

## **Exploring Racism in *the Freedom Writers* (2007): Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis of Social Context and Social Ignition Dimensions**

Joko Wibowo

University of Al-Qolam Malang  
[jokowibowo@alqolam.ac.id](mailto:jokowibowo@alqolam.ac.id)

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research analyzed racism in *Freedom Writers* (2007) through Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, exploring societal influences, racial conflicts, and resolution strategies. The research revealed *The Freedom Writers* portrayed systemic racism through classroom discrimination, gang conflicts, and inequality. Using Van Dijk's CDA, highlighted education and empathy as tools for change, with activities like the Line Game fostering unity. Empowerment through storytelling and linking struggles to global issues, such as the Holocaust, emphasized collective efforts for lasting systemic reform and social transformation.

*Keywords: Racism, Freedom Writers (2007, Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Social Context, Social Ignition.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A major social issue that affects people across different communities and cultures is racism, affecting social interactions, opportunities, and relationships. The *Freedom Writers'* theme is important as it emphasizes these challenges through the experiences of its characters. This research helps deepen our understanding of how media reflects and addresses real-world racism by analyzing the issues portrayed in the movie. The study systematically explored the language, power dynamics, and societal structures related to racism using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework. This theme is substantial as it not only educates audiences about the impacts of racism but also stimulates discussions on how to deliver it effectively, particularly in educational and social contexts.

The movie's powerful theme portrays marginalized students' struggles in a racially divided society. Rich material for studying racism is provided in the movie as it reflects the daily challenges faced by individuals from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. It also portrayed the role of education and empathy in beating racial barriers, making it a beneficial case study for encouraging positive social change. This research focused on how societal factors, such as historical events and cultural dynamics, influenced the depiction of racism in the movie. Additionally, it analyzed the triggers and causes of racial conflicts, as well as how the characters' actions contributed to resolving these issues. By linking the fictional portrayal of racism to real-world issues, this study focuses on the importance of education, empathy, and collective action in fighting racism.

The significant role of education in addressing racism and stimulating social equity was the research focus. Studies displayed that racism negatively influenced people's lives and relationships, factors coming from unstable families, unsympathetic school environments, and external factors (Litaay, 2024). Discussing these issues requires educational awareness and relationship-building, as emphasized by (Sadena & Al-hafizh, 2024), who connected this approach with education's broader goal of raising empathy. Teacher awareness was particularly crucial, as proposed by (Keohane, 2022), who promoted anti-racism education to support marginalized youngsters and create inclusive classrooms. However, systemic challenges, such as those portrayed in New Zealand's Te Whāriki curriculum, lacked sufficient frameworks to support anti-racism pedagogies (Azarmandi et al., 2024). In addition, integrating anti-racism pedagogies through various disciplines has proven essential. For example, studies in Canada emphasized teaching systemic racism to improve students' attitudes and behaviors (Efimoff & Starzyk, 2023), while attempts in social work curricula stimulated eliminating conditioned biases and promoting equity (Cornell, 2023). These findings validated or justified the importance of providing educators and institutions with tools to encourage intercultural understanding and address racism effectively.

The research also highlighted the multidimensional nature of racism and the need for evidence-based involvement in various contexts. In higher education, denying the existence of systemic racism hindered efforts to create inclusivity. (Tichavakunda, 2021). Studies also highlighted cyber-racism in New Zealand's higher education and the necessity for digital citizenship teaching to fight online discrimination (Ibrahim, 2022). In medical education, Black students suffered micro-aggressions and lacked representation in the curriculum, worsened by systemic hierarchies (Alhassan et al., 2024). Effective responses included anti-racism workshops, policy changes, and community involvement to break down systemic obstacles (Baffour & Lawrence, 2023) and (Miller, 2021). Furthermore, addressing particular forms of racism, such as anti-Asian discrimination, is important to integrate both historical and modern viewpoints into the teaching and learning curriculum, as suggested by (Shin et al., 2022). Across all contexts, encouraging dialogues, updating curricula, and promoting awareness through movements like Black Lives Matter was key. (Hsu et al., 2022) displayed how education could be a transformative tool to fight racism and promote equity.

This research focused on how racism was shown in the movie *Freedom Writers* and why it matters. Unlike most studies that focused on racism in real-life schools or communities, this study applied a film to teach lessons about racism, empathy, and social change. It examined two ideas: "social context," which showed how racism existed in systems like schools, and "social ignition," which focused on events that inspired change, like The Line Game and Holocaust lessons in the movie. The study was unique because it linked the students' struggles in the film to bigger historical events, like the Holocaust, making the message relatable to many people. By using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research displayed how the film's language and actions challenged stereotypes and promoted unity.

