Waldorf early childhood care and education in the 21st century

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Many of the elements of the Waldorf approach, featured 100 years ago with the opening of the first Waldorf early childhood groups, are now supported by current evidence and research into child development. Waldorf practitioners are developing stronger and better-informed practice based on the founding principles, contemporary resources, and an ever-deepening understanding of young children today.

In this paper, I intend to explore five of the significant themes that have received additional impetus in recent years.
1. In the Waldorf approach, a foundation of social and emotional development is prioritised as a support for later cognitive development.
2. A key feature of the Waldorf early childhood environment is that it is a sensorially friendly and unhurried microcosm of everyday life.
3. Waldorf practitioners and teachers have been actively promoting for the past century the importance of building up children's connections with nature.
4. As a result of increased academicization and the pressures of 21st-century life, child-initiated, free, creative play is under threat and needs protection and support.
5. One aspect of the Waldorf approach viewed as key is that the inner development of the practitioner or teacher is just, if not more, important than their outer work. Following this review of essential aspects of the Waldorf approach in light of recent developments, the paper concludes by looking to the future and pinpointing three aspects at the forefront of research and development among Waldorf early childhood practitioners today.

Introduction

I became a Waldorf kindergarten teacher in the late 1980s, when training for the role was hard to access. I learnt through study, alone and with colleagues, through observing others, and through making many mistakes and endeavouring to put them right. For the last 15 years, I have had the privilege of working as a Waldorf early childhood consultant and mentor and of working with some of the seminars around the world, which now offer the thorough training that I never had myself. I have brought this international aspect into what follows.

When the first Waldorf school, founded on principles suggested by Rudolf Steiner, opened in Stuttgart in 1919, the youngest pupils enrolled were turning seven. Not until 1926 did the first kindergarten open, admitting children under the age of seven. Now the number of schools and kindergartens continues to grow worldwide. This paper will examine the continued relevance of the Waldorf early childhood approach and curriculum as it enters its second century. It is not a fixed method or a set of rigid principles, but a living, evolving way of understanding children and supporting their development. Circumstances have changed, and so have concepts of childhood and education. In its practice, Waldorf education (sometimes also known as Steiner or Steiner Waldorf education) has changed too, while its essentials remain constant. I cannot provide a complete overview of Waldorf early childhood theory and practice here, but I have chosen five essential elements to reflect on in this paper in light of contemporary developments.

When the first school opened, some of the ideas seemed radical. The aspects of early childhood Waldorf practice I will discuss here are now common topics of debate across the educational spectrum and can be supported by current research from educational psychologists and neuroscientists. Waldorf practitioners are developing stronger and better-informed practice based on the founding principles, contemporary resources, and an ever-deepening understanding of young children today.

In this paper, I intend to explore these five significant themes, which have received additional impetus in recent years. As the Waldorf approach is worldwide, I will include international aspects of practice from places where I have personal connections and experience.

Social and emotional development comes before cognitive development

Across Europe and much of the world, Britain is an outlier in the age at which children start formal education. In many parts of the world with enviable educational reputations, the tradition is that children start school at 6 or 7 years old, after attending kindergarten. In Slovenia and Croatia, two countries that I visit regularly as a tutor and mentor, children enter school at 6 and 7 years old, respectively. Childcare in organised groups is provided by the state from babyhood, if required, and most children will attend kindergarten from the age of three until they start school. In these flexible, family-friendly settings, they learn to socialise through free play and through adult-led games and activities. Children are there all day, and there will be an afternoon nap or rest in addition to meals and snacks, as well as indoor and outdoor time.

Since a compulsory school age was introduced in the 1870s, Britain has been notable for omitting the kindergarten stage, sending young children straight into formal schooling at 5 years old. Now, with most parents wanting and needing to work, childcare for children under school age is a necessity, and the concept of 'pre-school education', including semi-formal teaching of literacy and numeracy, has become embedded. Steiner (1861–1925) suggested that, for the first 7 years, the focus is on physical development and mastery of the physical body, through activity in which the child imitates what is happening around them (Steiner, 2008a).

There is contemporary research supporting the view that a later start to formal education may bring short- and long-term benefits. At its most dramatic, starting school early could be life-shortening, according to Kerr and Friedman: 'Early school entry was associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk.' (Kern and Friedman, 2009, p. 419). Others have argued that there is little academic benefit: 'success at reading is not assured by an earlier beginning.' (Suggate et al., 2013, p. 45).

