

## Freedom Schools Then and Now: A Transformative Approach to Learning

**Marcia Watson**

*University of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA*

### Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to provide a historical and conceptual link between Ella Baker's Freedom School model and Paulo Freire's demand for critical education and emancipatory learning. Ella Baker, situated in the daunting environment of the Civil Rights Movement, saw education as a tool for social mobility for Mississippi residents in 1964. Paulo Freire, likewise, demanded that educational changes be made for the social plight of Brazilian citizens. This need for liberating education spanned across decades and is still needed today. Under the leadership of the Children's Defense Fund ® (CDF), Freedom Schools still exist today as summer literacy programs for youth. This paper will provide a historical overview of the original 1964 Freedom Schools program and a programmatic snapshot of the current Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools program. In addition, this paper will explore the academic and social benefits that Freedom Schools offers, while outlining the imperativeness of the program's social action component for students.*

**Keywords:** Freedom Schools, social mobility, transformative education, emancipatory learning, multiculturalism, critical education, social action

### Introduction

A historical overview of African American education is critically important due to many misconceived notions about Black students, Black achievement, and Black aptitude. Misconceptions about the achievement gap and IQ testing have been eradicated through contemporary studies, but the damages have nevertheless branded African American students

with substandard academic abilities (King, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Because of the many qualms and misguided aims of past research, the legacy and heritage of African people have been tarnished and heavily marginalized in school curriculums (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011). In most districts today, the most many Black students learn about their ancestral culture is a diluted, piece-milled supplement with few key people and facts. For example, the iconic conglomerate of: Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman, presumably seems to be the only triad palatable enough for public school curriculums.

Freedom Schools, through their original development in the 1964 Freedom Summer, attempted to provide critical pedagogy to participating students. Although the Freedom Summer was situated in the height of the Civil Rights Movement, a tumultuous time for racial equality in the United States, the same need for transformative curriculum continues today.

Carter G. Woodson's work, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, calls attention to the ignored disconnect between school and education (Woodson, 1933). Here, Woodson dispels that often what students learn is not necessary an education – and in fact is a *miseducation* – due to curriculum's lackadaisical content which has lulled students into a sense of false consciousness. Transformative education seeks to liberate and reverse this *miseducation*, by realigning curriculum and pedagogy with truth. In this context, truth addresses the historical realignment of curriculums to be anti-hegemonic and critical. In addition, it also demands for the praxis and change of its students and the existing society. Transformative education takes a broader and more holistic approach, which benefits all students who have been miseducated by current school models. Whereas traditional multicultural education seeks to incorporate various cultures into the curriculum through additive approaches, transformative education uses social, political, and historical issues to facilitate critical thinking and analysis about education's role in social mobility.

From the dawn of its inception in 1964 to the contemporary program today, Freedom Schools have provided this described “transformative education” to students for decades. Today, the Freedom Schools program is sponsored by the *Children's Defense Fund (CDF)*, which is a non-profit dedicated to equalizing educational opportunities for all (Children's Defense Fund, 2011).

Under this program, Freedom Schools serves 80,000 students in twenty-nine states (ibid.). As a summer reading enrichment program, today's Freedom Schools program provides alternatives to traditional schooling for youth.

The need for a transformative curriculum is increasingly important for 21<sup>st</sup> century Black students in the United States. Whereas the steps to educational freedom have been documented in landmark judicial cases, such as: *Brown v. Board of Education*, widespread psychological and educational emancipation has not yet occurred for many African American students. This argument is manifested in the overarching disparities within local urban school districts, many of which underserve Black and Latino students with inadequate resources, unqualified teachers, and a lack of course offerings (Kozol, 2005; Toldson & Lewis, 2012). Here, in spite of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, many African American students attend schools that are both separate and unequal.

