



American Friends
Service Committee

Executive Summary

Freedom School Evaluation 2010



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Executive Summary

In *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Paulo Friere and Myles Horton shared their years of experience and wisdom gathered from their respective works. They both not only believed in the major importance of, but also understood the close relationship between educating and organizing. They saw that these two ingredients were the major foundation and springboard that are essential to mobilize collective efforts that bring about social change in the human conditions of a people. The Tyree Scott Freedom School is a living example of the principle of educating for organizing and organizing for educating.

-Theresa Lenear, Tyree Scott Freedom School evaluation

“Freedom School has been the most powerful life changing experience of my life so far. It has been scary, uncomfortable, enraging, amazing. Through that discomfort I have learned so much about myself. My eyes are now open to the racism present around me. I am hungry to learn more about the many different experiences in my city and in the world...

I want to expand my horizons.”

-2010 summer Tyree Scott Freedom School participant

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization founded in 1917 that includes people of various faiths who share a commitment to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. AFSC's Seattle office was founded in 1942 to assist Japanese Americans and oppose their internment during World War II. In 1947, AFSC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Quakers worldwide.

AFSC has conducted its youth leadership program Tyree Scott Freedom School in Seattle annually since its inception in 2001. Summer Freedom School has also been held in Edmonds, WA for three years. Inspired by the historic civil rights era Freedom Schools, sessions feature participatory workshops, field trips and visits from seasoned activists, with a special focus on the topics of racism, the global economy, sexism and homophobia, militarism, the education and criminal justice systems, and nonviolent social change. Five day-summer and three day-winter sessions have involved over 800 youth ages 14-21 during these years, including a majority of youth of color and young women.

Freedom School's mission is to educate and inspire young people to a lifetime of community engagement for social justice. As demand for Freedom School has grown, and recognizing the need to strengthen and enhance Freedom School curriculum and methodologies, AFSC sought an assessment of Freedom School effectiveness and opportunities. To achieve this, AFSC contracted with Theresa Lenear to evaluate the 2010 winter Freedom School session, Mayet Dalila to evaluate the summer 2010 session, and a team of consultants to conduct three focus groups comprised of Freedom School youth “graduates,” from different years along with adult mentors.

Key Findings

Freedom School Strengths

Participants and the Freedom School Learning Environment

Freedom School fosters a welcoming and supportive community, placing attendees in an ideal position to learn and develop their analysis of race and social justice. Some past participants of Freedom School return to support annual sessions, serving to deepen their learning and further strengthen their skills as facilitators. Participants are very diverse, including African American, Samoan, Asian, Native American, African immigrant, Latino, mixed/multiracial and white youth. Freedom School is consistently acknowledged by participants and mentors as creating opportunities for people from different walks of life to get to know each other in a way they have never been able to before. Presenters and organizers model friendship, respect and camaraderie. For some participants, Freedom School is their first experience of a participatory and interactive learning environment. The Freedom School facilitation team and adult mentors represent robust partnerships and collaborations, creating a solid foundational framework for Freedom School operations. Facilitators respect the serious nature of the issues discussed and allow room for feelings and experiences to be valued, visible and validated. They consistently check in with each other to evaluate the flow of the day and to adjust the agenda as needed.

Curriculum and Methodology

The curriculum is structured to sustain participants' active engagement as both learner and teacher on a variety of topics. Segments rotate between content presentations and hands on activities. Lectures are used as minimally as possible, and interspersed by personal stories shared by facilitators and participants. These serve to present concrete and relevant examples of the topics, putting a human face on complex issues. Additionally, thoughtful curriculum sequencing allows for each segment to connect to the next.

Impact

Participants, particularly youth of color, gain a new framework and vocabulary to find their voice in speaking out about institutional racism. There are numerous examples of Freedom School youth who are empowered to apply their knowledge and skills to organize in their communities. Youth of color are empowered by aspects of the curriculum which explore internalized oppression, and white youth by exploring privilege through hearing about the experiences of people of color. Close to 100% of participants (included in evaluation) self-report a positive impact from the experience and increased knowledge about topics such as different cultures, militarism, civil rights with the police, Native American history and how to organize for change. Over 80% of participants cite learning about racism and its impact as an especially powerful aspect of the Freedom School experience.

