

UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATIONS OF FREEDOM SCHOOL TEACHERS

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Abstract

Significant movements require serious motivations from those involved. During the Civil Rights Movement, those involved in Freedom Summer of 1964 risked their lives and comfort to advance the Movement. Freedom Summer Freedom School teachers had unique motivations; some motivations were shared amongst the teachers, while others were individual. Although it is difficult to fully understand the motivations of Freedom School teachers, this paper identifies three overarching motivations that were shared amongst the teachers: an understanding that African Americans in the South were denied equality in education, the belief that the curriculum of Freedom Schools would address this educational inequality, and the recognition that education has the power to initiate social change. In addition to identifying these overarching motivations, this paper examines three Freedom School teachers, Chude Pam Allen, Gwendolyn Simmon, and Liz Fusco Aaronsohn in order to explain individual motivations for joining the movement. The purpose of this paper is to point out the depth and complexity of overarching and individual motivations and to illustrate the importance of looking at both in order to fully understand the motivations of those who participate in a movement.

Introduction

During Freedom Summer, The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) recognized that education could be a tool to empower African Americans and bring about social change. In order to do so Freedom Summer included an educational opportunity for African American students in the form of Freedom Schools. In these Freedom Schools teachers not only taught students basic academic skills and subjects, but also taught African American history and civics. Many of these teachers were students or recent graduates of prestigious colleges from across the country. Almost 40% of Freedom Summer volunteers came from Harvard, Yale, Stanford or Princeton. Volunteers were distinctly non-southern, with over 40% of workers coming from Illinois, New York, and California. Over 90% of the volunteers were white, and less than 10% came from families whose income was below the national medium.¹ The typical Freedom Summer worker who would teach in a Freedom School was a white, non-southern, middle class, academically advanced college student or recent graduate. Freedom School workers were the opposite of their southern, black, under educated, economically disadvantaged counterparts that they were going to teach. Although the teachers and students were unlikely pairs, Freedom Schools could not have operated if wealthy white college students were not motivated to teach black Mississippian students.

What motivated these teachers to step away from their own comfort, risk their lives, and volunteer to teach others? There were many motivations, but three overarching motivations can be distinctly identified. These three motivations align with the motivations to initiate Freedom Schools and include: the need for educational

¹ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 42.

improvement for African Americans in the South, the belief that the curriculum of Freedom Schools would be effective, and the recognition that education has the power to initiate social change. Testimonies of Freedom School workers like Chude Pam Allen, Gwendolyn Simmon, and Liz Fusco Aaronsohn exemplify the individual experiences of the Freedom School teachers and add to the understanding of why teachers were motivated to volunteer. These testimonies are important as they represent the complexity and individuality that characterized the motivation of Freedom School workers. Therefore this paper will be separated into two segments, the first will examine three teaching motivations that align with the motivations to initiate Freedom Schools, and the second will illustrate the personal testimonies and stories of individuals involved in Freedom Schools.

Section 1: Three Motivations for Freedom School Teachers

The Great Need

One of the main reasons that Freedom Schools were created during Freedom Summer was because of the great need for improved education for African Americans in Mississippi. As individuals learned about this need, they became motivated to teach in Freedom Schools. Although states were expected to desegregate their schools after *Brown v. Board of Education I* passed in 1954, most schools in the south remained segregated in 1964. These schools were not only segregated, but also unequal. The education system in Mississippi was clearly prejudiced against blacks, not only in funding and resources, but also in the curriculum and opportunities. The state of Mississippi spent four times more on white education per pupil as they did on black

education per pupil.² Because of the lack of funding, black students often used discarded textbooks and equipment from the white schools. These textbooks would often be state-selected to convey white supremacy by portraying slavery as positive and excluding African American achievements.³ Additionally, the buses black students rode to school were inadequate, and it could take a student up to three hours to make it to school because of a poorly repaired bus.⁴ Furthermore, black students were stuck in this unequal school system because when they tried to integrate, they were met with violent opposition.

Funding was only one aspect of the inequality between segregated black and white schools. The failure to provide an adequate education to black students was perhaps even more detrimental than the funding deficit. White supremacists used the school system to institute black inferiority and limit black understanding about their rights. To begin, the teachers in black schools received inadequate training, were underpaid and were required to take on more students. Often times these teachers worked in fear for their jobs as the school system threatened to remove teachers who taught certain subjects like civics and language to students.⁵ It is absolutely unbelievable that some school superintendents, like the one in Mound Bayou County, went so far to require that no American history from 1860-1875 be taught in any African American schools.⁶ Other subjects often barred from black students included chemistry, algebra, journalism, drama

² Staughton Lynd, *“Freedom Schools, Concept and Organization”* (Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement).

³ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*. 83

⁴ Elizabeth Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2007), 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 106

⁶ “Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement -- History & Timeline, 1964 (Freedom Summer).”

and modern languages.⁷ When students were taught in these subjects, the content was often skewed to favor whites and states rights. For example when one teacher asked Mississippi 6th and 7th grade black students what the capital of the United States was, the students answered Jackson and when asked how many states there were in the U.S. the students responded with the number of counties in Mississippi.⁸ Many individuals were moved by the injustice in the education, and wanted to do something to resolve the problem. The response to the financial and curriculum injustices in Mississippi served as a motivation for teachers to come work in Mississippi during Freedom Summer.

A Belief in the Curriculum

Freedom Schools and their teachers sought to remedy the injustices in the school system through initiating a curriculum that mended the gaps in the public school system's curriculum. Although Freedom Schools did not have the financial resources to amend for the financial inequalities in the public school system, Freedom Schools were able to repair the curriculum injustice through proper teaching. A second motivation of teachers to work in Freedom Schools is the belief that the Freedom School's curriculum could remedy the failures of the public school system. Teachers resonated with the words of a COFO memo given to all Freedom School teachers stating that, "The purpose of the Freedom schools is to provide an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives, and ultimately, new directions for action".⁹ In order to

⁷ Lynd, *Freedom Schools, Concept and Organization*".

⁸ Martinez, *Letters from Mississippi*.

⁹ "COFO Memorandum: Overview of Freedom Schools", Council of Federated Organizations (U.S.)

complete their purpose, Freedom Schools not only offered academic work to students, but also offered cultural activities and leadership development.¹⁰ Freedom schools gave students the opportunity to express themselves through poems, plays, newspaper articles and other alternative outlets. By offering black children the same extracurricular opportunities that white children received, Freedom Schools empowered black children with the belief that they deserved equal educational opportunities as children in white schools. Those involved in Freedom Schools generally believed that it was the creative outlets that empowered students the most.

The emphasis on extracurricular activities is just one example of how Freedom Schools took a creative and interactive approach to teaching. Another example is their core teaching method- questioning. Liz Fusco, coordinator of a Ruleville Freedom School found that the curriculum of Freedom Schools sought to ask students the following questions: “Why are we in Freedom Schools? What is the Freedom Movement? What does the majority culture have that we want and that we don't want? What do we have that we want to keep?”¹¹ By questioning students, teachers sought to keep the material relevant and meaningful. The goal of questioning was to initiate conversation that would allow students to form an application of what they learned.¹² This process allowed for Freedom Summer teachers to engage in learning, because conversations with students developed teachers’ knowledge as well. Pamela Chude Allen recognized this engagement

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jessica Newman, “History and the People Who Make It.” *The Gainesville Iguana*, October 11, 2013.

¹² Lynd, *Freedom Schools, Concept and Organization*”.

in the learning process, feeling that she learned more than her students did from the Freedom School experience.¹³

Individuals like Allen who worked in Freedom Schools understood the need for quality education for African American students, believed in the curriculum of the schools, and recognized that education was a powerful avenue for social change. Civil rights workers were often divided over what was the best avenue or approach to initiate social change and establish equal rights for African Americans. The divisions included some of the contrasting avenues or approaches: political vs. social, local vs. national, violent vs. nonviolent, white inclusion vs. all-black associations. Although those who worked in the Freedom Schools may have had differing views on which avenue or approach to take, they all agreed in the importance of education.

The Power of Education

Workers who ran Freedom Summer understood that the oppression of African Americans would not end with just a political solution. Therefore, the programming of Freedom Summer was primarily two fold; it mainly consisted of voter registration and Freedom Schools.¹⁴ Freedom School workers believed that through education, they could reverse some of the subjugation students experienced in black schools. One of the reasons that Freedom School teachers believed in the power of education was because they were students themselves, receiving an education at some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the country.¹⁵ Freedom Summer volunteers were often students in the

¹³ Pam Chude, "Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement -- 'Three Letters From a Freedom School Teacher.'"