Amidst these inadequacies in building infrastructure and teacher training, there is an additional component that often goes ignored but is equally as damaging – curriculum. Current curriculum models stem from recent legislatures such as: *No Child Left Behind* and *Common Core State Standards*, which are known for high-stakes testing and assessments (Watson, 2013). Here, rote knowledge, repetition, and memorization have replaced the value of critical thinking. The research surrounding high-stakes assessments have shown that students are not necessarily mastering content, nor are they producing higher test scores (Thompson & Allen, 2012). In fact, the repetitive and frequent testing environments are creating the opposite – student apathy (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Further, researchers have even concluded that high-stakes assessments are both physically and mentally “oppressive” for students, due to the limited curriculum flexibility teachers have when teaching to the test (Grant, 2004). Under these conditions, students are being disenfranchised and created into low-skilled laborers, not citizens who are participatory in their own liberation and education.

Another area of concern within curriculum is content. Researchers, such as Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, assert the need for culturally responsive teaching, which encourages teachers to design lessons that are relatable and relevant to students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings,

1994). Multicultural educators demand the implementation diversity within the curriculum, and suggest supplementary, additive models to incorporate students' culture to the classroom. Still, there is a gap in literature that connects the necessity of these curriculum components to the urgency of today's dismal state of education. Moreover, there is an even wider gap of literature documenting the historical road to educational freedom, which is purposeful in improving current status of Black education today. These historical examples can provide a useful framework towards future trajectories of education.

This paper will document the historical journey Freedom Schools have taken from Ella Baker's organization during the Civil Rights Movement, to today's Marian Wright Edelman's leadership today. The purpose of this paper is to explore the benefits of Freedom School's curriculum and pedagogy as a method of transformative education for students today. Whereas schooling within a traditional framework generally uses hegemonic learning practices, and reinforces a grand narrative that distills critical components of curriculum, this paper will aim to answer: How can today's Freedom School summer enrichment program be a beneficial model for implementing transformative education in traditional schools today? The remainder of this paper will provide a literature review, explanation of transformative curriculum, data, and discussion. Examining Freedom Schools' historic journey unveils a consistent mission dedicated to emancipatory curriculum, which is critically important for students today.

## **Literature Review**

The road paved by ancestors has provided evidence that excellence in academia is custom to the African race (Ofori-Attah, 2009; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Woodson, 1933). During Trans-Atlantic slavery, Africans all over the diaspora experienced brutal colonization where schooling was eradicated and limited only to religious works, if any. Prior to the United States emancipation of slavery, the few slaves who could read and write held school sessions in church basements or slave quarters (Span, 2009; Sturkey, 2010). This provided slaves with dangerous opportunities for educational attainment, but continued the quest for literacy and freedom among African Americans. Post-emancipation, Anderson (1988) documents the formation of slave schools, which provided successful models for school curriculum. During the Reconstruction

Era, public schools were established in the South as a result of African American legislatures advocating for equal citizenship rights (Sturkey, 2010). At the turn of the twentieth century, the lack of political power resulted in poor educational conditions for Blacks in throughout the South (Anderson, 1988; Sturkey, 2010). In these schools, although poorly funded and with limited resources, Black teachers provided their own education to students.

### *The Formation of Freedom Schools*

Education was far more than reading, writing, and arithmetic for Black students. It has long served as a method for freedom and social mobility. After the decision of *Brown v. Board* in 1954, Blacks experienced this need to become literate for political and voting rights during the Civil Rights era. One particular group known as SNCC, or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, provided a leading role in organizing volunteers for the Black Freedom Movement in Mississippi (Ransby, 2003). The introductory program lead by SNCC leaders advocated for Freedom Schools to, “train and educate people to be active agents in bringing about social change.” (Hale, 2011, p. 330). In 1964, Charles Cobb, a SNCC field-secretary and student from Howard University, became the visionary behind the Freedom School idea (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2001; Ransby, 2003). Bob Moses, Stauhton Lynd, Septima Clark, and other local volunteers, helped further execute the vision for Freedom Schools. Cobb believed that social institutions in Mississippi restricted and oppressed African American youth in ways that crippled the Black voice. In 1964, Cobb wrote a memo to SNCC’s executive committee stating, “Mississippi’s impoverished educational system is also burdened with virtually a complete absence of academic freedom, and students are forced to live in an environment that is geared to squash intellectual curiosity and different thinking” (Ransby, 2003, p. 329). Thus, from its inception, Freedom Schools were designed to motivate students to have a political voice, going beyond what schools offer in tradition settings (Sturkey, 2010; Taylor, 2012).

