



**Linnæus University**  
Sweden

## Master's Thesis

# Analyzing *Freedom Writers*

*An analysis of the depiction of race in the film Freedom Writers and how  
using such films adds to student knowledge, values and attitudes*



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Term: Spring 2021  
Subject: English  
Level: Advanced  
Course code: 4ENÄ2E*

## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyze how the film *Freedom Writers*, released in 2007 and directed by Richard LaGravenese, reflects on the topic of racism. The analysis is based on two of the key tenets of Critical Race Theory, “Whiteness as Property” and “Commitment to Social Justice”, which are used as analytical tools. Furthermore, the analysis also includes Racial Identity Development Theory, which represents different stages of development as people begin to define themselves in relation to others. This thesis further evaluates pedagogical implications in connection to the analysis of *Freedom Writers* and Critical Race Theory. The results show that racism is depicted in *Freedom Writers* through the concept of Whiteness as Property, and the differences between white characters and characters of color are significant due to their different views on social justice. In addition, the results show that *Freedom Writers* may serve as a thought-provoking resource to use in the Swedish EFL classroom to create awareness about and discuss the importance of aspects such as racism, empowerment, and social justice in the world and with regard to the students’ own knowledge.

## Key words

Critical Race Theory, Whiteness as Property, Social Justice, Racial Identity Development Theory, EFL, Upper Secondary School, *Freedom Writers*

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to my supervisor, Anna Thyberg, who has patiently helped and supported me throughout the journey of writing this thesis.

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# 1 Introduction

Texts come in a variety of forms, and by the mid-1990s, new genres of texts had been created (Cope and Kalantzis 165). Films can be considered a text form, and when the first roll-films became available, educators started immediately experimenting with them in their own teaching (Masson 29-30). There is a great number of films available in good quality, quantity, and variety (Sturm 247). People around the world watch films for entertainment or educational purposes and the influence of film and audio-visual products in our society has grown remarkably. Many sceptics consider that using films in the classroom can cause teaching to become “mechanized”, as well as arguing that film is closely associated with the entertainment sector (Masson 29). However, as Eef Masson argues, films are a powerful pedagogical tool and can function as an effective teaching method that makes learning easier and more attractive for students, because cinematography is appealing to them (31-32).

*Freedom Writers* is an American drama film from 2007, written and directed by Richard LaGravenese. The film is based on the non-fiction book published in 1999 and called *The Freedom Writers Diary*, a compiled diary of 150 students from Long Beach, California and their teacher, Erin Gruwell (Muzzillo 175). Gruwell is an idealistic teacher who starts her first teaching job as an English teacher at a high school which two years earlier implemented a voluntary integration program. The program is the reason why Gruwell wants to teach at this particular school, and the classes Gruwell teaches consist of teenagers with different backgrounds and experiences. The title of the movie is inspired by the term “Freedom Riders”, referring to the multiracial civil rights activists who participated in Freedom Rides to protest segregated bus rides (Arsenault 2).

It being a film from 2007, *Freedom Writers* might not be highly popular among today’s young adults and thus not very enticing, given that it might be seen as an old movie. There are,

however, advantages with teaching it in the classroom. *Freedom Writers* deals with topics such as empowerment, tolerance, ethnicity and race, and highlights the importance of overcoming racial inequity and focusing on agency and the importance of making each individual's voice heard. However, the film can be seen as problematic due to its white savior narrative, because when characters of color are "portrayed as damaged and/or dysfunctional, it sets the stage for filmmakers to introduce a white hero to save" characters of color from tragedy (Murphy and Harris 52). Given that the director of the film is a white person the concept of the white savior narrative becomes even more powerful. The white teacher helps troubled Hispanic, African American and Asian teenagers to find their path in life, which can be viewed as problematic due to white supremacy in relation to the fact that the character portrayed as the hero is a white person.

It is of importance to mention that this thesis focuses on *Freedom Writers* because it is a film that can challenge students' thinking through its inclusion of actions and behaviors that represent white privilege and Commitment to Social Justice (two aspects presented later in the text. Evidently, there are films that include similar issues and aspects as *Freedom Writers* (see, e.g., *The Butler*; *The Help*). However, an additional reason as to why *Freedom Writers* is the chosen primary source is that it includes the school setting, which can also give students a higher chance to relate to or to understand than other films could. Moreover, another reason this essay is based on *Freedom Writers* is that it is a popular film with two awards, Golden Camera Germany and Humanitas Prize, and one nomination for the Image Awards.

The curriculum for upper secondary school mentions the importance of shaping and conveying values such as "freedom and integrity of each individual, the equal value of all human beings, equality between women and men and solidarity between human beings." It also mentions that no one at school should be the subject of discrimination because of their ethnicity, religion etc. (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., "Curriculum"). This can be practiced in many ways, including

through films. The topic of racism is sensitive, yet it is a reality and students in upper secondary school could benefit from discussing this topic with each other. The syllabus for English highlights the importance of giving the students the opportunity to develop knowledge of societal issues and cultural phenomena in different parts of the world where English is used (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.). In this case, *Freedom Writers* is a beneficial example of issues in the society where racism and violence among students from minority groups are shown.

Including *Freedom Writers* and similar films in the classroom could provide English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students the opportunity to compare and relate the events in the film to events in Sweden and around the world. For example, a current event is the Black Lives Matter, a movement against anti-blackness that can be useful in a comparison with the events in the film. Given that the majority of *Freedom Writers* is set in the classroom, it could be easier for students to relate their own experiences to the ones in the movie. The genre of the school story is prominent in literature and the school setting has been present especially in books since the late 1800s (Grenby 87). Relating one's own experiences to others' is something highlighted in the syllabus for English, which specifies that students should be given the opportunity to encounter spoken English of different kinds and relate the content to their own experiences and knowledge (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.). Sweden is a multicultural country, and students might have gone through or seen others go through what the characters in *Freedom Writers* do, and in that way can relate those experiences to the film content.

Nonetheless, there might be teachers who are reluctant to working with such films because of the controversial and sensitive issues they refer to. However, working with *Freedom Writers* in the classroom could be a step forward towards preparing students for real life by showing them the reality of the world we live in. One important reason to teach such topics in the classroom is to educate students to enact open-mindedness and fairness as well as helping them develop mutual respect and the ability to analyze and discuss controversial issues

(Chikoko et al. 6). Not only does it bring awareness of today's issues, but it also helps students strengthen their English language skills. Class discussions about the film and its content help students develop their communicative language skills as well as watching the film adds to their skills of understanding spoken English.

