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Writing the Self Against the Label: Identity Positioning and Counterstorytelling in *Freedom Writers*

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ABSTRACT

Educational films frequently represent marginalized students through narratives of deficiency before staging their transformation through an exceptional teacher. Although *Freedom Writers* has been widely discussed in relation to racism, teacher roles, and transformative learning, less attention has been paid to how its students move from being institutionally labeled to becoming narrators of their own lives. This study examines identity positioning, diary writing, and counterstorytelling in the film while also evaluating the tension between student agency and its teacher-centered plot. Using qualitative interpretive film and discourse analysis, the study analyzed dialogue, diary voice-overs, classroom interactions, institutional encounters, and major narrative turning points. Positioning theory was used to identify assigned and claimed identities, storylines, and associated rights and duties, while critical race counterstorytelling informed the analysis of student-authored narratives. The findings reveal a six-part movement: institutional deficit positioning restricts educational legitimacy; racialized storylines organize belonging through opposition; protected journals support private self-positioning; intertextual encounters develop ethical witnessing; consequential acts make narrative agency visible; and collective authorship produces the Freedom Writers identity. Across these patterns, however, student visibility remains mediated by Erin Gruwell's exceptional-teacher storyline. The study argues that writing does not give previously voiceless students a voice; rather, it creates conditions in which existing voices become legible, shareable, and consequential. This interpretation contributes a relational model of narrative agency and offers implications for critical, consent-based autobiographical writing in language and literacy education.

Keywords: counterstorytelling, Freedom Writers, identity positioning, narrative agency, student voice

INTRODUCTION

School narratives do not merely describe students; they help determine who is understood as teachable, dangerous, promising, deficient, or worthy of institutional investment. *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) dramatizes this process through a racially divided English class at Woodrow Wilson High School. Before the students' academic capacities are

known, school authorities and teachers repeatedly position them through deficit assumptions associated with race, neighborhood violence, prior achievement, and disciplinary risk. Valuable books are withheld because students are expected to damage them, advanced learning is treated as inappropriate for them, and their classroom placement becomes evidence that little can be expected. Against this institutional storyline, Erin Gruwell introduces journals, testimony, literary texts, and collective publication. The film consequently appears to move its students from imposed labels toward authorship, but the movement is complicated: a narrative celebrating student voice is organized around a teacher whose sacrifices and interventions remain the dominant plotline.

The film is adapted from *The Freedom Writers Diary*, a collective text created by Gruwell and her students (Gruwell & The Freedom Writers, 1999). Its cultural durability is partly explained by the appealing claim that literacy can alter how young people understand themselves and are understood by others. Recent educational scholarship similarly emphasizes that students' stories can contest racialized institutional knowledge, reveal capacities hidden by deficit frameworks, and create counterspaces for recognition (Blaisdell, 2023; Castro et al., 2024; González et al., 2024; Leathers et al., 2024). Counterstories do more than add personal experience to an established account. They expose the partiality of dominant narratives and reposition marginalized people as interpreters and knowledge producers (Berrett-Abebe et al., 2023; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Lee et al., 2025). This function is central to *Freedom Writers*, where private journals become evidence that the school's categories cannot adequately explain the students' lives.

Writing in the film is also a problem of identity positioning. Positioning theory understands identity as discursively produced through storylines that distribute rights, duties, possibilities, and moral expectations (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Speakers may accept, resist, or revise the positions assigned to them. Bamberg (1997) further distinguishes positioning within a story, positioning between narrator and audience, and positioning in relation to broader cultural master narratives. Educational applications have shown that positioning analysis can connect moment-to-moment language with institutional identities and longer trajectories of participation (Felix & Ali, 2023; Kayi-Aydar, 2021). In the film, students are positioned by administrators, teachers, peers, families, gangs, and their own narratives. A student can simultaneously be cast as a disciplinary problem, a loyal group member, a survivor, a witness, and a developing writer. The important analytical question is therefore not whether one label is replaced by another, but how competing positions become available, credible, or consequential.