Items for Reflection and Recommendations

Meeting the Learning Needs of Youth

A smaller group size would physically and psychologically create a comfort zone for participants. Physical space, materials and objects should be geared toward creating community. Winter and summer Freedom Schools could be structured as two part sessions, enabling summer participants to build on insights from the previous winter session. Given the wide age range of participants, understanding of the stages of human development should be factored into the design and flow of the curriculum. Another option would be to separate into two groups to narrow the age range in each. Information should be presented more simply and slowly, and all of the multiple intelligences (number/reasoning, linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist (Thomas Armstrong) should be incorporated into the framing and expansion of the curriculum. Principles of adult learning theory should be applied in the curriculum design to benefit older participants. Pre-Freedom School spaces to build the readiness of youth who have had fewer opportunities for participation in enrichment programs (such as a space for African American youth to focus on identity development) could be developed. Freedom School should be at least five days long to provide more opportunities for youth to bond, and to process and reflect on information. Lastly, Freedom School could ensure better focus and model good health by creating a menu of healthy food choices for participants.

Expanding the Curriculum and Methodology

Opportunities for content and methodological expansion include a focus on exercises which ask youth to build a vision for the future; presentation of a wider range of resource materials; incorporation of conflict resolution and leadership development components; infusion of music, art and spoken word; integration of literacy strategies; providing vocabulary lists; engaging youth in small research activities; fostering peer-led instruction and inclusion of participant items of personal significance as part of the learning and discussion space. Diversity of field trip opportunities and community speakers could be expanded. Curriculum could be modified for high risk youth by allowing more time for participants to catch up, focusing on familiar and easily relatable institutions like the media and continually tying material back to participants' lives. Community organizing could be incorporated as a more explicit component of Freedom School. Participants could be engaged in a Participation Evaluation process by receiving training to develop evaluation questions and interview each other.

Enhancing Facilitator's Insights and Skills

Opportunities could be provided for Freedom School facilitators to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the major issues presented, explore their individual stages of identity development, and comfort levels with and techniques for responding to emotional expression. Facilitators could be afforded the opportunity as a group to engage in dialogue about their own reality of internalized racial oppression.

Fostering Greater Ripple Effect

Freedom School participants should be connected to community service opportunities. Past participants can be involved in recruitment and outreach for Freedom School, offering presentations about Freedom School in the community. Social networking amongst Freedom School “graduates” could be supported. More follow-up opportunities could be created to continue the learning and develop leadership, including age-appropriate recommended reading lists, a post-Freedom School debrief session, peer-to-peer training, technical assistance for youth organizing, and relevant campaigns for youth to become involved with.

Documenting Impact

A pre and post Freedom School evaluation should be administered to determine participant growth.

Visioning the Ideal Freedom School

Focus group youth and adult participants were asked to imagine what the ideal Freedom School could look like if time and resources were unlimited.

- Freedom School would be a fulltime, accredited alternative school with its own buildings and teachers attracting more and more youth, forming more partnerships and involving the wider community.
- The reach of Freedom School would be expanded by “graduates” giving presentations about some of the Freedom School topics in middle schools or as speakers for school assemblies.
- Freedom School would host an overnight retreat for youth.
- There could be Freedom School monthly educational events.
- Freedom School “graduates” would form a youth board with real decision-making power.
- Freedom School would become a national program, with a nationwide network of youth who have attended.

Conclusion

For almost a decade, the Tyree Scott Freedom School has had a profound impact on the lives of multiracial youth, and through them their families, friends, classmates, teachers and communities. Freedom’s School’s greatest strengths are its relevant and incisive curriculum, its collective and interactive method of instruction, and its safe and welcoming environment. These strengths have yielded high returns, including increased self-confidence, critical thinking skills, love of learning and demonstrated community organizing and leadership skills. An already valuable program with solid support, Freedom School can be strengthened by incorporating a wider range of teaching methods and participatory experiences as well as greater content depth and follow-up activities. Assessments of Freedom School’s impact will be further enhanced by intentional and consistent tracking of Freedom School’s effect on participants’ knowledge base as well as youth activities post-Freedom School. Additionally, Freedom School has the potential to grow into a different type of community invested institution that is permanent and sustainable.