Chapter 185

Algebra as Civil Rights: An Interview with Bob Moses

Peggy Dye

Bob Moses, a popular political organizer and teacher admired for his quiet, self-effacing style, grew up in Harlem and graduated from Hamilton College. Inspired by the example of black students involved in southern sit-ins, he left graduate school at Harvard to work full time with SCLC. Encouraged by local NAACP leader Amzie Moore, he set up the first SNCC voter registration drive, a campaign that led to Freedom Summer (see chapters 107 and 108) and the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (see chapter 109), which challenged the state's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention. He is the founder of the Algebra Project, a national program to teach math and computer literacy in the inner city.

Peggy Dye is a New York–based freelance writer who frequently writes on city planning and preservation issues. A series of her articles in the Village Voice *and* Newsday *about the Audubon Ballroom, the Harlem landmark where the Transport Workers Union was founded and Malcolm X was later assassinated, led to a movement that resulted in the partial preservation of the site. She is currently completing a novel about the 1970s New York City fiscal crisis.*

An earlier version of the following selection, "Algebra: The Civil Rights Issue for the 90s," appeared in Newsday, *25 August 1994. Copyright © 1994 Peggy Dye. Published here with permission of the author.*

For more information, write The Algebra Project, 99 Bishop Richard Allen Drive, Cambridge, MA 02139, or call 617/491-0200.

Q: You're famous as the Freedom Summer leader who bused college students to the Mississippi Delta to register black voters in 1964. Today, you called math literacy the civil rights issue of the '90s. What's the connection?

Moses: It's a question of shifting technology. We lived in the '60s with technology that was industrially based. In the '90s, we're in a computer-based technology. That's brought about a profound shift in the literacy requirements for citizenship.

In the 1960s the requirements focused around reading and writing literacy. When we went into Mississippi in the Delta, many of the sharecroppers couldn't

read or write. We taught them to do that, and tied it to our [voter registration] campaign. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party came out of this.

You need literacy to get freedom. You need your freedom, too—in various degrees—to become literate. But the 1990s have brought in a requirement for quantitative literacy. Computers mean you need people not to crunch numbers—computers do that. You need people to interpret. That gives rise to a school system in which critical thinking about quantitative information is required.

If we don't know how to do that, there won't be any work for us. In this first district for the Algebra Project in New York, [Assemblyman] Roger Green told me there's 80 percent unemployment. So there's an issue for young people. They have no jobs and they don't think they can demand jobs because they don't have any of the tools they need.

Q: How did you start the Algebra Project?

Moses: I got a MacArthur Fellowship in 1982 for my civil rights work and I used that to start the project. Maisha, my daughter, was ready to go into algebra in public school in Cambridge, Mass. But the school didn't give a course in it. I was going to tutor her. I've taught mathematics and my Ph.D. is in the philosophy of math. But Maisha didn't want two "maths"—one at school and one at home. The MacArthur freed me to go into school with her. I gave her and three other students a small tutorial every day.

The next year I looked at the politics of math—who was taking algebra? You had the middle-class and upper-middle-class whites doing algebra, and the minorities and poor whites below grade level. It took another couple of years, but by 1987, Cambridge let us offer the Algebra Project to *all* seventh graders in the public system.

Q: How does the Algebra Project work?

Moses: It stands the usual approach to mathematics on its head. Usually, children begin with symbols in a textbook. They are asked to understand symbols and then to apply them to their world. This doesn't keep most students interested.

In the Algebra Project, we start with the world that children live in. We take some experience, like a subway trip, which the children learn to mathematize, through a protocol of drawing, writing and discussion. They learn to create their own symbols and in the same process, they experience themselves working together in class. They gain a sense of self, and they define their world. That's powerful.

We learned this method in the Delta. We were faced with the issue of empowering sharecroppers who were illiterate, which is what is said about school children today. In the Delta, we discovered that as sharecroppers participated, they gained their own voice, discussing events in daily life that were important to them and devising action plans to do something. Out of this process rose political movement and leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer, for instance, came out of this.

Q: What about white kids? Is the project open to them?

Moses: If there are white kids in the schools, they are in it, too. But in the South, most have fled the system, and more and more in the North, too. There's one

area in Eastern Kentucky in the mountains that is all white. But throughout the country, our focus is the same as when we organized around the right to vote. We focus on the sharecroppers, on people at the bottom. They are the people who can most quickly leverage the most change for everybody.

Q: Do New York City kids need a different kind of approach?

Moses: The way we work the project is to have a local group form and take charge. We don't try to implement from afar. Our first invitation here came from Dr. Lester Young when he was an assistant commissioner of state education last year. He asked us if we would consider bringing the project into the city. We said that you must have people from both the community and the school sitting together at the table.

He agreed. A group began to form—a core of about a dozen parents, educators and activists. In the meantime, Lester Young became superintendent for District 13 and the New York Algebra Project decided to pilot the project in this district. We've been holding meetings with parents and the community since last winter and out of that process two schools—Satellite West and P.S. 258—were selected.

The pilot will have 130 sixth graders, their math teachers and parents. We are currently finishing a two-week training of teachers plus some parents, activists, young adult students and a school-board member.

This is a side of organizing that isn't really understood as well as the mobilizing tradition. People know about big campaigns—marches on Washington, for instance. But I come out of a different organizing tradition. We build by bringing a whole community—teachers and parents and kids—together. Organizing is local.

Here, the Algebra Project classrooms will also be open to visitors. It's part of the culture of the project. You want students to feel comfortable being visible and explaining to visitors something they are making.

Q: All this energy comes into a city school system that many say crushes creativity. Is that how you see the system?

Moses: Let's look at it globally. Like all the school systems in major cities, this one is under enormous pressure. Integration has not worked. You have school systems that are public but predominantly minority. Black people have a larger voice in politics but the economic base of the city has eroded, along with the educational base. Then you have technology. How should the school systems be in this age when you have the new technology? You don't have answers. You don't necessarily even have all the questions.

New York City is in the middle of this. The Algebra Project is saying that whatever the transition is going to be, we know that math literacy has to be in place. You have to put a floor under all students. This is the citizenship question.

Q: What is the citizenship question?

Moses: The young people are being faced with the same charges as the sharecroppers—that they don't care about education, that the reason they're not getting education is their fault, that their social conditions are too horrendous, that they've given over to apathy and are dropping out.

The Algebra Project has to work on that constituency and its demanding what it needs. We want to help this generation find their voice in the larger society. ■