

Slowing down as sustainability: An exploration of slow pedagogies in Aotearoa and abroad.

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I am coming to the idea of *slow* as something that is synonymous with depth and connectivity. It requires us to stop hurtling forward in our busy individualism, and instead travel down into our experience and that of others. The following paper reports my understanding of the slow education movement that has come out of my recent exploration of the literature and which will inform the next phase of data gathering.

We opened by singing a waiata (song) together. This practice is seen in many diverse cultural and spiritual rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. But why? One argument is that putting all busy-ness aside in order to sing as a group fosters *togetherness*, which DeHaan and Singer (2010) define as the development of common ground, cooperation, and care of others. The role of cooperative singing in developing a sense of “we-ness” has been validated in research such as that of Good and Russo (2016). They found that singing together promoted synchrony, greater cooperation, and other prosocial traits within a group of primary children (n=50, mean ages 7-8 years). The children were allocated to one of three groups: collaborative singing, collaborative art, or competitive games. They were then asked to play a game called *Prisoner’s Dilemma* (developed by Matsumoto, Haa, Yabrove, Theodorou, and Carney, 1986). Prisoner’s dilemma tests cooperative and competitive behaviours, including betrayal in order to forward ones own aims. Those in the singing group demonstrated significantly more cooperative behaviours and social cohesion than those in the other two groups (which were commensurate with each other).

I could not find any statistics on the prevalence of collective singing in NZ early childhood settings; however, approximately 33% of primary school teachers in year 2 will offer music every day at mat time (see Figure 1), and we can assume that singing makes up a fraction of the overall music provision. In contrast, the same group of teachers reported that 90% of them would read to the children every day. Arguably, taking time to sing together and foster we-ness is not forwarding the

economic aims of a global knowledge economy in the way that literacy and numeracy do (Peters & Besley, 2006); however, synchrony with and cooperation with a community of others likely holds an important place in the sustainability of our wellbeing. *Slow* activities, such as collective singing, resist the momentum of fast curriculum, fast routines, and fast thinking at the expense of deep thinking. They are inherently political and inextricably tied in with sustainability.

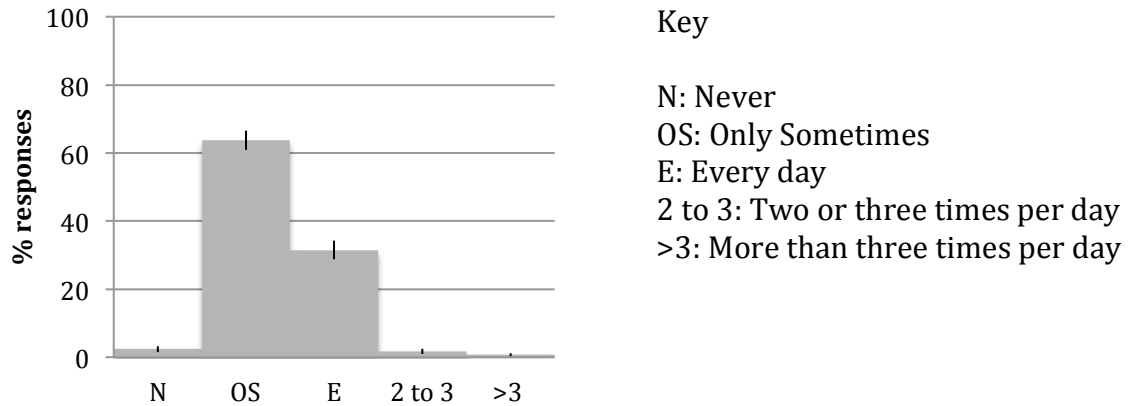


Figure 1. Percentage and frequency of music at mat time in year 2 classrooms (Mortlock, 2016, p. 77).

What is the slow movement?

Its birth is attributed to Carlo Petrini, when he initiated protests against the opening of a McDonald’s in 1986 in Italy. His argument was that fast food was devoid of all that made food nourishing; not only did it deprive eaters of nutrients, but it divorced eaters from land and the kind of conviviality that is shared with others over a slow meal. The fast food industry is a known polluter of our planet given it’s high use of plastics and packaging, intensive farming, and use of fossil fuels to produce food where it is cheapest and move to where it will be consumed. Moreover, it fails to carry any character of the area from which it comes; it is standardized. By contrast, the slow food movement is “convivial, mindful, and ethical” (Dunlap, 2012, p.38).

