

# MOVING GROWTH POINTS

*Excerpts from paper "Moving Growth Points: Curriculum Considerations Beyond the Standards" by Michael I. Bentley, Ed.D. Printed with permission.*

The title of this paper is derived from an expression, really a metaphor, used by the innovative educator, Sr. Grace Pilon, SBS (1997), who created the WORKSHOP WAY® educational model. Her work has been compared to that of Dewey and Montessori. Pilon's method differs radically from the traditional way of educating with its emphasis on content learning, testing and grading, and external rewards.

In Pilon's WORKSHOP WAY® the emphasis instead is on human growth and development of every child, which requires holding the child in importance over any particular content. Content is not neglected but the emphasis in the teacher's work is placed on providing students opportunities "to discover inside themselves the feelings of importance, intelligence, and the power of management." (p. iii)

...I came to know of Pilon's work in an around about way...The link for me was through Merrill Harmin's 1994 ASCD book, *Inspiring Active Learning*. Ever since I discovered this book I have been using it as a text in my secondary science methods courses. Earlier this year I met Professor Harmin and he told me of the influence on his work of Grace Pilon, whom he knew personally. This led me to the WORKSHOP WAY® web site where I was able to order books, audiocassette tapes and videos.

In my estimation, Pilon will be remembered as a great educator. Her educational model is based upon the recognition of the dignity and worth of every child and the belief that every child can not only develop intellectually, but also achieve growth in humanity.

In reading Pilon's (1997) WORKSHOP WAY® book, I came upon the metaphor for education of "moving growth points." Pilon conceives of a continuum of human growth which contains innumerable points representing where

each person has been, is now, and may potentially be in the process of growth from 'animal-like' behavior at the beginning of life to full 'human beingness' – "behavior which is in harmony with human dignity." (p. 136)

The importance of recognizing and nurturing human dignity is a recurring theme in Pilon's work. She writes, "I believe that the essence of growth in human beings is the power to feel one's dignity which includes the ability to feel the human dignity in all other persons." (p. 137)

Education, in Pilon's view, is the process of facilitating the movement of growth points along each child's continuum. Each child has his/her own timetable of growth and development – an important truth which is honored in the teaching methods prescribed in the WORKSHOP WAY® classroom. Movement occurs as "the light goes out of one growth point and moves into a new growth point" when a child comes to a "certain awareness depth of consciousness that a person can learn, think, and manage life." (p. 137)

Hence, facilitating the movement of growth points is about nurturing ever fuller states of consciousness in each child. As each new growth point is 'lighted' the child has increased her "amount of human beingness for living humanly" which Pilon also refers to as 'Person Power.' She says, "Person Power enhances motivation for learning and the desire for self-discipline. The quality of Person Power changes as growth moves along the continuum." (p. 137)

Pilon provides concrete suggestions for teachers on helping children move growth points. First and foremost is to lead children "toward a sense of their own inner order" and thereby higher levels of consciousness. She emphasizes the need for teachers to use language carefully in communicating with students. For example, teachers are not to manipulate student involvement by using disciplinary language. Teachers use cushioning dialogs to encourage risk-taking and deflect self-consciousness about making mistakes.

Further, in moving growth points, teachers do not hold up as models the students whose

performance is outstanding and do not try to talk students into doing better work than they are doing. Another example is that right and wrong answers are given equal respect (because we all can learn from our mistakes), yet applause is encouraged for the class when students exhibit risk-taking and do careful work. Also important is that students manage their own assignments when they are not learning with the teacher, including initiating their work without help from teachers or peers.

Another strategy Pilon recommends for fostering movement on the growth continuum is the use of what she calls ‘philosophy statements’ and what Merrill Harmin (1994, 1998) calls ‘truth signs.’ While teachers are not to use the signs to remind children about how to behave, they are clearly posted so that they can be read as children walk around the classroom. Here are several recommended statements:

- We are free to make mistakes while learning.
  - It is intelligent to ask for help.
  - It takes courage to be willing to risk.
  - Everyone has a right to time to think.
  - We don’t have to know everything today.
- (Pilon, 1997, p. 139)

As is obvious by now, the WORKSHOP WAY® classroom is radically different from traditional practice, and I have barely scratched the surface of these differences.