Autobiographical and self-sponsored writing can support this repositioning because it gives writers greater control over topic, audience, disclosure, and form. Stornaiuolo and Monea (2023) demonstrate that adolescents often protect writing from institutional capture, using private composition to sustain agency beyond school evaluation. Baldonado-Ruiz (2023, 2024) shows that testimonio can transform silence into socially situated authorship when young writers connect personal experience to collective conditions. Research with displaced and minoritized youth likewise finds that storytelling can enable writers to reject victim-only identities, claim expertise, and imagine futures (Kendrick et al., 2022; Zoch et al., 2024). These studies clarify why Gruwell's initial promise that the journals will not be graded and will be read only with permission matters. Privacy is not a preliminary inconvenience before publication; it is part of the rhetorical condition that makes honest self-positioning possible.

Previous research on *Freedom Writers* has usually concentrated on pedagogical methods, racial conflict, educational values, or the teacher's professional roles. Ratih et al. (2025), for

example, combine teacher-role theory with critical discourse analysis to examine Gruwell as controller, prompter, participant, resource, and tutor. Siahaan et al. (2025) interpret the film through transformative learning and explain how reflective writing, journaling, and narrative expression can inform English writing instruction. These studies establish the film's pedagogical significance, yet they leave a narrower linguistic-literary question insufficiently explored: how does the film's discourse first produce students as institutional and racial types, and how does student writing reorganize the right to define the self? A related omission concerns the politics of narrative centrality. Inspirational school films may celebrate marginalized students while relying on a white-savior or exceptional-teacher structure that converts systemic inequality into the achievement of one heroic educator (Aronson, 2017; Hughey, 2014). A study of narrative agency must therefore examine both the emancipatory work of the diaries and the limits imposed by the film's framing.

This study addresses that gap by integrating positioning theory and counterstorytelling. It treats labels, pronouns, evaluations, diary voice-overs, classroom exchanges, and collective naming as linguistic events through which identities are assigned or claimed. It also treats the film as a constructed narrative whose allocation of attention affects which agency becomes visible. The study pursues three research questions: (1) How are the students positioned through institutional, racial, and interpersonal labels in *Freedom Writers*? (2) How does diary writing function as counterstorytelling through which the students renegotiate their identities? (3) How does the film negotiate the tension between student narrative agency and a teacher-centered transformation narrative? By answering these questions, the article contributes a relational account of voice: students do not become agents because a teacher creates their voices, but because particular relationships, genres, audiences, and material opportunities allow already existing interpretations to acquire public force.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed qualitative interpretive film and discourse analysis. The design was appropriate because the research questions concern how identity, legitimacy, and agency are narratively and linguistically constructed rather than how frequently particular words occur. The analysis combined positioning theory with critical race counterstorytelling. Positioning theory guided attention to storylines, position assignments, self-positioning, and the rights and duties attached to each identity (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Counterstorytelling guided the interpretation of narratives that challenge deficit explanations and authorize marginalized experience as knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The two frameworks were used complementarily: positioning theory explained the discursive movement among identities, whereas counterstorytelling explained the political and epistemic significance of student-authored accounts.

The study was interpretive rather than evaluative in the sense of judging whether the film accurately reproduces every historical event. Nevertheless, it maintained a critical distinction between the fictionalized film text and an actual classroom. The findings concern representational patterns within the film and cannot be generalized directly to teachers, students, or autobiographical-writing interventions.

Data Sources

The primary data source was Richard LaGravenese's 2007 film *Freedom Writers*, a 123-minute adaptation of the collective diary edited by Gruwell and the Freedom Writers. The film's dialogue, diary voice-overs, character actions, institutional encounters, and narrative sequencing constituted the analytical corpus. The published *Freedom Writers Diary* (Gruwell & The Freedom Writers, 1999) was consulted as the source text behind the adaptation, but the film remained the object of analysis. A publicly accessible dialogue transcript (Scripts.com, n.d.) was used as a retrieval aid for locating and checking verbal passages. Because publicly circulated transcripts may contain punctuation or transcription differences, the analysis relied on short verbal fragments and scene-level paraphrase rather than extended quotation.

Criterion-based selection was used to identify scenes relevant to the research questions. A scene was included when it contained at least one of the following: an explicit or implicit label assigned to a student group; language that established racial, institutional, or interpersonal boundaries; a diary entry or first-person testimony; an encounter with another testimonial text; a change in the students' rights or participation; collective naming or publication; or narrative framing that elevated Gruwell's role relative to student initiative. This procedure retained the narrative development of the film while excluding scenes unrelated to identity positioning or authorship. After these criteria were applied, the final corpus comprised approximately 24 scene-level analytical episodes distributed across six narrative phases. Because timestamps vary across film editions and streaming platforms, the analysis uses stable scene identifiers, such as the book-allocation meeting, line game, journal montage, Miep Gies visit, courtroom testimony, and manuscript-compilation sequence, to make the evidence traceable.

