

The Director of a Freedom School describes the operation, purpose and elan of a significant venture into the politics of education.

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MISSISSIPPI'S FREEDOM SCHOOLS:
THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

All education is political. In Mississippi, at least, it is impossible to find this trite. There, it is inescapable that the educational system furthers the political, that the kind of learning the individual gets depends completely upon the role he is supposed to live.

A thirteen year old Jackson, Mississippi girl, sitting within a Freedom School circle this summer, described the events of the last day, the previous year, in her public (segregated) junior high school. Students in a high school nearby had asked the students in "Shirley's" school to join them in a protest-demonstration against local school conditions and procedures. "Shirley's" (Negro) teacher had threatened the class with failure for the year, should they walk out to join demonstrators. Most of the class was intimidated, but not "Shirley" and several of her friends. She left, she said, because she knew that she had not failed for the year, she knew she had earned good grades, and she knew that it was right to join the demonstrators. As she and her friends reached the downstairs floor, they met, head on, the (Negro) principal "who was coming at us with a board." They turned, fled, back-tracked through the cafeteria and out the back way to join the demonstrators.

The Negro school child in Mississippi, like "Shirley," associates the school he attends, in spite of the color of his teachers and principal, with the white world outside him--the police, the White Citizens' Council, the mayor or sheriff, the governor of his state. And the school child's instinctive vision is perfectly correct. His teachers are either timid and quiescently part of the system of they are actively extra-punitive, dictatorial, hostile, vengeful, or worse. Sometimes his teachers are badly-trained, misinformed, but even when they know just that, they remain fearfully bound to the system that made them. The teacher with the ruler or iron chain or whip is himself caught in a power structure that allows him to teach only by rote to rote-learners. You learn this, he says, and you too can learn to get along. Get used to the violence, get used to being struck, get used to taking orders, for that is the way life is on the outside. You too can learn the rules and get to sit up here, ruler in hand, ready to strike out at anything out of line.

It is possible to sympathize with the middle-class Negro teacher caught between his own desire to rise from the poverty around him and his fear of the white power structure that controls his ability to rise. For the Negro teacher and his Negro principal are directed by white school superintendents, themselves under the direction of other white political forces. In Negro schools, the intercom is used by the principal to intimidate and harass the teacher. The principal, in turn, is harassed by others. And only the "Shirley," finally, is able to stand up and sing, with her friends and associates in Freedom Schools:

Before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.

If the official public school system of Mississippi is geared and oiled to operate efficiently for the status quo, it is no wonder, then, that the civil rights movement should have conceived of the Freedom School. But would children for whom a school was an unpleasant training ground for a repressive society come, voluntarily,

even to a "Freedom" school? Of course, voluntarily was the first cue. No one had to come, and once there, no "attendance" was taken. You came if you wanted to and you stayed if you were interested and you left if you felt like leaving. Your teacher, moreover, was "Tom" or "Leo" or "Gene," who shook your hand, called you by your first name, and said how glad he was to meet you. In your "class," your teacher sat with you in a circle, and soon you got the idea that you could say what you thought and that no one, least of all the teacher, would laugh at you or strike you. Soon, too, you got the idea that you might disagree with your teacher, white or black, and get a respectful hearing, that your teacher was really interested in what you thought or felt. Soon you were forgetting about skin colors altogether and thinking about ideas or feelings, about people and events.

As educators, we live in a fool's paradise, or worse in a knave's, if we are unaware that when we are teaching something to anyone we are also teaching everything to that same anyone. When we say we are teaching mathematics to Freddy, we also must admit that we are teaching Freddy what kind of person we are, how we live in the kind of world we control (or the kind of world that controls us), and how he can grow up to be one of the controllers or controlled. Teaching, we become, as so many people have said, a model for Freddy to learn from, quite apart from the mathematics or French or history we may be teaching him. And sometimes we are very "good" models. Sometimes, like "good" parents or "good" political leaders, we teach Freddy to love his neighbors, to honor honesty and integrity, to value the means as well as the ends, to abstain from using and controlling and killing human life. But sometimes we are not so inclined. Sometimes, at our worst, we educators resemble tyrants.