¹⁴ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42

social studies area and were looking to apply what they were learning in higher education.¹⁶

Coupled with the belief in the power of education was a desire to experience the transforming ability of education first hand. The brand of education offered by Freedom Schools was different from that offered by public schools because students were not forced to come but came willingly. This willingness represented an eagerness to learn. Freedom School teachers had an attentive audience and were able to engage with students in a way that they could not experience in a common classroom setting. Freedom School teacher Pam Chude Allen described the atmosphere as “unbelievable”. In a letter to her parents, Allen described the excitement and smiles of her students that appeared after she taught them the history of the Republic of Haiti, which was established by a successful Negro slave revolt.¹⁷ Freedom School teachers were motivated by experiences like these where they saw the power of education first hand. The experience that Freedom School teachers had was so impactful that many of them switched their career path towards education.¹⁸

There are numerous examples of Freedom School workers like Pam Chude Allen who described their experience as life changing. The personal stories of individuals involved in Freedom Schools provide a fuller understanding to the question this paper seeks to address, “Why were white, non-southern, wealthy college students motivated to leave their comfort and teach black students during the 1964 Mississippi Freedom

¹⁶ Ibid., 254

¹⁷ Chude, “Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement -- ‘Three Letters From a Freedom School Teacher.’”

¹⁸ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 191.

Summer?” By looking at the context of Freedom Summer and Freedom Schools as a whole, three overarching motivations have been identified: a recognition of the great need, a belief in the Freedom School’s curriculum and teaching style, and a understanding of the power of education to initiate social change. However, these three overarching motivations are not sufficient in explaining the depth and complexity of individual motivations. There are many personal reasons beyond the three listed motivations that compelled individuals to work in Freedom Schools. In order to better understand why individuals risked their lives and comfort to teach black students in Mississippi it is important to look at the individuals themselves.

Section 2: Individual Experiences

Chude Pam Parker Allen

One of Chude Pam Allen’s motivations to teach in a Freedom School came from her experience as an exchange student at Spellman College. Allen was born in Pennsylvania and was attending Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota when she made the decision to join twelve other students to study at Spellman.¹⁹ At Spellman, she befriended a black student and wanted to visit her hometown in Mississippi during spring break. However, Allen’s friend discouraged the visit in fear that they would experience violence, as interracial pairs often did, while traveling and appearing together in Mississippi.²⁰ Although Allen had experienced racism before, she was appalled at the situation. Allen wanted to be friends with whomever she liked and knew that it was wrong to discriminate on the account of race. She saw racism as a sickness, and her

¹⁹ Pamela Allen, “Pamela P. Allen Papers, 1964, 1967-1980.”

²⁰ “Clip Syndicate Video: MidMorning With Aundrea - Oct. 22, 2014 (Part 2).”

motivation for teaching at Freedom Schools was to “contribute to making a non-racist society”.²¹

Although Chude Allen’s experience at Spellman may have been an immediate motivation to work as a Freedom School teacher, Allen’s belief that racism was wrong existed before her time there. Behind understanding that racism was a sickness was a spiritual motivation. Allen grew up in an Episcopalian home and had developed a strong faith.²² She continued her religious development in college by studying religion at Carleton College before her time as an exchange student at Spellman.²³ In a letter from Allen to her parents while she was teaching in Mississippi, Allen affirms her spiritual depth as she asks her parents to pray that she may have the strength of the Holy Spirit.²⁴ The Biblical call for justice and serving others motivated and directed Allen to join the efforts of Mississippi Freedom Summer. Allen accredits her faith as a motivation as she believed that, “God wanted (her) to go to Mississippi” to work as a teacher in the Freedom Schools.²⁵

Gwendolyn Zohara Simmons

Gwendolyn Simmons originally intended to be Freedom School teacher in Mississippi but circumstances forced her to assume a role of a project director instead. Even though Simmons worked as a project director, not a Freedom School teacher, she did teach a class and her motivation to work in Freedom Schools can still be evaluated.²⁶

²¹ Allen, *MidMorning with Aundrea* (Part 2).

²² Allen, “One More Thing...”

²³ Allen, “Pamela P. Allen Papers, 1964, 1967-1980.”

²⁴ Chude, “Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement -- ‘Three Letters From a Freedom School Teacher.’”

²⁵ Allen, “One More Thing...”

²⁶ Allen, “History Student Seeking Interview.”

