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What is education?

Education, as Louisiana CORE envisions it, is not just the acquisition of training and knowledge for pragmatic ends. It is a dynamic, ongoing process which involves a growing self awareness, self expression and social consciousness on the part of the individual who has learned to question the world in which he lives.

CORE thus wishes to destroy the traditional concept of education. We are not merely interested in giving someone the opportunity to take courses which will fulfill requirements for a high school diploma. We do not consider our goal for this individual to be a satisfactory job. Our concept of education cannot be tied to so specific a program or so concrete an objective. For indeed, what in fact are we to educate this individual for? Into what society will he now be accepted? Once having arrived at such immediate goals, to what does this individual look forward?

Education must instead involve an attempt to question an established pattern of life, the wish to destroy the role which the Negro has traditionally played in order to survive in the white man's world. Up until the present, education for a Negro has really meant learning how to play a role, learning how to get along with "Mr. Charlie". It is now the time for this role to be disregarded. People must begin to believe that they are really free to think of viable alternatives to their present way of life.

But is it more than just a role which must be changed? Education, by its very nature in the South must be political and CORE's conception of education implies a challenge to our society in general as well as to the individual within his own community. For ideally, education leads to group participation, to the belief that "we can help ourselves". It leads the individual away from attributing all decision making powers to others, as he has in the past - to the Governor, the Mayor, the Sheriff or to the Boss. Yet in each community, Negroes are faced with terrific resistance from the outside community. Despite certain significant symbolic legal gains the Negro is still confronted with an immovable political, social and economic societal structure. Once he realizes this where can he then turn?

Thus although CORE may help communities to meet particular educational needs, all community activities are in effect part of the educational process.

What is the relationship between our goals of education and CORE's entrance into a community in order to mobilize its members to utilize all the resources available to them?

Throughout the country today, Federal funds are one major source of assistance to poverty stricken areas. Millions of dollars have been directed to such regions by the U.S. Government. The attempt to build the Great Society has led to the development of numerous programs such as Operation Headstart, The Job Corps, and ViSta Volunteers.

It is obvious that CORE as an organization could never raise the funds necessary to engage in such large scale, long range programs. But should we then encourage community groups to take advantage of these opportunities? Will our support of such programs help or hinder our own initial efforts towards our stated goals? If we are to involve ourselves in such government endeavors how can we make good use of the various programs within the community and yet not lose sight of our own prospectus for future CORE activity in Louisiana?

To be specific, how can we work towards achieving our own ends by involving ourselves in Operation Headstart, the pre-school program for culturally deprived children? This program has been set up by the Government to provide pre-school training and experience for socially disadvantaged children who will enter the first grade in the fall. The Government has funded local communities who have submitted workable pre-school programs and each community Headstart Project is to be staffed and run by local people.

The Government has set up this program in order to provide educational benefits for the children who live in these communities. But does CORE's involvement in this program stop with these educational benefits? How does such a program fit into CORE's own present thinking about community organization and involvement?

Headstart provides a marvelous opportunity for CORE to work with local community members within a program determined by the needs originally articulated by these very people. At the same time, the nature of Headstart as a program involving large numbers of children (1,100 in the three centers that CORE is directly involved in) provides a ready-made situation in which parents can be brought together in order to discuss local community needs.

Staughton Lynd, has said that " it is a political decision for any parent to let his child come to a Freedom School". In a similar fashion one might say that in any parish in Louisiana it is a political step for a Negro Headstart program even to exist. In Concordia Parish for example, in Ferriday, where Negroes are terrorized by the Klan (a man was burned to death there by the Klan in February) Headstart will be the first sign of any group organized by the local Negro community. Placed in this perspective one can readily see the political value of Headstart as an instrument to build up confidence in the Negro community.

More important, local community participation in Operation Headstart is political when such programs are run by people who are not beholden to the power structure. Under such conditions, involvement in Headstart is not just participation in a structure built and directed by the Federal Government. People working together to make their own decisions in turn become involved in a very different sense. Though they are indeed a part of Headstart in general, it is not in the traditional organizational sense. It is only under these conditions, when people are ultimately responsible only to themselves, that we can hope to provide a real challenge to present conditions.

In Claiborne Parish for example, at a recent meeting parents began asking themselves certain questions in regard to their Headstart project. They were discussing how teachers were to be selected for the program. They concluded at this meeting that someone who was willing to teach in the pre-school program but who was unwilling to join the group at mass meetings, at demonstrations or in the planning of future community action projects would be unacceptable for a teaching position. They based this decision upon the belief that the teacher's job cannot be limited to the teaching of the traditional subjects taught to Negro children in Southern schools today. The tacit assumption implied in this decision is that when an atmosphere is free for discussion and personal expression, a whole way of life is challenged by the teacher as well as by the child. These parents thus see the role of the teacher in the Headstart program in terms of CORE's conception of the educational process. In such a community, Headstart is thus an instrument of political education, a key to the rest of the community. Parents as well as children will come together to share their experiences and ideas. The questions they raise in regard to Headstart will hopefully lead to others- about themselves and the world at large.

From these parents' meetings it is hoped that the group's activities will then increase in scope. The initial Headstart parents' meetings may therefore lead to the development of farmers co-ops, adult education programs, freedom school classes or to any other activity that the community desires to initiate. Just as this vision of Headstart involves much more than just the creation of a pre-school formal educational program, the summer learning experience for each child is envisioned as much more than the mere classroom situation. For it must be noted that since the Headstart program is only planned to run for eight weeks, the children involved will be faced in the fall with the very sort of formal education system which we hope a pre-school program will dramatically challenge. Thus it is most important that parents as well as teachers must begin to participate in the kind of educational process we desire if the program is to have any lasting value.

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