Ella Baker was one of the key leaders in the formation of Freedom Schools. Baker re-signified the term "democratic education," which taught, “literacy skills and academic subjects to young blacks [who] in turn, learned about the underlying economic structures of white supremacy from their students” (Ransby, 2003, p. 299). Modeled after the Worker’s Education Project in the

1930's, Baker introduced suspended public school students in McComb, Mississippi to supplemental Black education (Ransby, 2003). This education was welcomed among the Black community because of impoverished schools in Mississippi were suffering due to lack of state funding in Black areas. At that time, the Mississippi state government spent almost four times per year on white students as it did on black ones (ibid.). Baker found the curriculum differences to be advantageous for Black students as well.

### *1964 Freedom Schools Experience*

One of the most notable differences that Freedom Schools offered from traditional schools was the increased access Black students had to culturally relevant curriculum. This term, which is often used by researchers today, is also noted to describe the curriculum during the movement (Ransby, 2003). This curriculum provided differences not typically seen during this Civil Rights decade, which spanned across literature, history, social studies, politics, and government. During the 1964 Freedom Summer, these students studied race relations coupled with intense learning about African American history and literature (Hale, 2011; Perlstein, 1990). The students assessed what it meant to be an “African American” in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, and comparatively studied the differences in African American identity in the North and the South (Hale, 2011). In addition, the students specifically used the skills learned from literacy training to see the role of education towards their own social mobility, especially in a Jim Crow System where African Americans were marginalized and seen as inferior to their white counterparts (Hale, 2011). These Freedom Schools provided pedagogical alternatives to traditional schooling that provided students with a critical education (Taylor, 2012).

By engaging students in this critical information, students were able to connect education to their present condition and their need for freedom. Students began to see literacy as the link to greater political freedom through better understanding the U.S. Constitution, which was required for voting rights (Hale, 2011). Baker's goal of providing alternative methods of education was first addressed through curriculum changes. Here, students were able to reexamine issues of inequality that surrounded them in the South during this period. In short, students were able to center themselves in justice – politically, economically, and racially (Hale, 2011; Perlstein,

1990).

The difference between traditional schooling and Freedom Schools was witnessed through the reverse in paradigms from traditional schools. Instead of learning the hegemonic, grand narrative found in traditional schooling, the Freedom Schools curriculum placed students in roles of authority and allowed them to critically examine their identity in a radicalized world (Ransby, 2003; Taylor, 2012). These schools were designed to empower youth to become leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, while also equipping them with the tools to empower younger generations. Within the Freedom School curriculum, “self-knowledge, applied knowledge, and critical thinking were all strongly emphasized as essential components” (Ransby, 2003, p. 328).

An emancipatory, transformative curriculum was critical for the Civil Rights Movement, because it further ignited students as agents for social change. One theoretical difference that Ella Baker had to traditional school models was noted through her objection to conformity and obedience. Like the aforementioned curriculum researchers of today, Baker realized the importance of relevance within the curriculum. Furthermore, she also concluded that learning had to be redesigned to provide both students and teachers with authority (Ransby, 2003). The equalization of students and teachers within the transformative educational setting is one of the most noticeable differences between Freedom Schools and traditional school environments. Paulo Freire, in his critical theories on education, also believed that the hierarchical roles of teacher and student had to be dismantled. In his experiences in Brazil, lower-class citizens were accustomed to the same rudimentary, rote-learning style that stunted critical learning. Although it was never documented whether Ella Baker and Paulo Freire met, the similarities between their ideologies on education are strikingly similar (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Ransby, 2003). The same emancipation that Ella Baker desired for rural Black students in Mississippi, Freire likewise advocated for lower-class citizens in Brazil. This magnifies the interconnectivity and applicability of critical learning practices for all students. Although they existed in two geographically different regions of the world, the same emancipatory learning needs for students were evident.

