

Textural Perceptions of School Time and Assessment

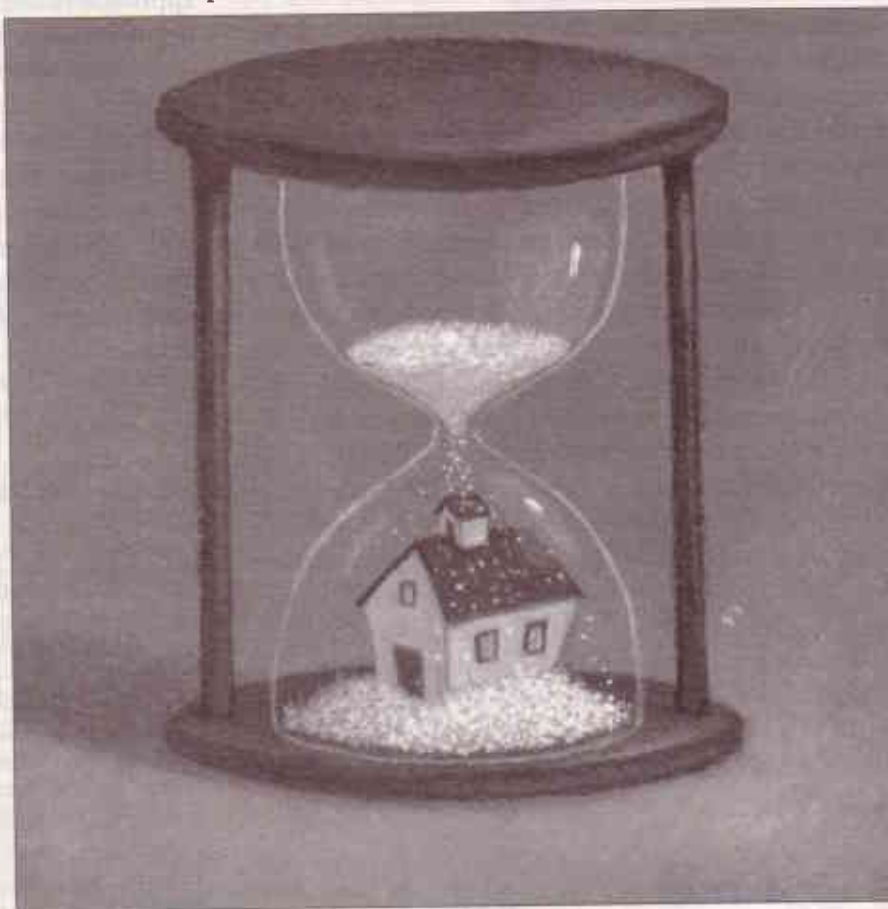
Mr. Turley pinpoints one factor that has a tremendous effect on whether a school's handling of assessment aids or interferes with student learning.

BY ERIC D. TURLEY

THE 1994 REPORT *Prisoners of Time* refers to time as “learning’s warden,” the regulator of all aspects of our schools. Those who work in or are involved with schools — students, parents, teachers, administrators, and staff — “are captives of clock and calendar.”¹

More than a decade later, schools are still struggling with how they perceive time and how they use it. As teachers attempt to negotiate their workloads within the constraints of school time, an imbalance often occurs. Michael Apple refers to this imbalance as intensification, the process by which teachers’ work becomes more time-consuming because things are added to the curriculum but nothing is ever dropped or substituted.² Essentially, there is more work to do, but available time remains unchanged. Under this approach to curriculum and assessment, teachers feel burdened: they are told to accelerate their work to compensate for a lack of time in which to accomplish the extra tasks.

Prisoners of Time suggests that states and local boards “work with schools to redesign education so that time becomes a factor supporting learning, not a boundary marking its limits.” A good visual representation of thinking about time in alternative ways is Salvador



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Dali's *Persistence of Memory*. In this oil painting, Dali depicts four clocks. In the bottom left corner is a clock similar to a pocket watch, solid and stagnant, its face not visible. It is being attacked by ants. The ants "seem to be devouring it as it devours the time of our lives."³ Dali also includes three clocks that are melting and flowing over objects in the painting. Dali's clocks — solid or fluid — provide an image of two states of time that can occur within a school environment.

