

# Not Your Typical Summer School Program

Reading Young Adult Literature in Freedom Schools

*I know that I can make it  
Though you're doin' me wrong, so wrong*  
—from “Something Inside So Strong,” music and lyrics by Labi Siffre, 1988

It's 8:30 a.m. on an already-hot June day, and 50 young people—predominantly African American youth, grades 3–8—attending the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom Schools program at the local youth community center are singing the motivational song “Something Inside So Strong.” Singing songs, clapping hands, and reciting chants are part of “Harambee,” a Kiswahili word meaning “all pull together,” which marks the beginning of each day at Freedom Schools. The idea is to get all the young people (called “scholars”) pepped up and motivated to spend the day reading and learning how to make a difference in their lives and in the lives of others.

Obviously, the Freedom Schools program doesn't offer your typical summer enrichment. Some summer enrichment programs focus on pairing low-income adolescents with positive role models and mentors (e.g., “Big Buddy”; “Big Brothers/Big Sisters”) or improving graduation rates and providing access to postsecondary education (e.g., “Project GRAD”; “Gear Up”).

School-based summer programs often maintain a narrow focus on the mechanics of reading or remediation of perceived reading difficulties. Not so with Freedom Schools, whose main goal is to help African American youth “fall in love with books” and experience an “overwhelming *desire* to read” (Children's Defense Fund, 2010).

Underlying the Freedom Schools movement is the knowledge that a correlation exists between voluntary reading, civic engagement, and positive life outcomes.

Grounded in the history of Black slavery, the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, and African American pedagogy, the Freedom Schools program “holds sacred the two goals of freedom and literacy. Literacy is inseparable from the struggle for freedom because education interrogates power” (Jackson & Boutte, 2009, p. 110).

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on the theme of “I Can Make a Difference,” and culminates in a “Day of Social Action.” Ultimately, reading and empowerment are at the heart of the Freedom Schools movement, as are “dimensions of African American culture . . . that schools are lacking . . . (e.g., spirituality, harmony, verve, creativity, movement, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, social time perspective, and oral tradition)” (Jackson & Boutte, 2009, p. 110).

## Why Freedom Schools?

### Preventing Summer Reading Setback

The founder of the Freedom Schools program, Marian Wright Edelman, and national director, Dr. Jeanne Middleton-Hairston, are aware of the long history of research that describes the significant link between summer access to books and reading achievement. As Heyns (1978) reported, “The single summer activity that is most strongly and consistently related to summer learning is reading” (p. 161). More recently, Kim (2004) found that summer reading activity stemmed summer setback in a sample of 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students in an urban school system. In 2006, Kim reported on a single summer intervention that provided 252 randomly selected low-income 4th graders in 10 schools with books to read during the summer months. The study found small positive effects on reading achievement as measured by standardized tests, and gains were especially evident among African American students.

In an experimental, longitudinal study, Allington et al. (2007) found that high-poverty students who had access to books over the summer scored significantly higher on standardized tests than children without such access. Both Kim (2004) and Allington et al. (2007) found that easy access to varied reading materials in the summer correlated with reading volume, and increased summer reading improved fall reading proficiency. In a 2009 evaluative study of the Freedom Schools program, researchers saw reading levels as measured by the Basic Reading Inventory rise for 60% of its 51 program participants (Portwood, Parara-Rogers, & Taylor).

We know that students from low-income families have more restricted access to reading material at home than their more advantaged peers do (Constantino, 2005). Neuman and Celano (2001) found roughly 10 times greater access to reading material in

higher-income neighborhoods than in lower-income neighborhoods in the same large urban center. As researchers have shown, providing low-income youth easy access to books and rich literacy models in the summer is certainly one way to raise literacy achievement and motivate voluntary reading. This is one of the reasons why Freedom Schools exist, but this is only part of the story.

### A Necessary Counter-Story

The lyrics to “Something Inside So Strong,” two lines of which open this article, reference the idea that African American youth are being “done wrong” in public schools: public schooling in the US has been unsuccessful in improving the school experiences and academic achievement of African American students (Jackson & Boutte, 2009, p. 109). There are many who believe that African American students do not read or like to read. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) explain that it is important to recognize the power of White privilege and domination in the construction of such narratives, or “majoritarian stories” that serve to “distort and [silence] the experiences of people of color” (p. 29).

