



The Ella Baker Conversation Series

Education for Liberation: Hasan Kwame Jeffries and Charles E. Cobb

Video Discussion Toolkit

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Civil rights leader and organizer Ella Baker believed in the capacity of ordinary people “to understand and interpret the world around them, to see that world for what it was and to move to transform it.”

This Learning for Justice series of conversations with host Hasan Kwame Jeffries builds on Baker’s model of democratic learning and dialogue as foundational to the freedom movement and democracy. Each conversation includes a video of the convened conversation along with a discussion toolkit for civic and political education in communities and schools.

Learn more about Ella Baker in Barbara Ransby’s *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision, Second Edition*.

Note for Facilitating Community Discussion:

Learning for Justice is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a 501(c)(3) nonpartisan nonprofit that does not engage in political activity. This means that, while we can discuss various current events and topics, some of which may relate to political issues, we cannot discuss candidates or political parties in a way that favors one party over another.

Videos for the Ella Baker Conversation Series are available at splcenter.org/learning-for-justice.

Introduction to Education for Liberation

“Well, really, it’s a core idea, I think, of the Freedom Movement: People need to take control of their own lives. They need to take control of the decision-making that affects their lives. It’s the only way to gain, I think, to gain any semblance of freedom.” — Charles E. Cobb

As a young civil rights activist working on voting rights, Charles E. Cobb conceptualized the idea of Freedom Schools during his involvement in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. This video features a conversation between Mr. Cobb and historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries, recorded at Mr. Cobb’s home in Jacksonville, Florida, in October 2025.

In this conversation, Cobb traces the role of education in his youth, his transformative experiences as a student at Howard University, and his deepened activism and commitment to the movement for freedom in Mississippi. Cobb recognized that Black Americans in the United States — and especially in the South — strongly believed in voting rights and education. Building on this consensus, Cobb and other civil rights organizers planned the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project as an effort at liberation education and voter registration. The legacy of this model continues today.

Hasan Kwame Jeffries is an associate professor of history at The Ohio State University, host of the *Teaching Hard History* podcast series, and author of *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt*.

Charles E. Cobb Jr. is a distinguished civil rights organizer, journalist and educator. As a field secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), he originated the idea of Freedom Schools as a part of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. In partnership with civil rights organizer and educator Robert P. Moses, Cobb coauthored *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project*. He also authored *On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Trail* and *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*.

Video Discussion Toolkit

This conversation between Hasan Kwame Jeffries and Charles E. Cobb invites us to engage in community dialogue about justice and liberation and promote political education and civic participation to strengthen democracy and build a more inclusive society.

This toolkit, divided into eight sections or chapters, complements the approximately two-hour conversation, which we offer as one full video or two-part versions. The eight chapters can be used as individual community workshop sessions or classroom lessons, and each includes key points from the video and discussion questions to foster reflection and dialogue.

Essential Questions:

- What is liberation education? How is liberation education a strategic tool for resisting oppression and helping people realize their power for civic participation?
- How does listening deeply to communities, engaging in dialogue and building solidarity allow ordinary people to transform awareness of injustice into meaningful democratic action?
- How can sharing personal and collective stories through an organizing lens help communities understand their history, strengthen their voice and inspire civic action to create a more just and equitable society?

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Part 1: Seeds of Justice

[Video Part 1: Approximately 1 hour; time: 00:00 to 1:03:38]

In the first part of the conversation, Charles Cobb traces his education and growth as a civil rights activist from his childhood exposure to “dinner-table conversations” to his experiences in Mississippi leading up to the 1964 Freedom Summer Project.

As you watch each video chapter, pay close attention to the various decisions Cobb makes and how each one leads him down the path toward his commitment to the freedom struggle in Mississippi. Consider how Cobb’s own story connects with the stories of communities (past and present, at home, at Howard University and in Mississippi) and the broader Black freedom struggle. And think about the relevance of Cobb’s story to our lives today and current issues of freedom, human rights, voting and democratic participation.

Chapter 1: A Tradition of Education and Conversations

“So, there’s always been this kind of... link between education and freedom.”

Before watching the video, listen to a recording of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”
[Or sing together!]

1. In what ways does your community foster practices that instill pride in identity and history?

Watch Chapter 1 of the video (21 minutes, time stamp 0:00 to 0:20:54).