For those used to seeing early childhood classrooms crammed with materials for teaching literacy and numeracy, there may be a hesitation about approaching education and care for young children without this structure. An overview of the Waldorf early childhood setting will show what can be done to provide a rich and nurturing environment, in a welcoming and inclusive community, for children up to the age of seven. A typical arrangement may be that there are 16 children, aged 3 to 7 years old, in the care of two adults. With all-day provision, there will be a rotation of staff to cover this, but the aim is for a consistent pattern and a family

atmosphere. From the start, we want to create trusting relationships with children and their families, and to look upon parents as our colleagues. This community takes care of its own needs. Caring for the spaces, indoors and out, preparing meals, and clearing up from them create a daily rhythm with structure and purpose. Some children will be busy alongside adults, chopping vegetables, polishing windows, and counting out bowls and cutlery. Others will be just as busy playing, often with a free flow between adult-led activities and child-initiated play. This purposeful mood of care lies at the heart of practice and is encapsulated in this quote: 'the task of the kindergarten teacher is to adjust work taken from daily life so that it becomes suitable for the children's play activities' (Steiner, 1923a, p. 81).

The daily rhythm with its emphasis on time for play, will be punctuated by whole group activities, such as a 'ring time' in which the children follow through imitation the voice and gesture of the adults in a linked sequence of songs, verses and games, often celebrating seasonal changes, and story time, when the whole group comes together to listen to a story usually learnt by heart and told by the practitioner, sometimes given as a simple puppet play. The environment will fuse practicality and beauty, including artistic activities such as painting, drawing, and modelling.

The Waldorf approach to early childhood education and care is not a fixed method; from the foundational seeds based in observation of child development, the evolution to meet present and future needs is continual. Recently, questions of diversity, inclusion, and equality have been highlighted in Britain and internationally. In Britain, all Waldorf settings are asked by Waldorf UK (our national organisation) to conduct a DIE (diversity, inclusion, equality) audit of their provision. A recent publication based on a conference reflects the changing needs of the time:

'As Waldorf Early Childhood practitioners, we are invited to develop the spiritual attributes of greatheartedness, humility, curiosity, interest, wonder, and integrity. In these unique and challenging times, we are being asked to see clearly, without any veil of illusions, what influences us. We are being asked to be willing to change, to respond, and to transform' (Howard, 2022, p. 5).

Providing a protected and unhurried environment

Putting ourselves in the shoes of a young child in a busy city street or a supermarket, we can imagine the assault on their senses. Not just the sights, noises, and smells, but the mood of urgency and the lack of community connections are strong impressions. In 1981, David Elkind, the American psychologist, wrote about how pressures and stresses in the second half of the 20th century were affecting children's educational experiences (Elkind, 1981). A pressured attitude infiltrates even methods of child assessment with a tendency for electronic notebooks and tick box forms aiming to identify omissions to be rectified, replacing the educator's time to stand back and observe the child.

In China, Waldorf schools and kindergartens sprang up in the first two decades of the 21st century like a thicket of bamboo shoots, and I have been involved in the adult education required to support this. Many settings have been in densely populated urban areas where living spaces are small and parents' working lives are stressful. Families who discovered the Waldorf approach to education and care found settings that offered a respite, where sensory experiences encourage calm and peace, where there is no rush, and children can receive the individual attention in their pre-school setting, which parents saw as missing in their own educational experiences.

Freye Jaffke, an experienced Waldorf early childhood practitioner, discussed the concept of the mantle as a protective space around the child within which opportunities for healthy development can be nurtured. This mantle is created by the physical environment and, more importantly, by the way adults conduct themselves and organise time in the setting. In addition to the mantle of time, she writes about the mantle of physical and psychological warmth and the mantles created by the way practitioners speak and move (Jaffke, 2002).

This emphasis on psychological warmth is one explored by Tamsin Grimmer in her research-based book, '*Developing a Loving Pedagogy in the Early Years'.* Grimmer writes:

The main benefit to adopting a loving pedagogy is that children will feel loved and have a sense of belonging and will want to be part of our setting and spend time in our company. … This in turn will raise levels of well-being and children's self-esteem. … adopting a loving pedagogy helps to foster positive dispositions to learning, such as the characteristics of effective learning, and also helps to build really strong and secure relationships with children and their families (Grimmer, 2021, p. 6).