The benefits of Baker's transformative education were seen through the social empowerment Freedom Schools and SNCC provided for students. Testaments from teachers and workers in the 1964 Freedom School summer provide insight to the effectiveness of the original Freedom School curriculum. These primary source narratives are pivotal to understanding the impact the initial summer experience. One Freedom School volunteer, Liz Fusco, reported:

Through the study of Negro History [the students] began to have a real sense of themselves as people who could produce heroes. They saw in the history of Cinque of the Amistad a parallel to kinds of revolts in the Movement, as they began to learn about it, represented. They saw [that] Joseph Cinque, in leading a mutiny on that slave ship, instead of asserting his will to freedom by jumping off the ship into the shark-waiting waters, was saying that freedom is something that belongs to life, not to death, and that a man has a responsibility for bringing all his people to freedom, not just for his own escaping (Sturkey, 2010, p. 356).

In addition, one Freedom School teacher found a similar experience inside the classroom when teaching students about the history of Haiti. Pamela Allen, a teacher, described:

I watched faces fall around me. They knew that a small island, run by former slaves, could not defeat England. And then I told that the people of Haiti succeeded in keeping the English out. I watched a smile spread slowly over a girl's face. And I felt girls sit up and look at intently. Then I told them that Napoleon came to power, reinstated slavery, and sent an expedition to reconquer Haiti. Their faces began to fall again... And when I told them that Haiti did succeed in keeping out the European powers and was recognized finally as an independent republic, they just looked at me and smiled. The room stirred with gladness and a pride that this could have happened. And I felt so happy and so humble that I could have told them this little story and it could have meant so... The freedom school volunteers at the time and afterward mentioned that "Negro history" lessons provoked a great deal of emotion, sense of pride, optimism, and personal confidence." (2010, p. 356).

The usefulness of this curriculum is seen as testament to the emotional, social, and intellectual well-being of African American students during the Civil Rights Movement. By the end of the summer, over fifty Freedom Schools were established, impacting over 2,100 students and adults in Mississippi (Ransby, 2003; Sturkey, 2010). Many of these students progressed to become further advocates in the Movement (Hale, 2011). This is a demonstration of how powerful critical education can be for social mobility, political activism, and justice.



### *Freedom Schools Today*

Civil rights activist Marion Wright Edelman spearheaded the continuation of Freedom Schools. In 1963, she became the first African American admitted to the Mississippi State Bar, a testament for a minority woman during that time. Her passion for youth and social justice led her to establish the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) in 1995 (Hale, 2011). Through the Children's Defense Fund Edelman launched a more contemporary Freedom Schools model. In 2010, CDF Freedom Schools reached more than 80,000 students and their families in eighty-four cities in twenty-nine states (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). The same mission from the 1964 Freedom Summer, is witnessed throughout today's CDF Freedom School Program.

To start, it is important to examine the training of Freedom School staff, which is held annually in a national conference in Clinton, Tennessee. This national conference provides training, support, and professional development to new and returning members of the Freedom Schools organization. Similar to the schools in the 1964 Freedom Summer, the CDF Freedom Schools program employs undergraduate college students to serve as teachers. Not to be confused with *Teach for America* or other teaching internship programs, the Freedom Schools program is centered on social action and critical education. In addition, whereas *Teach for America* serves as an employment option for recent college graduates (many of whom are not education majors or future teaching aspirants), Freedom Schools positions current college students within their local communities.

Another difference in Freedom Schools and other teaching or internship programs is the authority both students and teachers have within the classroom. This critical component is believed to be critically important, and described in the original 1964 Freedom Schools and in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The college students who serve as teachers are known as *servant leader interns*, and help to teach, mentor, and guide students throughout the summer program. This mentorship role is important for both male and female students due to the social and cultural similarities between adults and students (Evans-Winters, 2011; Hopkins, 1997). Facilitators, or *site coordinators*, manage the sites and oversee logistical issues. Most notably, however, is the name assigned to Freedom Schools students. Students within Freedom

Schools are strictly referred to as *scholars* (Smith, 2010). This nomenclature places students into roles of leadership, responsibility, and masters of academia. In essence, it elevates their position in Freedom Schools to someone of value and purpose.

