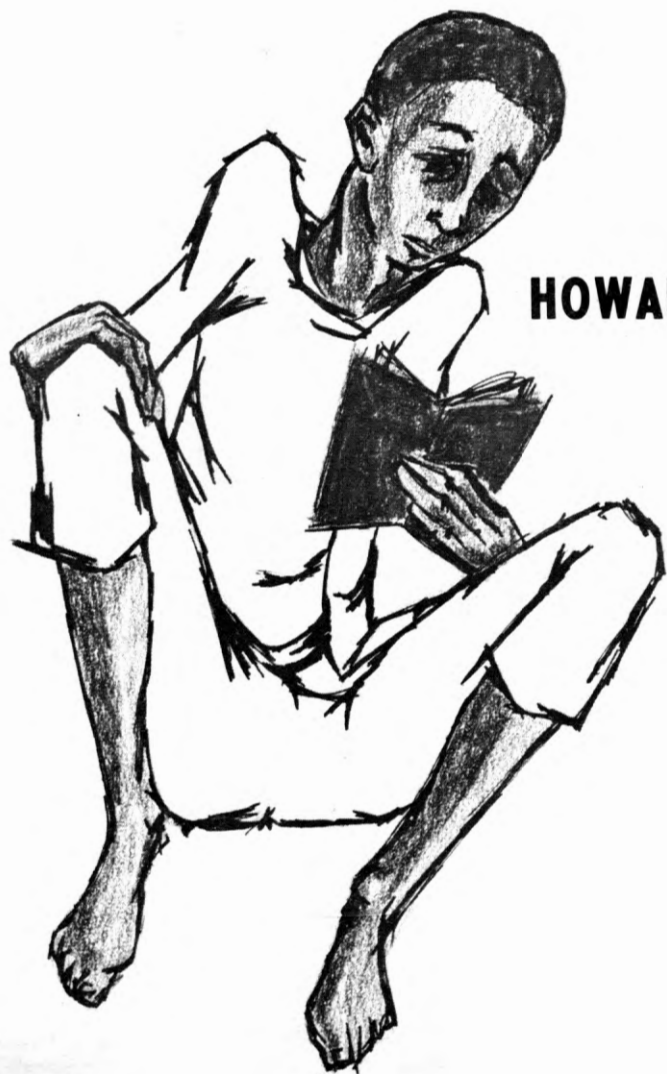


**SCHOOLS IN CONTEXT**

# **THE MISSISSIPPI IDEA**



**HOWARD ZINN**

Schools in Context:  
The Mississippi Idea  
*Howard Zinn*

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*Howard Zinn is the author of The Southern Mystique (Knopf) and SNCC: The New Abolitionists (Beacon). He teaches Government at Boston University, and taught last summer in a Mississippi Freedom School.*

**Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee**  
**6 Raymond Street, N. W.**  
**Atlanta, Georgia 30314**

# Schools in Context

## The Mississippi Idea

Howard Zinn

**T**he triple murder last summer in Mississippi probably would not have taken place if there had not been plans to set up a school at the Mount Zion Baptist Church near Philadelphia. It was the visit of three young civil rights workers to the burned-out school site which led them to arrest, and then death. That a school should frighten a band of Americans into committing murder is not totally credible; that those particular killers made a deliberate mental connection between their act and the establishment of a "Freedom School" in the area is unlikely. Yet education spells danger to certain people at certain times, and what happened in Mississippi last summer suggests a continued sensing of peril.

This article will be concerned, however, not so much with the danger the Freedom Schools represented to some in Mississippi but with the promise they opened for the rest of us, throughout America. For eight weeks, more than 2,000 Negro youngsters, averaging 15 years of age but ranging from 6 to 26 and older, went to schools which violated all the rules and regulations of educational orthodoxy. They were taught by teachers who met no official qualifications; they assembled in church basements or on the streets or in the fields; they

came and went without attendance records, grades or examinations.

It was an experiment that cannot be assessed in the usual terms of "success" and "failure," and it would be wrong to hail it with an enthusiasm which would then lead it to be judged by traditional criteria. But that venture of last summer in Mississippi deserves close attention by all Americans interested in the relationship between education and social change.

