

It's Time to Start the Slow School Movement

The "slow food" movement began as a protest against the global proliferation of McDonald's restaurants. Mr. Holt calls for a similar backlash against today's "hamburger" approach toward education, which emphasizes uniformity, predictability, and measurability of processes and results.

By Maurice Holt

WHEN THE YOUNG Cole Porter left his elementary school in Indiana for a prep school on the East Coast, his mother gave his age as 12, although he was in fact two years older. She had always encouraged his musical gifts and evidently decided that two more years at home, practicing the piano and entertaining passengers on the passing riverboats, was a better way of fostering his songwriting abilities.¹ We should all be grateful for her foresight.

In today's school climate, Kate Porter's deception appears both unlikely and unwise. The pressure to proceed from one targeted standard to another as fast as possible, to absorb and demonstrate specified knowledge with conveyor-belt precision, is an irresistible fact of school life. Parents are encouraged to focus on achievement, not self-realization. A present-day Porter would soon be labeled a nerdy slow learner if he flunked the math test and preferred the keyboard to a baseball bat. It's curious that, in an age when the right of adults to shape their own lifestyle is taken for granted, the right of children to an education that will help them make something of themselves is more circumscribed than ever.

This curriculum straitjacket is the price exacted for believing that education is about assessed performance on specified content. The march toward ruthless conformity began in the 1970s, as the Cold Warriors blamed schools for the supposed deficiencies in American technology. It gained momentum in the 1980s, when, as Arthur Levine has noted, the generation born after World War II became young urban professionals, and "the education of their children became the baby boomers' and the nation's preoccupation."² The 1983 Reagan-era report *A Nation at Risk* set the agenda for all that has followed. Influenced on the one hand by the idea that education is an atomistic, science-like activity, and on the other by the

output-led simplicities of supply-side economics, schools in America have been in the grip of some form of standards-based reform for nearly 20 years.

The current Administration of George W. Bush has pushed through the idea of universal standards-based tests to be given each year in grades 3 through 8, a requirement that undermines the independence of the states and is widely thought to be unworkable. History may show, as is so often the case, that this ultimate adornment to the edifice of standards may mark the very moment when its foundations begin to crumble. The 33rd Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll shows a rising trend in favor of school-based assessment and of public schooling in general.³ The results of state testing in English and mathematics, far from offering new insights, merely confirm that the chief determinants of performance are parental income and the level of school resources -- in short, the affluence of the neighborhood. Conservative columnist George Will puts it more brutally: "The crucial predictor of a school's performance is the quality of the children's families."⁴

But this is not a law of nature: it reflects the tendencies of tests to reflect culturally embedded concepts of student "quality" and of school funding systems to offer least to those who need most. To excel in high-stakes tests, even schools in sleek suburbs are prepared to distort their curriculum, as Billie Stanton observes in a revealing report on the effects of standards-led reform in Colorado: "Even parents in an affluent Boulder neighborhood . . . are questioning whether private school may not be preferable, since watching their fourth-graders return home dazed and drained from being drilled again and again in how to write a 'power paragraph.'"⁵

In borderline schools, Stanton writes, there is "a narrowing of curriculum, a trend that sucks all enrichment and love of learning out of education while creating a 'drill and kill' focus on reading, writing, and math to the exclusion of everything else." Colorado rates schools on a bell curve, with the threat of intervention for those that "fail," creating a climate of fear that encourages recourse to dubious practices -- not least by the state itself. Astonishingly, a state recommendation points out that a school can raise its rating and avoid humiliation merely by getting "three more kids to prove proficient on third-grade reading and five more on fifth-grade reading."⁶ The pursuit of "tough standards" can corrupt everything it touches -- not least, the results.

A Fresh Perspective

There has to be a better way of understanding what schools should be about and how to improve them. For some, charter schools are the answer, but the recent RAND research offers little encouragement for this view, and privatized schools have fared no better.⁷ A report on an Edison school in Michigan hardly inspires confidence: standardized tests are administered by computer every few weeks, and "inside the classroom, the teachers follow a curriculum . . . which provides daily lesson plans that are scripted down to the questions that the teachers are to ask students about particular stories."⁸ The default discourse of the classroom has become command rather than conversation. Little wonder that students have become as restless as their teachers. It is time we devised a fresh scenario that will help our legislators to get their feet on the ground again.

