

**School Science and Mathematics Association
100th Anniversary Celebration and Annual Conference
Downers Grove, Illinois
November 1-3, 2001**

Moving Growth Points: Curriculum considerations beyond the “Standards”

Michael L Bentley, EdD
mbentle1@utk.edu

Abstract

Dewey understood the role of affect in education and that education is part of a larger context of life outside school. Children's timetables of normal growth and development have a wide range, and there are multiple intelligences. Educational reform has been in process for decades, but the cure can be worse than the disease if the diagnosis is wrong. Bruner attends to the reality of antinomies, two "truths" that are contradictory. 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 context leads to disaster. Lemke suggests traditional notions of both science and science education have become obsolete. Linear, reductionist prescriptions ignore the larger context, children's different timetables, and the key role of affect. A post-modern perspective suggests different directions for science and math education in the new millennium.

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) Pilon gives this rationale for emphasizing the affective over the cognitive domain:

Once human beings feel important and intelligent they become brave enough to live and to risk management of whatever they do. When students in the classroom keep these feelings consistently, they live in the state of inner motivation for growing and learning. They will want to work, and they will love learning. (p. 135)

I came to know of Pilon’s work in an around about way, as, after all, WORKSHOP WAY® does not specifically emphasize science teaching and learning (though science is indeed a regular part of a WORKSHOP WAY® classroom). 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 (<http://www.workshopway.com>) 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)

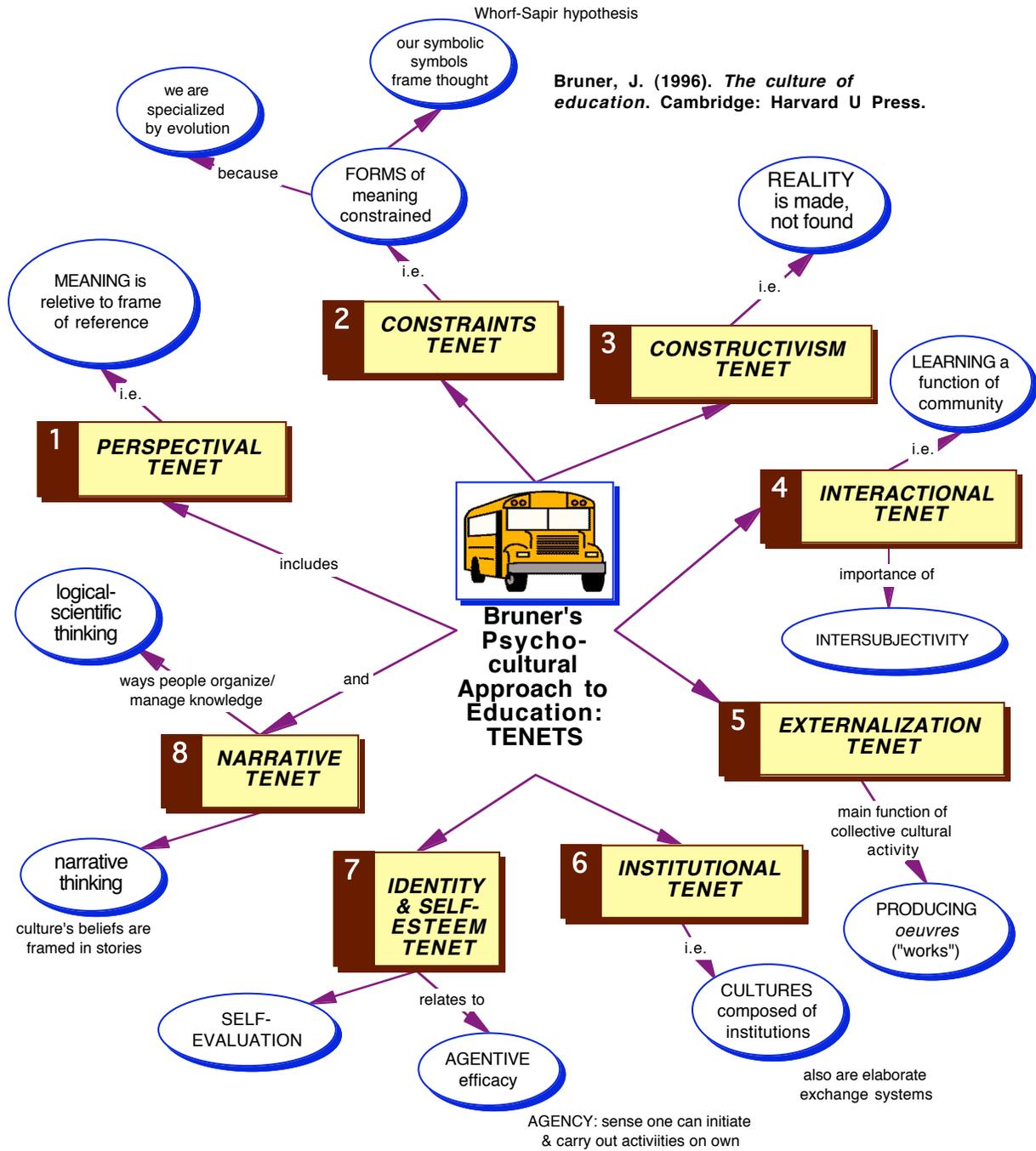
As is obvious by now, the WORKSHOP WAY® classroom is radically different from traditional practice, and I have barely scratched the surface of these differences. In the WORKSHOP WAY® classroom, for example, much student work is examined by teachers but not marked (indeed, teachers are advised to take the daily work home and 'reverently' dispose of it). Teachers are not to put any marks on papers except those indicating right answers. And grades and traditional report cards are anathema to this method. The latter I can applaud from my own experience, as my own children attend a school that does not give grades or issue report cards – and my three children's intellects have been growing right along.