Analytical Instrument and Coding

A document-analysis matrix was developed with eight fields: scene and narrative phase, speaker or focalizer, salient wording or action, position assigned or claimed, dominant storyline, associated rights and duties, counterstory function, and evidence of narrative agency. Initial coding was descriptive and structural, marking institutional deficit labels, racialized group positions, private self-positioning, witnessing, collective identification, and teacher mediation. A second cycle used focused coding to compare scenes and consolidate recurring patterns (Saldaña, 2021). The coding process was informed by reflexive thematic analysis, which treats themes as interpretive patterns developed through sustained engagement rather than as categories mechanically discovered in a text (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and by qualitative content-analysis principles of transparent category definition and iterative comparison (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Both authors participated in coding and interpretation. One author completed the initial coding matrix, and the other reviewed representative and discrepant episodes; interpretive differences were discussed until a shared reading was reached.

A position was coded as externally assigned when another character or institution defined a student's competence, morality, group membership, or future. It was coded as claimed when a student used speech, writing, decision, or collective action to define the self. Counterstorytelling was identified when a student narrative challenged a dominant deficit account, exposed structural or relational conditions omitted from that account, or proposed a different moral interpretation of the student's actions. Narrative agency was not equated with positive behavior. It was coded when students shaped meaning, made consequential choices,

changed an audience's understanding, or participated in determining how their stories circulated.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis proceeded through four stages. First, the film's major narrative phases were mapped: arrival and institutional classification, racial conflict, the line game and journal introduction, encounters with testimonial literature, moral decision and collective writing, and the struggle to continue the class. Second, positioning episodes were compared within and across phases to identify shifts in who possessed the right to describe the students. Third, diary sequences were analyzed as counterstories by examining what dominant account they interrupted, what previously concealed experience they disclosed, and what new identity they made available. Fourth, the resulting pattern was interpreted in relation to the film's overall focalization, especially the degree to which student transformation was narrated as self-authored or as the outcome of Gruwell's exceptional labor.

Credibility was strengthened through theoretical triangulation across positioning theory, counterstorytelling, and narrative-agency research; source comparison between the film, transcript, and published diary; and attention to negative evidence. Scenes that complicate an uncomplicated empowerment reading - including students' resistance to Gruwell, Eva's divided loyalties, Andre's withdrawal, and the film's sustained emphasis on Gruwell's sacrifices - were retained rather than treated as anomalies. As the study involved publicly available cultural texts and no human participants, institutional ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS

The analysis identified six sequential patterns in the movement from imposed identities toward increasingly self-authored and collectively negotiated positions. This movement was neither immediate nor complete. Institutional and racialized storylines continued to shape the students even after the journals created alternatives. A cross-cutting exceptional-teacher frame also shaped all six patterns and is discussed separately after the sequence. Table 1 summarizes the six patterns and provides representative scene markers for tracing the claims to the film.

Table 1

Positioning and counterstorytelling patterns in Freedom Writers

Narrative phase	Dominant positioning	Primary evidence	Narrative effect
Institutional entry	Deficient, dangerous, unteachable, resource risk	Book-allocation meeting; Victoria transfer and tokenization scenes; Andre grade-conference scene	Students are denied full learner status before demonstrating capacity
Racialized classroom conflict	Gang member, racial representative, enemy, outsider	Opening classroom divisions; racist-caricature confrontation; line game	Belonging is initially secured through exclusion and reciprocal othering
Protected journal writing	Survivor, witness, family member, private author	Journal-introduction scene; diary voice-over montage; later homecoming sequence	Students gain control over disclosure and reinterpret behavior through context
Intertextual witnessing	Reader, ethical witness, ordinary moral actor	Anne Frank and Zlata reading; Holocaust museum	Personal pain is connected to wider histories without becoming identical to them

		visit; Miep Gies classroom visit	
Consequential self-positioning	Truth-teller, returning learner, responsible decision-maker	Eva courtroom testimony; Andre return-to-class scene; peer recognition	Narrative agency becomes visible in choices that alter relationships and outcomes
Collective publication	Freedom Writer, co-author, member of a chosen community	Computer-lab compilation; Freedom Writers naming; campaign to retain Gruwell	Private counterstories become a collective intervention, though teacher mediation persists

