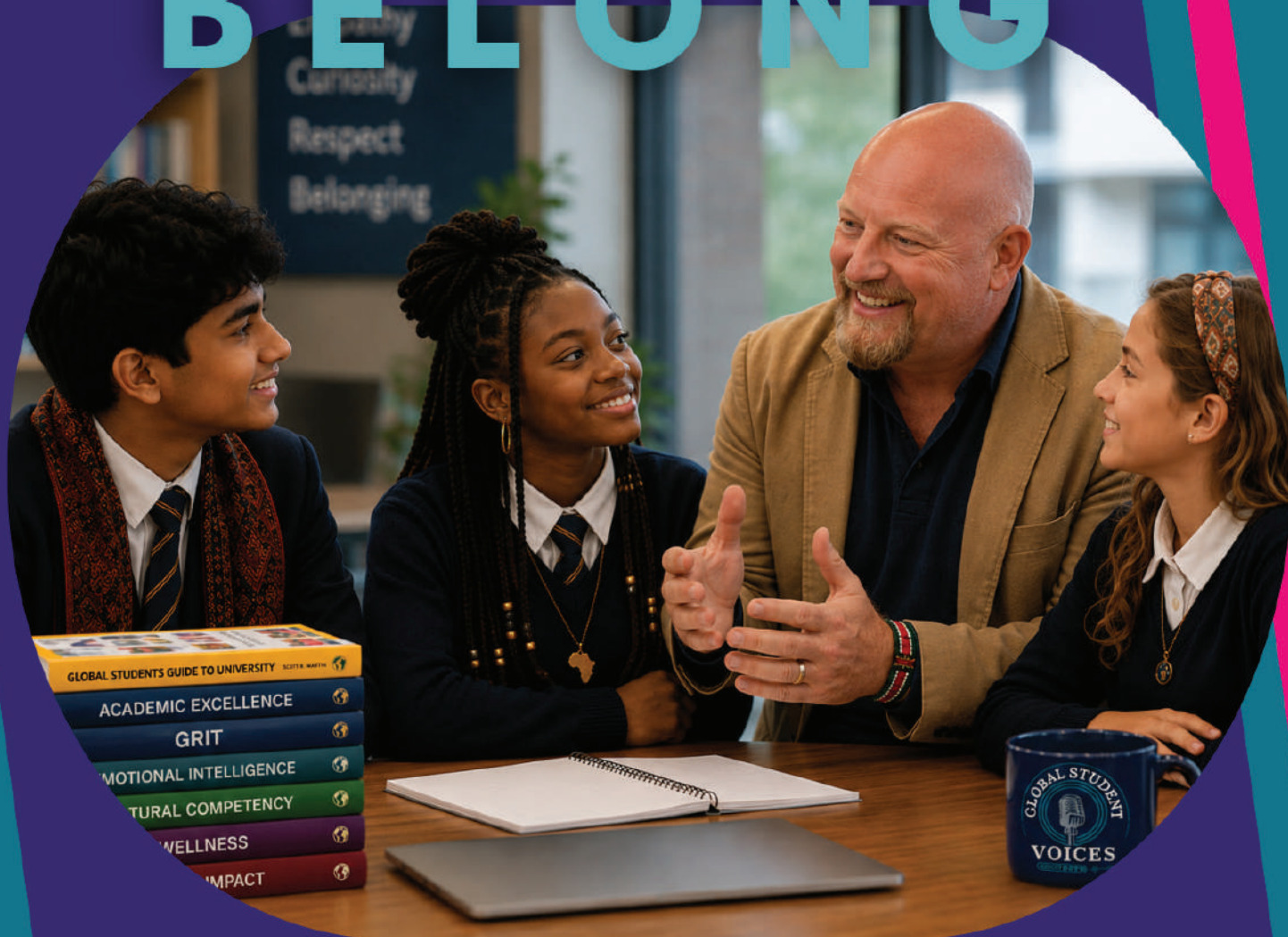
So the question is not whether AI will replace teachers. The deeper question is whether we will remember what only humans can do. If we lean into our senses, our intuition, our context, and our connections, we will not become obsolete. We will become more essential than ever.

In an AI world, the most irreplaceable technology in any school is still the human heart.



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