The idea of the Freedom School turns upside down particularly effectively the conventions of many public school systems that have to do with the role of the teacher. The teacher is not to be an omnipotent, aristocratic dictator, a substitute for the domineering parent or the paternalistic state. He is not to stand before rows of students, simply pouring pre-digested, pre-censored information into their brains. The Freedom School teacher is, in fact, to be present not simply to teach, but rather to learn with the students. In the democratic and creative sense that Wordsworth understood when he described the poet as "a man among men," the Freedom School teacher is a student among students. He does not have all the answers; his creativity is his ability to communicate with his students, to listen to them as much as they listen to him. The vitality of the teacher, as Freedom Schools would have it, lies in the student's and the teacher's mutual apprehension of life. A Freedom School teacher knows that education is the drawing out not of blood from stones, but rather of experience and observation from human beings. He knows that a thirteen year old who has survived his years in Mississippi understands, however fearfully or inarticulately, a great deal about the world he has survived in. The Freedom School teacher is there not as professional manipulator, but as concerned questioner--who really wants to hear what his companions will say, who really wants, himself, to be led by it. And thus he can turn the key to help the student break through the door that confines him--and all without recourse to the same means, authoritarianism, repression, violence, that have kept him locked in.

For much of the month of August, I coordinated and taught in one of Jackson, Mississippi's nine Freedom Schools. Opened on the fifth of August, these were in addition to the more than forty others that functioned through the summer in more than twenty different towns. Like most of the schools around the state, mine was located in the basement of a church. The basement room was acoustically difficult for a single voice and yet many voices together filled it uncomfortably. How to get attention, even briefly for announcements or for the start of some activity, perhaps the breaking up of the group into small discussion units? On the second day, when my voice had begun to hurt and when clapping my hands had begun to seem ineffectual, I hit accidentally upon the Quakerly method of raising your right hand. The children saw me standing before them, my right hand raised, and for communication's sake, my left index finger against my lips. They began to nudge one another, to raise their own hands, and to place their own fingers on their lips. And very quickly, the room grew quiet. I said, "All hands down," and delighted that the

method had worked, added, "Isn't this a lovely way to get silence?" Of course the children responded all together to me and to each other, and we had to begin all over again, right hands raised. But the method did work.

Also on one of the very first days, in the hot afternoon, with the teachers uncomfortable because they had had no lunch, and the children restless because we had not yet solved the problem of outdoor play space, two little boys began to fight. They were small enough so that I could forcibly separate them, but even in the midst of my hot, hungry exasperation, I had a vision of other fights and bigger boys whom I would be unable to pull apart. And from somewhere came the words: "Now, look here, we have few rules in this school, but we do have one important one and that is we do not hit each other--we talk. Understand? We talk here. This is a school for talking. Whenever you feel like hitting someone, remember to talk instead." The children looked puzzled and I said it all again. And then I sat down--in the midst of chaos--to talk with the two little boys about their fight. There were more fights in the next several days, but my words had begun to spread so that some of the older children were repeating them to the younger ones. And while we were never entirely free from an occasional blow--it was virtually impossible, for example, to keep older brothers from "punishing" their younger siblings--there were few or no fights after the first week.

The Greater Blair Street AME Zion Church, under the direction of Reverend R. H. Richmond, gave us not only shelter and equipment but most of all moral support and friendly protection. We drew our students, regardless of church membership, from the neighborhood. The families in a six to ten block radius ranged from lower-middle class to very poor (incomes from close to nothing to four thousand). The people in the neighborhood, like most of Jackson, were nervous about the arriving Freedom School teachers and were especially loathe to give us housing, for that would signify open support. Reverend Richmond convinced the people next door to give their empty room to the two male teachers. They, Gene Gogol and Tom Timberg, in the company of friendly students-to-be, had been canvassing the neighborhood during the time I was spending getting acquainted with the minister. When they reported back that they had had several offers of spare cots that could be moved elsewhere as well as of food--signs, of course, of a desire to help but without the attendant danger of housing a summer volunteer--we were able to make arrangements to move the beds into the empty room in the house next door to the church.