Institutional Labels and Rastricted Learner Rights

The film first positions the class through institutional discourse rather than through the students' own accounts. Placement in the lower-track English class is treated as a near-total identity: low prior scores, disciplinary histories, and neighborhood affiliations become proof that rigorous learning is unrealistic. The department head's refusal to provide new books expresses this logic materially. Students are imagined as likely to destroy resources, so the institution withholds the very resources that could enable different academic conduct. The position therefore carries restricted rights: they may attend school, but they are not granted the same access to demanding texts, curricular investment, or expectations of advancement.

This positioning is reproduced by teachers who describe the class primarily through violence and rule breaking. Their language transforms structural and historical conditions into presumed character defects. The students' legal or disciplinary histories become a master narrative that explains all present behavior and anticipates future failure. Love (2023) describes how school reform can punish Black children through institutions that treat harm produced by inequity as evidence of individual deficiency, while Safir and Dugan (2021) argue that aggregated school labels often obscure the lived knowledge needed for equitable decisions. In the film, the school possesses data about the students but lacks stories capable of interpreting that data humanely.

The institutional storyline also racializes academic legitimacy. Victoria, a high-achieving Black student transferred into the class, explains that she has been encouraged to study with her "own kind" (LaGravenese, 2007, Victoria transfer explanation scene). Her placement demonstrates that racial belonging can override individual achievement: she is positioned less as a particular learner than as a representative body. In another classroom, she is expected to explain Black experience for white peers, a demand that assigns her the duty of racial spokesperson without granting interpretive complexity. Such tokenization shows that apparently inclusive participation can still deny a student the right to be ordinary, partial, or internally diverse. Muhammad (2023) and Ladson-Billings (2021) emphasize that culturally responsive education must affirm identity and intellectual capacity rather than merely insert racialized students into unchanged structures. The film initially presents the opposite condition.

Andre offers the clearest verbal condensation of institutional invisibility when he concludes, "She doesn't see me at all" (LaGravenese, 2007, Andre grade-conference scene). The statement follows a teacher's interpretation of his performance through assumptions about his future. His complaint is not that the teacher literally fails to notice him, but that the institutional version of Andre is more authoritative than Andre's own history, grief, intelligence,

or reasons for disengagement. The position of 'failing student' narrows what others can recognize and what he can plausibly claim.

Racialized Storylines and Reciprocal Othering

The students do not enter the classroom only as victims of institutional labeling. They actively reproduce storylines that assign danger, loyalty, and moral worth along racial and gang boundaries. Seating patterns, insults, caricatures, and arguments establish an oppositional grammar of us and them. Within these storylines, group membership provides protection and intelligibility, but it also creates duties: one must defend one's people, distrust outsiders, retaliate against insult, and treat cooperation across boundaries as betrayal. The students' reciprocal positioning makes classroom interaction appear naturally antagonistic even though the film gradually reveals that the antagonism is historically and institutionally organized.

Eva's voice-over is crucial because it initially articulates the gang storyline from within rather than presenting it only as irrational behavior observed by the teacher. Her understanding of loyalty is rooted in family memory, racialized violence, and the demand to survive. This does not excuse the moral consequences of her choices, but it shows that actions described institutionally as misconduct carry different meanings within her community's moral order. Positioning theory is useful here because a position includes both identity and an associated set of rights and obligations. Eva understands herself as obligated to protect her group, even when that duty conflicts with legal truth and personal knowledge.

The racist caricature circulated in class exposes how such positioning reduces a peer to a visual type. Gruwell's decision to connect the caricature to propaganda interrupts the students' assumption that ridicule is merely local humor. Yet the decisive repositioning does not occur through lecture alone. The line game makes students move physically in response to experiences of loss, incarceration, violence, and fear. Without requiring immediate public explanation, the activity renders shared vulnerability visible across group boundaries. Students who had positioned one another as incomparable enemies encounter a different storyline: people divided by race may nevertheless recognize analogous experiences of grief and insecurity.

