

Class(room) matters

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Baltimore math teacher Jay Gillen offers a revolutionary alternative to the punitive nature of public education

Don't be put off by the awkward title. In "Educating for Insurgency," Jay Gillen writes about a subject that most people in the education debate don't want to face: that the chief result of most schools in poor neighborhoods is to prepare students to accept a lifetime of subordination, unemployment and poorly paying jobs, not to put poor kids on equal footing with their better-off peers. Luckily, he proposes an alternative.

The education reform movement has tried to blame the difference in educational outcomes between schools full of children in poverty and those from more prosperous backgrounds on everything but poverty and racism. It finds fault in teachers, in parents and in insufficient focus on core curriculums. It proposes to apply "science," as measured by test scores and behavioral modification, to fine-tune discipline and curriculum. *It's as if, Gillen observes, children are automatons who will absorb skills and knowledge if only the right inputs are applied.*

Gillen cuts through this fog, combining realism — schools as we have organized them simply don't function for children in poverty — with an incisive radical purpose — to motivate children in poverty to learn, schools will have to teach them to change the society that

oppresses them. Most children and youth will not see a reason to learn, or to focus on learning, until the institutional purposes of schools are in line with their own, autonomous purposes as human beings.

Gillen is not just a dreamer or an academic with his head in the clouds — he's a teacher in Baltimore Public Schools, deeply involved with a project that he believes exemplifies a way to get young people to learn. But he's not a history or a social studies teacher. He teaches math.

That's right, math.

The Baltimore Algebra Project is a nonprofit run by high school students and recent high school graduates, using grant money to hire students and former students as math tutors. By all accounts, it's been a success in spreading math literacy, as well as giving young people jobs in a city where the youth unemployment rate is high. The project's website boasts that it has paid out more than \$2 million in wages to youth in the 15 years of its existence.

But, as Gillen puts it, getting funding to teach math is just a way to create a "crawl space" — a concept he takes from the Project's founder, civil rights veteran Bob Moses — that gives students a place where they can try out new roles and ways of being. It provides students ways to organize themselves and become accountable to themselves and others; of practicing democracy and learning how to demand from the school district and from the society at large the things they need.

Gillen talks about what's pushed to the side in current debates about school reform. As an example, he examines the irony of teaching that *Brown v. Board of Education* made segregation in public schools illegal: "at best, the lesson ... must be understood by the students as revealing deep duplicity in the curriculum and in the country's unifying myth ... At worst, the lesson is nonsense." Gillen points out that the curriculum in such schools is the least of what's taught — what's really taught is obedience to authority and self-blame for failure.

Gillen points out that the repressive atmosphere in most schools is based in the belief, shared by teachers and students alike, that teenagers would "run wild" if they weren't strictly controlled. As an alternative, he compares the classroom to a dramatic ritual in which the conflicts generated by the "embarrassments of caste" — of racial and class hierarchy — can, instead of interrupting learning, be integrated into the learning process.

"There are many ways to treat an outburst as an opportunity ... rather than as a crime," Gillen writes. If what takes place in a classroom is a form of theater, it's easier to see alternatives to the "no-tolerance" policies that end up suspending or expelling students: "The nature of the ritual is such that ... cussing, or any other action initiated by a student short of violence, can be incorporated into the dialogue by an adjustment of terms and suppleness of the actors' responses."

This is heady stuff, but Gillen provides a couple of examples of how that might play out in his "idealized" Algebra Project classroom.

Half philosophy and politics, half anecdote and dramatization, "Educating for Insurgency" doesn't offer a quick fix or a cookbook approach to teaching in poor schools. Being a teacher using Gillen's approach would require a willingness to make mistakes and enough space to figure out what it means to treat youth in schools as collaborators in their education. But at least it provides a place to start.

Reprinted from Street Roots sister paper, Real Change news, Seattle, Wash.

Jay Gillen writes about a subject that nobody in the education debate wants to face: that the chief result of most schools in poor neighborhoods is to prepare students to accept a lifetime of subordination, unemployment and poor-paying jobs, not to put poor kids on equal footing with their better-off peers.

