

Education as an Emancipatory Tool: A Critical Appreciation of the Movie Freedom Writers (2007) directed by Richard LaGravenese

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Abstract: This research paper explores education as a transformative and emancipatory process in the film, Freedom Writers. The paper will discuss education as a transformative and emancipatory process in the film, Freedom Writers, which is a biographical drama, authored and directed by Richard LaGravenese in 2007. It is a documentary on the real-life story of a teacher Erin Gruwell and her students in a school in Long Beach, California. The MTV Films and Paramount Pictures produced the movie with Hilary Swank as the star. The movie is adapted on the same-titled book The Freedom Writers Diary, the collection of the works of Erin Gruwell and her pupils. The film is set in the racially segregated, urban, and violent environment where the life of the marginalized youngsters who are battling the gang warfare, poverty, discrimination, and neglect in the system are captured. The paper, which applies the liberationist educational theory in critical pedagogical approach, argues that writing is a counter-hegemonic act in the classroom, which is both a testament and resistance. Pedagogical provocations created by Gruwell (played by Hilary Swank) of introducing texts such as The Diary of Anne Frank and dialogic learning are opposed with the institutional definition of students as at risk/unable to be taught; instead, students are defined as knowledge creators and moral agents. Diary form provides the students with an opportunity to tell the traumatic story, cross racial boundaries, and re-construct fragmented identities. The practice of writing is therapeutic and political: it will enable the students to turn the victimhood as agency and personal victimization into collective solidarity. The paper further elaborates on how literacy turns out to be a kind of social mobility and self-identification and refutes deterministic description of class and race. Through the comparison of their experiences with historical atrocities like the Holocaust and the civil rights movement, the students get to learn empathy, understand how to have a culture of understanding others, and realize of the responsibility to their civic duty. To sum it up, the paper suggests that the movie Freedom Writers recreates education not as a teaching process but as a relationship praxis of trust, relevance and critical consciousness.

Keywords: *Critical Pedagogy; Emancipatory Education; Marginalized Youth; Narrative Identity; Transformative Learning.*

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Introduction

Education has always been set as a democratic empowerment, but in the socially stratified society it often becomes a containment machinery. In Freedom Writers by Richard LaGravenese, the classroom is a place with domination and liberation in one. The movie takes place in a post-riot Long Beach, California and depicts a Californian school system that is characterized by racial aggression, economic insecurity, and institutional indifference. At risk, students get put into remedial tracks and deprived of intellectual opportunity. Informed by the concept of critical pedagogy as suggested by Paulo Freire, the paper maintains that Freedom Writers reinvents education into the form of liberating praxis. Due to dialogic interaction and testimonial writing Erin Gruwell turns her classroom into a place of surveillance into the place of recognition. Literacy is the main tool by which the marginalized youth express trauma, recreate identity, and develop solidarity.

The movie places education in a more comprehensive socio-political context with racial concerns and institutional inequalities that pervade the system. The story reveals how the tracking systems, deficit labeling and unequal access to the academic resources perpetuate social hierarchies rather than presenting schooling as a place of neutrality. The students at Gruwell class come into the classroom with their experiences of gang, violence in the community, and mistrust towards authority. Their identities are also shaped not only by the experience but also by institutional discourses that define them as incompetent or negatively beyond academic redemption. In this setting, the classroom at first reflects the external barriers, as students themselves segregate on racial lines, whereas the administrative officers favor the so-called advanced students and inhibit the possibility of rigorous programs in remedial ones. Education thus, is a disciplinary system that upholds a hierarchy instead of eroding it.

Research Questions

1. How does *Freedom Writers* construct education as a site of resistance and emancipation?
2. In what ways does literacy function as identity reconstruction?
3. How does the film negotiate racial tension between teacher and students?
4. Does the film reinforce or subvert institutional hierarchies?
5. How does testimonial writing transform trauma into agency?

Methodology

This research employs qualitative textual analysis of the movie, *Freedom Writers*. Dialogues are examined using:

- Discourse analysis
- Trauma narrative theory
- Freirean critical pedagogy
- Postcolonial identity theory

Critical Pedagogy and the Rejection of the Banking Model

The idea of the banking model by Freire frames the traditional schooling model as a top-down transfer of knowledge where teachers pour the information into passive students (Freire 72). In this paradigm, power is centralized, the discussion is narrow and students are placed as consumers instead of creators of meaning. This model is manifested in institutional practices in *Freedom Writers*. Administrators lay a greater emphasis on discipline, conformity, and discipline rather than on intellectual stimulation. The students identified to be at risk are put into remedial tracks, offered watered down curricular materials, and implicitly characterized using deficit assumptions. In this regard education supports the social stratification instead of questioning it.

The pedagogy proposed by Erin Gruwell interferes with this hierarchical design by pre-empting conversation and the knowledge of experience. Instead of enforcing authority, she makes students critical in the realities they have lived. The Line Game exercise is a critical event of such transformation. Gruwell makes the dialogic space by requesting the students to answer the questions about violence, incarceration and loss physically so that personal experience turns into the common recognition. This exchange of bodies breaks down strict racial divisions in the classroom and opens the familiar formations of marginalization. These practices support the idea of conscientization introduced by Freire, which refers to the process of creation of critical awareness, the resultant process of critical awareness in action and reflection (Freire 80).

