

Reflecting on ... Series

Reflecting on the Pace of Schooling:

By Judith McGill

As North Americans we have become accustomed to having our lives whirl by us at an astonishing pace and we are barely able to make sense of them.

In fact we have made it our custom to take life in at a pace that works against being able to assign meaning to our day to day activities. Life seems to be just happening to us. We ask where did the past few months go? It's already Fall. There is little that slows us down maybe - moving to a new home, a new child, a new job or a vacation. However, these transitions can be more like turning lanes rather than full stops, only slowing us down long enough to make a safe turn onto the next highway. In this day and age, it takes a lot of conscious effort to allow these events to slow us down to any great extent.

This article takes a look at the pace of modern life and its impact on ourselves and our children, especially as it relates to education.

There are a few dictates of modern life that most of us have consciously or unconsciously internalized to a large degree: Have it and have it now! Why wait? If you are not living on the edge you are taking up too much space.

To be on the fast track is to be in the game of life as a player not a mere spectator. The game is to spend and to speed. Guy Claxton, a British Psychologist, claims that speed has become second nature. "We have developed an inner psychology of speed, of saving time and maximizing efficiency." (Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* pg. 4)

We are all caught up in cramming more and more into every minute. Technology is there to aid what is now called "time deepening" or doing many things at once. Thanks to technology we can now drive, paint our nails, sail a boat, change a diaper while carrying out important business on the phone. We can send emails while watching the children play at the park or waiting in line at the grocery store. We have begun to take multi-tasking for granted and have mastered the ability to split our attention into several different focuses at once. We are consumed with maximizing behaviours that aim at getting the most out of each interaction. We have become obsessed with making every second count. Our fascination with fast food and the nanosecond burger is more about not having to slow our pace than what it is we are eating. Communication technology has pushed its way into every domain of our lives. We are seldom unreachable. Personal cell phones and Palm Pilots invade our private lives. The unrelenting demands of our jobs have spilled over into our family and private domains.

Time has become a commodity that we trade in. "If you will pick up the kids that will give me time to go to the gym, pick up groceries and call my mother then you can do some work before I get home".

Speed helps us to block out the horror and barrenness of the modern world. Our period is obsessed with the desire to forget, and it is to fulfill that desire that it gives over to the demon of speed. . (Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* pg. 33)

Work places higher demands on us than ever before. Technical advances have allowed work environments to expect more and more out of fewer and fewer people. Downsizing and capital flight has made us feel even more insecure in the work force than we did before. Companies can not rely on worker loyalty to stay at the job through thick and thin, as workers change jobs and careers more frequently. Companies have no loyalty to their workers. Their loyalty is directed at ensuring the bottom line. This profound insecurity has led to a number of stress related illnesses and other adverse impacts on workers,

not the least of which is the unwillingness to take time off work for illness and to take vacations. Employment statistics around the world point out that more and more people have an aversion to taking a proper vacation, for fear of losing their position in the workforce and or feeling overstressed playing catch-up when they return to work. Work has taken on an unprecedented manic pace.

We are used to having what we want when we want it. We gather experiences the same way we accumulate things, seldom holding off and waiting. We are inundated by "Why pay a cent event" marketing campaigns that delay payment for a year so that you can have it all now. We are anxious for our children to have those experiences we cherished. We have lost our sense of timing and our ability to discern what experiences are age-appropriate for children. In our over eagerness, we read our favourite books to them when they turn three and take two year old children to Disney movies that are scripted and aimed at adult audiences because we can't wait to share that experience with our child.

We place massive expectations on ourselves. We have come to expect that each day deliver certain accomplishments and we seem to need to feel that we are being productive even in our leisure, and our family lives. Children like never before have become "projects". Parents have taken on childrearing in much the same way they manage projects at work, cautiously assessing the level of input that is needed to get a certain output. Children find themselves signed up for numerous lessons from an early age in order for them to get the most benefit they can from an early start in sports, music or academics. This need to "enrich" children with additional lessons is felt even more profoundly by immigrant families who feel their children are at an instant disadvantage in trying to fit into their new way of life. These children are often under pressure to study their culture's traditional language and religion at the same time as taking academic upgrading and leisure programs to assist assimilation.

