

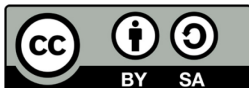
# Teaching *Friday Night Lights* Critically

## Theoretical Considerations and Exemplary Sequences

Jannik Handke<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universität Bielefeld

\* Contact: Universität Bielefeld,  
Fakultät für Linguistik und Literaturwissenschaft,  
Universitätsstr. 25,  
33615 Bielefeld  
handkejannik@gmail.com



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**Abstract:** Sports arenas have always been a mirror for societal changes and affairs, as player protests during the Covid-19 pandemic and the FIFA World Cup showed. Therefore, it was even more surprising when H.G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* (1990) "exposed" the open secret of institutionalized segregation and racism that run rampant in Texas high school football operations. While Black players were key contributors on the field, they were often excluded from "white" society once they were unable to perform. This article uses a critical foreign language pedagogy framework (Gerlach, 2020) to design exemplary teaching sequences based on the events described in *Friday Night Lights*. The goal of these sequences is to further the learner's critical literacy using a framework designed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004).

**Keywords:** football; critical literacy; critical pedagogy; racism

## 1 Introduction

Like many other sports fans, what truly made me fall in love with a sport were the narratives that were spun around it, as well as fan culture. Players' stories are simultaneously spun on the field and on TV and the most successful ones are immortalized in popular culture. And no league does it better than the NFL; viewership numbers have been steeply rising since the pandemic, and the league has even branched out and is playing games in Germany. My fascination with the NFL started when Philadelphia Eagles Quarterback Carson Wentz tore his ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) heading into the 2017 playoffs. Despite losing their best player at the most important position in the game, they fought through and made it to the Superbowl. There, perennial backup Quarterback Nick Foles stepped up and led his team to victory in a historical performance, cementing his legacy as one of the few Quarterbacks to win a shootout against the best to ever do it, Tom Brady.

With the thoroughly American product gaining more hold in Germany, English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers could use this trend as an opportunity to foster sociocultural learning with a relevant connection to the students' lives. One of the most famous football stories is *Friday Night Lights*, a 1990 non-fiction book by Buzz Bissinger, in which the author accompanies a Texan high school team throughout their season. During this endeavor, he accompanies the players during their classes and interviews influential people such as politicians, preachers and coaches. His investigation, originally intended to get to the heart of the football craze, instead resulted in him exposing the town

for its racist sentiments, failed inclusion and abuse of players for entertainment. This paper will look at racism as both a form of othering (s. Section 4) and systemic oppression of minorities. The reaction to *Friday Night Lights* was a shock – how could such sentiments and policies still exist, more than 15 years after the civil rights act and seemingly successful desegregation (Debenport, 1990)?

Similar sentiments have been gaining traction once again, with far right and fascist political parties calling for the reversal of immigration and incidents of racially motivated violence rising. In light of these challenges, teachers are urged to teach their learners to recognize, analyze and criticize racist structures, sentiments and messages (s. Klaes' contribution, pp. 78–117 in this issue). Many researchers argue that this includes building a critical consciousness and furthering the ability to recognize statements and stances that are undemocratic, underlining the importance of developing critical literacies (Louloudi et al., 2021).

This article will make a case for the use of *Friday Night Lights* in ELT classrooms to foster critical literacy and promote the development of a Social Justice Education environment. For this, principles of critical foreign language pedagogy (Gerlach, 2020) as well as critical literacy didactics (e.g. Luke, 2014) will be connected to cooperative language learning and critical literacy lesson frameworks. Finally, there will be some suggestions on how to implement certain parts of the book in a lesson, focusing on analyzing racist sentiments, institutions and structures through the white gaze theory.