Students are made to see their plight not as their personal failures but as part of more widespread structural injustices. Silence is replaced by dialogue and alienation by recognition. The classroom then becomes an area of surveillance and control to an anti-hegemonic arena in which experiential knowledge is recognised. During dialogic learning, *Freedom Writers* demonstrates the idea that education is emancipatory when students are placed as active agents in the process of meaning-making. Marginalized youth can perceive their conditions with

criticality and can envisage alternative possibilities other than the institutional labeling through the rejection of the banking model.

Writing as Testimony and Resistance

The diary project that was eventually published as *The Freedom Writers Diary* forms the core of the emancipatory approach of *Freedom Writers*. Erin Gruwell transforms the concept of literacy into true testimony; she does so by taking grades out of journal entries, she asserts that literacy is not an evaluation of performance. Writing ceases to be a machine of scholarly testing and evaluation and a way of expressing oneself and thinking. With this pedagogical transformation, literacy is treatment and politics. The theory of trauma by Cathy Caruth is that, through narration, people can process and incorporate memory of traumatic experience into consciousness (Caruth 6). In the film, students document the experiences of gang violence, domestic instability, race profiling and community loss.

The diary can be seen as an enclosed environment in which repressed pain can be expressed without the fear of being judged. Narrative enables fragmented experiences to have some degree of coherence enabling students to face their pasts instead of suppressing them. Writing then becomes a form of re-creating agency around memories that have been made by the violence and marginalization. At the same time, the diary project is an act of defiance against mainstream discourses that criminalize or reduce marginalized youth to intellectually backward people. The idea of subtractive schooling that is employed by Angela Valenzuela denotes the fact that the culture of students is frequently removed or undermined by the practices of institutions (Valenzuela 45). On the contrary, the strategy of Gruwell validates those identities.

The journal turns out to be a place where lived experience is authenticated as a legitimate knowledge instead of being discredited as insignificant or disruptive. Authorship is also the way in which students reinvent themselves as knowledge producers. They criticize hegemonic labelling, which is expounded through finer descriptions of their realities, thus being able to challenge institutional stereotypes. When the diary entries are communized in the classroom society, personal pain is converted into a common knowledge. Writing brings about unity since it allows us to understand that there is a solidarity in the structures of oppression that lie underneath outward appearances. In this regard, testimonial literacy in *Freedom Writers* overcomes individual catharsis. It transforms into a counter-hegemonic gesture which redeems dignity, interrupts the discourse of deficit and creates a community based on mutual knowledge.

Historical Consciousness and Moral Agency

Gruwell uses *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank to relate the experiences of students with a larger history of oppression. Curricular exclusion is manifested by many students who do not realize what the Holocaust was. Gruwell broadens their moral horizon by making parallelisms between the Nazi ideology and modern-day racism. According to Freire, education should put in historical contexts that personal suffering belongs to (Freire 85). The comparison of reflection helps the students build empathy and critical consciousness. The diary of Anne Frank turns out to be the one that they can look through and see their own frail and strong sides. The moral responsibility is strengthened with the visit of Miep Gies. Gies underlines that people in common are able to be resistant to injustice, and moral courage will be democratized. Students start feeling that civic engagement is something

achievable and not something abstract. The historical consciousness therefore leads to awakening to morals. Education becomes the tool of developing empathy and responsibility.

Literacy as Social Mobility and Identity Reconstruction

The freedom writings is far beyond the axis of scholarly competence and emerges as the way of self-identification and social mobility. As a part of the institutional organization of the film, students are first refused entry to demanding curricula and canonical materials because of deficit labelling and remedial track. This exclusion supports the deterministic accounts of race and class in which marginalized young people cannot be intellectuals. But once the students critically and effectively work on the complex literary works, they contravene these presuppositions and overturn the expectation of the institution.

Gloria Ladson-Billings presents culturally responsive pedagogy that validates lived experiences of the students and at the same time encourages academic excellence (Ladson-Billings 28). This principle is visible in the approach of Gruwell who mixes personal stories of students with historical and literature texts. Instead of handling the canonical literature as remote and irrelevant, she places it with the realities that students are going through, which allows it to make a difference. Literacy therefore is reflective and aspirational: it helps affirm identity as well as widen intellectual boundaries.

The Freedom Writers Diary is a book that represents the high point of this change. Learners no longer emerge as marginalized adolescents who are coined in deficit discourse but come out as published writers whose voices take up social space. Authorship gives them cultural legitimacy and re-positioning to the social arena. They no longer receive institutional judgment passively, but are acknowledged as contributors to the shared knowledge. Moreover, the naming themselves of the Freedom Writers, which was based on the Civil Rights activism, is also an act of political self-definition.

The identity has changed not based on gang affiliation and racial separation but based on belonging to a literary society based on unity and purpose. In such symbolic renaming students take back the narrative power over who they are and who they want to become. Here literacy is a tool of empowerment. It allows the marginalized young people to rebuild fractured identities, oppose the deterministic accounts of the classes and race, and imagine other possible futures based on intellectual agency and community acknowledgment.

