

The Potential of Waldorf Pedagogy in Developing Social Competence

Gabriella Tóth-Babcsányi

Doctoral School of Mathematical and Computational Sciences, Debrecen, Hungary

Világfa Waldorf Elementary School, Bálványos, Hungary

Piroska Inczédy

ÓWI—Óbuda Waldorf Elementary School and High School, Budapest, Hungary

Zsuzsanna Appl

Szekszárd Waldorf Kindergarten and Elementary School, Szekszárd, Hungary

Social competence encompasses the knowledge, sensitivities, and skills needed to collaborate effectively with others in society. Waldorf pedagogy, with over a century of history, centers on the idea that children discover and understand the world around them through the arts. Educational activities like drama, movement arts (eurythmy), singing/music, and crafts play a key role in fostering children's social skills. Moreover, the close cooperation between subjects in the Waldorf curriculum further enhances the social sensitivity and cooperative abilities of future generations. This study aims to explore the moral significance of "social empathy" and to share the authors' pedagogical experiences on how social competence can be developed through this pedagogical method.

Keywords: social competence, reform pedagogy, arts

Introduction

This study presents a collection of educational strategies and approaches that support the development of students' social competence within Waldorf schools. Beside examining the pedagogical methods, we also contemplate on the potential broader social impacts of these practices. Drawing on our own teaching experience, we illustrate how such innovations can be effectively integrated into everyday educational settings.

Theoretical and Historical Background

In the 20th century, education was largely characterized by authoritarian schooling models. Over time, however, an increasing number of philosophers, physicians, and educators—such as Rudolf Steiner and Maria Montessori—began advocating a paradigm shift. They recognized that in addition to intellectual and physical development, the healthy emotional and psychological growth of children must also be a core focus.

Gabriella Tóth-Babcsányi, MA in Teaching—Mathematics for Secondary Education, Doctoral School of Mathematical and Computational Sciences, Debrecen, Hungary; Világfa Waldorf Elementary School, Bálványos, Hungary.

Piroska Inczédy, BA in Social Pedagogy—Child and Youth Support, ÓWI—Óbuda Waldorf Elementary School and High School, Budapest, Hungary.

Zsuzsanna Appl, B.Ed.—Primary School Teaching, Szekszárd Waldorf Kindergarten and Elementary School, Szekszárd, Hungary.

Education, they argued, should be holistic, nurturing the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human beings.

The emergence of reform pedagogy gained momentum between 1915 and 1935. In Hungary as well, prominent scholars contributed to the study of pedagogical effects, child development, and the differentiation between social and educational upbringing. One key figure was László Nagy, who founded the Hungarian Society for Child Study in 1903. Other notable contributors include Ödön Wessely and Lipót Nemes, whose work helped shape the discourse on social education and its pedagogical implications.

Wilhelm Dilthey—a historian, philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist based in Berlin—was among the first to establish a systematic and methodological foundation for the humanities, enabling them to stand independently alongside the natural sciences. As Dilthey (1978) noted, he laid the groundwork for a method of understanding (*Verstehen*) suited to the study of human beings and their inner experiences. While he did not deny the significance of the natural sciences, he emphasized that they deal solely with external phenomena, whereas the humanities engage with internal experience and self-awareness. In his view, the humanities are rooted in the intuitive consciousness of life itself, and therefore, life can only be truly understood through them. One of Dilthey's key contributions was the development of this method of understanding into a comprehensive hermeneutical approach.

Rudolf Steiner, founder of anthroposophy and the creator of an educational theory based on spiritual science (*Geisteswissenschaft*), built upon similar principles. His research focused on observing the processes of growth and transformation in the world, emphasizing that education must be grounded in the laws of human development. Steiner's holistic approach views the human being as a cosmic entity, inherently connected to the spiritual world—not only at birth but throughout life.

His pedagogy centers on the unity of body, soul, and spirit, maintaining that meaningful education can only occur when all three aspects are acknowledged and addressed. This tripartite view is closely linked to three core soul qualities—thinking, feeling, and willing—which form the basis of pedagogical work in Waldorf schools. These institutions are often described as “schools of head, heart, and hands”:

- Heart, because the arts, as a means of expressing and shaping emotion, play a central role;
- Hands, because physical movement and the cultivation of motor skills strengthen the child's will;
- Head, because beyond conventional academic learning, Waldorf education cultivates keen observation, independent thinking, and the ability to draw one's own conclusions.