Here I want to explore how two schools in Nebraska perceive time as they teach and assess student learning. Parker School views time as fixed and sees its teaching and assessing as in perpetual conflict because there is not enough time to do both.⁴ Arbor School views time in a more fluid way, allowing teaching and assessment to work simultaneously. Ultimately, it is the perception of time within a school that most strongly affects how teaching, assessment, and overall school improvement are conceptualized and enacted. And that perception can radically change the way teachers and administrators view education and engage in school improvement.

The data for this article come from the comprehensive evaluation of the Nebraska STARS (School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System) program.⁵ This evaluation included interviews with teachers, assessment coordinators, and administrators in 23 schools located in 15 districts, as well as two large surveys distributed through the mail. Parker and Arbor were two of the schools that took part in the evaluation.

PARKER SCHOOL: FIXED TIME AND THE SLOTTING OF WORK

Thinking back to Dali's painting, we recall that the pocket watch represents stagnant, fixed time. It is a fixed and solid state that the ants must break into smaller pieces before they can make use of it. Thus stagnant time is presented as atomistic, broken into small increments that create a whole.⁶ This concept is best exemplified by clocks that have second hands that tick as they move. Such clocks allow the viewer to see and hear the passage of time.

When time in education is viewed in this atomistic way, it becomes a force that works against teachers. The efficiency of their teaching and of their students' learning is judged by time-based measures. Class activities such as instruction or assessment become similar to a zero-sum game in relation to time. Every second, every

minute, every hour must be used — and used efficiently — to do something, which necessarily means that other things are left out. The zero-sum nature of atomistic time further intensifies the work of teachers.

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enced test for math and language arts, which is given to students in the spring. Teachers from each school met to create the STARS tests for the consortium, but only the eighth-grade teachers at Parker Middle School participated in creating the test. Getting these STARS tests to the individual schools on time became an issue and demonstrates how the staff members experienced the intensification of their work.

The Educational Service Unit, which serves as the coordinating center of the consortium, promised the language arts test to the schools by August so that the teachers could know what was to be covered throughout the year. However, the test did not arrive until February. An administrator from Parker Middle School said, "We don't have a STARS math test yet; it's not complete. We don't report on the STARS math this year, so that's a good thing, but we just got the language arts test Friday of last week. . . . We have been waiting until February to implement [the test], and now it's going to be a crunch. Hopefully, from now on, we'll be able to do it the way we designed it."

The frustration of not having the test on time grows out of the need to match a school's curriculum with an external assessment. Because the test was not available in August, when planning could reasonably have begun, teachers were forced to spend time during the school year reviewing material (and teaching anything they might have omitted) and then had to make time to give the assessment itself. The belated delivery of the test is one source of the time "crunch" that the ad-

administrator referred to. But the model of creating assessments outside the school also means that assessment is not a regular part of a teacher's class time or school day. The teachers are simply given a test and told to make it part of their curriculum and classroom practices so that the students will be prepared for the test in the spring.

At Parker Middle School the STARS tests add to the teachers' sense of intensification because they are seen as just one more thing for teachers to do in their classrooms. An eighth-grade language arts teacher claimed that "the biggest drawback is the amount of time it takes out of instructional time. . . . It takes two weeks." And this does not include time spent preparing the students for the test. The eighth-grade teachers originally planned on breaking up the STARS test into units to be given throughout the year, but, because of the test's late arrival, the teachers had to give the entire STARS test in the spring. But even if the STARS test had arrived in August, the teachers would still have felt that class time was being taken away from them and replaced by assessment. "Last year we didn't feel like we had any time to teach," said a seventh-grade language arts teacher. "All we did was prepare them for that test, take the test, prepare them for the next test, take the test." These comments make clear the perception of the assessments as a zero-sum game.

