

EDUCATIONAL

The history of the American high school system is one of modeling young people to fit in the society, to advance the system. The idea of challenge to the existing structure is started early. If there is little academic freedom in colleges, there is none in high schools. The possibility of intellectual curiosity is "channeled" into academics and abstractions so that real questions aren't related to the lives of students. They are directed to look at things objectively and practically rather than as things really affect their lives. In the end, there is perhaps little difference between the high schools in Mississippi and those in Los Angeles. There is a thread between those students who have been intimidated in Mississippi for raising questions with teachers about their ability to vote or about segregated schools, and those who are intimidated and isolated in Los Angeles for raising questions about loyalty oaths for teachers, the student's role in choosing a curriculum, what student government really is, or who determines policy for school newspapers. And there is a final thread perhaps, between those students and others whose only protest is to drop out of these schools because they can't fit into the mold.

To challenge that authority which is set up to direct the lives of the people who are the subjects of the system, is, of course, a very dangerous undertaking. But this was the basis for the Mississippi Freedom Schools, and seems reason enough for the establishment of similar schools in Los Angeles.

My idea of a Freedom School is an area, somewhere, situation—any place where young people, whether black or white, rich or poor, come to deal with real questions as they relate to their lives. The aim of this part of the Freedom School would be to let young people challenge not only the authority which stifles them, but also to challenge themselves, to bring about basic changes in the system so that the stifling ends.

The center of the Freedom Schools would be the students and their freedom of expression would be the life of the school. They and their teachers (or more closely, leaders) would have equal parts in determining curriculum. Perhaps, even the student may rotate as leaders of the schools.

The possibility of challenge, no matter what the level or what the issue, through questions, was a vital force in last summer's project. The only failure of the Mississippi Freedom Schools was its teachers. No one in this country has been trained in raising those necessary, fundamental and challenging questions. Most of the Freedom School teachers were college students who were taught that the only way to learn was to have information poured into their heads -- mostly dates, places, events, names -- most of which is lost and cannot be used in their lives. The idea of the Freedom Schools was in the question "why" or more deeply, how does it "relate" to this thing or that situation, or your life, or being poor or rich, free or slave, America or Rockefeller. Finally the schools were based on the concept that seeking information must be based on need so that it can all be used.

The Mississippi high school students were not as caught up in abstractions, academics and looking at things "objectively" as their teachers, so they not only raised their own questions; they taught the teachers how to relate. Many students had no education in the proper sense so what they gave to the white students from the North was themselves. The idea is not to give what you have (time, money, etc.) but to give what you are. They did not need college degrees to do that. People are called "ignorant" if they know about nothing except their own lives. Are people "educated" if they know about everything except their own lives? That was the question which related the young Mississippi Negro to their northern teachers.

RANDOM IDEAS ON THE SCHOOL, STUDENTS, AND TEACHERS (LEADERS)

I would think that a most important part of the Freedom School would be to try to make each session complete so that people can see that each session was its own.

In areas where people may want part of the Freedom School to be a tutorial, they may want to tutor each other in math, English, social studies, etc.

Art, music, drama can all be related to people's lives. When I was in high school I was instructed to paint farms not slums, or faces and not what I really saw in faces.

Main Class: Why are many young white (especially those close to the Movement) interested in folk music and young Negro people like rhythm and blues? Don't need psychiatrists to discuss that. It may be a good way to get students to open up.

Drama and Creative Writing: What does it mean to create? Who decides what creating is? What is acting? Who acts?

Newsletters which display writing of Freedom School participants without censoring.

People may want to find their own school. They may want to talk about ways of getting classrooms: 1. Through the structure (Principal, Bd of Educ, etc.)

2. Not through the structure (ask the janitor for a key)

There may be seminars where lecturers who can bring fruit for discussion (not necessarily respected experts - example try 5th St downtown LA, or Synanon House.) People can come in and relate their experiences. The idea is to give information.

The possibility of interschool conferences may be good to draw closer ties between young people. This might be particularly good if the schools were held in different areas within southern California (Watts, East Los Angeles, San Fernando Valley, Long Beach, West LA). There may be several conferences where people may check their own growth in the schools. The largest reason for the conferences may be to break the controlled conferences held in regular schools.

Art supplies, books, crayons, etc: What can they be used for and where and how can they be gotten?

Can students feel free to talk about themselves in high schools - their fears, shames, guilt, God, happiness, joys? I don't think so. Most schools seem to try to make people ashamed of what they are so they'll want to be something else (more pliable to the system). That's what my school tried to do to me. If not so bad, the only reasons I went to school were because of the dances and sports events and because there was no place else to go. I couldn't talk about my life because it had little to do with the teachers life. It certainly had nothing to do with what my country wanted me to be.

I think people can talk about themselves in Freedom Schools but only if the atmosphere is right, only if they feel they can do that freely. That atmosphere can ultimately be set by the leader. The leader's role in my mind is to challenge the challengers. He raises questions as honestly as possible. He talks about himself so that others will feel free to talk about themselves. That means that the leader has to feel free himself, to trust others. The leader must continually ask questions of not only the people, but about the people - the deepest questions, ultimately what am I and why. Can leaders (mostly college students who grew up in this society) trust themselves enough to pose these questions? Are they that free? It is not accidental that the leaders of the FSM at Berkeley came out of the Freedom School experience last summer. Students who had gone South to help free other people saw, when returning to their universities that they were more deeply slaves than the people in Mississippi.

The purpose of a freedom school in Los Angeles to me is no different from the purpose in Mississippi: to create, by raising basic questions, an educational experience for young people which would make it possible for them to challenge the authority of a system which stifles and destroys, to see more clearly its realities and to seek alternatives - finally new directions for actions. (This perhaps would be the most important student movement in Los Angeles). Can young people, who've been told that they're too young, not qualified, not fully educated, that they have to be molded and developed and have to be administered, make decisions about their own lives just as they are? Can they, the following semester, run their own school (newspaper, student government, Board of Education)? Maybe by the end of the Freedom School session some of these questions will have been dealt with.

In a larger sense, very few of the people make decisions which affect their lives. Our government is set up to represent property - not people (the few people they do represent are those who own all the property). What would happen if we had a referendum to decide whether or not we went to war in Vietnam? What would Rockefeller say to that?

My idea of a Freedom School is that it would not be directed simply to young Negroes to get them involved in civil rights activities (although that may be one outgrowth). The Freedom Schools would be open to include all those who are considered in "the mainstream of American life." What does it mean to be in the mainstream of a cesspool? What does it mean to be called a "normal" American in a decayed society?

The Freedom School concept would be to challenge all our old concepts - including education.

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