
MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SCHOOLS' RADICAL CONCEPTION OF PEDAGOGY, CITIZENSHIP, AND POWER

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John Dewey's pragmatism and progressive education sought to nourish the democratic principles of critical thinking and collective social action, which he saw as central to democracy and threatened by what Jürgen Habermas would call the rise of *instrumental rationality*. Dewey was concerned that traditional approaches to education operated to limit student growth and failed to nurture the skills and knowledge they needed to address contemporary experiences, issues, and problems. Recognizing students as active participants in the construction of knowledge and the decisions that affect them, Dewey had a radical democratic vision that centralized the role of education in its creation. We have much to gain from his revolutionary educational philosophy and the direct link he saw between education and personal and social transformation.

At the same time, however, we need to recognize that his neglect to deal with the issues of racial segregation and the status of blacks as second-class citizens,¹ precluded the possibility of realizing his vision. In this essay, I argue that Mississippi freedom schools can be understood as an important critical intervention to such antidemocratic oversight from which we have much to learn. I look particularly at the conceptions of pedagogy, citizenship, and power as operationalized in the formation of freedom school curriculum. In so doing, I offer a sketch of how the most revolutionary of twentieth-century educational theories provides fruitful strategies for fostering the capacities of critical thinking, imagination, and collective action but need to be further developed, as each, in some way, wound up reinforcing aspects of the very undemocratic principles that they deplored and struggled against.

A central question I have for this inquiry is, how does it come to be that even the most revolutionary discourses manage to reinscribe aspects of the traditional authority of which they are critical? It would seem, for example, that one of our most highly esteemed educational philosophers was unable to address the greatest challenges to the democracy he believed in so profoundly because of the "future-oriented instrumentalism"² that was invoked to create the possibilities for a radical democracy. Frank Margonis argues that Dewey helped to "hammer out the terms of a new social amnesia, featuring a forward-looking philosophy that directed attention to the possibilities of tomorrow and away from past conquest and ongoing racial violence."³ Dewey's portrait of a future democracy is flawed in that it failed to consider honestly present and past relationships with people of color, who at the time of his writing were being violently denied recognition and status as full and active citizens.

If Dewey was truly committed to democracy, why did he avert his gaze from the conditions that ensured its demise? Because Dewey focused on the

character of future democratic relationships, argues Margonis; he never discussed the challenge of ending the gross injustices committed against people of color and “mending those battered relationships.”⁴ And yet, his views on democracy and progressive education were profound in their insistence that learning be *useful* and based on student *experience*, interest, and ability to *think critically* about collective *social action*.⁵ Dewey’s orientation toward the future, however, allowed him to deny the realities of race that permeated his present, making impossible the development of the democracy he so dedicatedly worked toward.

Seeking to address that silence, I examine the formation of Mississippi freedom schools which, I suggest, managed to put into practice the most revolutionary aspects of Dewey’s pragmatic vision. As testimony to the continuing denial of racial discourse in modern philosophy, I think it important to note that as a graduate student in the field of philosophy of education with a keen interest in critical transformative pedagogies and the role of education in a democratic society, I had not been introduced to freedom schools or the Mississippi freedom school curriculum in my formal program of study.⁶ This essay seeks to address that gap and place freedom schools in the tradition of progressive and emancipatory education. Not only did freedom schools formulate a radical pedagogy and notion of democratic citizenship, but they also began to develop a very sophisticated theory of power that can help us begin to mend those aforementioned “battered relationships” so often ignored. The progressive and radical conception of education behind the formation of freedom schools embraced the central tenets of a critical democracy and the project to create social justice, providing us not just with theoretical discourse, but a concrete example of pragmatic pedagogical strategies that contemporary social justice educators can use directly. And yet, space to critique the gender regime and hierarchical sexual arrangements of the dominant society was not created. Women were generally assigned the role of teaching while men occupied formal leadership positions in movement organizing. Once again it would seem that even the most radical of democratic visions failed to sever itself from some of the very antidemocratic principles it was struggling against.

In what follows, I briefly historicize the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the formation of freedom schools as part of the larger civil rights struggle for racial justice. In the next section, I outline the central tenets of the freedom school curriculum, highlighting their radical conceptions of pedagogy, citizenship, and power. I conclude by offering an analysis of what we can learn from freedom schools today, where I suggest that they be seen as an example of how critical pedagogies have the capacity to spark radical personal and social transformation and emphasize that their pedagogical strategies be put in the service of educating for full and active participation in a multiracial democracy.