There has been research on the inclusion of films in the classroom, many based on historical films and their effect on educating students on the events of the past (see, e.g., Butler et al.; Gokcek and Howard). Reviews of and research on racism in American films have also been done (see, e.g., Prorokova; García). Moreover, research on racism in *Freedom Writers* has been done (see, e.g., Petersen), along with research on the effectivity of applying various activities in *Freedom Writers* to the classroom (see, e.g., Wahyu and Malikatul). There is, however, not a considerable number of research on *Freedom Writers* from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) point of view. *Freedom Writers* includes issues such as racism and social justice which, according to Dorian L. McCoy and Dirk J. Rodricks (6), are two of the issues that CRT deals with, making it relevant for the film and for this study. As mentioned earlier, showing films in the classroom often acts as an entertaining activity at the end of a term. With that being said, this essay aims to examine how the film *Freedom Writers* reflects on the topic of racism, an analysis based on two of the tenets of Critical Race Theory, Whiteness as Property and Commitment to Social Justice, as well as on Racial Identity Development Theory. By analyzing the representation of the abovementioned issues in *Freedom Writers*, this thesis argues that racism is proven to be reoccurring throughout the film, through characters' actions, as well as arguing that working with the film in the classroom gives students a chance to see the importance of empowerment and of having their voices heard.

## 2 Critical Race Theory

The choice of using Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework for this essay is based on two of the key tenets of CRT, Whiteness as Property and Commitment to Social Justice, which are recognizable aspects in the film *Freedom Writers*, and will be presented in the following two sections. Additionally, Racial Identity Development Theory, which is related to CRT, will be presented in the third section, as well as presenting it in connection to education. In other words, this essay has, among other pursuits, the intention to analyze how Whiteness as Property, Commitment to Social Justice, and Racial Identity Development Theory are represented in the film.

Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework inspects the “unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines” (Taylor 1, qtd. in McCoy and Rodricks 5). In *Freedom Writers*, the most evident inequality that Taylor discusses is the one connected to racism, thus the one that this essay mostly focuses on. With its tradition of questioning the ideologies and narratives of society through a critical conceptual lens, CRT aids the better understanding of racial inequality (Zamudio et al. 11). According to Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, CRT accounts “for the role of race and racism in education and works toward the elimination of racism” (25). In the field of education, CRT is used to understand issues of school discipline, bilingual and multicultural education etc. (Delgado et al. 7). The present study analyzes a film set in a high school, which makes CRT a relevant theoretical framework, since it is used, among others, in the field of education.

### 2.1 Whiteness as Property

Property is defined as the benefit of having the rights of possession, use, transfer, disposition, and exclusion, which are, for the most part, rights afforded white people (McCoy and Rodricks 11). Robin DiAngelo argues that white people “hold the social and institutional



positions in society to infuse their racial prejudice into the laws, policies, practices, and norms of society in a way that people of color do not” (22). Having more social advantages, rights, and benefits than people of color is also called white privilege (Fitzgerald 41). The terms white privilege and Whiteness as Property will be used throughout this essay in the same manner, since they both are connected to the advantages afforded white people. The value of whiteness in relation to other races is more significant as long as it maintains its exclusive privileges because the more rights and privileges of whiteness are granted to other races, the less value whiteness maintains (Zamudio et al. 33).

*Freedom Writers* is mostly enacted in the school setting which makes discussing Whiteness as Property in the school context more suitable. Richard A. Orozco argues that in schools around the U.S., Whiteness as Property functions to create schooling inequality as, for example, rights to use different materials and enjoyment (822). There are differences between schools where the majority of students are white and schools with predominantly non-white students, and the differences concern material and curricular inequities. Further, inequity in schools regarding Whiteness as Property is also affected by reputation and status of property (Orozco 822). White children are provided with greater educational advantages, and the use of standardized tests to track students to determine who goes on to college provides white supremacy with a powerful tool in maintaining the property interests of whiteness (Zamudio et al. 33-34). Not only that but Whiteness as Property in schools and the inequality that comes with it is also associated with the right to exclude, meaning that non-white students have been constantly excluded from schooling experiences that white students get to enjoy (Orozco 822). Thus, from a perspective of Whiteness as Property, white children are placed in high achieving schools that have little reason to challenge a system that benefits them, and children of color are relegated to low achieving schools that have few resources to change a system that does not benefit them (Zamudio et al. 34).

The situation of the difference between schools mentioned above can be seen as the result of the exclusion of people of color from owning their homes. Since the 1990s, homeownership rates of people of color in the United States have been 25 percent lower than those of white people (Tesfai 1005). Rebecca Tesfai points out that the large homeownership gaps between white people and people of color suggest that minority households face discrimination in the housing market, and that racial discrimination often occurs during the home purchase process (1008). The difference between white households and those of people of color in the U.S. is relevant for this study because in *Freedom Writers* the difference between white characters' homes and the homes of characters of color is substantial.

## 2.2 Commitment to Social Justice

Social justice is an equal division of social advantages, benefits, and burdens in society (Israel and Frenkel 648). According to McCoy and Rodricks, "with its emphasis on social justice, CRT accounts for race and racism's role in education" (14). Critical Race Theory is committed to resist racialized inequality and injustice restricting access to social, political, economic, and cultural resources. It focuses on change toward social justice for people of color and the empowerment of minority groups that are oppressed and marginalized (McCoy and Rodricks 14). In the next paragraph I will turn to Paul Kriese and Randall E. Osborne's questions related to judgements about justice and injustice (44).

Regarding social justice, people of color, as well as white people, are supportive and cooperative with each other if a decision is just, yet if there is an injustice, people's responses may be sabotage, protest, or rebellion (Kriese and Osborne 44). However, white people support a just decision that benefits people of color only if it is beneficial to them as well. Derrick Bell discusses this by arguing that society recognizes the rights of people of color only when and for as long as the recognition serves the interests of greater importance to white people (146). Kriese and Osborne describe five questions relevant to judgements about justice and injustice

(44) and they will be presented since they are going to be used to analyze the film. Firstly, there is the question about how feelings and attitudes are influenced by matters of justice and injustice, and the nature of these feelings is often strong. Not only do individuals compare themselves with others, and these comparisons determine their feelings, but they also focus on the position of their group in relation to other groups in order to see if their circumstances are just or unjust (Kriese and Osborne 44).

Kriese and Osborne's second question relevant for this essay focuses on three criteria that people use to decide whether something is just or unjust, and these criteria are *equity*, *equality*, and *need* (44). *Equity* means that outcomes may be matched to input, while *equality* means treating everyone the same way, and finally, *need* focuses on providing the most benefits to those who need them the most (Kriese and Osborne 44). The third question addresses people's responses regarding injustice, meaning that individuals' responses differ from each other depending on whether they are advantaged or disadvantaged. This means that individuals with more advantages tend to deny that they are receiving more than they deserve, for self-interest, while those with more disadvantages often do not act against the injustice, which may be the result of powerlessness. In addition to that, these individuals' inaction is also based on worries about the damage it may do to their self-image. Also, when taking actions, there is a high risk of causing civil disturbance and violence (Kriese and Osborne 45).