Only by harmoniously integrating these elements can educators effectively support the child's development through its various stages (Waldorf Curriculum Framework—Hungary).

Steiner also emphasized the importance of neutrality in education—advocating for a pedagogical approach that is entirely autonomous and free from political or societal pressures. In his view, education must focus solely on the individual child: their abilities, developmental potential, and age-specific physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The aim is not merely to meet the demands of society, but to guide each child towards realizing what they are capable of, fostering their intrinsic motivations and capacities. Teachers are thus called to support children in forming their own judgments and perceptions—so that they may see with their own eyes, think with their own minds, and act on their own behalf. The ultimate goal is to nurture well-rounded, free human beings—not in the sense of permissiveness, but in the sense of conscious, responsible freedom.

Education, then, must serve to help individuals discover their inner freedom. Only in doing so can they become valuable, contributing members of their communities, aligned with their knowledge and capabilities. To support this ideal, Waldorf schools are encouraged to operate under a self-governing administrative model (Carlgren, 1992).

Objectives and Tasks of Waldorf Education in the Context of Social Competence. One of the primary aims of Waldorf education is to create the conditions necessary for the healthy development of every child—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This includes not only the material environment but also the psychological and intellectual atmosphere surrounding the student. The educational process is designed to help children recognize their own abilities, potentials, and individuality, and to offer them the space to unfold these capabilities in a way that supports their integration into both immediate (family, peer group, workplace, etc.) and broader (workplace) communities.

The concept of social competence gained prominence in psychology and pedagogy during the 1970s. Although it is not always easy to pinpoint its original source, the American psychologist Robert L. Selman (1980) significantly contributed to its definition and understanding—particularly in relation to children’s social interactions. Based on his research, Shepherd (1983) classified social competence through the interrelation of behavioral, cognitive, and social role performances. Saarni (1999) also emphasized the role of personality as a determinant of social competence, arguing that in addition to innate factors (such as neurophysiological temperament or inherited regulatory traits), an individual’s immediate environment and cultural influences—particularly as manifested within the family—are crucial to the development and functioning of these components. With the growing emphasis on personality development, social competence came to be understood within a hierarchical framework—where skills are acquired in a sequential, layered manner (MacLean, 1993). The significance of this lies in the idea that if a child becomes “stuck” at a particular level, it may negatively affect the quality of their future social interactions. In extreme cases, such limitations could lead to antisocial behavior—further underscoring the importance of addressing social development proactively in education.

According to Benner (1991), the acquisition and development of social behavior is a long-term process. Therefore, it is essential that a school—both as a social space and as an educational community—provides rich opportunities for the continuous cultivation of these behaviors. He also emphasizes that the quality of cognitive, emotional, and social development in children is greatly enhanced when parents are actively involved in the educational process. Waldorf pedagogy is well suited to meet these developmental needs and expectations. The approach views the cultivation of social skills and emotional intelligence as equally important to intellectual or practical education. One of the most fundamental principles of Waldorf method is the continuous practice of cooperation, empathy, and mutual attention among students. From the earliest years, artistic subjects—particularly eurhythmy, drama, and music—are central to fostering collaborative learning. Group performances and shared artistic experiences play a key role in building community and strengthening social bonds, and this emphasis continues throughout all twelve years of schooling. Handicrafts and visual arts serve as primary tools for will development and self-awareness, both of which are essential for constructive social participation. Over time, these subjects increasingly support the student’s inner development and thus form a foundation for healthy social living. Most importantly, Waldorf schools also encourage active parental involvement in community life, enhancing the interconnectedness between school and home. As outlined in the Hungarian Waldorf Curriculum Framework, schools should strive to build inclusive communities. One of the

central goals is to establish an atmosphere that is accepting, cooperative, and supportive—where every child feels safe to grow, express, and engage in meaningful relationships.

Subjects Through the Lens of Social Competence

In this section, we explore how specific subjects within Waldorf education can foster the development of social competence. Three subjects in particular are examined: eurhythmics as a social art, main lesson as a key component of the epoch-based teaching method, and gardening, which connects students to both nature and community.