The scene does not dissolve difference into sameness. The students' histories, racial positions, and risks remain distinct. Its effect is instead to weaken the exclusive authority of the gang storyline. New interpersonal positions become possible: classmate, listener, co-survivor, and potential witness. Felix and Ali (2023) note that repositioning occurs when a discourse makes alternative rights and duties available. Here, students acquire permission to acknowledge another person's pain without abandoning their own identity. This emerging recognition prepares the conditions for diary writing, because a narrative is more likely to matter when the audience is no longer imagined only as hostile.

Diary Writing as Protected Counterstorytelling

The journal project changes the distribution of narrative rights. Gruwell gives students daily writing space but removes conventional assessment and promises not to read an entry unless the writer permits it. This arrangement matters because school writing normally grants the institution extensive authority over topic, correctness, evaluation, and audience. The journals initially reverse that relationship. Students decide what to disclose, how to phrase it,

whether to use diary, poem, or song, and whether the teacher may enter the text. Stornaiuolo and Monea's (2023) account of self-sponsored writing helps explain why this protected status supports agency: a text kept partly outside institutional judgment can become a place where the writer experiments with identities not yet recognized publicly.

The diary voice-overs reveal experiences that institutional labels omit: homelessness, domestic abuse, the death of friends, incarceration of relatives, displacement, fear, and the emotional cost of performing toughness. One narrator observes that "Nobody ever listens to a teenager" (LaGravenese, 2007, journal voice-over montage), naming a structural condition of inaudibility rather than a lack of language. The journal is thus a counterstory not because it automatically contradicts every allegation of violence or failure, but because it restores context, causality, interiority, and moral reflection. A disciplinary record can show that a student fought; it cannot show the losses, threats, loyalties, or interpretations through which the act became meaningful.

A particularly important sequence moves from the statement that the writer has no home to the later declaration, "I am home" (LaGravenese, 2007, later journal voice-over/homecoming sequence). The shift does not erase material housing insecurity. Instead, it marks a change in relational positioning: the classroom becomes a place where the writer can be recognized without performing a predetermined racial or disciplinary identity. Narrative agency therefore emerges through audience as well as authorship. A story kept private may preserve the self; a story voluntarily shared may alter the relationship between writer and reader. Baldonado-Ruiz (2024) similarly shows that testimonio can move young writers from silence toward agency when personal accounts are connected to structures and communities rather than treated as isolated confession.

The film's diary montage also changes the viewer's access to students. Early scenes often organize them as a noisy collective perceived from Gruwell's perspective. Voice-over gives individual students temporary control of focalization, allowing the audience to hear interpretations unavailable to the teacher at the time of writing. This shift partially redistributes narrative authority. The students become more than evidence of Gruwell's difficulty or success; they become narrators whose words can revise the meaning of scenes already witnessed. Counterstorytelling here operates retrospectively: later knowledge exposes the insufficiency of earlier labels.

Nevertheless, privacy remains ethically important. The value of the journals does not depend on all pain becoming public. Contemporary applications of counterstorytelling warn that institutions can appropriate marginalized narratives while leaving power relations intact (Hauber-Özer et al., 2023; Matebekwane, 2022). The film's most defensible pedagogical principle is therefore not compulsory disclosure but controlled access. The writer's permission precedes the teacher's reading, and private meaning precedes collective publication.

Intertextual Witnessing and Ethical Repositioning

The students' diaries acquire greater public and ethical significance through encounters with other testimonial texts. Reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Zlata Filipovic's writing, visiting a Holocaust museum, and meeting Miep Gies connect the students' narratives to histories of persecution, war, hiding, and survival. These encounters do not simply supply inspirational content. They introduce genres through which ordinary people record events that

dominant institutions may distort, forget, or normalize. The students begin to position themselves not only as sufferers but as witnesses whose accounts may matter beyond the immediate moment.

Intertextual recognition is potentially risky because the film places distinct histories of racial conflict, genocide, gang violence, and war in close analogy. A responsible interpretation should not collapse them into equivalent suffering. The productive function of the comparison lies instead in ethical repositioning. Students who initially recognize only the injuries of their own group encounter testimony that demands attention to another person's vulnerability. They also discover that historical actors are not divided neatly into powerless victims and extraordinary heroes. Miep Gies rejects heroic elevation and frames moral action as something ordinary people can undertake. This position becomes important because it relocates agency from exceptional identity to consequential choice.