For example, when impoverished African American youth attending high-minority/high-poverty schools score poorly on standardized reading achievement tests, the standard “majoritarian” story would have us believe that students of color (and their families) are 1) literacy-poor; 2) struggling, reluctant readers who place a low value on reading; 3) “culturally deficit” and short on optimism and a strong work ethic to persevere in education (cf. Ogbu & Simons, 1998); and 4) lacking in cognitive skills that, when learned or gained, unlock reading comprehension. Some claim minority youth come from an “anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace school-work too whole-heartedly” (qtd. in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 31).

Freedom Schools serve as a powerful and much-needed counter-story to these discourses, proving that they can successfully engage African American youth with reading and civic engagement, *and that African American youth are indeed avid, passionate, skilled readers.*

As Jackson and Boutte (2009) explain:

The goal of African-centered education is not to prepare children to fit within the present [educational] system, but

to revolutionize the system toward the promise of democracy articulated in the documents (but not the deeds) that shaped America. Hence, Freedom Schools employ the use of *counternarrative* strategies [that] oppose the dominant society's notions about the intellectual capacity of African Americans, the role of learning in their lives, the meaning and purpose of school, and the power of their intellect. (p. 110)

In what follows, we describe the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) that is the core of the Freedom Schools' summer program and the young adult literature specifically selected for use by the Level III scholars (grades 6–8) in the program.

### The Freedom Schools' Integrated Reading Curriculum

Twice a year, a committee comprised of teachers, school media specialists, university professors, Freedom Schools site project directors, and members of the Coretta Scott King book award committee meet at the Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee, to read multicultural young adult literature and select the books that the Level III scholars will read in the six-week summer program. It is expected that each week, the Level III scholars will read a different, whole young adult novel that young people may not know about. The committee's rationale for reading a novel in its entirety is that young people need practice reading longer, sustained, complete texts (rather than short excerpts from texts or worksheets) in order to better understand and monitor such literary elements as theme, plot, and character development. The committee also feels the need to introduce books to African American youth that feature characters who look and talk like they do. Committee members believe that non-White students need to know that authors of substance and value come from their culture.

It is well known that there is a lack of multicultural literature in use in public middle and high school language arts/English classrooms. As Applebee (1989) and Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006) suggest, many language arts and English teachers continue to teach the same White-male-centered canonical works taught over two decades ago (e.g., *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Hamlet*). Stallworth et al. (2006) further contend that even the multicultural literature that is predominantly taught in high schools—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Invisible Man*, *Black Boy*, *Things Fall*

*Apart*—describes people and events that occurred in the past. Thus, students reading such works may get the sense that racism and oppression are also things of the past or that the racism and oppression some students experience on a daily basis out-of-school (and in-school) are not important or relevant to their teachers or school officials. Stallworth et al. (2006) also explain, "It is troubling that [*Black Boy* and *Invisible Man*] may be the only representative literature about black experiences that students in most high schools will read. It would be similar to having Huck Finn as the single spokesperson for the white experience" (p. 487).

Thus, the committee looks for novels that will resonate with and reflect—in respectful ways—the Freedom Schools participants themselves. The youth who attended the Freedom Schools program we worked with this summer tended to be self-identified Black or biracial youth, living below the poverty level, usually with an extended family member (e.g., grandparent, aunt) or foster family. The novels selected for Freedom Schools readers illuminate these social contexts, reflecting what the authors see as an accurate, authentic sense of people who live in such contexts. In addition, the novels often depict vernacular language and discourse styles of many African Americans, privileging Black oral communication and rhetorical strategies. Jackson and Boutte (2009) call such literature "liberation literature," explaining that the books chosen for Freedom Schools

. . . allow African American students to have a mirror of and window into social, cultural, and historical awareness that centers their culture, not as an additive or referent, but as a factor worthy of serving as curriculum in its own right. These books . . . can be inclusive of authors who are not Black, as long as the work reflects the significant features of African American children's literature: (1) celebrates the strengths of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival; (2) bears witness to Black people's determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity; (3) nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competencies that we as adults see in them; (4) situates itself, through its language and its content, within African American literary

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and cultural contexts; and (5) honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and as a way of knowing. (Bishop qtd. in Jackson & Boutte, p. 110)

Ultimately, all the books chosen for the Freedom Schools summer program must meet the criterion of being affirming for Black children and their culture.

