

A Creative Teacher for Problematic Students: An Individual Psychological Study on *Freedom Writers* Movie

Abdillah Nugroho

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta

abdillah_nugroho@ums.ac.id

Abstract

The paper analyzed a creative teacher handling some variously problematic students in her classroom reflected in *Freedom Writers* movie. Based on the problem, the paper was aimed at analyzing ways that the creative teacher took to solve the students' problems. The theoretical framework of the analysis was the Individual Psychological approach by Alfred Adler. Teacher has an important role in human life. As a teacher, he or she not only teaches but also educates the students. To teach means transforming the teacher's knowledge to the students. Through interaction with students, a teacher gives them various materials of knowledge. The knowledge can be language, mathematics, biology, physics, history, and so on. Meanwhile, to educate means a teacher can educate the students about social norms, ethics, proper manner, morality and the like. To play their roles, teachers often face a lot of problems. The problems ranged from students' personal problem, their environment problem, lack of facilities of teaching learning process, to their own private problem. *Freedom Writers* movie, in which the creation was inspired by a true story, delineates complex problems experienced by both the teacher and the students. The teacher, Erin Gruwell, faced her students who had various and complicated problems, which later motivated to find a solution for her students' problem. Her students' problem might be racial discrimination, social oppression by the dominant group, social injustice experienced by the marginalized group, and so on. With her creativity of teaching technique, Gruwell created some ways to understand their students' private problem and found a wise way out of their problems.

Keywords: creative teacher, problematic student, racial discrimination, social oppression, social injustice

1. Introduction

A creative teacher has a great role to guide bad-tempered students. Bad-tempered students are problematic students who always make problems in the classroom as well as outside the classroom. They often do something amasssed. They fight with their own friends and disturbed others with their behavior. They are basically trouble makers. They do not respect their teachers and disregarded them. Looking at such a phenomenon of bad-tempered students, the school will need a teacher who can listen and understand them wisely. A creative teacher might find a reason of why they behave in such bad behavior and they will 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 behavior of the students in their day-to-day activity including at school. Mrs. Erin Gruwell came to Woodrow Wilson High School due to the integration program at that school. On the first day she met her students, they disrespected her because she was a white woman. They hated white

people because white people always oppressed them in their lives. Gruwell was very shocked and surprised of those facts in the classroom.

The students' behavior at classroom 203 of Woodrow Wilson High School was very cruel and brutal. They fought each other just because of trivial matters. They could even kill other students for the sake of revenge. The students were oppressed with their social condition in that region. They struggled for their life and tried to survive. They lived under pressure and it was not a good place for them to grow up. Mrs. Gruwell as the teacher tried hard to find a solution for their social and also psychological conflict among her students. She felt concerned and finally tried to create a conducive situation for them by teaching and educating them peacefully. This paper tried to analyze Mrs. Gruwell's efforts to harmonize her students' lives at school, in society as well as at home.

2. Theoretical Framework

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

Gruwell's creativity to overcome her students' problem was a form of her consciousness to find a way of teaching, educating and guiding them to the right way. Her process of creativity could be depicted through this perspective. The basic concept of this theory could be broken down in the following section.

2.1. Fictional Finalism

Fictional finalism 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 was guided by fictional goal that he or she had adopted. He also believed that a person's fictional goal of superiority was self-determined; it was formed by the person's open creative power, therefore making it individually unique.

2.2. Inferiority Feeling and Compensation

According to Adler (in Hall and Lindzey, 1991: 247), inferiority feeling referred to the person who felt inferior due to some weak factors in their life, for instance, the imperfections of the physic, the lower class position in the society, and the problem that could not be solved. Therefore, inferiority feeling meant weak feeling or imperfection in each field of life. Adler (in Hall and Lindzey, 1993: 247) proposed that inferiority feeling was considered as feelings that appeared as a result of psychological and social weakness in an 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 dominating than others. Each individual is forced by drivers to be superior, powerful and regarded. Person will strive to cover his or her weaknesses to be perfect. Adler (in Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 144) proposed that every person had their own creative power in driving

perfection in his life. It was closely related to social because human beings lived in reality with their social world even to strive in creating 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 realize his or her life goal. Adler (in Hjelle and Ziegler, 1992: 144) argued that style of life encompassed the unique pattern of traits, behaviors, and habits which, when taken together, defined 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) proposed four general life style attitudes. His proposal was made to classify individual according to their attitude and behavior to watch the outside world, which could be summarized in the following:

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 were potentially dangerous; they could be murderers, rapists, tyrants and people with suicidal tendency.

