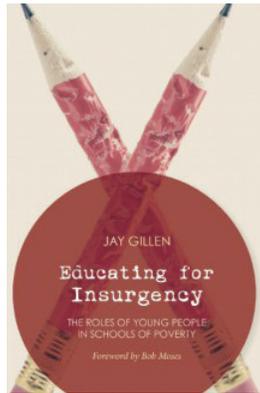

Democracy & Education

Democratic Rehearsals

A Book Review of *Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty*

Reviewed by James Johnson (University of Rochester)



JAY GILLEN HAS taught in the Baltimore public schools for three decades. He opens his astonishingly insightful, provocative book by calling attention to our predicament. How, he asks, do we “imagine and create a way to educate our children for democracy” (p. 9) when the democratic polity we proclaim and endorse does not yet exist? The “we” here includes not just students and teachers but parents and (yes) school administrators. And while we all confront this predicament, Gillen is, as his subtitle suggests, preoccupied with the impact it has on young people who also are beset by poverty with its many accompanying dangers and humiliations.

Gillen crystallizes this predicament in an epigram in which Langston Hughes (1938/1995), voices his aspirational commitment to American democracy. He might well have invoked James Baldwin (1963) urging us to “achieve our country.” Or he likewise might now invoke Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), himself a graduate of the same Baltimore public schools in which Gillen teaches, urging his own son not simply to “hope” but to “struggle,” to aspire to become “a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.” That incomplete literary genealogy simply underscores how

enduring our predicament has been. Regardless, Gillen urges on us a prefigurative politics, encouraging us to “practice taking stances that will only be fully appropriate in a future America” (p. 12). He does so fully cognizant of the risks, not least of which is the nearly certain, deep conflict that any attempt to truly reconstruct education in America will elicit from those who most benefit from its current form.

It is important to grasp how the promise of such conflict figures in Gillen’s thinking. A clear hint appears in his title, which identifies insurgency as a central aim of his educational practice. Gillen has in mind “a rising up of young people that massively interrupts the functioning of the country’s educational system and forces a rearrangement of roles, authority and power well beyond the boundaries of ‘school’” (p. 16). The proximate exemplar of such insurrection is the mid-20th-century interruption of official segregation precipitated by the struggle of African-Americans for civil and political rights. But Gillen provides a second, perhaps more telling example in a discussion of the role played by, among others, the mostly young Black slaves who ran away and undertook the flight to freedom on the Underground Railroad in the 19th

century (pp. 39–44). As was the case in these earlier episodes, the outcome of the insurrection Gillen advocates is not, he knows, something young people can control. Indeed, it depends crucially on the ways, sure to be defensive and hostile, that those privileged by extant arrangements respond to the disruption.

The sources of Gillen's argument, or perhaps more precisely its inspiration, are varied. On the one hand, there is Bob Moses and his Algebra Project (Moses & Cobb, 2001) who, in turn, channel the inestimable Ella Baker. Gillen has been involved with the Baltimore Algebra Project since the mid-1990s. Like Moses, he sees teaching and organizing as coextensive activities (p. 28). And therein lies the inspiration of Baker. For her, organizing in a way that respected ordinary people and local knowledge remained a lifelong vocation, one that she bequeathed to young civil rights activists in the 1960s (Payne, 1989; Ransby, 2003).

On the other hand, Gillen constructs his intellectual scaffolding from work by literary critic Kenneth Burke and writer Ralph Ellison and uses it to structure his analysis of educational experience as a drama. From Burke and Ellison, he gathers resources we might deploy if we hope to evade the common tendency of educational regimes to treat students as objects rather than agents and to treat rules and regulations and standards in a mindlessly literal manner. In short, Gillen believes these resources are necessary if we are to succeed in “resolutely treating persons as persons, not as things, and . . . celebrating and putting to use the historical and aesthetic complexities of public speech and action” (p. 23)—as we must of we are to transform our schools into a “crucial democratic institution” (p. 79).

The heroes of the dramas Gillen relates are young people, the students he has taught, mentored, collaborated with, advocated for, and learned from. Ironically, these young people make only relatively brief appearances here even as concern for their lives infuses the text. This is intentional. Gillen notes explicitly at the outset that he aims not to relate in detail the experiences of his students but to enhance our more general understanding of the roles young people and teachers might take on as they navigate their schools (p. 31). We can, in any case, catch glimpses of Gillen's heroes elsewhere (Payne, 2008).

Gillen offers what he likens to “program notes at a play” (p. 14) rather than a detailed case study. He structures his argument around a pair of vignettes. The first is relatively brief and asks us to imagine how students “in a contemporary classroom for students in poverty, that is, in a segregated classroom” (p. 77), might make sense of a social studies lesson claiming that the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v Board of Education* had, in fact, ended segregation in public education. Gillen's analysis of this example is succinct and incisive. If, as he asks, we approach students as agents rather than as objects and see the language used in schools as a rich symbolic repertoire, it is easy to grasp the sort of bewilderment, cynicism, and worse that this lesson might well elicit.

The second vignette is more like a series of snapshots. In it Gillen seeks to convey the demands students and teachers place on one another in what he calls an idealized Algebra Project classroom. Here “idealized” captures salient features of the scene Gillen sets (p. 98). In the first place, while such classrooms

have existed for some time, they neither operate perfectly nor possess a credible conception of what perfection would consist of. But, second, while such classrooms exist, they usually are unwelcome in “typical schools” precisely because the students and teachers who inhabit them proceed in ways orthogonal to established regimens. In short, they operate, or at least aspire to operate, in democratic ways.

This brings us back to the prefigurative politics that Gillen urges on us. Toward the end of the book he reminds us: “What is difficult is helping the young grow up into a society that does not yet exist” (p. 134). On his account, the Algebra Project classroom facilitates this undertaking by setting the scene within which students and teachers can rehearse roles they play now or might play in the future. The drama they enact transpires within what he depicts as a “crawl space,” one they themselves create by exploiting official demands for mathematical literacy. Those affiliated with the Algebra Project are aware that demands for mathematical literacy are arbitrary (Moses & Cobb, 2001). But they do not rest content with characterizing such demands, however tempting and appropriate it might be to do so, simply as “myth” (Hacker, 2016). Instead, they approach mathematical literacy strategically, “as an organizing tool not as an end in itself” (p. 17). If a consensus exists among both school officials and putative education reformers on the importance of such literacy, who could complain about a project that seeks to bring it to a most unlikely constituency? Yet if the consensus affords space where students and teachers—and perhaps parents and administrators—can interact in meaningful and democratic ways, the task of organizing is well underway. It takes the guise of effectively teaching mathematics and, because that effectiveness trades on democratic relations, simultaneously lays the groundwork for insurrection. As Gillen, following Moses (2009), notes: “Insurgencies must be earned through the patient laying up of stores till the people—or a large part of the people—achieve a new vision of what might be” (p. 139). Familiar demands for math literacy offer cover for such transformation.

Gillen, then, is trafficking in possibilities. This is terrain that might seem forbidding to those involved in whatever way with “schools of poverty.” For them, the realities may seem crushing. But the possibilities Gillen holds out hardly are fiction. They exist, he rightly claims, however tenuously, in the here and now, in the dramas he and his students have been staging. We may well wonder whether and how such experimental theater might aggregate into full-blown insurrection. Yet for those trying to sustain even mild optimism in the face of the uninspired record of large-scale educational reforms (e.g., Payne, 2013; Ravitch, 2010), the prospect that Gillen, his students, and others like them might, as he puts it, “step into history” (p. 31) more fully surely is welcome.

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