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. Figure 1 presents in graphic form what Jerome Bruner calls his educational tenets. In examining Pilon’s approach I find much that is consonant with Bruner’s constructivist stance, particularly in relation to his tenets 3, 4, and 7.



"(The tenets) emphasize the powers of consciousness, reflection, breadth of dialogue, and negotiation." Bruner, 1996, p. 42.

Figure 1: Jerome Bruner's Educational Tenets

Over a period of fifty years of refinement, Pilon developed a complete system of education and has copyrighted her system and many of its components. There are schools that use the WORKSHOP WAY® system, though none are in my area and I have not seen any in operation. However, educational research has been conducted on these schools that attests to their success (Pilon, 1997). 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. Maria Montessori also appears to concur:

No human being is educated by another person. He must do it himself or it will never be done. A truly educated individual continues learning long after the hours and years he spends in the classroom because he is motivated from within by a natural curiosity and love for knowledge. Therefore, the goal of education should not be to fill the (student) with facts from a pre-selected course of studies, but rather to cultivate his natural desire to learn.

In this sense I think Jay Lemke (2001) is right when he declares that traditional notions of both science and science education have become obsolete. The assessment systems now in place in many states, including my own state of Virginia, clearly makes the goal of education to fill the students with facts in order to pass an industry constructed multiple-choice test. 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 elude us if our energies

continue to be focused so predominantly on raising standardized test scores. As Brooks and Brooks (1999) point out, “Educational improvement is not accomplished through administrative or legislative mandate. It is accomplished through attention to the complicated, idiosyncratic, often paradoxical, and difficult to measure nature of learning.” (p. 20)

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>.

One of the more significant outcomes of our current national education policy is well illustrated in a recent issue of *Rethinking Schools*. Texas teacher Teddi Beam-Conroy (2001) debunks the so-called “Texas miracle” and the high-stakes TAAS test that figured so prominently in the last presidential election:

I needed my job. So I learned to play the TAAS game. This year, all my students passed the reading portion of the test and all but one ...passed the math. But in exchange for that “success,” I have watched my teaching deteriorate. I have also watched my entire school be transformed into little more than a well-oiled test-taking machine. (pp. 3, 18)

Beam-Conroy describes how the school’s ESL program was “gutted” for the test, and how after years of teaching she finds herself, “trapped into teaching to the test.” (p. 18) Her experience jives with what I hear from my three sisters, all Virginia classroom teachers. 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:

If one thing is clear about this 'reform' movement, it is that it is not really a reform or restructuring movement at all. Rather, it is simply a return to and a shoring up of the traditional, top-down, highly centralized, bureaucratic school system that we have had in this country for roughly the past century. This is the system imposed on our schools as a result of the perceived success of the 'scientific industrial management' model that was introduced into our businesses and industries around the turn of the century by Frederick Taylor and his 'efficiency expert' associates. (p. 273)

So, I would claim that our educational efforts as a society have been misplaced. Environmental degradation, the technology revolution, overpopulation 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. Figure 2 is a graphic I created to summarize what I see as the down-side of educational reform based upon standards and high-stakes testing.

