

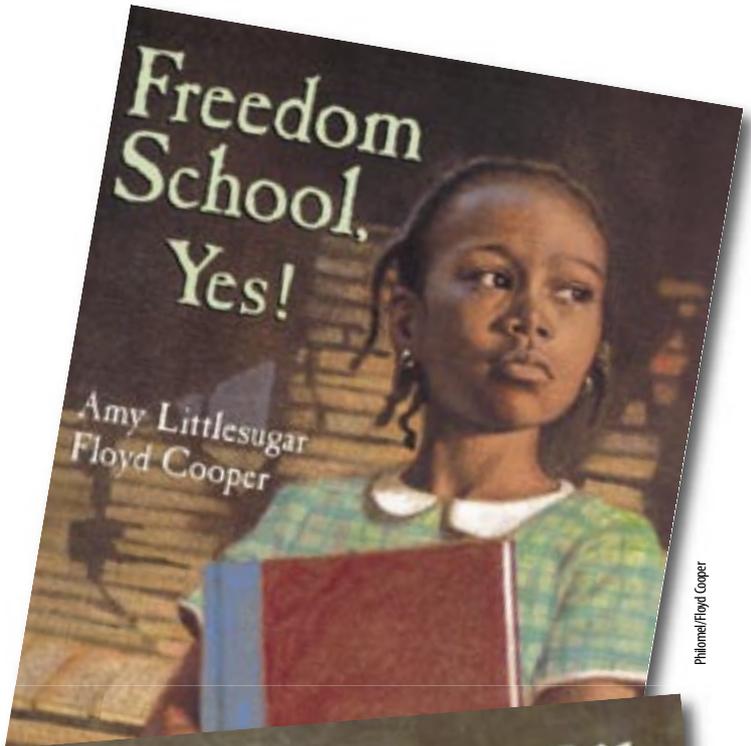
"Picture Yourself in Mississippi"

The Struggle for Desegregation in 1962

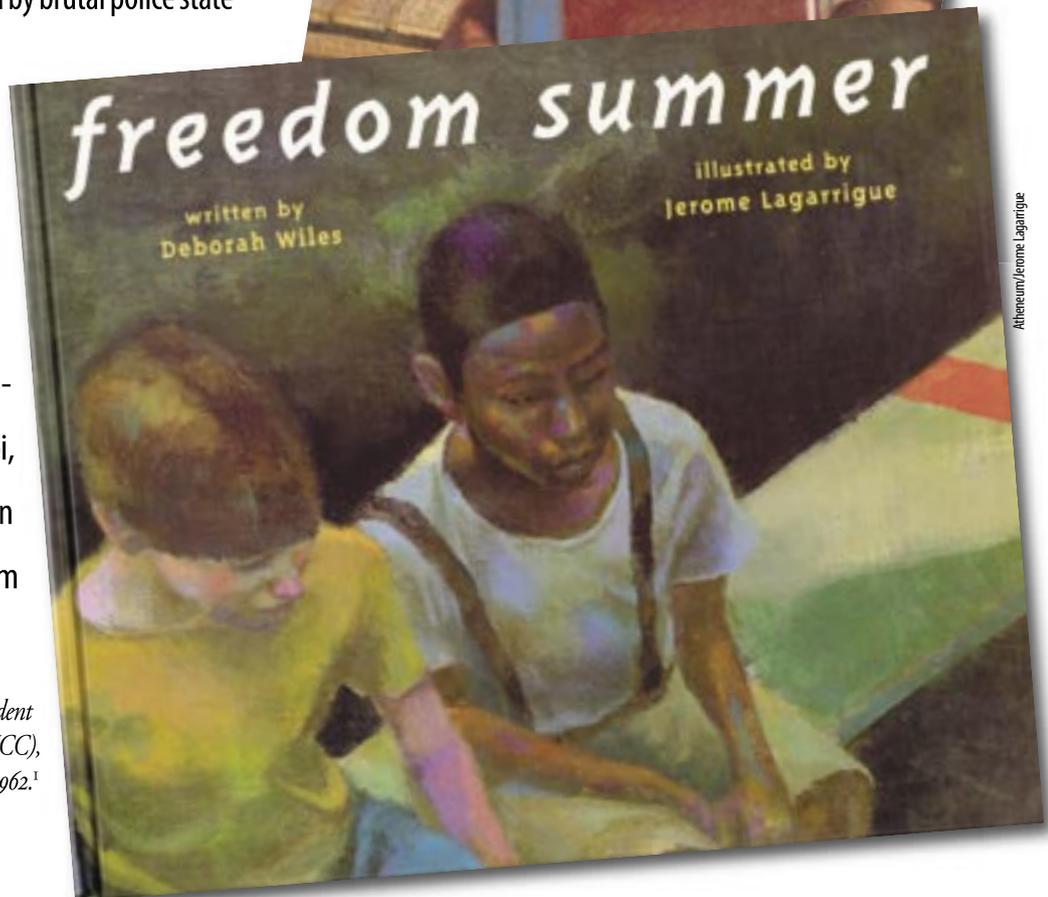
George W. Chilcoat

"Picture yourself in Mississippi. You are a high school student. You are a Negro. Segregation limits you to the poorest schools in a state whose educational system is the poorest in the country. Most of the libraries, theaters, and recreation centers provided by your community are closed to you. What you may or may not learn is decided by a government dedicated to maintaining white 'supremacy.' Activities to gain your constitutional rights, even the right to vote, are crushed by brutal police state action. You have learned of no heritage but the broken bones of lynchings that stretch back as far as anyone can remember. Unless things change, you can see nothing ahead but deprivation and exclusion in Mississippi, or perhaps 'escape' to a northern ghetto. Where do you go from here?"