Eva's courtroom testimony represents the strongest transformation of this principle. Her earlier gang position assigns a duty of loyalty that requires supporting a false account. Through reading, discussion, and the classroom's counterstories, a competing position becomes available: witness responsible to truth and to the life of a person outside her group. Her decision has interpersonal costs and does not free her from the danger attached to her community position. For that reason, it constitutes narrative agency rather than simple obedience to Gruwell. Eva authors a public account that changes the legal storyline and redefines what loyalty can mean.

Andre's return to the classroom after withdrawing produces a related but different repositioning. The film allows his grief and discouragement to interrupt the upward arc expected in an inspirational school narrative. Gruwell's response insists that she sees more than his failing grade, but the scene's significance also rests on Andre's choice to return and accept recognition as a learner. Zoch et al. (2024) show that youth writing can resist victim positioning by making future-oriented identities available. Andre's return similarly reopens a future that the institution and his own despair had narrowed.

These sequences support a distinction between voice and consequence. Students have voices throughout the film, including in anger, refusal, and hostile group speech. What changes is whether their accounts are received as knowledge and whether those accounts can affect relationships, institutional decisions, or public memory. Counterstorytelling therefore does not manufacture expression; it changes the social uptake of expression.

Collective Authorship and the Freedom Writers Identity

The final writing project transforms individually controlled diaries into a collective manuscript. This shift could have erased difference by absorbing all students into one uplifting story. Instead, the film represents compilation as the creation of an anthology: distinct entries remain attached to different experiences while gaining force through proximity. The class is no longer united because members share a race, neighborhood, or identical trauma. They are united through the practice of writing, reading, witnessing, and preserving one another's accounts.

The name "Freedom Writers" performs collective repositioning (LaGravenese, 2007, manuscript-compilation and naming sequence). It recalls the Freedom Riders while defining students through authorship rather than institutional deficiency. Naming creates a new storyline with corresponding rights and duties: members can claim public readership, recognize one

another as writers, and contribute to a shared record. Kendrick et al. (2022) and Farrington (2024) demonstrate that multimodal and public counterstories can expand youth participation by linking individual expression to collective action. In the film, computers, editing, compilation, and eventual publication provide material infrastructure through which private writing becomes a public intervention.

The new identity is also relationally grounded. Students repeatedly describe the classroom as the place where they can be themselves, and one diary sequence condenses this belonging in the phrase "I am home" (LaGravenese, 2007, later journal voice-over/homecoming sequence). This sense of home should not be romanticized as a substitute for safe housing, equitable schools, or community resources. Its narrative function is to show that recognition changes what kinds of selves can be performed. The class becomes a counterspace where students' complexity is legible and where academic participation no longer requires disavowing lived experience. Contemporary counterstory research similarly emphasizes that collective spaces can support healing and professional or educational regeneration when participants' knowledge is treated as foundational rather than supplementary (González et al., 2024; Leathers et al., 2024).

Collective authorship therefore marks the film's clearest transfer of narrative authority. The students are not merely subjects in Gruwell's account; they become co-authors of a text addressed to readers beyond the classroom. Yet the transfer remains incomplete because access to publication, technology, visitors, and institutional recognition depends heavily on Gruwell's initiative. This unresolved mediation becomes central to the final analytical pattern.

The Persistance of the Exceptional-Teacher Storyline

Although the film increasingly includes student voice-over and decision-making, its overarching narrative continues to privilege Gruwell. Major opportunities are initiated through her labor: she purchases books, holds additional jobs, arranges visits, secures speakers, obtains computers, and challenges administrators. Cross-cutting between the classroom and the deterioration of her marriage intensifies the representation of personal sacrifice. The plot invites the viewer to understand student transformation through the exceptional teacher who refuses institutional indifference.

This structure produces a genuine contradiction. Gruwell's material and relational interventions are necessary within the film's world; minimizing them would ignore how institutions often require advocates to redistribute access. At the same time, centering her exceptionalism risks converting structural racism, curricular tracking, poverty, and community violence into obstacles overcome by individual goodness. Hughey (2014) identifies this pattern in white-savior films, while Aronson (2017) explains how teacher-savior narratives can shape future educators' understanding of urban schooling. The problem is not simply that the teacher is white or helpful. It is that the narrative may locate causal power so strongly in her moral commitment that students appear to become agents only after she recognizes them.

