

The Workshop Way and Democratic Schools: A Comparison

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Grace Pilon began her teaching career in 1927. The philosophy, psychology, and even the techniques she wrote about are as relevant today as they were in that era. A comparison of her major work, *The Workshop Way* (Pilon, 1991), with those of contemporary writers focusing on issues of diversity and culture reveal an unmistakable challenge to the status quo.

The basic premise of a democratic school sounds simple – all children should be treated with respect and accorded the same human rights and freedoms as adults in a democratic society (Greenberg, 2000). However, when those rights and freedoms are actually exercised, the democratic school becomes steeped in controversy.

When I first began using Workshop Way in my classroom, I did not think of it as an example of a democratic school – only as a system of education that felt right to me. . . . When Grace Pilon envisioned the system of education now called The Workshop Way she did not base her vision on any model she had seen or heard of before. Instead, she described what she learned to do while teaching children in her classroom over a period of years. She believed that all students at every learning level could gain the mental power of conscious living that it takes to achieve happiness in learning, thinking, and using common sense (Pilon, 1991). These are the words of Grace Pilon (1991) concerning the “evolution” of the system:

“This system evolved throughout many years, because whenever I became aware that something in the classroom hurt a child’s nature, I dropped it. From 1927 to 1933, I followed what I was taught to believe about the attention spans of little children. Changes in activities came about every ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes. I observed that there were some children who consistently would finish their work in that amount of time and were satisfied daily. There were some, however, who consistently became frustrated because they never had enough time to finish. It seemed to me that classroom living was a cruel way of life for too many children” (p.109).

“...pupil identities are created almost wholly by teachers’ perceptions of students in classrooms” (Apple, 1990, p.140). Pilon (1991) wrote to teachers that the two basic attitudes necessary for successful classroom instruction were that they accept children are not born perfect, and be willing to wait for growth and that teachers must believe that all children can learn academically regardless of their background, including social, economic, physical, emotional, or cultural factors. Pilon (1991) cautioned teachers about judging students. “. . . teachers do not judge which students can read or will read. They believe all children will read, learn well, and learn how to think” (p.12). She believed that attitudes of respect and acceptance from the teacher enhanced the student’s nature in a human way, and so increased mental growth.

Apple and Beane (1995) write that the idea of democratic schools has fallen on hard times. They go on to say that public schools are called on to educate all children, but they are blamed for social and economic disparities that make that extremely hard to do. We have lost sight of democracy in our schools. We are robbing our children of their right to learn how to use their freedoms by mandating their choices. A healthy society gives its people freedoms but if the freedoms are used without mutual respect and common sense then the society is in danger of losing those freedoms.

It is imperative that students learn to respect the rights of others while exercising their freedom of choice early in life (Pilon, 1991).

Apple and Beane (1995) also write "...we must move beyond hand wringing and find real answers to the question "What works in schools?" (p.8). Pilon agreed. In 1991 she wrote,

"It is not enough to stand around "identifying" the problem of school failure. Nor is it enough to theorize reasons for the failure. We must turn our energy and attention to the question of 'What makes success?' or, more important, 'What can teachers do to make the physical and social atmosphere of the classroom the best for the development of self-actualized human beings?'" (p.ix).

Democratic schools do not happen by chance. They involve two avenues of implementation. which are carried out in the life of the school. The second is through a curriculum which provides democratic experiences for students (Apple & Beane, 1995).

Students develop feelings of importance and intelligence, and experience the power of managing their own learning. Workshop Way develops in the student a strong self-concept, a comfortable sense of inner self-direction and self-discipline, and an internalized respect for the rights of others (Pilon, 1991).

It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to change the curriculum. Curriculum decisions are often politically charged. However, democratic structures and processes which define life in the classroom can be put into place in the school through the Workshop Way system of education.

Workshop Way is a system of human growth for education that encourages a climate in which teachers and students can become partners in learning. Students develop feelings of importance and intelligence, and experience the power of managing their own learning. Workshop Way develops in the student a strong self-concept, a comfortable sense of inner self-direction and self-discipline, and an internalized respect for the rights of others (Pilon, 1991).

Giroux (1997) discussed multiculturalism and racialized identities that are a part of the pedagogical terrain. He called for a broader definition of pedagogy to address how the production of knowledge, social identities, and social relations might challenge the racist assumptions and practices that define the public and private schools.

Workshop Way calls for the development of a positive self-concept for all students as its first priority in the educational process and provides a psychologically safe climate for learning and growing. Teachers tell students the truth about human nature, they are taught they can make a mistake and still be intelligent. Differences in ethnicity, culture, socio economic status, etc. are treated as positive issues, discussed openly, and used as a tool toward a deeper understanding of self and others. This also helps children not to be afraid when they experience human feelings and emotions. Teachers allow students to discover how they can help each other and learn to pull together (Pilon, 1991).

Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo, 2000) describes the banking concept of education as "...knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others...(p.68).

The Workshop Way is in polar opposition to the concept of banking education. In a Workshop Way classroom there is a schedule of tasks that is the heart of the work-life climate.

It is the management system of the students that consists of a series of tasks done by the students on a daily basis. Students learn to depend upon themselves or peers for whatever they have to do daily in the Workshop. It is important for whole person growth that students learn how to love to work by learning how to involve themselves in something that has interest and/or meaning for them. When the learning process calls for a whole class lesson, teachers use a five step lesson plan that calls for active participation from students and a new "bit" of knowledge is given to all children to process and use in a way that is compatible with their timing and way of learning (Pilon, 1991).