A lot of this "over programming" happens because of a deep longing or insecurity on the part of the parents. Parents send their children to lessons that they wish they had gotten when they were children. For many, a sign of affluence is to ensure that your children get every opportunity that you did not get as a child. Parents unconsciously try to make up for their impoverished upbringing, never stopping to assess what they really missed and what they may have gained by its absence.

The most deleterious affect of this constant programming and objectification of children is the imposition of the hurried adult pace onto the life of the child. Childhood, by its very nature, is a much slower pace. Children are naturally not overly concerned about the constraints of time. They linger at play. At their very best they are oblivious to time and live in the moment. They are not specialists at multi-tasking. In fact they are able to move from one intense experience to the next with the same amount of focus on each moment- savouring the experience- no inclination to multi-task. Children are, when given the freedom to immerse themselves in whatever fantasy they wish, able to make time disappear. One moment it is night time and the next moment it is time for lunch. They are masters of time. Time is not a master of them.

Children have their own inner sense of pacing that speaks to them in the quiet moments and is uniquely geared to their own developmental needs. They have an intuitive sense of when to take up the next challenge and if left alone they will do this all in their own time. They do not naturally have the same insecurities that their parents do about what they should be doing each step of the way or even a picture of who they have to be to make it in the world. These are all external pressures that are imposed from the outside by school, by the media and by parents. The pressure to be something that fits a particular stereotype of success.

Another damaging aspect of this hurried lifestyle can be that families begin to fall apart. Parents experience the pressure of work to such an extent that the only thing they can manage between work and more work is to numb out and conserve energy. Parents return to the home after stressful extended work hours and collapse with no energy left for the children or for building any sort of a home life. Children are left to fend for themselves in front of the television. Many children today have been raised without any formal ritual around mealtime or bedtime. Children fall asleep in front of the television. Children snack from the fridge or heat up microwave meals for themselves. Parents bring home takeout food. The family meal, where a meal is planned, put on the table and everyone eats together, has all but disappeared for a good number of families.

There is a significant absence of adults in the lives of some children. This can be witnessed in the alarming number of latch key children who come home to an empty home and have no adults to talk to and to work through their day with. Many households have come to rely on having two incomes with both parents out working. When parents do arrive home they are exhausted from the daily demands of life and unavailable to their children. This lack of social contact and guidance from parents has left a vacuum for many children not only in terms of having no adult role models but also in terms of learning basic social etiquette. Children are coming to school un-socialized and not able to grasp basic codes of behaviour.

Post it stickers on the fridge door are now the main form of communication in many homes. According to figures released by the British Government, the average working parent spends twice as long dealing with email as playing with their children. (Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* pg. 11)

Growing demand to Slow Down:

In response to this frenetic pace of life a growing number of people around the world have called a halt to the insanity and have consciously begun to slow down. The "slow movement" as it has been branded, is described beautifully in Carl Honore's (2004) new book "*In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*". He asks us to re-imagine the modern connotations of slow. Fast and slow are not just the rate of change in our lives- they are shorthand for ways of being. Slow does not mean dumb or dull. "Slow is the opposite of fast. Where fast means busy, controlling, aggressive, hurried, analytical, stressed, superficial, impatient, active, and quantity over quality. Slow means calm, careful, receptive, still, intuitive, unhurried, patient, reflective, quality over quantity, making real and meaningful connections with people, culture, work, food, everything". (pg. 14)

The language of slowing down began initially with the "slow food" movement in Europe and was meant to stand in stark contrast to the fast food culture that began insidiously creeping into major European cities. Promoters of "slow food" were championing a way of life that was in danger. A way of life that savours the moment in everything that takes place not only in the taking time to eat a meal, but also taking time to cook and to appreciate the flavours. The slow food movement believes in the human encounter and what takes place between people over a meal with a fine bottle of wine and good food. They are appalled at what is happening to food through genetic engineering and the desire for the "sixty second drive through" eating experience.