Adding to this burden for some teachers is the fact that teachers at the benchmark years — fourth, eighth, and 11th grades — are responsible for reporting assessment results to the state. For example, instruction takes place during second and third grade, while the formal assessment that occurs during the third quarter of fourth grade is reported to the state. Because sixth and seventh grades are not responsible for reporting to the state, time in these grades passes without a focus on assessment. However, during eighth grade, the teachers need to prepare their students for the test.

At Parker Middle School, the further a teacher is from the reporting year, the less knowledge and interest he or she has in the assessments. The sixth- and seventh-grade teachers do not play a role in the assessment and so leave it to the eighth-grade teachers to shoulder the load. When a seventh-grade math teacher was asked about the assessment process, he responded, "I'm not involved at all with the eighth-grade testing or how they keep track of it or how they report [it]." Likewise, when asked about what language arts assessments are used at Parker Middle School, a sixth-grade teacher responded, "I don't know." When asked if he had any

input on the assessments, the same teacher replied, "They do it on the eighth-grade level."

The administration and teachers of Parker Middle School offer conflicting viewpoints on how assessment has affected classrooms. "We don't want to take too much of our classroom time for assessment. . . . We tested 61 days four years ago. Sixty-one days is almost one-third of our school year; that's too many days," the principal of Parker Middle School stated. The principal's perception that the school had spent less time testing over the past four years was in stark contrast to the claims of teachers that testing had increased during that period. Describing the amount of testing, a sixth-grade language arts teacher said, "We have a language arts test, and then they are going to have a math test and a science test and all of those take time . . . so you get the state [test] on top of what the district has been doing, . . . and it is lost time." Or as one seventh-grade teacher concluded, "We need to streamline [the process] so we are not doing standardized types of testing and reporting all those scores and giving all those tests to those kids because they really get tested out." Both the administrators and teachers at Parker Middle School discuss time used for assessment as separate from class and instructional time; they perceive assessment time to be in conflict with class time. Therefore, in order to do one, time must be given up for the other.

ARBOR SCHOOL: FLUID TIME AND THE EMBEDDING OF WORK

An alternative perception of time sees it as fluid or in flux. In this view, time is like a stream, continually flowing and never really divided.⁸ Perceiving time as fluid allows teachers to view class time as flexible and malleable rather than as rigid and static. The opportunity to mold time to the needs of the class helps in reducing the anxiety that intensification brings because static moments do not exist. Instead, time is always changing. Rather than being a zero-sum game, it is something to be experienced. As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in."

Those at Arbor School, a K-12 school, view assessment and time very differently from those at Parker Middle School. While staff members at Parker emphasize the atomistic qualities of time, those at Arbor School view time and assessment as fluid and continuous. Assessments at Arbor School are created by the teachers in the school, for their classrooms, and so are seen as part of the teachers' days. A committee of teach-

ers reviews these classroom assessments to check for reliability, validity, and bias. There is not a single large high-stakes assessment, or even several small tests; rather, the teachers at Arbor School have embedded assessment within their instructional and classroom practices, thereby allowing students multiple opportunities to master the standards to be tested.

The teachers at Arbor School not only assess students frequently in their classrooms but also have found ways to assess multiple standards through the structuring of assignments. "I used to do more chapter or unit tests," commented a third-grade teacher, "and now, especially at the third-grade level, if I assess more frequently and review more and throw in a couple questions over each skill, it seems that the students retain a lot more than they did before." A high school language arts teacher substituted an informative speech rather than having her students write another research paper. The speech "called for research, so I've piggybacked the two activities," she said. Assessment is part of the classroom procedure rather than something that takes time out of the typical classroom routine. In this model, instruction and assessment can flow along similar paths. The flexibility reduces feelings of intensification because the teachers do not add more to their workloads but adjust their curriculum and classroom practices to include a variety of assessments.

