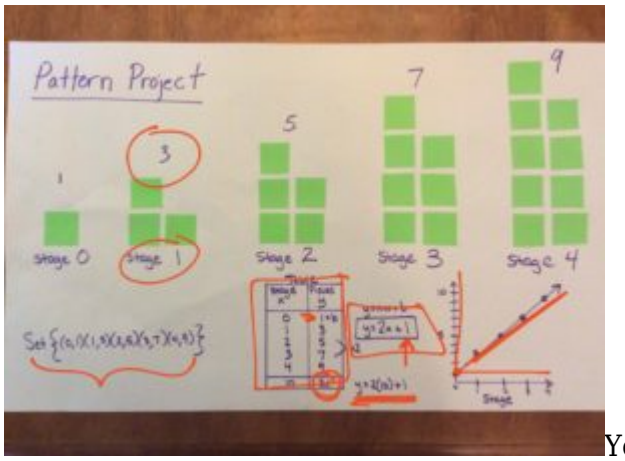
On Student Peer-to-Peer Economic Power

written by Jay Gillen | December 20, 2019



You can't get the right answers if you don't ask the right questions.

"What are the jobs of the future?" is the wrong question to ask about both work and education. It presumes a capitalist class determining the structure of employment and therefore the structure of schools.

The right question is: "How will communities organize themselves to meet their needs?"

A democratic system of education should never accept the neoliberal economy as a given. Instead, we should understand how a new economy, a new politics, and a new educational system must all be created together.

Emerging out of Ella Baker's work in the 1960s with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Algebra Project is exploring this nexus of economics, politics, and education. In Baltimore alone, Algebra Project students have earned more than $4 million over the last decade by sharing mathematical and organizing skills with their peers. Their local organization is a youth-run, democratically governed collective that has inserted itself into political questions at the local, state and national levels while advancing the participants' education—both inside and outside of school. (See, for example, *The Nation*'s 2012 article, "Baltimore Algebra Project Stops Youth Detention Center.")

Another Algebra Project affiliate, The Young People's Project (TYPP), has sites in many states where young people have earned millions more dollars in a cascade of near-peer relationships. College students teach math and coding to high school students, who run number theory games with middle and elementary school students. The National Science Foundation has awarded TYPP extensive grants to try to understand better how this structure helps construct mathematical identities.

We should understand these initiatives and others like them as much more than a "program" supplementing existing educational structures. Paying young people to share knowledge and skills with peers is an organizing strategy to challenge the distribution of economic and political power. In fact, this strategy could be key to the long-term success of the new radical teacher movements and to bottom-up, community-based political insurgencies.

Millions of oppressed young people in the United States and elsewhere have already rejected schooling as a false promise. Their power is greatly underestimated. Even unorganized they

interrupt the educational authorities at every turn. They have made sure that every technocratic reform for fifty years has failed miserably. Those reforms would work if young people just did what they were told. But they don't. They refuse to learn what they are "taught," and instead they learn what they want—which is a great deal, but it doesn't show up on the schools' tests.

Young people under oppression interrupt the educational authorities because they have correctly analyzed the economics and the politics of neoliberalism and racial caste. There's no room for the poor, except as disposable, part-time, seasonal, low-wage labor at best. In the Algebra Project, we label what the schools offer now as "sharecropper education." Sharecroppers were only allowed as much education as they needed to do the work allotted to them—planting and harvesting crops owned by someone else on land that wasn't theirs. Millions of public-school students today also receive only as much education as they need to do the work allotted to this generation: sweeping malls, cleaning hotels, working cash registers, patrolling whiter spaces as security guards. Six years after graduation, the median annual earnings of former Baltimore City high school students is $15,000. Those students have been "prepared" for $15,000 a year jobs. The official line is that they're entitled to a "world-class" education, but the masters won't invest in what that takes. They won't invest because they only need oppressed poor to perform low-skill work, so why educate for better? Most young people see through the ruse by about the sixth grade.

The Algebra Project, The Young People's Project and similar organizations create economically viable structures *parallel to schools* where young people from schools of poverty are startled to find (1) that they *can* learn, (2) that they can organize for power, (3) that money isn't only given by capitalists to wage-earners like food to dogs, but can be generated and shared by collectives through work that is democratically determined. The experience of participating in such an organization creates radical consciousness and leads to new possibilities of many kinds.

Changing the structure of education in poor communities to accommodate paid peer-to-peer knowledge work will also change economic and political structures. Throw out the 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. babysitting structure. Picture this instead: A group of friends starts their day going to a local rec center for an exercise class taught by paid peers, cooling down afterwards at a student-run snack bar/teen-health hub that offers nutritious food, health information, referrals for students with worries, and free condoms. They then go to their own jobs at a nearby elementary school where they do math with fifth graders. Their specialty, for example, might be geometric art, showing the amazing but relatively simple forms that can be constructed with a ruler and compass, or with dynamic software on a computer or phone. Their fifth graders eventually share with parents how they make circles inscribed in triangles by finding the intersection of angle bisectors. The high schoolers then make their way to their own high school math class, where, in addition to a skilled teacher, older or same-age peers help them learn new ways to explore circles and triangles at a more advanced level, using ideas from trigonometry, for example. In the afternoon, one of the friends attends play rehearsal, run by paid peers, where she is developing a role in an adaptation of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, while another friend goes off to work on an oral history project with some paid youth researchers. A third member of this group goes to a scheduled stint at a worksite, learning from a peer how to do electrical wiring in a house that is getting renovated, supervised by a licensed electrician from the community. Another student, a strong athlete, ends the afternoon in a varsity practice, and another, who loves basketball but isn't very good at it, plays in a youth-run intramural league. In the evening the friends watch a live-streamed political poetry slam managed for pay by some other young people at a cultural center downtown.