...In her book Pilon frequently refers to ‘teacher artistry.’ From the contexts in which this phrase is used, it is clear that she recognizes the challenge and immense complexity of the teaching learning process. Education, according to Jerome Bruner (1996), is “not simply a technical business of well-managed information processing, nor even simply a matter of applying ‘learning theories’ to the classroom or using the results of subject-centered ‘achievement testing.’ It is a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members and of fitting its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture.” (p. 43)

Bruner speaks of ‘antinomies’, two statements that are true but also that are contradictory. Thus no one disputes the need for standards, but standards have become a grotesque, a little truth that when latched onto with single-mindedness

and without note of context becomes disastrous in its consequences.

While Pilon does not describe her approach as ‘constructivist,’ it is certainly consistent with what I have read about constructivism. As Mark Windschitl (1999) points out, “...constructivism cannot make its appearance in the classroom as a set of isolated instructional methods grafted on to otherwise traditional teaching techniques. Rather, it is a culture—a set of beliefs, norms, and practices that constitute the fabric of school life.” (p. 752)

It is the culture of the classroom, mentioned by both Bruner and Windschitl, that Pilon is most concerned to address in her WORKSHOP WAY® approach.. In examining Pilon’s approach I find much that is consonant with Bruner’s constructivist stance...

...Merrill Harmin has adapted many of Pilon’s teaching strategies, which are described in his books (Harmin, 1994, 1998). Harmin, like Pilon and John Dewey, puts great emphasis on classroom climate and the affective domain. How opposite this is from our current national obsession with test scores!

In my opinion, this current national obsession with standards-based reform and high-stakes testing is pedagogically unsound. Pilon, Harmin, and Dewey no doubt would agree with George Bernard Shaw, who said that, “What we want is to see the child in pursuit of knowledge, and not knowledge in the pursuit of the child.” Standards-based reform is about knowledge in pursuit of the child. I think our efforts in the classroom should be more about facilitating the child in the pursuit of knowledge.

...Students and schools are threatened with personal and community failure if they don’t pass, because everyone perceives the loss of diploma or school accreditation as very significant consequences.

Alfie Kohn (2000), John Goodlad (2000), Linda McNeil (2000), and Bill Ayers (2000), among others, have addressed this situation in recent works. As I see it, quality in education will

clude us if our energies continue to be focused so predominantly on raising standardized test scores.

...Negative outcomes of current education policy include the result that children will see test scores are the purpose of education, and to believe that this is what the adult society holds of most value. We risk the alienation of our most intelligent and insightful children. Thus I am against making fear of not making a grade or certain test score a motivation for children to learn. There is much more to education than that. To me, what is really the important priority in our times is educating students for democratic citizenship. I have addressed this goal extensively elsewhere and refer you to a recent paper posted at <http://web.utk.edu/~mbentle1>.

... Certainly the school curriculum should be evaluated as to its ability to meet educational goals, and certainly teachers should gather data from children about what they are actually learning from the curriculum, but to do this in a valid manner requires multiple measures (and not necessarily data from each individual child in a classroom or school), and it needs to be done continuously, not on one day in May each year.

What's more, in a recent Phi Delta Kappan, noted educational researcher Iris C. Rotberg (2001) finds the high-stakes testing may have seriously weakened the academic standards they were intended to raise, and Evans Clinchy (1998) questions whether standards-based reform represents reform at all...

So, I would claim that our educational efforts as a society have been misplaced. Environmental degradation, the technology revolution, over - population in much of the world, and a globalized economy pose new challenges to schools in educating students for democratic citizenship. The current over-emphasis on simplistic accountability regimes is a major obstacle for educators who truly want to address such challenges and who want to help children move those growth points toward full humanity.

To be sure, there are some positive aspects of standards-based reform, and certainly one of them is that science education has become a more

prominent component in the curriculum, especially at the elementary level. But the negatives outweigh the positives.

## Conclusion

The great educators of the 20th Century include John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and, in my view, Grace Pilon. They all understood the role of affect in education and that education is part of a larger context of life outside the school. The so-called educational reform of state-dictated standards and high stakes testing on balance do more harm than good. Linear, reductionist prescriptions for curriculum ignore the larger context, children's different timetables, and the key role of affect. With many new challenges facing schools in the new millennium, we need a different approach to education. As William Butler Yeats pointed out, "Education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire."

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