

# They Say I'm Your Teacher: The Story of the Citizenship Schools

## *Educator Discussion Guide*



### Background

Bernice Robinson, a beautician who became the first teacher of a literacy program on Johns Island, lived off the coast of South Carolina and taught adults to read and write in order to pass racist Jim-Crow era voter registration requirements during the mid-1950s and 1960s. Later, she led the adult education program for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and taught classes throughout the South. Between 1970 and 1975, Robinson worked for the South Carolina Commission for Farmworkers, and around the same time, became the

first Black woman in South Carolina to run for a state senate seat.

Robinson's approach to education was rooted in her own understanding of how adults learn what people in her own community needed. Here, she describe an especially meaningful Citizenship School experience:

*"I will never forget Anna Vastine. She couldn't read or write and it was the greatest reward when I had all the names up on the board one night, in a jumbled fashion, you know, and I'd asked if they could pick their names out. Mrs. Vastine said, 'I see my name,' and she went down the list and she took the ruler from me and she said, 'That's Anna, that's my first name.' And then she went over on the other side up and down 'til she found Vastine and she said, 'That's my name, V-A-S-T-I-N-E Vastine,' and goose pimples just came out all over me, because that woman couldn't read or write when she came in there. She was 65 years old.'*

## Learn About These Topics in the Film

More than anything, "They Say I'm Your Teacher" is about people becoming aware of their own power and using it to make important change.

It also touches on:

- Segregation & Jim Crow laws
- Voter suppression & systemic racism
- Citizenship Schools, Freedom Schools & the Civil Rights Movement
- Popular Education, Leadership Development & the Highlander Center

## Continuing the Conversation (select a few questions from this list)

1. What inspired or surprised you about this story?
2. How did Bernice Robinson describe her experience of segregation in Charleston, SC? What were her observations of segregation after she moved away and then returned?
3. What did Robinson mean when she relayed that "there was only one party in South Carolina" and how was this connected to not allowing Black people to vote in primary elections?

4. What are some examples of the voter suppression mentioned in the film?
5. Robinson mentions that people in her community understood that the most important way to bring about change was through the vote, and that they knew that something had to be done, but that she didn't think there was anything that she could do. What shifted for her?
6. Who was Septima Clark and what was her role with Highlander and the Citizenship Schools?
7. Who was Essau Jenkins and what was his role with Highlander and the Citizenship Schools? Why did he run for the School Board on Johns Island, SC?
8. How did Robinson experience her time at Highlander? What did she observe about what allowed people at Highlander to share what mattered most to their communities?
9. Who were the Citizenship Schools originally intended for and how did their work schedule determine which months classes could be held?
10. What was Robinson communicating about her understanding of education when she told the class "They say I'm your teacher, but I'm not a teacher. I'll teach you some things and you teach me some things and we'll learn together"?
11. Who was Anna Vastine and why was she so memorable for Bernice Robinson?
12. To what extent did the Citizenship School pilot project achieve its goals? Did people go on to register to vote once they learned to read and write? What happened next?
13. How does Robinson describe the relationship between the Citizenship Schools and the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s?

### Connecting Past & Present (select a few questions from this list)

1. Do parts of the story of the Citizenship Schools remind you of any present-day initiatives? How so (or not)?
2. To what extent do you think that teachers and students hold reciprocal responsibility for successful education? Do you think of teaching as "giving"? Is learning also a form of "giving"?
3. What are some ways that everyone involved with education can learn what each person has to offer? How might you bring this practice into your own work?
4. Are there other elements of the Citizenship Schools that you could apply in adult education settings (community classes, skills-based trainings, conferences, union workshops, etc)?

5. If people were not already part of an existing organization, the Citizenship Schools would form organizations with the people in a first class in order to support ongoing learning. Are there educational settings where you might want to create something similar?
6. Bernice Robinson mentions the concept of 'leaders,' and that she'd encounter people who insisted that they were not leaders, even though they knew the problems and had ideas about solutions. In your experience, what is leadership?
7. Related, what makes someone a leader? Are there people you might want to encourage to take on leadership roles? Are there ways that Bernice Robinson did this that you might want to emulate?
8. How are today's voter suppression tactics similar and/or different from those of the 1950s? What strategies seem critical for addressing contemporary voter suppression? Are there parts of the Citizenship Schools' approach that might be beneficial today?
9. If you could ask Bernice Robinson, Septima Clark or Essau Jenkins one question, what would it be?
10. What is something you'd like to learn more about?
11. Who else could you share this film with?
12. Are there people in your community or organization whose stories, like Bernice Robinsons', are important to learn about and share? How might this happen?

## Additional Resources

[Highlander Center Research & Education Center](#) & [Highlander's Septima Clark Learning Center](#)

[Civil Rights Movement Documents & Materials, Citizenship Education Program \(Citizenship Schools\) 1954-1966](#)

[Bernice Robinson Papers](#) (Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, Civil Rights History Project)

[Bernice Robinson](#) (Adult Learning Unleashed)

[The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom](#) (*History of Education Quarterly*, David Levine)

[Literacy & Liberation](#) (Freedomways, 1964, Septima P. Clark)

[The Literacy Project](#) (Documentary Oral History Project centered around literacy)

[Freedom Schools Curriculum](#) (Education & Democracy)

[Civil Rights Teaching: Freedom Schools](#) (Social Justice Books, Teaching for Change)

[Teaching About Freedom Schools](#) (Teaching for Change)

[Their Own Talking: Septima Clark & Women in the Civil Rights Movement](#) (*Southern Cultures*, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Eugene P. Walker, Katherine Mellen Charron, and David P. Cline)

[Essau Jenkins Papers](#) (Library of Congress, American Folklife Center)

[Zinn Education Project's Background on \*They Say I'm Your Teacher\*](#)

**This documentary short project and accompanying discussion guide was made possible by:** Ceres Fund, Buenas Obras Fund, Rosa Parks Fund, You Got To Move Films and Maestra Productions