The fourth question focuses on why people are concerned about justice, which is connected to the importance of relationships and feelings of self-worth. Kriese and Osborne state that "people interpret the way they are treated as indicating the quality of their social status within the group," and the feeling of not being valued by the group comes if they are unfairly treated (45). This is a question relevant for *Freedom Writers* because a considerable number of scenes depict the connection between relationships in one's own group and the feeling of self-worth. Lastly, the fifth question addresses why people care about justice, a question that aims

to understand under what circumstances people become concerned about justice (Kriese and Osborne 45). This last question is less relevant for this essay and will therefore not be explained in more detail or be mentioned in the analysis.

### 2.3 Racial Identity Development Theory

Identity consists of many aspects, and it is a prominent concept in CRT. However, the choice of using Racial Identity Development Theory in this essay is based on its high relevance for *Freedom Writers*. Identity is how we see ourselves, and Kathleen J. Fitzgerald's view of racial identity is the following:

We establish our racial identity, our sense of who we are and how we view ourselves, through interaction with others. In addition to interaction with others, the way race is discussed and presented in society contributes to the creation of individual and collective racial identities (27).

Racial Identity Development is part of a process that differs for white people and for people of color, in which people go through stages of development as they begin to define themselves in relation to others (Fitzgerald 28). People of color go through five stages, but this essay will focus on *immersion*, *internalization* and *internalization-commitment* on the grounds that these three stages are most relevant for the characters in *Freedom Writers*. Furthermore, white people go through six stages. However, only four stages, *contact*, *disintegration*, *immersion* and *autonomy* will be considered in this essay (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 10). As mentioned, the number of stages for each group is solely based on what is relevant to the characters in *Freedom Writers*. These stages will be further analyzed and applied to *Freedom Writers* in the literary analysis section.

## 2.4 Pedagogical Framework

Since CRT explores unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along, among other, racial lines, including *Freedom Writers* in the EFL classroom gives teachers the chance to focus on inequality while addressing two of the important tenets of CRT, Whiteness as Property and Commitment to Social Justice (Taylor 1, qtd. in McCoy and Rodricks 5). First, many white people are of the opinion that acknowledging race is a form of racism and that denying it means not discriminating against minority groups (Fitzgerald 13). The fear that white people feel in connection to race is also called white fragility, a term defined by Robin DiAngelo as the stress white people feel when confronted by problems related to race (2). *Freedom Writers* contains many white characters to whom white fragility applies that seem to consider themselves superior to others, as well as containing a considerable number of scenes where white privilege, the oppression and prejudice against minority groups are obvious. These aspects in the film will be further discussed in the analysis section of this essay. Second, watching *Freedom Writers* in the classroom can lead to an understanding of how social justice works, since the characters in it fight for justice and equality between each other. Third, the characters in *Freedom Writers* make their voices heard and become increasingly empowered, and for that reason, working with the film in the classroom can lead to what Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith call social and intellectual pleasure (55). These terms will be further discussed and applied to classroom practice in the pedagogical implications section of this essay.

Talking about racism in the classroom can be a difficult task regarding students' fears about breaking the race taboo and their anxieties about exposing their own internalized racism (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 18). However, recognizing race and the differences between individuals, also called being color conscious, gives us the chance to celebrate difference without implying that difference means inferiority (Fitzgerald 13). Talking about race in the

classroom gives students the chance to reflect on the roles and experiences, as well as functions of race in their own and others' lives (Guest 4). At the same time, the subject of racism in the classroom, in connection to a film such as *Freedom Writers*, can be seen as an opportunity to talk about the value of each human being, about the sense of justice and responsibility (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. "Curriculum"). As Margaret Zamudio and others claim, CRT stresses the importance of applying counter narratives in the classroom, a tool that students need to think critically and to understand the voices and experiences of the oppressed (123-24). For that reason, *Freedom Writers* is an effective tool to expose students to counter narratives.

When incorporating a film such as *Freedom Writers* in the classroom, in which the main character is a white person that is seen as the hero of the story, it can be problematic for how students view their white teachers, and how they interpret their actions. Mollie K. Murphy and Tina M. Harris mention that films that encompass interracial relations often offer narratives that are most appealing to white audiences, one of these narratives being the white savior (49). Mrs. Gruwell is the white lead character, who can be seen as the white savior who tries to "save" people of color, a person often being portrayed as very generous (Murphy and Harris 50). It is of importance to highlight the problematic nature of this issue because such narratives can lead to misunderstandings. For that reason, it could be important for teachers to make sure students understand that by working with *Freedom Writers*, it is not the teacher's attempt to emphasize the dominance of whiteness nor that it is superior to any other skin color.

Although *Freedom Writers* depicts situations in a school in the U.S., it is still relevant for the Swedish classroom, since almost every classroom in Sweden is multicultural. The multicultural group in Sweden is heterogeneous although it is often seen as a homogeneous group. The group includes students with different countries of origin, different languages, different socio-economic conditions and more (Sandström and Nordström 172). For that reason, similarities between the students in *Freedom Writers* and Swedish students can be found. What

is more, similarities between Sweden and the U.S. are also seen in national policy and curriculum since social justice, for example, is highlighted in both (Norberg et al. 104).

The relevance of using films like *Freedom Writers* in the classroom is not only high for the subject of anti-racism but also relevant for students' ways of interpreting, speaking, and understanding varieties of spoken English language. As Samina Mishra says, "a classroom where there are many voices engaged in conversation is alive with the possibility and the potential for knowledge-seeking" (112). Mishra also mentions that what students see as a "fun" activity, meaning watching a film in the classroom, can also mean serious learning, which can happen when teachers introduce films that can present multiple perspectives of and on the world (115). With that being said, watching, listening to, and talking about *Freedom Writers*, and films in general, does not only bring awareness and knowledge about racism, justice and injustice and the situations of minority groups, especially in the U.S, but it also gives them the opportunity to develop correctness in speech and the ability to express themselves with variation and complexity (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., "Syllabus").

### 3 Critical Race Theory Applied to *Freedom Writers*

In the following analysis, Whiteness as Property and Commitment to Social Justice will be applied to the film *Freedom Writers*. What is more, a part of the analysis will also be focused on Kriese and Osborne's four questions regarding judgements about justice and injustice. As mentioned earlier, the first one is about how feelings and attitudes are influenced by questions of justice and injustice, the second focuses on equity, equality and need, the third one addresses people's responses regarding their perceptions of injustice, and finally, the fourth question focuses on why people are concerned about justice. In the analysis, the questions will not be discussed in consecutive order because the scenes that represent these questions do not take place in consecutive order in *Freedom Writers*. Furthermore, the analysis will include the

connection between the stages of Racial Identity Development for white people and people of color and the characters and actions in *Freedom Writers* (Tatum, “Talking about Race” 10-13).

