DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

# A Baltimore Public School Teacher Explains Why It Pays to Put Kids in Control by Andy Lee Roth

What do Shakespeare's plays tell us about how to run classrooms in an unequal society?

The school as factory was a predominant metaphor for education in the middle of the last century. Schools were to churn out young people ready for roles as workers and consumers. In current debates, the laboratory is the model, with successful education defined as controlling variables to produce desired outcomes.

In Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty, Jay Gillen, a Baltimore public school teacher, vividly shows the limitations of both models. In each, authorities define successful outcomes in ways that reduce learning to a matter of obedience. By contrast, Gillen says we can address the "mammoth failure" of education reform by trying to understand "what actually happens" in school, as opposed to "what the dominant ideology says should happen."

Rather than blaming students or their teachers, Gillen says, we stand a better chance if we begin by acknowledging that young people are "often effective in developing and advancing their plans autonomously." If schools reproduce inequality, the needs and interests of students in poverty are not met, and they resist.

These insights informed Gillen's work with the Baltimore Algebra Project, which uses math literacy as a way to teach and encourage political organizing. Its immediate aim is to show students that efforts to learn math do serve their interests. One measure of success: Students use math skills developed in Algebra Project classrooms to teach other students. In the past 10 years, their student-run tutoring co-op has earned more than $2 million.

Gillen encourages teachers, and administrators to rethink what it means to be “disobedient” in today’s “failing” schools.

The Baltimore Algebra Project’s ultimate goal is to serve as a kind of “mini-society” in which students address systemic educational problems. Students begin by putting demands on themselves—come on time, pay attention, put effort into learning. Then they can make credible demands on their peers, the “beginning of political action.” Thus prepared, students go beyond the classroom to make demands on the larger society. Through this process they experience a “reversal in the direction of authority,” which allows them to envision truly democratic schools and workplaces.

Angry, sullen, and boisterous, adolescents are clearly theatrical. But, Gillen observes, theater is never to be interpreted literally. It is symbolic action. He identifies “pervasive literalism” as a fundamental problem in today’s schools. Adults typically misconstrue adolescent resistance, and fail to recognize the implicit politics of students’ behavior.

This insight leads to Gillen’s proposition that we consider the development of relationships in drama as a model for student-teacher interaction. In drama, the creation of obstacles—including indirection, allusion, and disguises—aids communication across differences, as he shows with examples from Shakespeare. Adapting these insights to classroom interaction, Gillen observes that students’ behavior often exhibits extreme sensitivity to the “complications of social difference” and the “embarrassments of caste.”

Given freedom to address difference and inequality, young people “step into history,” a concept that links the Baltimore Algebra Project with the organizing tradition of Bob Moses and Ella Baker. Gillen presents the Algebra Project’s students as the latest in an ongoing freedom struggle tracing back to fugitive slaves and to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of the civil rights era. Across generations, young people have refused passive roles, engaged in acts of resistance that pressured societal hierarchies, and accomplished significant increases in freedom.

“It’s an open question,” Bob Moses writes in the book’s foreword, “whether our country is mature enough to have an honest understanding about the past and present public school education of its youth.” By providing a classroom-tested framework in which to understand the historical antecedents and political implications of young people’s resistance to injustice, Gillen encourages teachers, administrators, and pundits to rethink what it means to be “disobedient” in today’s “failing” schools.