2.4.2. Getting Type

Individual with this attitude relates to the outside world in a parasitic manner, depending on others to satisfy most of their need. Their main 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 and, instead, trying to ignore them because they like to avoid any possibility of failure.

2.4.4. Socially Useful Type

According to Adler (in Feist, 1985: 76), 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 the aspect 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 relationship with other people in order to achieve their goal. The social interest influences humans in building their confidence. Social interest can also be the measurement that the human is considered as being useful for the society or not (Adler in Feist, 1985: 71).

2.6. Creative Power

Creative power reveals freedom. People have freedom to do anything and to be what they want and to create their own style of life to gain their life goals. 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 the 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. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

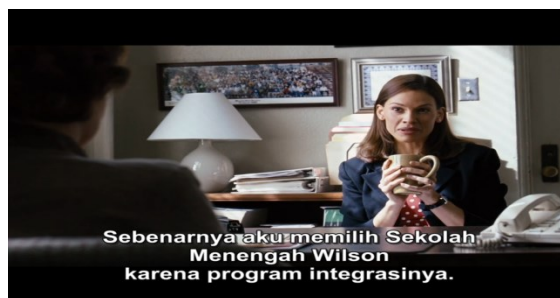
There were some findings that related to Mrs. Gruwell's efforts to integrate her students. The findings were the result of analyzing *Freedom Writers* movie based on the Individual Psychological perspective as follows.

3.1.1. Mrs. Gruwell' Fictional Finalism

Her first fictional finalism was to have a happy marriage, for her husband to be an architect.

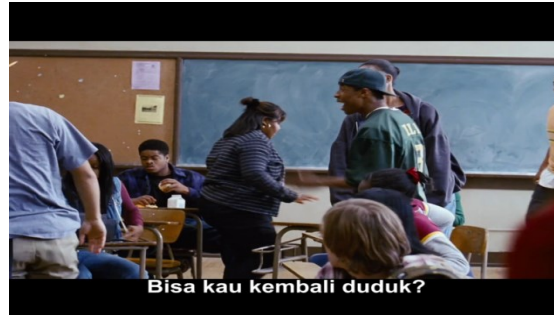


Her second fictional finalism was to be a teacher in Woodrow Wilson High School because of its integration program.

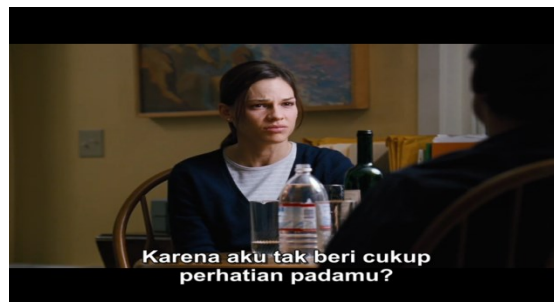


3.1.2. Mrs.' Gruwell's Inferiority Feeling

Her first inferiority feeling occurred on the first day she met her students at room 203, her students disrespected because she was a white woman.



Her second inferiority happened when her husband divorced her.