Eurhythmics as a Movement and Social Art

Since Waldorf education is fundamentally rooted in art-based pedagogy, eurhythmics—a unique movement art—is a cornerstone of its curriculum. Eurhythmics is an art form that bridges artistic expression, pedagogy and healing. It engages not only the physical body, but also connects with the soul and spirit, often referred to as a kind of “gymnastics for the soul”, making language and music visible through movement. Developed by Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers in 1912, eurhythmics has been part of Waldorf education from early childhood through to graduation. As a subject, pedagogical eurhythmics supports and complements many other areas of learning, including mathematics, form drawing and literature. Beyond enhancing rhythm, coordination, musical and literary sensitivity, and associative thinking, eurhythmics plays a powerful role in cultivating social sensitivity and empathy—which is why it is often referred to as a social art. Eurhythmics lessons typically involve the movement-based interpretation of poems, stories, fairy tales, and musical pieces. This approach resonates with the TLC method (Teaching, Learning, and Caring), which emphasizes the role of literature in developing social competence (Vaughn, 1987). The emotional atmosphere of poems or music is experienced through movement, while students work together to form complex spatial patterns, requiring precision in rhythm and articulation of sounds and phonemes (see Figure 1). The spatial forms in eurhythmics are often based on geometric principles and are shaped using the students’ own bodies in coordinated group movement. These shared forms demand a high degree of mutual attention, as any lapse in coordination—such as collisions or delays—can distort the intended pattern. Likewise, rhythm and sound expression must be executed in unison and with artistic precision. Mastering these collective processes requires time, patience, and sensitivity. Success depends on the students’ ability to attune to one another—listening and moving as a unified group. This attunement nurtures empathy, acceptance, and self-regulation, all of which are essential components of social competence. For example, verbal instruction or impatience can disrupt the process; instead, cooperation must arise from shared focus and silent coordination.

The sense of shared achievement—especially during performances—can be deeply motivating. It reinforces the value and beauty of working together, for and with one another. Students also experience what it means to support a peer—particularly when someone struggles with a movement sequence or loses their place. These moments foster a culture of care, where the development of one becomes the responsibility and joy of all.



Figure 1. Eurhythmy lesson in the second class.

Main Lesson

In Waldorf education, the main lesson represents the central and most important part of the school day, typically encompassing the first two hours. This time is dedicated to deep, focused learning, during which a particular subject or thematic block is explored intensively over several weeks with the guidance of the class teacher. Each day often begins with a moment of social attunement—such as a “conversation circle”—where students listen to and share stories or feelings. This is followed by rhythmic activities involving verses and coordinated movement, which serve not only cognitive and emotional development, but also foster the acquisition of social behavioral skills.

The structure of the main lesson provides many opportunities for developing social competence. It supports collaboration, conflict resolution, and integration into the classroom community. Alongside individual work, students learn to cooperate in pairs and groups, developing the ability to support one another, listen attentively, and reflect both on their own work and that of their peers.

Collaborative projects are often designed to include parental participation, enriching the learning experience and reinforcing community bonds. For instance, in grade 6, the “Rome” main lesson block encourages children to develop their own legal systems and elect consuls to oversee the implementation of rules—exercises that strengthen their understanding of civic responsibility and collective decision-making.

The expectations placed on the class teacher stem from the foundational principles of Waldorf pedagogy’s educational philosophy. The class teacher is a stable and guiding figure in the development of students’ personalities and represents the professional embodiment of the educator’s role. Ideally, a single teacher accompanies the class for eight years, cultivating a cohesive, collaborative learning environment. This continuity allows the teacher to shape the class into a cooperative social unit and establish the optimal conditions for learning.

Their moral authority is grounded not in formal hierarchy, but in their dedication, respectful engagement with students, genuine interest in their development, and in maintaining trust-based, transparent relationships with parents. The class teacher works in close collaboration with subject teachers and holds monthly parent-evenings to strengthen pedagogical understanding within the parent community and provide insight into classroom life. Events such as open days, seasonal festivals, and family excursions further support this goal.

Gardening

The subject of gardening offers abundant opportunities for cultivating social competence, as shared tasks and interaction with nature inherently foster communication, cooperation, and the strengthening of empathy.

The school garden is an integral, open-air part of the learning environment, providing space for meaningful engagement with the living world.