Out of the protests, a slow food manifesto was developed. It states:

Born and nurtured under the sign of Industrialization, this century first invented the machine and then modelled its lifestyle after it. Speed became our shackles. We fell prey to the same virus: 'the fast life' that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us

to ingest "fast-food". Homo sapiens must regain wisdom and liberate itself from the 'velocity' that is propelling it on the road to extinction. Let us defend ourselves against the universal madness of 'the fast life' with tranquil material pleasure. (Retrieved from http://slowfood.com/filemanager/Convivium%20Leader%20Area/Manifesto_ENG.pdf)

The slow movement has now branched out from food into many different areas such as fashion and education, and can now be recognised as a cultural movement. It is organised through a network of cells, each often referred to as *convivia*. In my recent trip to Auckland to visit Anutosh Cusack (Slow Food Auckland), she described the slow movement as being like a brain; each convivium was a neuron that has a specific function that is relevant to its location and is connected to other neurons through a network of neural pathways. As a metaphor, the image of a brain is apt given what we now know about the negative effects on the brain of hurrying children's development and routines, and disconnecting them from key people and places. This is akin to Elkind's (2001) idea of the *hurried child*.

As well as being connecting, slow is careful. Carl Honoré wrote a book about the slow movement called "In Praise of Slowness," in which he described it as a philosophy that could be applied to every facet of human life. In his book, Honoré states that the slow movement is about doing things at the right pace. Being conscious to qualities of processes and things are emphasised over speed; for example, in a group decision-making situation there will most likely be a focus on inclusive process. The slow movement is anti-autocracy and is interested in the collective; therefore, everyone must have space for his or her voice to be heard and considered. Decision-making is unlikely to happen with haste; however, much richness is potentially actualised in terms of hearing the voices that are often marginalised and in sustaining the cohesion of the group.

Slow Education

One of the key people involved in the slow education movement is Maurice Holt, who is thought to have developed the connection between slow food and slow education (Smith, 2017). Holt (2014a) felt that the slow food principles of collaboration, sustainability, quality, and esteem for local culture and practices were useful tenets for education. He stated that slow education should bring about learners' deep understanding of phenomena through the "arts of deliberation", and that a slow process is integral to this (Holt, 2014b). Furthermore it should foster "conduct, virtue and balance" (2014a).

With a slow approach, not only should learners be given ample time to ruminate on their learning, but the approach itself should be subjected to reflection about

power and politics. Ted Robinson delivered a now-famous TED talk in 2010 where he compared contemporary education in the OECD to fast food, captured by similar underpinning power dynamics and politics. Smith (2017) described the thesis of Robinson's (2010) talk well and further went on to describe many education systems today as being premised on "efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control" (p. 18). Instead, Smith (2017) advocates for an education system that (1) devolves power from the State to local settings, that (2) fosters critical thinking, creativity, and curiosity, (3) and that encourages people to become autonomous and self-reflective. In short, education should not socialise learners predominantly to contribute to the economy as mere future employees and consumers, but should empower people to attain awareness, freedom, criticality, and happiness (Huang, 2014). In addition, Smith (2017) argued that, "education should follow the child's innate growth rather than the demands of society" (p. 19). This sentiment was strongly expressed by Rousseau in 1762 (Smith, 2017); Rousseau, of course was highly influential with regard to some of the founding beliefs of ECE.

Mountz, et al. (2015) described slow education as *careful*. Their paper was written in the context of a university setting, wherein which they noted that high productivity is required with short timeframes and thus quality and carefulness are sacrificed; something they associated with neoliberalism. According to Mountz, et al. (2015) the antithesis of a neoliberal approach is one that is slow; it challenges elitism, resists acceleration, and foregrounds activity that is collective, collaborative, and careful. Moreover slow education aims to withstand the pressures of profiteering, commercialization, commodification, and standardization and instead bring about that, which is unique to its location, transformative, socially and environmentally just, and diverse. With a slow approach, we must look at the discourses surrounding commercial facets of education. For example, there is the burgeoning financial profiteering of early childhood education (ECE) and increasing pressure on teachers with regard to workload as they try to balance teaching, onerous evaluation and assessment processes, and support the business interests of their ECE setting (Blaikie, 2014).

