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# **THE CASE FOR THE SLOW SCHOOL**

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## **Introduction**

The concept of the slow school derives from the slow food movement, which began in Italy nearly 20 years ago and has since established “slow” as a metaphor for enterprises that respect tradition, community, and deliberative judgment. Its founders – an informal group of writers and journalists – were concerned with the implications of a culture that, in pursuit of instant gratification, regarded eating as a necessary inconvenience rather than a form of “quiet, material pleasure”<sup>1</sup>. Their fear was that meals based on cheap ingredients and unskilled labour would make money for corporate business at the expense of other traditions – locally-produced foods, specialist skills of preparation, and healthy yet affordable dishes. Equally important are the conversation and reflection that accompany a meal conceived as a social experience. There are now some 80,000 members of slow food groups spread around the world, and a substantial number of slow cities, where councillors think twice about allowing supermarkets to threaten small shops and impoverish producers. A local campaign has become an international movement that puts quality of life at the centre of its thinking.

A closer look at the fast food industry is not irrelevant. The system aims to produce items that are as cheap and uniform as possible. It is driven by outcome requirements which are readily measurable (shape, size, weight, colour) and which determine the nature of the process – simple procedures that can be learnt by unskilled labour. The outcomes also determine the input: preformed, identical portions based on inexpensive ingredients. In brief, uniform outcomes drive a system based on identical processes. Compliance with external norms is seen as essential<sup>2</sup>.

Now suppose a government requires by law that the school curriculum must be such that all students demonstrate, at various stages, a minimum level of performance in certain subjects, to be determined by standardised testing; subject matter will be prescribed and in some cases lessons will be scripted; inspectors will regularly determine every school’s degree of compliance and make numerical assessments of the performance of its teachers. The similarity of such an operation with the production of hamburgers is remarkable. In this “fast” school, the entire system is driven by a series of test-based outcomes, which in turn stipulate curriculum content and impose uniformity upon curriculum process: since every child takes the same test, little time is available to allow for variation from pupil to pupil. The effect of using outcomes as driver is to *push* the student through the system, by stressing what the student has to acquire rather than extending the student’s interest to particular ideas.

This is a reasonable description of the schools created by the 1988 Education Reform Act – prescriptive legislation that won bipartisan support and has been endorsed by all subsequent administrations. The original “National Curriculum” was virtually a giant hamburger, too bloated with fat content to pass through the school door, and clear evidence that Parliament’s obsession with enforcing standards would oblige teachers to concentrate on training rather than educating. Twenty years of trimming and tampering have, if anything, reinforced the innate defects of this curriculum model, and its promise

to improve education remains unfulfilled. If this is what the fast school is like, it's not unreasonable to suppose that a slow school might be better.

### **Attractions and defects of outcome-based education**

A proposal to replace the current system needs to examine the causes of failure. The basis of the National Curriculum (which does not apply to Scotland, and is subject to modification in Wales) is the doctrine that if Britain is to compete in the global economy, schools must be driven by national standards defined by numerical goals. Business interests have backed this argument and politicians appear to support it. Its basis in economics, and its suitability as an overriding educational aim, have been challenged by Alison Wolf<sup>3</sup>. Implicit in the 1988 Act and in subsequent legislation is the command-and-control management model that deprives schools of their autonomy. Notable among its critics is W. Edwards Deming, who has attacked similar American legislation: "A numerical goal accomplishes nothing. What counts is the method ... Ranking and reward of individual people, schools, districts, do not improve the system. Only the method is important. By what method?"<sup>4</sup>

The 1988 Act offers no thoughts on method, and neither has subsequent legislation. Instead, the literacy and numeracy strategies proposed by Mr Major's government and implemented by Mr Blair are merely programmed procedures for teachers to follow. Method inheres not in the recipes of consultants but in the decisions teachers make as professionals.

Faith in outcomes is not the only problem with standards-based schooling. Making standards work requires reliable methods to measure performance – an expensive business when every student is to be tested in maths, English and science. The more exacting the test, the more complicated and costly it becomes. It took the Major government very little time to abandon the formats devised by academics and plump for simple paper-and-pencil answers. And what do the results mean? A crude standardised test cannot be an accurate measure of the student's entire knowledge and understanding at that point in time. Shrewd guesses can conceal profound ignorance. Deming argues that the variation in test results simply reflects the variation in the system – the system that requires students to give back, in the tests, the information rammed into them by the teacher. Test results describe the performance of the system, not of individual students. This explains why, in the "league tables" comparing the aggregate test results of schools, there is usually less than ten percent variation about the mean. The results merely show that all the schools function as stable systems, within the limits of normal variation – exactly what one would expect, since they are all required by law to do the same thing. Only if a result lay outside expected limits would it have any significance for school performance.

The failure of the National Curriculum to provide a satisfactory model for schooling can hardly be doubted, when public faith in test results is waning, teacher morale is so low that many new teachers leave after three years, and deputy heads are reluctant to apply

for headships because the position is so demanding, so unfulfilling, and so insecure. Inspection is a notably effective way of destroying self-esteem.

