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# Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools

*Daniel Perlstein*

We want people to be able to live the truth.

—SNCC report on Mississippi schools, 1963

The movement has been called the closest thing in the United States to Paul Goodman's "anti-college" where students learn because they want to learn, learn in order to do and to discover who they are.

—Fifth Annual Spring Conference of SNCC, 1964

For a brief moment in 1964, a network of alternative schools flourished as a central component of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. The Freedom Schools of the Mississippi Summer Project were sponsored by COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, an alliance of civil rights groups led by SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Through COFO, SNCC activists brought hundreds of northern volunteers, most of them white, to Mississippi for a few months to register voters and to teach in forty-one Freedom Schools. The schools offered young black Mississippians an education that public schools would not supply, one that both provided intellectual stimulation and linked learning to participation in the movement to transform the South's segregated society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship of COFO to SNCC was ambiguous. Many of the SNCC activists planning the summer project were confused about whether its sponsor was SNCC or COFO. SNCC Executive Committee Minutes, 27–31 Dec. 1963, 28–29, file 4, series II, subgroup A, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers (hereafter SP), Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for the Study of Non-violence, Atlanta, Ga. According to SNCC Executive Secretary Jim Forman, "the force most active within COFO was SNCC. . . . [Mississippi Project Director] Bob Moses presented the idea [for the summer project at a] meeting of SNCC's executive committee." James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C., 1985), 372. Still, according to Moses, "The Mississippi Project had its own locus of decision-making—SNCC people, CORE people and local people. . . . It's SNCC-driven, but it isn't really SNCC. . . . [There was] much more of a movement orientation as opposed to an organization orientation." Bob Moses, interview with author, 23 Feb. 1988.

The Freedom Schools grew out of SNCC's early history and the wider movement culture. Founded in April 1960, SNCC brought together black college students who were active in the sit-ins around the South. SNCC activists quickly gained fame for their lead in the sit-ins and Freedom Rides, actions considered too dangerous by other civil rights organizations. Yet, incredible bravery in the face of beatings and jailings only partially explains SNCC's fame. The protests enabled SNCC activists to live their beliefs while making demands for the elimination of discriminatory laws, and to articulate a vision of radical transformation in the language of shared national values. A pedagogical vision infused SNCC's activism as militants sought simultaneously to change the hearts of southern whites, to enlighten America about conditions in the South, and to discover true morality in themselves. As James Lawson proclaimed in SNCC's founding statement of purpose, "Non-violence . . . seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. . . . Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality."<sup>2</sup>

SNCC's efforts were facilitated by the tutelage of long-time activist Ella Baker, who called the conference at which the group was founded. Decades of involvement in social movements had convinced Baker that self-directed, organized activity by women and men at the grass roots, rather than charismatic leadership, sustained the movement. She encouraged the young militants who formed SNCC to remain unaffiliated with the established civil rights organizations and promoted "group-centered leadership" within SNCC. Baker's willingness to eschew a public leadership role in order to promote self-discovery and democratic participation among SNCC activists both bolstered the emphasis on internal democracy within the new organization and became a model for SNCC organizing in the black community.<sup>3</sup>

SNCC's move to supplement direct-action protests with community organizing had several roots besides Baker's formative influence. On a practical level, liberal foundations, with Kennedy administration support, offered funding for voter registration that was not available for direct-action campaigns.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, activists concluded that "the only time the feds or anybody else . . . preserve and protect the people's interest is

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<sup>2</sup> *The Student Voice*, June 1960, 2, appendix D, SP. For a full account of SNCC's evolution, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Baker quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 38–39, 41–42. For a discussion of the roots of SNCC's ambivalence about electoral work, see Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York, 1967), 46.

when the people have the capacity to make a demand . . . and to see to its implementation. . . . Therefore, we reasoned, the object of the movement should be to empower people to make those demands.” Beyond these tactical concerns, the very desire to participate in an egalitarian community governed by justice and love propelled SNCC to organize among the voiceless, and the unmerciful repression against its registration campaigns endowed them with the moral aura of the sit-ins.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to instill in the black community “the capacity to make a demand” added new pedagogical functions to direct-action protests. According to SNCC’s Charles Sherrod, organizers had to confront white power in order to demonstrate “that there were worse chains than jail and prison. We referred to the system that imprisons men’s minds and robs them of creativity. We mocked the system that teaches men to be good Negroes instead of good men.” Combined with workshops in non-violent resistance for blacks “searching for a meaning in life,” such confrontations were doubly instructive. They not only enabled southern blacks to imagine a life unmarked by racial oppression; they also removed “the mental block in the minds of those who wanted to move but were unable.”<sup>6</sup>

In personifying the capacity to overcome racism, SNCC militants risked evoking awed deference in black communities. Therefore, by developing introspective and uncharismatic demeanors, and pushing the black community to a deeper and more radical level of understanding and action, activists sought to make themselves superfluous. Julian Bond captured the delicacy of this strategy of catalyzing activism without institutionalizing one’s own leadership. When SNCC organized in a community, Bond said, it left behind “a community movement with local leadership, not a new branch of SNCC.”<sup>7</sup>

Nowhere was the emphasis on fostering the movement, rather than on building SNCC, stronger than in Mississippi. There, in the years leading to the 1964 Freedom Summer, Bob Moses, a former New York City teacher and philosophy student much influenced by Albert Camus, came to epitomize SNCC’s efforts to transform the oppressed into self-

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<sup>5</sup> John O’Neal, interview with author, 12 Feb. 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 57–58. Sherrod’s distinction between good Negroes and good men recalls strikingly similar language from W. E. B. DuBois’s endorsement of black liberal arts colleges: “[Negroes in the South were a] people who needed to learn the meaning of life. . . . The object of education was not to make men carpenters but to make carpenters men.” W. E. B. DuBois, *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906–1960* (Amherst, Mass., 1973), 63–64.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 62. See also Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn, 1989), 71–90.



From Guy and Candie Carawan, *Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement through Its Songs* (Bethlehem, Pa., 1990). Ken Thompson, photographer. Courtesy of Guy and Candie Carawan.

directed activists. Moses's work in Mississippi began when SNCC established a voter registration drive in the town of McComb and two neighboring counties in 1961. The registration campaign was "more than a mere offer to participate in statecraft; it [was], in a larger sense, the process of extending hope to an almost hopeless segment of the national community."<sup>8</sup>

Besides attempting to register voters, SNCC organizers conducted workshops in nonviolent action for those too young to vote. In August 1961, six McComb high school students staged a sit-in and were arrested. When the black high school principal ordered students to desist from further protests, over one hundred turned in their books and walked out. For their benefit, SNCC established "Nonviolent High" which functioned until much of the McComb staff was jailed for contributing to the delinquency of minors. The McComb movement thus exemplified the role of southern schools in maintaining racial oppression, and provided a

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<sup>8</sup> "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council: A Prospectus for Action," 6 Apr. 1962, 1, file 387, series IV, subgroup A, SP. According to activist Jane Stemberge, Moses's style of organizing made him "a teacher to most people in SNCC." Stoper, *Growth of Radicalism*, 252.

model for the Freedom Summer—the intersection of education and political action.<sup>9</sup>

The McComb movement withered in the face of arrests, beatings, and murder, and wherever SNCC operated in Mississippi, a barrage of violence imperiled civil rights workers and the black communities that supported them. Because the federal government refused to intervene in defense of blacks' civil rights, SNCC activists faced a dilemma. Although the magnitude of racist violence prevented effective organizing, such organizing, along with the mobilization of northern public opinion, was needed in order to compel the federal government to protect activists from white terrorism. To deal with the dilemma, SNCC launched a Freedom Vote campaign in Mississippi in September 1963. Excluded from the regular polls, blacks would cast votes in a mock election run by SNCC and COFO. White college-student volunteers were brought to Mississippi in order to supplement SNCC staff and help attract national attention.<sup>10</sup>