Charles Cobb’s story of his education — both formally at a Rosenwald school and at home through dinner table conversations and readings — offers insights into the learning that deepened his understanding of race and injustice in the U.S. and his own potential.

2. What does the Rosenwald schools’ singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” daily tell us about the education culture and pride in the schools?

Black Americans always grasped education as a strategy for personal growth and community change — an act of resistance as well as a vehicle for community progress. Education’s potential for growth and advancement is why teaching enslaved Black people to read and write was prohibited.

From Mary Peake teaching children under Emancipation Oak in 1861 to the Rosenwald Schools, education that fostered cultural pride as well as literacy and a sense of possibility became a tool of liberation.

3. With current efforts to restrict inclusive education and honest history conversations in public schools — especially about race and white supremacy — what can we learn from Mary Peake’s actions? What are some ways today to foster education as resistance and a vehicle for community advancement?

Cobb describes how major events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the murder of Emmett Till were discussed “at our dinner table” and “on the street corners.”

4. What conversations about injustice or social movements happen today in our homes, schools and community? Who is talking about current events and justice? Who is not, and why?
5. Let's brainstorm some ways to encourage more of these conversations. (For example, finding children's books to read together; identifying reliable media outlets for news and information; having community spaces that feel safe to have these conversations.)

When the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was announced, Cobb's family celebrated the legal victory but immediately asked, “What's that going to mean for Black teachers and Black principals?” Integration promised opportunity but also threatened the cultural spaces and leadership that sustained Black communities.

Although segregated Black schools had limited resources compared to white schools, they often fostered a learning culture supported by dedicated Black teachers, principals, coaches and deeply invested communities. This demonstrates that liberation and self-determination are not always guaranteed by access to material resources alone.

6. What were some negative consequences of school integration that focused on moving Black students into white schools? How does this history contextualize current public education concerns? (Consider, for example, the shortage of Black educators in public schools today.)
7. In your community, where do we see education reflecting cultural pride, identity and community investment?
8. What would it look like to combine fully resourced schools with an educational culture that affirms students' histories, strengths and sense of self while being honest about our nation's history and inclusive of diversity?

Chapter 2: Discovering Student Activism

“I’m what, 18, and I’m listening to them and whatnot, and they’re interesting, but I’m in school, but it plants the idea that there’s something besides picketing or sitting-in in restaurants that you can do...”

Watch Chapter 2 of the video (10 minutes, time stamp 0:20:54 to 0:31:34)

Howard University functioned as a site of learning and a catalyst for student activism. Students were politically engaged in various ways (newspaper, student government, public debates), creating an environment that immersed students in the ideas, strategies and moral questions of the Civil Rights Movement.

1. What are some of the justice and democracy issues that young people today are discussing?

Student networks and dialogue shape political consciousness. Through interactions with activists, organizers and intellectual debates on campus, Cobb’s awareness of the movement expanded. His experiences — riding a bus to a protest, joining a sit-in, and spending time in jail alongside seasoned organizers who exposed him to wider organizing efforts — demonstrate how dialogue and mentorship can cultivate commitment to democratic activism.

2. What does Cobb’s experience suggest about how young people learn to organize and mobilize communities for change?
3. What roles do relationships, mentorships and exposure to experienced activists play in developing the skills and confidence necessary for collective civic action?
4. Who are the mentors or seasoned organizers and activists in your community? How can we foster mentorships so young people can learn from them?

At Howard University, students did more than organize sit-ins; they shaped campus life by leading the newspaper, participating in student government and hosting debates between such activists as Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin, who offered different visions for Black freedom.

5. What does this suggest about how debate, educational institutions and exposure to competing ideas can help our youth and community members learn to organize and build civic power?
6. Cobb describes how quickly his involvement and activism grew, from reading about the movement to joining protests and going to jail. What is the difference between simply learning about injustice and becoming civically engaged to challenge it? What kinds of experiences and exposure might help young people today move from awareness to organizing for change in their communities?

Chapter 3: The Power of Place – Mississippi

“No place in the universe could be as bad for a Black person as Mississippi. Now here these students are in Mississippi, sitting in, so I want to know, I’m thinking in my head, ‘What kind of students are these?’”

Watch Chapter 3 of the video (16 minutes, time stamp: 0:31:34 to 0:48:08).