Additionally, the committee looks for young adult novels that fit the theme of Freedom Schools: "I Can Make a Difference!" For week one, the novel must

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reflect a character making a difference in one's self and promoting a positive self-image (Children's Defense Fund, 2010). For week two, the novel must reflect a character making a difference in one's family through positive interactions with family members, other adults, and peers. For week three, the novel must depict an

appreciation and ownership of community and the ability to strengthen one's community. For week four, the novel should depict the lives of people who have changed the course of this country's history. For week five, the novel should encourage readers to explore the world and what they can do to make the world better, as well as what obstacles they must overcome to achieve their goals. For week six, the novel should depict Americans who made a difference in their own lives and the lives of others with hope, education, and action. The books for this final week should motivate students to do all they can to ensure that they get a high quality education and empower them to take action to make their hopes and dreams become a reality.

Finally, because the directors of the Freedom Schools program do not want the Freedom Schools to "feel like school," the book selection committee also designs an activity-oriented, rather than a skills-oriented, curriculum to accompany each book that is taught.

So what did Freedom Schools Level III scholars read this past summer, and what did they have to say about the books? In what follows, we describe the six young adult books chosen for the 2010 Freedom Schools summer program and then share some in-

sights about the Freedom Schools reading experience from two program participants.

## **Reading Young Adult Literature in Freedom Schools**

### **Week One: I Can Make a Difference in My Life**

The first novel the Level III scholars read was Sharon G. Flake's (2007) *Begging for Change*. In this book, due to a domestic "turf war," Raspberry Hill's mother has been beaten with a metal pipe and lies in a hospital. Raspberry's father is an alcoholic and a drug addict. No wonder Raspberry decides to steal money from her well-off friend, Zora, even if it is Zora and her father, Dr. Mitchell, who treat Raspberry and her mother like family. But Raspberry's stealing does not stop there, and soon she has lost the trust of people she cares about most. When her own father steals from her, Raspberry begins to wonder if she is any different from him. As Raspberry's mother tells her and other thugs on the street, "To be better, you gotta want better." Ultimately, Raspberry must do some hard soul-searching to decide who she is going to be and what "better" looks like for her.

Activities that the Level III scholars participated in while reading this book included creating self-portraits, role-playing the conflict between Raspberry and Zora, and researching social service agencies that could be helpful to people who find themselves homeless and living on the streets. For this last activity, the scholars listed names of agencies in the community, investigated the services they provided, and described how those services could be helpful to people in the community.

### **Week Two: I Can Make a Difference in My Family**

Next, the scholars read *Joseph* by Shelia P. Moses (2008). This young adult novel tells the story of 14-year-old Joseph Flood, who is a victim of his mother's chronic drug abuse. Spending all of the child support money sent by Joseph's dad, who is away fighting in Iraq, Joseph's mother lands the two in a homeless shelter. Joseph has the opportunity to go live with his mother's sister in the suburbs, where he can attend a good school and join the tennis team. But Joseph does not want to leave his mother. Who will look out for her? Who will take care of her? Joseph must navigate the slippery slope between loyalty to

family and self as he scrapes out a stable future for himself.

Activities accompanying this book included drawing family portraits, conducting research on alcohol/drug abuse, role-playing conflict resolution strategies, and identifying things young people can do to help others living in poverty.

### **Week Three: I Can Make a Difference in My Community**

For week three, the scholars read another Sharon G. Flake novel, *Bang!* (2005). This young adult novel depicts the violence that mars some impoverished urban neighborhoods and the constant state of terror its residents live in as a result. Mann, the main character, has just seen his little brother, Joseph, shot to death on the front porch of their house—an innocent victim in the wrong place at the wrong time. Mann’s mother and father are grieving in their own ways, none of which are helpful to Mann, who has started smoking weed with his best friend, Kee-Lee, and skipping school. When Mann’s father decides Joseph was shot because he was “too soft,” he abandons Mann and Kee-Lee miles from town and tells them to find their own way back home. Mann’s journey back to self-hood is fraught with violence, disappointment, mistakes, and regrets, but Mann ultimately decides what kind of man he is going to be and what it might take for Black men to stop killing one another.

Activities accompanying this book included discussing Sharon G. Flake’s poem that opens the book, “Boys Ain’t Men . . . Yet,” creating cards commemorating people who have died in the community, researching news articles regarding deaths in their neighborhoods, and comparing Luther Vandross’s song, *Dance with My Father Again*, to the book.

### **Week Four: I Can Make a Difference in My Country**

During week four, Level III scholars read Phillip Hoose’s (2009) National Book Award-winning *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*. This nonfictional work gives voice to the 15-year-old girl who refused to give up her seat to a White woman on a segregated bus nine months before Rosa Parks did. But instead of being celebrated, like Rosa Parks was, Claudette found herself shunned by her classmates and ignored by the Black leaders of Montgomery, Alabama. Why was Claudette shunned and ignored? Why did she not

get credit for jumpstarting the Civil Rights Movement? This book answers these questions and elucidates a little-known piece of American history.