Another recent book by Alison Clark looks at the benefits of slow pedagogy. She quotes many modern authors on the negative effects of accelerating time in education and how, especially for young children, this undermines the firm foundations for future learning that are needed. She sees the young child as in a process of becoming which cannot be hurried, and writes, "This 'becoming' is, by necessity, time-consuming" (Clark, 2023, p. 71).

In a complex world, the need for simplicity is crucial for the young child and is a feature of early childhood approaches such as Froebel and Reggio Emilia. The simplicity of daily life in a Waldorf early childhood group, where meals are prepared and eaten, and the environment is cleaned and repaired as part of the children's experience, supports young children's feeling that the world makes sense, that they can contribute to it, and that it is valuable.

In the same way that you cannot hasten the opening of a flower by tearing open the bud, childhood cannot be rushed; it needs to unfold in a way that gives children time for horizontal exploration of each stage of development, rather than a vertical ascent to be achieved at the utmost speed. The Waldorf setting is designed to be a sensorily calming and peaceful place. You will see a clear space with equipment rich in natural materials and open-ended possibilities inviting exploration and play at a young child's pace. Days and weeks follow secure rhythms within which it is safe to be curious and make mistakes. In recent years, as the outside world seems to become more frenetic, Waldorf practitioners have taken more steps to provide a respite in their settings. In Britain, kindergarten hours have been extended to provide more time for play and leisurely transitions between play and adult-led activities. I would like every Waldorf early childhood setting to have above its gate the motto, 'Here we have time!'

Connections with nature are essential

Approaches to early childhood education since the time of Rousseau have referred to connections with nature (Peckover, 2012). Reinvigorating this concept in the 21st century, Richard Louv wrote 'Last Child in the Woods' and brought to the fore the danger for young children of a diminishing connection with nature, which has been echoed by many (Louv, 2007). As a contrast, Louv posits a connection between an experiential relationship to the natural world and later active engagement with environmental issues (2007, pp. 9–11). Louv writes, 'If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered species: the child in nature' (2007, p. 158). The Forest School movement, with its roots in Scandinavia, has flowed into Britain since the 1990s and actively seeks positive outdoor experiences as a foundation for a lifelong respect and reverence for the natural world (Miller and Pound, 2011).

There are many commonalities between the Forest School or Kindergarten and a Waldorf setting. The Forest School setting emphasises the sensory experiences, challenges and opportunities which only a natural outdoor environment can bring (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2017). Natural resources, referred to so eloquently by architect Simon Nicolson as 'loose parts', bring a call on flexibility and imagination which much mass-produced play equipment does not: 'in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity and the possibility of discovery are directly linked to the number and kind of variables in it' (quoted in Tovey, 2007, pp. 74–5).

Loose parts include not only such variable and valuable items as branches for den-building, plants for making potions, and that most attractive and versatile of materials, mud, but also the tools and equipment needed to make the most of this bounty. Only by using tools for play and for real work can small hands become adept at achieving their aims. There is plenty of research to support the larger benefits of this, such as 'Do nimble hands make for nimble lexicons? Fine motor skills predict knowledge of embodied vocabulary items (Suggate and Stoeger, 2014). Positive impacts of outdoor settings on well-being and social and emotional skills are also well documented (Miller and Pound, 2011).

That essential relationship of the human being with nature was thoroughly explored by Rudolf Steiner. The view of the earth as a living entity in which everything is interrelated was repeatedly postulated by Steiner in the early 20th century (Steiner, 2008b) and can be seen as a forerunner of Lovelock's Gaia theory, which posits that the world is a composite living being that self-regulates (Lovelock, 1974). The Waldorf educator sees a warmth towards the natural world as intrinsically present in the very young child. The aim is just to protect this warmth so that adults who are motivated to take care of our world, eco-warriors, can develop from the mud-splashed small children playing in the meadows, woods, and streams.