This research analyzed racism within the social context portrayed in *Freedom Writers* (2007) by identifying and evaluating how racism was represented in the characters' interactions, dialogues, and experiences. It also explored the broader societal factors, such as historical events and cultural dynamics that shaped the portrayal of racism in the movie. Additionally, the study investigated the social ignition dimensions of racism by analyzing the triggers and causes of racial conflicts and tensions in the story.

This research assumed that *Freedom Writers* (2007) portrayed racism as a central theme that significantly affected the lives of its characters. The movie was believed to use interactions, dialogues, and character experiences to show how racism affects individuals and

communities. It also assumed that societal influences, such as historical events, cultural beliefs, and social structures, play a major role in shaping the portrayal of racism in the film. Additionally, the study assumed that certain events or triggers in the movie ignite racial conflicts. Furthermore, it was assumed that the key to resolving these issues was the characters' actions and responses along with empathy and education being essential tools for solving racism. The research advantages included providing insights into how racism was portrayed in media and helping audiences understand its social impacts. It also linked the movie's portrayal of racism to real-world issues, stimulating viewers to reflect on their communities. The study offered valuable lessons for educators, policymakers, and audiences to address such issues. It emphasized the role of education in fighting racism, as seen in the teacher and students' actions, inspiring educators to promote inclusivity and empathy. Finally, by displaying how characters resolved conflicts, the research promoted individual and collective efforts to reduce racism and stimulate positive social change.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The research focus was the movie *The Freedom Writers*, directed by Richard LaGravenese. It was to analyze the racism portrayed in the movie. The research focused on two main ideas: the Social Context Dimension, which showed how racism and inequality exist in society, and the Social Ignition Dimension, which showed actions and moments that challenge these unfair ideas and practices.

The research applied two types of sources. The first type was the movie itself, which included scenes, dialogue, and the storyline. Important examples were classroom segregation, gang conflicts, and The Line Game, which showed themes of racism and efforts to create unity. The second type of source was extra materials like books and articles on Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which helped with the study, and information about racism and education systems to give more background.

The research applied Van Dijk's CDA framework to analyze racism at two levels. At the macro level, the study investigated big problems, like unfair systems and economic inequality, and showed how society's systems keep racial differences. At the micro level, it explored small actions and activities, like The Line Game and The Diary Project, to find biases and moments where people changed their views. The study also studied symbols and themes in the movie, like stereotypes and activities that bring people together, to show how language, actions, and systems keep power imbalances. This approach helped find both the ways discrimination continued and the ways it could be challenged and changed.

## FINDINGS

### Social Context Dimension

This part showed how racism and the structure of society keep discrimination and inequality alive.

### **1) Classroom Segregation: How Systemic Racism Was Shown in Schools**

The scene described students in the classroom were divided by their race and ethnicity, reflecting the divisions in society. They came from different backgrounds, such as African-American, Latino, Asian, and White, and did not get along due to inequality and stereotypes. This separation showed the bigger problem of distrust and division in society.

The analysis results revealed that this scene showed how racism created barriers between people and affected their relationships. In the classroom, students brought the racial discrimination they faced in society, making it hard for them to work together. This unfair treatment also led to isolation, making some students feel left out and unimportant.

The context of the scene was that the separation in the classroom showed the larger divisions in society caused by racism and inequality. Students often lived in neighborhoods divided by race and money, so they did not meet or learn from other groups, making stereotypes worse. This separation in schools led to anger and mistrust, continuing unfairness and conflict.

### **2) Gang Conflicts: The Link between Racism, Poverty, and Violence**

The scene explained that it was a gang conflict that happened because of racial and ethnic differences among students. Each group, like Latino, African-American, and Cambodian, formed its gang to feel protected and included. These gangs were not just for friendship but also for survival in a world that feels unfair and hostile.

The findings of the analysis exposed the gang conflicts and showed how racism and unfair systems lead to violence among marginalized groups. Students joined gangs to feel they belonged and stayed safe because they lived in poverty and lacked good education or resources. Racism and stereotypes kept them divided, leading to more violence as they thought fighting was the only way to survive and gain respect.