Activities accompanying this book included watching and discussing Reginald Bullock’s YouTube video, “A War for Your Soul”; creating a visual timeline of the events taking place in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955; identifying civil rights issues that continue to plague their communities; and conducting research on the “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” and creating a commercial about its content (The “Cradle to Prison Pipeline” is a CDF report—see <http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/cradle-prison-pipeline-report-2007-full-highres.html>).

### **Week Five: I Can Make a Difference in the World**

For week five, scholars read Sharon Draper’s (2008) Coretta Scott King Book Award-winning young adult novel, *Copper Sun*. This novel, told in two voices, depicts the lives of Amari, an African girl brutally stolen from her homeland and enslaved on a rice plantation in Charleston, South Carolina, and Polly, a White indentured servant girl hired to help Amari learn English and her place in the new racialized hierarchy. Gradually, the two become friends and seek their freedom together, although as Amari reminds Polly, she can escape at any time and not be killed, because her skin color will always protect her.

Accompanying activities included discussing Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” that opens the book; tracing the sun motif while reading; locating South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida on US maps; comparing the plight of Mexican immigrants to slaves; tracing the route to freedom Amari and Polly took; and reading Tom Feelings’s (1995) adult picturebook, *The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo*, about the horrific transatlantic slave journey that claimed millions of lives and brought enslaved Africans to their American prisons.

### **Week Six: With Hope, Education, and Action, I Can Make a Difference!**

Finally, for the last week of Freedom Schools, the Level III scholars read David Colbert’s (2009) young adult biography, *Michelle Obama: An American Story*. This rich biographical portrait traces Michelle Obama’s life from her ancestors, who were slaves on

a rice plantation in South Carolina, to her working-class, Southside Chicago childhood and her rise as one of the most influential women living today. Unique to this biographical telling, Colbert contextualizes Michelle Obama's life story within larger movements in African American history: slavery, freedom, the Reconstruction era, the Civil Rights movement, and finally, the 21st century.

Activities accompanying this book included conducting research on Ivy League (e.g., Yale, Princeton) and Historically Black Colleges or Universities (e.g., Claflin, Allen, Benedict), including a look at male/female ratios, majors offered, and cost of attendance; researching the Urban Prep Academy and debating whether or not integration or isolation in schools is better; and describing dream jobs and what it will take to land one.

### **What Do Freedom Schools Scholars Say About the Books?**

Four months after the Freedom Schools program ended, we interviewed DaShaun and Brittany (pseudonyms), brother-and-sister Level III scholars who participated in the 2010 Freedom Schools program in Knoxville, Tennessee. Even though it had been some time since DaShaun and Brittany had participated in the program, they were excited to talk about the books and could recall specific details and provide thorough summaries about each book. When asked how they could remember so much about the books, DaShaun and Brittany explained that they had continued to read the books over and over again since the program ended. When asked why they read the books again and again, Brittany responded, "They're that good," and explained that she had read *Begging for Change* and *Copper Sun* "at least 2–3 times" and "[shared] and [talked] about the books with her friends" (personal communication, October 26, 2010). Both DaShaun and Brittany looked for the books in their school library. Brittany stated that she also looks for other books by the authors Sharon G. Flake, Sharon Draper, and Shelia P. Moses. When we asked DaShaun and Brittany if they would have known about these young adult novels or authors if they had not participated in Freedom Schools, both responded, "No," and said that they had never heard of these authors before the summer program.

DaShaun and Brittany went on to describe several reasons why they liked the young adult novels they read during Freedom Schools. Brittany said, "They're contemporary, they're real. People are like this out in the world." DaShaun explained he liked books that showed "violence, but with solutions." He revealed that he liked a "hopeful ending." Brittany added that, "[The characters in these books] think that maybe because their dad is a drug addict they may end up like that in their life. But you see that they don't have to end up like that." DaShaun and Brittany also said that they felt the books "don't try to tell you how to live your life, but they are examples. They are suggestions." Brittany elaborated, "If you want to change your life, you have to change it yourself, don't let someone else do it for you. You have the power to do that" (personal communication, October 26, 2010).

When asked to pick a favorite book from that summer's reading, Brittany said she could not pick just one. DaShaun said it would be between Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* and Sharon G. Flake's *Bang!*, which were probably the two most intense books of the six. DaShaun stated, "These set you up for more mature books."