*From a letter of appeal by the Student
Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),
February 12, 1962.¹*



Phyllome/Floyd Cooper



Athenium/Jerome Lagarrigue

On Monday, May 17, 2004, Americans will commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court Decision that ended segregation in public schools. That decision, often referred to as *Brown v. Board of Education*, did not arise from a single incident of racial discrimination. It was actually a result of several years of struggle by many ordinary citizens to open up public education to all Americans. (For example, the Brown family was just one of thirteen families listed in the class action lawsuit, which had a much longer formal title).

The 1953 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was a landmark for the nation, but it did not end the problems of segregation in the nation's schools; it just marked a new chapter in that struggle for civil rights. In many states, school administrators and public officials decided (in response to the ruling) to close public schools rather than integrate them. White students fled to private schools, harassed the black students who showed up for class, or tried other ways to stifle the reform.

Even when black children were allowed to enter a once-segregated school, they often confronted an impoverished environment, including lessons that demanded only rote learning, teachers who were unqualified and bigoted, broken furniture, rundown buildings, and decrepit textbooks.

The letter quoted above (p. 24) was written nine years after the *Brown* decision. Student activists (see the sidebar on SNCC) sent this letter in 1962 to supporters in colleges, churches, and community organizations, hoping to inspire volunteers and raise funds for "the Summer Project." This project, which became known as the Mississippi Freedom Summer, employed one thousand white and black college students to work with black adults on voter registration and with over two thousand black students in various "Freedom Schools" throughout that state.

The Freedom Schools had no walls, no administration, and no official standing. They were a volunteer meeting of teachers and pupils. Teachers provided remedial education in the three Rs. But they did more than that. Freedom teachers created and then taught a curriculum using instructional strategies and course content that (a) challenged their students to think critically and (b) empowered their students to start seeing themselves as citizens with full rights and responsibilities. The Freedom Schools, in the summer of 1962, began to envision a world that fostered compassion, justice, peace, and freedom.

Many children's books about the Civil Rights Movement focus on a famous event or person from that era. The two books described here are different in that they suggest (through fictional characters) what ordinary people were experiencing at the time. Individual children and adults witnessed and suffered from discrimination. They gathered together to discuss what was happening. Then many of them took some sort of action. The summation of many small actions taken by many people in 1962 created a great wave of social reform that swelled up during the warm days of the Mississippi Freedom Summer.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was a civil rights organization formed in 1960 by college students (and some high school students), both black and white, to support and encourage sit-ins at lunch counters. For the next five years, SNCC planned and participated in numerous desegregation projects and protests throughout the Deep South. The Mississippi freedom schools comprised a SNCC project to provide "an educational experience for students which [would] make it possible for them to challenge the myths of [Mississippi] society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for action." The members of SNCC believed that if a new power structure and real democracy were ever to come to Mississippi, the change would have to begin with the African-American youth. SNCC made it clear that the primary goal of the freedom schools was to empower students to become catalysts in directly resolving the social ills of Mississippi society. "The overall theme of the school[s] would be the student as a force for social change in Mississippi."

Sources

Carson, C. *Partners In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981/1995).

Stoper, E. *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1968/1989).



The “Separate but Equal” Doctrine Falls

To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. . . .

Segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities, even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors may be equal . . . such segregation is a denial of the equal protection of the laws. . . .

The “separate but equal” doctrine . . . has no place in the field of public education. Such segregation is a denial of the equal protection of the laws.

From the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of May 17, 1954.

Freedom Summer

This picture book, written by Deborah Wiles and illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue (New York: Atheneum Books, 2001), is for young children ages 4 to 8. It begins with background information about the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which allowed blacks the basic freedoms that whites always enjoyed—and a short description of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project. The story takes place in the context of these two events. The entire story is told from the perspective of Joe, a white boy, who tells about best friend, John Henry, a black boy. John’s mother works for Joe’s parents.

The early part of the book reveals that, even though John faces bigotry and discrimination, the sting is lessened because he and Joe have found ways to circumvent such social barriers. Half-way through the book, as Joe sets down to eat dinner his father and mother relate in a matter-of-fact tone that a new law has been passed and blacks can basically do any and everything whites have been doing. (This part of the book I find somewhat unreal. The author should have developed the scene a bit more.) Joe excuses himself from the table and runs to tell his friend that they can go swimming together in the municipal pool.

