

# [Education in freedom writers](https://assignbuster.com/education-in-freedom-writers/)

Foundations of Education

Film Critique – Freedom Writers

Historically, concepts such as curriculum, syllabus, lesson plan, educational objectives have been all-important words in education. These concepts do not exist in a vacuum. Teaching and learning are often affected by social, political, economic, and historical factors that are not accounted for in the formal curriculum. The film Freedom Writers explores some of these factors from the vantage point of Ms. Gruwell, an inexperienced middle class Caucasian female teacher at an integrated school, Woodrow Wilson Classical High SchoolinLong Beach, California. The film is set in the racially charged atmosphere of 1994, less than two years after the Los Angeles riots sparked by the acquittal of the Caucasian officers who were caught on camera brutalizing Rodney King, an African American. Her group of racially diverse at risk students are unflatteringly labeled “ unteachables”. Before she can teach basic concepts in poetry, however, Ms. Gruwell has to contend with and overcome the racial stereotypes, low teacher and student expectations, poor discipline, socioeconomic restraints, and myopic bureaucratic policy that have resulted in her students’ negative attitude to their teachers, school, the educational system, and life in general. They believe that their educational boundaries are limited, that their teachers are not invested in them, and that school is merely another prison to which they are assigned during the day to fight the undeclared war. Both teachers and students believe that the students are hopeless and that attempts to teach them using the formal curriculum is an exercise in futility. This paper explores how certain factors external to the educational institutions—racial stereotypes, low teacher and student expectation, poor discipline, socioeconomic and historical restraints, and myopic political policy—affect the educational process as portrayed in Freedom Writers.

Initially, Ms. Gruell tried an ineffective teacher dominated, teacher centered approach to educating her students. Try as she might, however, she could not get the students interested in her lessons. The students regarded her as an outsider and that she had to gain their respect before they would give them hers and allow her to teach them. Ms. G was forced to revise her teaching style and strategies to reach her students. Eventually she expelled the curriculum and simply listened to her students. Her wisdom was in recognizing that she had to connect with them and to understand that they had needs that had to be acknowledged and barriers that had to be demolished before they would be taught. She assigned materials about minorities and discrimination that they could relate to including The Diary of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel’s Night . She empowered them with words by giving them diaries in which they could write their own stories. She devised activities and field trips to help them learn respect and tolerance of one another. The student listened to guest speakers, and conducted a field trip to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum so they could experience racism, intolerance, death and injustice in a new context. She was even able to raise funds for class projects and outings. Once she had gotten their interest, Ms. G relentlessly built on themes that which was familiar her students. In so doing, she achieves what thus far had been seemingly impossible: getting her students interested in reading education.

Ms. Gruwell’s pedagogical style evolved to resemble the Inquiry Approach. Inquiry is a student-centered pedagogical model which is based on the idea that teaching and learning are enhanced when students are active agents in the teaching and learning process. Teaching is most effective when students are not just passively digesting arbitrary information, but are engaged in the actual construction of diverse, relevant, and real world knowledge. Thus, the very nature of the Inquiry Approach means that it is highly effective framework for catering to students’ different learning styles and for facilitating the management of challenging curricula. The learning sequence is based on concepts that facilitate effective learning rather than arbitrary classroom activities: tackling real-world questions, issues and controversies, developing questioning, research and communication skills, and solving problems or creating solutions. Schema activation, articulating novel methods of processing ideas, drawing ideas and generating new ideas from experiences, conducting independent research are important to Inquiry. Inquiry is authentic: lessons and content are focused on authentic, relevant ideas that students are actually interested in. This is the ultimate genius of the Inquiry Approach: the deep understanding of self-generated content in an authentic context which extends beyond the classroom. While Ms. G might have opted simply to teach the established curriculum, she instead opted to teach the students in the way they needed to be taught.

One of the important themes of Freedom Writers is that teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum. Rather, the classroom is a microcosm of the larger society where a host of social, historical, political and economic factors converge in the classroom and directly impinge on the education process. This plethora of factors influence the educational process and how effectively a teacher can teach.