## 2 Becoming critical: a method and a stance

Critical literacy is an educational approach that invites learners to analyze, question and evaluate materials with regard to the sociopolitical power they carry with them in order to then learn how to take action against societal injustices in- and outside of the classroom (Luke, 2014). Critical literacy as a concept can be traced to the writings of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), who developed critical pedagogy as a teaching philosophy to further the efforts of an educational campaign among Brazil's illiterate population during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Freire argued for a more critical approach to teaching that would equip adult learners with the tools to organize political representation and emancipate themselves as literate members of society. To do that, they needed to be not only literate in reading texts, but also in reading the text's purpose, perspectives and underlying beliefs. This meant turning away from the “banking model” of education, which treats learners

as passive, empty containers that just need to be filled with knowledge, and instead focusing on problem-posing education, which asks learners to solve problems and use their already acquired knowledge along the way (Freire, 2012, pp. 71–75). This approach is also why Freire argued that teachers need to rid themselves of the authority of pre-packaged educational materials and their administration's influence to be able to create truly critical and autonomous students. Recognizing that those educational authorities are products of the ideology shared by the current government (and usually a large portion of the population) is imperative to recognize the ideology's faults and any misconceptions of its character. This essentially means that teachers should attempt to align with and include their students' interests, restructuring education as a dialogue that actively includes the students as equals (Freire, 2009, pp. 15–16). This also requires teachers to take a step back and reflect on their own opinions, dispositions, and upbringing, and how those entanglements influence their teaching.

While Freire mainly sought to make his learners create the curriculum, his binary, Marxist analysis of “oppressor” and “oppressed” does not account for the effects of globalization and rising complexity of political dynamics (Luke, 2014, pp. 8–9). Luke, therefore, defines critical literacy as:

“[...] [the] use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to analyze, critique and transform the norms, rule systems and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2014, p. 2).

Current definitions and approaches of critical literacy, therefore, *also* focus on critical discourse analysis, looking to understand how words, grammar and discourses influence relations of power and our concepts of reality. Hence, critical literacy can be described as a critical approach to materials of any kind regarding their ideological functions, reflecting how the reality described within those texts differs from one's own. This also goes for the language features used to achieve that effect (Luke, 2014, p. 7).

As Gerlach (2020) points out in his introduction *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik*, creating critical thinkers is a key process of democratization. Therefore, critical literacy should inherently be part of any curriculum that aims to create responsible citizens. Since critical skills are not objectively measurable, teachers helping learners build a mindset that allows them to come to their own conclusions and reflect on them is the most important part of critical literacy and critical pedagogy.

However, that does not mean that critical pedagogy as an approach is neutral or unbiased. Jeyaraj and Harland (2016) have rightfully pointed out that, because it has its roots in left-wing theory, it eventually leads learners to challenge traditional power structures and find themselves on the left side of the political spectrum of discussions (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016, p. 589). But Freire and others have argued that no education or teaching can be truly neutral, as curricula and the context in which contents are thought are always influenced (or even created) by the current governing body. Avoiding critical literacy in the name of political neutrality would just result in regression to political apathy (Gerlach, 2020, pp. 17–18).

But this does not stop teachers from using critical pedagogy, because they can and should address the topic of neutrality in their classrooms. As the aforementioned study by Harland and Jeyaraj (2016) showed, teachers that are familiar with the goals and benefits of critical pedagogy also tend to be aware of its risks and often vocalize them. Ultimately, they focus on teaching their students to be critical, even of their teaching, while constantly reflecting on their practice. Gerlach (2020) also emphasizes a similar aspect, as he claims that teachers should plan their teaching from a learners' perspective, focusing on their questions and connecting cultural issues and topics to their everyday lives (Gerlach, 2020, p. 18). Gerlach's critical foreign language pedagogy extends the principles of critical pedagogy and critical literacy to make them applicable to the ELT classroom by meeting curricular goals and addressing the aforementioned concerns, therefore legitimizing the use of critical literacies in ELT contexts.

This also extends to the role of literature when fostering critical literacy. Matz (2020) argues that teachers should make use of literature to help learners reflect on their feelings, ideas and language. It can also be used to further their literacy, in the sense that learners should get better at communicating with others as well as at understanding, explaining and critically reflecting that communication on a meta-level. In the German curricula, this goal is defined as discourse competence, modeled after Foucault's concept of discourse and "meaning the ability of people to participate in multilingual and complex social processes and discourses, to be part of them and to shape them" (Matz, 2020, p. 56).