 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Developed as a response to the ongoing and institutionalized dehumanization of the African American population, the Mississippi freedom project was created to bring national attention to the gross injustices being perpetrated in Mississippi. Freedom Summer was sponsored by an umbrella organization called the Council of Federated Organizations, which coordinated the efforts of major civil rights groups, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,⁷ the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress for Racial Equality, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The project was designed to flood the state of Mississippi with approximately one thousand black and white volunteers who would form a nonviolent army to participate in massive voter registration campaigns, the creation of freedom schools and community centers.⁸

Dramatizing the need for change in Mississippi, the volunteers were organized to promote equality and democratic rights among the racially marginalized black population by teaching them about the political life of the state and encouraging them to participate in it. In the summer of 1964, one of the “most celebrated educational efforts of the civil rights movement”⁹ began when at least forty-one freedom schools opened in the churches, on the back porches, and under the trees of Mississippi. The goal was to “use education and moral suasion to give democracy and citizenship a more genuine meaning.”¹⁰ Despite the tension surrounding the issue of sending in privileged whites to “educate” disenfranchised blacks, activists brought in hundreds of Northern volunteers (most of them white college students unaware of the lived conditions of black folk in Mississippi) to work in the voter registration campaigns and to teach in freedom schools.¹¹ Advocates argued that the federal government’s disregard for protecting the civil rights of blacks made it a viable strategy,¹² emphasizing that “only a new kind of education could prevent black children from being intellectually and psychologically mutilated, and that without new schools the struggle to eliminate racism from American society could not succeed.”¹³ Moreover, it was emphasized that drawing on the participation of students from America’s elite educational institutions could provide disenfranchised southerners with access to some of the “newer ideas” circulating in educational circles.¹⁴

MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM SCHOOLS CONCEIVED

SNCC field secretary Charles Cobb formally proposed the formation of freedom schools for Mississippi in December of 1963.¹⁵ Drawing from an array of educational programs in which SNCC activists had already worked, as well as other progressive educational initiatives, including Myles Horton’s Highlander Center in Tennessee, which had been fostering the development of grassroots activists since the 1930s,¹⁶ Cobb argued that freedom schools were needed to challenge the traditional institutions of learning which were geared to “squash intellectual curiosity and different thinking,” creating “social

paralysis” for both black and white students.¹⁷ Cobb emphasized that the formal institution of education was part of the apparatus of oppression and that “every aspect of traditional Mississippi schools conveyed the state’s message of white supremacy,”¹⁸ preventing American democracy from becoming a reality. While Cobb is credited for writing the initial prospectus for the Mississippi freedom schools, it is important to emphasize the essential contributions of the educational initiatives from which he drew in order to understand why freedom schools should be placed within the tradition of progressive and emancipatory education in philosophy of education classes.

During most of the twentieth century, the term progressive education has been used to articulate ideas and practices that aim to make schools more effective agencies of a democratic society. The founder of Highlander, Horton, had maintained correspondence with Dewey for many years;¹⁹ here, Dewey’s crucial educational insights were deeply politicized, as his call for active participation by *all* citizens was applied to those ignored in Dewey’s corpus. While Dewey might be seen to have laid theoretical ground for the conception of progressive, emancipatory education, freedom schools offer us a concrete example of how such theory can be implemented in practice in the spirit of creating a genuine democracy. The overlap between freedom school theory and practice and the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire is significant,²⁰ as will become obvious below. It is known that Freire collaborated with Horton later on; during their early years as theorists and activists, however, they were doing similar things concurrently, albeit not known to each other. And while Freire will often be on syllabi in philosophy of education courses, the study of freedom schools is not.

THE FORMULATION OF A RADICAL PEDAGOGY

The content of the curriculum will be detailed below, but first I want to emphasize the radical pedagogical principles under which it was to be implemented. Freedom schools set out to support black Mississippians in *naming* the reality of their lives and then in changing that reality: education and political action were to become one, in true pragmatic form. The goal was to transform disempowered and racially marginalized students into active agents in bringing about social change. By drawing on student experience and knowledge in order to *collectively* develop a more realistic perception of U.S. society, themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and the conceptualization of alternatives to the prescribed social order, teachers were to be facilitators who also learned from the process of cultural exchange. The purpose, it must be stressed, was not to *impose* a particular view upon students but to aid them in articulating their own desires, demands, and questions and provide them with information and the skills with which to question it. The strong emphasis on student questioning was especially important given that teachers themselves, as socialized members of the dominant culture, could be

unwitting perpetrators of reproducing the very racism they were trying to subvert.

