

# FREEDOM SCHOOLS IN MISSISSIPPI, 1964

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(Provided courtesy of [Freedom School Curriculum Website](#))

From the carbon copies of the spring's letters and reports I see what real apprehensions, as well as hopes, the people who dreamed of Freedom Schools had. Out of Charlie Cobb's idea of a situation in which there would be questioning, release from rigid squelching of initiative and expression—from Charlie Cobb's bitterness about the way the Negro has had to be silent in order to survive in white America, and his vision of the kid's articulateness and reaching for change, meaningful change, in Mississippi—out of his seeing that kids are ready to see “the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America”—came the original plan for Freedom Schools in Mississippi. That it could be an idea that people working desperately on voter registration and on keeping alive in the state could take seriously is perhaps evidence of the validity of Charlie Cobb's dream: Mississippi needed more, needs more, than that all Negroes 21 and over shall have the right to vote. The staff in Mississippi understood what Charlie was dreaming because they, too, were daring to dream that what could be done in Mississippi could be deeper, more fundamental, more far-reaching, more revolutionary than voter registration alone: more personal, and in a sense more transforming, than a political program.

The decision to have Freedom Schools in Mississippi then, seems to have been a decision to enter into every phase of the lives of the people of Mississippi. It seems to have been a decision to set the people free for politics in the only way that people really can become free, and that is totally. It was an important decision for the staff to be making, and so it is not surprising that the curriculum for the proposed schools become everyone's concern. I understand that Louis Chaffee, Dona Moses, Mendy Samstein, and Casey Hayden as well as Noel Day, Jane Stembridge, and Jack Minnis worked on and argued about what should be taught, and what the realities of Mississippi are, and how those realities affect the kids, and how to get the kids to discover themselves as human beings. And then, I understand, Staughton Lynd came in to impose a kind of beautiful order on the torment that the curriculum was becoming—torment because it was not just curriculum: it was each person on the staff in Mississippi painfully analyzing what the realities of his world were, and asking himself, with what pain I can only sense, what right he had to let the kids of Mississippi know the truth, and what right he had had to keep it from them until now. And because of these sessions, the whole concept of what could be done in Mississippi must have changed.

In a way, the Freedom Schools began to operate in those planning session. A section of the curriculum called “Poor whites, poor Negroes and their fears,” for example, considers the unity of experience between whites and Negroes, as well as the psychological and political barriers. And out of the discussions that produced this part of the curriculum came, perhaps, the idea of a “White Folks' Project,” and the intense economic orientation of what was begun in Research, and Federal Programs, also new projects. And out of work with the people day after day in the Freedom Schools emerged medical concerns, and farm league ideas, and the community building of community centers. It was because the people trying to change Mississippi were asking themselves the real questions about what is wrong with Mississippi that the Summer Project in effect touched every aspect of the lives of the Negroes in Mississippi, and started to touch the lives of the whites.

It was the asking of questions, as I see it, that made the Mississippi Summer Project different from other voter registration projects and other civil rights activities everywhere else in the South. And so it is reasonable that the transformations that occurred—and transformations did occur—out of the Freedom School experience occurred because for the first time in their lives kids were asking questions.

The way the curriculum finally came out was that it was based on the asking of certain questions, questions which kept being asked through the summer, in connection with the kids' interest in their Freedom School teachers (mostly northern, mostly white, mostly still in college), in connection with Negro History, in connection with African culture, in connection even with the academic subjects, as well as in connection with the study of the realities of Mississippi in the light of Nazi Germany, 1935. The so-called "Citizenship Curriculum" set up two sets of questions. The primary set was: 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? What was called the secondary set of questions, but what seemed to me the more important, because more personal, set was: 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?

The answering of these questions, and the continual raising of them in many contexts, may be said perhaps to be what the Freedom Schools were about. This was so because in order to answer anything out of what these questions suggest, it is necessary for the student to confront the question of who he is, and what his world is like, and how he fits into it or is alienated from it.

It was out of the experience of asking these questions that the transformations occurred. At the beginning of the summer, with rare amazing exceptions, the kids who were tentatively exploring us and the Freedom Schools were willing to express about themselves only one thing with honesty and passion, without the characteristic saying of the thing they think the white man wants to hear: that thing was that as soon as they could gather enough money for a ticket they were going off to Chicago, or to California! To leave the state was their ambition, and about it they were certain, even though they had not thought any further than that, even in terms of where the money was to come from, and certainly not in terms of what they would find there and what they would do there. Some sense of "go home to my Lord and be free"—some vague hope of a paradise beyond—seemed to inform their passion for the north, their programless passion.

But by the end of the summer almost all of these kids were planning to stay in Mississippi.

