# Introduction

> *We need to stop hurrying children. Our school days require time. Time to wonder, time to pause, time to look closely, time to share, time to pay attention to what is most important. In school we must give children the time they need to learn. To hurry through the day, to hurry through classes, grades and a timetable of achievements, is contrary to the nature of children and will do irreparable damage to their minds and souls.*[1]

IN 1985, WHEN I WROTE THESE WORDS, I was just beginning to fully understand school. I had already decided to devote myself to education for life and had fifteen years experience. But school was still full of mystery.

I understood children well. I had been working with children since high school, first as a Sunday school teacher, camp counselor, and babysitter. During college, my wife and I lived and worked as house-parents in a home for dependent children. Our family began with twelve rambunctious teenage boys. Summers we directed camp beside a meandering Midwestern prairie stream. Those who have held such jobs know they demand attention and commitment twenty-four hours a day. Like teaching.

My first job out of college was as a combination first-second grade teacher. I adored everything about working with the children: teaching reading, math, and spelling; playing on the playground; sharing silly songs and Pooh poetry. But school confused me. The institution kept getting in the way of my work with the children.

I went to graduate school in social work and became a community

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organizer, working in the field of civil rights before being drawn back to education through the inspiration of a friend.

Jon Ball had a vision that schools could be different. He introduced me to Dewey and to daring. He saw school as a community first, an institution second. He taught me, by his example, to hang on to playfulness when considering how to change school, and to draw adults into mental play the same way you would children into a game of tag. When I chose to postpone doctoral work, he encouraged me to apply for a job as a teaching principal of a small, rural, public elementary school and he coached me through those early years. He also taught me the power of skillful listening. There really is nothing in life quite like a great teacher.

I took that teaching principal's job and dropped summer camp into the middle of a public school. We had school sings and school contests. We ate family style in the cafeteria and everybody had jobs. We sang for people's birthdays at lunch and gathered every morning in a circle of teachers and staff five minutes before the buses arrived to check in, see how we were doing, and look to the day ahead. I made lots of mistakes, but I knew we were on the right track.

I tested my superintendent's patience, questioning everything from inventory to attendance forms, challenging curriculum and testing requirements. To his credit, he gave me some rope but also kept me from hanging myself, though I came close on several occasions. I learned a deep respect for the veteran teachers on staff who knew how to elicit academic skills and the critical personal skill of persistence from their students.

I learned from Betty Mayberry, for example, how to use the seemingly dry and difficult skill of dictation to light a fire under both the reluctant and the inspired student. I used that same technique every year thereafter in my classrooms, whether I was teaching first grade or eighth. For nearly a decade I shared the gathering of such vibrant and useful teaching methods with a dedicated group of teachers.

Gradually, the institution called school began to be different for me, my colleagues, the children, and parents. It took some getting

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used to, this idea of school as community, but it grew on you. It was infectious and fun and the test scores didn't suffer. I began to wonder out loud with colleagues in other schools and teacher education programs if what we were engaged in could have broader application.

In 1981, some of us joined together to found Northeast Foundation for Children and Greenfield Center School in Greenfield, Massachusetts where I have been ever since. For our first five years I taught full-time and helped administer our new community/institution. Each year I worked a little more with teachers in other schools, something I now do full time.

As we collected more and more ideas about teaching and learning through our own laboratory school as well as through our work in the field, a more elaborate structure of school as a learning community emerged. These ideas were first introduced to the teaching public in 1985 in our co-authored book, *A Notebook for Teachers: Making Changes in the Elementary Curriculum*[2], and later and more widely through Ruth Charney's book, *Teaching Children to Care: Management in The Responsive Classroom.*[3]

Our work is, in fact, now known as *The Responsive Classroom®,* an approach to professional development in education utilized by thousands of teachers and hundreds of schools nationwide. Its central idea is the need for balanced integration of social and academic learning throughout the school day and throughout the school curriculum. *The Responsive Classroom* has now become a respected contributor to the national debate on education reform.

Yet, despite our voice and that of many other national reform organizations, the bulk of educational policy continues to move toward a more stringent, mechanical, narrow, and punitive approach to schooling. Today it is called the standards movement. In its name, schools now cram more into every minute of every school hour of every school day, believing that less time to wonder and more "time on task" will make for better students. What this indicates, however, is that policy makers mistake better test scores—better student *performance*—for better students. These are two different things.

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If the focus were really on better students, children would have time in school to consider and reflect on what they were learning and time to care about and contribute to each other and their school. They would have time to ponder where their lives were headed. School would be a learning community, not a fact factory with only enough time to worry about the next test or homework assignment.

In all these years, we have not stopped hurrying children. We have not given them adequate time or space or opportunities for learning. Again and again, we have returned to the assembly-line model of production and alienation, even though extensive research has shown that different models of learning communities are more productive and effective.

If we are to stop hurrying children we must pay attention to what's been proven, and to what's most important—the children themselves, their hopes and dreams, and everyday difficulties. If we are to stop hurrying children, we must stop "busying" teachers. Today, teachers are clearly even more preoccupied than their students. Every new content curriculum a teacher is required to implement these days comes with specific daily time requirements. By simply adding up all the time requirements from the various content areas, it's clear that you would need to stretch the day into the early evening! "Being stretched" does not begin to describe how teachers feel today. Teachers are under extraordinary pressure from principals who, in turn, are hurried by superintendents who are pushed by school boards. It is a vicious and self-perpetuating cycle. All of us are pressured by standards we hurried into because we rushed the children so much they failed to meet our expectations as measured by tests for which we failed to adequately prepare them.

I know it is possible to stop this cycle if, together, our voices grow clearer and more insistent on behalf of the true needs of children in school. In this book, I advocate changing how we structure and use time in school to improve the quality of education. Time, of course, is the major resource at our disposal, and the most significant variable in any reform initiative. But "time on task" is not the

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answer. Instead, we need to explore both the quantity and quality of educational time, both the way we structure and schedule time and how we use that time. We can teach most effectively and give all students the kind of time it takes to learn and achieve to the best of their abilities if we slow down and listen more.

Thomas Merton, the great spiritual teacher, wrote:

> The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation with violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.[4]

Merton was not talking about teachers or children, but I am.

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