This certainly negotiates part of the aforementioned definition of critical literacy by Luke (and others), and Matz (2020) argues that because of this, fostering discourse competence and critical literacies are mutually dependent and a central curricular goal. Matz (2020) also argues that the overall goals

such as enabling independent critical judgment and action, fostering peaceful attitudes, and making ethical and religious values understandable need to be modernized and adjusted to the complexity of globalization. Drawing from current and older research, Matz concludes that emphasizing sameness instead of otherness is a key process to help learners form a global identity (Matz, 2020, pp. 57–58). Matz (2020) continues their article by connecting these conclusions to youth novels dealing with the curricular topic of ‘visions of the future’. Some of these aspects are relevant for *Friday Night Lights* as well, since it is fundamentally a dramatic and somewhat tragic narrative and deals with issues that most learners hopefully have not encountered yet, most of them concerning human rights. However, it also heavily emphasizes personal development, young people’s dreams and aspirations, and how they deal with failure or disappointment.

### 3 A critical literacy framework

Teaching learners to take a critical approach towards literature that they encounter is not possible without a proper framework. A good way to introduce learners to critical literacy strategies is McLaughlin and DeVoogd’s (2004) framework described in their book *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students’ Comprehension of Text*. It should be noted that their proposal sticks closely to Paulo Freire’s ideas regarding the teacher’s role, with their main task being to motivate and foster a good learning atmosphere (providing materials and time) by valuing independent thought (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, pp. 36–37).

Their main strategy for critical analysis is “problem posing”, which is essentially a historical source analysis. The reader evaluates the intended audience and origin of the source, as well as the motivations and intentions of the author in a broader or historical context. The reader also explicitly looks for perspectives that go unmentioned and are possibly marginalized, and then thinks about how they can further social justice by using what they have learned during their analysis. This procedure can then be simplified by switching the gender, race or another characteristic of some characters and analyzing how this changes power relationships and the (intended) message of the text (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, pp. 47–48, 63).

The other strategies suggested by the authors branch out from these key aspects but add different reading strategies such as partnered pattern reading and strategies that are meant to help learners relate the text’s contents to their

lives. These strategies are introduced through a five-step method of *explaining*, *demonstrating* the strategy, *guiding* the learners through it, *practicing* it and finally *reflecting* on its use and implications (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, pp. 39–40, 41–45). The last step is also where teachers should again reflect on the aforementioned point of political neutrality and whether their practice truly considers their learner's perspectives and does not push them towards a pre-set conclusion.

Once some strategies are established, McLaughlin and DeVogd's (2004) lesson plans follow a process of engaging learners, guiding their thinking, extending their thinking and finally reflecting on the process:

- *Engaging* the learners' thinking is similar to common activation exercises that relate to what they have already learned or get them to ask questions about something they have not learned yet.
- Teachers then need to *guide* their learners' thinking while they work on analyzing a text, for example by making use of reading strategies or by providing guiding questions.
- Afterwards, learners and the teacher *engage* in a critical discussion and try to come up with ideas on how to act on what they have learned.
- Finally, the teacher should *reflect* on what they taught, how they taught and chose it and how the learners reacted to both content and methods used. Teachers can then use their reflection to adjust the next lessons to what their learners have gained (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 41).

Furthermore, teachers and learners could profit from a cooperative language learning framework, as it helps teachers put more focus on group work and help create a more positive classroom atmosphere, which would help during the discussions (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, pp. 71–73). It could also be a way of providing scaffolding to weaker learners and lead to more interactions and discussions between learners regarding social justice, while positioning the teacher into the role of a guide and fellow learner. This is why the sequences developed in this paper will be based on the cooperative language learning framework.

#### 4 Content and analysis

*Friday Night Lights* is a nonfiction novel written by H.G. Bissinger, published in 1990, with the events of the book taking place in the fall of 1988. Bissinger moved from Philadelphia to a small, west Texan town called Odessa to find out more about how an obsession with high school football could keep a town “alive” amidst financial crises and the vast nothingness of the Texas oilfields. While he found many lives tied to the city’s football team, he also found a town stuck in time, its white inhabitants clinging to the ideals of the pre-civil rights movement white majority.

