Something Inside So Strong: Learning from the Freedom Schools Movement

Abstract:

Freedom Schools, historically and currently, show what is possible when one moves beyond white normativity and embraces a liberative or emancipatory pedagogy. This paper examines the history, philosophy, pedagogy, and contributions of the Freedom Schools movement from 1964 until today.

Paper

Setting the stage

Imagine this scene:

It is 8:00 am on a warm, summer morning, and forty children in grades three, four, and five, stream through the doors of Friendship Baptist Church in Evanston, IL. It is the first day of the 2016 Garrett-Evanston CDF Freedom Schools program, and the children are expecting a “normal summer school” experience. Instead, they are offered breakfast in their classrooms and then they gather in the multi-purpose room for Harambee. ¹ It is a loud, high-energy event that includes Cheers and Chants, Morning Read Aloud (by an outside guest), recognitions, motivational song, moment of silence, and announcements. While the scholars (what the children are called at Freedom Schools programs) do not know the cheers, chants, or songs the first day, they will quickly learn them and will soon be leading them!

While this morning activity allows children to move and express themselves, it also empowers them and helps them to recognize their own agency and ability to make changes. The motivational song is “Something Inside So Strong” written by Libi Siffre. ²

¹ A Kiswahili word that means “let’s pull together.”

² One version of the song with printed lyrics and music, “Something Inside So Strong,” accessed September 13, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcKoYGNj0BU
Children not only sing the words, but they also have actions for the words. The lyrics are powerful and the children appear to internalize them as they sing.

**Something Inside So Strong**

The higher you build your barriers, the taller I become
The farther you take my rights away, the faster I will run
You can deny me, you can decide to turn your face away
   No matter 'cause there's

   Something inside so strong
   I know that I can make it
   Though you're doing me wrong, so wrong
   You thought that my pride was gone
   Oh, no, something inside so strong
   Something inside so strong

The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing
You hide behind walls of Jericho, your lies will come tumbling
   Deny my place in time, you squander wealth that's mine
   My light will shine so brightly, it will blind you, 'cause there's

   Something inside so strong, so strong
   I know that I can make it
   Though you're doing me wrong, so wrong
   You thought that my pride was gone
   Oh, no, something inside so strong
   Something inside so strong

**Brothers and sisters**

When they insist we're just not good enough
   When we know better
   Just look 'em in the eyes and say

   We're gonna do it anyway
   We're gonna do it anyway

   Something inside so strong, so strong
   I know that I can make it
   Though you're doing me wrong, so wrong
   You thought that my pride was gone
   Oh, no, something inside so strong
   Something inside so strong

(Repeat Bold Section)
After this time of Harambee, the scholars are ready to go to their classrooms where their Servant Leader Intern (SLI), who is a college or graduate student, leads them in the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC). The classroom library, on which the IRC is based, is culturally relevant and allows the scholars to see themselves reflected in the texts. Each week, scholars will take home one book from that week’s curriculum. The Integrated Reading Curriculum is based on “Common Core Standards,” and uses Bloom’s taxonomy of educational standards. IRC includes book discussions, critical thinking, cooperative group activities, and group roles/teamwork. The themes for the six-weeks include I can make a difference in my self, my family, my community, my country, my world, and with hope, education, and action.

Before lunch, everyone in the program participates in DEAR time, which stands for “drop everything and read.” Scholars may choose a book from their classroom library, the resource library, or the read-aloud books.

After lunch, scholars are engaged with afternoon activities that might include photography classes, art or music or dance classes, sports, scavenger hunts, or field trips. The day ends for scholars at 3pm.

The program lasts for six weeks and the culminating event is a finale presented by the scholars for their families and the community showcasing their accomplishments. Each year, we are amazed at the difference that the program makes in the lives of so many children. It is obvious that the program is liberative, but what makes it so? That question led me to the topic of this paper: to examine the history, philosophy, pedagogy, and contributions of the Freedom Schools movement from 1964 until today.