Our first impressions of the community were not incorrect: the parents continued to be cautious. With few exceptions, we had no contact with parents. But the children, of course, were different. They turned up, they turned out, they were willing to do anything, to go anywhere with us.

As Staughton Lynd, professor of history at Yale and summer director of all Freedom Schools in Mississippi, said, it was "a political decision for any parent to let his child come to a Freedom School." And many parents, in Jackson at least, avoided making that decision. I had assumed that parents knew that their children were attending Freedom School--until the day when I took up the question of sending a representative from our school to the state-wide Freedom School convention in Meridian. Expenses would be paid and the weekend program would be entertaining; I felt certain, that morning, that it would be difficult choosing the one delegate we were allowed to represent us. But to my surprise no one was willing to make a nomination--it was as if they all understood something I did not. I asked for volunteers and got no response again. Then I asked a thirteen year old girl, who had been particularly articulate the day before in a discussion, whether she would like to go. She said, first, only an abrupt "No," but when questioned in disbelieving tones, she admitted to, "Yes, but I can't."

"But why not, then? All your expenses would be paid, and you know you'd enjoy it."

She finally said that her father would not allow her to go, that he disapproved of her association with "the movement" in general, and that he did not approve even of her attending Freedom School. She was deliberately vague about whether or not he knew she was attending. When I asked whether it would help if I went to see him,

she first laughed and then urged me most seriously not to. The story repeated itself, with certain variations, around the room.

Two young mothers, both of them relatively new to the neighborhood, were sympathetic enough to the movement and interested enough to issue invitations to us. The mother of a six year old, who sent her daughter to Freedom School, sent word also that she would like to see "the teachers" after school, at which point she invited all of us to a hot dinner the following afternoon at three. Later, she asked to be included in our evening activities. Another mother of a teen-ager, whose own family disapproved of the student's attending Freedom School, also sent for the teachers, whom she then invited to accompany her to a jazz concert. Later, this mother held a party for the departing teachers and announced her willingness to be of service to Freedom Schools in the future.

Freedom Schools were planned originally with high school students in mind. In most places around the state, when Freedom School opened, all children turned up, regardless of publicity about high school students. Eventually, around the state, community centers were founded, first to take care of the younger children, later to function in ways that Freedom School could not or would not. When we opened our Blair Street doors on Wednesday, August 5, at eight a.m., "children," ages three to twenty-three, began to arrive. And of course we turned no one away. They came in twos and threes, sometimes several from a family, the teen-agers holding the hands of their younger brothers and sisters. Fifty-one students arrived throughout that first day and fifty more during the next several days. Some stayed awhile and left, never to appear again. Others stayed that day and came every day thereafter. Some came and disappeared, and then came again to stay to the end.

Nearly half of any total number of children present at the Blair Street School were under the age of ten. For these children we ran a combined school and community center in one of the two basement rooms of the church. Luckily, on the day before school had opened, I had met Leo Reese, a magically personable reading specialist from Gary, Indiana, the father of eleven children, who had volunteered to spend one week in Jackson. Leo, a native Mississippian and a Negro, had been born and raised in Pascagoula, on the Gulf. In the few days that Leo was present, he organized a program for the younger children, and because of his skills, freed three of the four assigned teachers for work with the older students. Later, after Leo had gone, two young women, Shirley Logan, a Jacksonian and a recent college graduate, and her cousin from Chicago, Superior Walker, came to the Blair Street School for a visit and stayed for two weeks to carry on the program with the younger children.