While the imaginative world of early childhood is still strong, the approach will be lively and pictorial. In the European context, there could be stories of gnomes at work underground who take seeds and bulbs into the protection of Mother Earth in the autumn, look after them during the winter, and help the plants grow in the spring. (Of course, Waldorf is a global approach and in other parts of the world, nature forces will have other characteristics and names.) The children will be actively involved in gardening, recycling and careful use of natural materials but not given 'scientific' explanations of why sustainable activities such as these are good for us and the environment. The young child will take the vegetable peelings 'back to Mother Earth' by emptying them onto the compost heap, will see them decay and be there when the compost is added to the garden beds, but, although any questions will be answered in a lively way, this experience will not be extended into a lesson which explains the cycle of growth and decay, thus remaining as an experience.

Beyond the Waldorf early childhood setting, value for the natural world continues to be nourished throughout the full Waldorf school curriculum, and the mood will change to one that

includes detailed observations, practical involvement in food and craft production and land care, and, eventually, critical inquiry into humanity's relationship with the natural world. The developing human being takes a natural journey from the wish to 'help the gnomes' to an adult understanding of the responsibility of the human being towards the ecosphere (Rawson and Richter, 2000).

From my own experience as an early childhood educator, social dynamics outdoors are easier under the sky. For many years, I began my kindergarten days outdoors, rain or shine, summer and winter, so that children, appropriately clad for the season, could relax and rediscover each other after the early morning rush to leave home and get to school. I found that anxious children separated more easily from their parents outdoors. They were not leaving their parents to come into my space but arriving in Mother Nature's space, and that seemed to be more congenial.

Waldorf early childhood groups have included outdoor time as part of the daily rhythm over the past 100 years. Risk-taking has an additional dimension in natural outdoor settings, and this has been fully acknowledged in 21st-century Waldorf kindergartens, with a renewed emphasis on work and play in nature. Children learn respect for nature and respect for tools through imitating the adults around them and their 'ground rules', which make sense and become good habits. Now, many Waldorf settings include days spent mostly or entirely outdoors at least once a week. This will include preparing food, al fresco, and cooking over fires, which brings further opportunities for respecting boundaries, self-regulation, and learning resourcefulness, all very transferable skills for life. For many urban children today, their only experience of fire may be the virtual explosive disasters that happen in the cartoon realm. In the kindergarten, the cooking fire is a regular and familiar presence to be nurtured with twigs, respected and blessed for the warmth and the hot food and drinks it provides.

Free play needs protection and support

I am in a Waldorf kindergarten in provincial Thailand observing a group of 16 children aged four to rising 7 years old. This is 'free play' time, and the children are engaged in self-initiated activities indoors. They have space and time to play with a range of simple and open-ended toys and equipment. A boy, aged about 5 years, begins to build by himself. He sets up four large wooden frames in a square, tying them together at the corners with ropes. He drapes a sheet over each frame so that the space he has created is hidden. He selects some items to take inside:

a stool, some coconut-shell dishes with seedpods, and some log slices. As a finishing touch, he carefully balances a small piece of wood on the projections at each end of all the frames that he has used. This is difficult as they keep falling off, but he patiently replaces them until his structure appears to satisfy him. At this point, he leaves and joins his friends, who are sitting at the table and drawing.

Such a play situation would be unlikely in a mainstream English educational setting for children of this age. By the age of six, if not before, the child will have left behind the requirements of the Early Years government curriculum and embarked on the National Curriculum for schoolchildren. Cognitive skills, in particular, will be tested regularly as part of a national system that ranks individual achievements, as well as those of classmates and schools, against those of peers nationally. Much adult consideration will have gone into surrounding the child with equipment designed to stimulate cognitive development and into filling school days with adult-directed tasks that have the same aim. There is a contrast here not only with the Waldorf approach but also with Piaget's belief in the child as an innate learner, and with the ideas of Froebel, whose child-centred pedagogy has in the past had a great influence on early childhood and primary teacher training programmes in the United Kingdom.

Froebel, like Steiner, believed that play would allow a rounded, holistic development of the young child and provide an essential, sound basis for future education. His own ideas changed during his life from a more to a less fixed curriculum (Bruce, 1992, p.13), a move which the Waldorf practitioner would support. As the world becomes more complex, so play, which is essentially child-initiated and relies on simple open-ended equipment, becomes more important. The adult still has a role, but it is a peripheral one, to engage with some purposeful work in an artistic way, which will add to the busy, engaged but not hurried mood in the room. The adult's task, alongside their cleaning, cooking, making, and repairing activities, is to be awake to what the children are doing. Intervention might be necessary because somebody's ingeniously constructed 'aeroplane' or 'fire engine' is in danger of collapsing on those within, or because an unhappy mood is developing which the children are unable to resolve themselves. Additionally, observing children at play, free from your expectations of their achievements, will enhance the deepest understanding of the essence of each child.

