

A CREATIVE TEACHER FOR PROBLEMATIC STUDENTS: AN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY ON *FREEDOM WRITERS* MOVIE

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at analyzing the way the creative teacher takes to solve the students' problems. The theoretical framework of the analysis is the Individual Psychological approach by Alfred Adler. As a teacher, he or she not only teaches but also educates the students. To teach means the teacher transforms their knowledge to them. The knowledge can be language, mathematics, biology, physics, history and what not. Meanwhile to educate means the teacher educates the students about social norms, ethics, proper manner, morality and the like. To play their roles, the teacher often faces a lot of problems. Their problems range from students' personal problem, their environment problem, lack of facilities of teaching learning process and also teachers' private problem. *Freedom Writers* movie in which the creation was inspired by a true story delineates a complex problems of both the teacher and the students. The teacher, Erin Gruwell, faces her students having so complicated problems that motivate her to find a solution of their problem. With her creativity, Gruwell creates an appropriate teaching technique for teaching, educating and guiding them into the right track of life.

Keywords: *creative teacher, problematic student, racial discrimination, social oppression, social Injustice*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis cara yang dilakukan guru kreatif dalam mengatasi masalah-masalah para siswanya. Kerangka teoritis dalam menganalisis menggunakan pendekatan *Individual Psychological* yang dikembangkan oleh Alfred Adler. Peran seorang guru tidak hanya sebagai pengajar melainkan juga sebagai pendidik bagi para siswanya. Sebagai pengajar, guru menyalurkan pengetahuan yang dimiliki kepada para siswanya. Pengetahuan tersebut dapat berupa ilmu bahasa, matematika, biologi, fisika, sejarah dan lainnya. Sedangkan sebagai pendidik, guru mendidik para siswanya tentang norma sosial, etika, sikap pantas, moralitas dan sebagainya. Dalam memerankan peranan tersebut, seorang guru sering menghadapi berbagai masalah. Masalah-masalah tersebut dapat mencakup masalah pribadi siswa, lingkungannya, kurangnya fasilitas proses belajar mengajar dan juga masalah pribadi guru. Film *Freedom Writers*, yang pembuatannya terinspirasi berdasarkan sebuah kisah nyata, menggambarkan setumpuk masalah

kompleks yang dihadapi guru dan para siswanya. Sang guru, Erin Gruwell, menghadapi para siswa yang memiliki masalah-masalah rumit yang memotivasi dirinya untuk mencari solusi terhadap berbagai permasalahan tersebut. Dengan kreativitas yang dimilikinya, Gruwell menciptakan sebuah teknik mengajar yang tepat dalam mengajar, mendidik dan menuntun para siswanya menuju ke jalan hidup yang benar.

Kata Kunci: *guru kreatif, siswa bermasalah, diskriminasi rasial, tekanan sosial, sosial*

1. Introduction

A creative teacher has a great role to guide bad-tempered students. The bad-tempered students are problematic students who always make problems in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. They often do something amass. They fight with their own friends and make others disturbed with their behavior. They are trouble maker. They do not respect their teachers and look him or her down. Looking at such a phenomenon of a bad-tempered student, it needs a teacher who can listen and understand them wisely. The creative teacher might find a reason of why they behave such a bad behavior and they also try to look for a way out of the problem.

The phenomenon described above is reflected in the movie entitled *Freedom Writers*. The film making was inspired by a true story of gang violence and racial conflict in New Port Beach, Long Beach California USA in 1992. What happened in New Port Beach influenced the behaviour of the students in their day-to-day activity including at school. Mrs. Erin Gruwell comes to Woodrow Wilson High School due to the integration program at that school. When at the first time to meet her students, they do not give respect to her because she is a white woman. They hate white people because white people always oppress them in their lives. Gruwell is very shocked and surprised of those facts in the classroom.

The students' behaviour at classroom 203 of Woodrow Wilson High School is very cruel and brutal. They fight

each other due to a small case. Even they kill the other because of revenge. The students are oppressed with the social condition in that region. They struggle for life and try to survive. They live under pressure and it is not good for them to grow up. Mrs. Gruwell as the teacher finds hard a solution of social and also psychological conflict among her students. It makes her concerned to create an appropriate teaching technique for them. This paper tries to analyze Mrs. Gruwell's efforts to teach, to educate and to guide them into the right track of life.

