

Freedom Schools

I. Introduction

The need for freedom schools cannot be questioned, nor can the great benefits which they have and are providing. Public schools provided for the negro citizens are appallingly inferior to those of the whites. Of course, the extent of inferiority varies, but the following are examples which, though probably not universal, are in existence. Basic materials are in short supply, many are the used discards from white schools. Classes are as large as 60 students, many of whom sit on the floor. There may be no lunch hour provided, no physical education, no foreign language and no science equipment. For the first 6 weeks, school is run on a half session so that children are free to pick cotton. Naturally the children who are not picking cotton (a sizeable number do not) feel they are being cheated out of valuable hours for learning. Because of the pressures on Negro teachers and administrators, no open discussion of civil rights, freedom, even the Civil War, is allowed. It is generally known that Negro schools are 2-3 years behind white schools. To meet these deficiencies, especially the lack of open discussion, freedom schools have been established.

II. Goals of the Freedom Schools

Freedom Schools are set up with several goals in mind. A major problem among Mississippi Negroes is a lack of the ability to express, in an organized manner, what they feel and want done. In this, SNCC is helping to develop leadership within the Negro community, itself. Another major goal is aiding the people with things they think are important. Working with the people on local affairs is something which must be done through Mississippi people. In addition, there is a very large commitment to those students with a great deal of academic potential. It is vital to give them as much extra help as is possible, in order for them to continue their formal education in the North, that they may be of more help to their communities.

III. Organization and Composition of Freedom Schools.

The conditions under which Freedom Schools meet and the quality and amount of available materials varies throughout Mississippi. Many of them are held in churches, community centers, and some in their own buildings. Supplies are at a minimum, and those most needed include writing paper, pencils, and books dealing with Negro history and art (including reproductions) history.

The curriculum of the Freedom Schools includes a basic three courses: Negro history, Civics, and English. From there on, the volunteers are on their own as to what will be taught and they must more or less "play it by ear". Because of this, the additional courses taught will vary from school to school. Among those taught are science, mathematics, health, art-appreciation and practice, and foreign language. Foreign languages, when available are a favorite of the students. The teaching of languages is of much importance for it helps bring them out of their environments and makes them aware of and concerned with other cultures. It is also an excellent means of getting students, who have difficulty with school, to express themselves. Concerning this, the key is "Teach through talking". Also, in learning a foreign language, the students vocabulary is enlarged as is his knowledge of grammar.

A major factor in the programs at Freedom schools concerns the age of the participants. Although the vast majority are teenagers, many adults are involved. There are also a great many younger children present, and the feeling is that a better program is needed for them. One suggestion is a "One to One" program whereby each older student teaches a younger one.

This type of a program would give the older students a chance to develop their ability to communicate and is also a chance for them to have practical experience in leadership.

IV. Building rapport in Mississippi communities

The establishing of rapport is by far one of the greatest problems confronting the volunteers, for without this rapport, nothing can be accomplished. For a vast majority of Mississippi Negroes, coming into contact with middle class white northerners in an informal situation is a new experience and creates many problems because it is unheard of in their society. In the same respect, for many volunteers, coming into contact with poor and semi-literate Negroes and Whites may be just as new, and in some cases, unheard-of experience also.

Below are some suggestions for the volunteer as to establishing this rapport once in Mississippi:

1. Admit your prejudice.
2. Remember that Mississippi is a "physical" state and such things as talking, eating, playing and touching the people helps make you a part of them.
3. Admit your gripes freely - Remember, people are people and we all get upset sometimes.

Following are some suggestions to the prospective volunteer while in his local area up North.

1. Become involved in a tutorial program where you come into contact with people of various backgrounds and economic levels.
2. Working through COFO, establish an "Adopt-a-School" program whereby you maintain contact with a Freedom School. Let them know what you are doing. Ask them what they need. This contact will serve as a means of making yourself known before you arrive. The bridge between you will have been started.
3. "Pen Pals" is still another method of making yourself known. In addition they give the student, you are corresponding with, practical experience in writing and expression.