

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT IN SHAPING STUDENTS' CHARACTER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE FILM FREEDOM WRITERS

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ABSTRACT. This study analyzes how the school cultural environment influences students' character formation as represented in the film *Freedom Writers*. Character education is a central issue in educational studies because students' moral, social, and behavioral development is shaped not only through formal instruction but also through everyday interactions within the school environment. This study employs a qualitative approach with a critical analysis design. Data were collected through document analysis by examining scenes, dialogues, and the narrative structure of the film. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that the school cultural environment plays an important role in shaping students' character. At the beginning of the film, the classroom is portrayed as fragmented by racial tensions, prejudice, and low learning motivation. However, through Erin Gruwell's interventions and supportive teaching practices, the classroom culture gradually becomes more inclusive, reflective, and empathetic. This transformation promotes the development of empathy, responsibility, tolerance, cooperation, respect, and perseverance. The study concludes that character formation is a social process shaped by school culture, teacher-student relationships, and peer interactions.

Keywords: *Character formation, school cultural environment, Freedom Writers, character education, critical analysis*

Introduction

Character education has become a major concern in educational research because schools are expected not only to develop students' academic competencies but also to foster

their moral, social, and behavioral qualities. In this context, education is understood as a process of transmitting knowledge, values, habits, and attitudes that shape the way students interact with others. Therefore, character education is closely related to the development of virtues such as responsibility, respect, discipline, empathy, tolerance, and cooperation (Lickona, 1991).

The school cultural environment is one of the most influential factors in shaping students' character. School culture refers to the shared values, norms, traditions, expectations, and patterns of interaction that shape everyday life within the school community. Saryanto et al. (2023) found that school culture contributes to the development of students' personality and character, particularly in terms of discipline, social attitudes, and responsibility in learning. In line with this, Cahyanto (2023) emphasizes that character education becomes more meaningful when it is practiced through school culture rather than merely delivered as moral instruction.

Character formation in schools is also influenced by the consistency of educational practices. Values are not developed instantly but are internalized through repeated experiences, teacher role modeling, peer interactions, classroom routines, and school programs. Zubaidah and Dari (2024) explain that character education and national culture can be strengthened through learning activities, school culture, extracurricular activities, and daily habituation. This perspective indicates that character education needs to be integrated into a broader learning environment.

Previous studies have shown that school culture-based character education is effective in developing students' moral awareness and social responsibility. For example, Yarid and Purwandari (2023) argue that school culture provides a concrete space for students to learn values through habituation, interaction, and meaningful school activities. Nurindarwati (2019) also emphasizes the importance of management, teachers' roles, and school programs in supporting character education. These studies demonstrate that students' character formation is closely related to the environment in which they learn and socialize.

In addition to empirical school settings, films can be used as reflective media for analyzing educational and cultural issues. Films represent social realities through characters, conflicts, dialogue, and visual narratives. *Freedom Writers* portrays a multicultural classroom characterized by racial conflict, social division, and low academic motivation. Through the

role of Erin Gruwell as a teacher, the classroom gradually transforms into a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. This transformation makes the film relevant for examining the relationship between school culture and students' character formation.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the role of the school cultural environment in shaping students' character as portrayed in *Freedom Writers*. Specifically, this study examines how the school cultural environment is represented in the film, how it influences students' character development, and what character values emerge through interactions among teachers, students, peers, and the broader school context.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a critical analysis design. This approach is appropriate because the study focuses on the meanings, values, interactions, and social representations presented in the film. The qualitative method enables the researcher to interpret how educational values and school culture are constructed through scenes, dialogues, characterization, and narrative structure (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The subject of this study is the film *Freedom Writers* (2007), directed by Richard LaGravenese. The film is used as the primary data source because it portrays educational issues related to multicultural classrooms, social conflict, teacher-student relationships, and character transformation. The main data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, characters' actions, and narrative events that represent the school cultural environment and students' character development.

Data were collected through document analysis. The film was viewed repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and to identify scenes relevant to the focus of the study. Important dialogues, classroom interactions, visual representations, and narrative moments were recorded and classified based on the themes of school culture and character formation. Document analysis is appropriate for this study because a film can be examined as a cultural text containing meanings, values, and social messages (Bowen, 2009).

The data were analyzed using a descriptive-interpretative technique. The analysis began with data reduction, which involved selecting only the scenes and dialogues relevant to the research questions. The next stage was data presentation, in which the selected data were organized into thematic categories, including the school environment, teacher-student

interactions, peer influence, and character values. The final stage involved drawing and verifying conclusions by interpreting the meaning of the selected data and relating them to theories of character education and school culture (Miles et al., 2014).

A critical interpretative perspective was also applied to strengthen the analysis. From this perspective, the film is not treated merely as entertainment but as a cultural representation that reflects broader educational issues, such as social inequality, racial prejudice, student marginalization, and the transformative role of teachers. This perspective helps reveal how school culture can either hinder or strengthen students' character development (Fairclough, 2015).

Result and Discussion

1. Representation of the School Cultural Environment in *Freedom Writers*

Freedom Writers represents a school cultural environment shaped by social conflict, racial segregation, and low learning motivation. At the beginning of the film, the classroom is portrayed as a fragmented space in which students separate themselves based on racial affiliations and gang groups. This condition reflects a negative school culture characterized by distrust, prejudice, discrimination, and the absence of meaningful communication among students.

Initially, the school environment fails to provide students with a sense of emotional safety. Many students bring experiences of violence, poverty, family problems, and social exclusion into the classroom. As a result, the classroom does not function as a collaborative learning community. Instead, it becomes a tense space in which students defend their identities and refuse to interact with those from different backgrounds.