The pedagogy fore grounded the notion that education is a political endeavor, implicated in oppressive power structures and in their transformation, so that learning was linked both to personal and social transformation. Aiming to nourish the democratic principles of critical thinking, equality, justice, community, and social change, the pedagogy sought to provide students with the skills and knowledge needed for full and active participation in the transformation of the social order. In contrast to traditional practices of education, the experience, insight, and desire of students in freedom schools was to set the agenda. The pedagogical practice that guaranteed this student centered approach was *questioning*.

To facilitate this process, teaching and learning were practiced in an open setting; participants sat in circles in order to disrupt traditional hierarchies of teachers as the authority on the knowledge to be imparted to the obedient students, seated in rows that impeded communication and interactive learning. Reciprocity between teachers and students, it was argued, could (and ought to) be established if questions were based on student knowledge and experience. The questioning method would disrupt the traditional assumption that knowledge was static and that students were its passive recipients. In this way, in true democratic fashion, the ends of education and aims of its participants could be defined and constantly refined through its practice. Learning, then, was inseparable from the use made of it. Questioning would provide students with a chance to engage in cultural critique, expose inconsistencies, and engage in collective dialogue and debate about how to effect change.

Previously segregated, materially destitute, and psychically damaged youth could begin to collectively name their reality, recognize themselves as social agents and deserving *citizens*, responsible for shaping social structures and their transformation. Challenging traditional educative practices, freedom schools fostered a profoundly ethical notion of citizenship that was not to be based on individual achievement or success, but upon collective and responsible social action. This conception of citizenship was particularly radical in that it challenged dominant conceptions that deemed whiteness as an institutionalized and violently enforced prerequisite for it. Disenfranchised black youth were deemed capable of and responsible for finding solutions to community problems. The radical conceptions of pedagogy and citizenship designed for freedom schools put into practice the principle that not having an actively informed citizenry is the greatest challenge for democracy.

THE CONTENT: A PROVOCATIVE VIEW OF POWER

The curriculum had three main sections: academic, citizenship, and recreational, but it was to serve only as a guideline, not a rigid formula; teachers were encouraged to use the resources of their imaginations to constantly develop it as they responded to student need and interest. All aspects

were intended to promote the school as agent of social change, to provide students with a sense of their history, to link the curriculum with student experience, to pose open-ended questions with no prescribed right answer, and to help students develop the academic skills they needed. Very much in line with aspects of progressive education and pragmatism, the academic curriculum suggested that reading, writing, and verbal activities be based on the student's experiences and be directly related to student need and interest. Writing, for example, was to be taught in connection with how to write a leaflet, how to fill out voter registration forms, how to write reports, newspaper articles, business letters, prose and poetry. Math, it was suggested, could be taught by learning how to calculate the number of eligible voters in a community and learning how to study the population that could be canvassed.

The citizenship curriculum²¹ consisted of seven units that would be used to encourage questions and create the awareness that students were capable and responsible agents of social change. Each of the units developed key concepts that would be further developed by those that followed. The units were:

1. comparison of the student's reality with others (the way the students live and the way others live),
2. north to freedom? (The Negro in the North),
3. examining the apparent reality (the "better lives" that whites live),
4. introducing the power structure,
5. the poor Negro, the poor white, and their fears,
6. material things versus soul things, and
7. the Movement.

Two additional sets of questions were to be reintroduced periodically throughout the curriculum to permit ongoing evaluation of its effectiveness as well as to provide students with the opportunity to perceive their own progressing sophistication. The first basic set of questions included:

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 included:

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?
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And an additional question was later added as it was generated by the students themselves:

4. What do we have that we don't want to keep?

Each unit delineated a clear purpose and a range of materials from which to draw. The first unit, for example, was intended to create critical awareness of unjust social conditions for blacks and the awareness that there were alternatives. Materials included statistical data on differences in educational facilities, housing, and employment for whites and blacks. The purpose of the second unit was to emphasize the condition of blacks in the north to demonstrate that migration was not a solution: blacks were second-class citizens all over the country and ought not be. The third unit was set up to investigate the supposed better life of whites, to see what it is really like and what it cost them; in this unit, students were encouraged to talk about what education is and what it could be, and to debunk myths generated about black people by coming to understand black history and discussing the ends served by stereotypical representations. The fourth unit introduced the basic workings of the power structure, designed to develop the concept of "political power." Students were to be invited to investigate how laws were made, how people got jobs, and what would happen to those laws and job opportunities if black people voted. The basic concept was that the power structure is a connecting and *interlocking* series of cliques that goes from local towns and cities up to the highest level of national government. Here the seeds for developing a very fruitful conception of power were planted.