Bissinger spends the entire 1988 season with the team, retelling their games in short chapters, and interviewing players, their families or other important members of the community to compliment the picture. The town hopes that their team will make a run for the state championship, and most fans have very high expectations. The apparent protagonist, star running back Boobie Miles, is injured during a preseason scrimmage and never plays at his former level again. Nevertheless, Bissinger continues interviewing him, recording the tragic story of a teenager that was sure he would be a well-paid sports star slowly realizing that he has almost no other options. Other players, among them fullback Don Billingsley or quarterback Mike Winchell, also receive more detailed portrayals, with Bissinger providing insights into their school days and private lives, enjoying the fame and status of being small town celebrities. During the entire book, Bissinger acts as the narrator and sometimes as the focalizer.

During the personal passages focusing on the players, the reader is often met with an internal focalization, making it seem as if Bissinger had extensive access to the interviewees’ thoughts and emotions. During game-related passages, the focalization mostly stays external, but sometimes dives into key players’ minds to shine more light on their inner turmoil during mistakes. This switching between focalizers makes it seem like an omnipotent zero focalizer just switches modes at will.

However, Bissinger may only report what others told him, which means that any analysis of the novel’s content must first evaluate whether he is a reliable narrator, and how his disposition towards certain characters and the public reception of the book may have influenced what he was willing to relay.

While Bissinger’s main focus remains with describing the events surrounding the football season, his repeated focus on racism, especially structural racism, stands out. He frequently does in-depth research on the race-related history



of the town, and race plays a major role in each of his interviews, game reports, or historical context narrations. This is especially prevalent in a chapter titled “Black and White” that is an in-depth dive into the race-relations in Odessa and could be described as the key chapter for understanding the underlying narrative about race. Bissinger (2004) presents the opinions of several “white” men and women on desegregation and the current state of the town, as well as the opinions of several BI poc<sup>1</sup>, including the vagabond-turned-preacher Lawrence Hurd, who offers strong opinions on the effects of competitive sports on BI poc men:

“He firmly believed that football, like other sports, used blacks, exploited them and then spit them out once their talents as running backs or linebackers or wide receivers had been fully exhausted. For a few lucky ones, that moment might not come until they were established in the pro’s. For others, it might come at the end of college. For most, it would all end in high school. ‘Before, it was take the blacks and put ‘em in the cotton fields. Let ‘em do farm work. Let ‘em do share crops. In the twentieth century, because of football, the real smart people use these blacks just like they would on the farm. And when it’s over, they don’t care about them.’” (Bissinger, 2004, p. 109)

During this chapter and during the description of racist incidents, Bissinger’s disposition shows in the way he frames these incidents and how many different opinions and people he recites. An example for this would be a passage where three men compare the injured Boobie Miles to a lame horse, then follows it up with another point of view from another coach:

“On the practice field, a trio of men gathered one afternoon to joke about his plight. One of them suggested that maybe it was best for Boobie to just kill himself since he didn’t have football anymore. ‘No’, one of them objected. ‘When a horse pulls up lame you don’t waste a bullet on him.’ There was unrestrained laughter and the three enjoyed the analogy of comparing Boobie to an animal. It was repeated. [...] Only Nate Hearne had a different perspective on it all.” (Bissinger, 2004, p. 262)

As most “white” Odessans use the *n-word* like any other word and without considering its power, Bissinger often uses direct quotes when describing these incidents, instead of the usual factual and paraphrasing style (Bissinger, 2004, p. 89). During the aforementioned chapter on race relations, Bissinger gives ample room for BI poc to share their experiences and voice their opinions, while giving little room for the town’s “white” inhabitants to share their

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, BI poc is used to refer to black, indigenous and people of color.

opinions beyond why they think that BIPOC are not to be trusted and why the town is so divided.

In another very relevant sequence, the reader is confronted with the thoughts of Fullback Don Billingsley on not getting his chance to be the starting Running Back after Boobie's injury (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 84–88). Bissinger describes how Bobbie's backup, Don Billingsley, struggles to hold onto the ball onto the field, resulting in him getting benched for a black player called Chris Comer. Due to his age, Comer should not be on the team, but he was elevated from the junior squad after Boobie suffered his injury. Billingsley then blames the fact that he lost his starting job on the circumstance that black players are allowed to play on the Permian team, stating that he did not even get a chance to carry the ball, and he, as a "white" football player, is subject to a stricter treatment and different expectations. He does this despite having obvious problems hanging on to the ball, costing the team points, and having a reputation of not being committed enough:

"With all those eyes focused on him, the ball popped loose from Don's hands without anyone's touching him. [...] Regaining his composure, he had peeled off a nice thirty-four-yard run on a sweep. But then, with time running out in the half, he had fumbled again [...]."