The "Slow Cities" movement arose out of the slow food movement and gained its momentum in Italy, a country that is particularly committed to slowing down and savouring life at a reasonable pace. There are currently over sixty cities committed to the tenets of the movement worldwide and this number is quickly growing. The Slow Cities movement is an attempt to deal with the tendency of globalization to homogenize and "conceal the peculiar characteristics" of local places. (www.slowfood.com) The Slow City manifesto contains several pledges that include: cutting noise and traffic; increasing green spaces and pedestrian zones; backing local farmers and the shops, markets and restaurants that sell their produce; promoting technology that protects the environment; preserving local aesthetic and culinary traditions and fostering a spirit of hospitality and neighbourliness. (Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed*. pg. 86)

In 2002, a well known educator, Maurice Holt, distinguished himself in the literature of education when he compared public education to fast food and called for a slower approach to schooling.

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....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. (Holt, "It's Time to Start the Slow School Movement", *Phi Delta Kappa Journal*, **December, 2002 (Vol. 84, No. 4)**)

Speeding through Curriculum:

There is a concern today in public education that since children have so much to learn, they need to begin learning academics at an earlier and earlier age. This is particularly true in Ontario now that they have eliminated OAC. There is a dominant belief that more and more must be taught in fewer years. This trend to accelerate learning is now referred to as the "accelerated curriculum" and it is almost as commonplace today in the independent school movement. It is felt that offering the child an accelerated curriculum will put the child at an academic advantage in the long run. Academic subjects as well as computers have now found their way into nursery and kindergarten classes. The Grade One curriculum is now being taken up in kindergarten. Nursery and kindergarten are no longer reserved as the place for children to learn through play and for building the social graces. Kindergarten children are sent home with homework and are expected to know how to tell time and read by the time they hit Grade One. All of this has led to a loss of childhood and an increase in children losing their sense of wonder and their ability to play. Learning has become a chore. This sped up pace also has an affect on how the child learns and what he is able to take in of what he is being taught.

Even in the public school system where they are not adhering specifically to the "accelerated curriculum" there is a quickening of academic expectations. Kindergarten children are being expected to begin academics and homework regimens when they first enter school. Below, Steve Brannan, a parent who switched his children over to Waldorf education after being in the public system for a few years, shares his inner conflict as he was supporting his son to succeed in a public kindergarten:

I remember sitting with my son when he was in junior kindergarten and then senior kindergarten, he had homework two or three nights a week, and he had to read and trace his letters...I was sitting with him and he'd put his head in his hand and sigh and I'd say "I know that you don't want to do it but you're trying really hard and that's good" and something inside me felt like I was betraying him. I felt terrible, but I had to do it because everybody else was doing it and that just didn't feel right. I could see the spark dying in him, he was such a spunky, love life kind of guy and he was doing this, he hated it but he was doing this for me. I had to ask why am I making him do this, it didn't feel right. It felt like it was really forced.

In the book, (2002) "*What Happened to Recess and Why are our Children Struggling in Kindergarten?*" by Susan Ohanian, she questions the whole practice of bringing academics and testing into the early childhood curriculum.

She points out the primary need of children to play and learn through that play and rails against the need to push academics and testing for children who are just entering school.

So today's kids enter kindergarten identified as deficient in skills that weren't even introduced to kids a decade ago. Long regarded as the place where young children develop social, emotional and verbal underpinnings on which their later academic achievement is based, kindergarten has become a targeted skill zone. After all, if you are

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under a lot of pressure to get high test scores out of second Graders, then first Grade is already too late to start teaching them to read. So standards...mentality now pollutes the place that originated as a "children's garden" flooding it with such notions as raising the bar and high stakes and zeroing in on skills. With the speeded up curriculum, kindergarten should be renamed kinder grind. (Ohanian, pg. 10)

As parents, in our anxiety over ensuring that our children are not "left behind" we expect them to focus on learning at the expense of experiencing the awe and wonder of a playful childhood. In the United States and in parts of Canada there is a trend to eliminate school playgrounds and recess in favour of studying longer and harder.