The national training held in Tennessee is infused with multiculturalism, African tradition, and research-based practices that all attendees take back to their respective Freedom School sites. The cultural component of the Freedom Schools experience is an undeniable continuum. During the 2013 national training, seminars and interactive workshops included: slavery simulations, race and diversity training, panels from Civil Rights leaders like Bob Moses and Marian Wright Edelman, and even presentations from young activists seeking immigration reform, school equality, and community empowerment (Children's Defense Fund National Training Manual, 2013). Each of the mandatory training components focuses on the importance of liberation education and social uplift. In fact, over one-third of the intern's training is dedicated specifically to culturally relevant curriculum implementation (Jackson, 2009).

In addition to training, the notion of "Freedom School family" and the "Freedom School way" are infused in every activity, meditation, and workshop. The notion of "Freedom School family" reinforces the ideas of community, village, and repeated affirmations that "the circle must be unbroken." All attendees are held to a standard of mutual respect, understanding of culture, and homage to the African tradition. Likewise, this "Freedom School way" eradicates the capitalist, Eurocentric thought of competition. Extending the notion of family and community, the "way" in which everyone is expected to govern themselves is positive, polite, and humble. These principles are transposed into every moment during national training (Children's Defense Fund, 2013). These expectations reinforce the reversal in traditional ideology. An underlying theme that resonates throughout the training is the connectivity to our ancestors and those in the 1964 Freedom School movement.

### *Freedom Schools Nationwide*

After national training, CDF Freedom School program meets for 6-10 weeks over the summer at various sites nationwide. Sites meet at local churches, schools, and community centers that

service the neighboring students in the community, similar to the original Freedom Schools in 1964. Generally, all sites follow the same format and curriculum, as guided by the national organization (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Scholars generally meet from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. over the summer, like a traditional school day. Similar to its 1964 inception, the mantra that extends over the summer implores students to make a difference in their self, their family, their community, their nation, and their world (Smith, 2010). Students are exposed to these transformative themes throughout the *Integrated Reading Curriculum* (IRC), which is used to promote advances in literacy and reading in all students. Two and a half hours each day are dedicated to reading intensive, culturally relevant stories and novels (Bethea, 2012). Books within the curriculum prompt scholars to think critically about their actions and the world around them. Lesson plans include social action and community service activities where scholars are charged with making positive changes in their communities. In addition, the stories they read reflect multiculturalism, Afrocentricity, and ethnic studies. Whereas traditional schools teach towards a grand narrative and “one size fits all” approach, Freedom Schools use different curriculum models that empower students to embrace culture and heritage (Jackson & Boutte, 2009). In fact, the children’s literature selected for Freedom Schools is multicultural and affirming of all cultures (Jackson & Boutte, 2009). For example, during the 2012 CDF Freedom Schools summer, some of the IRC books included: *A Picture Book of Ceasar Chavez*, *Tanika and the Wisdom Ring*, and *I Can Make a Difference* (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Each of these books highlights ethnic heroes or community action that positively reflects student culture.

But Freedom Schools extends beyond the IRC classroom. Every morning throughout the summer, freedom school sites all across the county participate in *Harambee*, which stems from the Swahili tradition meaning “all pull together” (Children’s Defense Fund, 2005). According to CDF, this tradition reaffirms positivity within children and prepares their bodies and minds for the upcoming day of learning (Children’s Defense Fund, 2011). *Harambee* has its own format, which each stimulates different energies within children. First, the “Read Aloud” segment allows students to hear someone read a short story, fable, or narrative that is multicultural and positive (Smith, 2010). Immediately after, students are allowed to ask the guest reader questions about the book, personal academic experiences, or thematic issues that were relevant to the story. This allows students to engage with the Read Aloud guest, leveling and promoting equality among

adults and students. Next, scholars participate in singing together *Something Inside So Strong*, which was selected for its positive message and the connectivity of each scholar to the Freedom School family and the world. The next, and most energetic section is called “Cheers and Chants,” which allows scholars to incorporate rhythm, positive affirmations, call and responses, and sequencing to provide other scholars with energy and motion. Following this portion, “Recognitions” allow any participating member of Freedom Schools – both adults and scholars – to highlight something positive in someone else. Recognitions can spotlight scholar accomplishments, birthdays, or performance in class. The next stage is the “Moment of Silence,” which scholars are encouraged to meditate and respect some quiet time, both mentally and physically. This allows the scholars energy to be re-centered for the upcoming academic day. *Harambee* concludes with everyone saying “ashe” in unison and proceeding to the last stage with “Announcements” from the site coordinator and teachers. After *Harambee*, students go with their respective teachers and participate in the aforementioned IRC and afternoon activities, which usually consists of fieldtrips or community involvement.