In 1996, a book on the current state of education observed that: "General disruption is clearly a matter of concern, and by no means only in inner-city schools ...The overall picture is, to say the least, alarming"<sup>5</sup>. This was after eight years of the National Curriculum, and hardly a vote of confidence: but Mr Blair was to continue the strategy with renewed vigour. Indeed, the quotation comes from a book by Michael Barber, who became a senior official in the 1997 Blair administration, with particular responsibility for raising standards.

Ten years (and many billions of pounds) further on, the 2005-06 report of the Nuffield 14-19 Review has this to say:

First, it is our contention that motivating disaffected learners requires more than the introduction of specialist vocational provision pre-16. Addressing disaffection has to be seen within the much broader parameters of reforming secondary education as a whole to tackle the roots of alienation rather than its symptoms. This type of reform demands a culture shift ...<sup>6</sup>

It appears that disaffection 14-16 has grown to the point where separate "vocational" courses are needed – last seen in the 1970s, when the old grammar/secondary-modern rift still lingered. Modernisation – Mr Blair's cry as each fresh initiative was launched – has turned back the clock.

### **The path to reform**

Given a more open-minded approach, and respect for school autonomy, it is not difficult to improve matters. Wales has shown initiative in abandoning league tables and introducing a form of baccalaureate that currently can incorporate two A-levels. The Scottish curriculum allows a degree of school autonomy and continues an enlightened tradition going back to the Munn and Dunning 1970s reports on curriculum and assessment. The irrelevance of benchmarks, tests, targets and inspections is confirmed by many other countries, notably Finland, where none of this apparatus exists, schools are free to make their own curriculum decisions within very broad national guidelines, and teaching as a profession is the first choice of the most able graduates.

Clinging to tests and outcomes is entirely wrongheaded. As Deming remarked, "It's like driving by looking in the rear view mirror"<sup>7</sup>. The aim of an educational encounter is to seek what John Dewey called "an end in view" – to encourage students to look ahead, to imagine, reflect, pursue consequences – rather than push students back over material simply so that it can be recalled in a test. Dewey observed that what is learnt is often not what is taught, but what is collateral to it. Research shows that students, told that successful completion of a task brings a reward, perform less well than those who do so out of their natural interest. Testing and targets are about extrinsic motivation; education – the development of mind – is about intrinsic motivation. Testing also

suboptimises the system: if tests in maths, science and English are crucial to success, other subjects are neglected while teachers focus on the tested material.

A further effect is that the ability of teachers to link their interactions to varying student needs is tightly circumscribed when the outcome of the encounter is predetermined by the subject-matter that will be tested. Bright students want to go further, or examine related issues; slower students need more time and different forms of explanation. But the prescribed material must be covered, so the result is disaffected students at both ends of the ability range. Dealing with this *inherent variety* is crucial if students are to get on the inside of the school's curriculum and thus become drawn through the system. Then they acquire *traction*, and *pull* themselves into curriculum experiences instead of being *pushed* through outcome-determined material. Mr Blair's "personalisation" is not a matter of creating choice between schools, but of student engagement within a properly-conceived curriculum.

### **The nature of the slow school**

Using slow as a metaphor is counter-intuitive, but so also is cool, in the sense of an event or proposal that meets with approval. Wherever the metaphor of standards has become entrenched, it may be necessary to counter it with one that is equally strong, yet richer and more generous in its promise for education. And metaphors have their own virtues: as Israel Scheffler notes, they are "of help in reflecting and organising social thought and practice with respect to schooling"<sup>8</sup>. If we see schools as active moral agents in the community rather than passive respondents to external control, a metaphor originating from grass-roots deliberation is likely to be much more helpful than one derived from the supposed needs of corporate business.

Elaborate discussion of aims is pointless if they cannot be achieved. I suggest that a reformed curriculum must address four elements that are crucial to an acceptable form of public education:

- (a) A concept of what education is for;
- (b) A concept of how this can be enacted in practice;
- (c) Public acceptance;
- (d) Appropriate forms of accountability.

As for (a), and having regard for the ideals of the slow food movement, I suggest that the slow school would address human flourishing as a personal and social activity, based on a selection from the culture, the arts of the practical, and the formation of students as moral agents<sup>9</sup>. Regarding (b), it is clear that tests, targets, and standards have no relevance. What is wanted is a flexible strategy for learning that can take account of the variety embodied in any group of students and give them a commitment to learning for its own sake; one that provides what I have termed *traction* for every student. As for (c), the introduction of the Welsh Bac is an interesting experiment that suggests the

public may be more open-minded towards education reform than its political masters. For that matter, the growth of international interest in slow food, and the applications of the slow metaphor at local level, are not without significance. Regarding (d), I suggest it is helpful to return to the idea of accountability as *giving an account*, having regard for those directly concerned with the work of a school. The locus then shifts from inspection and targets stipulated by government agencies, to involving parents in curriculum decisions and sustaining that involvement as their children move through the curriculum. Local education authorities would have an important moderating role. I characterise this as *narrative accountability*, as opposed to the summative forms favoured in standards-based education where education is seen as a commodity rather than a process. Students' progress would be judged formatively by teachers; summative assessment would be based principally on exhibitions of student projects. A substantial literature exists on the successful use of such approaches<sup>10</sup>.

