

REPORT ON THE SUMMER PROJECT

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August 8, 1964

My first observations of the Freedom School in Holly Springs were alarming: the youngsters were so passive compared with what I had come to expect from others of their age in my capacity as a northern school teacher. I visited from class to class and found the same pattern of silent boys and girls politely and perhaps attentively listening, but contributing little more than "That's right" or a "Yes sir." This was shocking: apparently, these children were coming because we were here -- out of respect for the "movement" -- but were altogether "out of it" so far as the real values of the Freedom School were concerned. I wondered what their reactions to us were -- could they ever trust us? did they like us? did they agree with our ideas, particularly concerning non-violence? At the last I came to understand the situation better. Unlike northern kids who, when dissatisfied with classroom procedure, will make a constructive suggestion -- such as sailing an airplane around the room or putting a tack under your seat -- these children were afraid of hurting our feelings and so suppressed any free expression of their own. This, in addition to the newness of the situation, led to the passivity remarked above. There was a further problem, primarily the fault of the predominantly white teaching staff. In trying to overcome the traditional southern caste system, we might admonish them, "Call me Joe, not Sir, " thereby leading them to fear that we might be white people who would make new sorts of demands upon them but still would be imposers and disrespectors of the privacy of their thoughts and feelings.

The resolution of the problem came in time. I think that the primary agency was the continued contact between staff and students leading to personal friendships and mutual curiosities. The adroitness of the teacher in showing his regard for Negroes, Negro culture, and Negro history was, of course, another factor-- particularly when it could be got across that resentment was the natural reaction of the southern Negro to his existential position, not a sense of humiliation or inferiority. Getting at "true" feelings was the focus of the best teacher's lesson; letting hate, jealousy, fear, curiosity, pity, shame, etc. come to the surface as in a group-therapy session while the teacher, like the therapist, could accept and share such emotions. This, then, constituted a second phase in the instruction where the class passed over from initial lecture and question-and-answer to discussion. This was an exciting stage, attended by the usual teen-age phenomena of "crushes," gossiping, and hanging-around to meet/ people. Yet soon enough, another phase became evident -- the students began to demand contentual instruction, principally in Negro history. Now it was that we could reach their minds (as an independent rather than a passive agency) as well as their hearts. The trouble is that few of our teachers were able to recognize this third stage or to cope with it if they did. Few of us had sufficient background to deal with the curiosity of these kids or the patience or the discipline or the setting in which to create a systematic curriculum which would really explore the full gamut of race relations and history in the U.S. Probably, it was too much fun to be "discussing" -- meaning an unending rehashing of the problem.

Another difficulty became evident at this time, creating no end of soul-searching in Holly Springs. The oldest of the

students were of the same age as the college-age teachers and began to feel that they could contribute to the program too. They wanted to transcend the teacher-student relationship and relate as peers. These last two issues (namely, contentual instruction and peer relationships) remain the outstanding problems as I ~~maximize~~ leave the project.

In fine, I believe this project has done a great deal towards leading these youngsters toward greater authenticity with respect to their feelings where the race question is involved and also a certain amount has been done in elucidating the roots of their historical circumstances. Further, the children we reached will certainly "infect" others with their newfound curiosity and daring. There were very many signs of this. On the other hand, the project has yet to assimilate these students into the project proper, nor have the Freedom Schools developed bona fide "courses." The youngsters are now at the point where they can and do resent superficiality and transcendence on our part. But this in itself is the nearest compliment we can pay to the summer project, 1964.