The idea, and the term "freedom school," were first brought before the civil rights movement by a slender Howard University student named Charles Cobb, who several years ago interrupted his studies to plunge into the Mississippi Delta as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Cobb pursued his scheme with quiet, slow persistence, and when plans were laid last fall for a big "Mississippi Summer," with 1,000 or more volunteers to arrive in the state, Freedom Schools were on the agenda. Bob Moses, director of the Mississippi project, has a Masters degree from Harvard. He gave the idea close attention, and when Northern students were recruited during the spring many of them were told to be ready to teach.

The man who took charge of the summer Freedom School project for

COFO (the Council of Federated Organizations: a union of SNCC, CORE and other civil rights groups in Mississippi) was Staughton Lynd, a young historian whose field, some might have noted warningly, is the American Revolution. He had spent three years in north Georgia in a rural cooperative community, and then three more years at Spelman College, a Negro women's college in Atlanta. He had just resigned from Spelman in protest against restrictions on the academic freedom of both students and faculty, and was then immediately hired by Yale University. From the orientation session at Oxford, Ohio, in early June to the end of August, Lynd was a dynamo of an administrator, driving into the remotest rural regions of Mississippi to keep the schools going.

At Oxford, the Freedom School teachers were warned about difficulties: "You'll arrive in Ruleville, in the Delta. It will be 100°, and you'll be sweaty and dirty. You won't be able to bathe often or sleep well or eat good food. The first day of school, there may be four teachers and three students. And the local Negro minister will phone to say you can't use his church basement after all, because his life has been threatened. And the curriculum we've drawn up—Negro history and American government—may be something, you know only a little about yourself. Well, you'll knock on doors all day in the hot sun to find students. You'll meet on someone's lawn under a tree. You'll tear up the curriculum and teach what you know."

They were also told to be prepared for violence, injury, even death. But they hardly expected it so soon. The first batch of teachers had just left the orientation session for Mississippi when word came that one of the summer volunteers (Andrew Goodman), a white community center director (Mickey Schwerner) and a local Meridian Negro youth (James Chaney) were

missing. A publicity stunt, said Mississippi officials. But the SNCC veterans of Mississippi disagreed. "Man, those guys are dead," Jim Forman said.

The summer volunteers got into cars and into buses, and moved into Mississippi. Two hundred Freedom School teachers spread out over the state, from Biloxi in the Gulf Coast up into Ruleville in the Delta, and farther north to Holly Springs, covering twenty-five communities. Day by day, more and more Negro kids came around to the schools, and the expected enrollment of 1,000 rose to 1,500, then to 2,000.

One of the Jackson Freedom Schools opened in early August in a church basement just a short walk from the state COFO office on Lynch Street. Its combination of disorder and inspiration was very much like that of the other schools in the state. The "faculty" was more experienced than most: a young high school teacher of English from Vermont acted as "coordinator"—a combination of principal, janitor, recreation supervisor, and father confessor. Another youthful junior high school teacher of mathematics was from Brooklyn; there was one college professor of history who had taught for a number of years in a Southern Negro college; also, an enthusiastic young woman named Jimmy Miller, whose husband, Warren Miller, had written in *The Cool World* about young Harlem Negro kids. The teachers lived in spare rooms, or spare corners of rooms, in Negro houses of the neighborhood.

Two days before the school was set to open, in close to 100° heat, the teachers canvassed the neighborhood for students. Each asked one of the Negro youngsters hanging around the COFO office to go along with him, so as to establish from the start that these were friendly visitors walking up on the porches, knocking on the doors, asking: "Do y'all know about the Freedom School starting on Wednesday

over at Pratt Memorial Church?" No, they mostly didn't, and so the information passed across the threshold: "It's for teen-age boys and girls, to learn about Negro history, and the Constitution, and the civil rights movement, and mathematics, and maybe French and Spanish, the way they don't get learning in the regular school." Kids on bicycles stopped, and one friend told another, and the word was passed on.

No one paid attention to details like age requirements, so that at the opening of school, sixty kids showed up, from 6 to 19; Jimmy Miller marched the 6-to-10 children off to a corner, to read with them, and teach them freedom songs, and sound out French words whose English equivalents they had not yet discovered, and painstakingly correct their spelling.