In the two hours of *Freedom Writers* there is a considerable number of scenes in which whiteness dominates, in which there is a fight for justice not only between white people and people of color but also between people of color representing opposite cultures, in which, from the beginning to the end, characters go through different stages of Racial Identity Development. For that reason, the following analysis will not include all scenes in the film but only those which are most relevant to this thesis. All things considered, it is essential to mention that *Freedom Writers* is a film which can be differently analyzed and interpreted, and to which Critical Race Theory can be applied in various ways. Therefore, this analysis represents one way of applying CRT to the film.

### 3.1 Key Tenets of Critical Race Theory in *Freedom Writers*

When the United States was formed, freedom and equality were radical new ideas, yet the economy in the U.S. was based on the enslavement of Africans, the genocide of Indigenous people, and the takeover of the Mexican lands (DiAngelo 15-16). Whiteness as Property and Commitment to Social Justice are both present in schools around the United States (Orozco 822). In the following two sections, these two analytical tools will be used to analyze the actions and characters in *Freedom Writers*.

#### 3.1.1 Whiteness as Property

The first scene in which whiteness is noticeably dominant is the one in which Latina student Eva’s father is arrested for the death of someone, a murder he did not commit (2.32). The scene depicts Eva watching two white policemen forcefully push her father to the ground, cuffing him, while she explains that they arrest him for retaliation. The father is put into jail for a crime he never committed, which gives the viewer the chance to come to the conclusion that



institutional racism is powerful in the United States. Here, the viewer is offered the chance to see the feelings of terror, despair, and helplessness that Eva and her father are feeling in the moment, as the focus of the camera zooms in and shifts between their faces (2.41). The viewer can see the unequal and unjust distribution of power between the dominant and minoritized group, in which the Hispanic man does not have any power to stand against the white policemen, nor does he speak with them. The viewer does not get to hear why Eva's father does not say anything, but one can conclude that he fears for being abused, or even killed if he does anything, which confirms what Malcolm D. Holmes claims about people of color being considered a threat to police authority by the police (345). Police brutality includes, for instance, abusive language, unnecessary searches, as well as deadly force, often experienced more by minority groups than dominant groups, which is confirmed in the scene above (Holmes 344-345).

In another scene, Mrs. Gruwell, the teacher in *Freedom Writers*, decides to ask her students questions with different levels of significance. The questions gradually become more emotionally substantial, and through these questions for the whole class, the viewer receives a clear picture of how privileged white people are in the film. By asking her students to raise their hands if they have ever been shot at, the viewer can see that every student of color in the classroom raises their hands; the one without a raised hand is the only white student in the classroom (36.35). Evidently, the argument made here is that the white student has not been shot at because of his privilege of being white, which shows how significant the difference between white people and people of color is. Further, this is also a scene in which a student mentions that Mrs. Gruwell is not respected by the class because she is a teacher. Here, an argument can be made that she is not respected because she is a white person in a position of power, representing an authority figure.

One scene in which the unequal division of benefits is clearly unfair is where Erin Gruwell discusses her schedule, students and lesson plans with her department head, Margaret Campbell, a white character (4.00). In this scene, Mrs. Gruwell is informed that most of the students she will teach have to take three different buses, totaling 90 minutes each way and that assigning homework should be left out, since they have no time to do it. Upon hearing this, Mrs. Gruwell is shocked, and one interpretation of her reaction can be that she reacts that way because academic rigor is not applied for these students. Another interpretation of her reaction can be that taking so many buses is not something that she has experienced, because she, as a white person, has the benefit of owning a car and of using it as a means of transportation between home and work, while her students, people of color, do not have the same benefits.

As Orozco explains, Whiteness as Property serves to create inequality in schools around the United States, and many of the differences between white and non-white schools concern material and curricular inequities (822). The school in *Freedom Writers* is a school with predominantly white students. The viewer can notice that the classrooms with more white students are equipped with higher quality materials such as a whiteboard with whiteboard pens, better desks and even computers. On the other hand, the classroom in which the integration program students study includes materials such as scratched and old desks, a blackboard with chalk and no eraser, as well as no computers. An argument can be made that the differences in quality between the classrooms are so obvious because people such as, among others, Ms. Campbell, do not consider people of color worthy of equally good educational opportunities and materials because they will destroy them. This can be seen in the scene in which Mrs. Gruwell wants her students to read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, but Ms. Campbell replies: “Look at their reading scores. If I give your kids these books, I’ll never see them again, and if I do, they’ll be damaged” (37.42).

In continuation of the same scene, Ms. Campbell proceeds to suggest another version of the same book, but torn and aged. This can be a matter easily related to fairness in connection with equity and equality, two criteria that decide if something is just or unjust (Kriese and Osborne 44). There is an evident unfair division of books, where students of color receive books of lesser quality, which again, shows the disadvantaged position people of color are in. In other words, people of color are often connected to the destruction of goods, violence, and carelessness by some of the white characters, such as Ms. Campbell. This characterization of depicting people of color as violent and dangerous causes hostility toward them, as DiAngelo claims, as well as it causes feelings of superiority for white people towards themselves (91). These feelings are quite clearly expressed by Ms. Campbell.

### 3.1.2 Commitment to Social Justice

When there is injustice, people's responses may be violence, which means, when people act against injustice, there is a high risk of reaching civil disturbance and as mentioned, of violence (Kriese and Osborne 45). This information represents the third of the questions connected to judgements about justice and injustice that Kriese and Osborne describe, and it applies well to the acts of violence in *Freedom Writers* (45). There are several scenes throughout *Freedom Writers* in which justice and injustice are present, the greater number of them being dealt with in violent ways. For example, there are fights between students at school several times throughout the film. The reason for these fights is not always clear, but the viewer may conclude that they take place because the different racial groups assume that this is a way to deal with social injustice between minoritized groups. An example of this is the scene in which Eva lets five gang members enter the school area to initiate a violent fight in the schoolyard, in which the different racial groups fight each other (14.50, 15.40). An interpretation of this can be that these outbursts of violence are each group's own way to commit to justice.

