



Cultivating the Skills and Dispositions Young People Need to Flourish in Life: Learning from four key Waldorf Education practices

HEADLINE FINDINGS FROM NEW REPORT

Prof. Bill Lucas & Dr. Ellen Spencer | University of Winchester | December 2025

Why this research matters

Schools today face multiple challenges: rising absenteeism, growing mental health pressures, increased SEND needs, and the challenge of equipping young people with skills fit for an AI-driven future. The recently published [Curriculum and Assessment Review](#) (CAR) stresses that 'It is vital that schools and colleges are able to innovate and respond to local needs, and that teachers have the flexibility to extend the curriculum and draw out its relevance for the young people in their classrooms' (CAR, p.5). This research is offered as a contribution towards just such innovation and in the belief that the CAR does not go far enough. It shows that Waldorf's approaches build not only knowledge but also the skills and dispositions young people need to thrive at and beyond school.

Four key practices and their impact

Waldorf Education aims to equip children with the knowledge, skills and capacities they will need to flourish in a complex and changing world. Four important approaches underpin this ambition and the benefits of each are summarised here.

1. Experiential Learning

Hands-on, discovery-based, real-world activities - from gardening and crafts to scientific inquiry, fieldwork and role play – inviting both active engagement and careful reflection.

- **Evidence shows:** Improves empathy, wellbeing, resilience, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Significant boosts in science and maths. The approach works best when it emphasises reflection as well as exploration. Requires skilled teachers able to provide both structured input and well-paced opportunities for exploration.
- **Policy relevance:** Can support attendance and re-engagement by making learning more authentic and meaningful. Emphasis on head, heart and hands complements 'knowledge-rich' approaches.

2. Interdisciplinary Learning

Thematic, project-based learning that connects subjects and perspectives and helps pupils to see how complex challenges frequently require knowledge and skills from different disciplines.

- **Evidence shows:** Increases motivation, teamwork, holistic understanding, and transfer of knowledge. Helps develop complex skills like collaboration, problem-solving and creativity. As with experiential learning, requires teachers to have a good understanding of the key concepts underpinning any topic.
- **Policy relevance:** Aligns with trends identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum, the International Baccalaureate, the Association for Science Education, and Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, as well as better preparing young people for employment.

3. Play

Play is a physically and/or mentally engaging activity, often spontaneous, primarily chosen for enjoyment and recreation rather than for a specific purpose. It typically involves imagination, social interaction, and learning through exploration. For children, play is a fundamental way of learning and developing social and emotional skills. Historically associated with primary education, playful experimentation also has a role in secondary.

- **Evidence shows:** Supports language development, self-regulation, social interaction, social skills, and early literacy and numeracy. Particularly beneficial for children with SEND or socio-emotional challenges. Important to understand that there is a continuum of play from entirely free to largely guided by a teacher. As yet not enough evidence of the impact of play in primary school settings.
- **Policy relevance:** Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child – ‘Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities’. Reinforces the DfE Early Years Framework. Important to balance benefits of free play with need for some explicit instruction.

4. Creative Education

Creativity involves imagination, curiosity, persistence and collaborative problem-solving, typically focused on creating novel or fresh thinking. Often associated with arts and crafts, it has a role across the whole curriculum.

- **Evidence shows:** Enhances idea generation, curiosity, critical thinking, resilience, self-awareness and deeper learning.
- **Policy relevance:** Responds to calls from the Times Education Commission, Arts Council England, and the recent PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Test of Creative Thinking. The expression of human creativity and intelligence is essential in an AI world. England is currently an outlier internationally in not more explicitly integrating creativity into education in schools.

Key lessons for education policy

1. **Recognise creativity, play, and experiential learning as central** to effective education, not optional extras.
2. **Support teachers** with training and confidence to deliver these pedagogies rigorously.
3. **Pilot Waldorf-informed practices** in mainstream schools to improve depth and breadth of learning, enhance wellbeing, tackle attendance and support pupils with SEND.
4. **Embed whole-child approaches** that cultivate not only knowledge but also dispositions such as empathy, resilience and adaptability.

Conclusion

This research confirms what many educators already sense: that in order to flourish in life, young people need more than exam success. They need opportunities for experiential, interdisciplinary, playful, and creative learning too. The current polarised view of education that it is either all about knowledge and its direct instruction or the encouragement of child-initiated enquiry is unhelpful, a false binary alternative.

Waldorf schools provide powerful examples of how these approaches can be woven into a coherent education. The challenge now is to make them available to all children.