With the older ones—14 to 19—any idea of going in an organized way through an outline of Negro history or American government was soon dropped. Beyond a core of seven or eight who came faithfully every morning at 9 and stayed until mid-afternoon, there were a dozen others who came and went as they liked. So the history professor started each day from where the mood struck him, from some point on which he thought the students' recognition might be fastened just long enough to pull them onward.

One day, it was an editorial in that morning's *Clarion-Ledger*, charging that civil rights workers were teaching people to break the law. "What do you think about that editorial? Is it true? If you could write a letter to the editor about it, what would you say? . . . Here's paper and pencil, go ahead. We'll pick out one or two and really send them to the editor." This was not education for grades, not writing for teacher's approval, but for an immediate use: it was a learning surrounded with urgency. And the students responded with serious-

ness, picking apart the issues: Are we for the law? Is there a higher law? When is civil disobedience justified? Then the teacher explored with them the differences between statutory law, constitutional law, "natural" law.

On another day the teacher told his students about the annual fair he had visited the previous afternoon. It was held in Neshoba County where the bodies of the three murdered civil rights workers had just been discovered. A strain of tension and fear had pervaded the fair grounds. The teacher reported what speakers had told the crowds that day at the fair. Gov. Paul Johnson had said: "It is not Mississippi's obligation to enforce federal statutes." A representative of the John Birch Society had said: "I am for the Constitution, for freedom, for the open Bible." The students were asked: Do you disagree? Aren't you for the Constitution? For freedom? The discussion became heated. Distinctions were drawn, and became more and more refined, all by the students themselves, the teacher just listening: "Which Constitution does he mean, U.S. or Mississippi? . . . Maybe we're for different parts of the U.S. Constitution. . . . Well, maybe we're for the same part, but we interpret it differently."

Teachers and students ate lunch together in the church basement, sang together, then separated into various activities. In a creative writing class, a teen-age girl named Lillie Mae Powell wrote a poem "The Negro Soldier":

*One day while i was visiting a certain*

*City this is what I saw. A Negro soldier with a broken arm who was wounded in the war.*

*The wind was blowing from the North; there was a drizzle of Rain. He was looking from the Last place; his arm was in a sling.*

*The Negro soldier didn't go Home. He was looking to the east And to the west. His broken arm was in a sling.*

The Jackson Freedom Schools faced only mild harassment. Early in the session, while canvassing for more students, two teachers—one a slim, blonde Skidmore undergraduate—were picked up by the police, held for several hours, then discharged. Violence spluttered around the COFO office in Jackson one ugly Saturday night: a young man building book shelves for a Freedom School bookmobile on the street across from the office was clubbed to the ground by a white man who fled in a car; a dance hall where teachers and students were spending the evening was sprayed with bullets by a passing car, and a Negro boy was wounded; crosses were burned. But by Mississippi standards, Jackson was peaceful.

In the rural areas of the state, the danger was greater. A church used as a Freedom School in the little town of Gluckstadt was burned to the ground (when the teachers arrived on the scene, fifteen youngsters were waiting under a tree for class to begin). A Northern doctor who spent the summer in Mississippi with the movement told of the two white girls who lived alone in a hilltop house out in the country, 30 miles from Canton, and held a Freedom School there. In McComb, so dangerous that the Justice Department pleaded with the Mississippi project not to send anyone in there, a Freedom School was started by a Washington, D.C., speech teacher, a young Negro named Ralph Featherstone. Two days after the first contingent arrived, a bomb exploded in the midst of sleeping SNCC workers. But 100 children came regularly to attend the McComb Freedom School.

Violence took the headlines, but behind it a phenomenal thing was happening to Mississippi: 2,000 young people were having experiences that would—for some in a small way, for some drastically—change their lives.

The kind of teaching that was

done in the Freedom Schools was, despite its departure from orthodoxy—or, more likely, because of it—just about the best kind there is. For the teachers were selected not by any mechanical set of requirements but on the basis of general intelligence, enthusiasm and the kind of social conscience that would drive them to spend a hot summer in Mississippi without pay. They taught, not out of textbooks, but out of life, trying to link the daily headlines with the best and deepest of man's intellectual tradition.