Within the flexible structure of the Freedom School it was natural that a confession of—an insistence on—the desire to race northward lead to a discussion of the condition of the Negro in the North, about which most of the teachers could tell specifically. And then came the news stories about Harlem, and Rochester, and Medford, Massachusetts, and the kids were interested, and worried. But it was not just because the truth about the North began to shatter their dream of it as a paradise that the kids changed their minds. The yearning for the North was, of course, the expression of a need to escape the intolerability of the situation in Mississippi. But the nature of their need to escape was that they really did not know what it was about Mississippi that they hated—or, rather, they felt that what was intolerable for them

had somehow to do with the white man, somehow to do with getting only \$3.00 a day for 10 hours' work chopping a white man's cotton, somehow to do with the police—but they had not yet articulated, if they knew, the connections among all these things. And they had not, as well, articulated the connections of those things with their experiences of repression at home and in school. And so the very amorphous nature of the enemy was threatening to them.

The experience in the Freedom School was that patterns began to be seen, and patterns were real and could be dealt with. So the kids began to see two things at once: that the North was not real escape, and the South was not some vague white monster doomed irrationally to crush them. Simultaneously, they began to discover that they themselves could take action against the injustices—the specific injustices and the condition of injustice—which kept them unhappy and impotent.

Through the study of Negro History they began to have a sense of themselves as a people who could produce heroes. They saw in the story of Joseph Cinque of the Amistad a parallel to kinds of revolts that the Movement, as they began to learn about it, represented. They saw that Joseph Cinque, in leading a mutiny on that slave ship instead of asserting his will to freedom by jumping off the ship into the shark-waiting waters, was saying that freedom is something that belongs to life, not to death, and that a man has responsibility for bringing all his people to freedom, not just for his own escaping. Connections between then and now kept begin made—at first by the teachers, very soon by the students: who do you know that is like Joseph Cinque? How is Bob Moses like Moses in the Bible? How is he different? Why did Harriet Tubman go back into the South after she had gotten herself free into the North—and why so many times? And why doesn't Mrs. Hamer stay in the North once she gets there to speak, since she doesn't have a job on that man's plantation any more, and since her life is in so much danger? And what do you think about Fredrick Douglass's talking so straight to the President of the United States? And how does the picture of Jim Forman in the Emancipation Proclamation issue of Ebony suggest that same kind of straight talking? And who do you think the Movement is proving right—Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. DuBois? And why are the changes of gospel songs into Freedom Songs significant? What does "We Shall Overcome" really mean in terms of what we are doing, and what we can do?

Beginning to sense the real potency of organized Negroes in Mississippi, the kids in the Freedom Schools found an immediate area of concern in the Negro schools they attended or had dropped out of: the so-called "public" schools. They had grievances, but had, until drawn into the question asking, only been able to whine, or to accept passively, or to lash out by dropping out of school or getting themselves expelled. Within the Freedom Schools, especially by comparing the Freedom Schools with the regular schools, they began to become articulate about what was wrong, and the way things should be instead: Why don't they do this at our school? Was the first question asked, and then there began to be answers, which led to further questions, such as, Why don't our teachers register to vote, if they presume to teach us about citizenship? And why can't our principal make his own decisions instead of having to follow the orders of the white superintendent? And why do we have no student government, or why doesn't the administration take the existing student government seriously?

This was the main question, which came also out of why there are no art classes, no language classes, why there is no equipment in the science labs, why the library is inadequate and inaccessible, why the classes are overcrowded. The main question was WHY ARE WE NOT

TAKEN SERIOUSLY?—which is of course the question that the adults were asking about the city and county and state, and the question the Freedom Democratic Party asked—and for which the party demanded an answer—at the Convention.

The students were taken seriously in the Freedom Schools. They were encouraged to talk, and their talking was listened to. They were assigned to write, and their writing was read with attention to idea and style as well as to grammar. They were encouraged to sing, to dance, to draw, to play, to laugh. They were encouraged to think. And all of this was painful as well as releasing because to be taken seriously requires confrontation. And so Freedom School was painful for the kids who grew the most.

Tangibly, what was set in motion out of this experience of joy and pain was the thing the Mississippi staff had hoped could happen in Mississippi, but could not totally form. In the spring before the summer, SNCC in Mississippi had tried to organize a Mississippi Student Union, bringing together kids from all over the state. And there was good response, but not on the scale the MSU was soon to achieve out of the Freedom Schools. This summer the kids began to talk boycott of the schools, but to be able to discipline their thinking about boycott so that their action would not just be acting out their frustrations but careful, considered, programmed, revolutionary meaningful action along the lines of the Montgomery bus boycott and African revolutionary action. The kids were able to come together in the middle of the summer, in Meridian, and draw up a series of resolutions which said with terrible clarity what they felt about their world: what a house should be, what a school should be, what a job should be, what a city should be—even what the federal government should be. And they were able to ask why it was that the people did not have a voice, and to assert that their voices would be heard. The seriousness of their concern for a voice is reflected in the final statement of the list of grievances drawn up by the McComb Freedom School:

We are 12 Pike County high-school students. Until we are assured our parents will not suffer reprisals, until we are sure this list of grievances is met with serious consideration and good will, we will remain anonymous.