The fifth unit was aimed at uncovering how the "power structure" derived its power. What is it? What mechanisms support it? students were asked. Tapping into the under-theorized psychic dimensions of power, fears of both blacks and whites were explored as was the deep psychological damage done to those on either side of the color line (though of course in different ways with different results for different reasons). Power was interrogated on many levels including the political, material, and psychological. Not only were students asked to consider how and why they, themselves, might be responsible for the perpetuation of their own subordination, but also to examine the fears that prevented both blacks and whites from changing that system. Unpacking the fears behind the scenes, those that underpin the actions, thoughts, and dreams of agents on both sides of the color line became central to the practice of understanding the obstacles to creating a genuine democracy.

Developing such analyses, I would like to venture, is key to the creation of social solidarity and responsible citizenship in a democratic society. By inviting students to individual introspection as well as collective analysis of dominant depictions of black people as servile, inferior, and happy in their imposed subordination, as well as developing understanding of the sentiments and justifications behind those representations, the disavowal of gross injustice could begin to be deconstructed and dismantled. Power was probed as

productive, not just repressive, as students were provoked to reflect on the psychic effects of domination in their own minds and in those of the perpetrators of multi-dimensional, unjustifiable privileges. Student opinion was sought, for example, as to whether or not members of the KKK appeared to them like they were happy or free. By inquiring into how the white psyche was distorted, ridden with guilt and fear, the notion that “privileged” whites also had a stake in fighting for justice is fostered, laying fertile ground on which to cultivate social solidarity and a responsibility. Here we can see the beginnings of a theory on how to mend those damaged relationships that Dewey’s forward-looking vision failed to address as students were invited to interrogate the multi-dimensions of physical, political, economic, psychic, and soul power, with emphasis placed on the ways in which it is not just the disenfranchised that are dehumanized in the perpetuation of white supremacy.

CONCLUSION

The freedom school curriculum serves as a useful and concrete example of a progressive and pragmatic curriculum that links education to the politics of the larger social order and to its transformation. Given that privileged whites were to be the teachers of disenfranchised black students, devising pedagogical strategies that would prevent reinscribing dominant racial hierarchies was of paramount importance. Aiming to sever revolutionary discourses from the very antidemocratic principles they put into practice, freedom schools’ major contribution to the project of creating a real democracy in which *all* citizens could be recognized and respected was to implement a curriculum based on the asking of questions whose answers were to be found in the lives of the students. The radical conceptions of pedagogy, citizenship, and power discussed here have important implications for thinking about the role of education in building a multiracial/sexual democracy. Though resoundingly silent on the issue of gender and sexuality, the pedagogical practice of questioning and the endeavor to reconceive citizenship and power in freedom schools is an important historical example of a radical educational project that can inform contemporary educators concerned with making the practice of education a vehicle for social justice and democracy.

NOTES

1. Or subpersons, as Charles Mills would say. See *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), for an important analysis of how black people have occupied the unspoken category of subpersonhood which constitutes liberal and democratic notions of personhood.
 2. Frank Margonis, “The Path of Social Amnesia and Dewey’s Democratic Commitments,” in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003).
 3. *Ibid.*, 296.
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4. Ibid., 302.
 5. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916); and John Dewey *Experience and Education: The 60th Anniversary Edition* (West Lafayette: Kappa Delta Pi, 1983).
 6. I learned of freedom schools in a class in gender and women's studies that focused on the activism of African American women in the civil rights movement.
 7. Margonis points out that Dewey was a member of this organization but never mentioned W.E.B. Dubois or *The Crisis*, the organization's journal. See Margonis, "Path of Social Amnesia," 298.
 8. Paul Lauter and Dan Perlstein, "Introduction," *Radical Teacher* 40 (1991): 2□5.
 9. Ibid.
 10. John Rachal, "We'll Never Turn Back: Adult Education and the Struggle for Citizenship in Mississippi's Freedom Summer," in *Adult Education Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2000): 166□97, 173.
 11. The relatively unexamined gender hierarchy comes to light here when one considers how women volunteers were posted as teachers while men were assigned to the voter registration campaigns.
 12. See Daniel Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools," in *History of Education Quarterly* 30 (1990): 297□324.
 13. Lauter and Perlstein, "Introduction," 2.
 14. Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom," 304.
 15. Kathy Emery, Sylvia Braselmann, and Linda Reid Gold, *Freedom School Curriculum* (2004), 8.
 16. Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom," 308.
 17. George W. Chilcoat and Jerry A. Ligon, "Helping to Make Democracy a Living Reality: The Curriculum Conference of the Mississippi Freedom Schools," *Journal of Curriculum Supervision* 15 (1999): 43□68, 44.
 18. Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom," 308.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1993).
 21. See *Radical Teacher* 40 (1991), 6□34, which has reprinted the curriculum and forms the basis of the following review.
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