Their object was not to cram a prescribed amount of factual material into young minds, but to give them that first look into new worlds which would, some day if not immediately, lead them to books and people and ideas not found in the everyday lives of Mississippi Negroes. They didn't always succeed, but even their failures were warmed by the affection that sprang up everywhere between teachers and students—both aware that they talked with one another inside a common cradle of concern.

One afternoon in Jackson, a visiting folk singer brought the students of a Freedom School out into the sun-baked street back of the church, formed them into a huge circle, and taught them an Israeli dance chant imploring the heavens for rain to help the harvest. Older Negroes passed by, sat on porches, listened to their children utter strange words and dance this strange dance. The young ones seemed to understand; they were beginning, for the first time in their lives, to reach beyond their street, beyond their state, to join in some universal plea.

A Stanford University professor of English told how hard he had to work to make contact with these young boys and girls, so different from his regular students. But it came. He walked into class, put them at ease with some foolery, got them to talk about the events in the morning newspaper. Then: "Who would like to read a story?"



One girl stubbornly had her back to the class. He asked her to read and she turned around. "She then read this story by Eudora Welty. 'The Worn Path,' and read it beautifully; it could have been a staged performance. And this was back of the church, the only place we had for my class, with the noise of traffic all around."

When the girl finished reading, the teacher asked the class: "Did you like the story?" There was a chorus: "Yes!" "Why?" They responded. He told them about subject and plot, about description and dialogue, how in general one analyzes a story. He asked how the story made them *feel*, and one said sad, and another said it made her laugh, and he asked how could a story do both at the same time, and spoke to them of *irony*. "God, how they understood!"

He bridged what they read and how they lived. He read to them from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

This was written, he said out of a Negro boy's personal experience. "Now I'll tell you a story of my personal experience." And he told of a wartime incident involving himself and Negro soldiers, in Charleston, S.C. And then, to the class: "Who else wants to tell a personal story?" The next day, one girl brought in a story which, he realized, was prose as good as that written by any Stanford freshmen he had encountered. And so, literature was read and created at the same time.

In these classes, discussions of democracy, of the philosophy of nonviolence, were hardly academic. In one Jackson school the class met to elect delegates to a convention of all the Jackson Freedom Schools. An older fellow named Jimmy, age 24, had been hanging around the class for the past few days. He spoke breezily of having recently spent three years in jail for a knifing. The teacher suggested that Jimmy sit up at the desk and chair the meet-

ing. He laughed and complied. "O.K., now, I'll choose the delegates," he announced. There were objections from all over the room: "We've got to *elect* them!"

"What kind of resolutions are we going to propose to the convention?" a girl asked. One was suggested: "If any kid is treated brutally in school in Jackson, all the kids in the Jackson schools walk out; we'll have a chairman in each school; we won't act just on say-so; we'll get written affidavits and witnesses before we take action. It's something like a student union."

The teacher was curious: "Do students get beaten up in your schools?" A girl answered: her principal had beaten a boy until he bled.

Jimmy then told how he'd been beaten by a teacher when he was younger. And how he, and some friends had then found the teacher alone and taken revenge. "We had a nice understanding after that." He hesitated. "But I don't know what I'd do now. You know this nonviolence we're talking about. If it happened now I might beat him. Or I might just laugh and go away. I was young then and full of hate. At that time, I see something I want, I take it. Now, I *ask*. It's the movement I guess. . . . I want my son to come up different."

Role playing was used very often in the Freedom Schools. "Kids that age are natural actors," a teacher explained. "And it puts them in other people's shoes. We don't want to win easy arguments over straw foes. They have got to be tough thinkers, tough arguers." The teacher listed on the blackboard Barry Goldwater's reasons for voting against the civil rights bill: (1) It is unconstitutional. (2) No law will end prejudice ("We cannot pass a law that will make you like me or me like you."). (3) It can't be enforced. (4) It violates the idea of States' rights. The class went over the arguments, with one boy portraying Goldwater, and defending his points powerfully, another

trying to break them down.

Outside on the street, in front of the building, an energetic, red-headed teacher was pointing to a blackboard propped up in the sun, the kids sitting in rows in the shade of the building. "O.K., we can build any kind of community we want now. What will the rules be?" This was a hortatory kind of teaching, but a kind the schools fostered: constantly talking with students not just about what *is*, but about what *should be*.

