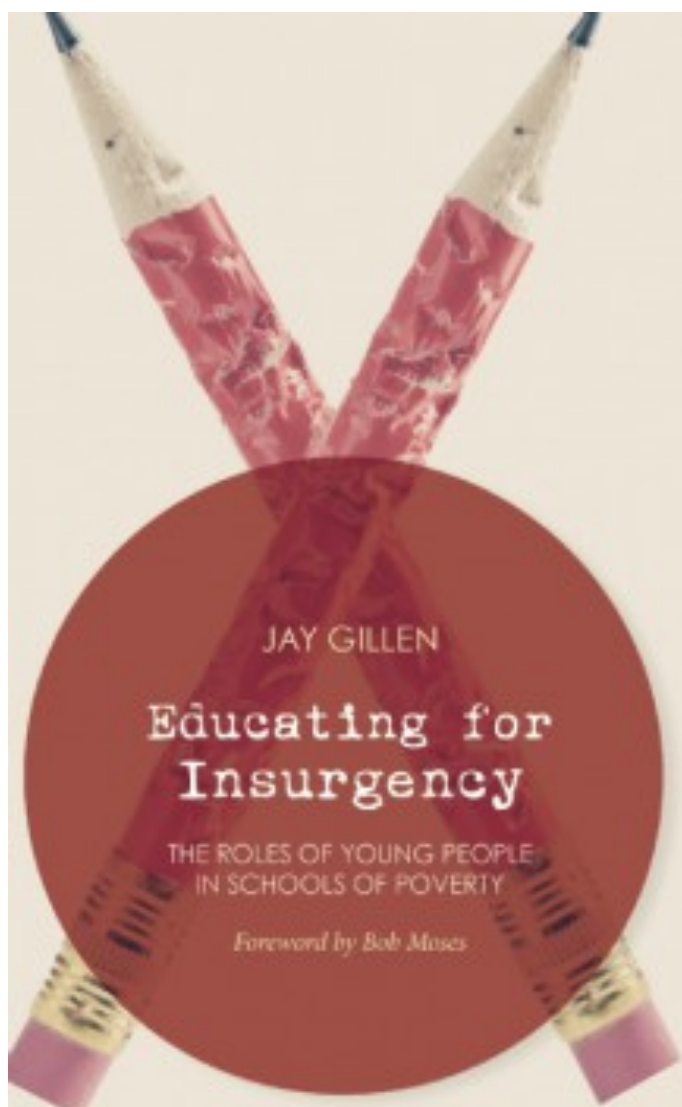


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review: Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty by Jay Gillen

Reviewed by Paul Lauter



Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty by Jay Gillen (AK Press, 2014)

"I did not enjoy high school much because my work in the Algebra Project taught me that I was not receiving the quality education I deserved. So each day I waited for the bell so I could leave and work in the program, where I learned so much more. I began organizing in high school and was nearly expelled for organizing a student strike. . . . most of my focus in high school was on organizing students to speak out, to demonstrate and demand quality education." —Chris Goodman. ("No Justice No Life: Brian Jones Kicks it with Chris Goodman of the Baltimore Algebra Project," Posted in *Article Link*, August 3, 2009.)

(This review was written three weeks ago, before the events that have made "Baltimore" a symbol of racial tyranny and political malfeasance. It is not, therefore, focused on police violence nor responses to the killing of Freddie Gray and so many other black men. It presents, rather, a project designed to help empower students in schools of poverty—not on the specious theory that educational institutions can by themselves overcome discrimination, marginalization, and poverty, but because schools can, and must, be part of the solution rather than continuing to be part of the problem.)