The context was gang conflicts came from bigger problems in society, like economic inequality and racism. Marginalized communities often lacked good jobs, housing, and healthcare, which led to poverty and violence. Schools also showed these unfair situations, as they had fewer resources, keeping minority groups stuck in cycles of poverty and crime.

### **3) Police Profiling: The Reality of Institutional Racism**

The scene displayed that it was a student who shared how her family was treated unfairly by the police because of their race. This showed the distrust between some communities and the police. For these students, the police created fear instead of helping, which made the racism they faced even worse.

The analysis showed how racism was part of the criminal justice system. The police judged the student's family based on their race, an unfair practice called racial profiling. This treatment made communities of color lose trust in the police and feel unfairly watched, leading to the belief that some groups were bad just because of their race.

The scene context was that Police profiling was part of a bigger problem rooted in history, like slavery and segregation. In some neighborhoods with mostly people of color, the police focused more on watching than protecting, even when people were not doing anything wrong. Poverty and fewer opportunities in these communities made them more likely to be unfairly treated, worsening the problem.

### **4) Institutional Discrimination: Inequities in the Education System**

It was a scene in *Freedom Writers* when Erin Gruwell talked to school administrators who refused to help her disadvantaged students. The administrators acted like these students did not deserve support, showing unfair treatment. This scene showed how the education system failed to meet the needs of marginalized students.

The analysis showed how the education system treated minority students unfairly. Schools with mostly minority students often lacked money, good teachers, and support programs, which made it harder for students to succeed. Wealthier schools serving mostly white students got more resources, creating a cycle of inequality.

The context was Erin Gruwell's students lacked support because public schools got money from local property taxes, so schools in rich areas had more funds. Even though schools were legally desegregated, many were still divided by race and class, with minority students getting fewer resources. Some teachers had lower expectations for these students, which limited their chances of success.

### 5) **Racial Stereotyping: The Power of Microaggressions and Bias**

The scene demonstrated a student drew a racist picture of a Cambodian classmate, showing harmful stereotypes. Erin Gruwell used this moment to teach about prejudice and how stereotypes cause harm. This lesson helped the students think about their biases and attitudes learned from society.

The analysis revealed how small actions, like hurtful drawings or jokes, could spread racism and divide people. These actions seemed harmless but passed along harmful stereotypes, making unfair treatment more common. The drawing hurt the student and reminded them of society's unfair views about their race.

The context was racial stereotypes came from history, like war, colonialism, and propaganda, which were used to justify mistreatment. For example, after the Vietnam War, Southeast Asian immigrants faced unfair stereotypes that made them seem like outsiders. These stereotypes spread through media and culture, causing unfair treatment in jobs, law enforcement, and education.

### 6) **Economic Inequality: The Intersection of Poverty and Racism**

The scene showed Erin Gruwell's students sharing their daily financial struggles. They explained how racism made these problems worse for minority groups. Being poor and from a different race limits their opportunities and affects their lives.

The analysis displayed how poverty and racism were connected. Unfair practices like redlining and unequal pay have kept many minority communities poor, making it harder for them to access education, jobs, and healthcare. The stress of poverty and racism also harmed mental health, leaving people feeling hopeless and stuck in a cycle of poverty.

The context was the students' economic struggles were connected to larger social issues. Unfair housing laws like redlining and fewer job opportunities have kept minority families in poverty for generations. This led to underfunded schools and fewer resources, while the students faced both economic and racial discrimination, making their challenges even harder. Erin Gruwell's work was to provide her students with the basics highlighting this problem.