A Harvard graduate in literature who had taught in Israel worked in a Vicksburg Freedom School.

*It was hard. Youngsters hung around the school, slept there. Every morning, they were like corpses on the floor. To start class, you had to clean them out. The school was cramped, noisy. We used role playing a lot. Kids would portray three generations of Negro families, and we learned history that way. We sat in a circle rather than the usual classroom format, to stress the equality of teacher and student. I read to them from Thomas Wolfe's You Can't Go Home Again and from Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream, then had them write speeches as if they were Senators urging passage of the civil rights bill. I tried to extend the idea of oppression beyond race. If you pick on a small kid with glasses and beat him up, aren't you acting the same as these white segregationists? I asked them.*

One teacher spent a whole hour with his students discussing the word "skeptical." He told them: "This is a Freedom School and we should mean what we say. We should feel free to think as we want, question whomever we like, whether it's our parents, our ministers, our teachers—yes, me, right here. Don't take my word for things. Check up on them. *Be skeptical.*" For these youngsters it was a new way of looking at the classroom. They told how in their high school in Jackson the rooms were wired so that at the flick of a switch the principal could





listen in on any class in the school. Teachers were afraid to discuss controversial subjects.

The blonde girl from Skidmore College taught French to teen-agers in her Freedom School. "I try to do the whole class in French, use pantomime a lot. . . . I soon realized these kids had never had contact with a white person before; maybe that's the greatest thing about this whole experience. If nothing else is accomplished, it's been a *meeting*, for both student and teacher. . . . We have a Freedom Hour at 11 every morning. They run it themselves, make their own rules." She was asked if the Freedom Schools were not, in fact, *indoctrinating* the children. She paused. "Yes, I suppose so. But I can't think of anything better to indoctrinate them with. Freedom. Justice. The Golden Rule. Isn't there *some* core of belief a school should stand by?"

A green-eyed, attractive Radcliffe graduate, interpreter now for an international agency, whose field was Latin American history but who

had not a day of teaching experience or education courses to her credit, went to work in a Freedom School:

*My kids were 9 to 13. I told them about the Spanish background of Negro slaves in the United States, about the Caribbean islands and the slave plantation system as it developed there, and compared that system with the one in the English colonies. I spoke to them about life in Brazil, about the multiracial societies in Latin America where people get along fine. I told them about the problems of kids their age in Venezuela, in Puerto Rico (where I've spent some time). Yes, it did something for them psychologically to know that there are people in the world worse off than they are!*

Without a strict curriculum to follow, the schools capitalized on the unexpected. A class held out in the sun would take advantage of passers-by, draw them into discussion. One day, three Negro women came by who'd just been trying to register to vote and had been rebuffed. The teacher beckoned: "Come

over here and tell my students what happened." And so the children learned about the registration procedure, about voting, about what to tell their parents about going down to register. One of the middle-aged women, her anger still fresh, told them they must become educated if they wanted to change things.

It was risky, teaching without an ordered curriculum. And because it was risky, the Radcliffe girl said, it led to treasures.

*I could experiment, do what I wanted, try things completely new, because I had no one to answer to, no reports to make. Nothing could happen to me or to these young people that would leave us worse off than before. And I could go off on tangents whenever I wanted, something I'd be afraid to do in a regular school setup. Wherever thoughts and discussion led, we followed. There was nothing we didn't dare turn to.*

The road from study to action was short. Those who attended the schools began to come to mass rallies, to canvass for registration of voters, to question things around them for the first time. In Shaw County, "out in the rural," when the regular school began its session in August (Negro schools in the Delta open in August so that the children will be available for cotton picking in the fall), white Freedom School teachers were turned away from the regular school cafeteria, where some students had invited them to a lunch. The students then boycotted the school and flocked in large numbers to the local Freedom School.