Another example of commercialization in ECE includes inclusion of mass-produced, standardized children's pop culture toys or play environments without careful reflection about it. Giroux has written extensively about this in response to the pressure by Disney for children to develop a cult of consumerism that informs their identity and values. In other words, Giroux's argument is that the commercially mass-produced toys might not only shape children's brand loyalty early on and socialises them into a consumerist mindset but that they also shape children's peer culture and knowledge. Moreover, the very production of those toys often happens at the expense of children in impoverished countries and in ways that are not environmentally or socially sustainable (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). This is antithetical

to the notions of local, careful, and sustainable, and just, which the slow education advocates for.

Table 1: Key words associated with neoliberal and slow educational discourses

Key words associated with two educational discourses	
Neoliberal	Slow
Performance	Process
Profit	Attention to detail
High productivity	Carefulness
Expansion	Quality
Short time-frames/ acceleration	Timeliness
Competition	Collaboration, communal activity
Uniformity	Uniqueness
Hierarchical	Circular
Global	Local
Consumers	Creators
Product	Culture
Networking	Relationships
Efficiency	Discursive

The following section briefly describes aspects of two pedagogical philosophies in order to illustrate certain aspects of slow education. Each has the possibility for actualizing an approach to learning, which Smith (2017) described as allowing children “to pursue their own interests, become absorbed in their work, care about it and reflect on it” (p. 19). Furthermore, each has strong links to environmental sustainability.

Loose parts play

One of the earliest references to loose parts play in the literature is by Simon Nicholson (1971), although Casey and Robertson (2016) suggested that the idea of loose parts goes back to 1943 with Sørensen’s junk playgrounds (also known as skrammellegeplad or byggelegeplad) in Denmark. Notwithstanding, Nicholson’s early articles have become seminal. He was an architect who asserted that loose parts fostered creativity and imagination. He influenced several playground designers who experimented with loose parts playgrounds. Nicholson suggested that the number of materials increased variables for learning. His concept of variables transcended the actual things provided in order to include concepts such as gravity. He warned that the environment should be as open as possible in order to avoid depriving children of creative opportunities. In other words, the more that the adults control the space, the fewer opportunities can be provided for children’s innovation and open exploration. Nicholson also strongly believed that loose parts

play should be place-specific and reflect the environment/ ecology within which the play happened; for instance, the materials should be found in nature or up-cycled from junk found predominantly in the local environment. Further to this view when slow philosophy is taken into consideration this is a political act; for instance, Delind (2006) noted the importance of acquisition outside of the realms of global money systems to the slow movement.

When foregrounding found and repurposed materials, loose parts play potentially promotes a view towards sustainability; it should encourage children's affordances; they discover and develop innovative and new uses for old materials. *Affordance* describes the designed uses for something as well as its potential uses (Carr, 2001). Napper (1991) noted that children must have open opportunity to explore the properties of various resources in relation to their own skills. This assists children in getting to know their bodies in relation to the material world. Such exploration then might lead to applying their knowledge to problem solving situations. Children's ability to seek new affordances for old materials is crucial to a world where humans use more environmental resources to create new products than is sustainable. Moreover, its potential to foster innovative problem solving skills is essential; although we cannot accurately predict what knowledge and attributes children will need in order to navigate their futures, problem-solving skills are indubitably important.

Overall loose parts has the potential to foster (w)holism; children are able to symbolically and materially explore new combinations of parts to create a whole. Moreover, proponents of the unhurried and open nature of loose parts play state that it engages all aspects of the child (for example see Daly & Beloglovsky, 2016); and when combined with the outdoors children's psychological well-being and connectedness to nature is potentially improved (Casey & Robertson, 2016). Relationships, and hopefully conviviality, are central as children interact with each other on shared experiences. With a cultural and social focus on rights, children might enact experiences that foster togetherness and meaning; for instance, Casey and Roberston (2016) noted that a potential of well-provisioned loose parts is children's expression of "deliberate, ceremonial, meaningful actions often with metaphysical or transformational intent, invented by and participated in by individuals or groups; honouring or celebrating events, places, features" (p.13).