### Background to beginning a Garrett-Evanston CDF Freedom Schools Program

When Dr. Lallene Rector was installed as the new president of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2014, she was charged and challenged to help the seminary become more visible in the Evanston community. One of the ways in which she approached this challenge was through an emphasis on public theology. As noted on the seminary website:

> …we want our graduates to thrive as public theologians in their communities. Being a public theologian means being able to bring the resources of our faith to the public square with concern for “the common good.” It means being mindful about where God is at work—or not—in certain circumstances. It means explicitly using the language of our faith—sometimes. And, sometimes it means simply caring enough, across the otherness we encounter in the public square, to participate with those of different faiths, or no faith, in a set of shared ethics and in the actions that ensue from these commitments. This kind of collaboration with others for the wellbeing of all

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increases our impact on issues of homelessness, violence in our communities, poverty, hunger, unemployment, immigration justice, health care, sustainability of our environment, access to quality education, and more. 4

One of the ways in which Garrett-Evangelical participates in the life of the community is through sponsoring a Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools program. This program is a partnership between Garrett-Evangelical, Evanston-Skokie School District 65, the City of Evanston, Evanston Cradle to Career, and numerous community partners including faith-based groups. The summer 2019 program will be the fourth year of operation.

My colleague, Dr. Reginald Blount, and I serve as the Executive Directors of the Garrett-Evanston CDF Freedom Schools program. The program is housed in the Fifth Ward of Evanston, 5 the only ward that does not have a school within its geographic boundaries. The Foster elementary school was closed during the 1960’s following the desegregation of the city schools. The old Foster school is now the home of Evanston Family Focus. 6

Elementary school children who live in the Fifth Ward attend school at one of five elementary schools (Willard, Lincolnwood, Kingsley, Orrington, and Dewey) in neighboring wards. 7 While there are numerous after school and summer programs for children in Evanston, many of those programs are funded through Title I funds which are directly tied to schools. The five schools that the children of the Fifth Ward attend are not eligible for Title I funds because they are located in affluent areas of the city and the majority of children in those schools do not qualify for free or reduced lunches which is the basis for Title I funds. The children of the Fifth Ward are an underserved population of students in a school system that has a large achievement gap. 8

https://www.garrett.edu/public-theology

5 “City of Evanston Wards,” City of Evanston, accessed September 12, 2018,
https://www.cityofevanston.org/home/showdocument?id=4

6 Family Focus Evanston, accessed September 12, 2018
http://www.family-focus.org/centers/evanston/

7 “Elementary Schools Attendance Area Maps,” Attendance Area Maps for Evanston/Skokie School District 65,

8 “District 65, community members take closer look at racial achievement gap,” The Daily Northwestern, accessed September 13, 2018,
We also discovered that while there was a thriving summer program for children in grades kindergarten through second, there were few affordable summer programs for children in grades three through five or for middle school students in grades six through eight. We decided to focus on grades three through five for our program during the first summer.

History of the Freedom Schools Movement

Marian Wright Edelman, the first Black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, founded the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) in 1973. For forty-five years, she and CDF have been a “loud and persistent voice for every child.”

The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) is a child advocacy organization that has worked relentlessly for more than forty years to ensure a level playing field for all children. [They] champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty; protect them from abuse and neglect; and ensure their access to health care, quality education and a moral and spiritual foundation. Supported by foundation and corporate grants and individual donations, CDF advocates nationwide on behalf of children to ensure children are always a priority.

Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools programs are summer literacy programs that provide a multicultural reading curriculum that boosts students motivation to read, generates positive attitudes to learning, helps to reduce summer learning loss, and connects the needs of underserved children/families to resources in their communities. They also serve to help children discover their agency and ability to make changes in themselves and their communities.

During the summer of 2018, 11,830 scholars attended CDF Freedom Schools programs at one hundred eight-three sites in eighty-seven cities in twenty-eight states. One hundred fifteen organizations sponsored the programs for their community, and one thousand three hundred fifty-six staff persons were trained to operate the programs.

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Marian Wright Edelman was one of the participants in Freedom Summer 1964 and her experience that summer influenced what would become her life’s work for children.\footnote{For more information about Marian Wright Edelman and the mentors who influenced her, see Marian Wright Edelman, \textit{Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors}, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).}

The \textit{CDF Freedom Schools} program has its origins in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project of 1964, which brought college students from around the country to Mississippi to secure justice and voting rights for Black citizens. These early Freedom Schools aimed at keeping Black children and youth safe and giving them rich educational experiences that were not offered to them in Mississippi’s public schools. In a variety of makeshift settings, college student volunteers provided instruction in reading, writing, humanities, mathematics, and science along with subjects not taught in Mississippi public schools, such as Black history and constitutional rights. All of their instruction was tailored to encourage children and youth to become independent thinkers, problem solvers, and agents of change in their own communities.\footnote{CDF Freedom Schools Program Background and Details: Mission of the Children’s Defense Fund and Freedom Schools Background. Document from CDF Executive Director Training, 2018.}