Unlike most Freedom School teachers, Simmons was African American and born and raised in the southern city of Memphis. Like Allen, Simmons was also motivated by a personal experience. When she was a junior in high school, Simmons tried to get work as a clerk and was denied because of her color.²⁷ Upon her denial Simmons left the shop and went outside where she encountered a thunderstorm. Feeling embarrassed and unwanted, Simmons stayed outside in the storm rather than return to the shops where she had been rejected on account of her race. Just minutes later, Simmons responded to her rejection by taking a front seat on the bus, violating the law and cultural norms.²⁸ This experience changed the way Simmons looked at racism, as she began to see herself as having an active role against racism instead of a passive one.

Like Allen, Simmons also grew up in a spiritual context. She was raised in a Baptist family who attended Gospel Temple Baptist Church. Although now a convert to the Nation of Islam, Simmons was influenced by her family's faith at a young age. She was especially influenced by her Grandmother- a woman Simmons describes as "very, very religious."²⁹ From as early as twelve years old, Simmons took reading the Bible seriously and was able to read through the entire Bible twice before she graduated high school. Her experience with the Bible and the Church encouraged Simmons to question the meaning and purpose of life. From this questioning she found that her purpose was to be engaged in the movement against racism. Her upbringing and interaction with Biblical teaching of justice later served as a motivation for Simmons to be involved in Freedom Schools.

²⁷ Gwendolyn Simmons, *Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons :: Veterans of Hope*.

²⁸ Faith Holsaert et al., *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, (University of Illinois Press, 2012).

²⁹ Simmons, *Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons*

Liz Fusco Aaronsohn

Like Allen and Simmons, Liz Aaronsohn also had a spiritual motivation for being involved in Freedom Schools. Aaronsohn grew up in Seattle in a religious family. Her father was especially influential in her spiritual development because of his role as a Jewish rabbi.³⁰ Aaronsohn's father was also a member of the Peace Corps and the Seattle CORE and instilled a deep understanding of justice in Aaronsohn.³¹ From her father, Aaronsohn inherited a simple perspective of doing justice; an interview with Aaronsohn by a Gainesville newsletter summarizes this simplicity through one of Aaronsohn's statements, "My father was a rabbi and he taught me justice, justice thou shall do, and I took him seriously. Period. That's it."³² The decision to become a Freedom School teacher for Aaronsohn and many others did not happen overnight, but was cultivated by experiences and upbringing. For Aaronsohn the decision to become a Freedom School teacher can be traced back to her Jewish heritage and religious beliefs.

Although Aaronsohn was spiritually motivated, there were other immediate motivations as well. Another motivation of Aaronsohn was the desire to leave a bad marriage. Different than most Freedom School volunteers, Aaronsohn was twenty-eight years old, had experience in teaching and had already been married. Her experience and career in teaching also served as a motivation for Aaronsohn. Aaronsohn had a career in teaching and saw her work in Mississippi as an extension of her career.³³ She found great purpose in bringing black history to its own people and saw that her work brought voices

³⁰ Newman, "History and the People Who Make It."

³¹ Debra Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, (NYU Press, 2002), 72.

³² Newman, "History and the People Who Make It."

³³ Ibid.

to students. Aaronsohn's variety of motivations including her religious background, desire to leave a bad marriage, and love of teaching is an example of how the motivations for Freedom School workers were complex and individual. The motivations of Freedom School teachers encompass personal experiences, relationships, beliefs and emotions. The personal motivations of Freedom School teachers go beyond the three overarching motivations mentioned in the first section (an understanding of the great need, a belief in the curriculum, and a realization that education has the power to initiate social change).

Conclusion

During Freedom Summer, forty-one Freedom Schools were initiated in Mississippi for the purpose of social change. Their goal was to empower African Americans students and adults by teaching them their own history, citizenship principles and basic academic information. However, these schools would not have been possible if 280 individuals did not volunteer to work long hours recruiting, forming curriculum and teaching.³⁴ The motivation of these individuals to teach despite the lack of monetary reward and threat of their safety is complex. There are overarching motivations that many teachers would resonate with and that connect with the overall motivation for initiating Freedom Schools. However, the complete motivation of Freedom School teachers and workers can never be fully understood as each worker had individual upbringings and personal reasons that influenced their motivation for teaching in Freedom Schools.

³⁴ "Mississippi Freedom Summer Events."

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