For Cobb, Mississippi served as a transformative site for growth and activism. His decision to “get off the bus” in Mississippi exposed him to the realities of grassroots civil rights work, where organizing centered on voter registration, community relationships and the leadership of local activists.

When Cobb stopped in Jackson, Mississippi, Lawrence Guyot challenged him: “What’s the point of going to a workshop on civil rights when you’re standing right here in Mississippi?”

1. Think about that statement for a moment. What is Guyot trying to teach Cobb about “the power of place” in community action and social change? How might people today recognize when the work for justice is already happening in their own communities? What equity and justice work is currently happening in your community?

Political understanding is connected to the power of place. Experiencing the Mississippi Delta – from cotton fields to encounters with hostile white officials – revealed the everyday conditions and dangers Black communities faced.

2. The mayor of Ruleville’s statement to the organizers, “Well, that law ain’t got here yet,” shows the gap between constitutional rights and lived reality. What were some barriers to voting for Black people in Mississippi?

Grassroots movements are built through relationships and local leadership. Cobb’s entry into organizing emerged through interactions and invitations from activists already doing the work, which emphasizes how movements often grow through trust, collaboration and immersion in local communities.

3. How is Cobb’s narrative of his own growth and learning now connected to the people, communities and sense of place?
4. What does the movement in Mississippi demonstrate about the relationship between place, power and rights? What role do ordinary people in local communities play in making democratic promises a reality?

Chapter 4: From Curiosity to Commitment

“People are getting killed, people losing their jobs and all of that, and y’all say it’s apathy? No, it’s not apathy. You know, it’s fear.”

Watch Chapter 4 of the video (15 minutes, time stamp: 0:48:08 to 1:03:12).

Organizing requires humility and openness to learn from local communities. Cobb mentions that he grew to understand that effective activism in Mississippi depended on listening to community members and experienced organizers who understood the local risks, networks and strategies — “how to move in this place.”

1. What does this chapter suggest about the idea of “community as teacher”? What are some ways organizers and leaders from outside your community can learn from the knowledge and experiences within your community?
2. Who in your community might be considered a “Mrs. Anderson” — someone with a network of connections who knows what is happening? What are some ways in which everyday interactions can create momentum for change?

Faced with violence, arrest and the possibility of death, Cobb recognized that he had an option people in the community didn’t have — he could leave Mississippi and return home. At this turning-point moment, Cobb made the critical decision to remain and commit himself to the work alongside the community.

3. Some leaders, like Fannie Lou Hamer, lived inside the struggle with no option to leave, while others, like Cobb, could enter and exit. What responsibilities do those who can leave have toward those who cannot? How should the difference in stakes shape how power and decision-making are shared in civic movements?

Cobb emphasizes that fear, not apathy, kept people from voting and civic participation. Efforts like the Freedom Vote demonstrated that when offered safe, supportive community spaces to participate, people willingly engaged politically despite systemic threats.

4. What are some barriers to voting in your community today? What might make people feel threatened or unsafe in participating in elections? (For example, would the presence of police or immigration officers affect voting?)
5. Brainstorm and map out the barriers to voting in your community today. Using the LFJ Action Planning Toolkit, think of ways that community members might work together to address one or more of these barriers.

Part 2: Freedom Schools

[Video Part 2: Approximately 1 hour; time stamp: 1:03:41 to 1:59:03]

Cobb's work in Mississippi led to his participation in the 1964 Freedom Summer Project — especially his role in conceptualizing Freedom Schools. In recognizing that people needed environments free from hostility to learn effectively, these schools provided educational spaces and programs in Black-controlled spaces. The Freedom Schools model encouraged consciousness and confidence-building, with an intentional focus on introducing students to Black scholars and writers.

As you watch the video chapters, pay close attention to the ideas that shaped Freedom Schools as a model of liberation education. And consider the role of civics and political education in developing the capacity for community advancement and full participation in democracy.

Chapter 5: Community Learning in Black Spaces

“I mean, there are things that people have a consensus about. ... There was a consensus that existed that gaining the right to vote was good and necessary. And you could work with that as an organizer. ... And the one other thing in Mississippi, and I think the South, which there was a consensus about — education, it's a good thing.”

Watch Chapter 5 of the video (16 minutes, time stamp: 1:03:41 to 1:19:47).

