

## Why pushy parents fail to make the grade in education

Tiger Mums hold children back, says the Eton master behind a 'slow' approach to learning



Mike Grenier, Eton house master and 'Slow Education' champion: 'Micro-managing your children can have a corrosive effect'  
Photo: Clara Molden

By Peter Stanford

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The pushy parent is a creature of legend. While their child is still in the womb, they get its name on the waiting list for all the “right” schools. Before their offspring can walk, it’s a carefully calibrated schedule of Suzuki violin lessons, swimming galas, Pony Club and private tutors. And these tiger mothers and turbocharged dads, forever ferrying their darlings back and forth from improving activity to talent-stretching exercise, are not just the stuff of myth. I’ve met them at the school gates and they are profoundly unsettling. I try to laugh at the antics, but their sharp elbows make my own child-rearing feel like an appalling dereliction of duty.

However, according to Mike Grenier, a house master at Eton, and one of the leading lights in the growing “Slow Education” movement, I need worry no more. Pushy parents, he says, risk damaging rather than enhancing their children’s prospects. And a bit of down time – whether through instinct or parental neglect – is no bad thing. Phew, we can relax back on to the sofa.

“Micro-managing your child’s education can have a corrosive effect,” he warns, ahead of forthcoming

appearances to promote Slow Education at the London Festival of Education and at the Idler Academy in Notting Hill. “If children are overly controlled, they can get demotivated. Yes, they need encouragement and praise from their parents, and many mothers and fathers are doing this with love and devotion. But some, a minority, are mistaken in thinking that a child’s motivation can come from outside. That takes away from self-motivation, which is the ideal.”

His main argument, though, is not so much about the frantic activity of parents, but about the failings of the education system that drives them to it. We are sitting in his book-lined study at Wotton House, Eton College, where he has taught English and linguistics for almost two decades. As well as being a doer in the classroom, he is also a thinker. It is part and parcel of his job, he says: “No school can afford to rest on its laurels, and we try very hard to get the balance right here.”

That ambition has led him in recent times to join forces with a group of like-minded professionals – “we have met largely over the internet” – who fear that our entire education system is hopelessly out of sync with what children actually need. Among the key complaints of this informal alliance – which, Grenier is keen to point out, includes practitioners in both state and independent sectors – is that the current “debased curriculum”, with its emphasis on testing, prescribed goals, a rigorous regime of inspections, league tables and top-down diktats from Whitehall, is doing the nation’s youngsters no good at all.

“This year, we are marking the silver jubilee of the introduction of the National Curriculum,” he says. “In its own right, its introduction was nothing to get too upset about. Its purposes were altruistic – that every child should have access to knowledge, education and understanding. Yet in practice, every year it has meant that we see the introduction of flawed and inefficient processes that make the education system more and more industrial, mechanical, crisis-ridden and, ultimately, out of control.”

In a week that has seen a group of Cambridge academics announce that they are working with Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, to devise a new, more challenging maths

A-level paper, Grenier’s message is swimming against the prevailing tide. In essence, what he is suggesting is that all that breathless energy spent by pushy parents and ministers in the hope of improving things for today’s youngsters is actually having the opposite effect. Instead of turning out more well-rounded individuals able to thrive, personally and professionally, in adult life, our education system is producing fewer. “I think that is a worry many parents would share,” he says.

So how would his alternative work? Grenier and his colleagues look for inspiration to the global Slow Movement, promoted (despite its name) with vigour over the past decade by such figures as the Canadian writer Carl Honoré, who in December will share the platform with him at the Idler Academy. Its subject-specific spin-offs also include Slow Medicine and Slow Finance. All involve a root-and-branch rethink of what exactly it is we are trying to achieve by educational reform.

“Slow” used to be a polite way of saying, on a school report, that the pupil in question was not perhaps the brightest light on the street; but in this new incarnation it refers to bringing out the best in every individual rather than a one-size-fits-all mentality.

“We are arguing for a paradigm shift that will replace the emphasis on targets, outcomes and grades,” explains Grenier. “By slow, we do not mean lacking industry or challenge. We still want to stretch children, but by finding the optimal challenge for each student, and that means getting to know each one.

“Our ambition is slowness across the whole spectrum, developing children’s life skills and disposition. If you have a system that marches cohorts through examinations on the basis of their date of birth, it risks dehumanising each and every one of them.”

Grenier is a gently persuasive exponent of this new creed. And, his pupils would argue, someone who practises what he preaches. On the Rate My Teacher website, pupils refer to Grenier as “a legend” and “a great man, the best house master at Eton” – though there is also the dissenting voice that labels him “pompous”. That particular charge seems hard to stand up since he defers readily in our conversation to Slow Education’s academic guru, the British-born Maurice Holt, Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Colorado Denver.

Holt is fond, in explaining his concept, of drawing parallels with the Slow Food approach, which rejects industrialised production of fast food in favour of the home-grown, home-cooked world of, for example, rural Italy. And Grenier uses a food analogy to demonstrate how he would like to see more British schools operating. In outlining the “Goldilocks test”, he describes how it is down to teachers (and parents, though perhaps unsurprisingly in the corridors of a boarding school, his emphasis is on teachers) to find out precisely which bowl of porridge suits every student – “not too hot, too cold, too big or too small”.

The ingredients that make up this nourishing porridge include a much heavier dose of music, sport, arts and community-based projects. But sitting as we are amid Eton’s playing fields, theatres, concert rooms and the like, not to mention the school’s enviably low pupil-to-teacher ratios, isn’t Grenier being just a little bit naive? How many hard-pressed teachers in challenging inner city comprehensives, with class sizes of more than 30, can find time to tailor often scant resources to each pupil’s needs, however much they would like to?

He’s clearly heard this retort before, and details Eton’s work with local state schools, mentoring their pupils. But more broadly? “Well, that is an argument for smaller class sizes,” he replies, unperturbed. “Anyway,” he adds, “research suggests that the fundamental issue is not the ratio of one teacher to however many pupils, but the calibre of the one. It is the calibre of teachers we need to improve.”

So, if we were to introduce Slow Education principles nationwide, would there still be exams, and grades, and progression to university? “Of course, society will continue to need exams and qualifications,” he

says, “but here you quickly bump into the issue of motivation. If you reduce education to the motivation to pass exams in order to get the grades to pass more exams to get you into university, where you will get a degree which will get you a job, then you are undermining the education system.”

Grenier’s lively challenging of the very nature and purpose of education has prompted a heated debate on Mumsnet, the influential parenting website. There, the response has been broadly positive, but slightly impatient. “Isn’t slow schooling just common sense?” writes one contributor. “A great idea in principle,” suggests another, “but a luxury in real terms.”

And that is surely the biggest difficulty Grenier faces in carrying the argument. Articulate as he is, what he is demanding is a volte-face in education. That has happened in the past, but rarely and (in the case of the switch to comprehensives) amid great controversy. Even if politicians like the concept – and our Eton-educated Prime Minister spoke at the recent Conservative Party conference of his desire to extend the benefits of his own schooling to all pupils – they will struggle to provide the means. Which is why those pushy parents will continue to amuse and unsettle the rest of us in equal measure.

How we moderate

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