Eliminating playgrounds from the blueprints is the new fad in school construction. In this way school personnel prove they are devoted to high standards. Lollygagging over ladybugs is not permitted for children being trained for the global economy. From California to Chicago to Virginia, school districts have abolished recess. And even in districts where recess is still on the books, increasingly, children who score poorly on standardized tests are forced to forgo the play break. Those who do well on tests get a play break. (Ohanian, pg. 2)

After a decade of living with the results of this deprivation across public schools in Ontario there is over the past four years a recognition that recess can not be done away with. The Healthy Active Living programs in Ontario schools are concerned about the staggering increase in obesity with approximately twenty-five percent considered obese and many children with juvenile diabetes. For this reason as well as the increase in stress related illnesses in children, schools have instigated healthy living campaigns including snack breaks and twenty minutes of recess twice a day. (Public Health Agency of Canada: Physical Activity Guide 2004)

Susan Martin, a teacher at the Toronto Waldorf School, explains that she feels the focus on accelerated curriculum is misdirected in a number of ways. Firstly she claims that children develop differently in terms of gender and this is not taken into consideration. While most girls seem to crave the early stimulation of academic learning boys are just more interested in playing and being with their friends. Some boys are not as capable at four and five to manage the vocabulary, the language and math skills that are needed to cope. For this reason, Martin says that they see a lot of boys in Waldorf that have "failed out" of the public system and are given the signal that they are not good students. This judgment, she adds, can go very deeply into their being. In comparison, according to Martin, many little girls who are actually quite capable developmentally of taking up the language and doing the math are not as capable of entering into the social realm of negotiating, sharing and holding their own during play. They are unsure of how to find a place in the family of the class. Girls can be at risk in their ability to develop in other ways, particularly imaginatively, because they have prematurely focused on academics and much of their recognition and reinforcement has come from academics. Later in the higher grades there is a pronounced leveling off interest in academics and applied fields due to gender expectations and pressure.

Pushing curriculum early into children can set up a huge polarization within them and it is sad to see this. Boys begin to believe that they don't have the capacity and girls begin to believe that they have more capacity than they do have. In the end boys and girls even out very well academically around Grade Four. The girls may have an inflated idea of their ability while the boys may have a deflated idea of their capacity. Socially, when that happens there are real struggles and anxiety because there are judgments made about their capability very early on by themselves and others.

Secondly, Martin goes on to say that it is helpful to understand the significance of social development as a precursor for learning. She believes that if we focus in the first seven years as Steiner suggests, on their physical development and their social development, then by the time they are in Grade one or two they are really ready to take on the academic challenges in a way that has some grace to it.

They have a lot to learn from birth to seven in terms of impulse control: taking turns being kind towards the other all those things that would set up an environment where learning

can happen. If you know that you can take some risks in your peer group, that they are not going to jeer at you if your answer is wrong, then you can take chances in your learning. If you are so worried about being asked a question that you can't hear a thing your teacher is saying that is a problem. There can be big periods of time in a child's development where they really don't learn much because socially they are very anxious. For this reason we shouldn't underestimate the importance of social development that happens primarily in the first seven years.

Taking time to breathe:

All the things that bind us together and make life worth living- community, family, friendships, thrive on the thing we never have enough of,- time

Honore - "In Praise of Time"

Our bodily defenses are called upon on a daily basis to deal with the stresses of commuting, environmental toxins, working and raising a family. Today's sped up pace stimulates the adrenal glands to such an extent that many of us are living on borrowed time, using up our body's energy reserves and forcing it into adrenal exhaustion while we stay in a state of fight or flight reactions. When we begin to feel sluggish we take another shot of caffeine. While this state is chronic among the adult population, studies show that children are beginning to show signs of nervous system overload as well.