The success of the Freedom Vote in generating black political participation and national publicity, combined with continuing, murderous repression from whites, led Moses, SNCC Executive Secretary Jim Forman, and other activists to propose that SNCC bring “thousands of students” to Mississippi in 1964. The white volunteers, they argued, would attract national attention to the southern struggle, force the federal government to act as a buffer between organizers in the black community and repressive southern governments, and compel Lyndon Johnson, running for president, to commit himself on civil rights before the 1964 elections. Furthermore, matters were not entirely in SNCC's hands. Other organizations were planning to bring hundreds of volunteers south for the summer, and to do nothing would cede leadership of the Mississippi movement to more moderate groups.<sup>11</sup>

SNCC approved the Freedom Summer, but many of its activists remained skeptical, and while COFO, largely staffed by SNCC workers, planned the summer's program, SNCC continued to ponder the project's advisability.<sup>12</sup> Some activists feared that white college students would

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<sup>9</sup> Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, 1964), 68–76; Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, 232–33.

<sup>10</sup> *The Student Voice*, 1960–64, appendix D, SP; Executive Committee Minutes, 19 Apr. 1964, 5, file 4, series II, subgroup A, SP; Zinn, *SNCC*, 121–22.

<sup>11</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, 27–31 Dec. 1963, 28, file 4, series II, subgroup A, SP; SNCC Executive Committee Minutes, 27–31 Dec. 1963, 28–29, *ibid.*; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–1963* (New York, 1988), 920–21.

<sup>12</sup> See Staff Meeting Minutes, 27–31 Dec. 1963, 28; Minutes of COFO Meeting to Discuss the Summer Project, Hattiesburg, Miss., 24 Jan. 1964, 1–3, file 1, series III, subgroup A, SP; Executive Committee Minutes, 29 Mar. 1964, *ibid.*; Executive Committee Minutes, 19 Apr. 1964, 3–4, *ibid.*

dominate less sophisticated blacks, while others saw the employment of hundreds of inexperienced, short-term volunteers as a threat to SNCC's internal participatory democracy. In the words of activist Mike Sayer, "This isn't just a large summer project, it's a war and for the first time we really have privates." As a war, the project called into question SNCC's commitment to nonviolence. When reports that Mississippi's black activist leaders were "slated to be killed" unleashed calls for armed self-defense, Hollis Watkins responded, "We don't know what will happen with whites coming into the state. Neither do we know our own feelings and hatred of whites."<sup>13</sup>

Just days before the Freedom Summer was to begin, activist Lawrence Guyot responded to doubts about the project by reiterating SNCC's long-held belief that "our only protection now is militancy. To battle institutions we must change ourselves first." Still, SNCC's desire to replace established institutions with ones of SNCC's own making signaled a declining faith in the existence of shared national ideals through which to foster self-discovery, and the summer project's premise that black activism could not impel federal action portended a repudiation of the belief that poor blacks could enlighten America. Even if the Freedom Summer moved the Johnson administration to action, SNCC staff could view it only with much misgiving.<sup>14</sup>

While the decision to organize the Mississippi Summer Project was driven by strategic concerns and marked a liminal moment in SNCC's evolution, the creation of the Freedom Schools reflected a deep-rooted faith in education among movement activists and black Americans. In the words of a 1963 SNCC report which shaped the proposal to establish the Freedom Schools, "education—facts to use and freedom to use them—is the basis of democracy."<sup>15</sup>

Like other civil rights organizations, SNCC condemned southern schooling. The 1963 report attacked both low school expenditures in Mississippi and unequal spending on black and white students. Claiming that racial inequality in public schools contradicted the intention of federal policies, SNCC advocated bringing the state up to national standards in per pupil expenditures, teacher salaries, average years of schooling, and literacy.<sup>16</sup> Quantitative measures conveyed only one element of SNCC's critique. Echoing the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, SNCC contended that segregation itself led black children to believe themselves

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<sup>13</sup> Minutes Hattiesburg Meeting, 1–3; Staff Meeting Minutes, 9–11 June 1964, 1, 10, 31, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, 9–11 June 1964, 30.

<sup>15</sup> [Anon.], untitled, incomplete report, [1963], 7, file 122, series VIII, subgroup A, SP.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

incapable of learning. SNCC then claimed that poor people, white as well as black, “who spend their working hours in the cotton fields and who are uneducated cannot . . . question the system of oppression which keeps them . . . and their children in the fields.”<sup>17</sup>

The heart of SNCC’s analysis, however, drew on the possibility of harmony rather than the economics of conflict. Mississippi schools had to be reformed because they stifled “the freedom to think, to grow, to decide, to be the biggest, wisest man we can be. . . . Negroes and whites aren’t allowed to know each other to find out the truth. . . . How can a people who are separated from their fellow men live the truth?”<sup>18</sup> In SNCC’s eyes, truth was not merely studied, but also was lived. Its educational proposals, like its vision of organizing, reflected the conviction that learning and action were synonymous.

Intensive efforts to devise an alternative to Mississippi’s schools began in December 1963, when Charlie Cobb, an aspiring writer and the son of a Springfield, Massachusetts, minister, proposed that SNCC create a residential freedom school during the following summer. With a few modifications (most notably, an increase in the number of students and the use of day rather than boarding schools), SNCC and COFO would rely on his proposal in planning the Freedom Schools.<sup>19</sup> Like SNCC’s 1963 critique, Cobb argued that by quantitative criteria, Mississippi schools were the worst in the United States and Negro schools were the worst in Mississippi. He noted a “complete absence of academic freedom . . . geared to squash intellectual curiosity,” and maintained that Mississippi education produced “social paralysis” in both whites and blacks. In order to revitalize the state, SNCC had to build “our own institutions to replace the old, unjust, decadent ones which make up the existing power structure.”<sup>20</sup>

Cobb proposed the creation of a summer school for one to two hundred tenth and eleventh graders. SNCC’s Freedom School would include academic subjects, a cultural program, and political and social studies. Students would also work on projects such as a newspaper and a statewide student conference, and participate in local organizing. Cobb hoped that the Freedom School would both provide a true education for a few students and demonstrate to blacks throughout Mississippi that just such schools could be created. It would transform isolated students into a force of activists who could “fill an intellectual and creative vacuum

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>19</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Cobb, “A Summer Freedom School in Mississippi,” 14 Jan. 1964, 1, file 122, series VIII, subgroup A, SP.

in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and . . . get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions.”<sup>21</sup>

Cobb argued that the 1964 summer volunteers would be particularly well suited to teach in the Freedom School: “Students as well as professional educators from some of the best universities and colleges in the North will be coming to Mississippi to lend themselves to the movement. These are some of the best minds in the country, and their academic value ought to be recognized and used to advantage.” He added, “Some of the newer ideas now circulating in educational circles, whatever they are, might be incorporated into this program.” Cobb’s willingness to endorse unknown ideas depended on faith in fellow activists, faith in elite American educational institutions, and an apolitical notion of “newer ideas” in pedagogy.<sup>22</sup>

Cobb’s faith in educational innovation in part stemmed from educational programs in which SNCC activists had already worked. They had been able to appropriate seemingly apolitical “newer ideas” in instructional methods and refashion them to fit their project of transforming society. For instance, SNCC activists showed great interest in programmed learning, even though the method seems particularly inappropriate for the promotion of self-discovery and empowerment among the dispossessed.<sup>23</sup> And yet, in constructing programmed learning materials for a Selma, Alabama, literacy project, SNCC’s Mary Varela included among the program’s three behavioral objectives: “to work with the identity problem by introducing Negro History” and “to help an adult create a vision for himself as a political entity and as an agent for social change.”<sup>24</sup>