Through weekly activities, students experience the rhythms of the seasons and the broader cycles of life. These tasks are both challenging and joyful, and their interaction with the living environment plays a crucial role in developing a sense of personal and collective responsibility. Students co-plan garden beds, divide tasks among themselves, and work together to implement their plans (see Figure 2). With guidance from the teacher, they discuss subtasks and make joint decisions about who will take on which responsibilities. If challenges arise, they collaborate to find solutions—further reinforcing their problem-solving and social reasoning skills.

These experiences encourage the development of essential abilities for relating to the human-shaped natural world. Gardening is not just another subject; it is woven deeply into other areas of the curriculum, including history, geography, and literature. Designing garden spaces draws on geometric knowledge, while soil analysis relies on mineralogical understanding. Biological topics such as reproduction, growth, and development, along with the nutritional role of edible plants, also play a central role.

This interdisciplinary integration helps students discover points of connection between subjects and gives them a broader perspective on the significance and complexity of their work in the garden. Through this, they gain a more holistic understanding of ecological and social interdependence.



Figure 2. Gardening.

Potential Social Impacts

This chapter highlights the key aspect of Waldorf pedagogy: its capacity to generate positive social transformation through a morally grounded, community-oriented approach. This impact is not limited to the individual—it holds significance for society as a whole. One of the most meaningful milestones in a student's personal development within the Waldorf system occurs in the 11th grade, when students engage in social practice, an individual performance evening, a drama production, or a year-long project. These activities serve as practical tests of personal responsibility, compelling students to confront the boundaries between individual and communal experience. They learn the significance of real, tangible help in social relationships and gain direct experience of human interdependence (Source: Curriculum Framework of Hungarian Waldorf Schools). While the broader moral implications of social empathy and its transformative social effects remain an open question, it is increasingly evident that in today's world, the presence—or absence—of social competencies and emotional intelligence has critical consequences. As virtual environments increasingly simulate real-world experience, the development of authentic human connection and emotional expression becomes more challenging. Emotions and relationships often shift onto an abstract, digital plane.

Yet empathy, sensitivity, and genuine presence are uniquely human qualities. While they may be simulated through artificial means, they can never be fully replicated, they can only be imitated, because of the immediacy and depth of live human experience. This becomes especially evident during live performances, where no two shows are ever identical. The rich diversity of human personality and expression permeates each moment with uniqueness that technology cannot depict. It is human presence that brings color and vitality to our shared world.

In many parts of society, the growing presence of social and service-oriented initiatives—such as the Camphill movement, the “Rózsaház” Special Education School, elderly care homes, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) networks—illustrates the depth and diversity of social sensitivity in action. These efforts prioritize quality over quantity and embody the ethos of care, collaboration, and sustainability.

In Dornach, Switzerland—home to the Anthroposophical Society’s international headquarters—interdisciplinary professional groups are actively engaged in fields such as agriculture, medicine, education, and the arts. Their work opens up new perspectives and future opportunities for young people interested in shaping a more conscious, empathetic, and community-centered world.

Annual Festivals and Social Competence

In this chapter, we aim to illustrate, through a concrete example from the Szekszárd Waldorf School, how sixth-grade students develop their social competencies during the school year’s integral celebrations. We focus on the autumnal Michaelmas festival and its hallmark event, the “Courage Quest” in particular.

Throughout the academic year, numerous festivals are organized, including St. Michael’s Day (a day of challenge, reflection, and reckoning), St. Martin’s Day (celebrating the ability to turn towards oneself and others), St. Nicholas Day, St. George’s Day (a public market fair organized by the school community), Pentecost (festival of resonance), among others. Beyond their traditional role in fostering community cohesion, these festivals present unique social challenges, inviting students, teachers, and parents alike to engage in building and navigating social relationships (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Social celebration (Pentecost).

The anticipation and preparation for these festivals are significant periods during the school year. Educators utilize this time to nurture and activate a broad range of social skills and competences. Both main lessons and specialized classes initiate collaborative projects, in which children take on roles appropriate to

their developmental stages. This shared endeavor strengthens their sense of responsibility, cooperation, and empathy, reinforcing the social fabric of the school community.