Merrill Harmin, (as cited in Pilon, 1991) stated that when learning subject matter is the primary focus students are forced into a subservient position. Teachers tend to do the talking, modeling, and decision-making. Students merely receive and react. They see the teacher as the star. In the Workshop Way, where the growth of worth and dignity is primary, students do more of the talking, modeling, and decision-making. They increasingly see themselves as stars.

Freire (Freire & Macedo, 2000) goes on to say that in the banking concept, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p.69). Pilon (1991) allowed for that development of critical consciousness by building into the structure frequent opportunities for choice throughout the day. Providing opportunities to make decisions in creative living, even in creating their own structures for individual tasks, allowed for the development of consciousness (concentrating, thinking, listening, learning, living, creating, etc.).

In order to encourage critical thinking, the revolutionary educator must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. They must be partners of the students in their relations with them
(Freire & Macedo, 2000).

Pilon also believed in a special teacher-student-content relationship. This relationship plays an integral part in the structure of the Workshop Way. Content is used to establish this relationship. Subject matter is not individualized. It is the way and the time for learning to learn and learning to think that are individualized. Students feel their worth as learners and thinkers and begin to believe in themselves as persons who can see, hear, listen, talk, learn, think, and manage.

Teachers develop a trust in the designs built into the system that will, at some point in time, empower the children to want to learn and handle grade level content (Pilon, 1991).

David Corson (1998) uses the term ‘cultural capital’ to describe the advantages that people acquire as a part of their life experiences. The cultural capital valued in schools is not equally available to diverse groups. The cultural capital can vary greatly from group to group. Schools reproduce arrangements that are favorable to some and unfavorable to others by basing their criteria for success on student’s possession of a particular cultural capital, even though it is not available to all.

Pilon (1991) believed that if a society allows healthy family life to enrich its members, young people can grow mutual respect and common sense. But if the homes are invaded and robbed of healthy family living because of prevailing conditions in the moral, social, and economic areas of life (Corson’s cultural capital) or their culture is not valued because it differs significantly from that valued at the school, then it would be difficult for the home to provide respect and common sense. The classroom should then develop into a kind of family living. Students can live in a student-oriented classroom where all students are viewed with respect and treated with dignity and all of them learn at their own pace and in their own way. The cultural capital Corson speaks of would then be equally available to all.

Jim Cummins (1996) writes that when there are powerful relationships between teachers and students even the economic and social disadvantages of communities and schools can be transcended. He goes on to say that although powerful relationships can be established between teachers and students inspiring students to great academic effort, disempowering relationships can also be established that can send overt or covert negative messages.

Students need to discover feelings of importance, intelligence, and the power of management. If 100% of students have the right to be the active agents in the learning process then the immediate mastery of knowledge skills cannot depend upon right answers. It must depend on an environment that provides equal opportunities to manage the same experiences in different ways. It must depend on a special relationship of intelligence between teachers and students in the handling of content. Only then will students begin to feel their intelligence and human power to

handle both positive and negative consequences of the decisions they make (Pilon, 1991).

Cummins (1996) talks of the assumption held by some that there is a fixed quantity of power that operates by a balance effect. If one group has a particular amount of power then the other group has only what is left. This process almost inevitably results in interactions that can either psychologically or physically confine the groups. Therefore, when teachers have low expectations of some students, they usually provide fewer opportunities for their academic development. By doing so, they confine them intellectually.

Every human being has a human nature. Whatever hurts human nature in one person hurts it in all persons. The opposite is also true. Whatever helps human nature in one person helps it in all persons. "Human beings can have mental and emotional health only to the degree that their human nature's potential for quality of existence is fulfilled" p.107. This feeling of human dignity depends upon experiences. The classroom often is the only place the student can get this quality of growth; therefore, it cannot be left to chance. The classroom must provide 100% of the students with experiences that are highly structured for as long a time as it takes (Pilon, 1991).

A democratic school is one run by the principles of democracy. All young people have the right of access to all programs in the school and the processes of tracking, biased testing, etc. are eliminated (Apple & Beane, 1995).

In a Workshop Way school there can be no "pull out" programs or policies of any kind that will restrict students from exposure to grade level information in their own classrooms with their peers. Pilon (1991) writes that remedial and tutoring types of programs only deepen a student's awareness of his/her low worth. When a student is suspended from school because of his/her behavior, they no longer have access to the programs the school provides.

It is unjust to expect all children to learn knowledge skills at the same time. Therefore, the grading and report card systems in schools deprive children of their right to not be judged as inferior while they learn and grow (Pilon, 1991).

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Pennycook (1994) asserted that, "No knowledge, no language, and no pedagogy is ever neutral or apolitical. To teach critically, therefore, is to acknowledge the political nature of all education..." p.301.

It is critical that students be educated to challenge the status quo, for without this challenge how will the political issues of educational inequity by gender, race, and culture be brought to the forefront?

Pilon developed a system that goes beyond rhetoric and gives teachers a step by step plan to bring about change in their individual classroom. The Pilon system, Workshop Way, built on democratic foundations, helps build thinking individuals who are liberated from unhealthy fears and provides access to equal opportunities for whole person growth. These individuals will be prepared to challenge the status quo and become the adult citizens of tomorrow of any society in our world (Pilon, 1991).

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