The academic and economic benefits of such a structure are immediately obvious. No one doubts, and all available research confirms, that young people like to learn from other young people. They also like to teach each other. In fact, they exchange knowledge all the time outside the competitive confines of modern schooling: transportation routes, dances, gaming strategies, relationship

networks, apps, song lyrics, fashion. Many schools do dabble in peer or near-peer tutoring, but very few think much beyond a tutoring relationship and almost none include wages in the structure.

For students in poor communities, the wages are crucial. Pressure mounts on adolescents to bring home cash as their needs begin to expand. They eat more, take up more space, care more about how they look, stay more connected to their peer group, travel further afield, and develop more interests than they did when they were small. All those things cost money. Teenagers can bring home cash. They have most of the capacities of adults. But our current political economy is structured to keep adolescents economically inactive—except for menial or underground labor.

When democratic practices are added to peer-to-peer knowledge structures, possibilities expand even further. Students learn that they don't have to defer to people who are older, but undertake to make their own work assignments, budgets, and program plans. They negotiate contracts with schools to pay them for leading study groups or athletic camps. They even market themselves as capable of running professional development activities for teachers. Why not? They know how young people learn. Their knowledge is valuable. All these things take place currently in Baltimore's peer-to-peer organizations.

Harold McDougall in his wonderful book *Black Baltimore* explains how grassroots political organizing requires "base communities"—bigger than a family, smaller than a church. A base community is a place where communities in struggle develop political skills, make plans, reflect on what is working and what is not, regroup and hold each other accountable. The Algebra Project founder, Bob Moses, explains that small, grassroots meeting spaces served the same function for what he calls the "Mississippi Theater" of the Voting Rights Movement in the early 1960s. I have heard the same sentiment from veterans of the South African freedom struggle: the oppressed learn in small spaces how to make demands on themselves and on each other, so that they can grow strong enough to turn outward and make demands on the larger society.

Peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges create exactly this kind of base community. They meet young people's need for cash at the same time as they shift community understanding of who produces knowledge: not only a teacher, not only an employer, not only adults, but also young people themselves. Two Baltimore students—now adults—who "grew up" in after-school structures like these are working on a film project to show how a different economic and political consciousness can develop. They remarked that virtually every employed young person depicted in film or television is flipping burgers, washing cars, or sweeping something. Their film, by contrast, shows typical Baltimore scenes and dramas, but the heroes do peer-to-peer knowledge work, and so operate with a different consciousness. They expect each other to know things of a technical nature. They have experience determining their own employment structures. They have some understanding of the intersection of politics, economics, and education, and they have collectively intervened in the arrangements society has made for them, to make those arrangements better.

The new, radical teachers' union movement across the United States is crucially important. And we should also remember that the interests of public-school teachers are not always identical to the interests of public-school students. Radical teachers recognize that supporting youth power strengthens teacher organizing, but organized young people may sometimes push their own agendas, and teachers should be prepared to follow them. They want to work, and they want to work in jobs that advance their education and their interests, not jobs that track them towards the bottom. They want a say not just in the dynamics of classrooms, but also in the structure of schools more generally, in the relation between school and work, in requirements for diplomas, in curricula that addresses their material and cultural needs, in who they allow to teach them, and in how public resources are allocated. Currently, the most adults generally envision is "youth voice." What young people want is youth power.

The great benefit of youth employment in knowledge work for teacher/student partnerships is that older students can mitigate one of the major problems radical teachers face: large class sizes, too much student need, and disengaged students. Bored high school students waste their days avoiding adult authority, while a few blocks away distressed teachers try to respond to thirty young children's needs and demands all at once. Help the high school students organize themselves into knowledge-work collectives, and then pay them to spend part of each day inspiring elementary schoolers with their commitment to learning and youth power. In the process, radical teachers get breathing room to support great lessons, positive community relationships, and a new vision of economic and political possibility. Young people learn to differentiate people—old and young—who are supportive of what they themselves identify as in their interest, as opposed to others—mostly older—who are afraid of them, judgmental, or dismissive. Many radical teachers do ally with student leaders. We need to go a step further so that radical teachers understand how to create space for and then support a whole economy of student knowledge production which will necessarily evolve its own politics.

What do we need to make these visions a reality? Three things:

First, we need great lessons, curriculum, things to do with students that respond to their material and cultural conditions. Work on this front has been going on all over the country for decades and is flourishing. It's not mainstreamed for the most part, but it's also not hard to find.

Second, we need money to pay young people year-round, and to support 20-30-year-olds in full-time careers giving stability and continuity to the youth-run enterprises. In Baltimore we estimate that 10% of the city's education, police, and carceral budgets would be enough to fund $5,000-$10,000 a year in employment for every high school student in the city, with millions left over to pay for a cohort of 20-30 year old near-peer leaders.

Third, we need organizers to find adults who already have great relationships with young people (both inside and outside of schools) and to help them develop peer-to-peer structures that match young people's interests and community needs. Organizing strategies need to be developed bottom-up so that students can, for example, earn credit through their participation in a peer-to-peer activity instead of through seat-time in a boring class. And strategies need to be developed to interrupt schooling and policing as we know them, so that funding can start to get reallocated into youth employment in knowledge work.

In many parts of the country, these three pieces are nascent and ready to combine in powerful ways. Building awareness of the radical change emerging from paid peer-to-peer collectives will be an important next step. Millions of young people are essentially sitting idle. They represent billions of hours of lost productivity in economic terms, and they represent a source of political energy that in historical terms has been crucial to most revolutions. We should hold their gifts in high esteem, and should listen to their own articulations of what they need in order to commit themselves to organized struggle. They need cash, and they need meaning.