Probably the most notable component of Freedom Schools that distinguishes it from charter schools or other prescribed “fixes” to American education, are the social action components implemented into every summer. Everyone within the Freedom Schools community follows a theme chosen by CDF Freedom Schools. In 2012, the social action theme was political empowerment (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Students campaigned the importance of voting and students in their local communities and even registered people to vote. The 2013 social action theme was gun violence activism (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Students rallied within their communities to demand the end to gun violence and gang related crimes in their communities. Although there is a national theme, students are also encouraged to work within their own local communities on pertinent issues, such as: immigration reform, school access, and police violence. All of these opportunities provide uniqueness to the Freedom Schools program. Students are placed directly in their surrounding communities and empowers them to ignite tangible change about issues traditional reserved for adults.

## Data

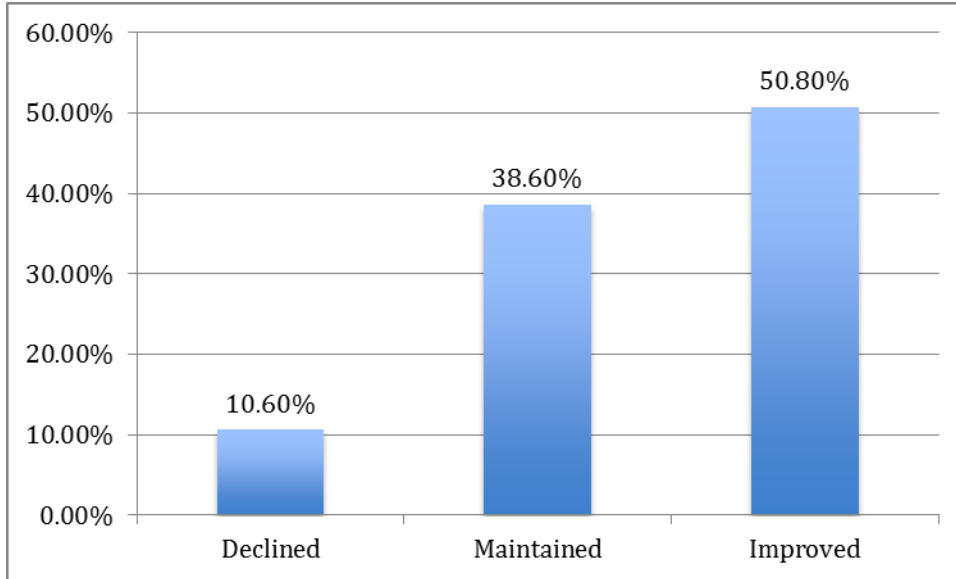
Secondary data was drawn from several evaluation reports that examined the effectiveness of the Freedom School program. In a 2010 evaluation report from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, researchers conducted a literacy evaluation of students involved in the Freedom Schools summer program. Students were tested in a pre and post-test format, documenting student BRI (Basic Reading Inventory) changes from the beginning of the summer to the end of the summer. This BRI measure is an informal reading inventory that demonstrates reading ability and comprehension (Taylor, Medina, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2010). Table 1 shows the differences in BRI measures, divided by grade levels. In each of the grade level categories, students showed mean gains in BRI when comparing the pre and post-tests. Figure 1 displays the changes in BRI measurements over the entire sample of 132 students (Taylor et al., 2010). Overall, 50.8 percent of students showed an improvement in reading, 38.6 percent maintained reading ability, and a small percentage, 10.6 percent showed a decline in reading after the Freedom Schools summer experience. This displays that 89.4 percent of students either maintained or improved in reading ability after six weeks.