There are many ways that we can alter the hyper fast pace of life around us. The body's natural way to regulate the body and slow it down is to slow down the breathing, forcing us not just to breathe in but to also breathe out in a rhythmic fashion. This sounds natural and easy to do: however for many of us breathing has become quickened and our body rhythms have begun to match the pace that our lives demand of us, breathing in shallow quick breaths. Breathing disorders are rampant in a culture that is busy taking in nanosecond images of the world and then not taking time to let go of these images and sense impressions by breathing out.

Waldorf education is predicated on the principle that learning and child development must imitate our bodies' own rhythmic processes. It must move easily between intense experiences of taking in information and sense impressions with periods of rest and time to absorb and digest that experience.

While it is important for children to take in the world around them it is equally important for children to take time to, in effect "breathe out" and assimilate those experiences. This rhythmic pacing is essential for learning to have a quality of resonance within the child. "I am told this to be true, does it make sense to me with what I know and what I observe? Can I relate it to other things that I have learned?"

When children at a young age are asked to sit and just do paperwork- and there is nothing breathing in that, and there is very little body experience: they will call upon very strong forces of concentration which depletes their system in other ways. It is demanding of them. You can see that children who are asked to do that often will look pale and thin and be hyperactive-all sorts of metabolic manifestations of what is being asked of them that is too much or not being asked at the right time for it. (Martin interview)

Waldorf curriculum has several ways in which it supports this breathing, process within the learning process itself. Firstly it gives children plenty of time during the day to move between the two rhythms of breathing in and then out again. In the morning when children are generally focused and better able to concentrate and take things in, the curriculum is organized around a main lesson that has academic content. The afternoon focus is on artistic; physical and repetitive skill activities. Absorbing and reflecting of the morning content is encouraged through these integrative forms of learning during the afternoon. Each day teachers allow time during main lesson to recall key learning points of the day before. This recall can be done through movement, oral and written recall exercises.

Strong extended rhythms are also viewed by Waldorf schools as essential to the child's ability to learn and essentially retain various subject matters. Extended main lesson blocks give the children an

opportunity to immerse themselves in one content area at a time for a three week period. For instance every morning for three weeks a certain grade may focus their studies on history. The subjects that are taken up in main lesson are worked with in a variety of creative ways and not solely through didactic lecture and rote memory. The teacher is given the latitude to work with the subject and to find creative ways to present it to the students in order to engage them fully. For example some history blocks may be suited to biographic storytelling, skits, music and others to individual research projects. The content is brought in such a way as to stimulate the children's imaginative forces and assist them to bring questions and enthusiasm to the subject. After the three week block is over the class moves onto another subject matter. History is then taken up again during another three week block later within the yearly cycle.

Children are given a variety of physical activities that they do first thing in the main lesson in order to bring them more fully into the concentration work. These rhythmic physical exercises have a tremendous health benefit to the children as well. Throughout the day there is a lot of repetition in the form of skills lessons. Each day the children take part in skills lessons where they review math and reading skills in order to strengthen these skills in a rhythmic way.

One of the critical differences in Waldorf education is that the pace of learning is slowed down to ensure that children are learning how to learn at the same time as they are taking in knowledge. Attention is paid to the depth of the learning, as well taking care to ensure that the child has digested as much as possible of the learning. In so doing, the child is able to retain far more of what he learns.

Paying attention to the "right time"

Central to the Waldorf approach to education is the "recognition of the physiological, emotional and intellectual changes that occur as the child develops. Waldorf education is about nurturing and protecting a child's growing abilities and aesthetic and moral sensibilities, by presenting just *the right thing at the right time*. In so doing, each of these capacities will unfold fully and appropriately in accordance with the needs of each successive developmental stage." (TWS prospectus)

The curriculum is based on three main developmental periods between infancy and twenty-one. The first period between zero and seven focuses on educating the child's will by learning everything through physical activity and imitation. The teachers are dedicated to nurturing the child's physical development. The next seven years from seven to fourteen is directed at educating the child's feeling life and imaginative forces. Beginning at fourteen the emphasis is on critical thinking and analysis. In High School the "thrust is toward developing independent judgment in the students, rather than feeding them finished statements. By working with diverse points of view in their studies, the students become skilled in looking at questions from a number of sides and appreciating the differences that are uncovered."(Joan Almon, 2002 *Educating for Creative Thinking: The Waldorf Approach* that appeared in *ReVision magazine*, Volume 15, Number 2.)