Institutional Resistance and Structural Limitations

In spite of classroom revolution, there is institutional opposition. Systemic gatekeeping can be explained by administrative hesitation to supply new books. The tracking systems favour the superior students at the expense of the remedial students. The impact of regulating bodies and reproducing hierarchy in schools can be explained through the analysis of disciplinary institutions by Michel Foucault (Foucault 170). Structural inequities are mostly prevalent in the film. The limitations of the system can be seen in individual efforts of Gruwell to address the institutional inadequacy. As the classroom gets turned into a democratic enclave, there is no larger-scale reform. Emancipation is still local and not an institutional process.

Ethics of Care and Pedagogical Commitment

The ethics of care by Nel Noddings emphasizes the idea of relationship attentiveness as the pillar of significant learning (Noddings 176). In Freedom Writers, the pedagogical practice of Erin Gruwell is beyond curriculum, to prolonged emotional involvement and advocacy. She listens to the testimonies of her students, addresses their weaknesses and establishes an atmosphere of trust and appreciation in a classroom. Her devotion demonstrates her insight into the meaning of teaching as a relationship responsibility as opposed to instruction as a procedure. This commitment however does not come free.

The personal sacrifice made by Gruwell in terms of sacrificing a marriage is due to the huge amount of time and emotional work she invested in the process. The movie therefore recognizes the moral ambiguity of pedagogical commitment indicating that emancipatory teaching requires long term commitment in a difficult institutional set up. Notably, the transformation of students is not shown as the passive reliance on the kindness of the teacher. Ethical development is an agency that is self-determined.

Eva refuses to be loyal to the gang in court where she testifies as a witness and declares that she upholds truth to moral autonomy that is developed through dialogue and reflection. Gruwell offers the circumstances of being ethical but not moral judgments. The movie hence constructs emancipatory education as a relational practice which is based on trust, recognition and long time commitment. Caring is not met with sentimentality but rather a pedagogical approach that will recognize the dignity of students without encouraging them to be moral dependent.

The White Savior Debate

Whereas critics have placed Freedom Writers in the white saviour cinematic genre, a story structure that involves a white character that is depicted as saving marginalized groups. The movie foreshadows the commitment of Erin Gruwell to her work, her selfless character, and perseverance in a hostile institutional setting, which are aspects that conform to the inspirational teacher tropes. The framing poses the question of whether there is a heroism of the teacher in the centre of change. Nevertheless, the story also portrays a long-term struggle of students and newfound agency. Gruwell does not simply impose herself, her students discredit her presence, her cultural knowledge, and they do not at first accept her instructional work. Instead of making unilateral action, transformation takes place gradually through dialogue, reflective activity and testimonial writing.

The classroom is made a participatory place where meaning is co-created as opposed to being dictated. More importantly, the key ethical and intellectual choices start with the students themselves. Eva has autonomy of judgment developed through critical thinking, as she testifies in court breaking the allegiance of her gang in favour of the truth. Similarly, the group decision to publish their diaries, which were later published as The Freedom Writers Diary, is produced by the involvement of students and by collective authorship. These steps emphasize the fact that emancipation does not happen but is made. Despite the use of familiar tropes of inspirational pedagogy in the film, it still ends up stressing the idea of collaborative authorship and student-cantered change. Gruwell acts as a facilitator and not a saviour, her job is to provide the environment of dialogue, recognition and literacy where students can define their own agency. It is the story that

complicates, but does not entirely confirm the white saviour construct, by pre-empting the centrality of the student voice and group empowerment.

Conclusion

Freedom Writers is a reconstruction of education in the form of emancipatory praxis based on dialogue, testimonial writing, and historical consciousness. The classroom, via the pedagogical interventions of Erin Gruwell, becomes transformed as a place of surveillance and deficit labelling, and a community of recognition and common inquiry. Writing serves both as a form of therapy and as a form of political resistance that helps the oppressed youth to turn his or her victimhood into an agency and silence into a form of articulation. The movie presents four key points that have been elaborated in this paper. To begin with, literacy is dignity restoring based on narrative agency. Writing their own stories, which were later published as *The Freedom Writers Diary*, students resume the power of interpretation of identities which were previously shaped by an institutional judgement. Second, conversation fosters unity between races. Formal interaction and collective witnessing eradicate gang-based fragmentation and lead to collective recognition.

Third, historical practice, especially by means of texts like *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, brings moral responsibility about as part of larger histories of oppression and resistance. Fourth, recognition takes issue with deterministic accounts of the class and race by legitimizing experiential, as well

as affirming intellectual, ability. Institutional structures in the film are still resistant with little change, but the room 203 comes out as a micro-cosm of democratic possibilities. It is a localized, but not a systemic transformation, which shows the potential of education based on trust, relevance, and critical consciousness. Finally, Freedom Writers reinvents schooling as a technocratic form of instruction but rather as a form of relational praxis- one capable of helping the marginalized youth to develop voice, solidarity and civic consciousness in the limiting social realities.

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