Mornings at Freedom School began slowly without opening bells. On some days we sang freedom songs until the group collected. On one day, August 6, Hiroshima Day, I told the students about what had happened nineteen years ago. On another day, I read from Langston Hughes' poems and then listened to reactions from the students. By nine-thirty, we were usually numerous enough to break into smaller discussion groups. Those children under ten went off to their room, generally for the rest of the day, unless there was to be a special activity in the afternoon. The older students separated sometimes into several age groups for a discussion that occupied most of the morning. The Citizenship Curriculum, about which I shall have more to say later, is the core of the program shared by all Freedom Schools in Mississippi. There was usually time, an hour before lunch and one after, for two hours of "electives." Negro history, chemistry, biology, English, French, and typing were the subjects settled on by the groups' desires and their teachers' abilities.

The afternoons were particularly hot, and more and more frequent were the noisy visits to the drinking fountain and the lavatories at the back of the church. There was no outdoor play space, but, eventually, teachers began to take groups of students to the playground of a nearby Catholic school that the sisters allowed us to use. One of the older boys organized a softball team and both boys and girls were eager to play ball regardless of the heat. Late in the afternoon (called "evening" in Mississippi) some of the teachers and students joined the regular COFO precinct workers for voter registration work.

The best afternoons at Blair Street were those filled with special events. On opening day, for example, Pete Seeger arrived at one-thirty in the afternoon to give us a private concert. With the whole school present, the very littlest ones asleep in any arms that would hold them, Pete talked first of his recent visit to twenty-seven countries around the world. He told us that all children were the same the world over and that music was a language that flew easily over even the highest walls. He demonstrated his statements by playing and singing Indian, African, Chinese, and Polynesian songs, in each instance allowing the rhythms to illustrate the emotion before offering a translation of the words. "Isn't this a happy song," he said, after singing, in African dialect, "Everybody Loves Saturday Night." He taught the children to sing the foreign words of several songs, and though we didn't know it then, that was the high moment for them. The Blair Street students had no idea that Pete was a famous man, but they wanted to hear more of him and happily turned up that evening to be transported across town to Anderson Chapel where Pete Seeger sang for a packed and overflowing house until his voice gave out.

Films were also a good afternoon activity. On the day we showed the full-length Oliver Twist to an audience of more than one hundred, I heard one boy of ten mutter to himself about Oliver, "He sho' is white, but he's a slave just the same." The film ran too late in the afternoon for discussion, but the following morning was filled with questions and talk about child labor. Another group of films were part of a special, state-wide program arranged by Paul Lauter, a professor of English at Smith College. All bearing upon the connections among the struggle for civil rights, non-violence, and the need for world peace, the four films were used by Paul to spark discussions. Two of these films were documentaries, one about Gandhi, the other about the Montgomery, Alabama, bus strike. The students were more interested in talking, however, about the other pair of films. One was a recent Polish film, The Magician. The other, an animated cartoon, The Hat, consisted of a dialogue between two soldiers (Dizzie Gillespie--whose music also filled the film--and the British comedian, Dudley Moore) who guard either side of a line, the hat of one falling onto the side of the other as they march. The students were quick to compare lines that divided nations with lines that divided people within nations. They remembered, during the discussion that followed, relevant details through which the film attempted to show that talking, in human terms, helps to erase lines.

Evening activities provided still other kinds of experience for the Freedom School student. Apart from concerts, there were mass meetings, at one of which, for example, A. Philip Randolph spoke along with leading Jackson ministers. Best of all was the Free Southern Theatre's production of In White America, which toured the state as part of a continuing program of special entertainment for Freedom Schools. Most of these students had never seen live theatre, and certainly not a play about themselves in history. Their response as audience was continuously energetic, especially since, as they reported the next day, they enjoyed recognizing incidents they had been reading of or discussing. One student, Kaaren Robinson, age fifteen, wrote the following as part of a review published in the Blair Street Freedom Bugle:

It portrayed the brutal transportation of the Negro from his native Africa to a new country, the inhuman treatment upon his arrival, the confusing position of the political-minded white man with regard to his stand on the slave question and the continuous struggle of the Negro against overwhelming odds.

....Because of his up-bringing, the new freedom put the Negro in a confusing state which naturally led him back into another kind of slavery. This slavery has lasted until now.