Arbor has created a systematized teaching philosophy composed of Introduce, Teach, Assess, and Review (ITAR). Every teacher in every department is responsible for introducing, teaching, assessing, or reviewing specified standards. The weight does not fall onto the reporting years, but is shared by all the teachers. "I don't think you can expect the fourth-grade teacher to cram it all into one year along with everything else she has to teach," stated a third-grade teacher. In order for the students to meet the standards that are assessed in fourth grade, the teachers have spread the introducing, teaching, assessing, and reviewing of standards across grade levels and years. Thus students will be exposed to the standards multiple times over a three-year period. Through the ITAR system, assessments are not stagnant tools used only in benchmark years but are ongoing and focused on the process of student learning over time. The same third-grade teacher describes her role in teaching and assessing standards: "I know what I am covering in third grade has to go in and flow with what will be taught next year in fourth grade so everybody will be getting what they need."

Arbor also encourages an interdisciplinary approach

to assessment, which further helps the students experience standards and assessment as embedded in practice. For example, the art teacher might not assess math standards but might introduce some of the material that will later be assessed by a math teacher. The superintendent pointed out that "juniors may have been exposed to a particular standard multiple times . . . perhaps as many as five or six times within their high school careers." A math standard, for example, might be assessed in an industrial arts class or in a business class. Or a health teacher might assess science standards, or music teachers might introduce and teach math standards.

Along with the local creation of assessments, every student in the school has an individual assessment plan. Each student has a folder that documents what standards he or she has met, when the standards were met, what kind of assessment was used, and the student's proficiency rating. Students are able to track their achievement as they move from grade to grade. This process allows students to meet standards whenever they are ready — either early in their schooling or even after the benchmark year.

This system stands in contrast to the practice at Parker, where the amount of time allotted for student learning is valued more than the actual learning. If a student does not meet the standard by the spring of eighth grade, he or she fails; however, at Arbor, a student can prove mastery of a standard in fifth grade or in ninth grade. The student's portfolio is simply re-adjusted to reflect his or her learning. The superintendent commented that "[students] are getting lots of chances. This is not a high-stakes test. The kids know that they are going to have several opportunities over the course of their career to reach mastery, and so it takes a lot of pressure off them."

CHALLENGES FOR ASSESSMENT

Nebraska's system of assessment is unique in the nation in that it values local assessment rather than a single high-stakes test. The state has created a system of assessment that differs markedly from the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind.¹⁰ This approach to standards and assessment provides the state's schools with flexibility that most schools in other states do not have. However, issues of time and the intensification of work are felt by teachers everywhere. Therefore, even in Nebraska, we must revise the way we teach and assess students if we are to improve the conditions under which

students learn, teachers teach, and schools improve.

As we have seen, Parker School, like many schools across the nation, views assessment and instruction as competing forces. Arbor School, on the other hand, approaches assessment in a way that is radically different. What Arbor School teaches us is that instruction and assessment work best when: 1) space is created for teachers to design assessments that allow them to experience time differently, 2) school practices are aligned with alternative approaches to time and space, and 3) educational time is reconceptualized as an experience rather than an end.

First, space must be cleared so that teachers can be brought into the conversation on assessment. Chris Gallagher argues that, if teachers are given a seat at the table, they will gladly become assessors themselves.¹¹ Arbor School reflects an optimistic portrait of Gallagher's "idealistic faith." A majority of teachers at Arbor are involved in the process. Not only has space at the table been cleared for the entire faculty, but many teachers are actively participating, communicating, and sharing in the assessment experience. The collaborative effort of Arbor School allows them the space to create an embedded approach to teaching and assessing, which ultimately transforms the way assessments take place.

Second, school practices must be aligned with alternative approaches to the use of time and space. The assessment practices of Parker School mimic the industrial ideas of Taylorism and time-and-motion studies. Every task at Parker is broken into components, and labor is divided according to skill level. One outcome of this method is a "separation of conception from execution," by which the people doing a specific job lose sight of the entire process.¹² For example, the sixth- and seventh-grade teachers at Parker Middle School are concerned only with what goes on at their grade levels and have lost sight of the overall educational process. The eighth-grade teachers are required by default to become the assessment experts for the entire building.