The idea that children have, through self-initiated unguided play, something intrinsically their own to contribute to their early educational experiences is now much more accepted, the right to play being enshrined as a basic right in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989). In England, United Kingdom, there is a tension between the value of play in its own right and the aim of preparing children for a flying start in school by introducing structured sessions in literacy and mathematics. The Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, a statutory document, for example states that 'Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems', while at the same time this document sets specific and extensive learning goals for reading, writing and mathematics (DfE, 2023).

Campaigners such as Sue Palmer in Scotland (Palmer, 2016) and Peter Gray in United States (Gray, 2015) have built a strong case for giving children more time to play, especially in early childhood. The English academic, Jule Fisher, has written eloquently on the need for young children to develop their own learning through long periods of uninterrupted play (Fisher, 2016). In the Waldorf early childhood group, play has been valued from the very beginning. In 1923, Rudolf Steiner wrote:

Play is fun for an adult, an enjoyment, a pleasure, the spice of life. But for children, play is the very stuff of life. Children are absolutely earnest about play, and the very seriousness of their play is a salient feature of this activity. Only by realizing the earnest nature of child's play can we understand this activity properly (Steiner, 1923b; p. 59).

The essence of the play incident in Thailand that I have described is mirrored in what is happening in Waldorf kindergartens all over the world. Child-initiated play, although balanced with periods of adult-led whole-class activities, is given time and space and special value. The view is that this kind of unguided play has value for young children not only in terms of their own satisfaction but also in its essential role in their development. As it emerges from the relationship between the child's inner life and their experiences, it can be relied on to provide their own bespoke curriculum.

One consequence of a world in which screen media is often dominant is its appearance in the play of young children. Children use their play to digest their experiences, including screen-based ones (though the Waldorf early childhood setting is free of electronic gadgets). But play-on-screen themes, such as superheroes and Disney princesses, can become repetitive and obsessive, and Steiner Waldorf practitioners today, notwithstanding their respect for free play, have found that there comes a point when intervention is necessary.

It is helpful to think of young children engaged in their self-initiated play as being within a bubble. However rumbunctious and exciting the play, the bubble is delicate and could be burst by the wrong word, or even gesture, from an adult. Sometimes one observes play on a screen theme which has become stuck because there is something incoherent and, from the child's perspective, indigestible, in the theme. Therefore, it keeps being regurgitated, and the adult must step in, without, if possible, bursting the delicate bubble of play.

One approach that 21st-century Waldorf practitioners have come to is by using their own imagination to drop in a few words that bring the play theme back to everyday concepts more comfortable for children, mostly around care. For example, Darth Vader must have to remove his helmet to eat his breakfast porridge and would need to remove his whole suit to put on his cosy pyjamas at bedtime, and there must be, somewhere in that Disney castle, a room filled with wonderful fabrics, ribbons, buttons, and embroidery threads where those beautiful dresses are made. In a similar vein, dinosaurs will inevitably hurt themselves from time to time and must be tended by the dinosaur vet and assistants. Such fantasies may sound bizarre to adults, but to the child, they make sense, form a connection to their lived experience, and make it possible for the play to move on. The Waldorf practitioner becomes adept at stepping in with an imaginative picture, which might help the children, and then stepping back to the periphery so that the free play can continue.

The inner development of the practitioner is just as important as their outer work

All Waldorf teacher and practitioner education programmes will cover the topic of 'the inner work of the teacher'. For example, the internationally agreed guidelines for early childhood training include a section entitled 'Path of inner development of the adult/educator' (IASWECE, n.d.). The view is that this inner work, which can take various forms, will give access to the kind of pedagogical wisdom that the ideal teacher or practitioner would have, and directly support healthy child development.

Steiner reiterated frequently in his lectures on education the importance of the self-development of the teacher or practitioner (for example, Steiner, 1924, p. 58), through the kind of attention to one's thoughts, feelings, and actions which seeks to make one a better, kinder, wiser person. For this purpose, Steiner suggested many exercises to strengthen one's capacity to be more attentive to thoughts, feelings, and actions and thus to gain increasing mastery of them. These include exercises to focus thinking, train the memory, reflect on one's past, and take a step back from instinctive, habitual, or emotional responses (for example, in the compilation 'Start Now! Steiner, 2004, pp. 109–119).