2. Theoretical Framework

To analyse Mrs. Gruwell's efforts, the proper theoretical approach to apply is the Individual Psychology by Alfred Adler. He was born in Wina in February 9, 1870. His concept is based on the fundamental unity of personality. According to Adler (in Feist 1985: 64) all apparent dichotomies and multiplicities of life are organized in one-self consistent totally and no definite division can be made between man and body between conscious and unconscious or between reason and emotion. All behavior is seen in relation to the final goal of superiority or success. This goal gives direction and unity to the individual.

Gruwell's creativity to overcome her students' problem is her consciousness to find a way of teaching, educating and guiding them into a right way. Her process of creativity can be depicted through this perspective. The basic concept of this theory can be broken down as follows.

2.1. Fictional Finalism

It is an individual goal of life, which is unreal in nature or as fiction. According to Adler (in Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 154) each person's quest for superiority is guided by fictional goal that he or she has adopted. He also believes that person's fictional goal of superiority is self-determined; it is formed by the person's own creative power, therefore making it individually unique.

2.2. Inferiority Feeling and Compensation

According to Adler (in Hall and Lindzey, 1991: 247) inferiority feeling refers to the person who feels inferior because some weak factors in their life, for instance, the imperfections of the physic, the lower class position in the society, and the problem that cannot be solved. Therefore, inferiority feeling means weak feeling or imperfection in each field of life. Adler (in Hall and Lindzey, 1993: 247) proposed that inferiority feeling is feelings appear as result of psychological and social weakness in individual's subjective perception.

2.3. Striving for Superiority

Striving for superiority means that someone generally is motivated by a will to be superior or more dominate than others. Each individual is forced by drivers to be superior, powerful and regarded. Person will stive to cover his or her weaknesses to be perfect. Adler (in Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 144) proposes that every person has own creative power in drive perfection in his life. It is closely related to social because human beings live in reality with their social world even to strive to create a better life.

2.4. Style of Life

Style of life indicates how person shapes his or her individual's concept about the self through his or her unique way of life to strive his or her life goal. Adler (in Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 144) argues that style of life encompasses the unique pattern of traits, behaviors, and habits which, when taken together, defines

the flavor of a person's existence. It relates to the way person does his or her life and how to overcome the problems and make relation with others. Adler (in Feist, 1985: 75) proposes four general life style attitudes. His proposal is made to classify individual according to their attitude and behavior to watch the outside world, as follows.

2.4.1. Ruling Type

People of this type have little social interest, but a high degree of activity. They possess a dominating attitude toward the outside world and approach three major problems of life (friendship, sexual and occupation). According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 75) people of the ruling type with an extremely high degree of activity is potentially dangerous; they are the murderers, rapists, tyrants and suicides.

2.4.2. Getting Type

Individual with this attitude relates to the outside world in a parasitic manner, depending on the other to satisfy most of their need. Their mind concern is getting as much as possible from others. According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 75) they possess a low degree of activity and little social interest; however they are not likely to hurt others.

2.4.3. Avoiding Type

According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 76) the avoiding type person is characterized by an attitude of avoidance. Fearing failure more than desiring success, their life is marked by the socially useless behavior of running away from the task of life. They lack of the courage to struggle with their problem instead to ignore them because avoiding any possibility of failure.

2.4.4. Socially Useful Type

According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 76) the person with socially useful attitude struggles to solve life's problem in a manner beneficial to society. This person rightly identifies the three major social problems; neighborly love, sex love and occupation.

2.5. Social Interest

According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 71) social interest is that human beings consider their relationship to live cooperatively with others for social importance rather than for personal importance. Social interest shows the nature of humans who are always involved in the relationship with other people in order to achieve their goal. The social interest influences the humans in building their confidence. Social interest also can be the measurement that the human is considered as the useful for the society or not (Adler in Feist, 1985: 71).

2.6. Creative Power

Creative power reveals freedom. People have freedom to do and to be what they want and to create their own style of life to gain the goal. According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 78) the creative self is a dynamic concept, movement and this movement is the salient characteristic of life. Based on that assumption, principally, individual has power to realize his or her own desire throughout creative action on daily life. Creative power is producing perception, memory, imagination, fantasy, and dream (Adler in Feist, 1985: 78).