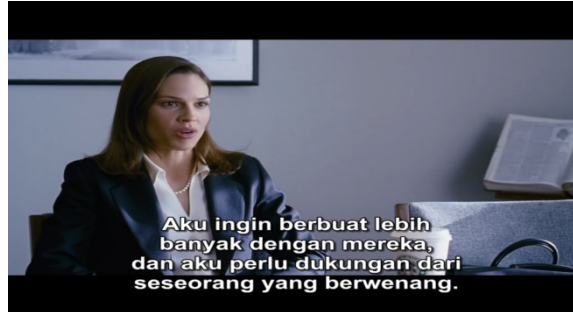


3.1.3. Mrs. Gruwell's Striving for Superiority

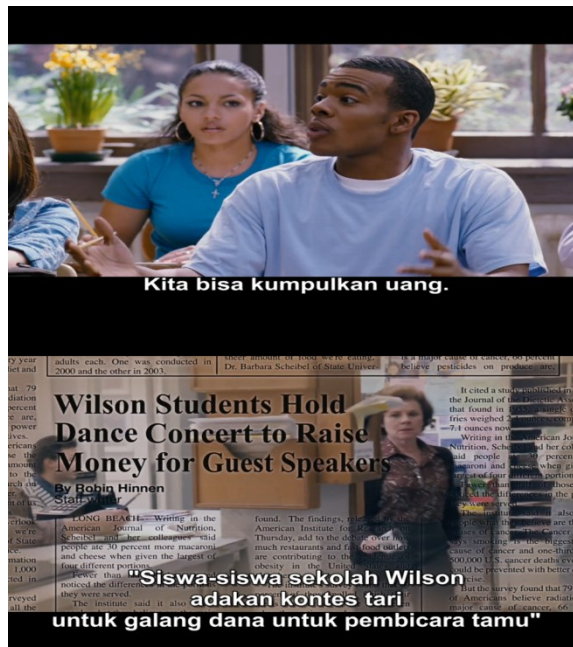
She tried to get support from her husband to be a teacher.



She tried to get the attention from Education Department District at Long Beach.

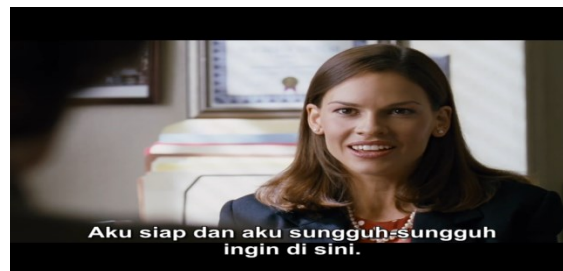


She received support from her students to get Miep Gies come to their school from Europe. Miep Gies helped Anne Frank hide at her home.



3.1.4. Mrs Gruwell’s Style of Life

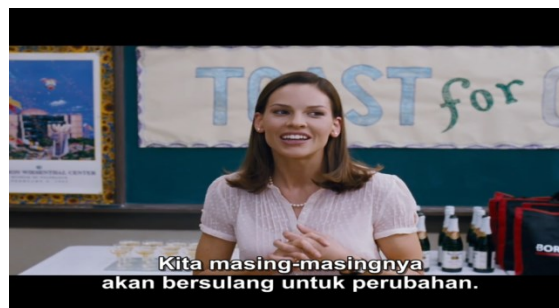
Mrs. Gruwell had dedicated her life as a teacher in Woodrow Wilson High School.



Mrs. Gruwell made an interactive communication with her students to discuss their life problems and Holocaust.



Mrs. Gruwell asked her students to make a change in their lives.

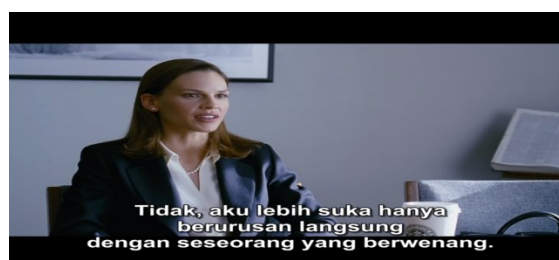


3.1.5. Mrs. Gruwell's Social Interest

Mrs. Gruwell asked her father for a solution of her problems concerning her students' complex problem.



Mrs. Gruwell approached Dr. Cohn to help her run her plan to make her students had better accomplishment in their education.



Mrs. Gruwell and her students made a fundraising program called “Taste for Change.”