**Table 1.** Mean scores for the BRI Independent scores by grade (N=132)

	Pre-test			Post-test	
	N	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Grades</b>					
<b>K-2</b>	48	.94	1.44	1.21	1.70
<b>3-5</b>	50	2.52	1.78	3.68	2.22
<b>6-8</b>	34	4.76	1.54	6.18	1.64

SOURCE: Taylor, Medina, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2010

**Figure 1.** Change over time on the BRI Independent measure



SOURCE: Taylor, Medina, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2010

In addition to the data above, this 2010 study revealed that over ninety percent of students increased or maintained their Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) by the end of the Freedom Schools summer (Taylor et al, 2010). These gains reflect changes in reading ability, which are critical for learners entering a new school year after the program’s summer end. This responds to research that suggests that poorer students lose more content over the summer, identified commonly as “summer reading loss” (Kim & Quinn, 2013).

Although there are many literacy benefits to the Freedom Schools program, students have shown social improvements as well. In a 2011 Oakland study, students reported improvements in attitudes towards African American culture, social skills, and student desires to participate in social action activities (Bethea, 2012). In addition, in a 2008 Kansas City study, students reported a significant increase in character development by completing the Freedom Schools program (Evaluation of Kansas City Freedom Schools, 2008). Overall, the impact of the Freedom Schools experience has shown both academic and social improvements in students nationwide.

The positive results of these two studies show a need to further explore a more widespread implementation of the Freedom Schools program across public education. The importance of

literacy, especially critical literacy, is increasingly important for students to prevent summer reading loss (Kim & Quinn, 2013). Freedom Schools offers an alternative approach to literacy, which replaces rote reading and memorization with active student involvement in their own critical, political, and democratic education. Although the Freedom Schools program is not a prescribed solution for all educational problems, the benefits of the program are substantial and meaningful to students' construction of what a critical education means.

## **Discussion**

The Freedom Schools program has stayed true to the original model of providing a critical, liberating education. The benefits of this transformative curriculum are ever-present in today's public schools. The 21<sup>st</sup> century child has an increasing need to address social and political issues within themselves, their families, their community, their nation, and their world as the CDF Freedom Schools curriculum suggests today (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). When examining this transformative curriculum, it is important to notice the theoretical alignments of Ella Baker's 1964 model that serves as a foundation for Freedom Schools, almost fifty years later.

Freedom Schools' pedagogical and curriculum models align heavily with Freire's critical theory and the need to mobilize the masses. Baker's theories about Black education in 1964 most similarly mirror Pablo Freire's educational philosophy (Ransby, 2003). As mentioned, although there was no indication whether Baker and Freire communicated, their philosophies were relevant for their respective communities. Eradicating the notion of "banking," both Freire and Baker assert that teachers should ignite discoverable learning versus simply depositing information into students (Freire, 2000). Baker, like Freire, wanted students to equip their surrounding communities with social change. The same advocacy instilled in students during the 1964 Freedom Summer has relevance today, and is revealed to students during the current Freedom Schools summer. Whether it is voting campaigning, anti-violence protests, or bullying advocacy, students in the Freedom Schools program have social action requirements that elevates students to places of importance within their communities (Children's Defense Fund, 2011).

The relationship between education, social mobility, and political power were all linked towards the overall advancement of people (Hale, 2011). More importantly, Freire's notion of equalizing teachers and students is a concept that Ella Baker and today's Freedom Schools value. During the original Freedom Summer, Baker recruited students who were recently suspended from school because of their political activism (Ransby, 2003). This shows a concerned interest to help students, in comparison to the stigmatized reality of suspended students today where students are forced to miss school because of behavior. In addition, Baker's recruitment of undergraduate college students added a sense of community for students, seeing older students as part of a concerted effort to increase the educational attainment for younger generations. Having undergraduate students, adults, and students all working towards the same common goal was a direct benefit for the Freedom School mission during the tumultuous time in Mississippi.

In a more contemporary sense today, the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) is experienced through culturally relevant readings, pedagogy, and teaching practices. The eradication of hegemonic grand narratives is witnessed not only in the curriculum content, but also the teaching style. The mentioned "Freedom School way" that encourages positive support and values students' culture is opposite of what traditional schools generally practice. As the growing needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner demands for a more globalized citizenship, education must transform the role of students from empty receptacles into culturally rich assets to the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kumavaradivelu, 2012).