"'I didn't get to carry the ball,' was how Don Billingsley sized it up. 'They moved up another [n-word] to carry the ball. [...] In practice, the [n-word]s<sup>2</sup>, they do what they want to do, and they still start Friday night. [...] There are different rules for black and white at Permian.'" (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 84, 85, 87, 88)

This sequence again hints at Bissinger's disposition towards the "white" population of Odessa, as he contrasts the events on the field with Billingsley's attribution, making him look like a hypocrite. It also represents the general opinion of "white" Odessans, who do not consider the n-word a slur and are portrayed as against desegregation and interracial relationships (Bissinger, 2004, p. 89). While the events are seemingly arranged to make him look hypocritical, we only hear Billingsley's side of the story, not those of the coaches or the player who replaced him. His quote on racial bias ends the fourth chapter and is then followed by the aforementioned chapter "Black and White", where Bissinger then clarifies how racial bias and segregation actually affect the town's minorities by reporting their stories and experiences. In the following paragraph, the narrator is speaking, once again showing his disdain

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<sup>2</sup> Racial slurs have been replaced by [n-word]; the novel does not censor them.

for the injustice and downright cruel practices of Odessa's "white" institutions. This is also where the narrator recounts the changes brought upon the desegregation, with the formerly "white" schools taking on BIPOC students. The narrator underlines his argument by adding a quote from a BIPOC that emphasizes the point of segregation:

"Desegregation had not altered the essential character of the Permian program. It was still a white institution. The overwhelming majority of its fans were still white. The overwhelming majority of its players were still white. But those few blacks attending Permian had made enormous contributions, one after another shipped across town to Permian for the mass enjoyment of an appreciative white audience and then shipped right back again across the railroad tracks to the Southside after each game. [...]"

'We know that we're separate until we get on the field. We know that we're equal as athletes. But once we get off the field, we're not equal [...].'" (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 106–107)

Throughout the rest of the book, the topic of race politics comes up repeatedly, and Permian's season, as well as the novel, eventually ends in a semi-final loss to the Carter Cowboys, a historically black school that did not field a "white" player. During the chapter leading up to the final game, Bissinger describes the lengthy and dramatic court process which decides whether the Carter Cowboys are even allowed to participate in the playoffs. The decision hinges on the failing math grade of a player, as teams that want to participate need to field players with passing grades, and the grade seems to be justified. The school's principal changes the grade to a passing grade, only to get overruled by the state's highest education official. Throughout the final court process, it is revealed that the school's grading system is way too complicated and that the teacher could justify giving almost any grade, but no one asked whether the student had actually learned anything. Eventually the judge decides that grading is not an exact science, and that the Carter Cowboys get to stay in the playoffs. The math teacher who gave the failing grade is sent to another school and punished by not being allowed to teach math anymore (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 300–311). Bissinger's description of this situation also shows his rather negative disposition towards the role that sports play at high schools, as the narrator remarks that "of course, he [the math teacher] was forbidden to teach math to prevent further threats to the sanctity of football." (Bissinger, 2004, p. 311) While Bissinger mostly focuses on the aspect of football, this situation once again highlights how race influences the perception and discussion of a team's right to participation, with one school board

member saying that this situation would not have happened with a “white” superintendent.

His growing disdain for the athletics program is also shown in a previous sequence where he interviews teachers at Permian. The teacher points out how much of the school’s resources of both money and time is invested in football instead of academics. The narrator finishes this part with a description of a substitute lesson, where “they learned about American history that day by watching ‘Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid’ on video” (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 146–147), an old Western-Comedy. These are just some examples, and overall Bissinger’s rather critical stance towards the influence of high school football on the academic curriculum is clear. This is also a part that teachers can use to reflect on their own position in the educational system, reflecting on how disciplinary punishment is decided upon or how department budgets are distributed.

