

Math Is a Civil Right

The Story of Bob Moses and The Algebra Project

Donna Curry

BEFORE YOU READ: What are civil rights? What civil rights do we have in the U.S.? Do you think math is a civil right? Why or why not?

Too many of us have asked ourselves, “Why learn math? And, especially, why algebra?” Robert Paris Moses, a dominant civil rights leader, has an answer. But, before revealing his answer, let’s take a minute to meet Bob Moses.

Bob Moses: Civil Rights Leader

Bob Moses believed in everyday people. He believed that people had to take responsibility for making change, and he was more than willing to help make that happen. In the early 1960s, Moses became an influential leader in the civil rights movement. He wasn’t a charismatic leader like Martin Luther King, Jr. Instead, he was quiet. He organized those around him so that they could have more of a voice in their own struggles.

He was a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and he helped organize people to fight for voting rights in the South, particularly in Mississippi where volunteers, including Moses, constantly risked their lives. In 1964, 45% of Mississippi’s population was African-American, but less than 5% were registered to vote. In the rural counties where many Blacks lived, there were even fewer registered voters.¹ Clearly, African-Americans did not have a political voice in Mississippi.

Moses also helped establish Freedom Schools for SNCC. Like the initiative to register voters, the Freedom Schools were run by volunteers that Moses organized, motivated, and supported. Mississippi’s schools were segregated and designed to keep African-Americans isolated and employed in low-paid jobs.² On average, Mississippi spent

about four times more for white children’s education than for Black children’s education.³ Plantation owners had the legal right to work Black children in the field whenever they wanted. Some Black schools closed when it was time to weed the cotton in the spring and pick the cotton in the fall. The curriculum used in the public schools extolled the “Southern way of life.” The Freedom Schools were established to encourage Blacks to challenge this view and to have access to new worlds of thought and possibility.

From Voting to Doing Math

When Moses was working in Mississippi, the crucial issue was *political access* — the ability to have some control over the political system. Therefore, helping people sign up to vote was a necessary strategy for social justice. As time moved on, Moses began to believe that the most important social issue affecting poor people and people of color was *economic access*. According to Moses, “Economic access and full citizenship depend crucially on math and science literacy.”⁴

He said, “I believe that the absence of math literacy in urban and rural communities throughout this country is an issue — as urgent as the lack of registered Black voters in Mississippi was in 1961.”⁵ Fixing this issue requires the same kind of community organizing that Moses led in the South in the 1960s. So Bob Moses developed The Algebra Project.



Photo of Bob Moses by the Miller Center

The Algebra Project

Bob Moses believes that the ability to do math is a civil right because it contributes to a person's ability to work and participate in politics. Mathematics and the world are integrated; they cannot be separated. To fully participate in the world is to be mathematically and technologically savvy. One goal of The Algebra Project is that "numeracy" (being able to do math) will be as important as "literacy" (being able to read and write).

Bob Moses is a community organizer at heart. He designed The Algebra Project so that it would be led by the community. And, just like the Freedom Schools, the Algebra Project starts with people's lives and requires students to think critically, to ask questions, and to connect learning to their own situations. The Algebra Project has been in existence now for over 20 years, and it has many offshoots. (See sidebar.)

Math and Adult Education

For adult learners to gain more political and economic access, they must not settle for just learning enough mathematics to pass a test. They must become willing to engage in math, beginning with its relation to their own lives. Mathematics and technology are critical skills for all adults. And adult education teachers, programs, and funders must be willing to take more responsibility for giving students opportunities to develop a strong foundation so that they can access more advanced math and science.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the article, why is math a civil right? Do you agree or disagree? Did your opinion change after reading the article?

Additional Sources:

Moses, Robert P. and Charles Cobb, Jr. (2001). *Civil rights from Mississippi to the algebra project*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA. National Alliance. Accessible at <iris.siue.edu/math-literacy>
Tucker-Raymond, Eli, Lewis, Naama, Moses, Maisha, and Milner, Chad. "Opting in and Creating Demand: Why Young People Choose to Teach Mathematics to Each Other" in *Journal of Science Education and Technology* (Vo. 25, No. 6) Dec. 2016. ISSN 1059-0145.
Robert Moses: Civil Rights, The Algebra Project Archives. <www.learn2question.com/seevak/groups/2001/sites/moses/index.html>
Video interviews with Bob Moses available at <therealnews.com>

Offshoots

The Algebra Project has inspired other projects. Here are some examples:

- an organization called "INCLUDES," which is an alliance of educators, students, and community members that helps underserved students access science and engineering.
- a website run by teachers who want to integrate economic and social justice issues into their math curriculum, available at <www.radicalmath.org>
- the Young People's Project (YPP), which trains young "math literacy" workers to support other young people (especially Black and Latino students) to access to mathematics and computer science.



Photo: The Young People's Project

Endnotes:

1. <www.crmvet.org/tim/tim64b.htm>; 2. Ibid.; 3. <www.crmvet.org/tim/tim64b.htm#1964freeschool>; 4. Moses, Robert P. and Charles Cobb, Jr. (2001) *Radical equations: math literacy and civil rights*. Beacon Press, Boston; 5. Ibid.

Donna Curry is the director of the SABES Center for Mathematics and Adult Numeracy in MA. She has trained teachers nationally and has taught and administered ABE classes for over 30 years.