Brittany was currently re-reading *Copper Sun* for the third time. Both Brittany and DaShaun liked *Copper Sun* because, as DaShaun said, "It relates to our heritage," and Brittany said, "It's Africa." They both indicated that they had read books about their heritage before, but DaShaun said, "In school, they just give you the social studies book," and Brittany explained, "It's like 'just read it.' It's no details, it's like 'slavery was blah, blah, blah.'" DaShaun added, "It will show you like 17 peoples' points of views in the textbook, but in [*Copper Sun*], you get one person's point of view and you get to see how they felt and how they reacted to the situations they were in."

When we asked if they thought *Copper Sun* was too intense or hard to read in some places (Amari is raped repeatedly in the book) and told them that some teachers may not think the book is appropriate for middle school readers, Brittany declared, "We're mature enough to handle it. And all the details let the people know about what really happened. Some books don't tell you the truth . . . you gotta let the people know" (personal communication, October 26, 2010).

DaShaun liked what he called the “realistic fiction” books, but he did not like the nonfictional works (*Claudette Colvin*; *Michelle Obama*) as much, because he said that he “couldn’t relate to these in any way.” DaShaun believed that they were like “social studies books, not like stories.” DaShaun further stated that “I’m not saying they weren’t good, I’m just saying they didn’t hook me in like the others did.” Brittany said she was inspired by Claudette Colvin’s story about a teenager who stood up for justice, and she liked reading about how Michelle Obama met her future husband.

We think it is safe to say these novels made quite an impact on DaShaun and Brittany, who described intense reactions and responses to the books. That DaShaun and Brittany revisit these books when they don’t have to, and look to these books as both mirrors and windows reflective of their own and others’ lives reinforces the importance of putting multicultural young adult literature in young people’s hands.

We ended the interview with questions about DaShaun’s and Brittany’s experiences as readers in school. Both DaShaun and Brittany are 8th graders in Honors reading classes at their urban middle school. DaShaun and Brittany indicated that they predominantly read short stories out of the textbook (e.g., “Raymond’s Run” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”) and not novels in class. They said that they do not read books in school like they read at Freedom Schools. When asked if DaShaun and Brittany felt that their teachers really knew them as readers, both replied “No.” Brittany explained that if her teachers really knew her and what she liked to read, mystery books and romance/drama books would be available in class for independent reading. DaShaun expressed that many of his teachers didn’t know he loved comic books and graphic novels. He stated that he was expected to read every day, but all he was able to do with his reading was write in his journal about it. He said that the teacher collected his journals and gave him grades for doing the writing. Both he and Brittany acknowledged that they wanted opportunities to talk about what they read, like they had in Freedom Schools, instead of always writing about what they read.

## **Conclusion: Stemming the Tide of “Readicide”**

As we have described in this article, the Freedom Schools’ summer program serves as a necessary counter-story to negative discourses about minority adolescent readers, and as research has shown, the program motivates reading engagement and achievement. Therefore, we think the program also serves as a resistant force to what California award-winning teacher and author Kelly Gallagher (2009) deems “readicide,” an overemphasis on testing in public schools that is killing students’ love and joy of reading. Much research supports the fact that reading engagement and motivation increase when students get to choose what they read and, when given opportunities to choose, teens choose to read young adult literature over more canonical works (Cole, 2008).

Unfortunately, however, less and less time in English classes is devoted to the instruction of whole novels; even less time is focused on instruction around multicultural young adult literature or independent reading time. As former IRA president Richard Allington (2005) suggests, school reading programs designed to raise test scores actually limit the volume of in-school reading, even though a potent relationship exists between volume of reading and reading achievement. Allington further contends that what really matters in raising reading achievement is giving kids time to read a lot, giving kids books they can read, and helping kids learn to read fluently (which depends on reading volume and access to books).

In school, adolescents learn to associate reading with passing a test. Layer the stress of taking high-stakes tests with the invisibility and lack of affirmation of the worldviews of diverse adolescents in typical classroom content, and it becomes clearer why reading disengagement among youth might ensue. This does not mean adolescents become nonreaders or do not want to read: this means they become “dormant” readers or “underground” readers (Miller, 2009), who must rely on programs like Freedom Schools to affirm their reading identities.

We wish it did not have to be this way: We wish we did not need programs like Freedom Schools, be-

cause all young people are being affirmed as capable readers in public schools, and multiple purposes for reading are celebrated in school curricula. Sadly, this is not the case, especially in public schools that struggle to meet federally mandated accountability demands. Thus, we second the emotion Brittany expressed at the end of our interview, “Thank goodness for Freedom Schools!”

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