Much of the debate going on in educational circles today concerns differing ideas about how to accomplish certain agreed-upon goals. Mainly these consist of the 3 R's—reading, riting and rithmatic—with a touch perhaps of American history, whether seen through the lens of Selma or of Mountain View. Some wish to provide teachers with greater scope, better resources, and fewer students in the classroom. Others, the multimillion dollar "reformers," promote a regime of ceaseless testing, managerial authority, privatization, and "teacher-proof" curricula. But suppose you conclude, based on observing the thousands of segregated Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland throughout the United States, that the huge number of students in schools of poverty are ill-served by these very goals, that poor, often black and Latino, students, even if they pass every test and climb in to community colleges, will never—a few tokens aside—get an even break in 21st-century America. What then? Can the goals of schooling themselves be transformed? Can schools become sites not of failure and exclusion, but of insurgency and transformation? Can the young people now marginalized, enraged, and trapped in disastrous institutions become agents of creativity and growth—and real learning?

Such questions lie at the core of Jay Gillen's essential book, *Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty*. I use the full title of Gillen's book because, unlike most of what is being written today, it shifts focus from the adults fighting about schooling to the students themselves as the key actors in their own education. The question Gillen addresses is how might we

think about the ways students can, indeed must, organize themselves, those close to them, and the many others with whom they must contend for a future. His approach is not to address the question always on a teacher's mind—what do I do Monday?—but to propose a theory about how change and education could and already do take place even in, or perhaps especially in, schools of poverty. This book is not a manual for classroom management but a treatise on education, democracy, and hope.

At the center of Gillen's treatise is his and his students' experience with one of the three r's, rithmatic, in the form of the Algebra Project. The Algebra Project was first devised by Bob Moses, a key figure in the efforts of the young organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to challenge and eliminate racial segregation in its most intransigent bastion, Mississippi, in the 1950s and 1960s. The Baltimore version of the Project has been highly successful, even in this society's financial terms: students working in it have earned \$2 million dollars over the last ten years "sharing math knowledge" (p. 140). It has also provided what Gillen calls a "crawl space" wherein students begin to learn how to mobilize the organizational resources necessary to confront the school boards, politicians, and courts that stand in the way of their educational development. Educational and political authorities who see math as vital to 21st-century schooling are willing to provide money, some, to those who succeed in teaching it, and they interfere less with the process. As Gillen puts it, "Math hides the student insurgency as it learns how to walk." In this way it differs from the admirable Mexican-American Studies program in Tucson, which was banned by Arizona lawmakers despite—or perhaps because of—its success in motivating and educating students to confront injustice.

At the center of Gillen's treatise is his and his students' experience with one of the three r's, rithmatic, in the form of the Algebra Project. The Algebra Project was first devised by Bob Moses, a key figure in the efforts of the young organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to challenge and eliminate racial segregation in its most intransigent bastion, Mississippi, in the 1950s and 1960s.

A project seriously devoted to teaching math is insulated against the charge sometimes registered against radical education projects that they are indifferent to students of poverty learning the basics. Mathematical knowledge is, of course, a goal of the Algebra Project, just as the vote was the goal of SNCC organizing in Mississippi. The brilliant analogy between voter registration and learning algebra in school, which Gillen has derived from Bob Moses' work, is apt, first, because young people are key to implementation. But for two other reasons as well:

one, both are directed to changing oppressive institutions, the segregated political system in the 1960s, and the segregated school system today. And, two, both the vote and mathematical literacy are necessary to full citizenship in the technologically-driven 21st century. To vote in Mississippi of 1964 and to be able to deploy math knowledge today are important goals in themselves, to be sure. But their importance derives as much from the sense of empowerment their achievement provides, especially to those who must press through the institutional barriers to such accomplishments. Empowerment—not test-taking—is what Gillen’s book, the Algebra Project, and real education are about. To put it a bit differently, “As with voting rights, the point is to encourage students to begin to demand—of themselves and of the system—what society claims they don’t want” [Jessica T. Wahman, “Fleshing Out Consensus’: Radical Pragmatism, Civil Rights, and the Algebra Project,” *Education and Culture* 25 (1) (2009), 11.]

Classroom events, he theorizes, are usefully understood in dramatic rather than legalistic terms.