Political agents included the school administration and the Board of Education; all cogs in a system designed to suppress the advancement of minorities. The callous label of “ unteachable” placed on the students only exacerbates the sense of oppression these disenfranchised minority students feel. The school serves as microcosm of the larger society where oppression was even more pervasive and detrimental. Instead of serving as a springboard for the students to self-actualize and escape the bonds of the “ matrix of domination” by challenging them to achieve high standards, it instead institutionalized the same oppression the prevented the students from self-actualizing in the first place. A simple example is the reading list for class. Instead of allowing the students to interact with high quality, challenging reading material such as Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet , they students were expected to read a condensed version of the play which was below the reading standard for their grade. Even worse, the main concern of the head of department, Ms. Margaret Campbell, was that the students would damage the books instead of reading them. She was not concerned with challenging students to reach for high academic accomplishments. She simply fed into the machinery of the “ matrix” where “ unteachable” students continue to perform much more poorly than their Caucasian counterparts. What she fails to realize is that this attitude simply perpetuates the very issue that she complains about. According to Carborne II in “ Race, Class, and Oppression: Solutions for Active Learning and Literacy in the Classroom.”

The disadvantage perpetuated by this oppression can influence a student’s motivation to succeed in school, and has been shown to negatively impact academic performance and levels of self-esteem. In many urban school settings, the racial impact of socio-economic status is reflected in the academic performance of minority students in those schools as well as in the sense of hopelessness that often accompanies it.

The influence of historical factors and the influence on attitudes to education is clear in Freedom Writers . The film is set in 1994 soon after the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles which were prompted by the televised police brutality of Rodney King. With the single exception of a male Caucasian student, Erin Gruwell’s students are minorities: African-American, Latino, Asian, and Mexican. Traditionally, undereducated, underprivileged and marginalized, these students grew up with a long history of racial, economic, educational, and social inequity. They come from neighborhoods that are traditionally controlled by crime lords, drug kingpins; neighborhoods where drugs, broken families, gang-life and violence are a way of life. Survival dominates their thinking, and most are confident that the will not reach their 18th birthday. The hate the system that warehouses them in integrated school and forgets that they exist. Their primary goal in school is to survive the day.

Learning is of secondary importance particularly if the education comes from a Caucasian, the representation of the system that they hate so much. Initially, Ms. G’s students resisted her attempts to educate them, because they had been socialized to think of Caucasians as “ them”: racially oppressive forces that historically have undermine and disenfranchised minority races. The students refuse to or cannot respect her as a teacher or even as a human being because she is one of “ them. They fail to acknowledge the possible positive ramifications of being educated by her.

The most damning aspect of this kind of oppressive system is that it is self-perpetuating. Over generations, the oppression has become firmly engrained in the lives of minorities to the point where they internalize and manifest the stereotypes even as they resist them. For example, while Ms. G was genuinely interested in her students, but after years of discrimination and ill treatment, her interest came across as sympathy, or worse pity. Her positive attitude was not accepted at face value. Instead her display of what the students interpreted as what Freire terms “ false charity” was yet another bit of proof that the system was stacked against them. The fact is that she “ needed” to show “ charity” because of the system—her system—put minorities at an unfair economic disadvantage.

Economics play a major role in Room 203. Researchers such as Jonathan Kozol (2008) and Berliner (2006) record startling correlations between the achievement gap and which are directly linked to economic prosperity. According to a Trends in Mathematics and Science Study TIMMS (2003), “ American schools with the most wealth possess the highest test scores”. Conversely, American schools with the highest levels of poverty achieve the lowest test scores. Hodgkinson (2008) reports even more startling statistics: the United States has the largest total number of children living below the poverty line. In this demographic, 33% is African while only 14% is Caucasian. Hodgkinson asserts that long term investment from government and non-governmental agencies would be the best way to alleviate the problem of student performance in underperforming schools. Investment like this would have a ripple effect in the larger society by breaking the cycle of poverty. However, the issue is far too complex to be solved by a simple injection of financial capital into poor performing schools. A collaborative effort is needed where students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and teachers converge as a single entity to combat this issue.