The film partly resists this implication. Eva's testimony, Andre's return, the students' campaign to keep Gruwell as their teacher, and the collaborative manuscript are actions students undertake with consequences that cannot be reduced to teacher instruction. Gruwell also explicitly attributes progress to the students rather than accepting sole credit. Even so, the

camera and plot continue to organize their development around her crisis, persistence, and institutional battles. Student agency is amplified, but its visibility is mediated.

The most balanced interpretation is therefore neither that Gruwell gives students a voice nor that the teacher-centered narrative makes student authorship meaningless. The film depicts mediated agency: a teacher changes the conditions of circulation, but students produce the stories, assume moral risks, recognize one another, and create the collective identity that makes those stories consequential. This distinction preserves the value of pedagogical support without representing marginalized students as empty recipients of rescue.

DISCUSSION

The findings answer the first research question by showing that identity in *Freedom Writers* is organized through competing storylines rather than stable character traits. Institutional discourse initially assigns the students the position of deficient and dangerous learners. This position restricts curricular rights and makes future failure appear reasonable before the class has been taught. Racial and gang storylines then supply alternative belonging, but they do so through reciprocal othering and duties of loyalty that narrow interaction. Positioning theory clarifies that these identities are not mere descriptions. Each one authorizes particular expectations: the school may withhold books from a presumed resource risk; peers may demand allegiance from a group member; a racial spokesperson may be required to explain an entire community; and a failing student may be denied the right to imagine an academic future.

The film's transformative movement occurs when new discursive positions become available. The line game makes classmate and co-survivor plausible without requiring students to erase racial difference. The journals make private author, witness, and interpreter available. Testimonial literature makes ethical reader and ordinary moral actor available. The collective manuscript makes co-author and Freedom Writer available. This sequence supports Kayi-Aydar's (2021) argument that positioning analysis must connect local discourse with narrated storylines and longer identity trajectories. Andre's statement that a teacher does not see him, for instance, is both a local complaint and a judgment on the institutional storyline that has made his complexity unavailable.

The second research question concerned how diary writing functions as counterstorytelling. The findings indicate three interconnected functions. First, the journals restore context to behaviors reduced to labels. They do not deny that violence, truancy, or academic disengagement occur; they contest explanations that isolate those acts from bereavement, insecurity, racialized threat, family responsibility, and institutional neglect. Second, the journals redistribute audience control. Because disclosure is initially voluntary and ungraded, writers can decide whether the teacher becomes a reader. Third, the diaries enable circulation across scales. An experience first written for the self can later become a classroom testimony, a contribution to collective memory, and part of a public book.

These functions align with contemporary research on counterstorytelling. Berrett-Abebe et al. (2023) describe counternarratives as a means of challenging privileged discourse while inviting critical reflection. Baldonado-Ruiz (2023, 2024) shows that testimonio connects self-writing to collective knowledge and agency, while Bauer et al. (2024) frame literacy as bearing

witness through authentic and hybrid student narratives. Castro et al. (2024) likewise demonstrate that student counter-narratives can resist policies and campaigns that treat young people as incomplete citizens. In *Freedom Writers*, the students' entries contest the assumption that adults and institutions possess the most reliable account of their lives. The diaries make the students' interpretive knowledge available without implying that suffering must be aesthetically improved or translated into institutional language before it deserves attention.

The analysis nevertheless complicates the common phrase of 'giving students voice.' Students speak continuously before the journals: they argue, refuse, insult, joke, narrate loyalty, and identify injustice. The problem is not an absence of voice but unequal legibility and uptake. Dominant institutions hear gang affiliation, anger, or low achievement as confirmation of deficiency; they do not hear the analyses embedded in those expressions. Diary writing, attentive reading, and collective publication alter the conditions under which student language is recognized as knowledge. Lee et al. (2025) and Hauber-Özer et al. (2023) similarly emphasize that counterstorytelling must reorganize research or institutional relationships rather than simply collect marginalized testimony.

The third research question addressed the tension between student agency and teacher-centered narration. The findings show that *Freedom Writers* both enables and restricts student narrative authority. It enables authority by granting students first-person focalization, consequential moral choices, collective naming, and co-authorship. It restricts authority by organizing access, plot development, and emotional emphasis around Gruwell's exceptional effort. The white-savior critique is therefore relevant but should not be used as a totalizing label that reproduces the simplification the article critiques. The film includes forms of student agency that exceed Gruwell's intentions, especially Eva's courtroom testimony and the students' construction of a chosen collective identity. Yet the film's inspirational economy repeatedly turns structural failures into opportunities for individual heroism.