A significant scene shows five members of the group called “Little Cambodia” by Eva, and five members in Eva’s group being in their cars and arriving at a convenience store (24.35). Inside there are Eva, Sindy - an Asian character - and two of her friends, and a black man. After the black man becomes angry for losing at the slot machine, he aggressively asks the cashier for his money back. From outside, one of Eva’s friends sees everything and takes his gun out, shooting at the black man. The black man runs away successfully but the bullet hits one of the Asian men in the store and kills him. When describing their first justice related question, Kriese and Osborne claim that the feelings and reactions influenced by justice are often subjective (44). The viewer can observe and conclude that this claim applies to a great number of the acts of violence in *Freedom Writers*. An observation can be made that the racial groups in the film appear to assume that they must have strong, negative feelings against each other. That means, the way the groups act and feel towards each other may be affected by them being disadvantaged in the society they live in, and that is why their responses regarding their perceptions of justice differ from other groups such as white people (Kriese and Osborne 45).

However, if the characters want to fight for social justice, they first have to become a community and accept each other. A great example of this is the scene in which Eva is in court as witness for what happened in the scene described above (1.31.50). Here, Eva feels pressured by family and her own racial group to give a false testimony in the benefit of the accused. She is shown contemplating what she should do as she looks at the people in court, watching their facial expressions. Further, Eva decides to tell the truth, despite the disappointment of her family and other Hispanic people. The result of Eva’s action is her starting to collaborate and become closer with Sindy, which proves the importance of relationships outside one’s racial group when one does something just (Kriese and Osborne 45). Here, an assumption can be made that Eva’s decision could have been inspired by Miep Gies’s visit at Wilson High School, in which she told her own story about how she, as a Dutch woman, hid Anne Frank in her home

during World War II (1.26.07). During her visit, Miep Gies mentions that she is not a hero, and that she did what she had to do because it was the right thing, an action that is similar to Eva's.

Nevertheless, Kriese and Osborne's fourth question focuses on why people are concerned about justice, with a further focus on the importance of relationships (45). An argument can be made that the characters of color in *Freedom Writers* appear to be more concerned about justice than white people for the fact that they are more disadvantaged, that they consider themselves and are treated as individuals less worthy of justice. Eva, together with other characters, claims that white people have no respect for people of color, and for that reason she cannot reciprocate the feeling (32.34). Hate is a word used often in the film, and in most times, it is connected to the relationship between people of color and white people. Eva justifies her hate for white people by explaining the event in which white policemen arrested her father for the simple fact that they can because they are white, a scene described in the previous section. A conclusion can be drawn that because of the event, Eva makes a generalization of white people, where she believes that they are all the same, the trauma of the past events causing a hatred for all white people. The importance of relationships that Kriese and Osborne discuss is significant in regard to the hate Eva and other characters feel towards their white teacher, because she is seen as the enemy representing all white people (45). On the other hand, this changes when Mrs. Gruwell manages to create a safe haven in the classroom, and a sense of community between students.

### 3.2 Racial Identity Development Theory

The development of racial identity is a process in which white people and people of color go through different stages (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 9). In the following two sections, the stages of Racial Identity Development will be applied to some of the characters in *Freedom Writers*. Four stages will be applied to white characters and three stages to characters

of color. The reason for the different number of stages is that it is those stages that are most relevant to the characters in the film.

### 3.2.1 Racial Identity Development Theory for Characters of Color

The use of “our people” when referring to the people representing one’s racial background is a good example of *immersion*, one of the stages that the process of Racial Identity Development includes. Immersion represents the collecting desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one’s racial identity while actively avoiding symbols of whiteness (Tatum, “Talking about Race” 11). In *Freedom Writers*, people of color do not only avoid symbols of whiteness but also symbols of other people of color that do not belong to their racial group. This stage is prominent particularly in the beginning of the film, where the majority of the scenes that focus on people of color are about the characters keeping to their own racial group. Each group avoids both groups of people of color representing a different race, and groups of white people.

To begin with, a great example of immersion is the scene in which Eva and her friend are walking on the street while the voice-over explains that “in Long Beach”, where the film takes place, “it all comes down to what you look like. If you’re a Latino, or Asian, or black, you can get blasted any time you walk out your door” (3.03). Eva, and other characters, automatically seem to believe that if someone comes from another racial group, they are dangerous. There are statements in which the reasons for killing each other are, among others, pride and respect. In *Freedom Writers*, respect seems to be gained by staying with one’s own racial group no matter what. For example, when Eva is shown running into a group of black people, they gather around her to beat her (3.49). An assumption can be made that every member of the group joins in in order to not lose the other members’ respect. Hence, they stay within the comfort of their own group, refusing to connect or to surround themselves with symbols of whiteness or of other groups of people of color (Tatum, “Talking about Race” 11).

In *Freedom Writers*, as soon as a minority/racial group encounters one or more members of another group, there seems to be an unwritten rule which claims that they must attack each other, otherwise one is not worthy of the group they belong to. What is more, it also has a connection to possession regarding territory. Eva likens school to Long Beach, which she compares to a prison divided in different sections, depending on tribes, such as “Little Cambodia” referring to Asian people, “The Ghetto” referring to black people, “Wonderbread Land” referring to white people, and “South of the Border” or “Little Tijuana” referring to Hispanic people (13.22). Each group keeps together. However, if one group violates the rules of another group by trespassing on their territory by, for example, bothering them at school without having earned respect, that means that they claim what is not theirs, meaning territory. This is another example of one racial group refusing to accept another. Minoritized groups being pitted against each other benefits white people in regard to education, adequate housing, or middle-level employment, because people of color who seek education, loans, housing, or jobs are more apt than similarly qualified white people to suffer rejections (Delgado et al. 12).

This preference of one’s own race and rejection of others is seen even in many of the scenes in which the characters are in the classroom. Here, the distrust and anger towards white people such as Erin Gruwell, and other people of color, such as their peers, is quite clear not only through words, but also through facial expressions and body language. As soon as the students take a seat in the classroom, they move their desk in such a way that they face each other’s racial group, with their backs against the other groups (9.06). This type of group separation, or school segregation, can easily lead to racial stereotyping in their cross-group interactions (Tatum, “*Black Kids Sitting Together*” 48).

*Internalization* is the next step of Racial Identity Development Theory that is relevant to the characters of color in *Freedom Writers*. This stage represents a more positive development in one’s feelings towards others’ race, with an openness for whiteness and other

oppressed groups, where one tries to establish meaningful relationships with these groups of people (Tatum “Talking about Race” 12). In *Freedom Writers*, internalization starts making its debut after a field trip at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. A conclusion can be drawn that the students realize the seriousness of unnecessary hate after gaining knowledge about World War II and about the Holocaust. Upon seeing that people of all ages were killed for being Jewish, the students’ beliefs that they must fight or kill each other because of differences in race and ethnicity appear to change radically.