Reading is one of the areas in Waldorf education where the question of what is the "right time" is seen to be essential. Waldorf educators view reading and writing as key aspects of learning and as a result strive to create a strong foundation for it in the early years. Elements of the early childhood curriculum and Grade One and Two focus on building certain capacities that are necessary for competent reading and writing. These capacities include the capacity to listen, to retain the spoken word and to recall it in a number of ways orally and expressively as well as being capable of creating vivid mental pictures of what they are hearing. Much of the curriculum is delivered orally in the form of stories, puppet plays and in the reciting of verses and plays. Children learn to pay attention in a way that is uncommon for other children their age. This capacity for attentiveness is central to the skill of reading and writing and is developed over many years. This leads to the higher level capacity of comprehending or making sense of what they have heard or later what they have read. In a Waldorf school language is introduced in such a rich way through stories, reading classic literature aloud and reciting passages that children come to understand in a deeper way that words are imbued with meaning and they must be taken seriously.

Waldorf educators believe that there is a danger that when reading is taken up at a very early age. Children may be able to read the words and yet not be ready or able to find the meaning or retain what

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they have read. In the public system it seems apparent from test scores that it is comprehension that suffers the most. These low scores have been blamed on the emphasis on early reading where meaning is not the focus. Today more and more children are reading at a young age however they struggle with understanding and remembering what they are reading. (Healy, *Endangered Minds*)

This methodical approach to reading and writing in Waldorf education is often misunderstood by parents who become alarmed at the pace of their children's progress. It is viewed by some as holding children back in some way. This perception is addressed by Helene Gross one of the teachers at Toronto Waldorf School.

We are not actually delaying reading and writing, this perception is a misinterpretation of the Waldorf program. There's a foundation being laid and children are reading in Grade One, they are hearing stories, writing down sentences from those stories and are in fact engaged in a process of learning to read right from the beginning of their formal schooling - from the first day in Grade One. In my opinion it's a fuller approach to learning to read. The reading process is connected to something meaningful. Fairytales that have meaning, that provoke feeling and imagination in the child, are an integral part of the process. This is quite different from a utilitarian approach to reading which involves learning how to sound out the words mechanically. Generally, reading material for children in Grade One is very boring and dull, because there's no depth to it. It's just a mechanical process, so the process of learning to read in Waldorf schools is more organic, it's deeper and richer and it starts right in Grade One. The children are able to recall the stories they hear in kindergarten, and then in Grade One the formal process of writing them down, and reading them begins. Learning to read is a process that is spread out over a long period of time, it's certainly not the case that it's held back, I think that it's time we corrected that myth – Oh that's the school where children don't learn to read until Grade Three. That is not true, we just use a different approach.

Helene Gross, a teacher at the Toronto Waldorf School, describes the fear that some parents have when they are watching the curriculum evolve at a slower than average pace when compared to the public system. Some parents have a crisis of faith at "around Grade two and three because of a fear that their child is not learning to read early enough in school, so they'll supplement it outside of school and take care of that fear, instead of just supporting a slower pace of learning, or a pace of learning that's more in tune with the child's natural development." (Gross, interview) These supplementary lessons can have a detrimental effect by giving the children mixed messages about their own progress and making them self conscious about their abilities.

Gross claims that these supplementary lessons can put too much pressure on the child since they are also often enrolled in a number of competitive sports or leisure events as well. Gross wonders about the effect of all of this on childhood burn out.

