Not so fast

(Re)finding yourself and our children in a world ruled by immediacy

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Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child: time for slow pedagogies in early childhood education

Alison Clark, London, Routledge, 2023.
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Beginning with slow food in 1986 and followed by slow cities, the 'slow movement' advocates a shift in the pace at which we lead our lives. It emphasises taking a different pace and rhythm, allowing us to see and experience our worlds in a different way. It allows us to change our relationship with time; time becomes not an ever-present and ever-constant pressure, but a part of our understanding of past, present and future events as we develop a greater awareness of how we use time and how time impacts on everything we do. Slow pedagogy builds on this broader slow movement.

Awarded the Professional Book of the Year at the *Nursery World* Awards 2023 and forming the basis of a postgraduate course carrying the title of the book at the University of Edinburgh, Alison Clark's book opens up the concepts of slow pedagogies and slow knowledge. While centred on early childhood education and care (ECEC), Clark's text, built on interviews with 20 researchers and educators from 11 countries and funded by the Froebel Trust, has much to say to the wider field of education – and to educational researchers – as it seeks to enunciate, and explore in practice, alternative narratives to the pervading and currently intensifying focus on speed in education.

The foreword to Clark's book recounts a recent study from Belgium, finding that three-year-olds in kindergarten spend 20 to 30 per cent of their time waiting. Ironically, this waiting is catalysed by the teachers' desire not to waste time, to move efficiently between activities and to ensure learning happens at speed. In the UK – certainly in England – we should heed this as a warning as current political rhetoric calls for 100 per cent attendance, longer days, extended study and higher standards (or rather, test scores). As Clark shows, slowing down, stepping away from accelerated childhoods and hurrying, may give us the time we really need to think about and to understand the world and the unpredictable future we face. Far from promoting a hurried, call-response, knowledge-rich curriculum emulating Victorianesque rote learning under combative zero-tolerance approaches, we should be looking at how slowing down might create opportunities to think about urgent issues for 21st century children and the planet.

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Clark's wide-ranging book challenges re-emerging traditional pedagogies, asking the reader to consider what might be gained from an unhurried approach to learning and the cultivation of deep, meaningful knowledge in children. It asks that we see children not as products in a system, but as humans with feelings and with important agendas and interests of their own. It advocates for an educational paradigm shift, moving away from a system prioritising superficial learning, memorisation and standardised testing (all concerns covered in depth in previous issues of *FORUM*) to one which encourages children to engage in a meaningful, reflective and experiential learning process. Through diverse case studies exemplifying innovative educational settings around the world, Clark illustrates how this shift might be achieved.

Slow pedagogies are not a new concept. In mathematics education for example, it has long been recognised – although not always seen in practice in the classroom – that real thinking can only take place over an extended time and that deep understanding takes time to develop. Clark shows us how slow pedagogies build on and use Orr's (1996) concept of slow knowledge, an epistemology that values complexity, interconnectedness and local knowledge. It is here that we begin to see the potential difficulties in evoking a slow pedagogy, where these ideas rub up against the considered 'norms' of current educational practice. Slow knowledge is difficult both to articulate and to measure and cannot be fully planned for or written down on paper in advance. Rather than listing facts to be learnt in a prescribed manner by a group of learners considered to be homogenous, a slow pedagogy sees education as contextual, complex, connected and allowed to develop over time. A learning setting that enacts slow pedagogy invites learners to bring their own self with them into the setting rather than leaving their lived experiences at the door. A slow pedagogy values the opportunity to be surprised and to face the unexpected – rather than being driven by the need to get to a predetermined endpoint at a predetermined time.

In order to achieve this, Clark examines the need for us to become 'longitudinal educators' with a sense of where a child 'was being, am being and will be'. This idea should go beyond ECEC – as could many of the concepts and cases explored in the book – and has something to say about educators' relationships with their learners; relationships which, in the broader scheme of things, are all too fleeting, lacking depth and a true understanding of the learners' lived experiences. It is important to emphasise that Clark's ideas are not about a return to some idealised way that was (that likely never was). Indeed, her discussion about how technology *should* play a role in the lives of children, how it might be employed in a harmonious, positive way to enhance learning, and how an important balance between screen and real-world sensory-rich experiences can be achieved, using technology as a powerful tool for cultivating slow knowledge in a mindful way, may sit as a useful reply to the recent kneejerk 'ban all phones in schools' discourse.

It seems possible for slow pedagogies to provide a necessary antidote to our current accelerated, next-stage-ready, system. However, I have a concern with where Clark leaves the discussion and how it may be picked up. Clark's evocative examples of where and how slow pedagogies work in practice are utterly charming (beaver dam building, anyone?), but many are set in educational and political systems quite unlike those in England. Based on my awareness of the 'lethal mutations' inflicted on various potentially promising interventions across education, I fear that the underfunded, time-poor, practitioner – or worse still, a setting *imposing* slow pedagogies – may cherry-pick aspects of the book out of context. For example, taking from Júlia Oliveira-Formosinho's interview that worksheets are simply a no-no, rather than taking or having the space to see that many artefacts – including worksheets – could be designed and used in accelerated or slow approaches, and that it is the surrounding work of the practitioner that matters. Slightly tongue-in-cheek, I do not believe it too much of a stretch to imagine a near future where an edu-business develops a slow-pedagogies package to deliver the approach quickly, efficiently and fulfilling necessary accountability metrics.

Given that there is a growing interest in redressing our fast-paced, information-driven society and the impacts this may be having on young children, Clark's book is timely. To support implementation, concrete strategies or case studies set within contexts or settings which practitioners, particularly early career practitioners, can easily identify are necessary. As much as it goes against the whole premise of this book, practitioners do need that first rung, something to grasp in beginning to implement slow approaches. The ideas underpinning this book can (should) be seen as somewhat abstract, and implementing the suggested changes in educational practices might require significant systemic shifts. Importantly, practitioners need time to engage with the ideas, to discuss what they might look like, to try out different approaches and to reflect. Implementing slow pedagogies is likely to be a slow process.

Before concluding this review, it is worth highlighting that the reach of this book is wide. It is not just concerned with implementing slow learning for our youngest children, but with finding slower ways of being and conducting ourselves. Chapter 10, 'Slow listening in research and practice', may easily be missed by its intended audiences and I would urge Clark to write this up as a stand-alone article for an education research audience. A recent student of mine made important use of Clark's discussion of 'slow listening with video reflection' to guide their research approach with great success, disrupting the status quo and uncovering important perceptions held by the children in her study. It is unlikely these would have been revealed had it not been for a slow listening approach. Slow practices in education would seem to have a lot to offer, if only we could find the time to use them.

In conclusion, Alison Clark's *Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child* is a thought-provoking and timely exploration of a potential paradigm shift in education. By

advocating for slow knowledge and an unhurried approach to learning, Clark challenges prevailing notions of academic success and offers a compelling vision of education that prioritises depth over speed. While the book may require further elaboration on practical implementation strategies, it serves as a vital resource for anyone interested in the future of education and the wellbeing of our children in an increasingly fast-paced world.

While it may seem somewhat at odds to the premise of this book, Clark's work is an urgent call to action, urging us to rethink how we educate our children and to consider the long-term benefits of unhurried, meaningful learning experiences.

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