After the summer break, Mrs. Gruwell’s students are shown hugging each other, talking to each other and being more united (1.09.54). Here, the viewer can see that the characters of color are becoming more open to whiteness and other oppressed groups, as well as seeming to be willing to establish meaningful relationships with each other. At this point, they have already established a meaningful relationship with their teacher. When people of color seek experiences and knowledge beyond their own race and about other people and cultures, and stop mistaking their race for the universe itself, they reach the last stage of racial identity development, *internalization-commitment* (Tatum, “Talking about Race” 12). Upon reaching the last stage, the characters of color in *Freedom Writers* learn to have a more open mind and learn the importance of education and of pride for making it so far, despite what is said about culture being the leading cause of the educational failure of students of color (Solórzano and Yosso 31). Here, an argument can be made that the students’ development is enabled, among other, by the exercise of writing counter-narratives, because they were given a voice. The students’ voices and stories are made heard when Mrs. Gruwell assigns them to put their diaries together in a book, which makes the students express the following words: “we weren’t just students in a class anymore, we were writers with our own voices, our own stories” (1.53.02). Students writing such narratives and turning their thoughts into a book can be seen as trauma therapy and as a way of students making a sense of the world, a way to create their own realities by



describing them in words (Zamudio et al. 124). The students' development can also be seen as the result of Mrs. Gruwell's hard work on creating community within the classroom.

### 3.2.2 Racial Identity Development Theory for White Characters

The earliest stage of the Racial Identity Development process that white people go through is *contact*, representing the naïve curiosity about or fear of people of color. Curiosity and fear are the result of stereotypes learned from people in one's group of friends or family, as well as from the media. Furthermore, people who go through this stage limit their interaction with people of color (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 13). In *Freedom Writers*, one of the characters that seems to constantly stay on this stage throughout the film is Margaret Campbell. Already from the beginning she shows negative feelings towards Mrs. Gruwell's new students. To begin with, she insinuates that upon the integration of the underprivileged students of color, her school, which used to have the highest scholastic results in the district, has lost 75% of its strongest students (5.00). Ms. Campbell appears as if she wants to persuade Mrs. Gruwell to dislike or fear her students of color, or to project her prejudices onto others, which is also helpful to understanding her white fragility (DiAngelo 20).

What is more, in the same scene, Ms. Campbell keeps looking at the new teacher's pearl necklace. After a while, she adds that the pearls are lovely, followed by her suggesting that she would not wear them to class. Here, it is easy to interpret what the department head says as hate towards people of color. She seems to believe that Mrs. Gruwell's students will steal her necklace. In a later scene, the pearl necklace receives yet another compliment, this time by Brian Gelford, who is the other English teacher at Wilson Highschool. Immediately after complimenting the piece of jewelry, Mr. Gelford and Ms. Campbell, who are sitting at the same table, give each other a type of smile that makes the viewer suspicious. To put it another way, their unspoken language suggests that the pearl necklace has been a private subject of discussion between the two teachers, likely for the same reason that Ms. Campbell mentioned earlier,

which is that she would not wear the pearls to class. To put this into more context, the feelings and behavior that Ms. Campbell and Mr. Gilford show can be related to what DiAngelo calls white fragility, meaning that they feel fear and stress when put face to face with problems related to race (20). In contrast to Mrs. Campbell and Mr. Gilford, Mrs. Gruwell appears to always keep away from this stage, leaning towards *disintegration*, *immersion* and *autonomy* instead.

*Disintegration* represents an increase in interaction with people of color. At this stage, white people feel shame, guilt and even anger at the recognition of their own race and the advantages whiteness comes with. What is more, while going through this stage, white people attempt to change others' attitudes toward people of color (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 16). A great representation of someone who attempts to prove to other white people that their negative attitudes towards people of color are wrong is Mrs. Gruwell. Although she shows that she is aware of the advantages whiteness comes with by, for example, driving her students to and from school in the evening, she also shows a lack of *cultural competence*. Cultural competence is part of Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, and it "refers to the ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" (75). A scene that can be interpreted as one in which Mrs. Gruwell lacks cultural competence is the one in which she talks about how a Holocaust happens, because here, she seems sure that her students know what it is when they, in fact, do not (31.34).

Moreover, white people reach a stage in which they are uncomfortable with their own whiteness, which leads to them wanting to search for new, more comfortable ways to be white; this stage is called *immersion*. An important part of this process is, for example, learning about whites who have been antiracist allies to people of color, because white people find it helpful to see that others have experienced the same feelings (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 16). The

viewer may conclude that Mrs. Gruwell is aware of how advantaged she is as a white person. The attempts she makes to make not only herself, but her students of color feel more comfortable with her whiteness are many, and these attempts go hand in hand with the next stage of Racial Identity Development process, *autonomy* (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 17). An example is Mrs. Gruwell trying to go to higher levels of authority, one of them being a black person, to try to persuade them to let her have the same class for Junior and Senior year. Her attempt at persuading them fails, proving that despite the color of her skin, she can be refused by people of color (1.46.50).

Mrs. Gruwell puts effort into confronting racism and oppression in daily life, and the viewer can notice an antiracist behavior conveyed by her actions every day. With each activity she does with her students, this character reaches the *autonomy* stage quickly (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 17). The development of Mrs. Gruwell's understanding for people of color is shown through the daily activities in the classroom, each activity becoming more meaningful and bringing her students together. What is more, not only do the activities help tighten the connection between students, but also between Mrs. Gruwell and the students. Firstly, she tries to make her students realize that they have many things in common by asking them to form two lines and to stand face to face, an activity that focuses on taking a step forward if the question she asks applies to them. This way, the students realize that they have all gone through similar situations in their lives (41.11).

Secondly, the viewer can see that Erin Gruwell's understanding of people of color and of what her students go through develops more after she reads the journals she buys for them (45.36). These journals contain the students' thoughts and real-life events that they decide to share with their teacher. The viewer, together with Mrs. Gruwell, gets to hear/read details about their personal lives, such as seeing their friends dying, members of their families getting beaten or arrested without reason by either other people of color or by white people, or losing their

homes. It is evident that Mrs. Gruwell feels empathy and wants her students of color to realize their worth and to know that they are strong. This teacher's growing awareness of her own whiteness and fight against oppression does not only help the students in *Freedom Writers* to feel more accepted, but it also helps them reach a high level of motivation regarding their own education. For example, by going on fieldtrips to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, the students become more interested in the books Mrs. Gruwell buys for them (*The Diary Of Anne Frank*), being more motivated to read them in order to know more about past events. The students' high motivation regarding their education is also proven by the information the viewer can read at the end of the film, which mentions that many of the students "were the first in their families to graduate high school and go to college" (1.56.27).