One of the forerunners of the freedom schools movement was the Citizenship Schools, first sponsored by Highlander Folk School in 1957. Myles Horton, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson were the major architects. In 1962, the program was passed from Highlander to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).\footnote{David Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom,” in \textit{Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African American Tradition}, ed. Charles M. Payne and Carol Sills Strickland (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 25.}

There were three crucial components of the Citizenship Schools:

1. “a sustained focus on overcoming illiteracy to strengthen Black electoral power,
2. an interactive pedagogy that built upon the experience and culture of the students, and
3. an explicitly political approach to education that assertively linked the acquisition of knowledge with collective efforts to overcome racism.”\footnote{Ibid., 25-26.}

Horton, Clark and Robinson “believed that the best teachers would be the peers of the students, rather than credentialed educators who might consider themselves superior to their pupils.”\footnote{Ibid., 35.} They all shared a commitment to “student-centered education” and
“consistently emphasized the need to focus on skills and topics of intense interest to the students, and to allow student voices to emerge within the educational process.” 17

Embedded in this pedagogy was a “fundamental belief in the dignity, life knowledge, intellectual competence, and capacity for growth possessed by these adult learners, even when they were illiterate or struggling on the edge of literacy.” 18

Also influential in the development and philosophy of the Freedom Schools movement was Ella Baker and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

During the tumultuous and decisive years of the early 1960’s, SNCC played a leading role in the Black Freedom Movement in Mississippi. Young field organizers put the principles that Ella Baker had taught them into practice by working alongside poor and working class black people in rural communities where white supremacy had seemed impossible to change. As a result the organizers found themselves at the center of a mass uprising that overturned old stereotypes of downtrodden, passive, and terrorized black folk…In Freedom Schools that were founded on the radically democratic pedagogy that Baker espoused and exemplified within SNCC, organizers taught literacy skills and academic subject to young blacks and, in turn, learned about the underlying economic structures of white supremacy from their students. 19

Ella Baker’s philosophy and pedagogy are also reflected in “Ella’s Song,” written by Bernice Johnson Reagan and sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock.

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hands of the young, who dare to run against the storm

To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail
And if I can but shed some light as they carry us through the gale

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Struggling myself don't mean a whole lot, I've come to realize
That teaching others to stand up and fight is the only way my struggle survives

I'm a woman who speaks in a voice and I must be heard
At times I can be quite difficult, I'll bow to no man's word

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be one in the number as we stand against tyranny

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes

While Ella Baker was the guiding force of SNCC and the Freedom Movement, Charlie Cobb has been acknowledged as the inventor of the Mississippi Freedom Schools. He was a Howard University student who had been in Mississippi since 1962. He “proposed that the Summer Project do something to address the impoverished nature of the education typically offered to Black students in Mississippi.” 20 Important to Cobb was that fact that “as with the voter registration drive and all other organizing in the state, the essence of the schools was that Black people could begin to think in their own terms the ways and means of shaping and controlling their own destiny.” 21

From the chapters in Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition, Charles M. Payne identifies several themes or characteristics of liberative or emancipatory education. These include:

- radical affirmation of student’s dignity
- students involved in decision making
- willingness to really listen to poor people (Septima Clark)
- insistence on a structural analysis of society
- explicitly encourage more supportive patterns of interaction (Like scholars “recognizing” each other during Harambee.) 22

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20 Payne, p.5.


• participatory learning – dialogue, debate, interaction (Ella Baker)\textsuperscript{23}
• “profound confidence in the capacity of ordinary people to grow and develop” – was true of Baker and Clark.\textsuperscript{24}

The following characteristics of CDF Freedom Schools seem to follow in the tradition of the earlier Freedom Schools movement:

• A focus on literacy
• An emphasis on cultural heritage
• Parent engagement
• Intergenerational servant leadership of young adults
• Civic engagement
• Encourages children to believe that they can make a difference in the world
• Beginning each day with “Harambee” where scholars can celebrate themselves and each other
• Connects the needs of children and families to the rich resources of the local community\textsuperscript{25}

Our goal for the Garrett-Evanston CDF Freedom Schools program was for at least seventy-five percent of the scholars to maintain or increase their instructional reading levels. Our average for the two years that we have results indicate that seventy-seven percent of our scholars maintained or increased their instructional reading levels. By this measure of success, we achieved our goal. We also saw an increase in self-esteem and purpose. Scholars believed that they could make a difference!


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., page 62.

\textsuperscript{25} “What Makes the CDF Freedom Schools Program Unique,” Document from CDF Executive Director Training, 2018.