Overall, Bissinger succeeds in opening a window into the lives of Odessa’s inhabitants and their motivations, wishes and fears. This inevitably revealed the structural racism deeply embedded and accepted in “white” Odessans. After publishing the book, Bissinger faced heavy criticism from the people of Odessa whose racist opinions were now out in the open for everyone to read. The signings and his visit to Odessa following the book’s release had to be canceled due to threats of bodily harm (Bissinger, 2004, p. 362), which is an interesting reaction, considering the inhabitants were open about their opinions and should have known that they could appear in Bissinger's project.

## 5 Anti-racist theory and English Language Teaching

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper will mainly focus on using the portrayal of racism in the novel *Friday Night Lights* to further Social Justice Education, because the author spends most of the book exploring its effects, forms and history in Odessa. The novel also contains passages that could be used to gain a deeper understanding of gender norms, sexism or the effects of a financial crisis on small towns that rely on one economic branch. That is beyond the scope of this article, but since these aspects often interact with racism, teachers should consider making use of these passages if they feel that they could be suitable.

Ensuring a safe discussion of content containing racism should be a teacher’s highest priority, which requires teachers to accept that racism is a part of their

identity and socialization, and that they need to continue working on deconstructing the impact it has on them (Güllü & Gerlach, 2023, p. 32). Preparing such discussions may prove to be extensive work, as properly explaining important words and phrases such as white privilege or white gaze may take some time, and talking about why certain words might be hurtful and how to avoid saying hurtful things can lead to confusion and even more questions. Therefore, when a teacher sets out to plan an anti-racist lesson, they need to be aware that doing so requires commitment to critical pedagogy.

According to Braselmann (2023), teachers and learners first need to reflect on their experiences and current position regarding racism, making sure that they are aware of the racist experiences that some of their learners may have had. Learners should not be made to share their own experiences, but if they are willing to do so, they may need to be discussed in theoretical or abstract contexts to ease the learners into talking about such a hurtful topic. The teacher also needs to address racism as transnational and transversal, actively challenging established racist and colonial narratives and stereotypes. Those narratives are exemplified by pointing them out in media that uphold or reproduce racist knowledge, and their use of language is critically reflected upon by pointing out the role of the English language in the construction of such narratives (Braselmann, 2023, p. 172).

This can be a challenge, because when one wants to deconstruct and discuss racism in any context, “white” contributors will eventually have to confront their “white gaze”. The white gaze is a perspective taken by a socially constructed group that is not subjected to racism and that structurally and socially profits from being part of this “white” group. Other, diverse groups get homogenized, resulting in the “white” majority purposefully misunderstanding cultural ties and assigning negative traits to groups of non-“white” people that feel no relation to each other. They are set opposite of the “white normalcy” and seen as “lesser” and “abnormal” through the white gaze.

Members of those marginalized groups that experience racism report feelings like they must disprove the “white” groups’ assumptions by acting differently than their assigned stereotype. In essence, it is a way of othering non-“white” people that is propagated at home and in social institutions (Güllü & Gerlach, 2023, p. 24).

Güllü and Gerlach (2023) also note that racist ideologies have changed over time; they stopped focusing on the biological concept of race, instead referring to cultural differences when othering non-“white” people. That is why

teachers need to pay attention to redefining the term “culture”, moving away from a static and oversimplifying definition towards one that emphasizes the complexity and dynamic nature of cultures (Güllü & Gerlach, 2023, p. 34). It is also key to accept that race is a social construct, and not based on biological or ethnic categories. This would become increasingly obvious the more learners engage with the topic, as it would become evident that society introduces new categories when needed and manipulates old ones as they see it to keep up the structural advantages of the majority (Braselmann, 2023, p. 170). In *Friday Night Lights*, structural racism is reflected upon by multiple characters and is the focus of Bissinger’s portrayal. Usually, learners have already interacted with the topic of racism before, for example in history lessons dealing with colonialism. This might enable them to relate the inequalities in the book to their prior knowledge of racism.