**Table 1.** Scenes, analysis, and context of racism in *The Freedom Writers* within the Social Context Dimension.

Social Context	Scene	Analysis	Context
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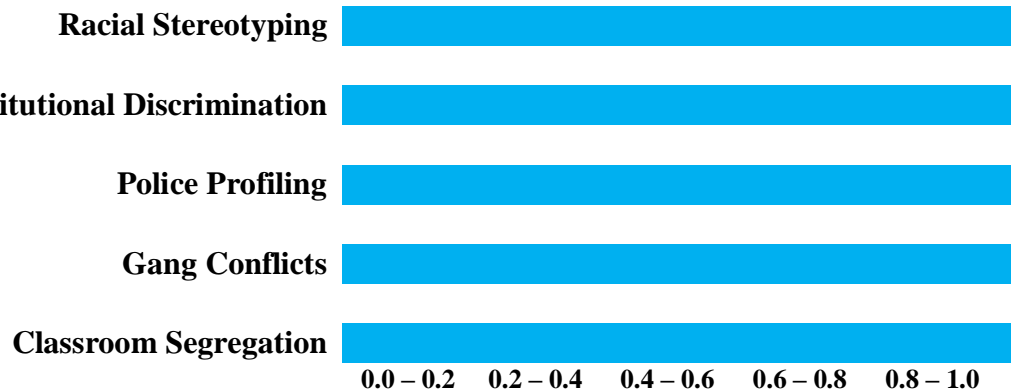
<b>Dimension</b>			
1) <b>Classroom Segregation</b>	In Erin Gruwell's classroom, students were divided based on their race and ethnicity.	This shows how racism influenced how students interact with each other, and how the education system reflected the divisions in society.	The way students were separated in the classroom reflects the bigger racial divisions in the community.
2) <b>Gang Conflicts</b>	Students fought in gangs because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds.	Poverty and a lack of support hurt marginalized groups, while racism caused division and violence in the community.	The way society was structured forced minority groups into conflict and violence.
3) <b>Police Profiling</b>	A student shared how her family was treated unfairly by the police because of their race.	This showed how racism affected many people, with minorities being treated unfairly by the police.	Police discrimination caused fear and made communities more divided by race.
4) <b>Institutional Discrimination</b>	Erin Gruwell argued with school leaders who did not provide resources for her "in danger" students.	This showed how the education system ignored schools with mostly minority students, which caused racial inequality.	The lack of support from the system made the education and opportunity gaps between races even bigger.
5) <b>Racial Stereotyping</b>	A student drew a hurtful picture of a Cambodian classmate, which started a discussion about stereotypes.	This showed how small actions could continue racial prejudices, reflecting larger societal views.	Stereotyping created social divisions and supports inequalities.
6) <b>Economic Inequality</b>	Students talked about how being poor made their lives harder, and how their race made these problems worse.	This showed the link between racism and economic struggles, which mostly affected minority groups.	Being both poor and a minority made it harder for people to move up in society.

**Figure 1.** Bar graph representing the Social Context Dimension of racism and inequality in *The Freedom Writers*, illustrating scenes of discrimination.

**Social Context Dimension: Racism and Inequality in the Freedom Writers**

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**Economic Inequality**



### Social Ignition Dimension

These scenes portrayed events that challenged racist ideas and helped people become aware of them, leading to change.

#### 7) The Line Game: Developing Understanding and Overcoming Biases

The scene described Erin Gruwell employed "The Line Game" to help students understand each other. She asked them to step forward if they shared similar experiences, like losing someone to violence or facing discrimination. This activity showed students that they had similar struggles, breaking down barriers of race and culture.

The analysis revealed that the Line Game helped students see that they shared similar experiences and were not so different. It changed their thinking from "us versus them" to "we are all in this together" by building trust and respect. By hearing each other's struggles, students developed empathy and stopped judging based on race, culture, or gang membership.

The social ignition was portrayed when The Line Game changed how students think and act, helping them see each other as teammates instead of enemies. It broke stereotypes and encouraged students to support one another. By sharing their stories, they built trust, formed stronger bonds, and created a more united classroom.

#### 8) Holocaust Lesson: Connecting Historical and Present-Day Oppression

The scene depicted Erin Gruwell teaching her students about the Holocaust, a time of racism and violence in history. She showed how it connected to the racism and violence her students face in their lives. This lesson helped students understand prejudice and think about their lives in a bigger historical context.

The analysis revealed that the Holocaust lesson helped students see their struggles as part of a bigger history of injustice. Erin Gruwell compared the Holocaust to the racism and violence her students faced, showing that prejudice had long-lasting effects. The lesson helped students understand the bigger problem of racism and encouraged them to challenge unfair systems.

The social ignition portrayed in The Holocaust lesson inspired students to think about their actions and the world around them. They began to see their struggles as part of a bigger story and wanted to break cycles of hate. This lesson helped them stand against injustice and take action to fight inequality in their own lives and communities.

### **9) The Diary Project: Sharing Stories and Building Connections**

In a scene in the movie portrayed Erin Gruwell gave her students a project where they wrote about their personal stories and struggles. Many students shared their experiences with racism and violence for the first time. Writing helped them safely express their feelings and made them feel heard and understood.