Varela argued that since southern registrars regularly failed educated blacks on literacy tests for voting, she had “no aspirations as to the relationship between teaching people to read and raising the voting percentage.” Rather, the literacy classes would encourage blacks to join the civil rights movement. Echoing Julian Bond’s vision of SNCC’s leadership, Varela claimed that the Selma program sought to “expand into a

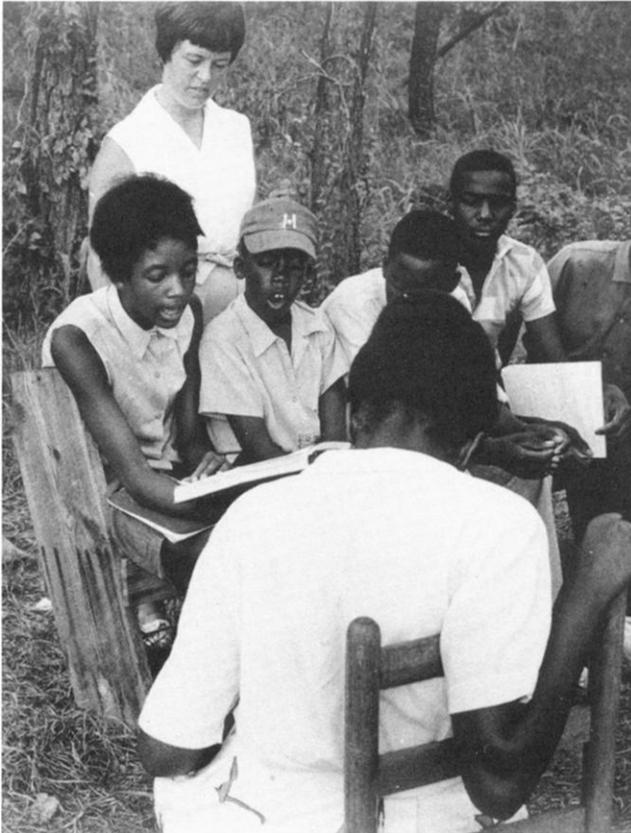
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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Silberman notes that in programmed learning, tasks are broken down into “precise, measurable, ‘behavioral’ terms. . . . Most of the applications of programmed instruction have been in training courses for industry and the armed forces.” Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York, 1970), 196–97.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Varela to Harland Randolph, 27 Oct. 1963, 1, file 19, series X, subgroup A, SP.



Mississippi Freedom School class. Courtesy of Staughton Lynd Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

year-long project where community people will be brought in and trained so staff can move out leaving trained personnel.”<sup>25</sup>

When Bob Moses headed a literacy project in Mississippi, SNCC developed instructional materials through a dialogue between activists and adult students about the conditions affecting black life. As Moses explains, it was the process of creating the materials rather than the method itself that attracted him to programmed learning:

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<sup>25</sup> Varela to Greg Gallo and Joel Sharkey, U.S. National Student Association, 16 Sep. 1963, 1, *ibid.*; SNCC Executive Committee Minutes, 19 Apr. 1964, 11–12.

I had gotten hold of a text and was using it with some adults . . . and noticed that they couldn't handle it because the pictures weren't suited to what they knew. . . . That got me into thinking about developing something closer to what people were doing. What I was interested in was the idea of training SNCC workers to develop material with the people we were working with. . . . At that point it was not programmed learning; there was a great deal of interaction. What would have happened [if the materials had been reused] I'm not sure.<sup>26</sup>

In Mississippi, as in Selma, the effort to refashion programmed learning reflected SNCC's conviction that oppressed people learn by being brought together and addressing their own problems.

Besides reflecting on their own educational work, SNCC activists relied on other movement educational programs in planning the Freedom Schools. They, too, suggested the need to relate education directly to the experience and problems of students. Founded by Myles Horton, the Highlander Center in Tennessee had been fostering the development of grass-roots activists since the 1930s. Like thousands of other southern organizers, many SNCC activists participated in Highlander workshops, and SNCC staff maintained frequent contacts with Highlander educators.<sup>27</sup>

Highlander's model of participatory education was based on the conviction that responses to oppression had to grow out of the experiences of the oppressed. In order to generalize from their experiences and discover solutions to their problems, oppressed people had to analyze them collectively. Highlander's task was not to dictate "correct" answers to activists, rather staff asked questions in order to kindle exchanges through which grass-roots activists could articulate concrete concerns, analyze them with others who had had similar experiences, and develop actions.<sup>28</sup> Highlander's synthesis of learning and action was influenced by the work of John Dewey, with whom Myles Horton corresponded for many years. One of the first public descriptions of Highlander paraphrased Dewey's *Democracy and Education*: "It is the aim of . . . education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them . . . it must take account of the needs of the

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<sup>26</sup> Moses interview.

<sup>27</sup> Press Release, Highlander Center, Knoxville, Tenn., 13 June [1962], file 387, series IV, subgroup A, SP; James Forman to Myles Horton, 10 May 1962, file 166, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> In words that echo SNCC's own mission, activist James Bevel described Horton as "a man who reminded me of Socrates. Myles was a guy who'd ask questions about your assumptions. He would challenge you on your inferior feelings. He sort of decrudded Negroes from being Negroes and making them think of themselves as men and women." Quoted in Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 147. For a fuller description of Highlander and its role in the civil rights movement, see esp. 139–57.



Group sing of freedom songs at the Freedom School Convention, summer 1964, in Meridian, Mississippi. Courtesy of Staughton Lynd Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common.”<sup>29</sup> Another passage, from Dewey’s *Reconstruction of Philosophy*, that guided Horton in his own work, aptly describes SNCC’s vision of education as well: “If ideas, meaning, conception, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization of the given environment they are reliable, sound, valid, good, true.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Letter for the Southern Mountain School” quoted in Frank Adams with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, N.C., 1975), 13.

<sup>30</sup> Adams, *Unearthing Seeds*, 9.

In addition to their association with Highlander, SNCC activists frequently worked with the Citizenship Schools, administered first by Highlander and then by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The organizers of the Citizenship Schools were Horton; Septima Clark, a veteran schoolteacher who worked at Highlander after being fired for civil rights activism; Bernice Robinson, whom Clark hired as the first Citizenship School teacher; and Georgia activist Esau Jenkins. Through the Citizenship Schools, the four sought to enable blacks both to pass literacy tests in order to vote and to be “real men and women in their own right.”<sup>31</sup>

Responding to the failure of earlier literacy efforts that had relied on infantile curricula and elementary school pedagogy, Citizenship Schools began with the problems blacks encountered in daily life and then linked the learning of practical skills to issues of political power and students’ capacity to participate in all phases of public life. In order not to discourage students from articulating their own concerns, the Citizenship Schools rejected whites and persons trained to teach in public schools as teachers. Starting in 1962, Clark and Robinson, joined by Dorothy Cotton and Andrew Young, trained hundreds of grass-roots teachers at the Citizenship Schools’ Dorchester Center in Georgia. SNCC staff sent many local activists to the Dorchester Center for training, and SNCC invited such Citizenship School teachers as Robinson and Annelle Ponder to help lead its Mississippi workshops.<sup>32</sup>

In planning the Summer Project, SNCC also looked to Freedom Schools that had already appeared. They examined materials from northern cities, such as Chicago, New York, and Boston, where school boycotts had been organized to protest de facto segregation and school conditions.<sup>33</sup> SNCC found another prototype in Prince Edward County, Virginia. There, a number of Freedom Schools, staffed in part by New York City teachers, emerged during the summer of 1963, when the county board of education, which had been sued in one of the cases decided in the 1954 *Brown* decision, closed the schools rather than integrate them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Myles Horton quoted in Morris, *Origins*, 151. See also Cynthia Stokes Brown, ed., *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, Calif., 1986).