The concept of traction is analogous to what John Seddon, in another context, calls "Making the work work"<sup>11</sup>. By such devices as team teaching, resources for learning, and linkage between cognate subjects, pupil-teacher engagement can be enriched and animated by the curriculum without invoking hypothetical "learning styles", or "individual learning programmes" that undermine the social benefits of learning, or devices such as "assessment for learning", which misunderstand the essentially tacit, intuitive nature of the encounters that build traction. The following description by Mary Jane Drummond of a primary-school classroom, in "an area of extreme economic and social disadvantage", conveys what I have in mind:

In this classroom, respect is a key theme: respect for children's powers, for their emotional and intellectual energy ... [T]his respect translates into a willingness to follow ... "the grain of their thinking" ... [T]here is a direct relationship between the lived curriculum, the first-hand experiences of these young learners, and the values of the teacher who provides and organises their experiences. It is the children's strengths that are valued, not their weaknesses.<sup>12</sup>

This is the condition to which the slow school aspires. It is as valid in the sixth form as it is in the primary school.

This observation leads to the issue of education 14-19. The slow school is an approach, not a segment, so its influence can extend across the entire span. Finland provides for the entire 8-20 age range in single institutions that appear to have slow-school aspects. France has a post-primary three-year unstreamed 12-14 college, followed by a three-year 15-19 lycée offering various alternative courses. Provision must take account of existing buildings. Given, though, the importance in the slow school of catering for variety, I believe that English school sixth forms cannot – unless inconveniently large – meet this requirement. I think the French system is better, and it achieves higher age participation rates. Adapting and extending the existing English system of sixth-form and tertiary colleges, so that 15-19 upper secondary colleges pursuing coherent courses

become the norm, would not be difficult and would leave more space in 11-14 schools. Space is always desirable: it allows for a variety of learning strategies.

It is important, too, to stress that schooling starts with the curriculum and not with assessment. It would appear that the recent 14-16 quasi-vocational courses began with the invention of qualifications, the curriculum content being added later. The same approach is evident in 16-19 education: the defects of A-levels went unaddressed, and new AS-levels were added as a further complication. Certainly the International Baccalaureate, as a course-based structure, lends itself to the slow-school approach much more than do A-levels based on a mixture of subjects.

## Summary

Looking at the UK as a whole, and in the light of curriculum developments in Scotland, Wales, and for that matter even the Irish Republic, the 1988 Act increasingly emerges as an anomaly – an invasive piece of legislation based on a manufactured crisis, out of keeping with the tradition of local control moderated by national guidance. It has proved to be a costly and retrograde law that gained support out of ill-founded expediency rather than considered thought. It now emerges that Mr Blair's principal adviser on education since 1997 is not even a supporter of comprehensive schools<sup>13</sup>. Little wonder that the school scene in England is in such disarray.

The slow school is an eclectic proposal: like the hovercraft, it takes established elements and puts them together in a new framework, to produce an effect that is more than the sum of its parts. It offers a rallying point, a source of ideas and a guide to public action which could pave the way to a revival of liberal education. It offers an escape from the tyranny of numbers as the measure of educational value, and it restores the notion of a broad curriculum driven by a deliberative process that has regard to our cultural heritage and that involves teachers, students, and parents. It values conduct and understanding rather than the pursuit of performativity with its corrosive implications for teacher professionalism. Most of all perhaps, it links school and community in the solution of practical problems, which could have important social implications for a more congenial and less turbulent public life in our streets and cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Details available on the website [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com)

<sup>2</sup> See Schlosser, E. (2002) *Fast Food Nation*. London: Penguin

- <sup>3</sup> Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter?* London: Penguin
- <sup>4</sup> Deming, W.E. (1994) *The New Economics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 47.
- <sup>5</sup> Barber, M. (1996) *The Learning Game*. London: Gollancz, pp. 76, 84
- <sup>6</sup> Hayward, G. et al (2006) *Annual Report 2005-06*. Oxford University: Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training, p. 57
- <sup>7</sup> Remark at Deming Seminar, General Motors Detroit, March 1993
- <sup>8</sup> Scheffler, I. (1991) *In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions*. New York: Routledge, p. 49
- <sup>9</sup> De Ruyter, D.J. (2004) Pottering in the garden: on human flourishing and education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 52 (4), 377-389.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sizer, E. (1992) *Horace's School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Adler, M. (1982) *The Paideia Proposal*. London: Collier Macmillan.
- <sup>11</sup> Seddon, J. (2005) *Freedom from Command and Control*. Buckingham: Vanguard
- <sup>12</sup> Drummond, M.J. (2005) *Annabelle Dixon: A Tribute*. Education Forum, summer-autumn
- <sup>13</sup> Shipman, Tim (2007) "Grammar schools should never have been closed" minister admits. (Interview with Lord Andrew Adonis). *Daily Mail*, 24 January