Reading the dialogues among Gillen’s students we get a sense of their mathematical literacy, as well as a challenge to older folks who likely do not have it. Mathematical literacy has to do not with the capacity to fill in bubbles on high stakes tests, but with the ability to solve ever-new problems on one’s own and, most important, to teach your knowledge to younger students, as Algebra Project instructors do. But underlying the Project is a more fundamental goal:

What we seek to encourage, however, is the methodical rehearsal of roles that emphasize the collective purposes of the troupe, acts that self-consciously grow through demands on self and peers toward demands on a larger society. The educational system does not serve the students’ purposes now. They must learn to use the crawl spaces we make available to them to prepare for organized acts that will render that system unworkable, and compel change. (p. 132)

This passage highlights two important elements of Gillen’s book. First, it is couched in the language of theater: “rehearsal,” “roles,” “troupe,” “acts,” and the like. Indeed, Gillen develops an extended analogy between the classroom and the theater. He contrasts the kind of education he is encouraging, which he describes as a “dramatistic approach to education,” to the “technocratic approach” (p. 121) which characterizes most of today’s schooling, with its emphasis on grading, indeed monetizing, students, teachers, and even schools. This is not simply a clever metaphor. Gillen points, first, to the importance to the development of young people of trying out roles for themselves and in relation to peers and adults. “For adolescents, nothing is more important than trying on personas and rehearsing roles. They do this whether they are permitted to do it or not” (p. 132). When it isn’t permitted, their actions are generally construed as

“acting out,” which is seen by authorities as a, perhaps the, major problem of students in schools of poverty—indeed in the streets of America’s towns and cities. It is met in both venues by repression, arrest, and, all too often, violence. In such dramas, hierarchies and the roles they demand are already defined, too often by the uniform, on the one hand, and skin color, on the other. Gillen’s work is to read students’ acts differently, not merely as insurrectionary, or childish, disruptions needing to be controlled, but as expressions of discontent with an authoritarian and unresponsive system, efforts to enter into more vital interactions with peers, teachers, and authorities. That involves, in practice, a more welcoming and interactive pedagogical style, which Gillen illustrates, and underlying it, a theory of classroom communications, which he develops at some length.

Classroom events, he theorizes, are usefully understood in dramatic rather than legalistic terms. As in a play, classrooms are domains in which people interact, change in relationship one to another. Legalistic terms trap and define people into particular, inflexible roles: e.g., there is the perpetrator, the policeman, the teacher, the witness, the principal, the judge, and so forth. People are able to act only within the definitions these roles impose. In dramatic terms, as in life, roles can shift, dissolve, open into new definitions: the perp becomes a baffled and enraged child reaching out for hope or at least solace; the cop becomes a slightly older, no less angry youngster acting out if not for solace or hope at least for strength. Legalistically, each has a set of predetermined lines that lead to a much-too-well-rehearsed denouement, often gunfire. Dramatically, the subtexts can be heard and responded to and the action creatively recast. The student learns to be the teacher; the teacher emerges as an accomplice; the judge is judged, or becomes a witness to actions for transformation.

In working out this theory of classroom action, Gillen draws creatively on the work of Kenneth Burke, especially his books *A Grammar of Motives* (1945) and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950). I was myself startled to see the work of Burke, until the last few years long out of fashion—and also of William Empson on pastoral and W.K. Wimsatt on the “counterlogical”—evoked in a book at some level about teaching mathematics. In fact, some of the most persuasive sections of Gillen’s book are his readings of scenes and characters from *King Lear* and *As You Like It*. Through those readings, using concepts derived from pastoral and courtship, he recasts the drama of the classroom.

Built into the long quotation I cited above is also another kind of theory, one having to do with the process of organizing for change: “acts that self-consciously grow through demands on self and peers toward demands on a larger society.” Those familiar with instances of radical change will recognize the sequence, if not precisely the language. What is being proposed is analogous to Gandhian Satyagraha, or the non-violent direct action associated with M.L. King and, differently, A.J. Muste. Gillen formulates the process with some care: “Demand on yourself. Demand on your peers. Demand on the larger society. This is an ordered series: the first is prerequisite

to the second, the second is prerequisite to the third . . . attempts to change the unjust arrangements of a society will be crushed unless the insurgents have developed a discipline that can withstand the oppressor's attempts to fracture their unity and weaken their organization" (p. 125). One begins with self-discipline, with the willingness to undertake tasks, like registering to vote in McComb, Mississippi, or participating seriously in inner-city Baltimore schools, that are necessary and potentially dangerous. But one cannot move to the next stage without undertaking the first oneself: one cannot propose to others that they register to vote or come to school regularly and put time and effort into learning, without attempting it oneself.