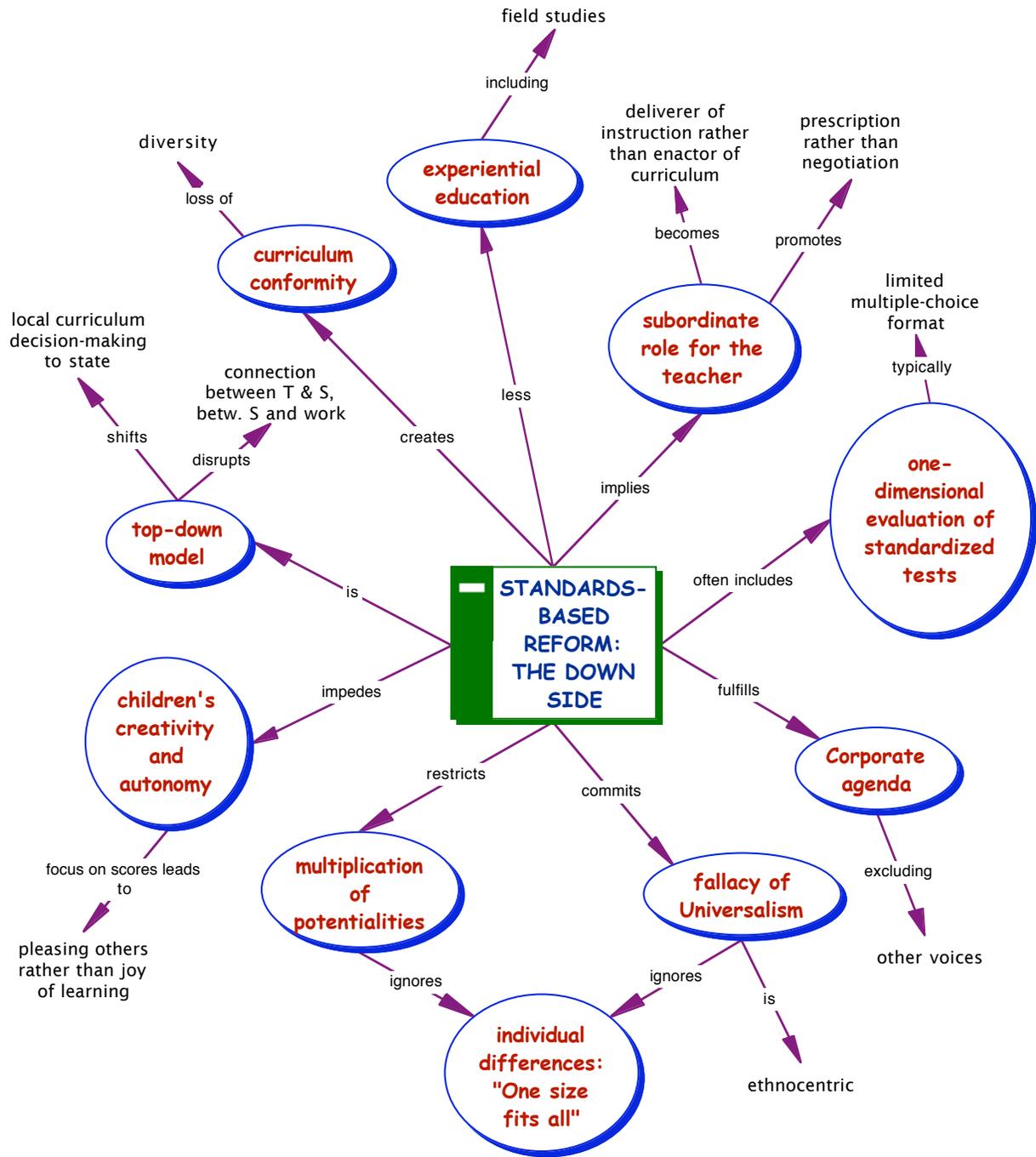


Figure 2: Standards-based reform: The down side.

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."

References

- Ayers, W. (2000). The Standards fraud. *Boston Review*. Available:
<http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR24.6/ayers.html> (Feb. 2, 2000).
- Brooks, M. G. & Brooks, J. G.. (1999). The courage to be constructivist. *Educational Leadership*, 57(3), 18-24.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clinchy, E. (1998). The educationally challenged American school district. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(4), 272-277.
- Goodlad, J. (2000, Sept.). Education and democracy: Advancing the agenda. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(1), 86-89.
- Harmin, M. (1994). *Inspiring active learning: A handbook for teachers*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Harmin, M. (1998). *Strategies for inspiring active learning: The complete handbook*. White Plains, NY: Inspiring Strategy Institute.
- Kohn (2000). *The Case Against Standardized Testing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Lemke, J. L. (2001). Encounters with complementary perspectives in science education research. Available:

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/education/jlemke/paspers/jrst4.htm> (Feb.15, 2001).

McNeil, L. (2000, Summer). The educational costs of standardization. *Rethinking Schools*, pp. 8-9, 13.

Pilon, G. H. (1997). *Workshop way: Hope for the future*, rev. ed. New Orleans, LA: The Workshop Way, Inc.

Windschitl, M. (1999). The challenges of sustaining a constructivist classroom culture. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80(10), 751-755.

Citation:

Bentley, M. L. (2001). Moving Growth Points: Curriculum Considerations beyond the 'Standards'. Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the School Science and Mathematics Association, Chicago, IL.