The analysis explained that the Diary Project helped students deal with their challenges by giving them a voice and showing they were more than just stereotypes. Writing helped them understand their pain, connect with others, and build empathy, breaking down divisions in the classroom. It also taught them to think about how their struggles related to bigger social issues and created a caring, united community.

The social ignition could be exposed in The Diary Project which helped students grow and build unity by reflecting on their emotions and sharing their stories. Writing broke down barriers like race and gang divisions, empowering them to take control of their future. This inspired them to challenge injustice and work toward a fairer society.

### **10) Field Trip to the Museum of Tolerance: Learning from History**

The scene narrated Erin Gruwell took her students to the Museum of Tolerance, where they learned about the Holocaust and the impact of prejudice. The trip helped them see connections between this history and their struggles with discrimination and hate. This experience inspired them to reflect on their biases and the harm caused by prejudice in their communities.

The analysis findings revealed that the trip to the Museum of Tolerance facilitated students to connect the history of the Holocaust to their own lives. It taught them the dangers of prejudice, the value of empathy, and the shared struggles of humanity. Inspired by the resilience of Holocaust survivors, the students reflected on their actions and found hope to create positive changes in their own lives.

The social ignition could be identified that the visit to the Museum of Tolerance affected the students deeply, assisting them to feel empathy for others and see their shared struggles. This experience created unity and mutual respect among them, inspiring them to fight against the injustices they faced. The trip motivated the students to take action against prejudice and inequality in their lives and communities.

### **11) Zlata's Diary Connection: Linking Personal Struggles to Global Issues**

The scene recounted that Erin Gruwell introduced her students to Zlata Filipović's diary about living through the Bosnian War. Reading her story facilitated the students to see that their struggles with racism and violence were similar to Zlata's experiences with war and oppression. This connection showed them that prejudice and injustice were global issues, helping them feel less alone and more united in their pain.

The analysis showed that Zlata's diary facilitated the students to see their struggles as part of a global problem by showing how violence and prejudice affected people everywhere. Her story taught them about shared humanity, helping them connect their pain to others' experiences and build empathy. The students were inspired by Zlata's strength, learning that they could overcome challenges and work for change in their lives as well.

It can be revealed that the social ignition was Reading Zlata's diary inspired the students to reflect on their struggles and believe in their strength to create change. Her story showed them that they could challenge racism and inequality, just as Zlata faced the hardships of war with courage. The students felt connected to a global fight for justice, and motivated to make a difference in their communities and beyond.

## 12) The Freedom Writers' Name: Taking Power and Identity in the Fight for Racial Equality

The scene described when the students named themselves the "Freedom Writers" to honor the "Freedom Riders" of the Civil Rights Movement, who fought against racial injustice. This name showed their respect for past struggles and their commitment to freedom, justice, and equality. It also symbolized their transformation into a united group working to overcome prejudice and create positive change.

The Analysis concluded that the name "Freedom Writers" was meaningful because it showed the students' decision to fight against racism and unfair systems. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, the name gave them strength and confidence to use their voices for change. It reminded them that their stories and writing could help create a fairer and better world.

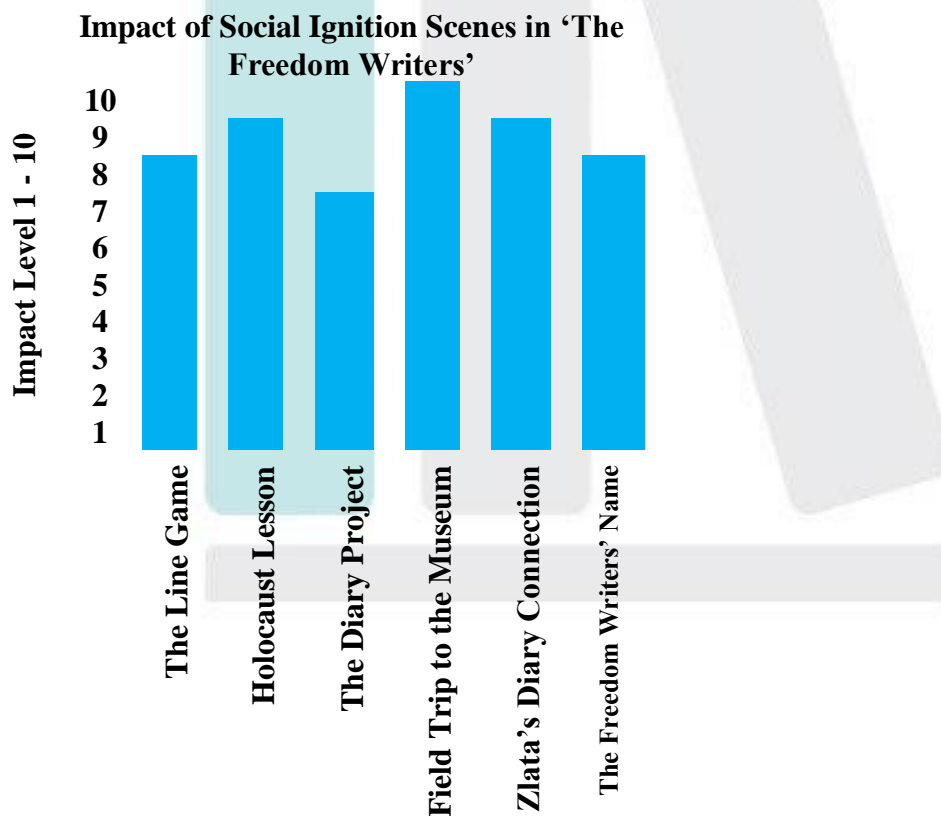
The social ignition could be identified when students called themselves the "Freedom Writers" which could unite the students and give them a shared identity. The name inspired them to work together, fight against racism, and see themselves as leaders who could create change. It also showed them how writing could be a powerful tool to challenge stereotypes and bring positive change to their lives and communities.