Arbor School avoids such Taylorism by sharing among the entire staff the responsibility for teaching and assessment. Thus each teacher is committed to either introducing, teaching, assessing, or reviewing a portion of a standard, even if it crosses disciplinary boundaries and grade levels. The teachers at Arbor have created a process that allows them to teach and assess simultaneously within the school day. This process has helped reduce their feelings of intensification, by making instruction and assessment a single recursive process.

Finally, as teachers are brought into the conversation

on assessment and as practices are created that help them experience time differently within their classrooms, a reconception of educational time can emerge. Parker School's model made assessments serve as "fixed ends" rather than as "ends in view." John Dewey uses the following anecdote to differentiate between these two views of "ends" in education:

A farmer has to use plants and animals to carry on his farming activities. It certainly makes a great difference to his life whether he is fond of them, or whether he regards them as means which he has to employ to get something else in which he alone is interested. In the former case, his entire course of activity is significant; each phase of it has its own value. He has the experience of realizing his end at every stage; the postponed aim, or end in view, being merely a sight ahead by which to keep his activity going fully and freely. For if he does not look ahead, he is more likely to find himself blocked. The aim is as definitely a means of action as is any other portion of an activity.¹³

The STARS test serves as a "fixed end" for those at Parker School; it is something that must be completed. However, it does not serve as a means to carry activity further. Once the test has been completed, the results are reported, and that's it. No one reflects on the specific details revealed by the assessment in order to improve instruction or learning because the students have moved on to the next grade. One byproduct of a system such as this is summarized by a seventh-grade math teacher at Parker School: "We tried to teach them how to take tests. We didn't change our curriculum. We didn't try to do anything differently. [We] prepar[ed] them for the material on the test and the procedure of the test." But mere preparation for a test ends up being a hollow activity. The only reason for undertaking the activity is to acclimate students to the "real" test. Therefore, time is being used on activities that do not foster real learning.

In Arbor School, the reporting years and the assessments themselves do not serve as fixed ends, but as guideposts. This approach reflects Dewey's ideas of education as an "end in view." Because the superintendent understands that not all the state standards can be assessed thoroughly by a set date, the assessments are allowed to become more important than the time set for conducting them. Thus the assessments are not fixed ends, but ends in themselves, ends that

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lead onward. They guide the instruction, but they do not dictate the use of school time. Students are given several chances to pass the tests and are given a variety of ways to demonstrate their proficiency on a standard over time. And every activity becomes a meaningful opportunity for learning.

1. National Education Commission on Time and Learning, *Prisoners of Time* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1994), www.ed.gov/pubs/PrisonersOfTime/Prisoners.html.

2. Michael W. Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 114.

3. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 23.

4. The names of the schools and educators have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

5. For more information on the study, see Chris Gallagher, "Charting STARS: Sustainability as Opportunity and Challenge," Year Two Report, STARS Comprehensive Evaluation Project, August 2003, www.nde.state.ne.us/stars/index.html. Unless otherwise noted, quotations presented throughout this article come from the evaluation interviews and surveys.

6. Kern, pp. 11, 20.

7. The seventh-grade language arts teachers piloted the STARS test the year before. They spent six weeks giving the various portions of the STARS test, not including preparing the students for the test. The following year, the seventh-grade teachers did not participate in the STARS test.

8. Kern, pp. 11, 24.

9. *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), p. 109.

10. For more on Nebraska's approach to assessment, see Pat Roschewski, "Nebraskans Reach for the STARS," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2001, pp. 611-15; idem, "Nebraska STARS Line Up," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2003, pp. 517-20; Pat Roschewski, Jody Isernhagen, and Leon Dappen, "Nebraska STARS: Achieving Results," *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 2006, pp. 433-37; Douglas Christensen, "Building State Assessment from the Classroom Up," *School Administrator*, December 2001, p. 27; and Chris Gallagher, "Charting STARS: The State of Assessment in the State of Nebraska," August 2002, pp. 1-2, www.nde.state.ne.us/stars/resources/execsummary0101.pdf.

11. Chris Gallagher, "A Seat at the Table," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 2000, p. 502-7.

12. Apple, p. 121.

13. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), pp. 112-13. ■