<sup>32</sup> Morris, *Origins*, 149–57; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 575–79, 718, 818–19, 825; Adams, *Unearthing Seeds*, 118–20.

<sup>33</sup> “Friends Ask Help for Chicago Boycott,” *Student Voice*, 16 Dec. 1963, 4; “Harlem Parents Committee Freedom School Lesson Guide,” [1963], file 340, appendix A, SP; Freedom Schools Materials for Freedom Stay-Out, 26 Feb. 1964, Boston, file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>34</sup> “NEWS,” United Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, New York City, 15 Apr. 1964, 1, file 328, appendix A, SP.

Although the Mississippi Freedom Schools replicated many of the elements of other movement programs, the creation of a system of alternative institutions aimed at youth rather than at adult activists, and SNCC's employment of inexperienced white volunteers as teachers, created unfamiliar problems. To design the Freedom School curriculum, COFO, together with the National Council of Churches, sponsored a conference in New York City in March 1964. In addition to Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles Horton, those recruited to plan the curriculum included civil rights activist Bayard Rustin; Norma Becker, a New York City public school teacher who had taught in Prince Edward County; author Michael Harrington; Boston Freedom School activist Noel Day; Rochelle Horowitz of the Workers Defense League; Paul Potter of the Students for a Democratic Society; and Staughton Lynd, a white Spelman College history professor.<sup>35</sup>

The March conference commissioned curricula in a variety of areas. Remediation, science, and mathematics received some attention,<sup>36</sup> and the conference developed a number of sample reading and writing lessons as well as more general pedagogical guidelines.<sup>37</sup> Most participants, however, focused on the civic curriculum. The committee decided to create a series of fourteen case studies dealing with the "political, economic, and social . . . forces at work in our society." Through the use of cases "related to the experiences and life situation of the students," the group sought to "stimulate latent talents and interests that have been submerged too long . . . causing high school youth in Mississippi to QUESTION."<sup>38</sup>

Among the planned cases was a comparison of Mississippi's new anti-civil rights laws with those of South Africa, in which Bayard Rustin and Allard Lowenstein were to include an evaluation of the practicality of nonviolence in the two settings. Michael Harrington, Myles Horton,

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<sup>35</sup> "People Invited to Curriculum Conference," file 164, series XV, subgroup A, SP.

<sup>36</sup> A guide to remedial education discouraged focusing on spelling at the expense of ideas. On the other hand, the science and math curricula made no mention of Mississippi and had no political content which would distinguish them from conventional curricula. "Notes on the Remedial Part of the Curriculum," file 90, appendix A, SP; "Memo from Ruth Emerson," file 122, series VIII, subgroup A, SP; Physics and Chemistry Curriculum, file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>37</sup> "Part I: Academic Curriculum," file 122, series VIII, subgroup A, SP; Sandra Adickes, "Report from the Curriculum Committee," file 340, appendix A, SP. Adickes described many reading and writing activities, stressing that they needed to be connected with students' lives and with political actions. She recommended team teaching and suggested that Freedom Schools consider tracking students. The last proposal was deleted when the report was reproduced for Freedom School teachers. "Academic Freedom," file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>38</sup> "Report of a Sub-group of the Leadership Development and Current Issues Committee at the Mississippi Summer Project Curriculum Conference," 21–22 Mar. 1964, 1, file 164, series XV, subgroup A, SP.

and Hamie Sinclair agreed to examine the “economic problems of *all* lower class people [by comparing] the labor movement . . . with the civil rights movement, [and] the meaning of Freedom Songs and Union songs.” In a study of “How the Power Structure Works,” SNCC research director Jack Minnis planned to illustrate the role of northern corporations in maintaining Mississippi’s social, political, and economic elite, and the effectiveness of northern sympathy demonstrations against those corporations.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, more case studies were promised than delivered, and by the end of April, COFO curriculum coordinator Lois Chaffee was consolidating studies. Still, the seven case studies eventually used were substantial documents. They included Jack Minnis’s description of Mississippi’s “power structure,” and a discussion of how the German power structure and the unwillingness of Jews to face reality contributed to the Holocaust. Other studies looked at the Mississippi judicial system at work on a black man, the effort to pass a civil rights bill in 1963 as an example of how Congress operates, and the role of Fannie Lou Hamer’s congressional campaign in the Mississippi movement.<sup>40</sup>

A second part of the Freedom Schools’ curriculum was the “Guide to Negro History.” Historian and soon-to-be statewide Freedom School Coordinator Staughton Lynd based the guide on a study of the Amistad slave revolt by Chicago activist Bea Young and on a “Negro History Outline” by Barbara Jones of SNCC’s New York office. The guide began with an account of the revolt on the slave ship Amistad in 1839. Led by Joseph Cinques, the son of a Sierra Leone chief, the slaves hoped to sail the captured ship back to Africa, but the ship’s white navigator duped them into sailing toward New York City. The Africans were held captive until the United States Supreme Court ruled that they be returned to Africa. The Amistad incident was intended to elicit students’ interest and pride in the Afro-American heritage and to introduce many of the topics to be studied during the summer, including African culture and history, the slave trade, slave revolts, abolitionism, and the role of the courts in enforcing civil rights.<sup>41</sup>

Because it was organized around analogies with contemporary civil rights reform, the introduction was the section of the Negro History Guide most easily adapted to classroom discussions. Following it was a series of questions with short essays answering them. In response to the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>40</sup> Horton to Mrs. Robert Moses, 1 Apr. 1964, file 337, appendix A, SP; Lois Chaffee to Tim Jenkins, 26 Apr. 1964, file 327, *ibid.*; “Case Studies,” file 327, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Bea Young, “Amistad Case,” file 340, *ibid.*; Chaffee to Barbara Jones, 26 Apr. 1964, file 327, *ibid.*; “Guide to Negro History,” 1–2, file 340, *ibid.*

question “What is the origin of prejudice? (Why do so many white men hate me? How did it all begin?),” an essay explained, “Prejudice came into being as a rationalization and justification for the institution of slavery. The origin of slavery was profit, not prejudice.” The guide continued with essays on slave revolts, the nature of slavery, the progressive record of the South’s Reconstruction era state governments, and the origins of segregation.<sup>42</sup>

The case studies and the Guide to Negro History supplemented a Citizenship Curriculum which formed the core of the Freedom School lessons. The main author of the curriculum was activist Noel Day, whose work was shaped by his earlier experience as a junior high school teacher in Harlem, New York. When Day began teaching in the late 1950s, he was assigned a group of nearly illiterate ninth graders. Although he was not a reading teacher, Day decided to teach them to read: “I said, ‘You bring in anything you want to.’ And I started teaching them to read phonetically. . . . By the end of the year, they were reading at fourth and fifth grade level. . . . I was excited; [but when] I went to the principal . . . he said, ‘You’re not a reading teacher. That’s not the method.’”<sup>43</sup> Day’s method of teaching “was not part of a cogent theory. . . . It was more that some adult cared about them.”<sup>44</sup> The discovery that teachers’ intentions were far more significant than officially tested methodologies paralleled Charlie Cobb’s relative disinterest in pedagogy. Furthermore, Day’s assessment of his New York City workplace was not unlike Cobb’s critique of Mississippi’s segregated schools: “I felt the school culture brutalized the children and brutalized the teachers and required us to be brutal. . . . We teachers were basically in the business of behavioral control. . . . You were basically serving as a prison guard.”<sup>45</sup>

Choosing not to be a prison guard, Day left teaching, moved to Boston, and became a community activist. When the Massachusetts Freedom Movement launched a one-day school boycott in 1963, Day developed its curriculum, following the form of his New York City lesson plans. After the Boston school boycott, Day wrote curricula for Freedom Schools around the country, relying on informal contacts with activists from such organizations as SDS, CORE, Highlander, and SNCC, and on many after-school hours he had spent studying Afro-American history at the Schomberg Library in New York. When Day was drafted to help write the Mississippi Freedom Schools’ curriculum, the lesson plans he produced again mirrored those he had used in New York’s public schools.