But students are not merely the victims of a perverse system that places them in a school to prison pipeline. They are, in fact, crucial players in the dramas of the classroom and any discussion that omits them—and most do—will miss the point.

Such change requires forcefully addressing the larger society, but as Gillen is quick to point out, "it is not the demand on the larger society, but the demand on peers that is the beginning of political action. The language 'demand on peers' is unfamiliar. But it is another way of saying 'self-government' or 'democracy'" (p. 127). Gillen is not arguing, of course, that schools or, indeed, American politics are in this or most other senses "democratic." As he quotes Vincent Harding, "we are practitioners in an educational system that does not yet exist." The problem is developing an understanding of how the "educational system does not serve the students' purpose now" and a practice (to return to our original quotation)—"that will render the system unworkable, and compel change" (p. 132).

What you want to "render . . . unworkable" is, among other matters, the systematic starvation of public education, particularly in schools that serve poor and working class students. Courts order the State to provide adequate funding to the Baltimore schools, for example, but when that funding is not forthcoming, Baltimore Algebra Project activists demonstrate, march on Annapolis, engage in a hunger strike, carry out "die-ins" at meetings of school authorities. They stage direct actions to extend student bus tickets to 8 p.m. so that all can participate in the math tutoring central to the Project's work. They organize against police violence—no small matter as we know in Baltimore and elsewhere—and put forward alternative narratives to those offered by the powers that be. They teach algebra successfully to younger students but also develop sessions on public speaking, civil disobedience, organizing tactics and the other skills necessary for pursuing their goals in the public arena. Their goals are not only teaching mathematics but demanding quality education as a "Constitutional Right," no less important than the ballot.

I have quoted extensively from Gillen's text partly to provide a sense to readers of the clarity of his prose. But partly, too, because—as the last sentence in the paragraph I have cited indicates—Gillen's goals need to be seen for what they are: not the tinkering around the edges that might elevate a few students' math test scores by some fraction, but as a radical (to the root) transformation of the system now in place to "educate" students of poverty. Gillen does not argue that public schools are somehow failing. To the contrary, he insists that "Schools for young people in poverty are marvelously successful at teaching about the scarcity of resources, arbitrariness of authority, and shunting of joy to the peripheries that characterize the society they are actually growing up into" (p. 134). The purposes of such schools is not especially learning, or rather the learning has to do with accepting particular forms of authority and power, accepting (even with rage) particular and limited stations in life, most of all accepting that it is your own limitations and not a system of hierarchy and privilege that defines your life chances (p. 89). We might wish to evoke here some of the conversation between Augustine and Alfred St. Clare in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: says Alfred: "'the lower class must not be educated.' 'That is past praying for,' said Augustine; 'educated they will be, and we have only to say how. Our system is educating them in barbarism and brutality.'" What Augustine does not see, of course, is the contravening education provided within the society of slaves, and he expresses the fear of white liberal society at what slavery was teaching its victims. But his point is nevertheless useful: however they may be failing in terms of orthodox educational yields, schools of poverty certainly do teach, and the students do learn those social meanings. That is surely one of the implications of Ferguson.

The importance of Gillen's book can perhaps be seen most usefully by placing it in the context of the opt out movement.

But students are not merely the victims of a perverse system that places them in a school to prison pipeline. They are, in fact, crucial players in the dramas of the classroom and any discussion that omits them—and most do—will miss the point. But can or even should students—and particularly students in schools of poverty—be thought about as change agents? Gillen's answer begins, as does his book, with the reflection that, historically, it was often young people of color who carried through abolitionist activities against slavery, as well as the heroic efforts to disrupt segregation in the American South during the 1950s and 1960s. The young people who sat in at lunch counters in Greensboro, who marched in and to Montgomery, who went from house to house in rural Mississippi may provide answers to the question.