In addition to curriculum, the method of teaching is drastically different in Freedom Schools classrooms. Both in 1964 and today, Freedom Schools were centered on action and change. This Freiren form of praxis is witnessed in today's CDF Freedom Schools through social action initiatives, community service, critical discussions in IRC, and *Harambee*. This refusal of traditional schooling methods and the implementation of action-based instruction are drastically unconventional when looking at today's K-12 schools. In order to meet the diversifying needs of the nation and the world, students first must think critically about education's role in the world and in their personal lives. Only when this critical conversation occurs will the awareness of a globalized citizenry and interconnectedness be reached.



Na'im Akbar (1998), in his emancipatory work *Know Thy Self*, alludes to additional benefits of transformative curriculum, which are made manifest, on a more personal, introspective level. *Harambee*, for example speaks to advocacy for a spiritual component, not to necessarily be confused with religion, be implemented into schools (Akbar, 1998). Meditation, for example, is seen in *Harambee* during the "Moment of Silence." During this time, positive affirmations are spoken for children to hear, contemplate, and internalize, which elevates the child's position and value to the school community. In addition, this highlights the morality of children and refutes the common practice of suggesting any child is inferior or less valuable to the school environment. Next, the curriculum content focuses on multiculturalism and African American culture, which helps children view their culture as valuable. This is not only beneficial for student understanding, but it aids in reversing teachers' and administrators' miseducation as well (Woodson, 1933).

From its inception, Freedom Schools were designed to motivate Black students to use their education as a voice for activism and social change. By providing students with ancestral history, students were able to identify with figures in stories, poems, and historical works. This ethnic pride manifested itself throughout the duration of the movement and thereafter, equipping young minds to be the vehicles for historical change in the nation. By participating in the Freedom Summer in 1964, "their feelings of resentment, hurt, and anger were replaced by models of personal and collective liberation" (Sturkey, 2010, p. 364). The practices of today's Freedom Schools program also prove to be beneficial for minority youth. One particular highlight is the pedagogical traditions found in the Freedom Schools program, which are of the African tradition. In essence, today's Freedom Schools are re-centering Africa back to its due place in humanity, both by content and through teaching styles. By elevating African thought and culture into reading curriculum, students are taught to appreciate African contributions and history. All in all, the positive peer and adult relationships fostered in Freedom Schools promote the village component to child development.

## Implications

### *Administrators and District Officials*

Using useful methods from the Freedom School model, administrators and school district officials should consider revisiting multicultural policies to encompass a more transformative curriculum model. The methods of implementation come in the form of curriculum materials and teacher trainings on a district level. These revised materials should explicitly respect student culture, both historically and contemporarily, and place its value and meaning within school curriculums (Gay, 2000; Jackson, 2009).

### *Teachers*

The Freedom School model, through the incorporation of multicultural activities, social action projects, and a recentering of the child's experiences as valuable in the classroom environment, provides great implementable strategies to improve the classroom culture. Teachers should implement the best practices encouraged by the CDF Freedom Schools, such as: active learning (as seen in *Harambee*), classroom respect, and critical pedagogy through asserting children as leaders versus the traditional methods of teachers providing classroom leadership.

## Conclusion

Although *Brown v. Board* was decided in 1954, and the original Freedom Summer emancipated the minds of students in Mississippi in 1964, the educational system – almost six decades later – still reveals a critical need in American schools. By initiating a transformative curriculum, minority students begin to reequip themselves with their ancestral tenacity to combat social issues. Once this critical awareness is recognized, social mobility for the masses is possible which can further ignite a transformation in schools on a larger scale. Transformative education, as Na'im Akbar suggests, starts within. Housed within effective programs, such as CDF Freedom Schools, the magnitude of self-emancipation can be multiplied. The best practices and strategies that Freedom Schools are currently implementing are beneficial to K-12 public schools. Only when the critical discussions reach the minds of every child will large-scale change take place.

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### **Author's details**

Marcia Watson is an Urban Education Doctoral Student at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, NC, USA. marciajwatson@gmail.com