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<sup>42</sup> “Guide to Negro History,” 4–15.

<sup>43</sup> Noel Day, interview with author, 23 Feb. 1988.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Day wanted the Freedom School curriculum to facilitate the work of volunteers who would be neither experienced at teaching nor knowledgeable about Afro-American history: "We tried to set up as much as possible an Arthur Murray Dance Book. We tried to impose control through the structure of the lesson plan. That's why it had things in it like 'Here are the questions.' . . . It was designed to try to deal with [the Freedom School teachers' inexperience]."46 In Day's mind, conventional, developmental lessons would not interfere with the Freedom Schools' ability to promote "critical thinking." Indeed, in spite of the mechanical approach to the volunteer teachers, Day, like Cobb, wanted to sharpen students' ability to question, to "think about . . . what the system tells you either about yourself or itself."<sup>47</sup>

SNCC largely adopted Day's Citizenship Curriculum. After an introduction which urged teachers to return continually to discussions about the merits of mainstream American culture, of Afro-American culture, and of the alternatives offered by the Freedom Movement, Day provided detailed lesson plans through which volunteers could approach these large themes.<sup>48</sup> The curriculum was divided into seven units, each one leading into the next. Students began by describing their public schools. The curriculum included a dozen sample questions, such as "What is the school made of, wood or brick?" and "What do you learn about voting?" Similarly detailed questions on housing conditions, employment, and medical care followed. In each area, resources for blacks were contrasted with those available for whites, and students were encouraged to see the characteristics of their environment as fundamentally political rather than merely physical.<sup>49</sup>

The second unit compared life of southern blacks with that of blacks in the North. If the curriculum was intended to encourage asking questions rather than learning answers, it nonetheless made clear that conditions were fundamentally the same North and South. The units that followed explored how the power structure created racial stereotypes and instilled irrational fears in poor whites in order to maintain its power.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Day posed racial conflicts more strongly than the final version of the curriculum, stressing not only black oppression but also white privilege and the possible benefits of separate black institutions. Jane Stembridge, a white staff member from Virginia who, in 1960, had been SNCC's first executive secretary, objected to Day's portrayal of white southerners and rewrote parts of the curriculum. Still, these changes were in keeping with the spirit of the schools as proposed by Cobb and adopted by SNCC. "The Poor in America," draft of Freedom Schools' curriculum, 1-2, file 165, series XV, subgroup A, SP; Casey Hayden to Staughton Lynd, n.d., file 327, appendix A, SP.

<sup>49</sup> "Part II: Citizenship Curriculum," 1, file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1-5.

These lessons concluded that knowledge and the struggle for freedom are inseparable:

Have you ever heard this: “Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free”?

Have we seen in this unit that lies and the fear behind lies and the guilt behind the fear . . . work together to enslave men?

What IS the truth? That is . . . what will make us free?

In the next unit, we will try to find the answer to the question: What is the Truth? Or, the same question: What *is* freedom?<sup>51</sup>

The notion that truth is freedom led to a unit on “Material things versus soul things,” that is, on nonviolence and what a new society might look like.

The means of achieving a new society were elaborated in the last unit of the Citizenship Curriculum, not written by Day.<sup>52</sup> There, developmental lessons were replaced by a catechism-like series of forty questions about the civil rights movement, followed by answers usually about a paragraph in length.<sup>53</sup> The form of the lessons, however, only partially reveals how they functioned. While the Negro History Guide and the unit on the movement did not facilitate class discussions in the same way as Day’s lesson plans, by conveying to Freedom School students their legitimacy and capacity as learners, the Negro History and Movement curricula complemented Day’s work rather than contradicting it.<sup>54</sup>

The curriculum had a great impact on the Freedom Schools. It offered information on Afro-American history to those who were ignorant of it and a vision of the movement to all. Although Day’s effort to dictate pedagogy to the volunteers contrasted diametrically with Cobb’s desire to promote the creativity of Freedom School teachers, both men sought to encourage the use of an “informal, question-and-answer method,” and volunteers seem not to have felt constrained by the curriculum.<sup>55</sup>

Freedom School teachers relied on the curriculum because they were receptive to the methods and goals of the summer project. The volunteers tended to be affluent, white, well-educated, and liberal-to-left politi-

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> “Outline for Case Studies,” 2, file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>53</sup> “Part II: Citizenship Curriculum,” Unit VII, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Note that SNCC intended for all sections of the curriculum to encourage questioning. Chaffee to Barbara Jones, and Jane Stembridge, “This Is the Situation,” file 340, appendix A, SP.

<sup>55</sup> “A Note to the Teacher,” *ibid.*; Staughton Lynd, interview with author, 26 Mar. 1988.

cally.<sup>56</sup> In a memo to those interviewing applicants to volunteer for the Freedom Summer, SNCC advocated that interviewers select students who had a “realistic understanding” of the dangers in Mississippi and who were willing to admit their doubts and fears.<sup>57</sup>

Beginning with their selection as Freedom School teachers and continuing through the summer itself, volunteers were provided with numerous pedagogical guides and background materials in addition to the Freedom School curriculum. Activists consistently stressed the political nature of Freedom School teaching. Jane Stenbridge advised volunteers that although each student would be different, all would possess “scars of the system,” such as cynicism, distrust, and lack of academic preparation, as well as a knowledge of “how to survive in a system that is out to destroy you.” Charlie Cobb warned that students’ “creativity must be moulded from the rhythm of a muttered ‘white son-of-a-bitch,’ [and that the Freedom Schools must draw] the link between a rotting shack and a rotting America.”<sup>58</sup>

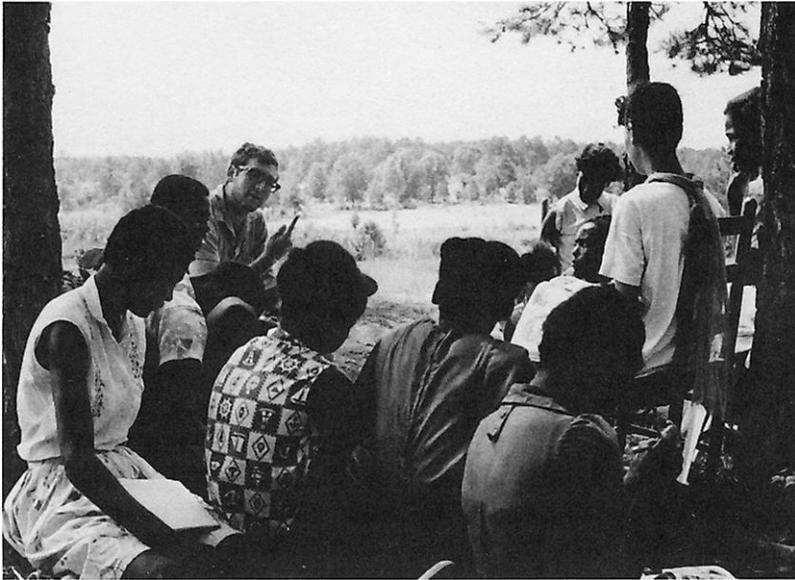
Freedom School teachers received a week’s orientation at the Western College for Women in Ohio before heading to Mississippi. Although volunteers were offered some information about the areas where they would be teaching and some instruction in pedagogy, the orientation was dominated by the effort to prepare volunteers for a Mississippi reality that they could not imagine. Role-plays simulated racist beatings. Staff screamed the types of humiliating abuse that volunteers would encounter. Security and safety procedures were detailed. According to volunteer Sally Belfrage, when a SNCC activist noticed “a couple of girls grinning self-