**Table 2.** Table of scenes, analysis, and ignition moments from the Social Ignition Dimension in *The Freedom Writers*.

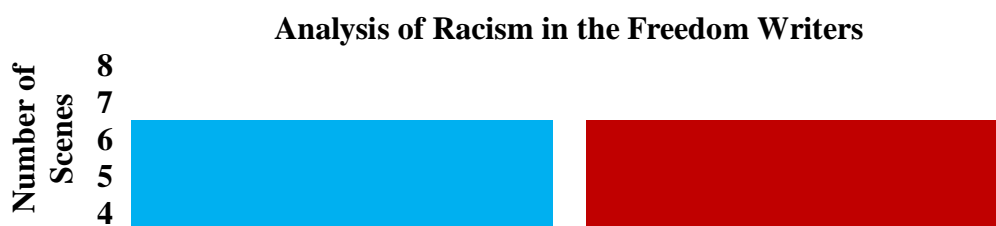
<b>Social Ignition Dimension</b>	<b>Scene</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Ignition</b>
7) <b>The Line Game</b>	Erin asked the students to step forward if they shared similar experiences, such as losing someone to violence.	This activity helped the students understand each other's struggles and reduce racial divisions.	It promoted unity and challenged existing prejudices.
8) <b>Holocaust Lesson</b>	Erin taught the students about the Holocaust and compared it to the racism and violence they experienced.	This lesson linked the students' struggles to historical oppression, helping them understand prejudice more deeply.	It stimulated the students to think beyond their own experiences and question unfair systems.
9) <b>The Diary Project</b>	The students wrote journals to share their personal experiences with racism and violence.	This activity allowed them to express themselves and challenge the stereotypes placed on them.	It also created a space for self-reflection and mutual understanding, helping to break down social barriers.
10) <b>Field Trip to the Museum of Tolerance</b>	The students visited a Holocaust museum and compared the events of the Holocaust to their own experiences.	This visit helped them challenge their prejudices and understand the importance of shared humanity.	It became a powerful moment that inspired empathy and strengthened their unity as a group.

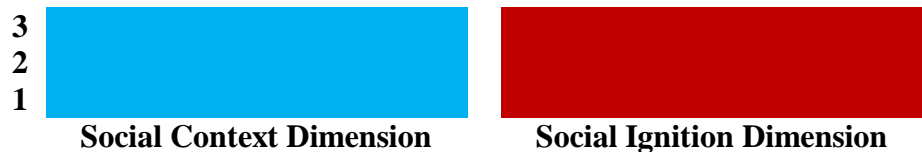
11) <b>Zlata’s Diary Connection</b>	The students linked their struggles to the diary of Zlata Filipović, a Bosnian war survivor.	This showed that racism and oppression were global issues and stimulated students to see themselves as part of the solution.	It motivated them to challenge their circumstances and the system that supports racism.
12) <b>The Freedom Writers' Name</b>	The students decided to call themselves "Freedom Writers" to honor the Freedom Riders from the Civil Rights Movement.	This choice gave them a sense of power and showed their commitment to fighting racial inequality.	It also helped them form a shared identity as individuals who could make a difference.