The author achieved these points through narration and conversation. Through this medium the Negro of today can better understand why the white man feels as he does toward him. However, this does not justify his feelings nor his actions. In White America is a great and moving drama which should be seen by black and white alike.

Though questioned, Kaaren resisted any attempt to enlarge upon the play's effect. From her point of view, the play allowed her to understand the white man's confusion; it told her nothing about the Negro she did not already know.

Charles Cobb, a student at Howard University before he joined the SNSS staff, was responsible late in 1963 for suggesting the idea of Freedom Schools. He has written cogently of their raison d'être, in a piece called "This is the Situation":

Repression is the law; oppression, a way of life--regimented by the judicial and executive branches of the state government, rigidly enforced by state policy machinery, with veering from the path of "our way of life" not tolerated at all. Here, an idea of your own is a subversion that must be squelched; for each bit of intellectual initiative represents the threat of a probe into the why of denial. Learning here means only learning to stay in your place. Your place is to be satisfied--a "good nigger."

They have learned the learning necessary for immediate survival: that silence is safest, so volunteer nothing; that the teacher is the state, and tell them only what they want to hear; that the law and learning are white man's law and learning.

There is hope and there is dissatisfaction--feebly articulated--both born out of the desperation of needed alternatives not given. This is the generation that has silently made the vow of no more raped mothers--no more castrated fathers; that looks for an alternative to a lifetime of bent, burnt, and broken backs, minds, and souls. Their creativity must be molded from the rhythm of a muttered "white son-of-a-bitch"; from the roar of a hunger bloated belly; and from the stench of rain and mud washed shacks.

There is the waiting, not to be taught, but to be, to reach out and meet and join together, and to change. The tiredness of being told it must be, "cause that's white folks' business," must be met with the insistence that it's the business. They know that anyway. It's because their parents didn't make it their business that they're being so systematically destroyed. What they must see is the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America.

The Citizenship Curriculum, the discussion of which filled most of our mornings, is frankly a response to the repressive society Charles Cobb has described. It is aimed at meeting two basic needs of students: first, a need for information; second, a need for identity and hence activity. The "facts" of history; in terms of dates, people's names, places, events, as well as the interpretations of history--all this has been denied to them, and denied particularly in relation to their own situation as American Negroes. Not only is Negro history unknown to them, but even the history of the current Negro revolution is known only in bits and pieces, largely through television, since their newspapers are notoriously uninformative. The second need, the need for identity and activity, is organically one with the need for facts. It has to do with what happens when an individual begins to know himself as part of history, with a past and a potential future as well as a present. What happens when an individual begins to assess himself as a human being? The aim of the Citizenship Curriculum here is to assist the growth of self-respect, through self-awareness, both of which lead to self-help. In this way, the curriculum at the center of the Freedom Schools is frankly and avowedly a program for leadership development.

In many different ways, the mimeographed curriculum makes clear the Freedom Schools' purpose: "to provide an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for action." Or more briefly, "to train people to be active agents in bringing about social change." The curriculum itself, however, declares that "It is not our purpose to impose a particular set of conclusions. Our purpose is to encourage the asking of questions, and hope that society can be improved."

Because the chief tool is the question, the curriculum is hopefully "developmental," that is, one that "begins on the level of the students' everyday lives and those things in their environment that they have either already experienced or can readily perceive, and builds up to a more realistic perception of American society, themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and alternatives offered by the Freedom Movement." The seven units are as follows:

1. Comparison of students' reality with others (the way the students live and the way others live)
2. North to Freedom? (The negro in the north)
3. Examining the apparent reality (the "better lives" that whites live)
4. Introducing the power structure
5. The poor negro and the poor white
6. Material things versus soul things
7. The Movement

In addition, two sets of questions are to be constantly in the minds of the teachers and frequently introduced to the students:

The Basic Set of Questions:

1. Why are we (teachers and students) in Freedom Schools?
2. What is the Freedom Movement?
3. What alternatives does the Freedom Movement offer us?

The Secondary Set of Questions:

1. What does the majority culture have that we want?
2. What does the majority culture have that we don't want?
3. What do we have that we want to keep?