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Aickin Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964–1965* (Westport, Conn. 1982), 33, 37. Rothschild estimates that 85 percent of the volunteers were white and argues that staff and volunteers alike tended to think of the volunteers as white, with blacks who were down for the summer in the different conceptual category of “perspective staff.” The Freedom Schools were designed with white volunteers in mind, and many blacks who came to Mississippi for the summer did in fact occupy more prominent roles than the average volunteer. Detroit teacher Carolyn Reese who administered the network of Freedom Schools in Hattiesburg and Washington, D.C., teacher Ralph Featherstone who directed the McComb school each continued to work with SNCC after the summer. Featherstone argued that the Negro History Curriculum was the most valuable legacy of the Freedom Schools, and black teachers may have been less interested in informality than white volunteers. Still, Reese stressed that “the children are learning that somebody is supposed to listen to them.” *Student Voice*, 5 Aug. 1964, 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> Memo to Mississippi Summer Project interviewers, 14 Apr. 1964, file 117, series VII, subgroup A, SP.

<sup>58</sup> Stenbridge, “This Is the Situation”; Charlie Cobb, “This Is the Situation,” file 340, appendix A, SP. See also mimeographed excerpt from W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Otis Pease, “The Development of Negro Power in American Politics since 1900” [summer 1964], file 340, appendix A, SP.



Freedom School class, Meridian, Mississippi. Courtesy of Staughton Lynd Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

consciously [during a self-defense training session], he whirled around on them and shouted, ‘*Don’t laugh!*’ All element of the comic suddenly left the situation, to be replaced, for many, by panic. . . . It was quite evident how vulnerable we were, helpless.”<sup>59</sup> The sense of peril was heightened when James Chaney and Michael Schwerner of CORE and summer volunteer Andrew Goodman disappeared in Mississippi. On the final day of the orientation, Bob Moses acknowledged publicly that the three were dead. According to Freedom School Coordinator Staughton Lynd, “individual Freedom School teachers . . . were trying to decide whether to go to Mississippi after all. . . . Everybody was on the very edge of what they could handle.”<sup>60</sup>

At the orientation, tensions surrounding race were usually raised by blacks and left unspoken by whites, whose very presence demonstrated, at least in their own eyes, their opposition to discrimination and their

<sup>59</sup> Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1965), 17–18.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 27; Lynd interview.

conviction that for them “there is only one race, the human race.”<sup>61</sup> SNCC staff pushed the volunteers to explore their motivations and feelings about going to Mississippi, and volunteers’ letters from orientation were filled with their efforts to understand the meaning of race in America. For these privileged volunteers, the orientation was a process of becoming less self-assured, more questioning.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of all the planning and training, no one could be sure what would happen when the Freedom School teachers reached Mississippi. The disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney confirmed that the volunteers would face white brutality; the attitude of local blacks was uncertain. As Lynd had predicted during the orientation, when the teachers arrived in Mississippi, half of the ministers who had volunteered the use of their churches had been convinced to change their minds: “People literally had the problem of finding a place to spend the night and a place to have the school.”<sup>63</sup>

Although some teachers spent their first several days canvassing the neighborhood for students, in general the Freedom Schools were a far bigger success than the project had planned. What was to have been a system of twenty schools and a thousand students ended up as forty-one schools with over two thousand students. Only the number of teachers failed to keep pace. Instead of the small student–teacher ratios that had been planned, volunteers faced something closer to the ratios they knew from their own schooling.<sup>64</sup>

There were other similarities with public schools as well. In one typical Freedom School, the day

starts at 9:00 AM with singing and current events. Students are divided into classes according to age level and interest—ages run from 4 to 25 years. But all students take citizenship in the morning. The class includes Negro History, Mississippi politics and composition. Students can choose dance, drama, art, auto mechanics, guitar, games or sports for the second hour. . . . Afternoon classes are many of the same subjects plus other special classes. One of the staff, a professional teacher, teaches a play writing class three times a week, and debate and journalism each once a week. [French, comparative religion, nonviolence, and voter education are also taught].<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Belfrage, *Freedom Summer*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Sutherland, *Letters from Mississippi* (New York, 1965); Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White*, 96–99.

<sup>63</sup> Zinn, *New Abolitionists*, 248; Lynd interview.

<sup>64</sup> Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End* (New York, 1965), 317.

<sup>65</sup> Wesley Foundation Newsletter, San Jose, Calif. [?], 28 July 1964, 2, container 1, The Stokely Carmichael Collection (M170), Department of Special Collections, The Stanford University Libraries. In order to encourage a statewide network among students, the schools even developed a Freedom Schools sports league. White woman volunteer, 4, folder 23, Project South Collection (SC55), Department of Special Collections, The Stanford University Libraries.

Because Freedom School designers had anticipated only high school students, plans for age-grouping do not appear in Freedom School proposals. Rather, they seem to have been a “common sense” arrangement by the teachers which mirrored their own schooling.

Florence Howe, who taught in a Jackson Freedom School, depicts how teachers faced with large numbers of students worked to encourage active participation and questioning: “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. . . . 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.”<sup>66</sup> Like the Freedom Schools’ organizers, Howe overstates the power of an egalitarian pedagogy to overcome social divisions. For instance, her suggestion that “soon [students] were forgetting about skin colors altogether and thinking about ideas or feelings, about people and events” seems exaggerated.<sup>67</sup> Ironically, the belief that discussions of students’ experiences promoted students’ apperception of universal truths occasionally prompted volunteers to slip into more hierarchical teaching styles. A report from one Freedom School explained that although “it is better to discuss things . . . than to lecture on them [because it] makes the students more interested, lectures can give out information . . . at a much faster rate.”<sup>68</sup>

The volunteers’ vision of the power of egalitarian teaching was not pure invention, however. Teachers generally incorporated students’ lives into lessons and worked to break down the authority of whiteness. As a Holmes County Freedom School teacher recalled, “you did not have the distinction between teachers and students as you do in ordinary schools, but we felt that the students had as much to teach as we did. We maybe had the facts, but they were rich in experience.”<sup>69</sup> For many volunteers and Mississippi blacks, the purpose of the Freedom Schools was fulfilled by their joining together and demonstrating to America the possibility of racial equality. According to Staughton Lynd, “Everybody was engaged in the business of empowering other people and giving other

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<sup>66</sup> Florence Howe, “Mississippi’s Freedom Schools,” [1964], in *Myths of Coeducation: Selected Essays, 1964–1983* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984), 3.

<sup>67</sup> For a description of Freedom School student attitudes about “good” and “bad” hair, see anonymous woman volunteer, 5, folder 20, Project South.

<sup>68</sup> “New Bethel School,” Canton, 10 July 1964, file 325, appendix A, SP. Although lectures are sometimes mentioned in Freedom School logs, they tend to be absent from volunteers’ recollections. At least for the volunteers, the ideology of questioning and dialogue left a deeper impression than whatever exceptions to it actually occurred.

