

Fresh Thinking About Schooling

Maurice Holt (first published on Vanguard website April 2006)

In her celebrated *Classic Italian Cookbook*, Marcella Hazan wrote: "What people do with food is an act that reveals how they construe the world." At the time - thirty years ago - it was a sentiment that needed a word of explanation. We now take what we eat much more seriously, and it is timely to ask: What does a school lunch of reheated burger and chips have to say about how we construe the world? For that matter, what does it say about how we construe the nature and purpose of education?

Some fifteen years ago, the Italian journalist Carlo Petrini was strolling past a new MacDonald's franchise in the centre of Rome and launched a major eating revolution. He paused and said: If this is fast food, why not have slow food? In much the same way, I was thinking about the standards-based school curriculum, with its emphasis on regurgitated information, when I recognized the analogy with fast food. What we have created, with our tests and targets, is the fast school, driven by standardized outcomes. So why not devise a slow school, driven by an emphasis on how ideas are conceptualized, just as slow food is driven by how the innate pleasures of eating can be realized?

The concept of Slow, as it has emerged from the slow food movement, derives its power as a metaphor from its moral force. It is about what it is good to do; to enjoy "quiet material pleasure", as Carlo Petrini has put it, which entails making judgments about conduct, virtue, and balance. In the Slow City, for example, the virtue of courage emboldens citizens to restrict the growth of hypermarkets so that specialist providers are not put out of business. As a result, people can conduct themselves thoughtfully in a society that values personal experience.

Since education is essentially about equipping our children with the ability to act responsibly in a complex society, the idea of a Slow School follows very readily from the metaphor of Slow. It brings to mind an institution where students have time to discuss, argue, and reflect upon knowledge and ideas, and so come to understand themselves and the culture they will inherit. It would be a school that esteems the professional judgment of teachers, that recognizes the differing interests and talents of its pupils, and works with its community to provide a rich variety of learning experiences.

This is a far cry from schools that measure their success by the ability of students to pass tests and meet numerical targets defined by obscure "standards" - where you get a good grade, as W.E. Deming remarked, "By feeding back to the teacher the same marbles that the teacher gave out to the class." Ticking boxes on multiple-choice tests has very little to do with education, yet this is the basic driving force behind the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States, and in England as the result of policies established by Conservative governments and reinforced by Mr Blair's New Labour administrations. Public education in these two democracies has taken as its model not the moral character of slow food but the commercial character of fast food.

What matters in fast food is not the process of preparing or educating, but the outcome. And the product itself is so worthless - a burger has little nutritional value. Schooling based on standardized tests and targets treats students as vessels to be filled rather than people who want to understand, to be inspired, to make something of themselves.

These "fast schools" deskill teachers, just as burger bars operate largely on casual labour. Decisions about the curriculum are made outside the school, and teaching is controlled from external test results evaluated by inspectors and officials. This is the inevitable result of running schools backwards from outcomes - it's like driving by looking in the rearview mirror, to quote Deming again. It sucks all the vitality and imagination out of the school and dissipates it in test factories and management factories - to use John Seddon's term. No wonder the result is bored students and demoralized teachers.

The metaphor of the standards-based school has to be replaced by the metaphor of the slow school - but it is not an easy task. Talk of standards conjures up a folk memory of fighting battles and winning wars, of steadfast purpose and reliable automobiles. It's a powerful image, but it's completely wrong-headed. The underlying assumption is that if we can make car engines to a high standard, why not turn out students to a high standard? The answer is simple; manufacturing crankshafts is a technical problem, while educating pupils is a moral problem. As Aristotle recognized, different kinds of problems need different methods of solution.

In the case of the slow school, we have to solve complex, practical problems of a moral nature. So at the heart of the slow school is the idea of bringing together, when new proposals are to be discussed, the responses of its students, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. In this way the school renders a continuous account of what it is doing to those with a real interest in its work. Accountability is built into the process of curriculum - it's part of a continuing narrative that has real meaning for pupils and parents.

This is much better than the summative form of accountability generated by standards-led schooling. Parents are confronted with tables of comparative performance on tests which baffle rather than illuminate. Only the politicians benefit; when the numbers go up, they take the credit, and when they go down they blame the schools.

The slow school can call upon an extensive tradition of liberal education that has been elbowed aside by command-and-control zealots. For teachers, the task is to devise systems that promote understanding by addressing the variety that students bring to the learning process - variety in home background, interests, ability and character. This is similar to the central activity identified by Seddon in revitalizing service organizations: only those who do the work can "make the work work," by mastering a repertoire of theory and practice that, in the case of schooling, enables teachers to enjoy the challenge variety presents.

Support is growing for the slow school movement. Some schools, already on the right track, are beginning to discover that they are really slow schools. The metaphor of Slow is not to be taken literally; a cool saxophone solo has nothing to do with temperature, and slow school students may take time modelling a medieval manor house in the morning, then tackle some vigorous trigonometry in the afternoon. Acquiring knowledge and understanding needs a variety of strategies, and the slow school is designed to offer them.

Maurice Holt is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Colorado at Denver.