I suggest that for guidance we turn, in the first instance, not to educational theory but to a different setting where thought and action are closely connected. We need to move away from mechanical models, where the ends are defined from above and the appropriate means are applied from below. We need to think instead about how people come together to examine and improve an activity which, like education, depends in its most realized form on the unexpected and the unpredictable. Learning and teaching are often at their richest when the moment gives rise to an expected insight, when what Dewey called the collateral experience can generate a new end and set in train new means to achieve it.

Something of this kind began to happen in 1986, when a McDonald's hamburger franchise opened its doors in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. Carlo Petrini -- then a journalist for a weekly magazine -- made a joke that turned into a movement: "We said, there's fast food, so why not slow food?"⁹ Now the International Slow Food Congress meets annually; there are American slow food convivia in New York, California, and North Carolina; and Italy has its first slow city. The founding manifesto declared: "A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life."

As the movement has grown, its main concerns have emerged: it is, "above all, a movement for cultural dignity," it is "a battle against a way of life based solely on speed and convenience," and it seeks to save "the cultural inheritance of humanity."¹⁰ Preserving the variety of different kinds of food, challenging legislation that restricts small producers, and making good, cheap ingredients available to all have become particular issues, while of course encouraging ways of living that find time for agreeable meals and quiet reflection.

Some similarity is already evident with the ends of education, in which respect for our cultural inheritance and for a variety of ways of interpreting it goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the long-term implications of schooling rather than short-term rewards. We remember from our schooldays not the results of tests but those moments when a teacher's remark suddenly created a new perception. As Michael Oakeshott put it, "Not the cry, but the rising of the wild duck impels the flock to follow him in flight."¹¹ You are not a mere observer, a passive consumer - you become part of an experience, savoring the moment and benefiting from its intensity.

It is helpful to identify some aspects of the slow food movement that underpin its approach. First, it expresses a definite *philosophical position* -- that life is about more than rushed meals. Second, it draws upon *tradition* and *character* -- eating well means respecting culinary knowledge and recognizing that eating is a social activity that brings its own benefits. A respect for tradition also *honors complexity* -- most sauces have familiar ingredients, but how they are combined and cooked vitally influences the result. And third, slow food is about *moral choices* -- it is better to have laws that allow rare varieties of cheese to be produced, it is better to take time to judge, to digest, and to reflect upon the nature of "quiet material pleasure" and how everyone can pursue it.

These attributes are not chosen at random; they are prominent in the writings of the curriculum theorist Joseph Schwab, and William Reid has suggested that they mark out what Schwab termed "the practical" approach to curriculum activity.¹² In "The Practical: A Language for Curriculum," Schwab argues that this view of social action itself embodies theoretical constructs such as tradition, character, and context and is fundamentally different from action conceived as "practice" and divorced from "theory."¹³ The slow food movement is entirely concerned with the language of the practical; it is all about real people eating, arguing, and legislating in ways that take account of particular issues, informed by the three crucial elements of philosophical grounding, tradition and character, and moral choice.

The alternative view, which currently dominates the scene, draws a distinction between theory and practice. Because theory, Reid argues, tends to be seen in education as "abstract and refined in character," it follows that practice "is conceived as concrete and mundane." Practice then becomes "the deployment of knowledge and skills," such as management, presentation, and implementation.¹⁴ By the same token, practice becomes value free: "Good practice is simply that which works. The idea of the practical, on the other hand, represents practice as

deeply implicated with considerations of a social, cultural, and political nature that . . . confront problems of moral choice." [15](#) In sum, the prevailing view of practice is not philosophically grounded, is independent of tradition and character, and is unconcerned with moral issues.