3. Finding and Discussion

3.1. Finding

3.1.1. Mrs. Gruwell's Creative Power

There are many creative efforts done by Gruwell in managing her classroom activity. Her creativity is actually a manifestation of her freedom to to and to be what she wants to reach her goal. Firstly Mrs. Gruwell switches the position of her students' sitting for reducing the social and racial gap among her students and also for breaking demarcation border in their interaction. The followings are their dialogues.

"Switch with Ben. Come on." said Gruwell.

"I can't go back there alone." Said Ben.

"It'll be fine." Gruwell convinced

The followings are her students' responses to Gruwell's instruction.

"No, it won't."

"I'm not sitting near him."

"I ain't going up there without my homey."

"I'm not sitting back there alone!"

"All right."

"Shut up."

"All right, you know what?"

"I want you all to move to this side of the room."

"You in the back, up here."

"Sindy and all of you, move to the back."

"Come on. Let's go. Now!"

"Get your ass back to China, all of y'all."

"You're all little midget-ass punks."

"Move before I stomp your peanuts."

"Boo!"

"Get your ass to the back, boy."

"Get off my desk."

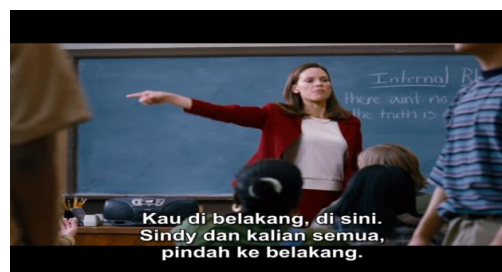


Fig.1. Gruwell is giving instruction to her students to switch their sitting position.

Her second creativity is inspired by one of her students drawing a black man with a big lips and big nose. With this picture, Gruwell explains to her students the event of Holocaust by Nazi. Through a hot debate, Gruwell can make her students have a wide vision of humanity.

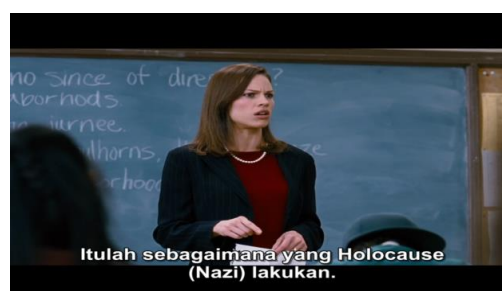


Fig. 2. Gruwell is debating about Holocaust with her students.

The followings are their dialogue.

“I saw a picture just like this once in a museum.”

“Only it wasn't a black man, it was a Jewish man.”

“And instead of the big lips, he had a really big nose, like a rat's nose.”

“But he wasn't just one particular Jewish man, this was a drawing of all Jews.”

“And these drawings were put in the newspapers by the most famous gang in history.”

“That's us, dawg.”

“You think you know all about gangs?”

“You're amateurs.”

“This gang would put you all to shame.”

“And they started out poor and angry, and everybody looked down on them.”

“Until one man decided to give them some pride, an identity and somebody to blame.”

“You take over neighborhoods?”

“That's nothing compared to them.”

“They took over countries.”

“And you wanna know how?”

“They just wiped out everybody else.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, they wiped out everybody they didn't like, and everybody they blamed for their life being hard.”

“And one of the ways they did it was by doing this.”

“See, they'd print pictures like this in the newspapers.”

“Jewish people with big, long noses.”

“Blacks with big, fat lips.”

“They'd also publish scientific evidence that proved Jews and blacks were the lowest form of human species.”

“Jews and blacks were more like animals.”

“And because they were just like animals it didn't really matter whether they lived or died.”

“In fact, life would be a whole lot better if they were all dead.”

“That's how a holocaust happens.”

Her third creativity is that Mrs. Gruwell makes a game called *Line Game*. This

game is inspired with an inappropriate interaction among the students at the school yard. They just interact with their group based on their skin color, ethnicity or race. Through this game, Gruwell intends in order that her students know and understand to each other.



Fig.3. Gruwell makes a game called *Line Game*.

The followings are their dialogues.

“We're gonna play a game, all right?”

“It's a lot of fun. I promise.”

“Look, you can either sit in your seats reading those workbooks, or you can play a game.”

“Either way, you're in here till the bell rings.”

“Okay. This is called the Line Game.”

“I'm gonna ask you a question.”