<sup>69</sup> White woman volunteer, 3, folder 23.

people the permission to use their own energies. . . . What they did when they finally got together . . . was secondary to the sort of existential act of having come together."<sup>70</sup>

Teacher efforts to promote equality and self-discovery were particularly evident in humanities classes. In no other area of the curriculum did volunteers exercise greater discretion. In addition to the Afro-American authors SNCC recommended, volunteers presented their favorite modern classics—the works of James Joyce and e. e. cummings seem to have been particularly popular. Still, the humanities curriculum was not the product of the divergent interests of volunteers and SNCC staff but rather the coincidence of their aims.<sup>71</sup>

Attention to the humanities was a logical outgrowth of the Freedom School's goal of promoting "self-expression in a political context," and the students themselves, for whom only movement discipline made the schools compulsory, gravitated toward such classes as creative writing and journalism.<sup>72</sup> Dan Hinman-Smith comments, "Those associated with the Freedom schools [sought to redefine] 'freedom' in 'languages' uncontrolled by the white Mississippi establishment: art, dance, song, drama. . . . The emancipatory capacities of these 'free forms' might also explain why French and typing, new modes of communication for most Mississippi blacks, were two of the most popular Freedom School subjects."<sup>73</sup>

The credibility of pedagogical efforts to promote the synthesis of experience, learning, and politics depended on the opportunities for activism that other components of the summer project provided. Students and teachers often spent afternoons and evenings together registering voters and picketing, and adults often sat in on Freedom School discussions. In addition, Freedom Schools frequently hosted mass meetings and cultural events that appealed to both students and adults. A film series, concerts by visiting musicians such as Pete Seeger, and performances of Martin Duberman's *In White America* by the Free Southern Theater were integral parts of the Freedom School program.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Lynd interview. See also Tracy Sugarman, *Stranger at the Gates: A Summer in Mississippi* (New York, 1966), 73.

<sup>71</sup> The humanities were included in Charlie Cobb's original proposal, and several SNCC staff launched a theater troupe during the summer.

<sup>72</sup> Lynd interview.

<sup>73</sup> Dan Hinman-Smith, "'For Hope, Justice and Freedom': The Mississippi Freedom Schools (1964–1965)" (unpublished paper, University of North Carolina, 1988), 37.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Lauter, interview with author, 28 Dec. 1987; Staughton Lynd, "Mississippi Freedom Schools: Retrospect and Prospect," 26 July 1964, 3, file 112, series XV, subgroup A, SP. The play opened with the audience's own experiences and then recounted the tradition of black struggle in the United States, thus echoing the Freedom Schools' pedagogy. According to Free Southern Theater founder John O'Neal, "We are trying to build the notion that these people [that were in the audience] were actually history makers. That idea was the idea of the movement." O'Neal interview.

While one can get only an approximate idea of what actually went on in the Freedom Schools from volunteers' accounts of their work, they do convey a clear sense of the values by which teachers judged their efforts. In the words of one volunteer, the purpose of the Freedom Schools was to "start young Mississippians thinking about how they could change the society in which they lived. . . . We tried to draw these students out and for the first time in their lives to express themselves—in writing, in speaking. We encouraged them to have discussions and in Freedom School . . . how we taught was just to ask questions. We didn't have a political doctrine or ideology that we were trying to impose on the students, but simply ask them why or what is the problem. Then, how are you going to solve it?"<sup>75</sup> Like the SNCC activists, the volunteers believed that the fostering of questioning would lead to self-expression, to an understanding of Mississippi's oppressive social order, and to participation in the movement for social change. Student participation in learning, a sense of the worth and equality among students, and the need to connect lessons to life were the frames by which the teachers assessed their teaching.<sup>76</sup>

Collegiate experiences of both black activists and white volunteers contributed to the Freedom Schools' pedagogy. SNCC's John O'Neal explains that when he was in college, every month or two there was another seminar on democratic group "leadership techniques and [such notions as] the value of the circle over the value of the rigid hierarchical relationships. It's a class thing more in fact than a racial thing."<sup>77</sup> It was Noel Day who suggested that students sit in a circle rather than in rows, a suggestion that most volunteers seem to have embraced.<sup>78</sup> According to black literacy activist Hosea Williams, the self-assuredness of privilege that volunteers brought to the South's brutalized black poor was one of the major contributions of the Freedom Schools: "The average Negro is

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<sup>75</sup> White woman volunteer, 3, folder 23. The volunteer's views are remarkably similar to SNCC's desire to "train people to be active agents in bringing about social change. . . . It is not our purpose to impose a particular set of conclusions. Our purpose is to encourage the asking of questions, and the hope that society can be improved. "Part II: Citizenship Curriculum," 1.

<sup>76</sup> See Alvin Pam, "Report on the Summer Project," Holly Springs, 8 July 1964, 1, file 175, series IV, subgroup A, SP; and Deborah Flynn, "Highlights of One Teacher's Experience," [fall 1964], 1, file 175, series IV, subgroup A, SP. Flynn and Pam were New York City public school teachers. About a quarter of the Freedom School volunteers were professional teachers. As a group, they were perhaps more traditional in their teaching than the college students. (Lynd interview.) Still, the similarities between the professional teachers' pedagogy and the college students' were far greater than the differences.

<sup>77</sup> O'Neal interview.

<sup>78</sup> Chaffee to Noel Day, 26 Apr. 1964, file 327, appendix A, SP; Noel Day, Teaching Hints, Discussion Leading Techniques, file 340, *ibid*.



Group sing of freedom songs at Freedom School Convention, 8 Aug. 1964, Meridian, Mississippi. Courtesy of Staughton Lynd Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

. . . authoritative by tradition, heritage . . . by training. . . My daddy's been bossed all his life by some white man, so he bossed the children, bossed his wife. . . The majority of [white students] . . . are rebellious to authority. . . It's not because of race, but it is because of training and education, and largely, it has to do with economics."<sup>79</sup>

Efforts to create an egalitarian pedagogy that relied on dialogue reflected gender as well as class. Whereas virtually all the volunteers SNCC assigned to voter registration were men, a slight majority of Free-

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<sup>79</sup> Hosea Williams, 15–16, folder 179, Project South.

dom School teachers were women.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, many of the volunteers shared a view of schools as a circumscribed women's sphere separated from real work. In the words of one male volunteer, "running a freedom school is an absurd waste of time. I don't want to sit around in a classroom; I want to go and throw a few bombs." Still, the visible role played by women activists in SNCC, the desire of women volunteers to do meaningful work, and the pedagogical project of stimulating students to find their own, authentic voices as a step toward gaining equality, encouraged women volunteers to actuate the Freedom Schools' curriculum.<sup>81</sup>

As the Freedom Summer ended, volunteers and SNCC activists sought to encourage self-reliance among Freedom School students. Teacher Deborah Flynn reported that "older and more advanced students are preparing to take over the Freedom Schools and run them as permanent Community Centers. A few high school students have already begun to teach the class consisting of elementary school students."<sup>82</sup> The Freedom Schools concluded with a statewide convention at which delegates adopted a detailed platform on issues ranging from housing and education to foreign policy, and laid the groundwork for a number of the school boycotts that took place in the fall. Echoing SNCC's belief that the goal of organizers should be to make themselves obsolete, Bob Moses, invited to speak to the convention, asked questions instead.<sup>83</sup>

Optimism about the future of the program proved ill-founded however. Although many Freedom Schools continued to operate after the end of the summer, SNCC's own vision of self-effacing leadership inhibited the institutionalization of the schools. Those who saw the Freedom Schools as a success—typically grass-roots Mississippi leaders—argued that short-term white volunteers had given blacks a sense of equality and the courage to demand integration into the American polity. By this logic, the project's very success in "cracking Mississippi's closed society" signaled the need for other types of organizing.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1988), 107–8. In fact, Freedom Summer organizers steered men into electoral work and women into teaching even against the volunteers' wishes.