## 4 Pedagogical Implications for *Freedom Writers*

The following three sections include discussions of pedagogical implications for the Swedish Upper Secondary EFL classroom, connected to the film *Freedom Writers*. With a connection to Critical Race Theory in education (see e.g., Zamudio et al.), the pedagogical implications will address what has been analyzed in the literary analysis section. However, the third section does not comprise each stage of Racial Identity Development Theory individually despite the detailed individual analysis in the literary analysis section, because the section will include more general pedagogical implications due to the difficulty of discussing each stage of the process in the classroom.

### 4.1 Whiteness as Property

In order to contextualize the film before watching it, presenting and discussing the term white privilege with upper secondary school students can be of relevance. As mentioned earlier, the terms white privilege and Whiteness as Property both represent the advantages, benefits and

rights afforded white people, which is the reason why both are mentioned in the same manner. Because the title *Freedom Writers* is inspired by the civil rights activists who participated in Freedom Rides to protest segregated bus rides in the U.S., talking about the *Freedom Riders* is important. Discussing such topics in the EFL classroom is essential because “students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, societal issues and cultural phenomena in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., “Syllabus”). Here, the students can discuss with each other what the civil rights movement Freedom Riders meant for the United States, and further discuss civil rights activists in Sweden, such as the Civil Rights Defenders (CRD).

One way to work with *Freedom Writers* is to work with Think-Pair-Share activities after presenting the term Whiteness as Property and *Freedom Riders*, because by acknowledging white privilege students challenge this issue, and thereby they acknowledge racism (Fitzgerald 13). The activity can, for example, start with each student constructing a definition of the term on their own before sharing it with the person sitting next to them. Thereafter, the definitions of white privilege can be shared with the entire classroom, which can improve their communication skills. It is possible that not all students think alike regarding such topics, and the introduction of issues such as racism can generate powerful emotional responses raging from guilt and shame to anger and despair (Tatum, “Talking about Race” 1-2). Also, as Tatum claims, students’ level of understanding can be remarkably enhanced if they are given the opportunity to explore race-related material, and their responses are acknowledged and addressed (“Talking about Race” 2). Since “no one at school should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., “Curriculum”), the importance and seriousness of terms like white privilege is something that teachers could take up before the Think-Pair-Share activity.

As a continuation, the students can choose to discuss different scenes in the film in which white privilege is predominant, as well as relate this to real life events in the U.S. and in the world. For example, an activity can be based on the students discussing the differences and similarities between the arrest of Eva's father and the murder of George Floyd in terms of white privilege. This activity can be of importance to connect to police brutality since, as Holmes argues, the police in the U.S. employ degrading, harassing, and restricting against minority groups (345). While the activity of choosing scenes can be effective if students are able to remember every scene in the film, accessibility can be an issue nonetheless, if students need to go back to watch different acts. Another issue can be the teachers' accessibility to the film, considering that websites such as Netflix can be illegal to use in schools, and a DVD of *Freedom Writers* is not always available, since not all educators own one. However, there is the possibility of students using Youtube to look for different scenes. What is more, in order to remember more of the film, students can, as they watch it, take notes based on different scenes in which white privilege is predominant, given that they receive the instructions of the activity beforehand so that they know what to focus on.

As Orozco mentions, racial differences in schools concern, among others, material and curricular inequities, as well as the rights to exclude non-White students from schooling experiences (822). By watching films in the classroom, students work to understand, observe and critique, leading to more in-depth analysis (Mishra 115). With that being said, concerning material inequities, a way to work more analytically with *Freedom Writers* in the classroom is to investigate materials used by the students of color in the film in comparison to the ones used by white students. A continuation of this can be a comparison between materials used in the school in *Freedom Writers* and the material in Swedish schools. The results of the comparison can, however, be of less importance because since 2007 when the film first came out, the quality of materials in the US could have developed significantly. What is more, for more

understanding and awareness of racial differences, students can also discuss such differences outside of school. For instance, the students can share their opinions on the increase of house value gaps between people of color and white people (Tesfai 1005).

The curriculum for the Swedish Upper Secondary School rests on the foundations of democracy, and it emphasizes the importance of the equal value of each human being. However, although the majority of actions take place in the school setting, the American curriculum for high school is not described in *Freedom Writers*. For that reason, a way for students to gain knowledge about curricular documents is to search for the Common Core Standards and/or the No Child Left Behind policy. With that being said, a more analytical way of using this film in the classroom is to compare the curricular documents in Long Beach with the Swedish ones. If it is not possible to find the documents specifically for Long Beach, students can search for documents in the state of California. The comparison can be based on what the curricular documents mention in regard to democracy, equal value of all human beings, as well as looking at what the Constitution mentions regarding human rights. This is a way for students to see the difference between Sweden and an English-speaking country, as well as to acknowledge their own privileges.

#### 4.2 Commitment to Social Justice

Every student, Swedish or not, should feel secure and safe in the classroom, especially when topics such as social justice for people of color and oppressed groups are considered. Therefore, a way of including the topic of social justice in relation to *Freedom Writers* can be done by talking about Sweden's five national minority groups. This can be done in the form of Socratic seminars in which students ask each other open-ended questions and keep an ongoing conversation. In its turn, this can lead to meaningful discussions about the oppressed groups in *Freedom Writers* and what social injustices they face. With such activities, educators can aim for acceptance and understanding among students, which is also a part of what Critical Race

Theory stands for. CRT focuses on change toward social justice for people of color and the empowerment of minority groups that are oppressed and marginalized (McCoy and Rodrick 14). This is of importance, because the values that the Swedish school aims to convey are, among other, the equal value of all human beings (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. “Curriculum”).

Some educators may claim that discussing social justice in *Freedom Writers* in the classroom may be irrelevant for students in a Swedish EFL classroom because they cannot relate to the characters in the film seeing as they are not American students. While it is true that Swedish schools and their students are not subjected to the same social injustice that the students in *Freedom Writers* are, for the reason mentioned above, students should learn about “social issues, cultural and social conditions, as well as ethical issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., “Syllabus”). The knowledge of how social injustice works in countries such as the U.S. raises students’ awareness of their own human rights, as well as reinforcing the value of fighting against injustice. Helping students develop a sense of agency allows them to think critically, which additionally “allows them to think judiciously” which is “a skill set to help them pursue actions that foster social justice” (Zamudio et al. 94). However, this can be challenging in regard to the violence depicted in the film. As Kriese and Osborne point out, it is easy to reach civil disturbance and violence when people take action against injustice (45). Thus, there is a risk that the students misunderstand that the fight for injustice does not need to be violent, which could be considered and discussed thoroughly after watching the movie. This can be done by, for example, looking at how non-violence has been used in Civil Rights movements and ensuring that students know that social protests do not have to result in violence.