## 6 Sequence design

The following sequences will focus on opportunities of furthering the critical deconstruction of racism, thus leaving chapters of the novel aside that deal with other problematic topics such as gender and sexism. However, it would be advisable for the teacher to read the entire book with the learners, using critical literacy strategies to focus on other social justice topics that come up in the book. The sequences were designed for a learner group of at least grade 10, and ideally, they would be very familiar with the method of *problem posing*.

Before teaching any sequence dealing with *Friday Night Lights*, teachers should aim to guarantee that the learners are prepared for the discussions ahead, preparing the learners for identifying hurtful language and acting against it, realizing why social justice is an important topic and defining important terms needed to discuss racism and football. This sequence should be taught before the learners begin reading the book. It could consist of a joint effort of learners and the teacher creating a glossary that acts as a permanent resource for the learners, as well as designing a social contract in which the learners and the teacher commit to being open-minded while minding the already established discussion rules and vocabulary. The glossary would need to define terms such as “white”, “black” and the n-word as they are used in the book and in current times, providing historical context and appropriate replacements for them to enable safer discussions of the book’s contents.

## 6.1 Sequence 1: Don Billingsley

In this sequence, learners engage with the previously mentioned thoughts of Fullback Don Billingsley on not getting his chance to be the starting Running Back after Boobie Miles' injury (s. Section 4). The goal of the sequence is to introduce the learners to the problem posing strategy using McLaughlin and DeVoogd's (2004) framework for introducing new critical literacy strategies. The sequence gives learners the opportunity to examine how white privilege, and racist belief might influence the "white" people's perception of their own failure (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 84–88).

Learners should have read at least up to the last part of chapter 4 (Bissinger, 2004, p. 84). It once again emphasizes why and how racist language can hurt others, giving the learners a concrete example to discuss later.

### 6.1.1 Explaining

The sequence starts with an activation exercise in which learners are asked to explain the terms that they had discussed during the first sequence, then the teacher projects pages 65–67 onto the wall. They explain the problem posing strategy and provide guiding questions. Those could include: *What are the points of view that we are presented with? What kind of relationship do the characters have to each other? What type of behavior does the text attribute to what group? Which perspective is missing?*

### 6.1.2 Demonstrating

Then, the teacher reads the pages aloud, making sure to highlight answers or interesting passages that relate to the questions that they have established beforehand. They make sure to demonstrate their thought process and explain what they are looking for, but only highlight one or two passages, leaving enough text for the learners to practice with.

### 6.1.3 Guiding

Afterwards, learners head into pre-established cooperative groups and read the part again, using the teacher's highlighted passages as a guide to practice their own analysis and come to their own conclusions. After an adequate amount of time that depends on the learner group, the groups present their results, with the teacher moderating the discussion when necessary.

#### 6.1.4 Practice

Next, learners will practice the newly acquired method on a new passage, the previously mentioned incident in which Don Billingsley shared his opinion on race relations and behavior in the team (Bissinger, 2004, pp. 84–88). Should groups be in need of support, the teacher may provide more specific questions to scaffold their efforts, such as: *Why did he believe that he was being treated unfairly? Whose perspective is not heard here? What if a BIPOC player said this about a white player?*

#### 6.1.5 Reflecting

The last step is reflecting on the strategy and results; this may take more than a single lesson. During the reflection, the learners and the teacher should consider how the use of the new strategy influenced their approach, process and results.

### 6.2 Sequence 2: Desegregation at Permian

This sequence could deal with the structural dimension of racism, using segments of the chapter “Black and White”. The chapter is a fantastic source of perspectives on the race relations in Odessa, but it is also littered with slurs, which means that the teacher and the learners need to pay more attention to keep discussions safe.

The learning goals for the sequence would be for learners to recognize, analyze and deconstruct structural dimensions of racism in texts with the newly acquired problem posing strategy. To achieve this, the sequence will follow the basic framework of engaging, guiding, extending and reflection that McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) established. Learners will first read pages 105–110 that are part of the previously mentioned chapter “Black and White”, which deals with the issues that BIPOC face in Odessa and contains some of the previously quoted passages about BIPOCs being exploited for their athleticism (s. Section 4 for examples).