Initially, Ms. G’s students resisted her attempts to educate them, because they had been socialized to think of Caucasians as “ them”: racially oppressive forces that historically have undermine and disenfranchised minority races. Their attitude toward her was based on their previous experiences with “ white teachers” and other privileged members of a racially oppressive system, who do not understand the struggle that they had experienced as minorities: poverty, discrimination, crime, drugs, racism, and death. In fact, for these oppressed students, these individuals are actually part of the machinery designed to perpetually oppress minorities. With her constant smile, her high minded ideals, and her feeble, misguided attempts to save the minority students from their own lives, she fit perfectly the stereotype of “ white privilege”. The author of “ Race, Class, and Oppression: Solutions for Active Learning and Literacy in the Classroom” explains this in terms of a “ matrix of domination” where the achievement gap between minority students and their Caucasian counterparts has led to the marginalization of many students by social class and race”. The students refuse to or cannot respect her as a teacher or even as a human being because she is one of “ them. They fail to acknowledge the possible positive ramifications of being educated by her.

The movie provides an in-depth exploration of the complex dynamics of expectations. Historically, low expectations were routinely assigned to lower class or minority populations by teachers and the students themselves. The academic downgrade of Woodrow Wilson High School after integration “ proved” that minorities are not as academically capable as students from other privileged backgrounds. The poor performance was further exacerbated by the students’ lack of discipline which in turn confirmed teachers’ negative attitude and low expectations. Perhaps the worst consequence so such attitudes is that they creates a sense of inferiority in these students who now internalize these low expectations of others now manifest them as low expectations of themselves.

Clearly, expectations are a double edged sword. Positive expectations are a major contributor to student success, while negative expectations have the opposite effect. Over the last several decades a number of researchers have shown that irrespective of whether the teacher or students have high or low academic expectations, self-fulfilling prophecies assure that those expectations will be met. The results of a study of 30, 000 minority students by Harvard University economist and researcher Ronald F. Ferguson discovered “ the distinct importance of teacher encouragement as a source of motivation of non-White students”. Both Mr. Gelford and Ms. Campbell, and the rest of the staff, had low expectations of the “ unteachables” in Room 203. From the onset, Ms. Campbell indicated that Ms. G’s objectives in her lesson plan were pitched above the students’ ability and advised her to simplify them. She also dismissed the idea that the student should be provided with rich, stimulating material. Mr. Gelford refused to entertain the idea that the students would be able to appreciate the novel The Diary of Anne Frank and sneered at the idea that they had the intellectual sophistication to draw parallels between their lives and Anne’s life. Ms. G’s kids were not expected to achieve as much as the students in Mr. Gelford’s advanced class so they were held to a different, albeit lower, standard.

The solution for counteracting the damaging effects of low expectations is not merely to dispel low expectations or to declare a belief in high expectation. Teachers must believe that students have to potential for unlimited success. Rosenthal and Jacobson’s 1968 experiment indicated that students showed remarkable academic success simple because their teachers thought they would. Had Erin attended to the advice about the achievement potential of the students in 203 would never have achieved their remarkable academic performance. What drove them to achieve was her simple belief that they were just as capable of the levels of achievement as their Caucasian counterparts.

Despite all odds, Ms. G was able to achieve what the two teachers before her had been unable to. She was able to get the students in Room 203 to take an active interest in their own education. Despite all odds, and with great personal sacrifice, she showed the students what it really meant to have an education in an oppressive world. She gave them hope for the future. Once she shifted the focus from her teaching to the students learning, she was able to recognize that the racial stereotypes, low teacher and student expectation, poor discipline, socioeconomic and historical restraints, and limited bureaucratic policy are real restraints that compromise the educational process.

The film Freedom Writers inspires me as a teacher. Students today are much more difficult to manage, but as the film shows, management difficulties are rooted in social, economic, political, and historical factors that the students internalize and consciously manifest in ways that compromise them. It takes enormous dedication, patience, and conviction to help students break through whatever constraints the students are struggling with. Ms. Gruwell’s experiences remind me of my first days as a teacher with typed lesson plans and a thousand misconceptions about how students should be taught. Ultimately, we have to understand out roles as facilitators of learning, and more broadly, life. Our jobs—vocation—as teachers is not merely to broadcast facts. Rather it is to educate students in the sense of helping them to gather and construct relevant information that will help them to evolve as creative individual thinkers. Teachers need to find catalysts that generate the fire for learning in their students. We need to strive daily to find creative and revolutionary means to get students to achieve way beyond their wildest expectations. If Ms. G, inexperienced and idealistic as she was, inspired 150 at risk students to persevere and graduate, then so can any teacher. She truly is an inspiration for us all.

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