Some of my own experience was with a relatively young group--eleven to fourteen-years-olds. After describing their own houses, they went on to describe the houses of whites in Jackson that they had seen, either because they had themselves worked as domestics, or because their mothers did. When asked what changes they would like made in their own houses, while their answers varied from additional rooms to more yard space, no one thought in terms as grandiose as the "white" houses they had described, and most of them thought of their houses as "comfortable." On the other hand, they were certain that their (segregated) schools were inferior, even when they admitted that the buildings were new. They resented their hand-me-down textbooks, they suspected the inadequacy of their teachers, and they complained particularly bitterly about the repressive atmosphere. In their schools, they reported that no questioning or discussion was allowed, except in rare instances when they and a particular teacher knew they were "taking a chance." Of course, they knew little or nothing of conditions in white schools, either in Mississippi or elsewhere, beyond their impression that these, somehow, were "better."

High school juniors and seniors were especially interested in the subject of going north to freedom. On the one hand, many of them expressed a wish to go north to college, in part because they suspected that Negro colleges in Mississippi were as inadequate as their public schools, but also because they wanted the experience of learning in an integrated group. They were articulate about the need for communication between black and white. The freedom songs they sang each day--"Black and white together / We shall overcome," for example--were not simply words to be mouthed. On the other hand, some of them had been reading with us from the works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin of the Negro in Chicago or Harlem; and they knew they were living through a summer which had brought riots to northern cities, though not to Jackson, Mississippi. They questioned the condition of Negroes everywhere, and many of them concluded that it was probably better to stay in Mississippi and work to

to improve things there than to imagine that things were better in another place.

The Freedom School curriculum's most substantial statement about values, "Material Things and Soul Things," takes as its central idea the society that is "humane" because it is "nonviolent." Negroes, of course, are no more naturally violent or nonviolent than any other group. But these students, brought up on the edge of a volcano, named as their heroes Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers, and, when they knew of him, Gandhi as well. At Blair Street, I asked the question about heroes because Paul Lauter had reported that when he asked the question at Freedom Schools throughout the state, those very three names occurred. It was also Paul's impression that as SNCC people became veterans at their jobs, nonviolence for them became not strategic manner but genuine conviction. For the veteran SNCC worker, Matt Suarez, who dropped in one afternoon at Blair Street for a visit and stayed for a discussion, nonviolence had become essential to life. Some of the students who listened to him had also experienced organized demonstrations within the discipline of the nonviolent movement. But their minds were far from decided. They questioned the theory; they suspected themselves of violent feelings"; they talked about "strategy"; they asked for a "speaker"--and got more discussion!

Because the student needs to learn not only about the world he lives in, but also how to be free enough to live in it, the chief tool of Freedom Schools always was discussion. Ideally, discussion began with the question, "How do you feel about...?" or "How would you feel if...?" and moved on to questions about motivation (Why do you feel this way? or "Why would anyone feel this way?"). Once the discussion had begun, the questions could move on to students' reactions to each other's ideas. At first, of course, students were distrustful of the situation generally. Some were also shy before their peers as well as frightened of their teacher. But of course they all had feelings and they all had some words with which to describe them. And eventually the moment came, unnoticed and passed over, when a student could say easily to his (white) teacher or to a fellow student, "I disagree," and explain why.

The teacher's main problem was to learn to keep quiet, to learn how to listen and to question creatively rather than to talk at the students. He had to discard whatever formal classroom procedures he had ever learned and respond with feeling and imagination as well as with intelligence and good humor to the moods and needs of the group. Above all, the students challenged his honesty: he could not sidestep unpleasantness; he could not afford to miss any opportunity for discussing differences.

I have no crystal ball, but I can submit two aspects of my own experience that suggest that the Freedom Schools of '64 spread more than transitory ripples in a huge Mississippi sea. The first was a discussion that led directly to social action independently instigated by the students themselves. The second was an experiment that led directly to the students writing poetry.