<sup>81</sup> Wally Roberts to Lynd, Shaw, Miss., 11 July 1964, file 356, appendix A, SP. Note that the Freedom Schools were an important source of feminist consciousness-raising groups. Rothschild, *Black and White*, 187; McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 185. For a more extended discussion of the salience of gender to the organization of the project and to volunteers' experiences, see McAdam, 108–11.

<sup>82</sup> Flynn, "Highlights," 2.

<sup>83</sup> "Platform of Freedom School Convention," file 334, appendix A, SP; Lynd to author, 3 Dec. 1989.

<sup>84</sup> Supporters of this view included Rev. J. C. Killingsworth, a Freedom Democratic party leader from Stonewall, Mississippi (Killingsworth, 13, folder 165, Project South), and Fannie Lou Hamer ("Forward" to Sugarman, *Stranger*, vii).

Other activists concluded that the presence of white volunteers had precluded black empowerment. Grounding their critique in SNCC's ideology of self-discovery, these activists argued that the superior skills which white volunteers brought to Mississippi discouraged "any real basic attempt to get [local people] involved," and "when the volunteers left, a lot of things collapsed because volunteers were doing all the work."<sup>85</sup>

Confidence in SNCC's capacity to enlighten America and in America's capacity to reform itself was ravaged as much by events outside of Mississippi as by anything that happened in the state. According to Summer Project leader Dave Dennis, activists had come "to Mississippi looking for the dissimilarities or the differences" between Mississippi and the American mainstream. However, media fascination with white volunteers and the refusal by the liberal leaders of the Democratic party to replace the all-white Mississippi delegation to its 1964 convention with an alternative, integrated one convinced activists that "the only difference is that the political oppression and control in Mississippi is much more conspicuous, much more overt." This belief that America itself was as hopelessly racist as Mississippi precluded attempts to transform southern blacks through the language of American values, or to instruct the nation about the evils of Mississippi's racial caste system.<sup>86</sup>

Activists lost faith in the United States at a time when the federal government was responding to many of the most visible forms of racism. Activists were hired by new federal "anti-poverty" programs, and when the 1965 Voting Rights Act outlawed literacy tests, the number of black voters increased dramatically. Still, educational efforts like Headstart transformed schooling from an arena for liberation into a social service, and political victories did not eliminate economic oppression.<sup>87</sup> For activists, Mississippi came to resemble what SNCC supporter Elizabeth Sutherland called an "atmosphere of fragmented reality—less a battle-

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<sup>85</sup> Ulysses Everett, 1–4, folder 156, Project South.

<sup>86</sup> Dave Dennis, 7–8, 11–12, 16–17, folder 139, Project South. By 1966 Charlie Cobb would argue that "America must be treated as an enemy—an enemy of humanity, in fact, and cut loose from." Cobb, quoted in Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1987), 504.

<sup>87</sup> O'Neal interview. The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), the Mississippi Head Start project, epitomized the new programs. Started by a white New York psychiatrist, CDGM received a \$1.5 million grant within five weeks of its founding. CDGM's Polly Greenberg argued that by 1965 SNCC no longer served the needs of poor blacks and had to be "neutralized" in order for white professionals and middle-class blacks "to build a federal program from accomplishments of the movement." Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi* (New York, 1969), 23, 211.

ground between good and evil, and more a labyrinth where none of the possible paths is a sure way out.”<sup>88</sup>

Many of the Freedom Schools struggled to operate after the end of the summer, but they sustained neither learning nor activism.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, although SNCC continued to establish Freedom Schools around the country, it never created another educational program on the scale of the Mississippi Project. SNCC’s new schools generally rejected the use of white volunteers and often relied on the SNCC staff itself. Activists were increasingly unlikely to seek the expertise of outsiders, black or white, for support and planning.<sup>90</sup>

As black activists became increasingly convinced of the immutability of American racism, the belief that one could live the truth while living in America receded. A pedagogy of open-ended questioning and self-discovery among the oppressed was replaced by the articulation of a critique of society to the oppressed. Although students’ lives retained pedagogical value as yardsticks of oppression, efforts to awaken an awareness of universal truths and values through self-discovery declined. On the one hand, a SNCC activist would argue that “a person who lives in the slum who disagrees with the power structure . . . is more qualified to teach in [a Freedom School] than a Ph.D. . . . because he has suffered.”<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, the civic curriculum which explored students’ lives was replaced by courses on African history.<sup>92</sup>

The Freedom Schools had grown out of a liminal moment when the movement simultaneously expressed itself with the rhetoric of American

<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Sutherland, “Mississippi: Summer of Discontent,” *The Nation*, 11 Oct. 1965, 212.

<sup>89</sup> Where white volunteers continued to work in Freedom Schools, changing views of race relations incapacitated them as teachers. Seeking not to dominate her students, one typical teacher attempted to facilitate “undirected learning [with people who] want to talk [to you] ‘cause they haven’t had much of a chance to talk before and their talk leads . . . and you don’t have to lead them anywhere.” Anonymous white woman, 6, folder 20, Project South. Another 1965 volunteer had a less optimistic explanation for the volunteers’ ineffectiveness: middle-class whites were separated from their students’ world by “an emotional chasm no amount of good feeling could overcome.” Abbie Hoffman, *Soon To Be a [Major] Motion Picture* (New York, 1980), 67.

<sup>90</sup> Memo from Judy Richardson to SNCC Executive Committee RE: Residential Freedom School, Presented 6 Sep. 1964, file 4, series II, subgroup A, SP; Judy Richardson, “Residential Freedom School Report,” Aug. 1965, 10, file 122, series VIII, subgroup A, SP; Bill Ware, “Freedom Schools: The Reason Why,” 1966, and Minutes, “Freedom School Meeting on April 25, 1966,” (Atlanta), file 8, series X, subgroup A, SP. For Ivanhoe Donaldson and Cleveland Sellers’s *Negroes in American History: A Freedom Primer*, see *Staff Newsletter*, 1 Sep. 1965, file 6, series VII, subgroup A, SP.

<sup>91</sup> Jesse Harris, “Fifth District Joint Meeting with Third District, 14–17 Apr. 1965, Waveland, Miss., file 61, series XVII, subgroup A, SP. On the decline of interest in the humanities among SNCC activists, see Dan Hinman-Smith, “‘For Hope, Justice, and Freedom,’” 58–59.

<sup>92</sup> Reports on Washington, D.C., Liberation Schools, file 74, series I, subgroup C, SP.

democracy and sought to restructure radically American society. Both SNCC's ideology and the volunteers' shattering experience of Mississippi life promoted the paradoxical project of teaching freedom through a pedagogy of shared uncertainty, questioning, self-discovery, and self-expression.

The decline of the Mississippi Freedom Schools reflects the limits that circumscribed SNCC's vision of politics and the pedagogy it fostered. The promotion of self-discovery only made sense when the movement gave students shaped by oppression the capacity and courage to see the oppressive aspects of their lives and an outlet through which to enact their political insights. With SNCC's growing sense that inequality and oppression were integral elements of American society, activists could no longer conceive of a liberatory pedagogy growing out of students' American experiences. In the face of the intractability of American injustice, the pedagogical project of simultaneously promoting self-discovery and articulating a vision of social justice could not be sustained. It continues however to challenge us today.