Developing the Metaphor

I suggest that conventional fast food expresses this narrow conception of practice. There is no philosophy behind the concept of a hamburger -- only the theory that a beef-filled bun is tasty and relieves hunger. Neither does its preparation draw upon tradition and character, as does, for example, the preparation of sole meunière or a Genoese sponge cake. Fast food involves only rudimentary skills, which can be taught to employees without any knowledge of the culinary arts. The fact that virtually the same hamburger sells in Paris and Moscow demonstrates its supremely decontextualized nature. And the sourcing of its ingredients is not a matter of morality; in a hamburger, one kind of salt is as good as another.

There is assuredly a place for both fast food and slow food in the world. There is nothing intrinsically objectionable in hamburger practice. If one is in business to make hamburgers, the fast food model -- theory and practice -- makes perfect sense. It is wholly appropriate to the nature of the problem, which is uncomplicated and procedural. But this is not the case if one has in mind a meal that is at once eclectic, imaginative, and socially stimulating. Judgment, finesse, tradition, and ambience all have a part to play, since the taste of food on the palate is just as important as a full stomach. And indeed, it is possible to produce a quick meal within the slow food canon: an omelet takes less time to prepare than the average burger.

In the context of education, the form of schooling espoused under the banner of standards demonstrates the same deterministic thinking that governs the production of fast food. What is sought is a conception of educational practice that can be defined in terms of content and sequence and assessed in terms of agreed-upon ends capable of numerical expression. The engagement between teacher and learner should be as predictable as possible, and variation between one teacher and another can be offset by scripting the learning encounter and tightening the form of assessment. If the purpose of schooling is to deliver the knowledge and skills that business needs, this approach cuts costs, standardizes resources, and reduces teacher training to a school-based process. Above all, the efficacy of the operation can be measured and the results used to control it and its functionaries -- the teachers.

But if schools exist to equip students with the capacity to address the unpredictable problems of adulthood and to establish themselves in a world of growing complexity, then crucial disadvantages emerge. Classroom practice becomes a boring routine, teachers feel de-skilled, and, though what is learned is measurable, its educative value is diminished. The "fast school" offers a static conception of education that has more in common with training. And how can this kind of practice be improved? Since it derives from an impoverished view of theory, distinct from practice, only practice itself can guide improvement. Hence the emphasis on defining "best practices" or "what works," based on the dubious assumption that practice is context-free. But can it ever be?

Commitment to standards-led school reform means creating a system of schools geared solely to the product -- test results -- and not to the process of creating educative experiences. Gerald Bracey has offered a few of the personal attributes that standardized tests cannot measure -- attributes crucial to the cultivation of the virtues and the formation of moral agents: "creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, humor, reliability, enthusiasm, civic-mindedness, self-awareness, self-discipline, empathy, leadership, and compassion."¹⁶ But these are as remote from the activity of fast schools as is gastronomic pleasure from fast food.

The result of creating fast schools is institutional indigestion, and signs of discomfort are now appearing. Even Advanced Placement courses in mathematics and science are not immune. A study commissioned by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education is critical of "the curriculums that most of those courses cover and the way they are taught. . . . The courses crammed in too much material at the expense of understanding."¹⁷

Standards supporters have always claimed that, if better tests are used, the quality of teaching will improve. The Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) is therefore of particular interest, since it has been rated "the best in the nation."¹⁸ But the February 2002 MSPAP results were so misleading that the latest eighth-grade version has been "all but scrapped." What went wrong? It turns out that the MSPAP tests, devised to "emphasize critical thinking," were difficult to grade -- "the process was rushed and subjective."¹⁹ And in any case, all the state wanted was "content-based exams" and simple tests to match. The implication is clear: however much time is spent improving tests, the problem lies elsewhere -- in the mistaken belief that tests and targets should drive the curriculum.

A school system based on testing content and basic proficiencies is better than none at all, and developing nations can afford to do little more. What is surprising is that the richest country in the world is hell-bent on doing exactly this.