However, Erin Gruwell's teaching practices gradually transform the classroom culture. Through journal writing, open discussions, reading activities, and experiential learning, students are encouraged to express their personal experiences and listen to others. These activities create a safer and more inclusive learning environment. This transformation demonstrates that school culture is dynamic and can be reshaped through consistent teacher commitment, meaningful pedagogy, and supportive interactions.

2. The Role of School Culture in Students' Character Formation

The transformation of classroom culture plays an important role in students' character development. Initially, the students display negative behaviors such as hostility, prejudice, lack of discipline, and disengagement from learning. These behaviors do not develop in isolation but are influenced by the broader social environment, including gang violence, racial conflict, and social segregation.

As the classroom becomes more supportive, students begin to develop positive character values. The teacher-student relationship becomes a key factor in this process. Erin Gruwell shows respect for the students' experiences, listens to their voices, and provides learning materials that are relevant to their lives. This approach builds trust and helps students feel recognized as individuals with dignity. Once trust is established, students become more willing to participate, reflect on their experiences, and change their behavior.

Peer interactions also contribute to character formation. Through activities such as sharing personal stories and reading one another's journals, students begin to realize that their classmates experience similar struggles. This process reduces prejudice and fosters empathy. The classroom culture shifts from separation toward solidarity, demonstrating that character is shaped through social interaction, emotional engagement, and repeated experiences within the school environment.

3. Character Values Developed in the Film

Several character values develop throughout the film. Empathy emerges as students learn to understand the suffering and life experiences of others. Respect develops as students begin to reduce racial prejudice and recognize the dignity of their classmates. Responsibility is reflected in increased participation in learning and a greater willingness to reflect on personal choices. Tolerance grows as students learn to accept diversity within the classroom. Cooperation and solidarity develop as the class gradually becomes a more united learning community. Perseverance is also evident as students strive to overcome personal and social challenges.

Empathy: Students learn to understand the experiences and suffering of others through journal writing and discussions.

Respect: Students begin to recognize differences without using them as a basis for hostility or rejection.

Responsibility: Students become more engaged in the learning process and more aware of their personal choices.

Tolerance: Students learn to accept diversity within the classroom community.

Cooperation: Students gradually build solidarity and support one another throughout the learning process.

Perseverance: Students continue to strive despite facing personal, social, and academic challenges.

Table 1. Scene Analysis and Character Values

No.	Scene Description	School Culture Aspect	Character Values	Interpretation
1	Students are divided into racial groups in the classroom.	Fragmented school culture	Intolerance, prejudice	Demonstrates a negative school environment at the initial stage.
2	Erin Gruwell introduces journal-writing activities.	Transformative teaching strategy	Self-reflection, empathy	Students begin to express their personal experiences.
3	Students discuss historical injustice through reading materials.	Exposure to social and historical realities	Empathy, awareness	Students connect the suffering of others with their own experiences.
4	Students begin to share personal stories.	Safe classroom environment	Trust, openness	The classroom becomes an emotionally supportive environment.
5	Students participate in learning activities outside the classroom.	Experiential learning	Respect, understanding	Learning extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom.
6	Students read and respond to one another's journals.	Improved peer interactions	Tolerance, empathy	Racial and social barriers begin to diminish.
7	The class demonstrates unity and solidarity.	Inclusive school culture	Cooperation, solidarity	Students demonstrate a strong positive transformation in character.

The analysis shows that the school cultural environment plays a fundamental role in shaping students' character. A negative school culture contributes to behavioral problems, whereas a supportive and inclusive culture encourages positive transformation. In *Freedom Writers*, character education becomes effective because it is embedded in everyday interactions, emotional engagement, reflective learning, and meaningful teacher-student relationships.

These findings are consistent with recent studies emphasizing that school culture significantly influences students' character formation. Vinona et al. (2024) found a very strong correlation between school culture and character education ($r = 0.857$), indicating that the more positive the school culture,

the stronger the development of students' character. Similarly, Wanti (2024) highlights that school culture—which includes values, norms, and social practices within the educational environment—has a direct impact on students' attitudes, ethics, and behavioral development.

In addition, Sumarno (2025), through a systematic literature review, emphasizes that the implementation of a positive school culture at the elementary school level strengthens discipline, responsibility, and social awareness through daily habituation and role modeling in school activities. Furthermore, Astuti et al. (2023) state that students' character is shaped not only through formal instruction but also through habituation and continuous evaluation embedded within the overall school culture. This reinforces the idea that schools function as a primary social space for the internalization of character values.

Therefore, the findings in *Freedom Writers* are consistent with recent empirical evidence showing that character education cannot be separated from school culture. Values such as empathy, responsibility, tolerance, cooperation, and respect can develop optimally when schools create an emotionally safe and inclusive environment supported by meaningful and sustained teacher-student interactions.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the school cultural environment plays an important role in shaping students' character, as portrayed in *Freedom Writers*. The film demonstrates that a fragmented classroom culture, characterized by racial conflict, prejudice, and low motivation, can be transformed into a more inclusive, supportive, and empathetic learning environment through consistent teacher intervention and meaningful educational practices.

The transformation of school culture directly influences students' character development. Negative behaviors, such as prejudice, hostility, lack of discipline, and social separation, gradually shift toward positive character values, including empathy, responsibility, tolerance, cooperation, respect, and perseverance. These changes occur through continuous interaction, reflective activities, experiential learning, and the development of trust between teachers and students.

Overall, this study emphasizes that character formation is not merely an individual process but also a social process constructed through school culture. The representation presented in *Freedom Writers* provides valuable insights into how educational environments can shape students' moral and social development. Therefore, schools need to foster an inclusive, reflective, and supportive culture to strengthen character education in everyday teaching and learning practices.

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