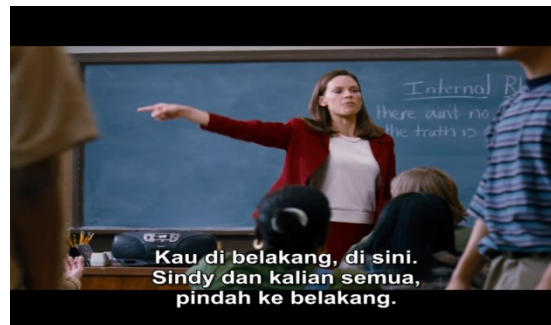


Mrs. Gruwell tried to find out the phone number of Anne Frank Foundation in Basel, Swiss.

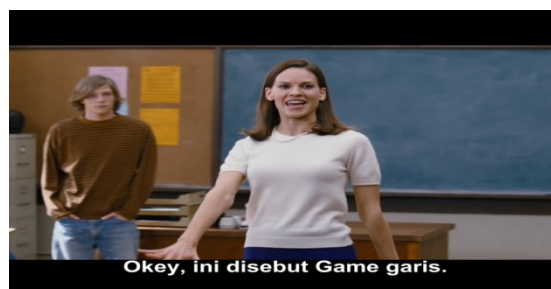


3.1.6. Mrs. Gruwell’s Creative Power

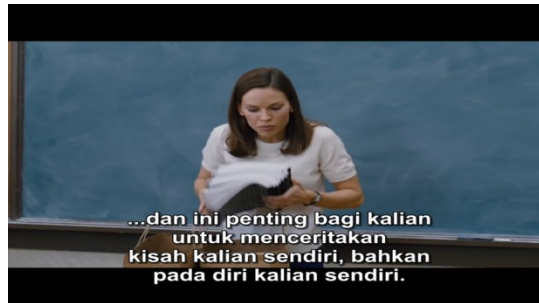
Mrs. Gruwell switched the position of her students’ seat plan for eliminating the gap among her students.



Mrs. Gruwell made a game called Line Game to understand and to know each other better.



Mrs. Gruwell asked her students to write everything about their ideas in a journal.



Mrs. Gruwell bought a lot of books in which the content of it related to her students' problem.



Mrs. Gruwell created a program called "Toast for Change."



3.2 Discussion

Based on the findings above, becoming a creative teacher was a long process of someone's life. Erin Gruwell faced varieties of trials when she stood in front of the class to teach her students. They have variously complex problems ranging from domestic problem, race discrimination, injustice and social problems. In addition to this, Gruwell herself also had a serious domestic problem both with her father and husband. To tackle her life problem, she struggled very hard. She was a woman of great efforts, passion and courage, as Ms. Chambell said in the movie that Gruwell was a lovely intelligent woman. Due to that fact, she was very creative to be a teacher even though she was actually a graduate of Law Faculty. In short, to be a creative teacher, one would need a strong passion to love his or her profession.

There were many impediments faced by Erin Gruwell when doing her job as a teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School, Long Beach, California. When she first met the students at room 203, none of them respected her. They underestimated her. They did not like her. They rejected her and they disobeyed her. Their rejection toward her was a manifestation of hating the white people in general. Since Gruwell is a white Caucasian, they hated her. It shocked her and made her feel inferior. In addition to this, the interaction among the students in her class

203 was not so good that they were grouped based on their race and ethnicity. They consisted of white people, Black people, Cambodian, Chinese, and Little Tijuana. Because of a small case, they could have brutal fight in the classroom as well as at the school yard. The students even hated each other.

They behaved in such kind of manner due to white man supremacy in USA at that time. They hated the whites because the white people felt that they had the rights to do anything to others. They could capture someone and put them into jail as they liked. The white did not treat others fairly. Her students were the victims of such discrimination by the white people abuses. They also hated their friends who came from other race, color and ethnicity. Even a trivial problem could raise war between them. For eliminating the gap among her students, Erin Gruwell switched the position of her students' seat. By doing so, Gruwell hoped they could mingle and have good social interaction.