It was certainly not meant to be so; the slow school requirement for philosophical grounding was very evident in the conclusions of the committee set up in 1918 by the National Education Association to develop the high school curriculum. Its members rejected continental models and decided to forge a uniquely American settlement. They took account of the earlier efforts of the Committee of Ten, of the writings of John Dewey, and of pressure from manufacturers who wanted school leavers to have the skills that would help them compete with European rivals. They took account of cultural tradition, too, and believed, like post-revolutionary France, that the success of the republic depended on schooling that was well conceived, free from sectarian bias, and equally accessible to all. But it was to be local rather than national. You went to high school to become an American, but you took a chance on what sort of Americans were running the school board.

The result in the U.S. was, and is, a system in which the language of the practical still lingers, but it is now in competition with an emphasis on deterministic doctrines that threaten to drive it underground. In part, this reflects the growing strength of the industrial lobby in American politics, but it also owes much to psychometric influences which, over the years, have persuaded Americans that numbers are everything: if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. Nothing, as W. Edwards Deming remarked, could be further from the truth: "The most important figures needed for management of any organization are unknown and unknowable."[20](#)

The system of local school boards was intended to frustrate federal interference, but the political prominence given to education since the 1960s has made such interference inevitable. Yet, unlike France, America has no tradition of education as a national construct. Indeed, the local character of the U.S. system was to be its strength. The current scenario could lead to the worst of both worlds: the individual character of schools undermined by national legislation based not on deliberation but on dogma. The more education is seen as a commodity, the less its power to animate the emotional attachment of students. The day may come when one goes to high school not to become an American but to acquire the technical skills of globalism.

The dissatisfaction of parents with fast schools is beginning to surface. One alternative is home schooling; another is to use a private school -- some of which offer radical solutions. In Woodstock, New York, for example, a "Sudbury School" has opened, with no classrooms and no grades, based on the proposition that "there

is no right way to learn, no time by which a student should have mastered a given skill."²¹ A study of students attending a similar school in Massachusetts found that 87% went on to higher education, but much of the interest in the Woodstock enterprise "has come from middle-class children's parents,"²² which is not irrelevant; these students are better able to cope with unstructured formats and benefit from family resources as well. But in the public sector, a slow school must have the practical underpinning to make it an enriching vehicle for students from all social and cultural backgrounds.

Toward the Slow School

What would a slow school look like, and would parents make use of a school with such a counterintuitive name? How might Schwab's three principles of philosophical grounding, tradition and culture, and moral judgment play out in practice? The first point to make is that several American initiatives designed to reform public schools over the last two decades or so have much in common with the principled underpinnings of the slow school. And variety should be encouraged. There ought not to be a canonical slow school, any more than there can be standardized slow food. Commonality of approach does not imply uniformity of practice.

It's reasonable to suppose that Theodore Sizer's Horace would be happy to work in a slow school.²³ The idea that "less is more" fits exactly with an emphasis on intensive rather than extensive experience. Better to eat one portion of grilled halibut than three king-sized burgers. Better to examine in detail the reasons why Sir Thomas More chose martyrdom or why Alexander Hamilton argued for a strong federal government than to memorize the kings of England or the capitals of the states of the union. The slow school is a place where understanding matters more than coverage; one takes time to see what Newton's concepts of mass and force might imply, to appreciate their abstract nature and the intellectual leap they represent. Then the usual algorithms fall into place quickly and securely. The slow school offers the intellectual space for scrutiny, argument, and resolution.

These are all essential to practical inquiry, and it would seem that the Paideia schools established in Chattanooga demonstrate the value of such strategies, since they manage to incorporate Mortimer Adler's commitment to Socratic dialogue while satisfying Mammon's need for good test results.²⁴ Indeed, the supreme irony of the slow school is that precisely because it provides the intellectual nourishment students need and puts curriculum first, good test results follow. Success, like happiness, is best pursued obliquely.

Equally relevant is the work of Deborah Meier, who has shown how a school, given the autonomy to do so, can construct a demanding curriculum that engages students from widely varied environments and can carry them forward into higher education.²⁵ What all these schools have in common is the power to improve themselves, and this is the singular virtue of any school curriculum that uses the language of the practical. Because ends and means are allowed to interact, improvement stems naturally from the deliberation that arises from this interaction. Improvement is not, as legislators have come to believe, a matter of extrinsic pressure; it is an intrinsic property of the school itself, precisely because "the practical" embodies theory within its practice.

