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Abstract:

A Breath of Freedom: The Role of Freedom Schools in Politicizing Mississippi's Black Youths

The focus of my research has been the Freedom Schools that were active in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, famously known as Freedom Summer. During that summer, COFO, a coalition of civil rights organizations operating in Mississippi since 1962, invited several hundreds of volunteers to the Magnolia state to engage in an array of civil rights activities, including Freedom Schools. 41 of these schools operated in Mississippi during the summer, servicing up to 1,300 black youths. However, more important than the numerical success of the program is that these schools fostered both the individual and collective politicization of the black children that attended. Through a combination of progressive pedagogical techniques, which centered the students in the classroom structure, and a culturally and politically relevant curriculum, Freedom Schools enabled their students to become active citizens both within the classroom and the larger political community. This type of liberatory education empowered students to enact social and political changes in their own worlds. During and after their tenure at Freedom Schools, many black youths became politically active in the movement, often by testing the newly passed Civil Rights Act and canvassing for voters for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Significantly, many Freedom School students also became highly active in trying to change their public schools in order to meet their educational needs. A number of black communities initiated protests against their public school systems in a fight for quality education for black students. Many of the criticisms that black students and their parents had in regards to public education were informed by their Freedom School experiences. By looking closely at student writings from the period, including poetry, informal essays, and newspapers, my paper highlights the connection between the Freedom School education and the growing political nature of black children in Mississippi during and after Freedom Summer.

Keywords: Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, liberatory education, student empowerment, student activism