Furthermore, the activities that Erin Gruwell practices with her classroom can act as inspiration for educators. For example, an activity inspired by one of Mrs. Gruwell’s can be to assign students to write their own journals and share them with him/her if they wish to, similarly



to how Mrs. Gruwell's students do. As Zamudio and others claim, if the teacher is "willing to allow students to give voice to their own personal experiences and stories", counter narratives may arise in the classroom (124). This way, the students receive the opportunity of having their voices heard not only by their teachers but also by their peers, counter-narrative being an important tool in the classroom for both white students and students of color. CRT scholars emphasize the importance of allowing students of color to "name their own reality", because by sharing their experiences with their classmates can create critical dialogues on, among others, racial issues (Zamudio et al. 124).

In the guidelines of the Swedish curriculum, it is mentioned that teachers should encourage students with difficulties expressing their views to do so (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., "Curriculum"). With that being said, writing a journal can also act as a way of helping students with difficulties to have their voices heard, as well as creating a sense of comfort and openness in the classroom. Thus, with encouragement from their teacher, the students can learn to share their thoughts with their peers. A safe classroom environment is also what Mrs. Gruwell aims to create, where through class discussions and sharing journal entries, she creates a sense of community in which students open up to each other. What is more, in order to inspire students to write journal entries, students can read the book *The Diary of Freedom Writers* for more in-depth view of Gruwell's students' journals. By reading the book, students can get a glimpse of more detailed journal entries, seeing the structure and language used. Not only that but seeing the original journal entries can also help students gain more courage to write their own.

#### 4.3 Racial Identity Development Theory

As described earlier, white people and people of color move from one stage to the other as they begin to define themselves in relation to others, and Racial Identity Development is a process that applies to real people (Fitzgerald 28). With that being said, although the characters in *Freedom Writers* are fictional, they still represent real-life individuals, which is why the

Racial Identity Development Theory is applicable to the classroom. In order for students to hear the people behind the characters of the film, teachers can show Erin Gruwell's TED talk in which the listener can hear both Erin Gruwell's and some of her students' stories.

It being unavoidable, prejudice is something that all humans have (DiAngelo 19). DiAngelo claims further that in order to change racial prejudices, we have to explore them (20). Both white characters and characters of color in *Freedom Writers* are prejudiced, and these prejudices seem to change throughout the film. In order for students to understand and realize the prejudices of white characters and characters of color as they define themselves in relation to each other, they need to understand what prejudice is. Additionally, it is of importance for students to acknowledge the fact that all humans have it, because when humans recognize that they have been misinformed, they have a responsibility to seek out more accurate information and to adjust their behavior accordingly (Tatum, "Talking about Race" 4). Further, this helps students develop what Gloria Ladson-Billings terms social competence, the "ability to help students appreciate and celebrate their cultures of origin while gaining knowledge of and fluency in at least one other culture" (75).

Since it is through interaction with others that people gain their sense of who they are and view themselves, this is also how they establish their racial identity (Fitzgerald 27). Hence, the benefit of social pleasure can be meaningful in the classroom. The term social pleasure is defined by Wilhelm and Smith as an experience that helps one identify self and affiliate with others and identifying with the protagonists of a literary work "stakes one's identity and helps one to experiment with, express, and consolidate that identity" (55, 57). Although it is connected more to reading, fostering social pleasure in the classroom in connection to films can still be effective. For that reason, working with social pleasure in relation to *Freedom Writers* can lead to students gaining a deeper understanding of who they are in relation to others, because working with identity is a social process, and for students to create a place in the social

worlds they inhabit, they have to create a sense of self (Wilhelm and Smith 57). Thus, Wilhelm and Smith emphasize the importance of encouraging peer discussion based on the literary source in focus, here *Freedom Writers* (58).

Additionally, watching and discussing the characters and actions in *Freedom Writers* can also lead to motivation to figure out the problems with real life issues such as the oppression of minoritized groups, social justice, inequality, and wanting to do something about it. This intellectual pleasure, as Wilhelm and Smith call it, is fun and therefore motivating, engaging, and it is a benefit that gives students to opportunity to develop their capacities for it (58). The class discussion does not have to be based on questions planned ahead by teachers, but teachers can allow students to come up with their own questions. Not only that but setting no limits can lead to authentic discussions (Wilhelm and Smith 58).

The topic of racism is one that requires cultural competence, and for teachers to have that competence, there is a process that Elena Aguilar calls transformational coaching (31). The viewer of *Freedom Writers* can conclude that Mrs. Gruwell may have needed more cultural competence while stepping into the classroom for the first time. As a result of her lack of cultural competence the students are hard on her. Additionally, Gruwell has no classroom management strategies, and there may be new teachers in Sweden experiencing the same. So, if teachers feel inadequate to teach anti-racism and are open to professional development, schools may be able to arrange that in order to find their way towards the last stages of the Racial Identity Development process that Tatum describes (“Talking about Race” 11-17).

## 5 Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine how the film *Freedom Writers* reflects the topic of racism by analyzing events and characters with the help of Critical Race Theory, two of its

key tenets, and Racial Identity Development Theory. Additionally, the essay intended to examine how using this film in the EFL classroom may affect students' attitudes and values.

By using Critical Race Theory, the analysis has demonstrated the different layers of racism depicted in *Freedom Writers*, and the complexity of each character's actions as they interact with each other, as well as how they see themselves in relation to others. The analysis has shown that racism is depicted in the film through the very much conspicuous concept of Whiteness as Property, the interactions between white characters and characters of color being what proved the difference between them to be significant. Examining the movie through the lens of Critical Race Theory has given a deeper understanding of the importance and impact of addressing racism and of trying to overcome it.

To conclude, although topics such as racism can generate powerful emotions in EFL students, working with race-related materials such as *Freedom Writers* gives students the opportunity to enhance their level of understanding by discussing it and connecting the events in the film to real life situations. Further, including *Freedom Writers* in the EFL classroom increases the chance for students to gain awareness of minority groups in Sweden and in the world, as well as motivating them to speak up, giving them a chance to see the importance of empowerment and of having their voices heard. Additionally, students learn to evaluate such issues, which can lead to wanting to do something about the oppression and social injustice in the world. Not only is the film effective for students, it can also act as inspiration for teachers who can apply Erin Gruwell's practices to their own classrooms.

For a deeper analysis of the characters and their feelings in *Freedom Writers*, it might be interesting to examine the film from a cinematic point of view, in relation to camera angles, exposure, color, music and more. More suggested ideas for future research could be a comparative analysis of the film and the book, to explore how racial differences are portrayed

in the film, as well as if there is other, if any, significant contrasts between the book and its cinematic version of it.

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