But are such historical models relevant? One might point as well to the disappeared students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College of Ayotzinapa. Or the American draft and GI resisters of the Vietnam era. Or the women and girls of Redstockings or the earlier Bread

and Roses strike. The question is sometimes posed as “how old should a child be to participate in activities for change?” That’s a reasonable question, particularly in an era in which children’s futures are being reshaped, some would say distorted, by a variety of political efforts to control schools and privatize their budgets. But perhaps the real question might better be formulated thus: what can young people, even very young people, learn by undertaking the kind of program Gillen proposes? As my epigraph suggests, his three-part sequence—place demands on yourself, on your peers, and on the larger society—entails a considerable learning process. One learns not only algebra but about the society and its politics, and not just from books and classroom curricula but from engaging in actions to change things. One learns, too, about one’s own power within a society, about the uses of language, about the critical tensions in American culture between individual advancement and shared progress. One learns, perhaps most of all, about the schools themselves, their crucial role in the implementation of the ideas of democracy, and the differences between organizing schools to train a docile workforce and organizing them to develop an informed citizenship, organizing them to enrich the few and organizing them to unshackle the many.

Gillen’s strategy, like that of the opt out movement, is to “render the system unworkable.” But what he offers in the place of disruption and test scores is learning rooted in the empowerment of students. The idea is not to train students to fill in bubbles but to teach them algebra and geometry, as well as how power operates, how poetry means, and how schools and communities can be changed. But most of all, it is to teach them democracy.

The importance of Gillen’s book can perhaps be seen most usefully by placing it in the context of the opt out movement. The movement to opt students out of high stakes tests is not, from one point of view, a “radical” crusade: most of those who have been active in it would probably not see it as a challenge to American capitalism, though it has the potential, I think, to undermine the authority of the “reformers.” It is, first and foremost, a brilliantly conceived act of civil disobedience. A comment on Diane Ravitch’s blog suggests its possibilities: “The students have the power and the means to squash the

test.” Were that to happen in any significant measure, the impact on the effort to impose a capitalist model on schools in America, which have heretofore been governed in quite another way, would be profound. That is true because the “reformers” have hung their hopes on testing as the pivotal instrument of change. To be sure, they have tried to privatize public schools into money-making charters; they have tried to break teachers’ unions; they have promoted the authority of managers over that of the people who do the actual work of teaching; above all, they have depended on the unspoken ability of capitalism to overturn all settled relations of labor and control. That effort has been almost entirely negative: it argues that schooling in America is broken and must be replaced, one way or another. Only then will . . . well, test scores go up. That then becomes the be-all and end-all. In the final analysis only significantly improved test scores can make a case premised on . . . improved test scores. “To squash the test” is thus to cut the legs from under the effort to change the schools from above. Those who live by the test will die by the test.

Gillen’s strategy, like that of the opt out movement, is to “render the system unworkable.” But what he offers in the place of disruption and test scores is learning rooted in the empowerment of students. The idea is not to train students to fill in bubbles but to teach them algebra and geometry, as well as how power operates, how poetry means, and how schools and communities can be changed. But most of all, it is to teach them democracy. It is not that schools in America or elsewhere have ever been democratic; they are, after all, organized around the hierarchy of one or more adults and younger children. But as students learn by placing demands on self, then on others, and ultimately on the society, they are learning, too, the practice of democracy, which is finally a system in which the critical decisions about a community’s institutions are made by all the members of the community and not by absentee governors, self-appointed philanthropists, or affluent testing agencies.

To say this another way, the conflict over the schools is really a conflict about the future of America. Are our schools and communities to be ruled by the 1% and the politicians and bureaucrats they buy? Or by the 99%, who may not know algebra but who know what the “reforms” imposed on them and their children really add up to.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.library.pitt.edu/).