“If that question applies to you, you step onto the line, and then step back away for the next question.”

“Easy, right?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“The first question, how many of you have the new Snoop Dogg album?”

“Did you steal it?”

“Okay, back away.”

“Next question, how many of you have seen Boyz n the Hood?”

“Okay. Next question.”

“How many of you live in the projects?”

“How many of you know someone, a friend or relative, who was or is in juvenile hall or jail?”

“How many of you have been in juvenile hall or jail for any length of time?”

“Detention don't count.”

“Does a refugee camp count? You decide.”

"How many of you know where to get drugs right now?"
 "How many of you know someone in a gang?"
 "How many of you are gang members?"
 "Nice try. Nice try."
 "Okay, that was a stupid question, wasn't it?"
 "Yeah."
 "You're not allowed gang affiliations in school. I apologize for asking. My badness."

The next Gruwell's questions are deeper and more serious.

"Okay, now I'm gonna ask you a more serious question."
 "Stand on the line if you've lost a friend to gang violence."
 "Stay on the line if you've lost more than one friend. Three. Four or more."
 "Okay, I'd like us to pay respect to those people now."
 "Wherever you are, just speak their name."
 "James."
 "Beatriz."
 "Thank you all very much."

The fourth creativity is that Mrs. Gruwell asks her students to write everything about their ideas in a journal. Gruwell knows well her students so that she wants them to write down their feelings in it.



Fig.4. Gruwell is telling her students to write anything in the journal.

The followings are their dialogues.

"Now, I have something for each of you."

"Everyone has their own story, and it's important for you to tell your own story, even to yourself."
 "So, what we're going to do is we're gonna write every day in these journals."
 "You can write about whatever you want, the past, the present, the future."
 "You can write it like a diary, or you can write songs, poems, any good thing, bad thing, anything."
 "But you have to write every day."
 "Keep a pen nearby."
 "Whenever you feel the inspiration."

The fifth creative effort of Gruwell is that when Gruwell buys a lot of book in which the content relates to her students' life problem.



Fig.5. Gruwell wants to buy many books entitled *Durango Street* by Frank Bonham for her students.

The following is the dialogue between Gruwell and the shop keeper.

"Excuse me, if I wanted to order any books in bulk, could I get some sort of a discount?"

The below one is the dialogue between Gruwell and her students in the classroom about the book.

"These books are brand new."
 "I know."
 "Okay, guys, gals. Listen up".
 "The only problem with this book is,"
 "it's about a gang member,"
 "and there's violence in it,"
 "so you may not be able to read it as part of the curriculum."

The sixth creative effort of Gruwell is that Gruwell creates a program called "Toast

for Change.” This program is intended to ask her students to leave their bad behaviours and to change into good one. They promise to do better things in the future.



Fig.6. Toast for Change

The dialogue is as follows.

“I want you to take one of these glasses of sparkling cider,”

“And I want each of you to make a toast.”

“We’re each gonna make a toast for change.”

“And what that means is, from this moment on”

“Every voice that told you “You can’t” is silenced.”

“Every reason that tells you things will never change, disappears.”

“And the person you were before this moment,”

“That person’s turn is over.”

“Now it’s your turn.”

3.2. Discussion

Based on the finding above, becoming a creative teacher is a long process of someone’s life. Erin Gruwell faces varieties of handicap when being in front of class to teach her students. They have veriously complex problems ranging from domestic problem, race discrimination, injustice and social problems. In addition to this, Gruwell herself also has a serious domestic problem both with her father and husband as well. To tackle her life problem, she struggles very hard. She is a woman of a great effort, passion and courage. As Ms. Chambell

said that Gruwell is a lovely intelligent woman. Due to that fact, she is very creative to be a teacher although she is actually a graduation of law faculty. In short, to be a creative teacher, it needs a strong passion to love her profession.

There are many handicaps faced by Erin Gruwell when doing her job as a teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School, Long Beach, California. When she teaches at the first day, her students at room 203, do not respect her. They underestimate her. They do not like her. They reject her and they disobey her. Their rejection toward her is a manifestation of hating the white people. Because Gruwell is a white people, they hate her. It makes her very socked and inferior. In addition to this, the interaction among the students in her class 203 is not so good that they are grouped based on their race and ethnicity. They consist of the white people, Black people, Cambodian, Chinese, Little Tijuana. Because of a small case, they can fight brutally in the classroom as well as at the school yard. They hate each other.