As a class teacher, I've seen many students whose time is very structured, in my opinion far too structured outside of school. These after school programs are not really leisure time, they do not provide breathing space, it's too organized, too many lessons, having to perform all the time. This leads to many children actually burning out by the time they get to high school and not being able to function at the level they should because of being over structured in their earlier years. This shows up as not being able to achieve what they are capable of academically. They've been used up; they've been working beyond the pace of their natural development early on, and have reached a saturation point.

There is also a recognition within Waldorf schools that there is a right time for certain developmental experiences. Children go through the grades aware that each grade holds a particular rite of passage. For instance, in the lower grades children are finally able by Grade Three to play on the sports fields during recess, up until then they are only allowed to play in the forest playground. This is seen by the students as an exciting time where they are being recognized within the school. Meredith Wylie, a Grade Eight student explains why:

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In Grade Three you want to go on the field and you are sick of the forest. Getting to play on the fields is something to look forward to. When you are not allowed to do things because of your age you don't like it but when you finally get to go on the field you feel like you deserve it. It's sort of like a child getting candy. You have to wait and it is way better when you actually get it.

In Grade Five the students host or travel to a one day Greek Olympics event where they have an opportunity of relive the spirit of the first Olympic games. In Grade Six they host a Renaissance Fair and enter into the gallantry and showmanship of the Renaissance period and so on through the grades. All of these experiences are aimed at exciting the child's passionate connection to different historical periods as well as meeting the needs of each developmental period. The student's savour moving from one year to another knowing that each grade holds a new challenge.

It takes a lot for parents to take the longer view of the education and recognize the foundation that is being built for strong academic work. We are accustomed to comparing ourselves and our children against others. We are also accustomed to seeing instant outcomes and results that are not so apparent in the steady progress of a developing human being.

Conclusion:

It is not always easy in the accelerated world of today for the Waldorf school system to declare the need for slowing down the pace of schooling so that children get the maximum benefit of a depthful education. It must constantly educate families about what they are offering in terms of an education that succeeds in finding a balance in educating the hands, heart and head and provides a strong social and physical foundation for learning in the early years. It tries to support families to examine their lives and their family rhythms so that they might find their own sense of balance between their work and family lives. It strives to ensure that the children are being held by caring adults not only during the school day but also at home. It offers a much broader picture of development than most school systems and looks at development up until the age of twenty one when the ego is fully matured. Waldorf has distinguished itself as a school system that is working at preparing children for life-long learning.

In closing, I will leave you with an image that Steve Brannan offered as an analogy between the pace of Waldorf and the public system as he sees it.

When I search for an analogy for comparing the pace of Waldorf and the pace of Public Schools I think of horse racing. If our children were racehorses, then the public school system and Kumon and all that, would be like throwing the gates open and you immediately start to whip your horse and that horse gets half-way around the track and doesn't even feel the whip anymore, it just says, "Forget it I'm not running any more".

In Waldorf it's like you love a horse, and when you love a horse, you don't let it go, you hold it back, you know what it can do, but you hold it back. It's hard to hold your kids back, I want my kids to experience everything, but they need to pace themselves for the end of the race, and at around the halfway mark, you let them go.

When I talked to High school students at Waldorf, they're not bored, they're working their butts off and it's a challenge, but they're up for it, they know they're three-quarters of the way, they can see the finish line, they're going for it. They are going to be glad to get out, because they know what they can do, but you're not breaking them and what we were doing in the public school system is that we are breaking them.

The author, Judith McGill is a parent at the Toronto Waldorf School. As a consultant on school integration and participatory theatre she works with youth in high schools across Ontario through a project called "Youth Speak Theatre". She is also the Provincial Coordinator of Families for a Secure Future, helping families whose sons and daughters have developmental disabilities. She has been interested in school reform for the past two decades.

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Interviews:

Thank you to all those that agreed to be interviewed and for sharing their insights.

Steve Brannan is a Toronto Waldorf School parent and has two children in the school.

Helene Gross is a Toronto Waldorf School High School Teacher

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Meredith Wylie is a Grade Eight student at the Toronto Waldorf School