This tension has important implications for language and literacy pedagogy. Autobiographical writing can support identity exploration, rhetorical awareness, and meaningful audience engagement, but it should not require trauma disclosure as proof of authenticity. The journal scenes suggest four safeguards. Writers need meaningful topic choice; privacy and permission must be explicit; assessment should distinguish language development from the moral evaluation of lived experience; and publication should occur only through informed authorial decision. The movement from private diary to public anthology should not be treated as automatically desirable. Some writing gains its agency from remaining protected, as Stornaiuolo and Monea (2023) show.

For EFL instruction, the film can be used not merely as motivational material but as a text for critical language analysis. Students can examine who uses labels, which pronouns construct group boundaries, how passive or agentive grammar distributes responsibility, and how diary voice-over changes focalization. They can compare institutional descriptions with first-person accounts and rewrite a scene from the perspective of a character whose interpretation is absent. Such activities align with culturally responsive and historically grounded teaching that joins identity, intellectual development, skill, and criticality (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Muhammad, 2023). They also extend Siahaan et al.'s (2025) transformative-learning interpretation by specifying the discourse processes through which reflective writing can produce perspective change.

Theoretically, the study proposes a relational model of narrative agency. Agency is not located solely inside an autonomous writer and is not transferred intact from teacher to student. It emerges from the interaction of genre, audience, privacy, material resources, recognition, and opportunities for consequential circulation. Ryan and Khosronejad (2025) similarly show that authorial agency is shaped through narrative choices and the social conditions in which young writers position themselves. Safir and Dugan's (2021) emphasis on listening to lived experience is relevant, but the film shows that listening alone is insufficient. Students also require rights over how experience is framed and where it travels. The teacher's most productive role is therefore not to author the student's transformation but to alter conditions so that students can author, revise, withhold, share, and collectivize their own accounts.

The study also contributes to film analysis by distinguishing represented agency from narrative centrality. A character may make consequential decisions while the film still directs emotional and causal attention toward another character. *Freedom Writers* gives students more narrative space as the plot progresses, yet Gruwell remains the organizing protagonist. Examining both levels prevents an overly celebratory interpretation of voice and an overly dismissive reading of the students as mere props. The film's significance lies precisely in this unresolved contradiction: it imagines writing as a challenge to labels while packaging that challenge within a familiar heroic-teacher narrative.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how *Freedom Writers* constructs the movement from institutional labels to narrative agency through positioning and counterstorytelling. The findings show that the students are initially positioned as deficient learners, resource risks, racial representatives, gang members, and adversaries. These positions are consequential because they regulate educational access, interpersonal duties, and the futures that can be imagined. Diary writing creates a protected counterspace in which students can restore context to their actions, claim identities as survivors and witnesses, and determine whether their narratives will be read. Encounters with testimonial literature then expand self-writing into ethical witnessing, while consequential choices and collective publication establish the students as co-authors of a public identity.

The central contribution is the distinction between having a voice and having a voice recognized as knowledge. The students are never literally voiceless. What changes is the social uptake, audience, and consequence of their language. The film therefore supports a relational model of narrative agency in which privacy, recognition, material resources, genre, and collective participation interact. At the same time, the film only partially transfers narrative authority because Gruwell remains its principal protagonist and facilitator. Student counterstories challenge deficit discourse, but their visibility is still framed by an exceptional-teacher storyline.

The study is limited to one dramatized film and uses the published diary only as the source text behind the film adaptation. It does not establish how actual students respond to autobiographical writing, how viewers interpret the film across cultural contexts, or how the film differs scene by scene from the published diary. Future research could compare the

students' entries in the book with their cinematic representation, investigate audience responses among EFL learners, or analyze translation and subtitle choices that affect racial labels and identity positioning. In practice, educators using autobiographical writing should preserve voluntary disclosure, privacy, writer control, and ethical audience preparation. The most valuable lesson of *Freedom Writers* is not that an exceptional teacher can rescue students through writing, but that educational relationships can make space for students to interpret their own lives and act on the meanings they create.

AI DECLARATION USE

Generative artificial intelligence was used to assist with language refinement during manuscript preparation.

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