

# Deeper Than Politics

Liz Fusco

THE ORIGINAL PLAN for Freedom Schools developed from Charles Cobb's 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 validity of the dream is evidenced by the fact that people trying desperately to keep alive while working on voter registration could take seriously the idea that Mississippi needs more than for Negroes to have the right to vote.

The decision to have Freedom Schools in Mississippi seems to have been a decision, then, 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 became everyone's concern. They worked and argued about what should be taught, about what the realities of Mississippi are, and how these realities affect the kids, and how to get the kids to discover themselves as human beings. And then Staughton Lynd, the director, 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 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 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. 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 as well.

As I see it, it was this asking of questions 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 took place because for the first time in their lives kids were asking questions. The curriculum itself was based on the asking of certain questions, in connection with the kids' interest in their Freedom School teachers (mostly Northern, mostly white, mostly still in college), in connection with Negro History, African culture, and even the academic subjects, as well as in connection with the

study of the realities of Mississippi in the light of Nazi Germany in 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? The "secondary" set of questions (which seemed to me more important because more personal) 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 continual raising of these questions in many contexts may be said to be what the Freedom Schools were about. This was so because in order to answer them it was necessary for the student to confront other questions of who he is, what his world is like, and how he fits into or is alienated from it.

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 characteristically saying what they thought the white man wanted to hear): as soon as they could gather enough money for a ticket they were going off to Chicago, or California! To leave the state was their ambition, and about it they were certain, even though they had not thought any further than that, not even where the money was to come from, and certainly not what they would find elsewhere or what they would do. Some sense of "go home to my Lord and be free"—some vague hope of a paradise beyond—seemed to inspire their programless passion for the North. But at 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 rush northward led to a discussion of the condition of the Negro in the North, about which most of the teachers could speak specifically. And then came the news stories about Harlem, Rochester, and Medford, Massachusetts, and the kids were interested, and worried. But they did not change their minds just because the truth about the North began to shatter their dream of it as a paradise. Their need to escape stemmed from the fact that they really did not know what it was about Mississippi that they hated. They felt that what was intolerable for them had something to do with the white man, something to do with getting only \$3.00 a day for 10 hours work chopping a white man's cotton, something to do with the police—but they had not yet

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articulated the connections among these things. And they had not connected these things with their experience of repression at home and in school. And so the very amorphousness of the enemy was threatening to them.

### No Hiding Place

In the Freedom School patterns began to be seen, patterns that were real and could be dealt with. So the kids began to see two things at once: that the North was no real escape, and that 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 which have 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. As they began to learn about the movement, they saw in the story of Joseph Cinque of the *Amistad* a parallel to the kinds of revolt that the movement represents. They saw that Joseph Cinque, in leading a mutiny on that slave ship instead of asserting his will to freedom by jumping 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 the past and the present were continually made—at first by the teachers, then 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 in the North?” “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?” “What do you think about Frederick Douglass’ 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?” “Who do you think the movement is proving right—Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. DuBois?” “And what comment on your own upbringing is made by the fact that you all knew about Booker T. Washington but most of you had never heard of W.E. B. DuBois?” “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 until drawn into the question-asking, had only been able to whine, accept passively, or lash out by dropping out of school or getting expelled. By comparing the Freedom Schools with the regular schools, they began to become articulate about what was wrong in the regular schools 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?” “Why can’t our principal make his own decisions instead of having to follow the orders of the white superintendent?” “Why do we have no student government?” or “Why doesn’t the administration take the existing student government seriously?”

Always in the end, the main question was *why are we not taken seriously*—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, the classes overcrowded. This is of course the question that the adults were asking about the city, county, and state, and the question the Freedom Democratic Party asked—at the Democratic National 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, dance, draw, play, laugh and think. All of this was painful as well as releasing because to be taken seriously requires that one take oneself seriously, believe in oneself, and that requires confrontation.

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 formulate. In the spring, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi had tried to organize a Mississippi Student Union, bringing together kids from all over the state. 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 they were able to discipline their thinking so that boycott would not just be acting out their frustrations, but careful, considered, programmed, revolutionary 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—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 is reflected in the final statement following the list of grievances drawn up by the McComb Freedom School:

We are twelve 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 sending the list of grievances to the newspapers and the school officials, city officials, senators, 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. Whomever the Freedom Schools touched they activated into confrontation, with themselves, with the world, and back to themselves 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 Songhai, Mali, Ghana, 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 (who had been suspended from the split-session summer school for participating in the movement and took Freedom School academic courses 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 deserve, and hearing the adults express some of their concern by forming 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 everyone, including the staff, crying with awe for the beauty and strangeness and naturalness of it. 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 the Freedom Summer include the kids' drawings on the walls of Freedom Schools and COFO offices 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 possibility 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 fall begun to experience for the first time in their lives student challenges that are not adolescent testing or insolent acting-out but serious insistence that freedom is in truth and that they 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 and summer plans of the Mississippi Project. Some project directors, who had been in Mississippi since 1961 participating in the slow, sometimes depressing, always dangerous work of voter registration, first thought of the Freedom Schools as a frill, detrimental to the basic effort. At best, they considered them a front for the real activity. But the project directors came to realize that the Freedom

Schools were not just a place where kids could be inducted into the movement, a convenient source of canvassers. They were something else, and in realizing this, the skeptical directors were themselves transformed by the Freedom Schools. The Schools provided the experience through which people, because we needed them, emerged as discussion leaders, teachers, organizers, speakers, friends, and persons. I know this 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.

### Expanded Horizons

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 one thousand 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 three thousand and that the original age expectation of 16-17-18-year olds had to be revised to include persons all the way from pre-school age up to 70-year olds, all anxious to learn about how to be Free. The subjects expanded from the Negro History, Mississippi Now and black-white relations to include typing and foreign languages. 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, independent study and longer range work with art, music, and drama as well as exploration in greater intensity of the problems raised in the summer sessions.

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 fund-raising 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 best 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. There are experiences and results to learn from. And it may well be that the very staffs of the Freedom Schools in Louisiana, Georgia, etc., will be the kids who were just this past summer students themselves in the Freedom Schools in Mississippi—and who discovered themselves there.