Is this the time to start the slow school movement? I believe it is an idea whose time has come. At a stroke, the notion of the slow school destroys the idea that schooling is about cramming, testing, and standardizing experience. It legitimizes a range of admirable yet hitherto marginal strategies for schooling and brings them into the mainstream of argument, using a philosophical basis that is supple enough to accommodate a variety of reform programs, yet tough enough to resist the counterarguments of the standards movement.

The slow approach to food allows for discovery, for the development of connoisseurship. Slow food festivals feature new dishes and new ingredients. In the same way, slow schools give scope for invention and response to cultural change, while fast schools just turn out the same old burgers. If we think about the future of education, we assuredly want a more satisfying and stimulating approach than the present sad state of affairs. Only slow schools hold out that kind of promise. The idea of the slow school, therefore, is more than a new metaphor; its foundation in the notion of the practical gives it great scope for development. It would seem to be desirable to form an association that could exchange ideas and establish the slow school concept as a distinctive institutional strategy for schooling in the new millennium: an approach that combines agile pedagogy and responsive structure with an imaginative grasp of knowledge and understanding.

The putative Slow School Association would help parents, legislators, and administrators understand not only what a slow school is, but also what it is not. It is important to establish the intellectual credentials of the slow school, since it would be necessary to agree to certain preconditions with legislators and administrators. For example, frequent testing (as opposed to informal teacher monitoring) is inimical to the philosophy of the slow school. Once slow school students have demonstrated their ability to do well with fewer tests, the movement

would acquire political clout and could help rein in the senseless over-testing that currently threatens schools and students.

One can suppose, for example, that a slow school would make use of computers as aids to learning, but without attributing to them the numinous educative powers that figure in the rhetoric of many politicians. Equally, the language of the practical, as the deliberative underpinning of curriculum thinking, has nothing to do with postmodernist flights of fancy of the kind espoused by some educational theorists, nor with the notion of basing a curriculum solely on practical work or students' transient needs and interests. Rather, the slow school philosophy, as expressed through the language of the practical, affirms an eclectic approach to schooling that addresses the question put by Robert Dearden: "Why should everything be judged by the standards appropriate to mathematics and science?"²⁶ The language of determinism, given brutal expression in the standards movement, obliges us to recall Aristotle's caution: "It is the mark of an educated man that in every subject he looks only for so much precision as its nature permits."²⁷ Between the precision of tests and the raw variety of classroom life lies a vast gulf.

Recent developments in Japan have a bearing on this issue. Starting in the 2002-03 school year, Japan's public schools will pursue a radically different curriculum that offers students much more free time -- a deliberate departure from the extreme formality and relentless drilling so admired a decade ago as the paradigmatic example of what American schools should be like if the U.S. were to regain its lead in the global economy. A senior official of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Ken Terawaki, has a convincing explanation: "Our current system, just telling kids to study, study, study, has been a failure. Endless study worked in the past, when . . . Japan was rebuilding. . . . But that is no longer the case . . . telling them to study more will no longer work. . . . We want to give them some time to think."²⁸ There is concern "that an orderly and unimaginative school system excels at producing pliant, disciplined workers . . . but is failing to produce the problem solvers and innovators of the future."²⁹ By pursuing a punitive, outdated model of schooling rather than encouraging U.S. schools to individualize, innovate, and fulfill their historical purpose, America has become stuck in a time warp.

There is no reason why the phrase "slow school" should not acquire the cachet associated with "slow food." In many aspects of life, doing things slowly is associated with profound pleasure. Fast sunbathing is not regarded as particularly enjoyable. If we want to understand a striking baseball catch, we replay it in slow motion. Why try to absorb the treasures of Florence in a brief guided tour, if you

can spend a month appreciating them for yourself? If we want our children to apprehend the variety of human experience and learn how they can contribute to it, we must give them -- and their teachers -- the opportunity to do so. Let the slow times roll!

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