**Figure 2.** Bar graph showing the impact of each scene in *The Freedom Writers* in challenging racist ideas and inspiring change.



**Figure 3.** Bar graph summarizing racism analysis in *The Freedom Writers*, divided into Social Context and Social Ignition Dimensions.





In conclusion, *The Freedom Writers* presented two views of racism using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The social context revealed how systemic racism and inequality exist in society, while the social ignition showed moments that challenged these injustices and inspired change. The film demonstrated that education and empathy could break down deeply rooted racism and encourage social change.

## DISCUSSION

This research studied how racism was displayed in the movie *Freedom Writers* (2007) using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework. It investigated the social context of racism by analyzing interactions, dialogues, and character experiences that showed discrimination and inequality. The study also looked at the triggers of racial conflicts and how they escalated or were solved. By applying Van Dijk's framework, it investigated the language, power dynamics, and societal factors that influenced the portrayal of racism in the movie. This research linked the movie's representation of racism to real-world issues and highlighted the role of education, empathy, and dialogue in overcoming racism. It aimed to provide insights into how media reflected social issues and promoted discussions on addressing racism in society.

The research findings underscored two main ideas: the problem of systemic racism, called the *Social Context Dimension*, and the possibility of creating change, called the *Social Ignition Dimension*. Systemic racism continued to exist in institutions and society, causing problems like segregation, stereotypes, and economic inequality. If no effort were taken, these issues would keep minorities trapped in cycles of poverty and exclusion. However, education could be a powerful tool for change, as shown in activities like the Line Game and lessons on historical injustices in *The Freedom Writers*. In breaking down stereotypes and stimulating students to think critically about unfair systems, teachers play an important role. To make real transformation, schools and society are required to reform policies, distribute resources fairly, and promote diversity. Marginalized groups also needed chances to tell their own stories, as storytelling could help fight stereotypes and unite people. Small actions, like sessions that sparked empathy, could lead to bigger movements for social justice, but these efforts had to be supported continuously to prevent society from going back to old patterns of racism. Finally, both individual and group efforts were needed to create lasting change. Personal efforts, like overcoming bias, had to be integrated with group actions and policy reforms to make sure these changes stayed strong. Education, along with continued efforts and fair systems, was key to building equity in society.

Research across various films demonstrated the widespread and complex nature of racism, affecting personal and institutional dimensions of society. In *The Freedom Writers*, systemic racism in education is shown through institutions, personal interactions, and internalized beliefs, while *Where's the Money* underscored pre-reflected gut racism, cultural racism, and institutional racism in daily life, including professional and social contexts (*RACISM IN WHERE'S THE MONEY (2017) MOVIE Jeanniefer Sholihati 1 and Arry Purnama 2, 2021*). Similarly, *Get Out* investigated racism through its plot, characterization, and dialogue, emphasizing stereotypes, discrimination, and violence (Nurhadi & Assidiqi,

2019). These works illustrated the widespread presence of racial issues in various societal contexts.

Further research emphasized the impact of racism in *Hidden Figures* and *42*. In *The Freedom Writers*, systemic discrimination and economic inequality limited opportunities for marginalized groups, while *Hidden Figures* portrayed institutional racism at NASA through exclusionary policies and personal prejudice. Additionally, *42* addressed individual and cultural racism by illustrating segregation and resistance to integrating African Americans into sports. Despite these challenges, these studies underscored positive responses, such as resilience, advocacy for equality, and the promotion of moral values, underlining the importance of education and policy reforms to achieve fairness and inclusivity (Yastanti, Rohati, et al., 2021) and (Yastanti, Rohati, et al., 2021).

Comparisons between *The Freedom Writers*, *Just Mercy*, and *The Green Mile* revealed the intersection of systemic and institutional racism across education and justice systems. While *Just Mercy* and *The Green Mile* portrayed prejudice and discrimination that sustained inequalities in the legal system, *The Freedom Writers* demonstrated how prejudice and ethnic divisions could be overcome by inclusive procedures. These studies emphasized the importance of inclusive education, like Erin Gruwell's transformative teaching methods, and anti-racism programs to foster empathy, unity, and social change (Nazar et al., 2024) and (Atika & Tarihoran, 2022).