The third week of Freedom Schools in Jackson was also the week of school registration for those Negro first-graders who were to attend previously white schools. Registration was scheduled for early Thursday morning; a mass meeting for interested parents had been called by thirty-six Negro ministers of Jackson for Tuesday night. This was Monday morning, and the group at the Blair Street School had begun, for some reason, to talk about the "myth" of Negro inferiority. At one point, when there was silence, I asked how many of the twenty students present (ages fourteen to twenty) knew some first-grader who was about to start school. Everyone did. Did anyone know any who were going to a white school? No one did. When I asked why, I got many different responses:

My sister thinks her son would be unhappy with white children.
My brother hasn't gone to kindergarten.
The white school is too far away.
My mother wants my brother to be with his friends.
My father says he doesn't like the idea.

None of the students had mentioned the word fear. They all looked uncomfortable and I felt my anger rise: "What am I going to say to my friends back North when they ask me why Negro mothers haven't registered their children in white schools? That they like things the way they are?" I could see the consternation on the face of Gene Gogol, my fellow teacher, who began, "I disagree, Florence, you just don't understand the situation." I felt that his rebuke was probably a just one, but then the students began to smile wryly and, one by one, they began to talk of the various fears that "perhaps" these parents were feeling. Personal safety. Economic security--the loss of jobs because they weren't being "good niggers." Failure in the white school--either because of social ostracism or because of poor training and possibly the alleged intellectual inferiority. But then suddenly, I don't know exactly what shifted the discussion, perhaps something about the white faces that Gene and I wore in the midst of the black ones, suddenly the students were talking about positive reasons for sending children into integrated schools. Then one of the sixteen-year-old girls suggested that perhaps we--meaning those of us in the discussion group--ought to go out into the neighborhood and talk with parents who were reluctant to send their children to white schools, that perhaps we were most suited for this job since we knew the value of good education and we knew there was really nothing to fear. When I suggested that we try one of the school's favorite procedures, role-playing, there were volunteers immediately for mother, father, child, and for two visitors from the Freedom School. The players were evenly matched so that the play-discussion rehearsed all the arguments we had heard. The role-playing father remained unconvinced, but his wife assured the visitors that she had really changed her mind and that, after they had gone, she would "work on" her husband.

Gene and a crew of student-volunteers worked all the rest of Monday, Monday night, and all of Tuesday. They talked to more than seventy families and received from twenty-seven of these assurances that at least the mother would attend Tuesday night's mass meeting, perhaps would take advantage of the transportation we would provide. Disappointingly, only one mother kept her promise. But on Wednesday morning, Gene and some students began their visits again, and by Thursday noon, all of Blair Street's Freedom School were boasting that eleven of the forty-three Negro children in Jackson who actually registered to attend previously white schools had done so as a direct result of Gene's and the students' talks with parents.

Thus the students had direct evidence that their school experience had led them to create something that was lasting and profound. Additional evidence--this of a more personal nature--followed their reading and discussion of poetry.

We had begun with poems by Langston Hughes. They knew immediately that when Hughes, in a poem called "As I Grew Older," mentioned a "thick wall" and a "shadow" growing between him and his childhood "dream", he was talking about walls and shadows they knew everyday in Jackson: the barbed wire around the parks, for example, or the hate in white men's faces when they tried to go to a movie downtown. I didn't need to be a teacher showing the difference between literal meaning and what was "symbolized." There was curiosity about forms. Do all poems rhyme? What is rhyme, anyway? Can poets use any words they like? The students, who had never heard of Langston Hughes, were surprised by his slang, by his use of jazz expressions. They listened to the occasional irregularity that made rhythms interesting, especially in a Hughes song-poem like "The Weary Blues"--which they never tired of.