The 2023 Michaelmas festival commenced with extensive preparations, in which parents played a significant supportive role—from baking and cooking to designing and creating costumes, as well as arranging the venue. The celebration aims to cultivate the feeling of courage and resilience, symbolized by Saint Michael’s battle with the dragon. Similarly, the children are given the opportunity to confront and experience their own “inner dragons”: facing fears, anger, and other challenging emotions, learning to overcome and master them (see Figure 4). On this day, the entire school community participated together, demonstrating their endurance through various trials of differing difficulty. The true strength of the community—manifested in cooperation, mutual support, and encouragement—became most evident during the final assessment, where it was revealed whether they had successfully faced the challenges as a united group.

Throughout the month-long festive activities, several positive developments in social competencies were observed. Progress was evident across all three domains: cognitive, affective, and behavioral social competencies.

From the community’s perspective, notable improvements appeared in interpersonal skills—those abilities that facilitate the formation and maintenance of relationships. These included polite and empathetic behavior towards others, attentive listening and thoughtful questioning. Development was also visible in social intelligence, referring to the students’ capacity to perceive and understand social dynamics, group roles, hierarchies, and their ability to collaborate effectively. This is sometimes described as enhanced “situational awareness”.

Furthermore, their social problem-solving evolved in that solutions to various challenges were based on consensus. This required accurate and objective assessment of situations, consideration of consequences, and jointly agreed resolutions. Adaptability was demonstrated in the students’ responses to changing circumstances and environments.

Finally, emotional intelligence was significant in how students comprehended and accepted each other’s reactions, fears, and intensity of emotions, and how helpfully they managed these emotional exchanges.



Figure 4. Group and individual challenges “Courage Quest”.

Summary and Outlook

In this paper, we have aimed to demonstrate the methods employed by Waldorf pedagogy to develop social competencies and skills, as well as their impact on children and their immediate, yet expanding communities.

The atmosphere created by the school building, classrooms, and communal spaces provides the fundamental environment in which numerous pedagogical and artistic activities unfold. We have shown how these competencies develop and how social relationships are built through festivals and communal events among students, between students and teachers, students and parents, and teachers and parents.

Improving the quality of social morality in society can only be achieved by fostering the social skills, abilities and sensitivities of young people to a level where personal interests and material possessions no longer serve as sources of satisfaction. Instead, the focus shifts towards the well-being of the environment, community, and the world's spiritual and emotional health. This shift may help prevent the widespread apathy and negativity that have become normalized and accepted as commonplace news.

Social communities within Waldorf schools contribute to this higher goal, cultivating a more conscious and compassionate future generation.

References

- Benner, D. (1991). *Hauptströmungen der Erziehungswissenschaft. Eine Systematik traditioneller und moderner Theorien*. Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag.
- Carlgrén, F. (1992). *Szabadságra nevelés*. Budapest: Dürer Nyomda.
- Debus, M. (2018). *Az euritmia lénye*. Budapest: ABG Rent Kft.
- Dilthey, W. (1978). *Bevezetés a szellemtudományokba*. Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó.
- Kron, F. W. (1997). *Pedagógia*. Budapest: Osiris Kiadó.
- MacLean, P. D. (1993). Cerebral evolution of emotion. In M. Lewis and J. M. Haviland (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 67-83). New York: Guilford.
- Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of emotional competence*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Selman, R. L. (1980). *The growth of interpersonal understanding: Developmental and clinical analyses*. New York: Academic Press.
- Shepherd, G. (1983). A szociális készségek fejlesztése (SST). In A. Zsolnai (2003, szerk.), *Szociális kompetencia—társas viselkedés* (pp. 151-169). Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó.
- Steiner, R. (1984). *Eurythmy, as visible speech: Fifteen lectures given at Dornach, Switzerland, 24th June to 12th July, 1924* (2nd ed.). Rudolf Steiner Press.
- The Curriculum of Hungarian Waldorf Schools. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.waldorf.hu/wp-content/uploads/WALDORF-KERETTANTERV-2020-9-13.pdf>
- Vaughn, S. (1987). TLC—Teaching, Learning, and Caring: Teaching interpersonal problem-solving skills to behaviorally disordered adolescents. *Pointer*, 31(2), 25-30.
- Zsolnai, A., & Kasik, L. (2007). *Az érzelmek szerepe a szociális kompetencia működésében*. Retrieved from <https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00035/00115/2007-07-ta-Tobbek-Erzelmek.html>