Lastly, research integrating findings from *The Freedom Writers*, *Hidden Figures*, and media portrayals, such as *The Little Mermaid*, highlighted the widespread effects of racism across education, media, and society. These studies revealed how systemic and institutional racism marginalized minority groups, particularly women and skin color, and how media prejudice reinforces stereotypes (Jayanti et al., 2024) and (Al-Qudah et al., 2023). By addressing these issues through inclusive education, storytelling, and reforms in media representation, these findings emphasized the need for global efforts to fight discrimination, foster unity, and promote equitable environments where diversity could be developing (Gammon & Phan, 2024) and (Rahmawati, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

The research findings from this study offered a clear understanding of how racism and social change were displayed in *The Freedom Writers*. The film portrayed racism to be deeply rooted in institutions and social systems, affecting both individuals and larger communities through classroom discrimination, gang conflicts, and unequal treatment. However, the study underscored that education could serve as a powerful tool for improved change. Erin Gruwell applied activities like the Line Game, Holocaust lessons, and journal writing to foster empathy, critical thinking, and unity among her students. Empathy played a key role in solving racial divisions, as sharing experiences helped people understand each other and let go of stereotypes. While personal and group changes were essential, the research also emphasized the need for systemic reforms in areas such as education, law enforcement, and resource distribution to provide lasting solutions. Empowerment through storytelling was another important finding, as students in *The Freedom Writers* reclaimed their narratives through the Diary Project, challenging stereotypes and asserting their identities. The study also showed that racism was a global issue, linking the students' struggles to larger historical incidents like the Holocaust. Small actions, such as visiting the Museum of Tolerance, were shown to have the potential to stimulate significant change. Overall, the analysis of *The Freedom Writers* using Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework revealed

both the reality of systemic racism and the promise of addressing it through education, empathy, and collective efforts.

Integrating the findings from *The Freedom Writers* with the issue of racism in Indonesian universities offered valuable awareness into addressing racism in diverse educational settings. The study underscored how systemic racism existed in schools and universities, where hidden prejudices in academic and administrative systems often resulted in discrimination, underrepresentation, and unequal resource distribution. It also addressed ethnic and religious divisions, such as between Javanese and Non-Javanese students or Muslim-majority and non-Muslim groups, showing how educators could stimulate understanding and cooperation among students from different backgrounds. Teachers in Indonesia could adopt or adapt wide-ranging practices, such as activities like the Line Game or journal writing, to build and stimulate empathy and awareness. Empowering marginalized students to share their stories could raise awareness about the challenges they face and promote mutual understanding. The research also linked economic inequality to racism, emphasizing the difficulties faced by students from poorer or remote areas and calling for better support from schools and universities. It suggested implementing anti-racism programs, such as workshops and seminars on Indonesia's history of ethnic and racial issues, to inspire movements for equality. Additionally, the study provides opportunities for further research on how race, ethnicity, and religion affect student experiences in schools and universities. Finally, the research proposes practical policy changes to promote diversity and inclusion, such as improving admissions, scholarships, and training for educators to address racism. These findings support Indonesia's goal of "unity in diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*).

It can be drawn valuable lessons from *The Freedom Writers* for future researchers who are focusing on racism in Indonesia. They could compare issues of racism in Indonesian schools and universities with those portrayed in the film, examining similarities and differences in Indonesia's unique culture, history, and institutions. Exploring interrelation is also important, as it exposes how racism combines with other forms of discrimination, such as gender, religion, or class, to impact marginalized groups. Linking studies of racism to historical events, such as the 1998 anti-Chinese riots or the Papua autonomy movement, can provide a deeper context for current racial issues in schools and universities. Researchers might also analyze university practices, including policies and curriculums, to identify any unintended reinforcement of inequality. Collecting personal stories from students using journals, interviews, or group discussions could provide a detailed understanding of their experiences with racism. Examining solutions, such as workshops or empathy-building activities, would offer practical strategies to reduce and eliminate racism in educational settings. Analyzing media, textbooks, and other educational materials applying Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis can reveal how language affects stereotypes and informs more inclusive materials. Researchers could also investigate how racism differs across different regions, such as urban versus rural areas or Java versus Eastern Indonesia, to understand local cultural influences. Integrating qualitative methods with statistical analysis would deliver more reliable findings. Working in partnership with experts from various disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and education, would reinforce the research. Long-term studies can be tested to measure the impact of anti-racism programs or long-time period. These approaches can deepen and broaden understanding of racism in Indonesian student life and guide efforts to create positive change.

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