To know more her students, Erin created a game called *Line Game*. Through this game, she wanted to explore her students' problems and trained her students to understand each other better. By experimenting on this game, she observed that her students began to know their friends' problems and began to give sympathy. It also motivated them to respect each other. Gruwell hoped that the game could unite them in one family. Furthermore, to dig more information of her students, Erin also asked her students to write their experiences, feelings and whatever ideas in a journal. She gave them a journal book for that purpose. Besides that, the activity could also increase her students' creativity in literary works and prompted them of doing more creative writing.

To improve her students' reading skills, Erin gave them some books to read. There were many books that she shared with them and the content of most books was not so far from her students' life problems. By such kind of activity, they were expected to have a better understanding of life. In addition to this, Erin Gruwell also asked her students to go on picnic to Holocaust Museum. The activity was her respond towards her students' desire of knowing more about Holocaust. By doing this activity, Erin wanted to give her students more vision of life. From that activity, Erin hoped that they loved and respected each other.

What surprised Erin Gruwell was her students' respond from all activities she created. Her students asked her to invite Miep Gies who helped Anne Frank hid at her home when Holocaust happened. Anne Frank was the writer of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, one of books they read. Her students wanted Erin to invite Miep Gies to come to their classroom and shared her experience about Holocaust. For the sake of her students' wish, Erin asked every student to write a letter for her. Finally, Erin sent their students' letters to Miep Gies in Swiss, Europe. To make their dream come true, her students made some events for fundraising. Their activities were conducted at a local restaurant, and it was named "Taste for Change" and dance concert of "Concert for Change." At the end of the day, Miep Gies came to their class room 203. They were all very happy. In that room, Miep Gies shared her story of Anne Frank and Holocaust horrors. They listened seriously. Miep Gies later said that she had read all their letters and she said that they were the every day heroes.

All activities held by Erin Gruwell and her students made the condition of class room 203 better and the students began to realize how they should behave towards their teachers, friends, and also family. They loved each other. They acted properly. They respected all people without seeing their skin color, race, religion or ethnicity. In the class room 203, they were united and became a family, finally. In short, they had changed under Mrs. Erin Gruwell's guidance.

Human being is not a perfect creature, and so do Erin Gruwell. She failed her marriage, even though she already tried hard to defend it but she was not successful to retain her marriage with her husband. Her husband divorced her because he did not agree to what Erin did. He thought Erin gave much more attention to her students than to him. Erin actually had explained that her teaching profession was important and other side job was just temporary. She wanted her husband to wait but he could not do that. Hence, he decided to leave.

4. Conclusion

From the analysis above, it could be concluded that to teach students with multicultural and different social background was not a simple job. It needed a person who had sincere passion of being a teacher. As a teacher, he or she should be creative to teach, to educate, and to guide the students in heading towards the right track of life. The major character, Erin Gruwell, was one example of a creative teacher with great dedication to education. She dedicated and sacrificed her time and energy for education. Erin had shown her creativities in teaching her students with complex problems of life. She was very successful to guide them into a better understanding of life through her creativities. However, she failed in managing her marriage as in the end of the movie, she divorced her husband.

From Erin Gruwell' experience, there were some benefits to take. As a teacher, he or she should be balanced in managing time and energy for profession and family. It was very important in order to ensure that both family affairs and teaching profession could run well. He or she had a happy family and the students became successful in their study. It would of course need the understanding between the wives and husbands on whatever their profession was.

The implication of *Freedom Writer* movie for Indonesian teachers was the fact that the movie could inspire them to be creative in teaching or educating their students with different cultural and social background. Indonesia is a nation with different cultures, races, ethnicities, religions and beliefs; therefore, it will need a teacher with great vision in multiculturalism, ethnicity, race, religion and beliefs. By so doing, Indonesian creative teachers could unite the young generations of Indonesia for a better nation under the national slogan *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or Unity in Diversity.

References

- Feist, Jess. 1985. *Theories of Personality*. New York: CBC College Publishing.
- Hjelle, Larry A, and Ziegler, Daniel J. 1992. *Personality Theories: Basic Assumption, Research and Application*. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc.
- Hall, Calvin and Lindzey, Gardner. 1991. *Introduction to Theories of Personality*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. Inc.
- _____. 1993. *Theories of Personality*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. Inc.