Figure 2: Loose parts arrangement

Steiner

Rudolph Steiner believed that society was in disarray after the first World War, and saw education as a method through which social renewal could occur. His educational approach is known as *Waldorf* education after Emil Molt, the director/owner of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette company, asked Steiner to develop a school for the factory workers' children (Trostli, 1998). His approach and teachings rapidly became popular in other countries affected by the war, such as Britain. By the 1930s Waldorf schools had opened in many countries across Europe and the USA. One of Steiner's key ideas was that humanity could be transformed through each individual person developing her or his best capacities in part by acknowledging a three-fold person: (1) nature of willing (doing), (2) thinking, and (3) feeling (Trostli, 1998; Sarkan & Nemeč, 2010). In short, each person is considered to be able to make a unique contribution to all of humanity, but only if his or her whole potential is witnessed and nurtured. To achieve this, a child must be well-understood (Trostli, 1998). This means that a teacher must work carefully in order to understand the child in his/her entirety and potential. Moreover, a teacher must devote ample time to carefully nurture his or her own capacities as well so that the child's can more easily be recognised (Avison and Rawson, 2014).

Similar to the slow movement, bonds between people are important; time is typically given for children to explore relationship in deep ways (Avison and Rawson, 2014). First, they will have one teacher for their early childhood time and only one other for their primary schooling. In both settings, their teacher is expected to undertake inner work in order to be worthy of the children's imitation and to meet the children without bias and with love. Steiner suggested that, "*if teachers find that they do not naturally relate well to certain children, they have the duty to understand what lies behind their feelings. More than understanding is needed, however; class teachers are expected to work on such difficulties within themselves*

until they have transformed them.” (Trostli, 1998, p. xxiii). Children in a single class will stay together for their entire schooling thus potentially developing a strong understanding of each other. Ideally, these cohorts are representative of society and allow the children to experience conflict and resolution (Avison & Rawson, 2014). The importance of cohesion is fostered as teachers bring children together for activities that promote synchrony such as singing and morning circle.

Waldorf education has several core pedagogical ideas that are integral to slow education. The first idea is self-capacity building. Trostli (1998) suggested that Waldorf education is education for the future; rather than prepare them for the world as we know it, we must prepare them for something unknowable. However, rather than a focus on facts and figures, Steiner education aspires to assist children in working towards (1) self-knowledge, (2) to develop clear, logical, and creative thinking, (3) to feel deeply and have compassion, and to (4) build strength and willingness to act for Self, humanity, and Earth (Trostli, 1998). Common Waldorf practices that are associated with these ideas might include orienting children to the changing seasons and place through a seasonal table (see Figure 3), or through working with the building blocks of nature by spending ample time outdoors together experiencing earth, air, water, and fire (yes, fire! In an ECE setting! *Wonderful!*). Waldorf teachers typically foster children’s imaginative thinking through regular storytelling; imaginative thinking, of course, being a crucial skill needed for the kind of innovations required for a sustainable future (Nielson, 2006). In addition, some of the storytelling might meet children’s spiritual needs for numinosity so stories might be about elemental beings that live in nature, such as gnomes or patupaiarehe. They may even go on, to carefully and mindfully make by hand, felt or wool representations of elemental beings to complement children’s play (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Waldorf felted gnome and seasonal table

A final aspect that I want to discuss here is Steiner’s belief in unhurried development. In fact, he believed that development occurred naturally in seven-year

cycles. With regard to young children, they need to be immersed in the material world and have ample opportunity to explore their bodies in relation to the senses, space, place, and the things within it. To enable this children in Waldorf education typically do not engage in instructional school-based activities until their seventh year opting instead for play-based education (Mazzone, 2017). This practice is supported by notable mainstream theorists such as the eminent Daniil El'konin who asserted that the best activity for children aged below seven-years is play (1972).

Final word

Slow education is more than slowing down. It seeks to achieve healthy relational bonds between and across people, as well as connectedness to the local and wider environment. It asks us to pause before we buy something and consider whether we might make do with the resources that we have on hand. In addition, it asks us to build our own skills and capacities to meet these ends.

Reflection task

Consider what contributions Slow educational approaches might make to:

- Selfhood and identity
- Community
- Humanity
- Planet

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