One day, when discussion had flagged, I suggested a "game." Let's divide into four groups of five and try writing a "group" poem. I even offered a subject: try writing about yourselves and Jackson--we had just been reading about Hughes and Harlem. When I returned, half an hour later, cries of "Listen to this" greeted me. With one exception, the poems were not group products--the groups had stayed to watch individual members create. The best poem came from a sixteen year old girl, a visitor to Jackson from Pascagoula, who had just come for the first time to Freedom School, and who was to continue attending thenceforth. This is Alice Jackson's poem called "Mine":

I want to walk the streets of a town,
Turn into any restaurant and sit down,
And be served the food of my choice,
And not be met by a hostile voice.
I want to live in the best hotel for a week,
Or go for a swim at a public beach.
I want to go to the best university
And not be met with violence or uncertainty.
I want the things my ancestors
Thought we'd never have.
They are mine as a Negro, an American;
I shall have them or be dead.

In the days that followed, we read poems by Sandburg and Frost, two poets the students had heard of, but the greatest excitement came from their introduction to e e cummings, especially to the poem "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town." One day, after two hours of a discussion of cummings' poems, I asked the eight or nine students present--ages fourteen to seventeen--whether they wanted to try writing again. When I asked whether they wanted a suggested subject, I heard an overwhelming series of no's. No subject...let us write what we feel like writing.

Within twenty minutes, Shirley Ballard, age seventeen, was reading aloud to me a poem called "Time." She read it slowly, emphasizing the individuality of certain words and phrases. Its feeling was clearly fragmentary. But then she showed me the page on which she had written the poem: four long lines, resembling her reading not at all. She had read it in a manner that suggested something else, and I showed her cummings' page. She caught on instantly, took her page, and returned in several minutes with the following version:

Time goes by so slowly
my mind reacts so lowly
 how faint
how moody
 I feel,
 I love not
 I care not.
Don't love me.
Let me live.
 Die
 Cry
 Sigh
All alone
 Maybe someday I'll go home.

Another seventeen year old, Sandra Ann Harris, quickly produced a cummings-like poem--even to the elimination of all capitalization:

why did i my don'ts
why did i my dids
what's my didn'ts purpose
is it to fulfill my dids

what isn'ts have i proclaimed
what ises have i pronounced
why can't i do my doings
my couldn'ts do renounce

my wouldn'ts are excuses
my couldn'ts couldn't be helped
my weren't were all willful
my words of little help

the haven'ts were just there
my didn'ts did believe
that all my won'ts are daring
my wills to receive

If it is startling to consider how much these students learned so quickly, it is also instructive to consider that in Freedom Schools all over Mississippi this summer students were becoming both social activists and poets. An impressive volume of poetry (which may soon be published) appeared in Freedom School newspapers. And a Mississippi Student Union has been formed. The connection between poetry and politics should surprise no one who has read the Romantics or, more recently, the poets of the Irish Renaissance. What is surprising is that, in some ways, it took so little to accomplish so much in the Mississippi Freedom Schools.

Consider the discussion circle, the union of teachers and students in a status-free ring. Consider too the position of these students--blacks in a white culture--as outsiders who were now, in 1964, conscious outsiders, youngsters seeing new possibilities ahead of them and, at the same time, young adults with the wisdom to see what Negro slavery has been. Under these special new conditions, one could talk and think about what it was like to be a slave and what it might be like to be free. One could even try being free. Under these special conditions--the consciousness of being suppressed combined with the proffered opportunity to base education on that consciousness-creativity was the natural response.

What have we to learn from Freedom Schools? The politics of education. That our schools are political grounds in which our students begin to learn about society's rules. That, therefore, if we wish to alter our students and our society, we must alter our schools. That if we would have strong and creative minds we must remove chains both from bodies and spirits. That we as adults and educators have to listen and respond rather than preach. That we need to share with our students a sense of being open to what each uniquely experienced companion can reveal. That this perspective of equality is itself a revolution that goes far beyond the surface movement of Negroes into white society. And that if Freedom School teachers in Mississippi society know themselves as unwelcome and harassed outsiders, not unlike the Negro students, then authentic teachers anywhere must face a similar knowledge.

The Freedom School students and teachers who heard Langston Hughes' "As I Grew Older" understood that Hughes' prayer was theirs too--for strength and wisdom to break through all spiritual prisons of self and society and so to reach freedom:

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!