The next day, the two boys arrive at the pool only to find it being filled with steaming asphalt. The next few pages make this book worth reading for all young students. The illustrations are very strong and support the text. Students get a glimpse of what racism is.

John Henry’s eyes filled up with angry tears,
“I did,” he says. “I wanted to swim in this pool.
I want to do everything you can do.”

Although the plot has little to do with Freedom Summer specifically, the story clearly demonstrates how blacks were treated in many southern states in 1963. It shows how discrimination and racism operate. I strongly recommend this book.

Freedom School, Yes!

This picture book, written by Amy Littlesugar and illustrated by Floyd Cooper (NY: Philomel Books, 2001), is for children ages 8 to 12. The story takes place in the middle of Freedom Summer in a small place in Mississippi called Chicken Creek. There are two stories going on at the same time. Jolie, whose mother is a leader in the black community, has the courage to board the community’s 19-year-old-female Freedom School teacher, Alice. Meanwhile, Jolie is not all that excited about going to Freedom School. Jolie’s mother is soon harassed by white folks for housing the freedom schoolteacher. To make things worse, the black church, where Freedom School classes were to be held, burns down.

The fire does not stop the first Freedom School class from meeting. As one young teacher exclaims, “One beautiful thing about a Freedom School is that, provided it doesn’t rain, the only physical plant needed is a shady spot, books, paper, and pens.”

Alice holds the first day’s class under a big bushy tree. Miss Rosetta, a seventy-year-old black woman, also attends the Freedom School. (It was not unusual for an adult to attend these summer schools.) The curriculum is exciting. They learn about Jacob Lawrence, a black American artist; Countee Cullen, a black poet;

No Swimming

Next morning, as soon as the sun peeks into the sky, here comes my best friend, John Henry Waddell, run-run-running to meet me.

“Let’s go!” he yells, “I got my nickel,” and I run right with him, all the way to the town swimming pool. We race each other over the last hill and . . . we stop.

County dump trucks are here.

They grind and back up to the empty pool.

Workers rake steaming asphalt into the hole where sparkling clean water used to be.

One of them is John Henry’s big brother, Will Rogers.

We start to call to him, “What happened?” but he sees us first and points back on down the road—it means “Git on home!”

From *Freedom Summer* by Deborah Wiles, illustrated by Jerome Lagarrigue. (New York: Atheneum, 2001).

Benjamin Banneker, a black mathematician and farmer; and Harriet Tubman, underground railroader. The students learn about accomplished black Americans—a topic they never heard about in their regular schools.

Jolie tells the story of her Uncle Shad winning the Silver Star during World War Two by saving the life of a white man. He tells Jolie, “Now I ain’t even allowed to sit beside one [a white man] at a lunch counter. Isn’t that somethin’? . . . You all got to grow up and change that.”

This is a wonderful book for children about how the Freedom Schools operated, but it also personalizes the process of social change. It describes how a person can be scared and brave at the same time. It makes credible the fears of whites who could sense that “a change was a comin.” This book has beautiful illustrations and a well-selected bibliography. I highly recommend it.

Conclusion

In 1964, Florence Howe was a 35-year-old English professor from Goucher College in Towson, Maryland. During Mississippi Freedom Summer, she was assigned to teach civics and English to 11-to-14-year-olds in Jackson, Mississippi. She was overwhelmed by the concept of freedom school and how it was brought to life in the classroom:³

In the summer of 1964 I went to Mississippi to teach in a Freedom School. I date this experience as the turning point in my life. In Mississippi I continued to teach mostly women students, but they were black and poor, not white and middle-class. In Mississippi I learned a few new things about teaching—only one of which I’ll mention here.

The subject of the summer was liberation: Freedom Summer it was called, and for many of us, teachers and students, it was just that. To liberate oneself—and no one else can do it for you—you need not only the belief in the value and possibility of freedom—without that nothing else is possible, but you need also an understanding of those social forces that have oppressed you. Without knowing the means of change, freedom or consciousness is meaningless—head-stuff only. And in Mississippi, the aim of Freedom Summer and Freedom School was to change the consciousness of students and the social and material conditions of their lives. A phrase that has become trivialized through its misuse was not stale then: teachers and students were “agents of change” in Mississippi. We moved from the classroom into the streets and back again to our books. The education of that summer changed lives, revolutionized people. And it was meant to. 🌍

Notes

1. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, reels 1-72. (Stanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980), reel 44.
2. F. Howe, *The Myth of Co-education: Selected Essays, 1964-1983* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 51.
3. George W. Chilcoat and Jerry A. Ligon, “Developing Democratic Citizens: The Mississippi Freedom Schools as a Model for Social Studies Instruction,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 22, no. 2 (1994):128-175; See also G. W. Chilcoat and J. A. Ligon, “Helping to Make Democracy a Living Reality: The Curriculum Conference of the Mississippi Freedom Schools,” *The Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 15 (Fall, 1999), 43 - 68.

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