Black people in Mississippi faced violence and hostility in any efforts toward equality and democratic participation. Organizers researched various aspects of power dynamics, community consensus and legal avenues to encourage Black civic engagement.

1. Considering the idea of knowledge as power, SNCC research director Jack Minnis discovered that Mississippi delegate selection meetings were legally required to be public, but the policy had been ignored for decades. How do you think this knowledge empowered organizers like Aaron Henry to challenge deeply rooted power structures?
2. In your community or state, are there laws, rules or civic processes that exist on paper but are routinely ignored? How can being aware of them create opportunities for change? What organizing efforts would be needed to increase awareness among us today?

Freedom Schools were planned as part of the broader Freedom Summer Project to provide meaningful education and counter systemic racism and miseducation of Black youth. The Freedom Schools program offered academic learning — reading, writing and arithmetic — and consciousness-building education in Black-controlled spaces, which allowed adults and youth to engage in learning without fear.

3. Think about the importance of Black-controlled spaces against the backdrop of hostility and danger in white-controlled places of authority in Mississippi in the 1960s. What does the participation of adults in Freedom Schools suggest about safety and comfort considerations necessary for civic engagement? Are there similar spaces in your community that could support learning and collective civic action?

Community consensus — what people believed was good and necessary — served as a foundation for organizing for voting rights and education in Mississippi. Organizers worked with these community priorities to gain trust, resources and participation.

4. Cobb emphasizes that effective organizing begins with what a community already agrees on and values. How does identifying shared beliefs or priorities serve as the foundation for civic action in your community, even when people might feel hesitant or reluctant to engage? What are some of the consensus values of your community — the things that matters most to ordinary people?

Partnerships between organizers and educators strengthened the Freedom Schools model. The organizers in 1964 recognized their own strengths but also demonstrated humility and collaboration by involving trained educators — “people who knew more about the techniques and methodology of school.”

5. Who are your local experts in community education and organizing? Instead of trying to do everything on our own or in our groups, how can we reach out to others who might have more training or expertise? When planning projects together, how can we work toward ensuring humility and collaboration?

Chapter 6: Educating for Liberation

“Freedom Schools were a venue where you didn’t get punished for asking the wrong question. It was a school where you could speak freely. ... You could ask — any question was a legitimate question. And you know, and the conclusions you came to about yourself and the life you wanted to live was a legitimate thing to do.”

Watch Chapter 6 of the video (14 minutes, time stamp: 1:19:48 to 1:33:24).

Freedom Schools reimagined education as a space for liberation and self-expression. Unlike segregated public schools that taught “Black kids to believe in their own inferiority,” Freedom Schools encouraged students to ask questions, read Black literature and express themselves through poetry, art and discussion. Education as a tool for self-determination and consciousness-building helped people develop the capacity to “take control of their own lives.”

1. Based on the Freedom Schools model, what are the characteristics of education for liberation? In what ways are education spaces that encourage critical thinking, creativity and self-expression important for individual empowerment and community advancement?

Writer and activist James Baldwin stated, “The paradox of education is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.”

2. What did Baldwin mean? How do Baldwin’s words connect to the purpose of Freedom Schools? How can we foster learning environments that help young people question societal norms, understand their lived experiences and imagine possibilities for shaping their own futures?

Liberatory education challenged systems that defined Black identity and aspirations. Cobb argues that oppression operates not only through laws and violence but also through institutions and everyday interactions that shape how people understand themselves, often pushing Black communities to aspire to externally imposed ideals rather than define their own futures.

3. What did Cobb’s story about his mother and the woman she worked for illustrate about the problem of Black Americans’ lives being defined by others — in particular, white expectations?
4. Cobb argues that institutions such as schools, media and societal norms often define what is relevant to people’s lives. Who do you think shapes those definitions today? How might that influence our sense of identity, opportunity and freedom?
5. Consider Black people’s visibility and spaces of success in society today. In what spaces and fields are Black Americans *expected* to succeed and be visible? Are there critical spaces of power and learning in which Black people are not seen? How can recognizing societal expectations and gaps in visibility help us push back against limits to aspirations for young people?

Chapter 7: Civics Education – Practicing Democracy

“I still think civics is needed, although there would be considerable debate about what constitutes civics, you know. But I think what we tried to do was — and we began with the country, how the country was founded, what the ideals of the country were. And we were frank, though, in discussing that. We were frank about the failures of the country to live up to its ideals.”