We can see this echoed by the current interest in 'mindfulness' techniques in education and many other areas of life (for example, Jennings, 2015) and common sense tells us that the kind of balanced personality which might result from this effort on the part of the teacher would be

an asset to pedagogical wisdom in the classroom. Every individual has personal strengths and weaknesses which make the path towards mastery of thinking, feeling and actions a more or less stony and uphill one, but being on the journey makes a difference to the teacher or practitioner.

Recently I have been working with two organisations in Lebanon to provide a Waldorf early childhood seminar for those working in kindergartens near Beirut and in the Syrian refugee camps. We have included, alongside sessions on Waldorf principles, child development and practical advice to practitioners, ideas and exercises for self-development, and in particular the six exercises which Steiner suggested as a basic framework for self-development (2004). The earthquake which struck parts of Syria and Turkey earlier this year (2023), had an impact on Lebanon too. Not only were there significant tremors, but there was a major impact on the mental health of a population that has suffered destructive civil war, failing infrastructure, and the massive explosion in the Beirut docks.

The following week, I met these students online for one of our regular study sessions. They spoke of the difficulties they found in regaining their equanimity in these appalling circumstances. ‘But,’ they declared, ‘we have been working on the exercises you gave us, and it is helping us to be strong and peaceful for the children.’ The troubles of my life are minor irritations compared with their experiences, and I found their statement a striking endorsement of the power of inner work. They knew that their efforts to calm themselves and come to terms with what was happening would be beneficial to the children in their care.

One of the foundational principles of the Waldorf approach to early childhood education and care is that, especially through the first 7 years, children learn most through imitation. Any parent of a baby a few weeks old can research this themselves and, in a few hours, teach their baby to stick out their tongue in response to the adult's action. Rudolf Steiner emphasised the point that children not only imitate our outer gestures but also imitate and respond to our inner activity. He wrote:

What matters are the thoughts, the attitude and the atmosphere with which one surrounds the child. … Everything children absorb goes in through the senses, and children will imitate everything that goes in (Steiner quoted in Jaffke, 2004, p. 39).

This leads to an obvious conclusion:

it is what you are that matters; … Health for the whole of life depends on how one conducts oneself in the presence of the child. The inclinations which he (sic) develops depend on how one behaves in his presence (Steiner, 1924, p. 18).

If we work in the care and education of young children, then it becomes our responsibility to be models worthy of imitation.

We have been aware of mirror neurons since Rizzolatti's work in the early 1990s (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004). There are still many unanswered questions, but as Steiner suggested at the turn of the 20th century, children not only imitate outer movements, but also more complex inward aspects of our inner nature. For me, the essential point is not that only perfect human beings are fit to take charge of young children, it is rather that young children, as they look to their environment to find out what it is to be human, need to meet the striving human being, one who is endeavouring, through self-discipline and personal effort, to become a better person.

The suggestion is that mirror neurons are involved in such inner activity as language learning, empathy, and acquiring social traits, because imitation extends to imitating the brain state of those close to us, especially when we are very young (Iacoboni, 2008). After almost a century, Waldorf early childhood practitioners now had neuroscientific evidence for a foundational principle which Steiner had indicated was especially important for those concerned with the education and care of children under seven.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of five aspects of Waldorf early childhood education and care that Steiner indicated more than one hundred years ago and that have been evolving ever since. Although there are societal and economic pressures moving against these, in this paper, I have demonstrated that there are convergencies with the thoughts of non-Waldorf practitioners, researchers, and academics, taking similar directions.

Looking forward, here are three areas of current discussion and research amongst Waldorf practitioners from which new ideas and practices are emerging. Firstly, as caring for very young children outside the home becomes more and more a necessity for families, more understanding of the needs of babies and children under three is needed. Secondly, fruitfully extend our support for families. Thirdly, working more closely with those who share a similar understanding of what constitutes a healthy environment for the young child to have a more substantial impact on family and educational policies.

As Waldorf education moves into its second century, there are still depths of understanding of the young child to be explored and researched, and the work continues.

Jill Taplin is a long-experienced kindergarten teacher. She now works in the UK and internationally, advising, writing, and teaching about many aspects of the Steiner Waldorf approach.

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