They behave such kind of manner because of the white man supremacy in USA at that time. They hate the white because the white people feel that they have rights to do everything to the others. They can capture someone into jail as they like. The white is not fair to treat the others. Her students are the victims of such kind of the white people abuselement. They also hate their friends from other race, color and ethnicity. To reduce the conflict, Gruwell creates some efforts such as switching her students’ sitting position, discussing about Holocaust, playing *Line Game*, writing journal of their life experiences, giving them some good books to read, making a party called *Toast for Change* and many others. By doing so, in

general Gruwell hopes they have a wide range of humanity knowledge and can interact well each other.

Specifically Erin creates the *Line Game* with the purpose of making them know and understand to each other. Through this game, she wants to explore her students' problems and trains them to understand each other. It seems to her, they begin to know their friends' problems and begin to give sympathy. It also motivates them to respect each other. Gruwell hopes that the game can unite them in one family. To dig more information of her students, Erin also asks her students to write their experiences, feeling and whatever ideas in journal. She gives her students a journal book for that purpose. Beside that the activity can also increase her students' creativity in literacy.

To improve more her students' reading skills, Erin gives some books to read by them. There are many titles of the books she shares to them. The content of most books is not so far from their life problems. By such kind of activity, they are expected to have a better understanding of life. In addition to this, Erin Gruwell also asks her students to picnic to Museum. The activity is her respond toward her students' want of knowing about Holocaust. By doing such a kind of picnic, Erin wants to give her students more vision of life. From that activity, Erin hopes that they love and respect each other.

What makes Erin Gruwell surprised is her students' respond from all activities created by her. Her students ask her to invite Miep Gies who helped Anne Frank hide at her home when Holocaust happened. Anne Frank is the writer of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, one of books they read. Her students want Erin to invite Miep

Gies to come to their classroom to share her experience about Holocaust. In the sake of her students want, Erin asks every student to write a letter for her. Finally Erin sends their students' letter to Miep Gies in Swiss, Europe. To make their dream come true, her students make some events for fund raiser. Their activities are local restaurant of "Taste for Change" and dance concert of "Concert for Change." At the end of the day, Miep Gies comes to their class room 203. They are all very happy. In that room, Miep Gies shares her story of Anne Frank and Holocaust horrors. They listen seriously. Miep Gies has read all their letters and she says that they are the heroes every day.

All activities held by Erin Gruwell and her students make the condition of class room 203 better and the students begin to realize what they should behave toward their teacher, friends, and also family. They love each other. They act properly. They respect all people without seeing their skin color, race, religion or ethnicity. In the class room 203, they unite and become a family finally. In short they have changed under Mrs. Erin Gruwell's guiding.

Human being is not a perfect creature and so Erin Gruwell is. She gets failure in her marriage. Although she tries hard to defend but she is not successful to make a happy family with her husband. Her husband divorces her because he is not suitable again with what Erin does. He thinks that Erin gives much more attention to her students than to him. Erin actually has explained that her teaching profession and other side job is just temporary. She wants her husband wait but he cannot.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be concluded that to teach students with multicultural and different social background is not a simple job. It needs a

person having passion of being a teacher. As a teacher, he or she should be creative to teach, to educate, and to guide the students to the right track of life. The major character, Erin Gruwell, is one example of a creative teacher with great dedication to education. She dedicates and sacrifices her time and energy for education. Erin has shown her creativities in teaching her students with complex problems of life. She is very successful to teach, to educate and to guide them into a better understanding of life through her creativities. In contrast she gets failure in managing her marriage. They divorce.

From Erin Gruwell' experience, there are some benefits to take. As a teacher, he or she should be balanced to manage the time and energy for profession and family. It is very important in order that both family affairs and teaching profession can run well. The family is happy and the students become successful in their study. It of course needs understanding between wife and husband whatever their profession is.

The implication for Indonesian teachers, *Freedom Writer* movie can inspire them to be creative to teach, to educate and to guide their students with

different cultural and social background. Indonesia is a nation with different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and beliefs so that it needs a teacher with a great vision in multiculturalism, ethnicity, race, religion and beliefs. By so doing, the Indonesian creative teacher can unite the young generation of Indonesia for a better and strong nation under the national slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or *Unity in Diversity*.

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