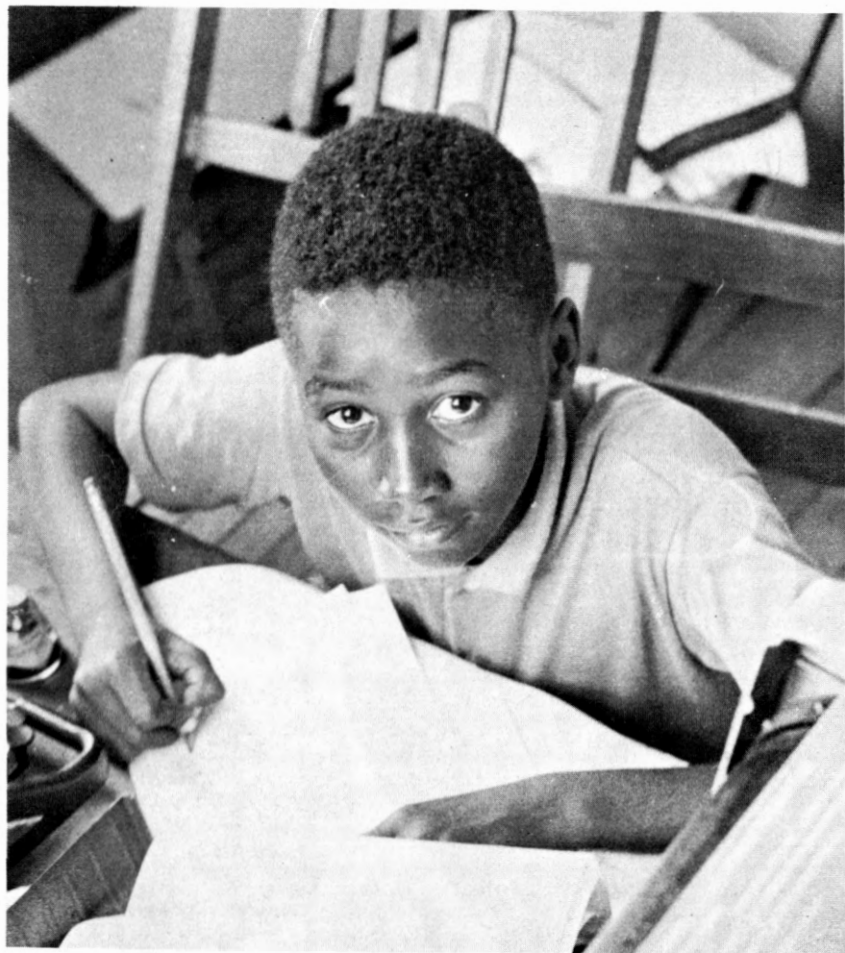
The Freedom Schools' challenge to the social structure of Mississippi was obvious from the start. Its challenge to American education as a whole is more subtle. There is, to begin with, the provocative suggestion that an entire school

system can be created in any community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions. But beyond that, other questions were posed by the Mississippi experiment of last summer.

Can we, somehow, bring teachers and students together, not through the artificial sieve of certification and examination but on the basis of their common attraction to an exciting social goal? Can we solve the old educational problem of teaching children crucial values, while avoiding a blanket imposition of the teacher's ideas? Can this be done by honestly accepting as an educational goal that we want better human beings in the rising generation than we had in the last, and that this requires a forthright declaration that the educational process cherishes equality, justice, compassion and world brotherhood? Is it not possible to create a hunger for those goals through the fiercest argument about whether or not they are worth while? And cannot the schools have a running, no-ideas-barred exchange of views about alternative ways to those goals?

Is there, in the floating, prosperous, nervous American social order of the sixties, a national equivalent to the excitement of the civil rights movement, one strong enough in its pull to create a motivation for learning that even the enticements of monetary success cannot match? Would it be possible to declare boldly that the aim of the schools is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for race and national hatred, and to turn all educational efforts into a national striving for those solutions?

Perhaps people can begin, here and there (not waiting for the government, but leading it) to set up other pilot ventures, imperfect but suggestive, like the one last summer in Mississippi. Education can, and should, be dangerous.



## HELP THIS WORK IN THE SOUTH

The Freedom Schools represent a basic philosophy behind the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the rural South. This means developing true leadership among Southern Negroes. Community centers and voter registration activities are carried out with the same approach.

SNCC works in southwest Georgia, central Alabama, southeast Arkansas and virtually every county in Mississippi. But for this work to continue, SNCC needs your help.

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