### 6.2.1 Engaging

The sequence starts with the teacher engaging the learners' thinking by having them think about incidents in sports that they are familiar with. What do the media talk about, what do the players want to emphasize when they individualize their uniforms or when they do charity work? They share their ideas with their partner and then with the class.

### 6.2.2 Guiding

Then, the learners get together into their cooperative groups to read pages 105–110 and use the problem posing strategy to analyze the text. The teacher should provide them with guiding questions projected onto a wall or written on a blackboard, such as: *What perspective is missing? Why is it missing? Who is being marginalized? Who controls the situation that is being described? What are the intentions of the author?*

### 6.2.3 Extending

The learner groups then get re-arranged, which could either be done randomly or through a group generator that can be adjusted so that certain group constellations can be avoided. Learners then exchange their results within the new groups and collect them within a mind map. They then try to relate their insights to their results from the activation task – have they encountered similar situations in the media? Are similar situations still happening in sports today, and do people know about them?

If this phase works well, and learners can make connections to recent events, the teacher may ask them to come up with a way to take action. The groups present their results and decide on a way to take action. This could be writing an informal piece and publishing it in the school newspaper, a letter to a charity or political institution or recording and publishing a video on the topic – as long as the learners make use of their newly acquired knowledge for this topic to influence the discourse and it is achievable, anything goes. A great example, should the learners not be able to find one, is the UEFA's "No al Racismo" campaign, which suggests that the organization is taking an anti-racist stance, while allowing for their players to be harassed and insulted on the pitch, highlighting that racism is a structural issue that cannot be fixed by a social media campaign. Taking action is also the hardest part of the framework, as analyzing and discussing a text is usually easier than setting up a

class project to take action on social justice issues, but it is simultaneously the most important one.

#### 6.2.4 Reflecting

Finally, the teacher should reflect on how the sequence went, what they learned, what the learners learned, and what they can improve. The learners should be part of this process as well, and provide feedback.

### 7 Conclusion

It almost comes as no surprise that Bissinger faced threats of bodily harm from anonymous Odessians after he had published *Friday Night Lights*. His observations regarding the obvious and mostly unquestioned effects of structural and everyday racism exemplify that while the Civil Rights movement may have impacted the federal legislature, it would take quite a while for the changes to affect the everyday lives of Black people.

The at times very critical nature in which Bissinger portrays racist statements or situations constitutes a special challenge for designing tasks around them. Some of the structural racism is openly criticized, and Bissinger makes an effort to include as many perspectives in his book as possible, not veiling his political stance. This lessens the effectiveness of the critical questions that learners may pose, as half of the answers to the questions such as “*Who is marginalized or underrepresented?*” are already provided.

However, this arguably lightens the workload for learners with good critical literacy skills, and scaffolds those that still struggle. Since the main goal was to use the book to further critical awareness of racism, spending less time on the text could enable the learners to spend more time reflecting on whether they have encountered similar behavior in their lives or whether they hold similar views. Especially the historical and structural dimensions could be put into focus, as Bissinger gives a fantastic summary of how the town came to be and what events shaped its political atmosphere during the early chapters. By shifting the focus from the portrayal of racism in the text to how racism affects the lives of people in another country, transferring the findings to the learners’ own experiences may be easier.

While the teaching approaches of critical pedagogy and cooperative language learning work very well together, and establishing a critical literacy frame-

work should be manageable, designing tasks that ask “white” learners to question their own privilege may prove to be challenging. Since there is no telling of how “white” learners will react to criticism towards their identity, teachers need to be prepared to deal with being antagonized, or even the learners’ parents getting involved. And even then, the teacher has not even accounted for how they can navigate the potentially hurtful situations for learners belonging to a minority. But this is exactly why teachers need to constantly reflect on their actions and dispositions and be an active member of the critical classroom that they are trying to build. Enabling their learners to take action, while not always easy, is the most important step of Social Justice Education. To successfully teach a K12 classroom with an anti-racist stance, teachers need to be committed to the cause (s. Klaes’ contribution in this issue). But although it might be challenging, teaching learners to question their own values and beliefs can lead to a more just and open-minded society that truly embraces and protects equity.

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