Watch Chapter 7 of the video (15 minutes, time stamp: 1:33:24 to 1:47:57).

Democracy is practical and must be practiced at various levels as part of living in a just society. Efforts such as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the Freedom Labor Union and Freedom Schools demonstrated how people can organize collectively to exercise democratic power when traditional systems fail.

1. What is the role of education for empowering people to engage in politics and civic action? What should civics education involve? How can civics education strengthen understanding of current events and foster understanding of the value of voting?

Freedom Schools offered civics education about the founding and democratic ideals of the U.S. through honest discussion about the nation’s history, contradictions and failures in living up to those ideals.

2. In what ways can schools and communities teach the nation’s founding and the values of democracy while honestly confronting historical contradictions, especially the “hard history” of American slavery and the ongoing struggle of Black Americans? What is lost when these contradictions are ignored or distorted today?
3. In what ways is the Freedom School model a practical act of democracy? Consider how a truthful approach to history by schools or community education programs can strengthen civic understanding.

Educators and all community members play a critical role in sustaining democratic education. Trained educators, supported by engaged families and communities, are essential for creating learning spaces that empower students to participate in civic life and work toward social change.

4. In the current political environment — with efforts to erase or distort history and exclude groups from civic life — what can educators do, both within and beyond public schools?
5. How can hands-on experiences in community programs or schools move people from learning about democracy to actively engaging in it? Is that something we can implement in our community today or in the near future?

Chapter 8: Offering a Sense of Possibility

“And which is why they welcomed us, particularly with the Freedom Schools, because we offered at least a chance that their kids might not be trapped in that kind of life. And we tried to design a program that opened their eyes to what was possible.”

Watch Chapter 8 of the video (11 minutes, time stamp: 1:47:57 to 1:58)

Restoring a sense of possibility is powerful. Freedom Schools aimed to counteract systemic poverty and low expectations by teaching students that they could envision and pursue lives beyond the limitations imposed by structural oppression.

1. Why is hope and a sense of possibility crucial? How can a liberatory education — one that fosters pride and cultural learning alongside academics — help young people envision futures beyond the limitations of their current circumstances?
2. Imagine and map out together some features of what a liberatory education might look like in your community.
3. How can imagining possibilities shape young people’s identity and sense of responsibility within our community?

Challenging deficit thinking is essential for change. Public schools and local systems often assumed Black children were incompetent, which reinforced barriers to access and opportunity. Freedom Schools disrupted this by demonstrating belief in students’ abilities and in the legitimacy of their aspirations.

4. Freedom Schools emphasized the importance of legitimizing students’ aspirations. How can we as adults (teachers, mentors, parents and community members) encourage and support our children in seeing what is possible for their lives and communities?

The Freedom Schools model can offer educational experiences to help young people understand their rights, name the systems that limit them, challenge inequality, and build the civic imagination to create new economic or civic futures.

5. How can a liberatory education model for adult civics and political education benefit adults in your community? What would you want to see in that education model?
6. How can you support education for liberation? How can you encourage the value of voting and civic participation in your community? How do you see yourself in the practice of democracy?

As we confront white supremacist ideology and current hostile efforts to weaken democratic norms and disenfranchise our communities, Charles Cobb’s message in this video conversation challenges us to consider how history contextualizes our current moment and encourages us to lean into liberation education and the power of collective democratic action in our work to build a more inclusive society.

Join us for additional learning opportunities and conversations with the Ella Baker Conversation series.

Resources:

- *Learning for Justice Anthology*, Volume 1, “Democracy for the 21st Century”
- Learning from the Civil Rights Movement Series
- “Out of the Ashes: Building a New American Democracy” by Hasan Kwame Jeffries
- “How We Got Here and How We Move Forward (With Our Heads Held High)” by Bettina Love
- *Teaching Hard History* podcast series
- “What Are the Values of Democracy?”
- Film: *Belonging Beyond Brown*
- “Freedom Schools” SNCC Digital Gateway

Learning for Justice (LFJ) is a community education program of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) that cultivates and nurtures dialogue, learning, reflection and civic action from those closest to and harmed most by injustices in the South. By focusing on education for liberation — community civic and political action education — LFJ complements the SPLC’s work to increase power and capacity for multiracial, inclusive democracy.

Learn more about us at splcenter.org/learning-for-justice.



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