The McComb students are sounding this list of grievances to the school officials, the senators and the newspapers and the city officials and the President of the United States. Out into the world: look at me—I am no longer an invisible man.

And back again into themselves. Whoever the Freedom Schools touched they activated into confrontation, with themselves and with the world and back again. On one level, it was the white teacher saying to the Negro girl that nappy hair vs. “good hair” is not a valid distinction: that it is a white man’s distinction, and that the queens in Africa—in Senegal, Mali, Ghana—in Ethiopia—had nappy short hair! On another level, it was the Northern Negro student teacher saying to the kids yearning Northward that he himself had gone to an almost completely (or completely) segregated school, and that his home was in a ghetto. On another, it was a senior, suspended from the split-session summer school for participating in the movement and taking Freedom School academic courses (fully parallel) instead, saying of Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” that the man took the road that needed him more: “because it was grassy / and wanted wear / . . . and that has made all the difference.” On another level, it was the white and Negro Freedom School teachers sitting with the adults in the evening classes talking about what kids want and what kids deserve, and hearing the adults express some of their concern for their kids in the forming of a parents’ group to support the kids’ action against the schools.

On still another, it was the junior-high-school kids in the community coming over in the evening to sit with the adults who were learning their alphabets, one kid to one adult, and both, and the staffs, crying with awe for the beauty and strangeness and naturalness of it. And on all levels, it was the whites, the northerners, listening to the Mississippi Negroes, reading what they wrote, taking them seriously, and learning from them.

Visible results of Freedom Summer include the kids' drawings on the wall of Freedom Schools and COFO officers all over the state, as well as kids' applications for scholarships (National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students) and even more applications for the Tougaloo Work Study program, which commits them to staying to work in Mississippi. In addition, there is the real probability that the Negro teachers in the regular schools—the teachers who have to sign an oath not to participate in civil rights activities or try to vote—have, this first week of school, begun to experience for the first time in their lives the challenge from a student that is not adolescent testing or insolent acting out but serious demanding that in truth there is freedom and that he will have the truth!

Most significantly, the result of the summer's Freedom Schools is seen in the continuation of the Freedom Schools into the fall, winter, spring, summer plans of the Mississippi Project. Some project directors, who had been in Mississippi since 1961 during the slow, sometimes depressing, always dangerous, serious, tiring work of voter registration, first thought of the Freedom Schools as a frill, detrimental to the basic effort. At best, they were a front for the real activity. But Freedom Schools were not just, as the same project directors came to concede, a place where kids could be inducted into the Movement, a convenient source of canvassers. They were something else, and in realizing this the dubious project directors were themselves transformed by the Freedom Schools. They were, instead of anything superficial, and will go on to be, the experience—not the place—in which people, because we needed them, emerged as discussion leaders, as teachers, as organizers, as speakers, as friends, as people. I know this is so because in leaving the Freedom School in Indianola, the county seat of Sunflower County where the Movement had been resisted for three years, and where, when we came in, the people did not know how to cross arm over arm to sing "We Shall Overcome," I learned for the first time in my life that with kids you love to disconnect is to suffer. So the teachers were transformed, too.

The transformation of Mississippi is possible because the transformation of people has begun. And if it can happen in Mississippi, it can happen all over the South. The original hope of the Freedom School plan was that there would be about 1,000 students in the state coming to the informal discussion groups and other sessions. It turned out that by the end of the summer the number was closer to 3,000, and that the original age expectation of 16-17-18-year-olds had to be revised to include preschool children and all the way up to 70-year-old people, all anxious to learn about how to be Free. The subjects ranged from the originally anticipated Negro History, Mississippi Now, and black-white relations to include typing, foreign languages, and other forms of tutoring. In fact, these aspects of the program were so successful that the continuation of the Freedom Schools into the regular academic year will involve a full-scale program of tutorials and independent study as well as exploration in greater intensity of the problems raised in the summer sessions, and longer-range work with art, music, and drama.

To think of kids in Mississippi expressing emotion on paper with crayons and in abstract shapes rather than taking knives to each other; to think of their writing and performing plays

about the Negro experience in America rather than just sitting in despairing lethargy within that experience; to think of their organizing and running all by themselves a Mississippi Student Union, whose program is not dances and fundraising but direct action to alleviate serious grievances; to think, even, of their being willing to come to school after school, day after day, when their whole association with school had been at least uncomfortable and dull and at worst tragically crippling—to think of these things is to think that a total transformation of the young people in an underdeveloped country can take place, and to dare to dream that it can happen all over the South. There are programs now, as well as dreams, and materials, and results to learn from. And it may well be that the very staffs of the Freedom Schools in Louisiana and Georgia, etc., will be the kids who were just this past summer students themselves in the Freedom Schools in Mississippi, and discovered themselves there.